



THE NATIONAL
FOREST

Planting hope

Growing our tree and
woodland cover



“He who plants a tree, plants a hope”

Lucy Larcom



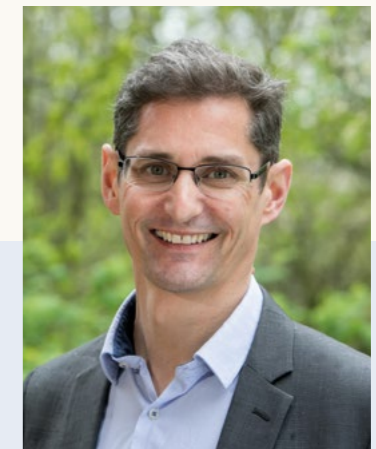
Introduction

If you could design a product to combat the climate crisis it would be hard to improve upon the tree. It is nature’s answer to climate regulation, creating the very conditions for life: storing carbon, holding water, reducing heat and cleaning air. And yet, whilst both the urgency of climate change and the benefits of trees are well understood, planting them at scale and speed in England is proving a difficult challenge.

As we reflect five years on from the launch of the Government’s 25 Year Environment Plan, it is timely to consider the progress that has been made and the size of the task we still face. Here in the National Forest we believe that big challenges can be tackled with big ideas. Having been created in the 1990s to help inspire the country’s regeneration from its industrial past, the National Forest has demonstrated what is possible, with a landscape, economy and communities now transformed by trees. Some 30 years on, as we strive to plant more trees to transition to net zero, the National

Forest has harnessed that experience to provide a model for growing our tree and woodland cover. A model that not only offers an opportunity to accelerate tree planting but gives renewed hope for a positive future in the face of a changing climate.

John Everitt
Chief Executive



30 years of transformation

In the last 30 years, a quiet revolution has been taking place in these 200 square miles of the Midlands. More than 9.5 million trees have been planted in what was once one of the least wooded parts of the country, steadily expanding and connecting woodland across a previously fragmented landscape. The impact has been dramatic, increasing Forest cover from a mere 6% in 1991, to more than 22% of the land area today.

These efforts have now lifted the National Forest from below to well above the national average for tree and woodland cover. It's a lesson in what can be achieved with shared ambition, sustained effort and partner engagement. Success has happened partly because it has been the right place to plant trees, with a groundswell of support that has taken root with landowners, farmers, businesses and communities. But it is also because of a careful set of guiding principles that have been created and adapted over the time.

Looking back, we can now see the extent of the transformation that has happened and the multiple benefits that this has brought. New homeowners moving into the National Forest are often surprised that the woods and trees have not always been here to frame their views, bring a sense of identity and provide greenspaces on their doorstep. But these wider impacts are not inevitable. They are the direct result of tree planting being based on a set of core beliefs.

These guiding principles and core beliefs combine to form the National Forest model of forest creation, outlined in this report. They demonstrate how the National Forest will continue to drive forward its ambitious vision for forest cover to reach 33%, whilst also acting as a template for scaling up our tree and woodland cover elsewhere across the country.



