

National Forest Strategy 2004 – 2014
Mid Strategy Review 2008

Summary of Consultation responses and future programme

Introduction

This paper summarises the key messages from the Mid Strategy Review consultation exercise, which ran for a 17 week period from June to the end of September 2008. It also sets out how the National Forest Company will take the review forward through to March 2009, when a revised Implementation Plan for the Forest Strategy will be launched to cover the period up to 2014.

47 written responses were received to the consultation exercise and the National Forest Company would like to thank all those who took the time to contribute. A breakdown of responses is shown below, with the organisations and businesses who responded listed in Annex 1.

Written Responses	Organisations	Businesses	General Public	Total
Totals	35	2	10	47

In addition, Forest-related questions were placed with three local authority Citizens' Panels, which surveyed 995 residents from across the area. Community perceptions research has also been commissioned in the Swadlincote/Woodville, Walton on Trent and Moira/Donisthorpe areas. A further 200 local residents are involved in this and the results from this study will be available separately in December.

Promotion of the consultation exercise

The consultation exercise was promoted in a variety of ways:

- 165 consultation documents were emailed or posted to organisations, businesses, local authorities, parish councils and individual contacts, locally, regionally and nationally.
- 500 copies of the consultation document were posted to libraries, community groups and drop-in centres.
- The document was posted on the NFC website and promoted through the local media.
- Special meetings were held with 23 partner organisations.
- The review was discussed with specialist organisations through our Access and Recreation, Tourism, Nature Conservation and Planning Technical Working Groups.
- Community views have been sought through Citizens' Panels and community perceptions research.

Key findings from the review

Respondents have given clear messages about particular issues which they feel have risen up the agenda since the 2004 Strategy was produced. Key overall findings are set out below, following the order in which the questions were asked in the consultation document.

A variety of other, individual, comments were also made by particular respondents. These are all welcome points which the National Forest Company has logged. However, in order to summarise the main points arising, the analysis below concentrates on the themes and issues which were most frequently mentioned.

Question 1 – How much planting should we aim to do in a year?

- There is widespread support for the proposed 200-250ha planting target. Several respondents felt that the target should be as high and ambitious as possible; whilst others recognised that it will depend upon the funding available.
- A more strategic, proactive approach to woodland and other habitat creation is generally supported; but some organisations recognised that land availability will be a constraint in being able to identify which land to plant.
- Targeting woodland creation to connect habitats, provide green infrastructure for new development, enhance specific landscape character areas (eg: in the coalfield) and to increase woodland cover in specific locations (eg: Staffordshire) was also highlighted.
- Several comments were made about the quality of woodland planting being more important than quantity and that high impact can also be achieved through small scale planting additions and filling gaps.

Question 2 – What means can and should we use to achieve further large-scale change in the landscape

- A strong recurring theme was agreement that there should be a balance of opportunistic forest creation and a more selective focus. Ways to achieve this include:
- Taking a pro-active approach to connecting woodlands and wildlife habitats through both new woodland planting and other habitat creation.
- Targeting green infrastructure linked to development growth locations; and developing urban forestry strategies to encourage more tree planting in urban areas.
- Aligning new planting with tourism development, trails and cycleways.
- Ensuring that new planting and other habitat creation continues to meet multiple objectives. Respondents recognised that a range of resilient, connected habitats will enhance landscape character, improve biodiversity, appeal to the public and help to offset the effects of climate change.
- Some concerns were also expressed about too much planting in certain areas and the need for future planting to be sympathetic to the wider landscape. Maintaining vistas and characteristic views and avoiding excessive in-fill planting in landscapes with a good balance of wooded to open land were mentioned.
- Focusing upon small-scale planting (eg: hedgerows and hedgerow trees) was highlighted, in areas where slower landscape change may be preferable.
- Several mechanisms were mentioned that can help to achieve a balance between opportunistic and targeted Forest creation including: habitat connectivity, the National Forest Strategy Indicative Planting Areas, Green Infrastructure strategies and opportunities for closer meshing of National Forest Company incentives with those of the Higher Level Scheme (Natural England).
- Other specific initiatives that can help to achieve landscape-scale change include:
 - development of the Charnwood Forest Regional Park;
 - development of a Geodiversity Action Plan, to identify geological features to

- enhance and use for tourism;
- acquiring disused railway lines to create new cycle routes;
- developing markets for woodland products – to ensure woodland is managed and to demonstrate success to encourage more planting.

Question 3 – How do we maintain and improve the quality of The National Forest?

