



Our vision for

The Heart of the National Forest



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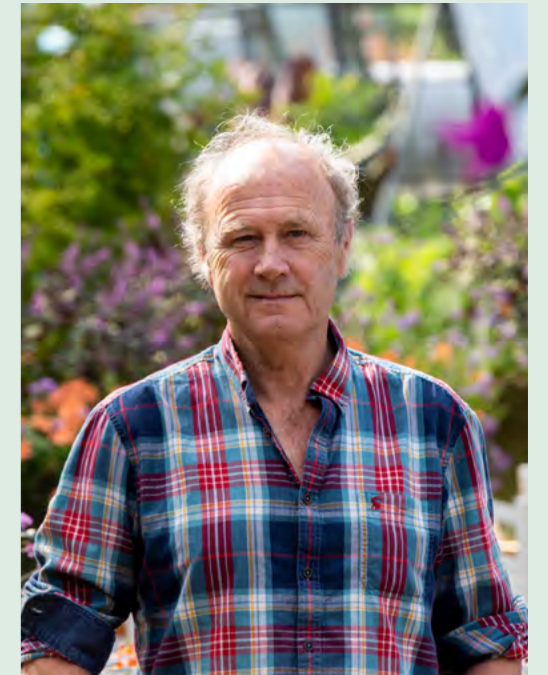
Foreword

The vision for the Heart of the National Forest is totally inspiring because it comes at a time when the world is waking up to our human need to be in nature in order to feel properly nurtured and connected to the Natural World.

The huge aspiration for the National Forest sets a high bar, and Eden and our National Wildflower Centre are really proud to become a part of it and to shout from the roof tops about it!

For us in general, and me in particular, this marks a moment where our culture comes alive once more and appreciates that the circular systems of nature are mirrored everywhere. In our experience to appreciate this is the mark of a learning and civilised society at the dawn of a new green enlightenment.

We love this project.



Sir Tim Smit
Executive Vice-Chair,
The Eden Project

Introduction

During its relatively short history the National Forest has responded with imagination and boldness to transform an industrial landscape scarred by coal mining and clay extraction into a network of habitats and woodlands, new economies, and regenerated communities.

10-square miles at the Heart of the National Forest has seen the biggest change. Here the landscape has been transformed from black to green, demonstrating that trees can be a catalyst for real change.

We are now faced with even bigger challenges. Climate and societal changes are drastically impacting on our natural world and our personal wellbeing, we need to respond urgently and with action that is bolder still.

This vision sets out what can be delivered when local communities, businesses, partners and investors come together behind a single shared vision to create a dynamic and sustainable place that will benefit communities, businesses and nature into the future.

Whilst we will need to adapt to new challenges and opportunities, our decisions will be guided by this document to ensure future development and improvement

strengthens the sustainability and character of this special place and inspires more people to visit.

The vision sets out how we will work with others and the outcomes that collectively we are aiming to achieve. Three **Investment Priorities** have been identified to *strengthen the sustainability and character of the **Place**; inspire and connect us through **Experience**; and diversify and grow green **Enterprise**.*

Six **Investment Sites** will unlock opportunities through existing assets and spaces to establish the area as a sustainable destination founded on sustainability, nature and wellbeing.

In developing this vision for the future of the Heart of the National Forest, we have involved our partners, businesses and communities; considered policies and strategies; and explored market opportunities. The work has been led by a dedicated team from the National Forest Company, North West Leicestershire District Council and Leicestershire County Council.



The Heart of the National Forest

A landscape transformed from black to green

The Heart of the National Forest covers around 10-square miles between the settlements of Swadlincote, Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Measham.

Located in central England and surrounded by some of the largest cities in the Midlands, the area has seen great change over the last 30 years through the creation of the National Forest. What was once a place marked by coal and clay extraction has been restored to become a

newly-forested landscape, regenerating communities and supporting an emerging visitor destination.

Since 1991 forest cover has increased from 2% to over 40%. This success has been achieved through the hard work and dedication of a partnership of organisations, with the support of local communities.

