

Thank you for the petition submitted to Birmingham City Council asking us to “Produce and implement a no-pesticide strategy by 2025”.

I can see from the amount of support shown that this is a matter close to the hearts of many of our residents, and I can assure you we take the quality and protection of the environment very seriously.

Your petition contains a number of requests which I have taken each in turn and responded accordingly.

You asked us for “A complete ban on the use of all pesticides including herbicides, insecticides and fungicides”.

We must consider the reach and implications of this ask as it goes well beyond the remit of just green and open space management. Pesticides come in many forms and so this would impact the work of other sections of the council such as environmental health and housing where issues such as insect and rodent infestations or internal mould may be impacting citizens lives and health. In addition, the hand sanitizers readily used during the covid pandemic were often anti-microbial and these are classed within the pesticides definition. So, in these instances, it may not be possible to cease all use of “pesticides”.

However, as previously stated, Birmingham City Council is committed to the reduction in use of all pesticides in the management of its green open spaces and highways network – with a cessation if/when a viable alternative becomes available. This is particularly relevant when it comes to some notifiable plant health pests and invasive plant species such as Japanese Knotweed, for which a reliable, effective, alternative has yet to be found.

We also need to put the request into perspective and give a sense of scale in terms of our highways and green space management. The highways network covers 2,900km of roads and footways which is about 12.5million square metres of applicable surface.

It may seem that all this area is treated for “weed growth” but based on records held of application, an average of just 10% is treated using a spot spraying method.

For the green estate managed by our grounds maintenance teams we look after approximately 3,700 hectares of land. Of this around 409 hectares is identified as needing some form of vegetation control through spraying, this accounts for just 8% of the estate.

While this is still in total a substantial area, pesticide use is not as extensive as may be perceived.

However, the strength of feeling on this matter has been recognised during the budget-setting process for the forthcoming financial year, and I am pleased to confirm that we intend to cease the use of pesticides as a form of treatment with our parks and green open spaces next year.

This is subject to the budget setting process, which culminates with the council’s financial plan being ratified in March 2024, ahead of the start of the financial year in April 2024.

As stated earlier in this response, the city remains committed to year-on-year reductions in pesticide use for invasive species and constantly reviews existing practices, seeking out new methods and products with a view to adopting any that are appropriate to the situations we encounter.

You asked us to “Stop spraying weeds”.

Really there is no such thing as a “weed”. Weeds are any plant that is unwanted at the place and time it is growing. The plant growth that we are managing, for example in the footway, is unwanted there because of the potential it

has over time to create a hazard and therefore present a risk or barrier to users if it were allowed to remain and grow. Therefore, we must manage that growth through some form of operation to reduce those risks.

All the “weeds” that are at present sprayed in specific locations are growing in plentiful amounts in locations where they won’t cause a longer-term issue, such as in parks, open spaces, and roadside verges.

As we have expressed, there is an intent to cease the use of pesticides in our parks and open spaces and to reduce and, where possible, stop spraying (for invasive species). Spraying of the footway and gutter lines as part of the highways management programme will remain but continued exploration of alternative chemicals and practices will be ongoing.

[You asked us to “Go organic with all seeds and bulbs”.](#)

The city to date hasn’t procured any bulbs nor any seeds or plug plants for the spring 2024 season. When we do seek to buy these, we must comply with our procurement processes which includes environmental and sustainability elements. We also need to be aware that not everything we require is going to be available as certified organic status, but the availability of organic seeds and bulbs though is an expanding market, so availability and our ability to secure these will no doubt increase with time.

However, the city council has been creating and managing several wildflower meadows across the city. Where we use wildflower seed for creating new meadows this does come from certified sources that are managed specifically for biodiversity and so are organically managed. We also use green hay taken from our own meadows that is then strewn on new freshly mown sites. As the source of green hay is from our own meadows, we know this is organically produced as we do not use any form of chemical treatment or in organic fertilizer on these areas.

