

APSE Plant Biosecurity Survey Results - February 2024

To: All APSE contacts

1 Executive summary

Ash Dieback, Oak Processionary Moth, Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed are just a few examples of the diseases, pests and invasive species which UK local authorities are struggling to control, many of which could have been avoided by using plant biosecurity measures.

As well as grappling with native plant diseases and pest common to the UK, now, because of climate change and increased global sourcing of plants and trees (UK imports of live plants have increased by 71 per cent since 1999), the opportunities for more invasive species and fungal and insect pests arriving on UK shores in the future, are increasing.

Plant biosecurity is not simply about ensuring we have healthy plants it is about ensuring biodiversity is protected, health and well-being is cared for, wider food security is maintained, and economic growth is not affected. And now with the need to ensure the negative impacts of climate change are managed and reduced, a healthy plant and tree cover is ever more vital.

To ensure member authorities are aware of the need to implement effective plant biosecurity measures APSE undertook a survey to identify the level of both understanding and implementation of plant biosecurity measures across UK local authorities. Also included within the survey were questions on non-native invasive species (NNIS) to allow this area also to be investigated.

'Biosecurity is increasingly recognised not just as an important tool in the fight against climate change, but also in reducing poverty and hunger, and boosting economic development. We all have a collective responsibility to protect plant health' - **The Plant Biosecurity Strategy for Great Britain 2023 - 2028**. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plant-biosecurity-strategy-for-great-britain-2023-to-2028/plant-biosecurity-strategy-for-great-britain-2023-to-2028>

2 Background

In January 2023 the UK Government issued The Plant Biosecurity Strategy for Great Britain (2023-2028) with the explicit aim of adopting a coordinated approach towards plant biosecurity which recognised a collective responsibility to respond to plant biosecurity challenges and protect the UK's plants and trees. The strategy represents an ambitious plan of action on the scale required to tackle the growing threat from current and future plant diseases and references the need to control non-native invasive species (NNIS).

APSE has noted through its work, that there is a growing interest for information around the issue of plant biosecurity. A recent online seminar on Ash Dieback had significant numbers of UK authorities attending and APSE's Parks and Greenspaces annual seminars, advisory groups and network query services are also covering plant biosecurity and NNIS because of local authority officers' requests.

Therefore, in late 2023 APSE sent out a survey to gauge local authority officers levels of knowledge regarding plant biosecurity, including awareness of the UK Plant Biosecurity Strategy (2023 – 2028), the main issues affecting plant biosecurity in their areas, and also to identify the measures local authorities are taking to ensure their plants, as far as possible, are being protected from current and future plant diseases and the encroachment of NNIS.

3 Survey Results

Questions contained within the survey were of a general nature, as at this stage it was felt a baseline was needed to allow more detailed actions to be taken following the results.

Question 1: Are you aware of Defra's Plant Biosecurity Strategy for Great Britain (2023-2028)?

Only 36% stated that they were aware of the strategy. As such, there is clearly a need to increase the level of awareness of this strategy and its aims and advice. APSE has already spoken with Defra and relevant partners to look at ways as to how the strategy can be more widely promoted and its advice and information acted upon.

Question 2: Does your service currently consider plant biosecurity as an issue regarding its operational practices?

Encouragingly 58% of respondents said plant biosecurity was something which was considered in their service's operational practices, however, this did mean that almost half of respondents recorded said that they were either, not sure (28%) or it was not (14%). Considering the level of challenges faced in this area there is evidently a great deal of work for Government and its partners to do in order to raise the profile of the need to adopt, understand and effectively implement sustainable plant biosecurity measures.

Question 3: What level of understanding would you say you have on biosecurity relating to plants?

25% recorded that they felt they had a good understanding of plant biosecurity, whilst 66% stated they had some knowledge, and the remaining 9% said they had no knowledge of plant biosecurity and what it entails. Unfortunately, those who stated that they had '*some knowledge*' does not allow for a detailed understanding of the actual level of understanding, but it would be reasonable to surmise that these respondents felt they needed a better understanding of plant biosecurity and its relevance to their job role.

Question 4: Do you currently have an issue relating to NNIS or disease and/or pests in your parks and greenspaces?

Whilst the survey gave respondents a series of options to choose from e.g. Ash dieback, Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam, Giant Hogweed, Oak Processionary moth, etc. it was clear from the results, that all of these options were common to many of the respondents and few replied that they did not have problems with all of these issues, although Ash dieback, Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam and Giant Hogweed were the most common diseases /NNIS recorded.,

What these returns also show, are that these diseases/NNIS are prevalent, and to be able to truly address these problems effectively and sustainably, then the levels of understanding and implementation of plant biosecurity measures must be uniform. To allow this to happen, there needs to be the same levels of understanding across the UK as to the importance of plant biosecurity measures.

Question 5: Have you reduced the amount of herbicides and pesticides you use? If so by what percentage (approximate figures).

Approximately 62% of respondents stated that they had reduced the levels of pesticides and herbicides they use, ranging from 0-10% to over 50% reductions.

The point of this question was not only to identify the number of local authorities which had begun to take steps to reduce the use of chemical methods regarding plant disease and NNIS management, but importantly whether this decision had had any negative effects i.e. led to increases in the occurrence of plant diseases/NNIS.

