Herbicide-Free Weed Management: Response to Council Motion and Next Steps

To: Services, Climate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (19 November 2026)
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Wards affected: All

Director Approval: James Elms confirms that the report author has sought the advice of all appropriate colleagues and given due regard to that advice; and that they are content for the report to be put to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

1.	**Introduction**
1.1	**Remit and purpose.** This item provides scrutiny of the Council's implementation of its herbicide-free weed management policy and the proposed response to the Council motion. The Committee is asked to examine delivery, risks and the proposed programme of evidence gathering, and to make recommendations. **Scrutiny functions.** Holding the Executive to Account; Policy Development or Review; Performance Monitoring. **Next steps.** A further report is proposed for 4 February 2027. The budget timetable requires parallel development of provisional financial options before that meeting.
2.	**Recommendations for Scrutiny**
2.1	**a.** Note progress and operational challenges in delivering the approved 2025 Herbicide-Free Weed Management Work Programme and the proposed response to the Council motion. **b.** Support the independent Integrated Weed Management Audit, operational equipment demonstration, online all-member briefing, engagement with Pesticide Free Cambridge and learning from other authorities, including Edinburgh and Brighton. **c.** Support development of a transparent, risk-based prioritisation framework, service standards and performance reporting, with immediate safety and accessibility concerns continuing to be addressed. **d.** Recommend that the Executive Councillor and officers, with Finance, place a provisional budget pressure or marker into the current 2027/28 budget-setting process, separately identifying potential one-off recovery and recurring maintenance requirements, without prejudging the review or approving expenditure.

	e. Note that the next scheduled scrutiny meeting on 4 February 2027 is too late to initiate a budget proposal; request that Finance, Legal and Democratic Services confirm the appropriate interim Executive decision route and deadlines. **f.** Request a further report on 4 February 2027 setting out findings, the comparison of options, recommended delivery model, financial implications and revised programme.
3.	**Attendees**
3.1	Assistant Director, Public Realm and Environment; Operational lead – Don Blair; Finance representative TBC.
4.	**Background and key issues**
4.1	**Purpose.** This report sets out the Council's response to the motion on herbicide-free weed management. It provides an interim position and a structured route to informed recommendations, rather than seeking approval now for a particular equipment, staffing or financial solution. **Policy background.** The Council declared a Biodiversity Emergency in 2019, supported a herbicide-free trial in two wards in 2021 and approved a city-wide Herbicide-Free Weed Management Work Programme in 2025. The commitment to ending routine herbicide use on City Council-managed land remains unchanged. The contribution of Pesticide Free Cambridge, On the Verge and other partners is recognised. **Operational experience.** The transition from chemical treatment to mechanical and manual removal is not a like-for-like substitution. Intensive initial work includes removing established vegetation and accumulated detritus, while subsequent maintenance requires repeat interventions. Seasonal growth, leaf-fall redeployment, weather, parked vehicles, narrow access, street furniture, equipment availability and surface condition all affect productivity. The programme has required specialist equipment and dedicated operational capacity. **Delivery evidence.** Officers are consolidating the planned-versus-delivered programme, initial treatments completed, remaining backlog by ward and risk, treatment productivity, staffing and equipment availability, complaints and service requests. A verified ward-by-ward position and financial baseline are not yet available for inclusion in this interim report and will be supplied through the review. Existing operational activity continues, with priority for safety, accessibility, drainage and infrastructure risks. **Independent audit.** An independent Integrated Weed Management Audit has been commissioned. The proposed scope covers site conditions, operational data, compliance and risk, financial and productivity assessment, asset protection and future equipment or treatment options. Officers will test its findings against local evidence and