[You asked us to “Use only peat-free compost”.](#)

In terms of the amount of land that BCC manages, the area set to horticulture and in particular ornamental displays is very small, the largest proportion of the estate being either grasslands (parks, open spaces, highway verges etc) or is woodland, wetland, or heathland etc. Many of the spaces we manage are also designated for nature conservation and managed as such. Therefore, for most of the land managed by the city council we do not use or add any form of peat, soil, or compost-based ameliorants.

The city’s parks section has for many years undertaken to compost much of its own green waste (produced from the management of parks and open spaces) through an open windrow system. The resulting compost has not received any additives or chemical treatments and so is organically produced. The resulting compost - which is peat free – is used to spread on selected shrub and flower beds as a way of adding some nutrients back and improving soil structure.

It is only in the plant production nurseries that any peat has been used and the volume of that has been reduced by 50% over the past 3 years. While peat has remained a small element of the growing medium, this year we have also trialled a peat-free growing medium as well as incorporating coir and more recently biochar as an additive that provides higher levels of water retention within the growing mediums.

Birmingham is committed to the phasing out of peat as part of its plant production practices for the 2024 season ahead of the government’s ban on use in 2030.

[You asked us to “Use organic growing practices when caring for all council owned spaces”.](#)

The vast bulk of the BCC estate is managed in an organic fashion this includes:

- 1,993 hectares of amenity grass
- 1,389 hectares of woodland

- >180,000 individual trees
- Multiple lakes, pools rivers and streams
- 1 National Nature Reserve
- 11 Local Nature Reserves (LNRs)
- 55 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs)
- 121 Sites of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINCs)
- 6 Country Parks (although partly covered by the above)

Our ornamental flower beds are either hand weeded, hoed or – by virtue of planting density or mulching – require limited to no weeding throughout the season. And within our plant production nurseries, along with careful management of the internal climate of the glass houses and propagation areas, biological control is deployed to deal with harmful pests and diseases.

We do though have some areas that are not managed in an organic way. These are limited to specific locations or types of area such as some sports pitches e.g., cricket wickets, hard surfaces, and linear features such as wall or fence lines or areas of difficult to manage non-native invasive species.

As previously stated, we are proposing to cease the wider use of chemicals and will continue to investigate and trial appropriate options and new technology as they develop for invasive species and notifiable pests and diseases etc.

[You asked us to “Ensure that council owned spaces take into account all biodiversity”.](#)

Through the implementation of the Environment Act, the city, like all other councils, now has a statutory duty to consider biodiversity. This comes from an amendment to the original Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC Act) section 40 duty, provided for in the Environment Act 2021, and extends the biodiversity duty on public authorities to include the enhancement of biodiversity alongside conservation by way of creating “the general biodiversity objective”. This came into force in January 2023. Sitting alongside this is the mandate for developments to provide a minimum of 10% biodiversity Net Gain which comes into force in November 2023. Allied to this is the development of a Nature Recovery Network, which maps out those locations that are key to supporting biodiversity and those areas that should be prioritised for enhancement to create spaces that are bigger, better, and more joined up – the principles that were enshrined in the Lawton Report Making Space for Nature 2010.

We have mapped our nature recovery network, and this was published in the City of Nature 25-year Plan (adopted at full council in February 2022). The 25-year plan also sets out how we are reviewing all our parks and open spaces to ensure that these meet the needs of the local community and play a part in delivering increases in biodiversity value and climate change adaptation services.

[You asked us to ensure that “The strategy should engage at ward level during implementation and ensure it applies equally across all wards”.](#)

The City of Nature Plan is based on an equity model, this means that we recognise that not all wards are the same or starting from the same place in terms of open space provision, quality of environment, impact on them from climate change or in their needs. In taking this position we are – through the City of Nature Delivery Plan – ensuring that we will provide Environmental Justice in a fair and equitable manner. Using an assessment process called the Future Parks Standard, we are engaging with local communities, starting with those encountering greatest environmental injustice to devise tailored actions plans for their local parks and open spaces.

[Brandwood & Kings Heath ward Plan: call for a ban on pesticide use](#)

Although not called for in this petition, we are aware from representatives of the campaign group that the elected members for the above-mentioned area have incorporated such calls within their ward plan.

As per earlier elements of this response, it is the council's intention to cease use of pesticides in parks and green open space from next year, except for invasive species etc.