



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Joint Meeting of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday, 4 March 2025

Report of Councillor Rhys Baker
Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste

Use of Pesticides across South Kesteven

Report Author

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Purpose of Report

To provide information on the Council's use of pesticides across the district following a Motion presented at a meeting of Full Council held on 21 November 2024.

Recommendations

In noting the contents of this report, the joint meeting of the Environment and Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees:

1. **Recommend to Cabinet that the Council should continue with a strategy to reduce the use of glyphosate on land it is responsible for maintaining where this is possible without having a detrimental impact on the aesthetic appeal of the district.**

Decision Information

Does the report contain any exempt or confidential information not for publication? No

What are the relevant corporate priorities? Sustainable South Kesteven

Which wards are impacted? All Wards

1. Implications

Taking into consideration implications relating to finance and procurement, legal and governance, risk and mitigation, health and safety, diversity and inclusion, safeguarding, staffing, community safety, mental health and wellbeing and the impact on the Council's declaration of a climate change emergency, the following implications have been identified:

Finance and Procurement

- 1.1 The use of glyphosate on Council land is a cost-effective method of controlling weed growth. The annual costs of purchasing glyphosate are relatively low and these costs together with the appropriate level of labour resource are currently being met within existing budgets.
- 1.2 Should alternative methods of weed control be approved this will involve the purchase and maintenance of additional machinery, and the cost of additional labour, maintenance and vehicles will need to be considered. None of these costs have been factored into the Council's budget for financial year 2025/26 and therefore any change to the current specification would result in a budget pressure for the Council.

Completed by: David Scott, Assistant Director of Finance (deputy s151 officer)

Legal and Governance

- 1.3 There are no significant legal or governance considerations arising from this report.

Completed by: Graham Watts, Monitoring Officer

Health and Safety

- 1.4 The use of glyphosate by the Council's Street Scene team is covered by a risk assessment and operating procedures. The glyphosate used is classed as a hazardous material and is currently used and stored in accordance with the manufacturers recommendations and industry best practice guidelines. The guidelines also state how to dispose of any excess product safely.

- 1.5 The risk assessment details appropriate mitigation measures which include following the product instructions, the use of appropriate personal protective equipment, washing hands after use, and being mindful of potential spray drift whilst in use.
- 1.6 The Council has a statutory duty of care and a moral obligation to protect both the public, and its employees and contractors from unreasonable foreseeable harm. When the Council considers employing alternative methods of weed control, then each method would need to be independently risk assessed to identify, mitigate and control any risks arising from the activity. The hierarchy of control requires the review and reduction of risk so any change must always be to a substance with a reduced risk of harm
- 1.7 Employers must conduct their work in a way that ensures, as far as reasonably practicable, that its staff, contractor and the public are not exposed to risks. Under UK health and safety law, the "reasonably practicable" test involves weighing the level of risk against the time, cost, and effort required to control it. Other factors, such as environmental sustainability, may be relevant but must not compromise safety.

Completed by: Phil Swinton, Emergency Planning and Health and Safety Lead

Climate Change

- 1.8 The use of glyphosate can have a direct and indirect effect on the environment. The eradication of weeds impacts birds and other animals by destroying a food source and adversely impacting their habitats. As glyphosates are water soluble, if they are not applied properly, they can enter water bodies and impact species which underpin the aquatic food chain. They have also been found to have adverse effects on earthworms, insects and bees.
- 1.9 The Council's use of glyphosate is currently limited to hard surfaces in mainly urban areas for the purpose of controlling weed growth. The product currently being used by the Council, according to the manufacturer, is not harmful to animals or aquatic life if diluted and applied according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- 1.10 When used responsibly glyphosate may have a lower environmental impact when compared to alternative herbicides which may require more frequent applications or have a higher toxicity.
- 1.11 The Council's Tree Officer works within the Sustainability and Climate Change team and is responsible for the delivery of the Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy (2024 – 2034). It has been identified that the delivery of the Strategy, and the protection and enhancement of the district's tree population, will play a key role in the Council's ambitions to increase biodiversity and help tackle the impact of climate

change. It is therefore important to consider the impact a ban of glyphosates across the district would have in relation to tree and woodland establishment. Without the ability to efficiently control weeds, which compete with the newly planted trees during their establishment phase, the scale and ambition of tree planting may need to be reviewed.

