

TRAFFIC, ENVIRONMENT & COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Traffic, Environment & Community Safety Scrutiny Panel held on Friday, 22 September 2023 at 3pm in the Guildhall.

Present

Councillor Judith Smyth (in the Chair)
Charlotte Gerada
Chris Dike

19. Apologies for Absence. (AI 1)

20. Declarations of Members' Interests (AI 2)

Councillor Charlotte Gerada declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest; she is a member of the RSPB.

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

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 July be agreed as a correct record.

Matters Arising

At the previous meeting, Councillor Pitt stated that members of the public had raised concerns about the council's Estates Services' greening proposals in Cosham. The Chair had looked into this and determined that it had concerned public green open spaces under Portsdown Hill and was now resolved.

Action

The location be sent to Phil Bentley, Head of Estates Services so he can look into this.

22. Reducing the use of pesticides on council land. (AI 4)

It was agreed that the panel is aiming to complete this review at its meeting in October if possible, and submit it to Cabinet during November to allow any new expenditure to be considered as part of the 2024/ 25 budget-setting process.

Councillor Kimberley Barrett, Cabinet Member for Climate Change & Greening the City

Councillor Barrett asked the panel to note the following points.

Many people are discussing this important issue which is a priority for the council.

Colas

Some residents have reported that when asked, Colas has left the base of their garden walls unsprayed.

Areas where it is safe to stop weeding have been identified.

There has been some good work with community groups.

Pesticide use has significantly decreased in Estates Services and Parks. Highways is working towards to further reduce their use.

Building up the evidence base is key to ensure the resources are deployed in the correct locations and that the money is there in future budgets.

In response to questions, she explained that:

Felicity Harris, Green and Healthy City Co-Ordinator is very keen to increase biodiversity and green spaces etc. She is working on biodiversity policies and strategies and an updated Greening Strategy will go to Cabinet on 3 October. This will be updated as and when changes happen. It is important that the council's policies are aligned.

There are discussions about including a Biodiversity Policy in the Local Plan.

Work was a little siloed in the past but will be under one umbrella going forward.

She was the Nature Champion for two years, but this role was removed because it was duplicating work that was already being carried out.

As Cabinet Member for Climate Change & Greening the City she works with many departments.

She tries to inform Opposition Spokespersons about what is going on as much as possible. The opposition monthly briefings are not held in public. The spokespersons attend portfolio briefings and decision meetings. Other members can make deputations or just talk to Cabinet Members. She encourages public deputations and is happy for these to be read out. She would be happy for more information to be made public. Public involvement is very important as they do not have all the answers.

She receives many emails from residents with concerns regarding pesticides use and requests for their streets to opt-out of spraying.

More research is required to establish whether there is a link between the reduction of pesticide use and increased biodiversity.

Milton Park is beautiful especially with the changing of the plants during the seasons. However, some complaints were made about the wilding and no-mow areas in the park.

An email from Felicity Harris was read out which included the following points: Every local authority has a duty with regard to improving biodiversity. The council is looking into having a biodiversity paper / strategy which will recognise the importance of being evidence-based and will look at different strands including having a soil policy. It is important that plants being put in now will be resilient to the changing conditions over the next few years.

Felicity Harris is running a workshop on 17 October for officers across many departments.

Action

More information from Felicity Harris is available upon request.

The Greening Strategy will include pesticides use and the results of this panel's findings.

It is important to take people along with us in the journey.

Depaving in Buckland was very successful.

The council is looking into identifying what can be done to encourage and support residents to adopt tree pits. It is important to consider that the responsibility for maintenance would revert to the council if the person no longer able / wants to look after it. The tree pits furthest from the highway would be easier to maintain.

Some residents would like to have wild plants growing at the base of their front walls, but their landlords do not permit this.

More advice can be given to garden owners and allotment holders to reduce pesticide use and increase biodiversity.

The council's Climate and Greening website page can include more information.

During their discussion, the panel raised the following points:

There is an appetite for a new way to manage wild plants. People have noticed more wild plants on front walls and that does not bother them. Care must be taken that paths are kept safe of course.

The management of wild plants without using pesticides may cost less because the council would be doing less.

Seafront noticeboards about the changes of planting have been well received.

This can only progress as part of a wider, integrated strategy.

There may be a need for engagement rather than a big consultation.

Westminster Council encourages residents to adopt tree pits and are advised to attach green ribbons on the trees to show that the pit should not be sprayed.

The Planning Committee can now add a condition to require a permeable surface be laid if a front lawn is being removed to make space for parking.

