

Hemlock Water Dropwort Policy 2025

This policy explains the process of assessment and removal of hemlock water dropwort from South Gloucestershire Council owned or managed land.

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Foreword

South Gloucestershire council owns or manages a wide range of public open spaces and land across our area. This land is managed in line with statutory requirements, Council priorities and policies for the environment, communities, and budgets.

This policy explains how for land we are responsible for, the council will assess and where appropriate, remove hemlock water dropwort *Oenanthe crocata*. The Policy aims to raise awareness and provide information about hemlock water dropwort so that the benefits and the risks are understood, and a clear process of assessment, management and action by the council is set out.

This species is an important source of pollen and nectar for our wildlife and plays a key role in natural ecosystems in the UK. This policy explains why and how South Gloucestershire Council will assess and where appropriate remove this plant where necessary to keep open space users, contractors, staff and livestock safe, whilst retaining hemlock water dropwort where it is assessed as safe and appropriate to provide beneficial natural resource for wildlife.



Hemlock Water Dropwort *Oenanthe crocata* flower are very important to summer pollinators.

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

Hemlock water dropwort *Oenanthe crocata* (HWD) is a common plant species that is native to the UK and from a biodiversity perspective plays a key role providing nectar, pollen and habitat for wildlife. However, it is extremely toxic to humans and animals if ingested and can cause serious skin burns when the sap makes contact with skin. It grows commonly in the UK, preferring river banks and wetter areas, and can oftentimes be found in public open spaces. The species is only harmful if ingested or broken/damaged, but otherwise it is safe if undisturbed.

This policy outlines a decision tree to assess and inform decisions regarding removal or retention of HWD, for dealing with plants when they occur on council managed land and have been deemed a risk by either a member of the public or a council employee, and methodology for removal.

The policy also provides information about latest requirements and best practice regarding removal of HWD particularly regarding safety, where appropriate following assessment using the decision tree in this policy.

1.2 Legislation

There is currently no legislation pertaining to the management of HWD. The species is not listed as notable, rare, vulnerable or at risk, but is a native species. This means it is protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) which makes it illegal to uproot any wild plant, unless you have the permission of the landowner. Where South Gloucestershire Council manages the land, plant removal is permissible, subject to the outcome of following the assessment decision tree in this document, and adherence to health and safety requirements and best practice (see section 4 of this policy).

HWD is not listed as an injurious weed under the [Weeds Act 1959](#).

1.3 Responsibilities

Due to the absence of legislation regarding this species, there is no legal responsibility or duty for the Council, landowners, other agencies or the public to report or remove Hemlock Water Dropwort from public open spaces. However, South Gloucestershire Council acknowledges that HWD plants may grow in locations which pose safety risks to people, particularly children, or risks to livestock, and so seeks to ensure safety of people using and maintaining public open spaces and council managed land as set out in this policy in collaboration with third party landowners where appropriate.

Where HWD is growing on council managed land, or within the land that falls under the Highways Act (1980), reports for removal will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis to determine the responsible body. Should a third party be responsible, SGC will pass this report on where possible.

1.4 Benefits of Hemlock Water Dropwort retention

As a member of the carrot family *Apiaceae*, HWD is a common umbellifer with smooth, green stems around 150cm tall, fronds of parsley-like leaves, and crowns of small white flower clusters in umbrella-shaped inflorescences. These flowers are a rich source of pollen for many short-tongued pollinators including beetles, flies, bees, wasps, butterflies and moths. In turn, these species then feed bats, birds and other species in the native food web.

Apiaceae species are often hard to distinguish from each other, with very similar visual appearances, growth habits and habitat preferences. Many species of *Apiaceae* are harmless to humans and are used commonly for vegetables or herbs, including parsley and fennel. Due to how prolific *Apiaceae* species are, and how large a proportion of the habitat they make up, it is important to only remove noxious species when determined necessary.

The South Glos Council [Pollinator Action Plan](#) also details various steps for local authorities to follow, including in section 1.2 Legislation & duties where national statutory advice including to '*think carefully about whether to use pesticide*' (relevant to section 4 of this document); and in section 3.2. Objectives to '*grow more nectar and pollen-rich flowers shrubs and trees*' (of which HWD can be classified as).

1.5 Case for Hemlock Water Dropwort removal

Following assessment using the HWD decision tree (see section 3 of this policy) where HWD plants are deemed a risk to public open space users, staff or contractors, removal of plants is advised to prevent toxic reactions to ingestion, or skin burns from incidental interactions. Hemlock Water Dropwort typically grows along riverbanks, in wet grassland and wet woodland, reaching around 2m tall. The sap of HWD can cause rashes and blistering when the sap makes contact with human skin.

