Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

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Ash Dieback Action Plan

November 2023

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1. Summary

In line with the best practice approach advocated by Defra and the Tree Council, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC) have developed this action plan to outline how it plans to manage the anticipated risks and issues associated with the spread of ash dieback (ADB) across the Rotherham Borough.

This action plan seeks to ensure that the Council are ready and adequately resourced to respond to the effects of the disease and to implement a recovery plan. The disease has already reached parts of the borough, and during the next 5 to 15 years we will see widespread death of ash both in the borough and the region.

Based on experience from other northern European countries, it is prudent to assume that ADB may result in the loss of between 50% and 90% of ash trees. However, the levels of decline and mortality that will result are matters of considerable uncertainty. In addition, as described below, there may be a considerable difference between mortality rates in woodland and non-woodland (urban) situations.

The Council's Tree Management Protocol identifies a standard for the management of the Council's tree resource and it will provide the basis for safety assessments of ADB affected trees.

In line with the Tree Management Protocol, the Council will take a risk based approach to the management of ash dieback. The emphasis will be on maintaining the highest levels of health and safety for the public while aiming to minimise the impacts on landscape, ecology and the environment. High risk areas are considered to be highways, schools, playgrounds, and other areas of high public use.

2. What is Ash Dieback (ADB)

Ash dieback, formerly known as *Chalara*, affects ash and other *Fraxinus* species of trees and is caused by a fungal pathogen. The fungus, *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* (formerly *Chalara fraxinea*), arrived from Asia, where indigenous ash species have acquired resistance, to Europe during the 1990s and spread rapidly across Europe. Although the first official record in Britain was in 2012, evidence now suggests it arrived here earlier, with analysis demonstrating trees dying from the fungus in 2004. This invasive fungus causes a range of symptoms from foliar leaf spots to branch dieback to the death of *Fraxinus excelsior* (ash) trees and some other *Fraxinus* species. Once infected, the majority of trees will die. A few ash trees may survive the infection because of genetic factors which give them tolerance to the disease. In non-woodland situations such as urban areas, where trees tend to experience greater stress, the percentage of UK ash that are likely to be tolerant to the fungus is not yet well understood. In woodlands, evidence from December 2018 suggests mortality rates may be between 70% and 85%. Evidence from Europe suggests that around 10% of trees were found to be moderately tolerant to the disease, with 1-2% having high levels of tolerance. The environment also has a role in how trees decline from ash dieback, with trees growing outside of optimal conditions declining more quickly.

The fungus has spread rapidly across Europe. First recorded in Britain in 2012, evidence suggests it arrived here perhaps a decade earlier. It is now widespread in the environment, with the most advanced effects of the disease in southern and eastern counties, particularly Kent, East Anglia and Devon. The disease is already having a significant impact in the Peak District and in other parts of Derbyshire and Yorkshire. From observation and the data gathered so far, the disease is spreading across Sheffield from the south and west, though affected trees are present in all areas.

There is no cure for the disease, but trees do exhibit varying degrees of resilience. Even the long-term fate of highly resilient trees is not known since they can continue to be re-infected each year, over time this may lead to reduced vigour and increased susceptibility to other pathogens such as honey fungus *Armillaria*. A small proportion of trees, young and old, are highly susceptible to the disease and are severely affected soon after the disease arrives in an area.

The rate of decline of any individual tree varies with age, young trees dying quickly and mature trees declining more slowly. As an example, the photographs below show the change in one tree in Devon over a one year period (photographs taken 06/07/16 and 07/07/17 respectively). The pictures show a 10 -15% decline in the canopy in a single year and anecdotal reports from areas of the UK currently infected by ash dieback support this as a typical rate of decline. However, some individual trees (depending on their health and condition) can decline much more rapidly.

Research is ongoing into the relative tolerance of UK native ash. The Living Ash Project, established by a partnership of organisations including Defra and Forest Research, is currently carrying out screening and selection trials to identify individuals with a high degree of tolerance which may be cloned or bred for future restocking. However, it remains sensible to plan on the basis that a high proportion of our ash trees will *eventually* be killed or severely damaged.

