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## **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT**

Date Written	20 <sup>th</sup> October 2020
Report Author	Robert Barnett
Service Area	Neighbourhood services, parks
Committee Date	2 <sup>nd</sup> November 2020

*To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen*

# **Weed Spraying Throughout the County Borough**

## **1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The presence or absence of weeds is an important element of what we call local environmental quality. If a street has lots of weeds, it looks rundown and uncared for. It can also attract environmental crime such as littering and fly-tipping, and if left to grow unchecked their roots can cause damage to pavements and garden walls. Streets that are free from weeds, on the other hand, look cleaner, tidier, and more welcoming.
- 1.2 In addition to native weeds, which appear on our highways and streets Invasive weed species such as Japanese Knotweed have become a major problem in the UK and tackling it is difficult and expensive. It can adversely affect building foundations and structures and can prevent people getting a mortgage if it is present at the property for sale or even if it is close by.
- 1.3 The most effective, cost efficient and widely used method of control of Japanese knotweed is by treating it with an herbicide containing the active ingredient called glyphosate. This chemical has been around for 40 years but questions are now being asked on its safety of use. National agencies across the world have declared glyphosate safe to use, however some countries have now decided to ban glyphosate or severely curtail its use.

## **2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 2.1 That the scrutiny committee notes the contents of this report.

### **3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 This report informs members of the Council's current practices in relation to weed control, its effects on biodiversity and people and highlight the risks of using certain chemicals like Glyphosate.

### **4.0 WHERE WE WERE**

#### (a) STREET SPRAYING

- 4.1 Prior to 2014 weed growth within the county borough was tackled in house by our grounds maintenance teams. Street weeds were sprayed twice throughout the summer period by our qualified staff using CDA (Controlled Droplet application) equipment. This method replaced the old knapsack type sprayers and reduced exposure of our staff to chemicals and reduced spray drift and the amount of chemical used. Weeds were not removed, as they remained small due to the successive herbicide applications.
- 4.2 However, this was labour intensive and subsequent efficiency savings meant there was not sufficient numbers of staff to complete the street spraying during the busy summer period. At that time the street spraying element was contracted out to companies with the necessary skills and equipment to provide the service for us.
- 4.3 Chemical solutions were readily available for a range of problems and products such as grass growth retardants, contact herbicides like paraquat, selective weed killers to remove weed from fine turf areas, brush wood killers etc. all of which were used by the council at one time or another.
- 4.4 With a better understanding of their long-term persistence within the soil and their effects on wildlife many chemicals have already been banned.
- 4.5 The council now has obligations to protect and enhance biodiversity under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and we must be much more careful in our use of chemicals to control weeds, pests and diseases. From December 31<sup>st</sup> 2019, the Council has been required to report back to Welsh Government to demonstrate the actions taken to fulfil duties under the act.

#### (b) JAPANESE KNOTWEED.( *Fallopia Japonica*)

- 4.6 Originally introduced to Britain by the Victorians in the 1800s as an ornamental garden plant, it quickly established itself spreading throughout the country. . It grows rigorously and spreads rapidly – up to 2m in one season with its underground root systems spreading deeply beneath the ground which can then cause damage to property and also make it very difficult eradicate.
- 4.7 In recent years the local authority has been involved with the eradication of Japanese knotweed on Council land and has worked in conjunction with private contractors which were externally funded at that time. Gradually methods and timings of chemical applications have changed but the process of eradication is essentially the same.

### **5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW**

#### (a) STREET SPRAYING

- 5.1 The local authority contracts out its street spraying (currently to Complete Weed Control) who treat all of the County Borough's streets and highways between the

months of May and July depending on weather conditions. This company utilises specialist spraying equipment fitted with chlorophyll detecting sensors. This ensures only the weeds are sprayed and not hard surfaces, this helps reduce the amount of chemical sprayed onto our streets. This method can reduce the amount of chemical required by up to 80%

(b) JAPANESE KNOTWEED

- 5.2 Now regarded as the single most problematic invasive species in the UK, Japanese Knotweed control is a priority for many local authorities. Japanese Knotweed will grow practically anywhere and once established is difficult to eradicate and can take many years of repeated herbicide treatments before it is killed off.
- 5.3 It spreads, not through seeds, but by being vegetative, i.e. all new plants are created by fragments of existing foliage and rhizome (underground stem). Anyone working near Japanese Knotweed has to take precautions to prevent it being spread by moving soil or small pieces of the plant from one site to the next.
- 5.4 Japanese Knotweed on Council land is currently controlled in house by Council staff. Studies have shown that the best results have been obtained during the end of plants flowering period. This is usually around September.
- 5.5 Merthyr Tydfil currently has around 60 active sites totalling approximately 1000 square metres of Japanese knotweed on Council land. In the last 5 years 58 sites have been eradicated which covered an area of 762 square metres
- 5.6 It is not against the law for landowners to have Japanese knotweed on their property. However, if it can be shown that the plant has spread from their property onto another property, they could be considered responsible for any damage and the costs of control.
- 5.7 Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 it is an offence to plant or otherwise cause it to grow in the wild. If its spread is not controlled land owners may be liable to prosecution
- 5.8 Some mortgage providers will no longer issue mortgages if there is Japanese Knotweed present on or within 7 m of the boundary. We occasionally receive requests from prospective home buyers and sellers asking for details of the Council's Japanese knotweed spraying programme. This can help buyers get a mortgage and also home owners to sell their property.
- 5.9 The Council is not responsible for Japanese knotweed on private land. However due to the plant's ability to spread it would not make sense to spray a knotweed stand on Council land and leave the adjacent patch untreated. However, we do have to seek permission from the land owner prior to work taking place.
- 5.10 Occasionally requests are received from land owners who want the Council to treat Japanese knotweed on their land. If it's easily accessible and safe to do so we can treat it. We would then charge the owner to cover the costs for our time and any materials used.

