

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Pesticide Policy



Introduction

The growing concern around the use of pesticides and trends in reduction

Throughout the UK many Councils are considering the use of horticultural chemicals which have traditionally been used as a cost effective way to control fungi, insects, plant disease and weeds amongst others.

There is growing public concern over the use of horticultural chemicals in public open spaces in particular the possible health effects on humans through the exposure to pesticides and herbicides, especially the impact on children.

Equally there is growing concern over the effects of pesticide and herbicide use is having on our environment and wildlife. The decline of bees and other pollinators, bird species, mammals, fish and invertebrates have all been linked to chemical use.

Nationwide horticultural chemicals are widely used, however, within the parks in Tunbridge Wells they are limited to hard surfaces, sports fields and the treatment of invasive and pernicious weeds.

Over the past few years the Council has seen an increasing number of comments and freedom of information requests about chemical usage and in particular the use of Glyphosate within our parks. It is clear people are concerned about the use of pesticides and are keen to see changes made.

In the UK there are several Councils adopting a policy of reduced or a total ban on chemical usage and eliminating the use of Glyphosate e.g. Lewes, Eastbourne and Brighton & Hove. Other Councils are planning a similar approach regarding chemicals. This presents the Council with an opportunity to review its approach to the use of horticultural chemicals in our parks and consider if this should be widened to other areas of land in the ownership of the Council.

The Councils Use of Pesticides

The Council owns significant areas of land throughout the borough, however, it should be noted parks, recreation grounds and sports grounds in the parished areas of the borough are in the care of the individual Parish Council.

Within the area of Tunbridge Wells town the sites are varied which include parks, recreation grounds, public open spaces, cemeteries and churchyards, play areas, sports pitches and woodlands. Other areas managed by the Councils Estates team include grass verges, property holdings and properties leased to tenants.

The Council aims to deliver a high standard of maintenance for all sites within the budgets available. In order to deliver its parks and open space service the Council employs contractors along with specialist contractors for some weed and pest control.

In order to achieve these standards and to provide a cost effective control the grounds maintenance contract has specified the use of pesticides and herbicides to control weeds and pests on hard surfaces and sports pitches.

The purpose of this policy is to cover the use of horticultural chemicals such as herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and growth inhibitors.

The phasing out and use of alternatives to pesticides

With the increasing awareness of the environmental impact and undesirable effects of horticultural chemicals on staff when applying them, the general public and the environment as a whole, consideration must now be given to the use of alternative methods to reduce our reliance on chemicals to maintain the land in the Councils ownership.

The development and research into alternative products in the industry has significantly increased in recent years as more local authorities seek alternative methods to control pests and weeds. Government and other organisations involved in licencing horticultural chemicals are applying increasingly strict controls on products available to both professional and domestic users.

It is the aim of the Council to phase out the use of pesticides and herbicides as quickly as is practical recognising at present it may not always be possible to eliminate their use altogether.

It will take time to explore all the alternatives and in some cases the Council may see an increase in cost in the use of alternative methods.

Aim

The aim of this policy is to start the process of reducing the Councils use of horticultural chemicals wherever possible, with the ultimate goal of phasing out chemical usage completely other than the control of invasive difficult to control weeds such as Japanese Knotweed and infestations of pests which threaten important plants or threatening human health e.g. Brown tail moth or Oak processionary moth.

This aim may be a challenge to achieve owing to the limited range of alternatives and their efficiency in controlling weeds. Some alternatives that provide effective control may present cost increases to the Council.

The Council may wish to consider an acceptance that the same level of maintenance in some areas is simply not needed, however, this may present a challenge where increases in weed growth may lead to complaints and negative publicity.

This policy identifies how the Council proposes to reduce, monitor and control the use of pesticides, using alternative methods where possible or exploring sites where a reduced level of maintenance is acceptable.

Where possible we will encourage chemical free/reduced usage across the parks estate and provide advice and support to other services, Parish Councils and sports clubs regarding new developments in alternative methods of weed and pest control.

The use of pesticides and herbicides

The Council will make every effort to use non-chemical control, however, there will be circumstances where alternative methods are currently unavailable or effective. In these circumstances a combination of cultural and chemical will be used to resolve the problem with the least impact on the environment.

Sports Pitches

The Councils sports pitches include football, rugby, cricket and bowls are all maintained to a high quality, many of the clubs using the Councils facilities play at a high standard in their respective leagues.

We will continue to use treatments to treat fungal diseases in fine turf sports pitches once changes to cultural methods have been explored such as aeration and increased brushing.

The use of lumbricides (worm control) have not been used on the grounds maintenance contract for a number of years due to its detrimental effect on the environment, instead cultural methods have been effective in reducing overall worm populations in fine turf areas.

Selective herbicides will be used on both fine turf and other sports pitches where broadleaf weeds impact on the quality of the playing surface. Selective weed killing will only take place on the playing surface and will not be applied on non-sports pitch areas. Hand weeding could be considered although this is labour intensive and costly.

Mole Infestation

A small number of sites have suffered from mole infestations periodically most notably Hawkenbury recreation ground. We do not support the use of gas pellets or other pesticides as a method of control. The use of humane mechanical traps by a specialist contractor are used where control is necessary on sports pitches for the safety of players and other visitors to the site.