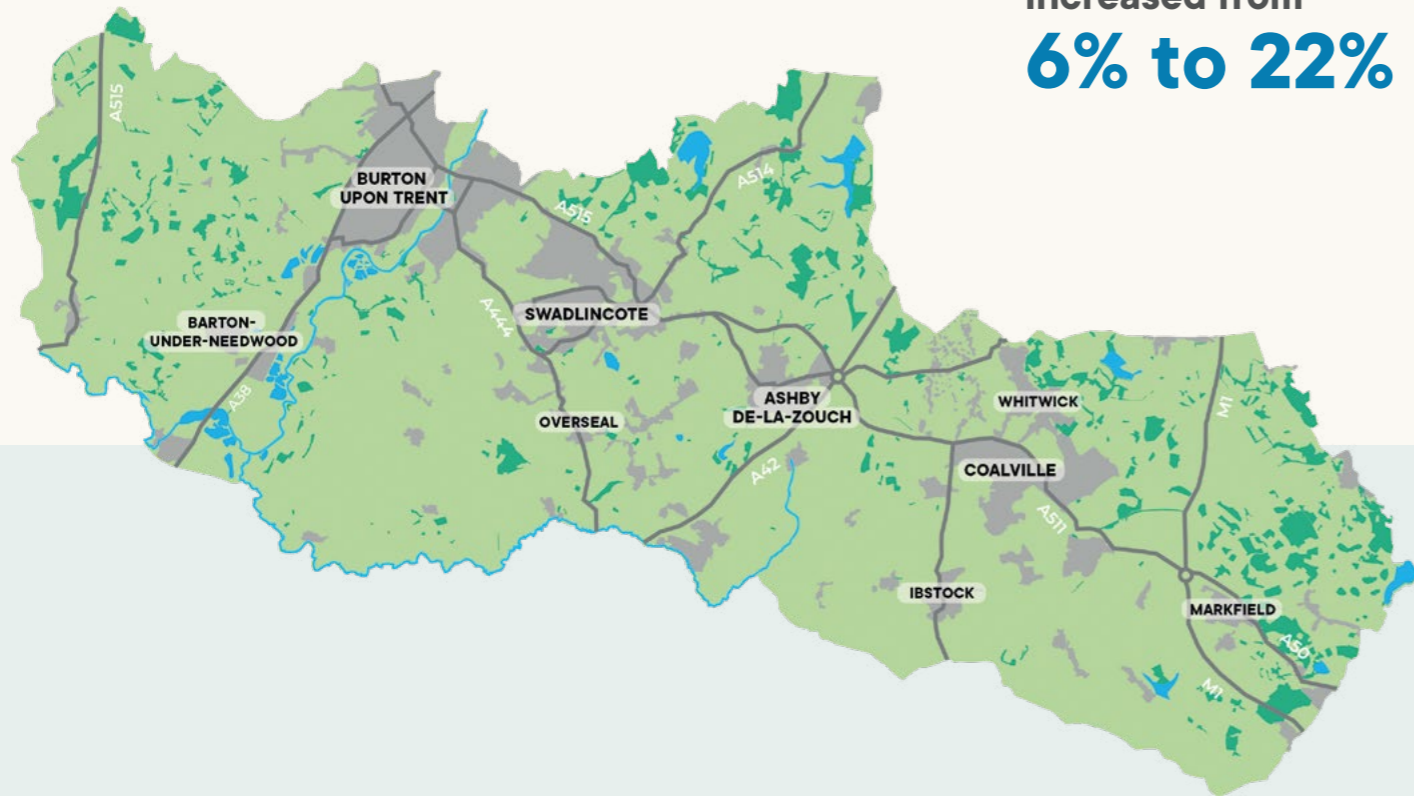
Before



After



Forest cover in 1991



Forest cover has increased from **6% to 22%**

Forest cover in 2023



9.5 million trees have been planted

Key

- Forest cover
- Towns and villages

1987

Visionaries at the Countryside Commission pioneered the concept of a National Forest as a national exemplar of environmental regeneration through trees.

1991

The National Forest area was chosen after a competitive process, and the 200 square mile boundary was established, covering parts of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire. The Forest was supported by Defra and this has continued since with cross-party support.

1995

The National Forest Company was established to lead on the creation and management of the Forest.

