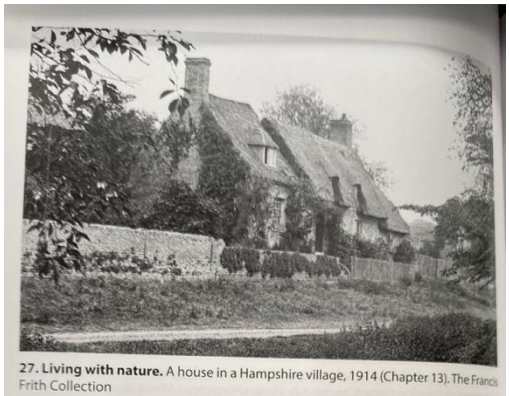
Summary of Information for Local Authorities on Becoming Pesticide-Free

Why move to pesticide free?

- Pesticides (insecticides, herbicides, fungicides) are a key contributor to biodiversity decline. LAs have a responsibility to contribute to the national target to reverse this decline.
- Many pesticides damage soil and water health with effects on both humans and wildlife. There is accumulating evidence that glyphosate is carcinogenic. It is the primary chemical used by Local Authorities and they have a duty to reduce the risk of employees and residents being exposed to harmful chemicals. It is understood that children, pregnant women, and older adults are especially vulnerable to environmental toxins. Many areas managed by Local Authorities include parks and play areas frequented by children are currently treated with pesticides.
- Whilst the untidiness of nature was accepted by previous generations, in recent decades people's expectations have been shaped by the ready use of pesticides, with public areas mown and tidy. Public education could help people to see this 'messiness' as habitat that supports the creatures that they love, such as birds, butterflies, bees and dragonflies. These photos show the same house and village street a century apart, demonstrating the contrast between the pre and post pesticide environment.
- The urban/suburban landscape can provide a vital network of corridors for invertebrates and other animals, and the use of pesticides severely impacts the richness of these habitats. Phasing out the use of chemicals would provide important benefits for nature.



27. Living with nature. A house in a Hampshire village, 1914 (Chapter 13). The Francis Frith Collection

28. Sterile Britain. The same Hampshire house as in Figure 27, photographed in 2017. Now cleansed as a result of ecological tidiness disorder (Chapter 13). Benedict Macdonald

Taken from 'Re-Birding' by Benedict MacDonald

Councils that have gone pesticide free: Locally, Newton Abbot Town Council made a formal commitment to be pesticide free in 2023. In 2015 Glastonbury was the first UK council to be glyphosate free. There are about 50 other councils that have also taken this step and many others who have pledged to phase out use of pesticides.

Where to begin:

Audit - Carry out an audit on where pesticide is currently used.

Review – Determine if there are areas/actions that are unnecessary. Stopping these will be a cost saving.

Consider alternative management/planting – Where can spraying be reduced in frequency or moved to spot treatment or non-toxic alternatives? Can planting of beds be more naturalised/ use more native plants and perennials rather than bedding plants (this would reduce weed issues as there is less disturbed and exposed soil)?

Involve communities – Make the public aware of how a change to less or no pesticide use benefits biodiversity, water quality and human health (and particularly children). Set up regular weeding parties in parks and public areas. Provide Health and Safety support for residents who wish to take responsibility for their own streets. One estate in Lewes, Sussex, decided to go glyphosate free and to weed pavements themselves. You can read about their experience here:

Review with contractors – Discuss with them the use of non-chemical methods and request that they invest in the appropriate machinery. Alternative methods include: Hot water; Steam; Foamstream; Infra-red flame burner; Thermoelectric weed treatment (described here).

Learning from experienced councils - Glastonbury, which has over 10 years' experience of being glyphosate free, has found a **revolving steel brush attachment** for trimmers (costing about £30) to be very effective for weeds on pavements and other hard areas where weeds may cause a hazard. They found Foamstream was demanding of staff time (required two to operate and frequent use). Glastonbury advises other councils:

- A pesticide-free approach is achievable and has been sustained for 10 years.
- No single method is perfect — a combination of tools works best.
- Staff time and capacity are the biggest practical challenges, but manageable.
- Glastonbury's experience is a proven, practical model for other councils to follow.

Share resources – If the council is buying its own machinery, the initial outlay for non-chemical methods can make them appear more expensive. However the ongoing costs can be lower than chemicals and safer for the people using them. They can also be shared with neighbouring councils. Renting out to other councils is easier as these methods can be used in any weather, unlike chemicals which cannot be used in the rain or when rain is due.

Invasive species – Increasingly non-chemical control is being explored to eradicate Japanese knotweed (JKW) and Giant hogweed, including heat methods and mesh (which cuts off energy from the tubers as the stems grow). Conventional methods, including chemical treatment, require repeated application and patience. The Wales Wildlife Trust are trialling a new biological control method for JKN called Roots Reset, developed by a company called Soilwise. The method involves removing the above ground parts of the JKW, spreading CleaRoot, a plant-based product, mixing it into the soil, covering with a barrier to exclude oxygen, and then allowing the microbes already in the soil and enriched by the CleaRoot to consume the roots of the JKW. This process takes 6-12 months. You can watch a video about Root Reset from an international conference on invasive species at Warwick University here.

Mowing - Is mowing happening more frequently than necessary? Can areas of mown grass become wildflower areas with paths mown through and the whole area cut once or twice a year? This will save money.

Communication - The success of change requires good publicity and communication with the public so that they understand the goal and the benefits to them and their environment.

The European experience – The Europeans are far ahead of the UK in moving towards being pesticide free, some areas beginning as far back as the 1980s (Belgium) and the 1990s (Denmark). Effective programmes have been characterised by a combination of public awareness campaigns and a gradual phase-out. Resistance has tended to come from the pesticide manufacturers rather than the general public. Significant progress has been made over the years but there is variance between municipalities in individual countries and derogations continue to be permitted. However, since 2023 Germany has prohibited the use of glyphosate in public areas and in private gardens and France implemented a broader pesticide ban on use by public authorities, with exceptions for some specific areas, and in private gardens, across the country in 2022 (including in forests).

Proposed Bill – Sian Berry (MP) has proposed a Private Member's Bill to prohibit the use by Local Authorities of professional plant protection products on amenity land under their control. The Bill has cross-party support and is due to receive its second reading in on 01 May 2026. https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3822

Online sources: Pesticide Action Network; Wales Wildlife Trust; Lewes Climate Hub;
Books: Vicki Hird *Re-bugging the Planet*; Benedict Macdonald *Re-Birding*;
With support from Pesticide Free Devon Network https://www.pesticidefreedevon.co.uk/

Shira Rüb
Action on Climate in Teignbridge, Volunteer Wildlife Warden
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