(c) The Use of Glyphosate.

- 5.11 There has been a great deal of debate across the world on the use of this chemical since the publication of a report from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in 2015. It found the Glyphosate was 'a probable human carcinogen' and these concerns have been heightened by recent court rulings in the United States which have awarded multi-million dollar damages to citizens who have claimed continued use of Glyphosate has caused them to develop cancer.
- 5.12 Legislation has been introduced in New York to ban glyphosate products from public parks and other properties, other countries such as Italy and Portugal have also

imposed bans on the use of Glyphosate in public areas. France and Germany are seeking to phase in a ban on its use.

- 5.13 There is growing concern and pressure for local authorities to move to a more integrated approach to weed control.
- 5.14 Some UK local authorities have taken the decision to either ban glyphosate based herbicide totally or at least in specific areas such as schools and parks.
- 5.15 Glyphosate is still legal in the UK and is on the EU pesticides database until 15 December 2022.
- 5.16 Alternatives to the use of Glyphosate herbicide are limited and there is no suitable substitute at the moment. Most other weed killers have been withdrawn from the market, as they are less environmentally friendly. They are also more likely to be hazardous to wildlife and particularly harmful to bees foraging on weeds. They are also less effective and more expensive.
- 5.17 Other alternatives such as brushing, sweeping, hoeing and hand weeding are all far more labour intensive and therefore much more costly. Newer methods which don't use chemicals such as hot water, Foam, and steam procedures are only partially effective as they don't kill the roots of weeds just the top growth. These procedures also have to be done on a regular basis and all can be lethal to bees and insects.
- 5.18 If the Council was to ban the use of Glyphosate it would require a range of additional equipment such as sweepers, flame guns, hot water or foaming machines. A manual based approach would require additional staff to maintain current levels of control.

## **6.0 WHERE WE WANT TO BE**

- 6.1 Weed free streets is something that we would all like and up until recently this has been achieved by the use of herbicide treatments throughout the summer. However, the advantages of using any form of chemical herbicide must be balanced against any negative effects and risks to our staff, members of the public and on biodiversity. At the moment there is no effective substitute for glyphosate and Councils are being encouraged to adopt a more integrated approach. This means adopting cultural methods such as hoeing out weeds by hand, physical removal by specialised brushes on existing and/or new machinery, investing in new technology such as FoamStream (hot foam which kills the plant but not the roots). All of these are options but are not as cost effective as the current treatment and would require additional resources if this was adopted.
- 6.2 It is likely that Glyphosate will be taken off the approved list at some time and unless there is a real alternative local authorities will have to implement other methods. Some councils are already making these changes. In the London Borough of Lambeth glyphosate will be phased out for routine weeding of all their streets from October 2021. Residents can opt out from having their streets sprayed in 2021-22 if they commit to weeding the streets themselves.

## **7.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT**

- 7.1 We need to carefully consider the scale of Glyphosate use, the likely risks arising and the potential to limit the reliance on glyphosate products.
- 7.2 It appears the only realistic option at present until affordable and effective alternatives can be found is to use glyphosate products as sparingly as possible and away from high public footfall areas. The adoption of a more integrated approach is the way to go as it reduces the exposure to chemicals and can also improve levels of

biodiversity. These methods are more labour intensive and expensive and there may also be a need for the public to accept higher levels of weed growth as a result.

## 8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

8.1 Our contribution to the Environmental Wellbeing objectives are as follows:

- **Environmental damage is minimised by preventing pollution.** This objective is supported by the reduction in the use of herbicides; and
- **Merthyr Tydfil has good quality biodiverse and connected green infrastructure and open spaces.** The over reliance of chemical controls can have an adverse effect on biodiversity.

**JUDITH JONES CHIEF OFFICER  
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<b>BACKGROUND PAPERS</b>		
<b>Title of Document(s)</b>	<b>Document(s) Date</b>	<b>Document Location</b>
List the Background documents which have been relied on in preparing the report. E.g. previous minutes of relevant committees		
<b>Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?</b>		