- 1.12 Whilst the concerns around the use of glyphosate are understandable, this substance can play a vital role in managing invasive species which may prevent tree planting (e.g. Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam, giant hogweed, rhododendron). A complete ban could hinder the Council's efforts to maintain tree populations, protect biodiversity and ensure successful amenity tree establishment and woodland creation.
- 1.13 In arboriculture, the use of pesticides is currently very limited. However, insecticides and fungicides can be used to control non-native pests and diseases, and a blanket ban on their use could impact the Council's ability to deal with any current or emerging threats.
- 1.14 The benefit of using glyphosate responsibly is that its use can be targeted and localised, therefore limiting the impact on surrounding wildlife and plants. This is extremely important in areas where species beneficial to biodiversity are present such as pollinators. Glyphosates also enable a quick response to any outbreaks which could damage or limit tree growth.

Completed by: Serena Brown, Sustainability and Climate Change Manager

2. Background to the Report

- 2.1. The Council's Corporate Plan (2024 – 2027) outlines the Council's priority for a Sustainable South Kesteven. This includes the ambition to ensure the district is a safe, clean and pleasant place to live, work and visit and to protect and enhance the natural environment.
- 2.2. At the meeting of Council on Thursday 21 November 2024 a Motion was presented to phase out the use of all synthetic pesticides on Council owned land, either by operatives directly employed by the Council or by third-party contractors. Following debate, it was agreed this matter should be reviewed and investigated in a timely fashion and considered at a joint meeting of the Environment and Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Current Use of Glyphosate

- 2.3. The Council's Street Scene Team are responsible for the cleanliness, safety and aesthetic appeal of streets across the district and public open spaces under the Council's ownership. This encompasses both grounds maintenance and street cleansing activities across General Fund and Housing Revenue Account areas.
- 2.4. The district of South Kesteven covers approximately 365 square miles. In terms of grounds maintenance activities, the total amount of land which the Council's Street Scene Team are responsible for equates to 1,044,004 square metres.
- 2.5. Currently the Street Scene Team use Round Up Pro Active 360 to kill and suppress weeds on identified areas across the district. This is a glyphosate herbicide recommended for the total control of annual and perennial grasses and broad-leaved weeds in non-crop areas and is the only chemical application which is routinely applied by the Council. The product is used under strict spraying conditions and only at the recommended dilution rates. When used under the correct conditions, although the neat (undiluted) substance used is identified as being hazardous, in its diluted form the manufacturer claims that it is not harmful to animals or aquatic life.
- 2.6. Full details of the locations which are currently treated are provided in **Appendix One**. The total amount of land identified equates to 146,251 square metres representing 14% of the total land the Council currently maintains. However, it is important to note that the whole of the area identified is not routinely treated with glyphosate, and this is only applied to areas where weed growth is present. Typically, the percentage of a site receiving treatment varies between 2% and 10% of the whole area identified.
- 2.7. The areas currently treated are limited to hard surfaces and the Council does not routinely apply glyphosate to any other areas. Typically, a maximum of four applications of product are applied per site per year, however this may be less depending on the prevailing weather conditions. Weed spraying activity is predominantly undertaken in the summer months when weed growth is most prolific.
- 2.8. The list of sites provided at **Appendix One** have been identified as either General Fund (GF) or Housing Revenue Account (HRA) land. Out of the total of 237 sites 187 of these are areas which are the responsibility of the HRA. The specification for maintaining these areas is agreed with Council's Housing Team, and the General Fund budget receives a payment for the service provided from the HRA budget.
- 2.9. In the case of Wyndham, Queen Elizabeth and Dysart Road Parks, weed control is only applied to paths and hard surfaces. Each of these parks currently have Green

Flag awards and any reduction in the level of maintenance undertaken, or in the aesthetic appeal of the amenities, may negatively impact the Council's ability to retain this status. A key part of the Green Flag inspection regime is the ability to demonstrate effective weed control.