The restoration of the area has resulted in a high proportion of land and assets

now in public and charitable ownership with additional former industrial land still being restored which will add to this. Committed and collaborative working between these organisations presents an exciting and unusual opportunity to deliver the landscape and infrastructure change needed to deliver this vision.



Hicks Lodge before



Hicks Lodge after (National Forest Cycle Centre)



Rawdon Colliery before



Rawdon Colliery after (Conkers)

The Heart of the National Forest



The Heart of the National Forest



800,000
visitors each year

£36.9m
visitor economic
impact per annum

10 million people
within a 90-minute drive



100% of households
have green spaces within 500m



Over 40 miles
of public rights of way



40% forest
cover

Community consultation

97%

of survey respondents supported the overall improvements proposed for the Heart of the National Forest

88%

of survey respondents said the improvements were important to their and their family's health and wellbeing

Our way of working

The Heart of the National Forest does not belong to any one agency, organisation, community or individual, and so realising the vision for its future will also be shared.

- **Leadership** We will work with government departments, local authorities and other public bodies to embed the Heart of the National Forest vision in local strategies and plans, whilst supporting the delivery of national priorities and policies.
- **Community** We will engage with all areas of our community including local leaders, businesses, schools, and voluntary and community groups. Our communities are the stewards for the Heart of the Forest's future, caring for its habitats, its culture, and its way of life.
- **Partnership** We will encourage openness and collaboration to share expertise, resource and opportunity. We will work closely with our landowners, businesses and those looking to invest in the area to enhance the overall experience in the short term, and ensure we create a sustainable destination for the future.



Our vision

The Heart of the National Forest will demonstrate how sustainable living, sustainable tourism, and sustainable enterprise in a newly restored and connected landscape is achievable.

It will be a place where nature thrives, businesses innovate, and communities are connected to the forest landscape they are part of. People will come here to learn, have fun, and unwind and they will leave refreshed and inspired by their visit.

It will be a new sustainable destination for the region, a forest learning hub for the nation, and a gateway to the National Forest.



Outcomes

Our future decisions will be guided by a shared commitment to achieve seven core outcomes for the Heart of the National Forest, and we will use these outcomes to measure our success.



1 A connected network of forest habitats will support **diverse and thriving wildlife**.



4 New and improved visitor experiences will encourage **more people to visit and stay for longer** spending money with local businesses.



5 **Greener jobs** will be created in low carbon sectors such as tourism and leisure, culture and arts, health and wellbeing, and forestry.



2 People will enjoy **improved wellbeing** from spending more time outdoors and having a greater connection with nature.



3 The landscape and things to do here will be **accessible for everyone**.



6 People will visit and explore the Heart of the National Forest using **sustainable modes of travel** and **local renewable energy** will supply more communities and businesses.



7 Communities will be involved in shaping and caring for the Heart of the National Forest through a range of **participation and volunteering** opportunities.

Investment priorities

Three Investment Priorities have been identified to:



