

Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting	Wednesday 12 th May 2021
Report Subject	Ash Dieback Update
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Countryside
Report Author	Andrew Farrow Chief Officer (Planning, Environment and Economy)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report details how Flintshire County Council has confronted ash dieback in 2020/21 in line with the *2019 Ash Dieback Action Plan* (Presented to Informal Cabinet 10th September 2019) and provides an update on the work undertaken to mitigate the risks associated with the disease following the survey and inspection of affected trees adjacent to highways over the summer 2020.

The 2019 Ash Dieback Action Plan identified and proposed ways in which to manage the risk and costs associated to ash dieback, highlighting where infected ash trees have an increased risk to public safety and the financial cost incurred to the Council. The areas of risk identified are as follows: trees on adopted highway land; trees growing on education land; trees growing on public open spaces; housing, cemeteries, industrial estates, countryside parks and public rights of ways

To moderate and manage the risk associated to ash dieback, a series of surveys have been undertaken to assess the distribution and disease classification of roadside ash trees for priority and secondary roads. A programme of tree removal has begun on Flintshire owned trees and landowners with infected trees have been contacted to highlight the presence of ash dieback in their trees, with an expectation that they will manage their own trees to mitigate the risks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Members note the content of this update and support the officers in their ongoing work associated with Ash Dieback.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE ASH DIEBACK UPDATE
1.01	Common ash (<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>) is a native ash tree found in nearly every part of the UK. Ash is typically found in hedgerows, highway verges and un-grazed land and a wide variety of urban spaces including, open spaces, semi-urban woodlands, parks, private gardens, schools and cemeteries. It is prolific at self-seeding on unmaintained land and has been extensively planted in the past by local authorities, private landowners, landscape architects and developers.
1.02	Ash dieback (<i>Hymenoscyphus fraxineus</i>) is a fungal pathogen that affects the UK's native ash trees. The disease arrived in Europe from Asia in the 1990s and spread rapidly on the continent. The disease was first recorded in Britain in 2012.
1.03	Ash dieback infects a tree via airborne spores produced by the fungus mushroom which grow on last year's leaves decaying on the ground. In favourable conditions many millions of spores are produced between during June to September on the fallen dead leaves of a single tree.
1.04	Symptoms of the disease are wilting and subsequent blackening of the leaves which usually hang dead on the twig. Infection extends into branches and stems initially causing a lens shaped lesion around the dead side shoot.
1.06	The Disease in Flintshire Ash dieback was first confirmed in Flintshire on the A55 at Northop by Forestry Commission plant health staff in 2015. In 2016 it was found in a woodland near Rhydymwyn on ash that had been cut down underneath overhead power cables.
1.07	It is evident that since being initially recorded ash dieback is now endemic in the county. It is widely distributed along the Alyn and Wheeler river valleys, the Dee coastline, Greenfield Valley and A55 trunk road. Ash is widely distributed and one of the most abundant trees species especially where the soil is calcareous over the limestone geology. It is estimated that Flintshire has approximately 24,000 ash trees growing outside the woodland environment adjacent to the highway.
1.08	Responding to the disease Flintshire County Council are focusing on the ash trees that pose the most risk to the public, whether these trees are growing on Council or privately owned land. The Council has published an Ash Dieback Action Plan which can be found on the Council's web pages here:- https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/LeisureAndTourism/Countryside-and-Coast/Ash-Dieback.aspx

1.09	The Authority sought advice from Counsel on our approach and the plan was found to be appropriate and reasonable. Officers are working with colleagues across North Wales and with the Trunk Road Agency, to share information and good practice and have set up an internal officer working group to oversee the response to the disease.
1.10	<p>Throughout 2020 a number of county-wide ash tree surveys have been undertaken by the Local Authority to identify and classify infected ash trees growing adjacent to Flintshire's roads.</p> <p>These surveys have verified the position, size and characteristics of the roadside ash trees/groups of ash trees, ownership and the disease infection classification (1 to 4, with 4 being the "most serious"). This information has now been recorded on a GIS program and will aid officers with the management of Flintshire County Council's infected ash trees and prompt officers (under Section 154 of the Highways Act) to notify private landowners to make safe their diseased roadside ash trees.</p>
1.11	To simplify the surveying process into manageable sizes, the highways network was subdivided into roads which were deemed to be of a High Priority roads (Blue), Secondary Priority roads (Yellow) and Other roads (left blank). Priority appointment level being speed of traffic, volume of traffic and the general character of the traffic.
1.12	<p>Surveying was carried out initially by utilising a drive-by video recording to capture high-definition images of the trees growing adjacent to Priority and Secondary roads.</p> <p>Successive annual video surveys will be used to compare the rate of change in the level of the disease in roadside ash trees. Information obtained from these video surveys will also be instrumental in helping officers with the recovery programme when disease resistant ash trees are identified and/or substitute species replanted back into the depleted treescape.</p>
1.13	Areas showing high incidences of disease and risk, were followed up with a foot survey, designed to determine the ownership (public or private), mark the position of infected ash trees and to record the disease class of infection of ash tree. Survey information being retained within the ARCGIS /Survey123 programs. This information is then used by the administration team to direct land searches (to identify landowners with infected trees), quantify the extent of the work and to officially prompt the authority to instruct landowners to engage with the management of infected ash trees (via a series of official letter). To date 46,606m or 21% of the Priority roads have been surveyed on foot and 5,503m or 6% of the Secondary roads have been surveyed on foot.
1.14	This year's first survey produced baseline data whereby the disease can be tracked more effectively. From early analysis between the dash-cam video survey (May) and the more detailed inspections (September), it is apparent that there is rapid decline between all disease classes, but in