HWD also poses a risk to livestock if it is accidentally mixed in hay, but anecdotal evidence presents a mixed case for whether livestock will avoid HWD when grazing. According to [NADIS](#), cattle become at risk when banks and ditches have been partially cleared of HWD, and the removal of foliage reveals the root tubers which cattle then forage. This presents a case for the importance of total removal, as discussed in section 4 of this policy.

Where the council owns land managed by tenant graziers, contract graziers, or grazing NGOs (e.g. Street Goat), it is the responsibility of the livestock manager to remove any potential risks to livestock, harmful or injurious weeds as set out in grazing licenses. This forms part of their responsibility to the success and safety of the animals in their care, and the Council Conservation Grazing Policy. Should HWD be removed, the methodology noted in section 4 of this policy is followed. Note this is different to the methodology used for injurious weeds such as Ragwort. See the South Gloucestershire Council Ragwort Policy [here](#).

Removal and disposal of HWD needs to be done according to the protocol set out in Section 4 of this policy to prevent risks to operatives and livestock.

2 Identification

Identification is tricky and the following information lists some of the key elements to verify the identity of the proposed plants for removal. Characteristics in **bold** note diagnostic features specific to the family. Photos are taken from Totally Wild UK¹ and a helpful [website with videos is available here](#).

2.1 Hemlock Water Dropwort

- Umbrella-like creamy-white flowers, **Most spherical dome-shaped umbels of the *Apiaceae*** that flower in early summer, usually 10-15cm across.
- **Stems are hairless but grooved like celery, with a hollow centre.**
- **Leaves are broader, more parsley-like and shiny green, and much more rounded than that of Cow Parsley or Poison Hemlock, but still has a toothed edge.**
- The seed heads are spiky clusters of small individually shaped teardrop and brownish black seeds
- Typically grows along riverbanks, in wet grassland and wet woodland, reaching around 2m tall
- Large, carrot-like creamy coloured tubers growing in bunches.
- All parts of the plant are poisonous, but sap can also burn the skin.
- Do not examine plant without appropriate PPE (see section 4)
- For identification queries contact nature@southglos.gov.uk

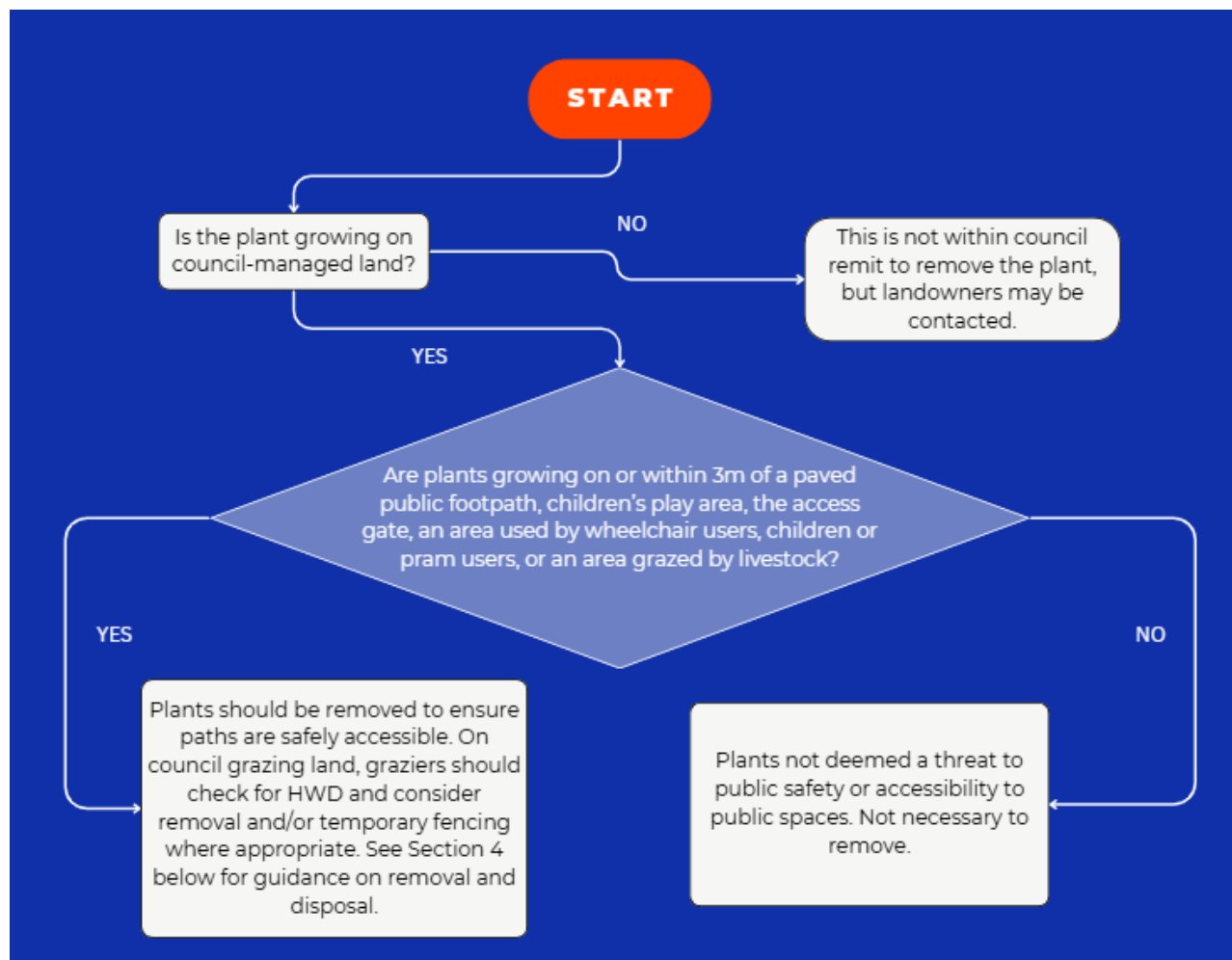
2.2 Reference photos of Hemlock Water Dropwort





