

# Minimising the use of Glyphosate herbicide to control vegetation/weeds in public spaces – 2020/2021

### Introduction

The Council planned to trial an alternative approach in controlling vegetation/weeds in public spaces this year in order to reduce its reliance upon the use of glyphosate based herbicides, and to consider alternative approaches to managing unwanted vegetation.

*October 2020 update: Due to COVID-19 and the availability of resources or ability to source and trial demonstration equipment within the lockdown period, Ubico has been unable to progress the use of alternative approaches as much as originally hoped.*

*The very dry spring in 2020 has helped naturally control weed growth in the early part of the year but the changing weather conditions from late June and early July has also resulted in weed growth which needs to be addressed within available resources, minimising the use of glyphosate. The reduced footfall in some areas of the town during lockdown has resulted in more weed growth than usual because footfall prevents germination and this has not been the case this year, particularly in the town centre and other outlying retail outlets making the challenge greater than usual.*

*Ubico has continued to address weed growth in the town centre by using manual methods of removal combined with the use of the jet wash equipment which has been fairly successful and would have been more so if jet wash resources hadn't been reduced due to the impact of COVID-19.*

*Across the rest of the town the biggest issues seem to be weeds growing at the back of pavements or in highway road gullies which ordinarily would have been controlled by 2 applications of glyphosate herbicide. Ubico will be trialling the use of weed removal equipment in targeted high profile areas during the year to assess the impact of this approach, within existing budgets. It may be necessary in some areas to consider the use of glyphosate herbicide, but this will only be applied where absolutely necessary.*

*Set out below is a summary of the alternative approaches which were planned to be trialled and an update on where we are following COVID-19.*

**It should be highlighted that other authorities who have adopted alternative approaches to weed control rather than using glyphosate herbicides such as Brighton have required additional budget to deliver more environmentally friendly manual approaches although we are endeavouring to deliver alternative approaches within existing resources at present.**

### Background – why we are reviewing our approach

In 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) published a report which stated that glyphosate was “probably carcinogenic to humans”. Since then, there has been a significant debate about whether herbicides including glyphosate, are safe to use.

There is growing concern about the risks to human health and to our biodiversity from unrestricted use of glyphosate as a herbicide. The World Health Organisation has expressed concern about its use, and there are thousands of lawsuits in US courts alleging links between glyphosate herbicide and cancer.

The council is aware of a growing concern from residents about the use of herbicides in the town which is demonstrated by a number of enquiries via councillors, FOI requests and residents themselves.

Currently glyphosate is licenced by the European Chemical Agency until 2022, with the European Food Agency stating that it is unlikely to pose a public health risk.

National agencies across the world have declared glyphosate to be safe to use however some countries have now decided to ban glyphosate or severely curtail its use but the UK continues to say glyphosate based products are safe to use.

Despite this some local authorities have banned glyphosate weed killer use totally, or at least in specific areas such as schools, playgrounds, parks and pavements.

### **Guidance**

The Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) recently provided a briefing to its members on glyphosate. Some notable points:

- There is no right or wrong answer to the question “is it safe to use glyphosate products”
- There are few alternatives to glyphosate and those which are seen as alternatives are often still in a pilot phase and much more expensive to use
- There may be a need for the public to accept higher levels of weeds if the use of glyphosate is banned
- Ending the use of pesticides on hard surfaces will likely mean that there will be more visible weeds for longer periods of time. However weeds do contribute to biodiversity by providing a habitat and source of food for bees and other insects.

Of particular note, APSE says “it may be prudent for all local authorities to carefully consider the scale of glyphosate use, the likely risks arising, the potential to limit the reliance on glyphosate-based products and the ability to find a suitable alternative product to prepare for the future”.

### **Existing Vegetation Management**

Most glyphosate use in Cheltenham is undertaken in the highway environment; roads, pavements and alleyways. It is also used around obstacles in grass verges including street signs, light columns, and inspection chambers to name but a few. A specialist company is contracted to apply a twice year weed spray usually in Spring and Summer.

Glyphosate is also used by Cheltenham Borough Homes to control vegetation on hard standing areas, and garage forecourts on three occasions per year. To a much lesser extent in parks and

open spaces where its use has been minimised to control notifiable weeds (i.e. Japanese knotweed) for which the authority has a statutory duty and woody perennials such as tree and shrub stumps.

