

ASH DIEBACK

Head of Service:	Justin Turvey, Interim Head of Place Development
Wards affected:	College Ward; Town Ward; Woodcote and Langley Vale Ward;
Appendices (attached):	none

Summary

This report is to advise the Conservators of the progress of Ash Dieback works to trees that are affected by the disease which have taken place to date, the programme of works that will be undertaken going forwards, and to note the increased costs associated with tree works.

Recommendation (s)

The Conservators are asked to:

- (1) Note the progress of Ash Dieback works to trees affected by the disease which have taken place to date, and the programme of works that will be undertaken.**
- (2) Note that an 82% increase in the annual tree maintenance budget, from £7,300 to £13,300 has been factored into the Conservators' indicative 2024/25 budget setting for consideration to fund the programme of works.**

1 Reason for Recommendation

- 1.1 To note the work which has been undertaken in respect of Ash Dieback on The Downs since the last Conservators meeting in June and the programme of works that are intended to be undertaken in relation to higher risk trees over the coming months, and to note the increased budget requirement to enable works to be undertaken to deal with Ash Dieback over a number of years.

2 Background

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- 2.1 At the Conservators' June meeting, £17,000 was allocated from available reserves to tackle high risk Ash Dieback. That meeting agreed that a further report would be brought back to Conservators in November to agree a phased approach and identify the ongoing budget requirement to tackling Ash Dieback over a number of years.

3 Ash Dieback Works

- 3.1 A felling licence is required from the Forestry Commission to agree a programme of tree works, unless the Forestry Commission have agreed that the trees are exempt (e.g. because they present an immediate danger). Following the June Conservators' meeting, officers submitted the application to the Commission and have held discussions with them. An exemption agreement was received at the end of October to fell both the high and medium priority trees (circa 70 trees).
- 3.2 Although the Council have only recently received the licence, the majority of work would not have been undertaken over the summer months in any event due to the bird nesting season. Fortunately, only one Ash Tree on The Downs has been considered dangerous enough to warrant immediate works so far this year, that decision being taken because of its health and proximity to Vale School.
- 3.3 Having received approval from the Forestry Commission, officers are now setting up a working group and have held discussions with the Council's tree contractors. The contractors have confirmed availability for high priority works and, given the limited working hours on The Downs, officers are looking to match the works on The Downs with local works in the morning to enable work on The Downs to take place in the afternoons.
- 3.4 As well as the work identified above, the programme of regular formal inspections will continue in line with the Council's adopted Tree Management Plan and Ash Dieback Action Plan, and officers will update the Action Tracker as appropriate.

4 Cost Estimate

- 4.1 At the meeting in June, The Conservators agreed to immediately set aside £17,000 from reserves to fund the high priority works, recognising that further funding would be required. Surveys from 2022 identified that works to the value of £49,707 (based on contract rates) would be required at the time the surveys were undertaken.

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- 4.2 The £17,000 therefore still left a gap of c.£33,000 to undertake the required works. It should also be noted that whilst accurate at the time, Ash trees are likely to decay at different rates, potentially over years, and the costs associated with removal and making safe will vary according to the location and access, rate of decay, size etc, and that inflationary pressures are likely to mean that these costs increase over time. Not agreeing the current level of funding presents the risk that additional funding above current requested levels is required at a later date.

Given the above, it is considered that £6,000 increase (equating to an 82% uplift) in the annual tree maintenance budget, from £7,300 to £13,300, will be needed to fund the remaining c.£33,000 of Ash Dieback works, phased over a six-year period.

5 Risk Assessment

Legal or other duties

5.1 Equality Impact Assessment

5.1.1 None arising from this report

5.2 Crime & Disorder

5.2.1 None arising from this report

5.3 Safeguarding

5.3.1 None arising from this report

5.4 Dependencies

5.4.1 None arising from this report

5.5 Other

5.5.1 Health and Safety

- Dead and declining large trees will pose a risk to nearby residents, property, and people using the site for recreation or Horse training
- Ash, especially when dead and declining, can be extremely brittle and unstable, elevating the risk for the safety of contractors.

6 Financial Implications

- 6.1 Ash Dieback will result in increased expenditure over a period of years to manage the risk.

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- 6.2 An additional annual budget requirement of £6,000 per annum should enable the managed plan of works to be undertaken over a period of six years.
- 6.3 Removing trees individually, as and when they become dangerous, will become more expensive as time progresses, and is more expensive overall than a managed plan of works.
- 6.4 **Section 151 Officer's comments:** The additional £6,000 budget requirement has been factored into the Conservators' indicative 2024/25 budget, which is reported in the separate agenda item '2023/24 Mid-Year Budget Monitoring'.

7 Legal Implications

- 7.1 This proposal enables compliance with obligations on the Council required by the Occupiers Liability Act 1957 the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.
- 7.2 **Legal Officer's comments:** None other than those highlighted in this report

8 Policies, Plans & Partnerships

- 8.1 **Council's Key Priorities:** The following Key Priorities are engaged:
- Green & Vibrant, Safe and Well and supports delivery of the Annual Plan.
- 8.2 **Service Plans:** The matter is not included within the current Service Delivery Plan.
- 8.3 **Climate & Environmental Impact of recommendations:** The plan supports objectives in the Biodiversity Action Plan and Climate Change Action Plan, maintaining and enhancing biodiversity and contributing to increased carbon sequestration and meeting the Council climate change targets. Well managed Ecosystems are key to ensuring climate stability.
- 8.4 **Sustainability Policy & Community Safety Implications:** The safe management of trees provides community safety.
- 8.5 **Partnerships:** the successful delivery of these tree management proposal relies on sustaining relationships with a number of stakeholders such as the Borough Council, Jockey Club, Training Grounds Management Board, the public and volunteers.

9 Background papers

- 9.1 The documents referred to in compiling this report are as follows:

Previous reports:

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- Epsom and Walton Downs Conservators Committee meeting June 2023 'Tree Management on The Downs'

Other papers:

- Epsom and Walton Downs Habitat Management Plan, 2023-2028 (January 2023)
- DERFA: Grants for ash with ash dieback, February 2023
- Epsom & Ewell Tree Management Plan 2023
- Epsom & Ewell Ash Dieback Action Plan 2023