

Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission

24th April 2017



Report of: Strategic Director, Neighbourhoods

Title: Outcome Report - Cotham trial for glyphosate-free weed treatment
Ward: Cotham, Ashley

Officer Presenting Report: Strategic Director, Neighbourhoods: Alison Comley

Contact Telephone Number: 0117 3574357

Recommendation

1. To continue to use glyphosate in parks and green spaces, on the adopted highway and on hard surfaces under council ownership as necessary.
2. To map priority areas and features for weed treatment with a view to reducing use of glyphosate where possible as a precautionary approach. This would require commitment from individual service areas.
3. To consider longer-term weed treatment contracts from 18/19 and in doing so assess whether costs of alternative treatments can be lowered through investment and whether environmental impacts from water and energy use can be reduced.

Summary

The Council has completed a 12 month trial in Cotham ward and St Andrews Park to treat weed growth on the adopted highway without using a glyphosate-based product. It has also completed a desktop study of alternatives to glyphosate for weed control.

The trial, desktop study and European guidance do not provide a compelling environmental or financial rationale, at this point in time, to change the approach to weed treatment. However, growing public interest in the use of glyphosate suggests that recent efforts to reduce its use in parks and open spaces should continue and be extended to hard surfaces where possible and ways to lower the cost of alternative weed treatment on the highway should be sought.

The significant issues arising are:

Final research findings are in line with those set out in the October 2016 'Interim Findings' report to Scrutiny:

1. Use of an acetic acid-based product on the highway is closest to using a glyphosate product in terms of cost but is a greater cost and is less effective per application;

2. Alternative treatments such as foam stream are available but appear to be at a much higher cost, have other environmental impacts, and are more difficult to use in a congested urban environment;
3. Greater weed growth on the highway and in parks has not generated a significant uplift in complaints in the trial and residents' tolerance to weeds in streets should be tested further;
4. Greater attention to hard surface design and materials will reduce the need to control weed growth in the long term;
5. Keep up to-date with relevant research and consider emerging products and techniques;
6. It is recommended to map priority areas and features for weed treatment with a view to reducing use of glyphosate where possible as a precautionary approach.

Context

- A full context to the trial and the assessment of glyphosate alternatives was set out in the October 2016 interim report to Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission and is not repeated here.
- A more detailed methodology of the trial and other key primary and secondary research is given in Appendix 1.

Proposal

- The aim of the trial was to provide answers to the following:
 - i. How effective is acetic acid compared to glyphosate as a herbicide?
 - ii. How is the public responding to visual changes in parks and streets?
 - iii. What are the costs of alternative weed control?
 - iv. Will further reduction on herbicide application affect infrastructure?
 - v. How and where can herbicide use be reduced without damage to infrastructure or increasing public concern?
- The final conclusion of the 12-month trial and desktop research exercise is not substantially different from the findings set out on the October 2016 'Interim findings' Neighbourhoods Scrutiny report. Updated recommendations are:

- i. *Use of an acetic acid-based product on the highway is closest to using a glyphosate product in terms of cost but is a greater cost and is less effective.*

The reduced effectiveness of acetic acid results in a need for more frequent applications in addition to each application being more expensive than glyphosate. The cost is likely to be at least 3.5 times greater than glyphosate for the same outcome.

An extension of the trial for a further 12 months may allow the testing of acetic acid at a higher concentration but this will require the agreement of Bristol Waste Company.

Through 2017/18 the Parks service will not use glyphosate in its parks and green spaces within the 16/17 trial area nor in St Andrews Park in order to look for longer term trends.

- ii. *Alternative treatments such as foam stream are available but appear to be at a much higher cost and are difficult to use in a congested urban environment.*

A long-term weed treatment contract may improve the overall cost of this method by allowing for investment in machinery. However concerns about its practicability and its environmental impact remain. Shorter-term contracts will limit the pool of contractors to approach and affect competitiveness. However, for the next two years, uncertainty over Council funding may favour shorter term contracts.

- iii. *Greater weed growth on the highway and in parks has not generated a significant uplift in complaints in the trial and resident tolerance to weeds in streets should be tested further.*

This continued to be the case for the remainder of the trial and residents' tolerance for weeds in public areas could perhaps be tested further.

- iv. *Greater attention to hard surface design and materials will reduce the need to control weed growth in the long term.*

- v. *It isn't clear that alternatives to glyphosate are better for health or the environment.*

This is still the case. Of particular concern is the amount of water used in non-mechanical methods and the amount of energy used in applications.

- vi. *It is recommended to map priority areas and features for weed treatment with a view to reducing use of glyphosate where possible as a precautionary approach.*

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Trial and comparison for glyphosate free weed treatment in Bristol parks and highway surfaces