Herefordshire Council

Ash Dieback Action Plan

An overarching plan to identify, communicate and address the risks of ash dieback disease (Hymenoscyphus fraxineus) on council owned ash trees or where the council has a legal duty of care or responsibility for public and property safety in respect of ash trees.

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Contents

Executive summary

Ash dieback is a serious tree disease epidemic caused by the fungal pathogen, *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* (formally called *Chalara fraxinea*). It causes canopy dieback and facilitates potentially rapid death of ash trees; in particular of 'Common Ash' (*Fraxinus excelsior*). The wood of affected trees often becomes brittle, making tree removal difficult and dangerous and a safety hazard to property and users of the highway network, public open space, public and private property and the Council's employees and contractors.

Ash is an abundant tree in Herefordshire. Best available figures suggest there are now in excess of 500,000 full grown or nearly mature ash trees outside woodlands in the county and that ash is our most numerous hedgerow tree with about 17% of highway-side trees being ash. Ash dominated woodland covers over 6500ha (>25%) of all broadleaved woodland in the county. Ash is also present within urban areas – Council managed public open space, for example has been shown through tree surveys to contain over 2600 recorded mature ash.

Current research indicates between 1% and 5% of the population may have a genetic tolerance to ash dieback, meaning they can survive and reproduce to eventually create the next generation of ash trees. Even so, this means many ash trees will need to be felled or have remedial safety work undertaken on them in the next 10-15 years. Due to brittleness, these felling operations may be more complex and costly than usual. There will also be significant tree surveying requirements that will need to be undertaken in addition to existing tree health and safety assessments, as well as additional tree planting to replace removed trees. This additional work will need to budgeted for within the Council as need is identified and costed.

Surveying for ash dieback symptoms ideally needs to take place between late June and mid-September as part of an annual survey and will largely be carried out by Council employed contractors with informal reporting by local residents. As more survey data is collected and collated, our understanding of required on-going survey and tree removal works will grow, which will inform the long-term action plan delivery resource requirements.

Drawing upon existing published material and to protect those trees that may have a genetic tolerance the common consensus is that **pre-emptive felling should be strongly discouraged and that infected trees should be felled only once they are clearly in serious decline, pose an imminent danger to people or property, or where significant timber value is likely to be lost through infection**.

This plan identifies the national and local importance of ash in the county, provides an overview of current knowledge and processes, and looks to recommend the way forward for the Council in respect of its own stock of ash trees ensuring there is not net reduction in tree numbers and that the council can fulfil its statutory obligations and implement new processes and systems. It is recognised that additional resources will be required to support the extra workload and tree planting requirements created by ash dieback.

About Ash Dieback

Ash dieback was first identified in Poland in 1992 and subsequently in Britain around 2012 although it is now agreed it was likely present but asymptomatic since before 2000. Ash dieback is now considered endemic to the whole of the UK and is widespread across Herefordshire.

It was initially given the name *Chalara fraxineus*, then *Hymenoscyphus pseudoalbidus*, and finally *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*. The disease has a very high mortality rate in Common Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) but has also been found to impact other ash species and some related ornamental trees and shrubs. Ash dieback acts either directly on its host or by weakening them making them more susceptible to secondary pests or pathogens such as Honey Fungus or *Inonotus* species.

Across Europe and research in the UK by the John Innes Institute has indicated that a small percentage of ash exhibit varying degrees of tolerance through genetic variation. Currently up to 5% of trees have been found to have some level of tolerance to the disease, with 1-2% having a high tolerance. Even the long-term fate of highly tolerant trees is not known since they can continue to be re-infected each year and this may over time lead to reduced vigour and increased risk of death for other reasons.

Work to identify, propagate and trial tolerant ash is underway and minimizing pre-emptive felling is a vital part of this research programme. Work is also underway to research ways in which the progression of the disease in a tree can be reduced including the use of natural fungicides, increased husbandry of trees and inclusion of soil additives such as 'biochar' known to reduce stresses on specific trees in urban areas.

Due to the brittle nature of dead and dying ash additional care is required during management works that often requires the use of specialist and mechanised equipment such as Mobile Elevated Work Platforms (MEWP), 'Tree Shears', Timber Harvesters and even cranes. These requirements and associated specially trained operators can add significant additional costs to management works.

Ash trees in Herefordshire

Ash is an abundant tree in Herefordshire. Best available figures suggest there are now in excess of 500,000 full grown or nearly mature ash trees outside woodlands in the county and that ash is our most numerous hedgerow tree with about 17% of highway-side trees being ash. Ash dominated woodland covers over 6500ha (>25%) of all broadleaved woodland in the county. Ash is also present within urban areas – Council managed public open space, for example has been shown through tree surveys to contain over 2600 recorded mature ash.

From current highway survey data and the Bluesky National Tree Map it is estimated that there is in excess of 70,000 Ash trees within a distance that could affect Herefordshire's >3250 Km of public roads and equal or even greater number potentially impacting the 3360 Km of public rights of way in the county. It is further estimated that over 95% of these trees will be the responsibility of private landowners. The ability of trees to mitigate air pollution is directly linked to the healthy leaf surface they contain, their abundance and canopy size. Ash trees, with their high leaf surface area, dense canopy and abundance have been identified as one of the key tree species helping reduce air pollution. This is of particular relevance in Herefordshire as they are considered the most frequent roadside tree.