- 2.10. The remaining sites listed in **Appendix One** include the Council's civic offices, bus stations, play areas, churchyards, and leisure centres.
- 2.11. The amount of glyphosate used by the Council has already decreased over recent years. Historically the base of trees and a strip adjoining railings or other barriers were treated with glyphosate to kill an area of grass and prevent potential damage during grass cutting. An alternative measure has now been implemented whereby the grass is allowed to grow longer in such areas to create a mowing strip. While this has reduced the need for glyphosate, it has been identified for larger scale tree planting that grass competes with young trees for essential resources such as water and nutrients. For newly planted trees, a clear mulched area is now being put in place around the base of the tree to help retain soil moisture, regulate temperature, and prevent competition, ultimately supporting the tree's successful establishment.
- 2.12. In financial year 2023/24 a total amount of £490 was spent on glyphosate with a significant amount of stock being left unused at the end of the financial year. Year to date the total amount expended is £1,582. However, it should be noted that 200 litres of glyphosate was applied to the whole of the Turnpike Road site on two occasions to prepare the land for the build of the new depot. The provision of labour and materials from the Street Scene team resulted in a significant saving when compared to the cost provided by the Council's contractor for undertaking these works.

Invasive Species

- 2.13. The use of glyphosate is crucial for controlling non-native or invasive plant species such as Japanese Knotweed and Hemlock. These species often compete with native trees and vegetation and prevent other plants flourishing. Therefore, it is acknowledged that the targeted use of glyphosates can help to preserve native ecosystems.
- 2.14. Glyphosates are also highly effective when applied to cut stumps to prevent the regrowth of undesirable trees, plants or woody weeds after they have been felled. Products such as Ecoplugs allow a highly targeted application of glyphosate and minimise the risk of accidental exposure, to humans and the environment.

Complaints

- 2.15. An analysis of the Council's complaints system has not identified any complaints, either in relation to the Council's use of glyphosate or relating to the prevalence of weeds across the district.
- 2.16. There is currently no evidence to suggest whether the lack of complaints is because the Council are effectively controlling weed growth, or whether the use of glyphosates is not an issue which attracts significant community interest.

Alternative Options

- 2.17. **Table One** below details some alternative options which have been identified to either eliminate or reduce the amount of glyphosate being used together with some advantages and disadvantages of each method:

Table One – Alternative Options for Weed Control

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Manual labour – remove weeds via hand or non-mechanical tools	Negates the need to use glyphosates	Time intensive and repeated visits would be required. As an estimate week removal would be required on a two weekly basis during the summer months
	Thorough and precise way to remove weeds	This option would require additional resource within the team. A conservative estimate would involve: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Four additional operatives• Two additional vehicles
		Weed regrowth can occur if the roots are not effectively removed
		Hand tools are not effective against some non-native invasives (e.g. Japanese knotweed)

Mechanical – use of weed ripper machinery	Effective in removing weeds from hard surfaces	Use of machinery is limited due to potential damage to surfaces, ie. tarmac and paving
	Operates without the need for chemicals or water	The current machines have been tested for hand arm vibration impact and can only be used for 15 minutes at a time to prevent injury to the user
		Requires investment to purchase and maintain new machinery. An initial two machines would be required costing approximately £2,400 each
		This option would require additional resource within the team. A conservative estimate would involve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two additional operatives • One additional vehicle
Mechanical – use of foam stream machinery	Glyphosate free alternative	Cost of purchasing and maintaining additional equipment. An initial two entry level machines would cost £21,200 each
	More effective than using hot water treatments	This option would require additional resource within the team A conservative estimate would involve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two additional operatives • One additional vehicle
		Foam treatments are ineffective at killing deep rooted weeds and therefore repeat visits would be necessary
		Machinery and a water source would need to be transported around the district