2016

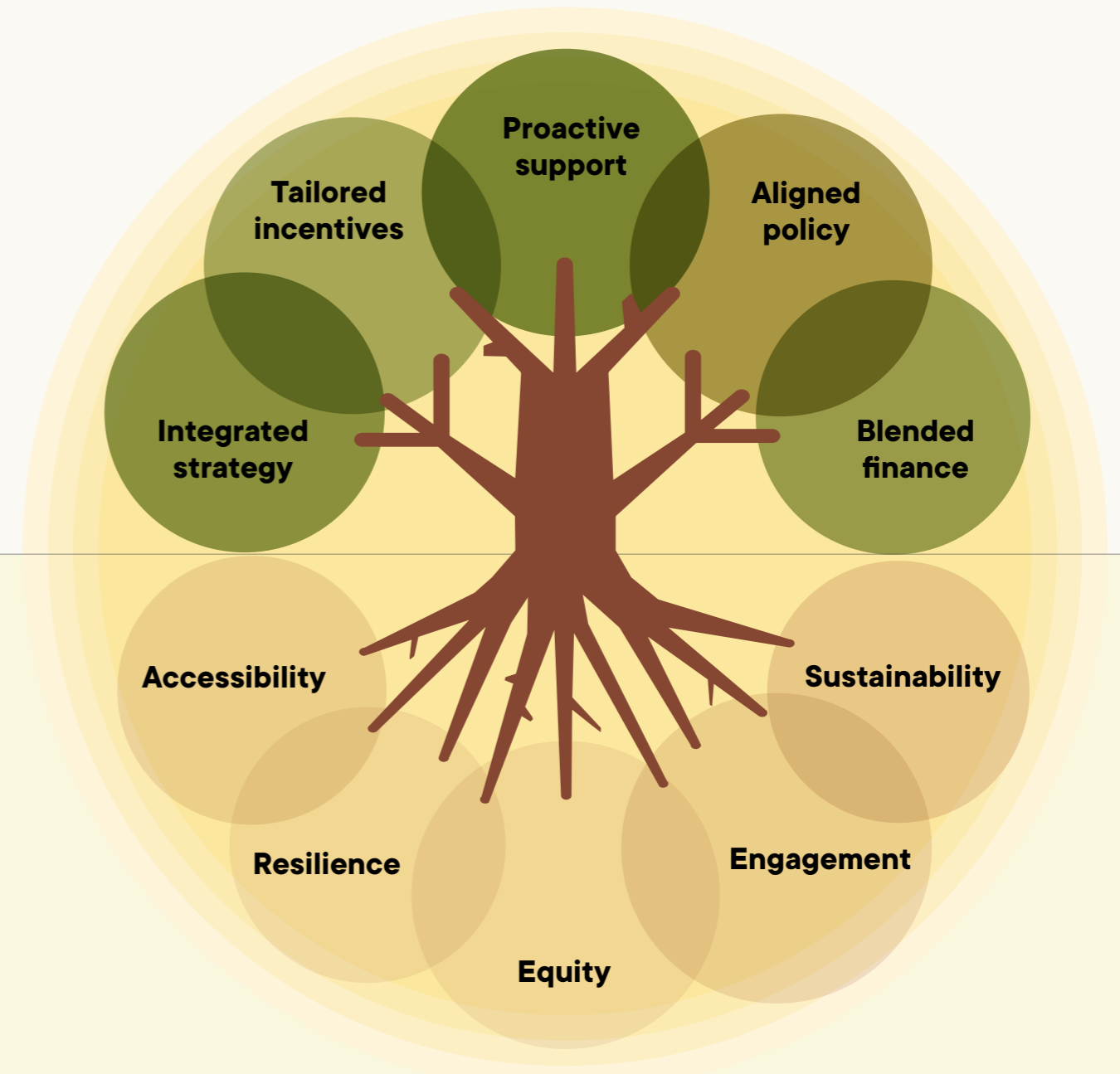
The National Forest Company became a charity as well as being an Arm's Length Body of Defra.

A model for positive change

The National Forest model brings together a set of guiding principles and core beliefs that can accelerate tree and woodland planting, and maximise value. Together they can contribute to our integrated vision for a landscape that is high in nature, has a low carbon economy and promotes positive wellbeing for communities.



Guiding principles



Core beliefs

The guiding principles

The National Forest model is led by guiding principles that act as the mechanisms for tree planting and woodland creation.



Integrated strategy



Tailored incentives



Proactive support



Aligned policy



Blended finance



Integrated strategy

- Use mapping to identify priority areas.
- Engage partners to support the strategy.
- Set deliverable targets.
- Reduce conflicts for land use.

By taking a strategic approach and identifying where trees best fit into the landscape, the National Forest has developed a strong rationale for its work, recognising the importance of other land uses. This has helped to reduce land use conflicts for housing, agriculture, industry or other natural habitats and to integrate trees and woods more effectively. In doing so, realistic priorities and targets can be set and delivery partners identified.

Adopting this principle has become increasingly important as more of the former industrial sites in the National Forest have now been restored and the potential for land use competition has increased. It has also helped to ensure that applications for new woodland creation are supported and approved, saving both time and money, as well as creating opportunities for scattered trees in areas where woodland is unsuitable.

As a result, the National Forest has doubled its annual forest creation in recent years from around 100 to 200 hectares despite the difficulties of working in a more heavily wooded landscape. Strategy and mapping will be essential to securing the remaining 11% of forest cover needed for the long-term realisation of the National Forest vision.



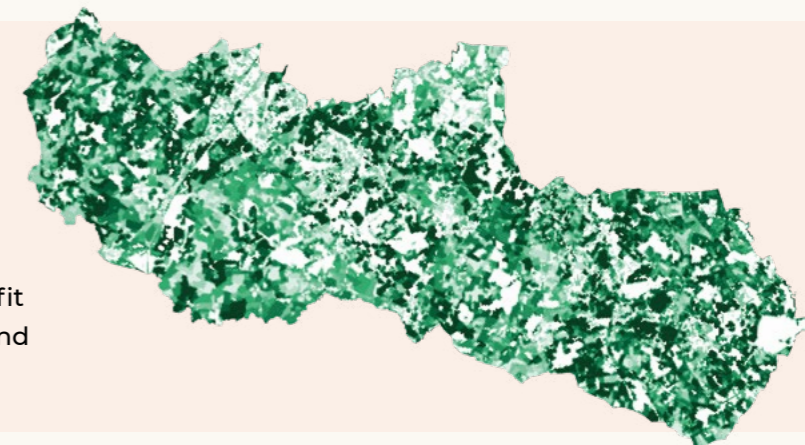
“We put the farm down to forestry. It was all arable land, but it wasn’t terribly good arable land. So when this came along it was an ideal opportunity to use some of the land, and it worked very well. The capital injection into the business was very good and allowed us to diversify.”