Ash species are included in the descriptions of 79% of the Council's registered Tree Preservation Orders. These ash may be individual 'specimen' trees, identified in 'group' orders or within larger area TPOs such as copses and woodland.

In heritage and landscape terms, potentially the most valuable trees are those which are either ancient, veterans (e.g. hollow) or very large. The Ancient Tree Inventory in 2016 listed 8328 "ancient, veteran or notable" ash trees in England with over 6% (531) being recorded in Herefordshire; by comparison Devon which is also a stronghold for ash only has 157 entries. Of all the trees recorded in the inventory for Herefordshire over 10% are ash. Ancient and veteran ash trees are mainly found within the county's large rural estates, parkland, nationally rare wood pasture, hedges and other landscape features, rather than within closed woodlands. Many more large trees exist but are as yet unrecorded.

The biodiversity value of ash as a host species is vast, as identified in the problem of finding alternative species to replant. The JNCC identifies 69 obligate species (has to use ash as a host or within its lifecycle) that are most likely to become extinct through the loss of ash trees in the environment. Over the past 15 years there are over 451 records held by the Herefordshire Biological Records Centre for species on this 'red' list including 2 species of galls, 5 species of fungi and 5 species of insects. With a dominance of ash in the county the real number is likely to be higher but records haven't been submitted or they just haven't been noticed. There is an even greater number of species who are partly ash obligate and a vast number who utilise ash as part of their lifecycle, foraging and commuting activity.

Nationally and in particular in counties like Herefordshire where ash is a dominant tree species there are many other 'benefits' associated with the species such as carbon sequestration – estimated by the Forestry Commission in 2012 to nationally be 1 million tonnes per annum; sound screening and mitigation; temperature management (shade) and wind screening and filtering air pollution. Tree and woodlands are also known to have a positive effect on people's mental health and well-being and are a key part of education and initiatives in the county such as 'Forest Schools'.

Unlike oaks, dead ash and those that are dying back can rapidly become more unstable and at greater risk of falling, so posing a substantial and often unpredictable risk. This issue is particularly pertinent to trees alongside roads and other public rights of way. The typical cost of felling and removing a mature roadside tree is estimated nationally at around £800 – a conservative figure where traffic has to be controlled. Smaller trees will cost less, and where lines of tree can be removed at the same time unit price will fall – although where this is a mixed line of dead, dying and living ash trees this complete removal should not be considered good or normal practice for any reason other than purely financial. It is recognised that few landowners and indeed this council, are likely to be able or willing to cover the expense of multiple visits for remedial tree surgery work such as limb removal or crown reduction except in exceptional circumstances.

Ash Dieback and Herefordshire Council

Herefordshire Council, as a Unitary Authority has both a managerial and a regulatory role, with legal responsibilities and duty of care not only to maintain its own ash trees such as those on Council owned land including highways, public open space, commons, Council-maintained schools and grounds of other council buildings. The Council also has to fulfil its other legislative obligations, such as the legal responsibility for wider highway safety, statutory tree protection, planning (including statutory biodiversity net gain) and other functions such as trading standards. The Council also has a role to play in demonstrating best practice and providing advice and guidance on ash dieback to residents and landowners in the county. The Council must also ensure the effects of ash dieback are fully considered through partnerships it is involved in such as National Landscapes (Malvern Hills and Wye Valley) and the Local Nature Partnership/Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

The management of its own trees is underpinned by ongoing monitoring through regular tree surveys of land under its management. These inspections ensure that council-owned trees are in a satisfactory condition by identifying potential problems so they can be remedied in a timely, appropriate, and cost-effective manner. The Council will also act in response to significant hazards identified within its tree stock by members of the public. The nature and potentially quick progression of ash dieback within infected trees requires additional levels of knowledge and training and a clear process to ensure appropriate frequency of surveys is maintained. The technical nature of works to dead-dying ash trees is also identified as a potential additional resource requirement (trained operators and equipment).

With some 95% of ash trees that could potentially impact a public highway being in private ownership the Council's duty under section 154 of the Highways Act to serve notice on the landowner for any trees identified as being of a high risk to highway safety is a potentially significant additional element of work requiring resource. If a landowner does not comply with the legal notice to reduce-manage the risk then the Council must intervene and undertake the work itself and then implement a full cost recovery process against the landowner as appropriate. This requirement to undertake the works and then secure full cost recovery is an identified additional risk and resource requirement on the Council.

With the different management systems for school grounds across the county there is currently no information available on the extent of ash trees in 'Council-maintained' school grounds. These school ash trees will have a higher risk potential due to their location and high use of school grounds. Further advice and guidance will need to be developed to support schools and undertake identified additional surveying and required management activities.

