



Communication tips for Local Authorities experiencing pushback after reducing or ending urban pesticide use

Public awareness-raising activities are absolutely key to the success of ending pesticide use. It is vital that the public know what changes are planned, and the reasons they are being made, so that they can support the initiative. For example, in Paris, when they introduced a ban on herbicide use over ten years ago, the Mayor instigated an awareness-raising campaign for residents, encouraging them to accept a greater level of 'weediness' as the payoff for reducing their exposure to potentially harmful chemicals.

With that in mind, here are a few ideas and tips gleaned from PAN UK's years of experience working with councils across the UK to go pesticide-free:

Focus on the positive

Flip the narrative to be more positive by asking members of the public and others to take photos of 'pavement plants' (don't call them 'weeds') and post them on social media. Get a community of people sharing photos and helping each other to identify the plants. Highlight and celebrate any rare plants that are spotted, or a high number of individual plant species that are found on one street, for example. Post photos of people exercising in local green spaces and children playing around housing estates that would previously have been doused in chemicals. Consider reaching out to a botanist or other expert who could lead walks for the public around the local area over the spring and summer to point out all the interesting plants and wildlife. Rather than call it a 'pesticide ban' which is inherently negative, focus your communications on the benefits of going pesticide-free! See [Greener Cities: A guide to the plants on our pavements](#)

Don't forget about health

The reason glyphosate has been in the news over the past six years (whether it's been about the EU approval process or the US court cases against Bayer/Monsanto) is due to its links to cancer. When advocates for going pesticide-free focus solely on biodiversity issues, it allows opponents to paint the debate as 'trip hazards/accessibility issues vs. the environmental agenda'. Do remind people that getting glyphosate and other herbicides off the streets will protect people's health from chronic diseases and is not some kind of green, 'rewilding' agenda gone rogue.

Tell people what you're doing and why

Many residents will think that the reason they are seeing more weeds is due to neglect rather than a proactive decision by the council. PAN UK sees time and time again that once people understand why areas have been left to grow they are, more often than not, supportive. Consider developing signs that can be put up in areas that have been left to grow telling people something like... 'This area is being maintained without pesticides to protect the health of people and wildlife'.

Harness the power of existing community or volunteering groups

Other councils have mobilised existing, local groups to help with hand weeding. This has included Friends of Parks groups and allotment groups. Lambeth Council's [Community Weeding Scheme](#) is a great example. It has not only brought benefits in terms of pesticide reduction but also social cohesion.

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Try identifying and reaching out to existing local groups, especially those with a focus on parks and green spaces or the environment more broadly. Good places to start could include local Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace or Extinction Rebellion groups or perhaps a local green spaces forum if one exists. If you do start a community weeding scheme, call it something positive such as 'Biodiversity Champions' and avoid negative or combative names such as 'Weed Warriors'.

Speak to local organisations that focus on disability rights and/or work with older people

If opponents are using arguments around weeds affecting accessibility to push back against going pesticide-free, then reach out to relevant local organisations to explore the extent and true nature of the problem. Ask these organisations to help you to better understand whether weeds are causing issues and, if so, which areas are affected and what needs to change. You can then use this information to help decide which areas need an increase in maintenance. If appropriate, you can also use the information for communications work to counter messaging that weeds are the number one problem facing people with limited mobility in your local area.

Make residents feel heard

Residents wanting to complain about weeds are often not sure who to contact or where to direct their frustration. Instead of emails being sent directly to the Leader of the Council or other high-level council decision-makers, consider setting up an email address for dealing with complaints about weeds. This will not only alert the council to areas that need weeding but also enable it to respond with meaningful explanations about what is happening and why.

Use global moments to raise the profile of being pesticide-free

From World Bee Day (20th May) to World Cancer Day (4th February), there are plenty of moments that can be used to promote being pesticide-free. Consider posting positive messages about going pesticide-free on social media on these days using the relevant hashtag. For example, "Proud to have taken cancer-causing pesticides off the streets, parks and playgrounds. Protecting the health of residents on #worldcancerday."

Emphasise that becoming pesticide-free is part of a global movement

It is easy to paint going pesticide-free as some kooky idea unique to your area. However, this could not be further from the truth. Globally, many cities (including New York and Toronto) have banned urban pesticides, as have whole countries such as France and Luxemburg. In the UK, the first councils started going pesticide-free in 2015 (e.g. Lewes and London's Hammersmith and Fulham) and there are now at least [47 councils that no longer use any pesticides](#) and an additional 80 that are in the process of going pesticide-free. Make sure to emphasise this in all communications. The global trend is very much away from urban pesticides, so a return to pesticides would put your area on the wrong side of history.

Be honest about the problems while standing firm on being pesticide-free

Transitioning over to a more ecological way of doing things won't always be easy. There will be plenty of bumps along the way that will need to be overcome if we are to have any chance of tackling the climate and biodiversity crises. Be honest with local residents about problems associated to weeds while explaining what's at stake in terms of both the environment and residents' health. Explain to residents that the response to issues around weeds should be looking for new alternatives and ways of working, and not a return to harmful chemicals.



It doesn't have to be this way...

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