



Shrewsbury

Town Council

Shrewsbury Town Council

Ash dieback progress update 2025.

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Overview.

In 2020 I was tasked with writing the Ash Dieback action plan (recently updated for 2025) and to complete a baseline survey of Shrewsbury Town Councils (STC) ash tree stock raising any work which would need to be completed during the following winter.

Since 2021, annual summer safety surveys have been completed by me and more recently Adam Clifford (Countryside Ranger), these have been purely on a risk based approach, so all trees near any targets e.g. all pathways, gardens, public open areas, benches, play areas, roads etc have been surveyed and given a risk rating, with those requiring work further inspected and work recommended/issued to either the Countryside and/or the tree team.

When the 2020 survey was completed and as part of the Councils Ash Dieback Action Plan it was decided that every five years would see a complete re-survey of all our ash stock. This will allow us to understand what has happened with ash dieback over the last five years, assess the current situation and plan for the next five years.

Adam has finished his first complete survey over the summer months and has visited every piece of STC land to count the ash trees, whilst at the same time completing a safety assessment of the trees and recommending work to be completed this winter.

The report is broken down into two distinct sections based on the management of the land – STC owned non-countryside land and Countryside sites, some owned by STC and others managed for Shropshire Council on a lease (pending). This being that countryside land is generally more populated with groups of trees and woodland whereas non countryside land includes recreation areas and land strips within estates which generally have more solitary growing trees. This is an important distinction to make as ash dieback is a fungal pathogen and is generally accepted to spread more quickly amongst trees growing close together, with the opposite true for trees growing on their own or in small groups.

1.Ash dieback on Shrewsbury Town Council non-Countryside land.

The total number of ash trees on STC owned non countryside sites is 2,058.

To recap, small trees are those between 4cm-30cm in diameter at breast (1.3m) height (DBH), a medium tree is between 30cm up to 60cm, large 60-120cm and anything over 120cm DBH is considered an ancient tree. A tree of 4cm DBH would be recognisable as a tree rather than a sapling or a seedling for example. A 30cm DBH tree would be considered as a good-sized mature tree to most people.

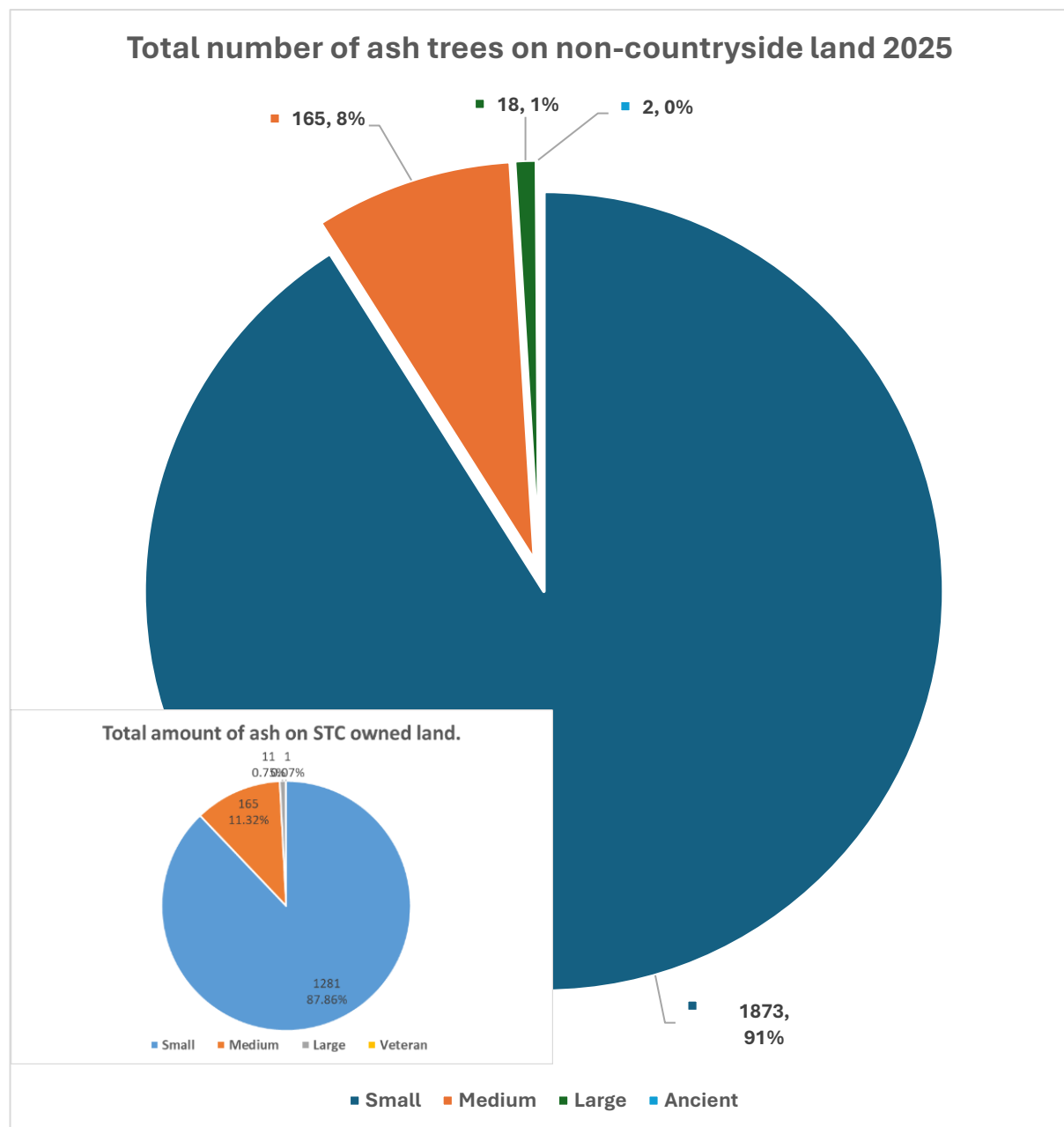


Table 1 shows the numbers of ash trees on non-countryside land and is broken down into size categories. Insert: 2020 chart.

1.1 Small trees.

Of the 1,873 small trees in the survey, 98% were in health class 1 with only 2% in class 2 and above.

To recap, the Ash health categories are Class 1, 100-75% remaining canopy (the healthiest class); class 2, 75-50% remaining category; class 3, 50-25% remaining canopy and class 4, 25-0% remaining canopy (the least healthy class).