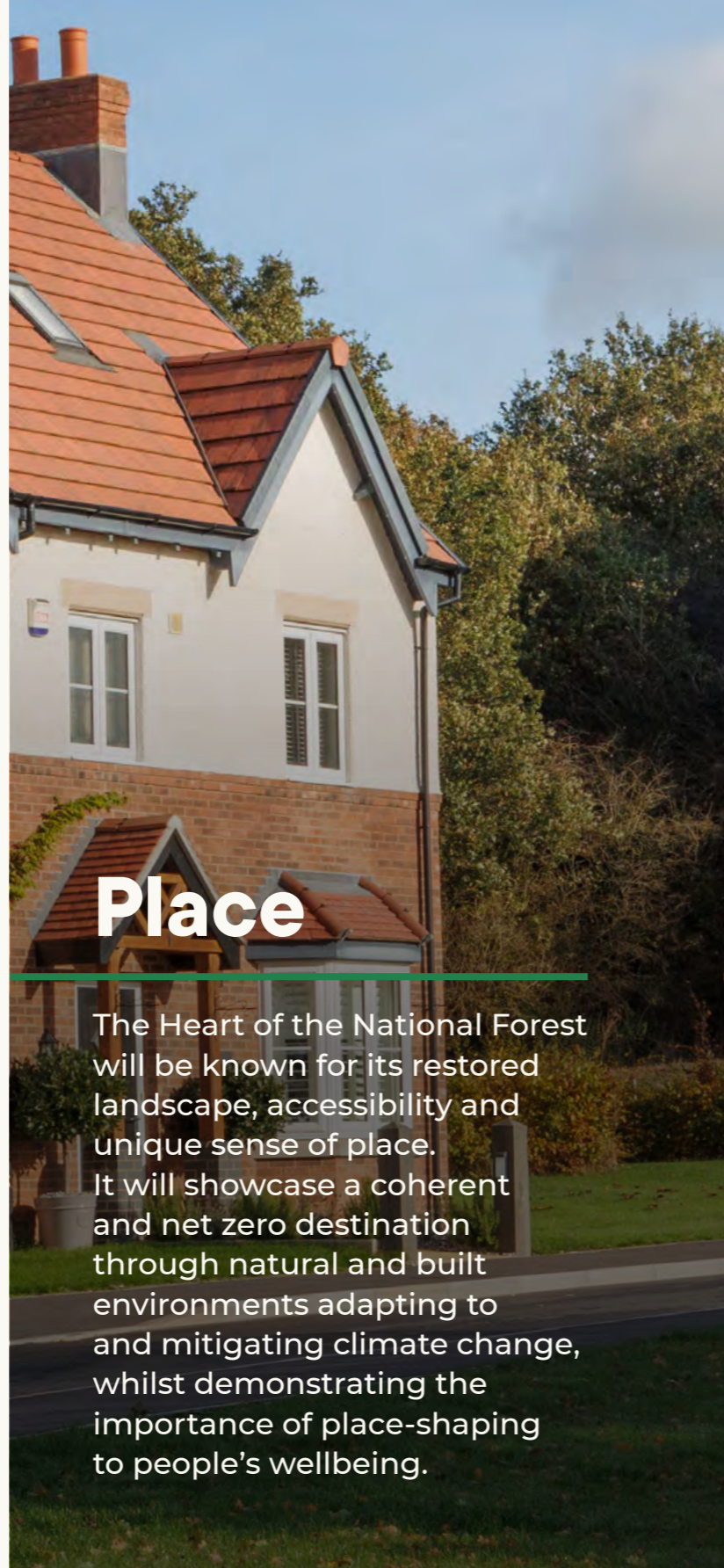
strengthen the sustainability and character of the **Place**



inspire and connect us through **Experience**



diversify and grow green **Enterprise**



Place

The Heart of the National Forest will be known for its restored landscape, accessibility and unique sense of place. It will showcase a coherent and net zero destination through natural and built environments adapting to and mitigating climate change, whilst demonstrating the importance of place-shaping to people's wellbeing.



Experience

Everyone living in or visiting the Heart of the National Forest will be able to experience activities which will connect them to the local landscape, improve their understanding of this amazing story and raise their aspirations for a greener, healthier and more sustainable future.



Enterprise

The local economy, its businesses, entrepreneurs and community enterprises, will underpin and drive the change needed to deliver this vision.



Place

Located in central England the area is in easy reach of surrounding cities including Birmingham, Nottingham, Derby, and Leicester, providing a large regional audience with over 5 million people within a 60-minute travel time.

If approved, the reopening of the Ivanhoe Line will allow visitors and commuters to travel by train from Leicester or Burton-upon-Trent to either Castle Gresley (nr Swadlincote), Moira or Ashby-de-la-Zouch. These stations will form main gateways from the Forest towns into the Heart of the National Forest, and incorporate cycle and mobility hire facilities connecting to an extensive network of foot and cycle routes – the ‘Green Web’.