Michael Stanton,
Owner, Knowle Hill Farm



Mapping using a public benefit index to target tree planting efforts

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| ● 10 - Highest benefit | ● 4 |
| ● 9 | ● 3 |
| ● 8 | ● 2 |
| ● 7 | ● 1 - Minimal benefit |
| ● 6 | ● 0 - Unsuitable land |
| ● 5 | |



Tailored incentives

- Ensure grant incentives are simple and flexible.
- Include a 'presumption to plant' culture.
- Adopt generous payment rates for priority outcomes.
- Design clear criteria and speedy approval processes.

Having bespoke grants has enabled the National Forest to more easily meet the needs of farmers and landowners looking to make the transition to planting trees and woods. With grants suited to larger landowners (Tender and Changing Landscapes Schemes), small community groups (Freewoods) and those seeking an entry level option (Parkland and Wood Pasture Scheme), the National Forest's incentives have helped private, public and voluntary sector landowners to all be part of creating the Forest.

The National Forest Tender Scheme, including payments for income foregone, was the most successful, creating c400 hectares of woodland per year at its peak. This was designed similarly to a 'reverse auction' to offer flexibility to landowner needs but with an element of competition to keep payment rates reasonable.

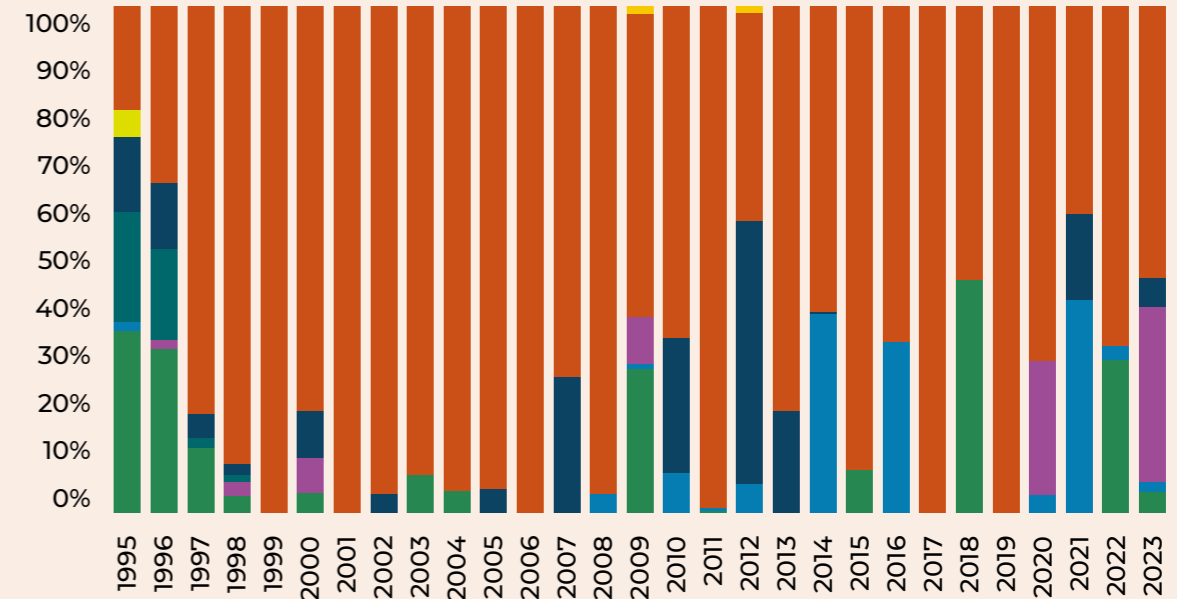
Early adopters were important in giving confidence to other farmers and landowners that the scheme was credible and a sensible financial decision. Tailored incentives offer significant opportunities to give an added push for tree planting where we need it most.



"It was just a natural progression to get on board and get excited about it. It's definitely one of the best things we've done."

Jane Kirkland, Owner, Grangewood Farm

Breakdown of grant applicants by year and type of landowner.



