

**Renfrewshire Council
Scrutiny Board**

**Renfrewshire Council's
Weed Control Strategy**

APPROVED

by Renfrewshire Council
26 June 2003

Report 5: 2002/2003

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**Renfrewshire Council
Scrutiny Board**

Renfrewshire Council's Weed Control Strategy

Approved by Renfrewshire Council: 26 June 2003

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**Renfrewshire
Council**

SCRUTINY BOARD

THE COUNCIL'S WEED CONTROL STRATEGY

RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by The Scrutiny Board

The Councils Weed Control Strategy

1 Summary

One of the issues which the Scrutiny Board wished to review was the approach taken by the Council in relation to weed control.

The Scrutiny Board at their meeting on 21 January 2003, agreed to the purpose, scope and provisional timetable for undertaking the review.

The **purpose** was:

- a) To clarify the issues surrounding the implementation and operation of the weed control strategy.
- b) To ensure that this is progressing in accordance with the Council's approval.
- c) To review the operational aspects of the strategy.
- d) To report on whether the desired outcomes are being achieved.
- e) To review the integrated approach by respective departments to the resourcing and operation of the weed control strategy.

The **scope** of the review was:

- a) To examine and consider how well the weed control programme is being managed and implemented.
- b) To establish if the desired outcomes are being, and will be achieved over the programmes duration.
- c) To investigate whether appropriate specific operational measures are in place to ensure delivery of the desired outcomes as per the agreed programme.
- d) To assess whether value for money is being achieved.
- e) To examine and report on improved product purchasing and usage.

- f) To assess the benefits of the more integrated interdepartmental approach.

The Director of Environmental Services, who is responsible for the integrated operation of the strategy, produced an initial report for the Board on 21 January 2003. He subsequently answered, in detail, questions put to him by Members and by the Lead Officer, and also responded to issues raised by, and in terms of the responses received from, Client Departments, who enjoyed the service namely, Housing & Property Services, Planning & Transport and Education & Leisure Services. The Board at that meeting, also asked that the views of the various Community Councils, Tenants and Residents Associations also be sought. This was done and the results of a questionnaire presented to the Board at their meeting on 4 March 2003. Representatives from these groups subsequently gave evidence to the Board meeting on 31 March 2003. All this information has been collated in the following sections of this report with recommendations made, as appropriate, for action.

2 Recommendations

It is recommended that the Council:

- 1) Note the content of the Report.
- 2) Note the various Service Improvements proposed to and accepted by the Director of Environmental Services for 2003 (as per section 4 of the report).
- 3) Agree that the Director of Environmental Services should report further progress on performance and customer satisfaction in relation to Weed Control, at the end of the 2003 season, to the Commercial Operations Policy Board.
- 4) Note that the Scrutiny Board propose to reassess the weed control strategy again at the end of 2004, to establish whether any further review of the operation and implementation of the integrated strategy should be undertaken by the Director of Environmental Services for 2005/06 and beyond.

3 Background

The issue of weed growth and weed control in all areas of Renfrewshire has become a high profile problem. A number of factors have contributed to this (as covered within this report), and in response to this issue, a strategic approach was taken by the Council from April 2002 onwards, following a paper produced by the Director of Environmental Services as part of the 2001/02 Budget and Service Planning process. This comprised:

- 1) An integrated and more focused approach being introduced to tackle the problem.
- 2) A single department having managerial responsibility, namely Environmental Services (rather than Environmental Services, Housing & Property Services , Planning & Transport and Education & Leisure Services each having a role to play).

- 3) Budgets being increased and pooled, to give greater control and to increase value for money by way of efficiency.
- 4) Recognising that whilst schools were excluded from this integrated strategy for reasons further expanded upon, the treatment of these areas is still under the weed control responsibility of Environmental Services.
- 5) A strategic approach being taken, to ensure that all areas within the programme received at least 4 sprays over the three year programme, in two six week blocks, in spring and/or summer (schools receiving 3 sprays per year, namely at Easter, during the summer break and the October week).
- 6) The use of improved chemical/product.

