South Derbyshire District Council

South Derbyshire Common Ragwort Policy & Advice Note

Date: March 2024

Version Control

Version	Reason for review (review date/legislation/process chances)	Effective Date	Review date
1.0	First Version	02/04/2024	

Approvals

Approved by	Date
Senior Leadership Team	TBC
Environment & Development Services Committee	TBC

1.0 Introduction

This Ragwort Policy portrays out how South Derbyshire District Council (SDDC) assesses and where appropriate controls ragwort on council managed highway verges and public open spaces. Ragwort provides important benefits for biodiversity; however, it can be harmful for grazing animals if it is in fodder.

This Ragwort Policy explains how the council assesses, manages, and monitors ragwort on the land it is responsible for. It aims to raise awareness and provide information about ragwort so that the benefits and the risks are understood, and a clear process of assessment and action by the council is set out.

Common Ragwort (Senecio jacobaea), hereafter referred to as 'ragwort', is a native British flowering plant. Ragwort is important for biodiversity and has a long flowering season making it an important nectar source for pollinators. It supports a high number of insect species, 29 of which depend entirely on ragwort for their existence including cinnabar moths, a bee species, hoverflies and a nationally scarce leaf beetle. Pollinating insects are key to life on earth and are fundamental to addressing the ecological emergency. The council seeks to protect and enhance the amount and quality of pollinator habitat and manage its greenspace to provide greater benefits for pollinators.

Ragwort has been classified under the Weeds Act 1959 as an 'injurious weed'. This is because it contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids which in high doses can have debilitating or fatal consequences if ingested by horses or other grazing animals. In view of this, ragwort must be controlled where it poses a threat to the health and welfare of grazing animals and the production of feed or forage for animals. It is important to note that ragwort is unpalatable to animals as a live plant and usually avoided by livestock unless there is no other food source.

It does become more palatable when cut and dried when it loses its bitterness, but the toxins remain. Ingesting small amounts of ragwort will not generally cause illness.

This policy sets out the legislation relating to ragwort and outlines the benefits of ragwort for biodiversity. It details a flow chart to assess and evaluate the risk of ragwort spreading and evaluating control methods to use where required.

1.1 Legislation & Duties

Key legislation relevant to this policy includes:

• Ragwort Control Act, 2003 which has led to Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Common Ragwort

• NERC Act, 2006: Section 40 - all public bodies must have regard for the purpose of conserving biodiversity in the discharge of their normal functions.

• Weeds Act, 1959 The Weeds Act 1959 and Ragwort Control Act 2003, Under these Acts, landowners are expected to manage ragwort so that it does not spread to adjacent sites.

Common ragwort is one of five species listed under the Weeds Act 1959 as being an injurious weed. An 'injurious weed' is a native species, seen to pose harm to agricultural pasture. Common ragwort contains toxins which can have debilitating or fatal consequences if ingested by horses or other grazing animals.

Under the Weeds Act 1959 the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can, if satisfied that injurious weeds are growing upon any land, serve a notice requiring the occupier to take action to prevent the spread of those weeds. An unreasonable failure to comply with a notice is an offence. The Weeds Act 1959 has been amended by the Ragwort Control Act 2003. It gives the Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Common Ragwort evidential status in any proceedings taken under the Weeds Act 1959. This means that a failure to follow this Code is not an offence, but non-compliance may be used as evidence in any legal action. The Code states that "common ragwort and other ragwort species are native to the British Isles and are therefore an inherent part of our flora and fauna, along with invertebrate and other wildlife they support. The Code does not propose the eradication of common ragwort but promotes a strategic approach to control the spread of common ragwort where it poses a threat to the health and welfare of grazing animals and the production of feed or forage." The Code of Practice provides guidelines on assessing the risk posed to grazing animals or forage production to determine whether action should be taken to prevent the spread of ragwort to neighbouring land. This policy will follow Defra's Code of Practice. It does not seek to eradicate common ragwort. However, it is necessary for the occupier of the land to prevent its spread where this presents a high risk of poisoning horses and livestock or spreading to fields used to produce forage.

2.0 Responsibilities

In line with the above, South Derbyshire District Council has duties and powers for assessing and controlling the spread of ragwort. Typically, this will be confined to high-risk areas where ragwort is growing within 50m of land used for grazing by horses or land used for forage production. Whilst South Derbyshire uses Glyphosate as a weedkiller for specific, selected, and controlled purposes, any changes in national policy will be adopted by the council where required and the council will continue to consider latest advice and best practice. In the meantime, the council is reducing usage wherever practicable. By reducing the reliance on herbicides and other pesticides, South Derbyshire District Council is taking important action to reduce the impacts of pesticides and to be ready for any future changes in law.

