

Council Report

Ward(s) affected: All

Report of Director of Strategic Services

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Petition: Make Guildford Pesticide-Free

Executive Summary

On 4 August 2021, an e-petition was launched on the Council's website requesting the Council to make Guildford pesticide-free. This petition received in excess of 500 signatures and under the Council's adopted Petition Scheme requires the Council to debate the matter raised by the e-petition and to indicate to the e-petition organiser what action, if any, the Council proposes to take in response.

Recommendation to Council:

Councillors are asked to debate the subject matter of the e-petition and to indicate to the petition organiser what action the Council intends to take.

Reason for Recommendation:

To comply with the requirements of the Council's adopted Petition Scheme

Is the report (or part of it) exempt from publication? No

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform the Council of the receipt on of an e-petition. The e-petition attracted 198 e-signatories and 336 paper signatories with a total of 534 signatures at the time the agenda for this meeting was published. The petition states as follows:

"We the undersigned petition Guildford Borough Council to Phase out the use of pesticides, including glyphosate, in Guildford."

- 1.2 The petition organiser's supporting statement accompanying the e-petition reads as follows:

“Every year, our pavements, streets, parks, playgrounds and other open spaces in Guildford are sprayed with pesticides. In particular, glyphosate is used across the borough on a regular basis. Inevitably, we as Guildford residents come into contact with these pesticides, as do our children, pets and local wildlife.

Pesticides (including glyphosate) have been linked to an array of health problems, from neurological disorders such as Parkinson’s disease, cancers such as non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma to autism in children. Vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant women and the elderly are most at risk of being affected.

As well as damaging human health, pesticides harm urban biodiversity. Pesticides are key contributors to the dramatic reductions in insects such as bees and other pollinators. Glyphosate has been shown to affect bees’ ability to navigate, their sleep, larval development, and immunity to deadly infections (1). Glyphosate also kills flowering plants that bees and other insects rely on. This reduction in pollinators has far-reaching consequences for both wildlife and people.

Pesticides contaminate our water supply and harm aquatic life. They also poison our soils and harm soil invertebrates such as worms (2).

Urban pesticide use is unnecessary. Many towns and cities around the world have banned them (3). Pesticides are banned in all green public spaces across the whole of France. Copenhagen and Seattle manage their public spaces without pesticides. Councils across the UK are showing it can be done too with over 60 councils now implementing programs to phase out their use. Locally, Waverley borough, Petersfield and Chichester have all committed to phase out pesticides whilst trialling alternatives.

Well tested, cost effective and safe non-chemical alternatives to pesticides exist and are already being used in other towns locally (4). Using alternatives, or simply leaving some weeds in place to flower (where they do not cause a hazard) would have a positive impact on biodiversity and human health in Guildford.

We are asking Guildford Borough Council to phase out the use of pesticides, including glyphosate, in Guildford.

Please support us, sign this petition, share it with your friends and help make our town pesticide free.

This petition has been organised by Guildford Environmental Forum, a voluntary organisation that works to promote environmental protection in and around Guildford.”

Please visit our website to find out more: <http://www.guildfordenvironment.org.uk>

Further Information:

1. Pesticides are particularly harmful to bees, studies show.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/sep/24/monsanto-weedkiller-harms-bees-research-finds>
2. Vital soil organisms being harmed by pesticides
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fenvs.2021.643847/full>

3. Countries that have banned Glyphosate

<https://www.baumhedlundlaw.com/toxic-tort-law/monsanto-roundup-lawsuit/where-is-glyphosate-banned-/>

4. Alternative Weed control solutions

<https://www.pan-uk.org/alternatives-to-herbicides-a-new-guide/> (Show truncated justification text)

- 1.3 Under the terms of our adopted petition scheme, the Council is invited to consider and respond to the petition.
- 1.4 To assist councillors in understanding the issues, the Parks and Countryside Development Lead has provided, by way of background information in section 3 below, details of:
- the Council's current policy and approach to the use of chemicals, including pesticides,
 - our current land management activities that use chemicals
 - Key areas where the Council is actively working to reduce pesticides and other chemicals
- 1.5 Section 4 below sets out details of the proposed actions that could be taken in 2022 towards a pesticide free Guildford, which forms the basis of a motion to be proposed formally by the Lead Councillor for Environment in response to the petition.

