

Review of the Highways Operational Standards in Relation to Weed Management

To:	Highways and Transport Committee
Meeting Date:	23 January 2023
From:	Executive Director of Place and Sustainability
Electoral division(s):	All
Key decision:	Yes
Forward Plan ref:	2024/021
Executive Summary:	<p>This paper provides the outcomes of a review that has been undertaken to assess the impact of changes in the Highways Operational Standards in relation to the management of weeds that were introduced in April 2023.</p> <p>The report recommends approval of draft revisions to the Highways Operational Standards in relation to the management of weeds for consultation with stakeholders.</p> <p>The report also seeks delegated authority to approve the final version of the Highways Operational Standards with respect to weeds management, following a consultation process to the Executive Director of Place and Sustainability in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee.</p>
Recommendation:	<p>The Committee is recommended to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">Note the outcomes of the review that has been undertaken regarding the implementation of the current weeds management policy that was introduced in April 2023 as outlined at Appendix 1.Approve the draft revised Highways Operational Standards as outlined at Appendix 2 in relation to the management of weeds for consultation with local stakeholders.Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Place and Sustainability in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee to approve the final draft of the Highways Operational Standards following consultation with stakeholders.

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1. Creating a greener, fairer, and more caring Cambridgeshire

- 1.1 Ambition 1 – Net Zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2045, and our communities and natural environment are supported to adapt and thrive as the climate changes.

The management of weeds on the highway removes the need for avoidable reactive repairs that would otherwise result from weed growth and roots damaging surfaces. A proactive approach to weed management also reduces the emissions of carbon in the service.

The recommended revised draft Highways Operational Standards (HOS) will improve environmental performance and reduce carbon emissions from the service through reduced reactive weed management activity.

- 1.2 Ambition 2 – Travel across the County is safer and more environmentally sustainable.

Extensive weed growth can obstruct visibility at junctions and detrimentally affect the drainage of water from the highway. These impacts can result in an increase in road user risks, particularly for vulnerable users. The proactive removal of weeds supports a safe and functional highway. Whilst not directly measured, the perception of risk from weeds as a walker or wheeler may contribute to modal choice, leading to an increase in car journeys.

The recommended revised draft HOS will support road user safety.

2. Background

- 2.1 As part of the County Council's Business Planning process for the Financial Year 2023/24 the Council approved a change in the Highways Operational Standards in relation to the management of weeds. The approach shifted from the planned application of chemical weedkillers across the network, to a reactive regime, where chemicals would not be used and with weeds being removed only if they presented a hazard or nuisance to highway users.

- 2.2 It is to be noted that before this change was made that the chemical treatment of weeds predominantly took place within the urban areas of Cambridge City, towns, and villages. Planned chemical treatment of weeds did not typically take place on rural roads.

- 2.3 The objectives of the change to the Highways Operational Standards were to:

- deliver a revenue saving of £120k per annum in Highways Maintenance through reduced operational costs,
- reduce the carbon footprint of the Highways and Transport service,
- reduce the use of potentially harmful chemicals, to improve the safety of the workforce, reduce risk to the environment, and support biodiversity,
- maintain road user safety by assessing all reports of weeds and removing those weeds causing a hazard or nuisance to highway users, taking a risk-based approach.

- 2.4 The management and removal of noxious weeds fell outside of these changes. The management of noxious weeds on the highway such as Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam has continued and is carried out in alignment with regulatory requirements as set out in the Ragwort Control Act 2003, Environmental Protection Act 1990, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Weed Control Act 1959, and the associated industry guidance.
- 2.5 During the summer of 2023, there was a high number of weeds reported by members of the public and elected members of the Council. Furthermore, on reviewing the implementation of the revision to the Highways Operational Standards, senior officers identified that the Council had not adequately engaged with key stakeholders before the revised policy relating to weed management was implemented.
- 2.6 The Council therefore wrote to District Councils, Town Councils and Parish Councils in the autumn of 2023 to outline that the Council was undertaking a review of the revised policy and that it was seeking views of stakeholders to inform that review. This report sets out the results of that review and recommends a further change to the Highways Operational Standards.
- 2.7 The Council's Draft Business Plan and proposed investment in Highways Maintenance includes a draft allocation for the management of weeds and vegetation on the highway. The cost of the proposed changes would be accommodated in the revised budget for highways maintenance if that were approved.
- 2.8 The County Council agreed a Motion in October 2023 to consider the approach to weedkilling at this committee, ensuring the report and associated decisions are effectively communicated to all Members, and Town and Parish Councils.