3.0 Benefits of Ragwort

The 2007 UK Countryside Survey shows a significant decline in ragwort. South Derbyshire District Council declared an Ecological Emergency in 2023, reflecting the importance of acting in response to the dramatic changes we are experiencing in climate and nature. At a time when biodiversity indicators are showing continued stress on habitats, it is time to re-evaluate the role of this plant and ensure that ragwort is not eradicated unnecessarily, and further damage of our already fragile biodiversity is avoided. As a native plant with long flowering season, ragwort is very important for wildlife in the UK. It supports a wide variety of invertebrates, and its long flowering period makes it a major nectar source for many pollinating insects which also pollinate our orchards and crops. Ragwort is a natural component of many types of unimproved grassland and is used by some invertebrate species that have conservation needs. At least 29 insect species and 14 fungi species are entirely reliant on ragwort and about a third of these insects are scarce or rare. For example, the distinctive orange and black caterpillar of the cinnabar moth is a common sight on ragwort. Common ragwort is one of the most frequently visited flowers by butterflies in the UK and more than 200 species of invertebrate have been recorded on it.

4.0 Current Practice

At the time of writing South Derbyshire District Council currently monitors locations on land it is responsible for where ragwort is known to be growing and aims to treat the ragwort using appropriate methods. In line with best practice the council is reducing its herbicide usage where practicable. Reviewing current practice and setting out a clear assessment and management decision flow chart regarding ragwort is needed to ensure that management aligns with the councils' corporate policies.

Ragwort growth on highway verges and public open spaces managed or owned by South Derbyshire Council is included within the scope of this policy. Land owned or managed by third parties is not included in this policy. Further information for ragwort management on third party land is available via the toolkit available from the British Horse Society which includes advice on contacting landowners.

Ragwort is a valuable plant for biodiversity and removal of ragwort must only be done when necessary. Risks of ragwort spreading to adjacent sites must be carefully assessed to decide whether removal is required and what is the most appropriate method.

5.0 Assessment of risk

As an owner and occupier of land, the council must inspect land for common ragwort and assess the risks of it affecting adjoining land. The council follows these steps from Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort:

1. Identify ragwort. Carefully look at the plants to identify if it is common ragwort.

2. Map the location and extent of ragwort.

3. If ragwort is on a designated site such as a Local Nature Reserve or Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), inform the relevant designation body. This is so that if removal is required the most appropriate method for control can be used and the correct permissions are granted. For example, Natural England may have to give permission for removal if on a SSSI.

4. Review the level of risk. These distances are only guidelines when assessing the risk, as prevailing winds and topography can affect the likelihood of ragwort spreading to neighbouring land.

a. High risk

Common ragwort is present and flowering/seeding within 50m of land used for grazing by horses or other animals or land used for forage production. Take immediate action to

control the spread of ragwort using an appropriate control technique, taking account of the status of the land.

b. Medium risk

Common ragwort is present within 50 - 100m of land used for grazing by horses or other animals or land used for forage production. Establish a control policy to ensure that change from a medium to a high risk of spread can be anticipated, identified, and dealt with in a timely and effective manner using appropriate control techniques (see appendix two) taking account of the status of the land (see section 5.2, flow chart).