Once here, walking and cycling will be the easiest and most fun way to explore the area with new and improved trails providing linear and circular loops, connecting settlements and key points of interest allowing local communities and visitors to leave their car behind.

There is 1.5 miles of navigable canal between Conkers Waterside Centre and Donisthorpe. Investment in restoration of the Ashby Canal could connect the Heart of the National Forest into the national canal network.

New or re-purposed buildings and developments will strengthen the sense of place through the highest standards of sustainable design, choice of materials and integration with the natural environment and local character. The area will be a showcase for local renewable energy supplying communities and businesses with heat and power through integrated systems in new

developments, refurbishments and elsewhere within the landscape where the landscape allows.

The natural landscape will continue to evolve with the creation of a new lake through the restoration of the Clay Stocking Yard, and more woodland and habitat creation to provide natural corridors for wildlife to move around.

Community woodlands, orchards, allotments and wildlife gardens will provide spaces for communities to meet and undertake a range of learning, cultural and wellbeing activities in the outdoors.

Active involvement from local communities will be integral in telling the story of the Heart of the Forest’s heritage whilst also helping to shape its future.



Key components

- Sustainable travel through the re-opening of the Ivanhoe Line for passengers
- ‘Green Web’ – cycling and walking network connecting towns, villages, and attractions
- Renewable energy supplying local businesses and communities
- New developments using sustainable design and materials, integrating with natural habitats and strengthening the sense of place
- Continued landscape enhancements through additional woodland planting and the creation of new and connecting habitats

Experience

Inspired by the Forest, these experiences will deepen people's sense of connection with nature and improve their wellbeing and mindfulness. Activities such as foraging, bushcraft, forest arts, talks and tours, cycling, and wildlife spotting will be accessible for residents through community hubs and for visitors through new and improved sustainable attractions and accommodation.

A creative annual programme of festivals and events will provide opportunities for people to come together to share ideas, showcase work and celebrate how trees are transforming this landscape.

The central hub of the Heart of the National Forest will be a re-imagined Conkers (see Investment Sites section), here a more diverse audience of communities, schools and visitors will be able to learn about Forest life, woodlands, sustainability, and leave inspired by what is being achieved here. Conkers will be a key access point to the 'Green Web' with cycle and mobility hire facilities to complement the existing offer at Hicks Lodge Cycling Centre. Signposting will encourage visitors to experience the whole destination including the lakes and canal, woodlands and country parks, heritage sites and new or refreshed sustainable attractions.

The 'Green Web' will have accessible routes for all ages and mobility to ensure everyone can enjoy these diverse habitats and young woodlands whether for relaxation, physical fitness or to be closer to nature. Art and sculpture, natural play, interpretation, and rest points will be installed to make the 'Green Web' another compelling reason to visit.

A new lake, adjacent but distinct from the Albert Village Lake, is proposed as part of the Clay Stocking Yard restoration further diversifying the community and visitor offer with the opportunity to introduce non-powered water sports such as kayaking, canoeing, paddle boarding and open water swimming.

Visitors will be able to stay for longer and spend more within the local economy with new distinctive Forest-inspired visitor accommodation to be supported and encouraged. Opportunities to improve facilities and increase capacity for school and group residential visits will be unlocked through attractions and accommodation operators working in partnership.



Key components

- More experiences improving people's wellbeing through connection with nature
- Arts, sculpture and natural play along the 'Green Web' connecting attractions
- Conkers visitor attraction re-imagined as a central hub attracting and dispersing visitors
- New activities introduced including open water swimming, kayaking, and canoeing
- A coordinated programme of forest-inspired festivals and events
- A broader range of sustainable visitor accommodation enabling people to stay longer



Enterprise

Inspired by opportunities emerging from a changing forest landscape and focussed on the need to rapidly respond to climate change, an innovative, creative, and green economy will grow and prosper in the Heart of the National Forest.

