

CLIMATE, BIODIVERSITY & PLANNING COMMITTEE

Date: Tuesday, 13 June 2023
Title: Weed Control & Use of Pesticides
Contact Officer: Operations Manager - Angus Whitburn

Background

In 2019 the Council was presented with a policy drafted by STRI (formerly the Sports Turf Research Institute) for the use of pesticides on sporting areas to be used by the former Grounds Contractors. A further update was scheduled for non-sporting areas but due to resources, a final policy on this was not submitted for approval. This has meant that in the years following, all pesticide application in non-sporting areas has ceased in line with the the above policy.

The use of pesticides, mainly herbicides on sporting grounds (bowls greens and cricket squares) is an essential part of their maintenance. Without these applications, the grounds simply won't be playable. The choice of the chemical is carefully made to ensure their usage is kept to a minimum and at some level they biological break down or can be completely absorbed.

Current Situation

Cemeteries

Across Winey Town Council estate, there are areas prone to high weed growth that draw criticism and complaints regularly; these include sensitive areas at the ashes path at Windrush cemetery and the memorial wall area at Tower Hill cemetery. The removal of the weeds in these areas did fall under the ground contract at the time. However, in 2019 when pesticide use ended on non-sporting areas the councils' grounds contractors, Continental Landscapes were asked to provide costings to remove weeds by hand. The huge amount of labour it would have required meant they weren't interested in costing it. The task was instead passed to the council's in-house works team.

The process of removing these weeds by hand consumes a large amount of labour. Depending on how strong the growing season is this can become a monstrous task to keep on top of the two cemetery areas. Windrush ashes path for example can consume up to 100hrs of labour to complete the task once, and if the growing season is strong, the task has to be repeated up to 16 times through the season. Finding 1600hrs of labour is a huge task along with the team's other burial and grounds maintenance obligations so often the team just has to be reactive when complaints are received.

Using weed rippers on brush cutters, a pedestrian weed brush, flame guns and a huge range of tools and materials have all been tried but none have reduced the labour or given an acceptable appearance.

This large amount of labour in comparison to an application of an appropriate herbicide is considerable. Many herbicidal products on the market would reduce this job from the potential 1600hrs to 2-3hrs to apply a residual weed killer twice yearly.

Recreation grounds

Certain other areas that are quite prone to weeds are the hardcourt areas mainly around the leys recreation round. As these aren't quite as prestigious or scrutinised as much as the cemeteries the Operations manager has found that strimming off the growth down to the head is appropriate for the area, but this leaves a messy finish and the vegetation regenerates quickly.

Flower Beds

Flower beds are susceptible to weed growth due to the well-tilled ground, however the maintenance team, are required to prune, water and litter pick these beds on a regular basis so amongst that work the removal of weeds is programmed in with little impact.

Tree's

The ivy growth around trees, killing of tree stumps to prevent regrowth and grass cutting around roots are three jobs that can require herbicide use.

Ivy Growth

Twice a year, the maintenance team remove epicormic growth from trees and will ring the ivy on as many trees as possible in this period. Ringing the ivy is a method to control and kill off ivy growth to ensure trees are not swamped by the plant. Although not perfect this method appears to be an appropriate way to control the ivy growth without the need for herbicides. The Council has also received complaints regarding ivy growth around trees on its estate.

Stump regrowth

Trees that are felled normally require the stump to be treated to prevent regrowth. As much as possible the Operation Manager or Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer will instruct contractors to stump grind our the sump below ground level preventing regrowth. However, on occasion, this isn't possible and the only way to control the regrowth is to plug in Eco plugs that control and application of glyphosate to the tree stump preventing regrowth.

Mowing around trees

One area the council does receive complaints in, is the damage to tree roots through mowers and trimmers, this does affect the health of the tree so is a concern. In the past this has been avoided through the spraying of growth regulators, reducing the need to cut the grass around trees. Now the use of growth regulators has decreased due to it being seen as an unnecessary herbicide application standard mowing has taken it place. Currently, the grounds maintenance team cut around trees at the same frequency and height as the area of grass

the trees are located in. The Operations Manager would recommend that this be adjusted through policy to allow this grass to be left longer around trees and reduce the cutting frequency to best protect tree roots.

Environmental impact

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 Councillors should have due regard to the environmental impact of any decisions they make with regard to its facilities and services it operates.

Herbicides have an impact on the environment, some glyphosate-based herbicides don't break down causing unintended damage to the surrounding environment.

Risk

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

As mentioned in the report the council receives a large number of complaints regarding the ashes path at Windrush Cemetery. And as outlined in the report it is hard to find the labour to keep this problem under control. Without the approved use of the correct herbicide, this area will be difficult to maintain.

Leaving the grass longer around trees could draw criticism as they are popular spots to shelter from the sun. These spots may not be so comfortable when the grass is long and potentially accumulates more litter.

Financial implications

Described here or as stated in the report above.

- There is a sufficient budget to cover the cost of additional herbicides, training and equipment in the ground maintenance budget.
- The cost of the required labour to remove weeds including ivy by hand is considerable compared to the cost of materials.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider the following:

1. Approve the drafting of a policy for the use of pesticides based on the information provided in the report and,
2. Provide feedback to officers on the correct approach for herbicide use around trees.