



City and County of Swansea

Minutes of the **Scrutiny Performance Panel - Natural Environment**

Remotely via Microsoft Teams

Thursday, 26 August 2021 at 2.00 pm

Present: Councillor P K Jones (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)
E W Fitzgerald
M H Jones
B J Rowlands

Councillor(s)
S J Gallagher
H Lawson
W G Thomas

Councillor(s)
O G James
H M Morris

Other Attendees

Mark Thomas	Cabinet Member – Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management
Emily Davies	Scrutiny Officer
Jeremy Davies	Group Leader Parks and Cleansing
Chris Howell	Head of Waste, Parks and Cleansing
Deborah Hill	Nature Conservation Team Leader

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): J A Hale, I E Mann, C Richards, M Sherwood and L J Tyler-Lloyd

52 Disclosures of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

In accordance with the Code of Conduct adopted by the City and County of Swansea, no interests were declared.

53 Prohibition of Whipped Votes and Declaration of Party Whips

In accordance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, no declarations of Whipped Votes or Party Whips were declared.

54 Minutes of Previous Meeting(s)

The minutes of the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel meeting, held on 29 June 2021, were agreed as an accurate record.

55 Public Questions

There were no public questions.

56 Ash Dieback

The Panel received an update from Cllr Mark Thomas, Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management and Jeremy Davies, Group Leader Parks and Cleansing.

Discussion focussed on:

- Context and outline of Ash Dieback disease. The disease affects Ash trees by blocking the water transport systems. If they are not dealt with, trees are at risk of collapsing, presenting an immediate danger to the surrounding area.
- Wider regional and UK issues. This is a significant, complex and expensive problem. Europe-wide problem and 90% of Ash trees are expected to be effected.
- Cabinet and Councillors received briefings in May 2019, the council website now has an FAQ section.
- Considered and recorded as a corporate risk - this has a significant impact on the environment, but also significant financial impacts to bear, surveying all trees on all council land.
- The Parks Department Tree Services Unit has prioritised category 3 and 4 trees in its highest level of response. This does affect the capacity to carry out less urgent and some income related arboriculture works.
- Difficulty in tackling category 3 and 4 trees as logistically challenging and time consuming.
- Public highways, parks and cemeteries have been prioritised in terms of removal of dangerous trees.
- The wood from felled trees that is in a re-usable condition is recovered for the Waste Wood Re-Use Project and utilised to manufacture products, such as benches, which are then installed in Swansea's parks.
- Replacement of felled trees remains a challenge. In some cases, the replanting of trees may not be necessary, allowing nature to take over naturally.
- Direct financial costs in the region of £150,000 per year. Indirect cost to other works being unavoidably side-lined.
- Contractors are used to fell when large numbers of trees occupy a single location and generally adjacent to the highway.
- Funding has been secured from Welsh Government to purchase machinery and equipment.
- Members queried the replanting strategies being used and what trees are to replace the felled Ash. Officers explained that any new Ash trees are likely to be affected by the disease, whatever their age.
- Early indicators show 5-10% of trees may have a genetic resistance. Annual surveys completed to confirm condition of trees.
- Single Ash trees felled are not necessarily replanted at the location felled, but nature is allowed to replace the areas naturally with flora and fauna.
- Wider Green Infrastructure strategy – trees planted are of native and mixed species, to ensure any new diseases will not affect all.
- Biodiversity – a number of species are wholly dependent on Ash. Localised guidance available to deal with this. Circa 50 species of trees to provide hosts for lichen dependant on Ash.

- Regarding regeneration of saplings, they will be same genetic stock, although will provide an immediate habitat for some species. Leaving stumps may also provide habitat for lichen.
- Invasive species of sycamore may take over if not managed.
- Members queried what the Council has done to ensure awareness of this topic amongst private landowners. Officers explained that extensive communication and publication had been undertaken.
- Members queried the extent of research being done into genetic resistance. Officers are involved in wider projects to provide samples for wider research across the UK. National research projects are ongoing.
- Members raised queries of signage and permanent information boards in areas where a larger percentage of woodland is affected. Officers explained that signage is provided before and during felling, also leaving bio-degradable signs following completion of larger scale work. Permanent signs were suggested.
- Officers undertook to better inform members of planned felling in wards.
- Members suggested a programme of tree sponsorship, allowing members of the public to engage with replanting.

The Panel considered the information provided, asked questions, and gave views on the way forward. The Chair thanked all for their input.

AGREED that the Panel write to the Cabinet Members with its views and recommendations.

