By: **Matthew Balfour, Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport**

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To: **Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee – 12 January 2017**

Subject**:** **Ash Dieback – Update**

Classification**:** **Unrestricted**

Past Pathway of Paper **N/A**

Future Pathway of Paper **N/A**

Divisions**: All**

Summary: This report provides an update for Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee on Ash Dieback in Kent and the local response to manage the situation.

Recommendations

Cabinet Committee is recommended to:

- Note the serious threat *Ash Dieback* poses to the environment and economy of Kent; and
- Comment on and endorse the KCC approach outlined within this report.

1. Background

1.1 It was agreed by Environment, Highways and Waste Cabinet Committee at their meeting on 10 January 2012 that the Committee should receive periodic updates on the local response to the ongoing Ash Dieback outbreak. This first update report outlines our current understanding of the impacts and implications for Kent arising from the outbreak.

1.2 Since the first Kent cases of Ash Dieback were confirmed in 2012, KCC has provided a direct link between the national response, led by Defra / Fera[1] and the Forestry Commission, and local partners. This approach has ensured a co-ordinated and consistent approach across the county and enabled KCC to influence national policy direction.

[1] Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs / Food & Environment Research Agency

1.3 This approach, and in particular Kent's pro-active and co-ordinated biosecurity measures ensuring that potentially infected fallen leaves are disposed of locally rather transported long distances into potentially unaffected areas) and robust command and control structures, has received endorsement from consecutive UK Chief Plant Health Officers.

1.4 Kent is a bridge-head into the UK from Continental Europe for the introduced fungal pathogen Ash Dieback. The fungus causes progressive die back within our native European Ash and other close non-native relatives, rapidly killing young trees and progressively killing-off individual twigs and branches within the crowns of mature trees, creating potentially dangerous standing dead wood and making them susceptible to lethal secondary infection such as Honey Fungus.

1.5 European Ash is Kent's most widespread tree. Furthermore, our gateway status for international trade, large areas of ancient woodland; more than any other county, large residential population and extensive transport network presents particular local challenges. Ash Dieback is now present across the county, and is most entrenched across east Kent [2].

1.6 In response to the initial outbreak, KCC initiated a Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG), in November 2012. KCC is the SCG Strategic Lead.

2. Progress to date

2.1 The Ash Dieback SCG has agreed a wide-ranging Local Action Plan to deliver an agreed multi-agency strategy, with an aim of ***'Working in partnership to protect the environment, by containing the outbreak, limiting the spread and mitigating its potential wider consequences'***.

2.2 Complementing this strategy, KCC has printed and distributed Ash Dieback public information signs to relevant teams and partners.

2.3 In addition, Public Rights of Way, working closely with Emergency Planning colleagues, has produced biosecurity guidance which has informed a unified approach by Kent Fire & Rescue Service, Environment Agency, Highways England and utilities companies working within infected areas. Guidance for residents and businesses has also been produced in collaboration with KCC, Kent Downs AONB Unit, Arboricultural Association, and Forestry Commission[3]. Indeed, the Kent guidance set the template for similar documentation rolled-out nationally.

2.4 Emergency Planners have also worked closely with KCC Infrastructure and Education colleagues to develop Ash Dieback guidance for schools. This was cited as best practice by DCLG in a national newsletter.

2.5 KCC continues to be active within the Defra Ash Dieback Safety Interventions Task Group. This forum develops national guidance to mitigate safety risks

[2] http://chalaramap.fera.defra.gov.uk/
[3] http://www.kent.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/12918/Ash-Dieback_Kent-Guidance_web-version.pdf

arising from Ash Dieback. More locally KCC issued a 'Trading Standards Alert' warning the public and businesses of the 'rogue traders' seeking to profit from the outbreak, and generating useful local media coverage.

