

AGENDA ITEM NO 5

**TAVISTOCK TOWN COUNCIL
BUDGET AND POLICY COMMITTEE**

**BRIEFING NOTE
BANNAWELL PARK – HEMLOCK WATER DROPWORT**

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Works Manager commissioned a formal identification from a specialist consultant following a suspected sighting of Hemlock Water Dropwort growing along the “wetland” in Bannawell Park.
- 1.2 Hemlock Water Dropwort is the most poisonous plant in the UK and can be fatal to humans and animals if digested. All parts of the plant are highly toxic including the leaves, stem and tubers (part of the root).
- 1.3 The sap if exposed (when the plant is strimmed, snapped etc.) can cause a rash and blistering on contact with skin. The plant in its entirety is not poisonous to the touch.
- 1.4 The plant is a native perennial, common throughout the UK growing in wet and damp environments, areas such as shallow water, streams, ditches, rivers and lakes.
- 1.5 The plant which is often mistaken with flat leaf parsley, water parsnip or water celery is an excellent pollinator with significant benefit to wildlife.
- 1.6 Due to mistaken identity (flat leaf parsley in respect of the leaves, water parsnip & water celery in respect of the stem/tubers) there have been documented cases whereby those foraging have ingested the plant and experienced severe vomiting, seizures, hallucinations and worse case death.
- 1.7 There have been documented poisoning of dogs, most commonly from ingestion of the tubers (also known as “dead man fingers”) however also from the leaves, where again worst case is death. Councillors may recall earlier this year an urgent announcement was made to the public when the plant root was washed up along the coast of Cornwall causing concern to dog walkers.

- 1.8 Bannawell Park is a popular area for dog walkers and families with young children.

2. THE CURRENT SITUATION

- 2.1 Hemlock Water Dropwort, *Oenanthe Crocata* was identified as growing in Bannawell Park by an ecologist in June.
- 2.2 The Works Manager immediately issued a public notice at Bannawell Park and publicised on social media for the local community / users of the park.
- 2.3 The Works Manager informed the Works Department, prohibiting all grounds maintenance in the vicinity of the growth (around the "wetland") until further notice.
- 2.4 Within their findings, the ecologist advised eradication of the plant was unlikely as it was likely to recolonise from upstream.
- 2.5 Hemlock Water Dropwort propagates via prolific seed production following flowering, the seeds are readily spread via waterways. Due to the direction of the watercourse from Bannawell, the Works Manager is commissioning a survey of the meadows to determine whether the plant is growing there.

3. WORKING SOLUTIONS

- 3.1 The Works Manager is seeking advice from a specialist contractor on appropriate control measures. Once received the Works Manager will report to Council.
- 3.2 Possible management options may include removal (chemical or mechanical) or leaving the plant in situ, treating it very much like other common poisonous plants in the UK which are widely accepted such as Foxgloves, Elder, Ivy etc.
- 3.3 Removal, either chemical or mechanical would have significant cost implications.
- 3.4 It is considered likely that nesting birds are currently utilising the "wetland" vegetation. Therefore, any vegetation removal or treatment undertaken between March and August would require

a nesting bird check by an experienced ecologist immediately prior to commencement.

- 3.5 Leaving the plant in situ (with permanent public notices to warn users) may have negative public perception, likely criticism to the potential poisoning of children and in particular dogs. The Council could also be accused of negligence by allowing the plant to seed and spread.
- 3.6 There is no legal requirement upon the Council to control the plant or prevent further spread. As a native plant, Hemlock Water Dropwort is not on any list of invasive species.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 This a briefing note to inform Councillors of the Works Manager's recent findings on Council land. The Works Manager will provide a further report with the appropriate management options available in due course.
- 4.2 The Works Department will continue to ensure there are warning notices in Bannawell Park.

**BECKY ROWE
WORKS MANAGER
July 2024**