
Report to Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee

17 November 2023

Ash Die Back Action Plan - Progress Update

Report by Assistant Director, Highways, Transport and Planning

1. Summary

- 1.1 Ash Dieback (ADB) is a disease that is likely to kill 95% of the county's ash trees over the next 10–20 years. This will have a major impact on the county's landscape, the wildlife it supports, other ecosystems that trees provide, and climate change. It will also have a high impact on the County Council, posing a significant risk to people, property (including schools), and the delivery of services (including highways). In 2019, an Ash Die Back Action Plan was formulated to steer the County Council's response to this issue.
- 1.2 This paper provides a summary of current progress which has been incorporated into an updated version of the Action Plan.

2. Focus for Scrutiny.

- 2.1 To review the performance against the ADB Action Plan and to consider the preferred initial 'Recovery' phase of natural regeneration.

3. Background and Context

- 3.1 The Action Plan sets out the County Council approach to managing ash dieback. The format of the Plan was recommended by The Tree Council to ensure users are able to compare our response to national guidance and to other councils.
- 3.2 The Action Plan objectives are to manage the risks from Ash Dieback and to generate positive routes to recovery. This includes defining a risk-based approach, manage the legal position and risks, consider environmental and biodiversity and plan for a responsible felling programme.
- 3.3 To deliver these objectives, an Ash Dieback Team (ADB Team) has been established with an Ash Dieback Project Lead, supported by dedicated arboricultural resource and project officers who undertake landowner liaison.
- 3.4 Comprehensive surveys of the network began in 2019, initially focusing on the A and B roads and followed up with surveys of the remaining network in 2021. Covid-19 impacted surveying operations during 2020. Surveys were carried by WSP (our professional services provider) and comprised driven surveys undertaken by a tree specialist and dedicated driver. All sites were photographed. More detailed 'ground-truthing' is then undertaken on a

rolling basis, according to risk, by our arboriculturists. This includes a more detailed assessment of ownership of the ash trees.

- 3.5 Following a formal procurement process a mass ADB felling contract was awarded to Euroforest that commenced on 1 April 2022. The contract duration is initially 4 years with the ability to extend in one-year periods for a maximum duration of seven years in total. It is not possible at this stage to be sure how long the programme will be, as site surveys immediately prior to the work are required to accurately understand extent of die back. The ADB Team have been working hard in the first year of the contract to pull together programmes of work for the contractor and we have seen significant felling works delivered across the county.
- 3.6 Felling has predominantly focused on the risk to highway users, but has also included works on the corporate estate, Public Rights of Way, and Countryside sites. Highway works are delivered on a priority basis utilising survey results, focusing on the extent of die back and classification of road as the two main drivers for prioritisation. The ADB Team have worked hard to identify and support landowners where private trees have been identified as being at risk of impacting the highway, including collaborative site works to minimise cost and disruption to the public.
- 3.7 Approximately 5,000 individual trees have been removed over the course of the first year of the mass felling contract with a spend of in the region of £1.5 million. This included savings resulting from the value of wood arisings, which amounted to £65,000 based on a return of £30 per tonne of wood removed from sites.
- 3.8 It is considered that progress to date is in line with the County Council's Ash Die Back Action Plan. The Plan has been reviewed to ensure that it provides an up-to-date approach to the removal of impacted ash trees in West Sussex.

4. Recovery phase

- 4.1 As we move through the 'Action' phase of the plan, focus will turn to the 'Recovery' phase where consideration will be given to how the County Council mitigates the impact of the loss of trees across the county. Survey locations have been established to understand the levels and benefits of natural regeneration at treated sites. The recovery focus will be on natural regeneration as a first phase, and the planned surveys will assist in understanding the impact on the ecology of the site and whether compensatory planting should be considered.
- 4.2 The majority of cleared sites are not suitable for re-planting, as the stumps and root systems are being retained on site to encourage regeneration and there is not sufficient space. It is likely that should large scale compensatory planting be considered; suitable land would need to be identified that enables good access for initial planting and ongoing maintenance. The requirement for maintenance would be significant in the first few years as the saplings establish, most importantly ensuring that sufficient watering is undertaken.
- 4.3 Intelligence from sites indicates that the extent of die back and speed of spread is as expected and in line with the known nature of the disease.

There is evidence to suggest that some trees show resilience to the disease and where safe and practical, these trees are being retained and monitored on an annual basis. It may be possible to utilise seed stock from these resilient trees to re-establish a resistant stock of ash trees both in the County and across the country.

5. Funding

5.1 Ash Dieback has a revenue budget of £1.635m in 2023/24. Future years allocations are subject to annual approval of the County Council's Revenue Budget by Full Council in February. Outturn expenditure in 2022/23 was £1.369m against a budget of £1.555m.

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
	£m	£m	£m	£m
Revenue Budget	1.555	1.635	1.635	1.635

5.2 There is also a £1.2m balance held in reserve for Ash Dieback.

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Appendices:

Appendix A - Updated Ash Dieback Action Plan

Background Documents:

[Ash Dieback Action Plan \(westsussex.gov.uk\)](https://www.westsussex.gov.uk)