The action plan will now split into sections specific to each of the key areas of ash trees that are council owned or managed, or where the council has a legal responsibility or duty of care. These sections will try to identify existing knowledge, actions and processes and provide suggestions and on recommendations on where and how change may be required in response to ash dieback in the county.

A nationally accepted 'quick' system to assess and record the extent/effect of ash dieback on a tree has been established by The Tree Council on behalf of DEFRA. This visual assessment using remaining density of canopy cover can be quickly and easily carried out by any officer after a short initial training has been received.

Class 1 100% -76%

Class 2 75% - 51%

Class 3 50%-26%

Class 4 25% - 0%

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It is anticipated that the Council will adopt this system to facilitate quick assessment of the progression of ash dieback in its ash trees to then guide what further specific professional surveys, tree risk assessments or actions may be most appropriate/necessary for trees considered to be in Stage 3 or Stage 4.

For ash trees on Council owned land or that are directly managed by the Council the recently adopted Trees & Hedgerow Code of Practice (2024) shall apply in respect of all works and actions. This CoP includes a recommended tree replacement scheme.

The CoP relevant to tree replacement and ash dieback recovery planting are:

Code of practice 8 – Right Tree for the Right Place

Tree planting on Council land will prioritise larger growing trees with multiple benefits wherever practical, scaling down to smaller trees and shrubs where larger trees are clearly not suitable.
A diversity of species will be planted to accommodate climate change and pest & pathogen resilience in the council's tree stock. The Council will have the final say in respect of all tree planting occurring on land it owns, manages or adopts.

Code of practice 9 – Replacement Trees

For every Council tree with a stem diameter greater than 15cm removed a minimum of three new trees (based on BS:3936 - 'Standard' tree or an equivalent number of smaller trees) will be planted and maintained through establishment and formative years and then thereafter maintained as necessary for their natural life. The replacements will be planted in the same or similar locations. Should these existing locations be deemed not viable alternative locations will be identified on land within the Council's responsibility or on other land with secured tenure within the locality.

Recovery-replacement planting should ensure a mix of species, native and non-native is planted in appropriate locations so as to help mitigate effects of future pests and pathogens and allow for climate change adaptation. The Council will promote this approach to third party landowners and the public as best practice and responsible tree husbandry.

Highways (not Public Rights of Way)

The management of the county's highways is currently devolved to the Council's public realm contract partner.

The nationally accepted 'quick' visual assessment system to assess and record the extent/effect of ash dieback on a tree as established by The Tree Council on behalf of DEFRA will be utilised.

For a Tree Survey a nationally accepted system of risk assessing trees in the public domain has been established. A risk rating of 1-5 is determined based on tree health, likelihood of risk and the likelihood of harm/damage to people and property.

Currently tree surveys are commissioned annually to include highway or highway side trees identified as requiring non-urgent professional assessment, risk categorisation and recommendation of any remedial works required.

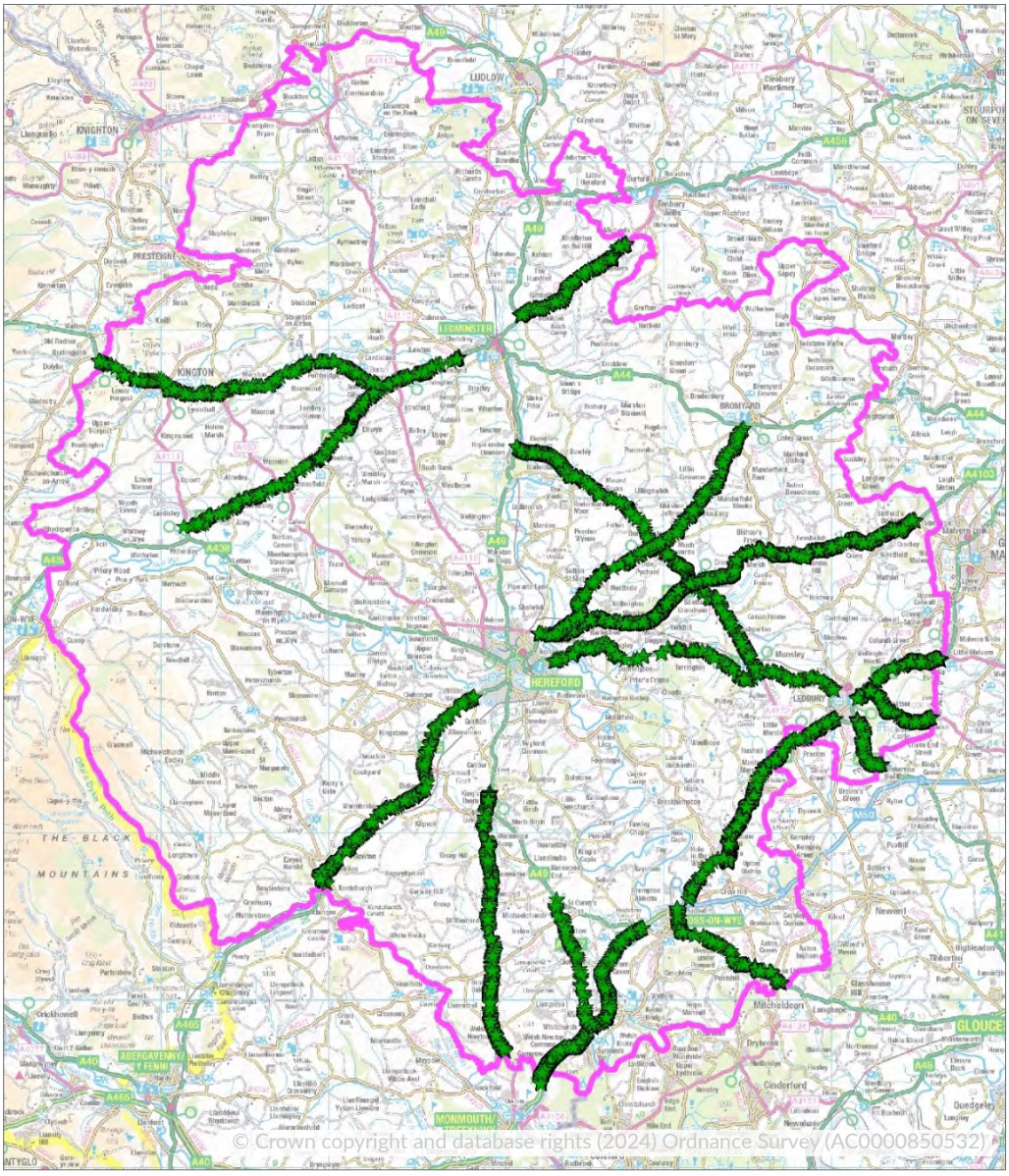
Tree assessments are included as part of the routine 'driven' highway safety inspections. Trees identified as being of potential risk are flagged and passed for further detailed assessment or detailed tree survey though reporting processes.