The disease is spread by the wind through spores produced from fruiting bodies on the central stem (the rachis) of fallen leaves, or in some cases on small, moist pieces of infected shoots. Infection mostly occurs through spores landing on leaves or twigs but, importantly, can also occur at the base of trunks. Where such root collar infection occurs, the affected trees can, if infected by honey fungus, rapidly become unstable and dangerous, without any obvious dieback symptoms in the canopy. Basal infection seems to occur mainly in forests and woodlands. It is important to note that because there are multiple entry points for the spores, individual branches can become brittle and vulnerable to failure before die-back in the rest of the crown is very advanced.

Basal canker on young ash

The disease affects all ash trees: young or old; maiden, coppice or pollard. Young trees and coppice re-growth succumb quickly, but many healthy mature trees seem to be able to survive for many years, depending on their growing conditions. So far in South Yorkshire, large trees outside woodlands seem to be disproportionately badly affected, while inside woodlands younger trees are more affected. This is perhaps due to the relative spore densities: outside woodlands the larger trees are more exposed to wind-borne spores and there is relatively little leaf litter; within woodlands the younger trees are nearer to the spore-producing leaf litter.

In the long term there is no way of stopping the spread of the disease. In the short term its spread can be delayed by the removal of fallen leaves (rarely practical except with isolated trees in an urban environment). Since the spores are wind-borne, biosecurity measures such as washing boots and vehicles when leaving infected sites are largely redundant in preventing the spread of ADB. However, biosecurity is still important in limiting the spread of other tree diseases, such as water-borne *Phytophthora* spp.

Typically, infection rates follow a J-shaped curve, with high levels of infection only apparent about 8 to 10 years after the fungus first arrives in an area. Experience from Suffolk, Kent and Devon suggests over 90% of woodland trees will exhibit symptoms, often severe ones. The degree to which the disease impacts on individual trees can, however, vary considerably between years - a progression towards death is not inevitable, although trees that are weakened will become more susceptible to other pathogens.

In non-woodland situations, there is currently still uncertainty about levels of infection, dieback and mortality. Many factors influence the severity of the disease in these situations include levels of tree stress, the density and age of trees, topography and hydrology and the prevalence of other pathogens such as honey fungus.

For further information on the biology of the fungus and on its symptoms see the following:

- The Forestry Commission. http://www.forestry.gov.uk/ashdieback
- The Living Ash Project http://livingashproject.org.uk/
- *Chalara: On the front-line.* Gary Batell, for Suffolk County Council. Presentation available http://rfs.org.uk/learning/external-advice-and-guidance/tree-diseases/ For an up-to-date GB map on confirmed reports for the disease, see http://chalaramap.fera.defra.gov.uk/

3. Ash Trees in Rotherham

Potential numbers of affected ash trees

An iTree survey was carried out by Treeconomics on behalf of the Council's Green Spaces service in the summer of 2023 to better understand tree density and species make and the results are due in early 2024. However, initial expectations are that there are around 80,000 trees in Rotherham, 10% of which could be ash.

National guidance suggests that the disease will kill up to 90% of Ash trees in woodlands, but for non-woodland trees the figures are more uncertain. A best-case scenario is that as few as 50% of Ash trees in urban areas will be killed, though surveys in Sheffield show that only a small fraction of trees are unaffected once the disease has taken hold in an area.

Some major urban streets, such as in the Broom area in Rotherham, are predominantly mature Ash avenues. ADB is likely to significantly change the urban aesthetic in these areas.

4. The Current Situation

Ash dieback has been confirmed in the Rotherham area in a small number of cases low numbers from 2018 to 2023, and has been treated as ‘business as normal’ as part of ongoing inspections and arboricultural works.

From 2023, financial records will split out works related to ADB in order for better financial planning for ADB in future years.

5. Managing the Risk

It is necessary to put the appropriate resources in the management of ash dieback (ADB) to manage the risk and liability as well as potential reputational damage to the Council. This action plan seeks to set out how the Council will address these issues.

The Town and Country planning Act 1999 and the legal framework relating to Tree Preservation Orders and Conservation areas and remains unchanged by the presence of ash dieback and each tree will be judged on its own merits. The existing exemptions for the removal of dead and dangerous trees allows for the speedy removal of the most dangerous trees. As for works to trees that do not require urgent and immediate action the normal processes should be followed.