3. Main Issues

Changes Made to the Highways Operational Standards

- 3.1 The Highways Operational Standards approved at Highways and Transport Committee on 7 March 2023 included a revised arrangement to the management of weeds, removing the planned chemical spraying of weeds across the network. This did not preclude the removal of weeds by other means.
- 3.2 Approximately 30% of the highway network in Cambridgeshire was affected by the change. Only kerbed urban areas were treated for weeds. Rural and non-kerbed areas were not included in the previous regime of chemical weed removal and hence were not covered by this change in the operational standards.
- 3.3 The operational changes have been applied consistently across the County including where Cambridge City Council as a partner local government organisation carries out weed clearance and control in Cambridge City. The City Council carry out treatments and works to their own timescales to fit with their wider operations. Where the City Council controls weeds to a higher standard they do so at their own cost.
- 3.4 Highways Maintenance staff were informed and trained in the new approach to ensure consistency of policy application when considering hazard or nuisance presented by weeds.

- 3.5 Where the use of chemical weedkiller was part of a wider maintenance treatment or process this was still carried out e.g., the preparation of surfaces prior to a footway slurry seal or a carriageway surface treatment.

Impact Review and associated engagement

- 3.6 A review of the impact of these changes to the Highways Operational Standards was conducted by the Highways Service in the autumn of 2023. This included engagement with County Councillors, District Councils and Town and Parish Councils via a survey seeking feedback on the impact on communities of the new operational policy.
- 3.7 In October 2023, a Survey of County Councillors, District and Town and Parish Councils was carried out. 130 responses were received. The feedback received is presented at 3.14.

Methodology of Impact Review

- 3.8 The review consisted of:
- The survey sent to all Councillors, District, Town, and Parish Councils.
 - Review of customer service requests, and complaints.
 - Site surveys undertaken by Local Highways Officers and Technical Officers.
 - Assessment of weed treatment options carried out by Cambridge City Council – See Appendix 3.
- 3.9 The review has considered:
- (i) Impact of weeds on the amenity and visual aspects of the street scene.
 - (ii) Impact of on the highways network and drainage systems.
 - (iii) Impact of weeds on road and footway surface deterioration.
 - (iv) Financial Impacts of the change.
 - (v) Carbon and nature impact of the change.
 - (vi) Heritage Impacts.
 - (vii) Impact of the change on street cleansing operations of District Councils.
 - (viii) Partnership trials on alternative weed removal systems.
 - (ix) Impact of weeds on the public and communities.

Results of Impact Review

- 3.10 The overall findings of the review have been:

i) Impacts on amenity and visual aspects of the street scene: There has been a significant increase in the proliferation of weeds in towns and villages across the county where previously few reports were received. The impact across the county appears to be the same with no area worse affected overall than another.

Survey respondents have highlighted that streets have looked untidy due to the weed volume and size. In some locations weeds appear to be trapping litter, increasing the untidy appearance of the street scene.

ii) Impacts on highway network and drainage systems: Weeds in channels can present a barrier to water reaching drainage gullies and channels. However, there has not been many locations where, on assessment, this has been considered a risk that has required the immediate removal of the weeds.

iii) Impacts on roads and footway surface deterioration: Weeds will, over time, cause minor local damage to the edges of road and footway surfaces. This is caused by the root growth of the weed plants. In the short-term the damage is minor and localised. The impact of the changes to the HOS has not had an immediate significant effect on surface deterioration. However, if continued in the long-term, there is likely to be a need for maintenance interventions across the network, due to weed damage.

iv) Financial impacts of the change: The cessation of the cyclic chemical weed treatment regime removed the cost of the treatments of £120,000. However, the resultant need to reactively respond to higher levels of reports of weeds causing nuisance or hazard and associated works to remove where necessary has increased resources required to deal with weed issues. This additional resource and costs have been absorbed within the wider Highways Maintenance budgets. Works to remove hazardous weeds cost £7000. The additional time and travel costs of officers responding the reports is estimated at a further £12,000. This results in a net saving of the policy change of around £101,000.

(v) Carbon and nature impacts:

Carbon: The ceasing of cyclic chemical weed treatments for 23/24 is not seen as having reduced the carbon in this area of service. The need to respond reactively to reports of weeds has led to an increase in site visits by Local Highways Officers, with associated carbon of the travel to and from sites and the works to manually remove nuisance weeds.

Nature: Glyphosate-based weed treatments are licenced for use in the UK. Glyphosate weed treatments are considered, by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), who are the UK licensing body, to be *non-harmful* to humans and animals when used correctly¹.

To avoid any harmful effects to surrounding flora and fauna during historic weed treatment, appropriate controls and good practice was always followed. However, it is recognised that the HOS change for 23/24 to remove chemical weed treatment mitigated this risk entirely.