	will retain responsibility for any recommendations. The specimen audit supplied with the proposal is illustrative, not evidence of Cambridge's performance. **Member and stakeholder engagement.** Officers propose a demonstration of mechanical and manual equipment and an online briefing for all councillors, including operational evidence and an opportunity to question the service. Pesticide Free Cambridge will be invited to provide environmental and policy context. Engagement should help establish realistic expectations while ensuring that residents' safety and access concerns are heard. **Learning from other authorities.** The review will examine practice elsewhere, particularly Edinburgh and Brighton, and test what is transferable to Cambridge in terms of treatment methods, scheduling, repeat cycles, resident communication, workforce requirements and whole-life costs. Contact with Brighton and Pesticide Action Network is already an identified programme action; the Edinburgh comparison will be developed. No unverified claims are made here about the outcomes achieved by those councils. **National sector evidence.** APSE's October 2026 survey of glyphosate and integrated weed management reports that only 5% of responding authorities had completely eliminated glyphosate; 84% cited effectiveness of alternatives as a barrier and 66% cited cost. Of respondents, 42% reported much higher costs and 21% slightly higher costs for alternatives. Only 41% reported monitoring effectiveness. These are survey responses rather than a direct benchmark of Cambridge and support the need for robust local evaluation. **Future service standards.** A proposed risk-based framework will prioritise obstruction and accessibility, safety, drainage, transport routes and protection of infrastructure, while allowing some vegetation where it presents no material risk. The review will develop measurable service standards, response times, planned treatment frequencies and transparent reporting of initial and repeat work. Responsibilities between the City Council, County Council and other landowners, including any additional costs of County Council verge work, will be clarified. **Options appraisal.** Officers will distinguish a non-recurring recovery programme to address established growth and detritus from the recurring maintenance required thereafter. Options will include continuing within existing resources with improved scheduling, targeted temporary capacity, additional equipment or specialist support, and different maintenance frequencies. They will be compared on deliverability, effectiveness, safety, environmental outcomes, workforce implications and whole-life costs. **Budget marker.** The 2027/28 budget setting process is already underway. Officers therefore propose that Finance records a provisional, uncommitted financial pressure now, separated into one-off recovery and recurring maintenance components. Figures should be based on initial operational assumptions and ranges, refined by the audit and options appraisal. A marker is not a spending approval, does not guarantee funding and

	does not predetermine the preferred delivery model. The affordability and any offsetting savings or competing priorities remain matters for the budget process. **Decision route.** The Committee considers this interim report on 19 November 2026. During late November and December, officers will progress the audit, operational analysis, member engagement and provisional costings. Finance, Legal and Democratic Services will confirm the budget submission deadline and whether a scheduled Cabinet decision, authorised Executive decision or other constitutionally compliant route is needed during December or January. The further scrutiny report on 4 February 2027 will review the evidence and proposed delivery programme; it must not be the first point at which a potential 2027/28 funding requirement is identified. **Communications and accountability.** A resident-facing statement will explain responsibilities, service priorities, seasonal regrowth, realistic standards and how urgent concerns are reported. Performance information will cover planned and completed initial treatments, repeat visits, backlog, complaints, costs and operational learning. An action-by-action response to the motion is provided at Appendix 1. **Conclusion.** The Council's environmental commitment is established. The task is to develop a safe, effective, transparent and financially sustainable delivery model. The proposed audit, engagement, comparative learning and early budget marker allow evidence-led recommendations without losing the opportunity to address a potential funding requirement in 2027/28.
5.	**Corporate Plan**
5.1	The Herbicide-Free Weed Management Programme supports the Council's Corporate Plan 2022–2027, particularly its commitments to responding to the climate and biodiversity emergencies, creating a sustainable city and delivering high-quality public services. The programme directly contributes to the Council's priority of responding to the climate crisis and protecting and enhancing biodiversity, by reducing reliance on chemical herbicides and supporting more environmentally sustainable approaches to managing streets, parks and public spaces. It also supports the objectives of the Council's Biodiversity Strategy. The programme contributes to building a sustainable city for all by seeking to maintain safe, accessible and attractive streets and public spaces. The proposed review recognises the importance of balancing environmental ambitions with the needs of residents, particularly those who may be disproportionately affected by vegetation obstructing footways and other public infrastructure. The review also supports the Council's commitment to leading a well-run council that works for and with local communities. The independent audit, operational assessment, engagement with councillors and community organisations, and learning from other

