

Ash dieback in Torbay

Overview Pests and Diseases within the UK

As a general overview of the risks of pests and diseases within the UK this description is taken from the gov.uk Animal and plant health page - *The damage to our trees, woods and forests from insect pests and organisms such as bacteria and fungi is significant. The rapid increase in movements of goods and people between countries has increased the risk of spreading pests and diseases. They can travel hidden in plants, plant products, packaging, wood, vehicles and holidaymakers' luggage - even in the soil carried on shoes.*

Some of these pests and diseases do little harm in their native environments, where predators, environmental factors and co-evolution with their host plants keep them in check. However, they can cause significant damage to trees and plants in other countries where those limiting factors are not present. Some single species of insect, fungus or bacterium can damage or kill dozens of different plant species, including trees. As well as causing economic losses for the forestry, timber and plant-based industries, they can disrupt other sectors, such as tourism, and threaten woodland biodiversity, ecosystems and native species.

Within the above description is the disease known as Chalara ash dieback - *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, although more generally known under its previous name *Chalara fraxinea*. It is currently the most prevalent of the diseases that is going to cause disruption throughout the UK and, unfortunately, Torbay has its fair share of the disease and it is likely to progress rapidly over the next 2-3 years. As we all know trees in general offer significant benefits to society and are a fabulous asset to Torbay Council, offering amenity value, shade, flood prevention, rainfall interception, homes for invertebrates and other mammals alike etc.

The disease has come over from mainland Europe where it was noted in Poland in 1992 and has infected and affected the majority of Ash on the continent. It was first found in the UK in 2012 at sites that had received saplings from nurseries.

Since then the spread of the disease has now reached most areas of the UK. Within Torbay the flush of Ash leaf at the start of this summer (2019) shows indications of a high percentage of infected trees. Some trees do appear more infected than others and there may be some resilience to the disease within some of the specimens. However it is widely regarded that once the tree has reached 35%-40% mortality then it very unlikely that they will respond positively and will ultimately die due to the disease or possibly by a secondary agent due to the weakened state of the tree. The rate of decline once a tree is infected can vary (no more than 2 years) with some trees dying quickly and others seemingly able to hang on for a bit longer.

Regrettably there is no known cure for the disease. Where trees have been shown to have a genetic resistance and so remain unaffected or are able to tolerate the disease this will hopefully enable the understanding of the mechanics of the resistance and potentially enable the re-stocking of the Ash.

Symptoms/Identification (Woodland trust website)

Dark lesions – often long, thin and diamond-shaped – appear on the trunk at the base of dead side shoots

The tips of shoots become black and shrivelled

Blackened, dead leaves – may look a bit like frost damage

The veins and stalks of leaves, normally pale in colour, turn brown

Saplings have dead tops and side shoots

In mature trees, dieback of twigs and branches in the crown, often with bushy growth further down the branches where new shoots have been produced

In late summer and early autumn (July to October), small white fruiting bodies can be found on blackened leaf stalks.

Further information can be found at

<http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/tree-diseases-and-pests/key-threats/ash-dieback/>
www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/pest-and-disease-resources/chalara-ash-dieback-hymenoscyphus-fraxineus/

These pages will also be able to answer many of the questions that will arise.

What Torbay Council will be doing for its own Ash tree stock.

As a unitary authority Torbay Council will regrettably have to take action should it be shown that infected trees pose a significant risk to people, property or traffic. Unfortunately this will result in the loss of some of our landmark trees and the general removal of the Ash population throughout the Torbay. To identify the areas where possible intervention might be needed we will assess areas of Torbay that are considered high risk targets and where Ash are adjacent to those targets. Each tree will be assessed on its individual merits removal but latitude will be given to the removal of adjacent infected trees to ensure economic value.

Torbay Council tree asset management system identifies 1046 Ash trees with an estimated removal value of £400 per tree. Therefore the estimated cost of removal is £418,400 based on current data. This clearly is a significant impact on council resources, with no funding supports from external source being available.

The educated inspection rule is to carry out intervention works once the tree has been identified as between 15% to 35% canopy loss. Any higher values than this the tree become unstable and removal costs are higher.

Torbay's i-tree survey 2011 identified 12% of its tree population is Ash. The borough of Torbay has an estimated urban tree population of 818,000. Tree cover in Torbay is estimated 11.8% of the total area.

Liability

With the prominence of Ash Dieback throughout the Torbay, Torbay Council is no different than any other land owner in that it has a duty of care to ensure that its tree population is managed to ensure expected levels of safety are retained as per our policy documents. Ash Dieback will undoubtedly increase our level of potential liability especially in high target areas such as main roads, railway lines, schools and properties. Should we not react and be proactive about the management of the Ash tree stock in Torbay Council ownership the likelihood of having an elevated risk of failure onto a high target area will increase with little in the way of a defensible stance to prove we have acted in a reasonable and proportionate way.

Ash Trees in Private Ownership

Some of our larger Ash trees are contained within the garden areas of private/residential properties. Household owners or those responsible for the trees still have the responsibility for the trees. However, should the tree be subject to statutory legislation (such as tree preservation orders or within a conservation area) the normal processes still apply. An appropriately qualified person should be employed to correctly identify the disease and make necessary recommendations for the tree. This is because in some instances an Ash may show signs of decline but the causal agent may not be Chalara ash dieback.

Replacement planting

There is however a silver lining. There will be numerous opportunities for replanting. Torbay are currently looking into the most suitable species to replace the Ash with the species used likely to be diverse which will increase resilience within the tree stock and promote greater biodiversity.

