



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

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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.

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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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