Glyphosate is currently authorised for use in the EU until 15 December 2023, following an extension to the renewal assessment process in 2022. In the UK, the current expiry date is December 2025, following a three-year extension as the UK's post-Brexit pesticides regulatory regime is developed. The HSE is the prime source of advice and guidance on the use of pesticides².

(vi) Heritage impacts: Cambridge City Council has reported that manual removal of weeds is risking damage to historic paths and paved areas in the City area. The City Council operational teams report that previous chemical weed killing regimes had significantly less risk or damage to the historic paving and surfaces.

¹ [HSE website content re Glyphosate herbicide](#)

² <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pesticides/index.htm>

(vii) Impacts on District Council cleansing operations: The proliferation of weeds can increase where there is detritus at the edges of roads. The removal of general detritus is the responsibility of the District Councils, and this is generally carried out through mechanical sweeping. The County Council as Highway Authority does not sweep to remove weeds as our operational approach in the past has been the cyclic chemical spraying regime. Sweeping does not tackle the weeds at the root and therefore there are concerns about the effectiveness of the approach.

Cambridge City Council reports that the lack of chemical treatment of weeds is affecting the City Council's ward deep cleaning programme. In previous years the cyclic chemical weed treatment required the removal of dead weeds. This season, as a result of no chemical treatment, teams are facing significantly more growth. The live nature of the weeds requires significant effort with hand tools and mechanical 'weed-rippers' and sweepers. This is increasing costs of the deep cleans. Cambridge City Council also reported additional costs as a result of reacting to the need to manually remove weeds by hand and mechanical means when reacting to reports in the City.

(viii) Partnership trials on alternative weed removal systems: The County Council has been working in partnership with Cambridgeshire City Council who have carried out a trial in two City wards of alternative weed removal methods. The trial assessed a number of methods as set out in Appendix 3 – Cambridge City Weed Treatment Assessment

Milestone, for Hampshire County Council, undertook an extensive trial into the use of chemical and alternative weed treatment methods. Appendix 4 – Alternative Methods of Weed Control on the Hampshire Highways Network 2022

Both trials indicate that, overall, Glyphosate-based chemical weed treatment is the most cost-effective method of weed management. To be effective to the same level, other treatment methods are overall more costly to carry out to achieve similar levels of weed reduction.

3.11 the public survey are as follows:

- Streets looking untidy, scruffy, and messy.
- Significant increase in the number and proliferation of weeds.
- Weeds causing danger to road users – trip hazard and visibility hazard.
- Use of mechanical and manual weed removal in place of chemical treatments.
- Reinstatement of chemical treatments.
- Weeds are causing drainage problems.

The table below breaks down the feedback received. The October 2023 Weed Survey Responses are set out in Appendix 5, and the associated analysis 'Weed Survey Trends' is set out in Appendix 6.

Table of over all responses		Town and Parish Councils	District Councils	County Councillors
Total responses		103	22	12
Positive	P	9	4	0
Positive and Negative	P&N	0	2	0
Negative	N	88	16	12
Indifferent	I	6	0	0

- 3.12 **Overall:** The 23/24 operational changes have not had the positive benefits envisaged when implemented. The carbon and cost reductions are not being realised and the impact has been reported as being negative by those that have responded to the survey.

It is therefore proposed to adopt a new operational standard that includes the use of planned chemical weed treatment to manage the impacts of weed growth in the highway as set out in Section 5 of the report.

4.0 Alternative Options Considered

4.1 The following new policy options have been considered:

- (1) Continue with the current Highways Operational Standards.
- (2) Commencing April 24/25 carry out 2 cycles of chemical weed treatment during the growing season together with additional planned maintenance activity on specific locations.

Recommended

- 4.2 The current approach to the management of weeds and its review has highlighted the cross-cutting network, environmental, financial, and reputational impacts associated with the removal of a planned weeds management regime. The desired financial savings and carbon reductions are not being achieved. Given the availability of additional budget, officers consider that this will be effectively targeted to a planned regime. Whilst this will not yield savings, it will support effective management of our asset, and support a positive reputation with our communities.
- 4.3. The cost of the preferred option will be £180,000 in financial year 24/25 and £135,000 in subsequent years. The initial higher cost for 24/25 includes targeted removal of weed buildup in channels to help remove highways flood risk and reduce the propensity for weeds in the next growing season. This will be funded through the proposed revised budget for highways maintenance.
- 4.4 The benefits of the preferred option will be:
- Streets looking tidy.
 - Reduction in the number and proliferation of weeds.
 - Removal of trip hazards and visibility hazards resulting in a safer network.

- Reduction in drainage issues caused by weed growth.
- Reduced risk of damage to highway surfaces.

5. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

5.1 The following change to the HOS is recommended:

Weed Growth

Within built up village and town areas within 40mph limits or below, the service will carry out planned chemical weed control with a minimum of two treatments in each year.

Where communities prefer that weeds are not treated or removed, the Council will engage and agree a local standard based on engagement with the community.

5.2 Officers will explore through discussion and agreement how closer working with the District Councils on weed and vegetation growth control and maintenance can benefit the outcomes to the public of weed management and street cleansing operations.

Next steps

5.3 Prior to adoption of the proposed new Highways Operational Standard for Weeds a community engagement exercise will be carried out to seek the community views on the new policy and its implementation. This will be done in March 2024, through an online survey of Local Members, Town and Parish Councils, and the City Council.

5.4 The consultation responses will inform any minor change to the standards and their implementation with a view to enabling locally nuanced highways weed management in line with community action on nature recovery and protecting and enhancing the natural environment.

5.5 To ensure the resultant weed control level is achieved, in April and May 24/25 it is proposed to undertake a one-off programme of physical weed removal on routes to be treated. This is to remove the residual weed growth from the highway.

5.6 Subject to approval, the HOS changes relating to weeds would take effect from April 2024.

6. Significant Implications

6.1 Finance Implications

The proposed investment in Highways Maintenance as detailed in the Council's Business Plan will support the funding the proposed changes. The costs of planned weed treatment of £180,000 for 24/25 and £135,000 for future years. The 24/25 costs reflect the costs to remove localised buildups of weeds in road channels. The ongoing cost of £135,000 reflects the increased costs of highways maintenance as a result of inflation rises in recent years. The ongoing costs for weed management will be higher than the original savings target as set for 23/24.

6.2 Legal Implications

If the roads are not effectively managed there is risk of third-party claims associated with any road traffic collisions. The HOS support delivery of the County Council's duty to maintain, providing and a basis for any section 58 defence.

6.3 Risk Implications

The policy options relate to the removal of weeds from footways and road edges. Weeds can be a hazard affecting road user safety, as can be a flood risk.

6.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

The highway is maintained for all users. Weed growth on footways and paths presents a particular hazard for those less physically mobile and can also be a hazard for the sight impaired. A proactive regime of weed management can reduce the nuisance and hazard weeds can present to vulnerable road users.

Consultation with users and communities will help ensure maintenance activities on the affected roads provides a safe and functional network for all users.

6.5 Climate Change and Environment Implications (Key decisions only)

The assessment of carbon benefit and nature impact that could be achieved through the 23/24 is subjective. There has not been an in-depth review by ecologists or carbon reduction experts due to the early nature of the change.

The policy change has potential to result in carbon reduction in the service for this year due to the reduced resources put into weed control. However, a significant proportion of this reduction is likely negated by the reactive response to reports by Local Highways Officers. Potential reductions are likely to decrease year-on-year as more reactive maintenance is required to increasingly prolific weeds.

Sign off table for Chief Executive or Executive Director

(to be deleted by the DSO before publication)

Area	Officer	Sign off confirmed
Mandatory Sign Offs (these are required for every report)		
Executive Director for relevant area	Frank Jordan	Yes

Finance	Finance Sarah Heywood	Yes
Legal	Pathfinder Legal Services/external solicitors where relevant	Yes Emma Duncan
Risk	Chief Executive and Executive Directors	Frank Jordan Yes
Equality and Diversity	EqIA Super User from within Directorate or EDI.Team@cambridgeshire.gov.uk	Jon Munslow Yes Faye McCarthy Yes
Please note that unless the mandatory sign offs above have been met the Corporate Clearance Group will not approve for publication		
Corporate Clearance Group (Head of Paid Service, S151 Officer, Monitoring Officer)	Stephen Moir Michael Hudson Emma Duncan	Yes
Optional Sign off (not necessary if there are no implications)		
Climate Change and Environment	Emily Bolton	n/a
Procurement	Clare Ellis	n/a
Public Health	Kate Parker	n/a
Resource (Assets, IT, & HR)	Chris Ramsbottom Katherine Hlalat	n/a

	Janet Atkin	
Communications	Sarah Silk	n/a

7. Source Documents

Appendix 1 – Current HOS approach to weeds

Appendix 2 – Recommended HOS approach to weeds

Appendix 3 – Cambridge City Weed Treatment Assessment

Appendix 4 – Alternative Methods of Weed Control on the Hampshire Highways Network 2022

Appendix 5 – Weed Survey Responses October 23

Appendix 6 – Weed Survey Trends.

Health and Safety Executive Guidance:

Glyphosate: [HSE website content re Glyphosate herbicide](#)

General Pesticide Guidance: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pesticides/index.ht>