

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL**  
**Wednesday 15 May 2019**

**1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR GREENSLADE**  
**Re: Lobbying and Ash Die Back**

Following the recent report which suggests dealing with ash dieback could cost some £15bn, Devon will obviously be facing a considerable bill. Does the Leader have any estimate as to the likely cost to DCC?

Secondly does he agree that like with storm damage costs Government should be stepping in with some form of financial assistance perhaps like a Bellwin type arrangement to help fund the cost of this natural disaster?

Lastly does the County Council have plans to lobby Government for financial help Including lobbying Devon MP's for support?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR HART**

A comprehensive report on the likely implications of ash dieback for Devon was presented to Cabinet at its meeting of 16 May 2018 (Minute \* 176). This included an estimate of the likely cost to DCC of dealing with this tree disease on the county road network and its own estate.

This initial estimate (i.e. £2.5m for manual felling of trees where Devon County Council has direct responsibility, with up to an additional £100k/annum to administer this activity, plus provision of £250k to fund replacement planting) is very significantly less than the costs estimated by the recent national research. The reasons for the discrepancy in the DCC cost estimate and those set out in the recently published research include the following:

- The majority of the national quoted figure is due to the loss of 'ecosystem services' provided by ash (i.e. costs incurred by society in general), rather than directly incurred costs;
- The estimate cost for each felled tree, on which the research is understood to have been based, far exceeds the typical costs currently incurred by DCC through its tree framework contract;
- The national research appears to ignore the fact that the great majority of all roadside trees are the responsibility of private landowners, rather than Devon County Council.

Notwithstanding these points, the potential financial implications of dealing with ash dieback for this Authority are of significant concern. On this basis, a communications campaign will shortly be launched to highlight private landowners' tree safety responsibilities. Devon County Council is already working very closely with others, including the Devon Ash Dieback Resilience Forum and The Tree Council, to highlight the huge threats of this disease. This work includes regular liaison with Defra and representatives of Government Agencies, through which the need for financial and practical support for local government and others most significantly affected by ash dieback is addressed.

**2. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR GREENSLADE**

## **Re: Connecting Devon and Somerset and Rural Areas**

What is the DCC response to recent complaints by a group of Parish Council's that 50,000 homes and businesses in the rural south west are effectively on Indefinite hold with the programme to bring superfast broadband to these rural Area's.

Why as the Connecting Devon and Somerset organisation put out little public information about the seven month contractual hold up which comes on top of five years of previous delays?

I hope the Cabinet Member will agree with me that completing the roll out of super fast broadband is a priority in attempts to regenerate the rural economies?

### **REPLY BY COUNCILLOR GILBERT**

The Member for Barnstaple North will recall that when the Coalition Government set out its objective for the rural broadband programme it anticipated that only a third of rural England would require publicly-funded intervention to deliver superfast broadband. The Coalition Government assumed that two-thirds of rural areas would benefit from wholly commercially-funded broadband infrastructure.

That did not prove to be the case in Devon and Somerset where the challenging terrain and sparsely populated countryside was less attractive to commercial investors.

Happily, the Connecting Devon and Somerset programme stepped up and quite literally went the extra miles. To date, thanks to CDS it is not just a third of our sparsely populated rural areas that have access to publicly-subsidised superfast broadband, but actually a half and in North Devon it is now over 55%. Over 250,000 miles of optical fibre has been laid by the CDS programme, enough to circle the Earth ten times, in what continues to be one of the biggest mass digital engineering ventures of its kind. The commercial market is playing its part and it is good to see positive signs that our region is becoming more attractive to private sector investment in broadband in the wake of CDS' ground-breaking roll-out, but the commercial market should do more to provide broadband to areas without a service. It is not enough to simply overbuild on existing provision.

It is CDS that continues to make the hard yards to ensure our rural communities and businesses benefit from the digital revolution. Over 300,000 homes and businesses now have access to superfast broadband entirely thanks to the CDS programme. Nearly 40,000 more have access to improved broadband connections because of CDS. Every month hundreds more homes and businesses are getting access to superfast broadband thanks to CDS. That vital work is continuing and CDS is committed to helping communities get superfast broadband if the commercial market won't. To provide additional opportunities for people to access broadband CDS has joined the national Better Broadband Voucher Scheme, which mean any home or business with less than 2 Mbps and not part of planned deployment from another publicly funded scheme within the next 12 months can request a voucher.

The public take up of broadband services as a result of CDS is nearly 55%, in line with the UK average, and that is generating millions of pounds of additional investment back into the CDS programme thanks to the Government's gainshare deal with BT. There is benefit too for the Heart of the South West economy. The CDS programme is boosting productivity, generating hundreds of millions of pounds in business growth, increasing jobs and prosperity, and transforming the prospects of our rural and coastal communities.

CDS takes a proactive, hands-on approach with its contractors, supporting them and also challenging them where necessary. Airband is making good progress across northern and western Devon and the National Parks. BT has entered into a new collaboration with CDS that will see the programme expand coverage into some of our hardest to reach and most deprived areas. Gigaclear is continuing to build a new full fibre network for communities across the CDS area at its own cost, backed by the company's owners Infracapital, part of M&G Prudential.

Gigaclear has by its own admission incurred a number of delays which were no fault of CDS and were set out in a joint briefing for Members in November, last year. A further update was

provided to Members in March. Briefings are also provided to unitary and district councils, Members of Parliament and published on the CDS website. Press releases have been issued and Gigaclear, in close consultation with CDS, has notified affected parishes and issued public apologies. Residents and businesses have been let down as a result of these delays and CDS has made it clear to Gigaclear that the situation cannot continue indefinitely. The company is on notice of default and CDS is withholding public funding to Gigaclear pending receipt of a recovery plan that is satisfactory both to CDS and the Government. CDS will not shrink from taking further tough action if that is deemed necessary. CDS is not the only programme affected by delays and Gigaclear is not the only contractor to have run into problems, but CDS' top priority is and always will be delivering digital connectivity to our rural communities and businesses.

It is pleasing that the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport backed CDS' bid to extend over £18 million of Government funding for superfast broadband in Devon and Somerset to March 2023. There has been a positive response from HM Treasury which is finalising an agreement for the funding extension with DCMS subject to the Spending Review process. I am grateful for the support CDS has received from DCMS officials and particularly the Digital Minister Margot James and Liz Truss, Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

It underlines the confidence in CDS and the vital work the programme is doing in often very challenging conditions. It means CDS has the flexibility to either agree an acceptable revised timetable with Gigaclear to complete a new ultrafast full-fibre network or CDS can pursue alternative full-fibre solutions for our residents and businesses. CDS has begun the process of testing the market to properly assess not only what alternative options there may be if required, but also to assess what potential exists to extend broadband coverage to the most difficult to reach areas of our region.