Direct notifications of potential tree safety issues by the public are flagged and passed for further detailed assessment or detailed tree survey though reporting processes.

If a tree considered as 'high risk' is within council ownership remedial works will be programmed for either immediate or urgent remedial work (depending upon actual assessed risk level). If the tree is in private ownership a process of landowner notification, and as necessary a 'section 154' notification and follow-up process will be initiated.

The Council is also responsible for authorising and in some cases directly managing any road closures and traffic management that may be required to safely undertake works to roadside trees. Traffic Management can be costly to the landowner to secure and implement.

During 2021-2023 a detailed tree survey of approx. 230km of 'A' class roads in the county (7% of total road Network) assessed 12,500 trees directly adjacent to the highway and of a size likely to cause significant effects in case of failure of these 2145 (17%) were identified as Common Ash in a range of different stages of ash dieback.



Highway (A Road) Trees Surveyed 2021-2023

Highways (Road Network)	Network (km)	Surveyed (km)	% surveyed	Trees surveyed	Ash in survey	% survey	Ash on whole Network
Highway Surveys within 5 years	3250	230	7.1	12541	2145	17.1	**30310**
NTM* (2009) -All Roads GIS data and 30m buffer				416545		17.1	**71229**

*NTM – National Tree Map Bluesky International Ltd

Public Open Space

The management of Council owned or managed Public Open Space (POS) is currently devolved to the Council's public realm contract partner or local bodies such as Hereford City Council, Town or Parish Councils.

The nationally accepted 'quick' visual assessment system to assess and record the extent/effect of ash dieback on a tree as established by The Tree Council on behalf of DEFRA will be utilised.

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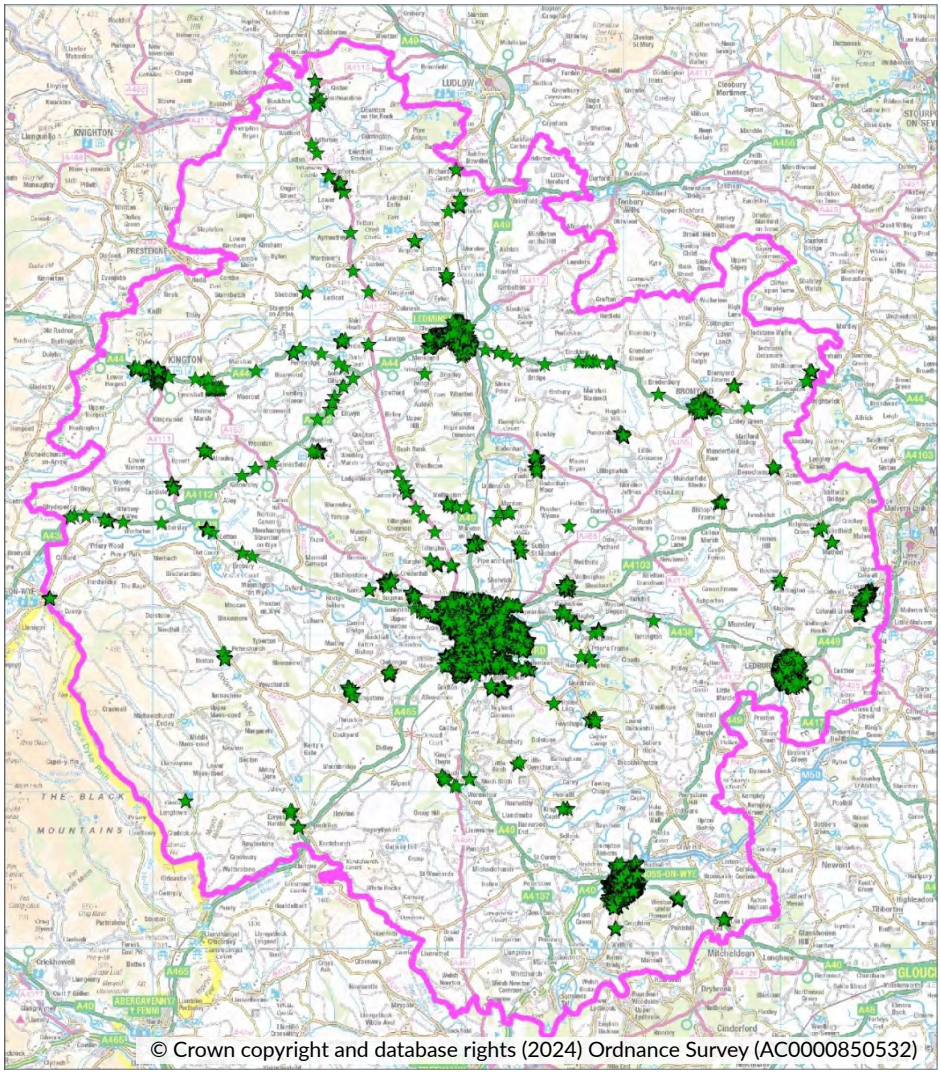


