



# Arts & Creativity in the National Forest





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FROM  
DEEP  
ROOTS

# Introduction

**The National Forest is a nationally inspiring place of transformation, led by people and driven by the simple belief that trees can be a catalyst for real, positive change.**

Over the past 30 years, this 200 square mile landscape of the Midlands has been transformed from black to green, providing communities with a new focus and revitalising a local economy. The bold imagination and creative approach that led to the beginnings of the National Forest still exists today and continues to show that a greener, healthier and more sustainable future is possible.

This, first ever, Arts and Creativity Strategy for **the National Forest** sets out the scope and ambition for a cohesive cultural offer that responds to and is embedded within this place. It builds upon the National Forest's 25-year vision to demonstrate real change in a real place by establishing a forested landscape that is **high in nature, promotes positive wellbeing and is transitioning to become net zero by 2045**. We believe that art and creativity play an important role in helping to achieve this vision through engaging new audiences, contributing to a low carbon economy and inspiring people to connect with the natural world.

This strategy has been developed through conversations and input from many artists, practitioners, cultural organisations and groups in the Forest. It sets out a shared creative approach to building a bold, inclusive, and impactful Forest culture which can be owned by everyone.





England's first new forest in

**1,000  
years**

More than

**9.5 million  
trees**

planted

**Network of  
habitats and  
woodlands**

that are close to

**where people  
live and work**

**Transforming**

an industrial landscape  
scarred by coal mining  
and clay extraction

Framed by the

**remnant  
ancient  
forests**

of Charnwood  
and Needwood

A living example of how  
people and nature  
can thrive together –  
showing that a

**positive  
future is  
possible**

# Cultural sector audit

**To help shape this strategy, the National Forest Company completed a cultural sector audit to better understand the scale and offer of existing arts and creativity across the Forest.**

The audit demonstrated that there is a strong foundation of participatory arts and creative environmental engagement to build upon. This includes the work of People Express and Charnwood Arts (both Arts Council England 'National Portfolio Organisations'), the annual Timber festival, and more recent arts, nature and wellbeing initiatives developed through the support of National Forest Arts Grants.



## Key findings from the audit:

- The National Forest is an inspirational story and place. Respondents believe that it could support a year-round connected offer of creative opportunities and impactful experiences.
- Arts & creativity can support new audiences to connect with the National Forest and engage people who currently experience barriers to accessing the outdoors and nature.
- There are low levels of arts engagement across parts of the Forest, most notably Burton upon Trent and Coalville which have been underserved by cultural provision. The National Forest can play an important and long-term role in supporting creative opportunities and the co-commissioning of new work in these areas.
- There is a need for further development and collaboration within the sector to support connectivity, innovation and growth, including through training, skills development and sharing of knowledge.

**Stakeholders from a breadth of arts organisations, venues, creative groups, and practitioners contributed to the audit through interviews and events. A shared ambition was reflected, to reach more people and to strengthen the connection between art, creativity, and the Forest.**

Image credits (from left to right): Nita Rao © David Wilson Clarke, Youth Landscapers Collective, Thingumajig Theatre/People Express © Film City



# The vision

Arts and creativity in the National Forest will take inspiration from the Forest's 25-year vision and will ensure the development of an innovative, inclusive, and far-reaching arts initiative, centred around people and place. Through creative dialogues and collaboration, we will reflect upon and reimagine our relationship to nature, climate and time.

Together, we will create a place where art, community and nature intersect. A place where the imagination is celebrated, and artists are supported.

# Ways of working

The following approaches and principles are central to our collective working.

## Of the Forest

Initiatives should be reflective of the National Forest and its vision, providing a creative programme that is rooted in place, but globally relevant.

## Environmental Leadership

We will provide environmental leadership, working towards a net zero creative sector in the National Forest that puts nature and sustainability at the forefront of decision making, programming and advocacy.

## Diversity & Inclusion

The National Forest is for everyone. We will address the barriers to access and inclusion for both residents and visitors, and work to better understand the lived experiences of those who are under-represented in the arts and environmental sector.

