



**To/
Councillor Mark Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment &
Infrastructure Management**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

*Please ask for:
Gofynnwch am:*

*Direct Line:
Linell Uniongyrochol:*

*e-Mail
e-Bost:*

*Our Ref
Ein Cyf:*

*Your Ref
Eich Cyf:*

*Date
Dyddiad:*

Scrutiny

01792 637257

scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk

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Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Panel on 16 December 2019. It is regarding Weed Management and Air Pollution Control.

Dear Councillor Thomas,

Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel – 16 December

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Performance Panel meeting on 16 December 2019 to discuss activities in relation to weed management and air pollution control and contribute to the debate. We also thank lead officers for provision of written material to the Panel, answering questions, and supporting the session.

We are writing to you, as relevant Cabinet Member, to reflect on the discussion, share the views of the Committee, and highlight any outstanding issues / actions for your response.

Weed Management

Our discussion specifically focussed on the Council's use of glyphosate for weed management, which you know has been the subject of public debate regarding health & safety. It is an issue of concern that I, and other councillors, have raised in other scrutiny meetings and forum. I am glad that we now have a dedicated Scrutiny Performance Panel for Natural Environment that has provided the opportunity to discuss this matter in some depth and keep under watch.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU
SWANSEA COUNCIL / CYNGOR ABERTAWE
GUILDHALL, SWANSEA, SA1 4PE / NEUADD Y DDINAS, ABERTAWE, SA1 4PE
www.swansea.gov.uk / www.abertawe.gov.uk

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The Panel was keen to have an overview of the Council's approach and activities in relation to weed management and control. We were interested to know the levels (whether it was being used sparingly) and locations of glyphosate use as well as plans for reduction in use, and whether alternatives to glyphosate have been, or are being, looked e.g. more organic / natural / integrated / mechanical methods to manage weeds.

The meeting also benefited from the contribution of Dr. Rosemary Mason, who has campaigned against the use of glyphosate, and she shared with the Panel her concerns regarding glyphosate use and dangerous impacts on human health and biodiversity. She referred to impacts experienced over the last ten years on a local nature reserve in Ilston, following the spraying of glyphosate-based herbicides on Japanese Knotweed in the valley below, and various efforts taken to prove that poisoning was taking place to insects, birds, mammals and its link to human ill health (including personal ill health experienced). She questioned government assertions about the safety of glyphosate, arguing that herbicides have turned weeds into invasive weeds, becoming resistant to chemicals, and that spaying on agricultural land has meant people are consuming residues of pesticides in their food. She felt that the public remains unaware of the dangers of glyphosate use.

We heard from you and officers:

- Why weed removal was necessary.
- About weed spraying activity (both Highways, Parks and other Council land) to limit weeds and scale of glyphosate use.
- That the Highways Service uses tendered contractors to carry out a limited spraying regime due to current resources, along approximately 5000km of public highway at a cost of around £10-12 per km (spend of £65,000 per year).
- That the Parks Service limits use to preparation prior to sowing wildflower sites, and to the treatment of Japanese Knotweed, and we noted the importance of a Council service for Japanese Knotweed, which complies with very strict licensing conditions.
- Glyphosate remains an approved active substance on the EU Pesticides database for weed management – with use beyond December 2022 subject to further decision.
- There are recognised health concerns with successful legal cases and claims in the USA that glyphosate has caused cancers.

Your report to the Panel concluded that all current practices follow Welsh Government and APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence) guidance and that the use of glyphosate needed to be balanced between cost, public demand and concerns over safety of chemicals uses and the effect of weeds on the public realm. You stated that currently there is no other cost effective treatment to meet public demand in terms of a weed free environment, however the Authority will continue to review other options as they become commercially available. You stressed that this was a very difficult issue to resolve, and recalled numerous public complaints a few years back, when

there was a gap in spraying due to contract renewal, which caused reputational damage to the Council. However, you were open to solutions that may help us in the future, that can work on a large scale. For example, whilst you accepted that manual / mechanical means of weed removal were best, it would not be cost effective given the area that needs to be covered in Swansea. You approximated that the Council would be looking at a ten-fold increase in current budget for mechanical clearing.