Public Open Space (and additional triggered tree surveys) 2019-2020-2022

Public Open Space and triggered surveys	Trees surveyed	Ash in survey	% Ash survey
Surveys 2019, 2020 and 2022	8176	1077	13.2

Public Rights of Way

The Council's dedicated Public Rights of Way (PROW) team are responsible for ensuring the county's network of over 3360 Km are accessible and all legal obligations of landowners complied with. The majority (>95%) of all trees, including ash, alongside the PROW network will be the legal responsibility of the landowner over which the route runs.

Maintenance and surveys-risk assessments are undertaken to potential risks identified by the PROW team or defects reported by the public that can include tree related concerns. A process for notifying landowners of risks is utilised and trees identified as being a significant risk can be issued a section 154 notice by the council's PROW team in a process similar to that for other highways.

The Council is responsible for managing/ authorising any temporary PROW closures and diversions that may be required by itself and private landowners in order to safely undertake works to trees alongside PROW. These can be costly to Council and the landowner to secure and implement.

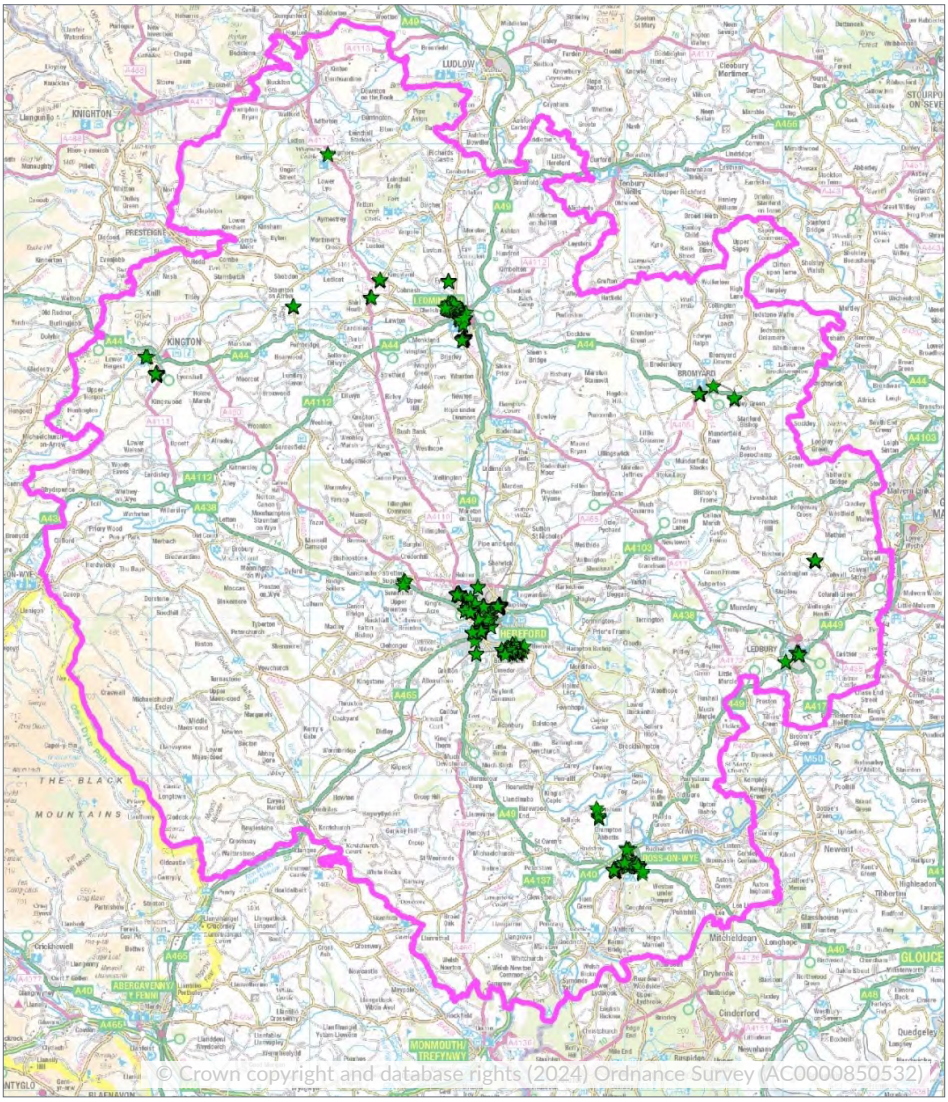
As the majority of trees are the responsibility of the landowner rather than the Council no regular tree survey process is currently necessary or undertaken. Reactive, tree specific, surveys are commissioned as necessary.

