

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 JANUARY 2024

PRESENT

Councillor D. Acton (in the Chair).

Councillors J. Holden (Vice-Chair), J.M. Axford, G. Carter, G. Coggins, W. Frass, W. Jones, B.G. Winstanley and D. Butt (ex-Officio)

In attendance

Councillor Stephen Adshead	Executive Member for Highways, Environmental and Traded Services
Councillor Rose Thompson	Executive Member for Communities and Safety
Councillor Aidan Williams	Executive Member for Climate Change
James Harries	Head of Climate Change and Sustainability
Chris Morris	Director of Highways, Transport and Environment
Bob Rothwell	Allotments Officer
John Stevens	Senior Environmental Contract Manager
Sharon Walls	Head of Highways, Transportation and Greenspaces
Harry Callaghan	Democratic Officer

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D. Jarman, M.J. Taylor, L. Walsh and D. Western

18. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meetings held 10 July 2023, 12 July 2023, and 20 September 2023, be agreed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

19. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations were made.

20. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

No questions were received.

21. WEEDING PROGRAMME, RE-WILDING AND GREEN SPACES REVIEW

The Executive Member for Highways, Environmental and Traded Services introduced the report which had been circulated with the agenda. Due to considerable changes to the weed spraying programme over recent years, the Executive Member felt the timing of the report was pertinent.

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The Senior Environmental Contract Manager spoke to the presentation and pulled several key themes.

Firstly, since agreed at the Executive in June 2020, the Council had committed to reducing the usage of glyphosate as part of the weeding programme. Furthermore, the Council had introduced an 'opting out' spraying scheme, where residents were able to adopt tree pits that were then not sprayed. The annual quantities glyphosate used on the highways had reduced by 50% since 2018. The Committee were also referred to the services role in Trafford Council's sustainability commitment, which had seen it stop weed spraying in all public parks, green spaces, and cemeteries, looking to introduce more wildflower and meadow areas.

The alternatives to spraying weeds were also mentioned, which included weed brush machines and hot water weed control on hard surfaces. This was on a low scale currently.

The different weeds found in Trafford were shared, with weed control primarily undertaken to prevent longer term damage to hard surfaces and infrastructure. The weed control programme timelines were also shared, usually starting in mid-May to June, as they were only effective in dry weather.

A review of the weed spraying programme was done in 2023, with the work being spread across Trafford's twenty-one wards. The work began in the North of the Borough down, due to the densely housed nature of the area. It was recognised that this does place the South at a disadvantage, with the programme usually ending in October. However, this was also down, partly, to delays in weed treatment when contractor procurement was delayed or unavailable. Challenges could be faced due to Trafford's contract being less lucrative than neighbouring authorities, and availability in contractors reducing due to national reductions in weed spraying programmes.

The plans for the future were shared. This included two weeding teams, starting in the north and south of the borough at the same time. The team in the north would also oversee the programme in the west, with the team in the south working on central. Further, there was an expectation that, despite glyphosate currently being deemed safe and effective, this may change. The Council considered that it was more appropriate to set a performance led programme for weed control, rather than increasing the number of chemical applications, as this would cause a detrimental effect to the environment.

Finally, the Council's re-wilding initiatives were shared. This included use of parks, greenspaces, and verges for wildflower meadows. This had been adopted by some parks in the borough already. There had also been appetite to implement this initiative on roundabouts as well.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member, the Senior Environmental Contract Manager, and all other officers for the update and offered Councillors the opportunity to ask questions.

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Councillor Axford asked how aesthetics were taken into account when considering the weeding programme, and how that was balanced with unsafeness caused by weeds. Further, Councillor Axford asked what the uptake of opting out was and whether it was increasing. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager responded that if weeds were neglected, they could become a trip hazard and could cause flooding around drains. Regarding aesthetic, the officer responded that the lay person only notices weeds when the work was not done, and as such this made the timing of the spray crucial. Councillor Axford asked how much of a negative response was received from weeds, as they felt they should be promoted and not seen as a bad thing. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager responded further that if weeds were left to grow, residents do notice them. They could also cause safety hazards if not managed properly.