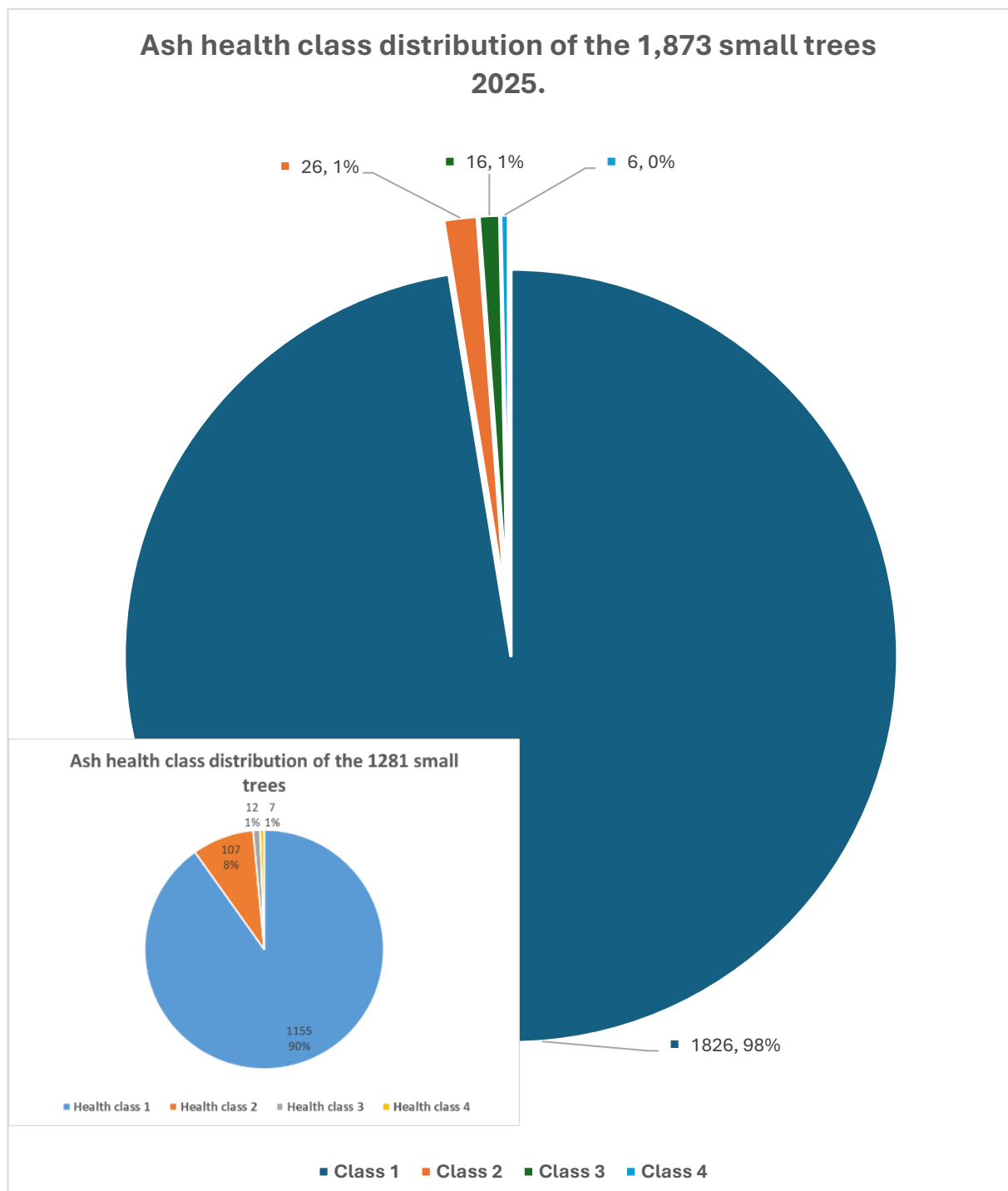


Table 2 shows the health class distribution of trees within the small category. Insert:2020 chart.

1.2 Medium trees.

There is a total of 165 medium sized trees 30-60cm DBH, these are very substantial trees and would be considered by most people as a “big tree”. Of the 165 medium trees surveyed, 95% were in health class 1 with 5% in class 2 and 3.

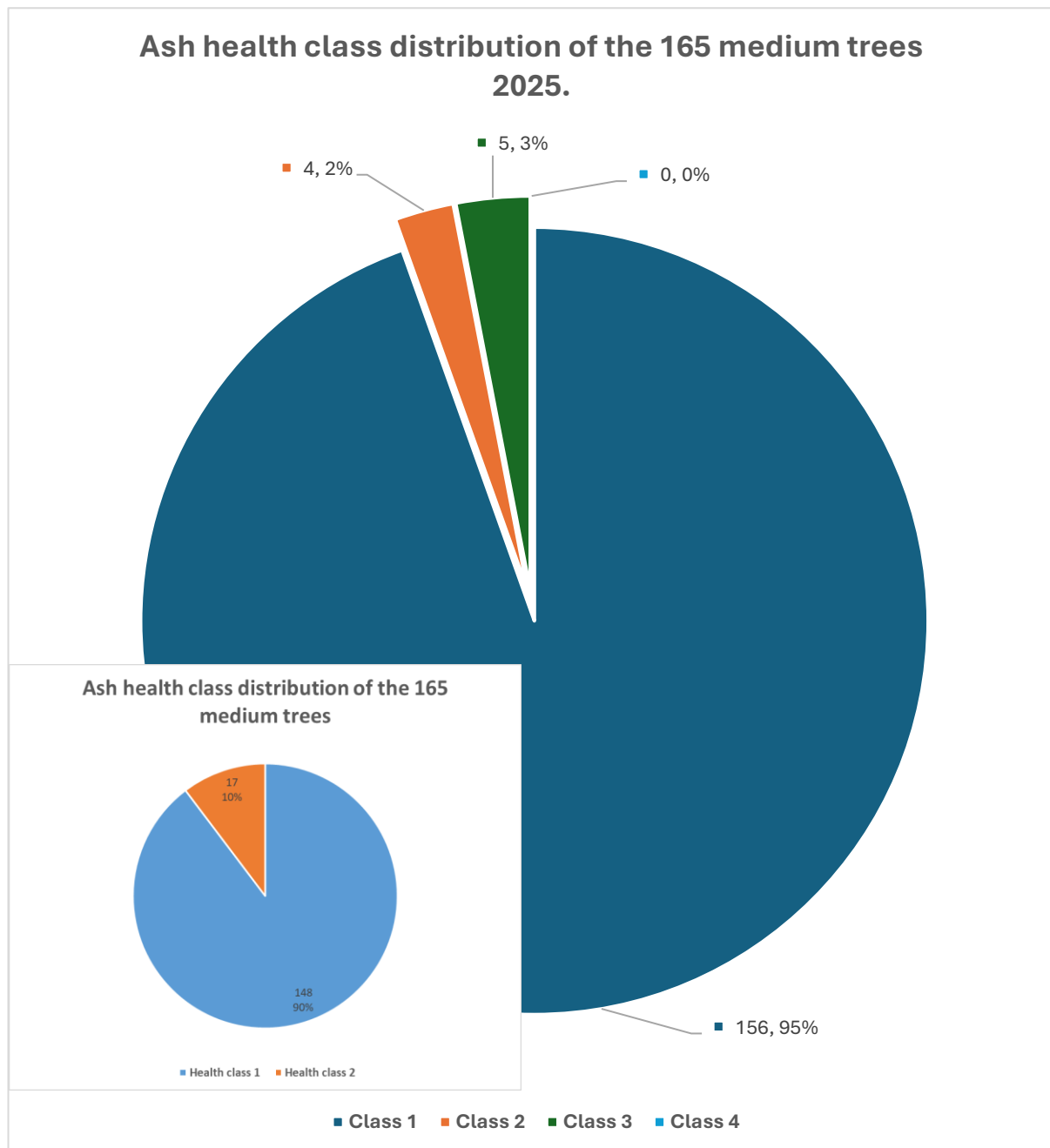


Table 3 shows the health class distribution of trees within the medium category. Inset:2020 chart

1.3 Large and ancient trees.

There was a total of 18 large and 2 ancient trees in the survey, all of these are currently in class 1 and good health.