## Health & Wellbeing

We will support health and wellbeing through cultural engagement that connects people to nature, reduces isolation, encourages active participation and brings joy to people's lives.

## Story of Change

Demonstrating transformation is integral to the National Forest. We will therefore assess the impact of creative and cultural activity in the Forest over the next five years to ensure that we are reaching our identified audiences and resulting in positive change. We will monitor, adapt where necessary and share key learnings along the way.



# Outcomes

We will use the following intended outcomes to inform decisions, and to measure our success.

- 1** A **growing and connected** arts and creativity sector, with strengthened networks and approaches to working together across the Forest.
- 2** More people **engaging with the National Forest** through arts and creativity, including under-served communities supported through relevant and accessible activity.
- 3** Increased **commitment to environmental responsibility** across the sector, working towards carbon neutral activity and inspiring climate action and justice.
- 4** **Improved wellbeing** amongst people engaging in creative opportunities through building their relationship with nature and woodlands.
- 5** The National Forest to be **recognised as a cultural destination**, producing bold and impactful creative encounters within environmental regeneration which attract visitors to the Forest.







# Themes

Three themes have been identified which will underpin creative initiatives and activity going forward in the National Forest.

## Collaboration

a strengthened and growing creative sector inspired by the National Forest

## People

more people and communities creatively connected with the Forest through meaningful engagement

## Place

a nationally recognised destination for arts within environmental regeneration



# Collaboration

**We will work closely with partner organisations and creatives to help the sector grow and become more connected. The National Forest will support a cultural network and strengthened creative community which promotes environmental sustainability and creativity that embraces and nurtures all.**

Together, we will cultivate an environment which encourages **collaborative conversations** and **joint ventures**. We will seek imaginative approaches to building relationships across the National Forest, from the rural to the urban, **through the woodlands and villages to the Forest towns**. This will involve the sharing of best practice, skills, ideas, and resources, as well as opportunities to present work created in and of the National Forest to other local sites and venues, and further afield through national art programmes.

Creative networks and partnerships will draw upon a spectrum of public and third sector organisations, including health care, schools, higher and further education, museums, libraries, and maker spaces, as well as arts organisations and creative groups. We will support wider social policy through initiatives such as Green Social Prescribing, working with **health & wellbeing** specialists to provide **creative opportunities in green spaces**.





## Collaboration priorities

- Artists, practitioners and partners to work collectively to share skills, knowledge and build capacity.
- Co-creation and co-production will be facilitated between artists, partners, and communities.
- A resilient arts and cultural sector will have a shared commitment to reducing environmental impact and driving climate action.







# People

**Arts and creativity in the National Forest must be relevant and accessible to communities, bringing people together to explore their relationship to the Forest and to play a role in shaping its future. Creative initiatives will celebrate the varied community identities and provide meaningful impact.**

The National Forest is a unique place which has been **driven and shaped by people**. This radical tree-led transformation provides **rich stories** to be shared and inspiration for **new narratives** to emerge, combining heritage, ecology, community and sustainability. Arts and cultural projects will provide new ways to devise and disseminate different modes of storytelling which are **engaging and inclusive**.

We are committed to ensuring that **children and young people** have access to high quality arts and cultural experiences that develop their curiosity, sense of belonging and connection to the natural world. The National Forest provides an inspiring setting for creative and cultural learning that empowers young people to be heard, to make a difference and to lead their future.





## People priorities

- A platform will be provided for people whose voices and perspectives are under-represented in the arts and the environmental sector.
- Cultural opportunities will be developed to reduce isolation and enhance wellbeing through connection to nature.
- Creative opportunities will be provided for children and young people that bring together nature, climate, art and digital technology.



# Place

**The National Forest provides both the location and the context for outstanding creative opportunities that can transform, engage and interpret. From temporary and transitory projects to those with longer term physical outcomes, these initiatives will contribute to a sense of place, pride and aspiration.**

There will be a **distinctive creative offer** that is specific to the National Forest character, places, people and ecology. This will include bold and relevant initiatives that bring visitors to the National Forest. **Signature projects of scale** will be presented, constructing memorable experiences that develop the National Forest as a cultural destination.