Main points from our discussion:

- We agree that this is a very difficult issue, but it is clear that the Council needs to be cautious about glyphosate use.
- Given global public health concerns surrounding the use of glyphosate, there may be a need for the public to accept higher levels of weeds. The impact on nature and biodiversity should be considered as equally important as concerns about public health.
- We note from the APSE briefing (Glyphosate – Where do local authorities stand?) that a number of local authorities have taken their own steps to impose restrictions on the use of glyphosate-based products and other pesticides and herbicides. It references Croydon, Lewes, Glastonbury, Wadebridge and the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham as reportedly banning the use of glyphosate-based products in public areas.
- We heard that the current highway weed treatment programme is limited to three sprays per season, with the exception of the primary gateway routes, which receive four sprays, primarily to clear kerb channels and central reservations. We noted that the quadbike vehicles only spray where overgrowth is detected, and that spraying is directed low to the ground.
- We heard that there was potential, in principle, for areas to opt out of the highway weed treatment programme, but you advised that because of the nature of the contract this would have to be clearly defined zones (e.g. whole ward) as opposed to street-by-street opt out. Furthermore, there may be potential for Councillors to use their Member Environmental Budget to deliver alternative weed treatment in their ward (including parks), but any such activity would need to be carefully thought through and planned.
- We discussed how trends have changed over the years in relation to weed management, the rise of chemical spraying and reliance on the Council to tackle weeds, which in the past were most likely cleared by individuals within their own community. We noted that any future community / volunteer activity would need to have clear point of contact / co-ordination.
- We were told that the Parks Service used glyphosate prior to sowing wildflower sites, though I am not sure the Panel entirely understood why this was necessary.

- We were aware of a pilot project carried out in Swansea a number of years ago for a new treatment for Japanese Knotweed that involved a tiny bug being released, which can devour knotweed and help control its spread, as a sustainable, natural approach to tackle knotweed. However, we were not aware of any information about the success of the pilot and current position.

Air Pollution Control

This topic has been the subject of a Scrutiny Working Group (meeting held in November 2018) and will be subject of regular monitoring of performance through this new Panel.

Picking up from where the Working Group left off the Panel asked you about current air pollution monitoring, in particular the measured levels of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) where available (including around schools), and measures in hand / planned to reduce levels further. We also discussed the issue of contracted vehicles (coaches / taxis etc.) parked outside schools with engines left running and impact on children's health, not to mention the numbers of parents / carers doing likewise in their cars. This has been previously raised by the Scrutiny Programme Committee with the Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning & Skills,

We are grateful for the detailed information provided on the air quality monitoring around a number of schools and discussed that at some length e.g. recorded levels, times and locations are these measures taken; whether they were mean averages through the whole 24-hour period, and what levels above the ground the measures were taken. We noted that 2019 data for the measure of NO₂ levels has indicated compliance with National Air Quality Standards - no exceedances of the NO₂ annual mean objective concentration of 40µgm⁻³ (micrograms per metre cubed) returned.

We heard from you and officers that:

- Swansea Council is required monitor and review air quality and submits an annual progress report to Welsh Government with assessment of ambient air quality in accordance with EU objective concentrations.
- The Authority currently monitors for levels of sulphur dioxide, ozone, heavy metals (e.g. nickel). All monitoring sites remain compliant with both the annual mean and daily mean exceedance for particulate matter (less than 10 microns).
- The main pollutant of interest, for exceeding the National Air Quality objective concentration in Swansea is NO₂, for the annual mean objective of 40µgm⁻³. There has been a downward trend over the last five years and there are currently no monitoring locations in excess of the annual mean NO₂ National Air Quality objective.

