

TRAFFIC, ENVIRONMENT & COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Traffic, Environment & Community Safety Scrutiny Panel held on Thursday, 13 July 2023 at 3pm at the Civic Offices, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Judith Smyth (in the Chair)
Charlotte Gerada
Chris Dike
Jason Fazackarley
Mark Jeffery

10. Apologies for Absence. (AI 1)

Councillor Simon Boshier sent his apologies for absence and Councillor Mark Jeffery sent his for arriving late to the meeting (he arrived at 4:30pm).

11. Declarations of Members' Interests (AI 2)

No interests were declared.

12. Minutes of the Previous Meeting. (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 8 June 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

13. Scrutiny review into reducing the use of pesticides on council land. (AI 4)

Information on glyphosate product usage over the last five years by the three maintenance teams was circulated to the panel. Richard Stocks, Highways PFI Deputy Contract Manager (Technical) explained that Highways/ Colas has used 100 litres so far this year and he expects that usage will continue to decrease. In response to questions, he explained that:

- It would be difficult to break down the usage by area as spraying is only carried out where it is required.
- Colas is considering using a less concentrated product. The effect would not be as immediate but the impact on the environment would be reduced. The same objective would be achieved.
- Pesticides are not sprayed near schools in accordance with the guidance.

In response to a question, Adrian Rozier, Parks Development Manager explained that equipment is not currently shared, but this could be considered. This is not necessarily practical as in the example of mechanical sweepers, these would be used on a fairly constant basis by one team. In response to the suggestion that teams could share a foam-stream machine if the council were to be pesticide-free, he explained that the aim of the trials is to see which method works best and the outcome may not recommend the council invest in this

During the discussion that followed, the panel raised the following points:

- Although the PAN Toolkit was published in 2016, it is still relevant and will be useful for this review.
- The toolkit reports that some local authorities imposed an immediate ban. However, the council decided not to do this.
- The panel was pleased that use is reducing.
- Colas works for other LAs too.
- There must be a change in attitude to appreciate that although some areas will be less neat, wild plants are beautiful in their own way. It is important to take residents along with us in the journey.
- Instructions regarding land management must be clearly communicated to operatives on the ground.
- It is important that Cabinet has the opportunity to consider the report so that it can feed into next year's budget.
- It is important to understand that certain areas may still require pesticide treatment.

The panel discussed what a pesticide-free city would look like and made it clear that no-one is suggesting that that wild plants would run wild on pavements. There are many alternatives to using pesticides to remove them. It is important that these alternatives are identified and trialled.

Councillor Darren Sanders, Cabinet Member for Housing and Tackling Homelessness outlined the overall strategy in his portfolio:

- The table circulated - which showed housing using 0.03 litres of pesticides this year - shows the diligence of the team in reducing pesticides.
- The Pesticide-Free Britain Website includes councils that have adopted a phased reduction in pesticide use, which is what this council and many other authorities are doing.
- There are some practical issues to consider. In housing, some workers are less well paid; he wants to tackle that.
- He has instructed the team to just do it in a practical, realistic and sustainable manner as part of reducing the environmental impact of the service, such as the decarbonisation of housing stock and the introduction of more recycling in the council estate.
- He is very pleased that the panel is going on a site visit to the Buckland housing area.
- Different parts of the council have different issues and have high-profile areas, such as the flower bed near Southsea castle, where looking good may be more important than having a mixture of plants. That difference should be understood when making conclusions and looking at the different rates at which pesticide use has been cut.
- The housing department has a separate budget, that has helped it a wider ecological, pragmatic approach to reducing the impact of its activities.
- In Brighton some pensioners sued the council after tripping on wild plants that were growing in the pavement.
- He was pleased that there had been a significant reduction in vibrations experienced by workers when using strimmers.
- The Baffins Pond Association has received the questionnaire.

- There are some fine examples of rewilding in the city.
- He was recently asked by a resident to remove wild plants in the road because they looked untidy. This shows that people's perceptions of what is acceptable vary.

In response to questions, he explained that:

- All members of the council should have an open discussion about what being pesticide-free means in practice.
- The impact on the tourist industry must be considered.
- He accepts that some people want to see all areas as wild as possible.
- The best alternative method should be used rather than the cheapest.
- There have been no complaints from residents about wild plant management.
- The remit of this review is quite narrow.

In response to questions, Phil Bentley, Head of Estate Services explained that:

- Wild plant growth is controlled by scraping except for Japanese Knotweed and grass control on the wildflower meadow.
- Cleaners have been given long handled scrapers to use if reasonable to do so.
- Staff are fine with the changes. Battery powered trimmers are used where possible and the petrol ones when the stems are thicker.
- The pesticide usage figures for housing (0.03L) shown in the table covers council stock houses in Portsmouth and the Havant Borough.
- Some alternatives come with as many issues as the glyphosate that is being replaced. The service will continue to seek alternatives.
- There is no integrated pesticide management plan.
- Work is planned but flexible depending on weather conditions.

Councillor Chris Dike left the meeting.

Adrian Rozier, Parks Development Manager explained that selective herbicide as a treatment is used on golf courses and sports pitches. The amount of pesticides used varies from year to year depending on the environmental conditions.

Councillor Sanders added that complaints are regularly received from the golf course users about wild plant management. The impact of the herbicides on the environment must be considered.

Future Reviews.

The panel discussed the following possible topics:

- At the last meeting community policing was proposed as a possible topic. Members noted that this area comes under the remit of the Health & Wellbeing Board.
- There is a notice of motion that will be considered at the following week's Full Council meeting regarding improving accessibility in Portsmouth taxis for disabled people.

- The council's progress in expanding plastics recycling. Phil Bentley informed the panel that work is being carried out in Portsea to ensure that the council is ready for the changes in law that are coming.
- The council's progress towards its Carbon Zero target. It was noted that it is important to know the baseline to be able to measure progress. Councillor Sanders suggested that the panel speak to the Principal Strategy Adviser for Carbon Management to understand how she might be able to support a review.

Rachel Hudson, Portsmouth Friends of the Earth suggested that the biodiversity in key areas could be monitored annually. She also recommended a book on pavement plants that had recently been published by the Pesticides Action Network.

Actions

1. A breakdown on pesticide use will be considered at a future meeting.
2. Colas will be invited to the next meeting to discuss:
 - Their company's policy on pesticide use.
 - How the reduction in pesticide use was achieved.
 - What alternative methods of wild plant management / removal they use in other local authorities.
 - Whether they work with any local authorities that have banned the use of pesticides.
3. A link to the Pavement Plants book will be sent to the Chair.

The meeting ended at 4:45pm

Councillor Judith Smyth
Chair