2.6 In the four years since Ash Dieback was first confirmed in Kent, our understanding of the pathogen has increased significantly. A key insight is the particular vulnerability of Ash within woodland, which provides optimal conditions for formation of the fungus on the previous year's fallen Ash leaves. This enables increased fungal spore production. Woodland also supports a range of organisms potentially harmful to already weakened trees. By contrast, Ash in urban landscapes, where the drier and more open conditions do not favour accumulation of leaf debris and offer fewer habitat niches for other potentially harmful organisms, has proven far less vulnerable to Ash Dieback.

2.7 Our understanding of the range and relative abundance of Ash has also increased. Investigations carried out by KCC have identified 20,000 Ash growing on KCC owned and maintained highway land and as many as 0.5 million trees growing on private and unregistered land adjacent to highways and by-ways. Surveys indicate that Ash is most frequent at the urban edge in Kent. This spatial distribution clearly has implications for future safety works and associated costs.

2.8 KCC and partners operate a policy whereby minimum required interventions are undertaken to address any identified safety concerns. This approach is encapsulated within the Kent Tree Officers Group Ash Dieback Toolkit[4], adopted by KCC and Kent Districts. Despite this, there has been a steep rise in KCC costs for Ash Dieback safety interventions. In 2015/16 £6,339.50 was spent on safety critical works, while the figure for 2016/17 is already £17,885.00. However, this level of spend must be viewed in the context of an overall annual safety critical tree works budget of £500k.

2.9 KCC Highways does not currently have a tree replacement budget, and felled street trees are therefore not routinely replaced.

3. Looking forward

3.1 In recognition of the potentially significant costs which may arise from the outbreak, KCC submitted an 'expression of interest' in July 2013 for a claim against the DCLG administered Bellwin scheme of emergency financial assistance. Where the criteria of the scheme are met, the grant is normally payable to authorities at 85% of eligible costs incurred above a threshold set for each authority. For KCC this threshold is £1,829,114. This threshold has not yet been reached, however, KCC and our partners continue to maintain detailed records of all costs accruing from the outbreak. If the Bellwin threshold is reached a detailed application against the scheme will be submitted.

3.2 The wider landscape, biodiversity and cultural impacts of Ash Dieback in Kent are the focus of the Ash Project, managed by Kent Downs AONB Unit and

[4] https://www.kent.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/65935/Kent-Tree-Officer-Group-KTOG-Ash-Dieback-Tool-Kit.pdf

funded by the Arts Council England, the Heritage Lottery Fund and KCC[5]. KCC and the Kent Downs AONB Unit have also identified a need to co-ordinate activity and learning on Ash Dieback at a national level, and are in the early stages of establishing a national Ash conference in partnership with the Woodland Trust and other key stakeholders. Additionally, a Kent Tree Strategy is to be produced, as part of the Kent Environment Strategy, to develop a policy framework for a sustainable future for the county's trees and woodland.

4. Conclusion

4.1 It is clear that the susceptibility of young trees to Ash Dieback is adversely impacting growth of new generations of Ash, and that Kent is currently undergoing an ***Ash decline*** which will inevitably result in changes to our landscape and biodiversity just as profound as those experienced during earlier Elm and Lime declines. Research from Continental Europe suggests that between 1 and 2% of Ash exhibits some natural resistance to Ash Dieback, so there is a chance that the future of Kent's most widespread tree may improve over time.

4.2 For KCC, a key issue is the rising cost of tree safety works and associated administration. This relates not just to KCC's estate but also to trees growing on private or unregistered land adjacent to highways and by-ways, where safety responsibilities still apply. This could involve as many as 0.5 million trees. Though we are in an early phase of this outbreak, KCC has already seen Ash Dieback related highway safety costs treble in the last year. Further, reduced budgets is inevitably resulting in a diminution of tree replacement.

4.3 However, mounting evidence that Ash within woodland is the most vulnerable to infection and the success of national and local biosecurity measures in reducing the spread of Ash Dieback is making the local response both more manageable and affordable.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Cabinet Committee is recommended to:

- Note the serious threat *Ash Dieback* poses to the environment and economy of Kent; and
- Comment on and endorse the KCC approach outlined within this report.

Contact details

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[5] http://www.kentdowns.org.uk/getting-involved/the-ash-project