- Private landowner (82%)
- Charity (7%)
- Local authority (5%)
- Government body (2%)
- Crown (2%)
- Corporate (1%)
- School planting (<1%)
- Minerals (<1%)



Proactive support

- Provide proactive support to landowners.
- Pay agents to offer advice and work up schemes.
- Create a network to share and showcase experiences.
- Publicise opportunities and celebrate success.

Providing support and advice has been an essential part of the forest creation process, especially in an area like the National Forest which started with such little existing woodland and few experienced forestry professionals. New grant regimes, regulatory processes and land management changes can be daunting, and proactive support, hand-holding through applications and technical advice have all been important components in encouraging new schemes to come forward.

The National Forest now has a landowner network of some 200 individuals, regular communications and a year round programme of events and visits to build momentum and trust, troubleshoot issues and share learning. Moreover, investment in training and

development has grown the professional skills and networks of the sector in line with the increased volume of work, from applications to planting, woodland management and timber processing.



“The National Forest and the people who have supported us through that process, they’ve all helped every stretch of the way.”

Lesley Prince,
Director,
Deer Park Farm



Aligned policy

- **Align the planning system to deliver woodland habitats.**
- **Engage local authorities, planners and developers.**
- **Use trees and woods to support sustainability in developments.**
- **Ensure aftercare management of sites.**

The planning system is a powerful tool in land use change but is frequently divorced from the woodland creation agenda. In the National Forest, around a fifth of all new forest creation has come through planning, with consistent policies adopted by all upper and lower tier authorities for residential and industrial development, minerals and waste. These were drawn up at the establishment of the National Forest and have been supported and updated throughout, in recognition of their impact on the character and improvement of the local area.

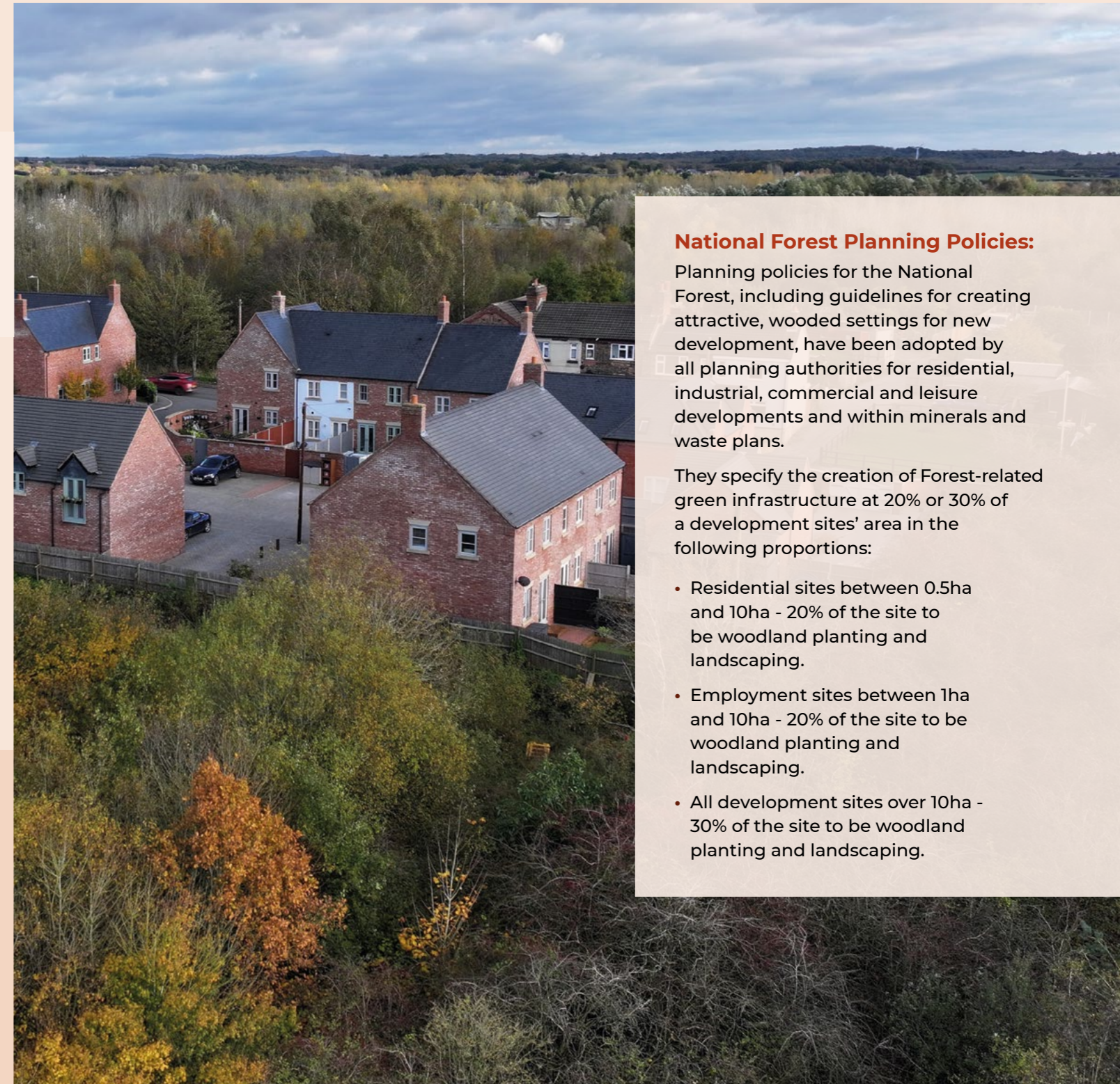
The National Forest remains neutral on planning applications, but works with developers, planners and communities to encourage the highest quality development that delivers for the Forest. Where woodland cannot be created on