	local authorities will inform an evidence-led approach to service improvement and the effective use of public resources. The proposed assessment of recovery costs, recurring maintenance requirements and alternative delivery methods will help ensure that the Council's environmental commitments are supported by a financially sustainable and deliverable service model. Overall, the proposed approach seeks to strengthen the Council's ability to deliver its established environmental objectives while maintaining public confidence in the quality, accessibility and management of Cambridge's public realm.
6.	**Implications and Risks**
6.1	**Financial.** A provisional pressure is proposed but no expenditure is authorised by this report. Finance must confirm the budget timetable, assumptions and affordability; recurring and non-recurring requirements must be separated. **Legal and governance.** Scrutiny makes recommendations but does not approve the budget. Executive delegations, key-decision requirements, publication and consultation obligations must be checked before any interim decision. **Equality and accessibility.** The prioritisation framework should give particular attention to footway obstruction and access for disabled residents and others with mobility needs; any revised standards should be equality assessed. **Environmental and carbon.** The herbicide-free policy supports environmental aims, but machinery, transport, disposal and alternative treatment methods have different environmental and carbon impacts requiring appraisal. **Workforce, procurement and community safety.** Review manual handling, vibration, traffic management, equipment safety, maintenance, training, procurement lead times and urgent obstruction reporting. Risks include an unmanaged backlog, unclear ownership, unaffordable recurring commitments and weak performance data.
	Principal mitigation: continue risk-based operational interventions; validate ward-level information; complete independent audit and options appraisal; involve Finance, Legal, Democratic Services and partner landowners before final decisions.
7.	**Background documents** Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985
7.1	Council motion on herbicide-free weed management 1st October 2026. The approved 2025 Herbicide-Free Weed Management Work Programme; APSE, Glyphosate and Integrated Weed Management: Where do local authorities stand?, Briefing 26/70 (October 2026);

8.	**Appendices**
8.1	Appendix 1 – Motion response and delivery tracker (attached below).

Appendix 1 – Response to Council motion

Interim action tracker for 19 November 2026. Status and target dates remain subject to confirmation with service leads.

Motion requirement	Action	Output	Position
Reaffirm policy commitment	Confirm continued end to routine herbicide use; explain biodiversity objectives	Current policy reaffirmed	Ongoing
2025 planned versus actual delivery	Validate ward-by-ward programme, completed work, variances and reasons	Delivery reconciliation	In progress
Backlog by ward and priority	Compile remaining first treatments, access and risk categories	Ward-level backlog register	In progress
Staffing, equipment and capacity	Model existing and required capacity; test productivity and whole-life costs	Resource and cost appraisal	In progress
Repeat cycles, seasonal and access constraints	Record seasonal effects, parked vehicles and realistic revisit frequencies	Treatment frequency model	In progress
County Council and landowners	Clarify ownership, coordination and verge-cutting costs	Responsibilities and costs statement	To develop
Non-recurring recovery options	Cost targeted backlog clearance scenarios	Recovery options appraisal	To develop

Motion requirement	Action	Output	Position
Recurring maintenance options	Cost sustainable maintenance scenarios and standards	Recurring options appraisal	To develop
Risk-based framework	Set safety, access, drainage and infrastructure priorities and response targets	Prioritisation framework	To develop
New methods and external learning	Independent audit, equipment demonstration, Edinburgh/Brighton benchmarking	Audit and comparative learning	Underway/planned
2027/28 budget implications	Submit provisional marker now; distinguish one-off and recurring; refine with Finance	Budget pressure and decision route	Immediate action
Public information and performance	Publish responsibilities and reporting routes; track completed and repeat work, requests and costs	Resident statement and dashboard	To develop
Return to scrutiny	Bring findings, costed options and revised programme	4 February 2027 report	Scheduled/proposed