Councillor Winstanley asked if the change in approach to work from the north and south of the borough simultaneously would reduce weeds growing too large. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager responded that this was the hope, with a more even approach across the borough.

Councillor Winstanley asked whether there was opportunity to procure contractors through the Council's STAR process, in conjunction with the other Councils. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager replied that this was already being done, with many contractors' operating in Trafford also working elsewhere. It was noted that procurement was not where the difficulty lay, it was monitoring the work onsite that provided an issue. Inclement weather was an issue of causing further delays if a contracted company operated in several areas.

Councillor Winstanley enquired as to how pathways within public parks and cemeteries would be monitored with no more spraying taking place. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager referred to the weed brush machine included within the report, and how this would mainly be used to handle pathways. An example of work done in Chassen Park was provided. It was also mentioned that a trimmer would be used in cemeteries, with Brooklands and Sale looking well after these, with Urmston set to be completed soon. The Executive Member for Highways, Environmental and Traded Services added his support for the effectiveness of this machinery.

Councillor Jones asked whether the approach to work from the North and South would see the programme take less than the twelve weeks laid out in the presentation. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager said this would be a goal, however, felt it was important to manage performance with twelve weeks already at tight timeframe. It was added that a natural reduction should take place across the borough.

Councillor Carter asked what guarantees could be given that spraying would begin in May, subject to weather. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager said that the aim was for this to begin late into May, with the programme to then kick in at the end of June and July.

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Councillor Carter reported an issue of knotweed behind Flixton garden centre a year ago, and wondered if the delay was usual as it had not been dealt with. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager responded that each time knotweed was reported it went into a register, which could take up to three years to be treated. It was mentioned that the site in question was landlocked, and a fairly sized infestation which would require a specific approach, including support from specialists. The Head of Highways, Transportation and Greenspaces added that this case was being picked up, but the sheer scale of the site may be a reason for delay.

Councillor Frass enquired as to what could be done to the lack of attention to footpaths and passageways which do not have a maintained carriageway adjacent but connect two roads and were heavily used by children walking to school. The Senior Environmental Contract Officer responded that a contractor would not be used in those cases, with any issues needing to be internalised. Officers within the Council would attend to this, trim, and spray it off. Councillor Frass asked further whether there was a programme that dealt with this, or did it rely on individual ward members reporting the issue. The officer responded that this was currently reactive but would take this away to look at making it more proactive.

Councillor Coggins enquired as to whether more could be done to stop the reasons as to why weeds grow, such as clearing drains. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager responded that simply put, if you removed things, it would reduce the ability for weeds to go, however, they would always find a way to grow.

Furthermore, Councillor Coggins mentioned whether the new approach of operating North and South, would mean the central area of the borough would become the new South. The officer assured that this approach could have different positive permutations. For example, if required teams could be moved to town centres, should the issue be worse in different areas they were covering.

Thirdly, Councillor Coggins asked whether 'no mow May' was still something the Council did. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager informed the Councillor that it was something being explored but would likely be in areas where it would be better received, possibly in line with re-wilding initiatives.

Councillor Coggins asked finally if any analysis was being done to look at the biodiversity impacts of the Council's new approach. The Officer felt it was early to look at yet, however, the team was starting to compile data to look at and monitor the impact.

Councillor Holden asked whether deep rooted plants, such as dandelions, were a major issue within the borough's greenspaces. The Senior Environmental Contract Manager felt that feedback on dandelions was generally good and would only cause damage if they were left year on year, with any damage being minimal.

The Executive Member for Climate Change thanked Councillor Axford and Frass especially for their feedback. The Executive Member drew the Committee's attention to a wider piece of work taking place, in the development of the Council's

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Greenspaces Strategy and felt that there would be an opportunity for the Committee to have this brought to a future Committee meeting if requested.