Discussion paper on Pesticide Changes.

Councillor Dike left the meeting at 4pm.

Charlotte Smith, Assistant Director for Corporate Services introduced the discussion paper that had been published with the agenda and in response to questions, explained that:

Information from national guides could be repurposed to create local guides for residents. Interest in the information provided on the website and social media channels would be evaluated to ensure that it is relevant.

Members agreed that engagement regarding pesticide use would need to be integrated with the rest of the communication strategy. It would focus on information, education and celebration and feature what residents have done.

Other local authorities' use of pesticides.

Councillor Smyth noted that it had been very difficult to obtain a clear picture of what other local authorities are doing and a number have made false steps. The Notice of Motion to Full Council's aim was to eliminate pesticide use. This review has demonstrated that a significant reduction has already been achieved. Care must be taken when referring to eliminating pesticide use, as residents cannot be prevented from using them in their own gardens.

This panel was unable to obtain information from the big landowners Portsmouth Hospitals' NHS Trust and the University of Portsmouth. It is important to consider how the council can work more closely with these partners

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

As glyphosate is effective for a long period of time, no repeat treatment is required.

This is not an exact science; trials are analysed and lessons learnt.

Some alternatives including acetic acid are still treated as hazardous to health and are not as effective as pesticides. Non-spraying methods are therefore preferable. However, alternative could possibly be trailed in different environments.

At the start of their shift, operative collect their tools and glyphosate, then go to the sites on the list. Glyphosate use is not measured per site, so it is not possible to provide more granularity.

Next year, if still glyphosates are still being used, the service is looking into getting a better level of data on the different approaches on sites and the monitoring of outcomes.

Members agreed that a breakdown of glyphosate use in different sites would be very useful and that a method for doing that should be found. Additionally,

if glyphosate treatment did continue to be used on Japanese Knotweed, the panel would not want this to continue indefinitely. The market should be monitored regularly for alternatives.

Draft Weed control in the Parks Service trial report

The panel noted this report and commented that many visitors manage the wild plant growth themselves to a small extent.

Growing in the Community report by the Local Government Association

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

There are approximately 2,000 allotment holders.

The council could restrict what products the allotment associations stock and influence the advice they give to allotment holders.

Empty plots are generally cleared and strimmed as quickly as possible because there is a long waiting list.

Members agreed that a further piece of work would be needed regarding allotments with consultation and involvement of allotment holders.

Glyphosate usage in the Parks, Housing & Highways Services.

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

If people enquired, we talked about what we were doing but people are happy with the approach taken. There had been no complaints about the area around a housing block in Paulsgrove when two maintenance cycles had been missed and the grass was ankle high. There seems to be an acceptance of having more greenery in estates.

Cleaners are instructed though their contracts for to clear wild plants where possible and within reason. Any significant growth is ripped or strimmed.

Members were impressed with the approach taken by Estates Services.

Glyphosate use by Highways.

This report was not available for this meeting but is attached to these minutes as an appendix.

Richard Stocks, Highways PFI Deputy Contract Manager (Technical) gave a brief update on the progress made in reducing pesticide use in highways.

Usage in 2018 was 860 litres and in 2023: 550- 600 litres. This reduction shows the decrease in concentration, not the volume being sprayed.

The alternatives were covered previously and included mechanical methods, electrocution, foam, flame, steam and high-pressure water. There are issues

associated with most of these and also a potential increase in carbon emissions.

Colas is keen to keep up to date with the changes in the market and will trial alternatives when they come up.

The costs that would be incurred if the PFI were amended as a result of an instruction from the council to reduce pesticide use have not been calculated and would be commercially sensitive.

The council is monitoring how other local authorities manage wild plants.

Acetic acid has been trialled but there were complaints about the possible impact on bees and plants.

There is 450km of carriageway and twice as much when footways are included.

Colas will attend the biodiversity workshop that was mentioned earlier in the meeting.

There was concern that planting in a tree pit might have reduced visibility and been a factor in an accident where a child ran into the road.

He has talked to Colas about the letters that they send to owners of hedges that overhang too far onto pavements. These should state more clearly what is expected of the residents and how much should be cut back.

A review into biodiversity improvements in urban Portsmouth 22 March 2022

Members had already seen the Cabinet's response to this biodiversity report and therefore agreed that their current review's recommendations should align with those made in the biodiversity review.

The guiding principles for the drafting of the recommendations

Members discussed these principles and agreed that the review should be put in context with what other local authorities are doing.

The meeting concluded at Time Not Specified.

Councillor Judith Smyth
Chair