

Impact Assessment

Version 2017

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Assessment of:	Managing Ash Dieback in Devon
Service:	Highways

Head of Service:	Meg Booth
Date of sign off by Head Of Service/version:	Version 1 - 2 nd May 2018
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Section 1 - Background

Description:	Ash dieback is a serious tree disease which is likely to kill at least 95% of all native ash trees in Devon (as elsewhere) over the coming ten years. As ash trees are the second most common of all tree species found in Devon, accounting for approximately 20% of all trees present, this represents a significant threat to public safety, as well as an environmental crisis. This impact assessment relates to Devon County Council's intended approach to the management of this tree disease from both a public safety and environmental perspective.
Reason for change/review:	This issue is being assessed now in response to a report to be considered by the DCC Cabinet at its meeting on 16 th May 2018 at which the DCC approach to managing ash dieback is to be considered. This assessment supports the relevant Cabinet report.

Section 2 - Impacts, options and recommendations

See sections 3, 4 and 5 for background analysis

<p>Options Appraisal and Recommendations:</p>	<p>DCC must decide how to address the significant risks associated with ash dieback. There are two main options:</p> <p><u>Option 1 – Adopt a planned and proactive approach to dealing with the public safety and environmental issues which are likely to result from ash dieback.</u></p> <p>This will require modification to the current policies and procedures employed by DCC in dealing with tree safety, as set out in the DCC Tree Safety Policy and the associated framework contracts for the surveying of trees and for tree safety works. Specifically, the frequency of tree inspections will need to be varied to ensure that infection is spotted in time and can be dealt with to limit public safety issues. However, DCC will only deal with trees for which it has legal responsibility and will expect others to take appropriate action to prevent risk or problems affecting the county highway network or DCC property. It will also require some action to be taken to address the anticipated environmental consequences of this tree disease, most notably by promoting / undertaking the planting trees to replace the huge number that will be lost to ash dieback. It is proposed that resources are made available to facilitate this approach.</p> <p>Pros – This proactive approach should be effective, to some degree, in addressing the anticipated public safety and environmental issues. Not only will action taken by DCC help to reduce risk to the public directly, but its example and leadership of the Devon Ash Dieback Resilience Forum might help to encourage effective action to be taken by others in a timely manner. The same is true of its intended proactive approach to the environmental consequences.</p> <p>Cons – A proactive approach will require the release of new and dedicated resources (i.e. funding for staff, for increased work through contractors and to fund the intended approaches to ecological mitigation). It also should be noted that taking this proactive action cannot prevent or lessen the disease, nor fully remove the increased risk to public safety and the environment.</p>
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Option 2 – Continue with current policies and procedures, taking no new action to manage the public safety and environmental issues which are likely to result from ash dieback.

This laissez-faire approach means that there will be no need to divert from the current tree safety policy and procedures, which are designed to deal with public safety risk associated with diseased, damaged or otherwise dangerous trees. Nor will it require any specific action in response to the environmental consequences of the disease.

Pros – This approach is straightforward, being based on a continuation of current practices. It will also avoid the need to release new and dedicated resources to deal with the situation in a proactive and planned manner, at least in the short term.

Cons – The disease cannot be prevented, so DCC will have to react and respond to it, regardless. The only issue is whether it deals with it in a pre-planned and proactive manner, or whether it adopts a more laissez-faire and reactive approach. This latter option will significantly increase the risk of public safety issues and will mean no effective environmental mitigation. In the event of a fatality or serious injury linked to insufficient or inappropriate action by DCC, there could a risk of legal action against the Authority. In addition, a lack of leadership by DCC, could limit the effectiveness of action taken by other organisations, meaning that the issues listed will be compounded across Devon.

On this basis, the report that is being presented to Cabinet recommends that a planned and proactive approach is adopted. Specifically, the following are recommended:

1. A variation to the frequency of tree inspections;
2. The release of resources to mitigate the Authorities liabilities linked to this disease, with this matched to its progress throughout the county.
3. Support and resource a programme of environmental mitigation in line the principles established through the Devon Ash Dieback Resilience Forum (chaired by DCC).

<p>Social/equality impacts (summary):</p>	<p>The very rapid loss of many millions of ash trees (i.e. approximately 20% of all trees) across Devon over a short time span will, inevitably, result in adverse social impacts for people in Devon, including all residents and visitors. There are likely to be specific consequences for certain groups, including land owners and managers and those involved in rural business linked to tree and woodland management, timber production and processing and, potentially, those involved in tourism. The indirect effects of the environmental consequences of significant tree loss will also have wider implications for Devon residents and for visitors across large parts of the county.</p> <p>Anticipated impacts are likely to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Consequences for public health and wellbeing or, indeed, quality of life, linked to a degraded natural environment. b) Implications for air quality and temperature regulation, particularly where there are significantly fewer trees in urban areas or in the vicinity of roads. c) Issues linked to greater slope instability, soil erosion, surface water run-off and increased flood risk. This could have localised implications for agriculture, for watercourses and for communities already vulnerable to flood risk. <p>Addressing these issues will require action to be taken not just by DCC, but by organisations, communities and individuals right across Devon.</p> <p><u>Note</u>: no specific equality issues have been identified. This is because ash dieback is a natural phenomenon, which will affect everyone in Devon in a variety of ways and which the whole of society has to address. Although there will be a requirement for particular action by certain sectors of society, particularly land owner individuals and organisation or others who have responsibility for tree management, they already hold these responsibilities, regardless of this disease. Nothing that is proposed by DCC will result in new and unfair burdens on particular sectors.</p>
<p>Environmental impacts (summary):</p>	<p>The inevitable and near complete loss of our second most common tree species in Devon represents an environmental crisis, although one caused by a tree disease, which is a natural process. The obvious environmental impacts will be upon Devon's wildlife interests and on the quality of its landscape. From a wildlife perspective, the loss of ash trees will result in detrimental impacts upon a wide range of wildlife interests that they support (e.g. birds, bats, insects, lichens etc..). From a landscape perspective, the longer terms impacts</p>

