

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to the Executive for Decision 10 January 2022

Portfolio:	Planning and Development
Subject:	Council Owned Trees- Ash Dieback Disease
Report of:	Director of Planning and Regeneration
Corporate Priorities:	Protect and Enhance the Environment Dynamic, Prudent and Progressive Council

Purpose:

This report sets out the implications of Ash Dieback Disease for ash trees owned by this Council, how diseased trees should be managed and the estimated costs to the Council to manage this disease.

Executive summary:

Many ash trees within the Borough are suffering from the effects of Ash Dieback Disease. Ash Dieback Disease is expected to kill the majority of ash trees within the Borough over the next 5-10 years. The nature of the disease means that ash trees become brittle and can regularly fail in whole or in part as the disease becomes established in the tree. Failing ash trees therefore pose an increased risk of harm to people and property. It is necessary for the Council to have a clear regime in place to monitor the ash trees it owns and arrange for works to, or the felling of ash trees, which are significantly affected by the disease.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Executive:

- (a) approves the annual inspection of the Council's ash trees;
- (b) agrees that £294,345 is allocated from the General Fund Reserves to cover the costs of the necessary tree works and felling resulting from Ash Dieback Disease;
- (c) notes that Officers will continue to monitor the actions taken by other authorities in respect of Ash Dieback and will continue to explore opportunities with other authorities to manage Ash Dieback, particularly where this would achieve notable cost savings; and

(d) notes that a report for information will be presented to the Planning and Development Scrutiny Panel on an annual basis setting out the number of ash trees which required work/ felling in the preceding 12 months and the cost of the associated inspections and works.

Reason:

Many ash trees will be infected and killed by Ash Dieback. Infected ash trees pose a risk to life and property when they fail. By adopting a clear regime for managing infected trees, the risk to people and property will be minimised.

Cost of proposals:

The cost of inspecting ash trees annually will be met from existing tree inspection budgets.

The cost of paying for works to or the felling of ash trees will be met from the Council's reserves.

Appendices: None

Reference papers: Executive report- 21 September 2021 Council Trees Service Review report

Background papers: None

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Executive Briefing Paper

Date:	10 January 2022
Subject:	Ash Dieback Disease
Briefing by:	Director of Planning and Regeneration
Portfolio:	Planning and Development

INTRODUCTION

1. At its meeting on the 21st September, the Executive considered a report relating to a review of the Council Trees Service. All three of the recommendations contained within the report were approved by the Executive.
2. The Executive were advised at the same meeting that Ash Dieback disease is an important issue linked to the management of the Council's tree stock. To ensure a planned and considered response, it was appropriate for a separate report to be brought to the Executive on this subject. The following report sets out the matter in detail and the options available to this Council for the management of the disease.

Background to Ash Dieback Disease

3. Ash Dieback is regarded as the most significant tree disease to affect the United Kingdom since Dutch Elm disease was first recognised in the 1960s.
4. Ash Dieback affects ash trees and is caused by a fungal pathogen. The disease can be spread between trees in a woodland on the wind and research suggests that wind-blown spores can carry for tens of miles.
5. The disease is also considered to have been spread because of planting diseased ash trees throughout the Country before the presence and significance of the disease was appreciated.
6. Movement of logs, leaf litter or pieces of wood from affected trees may also be contributing to the spread of the disease although this is considered a lower risk.
7. The fungus arrived from Asia into Europe during the 1990s and has spread rapidly. Although the first official record in Britain was only as recently as 2012, anecdotal evidence now suggests it may have arrived here over a decade earlier.
8. The fungus causes a range of symptoms from leaf and branch dieback to death of ash trees. Once infected, a high proportion of ash trees will die. A few ash trees may survive

the infection because of genetic factors which give them tolerance of, or resistance to, the disease but the percentage of the UK's ash trees that are likely to be resistant to the fungus is currently unknown.

9. Current estimates are that approximately 80% of ash trees will die from the disease. Of the other 20% somewhere between 1 and 5% may prove to be resistant to the disease with the remaining trees showing symptoms of the disease which may not result in the trees' complete demise.
10. The rate of decline of any individual tree varies with age, young trees dying quickly and mature trees declining more slowly. The experience in this Borough to date however has been that ash trees in close proximity to each other in woodland locations have succumbed to the disease the most quickly.
11. The nature of the disease causes the tree to lose its water content making the wood brittle, which has significant implications for the safety of the tree.