### **Proposed Management**

For the trial year due to start in spring 2020 the Council intended not to commence with glyphosate herbicide applications to highways; to significantly reduce the amount applied to Cheltenham Borough Homes land; and continue with minimal amounts applied to its own parks and green spaces. Money normally spent on herbicide treatment will instead be used to undertake manual removal, stinging and hoeing. The following approaches or combination of approaches were intended to be applied:

- Intensive cleaning operations in the town centre, and other outerlying retail areas (Sixways, Coronation Square etc) involving hoeing, sweeping and power washing which are already considered to be an effective control of unwanted vegetation in the highway and therefore ceasing of herbicide applications in these areas will make little difference. *Update: reduced footfall has made this more challenging this year as outlined above and this is taking more resource than anticipated.*
- Strimming around obstacles in highway grass verges will be undertaken once in the summer and again Autumn. *Update: this will only be undertaken where there is a prioritised need for safety reasons due to limited resources as a result of COVID-19.*
- Weed removal on roads, pavements and alleyways will be undertaken twice per annum; once in the summer and again in Autumn but only if it is safe to do so and does not cause damage to adjacent property. The Council will continue with its programme of gutter sweeping to remove detritus and material that promotes the germination of seeds. *Update: strimming is not possible in most of these locations due to the safety concerns around stones flying up during the strimming process however alternative equipment has been purchased by Ubico, in the form of mechanical weed rippers, to overcome these issues, and is currently being rolled out. Early indications demonstrate that the machine is reasonably effective, but the operation is undertaken at a much slower rate and other methods are being considered.*
- A reactive option will be available whereby problem areas can be targeted with a mixture of the following treatments: strimming, hoeing, and brushing. In severe cases it may be necessary to spot treat with glyphosate herbicide. Examples of this will be where visibility splays on highway junctions need to be maintained, or where vegetation infestations in the hard surfaces cannot practically be carried out by manual means and where the vegetation is likely to cause or speed up the deterioration of a road or footway surface.
- Glyphosate herbicides will continue to be used to control invasive/notifiable weed species (i.e. Japanese knot weed) and woody perennials such as tree and shrub stumps.

### **Alternative methods of vegetation management**

During 2019/20 and 2020/21 some trials of alternative methods of vegetation control have been undertaken in order to assess their effectiveness and suitability in Cheltenham although less than planned due to COVID-19. Similarly where reliable test data is available from other local authorities and professional bodies this will also be reviewed.

Early signs indicate there is no direct chemical replacement for glyphosate and alternative treatments such as hot foams, acid, electricity and flame throwers are far less efficient in terms of material cost and labour involved applying them.

### **Early conclusions**

There is no single method that is likely to replace the use of glyphosate in controlling weeds. It is likely that a future approach to vegetation management will incorporate a mixture of manual clearance, more expensive alternative treatments (used on a smaller scale where manual ones are not possible) and in some circumstances not to treat the vegetation at all. It is also likely that an early May weed spray will be required in 2021 to return standards to an acceptable condition and whilst we would like to avoid this if possible it will still reduce the use of glyphosate herbicide by 50%.

## **Managing expectations this year and into 2021**

Untreated vegetation is traditionally regarded as untidy and a sign of poor maintenance and until we all understand the value of biodiversity and the role weeds and wild flowers play in the environment, the council will need to help the public understand its value and our approach to weed control. TV presenters like Jimmy Doherty and his TV programme saving the bees helps us understand the need to review our traditional approach to grounds maintenance.

The Council is aware of the weed growth around the town this year (2020) and is doing its best with its service provider, Ubico, to address this as soon as possible. A programme of works will be published on the website in the next few weeks identifying where weed removal will take place and how we will do it within available resources.

Whilst this year was meant to be a trial year in minimising the amount of glyphosate herbicides used across the town for public health reasons and to contribute to biodiversity and sustainability, COVID-19 has caused a reduction in available resources this year. This became more problematic in controlling weeds around the town when the weather turned very wet in early summer and then turned back to mild and sunny – perfect growing conditions for weeds and meant we couldn't deal with all the weed growth at the same time with the available resources. What it has shown is what weed growth looks like without glyphosate herbicide sprays and how long it takes to manually clear weeds that regrow rapidly in the same places. Trials of alternatives to glyphosate herbicide sprays have taken place such as flame throwers, acid, hot foam, electricity and weed rippers however all but the weed rippers were less effective than hoped.

We are asking the public to please bear with us as we move around the town removing the weeds. Small weeds can be removed more easily than the larger weeds, some of which may well need to wait until they can be sprayed in early May 2021 but we will be doing our best within the available resources.

The public are encouraged to get involved in more wild flower planting on private land to provide bee corridors and even leaving some weeds for insects.

This document has been appended to the environmental services policy updated October 2020.