

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 14 SEPTEMBER 2010

REPORT BY THE HEAD OF ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

10. WEED CONTROL SERVICE: IMPLICATIONS OF ACHIEVING MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN SAVINGS

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL.

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**Purpose/Summary of Report**

- To advise on the options and implications of the continuation or cessation of the weed control service.

<b>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>	
<b>(A)</b>	The options and implications of ceasing the weed control service be considered; and
<b>(B)</b>	Environment Scrutiny Committee advise the Executive of it's views on future provision of this service.

1.0 Background

1.1 Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) is responsible via its Highways department for the maintenance and safety of adopted public highways in Hertfordshire. This responsibility covers weed growth on hard surfaces (pavements and the carriageway).

1.2 Hertfordshire Highways ceased weed spraying in East Herts in the early part of the decade. In 2005 Members decided to undertake this service following a Best Value Review of environmental standards.

1.3 Weed control in East Herts is therefore a non-statutory service and is undertaken seasonally through the tendering of a fixed-term contract. This contract is to supply and apply two applications of topical herbicide to designated areas, with an optional third application to sensitive areas if required. The annual budget for this contract is £30,000 and no funding from Hertfordshire County Council is provided for this service. The

removal of the weed control service was previously identified as a saving in the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2011/12.

- 1.4 The actual spraying is carried out by specialist, qualified contractors and the works normally take place between June and early October depending on daily weather conditions, as this is the main period of weed growth and the best time to administer the herbicide. As this is a contact herbicide it is absorbed by the plant causing it to die and can only act on weeds that have already emerged above ground level.
- 1.5 The benefits of this type of chemical are that it does not contaminate the soil and water table, nor will it harm wildlife or pets. The chemicals that local authorities are allowed to use is strictly controlled and reviewed by DEFRA (the Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs).
- 1.6 The areas sprayed, as per the contract, are all hard footpaths / pavements, all road channels including kerbed areas in lay-bys, traffic calming devices, around and on traffic islands, central reservations and roundabouts in Bishop's Stortford, Buntingford, Hertford, Sawbridgeworth and Ware, plus all channelled roads linking towns and villages and all roads in villages as per the list provided to the contractor – a total channel length of 933,000m. This excludes the unrestricted lengths of the A414 and A10.
- 1.7 All East Herts Council owned car parks are also sprayed as per the contract – a total area of 46,000 square metres. Privately owned land or properties owned by bodies other than the Council are not treated.
- 1.8 The Council currently has a 1 year weed control contract pending a decision on whether to continue with this service as it has been included in the MTFP as a potential saving from 2011/12. However it is included as a possible option in the Refuse, Recycling and Street Cleansing contract which is currently out to Tender, so it is uncertain as to exactly what this service may cost from 2011/12. (A reasonable estimate is between £25,000 and £30,000). It is anticipated that the Refuse, Recycling and Street Cleansing Contract will be awarded in November 2010.

## 2.0 Report

- 2.1 The ceasing of the weed control contract will save the Council approximately £30,000 annually, at current budget / contract costs.
- 2.2 However, it can be safely assumed that there will be a major rise in complaints from residents / public who are dissatisfied with the withdrawal of this service and a subsequent increase in negative publicity for the Council.
- 2.3 Ceasing the service will also have a negative effect on public satisfaction figures and will be visually detrimental to the street scene, with the possibility of associated increases in littering and graffiti in areas with excessive weed growth, as they will look unkempt and uncared for.
- 2.4 As previously mentioned, the withdrawal of the weed control service was identified as a potential saving in the MTFP from 2011/12. In 2008/09 when these potential savings were identified for the MTFP, the funding of the weed control service in East Herts by the County Council was not an option. However since then Highways have agreed funding with a number of the other borough / district councils to carry out weed control on their behalf, often as part of Agency Agreements. Officers are now instigating further discussions with Highways to see if they are prepared to make a contribution to funding for weed control in East Herts.
- 2.5 It should be noted that East Herts Council has an Agency Agreement with County which was agreed as part of the new Grounds Maintenance Contract in 2007. Although this agreement covers verge maintenance it does not include weed control as this was not previously funded by the County.

## 3.0 Consultations

- 3.1 The other nine district / borough councils in Hertfordshire were consulted regarding their current and future practice on weed control and funding for the service.
- 3.2 All nine District / Borough Councils undertake weed control via spraying to varying degrees within their areas. The majority contract out this work and have indicated that they will continue to provide this service in the next financial year.