	<p>are likely to be most serious in areas outside of woodlands. Although many woodlands will be devastated in the short term, other species of tree and shrub are likely, quite quickly, to regenerate naturally, or through planned re-stocking. In contrast, very little such natural replacement is likely to occur in non-woodland situation, where ash is an important hedgerow or field tree and is very commonly found alongside roads and riverbanks. Here, the replacement of trees will be very much more dependent upon direct planning and intervention by man.</p>
Economic impacts (summary):	<p>There are likely to be specific consequences for certain groups, including land owners and managers and those involved in rural business linked to tree and woodland management, timber production and processing and, potentially, those involved in tourism. Those organisations with very significant responsibility for tree management and safety will, inevitably, have to invest significant resource in dealing with this disease, which may have implications for their wider financial wellbeing; these impacts will be greatest over the main period of infection by ash dieback, which we cannot predict at present, although it is thought to be likely over the next 10 years or so. Businesses focussed on forestry and timber products are likely to be particularly affected, although there will be gains and opportunities, as well as increased problems and costs (e.g. very high demand for trained tree operatives). The environmental consequences of the disease may well have knock-on impacts for the tourist industry, with attractive landscapes and environments made less so, particularly in the short term as a result of widespread tree disease/ death and associated tree felling. Once again, any such impacts are likely to lessen over time, after the main phase of tree infection and loss.</p>
Other impacts (partner agencies, services, DCC policies, possible 'unintended consequences'):	<p>The impacts documented above relate to the likely consequences of the infection and death of the great majority of our ash trees due to ash dieback, rather than the policy changes proposed by DCC. However, as explained above, the severity of the impacts will be influenced by the approach taken by DCC. As already mentioned, it is not just an issue of the direct action taken by DCC and the degree to which this reduces tree safety problems and environmental impacts, but equally important is the influence that DCC might have over others.</p> <p>In the knowledge of the likely severity of ash dieback, DCC worked alongside others to establish the Devon Ash Dieback Resilience Forum, which it chairs. Its purpose is to encourage widespread awareness and understanding of ash dieback and to promote coordinated approaches to action to mitigate its effects. This has included the production of a Devon Ash Dieback Action Plan, the production of other promotional and advisory literature and the staging of meetings and events.</p>

	<p>One of the dilemmas that would result from a proactive approach to addressing ash dieback is that putting too much emphasis on the tree safety aspects (e.g. taking action unduly early to remove infected trees and, to limit costs, removing nearby trees showing no signs of infection) could compound the environmental consequences. Wherever possible, trees that may have resistance to the disease should be given the chance to survive. As far as possible, trees should only be removed at the time that such action is properly justified. Achieving this right balance is likely to be difficult and is likely to require different approaches over time, as the disease progresses.</p> <p>DCC and the Devon Ash Dieback Resilience Forum have already recognised the problems that ash dieback will present for compliance with legislative systems and processes which are designed to protect certain trees or limit inappropriate tree felling. These include the system of felling licences, tree preservation orders and the specific requirements in Conservation Areas. At present, it is possible for DCC to deal with these issues through its normal tree safety inspection and works programme. However, when faced with the huge increase in workloads as large number of trees have to be removed, this will no longer be manageable. For this reason, DCC has been working with other organisations at a national level to consider what changes to these systems and processes might be necessary; advice from Central Government is currently awaited on these issues.</p> <p>One of the consequences of the formation of the Devon Ash Dieback Resilience Forum is the development of shared proposals for environmental mitigation. This has included the establishment of a partnership of organisations who have develop a funding bid, which is being linked with similar proposals elsewhere in the country through coordination by the Woodland Trust, and for which a grant request will be made through the Heritage Lottery Fund. The recommendations made to Cabinet suggest the release of funding to match-fund this bid / project. If the bid is successful, the implementation of the project will provide a practical means by which DCC might discharge its adopted responsibilities for the replacement of the infected ash trees that it has to fell. But, beyond this, it should also help to support a comprehensive programme of community engagement in ash dieback initiatives and action (particularly tree planting) across Devon.</p>
How will impacts and actions be monitored?	<p>DCC already has systems in place to monitor safety issues affecting the tree stock that it has responsibility for; it is the frequency of tree inspections which will be changed as a result of the recommended new approach. However, such inspections are designed to address the risk presented by specific trees, rather than providing an advance assessment of the spread of the disease and the extent of infection, to inform overall approaches to be</p>

	<p>adopted by DCC. For this reason, a new type of monitoring has been introduced to assess the level of infection at sample survey points across the road network. This will be continued for as long as it is useful.</p>
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	<p>The recommendations made to Cabinet also envisage ongoing monitoring of the way in which DCC is undertaking tree safety works as a result of its (proposed) proactive approach. This will happen through the teams dealing with tree safety policy and works. They will report to the DCC Tree Board, who will advise on changes to the frequency of tree inspections and also to the detailed procedures used to tackle the removal of trees infected by ash dieback in the most effective and efficient manner.</p>
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