Managing the Council’s trees

The Councils adopted Tree Management Protocol sets out the frequency of specialist tree inspections on Council land based on an assessment of the level of risk at each site, with better used sites inspected more frequently. Tree inspections take into account the likelihood of failure of any particular tree, the size of the tree or limb and the level of use in the target area. While these criteria will remain the same during the predicted epidemic, inspection frequencies may have to increase significantly, which is likely to require more resources.

Risk to tree workers

ADB infected trees can become unpredictably brittle and unsafe to climb at different stages of decline, so judging when action is necessary will depend on circumstances. Devon County Council have produced a triage assessment which assumes that trees are no longer safe to climb when they are at or below 50% live crown remaining. However, pull testing and felling taking place in 2019 in Sheffield showed that some trees are extremely brittle in whole or in part even at 75% or more of their live crown remaining. Many trees may therefore need felling using mobile elevated work platforms (MEWPs), cranes or even tree shears.

Prioritising work

Research conducted by Fera Science Ltd (formerly the Food and Environment Research Agency) in conjunction with Norfolk County Council indicates that 50% crown remaining is the point at which action should be considered for trees within falling distance of significant targets.

The Council’s Tree Service will prioritise work on trees which have between 50-25% crown remaining. However, each tree or tree group will have to be judged according to circumstance. Hazardous trees in low-risk areas such as woodlands away from paths or roads will, where possible, be left in order to conserve their ecological and

landscape value. In high-risk areas, however, where a progressive decline is noted, trees may have to be removed before they reach the 50% stage. This may also be the case for hard to access trees - see next section.

Hard to access trees

Trees in difficult locations e.g., surrounded by properties or infrastructure, in cemeteries, or where access for machinery is difficult, will also be considered for felling at a much earlier stage in the disease's progress, to minimise the risk to arborists working on the tree. This will be the case for some trees subject to Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) or in conservation areas, so planning applications for tree work will need to be considered with this in mind.

6. Impacts on the Private and Public Estate

Landscape and Biodiversity

Like most native species, ash supports an enormous number of organisms - invertebrates, fungi, lichen, birds, mammals, etc. Only a few of these are exclusively dependent on ash, but the loss of such a large number of trees will inevitably have an impact on many other populations at the same time. However, large amounts of different types of deadwood (small and large diameter, standing and fallen timber) will support other organisms. The potential loss of trees will also have a significant effect on the landscape, so a robust replanting programme is essential to the management of ash dieback. This programme should begin before large-scale felling has to take place.

Private Landowners

Besides the financial impact on private landowners/households of felling trees, there are potential liabilities should privately-owned trees fail. The Council will do its best to counter any lack of awareness or disregard of duty of care with publicity campaigns.

The Council will need to consider resources to deal with ash trees on private land. There is likely to be a significant increase in tree work applications to planning officers, so again there needs to be enough resource for these applications to be processed in time.

Private Contractors

Private Contractors will be on the frontline of the management of ADB. As the Council works
closely with those contractors, it can ensure that these works are
carried out as safely as possible given the available information and resources. The Ash Die Back plans of the Council's Tree Works contractors will form an important part of future contracts, so that there is confidence that third party workers are properly trained and protected.

Contractors working on private land, including school grounds, however, come with varying levels of expertise and knowledge, and there is a danger that uninformed or unqualified contractors will work on ADB-affected trees unaware of the actual risk they represent. The Council can advise the public when it is notified of work in conservation areas or on TPO trees, but otherwise it will ensure that the general public is aware of the dangers through publicity campaigns. The Tree Service will continue to work with schools through the Council's Education and Inclusion Service.

Financial Impacts (Council-managed Trees)

It is estimated that of the 8,000 Ash trees currently situated on council land, most will be in parks and along highways. It is also estimated that the Council will need to arrange for the removal of up to 7200 Ash trees on Council land as a direct result of the disease at an average cost of removing each tree is estimated at £400.

A replacement planting programme to ensure long-term replacement of total losses of Council managed trees (where natural regeneration from other species isn't likely) could cost a further £400 per tree.

Over a 10-year period from 2024/25 to 2033/34 this could cost the Council between £3.2 million (at 50% ash loss) and £5.76 million (at 90% ash loss).

7. Raising Awareness

Staff & Member Awareness

All Council staff that have inspection roles should have a basic knowledge of Ash Dieback so that they can report cases more accurately to the Tree Service for investigation and action.