Business support will facilitate networks to encourage cross-sector collaboration, strengthen local supply chains and create opportunities for a circular economy.

Shared and connected spaces will be developed to stimulate knowledge exchange, innovation and creativity amongst new and growing green businesses and sectors. These could include workshops, studios and incubator space or facilities for artists in residence, woodland demonstrations, and retail of local products. The showcasing of locally inspired arts, crafts and produce will add to the visitor experience and sense of place.

National Forest research and demonstration, developed in partnership with our surrounding universities and national experts will be shared through a programme of conferences, talks, and training with specific focus on forestry, nature and wellbeing, and sustainability. We will improve and extend our 'Creating a Forest for Learning' programme and establish Conkers as a centre of excellence providing high-quality outdoor learning for children and professional development for teachers and education providers.

Local businesses and organisations will work together to establish the Heart of the National Forest as a coherent and sustainable visitor destination with shared values aligned to this vision, and wherever possible will procure goods and services locally and

sustainably. Forest-inspired and distinctive visitor accommodation will strive to achieve the seven principles set out in the National Forest Sustainable Tourism Accommodation Design Guide.

Building capacity within sectors such as arts and culture, health and wellbeing, and education will enable us to reach broader audiences from more diverse backgrounds, including more deprived and urban communities that may have less access to woodlands. Reaching and inspiring children and young people will be a key priority for us.

The establishment of volunteer hubs will build on the current sense of community and allow residents and visitors to get involved, learn new skills, and further connect with the area.



Key components

- A strong partnership of local businesses and communities committed to this vision
- Research and demonstration sharing knowledge on forestry, nature and wellbeing, and sustainability
- Flexible and connected spaces encouraging innovation, creativity, and collaboration amongst new and growing green businesses and sectors
- A centre of excellence for woodland based outdoor learning
- A volunteer hub and network learning new skills and caring for the landscape

Investment sites

Six investment sites will act as visitor hubs within the Heart of the National Forest. Coordinated visioning, planning and significant investment will be required to unlock the potential of these sites to deliver our aspirations for *Place, Experience and Enterprise*.

Key

- ① Conkers Discovery Centre
- ② Forest Enterprise (Waterside Centre)
- ③ Forest Hub
- ④ The Lakes
- ⑤ Moira Furnace
- ⑥ Hicks Lodge Cycle Centre

- Existing forest
- Indicative new forest
- Existing settlement area
- Ponds and lakes
- Trainline

Investment areas



Investment sites

1 Conkers Discovery Centre

Conkers is an indoor and outdoor nature themed and family-friendly visitor attraction welcoming over 200,000 paying visitors each year, including around 30,000 school children benefiting from woodland education programmes. It extends over two adjacent sites Discovery and Waterside connected by a miniature railway.

Our aim is to invest and re-imagine Conkers Discovery as:

- The most visited woodland attraction in the Midlands where families can explore the interrelation between forests and people through creative and nature-based play and immersive experiences all year round.
- A centre of excellence for forest outdoor learning, a place where all primary schools in the region will want to visit and educators will come to learn and share best practice.
- A central hub telling the story of the National Forest providing orientation, access to forest experiences, refreshments and local produce.



© Ian Kenny

2 Forest Enterprise (Waterside Centre)

Distinct from the Discovery site, Waterside has untapped potential to be redesigned as a flexible and multi-purpose space, this could include:

- Shared and connected spaces to stimulate knowledge exchange, innovation, and creativity amongst Forest-inspired enterprises e.g., workshops, studios, incubator space.
- National Forest research, training and demonstration centre developed in partnership and focussing on forestry, nature and wellbeing, and sustainability.
- Community and wellbeing facilities including space for performances and events.



3 Forest Hub

This extensive site has been designed with open glades connected by a network of paths and rides through young and mature woodland. There is also a large expanse of attractive parkland, farm buildings, access tracks and fields.

The main site currently hosts the annual Timber Festival and provides a unique woodland setting for an extended programme of Forest-inspired events, festivals, and art.