2. Conclusions.

The total number of ash trees on non-countryside land has increased 41% since 2020, this may be for a number of reasons:

1. We have taken on new land since 2020.
2. During the survey of 2020 it was noted that there were many thousands of trees below the 4cm DBH required to be counted as a tree. These trees may now have grown into this small category.
3. Removal of diseased trees has increased light and improved growing conditions for self-set ash seedlings

The spread of ages is broadly similar to that of 2020 with the exception of an additional 8 classed as large, again this will be due to trees within the medium range growing into the large category.

2.1 Small trees.

There is a small increase in the percentage of small trees within health class 1 (healthy) these trees may have signs of dieback but still retain more than 75% of their canopy. We no longer have any areas which are completely free from the disease.

Of the 1873 small trees (4-30cm DBH) 98% were in the ash class 1 with only 2% in ash health class 2 or worse. This is an improvement from 2020 when 10% of all trees were class 2 or worse. I think this shows the effectiveness of the action plan in reducing the number of dangerous trees from our land. Many of the trees in classes 2-4 will be dealt with this year if deemed unsafe for their location.

2.2 Medium trees.

These trees are a big feature of our landscape and will be a noticeable loss when they succumb to disease. The number of medium trees was the same across both surveys and again there is an increase in the number of trees which are in health class 1, 95% in 2025 compared to 90% in 2020. There are a number of medium trees requiring work this winter to again improve this percentage.

2.3 Large trees.

There was a total of 18 large trees 60-120cm DBH, these are considered specimen trees and would likely be well over 100, up to 200 years old.

All 18 of our large trees are currently in good health and will continue to be monitored and worked on where required in the future.

2.4 Ancient trees.

Two ancient ash trees were surveyed. Veteran or ancient trees are the jewels in the crown of our ash population; they are considered to be an ecosystem in their own right and support the highest numbers of biodiversity. The removal of either one of these

trees would be an irreplaceable loss. Again, these trees will be monitored and work carried out as seen fit.

3. Work across the years on non-countryside land.

This year (2025) we have 24 trees requiring work to undertaken on them. This work is predominantly completed by the tree team in addition to their SLA work, the Countryside team are able to help, where extra pairs of hands are required. This is around the same number of trees that they had last year although the location and size of the tree can determine its difficulty and resources required to safely complete the work.

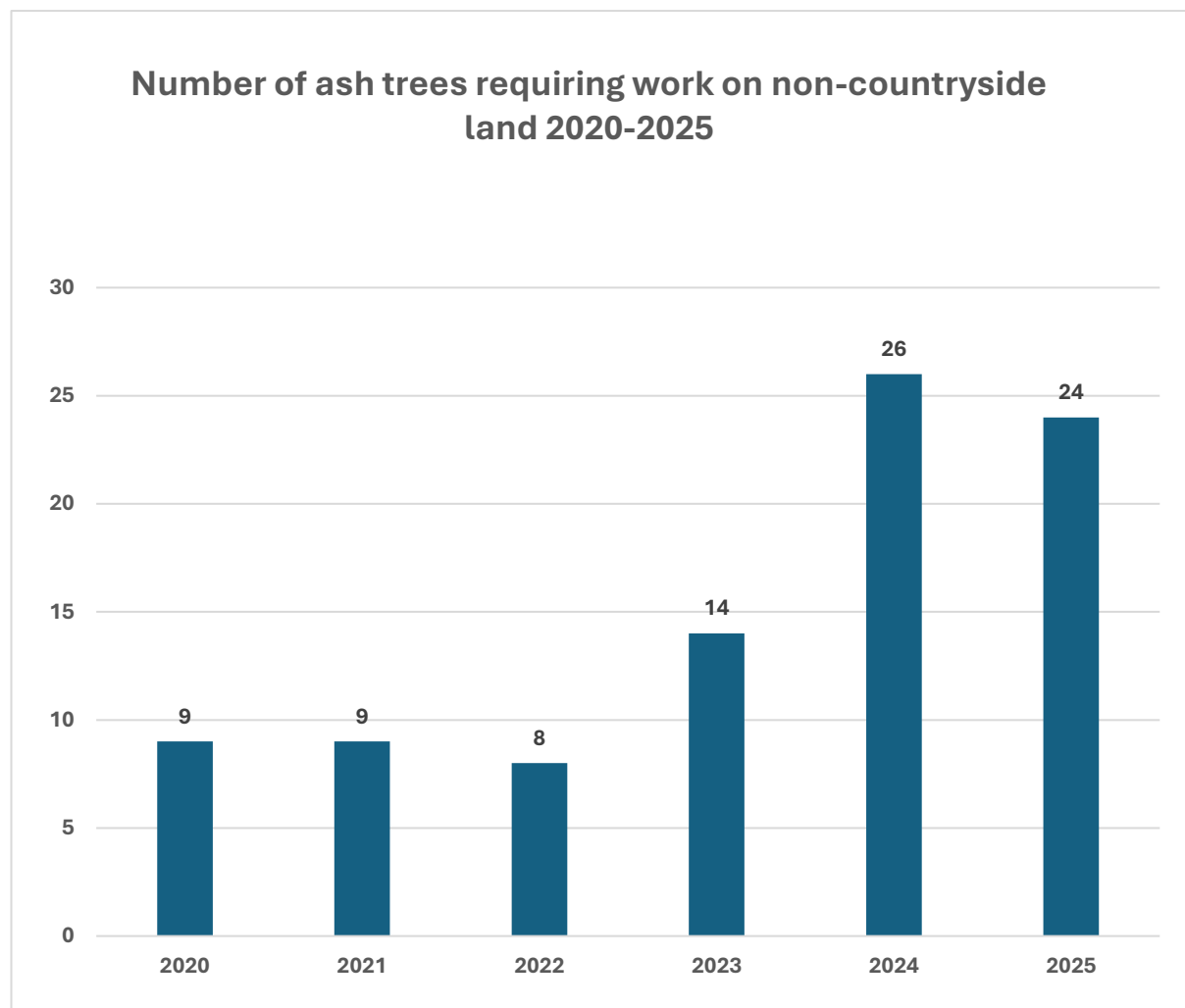


Table 4: shows the number of trees requiring work through the years on non-countryside land.

4. Ash dieback on Countryside land.

There was a total of 8,089 ash trees counted on Countryside sites which is a drop of approx. 4% from 8,408 in 2020.

To recap, small trees are those between 4cm-30cm in diameter at breast (1.3m) height (DBH), a medium tree is between 30cm up to 60cm, large 60-120cm and anything over 120cm DBH is considered an ancient tree. A tree of 4cm DBH would be recognisable as a tree rather than a sapling or a seedling for example. A 30cm DBH tree would be considered as a good-sized mature tree to most people.