Councillor Carter asked about greenspaces and wanted a conversation to begin on the old William Wroe golf course. The Councillor was aware of some of the potential options for the usage of this, which included wetlands development, a memorial forest, or a parkrun, but felt that for any of these to take off it would depend on improving access through entry points and pathways. It was asked what could be done to accelerate planning to add pathways and hopefully attract funding. The Director of Highways, Transportation, and Environment would take this away to the Strategic Growth team and provide Councillor Carter with a response.

The Director of Highways, Transportation, and Environment provided a response to some of the points raised. The Director felt that weed spraying was always a compromise, with the services trying to do things differently with different contractors. The Director also mentioned how they felt the management of biodiversity and moving this forward was important, and that the Head of Climate Change and Sustainability was leading on this.

Councillor Axford felt Kingsway Park was an ideal place for rewilding and enquired as to what was being done of this through its ongoing masterplan. The Head of Highways, Transportation, and Greenspaces would take this away and contact Councillor Axford.

The Chair thanked the officers for attending and answering the Committee's questions.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the update be noted.
- 2) That the Senior Environmental Contracts Officer, alongside colleagues, look at the feasibility of dealing with weeding issues on footpaths and passageways proactively.
- 3) That the Committee consider asking for the Greenspaces Strategy to be brought to Scrutiny.
- 4) That the Director of Highways, Transportation, and Environment have colleagues contact Councillor Carter around plans being discussed for the former William Wroe golf course.
- 5) That the Head of Highways, Transportation, and Greenspaces provide Councillor Axford plans being discussed for Kingsway Park.

22. ALLOTMENTS UPDATE

The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability provided an overview of the report which had been supplied with the agenda. The Committee were informed of the key themes within the report.

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The Council recognised that the service was crucial in improving community cohesion. The Allotments Officer in attendance was hired in September 2023 to oversee the service and gave opportunity for more discussions to take place over the priorities of the service.

Challenges faced by the service were shared with the Committee, including that the rental fee for an allotment in Trafford remaining static since 2015 whilst over costs associated with the service had risen.

Other themes that were shared from the report included increasing issues of flooding and extreme heat over recent and forthcoming years, the current waiting list for an allotment in Trafford of 540, and plans being put in place to increase access to allotments moving forward.

Opportunities were being developed as part of an Allotments strategy which was currently in development. This involved improving the services approach to communications, its website, a review of current internal processes, and developing networking and training within the service and for those that used it. There was also a desire from the service to tap into ongoing work being done across the Council on improving food cultivation, with the service hoping to play a role in improving this area within the borough.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report and opened the floor for questions from the Committee.

Councillor Frass asked if due to the allotments service being funded through the rent, was there any scope to expand sites or to look at Council owned plots which could be turned into new sites. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability responded that there were no plans currently to increase the number of allotments in the borough. However, there were aims to increase the number of communities growing collectives and promoting local growing groups. The officer would take away looking at using Council land to discussions on the development of the strategy.

Councillor Frass asked further what was being done around dealing with the issue of flooding, highlighting issues on sites in his allotment. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability recognised the issue. Referred to the strategy and how this would be discussed as part of this, as well as work that was done with Amey and their drainage engineers who monitor the issue.

Councillor Winstanley enquired as to how the Council would help to build networks between different allotments sites and how they would encourage residents to get involved. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability said that this was not something that had been thought about yet but was something to be considered. The service was keen to work with allotment committees and wanted to make sure tenants were not excluded from communications. Councillor Winstanley asked whether the service had the contact details of allotment tenants. The Allotments Officer responded that they did have contact details, but not all emails, which was part of what the service was aiming to do around communications being much quicker, with much currently being sent hard copy.

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Councillor Winstanley also asked how much input the Council had over self-managed allotments and whether they would get involved if a dispute happened in an allotment committee. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability responded that these were self-sufficient, but the Council may get involved if there was a particular dispute.

Finally, Councillor Winstanley asked whether there would be an element of improving inclusivity within allotments, citing an example of an allotment raising money to making a site disability friendly. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability assured the Councillor that despite not being flagged in the report, it was being discussed internally and was seen as a key issue. The Executive Member for Climate Change added that any future strategies for the service would engage inclusivity in their approach.

