

Briefing 15-34

July 2015

Giant hogweed and other non-native invasive, species of plants

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England

For information only to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Key Issues:

As part of our summer briefing series on environmental issues, APSE has produced this short briefing note in response to recent news reports that several children were hospitalised after coming into contact with giant hogweed. This briefing contains:

- What giant hogweed is, how to identify it and how to treat it
- Obligations of local authorities and good practice examples from other authorities
- A series of useful resources on giant hogweed

1.0 What is Giant hogweed?

The Royal Horticultural Society provides this definition: "*Giant hogweed (Heracleum mantegazzianum) is a close relative to cow parsley, but can reach over 3m (10ft) in height. The flowers are white and held in umbels, (flat-topped clusters), with all the flowers in the umbel facing upwards. The flower heads can be as large as 60cm (2ft) across. Although an impressive sight when fully grown, giant hogweed is invasive and potentially harmful. Chemicals in the sap can cause photodermatitis or photosensitivity, where the skin becomes very sensitive to sunlight and may suffer blistering, pigmentation and long-lasting scars.*" –

The images below are of Giant Hogweed and the damage to skin caused by the species.



Photo credits: Fritz Geller-Grimm and Bob Kleinberg

In addition the **Non-Native Species Secretariat** has an excellent guide for correctly identifying Giant hogweed accessible by clicking [here](#). The guide provides pictures of how the plant looks throughout the year and gives information on its natural habitat, as well as the current distribution of giant hogweed throughout the UK.

It is also useful to note for both staff and service users the NHS recommendations for people coming into contact with Giant Hogweed. The [NHS recommends](#) you should “cover the affected area, and wash it with soap and water. The blisters heal very slowly and can develop into phytophotodermatitis, a type of skin rash which flares up in sunlight. If you feel unwell after contact with giant hogweed, speak to your doctor.”

2.0 Obligations and powers of local authorities

According to the UK Government’s [guidance on harmful weeds and invasive, non-native plants: preventing them spreading](#), individuals “must not plant in the wild or cause certain invasive and non-native plants to grow in the wild. This can include moving contaminated soil or plant cuttings. If you do, you can be fined or sent to prison for up to 2 years.”

The guidance advises that “you’re not legally obligated to remove these plants or control them”, but many Councils do remove giant hogweed from public places under [section 79](#) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 when its placement is considered “prejudicial to health”. This might include instances where giant hogweed is growing on land accessible to the public such as on pathways.

Depending on the chosen course of action (spraying plants, burying plants, burning plants, disposing off-site), you may need to contact the [Environment Agency](#) in England.

3.0 Good practice examples from local authorities

Displaying information about giant hogweed on your Council’s website

[Dundee City Council](#) has a particularly well written section on their website on giant hogweed that would be a good example for Councils looking to develop their own page. Dundee’s page covers:

- Which areas of the city giant hogweed is most commonly found
- What you should do if you find giant hogweed on your property

- Options available for controlling invasive species
- An overview of the current law and regulations surrounding giant hogweed
- Information on local volunteer groups
- Further information on giant hogweed and various downloadable factsheets
- Contact details for the department

Putting together an online form for reporting giant hogweed

[Manchester City Council's](#) online form is a good example of how local authorities can encourage residents to report giant hogweed in a way that is useful for Council staff. The form allows you to:

- Report general weeds, Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed and Himalayan balsam
- Report who is responsible for the land (e.g. the council, park, local housing association, privately owned land, allotment/woodland or don't know/can't identify)
- Provide any additional information to help with the Council's investigation
- The location of the weeds (e.g. naming the nearest road/house/building, junction, street light number)
- Provide an e-mail address if the resident wishes to be updated on the progress of this request

Involving local volunteer and partnership groups in tackling the problem

The vision of the partnership group [Bollin Environmental Action and Conservation \(BEACON\)](#) in Cheshire is to "have a river catchment free from invasive species where our natural wildlife thrives. This will be achieved through surveys and monitoring, education, awareness raising and local action." They are one of many locally formed groups dedicated to eradicating species such as giant hogweed from their area, and have been successful in collaboratively working with landowners and private companies to achieve their aims, and have been successful in receiving DEFRA funding to support the project. For further information, BEACON produced an excellent resource, their [Invasive Non-Native Species Action Plan 2013-2015](#), which provides more detail on currently affected areas in the catchment, an overview of their visions and aims, survey and monitoring details, as well as plans for each of the three funding scenarios they may find themselves in. It is important that any community groups receive proper support from local authorities, as improper removal/disposal could create or exacerbate issues faced by parks and open spaces (e.g. spreading of seeds). Advice on using herbicides, burying, burning or disposing of plants off-site should also be obtained. Visit [here](#) for more detailed UK Government guidance on this issue.