Implications of Ash Dieback for ash trees managed by Fareham Borough Council

12. The Council as a tree owner has a legal duty to take reasonable steps to prevent foreseeable harm to both people and property from trees failing in whole or in part. Tree inspections are one of the key tools for identifying potential risks to people and property.
13. Not all Council owned/ managed trees are inspected. Only those trees that potentially pose a risk to people or property are inspected. There are currently around 21,000 trees on the Council's tree inspection register which are actively managed.
14. Of these 21,000 actively managed trees, there are presently 1,673 individual ash trees which the Council inspects. In addition to this there are four groups of ash trees recorded within the Borough which contain a further estimated 70 ash trees between them. Lastly, there are lots of mixed groups of trees within the Borough, some of which may contain ash trees. The number of ash trees which may be in these areas (and whether they may pose a risk to people and property) is currently not known. As tree inspections continue, further ash trees which need to be actively managed, will be added to total of 1,743 ash trees (1,673 individual trees and 70 within groups).
15. Inspections of ash trees are best undertaken during the summer months, as the amount of leaf coverage on the tree (its canopy) provides a good visual indication of the extent and progression of the disease affecting the tree. There are four stages of decline which have been identified which are used to inform the tree owner's management decisions. They are 100%-75% remaining canopy, 75%-50% remaining canopy, 50%-25% remaining canopy and 25%-0% remaining canopy.
16. In the summer of 2020, this Council began inspections of ash trees on Council owned/ managed land, to establish the condition of the Council's ash tree stock. A further inspection of all ash trees was undertaken in the summer of 2021.
17. Once the extent of canopy drops to less than 50%, it is highly likely that the tree will need to be felled. Trees in the 50%-75% remaining canopy range will need to be carefully considered having regard for their location and proximity to people and structures.
18. From the inspection undertaken in the Summer of 2021 it was found that approximately 425 trees had 50% or less remaining canopies and needed to be felled. The figure of 425 is based on individual trees and an estimation of the number of ash trees within

groups which required felling. A similar number of ash trees were identified in the preceding year, 2020.

How Ash Dieback is currently being managed by Fareham and other Councils within Hampshire

19. How regularly the Council inspects its trees was a matter considered by the Executive in September 2021 as part of the Council Trees Service Review. The Executive approved changes to the tree inspection regime, subject to approval by the Council's Insurers. In the summer of 2020, and again in 2021, the Council inspected all of its ash trees.
20. From those inspections, and based primarily on the extent of canopy loss, those ash trees which need to be felled imminently are being identified. The works to fell the ash trees are then being carried out.
21. Whilst the rate of decline varies between infected trees, broader research has found the rate of canopy loss between years to be in the order of 10-15%. Having carefully considered this matter, Officers believe it is appropriate that all of the Council's ash trees continue to be inspected on an annual basis.
22. In wooded areas it is often the case that trees which are felled are left in situ. This has ecological benefits, minimises further damage to woodland through trying to remove trees, and minimises costs. Where large numbers of trees need to be felled, which was the case recently at Bushey Land in Whiteley, it is necessary to remove trees from the land to allow for natural regeneration and replanting.
23. Where trees need to be felled within public open spaces the tree and any arisings are normally removed in their entirety.
24. Officers have approached all other Councils within Hampshire (including Hampshire County Council) to establish the approaches of each Council towards Ash Dieback disease.
25. From those approaches to other authorities in Hampshire it is evident that a number of authorities have not yet identified the scale of problem that Ash Dieback poses to their tree stock. Some authorities have not yet quantified the number of ash trees they are responsible for, how many ash trees may be affected, nor devised any strategies for how they will deal with the issue.
26. Of those authorities that have quantified the number of trees ash trees involved and prepared strategies to deal with them, none are promoting different approaches to that currently being followed by this Council (i.e., regularly inspect ash trees, assess the extent of any Ash DieBack and undertake work/ felling on a case-by-case basis).
27. Hampshire County Council does use arisings from differing species of trees it fells in Biomass boilers in County Council run facilities at Queen Elizabeth Country Park south of Petersfield, Runways Youth Activity Centre in Aldershot and Weyford Infant School at Whitehill. None of the Hampshire authorities (including Hampshire County Council) have any commercial arrangements in place whereby they sell biomass for burning elsewhere.

Proposals and related costs for removing the Council's diseased ash trees

28. The felling of trees is undertaken by contractors working on behalf of the Council. The Council has a Tree Maintenance Services Framework containing six contractors who

offer prices for different types of tree work. Typically, the cost of felling trees is dependent upon the diameter of the tree, accessibility, whether the tree requires complete removal from the land or the use of any special platforms/ machinery for their felling and removal. The average price on the Council's framework for felling a tree with a diameter of 30-60cms (which is expected to be representative of many ash trees) is £211 per tree.