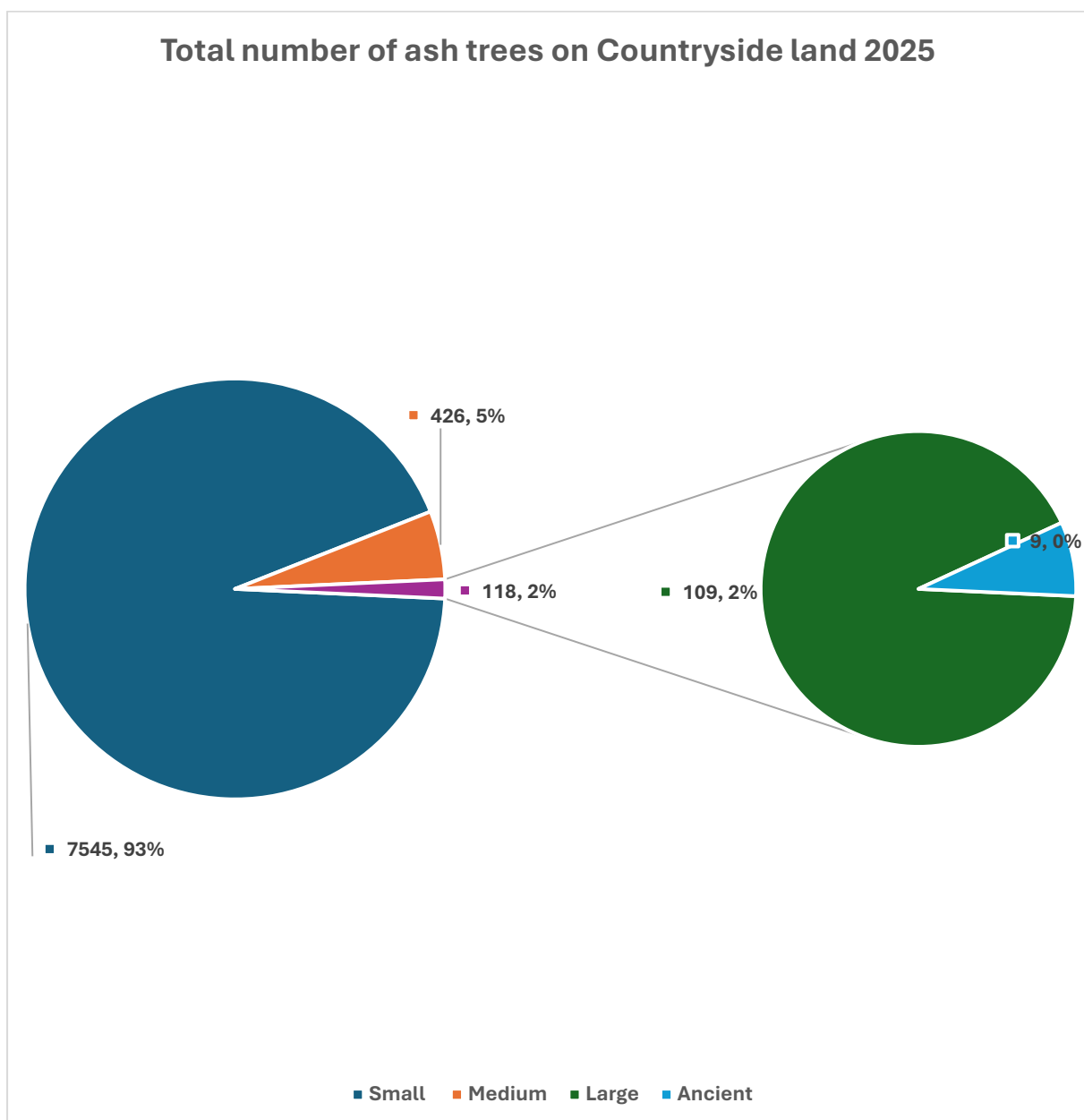


Table 5: shows the number of ash trees on Countryside land and is broken down into size categories. The 118 large and ancient trees are further broken down to show their proportions.

4.1 Small trees.

There is a total of 7,545 small trees of which 88% are ash health class 1 with the remaining 12% in class 2 or worse.

To recap, the Ash health categories are Class 1, 100-75% remaining canopy (the healthiest class); class 2, 75-50% remaining category; class 3, 50-25% remaining canopy and class 4, 25-0% remaining canopy (the least healthy class).