Weed control on hard surfaces

The maintenance of hard surfaces such as footpaths, car parks and bound gravel areas are maintained using cultural methods i.e. hand weeding or hoeing for small areas, however, the use of herbicides may be permitted where other alternative methods are not practical. When this operation is carried out weeds will be individually targeted (spot spraying) therefore reducing the amount of herbicide used and minimising the impact on the environment.

Invasive and pernicious weeds

This may include sites where a particular weed problem exists and requires clearing of perennial weeds. This will also include the control of invasive or injurious weeds such as Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed, Ragwort and Himalayan Balsam. In some cases small areas can be controlled by hand pulling, Ragwort and Himalayan Balsam, but larger infestations may require chemical control applied by a specialist contractor.

The Control of pests and insect infestations

The grounds maintenance contract does not support the use of pesticides to control insect populations in the parks other than infestations which pose a threat to important plants or present a risk to human health. The control of other pests such as rats and wasps is undertaken by specialist contractors when needed.

Alternative to pesticide and herbicide use

Non chemical methods of vegetation control will be used as a first choice wherever possible. The number of alternatives are currently limited with varying levels of effectiveness and cost. Owing to the growing concerns over the use of Glyphosate based herbicides it is likely alternatives will increase significantly. Currently the use of Glyphosate is licenced in the UK until December 2025 after which the Government may review its use in both the commercial and domestic markets increasing the demand for alternative methods of weed control.

Many of the available alternatives require more than one application to control weeds increasing the cost or simply more expensive per treatment. It is anticipated costs will reduce over time as more organisations switch to alternative methods.

The more radical approach to reducing the reliance on chemical control is an acceptance of more pests and weeds in our environment. Increased populations of pests and weeds may have a beneficial impact on insect populations. Owing to the growing popularity of wildflower meadows and less-frequently cut grassland the public perception of 'attractiveness' is

gradually changing especially if features have colour and diversity. Over the past two years we have increased areas of grassland to meadow where the grass is only cut once per year, in these areas we will keep a well maintained edge to create a well-defined boundary. In the decision to reduce maintenance in these areas we have consulted with key stakeholders who, in general, are supportive of a less intensely maintained area. This is supplemented by interpretation to explain our goals and aims, however in some areas it is possible this may lead to an increase in litter and fly tipping owing to the unkept appearance of the site.

A selection of alternative methods is outlined below.

Method	Use	Advantages	Disadvantages
No maintenance intervention	Can apply to any site.	No cost. May provide benefits to wildlife and insect populations.	Public perception of untidy, uncared for areas. Negative comments and complaints.
Manual weeding	Can apply to any site.	Can be effective if done correctly. No expensive equipment or training required.	Labour intensive requiring large numbers of staff. High labour costs.
Design and planting regimes	Can be applied to any ornamental areas.	Aesthetically pleasing. Benefits for insects and other pollinators.	Initial cost is high to purchase and plant material. Plant choice needs to be carefully considered. May not be suitable option for all areas.
Mulching	Control of weeds in shrub borders, under young trees, under hedges and rose borders.	Improves the appearance and maintains moisture in the soil. Provides organic matter improving soil condition.	Dependant on a good supply of mulch. Bulk quantities will need to be purchased. Will need to be carried out annually. High labour costs. Transporting mulch around increases diesel consumption.

Steel brushing	Hard surfaces such as footpaths and car parks.	Brushing can be effective when combined with acetic acid. Regular brushing will prevent re-growth.	Initial cost of equipment can be expensive. Potential for damaging surfaces. Acetic acid can leave a residual smell.
Hot foam	Weeds and moss on hard surfaces, safety surfaces in play areas and grass growth around trees	Non toxic therefore no licence needed. Can be used in all weather. Can be used in sensitive areas.	Expensive to purchase equipment. Only kills the top of the plant. Cost of foam can be expensive. Diesel consumption transporting equipment.
Hot water/steam	Weeds in hard surfaces, safety surfaces in play areas and grass growth around trees	As for foam treatment but lower initial purchase cost.	May require more treatments as heat is not held on the plant. Increased cost in labour and time. Only kills the top of the plant.
Flame gun	Weeds on hard surfaces.	Relatively cheap to purchase. Minimum training to use the equipment.	Health and Safety risk. Not very effective. Produces carbon emissions.
Electricity	Weeds on hard surfaces	Kills both top of plant and root. Can be used for invasive species. One off purchase of equipment and no certification required.	New technology. Only kills one plant at a time, too time consuming for large areas.

Chemical free parks

Reasons for nominating parks to go pesticide free:

- Safeguarding of the public's health of both adults and children.
- Potential impact on the environment, biodiversity and pollinators.
- Positive message for the public.
- Potential financial savings due to reduced spending on chemicals.

The aim of nominating parks as chemical free zones for adults, children and wildlife is to promote areas where there will be certainty there will be no direct contact with chemicals contained in pesticides and herbicides. These parks will be promoted as chemical free with the use of social media, the Council's website and notices displayed in the park.

Keeping visitors and key stakeholders informed about the Council's intentions is important to successfully deliver this policy. Communicating with the public will be key to gaining support and help to meet the Council's objectives.

The Council will need to develop a detailed communications plan to communicate to residents what the Council is looking to achieve.

To ensure all contractors employed by the Council comply fully with the Council's requirements, all future maintenance specifications will include detailed information of the Council's policy on horticultural chemicals, the areas selected to be chemical free or chemical reduced and the conditions for the use of chemicals where use is unavoidable.