

## ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

<b>Date of Meeting</b>	Tuesday, 15 <sup>th</sup> October 2019
<b>Report Subject</b>	Ash Dieback Action Plan
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Countryside
<b>Report Author</b>	Chief Officer (Planning, Environment and Economy)
<b>Type of Report</b>	Operational

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Ash Dieback Action Plan (the plan) sets out how Flintshire County Council will confront Ash dieback (*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*) which is the most significant tree disease to affect the UK since Dutch Elm disease. Ash dieback has the potential to infect more than two billion UK ash trees and lead to the death of approximately 90% of them.

The plan focuses on making stakeholders aware of the problem and assessing the considerable risks to the council resulting from the disease. It outlines the steps that will need to be undertaken to help mitigate the disease's worst effects. The most immediate threat is the increased risk to public safety as a result of mature ash trees dying and subsequently falling onto the public highway or within urban areas.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Members note the content of the plan and have awareness of the potential impact for the Authority in terms of finance and health & safety risks.
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## REPORT DETAILS

1.00	<b>EXPLAINING THE ASH DIEBACK ACTION PLAN</b>
1.01	<p>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.</p>
1.02	<p>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.</p>
1.03	<p>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.</p>
1.04	<p>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.</p>
1.05	<p>Despite the UK Government prohibiting the movement of Ash for planting in 2012, the disease has developed rapidly and response to the disease has changed from control to mitigating and managing its effects, by way of safety felling. The estimated cost of safety felling in Britain is £4.7 billion including £2.8 billion for a roadside safety felling and £1.6 billion for safety felling in urban areas.</p>
1.06	<p><b>The disease in Flintshire</b> 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.</p>
1.07	<p>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.</p>
1.08	<p><b>Responding to the disease</b> The plan summarises the various responsibilities, risks and required actions of Flintshire County Council and through the four phases of awareness, planning, action and recovery.</p>

1.09	The national media have extensively covered ash dieback in the parts of the country where it was first found but it is not appreciated that it is now in Flintshire. Members of the public will also be concerned about the disease and ash trees that they may own.
1.10	The disease's effects are not currently obvious in Flintshire. There is a need to make the public aware that ash dieback will have a major effect in the county but in several years' time.
1.11	Awareness can be raised by posting on social media, updating the Council's website tree pages and engaging with the media. Landowners will need advice on how to best deal with diseased trees. Officers are working with the Corporate Communications Team to develop an appropriate communication plan.
1.12	Tree officers are working together across North Wales to share information and experiences of dealing with ash dieback. The North and Mid Wales Trunk Road Agency (NWTRA), Network Rail, Transport for Wales and utility companies will also be key partners.
1.13	The Tree Council has produced an Action Plan Toolkit, now in its second edition, that provides best practice on how large organisations can tackle ash dieback and mitigate its effects. The document provides useful information about the background to the disease, its spread, impact and how to plan for the disease using the experiences of organisations who have coped with the disease for longer.
1.14	Currently Tree Officers are undertaking surveys and monitoring of progression to inform forward plans and detail likely costs.
1.15	The plan highlights the likely risks associated with ash dieback and estimates the potential cost impact in dealing with the disease.
1.16	Ash trees in Flintshire, although showing signs of the disease, have not yet developed to such an extent to require safety felling. The disease will develop at different rates across the county and monitoring is key to enable response to be effectively managed. Felling will occur when an inspection deems a high risk of failure.

<b>2.00</b>	<b>RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS</b>
2.01	The national cost of removing trees with ash dieback is difficult to calculate, but the health and safety implications of affected roadside trees or trees adjacent to major target areas will require significant investment. Officers are currently learning from those authorities with the disease in a more advanced state e.g. Leicestershire CC.