The southern area of the site provides commercial development opportunity to support growing forest-based industries and enterprise.



Investment sites

4 The Lakes

It is proposed that the site will consist of three lakes set within young woodlands and connected by a well-used path network.

The central Albert Village Lake is extensively used by the neighbouring community for walking and nature watching. Further investment will help to ensure the lake is accessible for everyone and facilitate its continued use by residents, and visitors.

To the east, recent restoration has created a smaller lake with adjacent woodland planting. This will be a less frequented and quieter site to allow wildlife to thrive.

To the west, a restoration plan is being developed for the Clay Stocking Yard which could include the creation of a further lake to facilitate new leisure activities adding to the community and visitor offer e.g. introduction of open water swimming, canoeing, kayaking, and supporting visitor infrastructure.



5 Moira Furnace

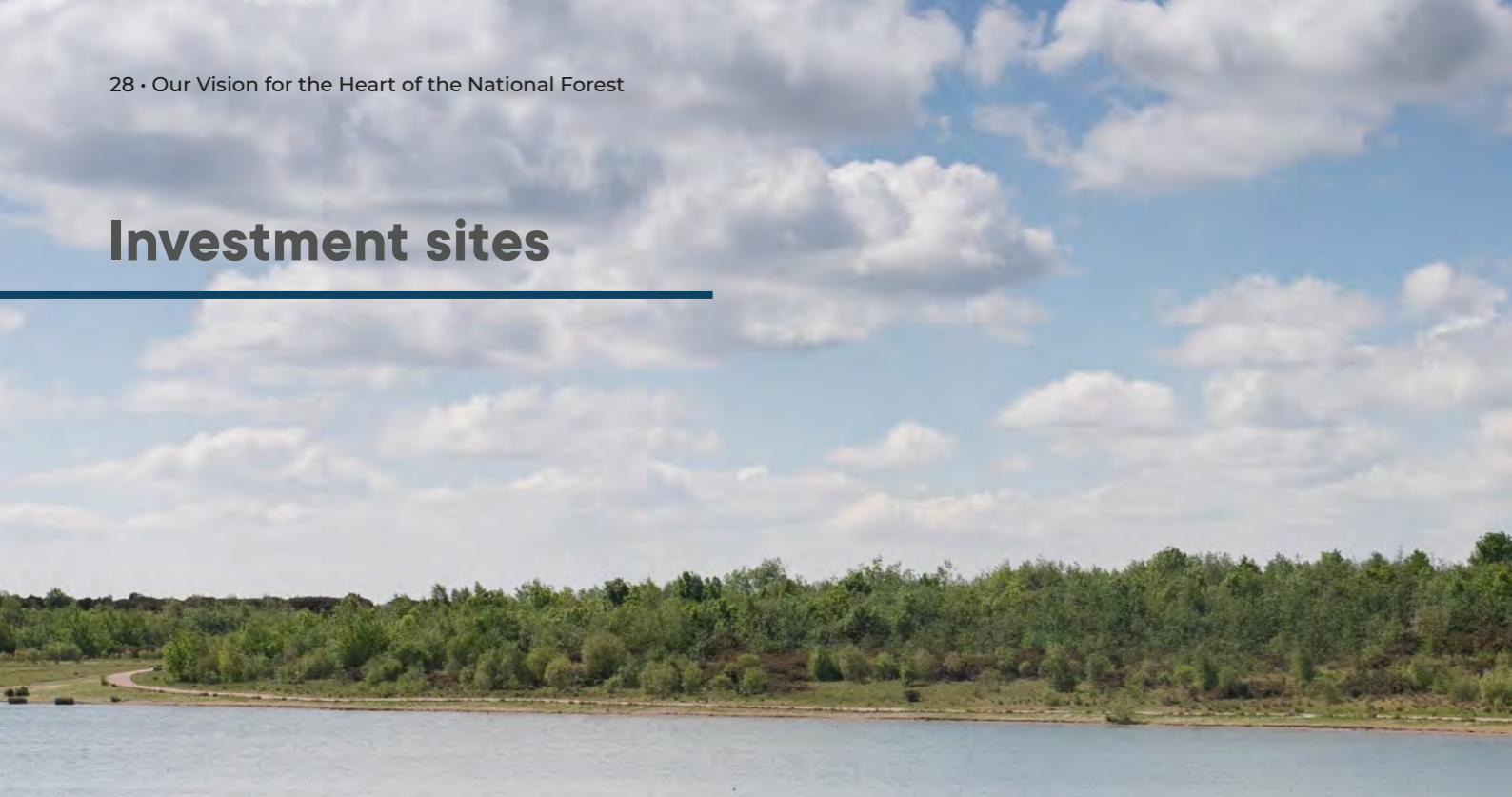
Adjacent to Ashby canal is the nineteenth-century iron-making blast furnace, now a museum with retail units, a cafe, children's play area and programme of events. It is owned by North West Leicestershire District Council and managed by the Moira Furnace Museum Trust.

