

Committee	Communities Scrutiny Committee
Date	16 May 2024
Title	Ash Dieback Disease
Cabinet Member	Councillor Berwyn Parry Jones
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Purpose	Update on the ash dieback survey and treatment programme and on the team's activities in general.

1. Introduction

- 1.1** Ash dieback disease is an extremely destructive fungus that specifically affects ash trees. The first cases of the disease were recorded in the UK in 2012 and are now widespread across Wales, including Gwynedd. The disease causes a range of symptoms, from leaf decay to branches falling without warning. Ultimately, it adversely affects the structural stability of most trees it infects.
- 1.2** Apart from the obvious health and safety risk, the disease poses a range of other risks to local authorities, including economic, environmental, and reputational risks. As a result, the Council's insurers, Zurich Municipal, regard the risk of falling trees, and ash dieback in particular, as one of their priorities. To this end, the potential impact of the disease on our residents and employees has been included on the Council's corporate risk register.

2. Establishing the Ash Dieback Team

- 2.1** Work commenced on collecting data to identify and quantify the problem on the Council's roads and grounds in June 2020. The surveys were undertaken by specialist contractors, and an Ash Dieback Support Officer was appointed to coordinate the work. Nearly 15,000 trees were inspected that year and, of these, over 3,000 ash trees and other species were identified as being in the high-risk category requiring immediate action. About 30 of the trees (mostly on school grounds) needed immediate attention to protect the public.
- 2.2** As a result of this data, the Council recognised that the situation posed a corporate risk to the authority. Therefore, in September 2021, the authority approved the Department's request to fund two new posts, that of Senior Officer and Arboriculturist, in addition to the existing Support Officer, in order to create a specialist team to manage the disease on its roads and grounds. At the same time, the team was allocated a permanent budget of £100k to conduct operational work such as inspecting, felling, and pruning infected trees.
- 2.3** Since its formation, the team has continued with the tree inspection programme, carried out full tree condition assessments and produced work programmes to deal with trees that pose a public safety risk. They also communicate with private landowners and issue legal warnings as necessary if their trees pose a safety risk to users of our roads and grounds.

- 2.4** More recently, the team has prepared information packs and resources on the Council's website to raise public awareness of the disease.
- 2.5** In addition to their work with the disease, the team offers advice to other Council officers on matters relating to trees. However, this does not mean that they have taken over the regular tree inspection and treatment responsibilities of each department, nor do they function as the first point of contact in relation to receiving complaints about defective trees in general. These duties continue with relevant officers in the departments unless they apply to ash trees.

3. Ash tree inspection and treatment update

- 3.1** The team gives high priority to surveying trees that are on or near our main roads, schools, cemeteries, and other public open spaces (this is after evaluating the risks in terms of their relative likelihood and impact). As a result, the majority of our unclassified roads, grounds with less use etc. have yet to receive planned surveys.
- 3.2** As well as conducting surveys on trees from new, the team also revisits sites that have already been surveyed to establish whether the condition of trees designated as high risk at the time has changed and also whether the condition of nearby trees previously designated as medium risk has deteriorated.
- 3.3** A total of over 23,000 trees have been inspected since 2020 with nearly 8,000 of them identified as being in the high-risk category.
- 3.4** Once high-risk trees have been identified, the team follows a recognised tree risk assessment approach (Quantified Tree Risk Assessment - QTRA) in order to include and prioritise them on their felling and pruning programme. Of the 8,000 high-risk trees identified to date, only 710 have been felled or pruned so far.
- 3.5** The current operating budget of £100k is used for not only felling and pruning trees, but also for other costs e.g. depreciation of vehicles, licences, equipment etc. This means there is only around £70k left for tree inspection and treatment works annually.
- 3.6** Requests for advice from other Council officers regarding ash trees and other species are increasing. Team members are ready to advise any officer on matters relating to trees. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to do so while also fulfilling their day-to-day role. As a result, the Department will need to prioritise requests against the day-to-day work programme.