Staff awareness should be raised generally through briefing sessions and for operational officers through specific Toolbox Talks and / or other training. Council Member briefing sessions will also be made available.

Press & Publicity

As well as affecting the Council's tree stock, ash dieback is just as likely to affect ash trees on private land and gardens. The Council should take every opportunity to encourage owners of trees in private ownership to inspect their own ash trees for signs of ash dieback and to encourage good arboricultural practice.

A document should be released on the Council's website aiding species and symptom recognition along with a facility for notifying the Council's Tree Service.

8. Recovery

Replacing the ash trees that will be lost over the next 10-15 years will be essential to restoring the landscape but will require a lot of trees, and money to pay for them. Expanding tree cover across the borough at the same time to meet commitments on climate change will make the task more challenging.

There has been an explosion of interest recently in planting trees in the UK and this makes it unlikely that enough commercial stock will be available to meet demand, at least in the short-term. NGOs such as the Woodland Trust and Trees for Cities may be able to meet some of the demand, but other options involving public contributions are likely to be needed.

In order to maintain bio-security and ecological integrity, any commercial stock will have to be specified as originating from British provenance seed which has been germinated and grown in Britain for the full extent of the tree's life.

In woodland areas natural regeneration will fill in gaps. Ash is not anticipated to be a particularly large component of Rotherham's woodlands.

9. Priority Actions, Estimated Costs and Lead Delivery Partners

Section 1: Strategic Framework
Section 2: Operational Considerations
Section 3: Risks and Issues
Section 4: Communication and Training
Section 5: Regulation

Section 1: Strategic Framework

No.	Topic	Key people/bodies affected	Actions	Priority	Cost Low <£10K Medium £10K -£100K High >£100K	Suggested lead	Delivery Timescale
1	Action plan delivery	RMBC Tee Team, ash tree owners, general public,	Establish a steering group to coordinate and promote this action plan and to monitor it, revising the plan as necessary.	High	Low	Green Spaces Manager	January 2024
2	Local Resilience Forum	Local authorities (LAs) in South Yorkshire area	Work with LA partners to establish a Local Resilience Forum to cover the wider Yorkshire area, for the sharing of resources and knowledge and a louder voice; establish a local network to deal with action on the ground and feed into the larger body.	High	Low	RMBC Other LAs NGOs (Wildlife Trusts, etc.) Contractors	July 2024
4	Works Protocols	Tree Service, Glendale	Beyond the Tree Safety Management Protocol, carry out an audit of the relevant highways and other policies and processes that may need to be reviewed in light of ash dieback e.g. road closures policy, etc.	Med	Low	Green Spaces Manager/ Highways	March 2024
5	Strategic planning	Policy makers and shapers	Revise and update strategic plans.	Med	Low	LAs, National Park Authorities & AONBs Natural England	December 2025

6			Outline potential costs to budget holders, based on national and international ADB statistics, RMBC surveys and iTree data. Revise and update likely costs, and apply for increased funding if necessary, as the situation develops. Highlight the indirect costs required in officer time across the council, as well as the direct costs of felling and replacing trees.	High	Low	Green Spaces Manager	September 2023 (then revised annually as outbreak develops)

Section 2: Operational Considerations

No.	Topic	Key people/bodies affected	Actions	Priority	Cost Low <£10K Medium £10K -£100K High >£100K	Suggested lead	Delivery Timescale
1	Point of action	Tree Service	Determine point at which action should be taken on a tree, combining standard risk matrix approach with current knowledge of ADB; set out protocols for contractors to avoid unnecessary risk. Draw up triage form, based on Devon County Council's (DCC), to help identify priority work and work protocols. Recognise we need to act earlier rather than later - contractors and MEWPs are likely to be in high demand and won't necessarily be available at short notice once large numbers of trees begin to decline.	High	Low	RMBC, contractors, private landowners	January 2024
2	Contractors	RMBC, Contractors, Public	Include Ash Die Back as an agenda item on Contract Monitoring meetings with Tree Works contractor	Med	Low	Tree Service Manager	January 2024