site, the National Forest also helps to deliver off-site planning requirements through developer contributions for new forest habitats and features.



“I am lucky enough to be surrounded by the beauty of the National Forest. In every direction you look we have picturesque countryside boasting rolling hills, an enormity of trees packed full of wildlife, meadows, lakes and canals. You can walk for miles along the vast collection of footpaths and still find yourself discovering much more hidden away.”

Helen Knight, Local resident



National Forest Planning Policies:

Planning policies for the National Forest, including guidelines for creating attractive, wooded settings for new development, have been adopted by all planning authorities for residential, industrial, commercial and leisure developments and within minerals and waste plans.

They specify the creation of Forest-related green infrastructure at 20% or 30% of a development sites' area in the following proportions:

- Residential sites between 0.5ha and 10ha - 20% of the site to be woodland planting and landscaping.
- Employment sites between 1ha and 10ha - 20% of the site to be woodland planting and landscaping.
- All development sites over 10ha - 30% of the site to be woodland planting and landscaping.



Blended finance

- › Secure private and charitable finance to support public investment.
- › Design investment models to stack and blend funds.
- › Ensure trusted delivery to avoid greenwashing.
- › Operate schemes at small and large scale.

Private funds can create financial incentives for new woodland planting, particularly where these can sit alongside public grants and charitable giving. In the National Forest, blended funding has made some forest creation schemes financially viable, providing better value for the public purse whilst also delivering corporate priorities or supporting philanthropy.

Flexible use of such finance means that funds can be more easily stacked or blended, and rigorous verification mechanisms to record and regulate outputs give greater confidence and credibility to both investors and landowners. This approach has

enabled the 175-hectare Minorca Woods complex in the National Forest to be assembled including a carbon partnership with FatFace, developer contributions, charitable donations and Defra funds.



“At FatFace sustainability is central to everything we do as a business. We have developed a fantastic partnership with the National Forest, and we’re excited to see an area of land being redeveloped with 60,000 trees being planted.”

Will Crumbie,
CEO, FatFace



The core beliefs

The National Forest is about so much more than trees. Whilst the guiding principles outlined above can start to unlock more woodland creation, the National Forest model draws on an underlying approach to long term public benefit and lasting impact through a set of core beliefs.



Accessibility



Resilience



Equity



Engagement



Sustainability



Accessibility

Providing access to people can improve buy in and local support for planting, as well as huge benefits to public health.

71% of National Forest households are within 500m of a publicly accessible forest site



Engagement

Actively engaging communities can improve understanding, involvement and skills to care for woodlands.

80% of National Forest primary schools are providing regular outdoor learning



Equity

Working in urban and rural areas can ensure the benefits are equally available to all, especially historically underserved communities.

20.2% urban tree cover in the National Forest*



*higher than the national average of 17.3%



81% of National Forest woodlands in active management

Resilience

Planting a diverse species mix can enhance biodiversity, increase resilience to pests and disease and support adaptation to a changing climate.

Sustainability

Early consideration of financial sustainability of woodlands can improve viability, supporting economic growth, placemaking and diversification.

*in 2022



£497 million contributed to the local economy through tourism in the National Forest*

Growing the future together

Government is rightly being ambitious for tree planting, with increased resources, focus and profile all helping to build momentum around a coordinated partnership approach. At a national level in England this ambition has been formalised into a legally binding target for 16.5% tree canopy and woodland cover by 2050, and an interim target to increase by 0.26% by 2028.

