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## Report of the Chief Recreation Officer

### Executive Board

Date: 11<sup>th</sup> September

Subject: Control of Ragwort and Other Invasive Weeds

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#### Electoral Wards Affected:

All

Ward Members consulted  
(referred to in report)

#### Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

Eligible for Call In

Not Eligible for Call In  
(Details contained in the report)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report seeks to inform Executive Board on the current arrangements for the control of Ragwort and other invasive weeds within Leeds following a deputation to the Council on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2007.

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT**

- 1.1 This report seeks to inform Executive Board on the current arrangements for the control of Ragwort and other invasive weeds within Leeds.

## **2.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 2.1 Following a deputation to Council on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2007 it was resolved that the Executive Board should consider a report on the control of this weed on Leeds City Council land.

The deputation speech is attached at Appendix One.

- 2.2 Ragwort is a biennial species native to the UK, growing predominately in uncultivated areas and waste land. If its habitat is disturbed, it can develop perennial characteristics. There are around 19 different cultivars prevalent in Britain, all of which propagate through the production of thousands of seeds that are dispersed by the wind. It is widely recognised that Ragwort plays a key biodiversity role, supporting at least 30 species of insects and invertebrates.

- 2.3 Ragwort contains toxins which can damage the liver of horses and other grazing livestock. These toxins can also be transferred through contact with skin and through produce such as milk, eggs and honey, although research undertaken suggests that food contamination poses an insignificant risk to humans. Common Ragwort (*Senecio Jacobaea*) is classified as an injurious weed under the Weed Control Act 1959 (and subsequently the Ragwort Control Act 2003).

- 2.4 Ragwort has a bitter taste while green, which deters consumption. Although the taste disappears once the dead plant dries out, making the plant more attractive as a source of food, the toxins are not affected by desiccation. It should be noted, however, that most suspected cases of Ragwort poisoning in animals are either due to eating contaminated hay or having no option but to consume Ragwort after being put out to over grazed pastures. Both of these scenarios can be attributed to either poor husbandry or lack of effective quality control by the hay and straw producers. It is estimated that an animal must consume between 2% and 7% of its overall body weight to receive a lethal dose of toxin from Ragwort.

## **3.0 MAIN ISSUES**

- 3.1 The Ragwort Control Act serves to control the spread of Ragwort onto agricultural and grazing land, not to eradicate it. In fact it is accepted that eradication is either impossible or undesirable as ragwort is a valuable ecological resource, being the natural habitat for the rare cinnabar moth of which the caterpillar feeds off the ragwort plant, so the emphasis is on effective control rather than eradication.

- 3.2 It is not illegal to allow the plants to grow or flower (some cultivars are protected), but land owners have a duty to monitor and assess the risk of it spreading onto agricultural land and take appropriate steps should this be the case. A Code of Practice has been produced by the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) which outlines criteria and approved methods of control. Should enforcement proceedings be initiated, this Code of Practice can be submitted in evidence to assess the level of compliance by the land owner.

- 3.3 Although all cultivars of Ragwort contain pyrrolizidine alkaloid toxins, only control of Common Ragwort (*Senecio Jacobaea*) is enforceable by the Act. DEFRA is

responsible for enforcement, and has delegated these powers to Natural England. The enforcement powers are permissive, and there is no legal obligation for either DEFRA or Natural England to take action or investigate the complaints received. Additionally, complaints will only be accepted for possible investigation if they meet the following criteria:

- The complainant has already made all possible attempts to contact the landowner or occupier of the infested land to inform them of the infestation
- A fully completed and signed complaint form has been received by post or delivered by hand which contains very specific information about the suspected infestation. Only signed originals are accepted.

3.4 The Code of Practice aims to define the situations in which there is a likelihood of Ragwort spreading to neighbouring land where it will then present an identifiable risk of ingestion by vulnerable animals and to provide guidance on the most appropriate means of control taking account of both animal welfare and environmental considerations.

3.5 Risk categories as set out in the Code of Practice are:

High Risk:

- Land on which ragwort is present within 50m of horses or grazing animals or land used for feed/forage production
- Land on which ragwort is present and flowering/seeding within 100m of horses or grazing animals or land used for feed/forage production.