Councillor Carter enquired as to whether there was protocol to cease tenancy of plots going unused and whether this could be tightened. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability answered that there was protocol, however, how this was used varied case by case, with some being complex and involving mitigating circumstances behind less usage.

Councillor Carter liked the allotments culture, however, with Council's facing acute financial problems, asked whether there were any plans to review allotment rates which had gone unchanged since 2015. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability answered that there were currently no plans but recognised that the discussion may need to be had in the near future.

Councillor Axford provided her support for community growing groups and networking between different allotments.

Councillor Coggins asked how effectively allotments were at helping people out of poverty and whether there were any demographic statistics behind allotment usage. Further, did the fee have to be paid up front, or could this be spread across the year. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability responded that there were no specific statistics on demographics, but that as part of the strategy, and using Trafford data lab, this would be looked at in the future. The allotments fee was paid upfront.

Councillor Coggins raised concerns from allotment tenants around lease renewals and asked whether there could be confirmation that none of the Council's current sites would be sold off. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability answered that they were not aware of any plans to close currently and would discuss with other departments around the process for how lease renewals were managed.

Councillor Coggins asked finally whether there was space for less formal community growing projects, where residents could make greater use of the borough's green spaces. The Head of Climate Change and Sustainability assured the Councillor that there were aims to promote this to residents.

Councillor Butt felt that communications should improve around engaging young people into the process and promoting the positives of organic eating and growing.

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The Executive Member for Climate Change supported this point and committed to working with public health in the establishment of this strategy.

The Executive Member for Highways, Environmental and Traded Services responded to Councillor Coggins' question around less formal community growing groups, with different projects taking place by different groups across the Borough. The Director of Highways, Transport, and Environment added that suggestions from the evening would be used as part of the development of both the Allotments and Greenspaces' Strategies.

The Chair thanked the officers for all the work that they were doing. The Chair provided his support for involving school children in attending allotments.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That the Head of Climate Change and Sustainability take the feedback from Members as part of the development of the Allotments Strategy.

23. BUDGET SCRUTINY REPORT

The Chair introduced the report and asked Member if they had any questions or comments.

None were raised and the Committee agreed the report for submission to the Executive.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the report be noted, and the recommendations agreed.
- 2) That the report be submitted to the Executive for approval.

24. EVENTS AT OLD TRAFFORD TASK AND FINISH GROUP INTERIM REPORT

The Chair updated the Committee as to why the report had not been brought to the Committee in the agenda. The Chair informed Members that they would receive the report the following day and were asked to provide any comments to the Chair and the Democratic Officer by the end of the week. The Chair would then approve the report for submission to the next meeting of the Council's Executive.

Councillor Carter asked for the report to apply pressure to Manchester United around increasing the viability of active travel on a matchday, citing the new ownership of the club and their involvement in cycling. The Chair responded that the Council could not force the football club to do something but would consider this response as part of the recommendations.

Councillor Holden understood the pressure to improve cycling to matches, however, felt it would fall low on the new ownership's priority list. Councillor Carter responded that the purpose of a task and finish group was not to improve

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Manchester United but rather to improve the impact on residents who must put up with the consequences.

The Democratic Officer asked for any comments on the report to be with the Chair and the Officer by the end of the week.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the update from the Chair be noted.
- 2) That Members respond to the Chair and Democratic Officer with comments on the report.
- 3) That Members delegate approval of the report to the Chair.

25. WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Axford asked whether the outcomes of the trial and consultation of temporary stopping areas for Travellers could come to a future meeting.

Councillor Axford asked further about reported mould in L&Q properties and whether there had been any feedback to an email sent in December. The Chair responded that he would chase this up.

RESOLVED

- 1) That the outcome of the trial and consultation come to Scrutiny in the future.
- 2) That the Chair respond to Councillor Axford's email on reported mould found in L&Q properties.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and finished at 8.13 pm

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