Although taking a long time to reach the mature heights of some of the Ash that will inevitably be removed, the replacement trees will ultimately provide significant succession planting to provide future amenity and biodiversity within Torbay providing a green environmental legacy for future generations to enjoy.

Community Engagement

As part of the ongoing action to mitigate the loss of Ash trees community groups will be encouraged, nurseries created to provide replacement trees species diversity will be encouraged including the potential for fruit tree planting to provide an all year round interest. The community engagement is seen as a vital part of the process to establish the future tree cover within Torbay with the potential to use both native and exotic species. One of the many outstanding features of Torbay are the benefits accrued from being able to plant exotic species and for them to not only survive but to thrive in our environment. This diverse range of planting will enable Torbay to recover from the loss of the Ash tree from the landscape and provide resilience as we move forward.

On behalf of the Devon Ash Dieback Resilience Forum, for which Torbay Council are members of. Devon Wildlife Trust is leading a partnership bid to the national Lottery Heritage fund for a five year Saving Devon's Treescapes project. The application for a £690,000 grant will be submitted in August 2019. £410,000 in match funding is contributed by other organisations and individuals.

If given the go-ahead, work will start early 2020. The project will harness this passion by empowering 36,500 people across Devon and Torbay.

‘Saving Devon’s Treescapes’.

Background

Devon’s spectacular landscape of rolling hills, picturesque river valleys and open moorlands – which provides livelihoods through farming and tourism, and a fantastic quality of life for all who live here - derives much of its distinctive character from Trees Outside Woods. These trees are the unsung heroes that create our small copses, orchards, parklands and wood pastures, and enhance our fields and the remarkable 53,000km of hedgerows that bind the whole patchwork together. Equally important are the street, garden and park trees that make our towns and villages attractive and enjoyable places to live in.

Trees intercept rainfall and guide water into the soil. They reduce flood risk and erosion, enhance water quality, and provide proven health and wellbeing benefits to the people around them. Ancient, veteran and very large trees are the most valuable in biodiversity and landscape terms, and in Devon these are mainly TOWs rather than closed woodland trees. Our 4,000 hectares of parkland and wood pasture include 53 sites of national importance. Meanwhile a two-year study near Hatherleigh discovered 2,070 plant and animal species in a single hedgerow that the author described as “nothing exceptional” – highlighting the huge biodiversity importance of hedges and hedgerow trees.

But right now, Devon’s TOWs – and hence its treasured treescapes that provide us with a sense of place and belonging – face unprecedented threats. Surveys show that a high proportion of hedge trees are nearing their end of life due to old age. Without concerted, sustained efforts to replace them, there will be profound impacts on the many other species that they support. Furthermore, we are faced by a wave of threats to tree health, most imminently ash dieback. Ash is Devon’s second most numerous tree after oak. Outside woods there are an estimated 1.9 million ashes in Devon’s hedges and along its footpaths, roads, riverbanks coastlines – and at least 90% of these trees will be killed by dieback over the coming years.

The project

People are passionate about trees. Our project will harness this passion by empowering 36,500 people – most of whom will never have undertaken practical conservation action before – to make lasting improvements to their Treescapes, providing hope in the face of the alarming changes that ash dieback is already bringing. Ash dieback is everyone’s problem; Saving Devon’s Treescapes will encourage everyone to be part of the solution.

The project will deliver across Devon, with 50% of resources dedicated to action in five priority areas (two urban and three rural). These will be Malborough (South Devon); Torbay; Exeter and Cranbrook new town; Neroche area (Blackdown Hills AONB); and Coly Valleys (East Devon).

The project is urgent. Firstly, because ash dieback is happening now, and the pace of its impacts on Devon’s Treescapes is accelerating. Secondly, because (in recognition of the gravity of the coming crisis) we have been offered substantial – but strictly time limited – match funding by Devon County Council for any grant that can be secured.

Objective 1: Awaken interest in TOWs and engage people in their long term care

3 new community tree nurseries will empower local people and generate tree stock for a Free Tree Scheme;

2 hubs will be developed to coordinate sustainable woodfuel supplies;

100 schools will engage in outdoor learning and Treescapes creation / enhancement in their grounds and neighbourhoods;

Free Tree packs, information and advice will be distributed at 29 shows;

80 community events will inspire people to work for healthy Treescapes;

45 TOWs workshops for communities, farmers and landowners will reach 675 people; and

In each of the five priority areas a new volunteer group will be established and supported to plant, tag and nurture new TOWs.

Objective 2: Safeguard the future of TOWs and their wildlife

360 Treescapes advisory visits will be made to farmers and landowners;

150km of existing hedges will be enhanced through sustainable management regimes, emphasising important hedgerow trees and treelines.

Objective 3: Establish more trees in the landscape and enhance connectivity

A 3-2-1 ash replacement formula will be championed, with at least three new trees planted (or encouraged) for every large ash lost, two for every medium-sized ash, and one for every small ash;

427 native "Landmark" trees will be planted and nurtured, one for every parish in Devon;

250,000 new urban and rural TOWs will be established, around 50% within the five project priority landscapes;

50 hectares of TOWs will be planted in field corners and copses;

20km of exemplar "Flagship" hedgerows with standards will be planted in prominent, accessible landscapes, demonstrating best practice to landowners and the wider public;

2,500 hedgerow trees will be established through planting and aftercare;

12,000 hedgerow saplings will be tagged and nurtured to the point where they are no longer vulnerable to hedge trimming; and

4,500 metres of wild 'fruit routes' will be established in urban landscapes, including 19,500 TOWs bearing edible fruit for foraging by both humans and wildlife.