RESPONSE

Response given by the Interim Director of Environment, Waste and Operations after the meeting to question asked by a Member:

Regarding Ash die back, and Biodiversity net gain.

To comply with Central Government requirements, it is anticipated that the authority will need to publish a Biodiversity report every five years from the end of 2026. This report will outline progress on achieving a 10% Net gain city wide. This is being led, in the main, by ECC Planning teams. Operations alongside our colleagues in Planning will investigate whether there are opportunities to benefit from the work internally as well, however we will not be duplicating the reporting process internally. There are several reasons for this: first, a biodiversity net gain is net gain, the city-wide benefits are received irrespective of where in the city it was achieved, allocating resource to duplicating value data is not a cost-effective use of constrained resources. Secondly, with conflicting demands on ECC land and extensively established site-specific use, high levels of biodiversity gain internally is unlikely. Arb teams will manage tree biodiversity and species resilience through annual planting programmes, any other operational gains will be limited to planned and project specific gains only.

Ash Die Back surveys manage the progression of the disease within the Councils Ash population keeping costs and the impact low. The disease progression has not been immediate, instead it is an ongoing and sustained process of decline requiring long term resource. The industry guidance available at the time the budget was set (circa 2020) suggested that 90% of ash trees would be killed by the disease. The current guidance now makes a more conservative estimate of 80% expected mortality. However, the service anticipates that as ADB reaches more isolated woodland, and as the disease in currently low risk trees advances, we will see an increase in ADB levels city wide and an acceleration in the disease across ECC tree stocks. At this stage 88% of ECC Ash trees are showing low levels of the disease, with c.785* trees individually plotted to date compared to 596 in 2022. *(2024 inspections need to be finished before a definitive 2024 figure is provided). This suggests an ongoing decline of the species is certain and will need to be managed.