

## ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

<b>Date of Meeting</b>	12 <sup>th</sup> September 2023
<b>Report Subject</b>	Ash Dieback Update
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Economy
<b>Report Author</b>	Andrew Farrow Chief Officer (Planning, Environment and Economy)
<b>Type of Report</b>	Operational

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report provides an update on how Flintshire County Council has confronted ash dieback in 2022/23 in line with the *2019 Ash Dieback Action Plan* (Presented to Cabinet 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019). A previous update was reported to Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2021 and 13<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

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.

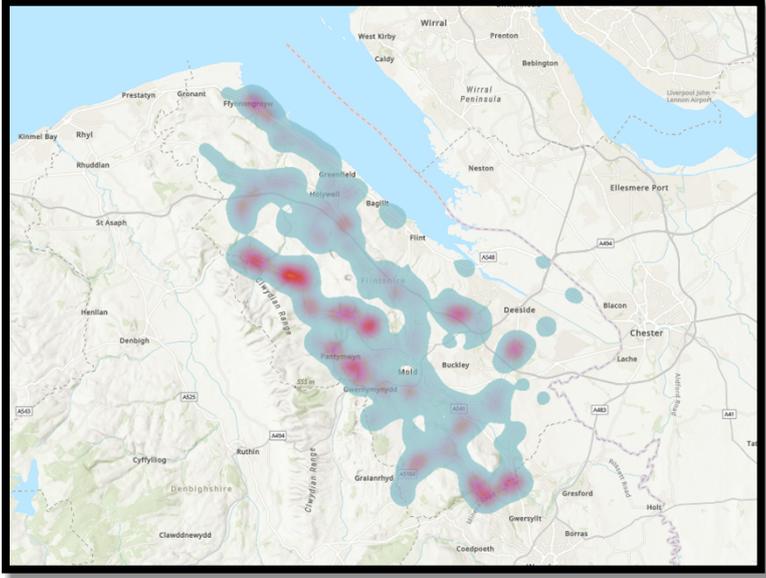
To moderate and manage the risk associated to ash dieback, a series of surveys have been undertaken to assess the distribution and disease classification of roadside ash trees for priority and secondary roads. A programme of tree removal is ongoing for Flintshire owned trees and landowners with infected 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.

