



CABINET – 6 JULY 2018

ASH DIEBACK

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT

PART A

Purpose of the Report

1. The Purpose of the report is to advise the Cabinet on the Council's approach to managing ash dieback in the county and seek approval to an Ash Dieback Action Plan.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that:-
 - a) The Council's Ash Dieback Action Plan be approved;
 - b) The Director of Environment and Transport be authorised to make such amendments to the Ash Dieback Action Plan as are considered necessary to ensure that the Plan remains current and conforms to legislation and good practice.

Reasons for Recommendation

3. Ash dieback is likely to result in the death of a high proportion of the estimated 500,000 plus ash trees in Leicestershire over a period of 5 to 15 years. The Council's approach to managing the outbreak focuses on maintaining the highest levels of health and safety for the public whilst aiming to minimise the impact on the landscape, ecology and environment.
4. The production and adoption of an ash dieback action plan will help the Council maintain its approach. The adoption of an action plan is advocated by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Tree Council.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

5. A report was considered by the Environment and Transport Overview and Scrutiny on 28 June 2018 and its comments will be reported to the Cabinet.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

6. The Tree Management Strategy was adopted by the Cabinet on 8 March 2011 and identifies a standard for the management of the tree resource under the stewardship of the County Council. The Strategy has been evaluated and is considered to be fit for purpose for the management of ash dieback.

Resource Implications

7. Ash dieback has been identified in the MTFS as a future potential financial development/pressure.
8. The financial implications of the spread of ash dieback will be more fully understood as individual business cases are produced as part of the implementation of the Ash Dieback Action Plan.
9. The Director of Corporate Resources has been consulted on the content of this report.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

10. This report is being circulated to all Members of the Council via the Members' News in Brief Service.

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PART B**Background**

11. Ash dieback, sometimes known as 'Chalara', affects ash and other *Fraxinus* species of trees and is caused by a fungal pathogen.
12. The fungus arrived from Asia into Europe during the 1990's and has spread rapidly. Although the first official record in Britain was in 2012, anecdotal evidence now suggests it may have arrived here over a decade earlier.
13. The fungus causes symptoms ranging from leaves and branches dying to complete death of the tree. Once infected, a high proportion of 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 unknown.
14. Ash dieback was first identified in Leicestershire in 2012 at the Park and Ride car park in Birstall. The disease is thought to have been brought to the site on infected nursery stock.
15. Ash dieback is now present throughout Leicestershire. Surveys undertaken in 2017 identified ash dieback in a number of younger plantations, landscape plots and self-set saplings, mainly in the north-west of the county. At present, there is very little evidence of the disease affecting mature trees. However, experience from other areas suggests that symptoms of ash dieback may be more subtle in mature trees than in younger specimens.
16. Existing procedures for County Council owned trees (and those in private ownership impacting the highway) provide for annual routine inspections by accredited operational staff (e.g. highways inspectors) and specialist inspections by qualified tree inspectors every three years. Additionally, tree inspectors provide ongoing advice to operational staff to ensure one-off / emergency situations are dealt with appropriately.
17. There are no exact figures of the number of ash trees in Leicestershire; however it is estimated that there may be over 500,000 in the county. In terms of County Council controlled land, there are 6,020 recorded ash trees on adopted highway verges with a further 120,000-plus ash trees in private ownership within falling distance of the highway. In addition, there are 2,014 recorded ash trees on school and other County Council sites. It is prudent to assume that the disease may result in the loss of between 75% and 90% of ash trees in Leicestershire. However, the levels of decline and mortality that will result are matters of considerable uncertainty.

Ash Dieback Action Plan

18. A cross departmental project team has been set up to co-ordinate the Council's approach to ash dieback.
19. In line with the best practice approach advocated by Defra and the Tree Council, an Ash Dieback Action Plan, appended to the report, has been developed to outline how the Council plans to manage the anticipated risks and issues associated with the spread of ash dieback across the county. The Action Plan is a live document and will continue to evolve over time.
20. The Tree Management Strategy (approved by Cabinet on 8 March 2011) has been evaluated in light of ash dieback and is considered to be fit for purpose for the management of this disease. It has therefore been used as the basis of the approach outlined in the Action Plan.
21. In line with the Tree Management Strategy, the County Council will take a risk based approach to the management of ash dieback. The emphasis will be on maintaining the highest levels of health and safety for the public where diseased trees are at risk of shedding branches or falling, while aiming to minimise the impacts on landscape, ecology and the environment. High risk areas are considered to be highways, schools, country parks, and other areas where the public has access.
22. Examples of key areas of work covered by the Action Plan include:-
 - a) Policy and Strategy
 - Ensure ash dieback actions are included in relevant team plans and Performance and Development Reviews (PDRs)
 - Carry out an audit of relevant highways and other policies and processes that may need to be reviewed in light of ash dieback
 - b) Communication
 - Development of a comprehensive communications and engagement plan
 - c) Training
 - Investigate training requirements and produce a training plan
 - d) Operational
 - Develop a matrix for the assessment, reporting and management of infected trees
 - Investigate opportunities for the development of a free/low cost tree replacement scheme
 - e) Commercial Opportunities
 - Produce an outline business case for commercial opportunities linked to the spread of ash dieback (e.g. tree inspection / management service, production of wood chip for biomass boilers etc.)

Background Papers

8 March 2011 - Cabinet – Tree Management Strategy

<http://politics.leics.gov.uk/documents/s52039/K%20-%20Tree%20Management%20Strategy%20March%202011.pdf>

Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2018

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/about-the-council/council-spending/medium-term-financial-strategy-mtfs>

Appendix

Ash Dieback Action Plan

Equality and Human Rights Implications

23. There are no equality or human rights implications directly arising from this report. An Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment (EHRIA) screening has been completed but this concluded that a full impact assessment was not required.
24. Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessments will, however, be undertaken, as appropriate, as relevant actions within the Action Plan are carried out, prior to final decisions being made. This will ensure that any new, proposed or significantly changed policies, practices, procedures, functions or services are assessed for equality and human rights implications.

Partnership Working and Associated Issues

25. Opportunities for information sharing and collaboration around the management of ash dieback will be explored where advantageous to do so.

Risk Assessment

26. Ash dieback is identified as a risk on the Corporate Risk Register. If the Authority fails to respond and manage ash dieback (Chalara) at a local level, then it could be exposed to financial, reputational, and environmental consequences.
27. A risk assessment of the Ash Dieback Action Plan has also been carried out. Key risks identified include:-
 - i) Health and safety risk to life, services and transport networks caused by diseased trees falling down / shedding branches; and,
 - ii) Threats to the local landscape character, land use or biodiversity in terms of changes in the landscape characteristics of Leicestershire

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