

## **Report Purpose**

Motion from Annual Town Meeting

### **Author**

Town Clerk

## **Introduction**

This report considers the following motion from the annual town meeting, 03 03 26.

“That Macclesfield Town Council (MTC) directs a proportion of its FY 26/27 budget, including but not restricted to its Public Realm budget, and Town Ranger time to clearing gutters and pavements of weeds (including grass) through a structured programme that covers problem residential streets throughout all the seven wards that comprise MTC. Exclusions would be where responsibility lies with a social landlord e.g. Peaks and Plains. Virements from other budgets should be considered, and funding from reserves if necessary”

The Town Council recognises residents' concerns about weeds and grass growing on pavements, kerbs and gutters. Cheshire East Council is responsible for the maintenance of adopted highways, including roads, footways and paved areas, and has statutory duties to maintain the highway in a condition that is safe for users. However, there is no specific statutory duty requiring the routine removal or spraying of ordinary weeds. Weed control is therefore generally undertaken as part of the Cheshire East Council's wider highway maintenance responsibilities, with intervention where vegetation is affecting safety, visibility, drainage or access. Separate statutory duties and legal controls apply to certain harmful or invasive plant species, for which action may be required to prevent risks or their spread.

## **Practical and Safety Considerations**

Weed clearance across pavements, kerbs and gutters would be labour intensive and would require repeated treatment as vegetation regrows. Parked vehicles can restrict access and increase both the time required and potential safety risks.

Different methods, including manual, mechanical and chemical treatment, would have different equipment, training, health and safety and environmental requirements. There is also no single method likely to meet the expectations of all residents, particularly given concerns about the use of weed killer.

The reference to gutters also needs to be clearly defined. Removing visible vegetation from the edge of a gutter is different from clearing drainage gullies, which form part of the wider highway drainage system. The Council does not currently have the equipment or operational arrangements to provide a comprehensive gully-clearing service.

## **Highway and Land Ownership**

Macclesfield Town Council is not the highway authority and does not operate a highways maintenance service. Clear boundaries would therefore be required between Cheshire East Council, housing associations, private landowners and the Town Council.

Although the resolution proposes excluding areas where responsibility rests with social landlords or other landowners, identifying responsibility on a street-by-street basis would itself require significant administration.

The Town Council has requested access to the Cheshire East Council system used to identify land ownership and responsibility but has been advised that access cannot be provided. The Council therefore does not currently have direct access to all the information required to determine responsibility for particular areas.

## **Town Ranger Capacity**

Macclesfield Town Council currently has three Town Rangers who are already operating at capacity delivering the existing public realm programme, including keeping the town centre free of weeds and empty the bins in Sparrow Park Mon- Fri.

Their work benefits residents across all seven wards, as well as businesses and visitors. Allocating Ranger time to an extensive programme of weed clearance would therefore mean reducing existing services rather than creating additional capacity. A town-wide weed clearance programme would therefore require additional Ranger staff. The Council is working towards bringing the three Rangers in-house from 1 April 2027, following the end of the existing Cheshire East Council arrangement. It would not be appropriate to increase the team before the transfer and employment arrangements have been finalised.

## **Cheshire East Council Option**

Cheshire East Council Highways has confirmed that in theory the Town Council could pay them to arrange weed clearance. However, it is likely that the work would be outsourced to an external organisation rather than undertaken by Cheshire East Council's own workforce. A cost cannot therefore be established until the specification, treatment method, frequency and areas to be covered have been agreed.

A criteria-based approach, similar to that used for winter gritting, would have to be developed to identify and prioritise streets.

The Council would therefore need to determine:

- what level of weed growth constitutes a "problem";
- which locations would qualify for treatment;
- how streets would be assessed and prioritised;
- whether pedestrian usage, schools, accessibility or safety risks should affect priority;

- how frequently qualifying locations would be treated;
- how requests from residents would be assessed against the agreed criteria;
- who would inspect and verify locations;
- how decisions would be recorded and justified; and
- how previously treated areas would be monitored and revisited.

This would effectively require the Council to create and administer a prioritisation system. It would also create an ongoing expectation that residents could report weed problems and expect the Council to assess and potentially treat them. Developing and administering these criteria would therefore create a significant ongoing officer and management requirement in addition to the cost of the actual clearance.

It is also worth noting that even where the Town Council is willing to pay Cheshire East Council for a service, this does not necessarily mean that the work can be delivered within a reasonable or required timescale. A recent example is the electrical pillar feeds required for the Christmas lights on Mill Street. Although Cheshire East Council has completed the lighting design, it has subsequently advised that it does not currently have the capacity to undertake the installation works and that these cannot be scheduled in the foreseeable future. This highlights the wider difficulty of relying on Cheshire East Council for service delivery, even where funding is available, due to their own capacity.

## **Other Local Councils**

Other local councils have adopted different approaches:

- Congleton operates a more extensive streetscape service with around 15 staff, and an agreement with CEC (and payment) that they do their own streetscape, parks etc.
- Sandbach pays Cheshire East Council for some weed spraying in the town centre
- Crewe uses Cheshire East Council for some weed spraying in the town centre
- Nantwich uses its Rangers for town-centre work.

Macclesfield Town Council's existing Rangers already keep the town centre free of weeds as part of their current public realm work.

## **Community Involvement**

The Council recognises the considerable contribution already made by residents and community groups who undertake litter picking, weeding and general tidying in their neighbourhoods. These groups make a positive difference to the appearance of local areas and strengthen community involvement.

Residents and community groups wishing to improve their local area are encouraged to contact the Town Council. The Council can provide green waste bags and arrange for the Town Rangers to collect the resulting waste.

## **Conclusion**

The Town Council recognises the concerns raised at the Annual Town Meeting but does not consider that establishing a town-wide residential weed clearance and gutter clearance service, is a service that the Town Council is currently equipped to take this on, in addition to the current services it delivers. The existing three Town Rangers are already operating at capacity, and it is not proposed to divert them from their existing public realm work to undertake weed and gutter clearance. Nor is it currently appropriate to expand the Ranger team for this purpose, particularly while the Council is working towards bringing the existing Rangers in-house from 1 April 2027.

The proposed programme would effectively create a new service for the Town Council, and an expectation that the Town Council would assess and respond to weed-related requests across all seven wards. Cheshire East Council Highways has historically delivered this service but no longer does due to cost. Given that they have significantly greater staffing, equipment, storage and operational resources, it is not considered reasonable or proportionate to expect the Town Council to take on this responsibility when it currently has six staff, two of whom are part-time, three Rangers, limited storage and no dedicated equipment for weed control.