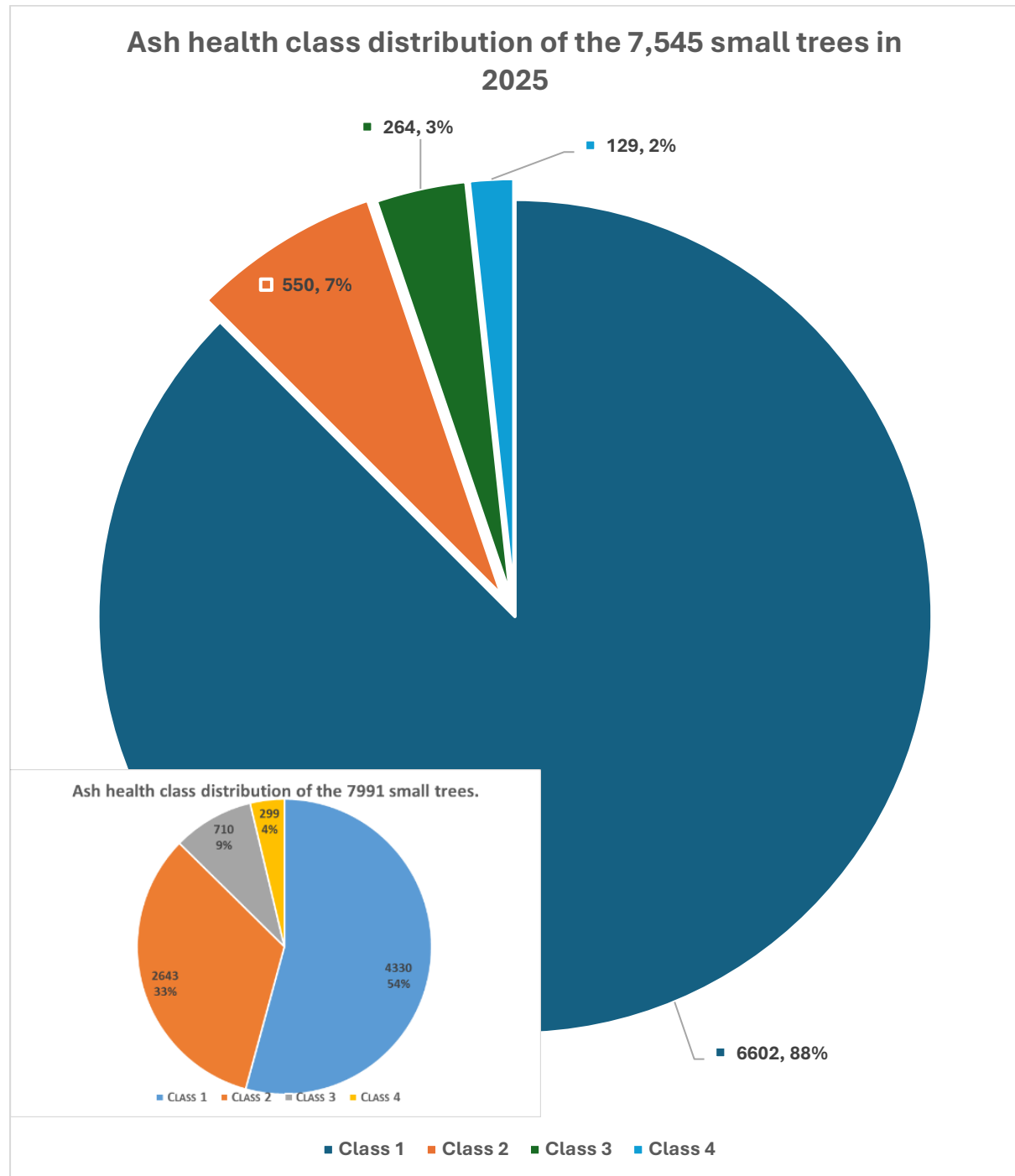


Table 6 shows the health class distribution of trees within the small category. Inset: 2020 chart.

4.2 Medium trees.

There is a total of 426 medium ash trees on Countryside land, 91% of which are in health class 1 with the remaining 9%

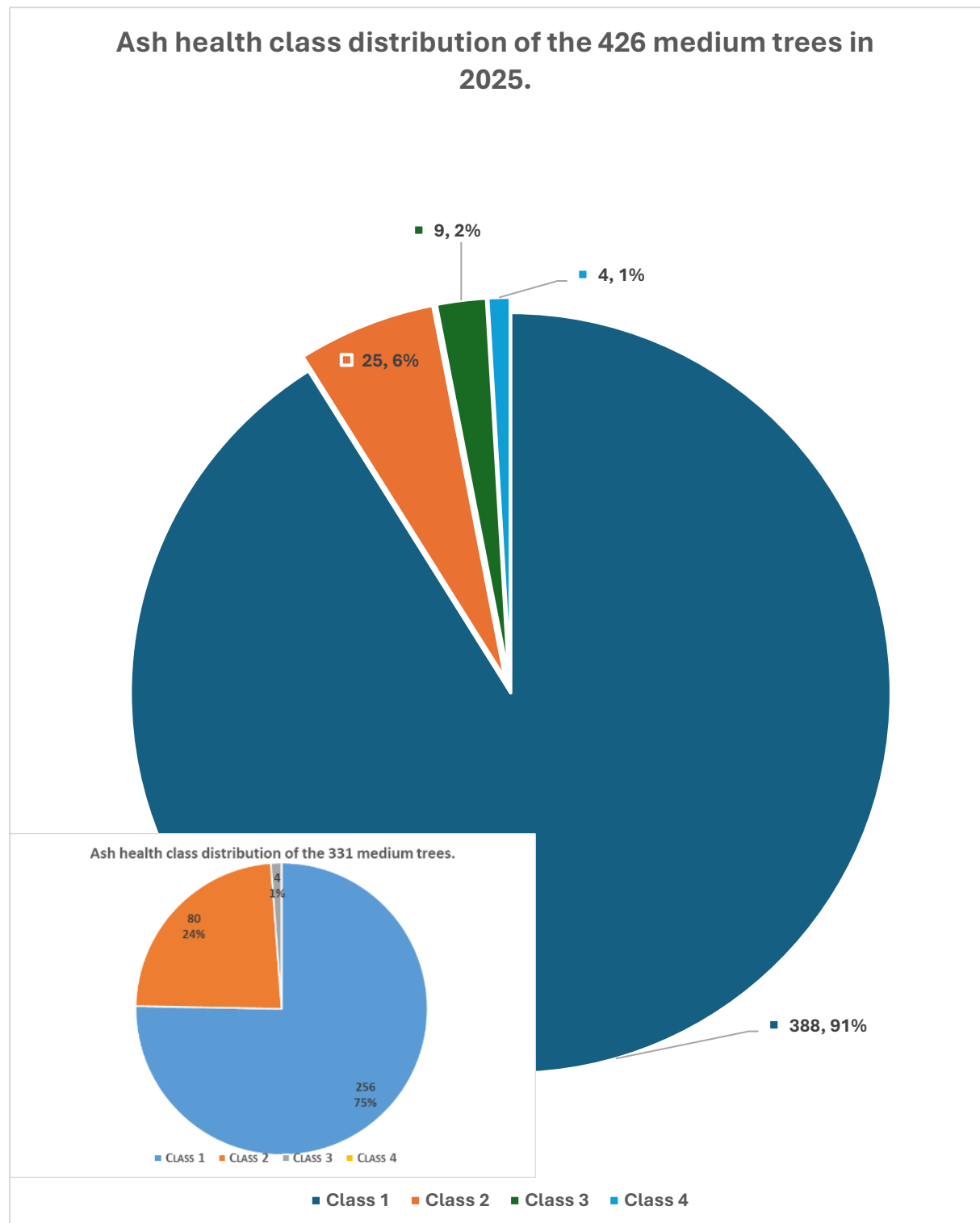


Table 7 shows the health class distribution of trees within the medium category. Inset: 2020 chart.

4.3 Large trees.

There is a total of 109 large ash trees on Countryside sites of which 94% are in ash class 1 with 6% in ash class 2 or worse.