The Integrated Approach

The key objective of the weed control strategy was to bring together all budgeted funding from various departments within the Council, and, together with the additional funding of £100,000 per annum, to take a more focused and integrated approach to weed control across Renfrewshire. The strategy does not cover the treatment of noxious weeds, it being recognised that this would be dealt with as a separate issue due to the specialist nature thereof.

A three year weed spraying programme was subsequently developed by the Director of Environmental Services and this commenced in April 2002. The three year weed spraying programme was necessary to ensure that all areas throughout Renfrewshire received an equal input of resources in line with their designated service categories and priority status.

The integrated weed spraying programme thus ensures, that high priority areas now receive 2 sprays per annum, namely principal routes through Renfrewshire within built up areas, and those areas being directly associated with high priority grass cutting activities. Other residential/housing scheme areas now receive one or two sprays per annum based on a rolling programme of spraying and will thus receive 4 sprays over the three year period.

Prior to Integration

Prior to 2002, several departments had responsibility for weed control, namely Environmental Services, Planning & Transport, Housing and Property Services and Education and Leisure Services. Their weed control remits were as follows:

- a) Environmental Services - core contract activities carried out by Grounds Maintenance DSO.
 - Around grassed areas (channels etc).
 - Around obstacles.
 - Interlinking footpaths*.

***NB** The above applied mainly to the Paisley area and some locations within Johnstone and Linwood. However some areas, e.g. Renfrew, required additional funding to be identified by the Department of Housing & Property Services for pathworks. Some new build areas were also not on the treatment schedule.

- b) Housing and Property Services - some path works were included within the core contract activities of the Grounds Maintenance DSO. Other pathworks, as belonging to Housing & Property Services relied on additional variations.
- c) Planning and Transport Roads Division - 2001/02 was the last year of a 4 year Roads Contract where the specification demanded one spray per year using a Glyphosate based herbicide. This however proved in the main, to be only of very short term effectiveness. All specified domestic roads verges and back heels of pavements (i.e. 4 edges typical), within the towns and villages of Renfrewshire were treated. This did not include trunk roads and additional roads where these were adopted during the contract period.

The 2002 Programme

The integrated weed spraying programme commenced in April 2002, with spraying being undertaken across two six week blocks, namely April/May and September/October. Preparatory work commenced in March 2002, and the initial spraying was delivered by a mix of specialist certified agency labour, and a number of trained/certified staff from within the Grounds Maintenance DSO. More staff have been trained for the 2003 season and it is anticipated that less agency labour will be required in the future, bringing about additional cost savings to the Council. The additional investment of £100,000 has allowed the purchase of an improved chemical/product for treatment. Some specially adapted vehicles and equipment to improve the efficiency of the spraying programme were also purchased, and this investment will benefit the continuation and success of the overall programme.

The chemical treatment was also enhanced in 2002, through follow up manual and mechanical sweeping by the Street Cleaning DSO. This allowed for the removal of residual weed growth and grit from certain areas.

The Director of Environmental Services advises that the performance outcomes achieved during the first year of spraying have been encouraging, and that continued improvement is anticipated over the next 2 years. The full effect and benefits of the 3 year programme will however only be established at the end of the 3 year rolling programme.

Schools

There is a separate contract with Education & Leisure Services in terms of weed control within schools, requiring Environmental Services to spray 3 times per year namely during the Easter holiday break, the summer break and during the October week. This work involves grass edges, obstacles, and spot treatment of playgrounds etc. This is however not part of the integrated weed control strategy, for whilst the same operatives are used, treatment is limited to specific school holiday periods at the request of the Department concerned. The Glyphosate based product is safe to use with little residual effect, but as employees involved in weed control are required to wear protective clothing e.g. white body suits and protective eye and face wear, there is therefore a potential of parental concern for the safety of children from the product if it were to be applied during school term, thus exposing children to the perception of a potential danger. For this reason it has been decided to leave this element as a stand alone contract, particularly bearing in mind that an adjustment of the contract will be necessary once various schools come under the responsibility of an independent provider in terms of the PPP.