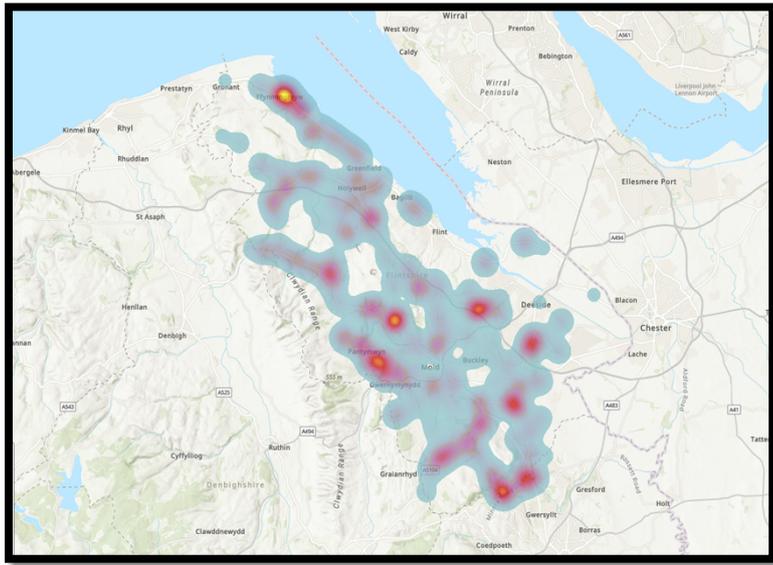
### RECOMMENDATIONS

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

<b>1.00</b>	<b>EXPLAINING THE ASH DIEBACK UPDATE</b>
1.01	<b>The Disease in Flintshire</b> Ash dieback was first confirmed in Flintshire 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.
1.02	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 trees growing outside the woodland environment adjacent to the highway.
1.03	<b>Responding to the disease</b> 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: -  <a href="https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/LeisureAndTourism/Countryside-and-Coast/Ash-Dieback.aspx">https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/LeisureAndTourism/Countryside-and-Coast/Ash-Dieback.aspx</a>
1.04	<b>Survey</b>  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.  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").  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.
1.5	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, Secondary Roads and Other Roads. Priority appointment level being speed of traffic, volume of traffic and the general character of the traffic.
1.6	All high priority roads have been surveyed from a vehicle to map the general distribution and intensity of the disease. This then prioritises the areas to follow up with a foot survey and tree inspection.  To date 177,257m or 81% of the high priority roads and 45,472m or 48% of the secondary roads have been surveyed, it is anticipated that the foot survey will be completed <b>2024/25</b> (NB completion date extended due to loss of personnel, capacity, and enforcement cases).

1.7	<p>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.</p>
1.8	<p>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 &amp; 4 trees, emphasise their responsibility and encourage landowners to manage their own trees (via a series of official letters). It is difficult to predict which landowners will/can take the responsible view.</p>
1.9	<p>The school baseline tree survey is complete with remedial work accomplished. In 2023 and ash dieback survey was carried out and identified 80 trees in need of removal. This work is programmed for this Autumn.</p> <p>Countryside sites are monitored in-house and infected ash trees, are systematically removed within the winter felling programme.</p> <p>Openspaces have been subject to an initial baseline tree survey 2022/23 (as per schools) with subsequent work acted upon recommendations.</p>
1.10	<p><b>Highways Heat Maps Indicating Class 4 and Dead Trees</b></p> <p><b>Disease Map 2022</b></p>  <p><b>Disease Map 2023</b></p>



Three prominent areas of the disease continue in Hendre, the Ffrwd valley and the Cegidog valley. There are six additional areas of concern being the North Coast Road, Pant-y-Buarth, Vinegar Hill (Northop Hall), A550 Penyffordd, Lixwm and Hawarden.

1.11

To date, legal ownership searches have been completed on 24 road compartments (out of the total 94 compartments) which represents 47% all the red-high priority compartments as identified in the 2023 Risk Matrix Evaluation. Work is programmed to complete searches on the remaining 53% before the end of 2023

291 owners have been identified and contacted regarding a total of 5,427 trees (covering all infection classes). Action has been taken on a total of 2,770 trees to date, representing just over 50%. This percentage increases to 65% for the most seriously infected trees (class three and four). Action is identified as either felling their trees or providing an indication that they will manage/fell their trees.