With a focus on heritage and culture, the site has potential for an enhanced canal-side visitor experience which could include boutique visitor accommodation and more local produce and crafts boosting its retail and hospitality offer.

6 Hicks Lodge Cycle Centre

The Hicks Lodge Cycle Centre, opened in 2011, is owned and managed by Forestry England. The site includes a cafe, cycle hire, natural play area, a lakeside walk, 9.5km of graded off-road cycling and 6.5km of multi-user trails.















It has proved an immensely popular attraction and plans are being developed to extend car parking facilities to accommodate the growing demand. A priority will be to improve connections from Hicks Lodge to neighbouring settlements, specifically Ashby-de-la-Zouch and the proposed Ivanhoe Line train station.



Green web

The Green Web will be a network of footpaths and cycleways connecting the main attractions, investment sites and surrounding settlements together. The aspiration is for this to be the easiest and most enjoyable way to get around the Heart of the National Forest and will be complimented by points of interest to become a reason to visit in itself.

Key

-  Green web - community gateways
-  Green web - visitor gateways
-  Green web - cycle hubs
-  Train station
-  National Forest Way
-  Conkers circuit
-  Indicative upgraded trails
-  Potential new trails
-  Heritage trail
-  Existing forest
-  Indicative new forest
-  Existing settlement area
-  Ponds and lakes
-  Trainline



Vision in action



Continued landscape enhancements through new planting and habitat creation

New water-based activities including swimming, kayaking and canoeing

Arts, sculpture and natural play

Cycling and walking network connecting towns, villages, and attractions

Volunteers learning new skills and caring for the landscape

Improving people's wellbeing through connection with nature

New developments using sustainable design and materials

A centre of excellence for woodland based outdoor learning

Flexible spaces encouraging innovation and green businesses

Renewable energy supplying local businesses and communities

Implementation

Delivery

The thematic and spatial proposals in this Vision will take 10-20 years to deliver in their entirety but some will be able to progress relatively quickly. We will work with partners to prioritise and timeline the key components and site-specific priorities based on feasibility,

deliverability, investment opportunities, and the necessary phasing to deliver the overall vision.

The table below highlights the indicative time-frame for proposed natural and built infrastructure developments and improvements required to deliver the vision.

Spatial components	Deliverables	Key partners and relevant authorities	Indicative time-frame for delivery
Biodiversity enhancements and connected habitats	Habitat and connectivity assessment. Woodland management plans in place. Priority interventions identified and work undertaken.	National Forest Company (NFC), Leicestershire County Council (LCC), North West Leicestershire District Council (NWLDC), Forestry England, Woodland Trust	Phase 1
Investment to re-imagine Conkers visitor attraction	Visioning work and concept development. Partnerships and funding. Implementation.	NFC	Phase 1 and 2
Establishment of outdoor learning 'centre of excellence'	Facility improvements and extended provision. Partnerships and funding.	NFC	Phase 1
'Green Web' - prioritised programme of walking and cycling improvements	Feasibility study. Priorities for improved and new routes. Designs undertaken, funding secured and implementation.	NFC, NWLDC, LCC, South Derbyshire District Council	Phase 1 and 2

