

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	15 th November 2022
Report Subject	Ash Dieback Update
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Countryside & Economy
Report Author	Andrew Farrow Chief Officer (Planning, Environment and Economy)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report provides an update on how Flintshire County Council has addressed Ash Dieback in 2021/22 in line with the *2019 Ash Dieback Action Plan* (as presented to Informal Cabinet 10th September 2019). It also reports on the recommendations following an internal audit in July 2021. A previous update was reported to Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 12th May 2021.

The 2019 Ash Dieback Action Plan identified and proposed ways in which to manage the risk and costs associated to Ash Dieback, highlighting where infected Ash trees have an increased risk to public safety and the financial cost incurred to the Council.

To moderate and manage the risk associated to Ash Dieback, a series of surveys have been undertaken to assess the distribution and disease classification of roadside Ash trees for primary and secondary roads. A programme of tree removal is ongoing for Flintshire owned trees and landowners with infected trees have been contacted to highlight the presence of Ash Dieback in their trees, with an expectation that they will manage their own trees to mitigate the risks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Members note the content of this update and support the officers in their ongoing work associated with Ash Dieback.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE ASH DIEBACK UPDATE
1.01	<p>The Disease in Flintshire Ash Dieback was first confirmed in Flintshire on the A55 at Northop by Forestry Commission plant health staff in 2015. In 2016 it was found in a woodland near Rhydymwyn on Ash that had been cut down underneath overhead power cables.</p>
1.02	<p>It is evident that since being initially recorded Ash Dieback is now endemic in the county and widely distributed. It is estimated that Flintshire has approximately 24,000 ash trees growing outside the woodland environment adjacent to the highway.</p>
1.03	<p>Responding to the disease</p> <p>Flintshire County Council are focusing on the Ash trees that pose the most risk to the public, whether these trees are growing on Council or privately owned land. The Council has published an Ash Dieback Action Plan which can be found on the Council's web pages here:-</p> <p>https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/LeisureAndTourism/Countryside-and-Coast/Ash-Dieback.aspx</p>
1.04	<p>Survey</p> <p>Officers are now in an annual cycle of survey and inspection to identify, monitor and classify infected Ash trees growing adjacent to Flintshire's roads.</p> <p>These surveys have verified the position, size and characteristics of the roadside ash trees/groups of ash trees, ownership and the disease infection classification - 1 to 4, (with 4 being the "most serious").</p> <p>This information is recorded on a GIS program and will aid officers with the management of Flintshire County Council's infected Ash trees and prompt officers (under Section 154 of the Highways Act) to notify private landowners to make safe their diseased roadside Ash trees.</p>
1.5	<p>To simplify the surveying process into manageable sizes, the highways network was subdivided into roads which were deemed to be of a high priority roads (Red), secondary roads (Amber) and other roads (blank). Priority appointment level being speed of traffic, volume of traffic and the general character of the traffic.</p>
1.6	<p>All priority roads have been surveyed from a vehicle to map the general disease spread. This then prioritises the areas to follow up with a foot survey and tree inspection.</p> <p>To date 145,603m or 67% of the priority roads and 23,460m or 25% of the secondary roads have been surveyed. With 50% of combined priority and</p>