c. Low risk

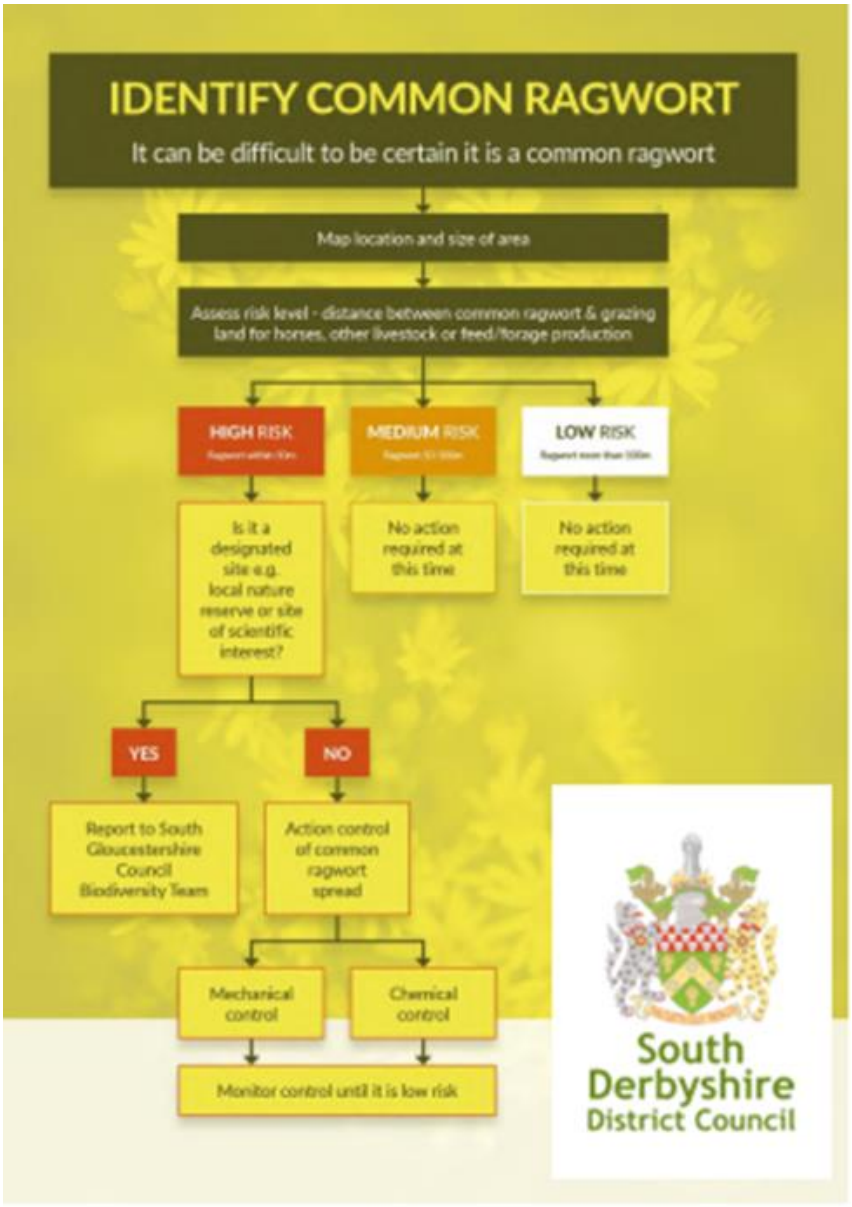
Common ragwort is more than 100m from land used for grazing or forage production. No immediate action is required.

The distances given above are guidelines only and when assessing risk, account should also be taken of local circumstances and other relevant factors such as prevailing winds, topography, shelter belts, natural barriers, soil type and vegetation cover of receiving land. Whether or not the density of ragwort is high or low, the risk factor will be determined by the likelihood of it spreading to land used for grazing and/or feed/forage production.

Dispose of ragwort plants in an approved manner. Follow safety guidelines (see Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort).

5. Record control methods used at each location.

6. Monitor the impact of clearance action to ensure its effectiveness for up to six months or to the end of the growing season.



6.0 Control Methods

The council will use the flow chart summarised above to assess the risk and if control is required. Control will only be taken where common ragwort is of high risk. Common ragwort is a highly successful plant, and a variety of methods may be required to control it.

Pulling and Digging

This is the preferred method particularly for small sites of high priority. Pulling by hand or levering out works well for small amounts. A long-handled hand tool, such as the ‘lazy dog’ or ‘ragwort fork’, can be used to remove the tap root without it breaking. If root remains, it can develop into new

plants. Ideal timing is when the ground is damp and before plants have started to seed. Risk assessment for this work is required as for all practical works. Gloves should be worn when handling common ragwort as ragwort can cause skin irritation. Pulled or dug ragwort must be removed from site because when dry, ragwort is palatable but still toxic to animals.

Herbicide

Second choice is using herbicide. Record use as required by COSHH (Control of Substances Hazardous to Health). Citronella based herbicides have been shown to be effective to reduce ragwort.

Cutting

This is a last resort and stimulates growth, so should only be used to prevent immediate seeding where no other control method can be used. If cut, the plants can re-flower later in the season or change from a perennial to a biannual, flowering the following year. Any cut plants are toxic and more palatable to livestock and should be removed from the field.

Land Management

Common ragwort is a pioneer plant, growing on bare ground. Ensuring that there is other ground cover may help reduce ragwort growth. Common ragwort readily grows on disturbed soil so avoiding disturbance of the soil can help to prevent growth.

Disposal

Pulled, dug or cut ragwort must be put into a sealed bag or container to prevent spread of seed. Ragwort must be removed from site and burnt or composted for at least 12 months.

References

None

7.0 Associated Documentation

Description of Documentation	Document Reference
Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort	Enclosed Separately

9.0 Appendices / Glossary

Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort

End of Policy Document