By 2024, The National Forest will be a transformed landscape across 200 square miles of the heart of England

Enjoyed by everyone
Economically vibrant
Celebrated for its quality
Sustainable into the future
The purpose of The National Forest has always been social and economic, as well as environmental. Beautiful wooded sites refresh the spirits and bring communities together. Individual trees support a wide range of wildlife and this is multiplied at the woodland scale. Across a 200 square mile landscape, hundreds of woodlands and other habitats can help to heal fragmented ecosystems and increase climate change resilience. They also support the visitor, woodland and recreational economies, along with inward investment and business growth.

The National Forest was set up with cross-party support in the early 1990s, to demonstrate all the many and wonderful benefits of a forest close to a large population. The National Forest area was chosen from a number of potential contenders, due to local support, the low woodland cover and, crucially, the extent to which mining and other extractive industries had laid waste swathes of the central area of the forest.

The progress of The National Forest is now beyond doubt. A generation on, community support for the forest is deep and widespread, with 85% of residents surveyed saying that the quality and safety of sites are good or very good. The visitor economy has grown steadily and by the end of this strategy period is projected to be over £300m pa, around double that in 2014. Already, since 2001, there has been c£1bn of investment in and around The National Forest. Meanwhile the population continues to grow, enjoying a well-designed green infrastructure as its setting.

The landscape is beginning to suggest the ultimate mosaic of woodlands and other habitats which will wend its way through transport links, factories, farms and settlements: a modern take on the medieval idea of a forest, with working areas and open land, as well as woods. Forest cover has nearly trebled and is currently nudging 20%. The woodland economy now includes recreation, woodfuel, crafts and market opportunities from thinnings. It depends on the good management of woodlands and as evidence of this the public should see many readable, temporary signs over the decade, explaining exactly what is going on in that woodland.

Trust in the brand is growing and one of the main messages from the consultation behind the strategy was that people, companies and organisations want even closer involvement in the forest. As one person said to us, ‘Everyone wants to be part of success’. This success has only been achieved through partnerships.

This is the coming of age decade, a fast-changing ‘teenage phase’ in which the forest will be well-stewarded to maturity. The refreshed vision for The National Forest is stated simply on the cover.

There is much we cannot predict in the ten years to come, so this document sets a direction rather than providing a blueprint, yet based on evidence and the views of partners and residents. I commend to you a strategy for this exciting decade divided into two periods, with a review in 2019 which sets direction to 2024.
The National Forest 2014 – 2024

KEY ACTIVITY

Here we summarise the priorities and shifts in key activities to deliver The National Forest to 2024.

National exemplar, centre of excellence and research partner
The National Forest will strengthen its contribution as a national exemplar alongside being a local success story. It will develop as a centre of excellence, a test bed for innovation through landscape-scale change. Academic partnerships and the engagement of trusts and individuals will shape the future forest and provide new resources.

Continued creation of the forest: how and why rather than how much
The forest creation rate at up to 150ha a year, will be much lower than in the early years, but targeting will expand ecological networks and make the most beneficial impact on the landscape. Green infrastructure near where people live is highly valued and this will be pursued. Over-planting will be avoided and the scale and nature of planting will reflect the forest’s varied character. Other habitats as well as woodland will continue to be created and will be counted as part of the ultimate map of forest cover.

Forest management: a systematic, long-term approach
This includes all aspects of the forest, including non-wooded habitats and visitor attractions. The aim is to maximise value of all kind: commercial, landscape, recreational, heritage, wildlife. Professionals, communities and trainees all have a role in the management of the forest. The woodland economy will be supported to expand, creating local demand and supply and supporting timber markets. The threats posed by tree diseases and damage by grey squirrel and deer will be met effectively but proportionately, with collaboration between landowners.

A great experience on the ground
People come to the forest for a very wide range of reasons, seeking varied experiences. The customer journey will be improved through effective marketing and information: it will be easier to find your way into the forest that meets your interests. The quality of existing infrastructure will be maintained and new investment will continue to make the forest an exciting, evolving destination. Connecting up facilities, experiences and information will be key, making the most of the asset created.

Building the brand, more entrepreneurial
As the brand becomes more and more established there will be opportunities for joint ventures, further sponsors and commercial operations. More businesses will adopt the brand and partners beyond the NFC will lead on telling the story of the forest.

'The forest for everyone'
A wider range of partners and experts will develop the forest as an inclusive, accessible and welcoming place for everyone, including those with particular needs. There will be an emphasis on accessibility. The diversity of the populations of surrounding cities will be increasingly evident in those enjoying the forest, through these partnerships. Community leadership will grow over the decade and there will be mutual learning, across the forest and beyond, about how all can engage more deeply in the opportunities provided by the forest. A wide spectrum of activities will enhance the health and well being of visitors. The Heart of the Forest has a special role to play as a focus for inclusion and engagement.

Background evidence is available at: www.nationalforest.org/about_us/strategy
- Review of strategy 2004-2014
- Community perceptions survey
- Full list of consultation responses
- Economic impact assessment
- Financial assumptions

This strategy has been informed by consultation with a wide range of partners and individuals. We are grateful for all the responses, which have been carefully considered.

The National Forest is one of England’s fastest developing destinations, providing a distinctive forest-based experience which nevertheless has great variety for a whole range of visitors. I look forward to seeing it go from strength to strength in the decade ahead.

James Berresford
CEO, VisitEngland
Leadership role of the NFC
Consultees to this strategy have stated clearly that to achieve our shared aspirations, in what will be a decade of exciting development and new activity, the forest will require co-ordination and leadership, which is the role of the NFC.

Charitable status
The NFC will take charitable status alongside continuing to be an exemplary Non Departmental Public Body as a first step in a phased transition. Its core mission will remain to provide a public good, whilst operating more entrepreneurially, actively managing its assets. It will strengthen and embed local engagement, representation and accountability. Closer partnerships will be an important means of implementing this strategy.

Government grant a smaller % of income
The financial contribution of central Government to the NFC will diminish in real terms and as a proportion of total income. This correlates with the gradual reduction in the creation phase of the forest and will be managed in a controlled and proactive way, securing alternative streams and new ways of operating, as signalled by the NFC’s Triennial Review.

Sustainability through diversification
Over the decade, in preparation for no longer being a Non Departmental Public Body, a sustainable financial model for the NFC will be implemented through a wide range of sources, including earned income, projects and programmes, private sector sponsorship, charitable trusts and foundations, and public support.

Responses from stakeholders demonstrated that the NFC is highly valued for its record of delivering Government priorities and is well respected by its partners.

National Forest Triennial Review 2013

A model of National Forest Company gross income 2014 – 2024, demonstrating diversified activity and funding

Our modelling assumes that the NFC’s catalyst role continues to be needed at least at the current scale, albeit across a broader base of activity and funding. The graphic sets out a conservative income scenario, with significant reductions in Government grant. In practice, as an exemplar organisation with a strong track record, the NFC may find itself asked to expand its services and partnerships significantly over the period.

This model assumes investing in the capacity to evolve, securing public money for programmes, local and national fundraising, modest earned income, controlled running costs, and roughly a 10% contribution to core costs from funded programmes.

At the levels of gross income shown in the graphic, a sustainable level of net income is achieved.

The model shows that beyond 2024, whilst grant in aid as a Non Departmental Public Body may no longer be received, income will be required to sustain the quality of the public good created, regardless of further programme activity.