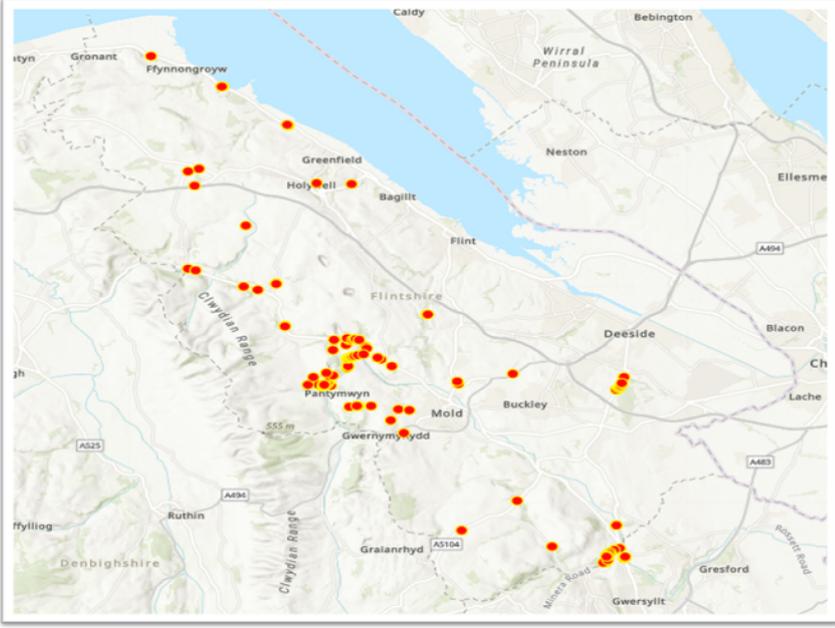
1.12

Section 154 Notices 2021-23

There has been a marked deterioration in the condition of the most severely infected trees leading to the need to serve Section 154 Notices to ensure the risk from the Highway is removed.

To date, Section 154 notice procedure has been initiated on 32 owners covering 514 roadside trees. Of these trees 425 have been felled/made safe. We have ten active notices which cover the remaining trees which are currently going through the Section 154 Notice procedure.

**Map showing distribution of S154 Notices issued**

	
1.13	<p><b>Flintshire action</b></p> <p>Survey data indicates there are 1238 Highways ash trees recorded on the Authority’s tree management data base as growing on land owned or adopted by Flintshire, however through our surveys, the actual amount is substantially more.</p> <p>It is accepted that Flintshire will assume the responsibility for ash trees growing on unregistered land adjacent to the highway. The number of trees on unregistered land is yet to be established as ownership registrations are ongoing.</p>
1.14	<p>2022/23 felling season</p> <p>Number of Highway trees felled = 1083 at a cost of £146,177.00  Number of Open-space trees felled = 50 at a cost of £18,675.00  Number of Valuation &amp; Estate trees felled = 45 at a cost of £5,170.00</p> <p>Total amount of trees felled = 1178</p> <p>Total cost (inc. Traffic management costs) = £170,022.00</p>
1.15	<p>Work on ‘recovery’ to re-plant the felled trees lost to ash dieback will begin after the predominant risk has been mitigated. Flintshire County Council are carrying out significant tree planting across the County in line with the target to increase canopy cover set out in the Urban Tree and Woodland Plan.</p>

<b>2.00</b>	<b>RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS</b>
2.01	Currently there is no allocated budget to deal with Ash dieback and is being reflected as an in-year portfolio overspend.

	The programme of work is generating a substantial amount of additional work and has been absorbed into existing Officer work programmes. The impact on existing day to day duties of key officers, in particular the Tree Inspector led to a successful portfolio pressure bid and a new Assistant Tree Officer and Natural Environment Technical Support Officer are in the process of being recruited.
2.02	Average felling costs in 2021/22 were around £120 per tree. In 2022/23 this figure has risen to £145 per tree. This is accounted by increasing contractor costs and higher costs for some larger and more challenging trees.

<b>3.00</b>	<b>CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT</b>
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.

<b>4.00</b>	<b>RISK MANAGEMENT</b>
4.01	<b>Internal audit</b> - A review of the management of Ash Die Back was undertaken as part of the approved Internal Audit Strategic Plan for 2021/22. 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.  All recommendations have been implemented.
4.02	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.
4.03	It was anticipated with the current staffing resource levels, the foot survey will not be completed until 2024. This gave a degree of risk that there may be trees unknown which have reached class 4 disease state. With the additional staff, once recruited, it is expected to complete this priority task quicker.

<b>5.00</b>	<b>APPENDICES</b>

<b>6.00</b>	<b>LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS</b>
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6.01	<b>Contact Officer: Tom Woodall, Access &amp; Natural Environment Manager</b> <b>Telephone: 01352 703902</b> <b>E-mail: tom.woodall@flintshire.gov.uk</b>
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<b>7.00</b>	<b>GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>
7.01	<b>Common ash (<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>)</b> 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.
7.02	<b>Ash dieback (<i>Hymenoscyphus fraxineus</i>)</b> 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.