

## **TRAFFIC, ENVIRONMENT & COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY PANEL**

Minutes of the meeting of the Traffic, Environment & Community Safety Scrutiny Panel held on Tuesday 25 July 2023 at 5pm in the Guildhall, Portsmouth

### **Present**

Councillor Judith Smyth (in the Chair)  
Charlotte Gerada  
Simon Boshier  
Jason Fazackarley  
Mark Jeffery

#### **14. Apologies for Absence. (AI 1)**

Apologies were received from Councillors Chris Dike and Kimberley Barrett. Councillor Smyth also gave her apologies for being late to the meeting.

#### **15. Declarations of Members' Interests (AI 2)**

No interests were declared.

#### **16. Minutes of the Previous Meeting. (AI 3)**

**RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 13 July 2023 be agreed as a correct record.**

#### Matters Arising.

Councillor Jeffery asked the panel to note that he felt the possible future topic he had put forward, community policing was suitable for this panel to review.

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

Councillor Charlotte Gerada chaired the meeting.

Eric Brangier, Managing Director of Ensign gave an overview of Colas' approach to weed management. They do use products that contain glyphosate to kill weeds. However, over the last two years, usage has reduced as they are using less concentrated products. There are three visits a year and the use is targeted but the amount used depends on weather and climate. Some weeds are resistant and therefore must be removed manually. In response to questions, he explained that:

- Colas is responsible for maintaining the verges.
- Reducing costs is not a factor in weed removal around trees.
- Colas does not carry out weed maintenance anywhere else.
- He is aware that some other local authorities are pesticide-free. However, a full ban seems to be quite difficult. He is not sure whether that would be acceptable to the public.
- The trials of other methods are encouraging.

## Action

Information on whether pesticides have been increasingly used around trees will be sent to the panel.

Councillor Steve Pitt gave an overview of the strategy for the Culture, Leisure and Economic Development portfolio with regard to pesticide use.

- Trials are being carried out now to try to reduce pesticide use.
- Pesticide use increased when the parks service was brought in-house and afterwards it reduced. There is scope for further reduction.
- Strimming around the base of trees has proven to kill young trees. Manual weed removal is always better. Parks take care not to hit trees, but it is not always realistic to expect them to take the necessary time to trim around the trees, particularly as they are not very well paid.
- The council has a legal duty to remove all Japanese knotweed on its land. Glyphosate is injected directly into the root base. No viable alternative to this method has been found yet.
- The report that was published with the agenda shows that out of 51 local authorities, 33 are still using glyphosate especially for specific treatment of invasive species. Three went pesticide-free and then decided to reintroduce it. Of the eight that have declared themselves to be pesticide-free: only one of these is a city and the others do not manage their own land and therefore never used it in the first place. He suggested that the validity of this data should be taken with a pinch of salt.
- The parks service only uses pesticides when necessary.
- One resident recently contacted the council to praise the weed management trials taking place in Highland Cemetery. They reported that the numbers of butterflies had increased significantly since this new method was introduced.
- Countryside wardens are in place now and can map the different management techniques happening in various areas.
- The verges on the Common were left unmown for as long as possible. These were mowed last week as the common is now required for large events.
- Most parks have rewilded areas. Wildflowers have come up by themselves and are more drought resilient.
- Grass left to grow pose a significant danger to dogs if the seeds get onto their coats. The darts burrow into the skin and make their way into vital organs, leading to the death of the dog. The council therefore ensures that there are clear paths for people to follow. This also shows that certain areas have been deliberately left unmown rather than just neglected.
- Some authorities pour acids, especially vinegar onto land. There are serious implications to doing that. A balanced approach is required.
- The potential cost of using alternatives need to be understood. If parks do more manual removal, additional staff will be required. Recruitment has been difficult this year, especially for this type of work.

In response to questions, Councillor Pitt explained that:

- Purchasing a new vehicle and recruiting at least two new operatives would cost in the region of six figures.
- There is further work to be done as parks are still carrying out trials.

- Manual weed removal would not be possible on bowling greens or golf courses. These need to be treated as special cases.
- Last year the Isle of Wight removed its ban on using glyphosates and then used beach buggies to speed up and down spraying them.
- Care must be taken in reaching a decision to ensure any ban is feasible. A u-turn would be worse.

Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson gave an overview of the strategy in the Transport portfolio:

- The PFI contract extends verge to verge not just highways or pavements.
- Insecticides are not used.
- Weedkillers are used when weeds are blocking roads, paths or drains or are causing a slipping hazard.
- The advantage of a weedkiller is that it kills the roots rather than just the green above ground parts of the plant. Alternatives do not kill the roots and therefore repeat treatments are required.
- Alternatives including freezing, burning and hot oil have been looked into. The aim is to minimise pesticide use as the council learns more.
- It would be unrealistic to remove pesticides completely, but it is very useful and the right process to reduce their use to a minimum.
- It is important not to go from one extreme to another. The council can do things that cost money and get us on the journey. It may not be possible yet to go pesticide-free, but that should not stop us from trying to get down that road to improve things.

In response to questions, Adrian Rozier, Parks Development Manager explained that:

- Westminster council states that it is pesticide-free, but its website says that it is glyphosate free.
- He is unsure how to quantify the amount of product used because its use is targeted.
- One of the council's golf courses is leased out and the other is maintained in-house.
- Burning off Japanese knotweed can be done but the ground needs to be excavated afterwards. A specialist will advise on the appropriate treatment and will carry it out. Of all the local authorities that are pesticide-free that he tried to contact, the vast majority have an exemption particularly for Japanese knotweed. The council may need to accept the need for pesticides in exceptional cases. The specialists were asked about electric shock treatments for Japanese knotweed but advised against using it as there are a number of associated safety issues particularly if it is used in a public place.
- Operatives using pesticides have specific training and wear PPE. Spot treatment is only carried out when appropriate e.g., not in windy conditions.
- He is not aware of any other plants that may need specific treatment of pesticides.
- A London council is using pesticides to eradicate processionary moth caterpillars.

- All local authorities are looking to reduce their use as much as possible. Portsmouth is in line with them and is not expecting a different outcome from the trials. Each local authority is set up differently. Some contract out the maintenance, for some county councils manage their land.
- The way the land is managed has changed, not the number of applications.
- Some local authorities moved too quickly to become pesticide-free and initially had to use staff from other departments to cover the shortfall in order to manage the workload. Now, in addition to having an in-house team, they contract out work at peak times.

In response to a question, Richard Stocks, Highways PFI Deputy Contract Manager explained that:

- Japanese knotweed is a very specific plant and an invasive species. A barrier is erected out it when it's being treated to keep people at a distance.
- Highways has had a significant reduction in its use of pesticides last year: 900 to 560 litres. It will probably have used 400 litres by the end of this year.
- Previous product used 490 chomes per litre. The current one contains 360 per litre. It is not more aggressive. It is a weaker solution.
- The figures show the actual litres used.
- They are always monitoring what else is coming out. As soon as something suitable comes on the market, it will be looked into.

During the discussion, the panel noted that:

- Exemptions may well be necessary, if the city is to go pesticide-free until an effective alternative is found.
- The possible impact on large developments if a non-glyphosate treatment is used on Japanese knotweed must be considered.
- The housing department has done a lot to reduce the volume of pesticides used without increasing costs and has received no complaints. The meadows required herbicide treatment to rebalance them.
- Members are aware of the difficulties in different parts of the Parks portfolio. Farlington Marshes, the golf courses and Southsea Common require tailored approaches.
- The report will include details of expected capital and revenue costs and the impact of any recommendations on the PFI contract which has 7-8 years left to run.
- A golf course in Basingstoke uses a different type of grass that requires a different type of treatment.

The panel noted the completed questionnaires that had been returned.

#### Actions

- A list of the organisations that had been sent the questionnaire will be resent to the panel.
- The University of Portsmouth be asked again for its views.

**18. Future Items for the Panel's Workprogramme. (AI 5)**

The panel discussed possible future reviews and noted that:

- As the panel has carried out reviews on the environment and transport, it may be appropriate to do one on community safety.
- Officers could help with choosing a topic, but the panel decides the scope.
- It is important that any review is manageable within the timescale.

The meeting concluded at 6:45pm

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Councillor Judith Smyth  
Chair