57 Work Plan 2021-22

58 Letters

The Panel received the correspondence sent following the meeting of the Panel held on 29 June 2021.

The meeting ended at 2.55 pm



To:
Councillor Mark Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment
Enhancement and Infrastructure
Management

Please ask for:
Gofynnwch am:

Direct Line:
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Overview & Scrutiny

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16th September 2021

BY EMAIL

Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management. The letter concerns the meeting held on 26 August 2021 and the updates received regarding Ash Dieback.

Dear Councillor Thomas,

On 26 August 2021 the Panel met to discuss the Council management of Ash Dieback. The Panel were grateful to all who attended to provide information and answer questions. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the observations of the Panel.

Ash Dieback

Officers provided information outlining and highlighting the nature of Ash Dieback. We heard that this disease affects Ash trees by blocking the water transport systems, and, if not dealt with, trees are at risk of collapsing, presenting an immediate danger to the surrounding area.

You explained to us that this is a wider regional and UK issue posing a significant, complex and expensive problem, adversely affecting 90% of Ash trees.

Council Management

You explained to Panel Members that the Council has considered and recorded this issue as a corporate risk – having significant impact on the environment, but also significant financial impacts to bear. We heard that Cabinet and Councillors received briefings in May 2019, and also that the Council website now has an FAQ section to promote information and share resources.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

SWANSEA COUNCIL / CYNGOR ABERTAWE

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Officers explained that in managing this issue, the Parks Department Tree Services Unit has prioritised category 3 and 4 trees as the highest level of response. The Panel understood that there is some difficulty in tackling category 3 and 4 trees as the poor condition of such trees means operations are logistically challenging and time consuming. You explained to us that this does hinder the capacity to carry out less urgent work as well as some income-generating arboricultural work.

Officers assured us that public highways, parks and cemeteries have been prioritised in terms of removal of dangerous trees, highlighting the importance of public safety. Officers explained that external contractors are used where large numbers of trees occupy a single location and are generally adjacent to the highway.

We heard that funding has been secured from the Welsh Government to purchase machinery and equipment. You explained that some wood from felled trees is able to be recovered for the Waste Wood Re-Use Project, and utilised to manufacture products, such as benches, which can then be installed around Swansea's parks and open spaces.

The Panel queried what measures the Council has taken to ensure awareness of this disease amongst private landowners. Officers explained that extensive communication and publication had been undertaken, in line with the guidance under The Ash Dieback Action Plan [Toolkit](#), as prepared by The Tree Council.

Members raised queries surrounding lack of signage and permanent information boards in areas where a larger percentage of woodland is affected. Officers explained that signage is provided before and during felling, leaving bio-degradable signs following completion of larger scale work. Members suggested more permanent signage after works are completed to better inform the public about Ash Dieback management. Officers took this suggestion on board and undertook to provide better signs and information boards where applicable.

Panel Members questioned the availability of information regarding planned felling. Officers undertook to inform individual ward members of approaching felling projects in applicable areas.

Panel Members also suggested a programme of tree sponsorship, allowing members of the public to engage with the re-planting programme. Officers undertook to look into this idea and acknowledged this could provide positive outcomes.

Biodiversity

Members queried the replanting strategies being utilised and the types of trees being used to replace the felled Ash. Officers explained that replacement of felled trees remains a challenge and, in some cases, the replanting of trees may not be necessary. We heard that single Ash trees felled are not necessarily replanted at the location felled, but nature is allowed to replace the areas naturally with flora and fauna.

It was pleasing to hear that under the wider Green Infrastructure strategy, trees planted are of both native and mixed species, to ensure any new diseases will not affect all trees.

The Panel were interested to hear about early research, indicating that between 5-10% of trees may have a genetic resistance to Ash Dieback disease. Officers explained that annual surveys are completed by the Council to confirm and review the on-going condition of trees on council-owned land, thereby avoiding the need to fell trees if recovery is at all possible.

Members queried the extent of research being done into this possible genetic resistance. Officers explained that some of the Swansea Council team are involved in wider national projects to provide samples for broader research across the UK.

Officers highlighted other aspects of general biodiversity issues, such as some species which are wholly dependent on Ash trees. We heard that circa 50 species of trees can provide alternative hosts for lichen dependant on Ash, and that there is localised guidance available to deal with this issue.

Officers also explained that leaving Ash tree stumps may provide an immediate habitat for lichen to thrive. It was pleasing to hear that the Council's Tree management team are working so closely with the Nature Conservation team to manage this issue.

Your response

We are interested in any thoughts you may have on the contents of this letter but, in this instance, we require no formal written response.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Peter Jones

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

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