2.02	Average costs for felling and clearing mature roadside trees are in the order of £800 per tree, a cost which may rise when traffic has to be managed and road surfaces cleaned. Smaller trees will cost less to remove and combining large work programmes/felling schedules will reduce the unit cost substantially. Nevertheless, dealing with smaller trees is expected to cost in the region of £400 per tree.
2.03	A significant proportion of the 24,000 mature ash trees are growing next to Flintshire's highways and are on predominantly privately owned land. Assuming a worst case scenario in which 90% mortality rates are experienced and based on a figure of £400-£800 per tree, the potential cost to private and public landowners, especially the farming community is estimated to be in the region of £1.2m - £5m.
2.04	It is currently estimated that the cost of removing Flintshire owned trees adjacent to the highway to be £344K.
2.05	Costs associated with other Authority departments who have trees within their remit such as schools, housing and public open spaces have an estimated cost for felling of £87K. The plan also identifies costs of increased monitoring, and replacement planting, to give a total cost of managing the disease on Authority owned land as £665K.
2.06	The impact on officer time to deal with issues associated with ash dieback will be substantial and will have to be prioritised against day to day duties. The plan looks at administrative costs associated with undertaking our statutory duty, at an estimated £190K.
2.07	Currently the Authority revenue budget is not expected to be robust enough to deal with this issue. It is expected that officers will make application to the Authority's Capital and Health and Safety budgets to partly cover this pressure.
2.08	It is hoped that Welsh Government may make some grant available to tackle the disease, but currently there is no provision. Welsh Government are being lobbied by Farming Unions and Tree Officers are in contact with the WLGA.

<b>3.00</b>	<b>CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT</b>
3.01	Consultation with Natural Resources Wales, North Wales Tree Officers, NWTRA and the Tree Council has been carried out in the production of the plan.
3.02	The plan, once adopted, needs to be shared widely with internal and external stakeholders.

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	The plan identifies the risk to Flintshire County Council under the headings of: Health and safety, economic, reputational, and environmental.
4.02	The risks can be divided into those associated with the Council being a landowner and those resulting from its statutory functions.
4.03	The decline and death of mature trees caused by ash dieback will make trees highly liable to failure and as a result has implications for public safety and tree related insurance claims.
4.04	To address this increase in the level of risk it is vital that that the frequency of council tree inspections is increased to address the danger. Focused tree inspections on critical areas such as trunk roads, A/B roads and urban streets are the priority.
4.05	Streetscene is the service which will be most affected because there will be a need to be proactive with the management of ash trees within its portfolio and also be proactive in identifying infected ash trees belonging to other landowners that are at high risk of falling onto the carriageway or footway.
4.06	Where it is necessary to remove or make safe infected trees on FCC highway land the work will need to be funded by the Council. As the Council does not have a specialist tree gang capable of undertaking the removal of mature trees, contractors will need to be employed to carry out this type of work. In addition to the cost of the tree works, it is expected that in most cases the removal of mature trees will require traffic management (e.g. traffic lights, cones) so that the works can be carried out safely.
4.07	In addition to the financial pressures on landowners, including FCC, there will be an initial shortage of trained and insured tree surgeons capable of under taking the work, especially dangerous trees adjacent to the highways, electricity lines and railway tracks. One of the issues highlighted by the Tree Council was that rogue operatives will cause further problems and endanger themselves and/or their clients.
4.08	The disease will continue to have a profound impact on how trees and woodlands are managed, reduce biodiversity and weaken environmental resilience. Protected habitats such as the Alyn Gorge Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and the landscape of the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) which are sensitive to change because of their high quality and will be harmed.
4.09	Currently, Flintshire County Council is embarking on a tree planting programme, whereby trees have been planted with a view of increasing the urban tree canopy cover and to offer more resilience to offset tree diseases (planting a selection of alternative tree species). As well as increasing resilience, it is anticipated these trees will also offer more in terms of supporting biodiversity.

<b>5.00</b>	<b>APPENDICES</b>
5.01	Appendix One - Ash Dieback Action Plan

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

<b>7.00</b>	<b>GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>
7.01	<b>Tree Council</b> is one of the UK's leading charities for trees, promoting their importance in a changing environment. We work in partnership with communities, organisations and government to make trees matter to everyone
7.02	<b>Natural Resources Wales</b> is the largest Welsh Government Sponsored Body. NRW were formed in April 2013, largely taking over the functions of the Countryside Council for Wales, Forestry Commission Wales and the Environment Agency in Wales, as well as certain Welsh Government functions.