

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILCABINET REPORT25th JANUARY 2024ASH DIEBACK DISEASE ACTION PLAN**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. To provide Cabinet with an update on the Council's current approach to managing Ash Dieback and consider proposals for future management of the issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Cabinet is recommended to:
- i. Note the current approach to managing Ash Dieback and the Interim Action Plan;
 - ii. Note the progress to date in tackling the disease;
 - iii. Note the significant budget pressure that this represents;
 - iv. Approve the undertaking of an Ash Dieback Disease Action Plan;
 - v. Consider the interim costs (£220,000) set out in Appendix A within the upcoming budget setting process; and,
 - vi. Note that a Policy for dealing with trees in private ownership will be part of the Ash Dieback Disease Action Plan which will need future Council approval.

BACKGROUND

3. Ash Dieback is a significant tree disease affecting all UK Councils that needs to be managed through pro-active intervention. Advanced stage diseased trees are at high risk of collapse and injuring people or damaging property. The disease is caused and transmitted by a wind-borne fungal spore and evidence from Europe suggests it will lead to the decline and death of 50%-75% of ash trees in Scotland within the next 20 years.

4. The Council has a duty under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 and Health and Safety legislation to protect members of the public from falling trees or branches on council-owned land and could be held liable for injury or damage caused therein. This is particularly relevant once the Council has identified potentially dangerous trees through surveys.

5. The disease affects trees of all ages. Young trees can be killed in one season and older trees tend to succumb after several seasons of infection. Trees are removed based on risk and progression of the disease. There are four categories used in managing Ash Dieback:

- Stage 1 - minor traces of disease (0-25% dieback).
- Stage 2 - visible signs of disease such as leaf darkening and reduced crown density (25-50% dieback).
- Stage 3 – Significant signs of disease and foliage becomes sparse (50-75% dieback).
- Stage 4 – Extremely sparse foliage, poor crown density and large dead branches may be present (75-100% dieback).

At Stages 3 and 4, the trees are in terminal decline, and as the disease makes the trunk brittle, tree surgeons are no longer able to climb the tree. A cherry-picker or scaffolding are normally required to fell the tree. Expert assessment of the stage of decline is key to informing the felling method.

6. It is estimated that there are approximately 4000 trees across the council estate all at various stages of disease. The death of a significant number of trees has an environmental impact. To mitigate this, the Council should aim to replace each tree that is felled as a minimum, although acknowledged that it will not always be in the same place.

7. If nothing is done to address Ash Dieback the consequences can be severe, both for individual ash trees and the ecosystems they are part of, and infected ash trees will continue to die. As the disease progresses, more and more ash trees will succumb to it, leading to a substantial loss of this tree species in affected areas.

8. To mitigate these negative effects, management of Ash Dieback through measures such as monitoring, removing infected trees, promoting biodiversity, and researching or introducing resistant tree varieties is recommended. Early intervention is crucial to limit the spread and damage caused by this disease.

REPORT

10. Currently, the assessment of trees and coordination of tree felling is being managed by each of the services who manage land for the Council. Neighbourhood Services manage parks and open spaces; Education manage the schools' estate; Housing Services manage the social housing stock; and Roads & Transportation manage roads, paths and verges. Each Service is managing the costs of Ash Dieback within their respective existing budgets for schools, roads, housing, etc. The costs associated with managing the disease are forecast to be significant over time.

11. The assessment and felling of trees is supported by an arboricultural contractor through a framework agreement. Most Services have now undertaken initial surveys to assess the extent of Ash Dieback within their land holdings, and the stage of the disease which trees are currently suffering.

12. An annual budget of £100,000 is set within the Neighbourhood Services budget for woodland management within parks. In recent years, this has been used to control Ash Dieback disease at the expense of other woodland management activities such as other diseases, preventative felling and storm damage. Other impacted Services, i.e. Education, Housing and Roads do not have any designated budget to manage diseased trees and have absorbed any related costs to date within existing budgets. Actions taken by impacted Services varies depending on the severity of disease, the risk the trees' locations poses to the public and budget constraints

13. The table below summarises what has been done to date by each Service.

Service	Survey completed to identify extent of disease?	Total no. of trees identified with Ash Dieback Disease	No. of trees felled to date
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Neighbourhood Services	Yes	899 in total Stage 1 – 59 Stage 2 – 783 Stage 3 – 55 Stage 4 – 2	499
Education	Yes	359 identified as stage 3 or 4 and will require removal. 55 trees identified at RED immediate removal stage. Further 1500 trees were assessed and almost all were found to have traces of the disease – so further felling will be required in future.	62
Housing Services	In process of identifying funds to undertake survey.	Unknown	None
Roads & Transportation	Yes	872 in total (many on private land but posing a risk to adjacent roads). 66 trees identified as RED immediate removal stage.	11

14. As noted in the table above, some progress has been made in assessing, felling and tree re-planting. Neighbourhood Services replace felled trees, though not necessarily in the same location, but this is not agreed across all the Services involved. It should also be noted that trees, unless in an extremely dangerous condition, are normally only taken down between the beginning of September and the end of March to avoid the bird nesting season.

15. There has been significant interest from some communities where a large number of ash trees have been felled. Between now and the end of March 2024 the Council will plant 10,000 mixed native saplings on sites across the council area, fully funded by the Scottish Government Nature Restoration Fund, which will help mitigate the effects of large-scale tree removal through the disease.

16. Based on completed surveys to date, well over 3,000 trees have been identified with the disease, with an estimate of a further 1000 on Council Housing land that will potentially be affected.

17. Given the risks outlined in above, and the potential scale of works required, it is considered prudent to take a consistent approach across Council Services in terms of surveys, prioritisation of treatment and remediation. It is proposed that an Action Plan for treating Ash Dieback disease should be put in place and specific milestones set out over the next 5-8 years to combat the disease and mitigate the associated risks to the Council. Neighbourhood Services will lead on the creation of the Plan.

