

Culture and Communities Committee

10.00am, Tuesday, 7 March 2023

Ash Dieback Action Plan Update

Executive/routine Wards Council Commitments	Routine All
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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that Committee notes this progress update on the Ash Dieback Action Plan.

Paul Lawrence

Executive Director of Place

Contact: Steven Cuthill, Local Transport and Environment Manager

E-mail: steven.cuthill@edinburgh.gov.uk

Ash Dieback Action Plan Update

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report provides an update on the Council's Ash Dieback Action Plan.

3. Background

Ash Dieback

- 3.1 The European (or common) ash tree, *Fraxinus excelsior*, is an abundant native deciduous tree species. It tends to self-seed readily, so it will therefore be present on many sites managed by the Council, including parks, cemeteries, woodlands, schools, care facilities, civic building and depot grounds, Council housing gardens, active travel routes, walkways and roadside verges.
- 3.2 Ash dieback is a serious tree disease epidemic caused by a fungal pathogen, *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, also known as *Chalara fraxinea*. It causes dieback and death of ash trees. Mortality rates are high among young trees, but dieback progresses through the crown and can kill a mature tree in two years. The wood of affected trees often becomes brittle, which makes tree removal more difficult and dangerous for arboricultural operatives.
- 3.3 Scottish Forestry acknowledge that there is a limited resource of suitably trained and skilled contractors with appropriate machinery and equipment to undertake the likely safety work, including pruning or safe felling, that ash dieback will create.

Ash Dieback Action Plan

- 3.4 The Council's Ash Dieback Action Plan was supported by Committee in [February 2022](#). The action plan highlighted that many thousands of ash trees will need to be felled over the next decade, requiring additional tree surveying; collation of data of disease presence; and additional resources (officers and equipment) to deal with the workload across the Council's estate.
- 3.5 Some ash trees appear to be more able to tolerate infection. So, other tree management approaches may be deployed including crown reduction or pollarding instead of felling. It is likely that there will be some natural regeneration of felled trees alongside propagation of tolerant tree's seeds that may help build future resilience to this disease.

- 3.6 In addition to the practical elements required to manage the presence of ash dieback across the city, the action plan also includes reference to developing and implementing an ash tree recovery plan to mitigate biodiversity, landscape, and environmental losses, as well as a replacement programme that aligns with the city's ambition to be a million-tree city by 2030. The Edinburgh Million Tree City project aims to ensure there is sufficient net gain in tree numbers as mitigation for the expected loss of a large proportion of ash trees.

Health and Safety Risk

- 3.7 Of critical concern is the immediate safety risk posed by ash dieback to residents and arboricultural officers. Trees affected by ash dieback quickly become brittle and may drop branches or fall over. This can cause injury, property damage, road traffic accidents and, in the worst case, fatality. This also creates additional safety and risk issues for the arborists working on diseased ash due to unpredictability of the timber. This has led to a change in methods and necessitated using mobile elevated access platforms instead of roped access to work on affected trees.
- 3.8 The Council has a legal duty (e.g., Occupiers' Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 and Health and Safety at Work Act 1974) to take whatever steps are reasonably practicable to prevent our trees from causing foreseeable harm. This duty requires the Council to take robust action to manage the risks to safety presented by ash dieback. Similarly, private tree owners and residents also have a duty of care and will also need to take appropriate action to ensure their trees do not fall on roads, footways, etc., to pose risk to others or property.

4. Main report

Current Position

- 4.1 The current estimate is that the overall number of ash trees managed by the Council is 40,000.
- 4.2 Up to, and including, October 2022 approximately 62% of the city's ash trees have so far been surveyed. This allows officers to identify the extent of ash trees succumbing to ash dieback and identify trees requiring work as a priority. The survey has so far focused primarily in high priority areas including highly frequented public areas, roadside trees, cycleways and walkways. All other areas will be assessed in due course on a priority basis and as resources allow.
- 4.3 Over the period July 2022 to October 2022, 2,410 trees have been identified as requiring removal of which 96 ash trees have been identified as requiring immediate attention. Over the 2022/23 period 126 trees have so far been felled. Removal of trees will continue on a priority basis.
- 4.4 The remaining ash trees will continue to be part of the Council's monitoring programme.

Risk Based Approach

- 4.5 The Council is taking a risk-based approach to prioritising tree survey and removal works, factoring in tree condition and location.
- 4.6 Recognising the importance of managing ash dieback in trees across the city, the Council allocated additional investment of £300,000 to progress with the implementation of the Ash Dieback Action Plan.
- 4.7 As noted in the original report to Committee, additional Trees and Woodlands Officers and arborists are required to support the implementation of the plan. However, it has proved extremely challenging to attract and retain suitable candidates for these (and other) roles.
- 4.8 This is, in part, due to the increased demand throughout the country for skilled arborists and additional work generated for contractors and self-employed to deal with ash dieback nationally.
- 4.9 In 2022/23, the service has prioritised high-risk tree issues, mainly associated with ash dieback. Recognising the recruitment challenges and the pressures on the team to progress other work, external contractors have also been engaged to support the Council's efforts in dealing with ash dieback.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 An annual surveying regime has been implemented to monitor the spread of ash dieback and to identify trees that need to be removed. Surveying for ash dieback symptoms takes place between late-June and mid-September. Surveys will aim to cover all Council-owned ash trees on a two-yearly rotation. The most recent exercise is referenced in paragraph 4.2.
- 5.2 Work to recruit to vacant positions remains a priority and will continue until successful appointments are made.
- 5.3 In 2023/24, it is hoped to also invest in new vehicles, machinery and plant to improve effectiveness and efficiency and ensure that the Council has suitable resources to deal with the management of dead, dying, and dangerous ash trees across the city.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 In February 2022, the Council allocated £300,000 for the implementation of the Ash Dieback Action Plan.
- 6.2 The costs of implementing the Ash Dieback Action Plan in 2022/23 have been met from this additional investment and existing revenue funding for parks and greenspaces.

7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

- 7.1 The timely identification and removal of dangerous ash trees will ensure that parks, green spaces, school grounds, and other open spaces can remain safe and publicly accessible.

8. Background reading/external references

- 8.1 Scottish Forestry [website](#) on ash dieback in Scotland.

9. Appendices

- 9.1 None.