4.0 Useful resources

- **Non-Native Species Secretariat (Giant hogweed)** – This is an excellent resource with a wealth of information on Giant Hogweed and other invasive, non-native species - [click here](#)
- **National Biodiversity Network interactive grid map for Giant hogweed** - [click here](#)
- **Centre for Ecology and Hydrology Information Sheet on Giant hogweed** – [click here](#)
- **UK Government guidance: Harmful weeds and invasive, non-native plants: prevent them spreading** – [click here](#)
- **Scottish Government guidance: Control of invasive non-native species (Giant hogweed)** - [click here](#)
- **The Giant Hogweed Best Practice Manual (financed by the European Commission)** – [click here](#)
- **Property Care Association Guidance Note – Management of Giant Hogweed** – [click here](#)

5.0 APSE Comment

APSE encourages our membership to educate their staff and their communities about the dangers of non-native invasive species like Giant hogweed, and to ensure that they are aware of how to report any instances of growth (in public places or on private land) to their Council's Environment department; regardless of land ownership. This approach will allow the local authority to approach landowners about taking necessary action and thereby prevent those sort of occurrences which have appeared in the national media over the past few weeks.

Currently there are a number of powers contained within various acts which allow local authorities to take action against Giant Hogweed. The Environment Protection Act 1990 – Section 79, allows enforcement action to be taken where its presence is likely to be prejudicial to health and may include where the plant is growing along pathways or on land which is easily accessible to users or passers-by. Similar powers exist within the Town and Country Planning Act 1990- section 215 and the Town and Country Planning Act (Scotland) 1992 – Section 63. The Weeds Act 1959, allows Defra to take enforcement action regarding the control of several injurious weed species throughout the UK. It aims to prevent the

spread of the Broad Leaved Dock, Common Ragwort, Creeping Thistle, Curled Dock and the Spear Thistle. Defra can use enforcement measures to prevent the spread of weeds on private land, which, if not adhered to by the landowner, can lead to a fine up to £1000 and further punishment. In response to recent news reports and the injuries giant hogweed continues to cause to people, particularly children (as well as preventing many native plants from growing), APSE would support the addition of giant hogweed to the illegal species list.

At present, there is a mismatch between the absence of a legal obligation to remove or control giant hogweed, when compared to the fines and/or prison sentences that can be given for planting or causing invasive plants to grow in the wild. Equally it seems immoral that there is a greater focus on eradicating species such as Japanese knotweed, due to the level of economic damage it causes, rather than removing and preventing giant hogweed which has the potential to maim and inflict long term injury on humans.

This leaves local authorities taking, or being able to take, different levels of often ineffective action where landowners continue to allow dangerous plants to grow on their property with impunity, and therefore this current approach is impeding local authorities in their ability to control such species. However, new EU regulations will hopefully address this problem by giving government agencies the ability to issue control orders that will necessitate the removal of high risk invasive species from specified areas potentially including, derelict sites, public land, construction sites and neighboring properties. Local authorities will therefore need to work closely with such agencies to ensure co-ordinated action, but equally will need to be aware they too could be subject to these control orders.

DEFRA currently estimates that the eradication of giant hogweed is likely to be in the order of £100 million, a figure which when considered against the continuing cuts to greenspace management budgets, suggests any action taken against giant hogweed would not be sustainable in trying to eradicate this nationwide infestation.

APSE would like to hear from our membership as to whether you believe coordinated action on this issue is necessary as well as any effective action you have taken to control the problems associated with giant hogweed. Please email any details to Wayne Priestley on wpriestley@apse.org.uk

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