

Cambridge City Council – Cabinet Update

Drafted for Cabinet member consideration outside of a formal Cabinet meeting and provided by said member to the Services, Climate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee for its consideration

Herbicide-Free Weed Management Programme

Date: 6 October 2025

1. Purpose of Report

This report provides an update on the City Council's transition to herbicide-free weed management across all wards. It summarises progress to date, outlines challenges encountered, and highlights next steps for delivering a sustainable, city-wide approach.

2. Background

The Council has committed to eliminating the routine use of glyphosate and other chemical herbicides on roads, verges, and pavements.

This approach supports the Council's Biodiversity Strategy, Climate Change Strategy, and wider ambitions to reduce harm to pollinators, improve air and water quality, and promote public health. It is a cornerstone of the Council's commitment to become a Net Zero Council by 2030 and to lead on sustainable public realm maintenance.

The decision by Members to end the use of herbicides has been the primary driver for the changes outlined in this report. The shift to mechanical, manual, and thermal methods has necessitated significant operational adjustments — including investment in new specialist equipment, revised scheduling, and increased staff time to deliver equivalent coverage. These impacts are discussed further in Section 5.

The Herbicide-Free Work Programme (Appendix A) sets out a systematic ward-based plan for weed removal using mechanical, manual, and thermal methods.

3. Programme Delivery

Ward Coverage: The programme is being delivered sequentially across all 14 wards. As of October 2025, Kings Hedges, Arbury, East Chesterton, and West Chesterton have been completed, and work has now commenced in Abbey Ward.

Methods Used: Mechanical sweepers with weed-ripper attachments, walk-behind weed brushes, manual clearance, and targeted thermal treatment.

Team Structure: A dedicated team of five staff, supported by temporary seasonal operatives during peak growth periods.

Impact of Herbicide-Free change: The change away from herbicides has increased the time and resources required to complete ward-based programmes. Mechanical and manual methods are labour-intensive and less weather-resilient than chemical spraying, meaning teams must revisit sites more frequently and adjust schedules to reflect seasonal growth. This has resulted in longer timescales for ward completion and, in some areas, variations in consistency as the service adapts to new methods and maturing vegetation.

Community Engagement: The *Happy Bee Streets* initiative enables residents to retain non-invasive greenery, promoting biodiversity and local stewardship.

4. Progress to Date

As of October 2025:

- Wards completed: Kings Hedges, Arbury, East Chesterton, West Chesterton
- In progress: Abbey Ward (commenced October 2025)
- Priority areas: Additional targeted work has been undertaken on main city routes and school access corridors to maintain safety and accessibility.
- City Centre: Deep cleansing and weed removal now underway, led by 4x4 cleansing teams.
- Engagement: Positive feedback received from residents on the uptake of *Happy Bee Streets* continues, supporting biodiversity and community ownership.

In addition, our 4-on, 4-off cleansing teams have commenced targeted deep cleansing and weed removal in the city centre, complementing the ward-based programme. While the service continues to face constraints in specialist vehicles and equipment, operations are being carefully scheduled alongside other essential cleansing duties to maintain overall service performance.

The revised operating model is delivering visible environmental benefits, including improved pollinator habitats and reduced chemical exposure in public spaces. However, these gains come with associated operational consequences: progress

through wards, higher equipment costs, and increased staff deployment compared to the former herbicide-based approach. These factors have been carefully balanced within existing budgets and resources.

To increase capacity and improve delivery speed, the Council has ordered additional weed brush attachments for the HAKO street cleaning fleet, enabling two machines to operate concurrently — one as a dedicated herbicide-free unit (as currently deployed) and a second supporting ward-based operations to accelerate completion of the remaining programme.

The programme is being delivered sequentially across all 14 wards, supported by a dedicated team of five staff using mechanical, manual, and thermal methods.

Ward	Status	Notes
Kings Hedges	✅ Completed (May 2025)	Cleared and monitored for regrowth
Arbury	✅ Completed (June–September 2025)	Follow-up maintenance planned
East Chesterton	✅ Completed (August 2025)	Additional detritus removal undertaken
West Chesterton	✅ Completed (September 2025)	Focused on main routes and cycleways
Abbey	🟡 In Progress (October 2025)	Work commenced; focus on high-use areas
Romsey	➡️ SOON Scheduled (November 2025)	Follows Abbey completion
Petersfield	➡️ SOON Scheduled (December 2025)	Linked to city centre routing
Coleridge	➡️ SOON Scheduled (December 2025)	Planned before winter close
Cherry Hinton	➡️ SOON Scheduled (January 2026)	Weather-dependent
Queen Edith's	➡️ SOON Scheduled (January–February 2026)	Coordinated with Cherry Hinton
Trumpington	➡️ SOON Scheduled (February 2026)	To follow Queen Edith's
Newnham	➡️ SOON Scheduled (February–March 2026)	Planned ahead of final phase
Castle	➡️ SOON Scheduled (March 2026)	Final ward in sequence
Market	➡️ SOON Scheduled (March 2026)	Completion before end of programme

5. Challenges and Mitigation

The Council's commitment to herbicide-free weed management has delivered positive biodiversity and climate outcomes but has also introduced several

operational challenges directly linked to the change in method. The following points summarises these impacts and mitigation actions.

- **Backlog of Growth:** Since chemical spraying ceased, dense and mature weeds have required significantly more time and manual effort to remove, increasing total programme duration. The weather conditions have contributed to strong growing conditions this year
 - *Mitigation:* We have deployed 2 additional staff and additional equipment and prioritised high-use areas.
- **Parked Cars:** Access to some streets has been restricted.
 - *Mitigation:* Advance notices, coordination with County Highways and TROs.
- **Public Expectations:** Some residents expected a rapid, visible improvement.
 - *Mitigation:* Communications emphasising the environmental benefits and longer-term nature of the project.

6. Programme Flexibility

The published ward schedule represents an indicative sequence rather than a fixed timetable. Delivery is dependent on multiple external factors, including weather conditions, seasonal growth rates, and physical access constraints (e.g. parked vehicles). Teams will continue to adjust schedules to ensure safety, optimise resource use, and maintain service quality. This flexible approach will also allow the service to respond to local priorities or emerging operational issues.

7. Next Steps

- Completion of the ward schedule by March 2026.
- Review of operational efficiency and equipment performance is ongoing.
- Expanded the communications and reporting of environmental benefits (e.g. biodiversity, pollinator counts).
- Ongoing engagement with County Council colleagues on TROs, highways maintenance, and long-term funding models.

- Consider options for scaling thermal or alternative methods as technology develops.

8. Recommendations

- a) To note the progress of the herbicide-free work programme.
- b) Endorses the continued city-wide roll-out and engagement with communities.
- c) Supports a review of bin and street cleansing routing to align with weed removal operations.
- d) Agrees that Cabinet should receive a further update in March 2026 with a full evaluation of costs, outcomes, and recommendations for any required future funding
- e) To note that perceptions of weeds can be expected to change. Over time, there will be increased knowledge of the issues involved. The herbicide-free approach will guide expectations as we develop this plan. Some residents will become more involved in the management of their own streets, as in the Happy Bee Streets Scheme. This approach, where we work in partnership with communities, is to be valued and encouraged. The Council has declared climate and biodiversity emergencies, and this work is in response to that.