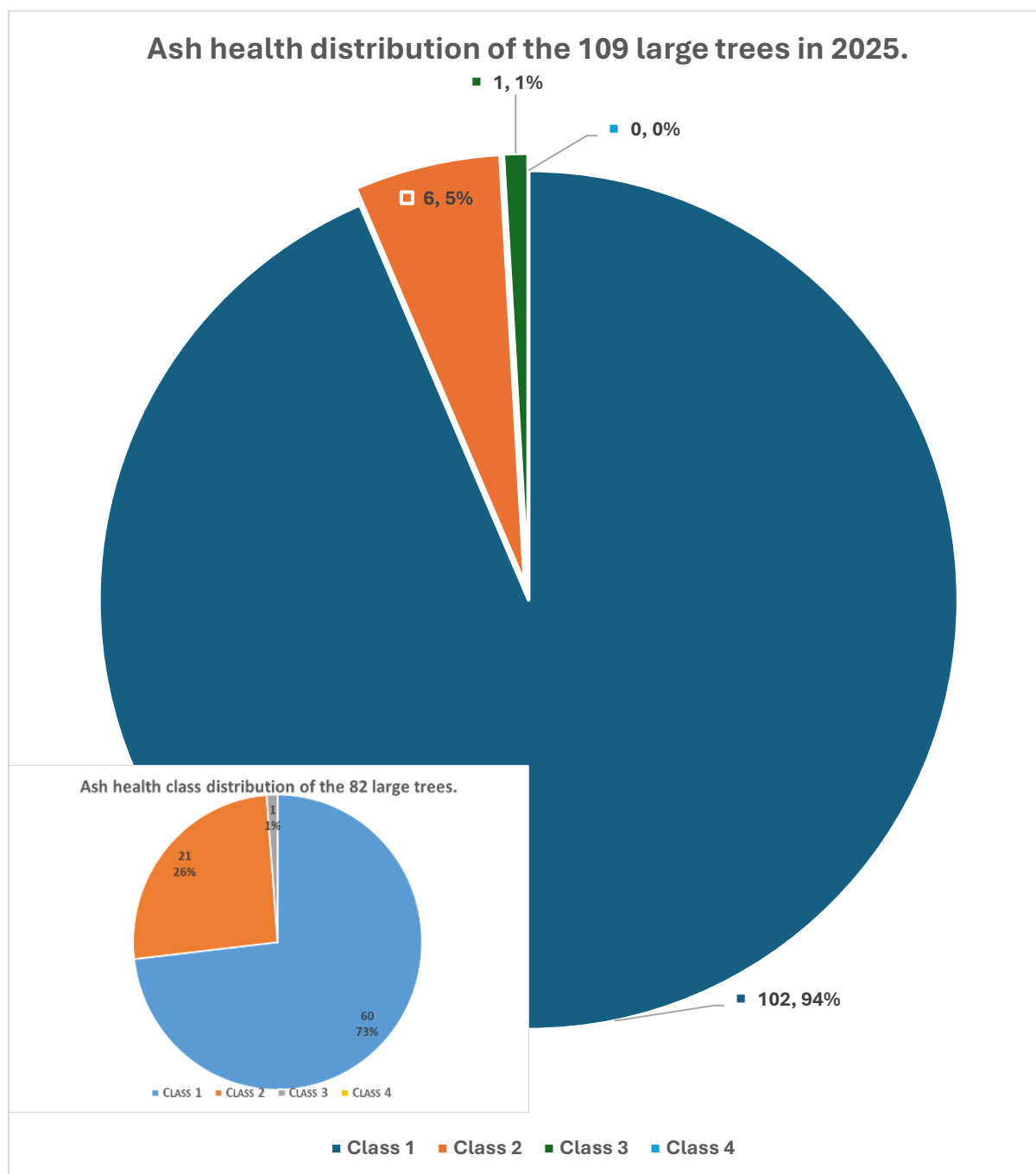


Table 8 shows the health class distribution of trees within the large category. Inset: 2020 chart

4.4 Ancient trees.

There is a total of 9 ancient ash trees on Countryside land, all of which are currently in health class 1 and in good condition.

5. Conclusions for Countryside land.

The total number of ash trees on Countryside land has dropped from 8,408 in 2020 to 8,089 in 2025 which is a decrease of just under 4%. This is likely due to the following reasons.

1. Many ash trees have been removed from Countryside sites since 2020.
2. Many of the trees towards the narrower diameter end of the scale in the small tree class have naturally died from the disease and have since decayed/fallen over, particularly in the Community woodlands.

As in 2020 due to the amount of ash trees to be surveyed and the more difficult terrain on Countryside sites e.g. long undergrowth and bramble barriers I would estimate that Adam has probably missed quite a lot of trees, and it would be safe to assume the real number of ash trees stands at around 20% higher at just under 10,000.

Although point 2 is true there are still lots of ash saplings of a size too small (less than 4cm DBH) to count as a tree in many of the areas surveyed. This can be attributed to the trees being under stress from the disease which is a well-known “shock” response where trees set seed profusely in a desperate attempt to survive. As in 2020 there are still countless thousands of these small saplings and seedlings so the actual number of ash on Countryside sites likely runs into the tens of thousands.

5.1 Small trees.

7,545 small trees (4-30cm DBH) were counted, which is down 6% from the 7,991 counted in 2020. Of these, 88% were classed as health class 1 and generally healthy with 943 in class 2 or worse. Compare this with 2020 of which only 54% were health class 1.

In 2020 the data was skewed somewhat by the amount of diseased small trees within the Community woodlands and when adjusted for that reason, a higher 70% of small trees were in health class 1. It hasn't been necessary to separate the woodlands in 2025 as the percentage of trees in each class roughly follows that of non-woodland trees at (class 1) 87% (2) 7.8% (3) 3.5% and (4) 1.7%.

This change in the number of healthy trees, particularly in woodlands demonstrates the teams valuable work in removing dead, dying and dangerous trees each year.

5.2 Medium trees.

A total number of 426 trees classed as medium (30-60cm DBH) up 29% on 2020's count of 331. This will as a consequence of many of the small trees in 2020 being on the cusp of becoming a medium tree. We have also tried to manage medium trees more sympathetically given their important stature in the landscape, with pruning and dead wooding being prescribed as remedial works rather than felling. This will use more

resources in the long term as many of these trees will still succumb to the disease and will have to be removed eventually, but it is felt that we should try to maintain these trees for as long as is safe.

This management means that 91% of our medium ash trees on Countryside land are in health class 1 with 9 % in class 2 or worse. Compare this to just 75% medium ash trees in health class 1 in 2020.

5.3 Large trees.

There is a total of 109 large (60-120cm DBH) trees on Countryside sites, this is a 33% rise on the number (82) in 2020. Again, this will be down to trees moving from the medium into the large category.

Of the 109 large trees, 94% are in health class 1 with just 6% in health class 2 or worse. In 2020, just 73% of large trees were in class 1. This increase can too be attributed to positive management of the tree stock.

These trees are notable for their large size and dominance of the local landscape. These are arguably the most important category of tree as they will (hopefully) form the next generation of veteran and ancient ash trees establishing their own individual ecosystems. Any removal of these trees will be a big loss to biodiversity and ecosystem functions.

5.4 Ancient trees.

We currently have 9 ancient ash trees on Countryside land, some of which may be well over 300 years old. All trees in this class are currently in health class 1, but we have lost one ancient tree in 2020 at Copthorne Park. Unfortunately, I found a parasitic simultaneous white rot decay fungi (*Inonotus hispidus*) present in the trunk, along with an unidentified bracket and a large split. *Inonotus* is renowned for branch drop and we had already had 3 or 4 very large branches fall from this tree in the previous few years. The tree was surveyed by Steve Shields, was deemed dangerous and was monolithed in September 2020. The short stem has been retained in place as decaying habitat for numerous invertebrate species including a rare wild bee's nest, blue tits have also been seen nesting in a hole, and tree creepers are regular visitors. Any timber removed from the tree was stacked nearby to create important dead wood habitat.

An ancient ash at Rad Valley woodland with a diameter of 133cm (4.2m in girth) has had numerous interventions over the past few years. Being near to a children's play area means the tree will be monitored closely, but at the moment it seems healthy.

6. Work across the years on Countryside land.

The general rule of our management is that once a tree declines into class 2, we will make an assessment, taking into consideration the likelihood of failure and the potential for injury or damage should the tree fail (targets) to give the tree a risk rating. We also must use our knowledge of tree removal to understand how the tree will be dealt with. Most trees can be dealt with safely from the ground by competent trained operatives. If, however, a tree is leaning towards a target for example a property boundary, then this tree may have to be climbed and dismantled from the top down.