		The health and safety implications of using hot foam treatments would need to be risk assessed
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Feedback from Wider Organisations

- 2.18. The Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK) promotes banning the use of glyphosates and transitioning to alternative methods of controlling weeds. They advocate a phased approach to stopping the use of glyphosate and do not advise eliminating its use overnight, suggesting that such action would be counterproductive.
- 2.19. PAN UK consider a three-year phased approach, in consultation with local residents and stakeholders, is likely to be more successful and have produced a comprehensive guide for local authorities interested in phasing out the use of glyphosates. Their advice includes selecting trial areas where the use of glyphosates is withdrawn over a few seasons.
- 2.20. PAN UK have a track record of working with local councils to transition to non-chemical alternatives. Successes identified on their website include working with Bristol, Lewes and Hammersmith, and Fulham.
- 2.21. However, research has identified several challenges associated with transitioning to alternative methods of weed control. The potential implications include out of control weed growth, public safety concerns and resident dissatisfaction. Some of the Councils who have made the decision to ban glyphosates have since reversed the decision due to public pressure. These include the following:

Brighton and Hove City Council:

Year of decision to ban glyphosate: 2019, decision reversed in 2024

Reason: Significant weed overgrowth led to safety concerns on pavements and roads. Alternatives including manual removal and foam were deemed insufficient, prompting reintroduction of glyphosates in a controlled manner.

North Lanarkshire Council:

Year of decision to ban glyphosate: April 2021, decision reversed in 2021

Reason: The council faced challenges in managing weeds effectively without herbicides, leading to operational difficulties.

Lambeth Council:

Year of decision to ban glyphosate: 2019, decision reversed in 2023

Reason: Weed overgrowth caused complaints from residents and safety issues were identified on pavements. Manual methods employed could not keep up with the scale of weed growth.

3. Key Considerations

- 3.1. The Council's current use of glyphosate to control weed growth has proven to be a very cost-effective tool in maintaining the aesthetic appeal of areas and sites across the district. The spend on glyphosate is minimal and its application is currently met within existing resources within the Council's Street Scene team.
- 3.2. The use of glyphosate can be highly targeted and allow unwanted weeds and vegetation to be treated without harming other plants. This approach is not easily achievable with other mechanical methods.
- 3.3. An outright ban across Council owned land would remove a proven strategy for weed control and prevent the control of invasive plant species. It would also impact arboriculture and the successful establishment of trees and woodland in line with the Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy.
- 3.4. The Council's use of glyphosate is minimal considering the size of the district and the land which it is currently responsible for maintaining. In recent times the amount of glyphosate used has already reduced, and the Council has adopted a strategic approach to treating hard surfaces only where required to remove and prevent weed growth.
- 3.5. Continuing with this strategy and seeking to further reduce the use of glyphosate is more economical than the mechanical removal or alternative controls which have been identified. Each of these require additional labour resource, enhanced monitoring, and the purchase of equipment.
- 3.6. No consultation has been undertaken to determine the level of community support for withdrawing the use of glyphosate on Council owned land. Should such a decision be made it would be vital to engage with residents and businesses to identify the level of support or otherwise.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1. The alternative methods of weed control and suppression are detailed within the body of this report.

5. Reasons for the Recommendations

- 5.1. The Council is currently effectively controlling weed growth on the land it is responsible for across the district in a proven and cost-effective manner. In addition, the amount of glyphosate being used is minimal and has already reduced in recent times.
- 5.2. Any deviation from the current strategy would require a robust consultation exercise to be undertaken to determine the level of support for a ban on the Council's use of glyphosate considering the potential impact. Research has shown that some Councils who have taken this decision have then had to reverse it due to public complaints and the ability to effectively control weed growth.

6. Appendices

- 6.1 **Appendix One** – List of Council sites receiving treatment.