- 3.3 Eight of the borough / district councils in Hertfordshire now receive funding from Hertfordshire Highways for weed control. The ninth district council is currently re-negotiating their Agency Agreement and weed control funding.
- 3.4 These Agency Agreements have been negotiated over a period of years between each individual borough / district and Hertfordshire Highways, and lack consistency in funding for weed control. In some cases the borough / district councils enhance the service at their own expense.

Background Papers:

Minibudget Essential Reference Paper A: Weed Control Service.

Minibudget Essential Reference Paper B: Weed Control Service.

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## ESSENTIAL REFERENCE PAPER 'A'

Contribution to the Council's Corporate Priorities/ Objectives:	<p><b>Promoting prosperity and well-being; providing access and opportunities</b> <i>Enhance the quality of life, health and well-being of individuals, families and communities, particularly those who are vulnerable.</i></p> <p><b>Fit for purpose, services fit for you</b> <i>Deliver customer focused services by maintaining and developing a well managed and publicly accountable organisation.</i></p> <p><b>Pride in East Herts</b> <i>Improve standards of the neighbourhood and environmental management in our towns and villages.</i></p> <p><b>Leading the way, working together</b> <i>Deliver responsible community leadership that engages with our partners and the public.</i></p>
Consultation:	Nine Borough & District Councils in Hertfordshire.
Legal:	None
Financial:	Potential £30,000 shortfall in MTFP if weed control service continues in current format.
Human Resource:	None
Risk Management:	High risk of resident / public dissatisfaction with East Herts Council and consequent negative publicity. Decrease in the visual amenity of the district, with the possibility of associated increases in littering and graffiti.

**Community and Cultural Services**  
**Medium Term Financial Plan 2011/12:**  
**Weed Control Service**

<p>Budget line description of activities/service</p>	<p>Provision of non-statutory weed control service.</p> <p>Option: To cease provision of non-statutory weed control service.</p> <p>Saving: £30,000 per annum based on the budget for 2010/11.</p>
<p>Impact of reduction:</p>	<p>Ceasing this service will save money but will doubtless generate a great deal of customer dissatisfaction and negative publicity for the Council. East Herts residents have become used to the Council providing this service and subsequently expect that the Council will always continue to control the weeds.</p> <p>The visual impact of excessive weed growth will become obvious in areas previously controlled by spraying. Therefore it is expected that there will be an increase in complaints received by the Council from residents / public. As confirmed in 2008/09, when due to the wet summer and the fact that weed spraying started later in the year, 74 complaints were received. This compares to only 33 in 2007/08 and 44 in 2009/10. However, it is anticipated that future complaints will be significantly higher if no service is provided and would increase further in subsequent years as weeds take hold.</p> <p>If the weed control service is withdrawn then the Council will have to refer all complainants to Hertfordshire Highways. It is highly unlikely that many residents will appreciate the division of responsibility between the Council and the County Council / Hertfordshire Highways and therefore their dissatisfaction will be with East Herts Council, as they have been providing the service in past years.</p> <p>The withdrawal of the weed control service will also decrease the visual amenity of the district, with the possibility of associated increases in littering and graffiti.</p>

	Subsequently public dissatisfaction with East Herts Council will increase and will be demonstrated by a fall in public satisfaction figures.
Risk management issues:	High risk of resident / public dissatisfaction with East Herts Council and consequent negative publicity. Decrease in the visual amenity of the district, with the possibility of associated increases in littering and graffiti. Fall in public satisfaction figures for the Council.
Human Resource issues:	No quantifiable immediate HR issues. However, it is possible that there would be an increase in complaints and enquiries when weed growth becomes obvious and impairs the visual amenity of the district.
Sensitivity: (high, medium, low)	<b>High.</b> Residents / public have become accustomed to East Herts providing a weed control service and the visual impact of excessive weed growth throughout the district will have major repercussions with increased complaints and negative publicity.
Options/ alternatives:	a) Withdraw the weed control service to provide a budget saving of £30,000.  b) Continue with the weed control service provision but this will result in shortfall in MTFP of £30,000.  c) Only provide a weed control service if County provides funding. (Officers will seek funding from Hertfordshire County Council via the Highways Department to continue the weed control service).