2. Strategic Priorities

- 2.1 Formal consideration by the full Council of proposals contained in a petition is consistent with the Council's desire to be open and accountable to its residents and to deliver improvements and enable change across the Borough.

3. Background

Current Policy and Approach

- 3.1 As major landowners and custodians of large areas of public space we care deeply for the environment and ecology of the areas we manage with a view to protect these areas so that they can be enjoyed and used by current and future generations. We continue to reduce the use of fertiliser and chemicals as far as possible, and this mindset is embedded in our management approach.
- 3.2 Our approach is to reduce and phase out chemical use, including pesticides, wherever practical and achievable. Our activity recognises the ongoing development of new alternative methods to replace chemicals such as pesticides, fertilisers and cleaning agents, considering legal requirements and health and safety implications. Whilst it is our aim to phase out use of chemicals over time, we recognise at present it may not always be possible to eliminate their use altogether and that alternatives have an effectiveness and/or cost implication.

- 3.3 As part of this management approach, we have operated a chemical minimisation policy for nearly a decade, and this was last updated in 2019 (see Appendix 1). The chemical policy covers the use of pesticides (herbicides, fungicides, insecticides) as well as other chemicals that could potentially cause harm.
- 3.4 The objectives for implementing the chemical minimisation policy can be summarised as follows:
- Compliance with legislation
 - Protect the health of staff and public
 - Protect the environment (watercourses, pollinators, priority species)
 - Reduce unnecessary chemical use
 - Ensure safe use, application, and storage of chemicals
 - Reduce applications where possible
 - Fulfil expectation from the public
- 3.5 The policy recognises that a balance needs to be achieved between public expectation on site management, cost, and environmental impacts.
- 3.6 Where chemicals are purchased and used, they are considered based on current knowledge, as those that will have least effect on the health and environment and are appropriate for the task.
- 3.7 It should be recognised that there are several factors that require consideration:
- Legal obligations (e.g., removal of trip hazards, reduction of health hazards, invasive species control)
 - Infrastructure maintenance and preventing deterioration
 - Decline of natural habitats due to lack of management
 - Provision of high-quality sports pitches
 - Other Environmental impacts (increase in site visits, storage of arisings, use of additional machinery and ground compaction, burning of arisings, water usage for hot foam applications, reduction of desired species when dealing mechanically with invasive species).
 - Each area of application will have a different solution, existing use of chemicals balances other constraints and limitations and often the use of chemicals is driven by public expectations of maintenance standards.
 - Cost/ resource implication in using alternative methods to reduce herbicide use and the Council uses a variety of methods the manage its land rather than single type approach.

Works areas for the management of Council-owned land

- 3.8 Guildford Borough Council carries out its land management activities with best consideration for current best practice, including provision of quality sports pitches. This includes legal obligations under Occupiers Liability Act, conservation and species management, Stewardship Agreements and Green Flag standards.

- 3.9 Details of the Council's current land management activities that use chemicals are set out in Appendix 2 to this report.

Key areas where the Council is actively working to reduce pesticides and other chemicals.

- 3.10 The focus of our resources are those areas where we can achieve greatest environmental gain.

- **Increasing the herbicide free areas on The Mount and Tyting Farm**

Guildford Borough Council manages the fields at Tyting Farm and The Mount in partnership with Butterfly Conservation to maintain rare butterfly habitat. This involves removal of developing scrub and controllable species whilst retaining the grassland flower sward, avoiding soil compaction, and preserving other developed habitats such as anthills. The aims can only be achieved by hand removal of species or targeted spot treatment with herbicide. Through the engagement of volunteers and, when budget allows contractors, we continue to increase the areas that are managed without any use of herbicides. Whilst we manage to recruit several volunteer parties annually and dedicate staff time to ragwort removal this is simply not enough to address the current volume within the available time window.