We will work together with other environment and heritage organisations including Forestry England, the National Trust, local authorities and local trusts to creatively **activate sites** and spaces within the Forest. We will seek imaginative and contemporary approaches – from artworks that

provoke contemplation, to trails in the landscape and interactive digital works. We will devise public interventions that contribute to **place making** and co-produce artworks that raise ecological awareness and climate action.

Events and experiences will be delivered in partnership with organisations specialising in outdoor arts, place-based commissioning, and sustainable creative practice. This will include national partners and cultural organisations from our surrounding cities.





## Place priorities

- A distinctive Forest culture will be created, connecting people to the landscape.
- High quality, bold and ambitious cultural experiences will be offered to attract people to visit the National Forest.
- Signature projects of scale will profile the National Forest to reach local, regional, and national audiences.





# Focus areas

**This strategy applies across the whole National Forest through the woodlands and villages to the Forest towns. Initially, activity will focus on areas of greater need or opportunity, where work will deliver the greatest social and economic benefits.**

The towns and surrounding areas of **Burton upon Trent, Swadlincote** and **Coalville** have high levels of deprivation and are places which would significantly benefit from the positive impact that arts and creativity can have in terms of health and wellbeing, community cohesion and tackling isolation.

Each of these places have existing arts or community organisations working to provide creative engagement, but overall they have been underserved in terms of cultural provision. They will be prioritised for creative activity which empowers people and fosters a sense of place.



The local authority areas for Burton, Swadlincote and Coalville are each included within the list for Arts Council England's (ACE) **Creative People and Places, 2026-2029**, which focuses on parts of the country where involvement in creativity and culture is significantly below the national average. This provides substantial opportunity for organisations and communities to work together to leverage funding which supports relevant and impactful creative development.



# Focus areas

## The Heart of the Forest

Covering approximately 10-square miles this area has seen the greatest change in the National Forest over the last 30 years. What was once a place marked by coal mining and clay extraction has been restored to become a **newly forested landscape**, regenerating communities, and supporting an emerging visitor destination.

A new vision has been created for the Heart of the National Forest, to demonstrate how **sustainable living, sustainable tourism, and sustainable enterprise** in a restored landscape is achievable. The vision outlines a number of creative ambitions including a **coordinated programme of Forest-inspired festivals and events, arts and sculpture in the landscape, a re-imaged Conkers visitor attraction and flexible spaces that encourage innovation and creativity**, with a focus on nurturing green businesses and sectors.





# Implementation

**The National Forest Company (NFC) is committed to supporting the realisation of this strategy to enable the arts and creativity sector to grow and strengthen, and to develop an ambitious Forest-inspired cultural offer. The NFC will:**

- Help to **connect** partners, practitioners, and artists across the Forest to encourage the co-creation and production of events, creative projects, and touring initiatives.
- Work with local authorities and funders to **secure and align resources** and support to grow and further develop the sector.
- Directly **commission** activity which supports wider National Forest programmes and priorities, including the Heart of the National Forest vision.

To steer and oversee the strategy a National Forest Arts & Creativity **Advisory Group** will be formed with representatives of organisations and groups who will actively work in partnership over the initial 2-3 years to take forward elements of the strategy, including fundraising, sector development, commissioning, and community engagement.

A wider National Forest Arts & Creativity **Network** will be established to take part in shared learning, training and to advocate for Arts and Creativity in the National Forest.

A high-level delivery plan has been developed to help prioritise interventions in support of the strategy.