4. Other considerations

- 4.1 *Private trees:*** It is stated in 2.3 above that the team communicates with private landowners and issues legal warnings as necessary. Landowners are responsible for maintaining trees growing on their lands and have a duty of care to ensure they do not pose a threat to people or property.
- 4.1.1 The Council has powers under the Highways Act 1980 and the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 to pursue landowners to make their dangerous trees safe and also to conduct work 'in-default' should they refuse to do so. The team manages this in relation to ash trees.
- 4.1.2 More than seven hundred of the 8,000 trees identified as high risk are from private lands. However, the team has not yet had the opportunity to contact the majority of landowners and follow the necessary processes to ensure that their trees are made safe.
- 4.2 *Technology:*** The team already uses the specialist asset management software 'Ezytreev' for coordinating and managing the data collected on trees. This software has helped significantly with scheduling felling work etc. However, it can be difficult to prioritise which trees should receive detailed inspections and in which locations unless the team has firstly undertaken preliminary surveys on its roads and grounds. This can take a lot of time and resources to implement.
- 4.2.1 To this end, the team is currently working with the surveying team within Gwynedd Consultancy to discover more efficient methods of accomplishing this. One method they are experimenting with is using drones to fly over wooded areas so that 'hot-spots' can be quickly identified. If the experiment is successful, it could revolutionise how the team prioritises where to conduct detailed inspections so that the trees that pose the greatest risk to the public can be surveyed first.
- 4.3 *Disposal of felled trees:*** This was a topic of discussion prior to the formation of the team. Presently, we rely on our contractors to deal with trees that have been felled. Depending on their size, the contractors either chip the trees on site or transport them off site to sell on as firewood. These are Council assets that have financial value. However, while consideration has been given for the Council itself to store the trees and sell them, the logistics of doing so, and the financial constraints, have prevented the project from moving forward.
- 4.3.1 However, the team is presently trying to secure funding to commission a feasibility study to identify options for tree disposal as well as tree replanting to compensate for the resulting carbon loss. This will be a priority over the coming months with an aim of getting clear arrangements in place by the Autumn.

- 4.4 *Tree Management Policy:*** The Council already has a policy on how to manage trees on its roads and grounds. However, it is outdated and some Services do not adhere to it sufficiently to fully defend the Council against third party claims, or worse, prosecution in the event of an accident. As previously mentioned, Zurich Municipal considers the risk of falling trees as one of their priorities.
- 4.4.1 A working group has been formed to review the existing policy so that it is more closely aligned with the national guidelines. This Department has a leading role on the working group which includes input from the ash dieback team. The working group is working closely with Zurich Municipal on the content of the revised policy. However, it should be noted that if the policy is adopted in its new guise, then it is anticipated that there will be significant resource implications for a number of Council Services.
- 4.5 *One Stop Shop:*** It has already been mentioned that the team deals with several enquiries from other Services about the condition of trees etc. In fact, apart from the team and a couple of specialists in the Environment Department, there are hardly any other individuals within the Council that officers can turn to in relation to tree matters.
- 4.5.1 Since the new tree management policy is anticipated to place a much greater demand on site managers in relation to tree inspections, felling and so on, it may be more effective to build a corporate specialist tree management team and have it responsible for all aspects of the Council's tree management. It would need to be carefully planned and financially supported to make the proposal a reality. However, it is something worth considering and could potentially lead to financial savings in the long term.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1** Although there is evidence that the ash dieback disease poses less risk as time goes on, there is no empirical evidence to support this. Some authorities report that they are now encountering fewer cases of the disease and consequently are felling or pruning fewer trees. However, their situation is often not put into context i.e. the size of the authority, whether they are rural or urban, when they began surveying and treating infected trees, or if they have been fortunate enough to have adequate resources from the outset to fully deal with the disease.
- 5.2** In relation to Gwynedd Council's roads and grounds, there is no evidence that the disease is in decline. Even if there was evidence that it was, many trees on Council roads and grounds remain unsurveyed. In addition, a considerable number of high-risk trees remain on the team's programme of work (without regard to any diseased trees that may be identified in future surveys). As a result, it is anticipated that the disease will continue as a high risk for the Council and that the team will be dealing with its effects for years to come.