Improved Coverage of Area

The integrated approach has thus allowed the Council during 2002, to tackle the problem in a more structured way, applying additional resources, and using a more expensive but effective product, benefiting from economies of scale in terms of product purchasing thereof. It has ensured a more consistent coverage of the area with priority areas obtaining 2 sprays per year and other areas 4 sprays over a 3 year term. The integrated approach has allowed greater value for money to be achieved and has provided the opportunity for the Council to establish where there are areas of potential further improvement. These potential areas for improvement are outlined in the section 4 of this report entitled Service Improvements.

Product Usage

The following factors have impacted on previous performance in terms of weed control and the public perception of the Council's effectiveness in this area.

- Chemical/product restrictions.
- Contact weed killer only permitted to be used.
- Nil residual weed killers allowed due to legislation.
- Timing and height of weeds.
- Weeds which are killed are unsightly and generally left standing.

The chemicals/products which are now mainly used and specified, are glyphosate based, which has no residual effect, as it only affects the growing weed at the time of application.

During September/October 2001, field trials were undertaken by the Director of Environmental Services with an improved product. This product, still being glyphosate based and therefore still complying with legislative requirements, has proved to have much improved eradication results. Whilst the cost of this product is significantly higher

than the previous product used, the use of this during 2002 has been facilitated with the benefit of the additional funding available.

Funding

The overall funding of the integrated weed control strategy has been achieved by means of the pooling of respective existing departmental budgets, together with additional investment which was approved during the 2001/02 Budget Planning Process for the Environmental Services Department.

A breakdown of the overall funding for 2002/03 (i.e. the 2002 season) was:

Environmental Services Core Contract	£56,000
Planning & Transport Roads Contract	£34,000
Housing & Property Services	£50,000
Additional Investment	<u>£100,000</u>
Total	<u>£240,000</u>

It has to be noted that during 2002/03, the budget from Planning & Transport (Roads) was amended from £34,000 to £74,000 reflecting the actual spend incurred during 2001/02. This increased figure was thus included within the revised budget available for weed control in 2002/03. This has allowed an additional spray to be applied (i.e. 2 sprays) for areas which were identified as requiring priority treatment.

The weed spraying services as provided to the Department of Education & Leisure Services have been kept outwith the integrated weed control strategy, and likewise the funding has been kept separate namely, £12,500 per annum.

Overall Analysis

In relation to the **Purpose and Scope** of this review, it is considered that the Environmental Services Department, having just completed the first year of the 3 year programme, are seeing benefits already flowing from the integrated approach. A greater area of Renfrewshire is being covered, there is less chance of areas being missed, and a more effective chemical product has been used facilitated by the pooling of and increase in funding. The additional funding has also allowed the purchase of additional vehicles and specialist spraying equipment to add to the effectiveness of the programme in later years. The programme appears to be progressing well in accordance with the Council's approval, and the desired outcomes appear to be achievable over the term of the programme.

Various issues were raised by Members of the Scrutiny Board, by the Lead Officer, by the responses from other Departmental representatives, and as a result of the Customer questionnaire and the contribution by those Community Organisations who attended meetings of the Scrutiny Board. This led to early agreement as to various service improvements to apply for 2003 and beyond, which improvements are outlined in Section 4 of this report entitled "Service Improvements".

Specifically, the Community representatives felt, that whilst more could be done, it was important not to throw resources at the problem. They appreciated the importance of service improvements and welcomed those now proposed by Environmental Services for 2003. They felt that Elected Members who they had approached previously about any weed problems in their areas, had dealt with the issue in a very receptive fashion, and that Environmental Services staff were also helpful. They suggested, that along with the maps and schedules now proposed for 2003 (see section 4), Environmental Services should also designate specific officers to deal with public enquires etc in each area. It was agreed that such an arrangement would be put in place. The Community Representatives also very much welcomed the Quality of Life 2003 "Spring Clean", undertaken by the Council, and felt that this was a good foundation on which to further develop the continuing integrated weed control regime. They mentioned some specific sites, and the Director of Environmental Services agreed to investigate their specific concerns and to tackle these areas where possible within budget available. Raised shrub beds were also mentioned as a concern, in regards to weeds, as litter traps and in view of the overgrown nature of these. The Director of Environmental Services was able to confirm that 2003 was the last year of a 3 year programme to have designated problem areas removed, re-seeded and thereafter maintained, and this progress was welcomed by the Community Representatives .