Phase 1 = 1 – 3 years; Phase 2 = 4 – 10 years

Spatial components	Deliverables	Key partners and relevant authorities	Indicative time-frame for delivery
Renewable energy for businesses and communities	Renewable energy options assessment/s. Design and installation. Community Energy Scheme established.	NFC, local authorities	Phase 1 and 2
Sustainable Forest-inspired visitor accommodation	NFC landowner advisory visits. Designs aligned to Sustainable Accommodation Visitor Guide. Planning decisions and development.	NFC, NWLDC, landowners, operators	Phase 1 and 2
A volunteer hub / centre	Refurbishment of building. Extended volunteer opportunities.	NFC, NWLDC, LCC	Phase 1
Restoration of Clay Stocking Yard (north)	Restoration plan for north site submitted and approved by Mineral Planning Authority (MPA). Restoration complete and land transferred to NFC.	Wavin, NFC, LCC	Phase 1
Re-instatement of the Ivanhoe Passenger Line	Outline Business Case (DfT decision). Design and full financial case (DfT decision). Build and implementation.	Network Rail / local authorities / Department for Transport (DfT) / Campaign to Re-open the Ivanhoe Line (CRIL)	Phase 1 and 2
Flexible spaces to support enterprise, training and research	Demand and feasibility studies. Partnerships and investment.	NFC, NWLDC	Phase 2
Restoration of Clay Stocking Yard (south)	Restoration plan for south site submitted and approved by MPA. Restoration complete and land transferred to NFC.	Wavin, NFC, LCC	Phase 2

Phase 1 = 1 – 3 years; Phase 2 = 4 – 10 years

Implementation

Funding

This document makes a compelling case for future investment in the Heart of the National Forest and the environmental, economic, and social benefits that this will deliver. These benefits will not just be felt here, they will resonate across the Midlands and our place-making aims and aspirations will exist as a national demonstration for sustainability and wellbeing.

The ambitious projects and proposals outlined will only be achieved through funding and investment from both the public and private sector – from individuals, government, and businesses. The drivers for investment will vary, but our place-based approach will ensure that all investment contributes to nature, wellbeing, and net zero.

We will work in partnership to pro-actively explore and respond to funding and investor opportunities and support the development of clear and robust proposals to encourage responsible investment and ensure public funds deliver public benefit for the long term.

Governance

Led by a dedicated team from the National Forest Company, North West Leicestershire District Council and Leicestershire County Council, this vision has been developed with the support of wider partners, businesses, and communities.

The National Forest Company Board is committed to ensuring that future development and implementation of the vision is delivered with others and by others to deliver our collective organisational, business and community priorities and aspirations.

A Project Board will steer this work supported by its respective organisations, and where required focussed project groups will take forward specific initiatives.

A Local Panel of community and business representatives, local councillors and other relevant and interested parties will be established to facilitate ongoing community engagement, provide knowledge and expertise, and help to build a network of advocates supporting delivery of the vision.



The Project Steering Group included representatives from the National Forest Company, North West Leicestershire District Council and Leicestershire County Council, we would especially like to acknowledge and thank colleagues from Gillespies and Blue Sail for their expertise, ideas and guidance in developing this vision.

We would also like to thank the following organisations for their support and contributions:

Forestry England

Youth Hostel Association

Planning Solutions Ltd
(operators of Conkers)

Moira Furnace Museum Trust

South Derbyshire District Council

Derbyshire County Council

A Different View

Ashby Town Council Events &
Tourism Committee

Ashby Woulds Parish Council

Castle Gresley Parish Council

Oakthorpe, Donisthorpe and
Acresford Parish Council

Overseal Parish Council

Woodville Parish Council



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