	secondary compartments remaining to be surveyed, it is anticipated that the foot survey will be completed in 2023.										
1.7	Information obtained in the foot survey is used by the administration team to direct land searches (to identify landowners with infected trees), quantify the extent of the work and to officially prompt the Authority to instruct landowners to engage with the management of infected Ash trees										
1.8	To date our survey data shows that the vast majority of infected trees are on private land and although the Authority have powers to deal with these trees, the approach currently adopted is to target owners with Class 3 & 4 trees, emphasise their responsibility and encourage landowners to manage their own trees. (via a series of letters). It is difficult to predict which landowners will/can take the responsible view.										
1.9	The school baseline tree survey is complete with initial remedial work accomplished, with future activities focusing on monitoring tree health and responding as and when necessary. Countryside sites are monitored in-house and infected Ash trees are systematically removed within the winter felling programme. It is proposed that greenspaces will be subject to an initial baseline tree survey in 2022 (as per schools) with subsequent work acted upon recommendations										
1.10	<p>Summary Data</p> <p>Searches completed on 24 road compartments (out of 93) and represents all the red high priority compartments</p> <p>Total trees searched and surveyed up to March 2022:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="320 1178 1386 1350"> <thead> <tr> <th>TOTALS</th> <th>Class 1</th> <th>Class 2</th> <th>Class 3</th> <th>Class 4</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>5229</td> <td>729</td> <td>1395</td> <td>1133</td> <td>1972</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>3105 (Flintshire, Unregistered and Private) recorded as class 3 and 4</p>	TOTALS	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	5229	729	1395	1133	1972
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5229	729	1395	1133	1972							
1.11	<p>253 Private Owners have been identified and written to. 108 have already taken action (action is identified as either felling their trees or providing an indication that they will manage/fell their trees).</p> <p>If a landowner does not act to remove a potential threat to the highway, then Flintshire may issue a Sect 154 notice and ultimately undertake the work and attempt to recoup the cost. This extent of this work is unknown.</p>										
1.12	<p>Flintshire Action</p> <p>1295 Ash trees have been recorded as Flintshire owned trees within the red compartments</p> <p>It is accepted that Flintshire will assume the responsibility for Ash trees growing on unregistered land. The number of unregistered trees within the red compartments is 857</p>										

	It is estimated that around 4-5000 unregistered Ash trees are growing adjacent to the highway across the county.
1.13	Action to deal with the 1295 Flintshire owned trees: 2020-2022 FCC owned trees felled – 218 2022–2023 Number of trees planned to be felled - 1077
1.14	Work on ‘recovery’ to re-plant the trees lost due to this disease will begin once the risk to highway has been reduced and officer time can be reprioritised to focus on planting.
1.15	The 2018 Urban Tree and Woodland Plan aims to increase canopy cover across Flintshire and clearly Ash Dieback presents a challenge in achieving the 3.5% target with so many trees having to be removed. However in February 2022 officers were able to offset the recent losses by utilising Welsh Governments Woodland Improvement Grant to plant 5000 new trees at Wepre Park.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS			
2.01	<p>Currently there is no allocated budget to deal with Ash Dieback and is being reflected as an in-year portfolio pressure.</p> <p>The programme of work is generating a substantial amount of additional work, and is currently being absorbed into Officer work programmes. However, this is having an impact on existing day to day duties of key officers, in particular the Tree Inspector who reports that the ongoing and regular Highways and Open-space tree inspections are behind schedule, and response times to inspect trees on request from customers is taking longer. This time delay may lead to an increase in risk in dealing with potentially unsafe trees. The Tree Inspector has also ceased undertaking work for Housing and Valuation & Estates teams.</p>			
2.02	Staffing cost 2021/22			
	Position	Grade	ADB Role	ADB Time Commitment/ Cost
	Woodland Officer	G7	Coordinate/Dev. Programmes Develop and Trial Surveys Survey Roadside Trees Liaise with landowners Co-manage information posts Offer Advice and Training. Research	90% £47,000
	Admin Support	G2	Organise and Administer Files	40%

			Coordinate email response and phone hub. Land searches Organise and if necessary redraft and send out letters and information posts	£10,400
	Tree Inspector	G7	Survey (Ezytreev) Highways link officer. Liaise with landowners. Supervision/manage tree resource	20% £10,400
	Manager	G11	Project overview, management control and coordination. Senior Officer reporting	5% £4,100
2.03	Currently it is anticipated with the current staffing resource levels, the foot survey will not be completed until 2023. This allows a degree of risk that there may be trees unknown which have reached class 4 disease state.			
2.04	Early surveys indicated that Ash Dieback maybe accelerating through the disease classification. The 2022 survey, with hot and dry weather, may show a change in pace as the disease thrives better in damp conditions. The pace of the disease is crucial in planning our response as the current staffing provision may not keep pace with a. identifying class 3 and 4 trees; b. identifying the landowners and communicating with them the inherent risk to the highway and c. the capacity of the Tree Inspector to coordinate works to remove the trees.			
2.05	<p>Current average tree felling cost £120</p> <p>Estimated felling cost of FCC owned trees adjacent to the highway in red compartments - £155,400.</p> <p>Estimated felling cost of trees growing on un registered land in red compartments - £102,840</p> <p>Estimated cost to remove private trees through Sect 154 notice is yet to be defined, however on current figures were expecting 20% of private trees to go through to notice and with a likelihood that FCC will undertake the works and endeavour to recoup the costs. This is estimated to be 2000 trees and cost £240,000</p>			

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	Local members and Town & Community Councils are notified of upcoming works to fell infected ash trees adjacent to the Highway. Landowners are notified when infected ash trees on their property are posing a risk to the Highway with a request for them to make safe.