Due to the nature of the disease making the affected tree brittle, once a tree reaches a certain point of remaining canopy cover it is no longer safe to climb. Due to this factor, it is often necessary for us to condemn a tree and remove it before it gets to this stage, particularly larger trees. To safely remove a tree, and to adhere to HSE's hierarchy of working at height which cites a start point of considering mechanical access, we often have to use a mobile Elevated Work Platform (MEWP) aka cherry picker. This comes at a much greater monetary cost as we currently hire machines in from a private hire company. MEWP hire was highlighted as being a potential significant cost going forward and this has proved to be the case.

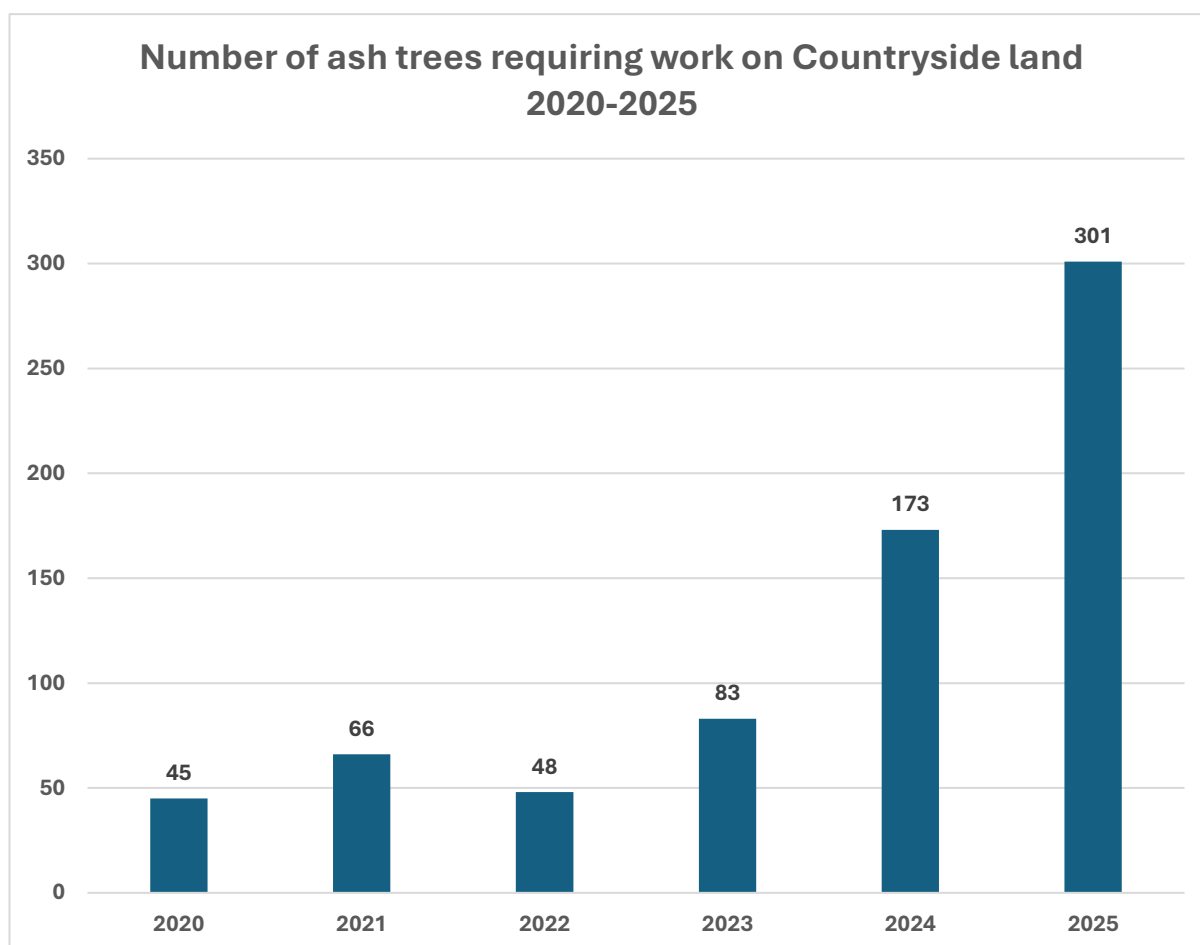


Table 9 shows the total number of ash trees on Countryside land requiring work from 2020-2025.

The number of ash trees requiring work on Countryside sites rises each year as the disease takes hold. There was an anomaly in 2022 which is the year that Adam took over the surveying of our ash trees and I think he may have been a little too lenient when it came to tree removal, this is quite understandable as removing a tree isn't a decision to be taken lightly. As his confidence and knowledge has grown he is now better placed to make those decisions. We do however have the help and support of the Tree Officers at Shropshire Council and also employ our own consultant, who advise us on any prominent ash trees or removals that would be seen as contentious.

It is unknown how many trees will require work next year, but I can say with a certain amount of confidence that it will be more than the 301 (325 across all land) that we have to deal with this year.

At the moment both the Tree Team and the Countryside Team are capable of absorbing this work into their annual schedules and both teams work well together. The Tree Team is generally doing more work on countryside areas each year, specifically trees which require climbing and/or MEWP, although some of the Countryside Team have now been trained in using a chainsaw from a MEWP so that may reduce as they get up to speed.

The extra ash works each winter does however have a knock-on effect on other work that the Countryside Team could be doing and generally takes them from October (start of tree season) to usually around Christmas to complete. Woodland management, including thinning is a key priority in the newly published "draft" Local Nature Recovery Strategy. This is work that would previously be completed in winter but has fallen by the wayside since 2020 due to the time spent dealing with ash dieback trees. Obviously, safety work quite rightly takes priority, in an ideal world it would be great to be able to do both.

7. Surveying.

To survey the countryside sites took Adam around 6 weeks. To survey non countryside land took around 10 weeks. During this time Adam also had to complete his usual duties of such as planning work for Countryside staff, path cutting, beaver project, haymaking as well as standing in for me during a period of absence so it is difficult to give an exact amount of time spent surveying. In 2026 the survey will return to being purely a risk-based exercise i.e. only looking at trees near to targets such as footpaths, open areas, roads, buildings, play areas etc. so the survey should be completed much more quickly. A full count and further update will be undertaken in 2030.

One issue which was raised during the survey in 2020 was the lack of appropriate software to survey and manage our tree stock. The Council has since invested in TreePlotter software which allows us to record and map trees but also allows work to be issued to teams electronically to be completed by them in order of risk rating. This has made the surveying and issuing of work much more efficient and has reduced errors. No more pieces of paper being misplaced and a dangerous tree forgotten about.

8. Recovery.

Since the inception of the ash dieback action plan in 2020 (updated for 2025) we have had the policy of a minimum of 3,2,1 replacement for trees removed 1 for a small tree, 2 for a medium and 3 for a large tree, again this is a minimum. The species of tree are chosen from a list provided by Forest Research as being the best to replace the ecosystem services and functions of the lost ash trees. Trees in woodland and where there are generous self-set trees already established, no trees will be planted and natural regeneration preferred.