Section 3: Risks and Issues

No.	Topic	Key people/bodies affected	Actions	Priority	Cost Low <£10K Medium £10K -£100K High >£100K	Suggested lead	Delivery Timescale
1	Health and safety risk to life, services and transport networks caused by diseased trees failing or shedding branches	RMBC, landowners and managers, including private and arms-length owners (e.g. schools)	Prioritise high target sites. Lower priority sites with lots of ash may need access restricting. RMBC Tree Service to provide advice on how to manage the disease, including regulatory requirements. Provide guidance for Building Control and Highways Enforcement to use when dealing with dangerous ash. Communicate with landowners/farmers through bodies such as the National Farmers' Union.	High	Low	Tree Service, Comms team	Will depend on progression of disease.
2	Risk of unqualified contractors working on trees	Contractors, public	Publicise the dangers of working on affected trees; warn Public against rogue or unqualified contractors; alert Trading Standards to reports of rogue tree contractors linked to ash dieback.	Med	Low	Tree Service, Comms team	Will depend on progression of disease.
3a	Planning	Planning dept, public	There may be a large increase in planning applications for removing ash; guidelines on felling for safety will not change, but account should be taken of the difficulties of felling where access is difficult and targets unavoidable: in these cases, felling earlier rather than later should be allowed.	Med	Med - potentially more resources required	Planning, Tree Team	January 2024
3b			Some may take advantage of the situation to fell healthy trees: again, guidelines will not change, and each case should be judged on its merits by a qualified inspector	Low	Low		January 2024

4	Biodiversity impact	RMBC, public, wildlife trusts, private landowners	Leave standing deadwood where possible; leave dead trees standing where possible; allow natural regeneration so potentially resistant trees can emerge	Med	Low	Green Spaces	Ongoing
5	Landscape impact	RMBC, public, wildlife trusts, private landowners, schools, businesses, farmers	Formulate tree planting/replacement scheme: in house via the Planting Engagement Officers; in partnership with the South Yorkshire Woodland Partnership.	Med	Med - External funding required	Green Spaces	Ongoing

Section 4: Communication and Training

No.	Topic	Key people/bodies affected	Actions	Priority	Cost Low <£10K Medium £10K -£100K High >£100K	Suggested lead	Delivery Timescale
1	Survey training	RMBC staff, volunteers	Investigate training requirements & produce a plan for Tree Officers, Green Spaces rangers, Grounds maintenance and Highways officers so they can report any affected ash to Tree Service -similar to previous training plan: can also be used to train any volunteers	Low	Low	Tree Service	Ongoing
2	Work training	Tree Works Contractors	Contractors experienced in felling affected ash should be used to train other contractors and Rangers in methodology and what to look out for. New network could be used to share this knowledge.	Low	Low	Tree Service and Tree Works contractor	Ongoing

3	Communication	All sectors, including plan delivery bodies, general public, farmers and other land managers, garden centres, etc	Develop and deliver a communications plan, to promote engagement by those bodies asked to help lead delivery of this plan, and to provide information and guidance to farmers, foresters, woodland owners, other landowners and managers, tree professionals (especially those not in professional associations), RMBC staff, Parish Councils, schools/colleges, Friends groups and other volunteers, the general public and the media. This plan must also link into other relevant local authorities.	High	Development - Low Delivery - Medium	Tree Service Manager/ Comms	Will depend on progression of disease.
3a		Tree team/ Comms team team	Produce ash dieback FAQs and publish on the Council website.	Med	Low	Tree Service/ Customer Services	March 2024
3b		Tree Service	Inform and prepare RMBC departments which may be affected by ADB for potential impact and extra resources required: e.g. Planning & Development, Building Control, Housing, Highways	High	Low	Tree Service	March 2024

Section 5: Regulation

No.	Topic	Key people/bodies affected	Actions	Priority	Cost Low <£10K Medium £10K -£100K High >£100K	Suggested lead	Delivery Timescale
1	Large-scale felling on private land	Farmers, woodland managers, other private landowners	Provide guidance on the need for Felling Licences if taking down large numbers of trees	Low	Low	Forestry Commission	Ongoing, led by FC
2	Wildlife legislation	All tree managers and professionals	Ensure tree professionals are aware of the protection afforded to bats and of necessary procedures. Issue licences rapidly where appropriate.	Med	Low	Green Spaces contractors	Ongoing
3	Planning Regulations	Homeowners, Planning, Tree Officers	Ensure adequate staffing for TPO, Conservation Area, etc, consultations and notices	Med	Med	RMBC Planning & Tree Service	Ongoing