

Report to: Environment Committee, 14th March 2023

Report of: Corporate Director - Operations, Homes and Communities

Subject: MANAGEMENT OF ASH DIEBACK - UPDATE REPORT

1. Recommendation

1.1 That the Committee note the contents of the report and that a further report will be presented to this Committee in Summer 2023, setting out a formal action plan for managing ash dieback, along with additional investment required.

2. Background

2.1 Ash Dieback *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* (formerly *Chalara fraxinea*) is now established across significant areas of Worcester City, although not every ash tree is currently showing signs of disease. **Appendix 1** of this report contains 2 images of trees within the city that are showing signs of disease.

2.2 Assessment of stress indicators of infected trees suggests that Ash Dieback has been significantly affecting trees within Worcester City for 3-4 years.

2.3 Upon recommendation from The Tree Council and Forest Research Agency, Worcester City Council have adopted the Suffolk County Council Ash Health Assessment System.

2.4 This will enable the Council to categorise the health of ash trees in line with a national standard and also allows assessment to be performed by a layperson with minimal training.

2.5 Using the Suffolk County Council Ash Health Assessment System in late summer/early autumn 2022, the conditions of Worcester City's mature and semi-mature ash trees were estimated as:

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| • Class 1 (100 – 75% canopy remaining) | 20% |
| • Class 2 (74 – 50% canopy remaining) | 75% |
| • Class 3 (49 – 25% canopy remaining) | 5% |
| • Class 4 (24 – 0% canopy remaining) | <1% |

2.6 At **Appendix 2** of this report, reference photographs which form part of the Suffolk County Council Ash Health Assessment System are included to assist Members with visualising Class 1 – Class 4 graded trees.

2.7 The figures estimated for Worcester City are consistent with trees in surrounding geographical areas.

- 2.8 Current advice from the Forestry Commission and Forest Research Agency is that diseased ash trees in public spaces should be removed early *once infection can be positively diagnosed*, as the costs and risks associated with the tree increase as the disease progresses.
- 2.9 Once infection is apparent, few trees survive longer than 4 years. While trees exhibit differing levels of resistance to the disease, once a tree shows significant signs of stress, recovery is impossible.
- 2.10 It is projected that the bulk of necessary ash tree removal within the city should be conducted over the next 3 years. This is based upon current observations of the condition of ash trees, and the rate of disease progression reported and seen within comparable sites in neighbouring counties.
- 2.11 It is reasonable to assume that there will be expected eventual losses of at least 95% of ash trees on City Council owned land, particularly in areas of plantation and wood. Trees standing alone survive longer than trees in wooded areas.
- 2.12 In terms of actual numbers, it is estimated that between 2000-4000 ash trees will be of a size that will require intervention on City Council land. Previous survey work has estimated that ash is approximately 8% of Worcester's total tree population, although distribution is focussed on several areas.
- 2.13 Warndon Villages has the highest concentration of ash, during its development ash was 40% of total trees planted. Due to natural regeneration and losses, some wooded areas are now as high as 80% ash. As such, Warndon Villages could lose up to 50% of total canopy cover.
- 2.14 Large, mature ash trees are a prominent feature of Gheluveld Park, Diglis Park, Lansdowne Park, and Astwood Cemetery and so these areas will also be prone to losses.

3. Next steps

- 3.1 A formal action plan based upon the template from The Tree Council is currently being drawn up for Ash Dieback and will be brought back to committee in Summer 2023 along with identified costs.
- 3.2 In summer 2023 it is also planned to launch a Citizen Science Project, which will gather more accurate ash census and condition data, with involvement from Worcestershire Wildlife Trust and Worcester Environment Group.
- 3.3 As part of developing a communications strategy, signage and a clear public communication plan will be developed to raise public awareness and understanding of ash dieback disease before widespread tree losses become evident. This will include advice to private landowners of their responsibilities and guidance for managing diseased trees.
- 3.4 If managed correctly, the removal of ash trees will lead to an overall improvement of both the amenity value, and ecological value of Worcester's wooded areas. During tree removals, every opportunity will be taken to create wildlife features such as standing deadwood.

- 3.5 Sale of wood product will also be investigated to offset the additional costs of ash tree removal, and some trees may be processed for use in general maintenance. It may also be possible to use some wood product for natural play equipment, in coordination with the Strategic Play Area Development Plan project.
- 3.6 A programme of extensive replanting will be developed to repopulate areas with ash trees, this will be planned in advance of felling, and form part of the action plan.
- 3.7 Members will be consulted regarding ash removals in their wards and in respect of replanting programmes.

Ward(s): All
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Background Papers:

Ash Dieback – Environment Committee, 27 October 2021

Suffolk Canopy Description - <https://treecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Suffolk-Canopy-Description.pdf>

Tree Council Ash Dieback Toolkit - <https://treecouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/science-and-research/ash-dieback/local-authority-ash-dieback-action-plan-toolkit/>

Appendix 1 - Examples of Ash dieback within Worcester City

Figure 1: An ash tree at dieback crown class 4, located on Coles Meadow, adjacent to Penhill Crescent. 02/11/2022.



Figure 2: Ash Dieback stem lesions on a young tree in Astwood Cemetery. 27/10/2022.



Appendix 2 - Suffolk Ash Health Assessment System reference photos.