Property Services

The Council's Property Services are responsible for management of council owned/managed buildings and their grounds; and also acts as the Commons Registration Authority for the county with management responsibility for a few specific commons not in alternative ownership.

A professional tree survey of significant trees on the main Council owned land, but not including commons, was undertaken in 2021 to provide a baseline assessment and facilitate appropriate management to be undertaken. Trees are assessed during regular site checks and tree specific, surveys are commissioned and further maintenance works programmed as necessary.

State maintained schools fall within responsibility of the Council's Education Services who have their own grounds maintenance systems and many schools will have a degree of autonomy in respect of management and maintenance of their grounds. No information is currently available on trees, or the effects of ash dieback on trees within educational establishments.



Property Services Tree Survey 2021

Property Services	Trees surveyed	Ash in survey	% Ash survey
2021 survey	2490	129	5.2

Other council services and Ash Trees

Tree Preservation Orders and conservation areas

From available records, some 440 (79%) of current Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) have reference to protected ash trees; and all conservation areas in the county will include some number of ash. As the disease progresses in the county the number of applications for works to Ash trees will potentially significantly increasing the workload on the current, sole, Tree Officer employed by the Council.

Development and Planning

Many Council led or supported developments and planning applications will include trees, including ash. Appropriate considerations, including practical management of retained trees, must be made and the council's adopted Trees & Hedgerow Code of Practice (2024) should be implemented to ensure there is no net loss of trees and urban canopy cover increased wherever practical.

The Council's Tree Officer is responsible for comments on the effects to trees by development and commenting on planning applications. Trees are also potentially part of statutory Biodiversity Net Gain which is a relevant factor for all eligible planning applications.

Environmental Health & Trading Standards

There may be potential for an associated increase in unlicensed disposal of waste and the sale of 'illegal' firewood.

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982

This Act provides the local authority with powers to become involved, and if all other measures have failed to undertake work on privately owned trees that demonstrate a risk to private property and then to undertake full cost recovery from the relevant landowner. This a similar process but applying to any land than that covered under section 154 of the Highways Act previously covered in this plan.

Communications

The Council has developed informative webpages related to Ash Die Back to be released as part of the launch of this Ash Dieback Action Plan, with regular updates and the latest national guidance provided.

Wildlife and Other Constraints

For works to all Council owned or managed ash trees, all relevant ecological surveys and assessments will be completed prior to works commencing to ensure compliance with statutory wildlife protection (eg bird nesting checks, bat surveys and obtaining any required protected species licences or permissions).

Where appropriate all licences, permissions and any statutory replanting required under the Forestry Act will be secured and undertaken.

Works undertaken by or on behalf of the council are exempt from any conservation area requirements. As required the necessary permission to undertake works to any trees subject to a Tree Preservation Order will be obtained prior to works taking place.

External Interests and Ash Trees

Many national organisations and authorities with interests in the county such as Highways England, Network Rail, Duchy Estates and the National Trust already have well established processes and protocols related to the management of trees and specifically for Ash Dieback and these are already being implemented.

There is a range of national guidance on Ash Dieback available from reliable/statutory sources such as the Forestry Commission, DEFRA-FERA, Woodland Trust and The Tree Council.

The council's ash dieback webpages will include appropriate information for landowners and residents, and provide useful links to the other available information and guidance.

Recommendations – the way forwards

1. Formation of an internal Ash Dieback Working Group to bring together representatives from all services and teams in the council impacted by Ash Dieback to progress a cohesive and consistent response to the effects of Ash Dieback on the Council and its responsibilities and wider role and remit in the county. Including:

- Implement the standardised assessment and survey process for all Ash trees within the Council's control.
- Review and update the guidance on how the council will manage ash trees and effects of ash dieback on its own land, or trees it has responsibility for as appropriate.
- Monitor effects of ash dieback nationally and locally and ensure any new information and guidance is published and communicated in a timely manner within the Council and externally to residents and landowners.
- Provide a single monitoring and reporting route for all activities related to ash dieback within the Council.
- Investigate the commercial opportunities associated with the timber created as a result of managing Council owned trees due to ash dieback (or any other tree work operations).
- Develop a risk assessment and management process for future pests, pathogens and climate change that could impact the Council's tree stock in the future.