- There is broad support for the National Forest Company's proposed approach.
- Achieving high quality management of newly planted woodlands linked to developing the woodland economy and locally produced timber and forest products is seen as a high priority. The use of early thinnings for wood fuel was particularly highlighted.
- High quality landscape management is also seen as important, particularly related to the public appeal and biodiversity value of woodland sites. Linked to this, the increasing cost of managing some sites and the need to re-visit some less successful mineral restoration sites was also mentioned.
- The need to address deer and squirrel management is important, where needed.
- The total visitor experience needs to be of high quality. This relates to the maintenance and quality of public access, interpretation and signage at Forest sites. It also includes the need to periodically refresh and upgrade existing visitor facilities; and support the development of new visitor infrastructure – such as creating new 'gateways' (interest in new visitor centres was expressed in East Staffordshire and Charnwood) and linking sites and attractions through trails and cycleways.
- Achieving high standards of customer care and 'quality marking' visitor facilities and services was also a recurring theme.
- Restoration of biodiversity networks and ensuring the on-going management of wildlife habitats was highlighted, as well as opportunities to 'add value' (eg: by introducing woodland ground flora into new plantations and using geological features to their best advantage when considering new planting).
- Community involvement to support the management of the Forest will be increasingly important – through volunteer involvement, 'Friends of' groups, social enterprises and listening to local residents and visitors views.
- The need to sell the value of the Forest to counter balance the planned rate of house building in the area was also registered by some respondents.

Question 4 – What organisational and funding agreements will best support the creation of the Forest to 2014 and beyond?

- There remains strong support for the National Forest Company's role and approach and for existing Government funding for the Forest to continue as they are. There were many comments supporting the NFC's work and the progress made so far.
- The value of the NFC contributing to effective partnership working and the need for this to continue, to help ensure the best outcomes to strategic proposals was a strong theme. Examples include:
- Planning policy, the growth agenda and securing green infrastructure and urban forestry.
- Development of the woodland, tourism and rural economies; including developing a more strategic tourism development function in the next phase of the Forest's development with tourism partners.
- Involvement in Sub-Regional and Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements.

- Maintaining strong local authority relationships, linked to environmental, tourism, access and planning agendas and particularly economic development, given the devolution of funding proposed through the Sub National Review.
- Ensuring strong links in helping to implement national and regional strategies (eg: England's Trees Woods and Forests, Regional Forestry Strategies and Regional Economic Strategies).
- Forging new partnerships, particularly as new initiatives have been identified by several respondents (eg: in Staffordshire, Charnwood and Hinckley Boroughs and parts of North West Leicestershire); as well as the potential for closer working with other organisations (eg: Natural England).
- The continued importance of working with non governmental organisations (eg: biodiversity organisations). Revenue funding is however, a factor in enabling some organisations to contribute substantially more than at present.
- Various funding sources were identified that could help the Forest's development through to 2014. These included:
 - the Rural Development Programme for England – particularly Axis 1 and 3 funding towards forestry and tourism projects.
 - Green Infrastructure, Section 106 funding and the Community Infrastructure Levy - to achieve environmental gain linked with new development.
 - encouraging Government funding towards public transport infrastructure (eg: the National Forest line and improved bus services) to link with the growth agenda.
 - Regional Development Agency funding towards woodland economy and visitor infrastructure initiatives.
 - achieving more business sponsorship.
 - Landfill Tax funding.
 - securing more local authority support towards Forest creation and management.
 - as well as continuing roles for the NFC's own grant mechanisms and land acquisition.
- Opportunities were also identified to pilot new grant mechanisms (eg: an Access Grants Scheme) and to look towards long term legacy funding towards future management of the Forest.
- Increased involvement of the voluntary and community sectors in helping to manage woodlands is seen as important. The idea of a Community Trust to maximise volunteer involvement and gift aid contributions was highlighted.
- On a cautionary note rising land prices are making it more difficult for certain organisations to acquire land and contribute to the Forest (eg: Wildlife Trusts).

Question 5 – Growth, development and planning

- There is recognition that the growth agenda will have major implications for the Forest.
- At a policy level there is strong support for the NFC's role in getting the Forest written in to Local Development Frameworks and continuing to engage in effective partnership working related to the growth agenda.
- This can help to influence and shape the form of development and provide opportunities to secure new green infrastructure.

- There is recognition of the importance of continuing to secure development-related planting and green infrastructure to ensure that it matches the scale of development growth planned.
- The need to promote sustainable building and design in line with established national standards, is also recognised.
- Helping to protect environmental assets from development (eg: Ancient Woodlands); the need for long term management of development related planting; and encouraging a more flexible approach to planning in rural areas were also mentioned.

