



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Streetscene and Engineering Cabinet Board

20th September 2019

Report of the Head of Streetcare – Mike Roberts

Matter for Decision

Wards Affected: All Wards

Ash Dieback

Purpose of the Report:

To advise members on the potential future environmental and financial impact of Chalara Ash Dieback disease which is currently affecting a large number of trees on local authority and private land.

Executive Summary:

Chalara Ash Dieback is a fungal disease affecting Ash trees throughout the UK. The position in Wales is that due to the micro-climate the disease appears to be more advanced. The exact number of Ash trees within Neath Port Talbot or their condition is not known and a survey will be required to quantify their number and distribution in detail. A number of trees affected by this disease have already been felled.

This report identifies the need for an Ash Dieback Action Plan and the funding for works associated with this.

Background:

Ash is the 3rd most common tree in the UK with an estimated 60 million outside woodlands. There are an estimated 140,000 Ash trees in NPT. A large number of these trees are within areas of limited access and low risk but there are a significant number adjacent to the highway network. The split of this figure between council and private land is unknown in the absence of detailed surveys, but the Council's Arboricultural Officer estimates that the Council may have an interest in around 10% of the trees by virtue of land ownership or location (more detail is given in Appendix A). The overall number of trees was calculated by Dr. Charles Hipkin who is an ecologist / botanist working in Swansea University. It is believed he obtained the information from Oliver Rackam's books and literature. Until his recent death Rackam was considered by many academics to be the top UK expert on British trees and woodlands.

Ash dieback is the most significant disease to affect UK trees since the Dutch Elm Disease epidemic of the 1970's. Ash dieback was first officially recorded in the UK in a plant nursery in Buckinghamshire in 2012. It has now spread across the majority of the UK and is expected to lead to the decline and death of the majority of Ash trees.

The following link to BBC news <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-47483197> confirms the climate related rapid spread of the disease with Wales being the hardest hit area in the UK where 80% of all Ash trees are already infected to various degrees.

A Dr Kirby of the Plant Sciences Department at Oxford University recently stated that a large number of Ash trees in Wales are near public highways. A recent tragic incident near Pontyberem in Carmarthenshire highlighted the issue with dying Ash trees. A large Ash tree collapsed on to a public highway landing on a passing delivery

van which killed the driver. Previous to its collapse the tree was showing symptoms of advanced crown dieback and basal decay. Although the collapse of the tree was not fully attributable to Ash dieback, if dead and dying Ash trees are not removed then collapsing trees could become a much more common occurrence.

Welsh local authority representatives and other stakeholders attended a recent event organised by the Welsh Government at the National Botanic Gardens to discuss the development and implementation of Ash Dieback Action Plans (ADAP'S). The representative for NPT was Nick Thomas, Senior Country Park Officer.

Due to Ash dieback a small number of Ash trees have already been removed within the last 12 months but the number of removals is expected to increase significantly over the coming years.

Due to the health and safety risks and the large number of trees involved which are often in urban areas and adjacent to public highways in rural areas a number of organisations and local authorities are in the process of developing an ADAP's.

The elements involved in an ADAP are:

- Awareness/anticipation: raising awareness about Ash dieback and the issues it may cause.
- Planning/assessment: preparing and developing the ADAP to help to manage the problems caused by the disease.
- Action/response to Ash dieback: undertaking actions e.g. tree removal to remedy the problems caused by the disease.
- Adaptation and recovery from the disease: landscape restoration.

Financial Impacts:

The additional surveys / inspections, enforcement actions and work to remove large dead and dying trees will incur significant costs for labour, mobile elevated working platforms, timber handling equipment, traffic management, stump grinding in some locations and replanting.

Having completed surveys, Leicestershire County Council have recently reported the requirement for £5,000,000 over 15 years to deal with the estimated 500,000 trees within that council area. Based on this there would be an estimated budget requirement of £1.4m over 15 years in Neath Port Talbot. £75k has been flagged as a budget pressure for next year to fund surveys, action plan production and initial urgent work. On completion of the surveys and action plan a further report will be presented for consideration

Integrated Impact Assessment:

A first stage impact assessment has been undertaken to assist the Council in discharging its legislative duties (under the Equality Act 2010, the Welsh Language Standards (No.1) Regulations 2015, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

The first stage assessment has indicated that a more in-depth assessment is not required. A summary is included below.

Valleys Communities Impacts:

Whilst the exact numbers and locations of the trees are unknown at this time, there will inevitably be higher numbers within rural wards.

Workforce Impacts:

There will be an increase in demand on resources over the coming years to deal with Ash Dieback.

Legal Impacts:

The authority has a legal duty to ensure that trees on council owned land are in a safe condition. It also has duties in relation to the safety of highways.

Risk Management Impacts:

If no action plan is developed the process of dealing with any dangerous trees will be reactive which will result in higher costs along with an increased risk of personal injury, property damage and insurance claims. If organisations such as local authorities wait until trees start to fail due to Ash Dieback they may well become overwhelmed with tree removal work. In addition to its direct impact the disease may have an impact and present a risk to other services requiring the free movement of people and vehicles or the management of storm water etc.

The following are examples of how Ash dieback may impact a corporate risk assessment.