# Implementation

## Delivery plan, 2024-2029

### Collaboration

a strengthened and growing creative sector  
inspired by the National Forest

Priority	Deliverables	Partners	Time frame
<b>Artists, practitioners, and partners working collectively to share skills, knowledge and build capacity.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A programme of networking opportunities to share knowledge and facilitate collaboration.</li> <li>• Learning opportunities identified, facilitated and shared.</li> <li>• Support for new entrants to the sector.</li> </ul>	Local arts venues, creative organisations, festivals, local authorities, artists, practitioners and collectives.	Yr 1 onwards.
<b>Co-creation and co-production facilitated between artists, partners and communities.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate available resources between local authorities, funders, creative organisations and artists.</li> <li>• Facilitate opportunities via wider initiatives including Stronger Towns Fund and Derbyshire Makes.</li> <li>• Establish local touring and co-producing opportunities working with venues, events and communities.</li> </ul>	As above.	Yr 1 onwards.
<b>A shared commitment to reducing environmental impact and driving climate action across the sector.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with national and local industry partners to identify, share and monitor sustainable environmental practice within the creative sector.</li> <li>• Provide creative engagement opportunities, which empower communities to take positive climate action and harness sustainable living.</li> </ul>	Above plus Arts Derbyshire, Creative Leicestershire, Julie's Bicycle.	Yr 1 onwards.



# Implementation

## Delivery plan, 2024-2029

### People

more people and communities creatively connected with the Forest through meaningful engagement

Priority	Deliverables	Partners	Time frame
<b>A platform for people whose voices and perspectives are under-represented in the arts and the environmental sector.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support projects which are co-created with communities and underserved groups.</li> <li>Take positive steps to ensure that diversity is reflected within delivery teams.</li> </ul>	Local participatory arts and community focused organisations, including People Express and Charnwood Arts.	Yr 1 onwards.
<b>Cultural opportunities to reduce isolation and enhance wellbeing through connection to nature.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Artists and creatives engaged in Community Woodlands, co-designing green spaces with local communities.</li> <li>Integrate opportunities where possible with Green Social Prescribing, mental health services and other community support groups.</li> </ul>	Social Prescribing groups and link workers, Air Arts - Queens Hospital, Burton.	Yr 1 onwards.
<b>Creative opportunities for children and young people that bring together nature, climate, art and digital technology.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support and encourage creative projects which involve young people in decision-making and advocacy.</li> <li>Pilot artist residency programme in Secondary Schools.</li> </ul>	Primary & Secondary Schools, Youth Landscapers Collective, Mighty Creatives.	Yr 2 & 3.



# Implementation

## Delivery plan, 2024-2029

Place a nationally recognised destination for arts within environmental regeneration			
Priority	Deliverables	Partners	Time frame
<b>Inspire a distinctive Forest culture, connecting people to the landscape.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish residency and commission opportunities inspired by the National Forest.</li> <li>Focus on visitor hubs to reach a broad range and volume of audiences e.g. Forest Towns and the Heart of the Forest.</li> </ul>	Local arts organisations, creative groups, libraries and local authorities.	Yr 1 onwards.
<b>High quality, bold and ambitious cultural experiences which attract people to visit the National Forest.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a programme of Forest inspired events and experiences.</li> </ul>	Local authorities, Forestry England, National Trust and national arts partners.	Yr 2 onwards.
<b>Signature projects of scale, profiling the National Forest and reaching local, regional and national audiences.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Co-commission with local and national partners with shared objectives. Link to Heart of the Forest vision.</li> </ul>	As above.	Yr 3 & 5.

With thanks to the following partners that have contributed towards the audit and/or helped shape the Arts & Creativity strategy –

People Express, Charnwood Arts, Brewhouse Arts Centre, Arts Melbourne, Buzzing Roots, ArtSpace, Live & Local, Youth Landscapers, CoalvilleCAN, Mantle Arts, Burton and South

Derbyshire College, Planning Solutions, South Derbyshire District Council, Derbyshire County Council, North West Leicestershire District Council, East Staffordshire Borough Council, Leicestershire County Council, Arts Derbyshire, Creative Leicestershire.

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## THE NATIONAL FOREST

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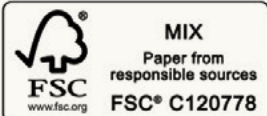
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