Question 6 – Community involvement and consultation

- There was a strong theme of continuing to involve local communities in the Forest's creation, particularly in the management of new woodlands. A range of mechanisms were advocated:
 - development of social enterprises.
 - volunteer involvement (eg: through the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers and Woodland Trust programmes).
 - 'Friends of' groups.
 - community management of woodland sites through leasing or management agreement approaches.
 - involving the younger generation in using woods as a learning resource, particularly through Forest School.
 - promoting recreation opportunities linked to the health agenda.
- Another strong thread was the continued need to involve new, as well as existing, communities. Suggestions here were wide ranging and included:
 - more direct engagement with communities on the edge of the Forest (eg: Charnwood and Lichfield) to raise awareness of the Forest's attractions and ways to get involved.
 - engagement with new residents through estate agents.
 - identifying community 'champions' in parishes and local authorities.
 - diversifying involvement, for example by setting up an 'ask the expert' section on the NFC website.
 - using local authority Community Forums to promote new programmes.
- There were also helpful suggestions to help engage with communities. These included working with Councils for Voluntary Service, Rural Community Councils, Parish Councils, Local Authority mechanisms (eg: Volunteer Bureau, Community Action and Engagement Initiatives, Community Forums) and specialist organisations (eg: the Country Land and Business Association, to continue to engage landowners and rural businesses).

Question 7 – Climate Change

- There is good support for the NFC's approach towards, and position statement on, climate change.
- Respondents particularly recognised the potential to promote wood fuel as a renewable energy source. Heating tourism developments was seen as one means of reducing the carbon impact of the visitor economy.
- A 'keeping carbon local strategy' aimed at using local timber was also highlighted.

- For biodiversity, improved habitat management and the creation of new habitat blocks in strategic locations were seen as helping to achieve habitat connectivity and increase the resilience of the natural world to the impacts of climate change.
- Other important contributions that the Forest can make included:
 - urban tree planting – with the need for shade becoming increasingly important in future years.
 - contributing to flood alleviation through wetland and wet woodland creation.
 - the NFC's current discussions with Forest Research to develop southern provenance tree species trials in the Forest.
 - and the Forest's role in helping to educate young people about climate change through the various strands of its work. If new visitor centres were built this educational function could form an important part within them.

Question 8 – Sustainable tourism

- At a policy level there is broad support for the NFC's approach to sustainable tourism.
- Visitor infrastructure development was highlighted as important in a number of ways:
 - New attractions – there is interest in new visitor centres being developed in Staffordshire and Charnwood; the continued restoration of the Ashby Canal; and the development of new attractions in the Central Rivers Initiative area (Staffordshire).
 - Visitor information points – there is support for the extension of the Visitor Infrastructure Project into Staffordshire; the development of gateway sites (Charnwood); and more interpretation facilities for visitors.
 - Accommodation – the latent demand for new accommodation (eg: a new hotel) is recognised following the success of the Youth Hostel and Camping and Caravan Club site.
- Creating connections between visitor attractions and local communities was also a recurring theme, particularly related to new trails, cycle routes, bridleways and public transport links. Trail development could help to influence the location of new tourism facilities. Low key activities (eg: walking) and providing park and ride schemes could also help to reduce car and energy use by visitors.
- Mention was also made about developing connections between local food producers to supply visitor attractions and accommodation providers; and broadening visitors' understanding about the Forest, by making connections between land management activity and wood products, wildlife habitats and climate change.
- Improved promotion and marketing of the visitor product should continue to be a priority, particularly 'linking' attractions to encourage more overnight stays, specialist breaks (eg: related to woodland crafts) and increasing brand and product awareness, so the Forest becomes recognised for sustainable breaks.
- Several respondents highlighted the need for business support mechanisms and increased networking. There is potential to link tourism businesses into national, green accreditation schemes and to link the Forest with other promotional initiatives (eg: the Sustainable Tourism Action Group for Staffordshire).

Question 9 – Sustainable Transport

- The need to enhance public transport, both within and to the Forest, and support for the re-opening of the National Forest railway line were the two main transport themes.

- Development of a Forest-wide Transport Plan is also advocated, recognising that improved public transport is a critical success factor for the Forest.
- There is support for the development of the proposed long distance trail and potential for increased access to the Forest via cycle routes, mountain bike and other trails.
- Providing cycle racks at Forest sites linked with public transport information and promoting more open top bus tours were also put forward as ideas.

Question 10 - Woodland species choice

- There is strong support for maintaining the current high proportion of broad leaved planting.
- The emphasis should be on producing good quality hardwoods for timber and public benefits, including wildlife and landscape character objectives.
- Conifer planting should still have a role to play particularly for its economic return and its appeal for certain wildlife species.
- Continuing to include locally native species and local origin stock was also mentioned, dependent upon the end use of planting schemes.