The trees which are planted out are potted large standards and not the small whips that you would usually see planted elsewhere. This gives them the best start in life and chance to thrive but also comes at a considerable cost which currently comes from the ash dieback budget. To try and reduce this cost, since 2023 I have ordered several whips of each species, and with the help of the greenhouse staff who have potted them up to grow on in the tree nursery. More will be added each year so in a few years we will have a sustainable source of replacement trees at limited cost to ourselves.

We have so far planted out 190 replacements which also require after care in mulching/spraying and in drier years watering, as has been the case in 2025. Watering takes around 4 days for 1 person to get around all the young trees, some of those planted earlier in the project in 2020 and 2021 are now at a point where they can be taken off the watering list.

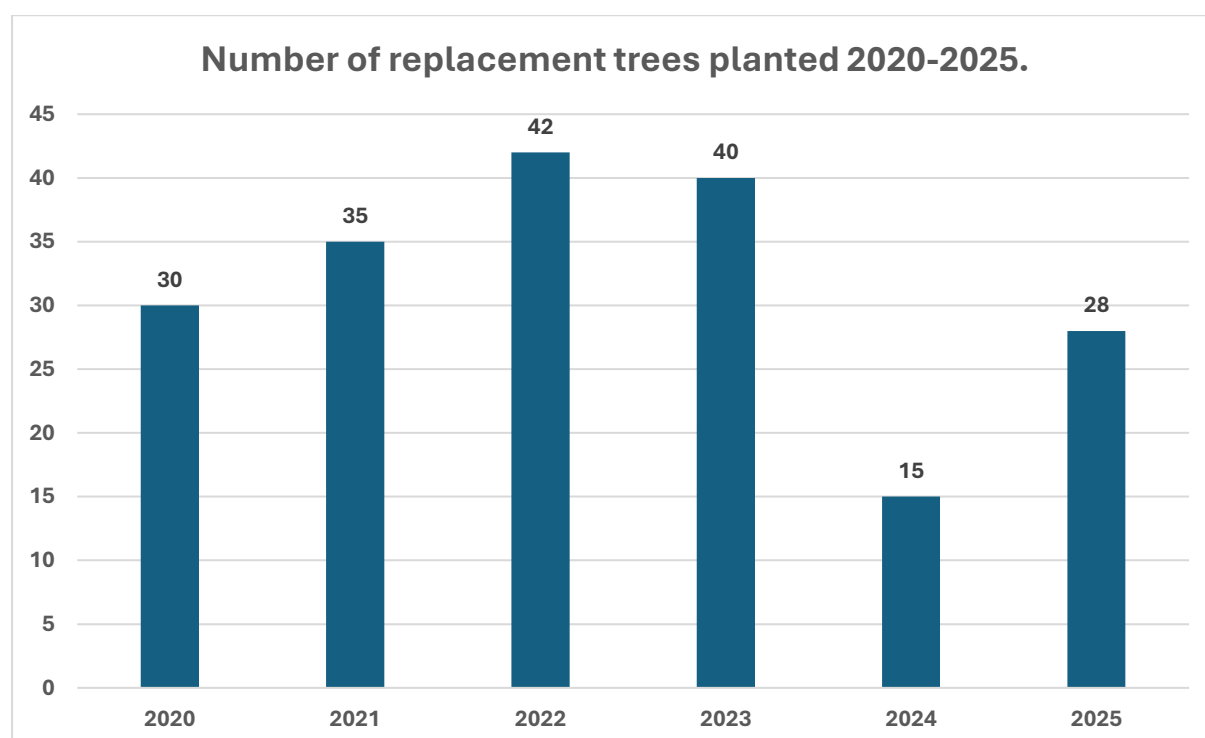


Table 10 Shows the number of replacement trees planted since 2020.

8.1 Ash dieback, planning for the future.

It is difficult to say when the incidence of the disease will begin to reduce but it is likely that we are some years away from that. I expect that numbers of ash trees requiring work will increase in the short term, eventually plateau and then begin to reduce in numbers annually. I suspect that we are still somewhere on the upwards curve though as we haven't yet seen a dramatic reduction in ash tree numbers locally.

8.1.2 Resistance.

It is estimated that 1-2% of ash are highly resistant to the disease with a higher percentage somewhat resistant. The original national estimate of 70-85% is still used and I don't see any reason why Shrewsbury won't adhere to that trend, meaning that we could still be facing the loss of 7,000 to 8,000 ash trees over the next decade or so.

It is important that we try to retain ash trees which are showing signs of resistance from unnecessary felling and this is something which Countryside staff have been briefed on to keep a look out for. As of yet though and with the disease still being in the relatively early stages, it has been difficult to separate those that simply haven't yet succumbed to the disease, to those which may look resistant.

There was a recent publication outlining that ash trees may be evolving resistance through natural selection. The hypothesis being that as ash seed profusely, creating seedlings which are then affected by the disease and die, the quick turnaround in generations favours the genes of the resistant few. Much of this is still anecdotal though and doesn't offer any hope to adult trees which will have grown before the disease arrived or took hold.

8.1.3 Climate change.

Fungal spore load is at its highest from June to late August and is affected by moisture and temperature. The ideal temperature of around 20 degrees Celsius combined with high moisture levels creates perfect conditions for spore production and infection of nearby trees. Temperatures above 30 degrees Celsius during this period and extending into early autumn could reduce spore load significantly. Current climate change predictions of hotter and drier summers may well affect future ash dieback disease spread.

8.1.4 Management options.

In Britain, management of ash dieback in woodlands and other environments focuses on felling of potentially hazardous trees, but also encourages conservation of veteran, ancient, or mature ash trees infected with disease which may survive for many years. This has so far been Shrewsbury Town Councils approach also.

Some landowners selectively thin to promote the growth of the remaining, more vigorous ash, whilst retaining the dead and decaying wood to benefit some species that

depend on these resources. The practice of thinning has been evaluated by quantifying the effects of selective thinning in an area of ancient woodland in Wales; the findings suggested that thinning was associated with lower tree mortality, and the prevalence of ash dieback were reduced. This is an action which we currently do not have the resources to complete.

8.1.5 National and international initiatives.

In the long term, the strategy for tackling ash dieback in Britain and elsewhere in Europe is the roll-out of resistant ash from breeding programmes. However, as aerial ascospore density appears to be an important determinant of disease outcome, and *H. fraxineus* can still colonize the foliage of resistant trees and produce spores, the impact of resistant ash planting strategies on remaining low density ash ‘survivors’ in the landscape may need to be considered.

The Living Ash Project continues to identify, screen, and collect seed from resistant trees, whilst also examining new propagation methods to replant future ash woodlands. Elsewhere in Europe, national projects such as Esche in Not (‘Ash in Need’, Austria) and the research network FraxForFuture (Germany) are leading initiatives to test ash dieback resistance under field conditions and develop better management of infected ash stands. FraxForFuture is not only centred on ash dieback but is also aimed at preparing for other anticipated far-reaching damaging events in trees.