Question 6: If you have reduced the levels of herbicides and pesticides have you noticed an increase in any specific types of NNIS, or plant pests/diseases as a result?

Only 10% of respondents indicated that they had seen an increase, whilst most respondents said they had seen little or no increases. Largely driven by the glyphosate debate, such reductions do not appear to be having any real negative impacts i.e. large increases in plant pests and diseases, but it should be remembered, that much of this reduction in chemical use has been driven by public demand and a greater environmental awareness regarding the use of chemicals to reduce weeds rather than plant biosecurity.

However, with regards to certain species of NNIS, such as Japanese knotweed, some reported that chemicals were still being used to control its spread.

However, responses to the next question do show that alternative methods other than chemical application, are being used to control NNIS.

Question 7: What actions have been taken to remove NNIS?

Interestingly almost a third of respondents replied that they were using manual methods to remove NNIS and the use of suitably trained volunteers was a common part of this process. Under 10% stated that they were using chemical methods as their main option, whilst a further 28% were handing the problem over to suitably qualified specialist contractors to deal with. These approaches although clearly different were often being used in tandem, perhaps reflecting the need of localised approaches depending on how and where the NNIS is occurring.

Worryingly 14% of respondents said that they lacked funding to address instances of NNIS, and whilst this doesn't suggest total abdication of dealing with NNIS, it does suggest that some areas are not being dealt with, which has the potential to impact on neighbouring authorities who may be taking a more proactive approach.

Question 8: Do you take any specific actions to address the issue of plant biosecurity?

The responses received to this question varied, although the most common was the sourcing of plants locally and from reputable nurseries. Other actions included, improving the levels of hygiene in council nurseries, monitoring the presence of NNIS/plant diseases, and reporting of NNIS to the relevant bodies. One interesting approach was that plant biosecurity requirements were now written into all contractor specifications. Also localised action plans were being developed where specific NNIS/pests and disease were present rather than including such areas as part of the general grounds maintenance service specifications.

Question 9: Do you have a Plant Biosecurity Strategy or Policy?

The response to this question is perhaps a reflection of the earlier findings on the levels of general awareness of plant biosecurity, in that only 10% stated they had any formal plant biosecurity strategy or policies. However encouragingly 21% did state that such documents were under development. But this still means that over two-thirds of respondents do not have a corporate strategy or policy on plant biosecurity, clearly an area which needs urgently addressing.

Question 10: Do you provide training courses on plant biosecurity to operational staff, or other relevant staff?

31% of respondents stated that they did provide training, but again as with formal policies on plant biosecurity, over two-thirds do not provide any form of training or awareness raising of the importance and need for plant biosecurity.

Examples of the training was in the inclusion of plant biosecurity in health and safety training regards NNIS, referring staff to online courses or information pages and regular updates to staff on plant pests and diseases.

4 APSE comment

The finding of the survey showed that there is some recognition of the importance of adopting plant biosecurity measures, but equally, there does seem to be large gaps across local authorities within the UK with regards to: uniformity of knowledge, application of plant biosecurity measures and ongoing training concerning the current and future challenges faces the UK regarding plant biosecurity.

Many respondents in comments received in the survey, suggested that further information is needed to help staff understand and deal with plant biosecurity, in fact a large proportion of respondents stated that seminars and training would be helpful if it were made available.

Clearly not all councils are giving the same levels of importance regarding plant biosecurity as others. So is this a problem?

Defra has stated in the Plant Biosecurity Strategy for Great Britain (2023-2028) that plants are a crucially important part of our economy, from agricultural and horticultural production to timber, medicines and wider co-benefits including for public wellbeing. The health of our plants and plant products is therefore of vital importance but is increasingly under threat from pests and diseases. More recently the wider importance of plant biosecurity to address climate change and biodiversity loss has also been recognised in that the health of our forests and plants will be integral, as a nature-based solution for our environmental recovery and the transition to a green and sustainable future.

As stated earlier in this briefing note, plant biosecurity is increasingly recognised not just as an important tool in the fight against climate change, but also in reducing poverty and hunger and boosting economic development and as such we all have a collective responsibility to protect plant health. Plant Biosecurity and its adoption is therefore critical for local authorities.

Therefore to help local authorities with understanding the issues around plant biosecurity and in recognition of comments received in the recent survey on plant biosecurity, APSE is holding an online seminar around the whole issue of plant biosecurity: what it means, the pests and invasive species we are currently dealing with, and may have to deal with in the future and most importantly, how by adopting plant biosecurity measures, we can deliver solutions to some of these problems and create healthy and sustainable plants and trees across the UK, both now and in the future.

The seminar will hear from nationally recognised experts on plant biosecurity, including organisations such as Defra, the Animal and Plant Health Agency, the Tree Council, Forestry Commission, Plant Healthy and the Invasive Non-Native Species Secretariat. There will also be presentations from those local authorities who have begun to develop specific policies and actions relating to plant biosecurity.

This seminar will be a critical learning opportunity for all those who are involved in caring for plants and greenspaces, including elected members, planners, parks professionals, ecology and

biodiversity officers, climate change officers, economic development officers and indeed any external stakeholders and community groups and volunteers who are involved in greenspaces and their management.

[Details of the seminar which will be held on Thursday 21 March 2024 can be found here together with a booking link.](#)

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