Medium Risk:

- Land on which ragwort is present within 100m of horses or grazing animals or land used for feed/forage production where growth has not reached the flowering/seeding stage or that stage has passed.
- Land on which ragwort is present and flowering/seeding within 100m of other agricultural activities that could be adversely affected by its spread.

Low Risk:

- Land on which ragwort is present where that land is more than 100m from horses or grazing animals, land used for feed/forage production or other agricultural activities that might be adversely affected.

3.6 The table below shows the control methods approved by the Code and their effectiveness.

Control Method	Long Term Effectiveness
Cutting	Poor
Pulling/Levering Out	Moderate
Herbicide Treatment	Good

## 4.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNCIL POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

4.1 Officers are aware of the growing problem created by Ragwort and other invasive weeds and the growing public awareness of the issue, most notably from the equestrian community. In an attempt to resolve the problem, the Learning & Leisure Department submitted a budget pressure bid for invasive and noxious weed control on Leeds City Council land in 2002. This bid was not successful, but a further bid in

2003, specifically for recreational land managed by Parks and Countryside, was approved and the decision was made to provide a budget of £50k per annum for treatment from 2004 onwards. Progress reports relating to invasive weeds on recreational land were submitted to Leisure Scrutiny Board in January 2004 and February 2005.

- 4.2 An information gathering exercise took place in late 2003, and all areas of infestation identified at that time were plotted on the Parks and Countryside Geographic Information System (GIS).
- 4.3 In 2006, it was estimated that there were around 46 hectares of council owned land infested with Ragwort in Leeds, over 38 hectares of which is on "Highways" land, 5 hectares on "Leisure" land and the remainder on land managed by ALMOs or not falling within the responsibility of a specific service. Maps and a copy of the Code of Practice have been supplied to those service areas affected (the most recent maps were supplied to Highways Network Management and Streetscene Services in May 2007), in order for them to assess the impact on the land they manage, and for those services to look at the funding options available to them.
- 4.4 The risk categories set out in the Code of Practice have been adopted by Parks & Countryside when assessing areas of infestation. When assessing risk, no distinction is made between varieties of Ragwort, i.e., if any variety of Ragwort is present, whether or not treatment is enforceable by the act, and the risk to livestock is high, then the recommendation would still be to implement a treatment plan. Where a need for treatment has been identified, the chosen method of control is regular spot treatment (2 to three applications per annum) using a product derived from citronella oil, which can be applied at most stages of Ragwort growth. One benefit of this method is that even if the plant continues to flower, the viability of any seed produced is reduced significantly. It is also possible to treat flower heads directly, preventing them from seeding at all.

## **5.0 LEGAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 Approximately 10% of the total Parks and Countryside invasive weeds budget is allocated for Ragwort treatment in parks, open spaces and cemeteries (Ragwort identified for treatment on land managed by Parks & Countryside is subject to a minimum of a three year treatment plan), with the remainder being used to deal with infestations of Knotweed, Hogweed and Himalayan Balsam. This equates to a total spend of approximately £14k on Ragwort treatment since 2004.
- 5.2 There is no specified budget identified for programmed treatment of invasive weeds on land such as highways and housing areas. Where a report is received regarding invasive weeds on land not managed by Parks & Countryside, the service responsible is contacted. If an assessment or professional opinion is requested, the appropriate officer will investigate and provide a recommendation, which is then subject to budget availability from the service with management responsibility for that site.
- 5.3 Approximately £32k has been spent on treatment of Ragwort adjoining the public highway in Leeds between October 2003 and February 2007 as a result of savings made omitting some options from the footpath spraying contract. Given the increased level of problems with weeds in footpaths which arose as a result of issues relating to the grass cutting contract, these savings are no longer possible. For this same reason, some Ragwort previously controlled by regular close mowing of grass verges has become established and seeded adjoining areas, meaning that

there is a likelihood of a significant increase in density of current infestations in the coming years.

## **6.0 CONCLUSIONS**

- 6.1 The processes detailed within this report show that Leeds City Council has a good awareness of its responsibilities for managing both Ragwort and other invasive species and has adopted reasonable control methodologies to ensure compliance with relevant statutes and Codes of Practice.

## **7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 7.1 Executive Board is recommended to note the contents of the report and to approve the action taken to date to manage Ragwort and other invasive weeds on Leeds City Council land.