Please note that we have several other grassland sites (e.g., Pewley Downs, Shalford Common, Effingham Common, Merrow Downs) where we already achieve reduction of controllable species to a level where chemical control is not required. However, some areas remain vulnerable to outside seed sources depending on the land management by adjacent landowners and nutrient input from outside sources.

- **Oak Processionary Moth Control**

Oak Processionary Moth (OPM) is a legally controllable species that presents a hazard to human health. Guildford Borough Council has set up a risk-based management regime that involves removal of OPM nests by hand from infected oak trees. We have taken this approach to minimise the significant impact of pesticide use on non-target species. Focussing on nest removal on areas of high risk to human health does not achieve the national target to fully eradicate this species. The Forestry Commission continues their own programme of OPM control in the Borough, including Council Land, using pesticides and biological controls that impact on non-target species. Nest removal by hand is currently not considered appropriate to fulfil the legal requirement of Statutory Plant Health notices.

Guildford Borough Council is part of the OPM Innovation Group to enable research into alternative methods of control without using pesticides, that has significantly contributed to national guidance to enable changes in legislation.

- **Playground areas**

Guildford Borough Council is implementing a new jet washing contract with the intention of jet washing play areas more frequently with the aim to stop using glyphosate in play areas. This includes removing edging stones in play areas where the safe fall surface meets the grass and will also stop the weeds growing between the edging stones and the safe fall surface and prevent shrinkage reducing the number of repairs required.

- **Merrow Golf Course**

We are working in Partnership with Merrow Residents Association, Butterfly Conservation and Surrey Wildlife Trust to improve the conservation management of Merrow Golf Course which is a major part of Merrow Downs' chalk grassland habitat. This includes aiming to reduce use of fertilisers and chemicals in the management of the golf course.

- **Contract with Surrey County Council**

On behalf of Surrey County Council, we are contractually obliged and responsible for the application of Glyphosate along the borough's highway and footways. We currently contract this out to a company called Complete Weed Control. To ensure every effort is made to minimise the amount of chemical applied they use spraying units that are mounted on the front of a purpose-built vehicle with sensors to detect the presence of individual weeds and accurately apply the correct amount of herbicide. Complete Weed Control also apply glyphosate to invasive species on highway verges.

The agency agreement for footpath and kerbside treatment is due for renewal in April 2022. We are currently reviewing this agreement with Surrey and will seek to agree a joint management approach to explore the efficiency, effectiveness, and implications of alternative control methods with Surrey with the specific aim of reducing or eliminating Glyphosate use in highway applications.

- **Exploration of alternative methods for weed control**

Guildford Borough Council is exploring alternative methods including inviting suppliers to carry out demonstrations of alternative methods on areas of land we control. For example, a demonstration at Stoke Park to electrocute weeds which is labour intensive and poses a fire risk. Whilst these methods have proven to be effective for small scale use in certain areas, continued improvements of technology are required (and are being made) to enable larger scale use. It should be recognised that new methods will require additional initial capital cost and an ongoing increase in revenue cost.

We currently use herbicides and pesticides in conjunction with cultural and mechanical methods to reduce the amount being used. We use the Nomix total droplet control system which reduces the amount of Glyphosate used by up to 70%. <https://www.nomixenviro.co.uk/index.php/products/what-is-total-droplet-control-tdc>.

Methods explored are electrocution, acidic vinegar, and hot foam. It is acknowledged that hot foam currently provides the most effective alternative, but there are significant issues to consider regarding the required high-water use and the logistics to provide the water supply. We anticipate new technologies and equipment will resolve some of these issues and will make this technology viable over time.

- 3.11 It will take time to explore all alternatives and understand the financial and operational implications. Please see appendices 3, 4, and 5 for further details on current use and alternative methods.

4. Proposed actions in 2022 towards a pesticide free Guildford

- 4.1 The Lead Councillor for Environment to propose the following motion in response to the petition:

“This Council acknowledges the work that officers have already undertaken to minimise chemical use and to explore alternative methods of weed control. We also recognise that the current Chemical Minimisation Policy, whilst still relevant, needs review.