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	<p>Internal audit</p> <p>A review of the management of Ash Dieback was undertaken as part of the approved Internal Audit Strategic Plan for 2021/22</p>
4.02	<p>A black inherent risk (catastrophic impact/ very high to extremely high likelihood) relating to Ash Dieback has been raised in the Council's Corporate Risk Register. The risk focuses on the implications of Ash Dieback on finances and reputation of the Council due to the scale of the problem and the ability to make safe highways and Council amenity land</p>
4.03	<p>Audit considered the adequacy and effectiveness of the controls in place to manage the risks and identified some improvements to controls with an amber red assurance rating reported.</p>
4.04	<p>Positive Audit findings</p> <p>The Ash Dieback Action Plan 2019 is comprehensive and identifies the key expected risks to the Council. It also sets out the strategy to address the risks identified.</p> <p>Legal Counsel Advice was sought in July 2020 to assess the adequacy of the Ash Dieback Action Plan 2019. The review by Legal Counsel concluded the plan approach was sound provided it was properly implemented.</p> <p>A number of updates have been provided to Senior Management and Members on progress of the Ash Dieback Action Plan 2019.</p>
4.05	<p>Areas for improvement</p> <p>Recommendation:</p> <p>A formal detailed delivery plan to be devised for the removal of Flintshire owned trees and those on unregistered land, with timescales/targets to be established.</p> <p>Explore reporting capabilities from ARCGIS system and routinely generate management information to provide progress updates against newly established targets.</p> <p>Action:</p> <p>A highways delivery and risk management plan has been produced.</p> <p>A review of ARCGIS was carried out and found that the reporting functions and management capabilities were inadequate, therefore work has shifted to use the existing Ezytreev programme to more effectively manage Ash Dieback information.</p>
4.06	<p>Recommendation:</p> <p>The outstanding work to identify the ownership of trees on private land and to send out first stage letters to those private landowners to be completed as quickly as possible.</p> <p>A review of all customer communication and effectiveness to be completed and management information to be introduced to oversee action plan deliverables.</p> <p>Action:</p>

	<p>All landowners within red, high priority compartments have been identified and written to. Work is ongoing to identify landowners in the next priority area.</p> <p>A review of the 4 stage letters was carried out with audit recommendations included.</p>
4.07	<p>Recommendation: Reports to senior management and members will be maintained at 6 monthly intervals. Reports will include performance targets and details of progress against these targets to ensure Senior Management and Members have a clear understanding of the success of the actions in mitigating risk.</p> <p>Action: This report is the first of such</p>
4.08	<p>Recommendation: A project/plan risk register incorporating strategic and operational risks to be compiled and regularly reviewed (at least quarterly) to assess impact on project/plan deliverables. Risk Method Statements (supporting corporate risk PE12) to be update every 6 months in line with designated timescales.</p> <p>Action: An operational risk register has been written as part of the delivery plan and will be reviewed every quarter.</p>
4.09	All audit recommendations have now been completed and closed.

5.00	APPENDICES

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	<p>Contact Officer: Tom Woodall, Access & Natural Environment Manager Telephone: 01352 703902 E-mail: tom.woodall@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	<p>Common ash (<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>) is a native ash tree found in nearly every part of the UK. Ash is typically found in hedgerows, highway verges and un-grazed land and a wide variety of urban spaces including, open spaces, semi-urban woodlands, parks, private gardens, schools and cemeteries.</p>
7.02	<p>Ash Dieback (<i>Hymenoscyphus fraxineus</i>) is a fungal pathogen that affects the UK's native ash trees. The disease arrived in Europe from Asia in the 1990s and spread rapidly on the continent. The disease was first recorded in Britain in 2012.</p>