- The Council is updating its Air Quality Action Plan, submitted to Welsh Government in 2018, with a view to going out to public consultation in Spring 2020, to maintain compliance and further reduce public health exposure to pollutants.
- The assessment of locations for NO₂ diffusion tube monitoring will continue and sites running low concentrations will be closed down in order to allow new sites to be created to enhance the quantitative data available.

We heard about various actions taken to improve air quality, for example:

- The opening of the Morfa Distributor Road and implementation of the Nowcaster system with the Hafod area leading to reductions in NO₂ being recorded along Neath Road in 2017 and 2018, as expected. We noted that the Nowcaster system has been in process of upgrade and tests have shown that it is running well.
- Junction improvement works on Gower Road, Sketty, though monitoring will be necessary for a number of years before removing any air quality management plan for this area.
- Testing of Green Infrastructure works.
- Research into behaviour change messages at busy road junctions and potential effects of engine idling at junctions on local air quality. We noted that this was not a straightforward matter as the switching on of an engine had the potential to release more concentration of pollutant. We heard that the Council was working with Swansea University over an engine idling study carried out at Sketty, which they were analysing.
- Clause in contracts for vehicles, such as school buses, requiring vehicles parked on any public highway to turn off their engines where the layover time exceeds ten minutes.
- NO₂ monitoring near a number of schools – all showing compliance with the annual mean objective of 40µgm⁻³ (we appreciated the detailed maps and data provided).

Furthermore, you told us about the approval of a £2.75m Active Travel Fund Welsh Government Grant to bring about increase in cycling and walking, and being able to secure £190k to facilitate the introduction of publically accessible electric vehicle charging points. Both are welcome developments.

The Panel also benefitted from the 'Local Air Quality Management In Wales' Policy Guidance (issued June 2017) which provided a good reference point for our discussion on how the Council is working to improve air quality, human health, and the quality of life in Swansea. It advises Councils to adopt the five ways of working set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 while carrying out local air quality management. This means looking to the long term; taking an integrated approach; involving a diversity of the population in decisions; collaborating with others to find shared solutions; and acting to prevent problems from occurring or getting worse.

You acknowledged the issues and challenges with air quality management, accepting that whilst objectives were being met, in truth, there were no safe thresholds for NO₂ and the focus was on reducing exposure and taking steps that will make a difference. You felt that in relation to schools and vulnerability of children being at greater risk of suffering ill health as a result of exposure, you felt that Welsh Government legislation may be the only way forward as local efforts around, for example, behaviour change in those transporting children to school were having limited success. At the same time, we recognised the need to understand the pressures facing parents/carers and parental choice around school places has contributed to greater car usage due to distances travelled. Perhaps some form of vehicle restriction around schools needs exploring.

We also discussed how industry in Swansea and the region contributes to air pollution, and the inspection and monitoring regime in place.

We noted that the UK Clean Air Day on 18 June 2020, the UK's largest air pollution campaign, had the potential to enable good data capture of pollution e.g. around schools, to see the difference in levels, and back up future action. Much of this campaign was around increasing awareness and encouraging behaviour change.

Main points from our discussion:

- Air quality is rightly recognised as a serious public health issue and it must be high on the agenda of the Council to tackle air pollution. We acknowledge air pollution is not an easy problem to solve and one that cannot be fixed overnight. However, there will be incremental solutions to reduce air pollution where possible, looking at air quality management as a public health issue, not one primarily focussed on traffic management.
- The Welsh Government Policy Guidance recognises that traffic congestion can result in high levels of both air and noise pollution, which is an issue that, we suspect, may be overlooked when developments are considered.
- The Guidance refers to the contribution of trees, hedgerows and green infrastructure in helping to reduce the harmful effects of air and noise pollution in a number of ways. Yet, these are being cut down for housing and roads and therefore poses concern about the future.
- The mainstreaming of electric cars in UK households appears to be a long way off in to the future, and public transport is still not an attractive or viable option, for many people. We need to reduce road traffic yet housebuilding is increasing road use.
- The challenge is to encourage people to avoid main roads and help direct road users to the safest best routes, and engagement with the public needs to be increased.
- Electric bikes are becoming more and more popular, yet other electric vehicles such as scooters remain banned from public roads.