Health and safety:

- Potential for death or injury to the general public and staff working on trees
- Increased health and safety issues on roads, parks, cemeteries, schools, footpaths
- Risks to statutory functions and service delivery
- Risks to staff and visitors from infected trees on adjoining land
- Risks from falling trees and branches on to local authority infrastructure

Reputational damage:

- Potential for disruption e.g. road closures due to tree work and falling trees
- Political risks as a result of negative press over the management of Ash dieback
- Public anxiety / anger
- Strained relationships with land owners and managers as increased costs fall on the private land owners.

Environmental impacts:

- Landscape changes with impacts on recreation and tourism
- Losses to ecosystem services e.g. reduction in air quality, increased flooding, loss of visual screens next to roads, biodiversity loss.
- Risks to protected species / sites through alteration of habitat structure, stability and composition
- Loss of carbon storage and sequestration
- Loss of biodiversity from the decline or extinction of species which are largely or entirely dependent on Ash.

Economic impacts:

- Increased liabilities
- Inability to undertake necessary works due to lack of trained staff
- The generated tree waste is not classed as controlled waste but due to the volume of chippings and timber it is inevitable that there will be additional disposal costs.
- Increased costs for management and organisation.

- Increasing prices as a result of market competition for skilled contractors
- Increasing direct and indirect costs due to increased flood risk and soil erosion.
- Costs of replanting to retain ecosystem services provided by Ash trees e.g. flood reduction, habitat for biodiversity, shelter.

Consultation:

There is no requirement for external consultation on this item.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Council:

1. Develop an action plan including tree surveys to identify tree distribution, affected trees and the degree of infection.
2. Fell and dispose of trees as required based on the findings of the surveys and associated risk assessment.
3. Via social media and other channels, the Council raise awareness of the disease and encourage members of the public to report trees which appear to be in poor health.
4. Liaise with private landowners who have trees near public highways, public footpaths and local authority property.
5. Pursue funding and carry out replacement tree planting to reduce the impact on biodiversity and local landscapes with suitable species such as Oak, Birch, Alder and Sycamore.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To manage the onset of Ash Dieback throughout the county borough ensuring that works are prioritised and carried out in a timely manner.

Implementation of Decision:

The decision is proposed for implementation after the three day call in period

Appendices:

None

List of Background Papers:

None

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Initial Assessment on the scale of activity required by the Council

As stated in the report there are an estimated 140,000 Ash trees in Neath Port Talbot. A large number of these trees will be on private property which will not have any impact on the authority's land, buildings, infrastructure or highways.

Highways

The A , B, C and unclassified highway network in Neath Port Talbot consists of the following.

Class	Length (km)
A	140.05
B	63.42
C	53.14
U	598.90
Total	855.51

Due to dead and dying Ash trees it is advisable to survey all land adjacent to all classes of highway. The depth of the survey on both sides of the highway should allow for the tallest Ash trees which is 30 metres. The total length of highway multiplied by the depth provide an anticipated total inspection area of 256 hectares in relation to highways.

Country Parks

There are four country parks in NPT, Margam, the Gnoll, Craig Gwladys and Afan Forest Park. Margam is managed by the Education Directorate. The Gnoll and Craig Gwladys are managed by the Environment Directorate. The Afan Forest Park is managed by Natural Resources Wales but the car park area and visitor centre is

managed by the Estates section of the Environment Directorate. This car park area has a number of Ash trees which are currently in decline.

Tree inspections have previously been undertaken but these were for the general safety and condition of the trees within the parks and were prior to the current impact of Ash Dieback.

Ornamental Parks

There are a total of 14 ornamental parks. The majority of these parks have varying numbers of Ash trees.

Playgrounds

There are 44 playgrounds across the authority and there are a significant number of Ash trees in the vicinity of them which will be the subject of early inspection.

Allotments

Of the 5 allotment sites there are Ash trees of varying size and condition near the perimeters of a number of the sites.

Public open spaces

There are numerous public open spaces across the authority e.g. Cimla Common which will require an inspection.

Cemeteries

There are 8 operational cemeteries and 2 non-operational cemeteries. There are Ash trees within or adjacent to the majority of the sites.

Canals

The 2 canals, the Neath canal from Resolven to Glynneath and the Swansea canal nature reserve at Ynysmeudwy have a large number of Ash trees adjacent to the towpath and waterway.

Woodlands

There are 9 woodlands managed by the authority. These woodlands have public access and Rights of Way and have a significant number of Ash trees within their boundaries.

Schools

There is a total number of 73 nursery, primary, junior and comprehensive schools. All trees in schools are inspected for their health and safety on a two year cycle with approximately 50% of the schools being inspected each year. The effects of Ash dieback disease will be evaluated during these programmed inspections and therefore will not require a specific survey for the Ash disease. However there will be additional costs to remove the infected trees.

Summary

Until accurate detailed surveys are undertaken the total number of Ash trees can only be estimated based on local knowledge in association with the above.

Furthermore, it should also be noted that the stated number of trees will include different age classes from semi mature to over mature specimens.

The initial estimate by the Council's Senior Country Parks Officer is that the total number of Ash trees on local authority maintained sites will be in the region of 14,000.