Other comments

- Notable other comments included:
- Recognition that the Staffordshire part of the Forest has not seen the same level of Forest creation as the area as a whole; and development of a Forest image and brand for this area will depend upon the perception of a developing Forest environment.
- A suggestion that coordinated ticketing arrangements for Forest-wide horse riding permits and access agreements for organised events, such as orienteering, would be of value.
- A wider area than the Forest boundary would benefit from achieving the Forest's objectives.
- The Forest has a positive role to play in demonstrating good practice in planning and implementing positive landscape change through the European Landscape Convention.

Citizens' Panels

Citizens' Panels are run by a number of the local authorities across the Forest area. They take the form of quarterly or half yearly on line tick box surveys of residents' views on a variety of topics. Three Forest-related questions were placed with the East Staffordshire, South Derbyshire and Charnwood panels which in total surveyed 995 residents from across their District/Borough areas as a whole (i.e. not from just within The National Forest area). The results are as follows:

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% due to some non replies or more than one option being selected.

Q1 Do you think that The National Forest has improved the local environment?

Panel	No of responses	Yes	No
South Derbyshire	459	85.2%	10.2%
East Staffordshire	430	82.8%	8.3%
Charnwood	106	91.5%	7.5%

This demonstrates high awareness and recognition that the Forest's creation has improved the local environment.

Q2 In what ways has The National Forest improved the local environment?

	South Derbyshire	East Staffordshire	Charnwood
Expanding woodland landscape	81.7%	68.3%	78.3%
New places for walking	74.8%	63.4%	74.5%
New recreation/tourism attractions	55.3%	48.1%	53.8%
More local wildlife	68.4%	53.2%	65.1%
New green space near to housing	44.3%	42.7%	60.4%
Other (comments included greener/healthier environment, better place to live, improved views).	6.7%	7.5%	9.4%

This demonstrates that people are becoming more aware of the growing Forest in the landscape and making the strong connection with new public access, recreation and tourism facilities and evidence of more local wildlife resulting from the Forest's creation. It is also noticeable that relatively high proportions of people are seeing the effects of more local green space being created associated with new development.

Q3 How would you like to get involved in 'the Forest' in the future?

	South Derbyshire	East Staffordshire	Charnwood
Tree Planting	16%	13.7%	29.2%
Conservation volunteering	10.9%	10.2%	18.9%
Health Walks	30.4%	22.3%	43.4%
Forest Events (eg. Wood Fair)	19.8%	33.6%	55.7%
Other (eg. school visits, walking groups, sports events)	3.7%	9.9%	8.5%
Not want to be involved	39.7%	32.3%	22.6%

There is a strong message that local people continue to want to be involved in the Forest in a variety of ways. Particularly noticeable is the interest in health walks and Forest events

such as the Wood Fair. The interest from Charnwood is particularly noteworthy, as it might be assumed that given the maturity of the landscape before the advent of The National Forest there might be less appreciation of new opportunities arising from it and modest enthusiasm for future engagement.

Around a third of respondents are happy not to be involved. Additional comments made in relation to this included 'lack of time', 'being too elderly or housebound', and accessibility issues. The general tone of comments is that this group of people is happy that the Forest is happening in their local environment, but they don't feel the need to directly engage with it.

Taking the Mid Strategy Review forward

The National Forest Company now intends to produce a revised Implementation Plan for the National Forest Strategy through to 2014, taking into account the consultation responses received. The intention is that the Plan will be launched at a Forest Forum towards the end of March 2009 (details of this will be made available in due course).

Throughout 2009 further discussions will also be held with the many organisations who have expressed an interest in developing new initiatives to help take forward the Forests creation. The National Forest Company looks forward to working with existing and new partners as we enter an exciting, yet challenging, next phase of the Forests development.

Simon Evans
28 November 2008

ANNEX 1

Mid Strategy Review Organisation and Business responses

ACH Limited
Advantage West Midlands
Ashby Woulds Regeneration Forum
British Geological Survey
British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
Charnwood Borough Council
Country Land and Business Association
Derbyshire County Council
East Midlands Development Agency
East Midlands Orienteering Association
East Staffordshire Borough Council
Environment Agency
Forestry Commission
Friends of Hopwas Wood
Government Office East Midlands
Heart of the National Forest Foundation
Heather Parish Council
Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council
Leicester Shire Economic Partnership
Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust
Leicestershire County Council
LeicesterShire Promotions
Leicestershire Rural Partnership
Lichfield District Council
National Farmers Union
National Trust
Natural England
North West Leicestershire District Council
Poplar Tree Company
Shepshed Town Council
South Derbyshire District Council
Staffordshire County Council
Staffordshire Destination Management Partnership
Staffordshire Wildlife Trust
Staunton Harold Parish Meeting
Woodland Trust