- News of the Active Travel Fund Grant is welcome and hopefully this can help to improve the infrastructure e.g. bike storage facilities that for example may encourage cycling to school.
- The Policy Guidance states that the Council should work with health and public health professionals to integrate local air quality management effectively with other local initiatives aiming to reduce health risks and inequalities in affected communities
- We noted that the Council web pages, although containing the Air Quality Index, needed to be revamped and clearer, and that the Council was working in collaboration with Swansea University around how we provide messaging to the public on air quality.
- The Welsh Government Clean Air Plan for Wales, with the approach to reducing air pollution in Wales, is out for consultation, which ends on 10 March 2020. A member of the public, a member of Friends of the Earth, was present and was concerned about the Council's response citing Council resistance to measures in the previous Plan, and need for clear holistic long-term Council strategy, integrated with health and others, to address air pollution.
- With increasing electric vehicle use predicted, this issue of battery decommissioning is going to be a concern for the future.
- The Welsh Government Policy Guidance contains numerous recommendations to Local Authorities that we should be implementing.

Your Response

In your response, we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically address the following recommendations:

Weed Management

- a) Until affordable and effective alternatives can be found glyphosate products should be used as sparingly as possible and away from high public footfall areas;
- b) The Council should undertake public awareness / education around health and biodiversity (including the effect of glyphosate on pollinators) and public consultation on the issue of weed spraying e.g. view on the Council changing approaches to weed management, stopping or reducing weed treatment and view on alternatives etc. Introducing this topic at established consultation events such as the Big Conversation would also be useful to gauge the response of children and young people;
- c) The Council should investigate what alternatives other Councils are looking at. Perhaps the Council could trial different approaches in certain areas to assess effectiveness, whereby a cost comparison could also be identified versus current method, and could be replicated elsewhere;
- d) The Panel would like to know about the planned highway weed treatment programme and when sprays are taking place;

- e) The Council should look to increasing community responsibility for weed management, without the use of glyphosate spraying, and explore ways that this could be achieved e.g. Friends of Parks Groups, other community groups etc.;
- f) The Panel would ask you to consider not using glyphosate at the next occasion of wildflower sowing to see the difference and consider whether it can therefore be avoided in the future, perhaps with manual intervention if necessary. A discussion on wildflower / meadow management would be useful at a future meeting; and
- g) The Panel would appreciate some information about the Japanese knotweed pilot in terms of success and current position.

Air Pollution Control

- a) Please share with us the output from the engine idling study carried out in Sketty;
- b) We would like to know more about green infrastructure works in the pipeline;
- c) Can you confirm whether the provision of bike storage facilities around schools is something that could be delivered within the Active Travel Fund Grant and report back to us on this?;
- d) We were interested in which parts of Swansea had the highest rates of correlation between air pollution and deprivation / health inequalities, and what is being done to communicate important air quality information and advice to the public to encourage behaviour change?;
- e) The Panel is interested to know the Authority's response to the Welsh Government's draft Clean Air Plan for Wales, which we presume you will lead on;
- f) Could you tell us what work is being done regarding the decommissioning of electric vehicle batteries?; and
- g) The Panel would like a statement regarding Council activity and progress in relation to the each of the recommendations in the Welsh Government Policy Guidance.

Please provide the response to these and any other comments about our letter by 28 February. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Panel meeting. We will arrange to follow up on both issues and invite you to a future Panel meeting in due course.

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR PETER JONES

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

✉ cllr.peter.jones@swansea.gov.uk