Clockwise from top: HWD leaf pattern, drawing of root tubers, umbel of flowers in a dome shape, seed head of HWD in autumn.

3 Decision tree



4 Removal

4.1 Biosecurity

The damp and riverside habitats in which both species are found are also hotspots for invasive non-native species (INNS), such as Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam and Azolla. As a result, any vegetation management should follow the '[Check, Clean, Dry](#)' method of inspecting and cleaning boots before and after use on the riverbank, especially if there are INNS known in the area. South Glos Council also have a Plant Biosecurity Policy that can be accessed [here](#).

4.2 Safety & PPE

When plants are being removed, or a council employee is working in an area where HWD is known, personal protective equipment should be worn during the entire process:

- **Long sleeves and long trousers**

- **Washable or disposable full body overalls**
- **Disposable nitrile or rubber gloves**
- **Disposable filtered face mask**
- **Eye protection** (washed after use)
- **Wellington boots** – to be worn to prevent risk of contamination of laces. Boots to be rinsed off after the job is completed

Hands should be washed with water after contact, after removal/disposal of PPE and especially before food consumption.

See section 5 for advice and actions in the case of contact with HWD sap or ingestion.

4.3 Physical removal

When removing plants, it is important to try and remove the whole plant and not just cut sections away. Cutting sections results in broken cells and open wounds on the plants that ooze sap and continue to pose if not greater risk to accidental contact with public open space users. The plants are also more likely to regenerate and continue to grow when roots remain. For effective removal, it is recommended to grasp the plants at the base with two hands and cut as close to the root base as possible. This removes most of the stems from the rhizome. Once the vegetation has been pulled away, the root rhizome can then be dug out. The whole plant can then be disposed of.

Under no circumstances should HWD be strimmed or brush-cut as a management technique.

Treatment with herbicide is not considered necessary, particularly due to the habitat of HWD to be wet and riverside locations. Herbicides such as glyphosate have high potential to leach into the waterway, causing serious and persistent unintended secondary effects on non-target plant species downstream. [South Gloucestershire Pesticide Policy 2022](#)

A method statement complementing this policy has been prepared for operatives.

4.4 Disposal of vegetation

Vegetation can be left on site to decompose, however it must be well away from publicly accessible areas including public rights of way, grazed, or open access areas. Hemlock Water Dropwort is not suitable for composting. Note that on agricultural land, HWD should be excluded from hay as it can retain a level of toxicity.

5 In case of contact or ingestion

5.1 In case of contact on skin

Wash the skin thoroughly with water, do not use soaps or cleaning products. Monitor symptoms. Seek emergency medical help immediately.

5.2 In case of contact with eyes

Wash eyes immediately with cold water and/or eyewash. Seek emergency medical help immediately call 999.

5.3 In case of ingestion

Call 999, and seek emergency medical help immediately. Do not drive to emergency care, call an ambulance or have someone drive you. Do not try to make the person sick. Ensure they are kept company and keep them as calm as possible.

6 References

1. [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#)
2. [Weeds Act 1959](#)
3. [South Gloucestershire Council Pollinator Action Plan 2022](#)
4. [NADIS](#)
5. [South Gloucestershire Council Ragwort Policy 2022](#)
6. [Identify Water Hemlock Dropwort – Totally Wild UK](#)
7. [Advice on Wildlife friendly weed clearance.pub](#)
8. [South Gloucestershire Council Plant Biosecurity Policy 2022](#)
9. [Check Clean Dry » NNSS](#)
10. [The Perils of Hemlock Water Dropwort: Identifying and Managing This Toxic Plant in Winter - Conservation Land Services](#)
11. [South Gloucestershire Pesticide Policy 2022](#)