	particular class 3 trees moving to class 4. Individual trees appear to be more resilient to the disease than groups. 2021 surveys will provide an opportunity for comparative analysis to further understand the pace of decline												
1.15	The survey work has shown that the vast majority of infected trees are on private land and although the Authority have powers to deal with these trees, the resourcing of the work will be a challenge and so the approach is to encourage landowners to manage their own responsibilities. It is difficult to predict which landowners will/can take the responsible view and undertake the work themselves and those who will expect the Authority to undertake the work for them. A flow chart of action has been developed around a 4 stage process, starting with an informative and helpful letter being sent to signpost the landowner, to the last stage which service notice on the landowner. This work has been supported from administration and legal teams.												
1.16	Work to deal with infected trees is also problematic. Trees become very brittle as they enter the final stages of the disease and the traditional method of sectional removal by a tree climber is not safe to practice, and so more expensive mechanical methods need to be employed. However, the more mechanised method can be more efficient and lead to reduced road closure times and public disruption.												
1.17	The school tree survey is ongoing and will identify trees with ash dieback and prioritise remedial works for consideration by schools. Countryside sites have been surveyed by the Rangers who will deal with the infected trees as part of their normal winter work programme and greenspaces will be monitored as part of the Tree Inspectors' regular work. These areas are considered in the Ash Dieback Action Plan as a lower priority due to level of risk the trees pose to the public compared with that of a road or school ground.												
1.18	<p>Overview of Activities by the Administration Team</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Activity</th> <th>Number</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Number of Land Searches undertaken (started December 2020)</td> <td>66</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Letters sent to private landowners (started January 2021)</td> <td>37</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ratio of enquiries following contact needing advice.</td> <td>45%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Activity	Number	Number of Land Searches undertaken (started December 2020)	66	Letters sent to private landowners (started January 2021)	37	Ratio of enquiries following contact needing advice.	45%				
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1.20	Next Steps												

	<p>Continue surveying and developing the existing survey techniques.</p> <p>Continue working with our partners and monitor the industry for changes in best practice methods.</p> <p>Develop a better system of fast streaming information from ARCGIS to the administration team, thereby reducing the time spent by surveyors on administration.</p> <p>Look to quantify the extent of unregistered land and then re-evaluate the cost involved with removing infected ash trees from this land.</p> <p>Continue to develop an awareness of ash dieback within Council departments with landholdings and ash trees. Improve the communications system of monitoring and recording public enquirers and responses</p> <p>Continue to prioritise trees posing risk and make safe. Continue to work with landowners to reduce the risk to Highway and Council land</p>
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2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS												
2.01	The programme of work to deal with ash dieback is generating a substantial amount of additional work, and is currently being absorbed into Officer work programmes. However, this is having an impact on existing day to day duties of key officers, in particular the Tree Inspector who reports that the ongoing and regular Highways and Open-space tree inspections are behind schedule, and response times to inspect trees on request from customers and other Portfolios is taking longer. This time delay may lead to an increase in risk in dealing with potentially unsafe trees.												
2.02	Felling of FCC owned trees adjacent to the highway Jan – Mar 21 - £10,775												
2.03	A budget pressure was put forward by Streetscene and an additional £60k for the year 2021/22 has been agreed.												
2.04	<p>Current planned Flintshire highways tree felling costs autumn 2021</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 70%;">Location</th> <th style="width: 30%;">Projected Costs</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Trelawnyd A5151</td> <td style="text-align: right;">£8,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ffrwd</td> <td style="text-align: right;">£4,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Pantymwyn</td> <td style="text-align: right;">£12,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Mold Denbigh Rd</td> <td style="text-align: right;">£6,900</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: right;">Total</td> <td style="text-align: right;">£30,900</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Location	Projected Costs	Trelawnyd A5151	£8,000	Ffrwd	£4,000	Pantymwyn	£12,000	Mold Denbigh Rd	£6,900	Total	£30,900
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2.05	An Overview of the work commitments for delivering Flintshire’s ADB Highways Programme 2020-21 (during the pandemic).												

	Position and when seconded	Commencement	ADB Role	ADB Time Commitment
	Woodland Officer	April 2020	Coordinate/Dev.Programme Develop and Trial Surveys Survey Roadside Trees Liaise with landowners Offer Advice and Training. Research	90%
	Biodiversity Officer	April 2020	IT Support Survey and Technical Advice	5%
	Admins Support (2x officers PT)	Started October 2020	Organise Files Coordinate email response and phone hub. Land searches Organise and send out letters	50%
	Tree Inspector	April 2020	Survey (Ezytreev) Highways link officer. Liaise with landowners	25%
	Relief Ranger (Arborist)	April 2020	Survey Technical and IT support.	90%
	Legal (ADB group members)	Continuous	Legal Advice Enforcement	2% (estimated)
	Others Tree Officer, Highways, GIS, Administration and PR	Contributed as and when required.	Policy Work Highways Safety & Licensing Raising Awareness and PR Research Digitising and Mapping	180% (accumulative time)
2.06				

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	Local members and Town & Community Councils are notified of upcoming works to fell infected ash trees adjacent to the Highway. Landowners are notified when infected ash trees on their property are posing a risk to the Highway with a request for them to make safe.

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
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4.01	Ash dieback is listed as a black risk in the Planning, Environment and Economy risk register.
4.02	The Ash Dieback Action Plan and works undertaken in 2020/21 are making good progress to manage and reduce this risk as detailed in this report.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix One - Ash Dieback Update

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	Contact Officer: Tom Woodall, Access & Natural Environment Manager Telephone: 01352 703902 E-mail: tom.woodall@flintshire.gov.uk

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	