The Council aims to stop using chemicals and believes that the approach to be taken should be to phase out their use as quickly as is practicable, recognising that at present it may not always be possible to eliminate their use altogether.

The Council feels that a detailed chemical action plan should be developed that includes continued commitment to:

- existing chemical reduction actions*
- exploring alternatives*
- communication*
- educating site users and managing expectations*
- working with partners to facilitate alternative approaches*

To that end, the Council therefore

RESOLVES: That the Executive be requested to urgently consider and approve the proposed chemical reduction measures in 2022 set out in Appendix 6 to this report.”

5. The Council’s Petition Scheme

- 5.1 The Council’s adopted petition scheme provides that where a petition contains more than 500 signatures, it will be referred to full Council for debate. The Council will decide how to respond to the petition at the meeting.
- 5.2 The petition scheme states that our response will depend on what a petition asks for, but may include one or more of the following:

- taking the action requested in the petition
- considering the petition at a meeting of the Council or Executive
- holding an inquiry into the matter
- holding a public meeting
- holding a meeting with petitioners or the petition organiser
- undertaking research into the matter
- writing to the petition organiser setting out the Council's views about the request in the petition
- referring the petition to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration

Procedure for dealing with the petition at the meeting

- 5.3 Under the Council's petition scheme, the petition organiser, or a person appointed on their behalf, is entitled to a period of up to five minutes to speak to the subject matter of the petition at the meeting. Councillors will have an opportunity to ask questions of the petition organiser (or their spokesperson) before the formal debate on the petition.
- 5.4 In accordance with the rules of debate in Council Procedure Rule 15 (a), at the start of the debate, a motion as to how the Council should respond to the petition shall be moved formally and seconded in the usual way. The Petition Scheme requires the motion to respond explicitly to the request in the petition. The motion to be proposed by the Lead Councillor for Environment is set out in paragraph 4.1 above.
- 5.5 As with any such motion, it may be subject to amendment. If any councillor wishes to propose an amendment, they should inform the Democratic Services and Elections Manager as soon as possible. Details of any amendments received will be circulated to all councillors and to the petition organiser and will be included on the Order Paper.
- 5.6 After the debate and before a final decision or vote is taken on the Council's response to the petition (as set out in the motion – amended or otherwise), the petition organiser will be granted a right of reply for a further period of up to five minutes.
- 5.7 Councillors' comments during the debate shall not exceed five minutes in length, although the proposer of the motion will have up to ten minutes.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 At this stage, there are no direct financial implications arising from this report. However, subject to the Council's response to the petition, councillors will be advised as to any financial implications.

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1 If the action proposed in a motion responding to a petition is an action requiring the exercise of an executive function, it would normally require the matter to be

referred to the Executive for a final decision. In this case, the motion, if carried, will need to be referred to the Executive.

- 7.2 Under the Council's petition scheme, the full Council is obliged due to the number of signatories to this petition to debate the issues raised therein and to pass a resolution in response.

8. Human Resource Implications

- 8.1 There are no human resource implications arising from this report.

9. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 9.1 Public authorities are required to have due regard to the aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010) when making decisions and setting policies.

- 9.2 This duty has been considered in the context of this report and it has been concluded that there are no equality and diversity implications arising directly from this report.

- 9.3 No Equality Impact assessments (EIA) have been conducted in relation to the subject matter raised by the petition.

10. Climate Change/Sustainability Implications

- 10.1 The proposed Action Plan will identify the sustainability implications. The reduction in chemical use has obvious environmental benefits. The realisation of those benefits in practice will need to be assessed in a case-by-case basis when looking at alternative methods. Benefits should be assessed, for example against, additional need to remove arisings and impact of invasive species on priority habitats.

11. Background Papers

None.

12. Appendices

Appendix 1: Current Parks and Countryside Peat and chemical minimisation policy

Appendix 2: Current Land Management activities that use chemicals

Appendix 3: Areas of weed control

Appendix 4: Glyphosate use

Appendix 5: Acetic acid assessment

Appendix 6: Proposed chemical reduction measures in 2022