18. Roadside trees growing within the adopted public road boundary in verges or footways may often be on land not owned by the Council. The Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 gives the

Council as Roads Authority the power to carry out work to the trees within the adopted road boundary at the Council's own expense or, if there is a danger of the tree falling, then the Council can serve Notice on the owner to carry out works within 28 days or do the work themselves and recover costs from the owner. It should be noted however that the experience of English Local Authorities has been that only a small percentage of the costs are ever recovered. Surveys of the road network have been carried out and these have established that there are a total of 1780 ash trees located on or close to our public road network.

19. Housing Services is likely to find Ash Dieback disease in mixed tenure estates and may require owner occupiers to partially fund the felling of the trees. There is, however, likely to be significant legal and administrative recourse required for this task and additional funding may be required.

FINANCE AND EFFICIENCY

20. There has been no specific budget allocation for managing Ash Dieback, with costs being covered by Services from their existing budgets. Whilst most of the surveys are either underway or planned, the surveys and the number of trees needing felled creates an additional cost burden for Services.

21. Costs related to Ash Dieback management are significant. It is difficult to estimate costs for identified future felling works as it will be dependent on tree size, location and quantity, how the disease has progressed, material disposal and traffic management fees (in cases where trees are on road verges). Using an average of £1,000 per tree (without traffic management) for approximately 4,000 trees yet to be felled, would result in an estimated cost of £4 million.

22. It is also recommended that surveys are undertaken every two years and costs would also be incurred for this work. Based on surveys undertaken to date, this could require a further £100,000 of survey work, every two years. As an example, Glasgow City Council has recently estimated costs of between £25-£38M to deal with approximately 250,000 diseased trees.

23. Funding this level of costs from other budget lines is likely to impact on the outcomes and targets associated with those budgets including improvements to the road network. Given the scale and significance of the challenge, consideration is requested to establishing interim funding as part of this year's budget settlement of £220,000 to mitigate the financial pressure that it is creating.

24. Prioritisation and spend from an Ash Dieback disease would be supported with the development of an Ash Dieback Disease Action Plan. Furthermore, it is proposed as part of that action plan that an annual assessment of the needs of each Service is undertaken, tendered as a combined bid to achieve best value, and managed within each Service by a nominated individual. Neighbourhood Services will lead on the development of the Action Plan, appointment of the contractor and management of the fund.

CONSULTATION AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING

25. Neighbourhood Services, Education, Housing, and Roads collaborated in preparing this report.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSALS

26. There are no implications related to this paper in terms of staffing, property, legal, IT and subsidy-control. A Climate Change Impact Assessment was completed for this report and was found to have a small negative effect on Community climate impacts.

CONCLUSIONS

27. The Council has taken steps to assess and fell trees identified as being significantly affected by Ash Dieback, although Services involved are at different stages in their plans to tackle the disease.

28. Management of Ash Dieback represents a significant cost burden and risk to the Council. Having identified the number of trees affected and the stages of disease prevalent, the Council must consider necessary actions to deal with the issue within its legal obligation as a significant landholder.

29. Failure to deal with trees that have been identified in the latter stages of Ash Dieback disease could have significant health and safety implications for the Council and could lead to reputational damage or legal action.

30. It is more cost effective to deal with trees in early stages of the disease through pruning or topping, rather than having to fell in latter stages. There are environmental and biodiversity aspects to the felling of so many trees and a planned approach on the consequences of that, including mitigation measures, would be considered as part of any action plan.

31. The ability to recover costs from private landholders should be considered as part of the Ash Dieback Disease Action Plan and an agreed Policy confirmed through a Council decision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

32. Cabinet is recommended to:

- i. Note the current approach to managing Ash Dieback and the Interim Action Plan;
- ii. Note the progress to date in tackling the disease;
- iii. Note the significant budget pressure that this represents;
- iv. Approve the undertaking of an Ash Dieback Disease Action Plan;
- v. Consider the interim costs (£221,000) set out in Appendix A within the upcoming budget setting process; and,
- vi. Note that a Policy for dealing with trees in private ownership will be part of the Ash Dieback Disease Action Plan which will need future Council approval.

Report Author: andrew.corry@eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk

Convener for Environment – Councillor Danny Devlin
January 2024

Appendix A

Interim Action Plan

Based on an assessment of Ash Dieback Surveys undertaken by our Framework Arboricultural contractors, a number of high-risk trees (RED Rated) have been identified as follows:

Service	RED Rated Trees	Approx Cost	Budget Available
Neighbourhood Services	57	£57,000	Partially yes - £40,000 set aside from Woodland Management Budget. £17,000 requested.
Education	55	£55,000	No
Roads	66	£99,000 (inc Traffic Management)	No
Housing	Unknown	£50,000 for survey	No

Total costs outwith normal budgets to be considered for expenditure within 2024/25 would be approximately £220,000.

If funding was approved the majority of the work will be undertaken from September 2024 onwards, unless trees are in a significantly dangerous stage of the disease.

To achieve best value, a Tender Exercise exclusively for Ash Dieback Disease treatment will be undertaken on behalf of all services by Neighbourhood Services. Other services will be able to draw down from this framework and access funding support to support the delivery of the Ash Dieback Action Plan.

Neighbourhood Services will manage the budget, oversee the development of the action plan and provide technical expertise to other services on request.

An Ash Dieback Disease Control Group will be set up with immediate effect, led by the Neighbourhood Services Operations Manager to commence and eventually produce an Ash Dieback Disease Action Plan on behalf of the Council. This will be produced prior to the commencement of 2025/26 financial year and will feed into the budgetary process.