Efforts to grow tree and woodland cover have been increasing and, through the Government's Nature for Climate programme, Defra has seen a significant increase in annual woodland creation in England from around 2,000 hectares per year in 2020-21 to more than 3,000 hectares today, alongside a range of wider benefits. The trajectory is moving steadily upwards and will require ongoing commitment and resources for tree planting if it is to continue to accelerate delivery and meet current targets.

The experience from the National Forest offers hope that these targets are achievable and, with the right model, can make a major contribution to the country's landscape, economy and wellbeing. In the National Forest itself, the vision is for 33% of the land area to be made up of forest habitats by 2045. This still means transforming 11% of the landscape or some 5,000 hectares, with targets for c200 hectares of new forest creation each year.

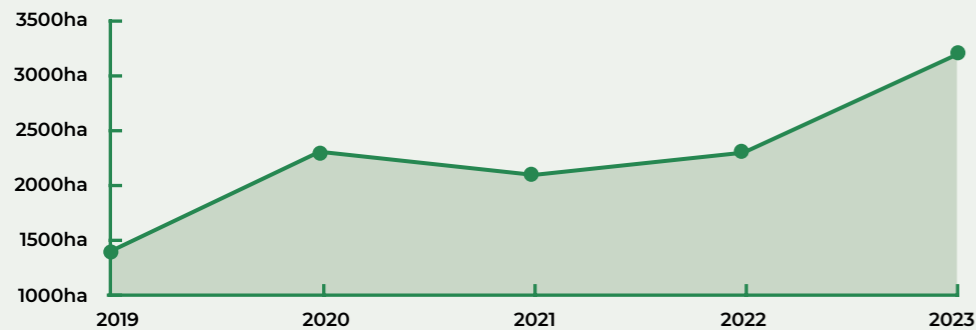
At an average cost of around £11,000 of public money per hectare, this is providing strong value for the many benefits delivered. Through the National Forest model, opportunity mapping has identified those areas most suitable for planting that will also provide public benefit. With forest cover already at 22%, more of the final 11% of planting will be through agroforestry, farm business diversification and urban greening to integrate with other land uses.

And as the area of forest cover continues to grow, the National Forest can play a more significant role outside its boundary as a national exemplar, using the forest creation model to realise opportunities to scale up woodland creation for a positive future.

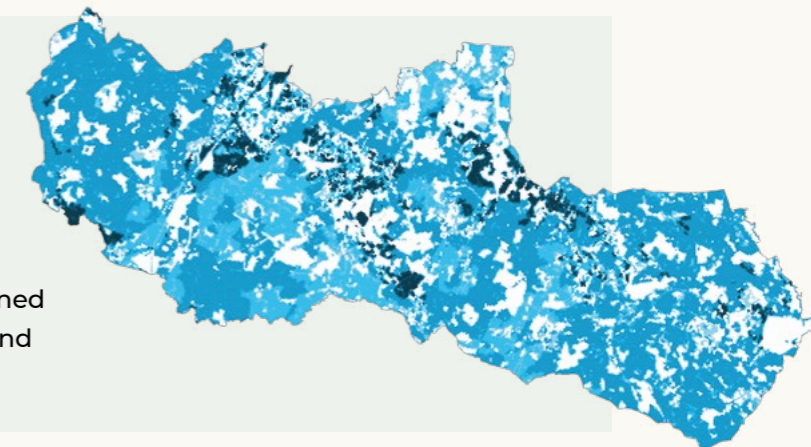
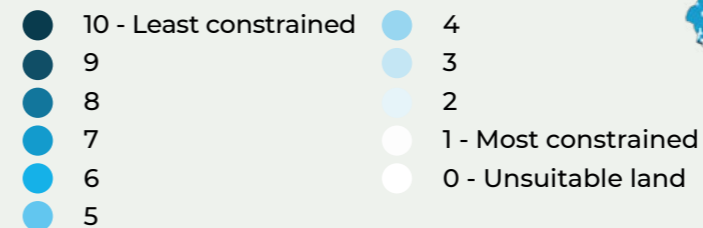


Annual hectares of woodland created in England from 2019 to 2023

Forest Research, Forestry Facts and Figures 2023



Land suitability map demonstrating available areas for planting



Scaling up delivery

With ambition, need and incentives all aligning, now is the time to take advantage of the opportunity for tree planting. The National Forest model can be applied and refined as a template to scale up woodland creation more widely across the country.

This is an illustrative map to demonstrate potential connectivity.



Integrated strategy

The National Forest will scale up its strategy and mapping to expand delivery more widely.

