



Street Weed Control in Minehead: Foam Stream Trial Report

Background

Several years ago, Somerset Council, as the highways authority, ceased providing street weed control in Minehead, deeming it a non-statutory service. Minehead Town Council (MTC) initially took on this responsibility using weed killer. However, after deciding to try to move away from the use of glyphosate, MTC has faced challenges in managing street weed control effectively. Recent attempts to find a practical solution while trying to negotiate with Somerset Council to reconsider their stance has resulted in limited weed control, leading to resident complaints and dissatisfaction.

In April 2024, MTC entered a 6-month agreement with Weedingtech to trial their foam stream technology as an alternative weed control method. The agreement stipulated that if MTC decided to purchase the unit outright after the trial, 80% of the hire cost would be deducted from the purchase price. Although the trial was set to expire in early October, Weedingtech agreed to extend it until the end of October, allowing Council to make a fully informed decision.

This trial was initiated in response to Minehead Town Councillors' desire to explore chemical-free weed control methods. Foam stream technology uses hot water insulated by biodegradable foam to control weeds without relying on glyphosate, a common ingredient in traditional weed killers.

Trial Results

The foam stream technology has been tested across various sites, primarily for street weed control but also in other areas such as allotments. Results have varied, and the following outlines the findings:

Positives

- MTC has demonstrated proactive efforts in weed control.
- No complaints received about the unit's use or foam residue.
- Areas with multiple treatments showed slightly higher weed kill rates.
- The long hose allowed for efficient use. Although quantity of parked cars had a negative impact on this.
- No accidents reported involving the public, operators, or property.
- The unit showed versatility, with potential use as a pressure washer.
- Modest solution usage.
- Generally positive public response to its use whilst in use.
- Foam stream can be used in all weathers. However, a better kill rate was observed in the summer period.

- Appeared to have better success on open ground (e.g. Allotments)

Other Findings

- Requires at least one staff member to operate, impacting other amenities services (Over 400 staff hours used up to 20/09/24).
- Treatment is slow, with less area coverage than initially anticipated. (130 machine hours required)
- There has been little evidence to suggest the ground around treatment areas has been sterilised as was hoped.
- Significant additional running costs due to diesel (for the boiler) and petrol (for pressure) consumption, potentially reducing environmental benefits.
- Physically challenging for staff due to heavy equipment.
- Disappointing overall weed kill rate.
- The unit's weight necessitated constant vehicle storage, limiting the vehicle's availability for other tasks.
- Although down on the previous year, we have still received a number of complaints into the offices for lack of street weed control across the Town.

Financial Considerations

The weed control budget for 2024/25 was increased to accommodate alternative weed control methods exploration. Sufficient funds are available for the outright purchase of the Foam Stream unit.

The long-term costs associated with Foam Stream if a purchase is carried out are difficult to fully calculate. However, working with the information available in terms of staff time (approx. £6,820) and Fuel (approx. £407) it is estimated to have cost MTC an additional £7,227 to operate on top of the hire cost fee. Therefore, with the cost of estimated annual solution consumption (22 tubs at £162.50 per unit = £3,575) it would cost approximately an additional £18,029 per year to operate. There would need to be additional considerations such as the cost of water usage which we have been unable to fully quantify, maintenance, which are expected to be modest and any unforeseen parts breakages if any were to occur.

Conclusions

After researching and demonstrating various alternative weed control methods, Foam Stream has shown the best results among non-chemical options. Its effectiveness could potentially be enhanced when used alongside other equipment like weed brushes. Improved street cleanliness would also aid weed control, though coordination with Somerset Council and their third-party contractor for street cleansing has had mixed success.

If compared solely against glyphosate-based methods, Foam Stream would still fall some way short in terms of kill rate, area coverage and overall value for money.

Throughout the trial MTC have actively sought public feedback on their opinions on its use, equipping staff carrying out the work with information and feedback forms as well as posting a number of social media status updates and having information with an online feedback form on their website. All Community Engagement Events have also had information on Foam Stream available with staff on hand to answer any questions. To date, public feedback

received has been extremely limited and not enough to make an informed decision on public opinion.

In response to previously received public opinion and when at the time, Glyphosate's licence to be used was not guaranteed to be extended, MTC has shown initiative in exploring alternative weed control methods. However, as a tourism-dependent town, it is clear higher standards of weed control are often expected, especially in high-footfall areas like the town centre and seafront. Providing comprehensive weed control across the entire town using Foam Stream alone does not appear to be feasible without impacting other current and future services. The areas covered in Minehead could be further impacted if MTC wanted to explore collaboration opportunities with neighbouring Town and Parish Councils to help offset running costs.

If Foam Stream is adopted, MTC would need to manage public expectations regarding weed control methods and acceptable weed levels. This could be supported by developing a clear weed control policy. Both aspects should be considered at a later date as part of a long-term street weed control strategy, regardless of the decision on Foam Stream purchase.

Options

- A) Purchase Foam Stream and all ancillary equipment at a cost of £8,064 inc. VAT.
- B) Terminate the use of Foam Stream at the end of the hire period and hand the equipment back to Weedingtech at no further cost to MTC.

Ben Parker
Town Clerk
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