Clearly however the programme has to be given sufficient time for all the benefits to be achieved, and until the full effect of the integrated approach and the additional funding applied from 2002 onwards, can be fully assessed. The various service improvements from 2003 onwards will help and inform the public better as to what is being done, and to highlight the achievements and progress made year on year.

4 Service Improvements

In response to the issues raised via the Scrutiny Board, the Director of Environmental Services has accepted that certain service improvements shall be implemented for 2003.

To help cut down on the level of enquiries, and to improve customer satisfaction and an understanding of weed control issues, the following proposals are to be implemented by the Department of Environmental Services:

4.1 Communication - This appeared to be the single most important area to address. This will effectively reduce enquiries and potential complaints. Prior to the 2003 season therefore, the Director of Environmental Services shall produce schedules (and associated maps), showing the proposed 2003 spraying programme, Spring and Autumn (2 sprays), Spring or Autumn (i.e. 1 spray) during the season. This will be structured on an area by area basis, made available within Housing Neighbourhood Offices and Libraries, and tailored to cover the local area of interest to the users of these Council facilities, to allow them to be informed of what is proposed in the programme for the year.

An explanatory leaflet will also be produced, to be available at these locations, to explain to the public, amongst other things that weed control effectiveness is weather dependant, and that if certain streets/areas are missed when scheduled, then they will be returned to not later than 8 weeks later (weather permitting). Information on the programme etc will also be provided by the Director of Environmental Services direct to Community Councils, Tenants and Residents Associations, and Environmental Services will also make available to these groups, (at Forum meetings etc) staff to explain the organisation and implementation of the programme in general, and how it affects issues relevant to their particular area in question. Environmental Services will ensure that on these leaflets/schedules, there will be a named officer for the public to contact to deal with their enquiry/concern direct. Environmental Services will also be open to suggestions from these Groups as to how the programme may be tailored on an area by area basis, shall be capable of some minor modification to seek to enhance the treatment of specific areas of concern to Community Groups, on the basis that this can only be achieved within the current budget available to the area i.e. resulting in changed priorities elsewhere in the area.

- 4.2 **Co-ordination** - It was evident that there was clearly an opportunity for the various Environmental Services DSO's to co-ordinate their activities, and indeed this has already been recognised and implemented by the Department. Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing were reorganised during 2001/2002, and, where possible, is now integrating with grass cutting activities, to ensure that any "arisings" which stray onto roads and footpaths (or are spread as a result of grass cutting vehicles running over hard surfaced areas), are cleared up and do not become a 'foothold' for weed growth or cause a potential safety hazard. This will also cut down on the possibility of drains being blocked. It is acknowledged also that the Ground Maintenance DSO are testing new machines which collect/box grass cuttings in certain areas which should result in further service quality improvements. The Director of Environmental Services is requested therefore to seek other opportunities for integration of service areas, has agreed to look at this further and also at specific working practices/patterns including further staff training.
- 4.3 **Equipment** - The Director of Environmental Services is asked to look at whether there is an opportunity for dual use of purpose built vehicles (such as quad bikes), to allow these to be used during the winter months to assist in de-icing of pavements/paths etc, by the DSO, provided this can be accommodated within the technical capabilities of such machinery, and provided the condition and longevity of use of these machines would not be compromised as a result of this.
- 4.4 **Weed Removal** - It is acknowledged that manual removal of weeds is labour intensive and that mechanical extraction can damage road verges/gullies etc. It is however proposed, and accepted by the Director of Environmental Services, that weather and budget permitting, he will endeavour to apply resources to remove more of the dead weeds from high priority areas.