This will start with expansion and connection of the forested initiatives surrounding the National Forest in the Midlands and more widely to create the Midlands Forest Network.

The Midlands Forest Network is a partnership between the National Forest Company, Midlands Engine and Woodland Trust with support from Defra and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It will bring together landscape-scale woodland and forest projects from across the Midlands, providing opportunities to increase woodland creation. The physical representation of the network will be the identification

of corridors and stepping stones that can be created to link the project areas with new planting and habitat creation. This network of new woodland habitats will bridge the gap between urban and rural communities, bringing the benefits that access to wildlife provides to a wider range of people and places, including some of the Midlands' most underserved communities.

The National Forest will use its experience and approach to convene, support and accelerate woodland creation with partners across the Midlands.



For further information on the Midlands Forest Network visit: midlandsengine.org/home-green-growth/midlands-forest-network/

Tailored incentives

The National Forest will expand its tailored incentives to generate larger and more ambitious schemes.

This will include the Farming and Forestry grant that returns to a Tender Scheme approach, working with landowners to co-create schemes with multiple benefits. It will also include a focus on tailored agroforestry schemes to help farm businesses transition to a low carbon approach.

The National Forest will use its experience to expand the promotion of the range of incentive mechanisms, including the England Woodland Creation Offer, outside the National Forest boundary to secure woodland corridors and connections to increase resilience.



Proactive Support

The National Forest will extend its proactive support to build larger networks for communications, skills development and delivery.

This will include wider outreach work, the engagement of partners across the Midlands, training and mentoring of staff and coordination of events. It will also involve the identification of case studies, exemplars and expertise to share knowledge and practice including the redevelopment of facilities

in the heart of the National Forest as a learning hub.

Through the Midlands Forest Network, the National Forest will help to secure revenue funds to invest in outreach teams for other landscapes, unlocking new woodland creation.



Aligned policy

The National Forest will grow its planning policy work to facilitate increased delivery both within and outside the Forest boundary.

This will include integrating Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Biodiversity Net Gain within the planning system to deliver forest creation effectively. In the National Forest, net gain will form part of the existing planning policies to secure 20% or 30% of forest-related habitats.

The National Forest will use its experience to work with partners in other areas to explore changes to planning policies that can promote woodland creation, including better prioritisation, monitoring of delivery and aftercare.



Blended finance

The National Forest will develop its blended finance work to bring more forest creation schemes forward and improve value for money for public investment.

This will include work across the Midlands Forest Network to develop private finance propositions to support landscape initiatives across the Midlands.

The National Forest will use its experience to work with partners in other areas to explore joint funding proposals for large scale investment including corporate support, philanthropy and public grants.



Planned Midlands Forest Network green finance proposals

The Midlands Engine Partnership is exploring interest in creating long term, affordable finance for green projects in the Midlands to accelerate the net zero transition and nature's recovery. The first step is to test demand and feasibility, engaging key stakeholders

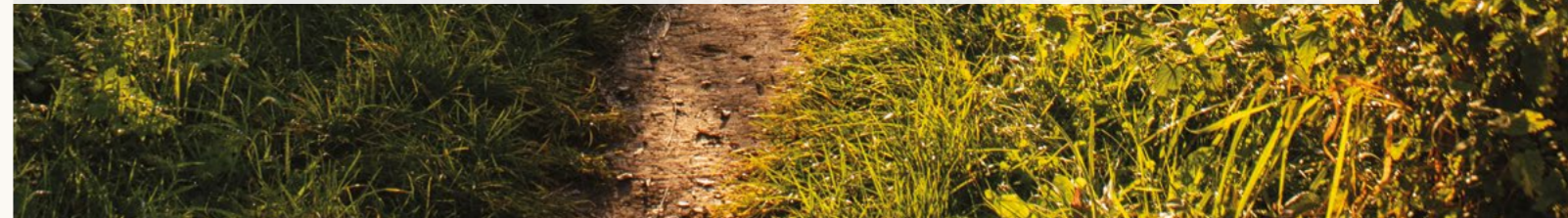
including local authorities, universities and businesses. Different options are being explored including public sector capital projects, private business capital expenditure, and environmental projects. The assessment will then inform the design of potential Bonds.



Help us plant hope, together.

There has never been a better time to plant trees, and never been a time when they have been needed more. The success of the National Forest offers hope that we can realise our ambitions for tree and woodland cover across the country. Whilst our model for forest creation continues to drive delivery here, it can also inspire others to take up the challenge. If you would like to hear more about our work, partnerships and opportunities, then please contact us for further information.

enquiries@nationalforest.org





THE NATIONAL
FOREST

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