2. Ensure wider effects and impacts of Ash Dieback are fully considered within the proposed Herefordshire Tree, Hedgerow and Woodland Strategy and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy that will be developed by the Council in partnership with all landowners, businesses, organisations and residents of the county.

3. Support the work of Parish/Town Councils, Herefordshire Tree Warden Network, Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, other appropriate 'third sector' groups and landowners in the management of ash dieback in the county and the replacement of trees lost in the county.

4. To recruit and appoint an Assistant Tree Officer to help facilitate the Council's actions in response to Ash Dieback and support the existing Tree Officer in their statutory functions.

Appendices

Notes

The plan is produced with support of the Tree Council's national Ash Dieback Toolkit and with reference to similar plans by other local authorities including, Gloucestershire CC, Somerset CC, West Sussex CC, Norfolk CC and Devon CC.

Data has been obtained from many sources including Forestry Commission and Forest Research, FERA, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Bluesky International Ltd (National Tree Mapping), Herefordshire Biological Records Centre and Balfour Beatty Living Places.

The principles and processes identified in this plan will be relevant and appropriate to the management of other existing and future tree related pests and pathogens impacting the council's and the county's trees.

Definitions

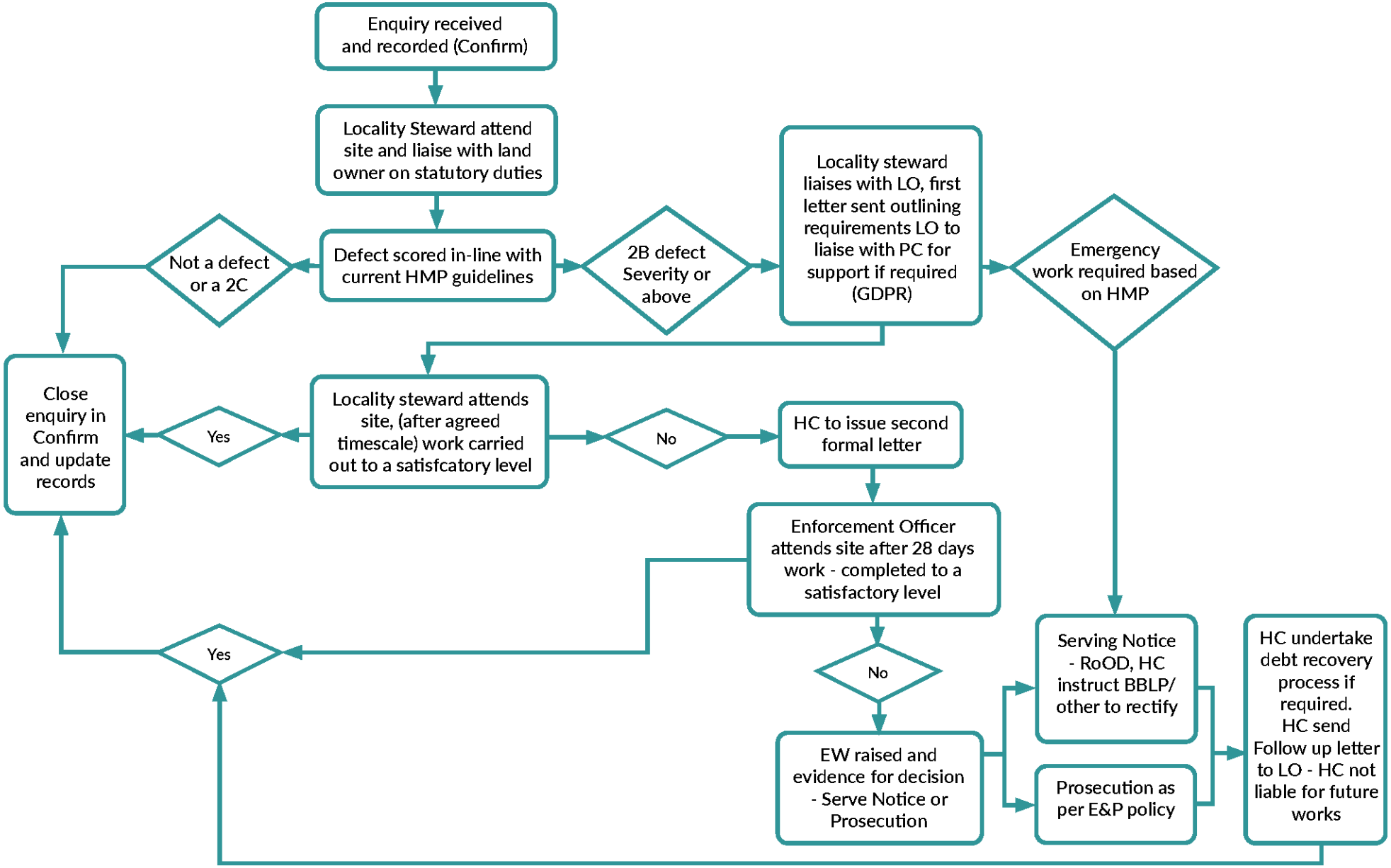
Tree Survey – is a formal survey carried out by a qualified and experienced arboricultural consultant or specialist tree officer.

