



## Report of the Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management

Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel – 26 August 2021

### Ash Dieback

<b>Purpose:</b>	To brief/update the Panel on Swansea Councils' response to Ash Dieback
<b>Content:</b>	A briefing/update on progress and overview of future aims
<b>Councillors are being asked to:</b>	Consider the information provided and give views
<b>Lead Councillor:</b>	Councillor Mark Thomas, Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management
<b>Lead Officer &amp; Report Author:</b>	Jeremy Davies, Group Leader Parks & Cleansing

#### 1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Council is responsible for all trees on its land and ensuring the safety of the public highway that may be affected by trees on land not owned by the Council.
- 1.2 Ash dieback, also known as Chalara dieback of ash, is a fungal disease that affects all species of ash trees (*Fraxinus*). The disease has spread west across the country and is now affecting almost all parts of Wales. The disease affects ash trees by blocking the water transport systems, causing leaf loss, lesions in the wood and on the bark. This leads to the dieback of the crown of the tree. Trees become brittle over time with branches breaking away from the main body of the tree. If they are not dealt with, trees are at risk of collapsing, presenting an immediate danger to the surrounding area.
- 1.3 Ash dieback is a Europe-wide problem and 90% of ash trees are expected to die from it. It is a significant, complex and expensive problem for landowners and councils across the UK who have ash trees on their land. Trees affected by the disease are categorised in severity using a scale of 1 to 4, 4 being the most severe.
- 1.4 Some rural councils in England think as many as 500,000 ash trees on their land have been affected by ash dieback. In Swansea, we have surveyed approximately

50% of the tree stock and identified around 3000 ash trees that need removal because of the disease, though the final figure is expected to be much higher.

## **2. Strategic Response**

2.1 Ash dieback is recorded as a corporate risk.

2.2 We convened an Ash Dieback Coordination group comprising representatives of all directorates across the authority; the group is following the Tree Councils Toolkit focusing on communications, immediate actions in relation to category 3&4 trees, ongoing identification, felling and recovery.

2.3 Cabinet and Councillors received briefings in May 2019, the council website has an FAQ section and we have communicated press releases to local media.

<https://www.swansea.gov.uk/ashdieback>

2.4 Highways Inspectors have been trained to identify classes of dieback and issue notices to landowners.

2.5 We are focusing on Council owned land and private landowners where their ash trees may encroach the highways.

## **3 Operational Response**

3.1 The Parks Departments' Tree Services Unit has prioritised category 3&4 trees in its highest level of response. This does affect the capacity to carry out less urgent and some income related arboricultural works.

3.2 There are approximately 47,000 individual trees of varying species on Council land identified through surveys and estimated a further 50k+ in un-surveyed woodlands. Ash tree surveys have yielded the following results to date:

- General council land (e.g. Parks, cemeteries, highways): 1584 ash trees approximately 35% of which are category 3&4 requiring immediate response
- Housing land: 798 ash trees approximately 20% of which are category 3&4 requiring immediate response
- Schools (education land): 450 ash trees approximately 20% of which are category 3&4 requiring immediate response

3.3 Numbers of ash trees felled in Swansea:

- 2018/19: Approximately 300 (prior to Ash dieback action plan surveying)
- 2019/20: 630 mostly category 4 small, medium and large trees
- 2020/21: 186 mostly category 4 medium and large trees
- 2021/22: 72 (to date) category 3 and 4 medium and mostly large trees

Numbers felled are not to be considered a representation of the progress or effectiveness of controlling the disease; they vary for numerous reasons such as size, location and accessibility.

3.4 The Highways department is using arboricultural contractors to deal with larger groups of ash adjacent to the highway.

3.5 We are confident that we are keeping up with the removal of any ash trees considered dangerous

#### **4 Recovery Strategy**

4.1 As the widespread impacts of ash dieback start to take their toll, in addition to short-term tactics that deal with ash loss, it will be vital to consider longer-term recovery planning and how to safeguard Swansea's' precious treescapes for generations to come. We will need resilient planting and visionary thinking, as well as Action Plans to deal with the immediate threats to each area.

4.2 The Tree Council Ash Dieback Toolkit specifically refers to key principles for replacing lost ash trees and these should be considered in the forthcoming Council tree planting/afforestation strategy and plans to be developed as part of the climate change response.

4.3 The number of new trees planted on council land by the Parks Service funded by various schemes, Members and grants was:

- 2018/19: 144
- 2019/20: 444
- 2020/21: 232

It is of note that these are the trees planted directly by Parks, there are many others planted by other departments or areas of the Council.

#### **5 Finance Implications**

5.1 All works are currently resourced from existing revenue budgets.

5.2 Costs to date are approximately:

- 2018/19: Parks £60k
- 2019/20: Parks £150k
- 2020/21: Parks £90k Highways £70k

5.3 Annual shortfall is estimated at £150k

5.4 Welsh Government have funded the purchase of an elevated platform (£100k), watering infrastructure for storing trees at Clyne nursery (£7k), and 350no. trees (£36k) for planting out.

#### **6 Future challenges & opportunities**

6.1 The main challenges for the service in relation to this report are:

- The need to ensure delivery of the action plan against a backdrop of resource pressures.

- Increasing demand and expectations from stakeholders in terms of non-urgent tree maintenance.
- Increasing demand and expectations from stakeholders in terms of tree planting and early life maintenance against a backdrop of resource pressures.

6.2 The Authority will continue to review other options and opportunities for grants and funding as they become available.

6.3 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 as an example.

## **7. Summary**

7.1 According to DEFRA, it is estimated that there are 125 million ash trees in woodlands and between 27-60 million ash trees outside of woodlands in the UK, plus potentially 2 billion saplings and seedlings in woodlands and non-woodland situations. Only nine years after its official identification in the UK, ash dieback has already started having significant impacts on the country's treescape. Although it is still too early to understand whether any trees will prove to be resistant to the fungus, the stark reality is that over 90% of ash trees across the UK are likely to be infected in the years to come.

7.2 This year has been reasonably good for the ash species in Swansea. Many species of trees were badly wind burnt during the two storms near the end of April but ash trees had not come into leaf at this point so were spared the damage.

7.3 Die off this year has slowed and many trees that would have been category 3 last year look like category 2 this year. Unfortunately, this does not indicate they are going to recover completely but it is supporting the evidence that the species has some genetic resistance/tolerance to the disease at some level and also that climate will affect the rate of disease spread by affecting spore levels from the fungi growing on the previous year's fallen leaf litter. It also adds to the evidence that this is a longer, more drawn out process, for dealing with the trees than originally envisaged. Depending on several external factors, the general health of the ash population will ebb and flow from good years to bad years. Our own arboricultural Officers believe the disease will become endemic once all the low tolerance trees are removed and much like Dutch elm disease it will continue to affect trees at various points into the future.

7.4 Our aim should be to manage the disease over a longer period without the need to fell every tree showing symptoms of the disease. Continual monitoring, categorisation and careful tree surgery/removal are still considered the best way to deal with the disease while caring for the environment at the same time.

## **8. Legal implications**

8.1 The primary legislation for the process adjacent to the highway is: The Highways Act 1980.

8.2 The Authority does not have a Tree Policy at present therefore all works related to ash dieback are in accordance with arboricultural best practice and utilising the resources on offer from The Tree Council, APSE and other local authorities.

## **9. Equality & Engagement Implications**

9.1 Engagement with the wider public sector, Welsh government and the WLGA is required to monitor any changes in legislation or best practice guidance.

**Background papers:** *None*

### **Appendices:**

Appendix A: The Tree Council: Ash Dieback Toolkit