29. Where trees are growing on the same site in very close proximity to each other, Contractors will agree an hourly rate with the Council, based on the number of tree surgeons and type of machinery needed. These economies of scale will result in the Council paying less than £211 per tree.
30. Where it is necessary to remove a large tree, which is difficult to access and specialist machinery is required, the cost per tree could go as high as £288 per tree.
31. In the light of all these potential scenarios, Officers consider that the use of the figure of £211 per tree, would provide the most robust basis for estimating costs, based on current prices.
32. At this time, it is not known how many of the Council's ash trees will need to be felled. Current estimates suggest that it will be approximately 80%; based on the number of known individual trees, 80% equates to approximately 1,395 trees. Of the remaining 20%, 1-5% of the trees may prove to be resistant to the disease with the remaining trees showing symptoms of the disease which may not result in the trees' complete demise. Whichever of these potential scenarios is correct, this Council will regrettably need to fell many of its ash trees over the coming years, in light of the risk posed to people and property.
33. Following the tree inspections in 2020, it was necessary to fell a number of ash trees in 2021. The works involved 288 individual ash trees and several groups of ash trees. The ash trees which were felled were primarily at Holly Hill Park and throughout Whiteley. The work cost approximately £59,000 and involved the felling of 288 individual trees and a number of trees within groups.
34. Following the inspections in 2021, a second tranche of work was identified (which has been carried out in part) which involves the felling of 125 trees and around 200 trees within a group and is estimated to cost a similar amount to that spent earlier in 2021.
35. The nature of Ash Dieback means that it is often not possible to fell ash trees by tree surgeons climbing in the trees and dismantling the trees in sections. The brittle nature of trees affected by Ash Dieback means that felling will often need to be undertaken by machinery, or from platforms/ cherry pickers, which increases the cost of felling the trees.
36. Officers have informally explored with some of the contractors on its Framework, whether any discount might be offered to the Council if a contract was awarded to one company to fell all the Council's ash trees.
37. Many of the companies on the Council's Framework are SMEs who provide services to a wide range of clients. Whilst some of the contractors have indicated that they would be interested in undertaking the felling of all the Council's ash trees if the Council followed such a course of action, logistically this would be quite challenging for them. It is also likely it would be carried out over a lengthy period considering the multitude of different sites and circumstances involved.

38. In terms of any potential discount being 'guaranteed' for the felling of all ash trees, contractors were reluctant to give any firm commitments in advance of carefully considering the sites and circumstances in far greater detail. One contractor indicated any discount was likely to be of the scale of 5%-10%.
39. In light of the feedback received from other Hampshire authorities, and the informal feedback received from contractors on the Council's Tree Maintenance Services Framework, Officers do not believe there is a more cost effective or environmentally sensitive way to remove ash trees, than the Council is following at the present time.

Overall Budgetary Implications

40. At its meeting on the 21st September 2021, the Executive approved a number of changes to the delivery of the Council Trees Service including the budget. The report in September advised that a further report would be brought to the Executive regarding Ash Dieback; the scale of the issue and the anticipated cost of dealing with it was not quantified at that time.
41. Managing Ash Dieback disease is an extraordinary cost on the Council Trees Service. This was recognised in 2020 when £56,000 was allocated from existing budgets to meet the costs of the first tranche of ash tree fellings carried out in early 2021.
42. If all the Council's individual ash trees needed to be felled, then based on 1,743 trees at £211 per tree, the total cost would be circa £367,773. On the assumption that 80% of these trees would need to be felled, the total cost would be circa £294,345.
43. It is anticipated that the annual cost of felling ash trees are likely to be approximately £75,000 per year based on current prices. This assumes a continuing need to fell around 350 trees annually at an average cost of £211 per tree. These costs are anticipated to reduce from 2025/26 onwards as the Council's stock of ash trees will have been significantly reduced by then and it will be clearer how many ash trees might be resilient to the disease.

CONCLUSION

44. It is recommended that £294,345 is allocated from the General Fund Reserves to cover the cost of these works over an approximately 5 year period.
45. The proposals will enable the Council to pro-actively manage the significant issues posed by the spread of Ash Dieback Disease. Managing and felling trees where necessary will minimise the potential for any harm being caused to people and property.

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Lee Smith on 01329 824427.