Tree Assessment – is a brief visual assessment carried out by an appropriately briefed officer, locality steward or highway inspector.

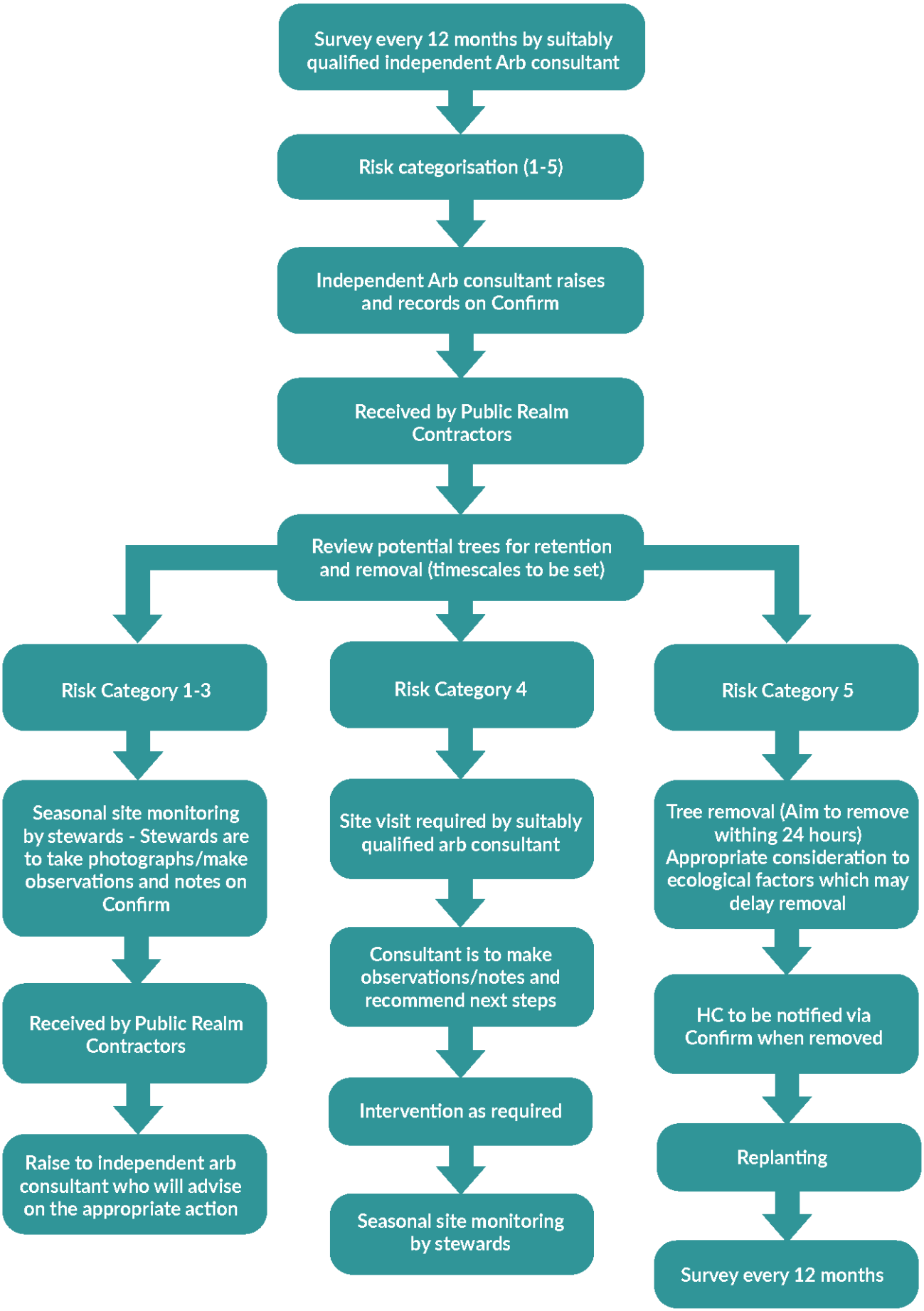
Section 154 notice (Highways Act) – a legal notice served on a private landowner requiring remedial work to a tree (or other feature) that is identified as being of high risk to the safe use of the adjoining highway. Failure of the landowner to comply (usually within 14 days) required the council as highways authority to step in and mitigate the risk. The council can look to a full cost recovery against the landowner for all essential works it carries out due to a breach of s.154 notice.

"Ash" or "ash" refers to Common Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) as this is the predominant species in the UK and the most at risk from ash dieback.

Highway Enforcement – current processes BBLP/HC



Proposed Ash Dieback 'A & B Roads' surveying process map



Steward training