

DATA LABEL: PUBLIC



ENVIRONMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

ASH DIEBACK

REPORT BY HEAD OF OPERATIONAL SERVICES

A. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To update the Environment Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel on the impact and costs associated with the management of Ash Dieback in West Lothian.

B. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Panel:

1. Notes the environmental impact that Ash Dieback will have across West Lothian.
2. Notes the significant future costs for the council to remove or make safe dead or failing Ash trees including the costs to replant trees of an alternative species on council land.
3. Notes that the council is required to act through the implementation of an Ash Dieback Action Plan.
4. Advises officers of any further actions required to mitigate the impact of Ash Dieback across West Lothian.
5. Notes that the panel will be provided with a further update on the finalised Ash Dieback Action Plan, in February 2022.

C. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

I	Council Values	Being honest, open and accountable; providing equality of opportunities; developing employees; making best use of our resources.
II	Policy and Legal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equality Issues, Health or Risk Assessment)	<p>The Council is required to demonstrate Best Value through a structured framework for the management of its assets.</p> <p>Ash Dieback Disease has been recorded on the council's risk register.</p>
III	Implications for Scheme of Delegations to Officers	Not applicable.
IV	Impact on performance and performance Indicators	None at present, new performance indicators to be added to track the performance procedure.
V	Relevance to Single Outcome Agreement	We live in resilient, cohesive and safe communities.

We make the most efficient and effective use of resources by minimising our impact on the natural and built environment.

VI Resources - (Financial, Staffing and Property)

Over the next 20 years it is estimated that up to £12 million may be required over the period to 2040 to remove all affected trees within council ownership, with £5 million required within the next 5 years.

£265,000 of additional revenue funding was allocated to Nets, Land and Countryside for additional staffing resources to develop an Ash Dieback Action Plan and to undertake emergency works this financial year.

£50,000 was allocated to an Ash Dieback Tree Replacement project by the Council Executive on the 22nd June as part of the West Lothian Emergency Climate fund – Carbon Sequestration Project.

VII Consideration at PDSP

None

VIII Other consultations

Scottish Ash Dieback Working Group led by Scottish Forestry and assisted by the Tree Council, COSLA, West Lothian Council: Roads and Transportation, Planning Services, Property Services, Financial Management Unit, Corporate Communications and Legal Services.

D. TERMS OF REPORT

D.1 Background

Ash Dieback is the most significant tree disease to affect broadleaved trees in the United Kingdom since Dutch Elm disease. Analysts estimate It will lead to the decline and death of between 50% to 75% of ash trees, around 75 million trees, in Scotland over the next twenty years.

Dead and diseased trees can pose real risks to human safety in addition to considerable economic and environmental impacts.

Ash Dieback Disease, was previously known as Chalara, and is caused by the fungus *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*. It has affected ash trees throughout Europe resulting in the death of a very high percentage of the ash tree population. It has been known to be present in the UK since at least 2012 but until recently, in Scotland, the disease has been noticed only on young ash trees in plantations.

Landowners have a legal responsibility to act and are being advised that their focus must be on managing the safety and decline of ash trees, and imitating the recovery process through replanting with alternative tree species.

Agencies such as Scottish Forestry and the Tree Council are working with the Scottish Government to develop action plans to assist landowners.

A round table briefing on implications for local authorities and other public bodies was held on the 10 June 2021. Attendees raised the need for urgent funding assistance from the Scottish Government to mitigate the substantial cost they face.

D.2 Ash Dieback in West Lothian

Ash Dieback has been present in West Lothian for some years but until more recently appears to have affected mainly young trees. Over the past few years it has become much more evident in mature trees, with a noticeable increase over Summer 2020.

A council wide tree survey is required to assess the number and condition of the all of the ash trees in council ownership however two risk-based surveys have already been carried out.

A survey of roadside trees identified over 35,000 ash trees could succumb to the disease over the next two decades.

The disease appears to be spreading at a fast rate with mature trees dying within 3 to 5 years of becoming infected. 17,000 road side trees have already lost half of their crowns. It is estimated that 41% (7,000) of these trees are in council ownership with the remainder being in private ownership.

A similar survey of other high use publicly accessible areas such as; active travel routes, open spaces around schools, play areas and residential areas confirmed a similar spread of the disease. Early evaluations suggest a further 10,000 are already suffering from Ash Dieback.

The surveys suggest that over 17,000 council owned trees in high risk areas are already diseased and are likely to fail with the next 3 to 5 years.

A survey of the remaining lower risk areas (woodland, general open spaces, etc) will be completed over the next year.

D.3 Ash Dieback Action Plan for West Lothian

The scale of the disease and its likely impacts are such that it will require more than a “business as usual” approach and it is proposed that West Lothian Council prepares an Ash Dieback Action Plan to help plan a way forward. The Action Plan will follow the guidance which currently is being prepared by the Ash Dieback Risk Group for Scotland. The Action Plan is currently being drafted by officers and will need to be in place by December 2021 to enable immediate emergency works to be completed this financial year and further tree surveying to be completed next year when trees are back in leaf; followed by felling of those trees with advanced disease.

A short-term working group comprising representatives from Nets, Land and Countryside, Roads and Transportation, Finance and Estates, Legal Services, Corporate Communications and Planning and Economic Development has been established to develop a fully costed Ash Dieback Action Plan.

D.4 Financial and Resource Requirements

Costs

It is estimated that additional capital funding of at least £5million, will be required over the next 5-10-year period and in the region of a further £7million over the following 20 years based on a proportionate risk-based approach to managing Ash Dieback disease and in discussion with councils in England that have implemented their Ash Dieback Action plans. The costs are based on current market rates of £1000 per roadside tree.

Officers completed the surveys of higher risk areas (roadsides) in October 2021 and lower risk areas (all other areas) will be completed within the next year. These surveys will allow work planning and costs for 2022/23 onwards to be more accurately estimated.

The current estimated costs, based on current survey information, for managing Ash Dieback are:

2021/22 - £265,000
2022/23 - £1m
2023/24 to 2025/26 - £3.735m
2026/27 to 2041/42 - £7m

There are contractor availability risks as demand is likely to outstrip supply. To mitigate the risk the service is recruiting an additional small team to supplement the council's existing arborist team.

Funding

The council has allocated £265,000 of additional revenue funding to the Nets, Land and Countryside service for additional resources to develop the Action Plan and to undertake emergency works this financial year.

To date, whilst discussions are taking place with the Scottish Government in relation to the funding of Ash Dieback, it has not yet provided Local Authorities with any additional funding for the management of Ash Dieback. The council has raised, and will continue to raise, the future funding pressures with Scottish Forestry and with COSLA with a view to them seeking funding from the Scottish Government.

If such funding is not provided by the Scottish Government, costs for 2022/23 onwards will need to be funded from within existing council resources which would put increased strain on these and require significant reprioritisation of service provision.

E. CONCLUSION

Ash Dieback will have a significant impact on our environment and poses considerable public safety, financial and biodiversity risk at a time the environment is being valued more highly for its contribution to climate change and recreational use is increasing.

The council is required to act to address this through the implementation of an Ash Dieback action plan.

F. BACKGROUND REFERENCES

None

Appendices/Attachments: None

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