

The National Forest Company
Disability Equality Scheme
Policy Statement

Chief Executive's Statement:

As Chief Executive of the National Forest Company and its Accounting Officer, I take direct responsibility for ensuring that we are aware of our responsibilities in relation to disability (and other forms of disadvantage where there is a risk of discrimination) and are conscientious in fulfilling them. The National Forest is a bold project for the nation, funded primarily through the taxpayer, and it should offer every opportunity to be participated in and enjoyed by all. Similarly, the National Forest Company will lead by example in its policies and practices.

I am content that this policy statement and associated action plan provide a framework to achieve this.

Introduction

The National Forest Company (NFC) is a Non-Departmental Public Body sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The remit of the NFC is to oversee the creation of The National Forest covering 200 square miles of the English Midlands.

The Mission Statement for the NFC is:

The National Forest Company leads the creation of The National Forest, a new and wooded landscape for the nation across 200 square miles of Central England.

The National Forest Company:

- Attracts and uses resources for ambitious, sensitive and imaginative Forest creation
- Provides the setting for new businesses, recreation, tourism and an improved quality of life
- Enhances wildlife and biodiversity.

The National Forest Company works through dynamic partnerships with landowners, businesses, public, private and voluntary organisations and local communities to fulfil the shared vision for the Forest. It promotes the widest possible participation in and enjoyment of the Forest.

As the Forest matures, the Company promotes at international, national and local levels the experience and knowledge emerging from this inspiring and ambitious project.

This Policy Statement acknowledges the NFC's duties under the Disability Discrimination Acts 1995 and 2005. By implementing the Action Plan associated with this policy, the NFC seeks to ensure that people with disabilities are treated equally and fairly in relation

to the emerging Forest and the range of public benefits being delivered and in relation to employment and career development.

Through this policy and associated action plan we aim to provide equality of opportunity for all disabled people, including those with physical disability, learning disability, sensory impairment, mental ill health and their carers.

The National Forest Strategy

The National Forest is a forest in the making. It is being developed in accordance with the National Forest Strategy. The first such Strategy was published in 1994 with the second covering the ten years 2004 – 2014. The principles that underpin the Forest's creation include:

- to be enjoyable, welcoming and accessible for all;
- to involve communities in the Forest's creation;
- to be sustainable – environmentally, economically and socially.

The Forest aims to appeal to all abilities, ages and groups irrespective of culture, social or economic background. Social inclusion is a key objective in encouraging people to visit and enjoy the Forest's many attractions and to getting people involved in its creation through community and voluntary activities. Particular attention is paid to involving socially and economically disadvantaged groups, especially from within and near to the Forest area. This requires partnership working with a wide range of stakeholders and interest groups.

The Forest Strategy 2004 – 2014 acknowledges the importance of providing benefits for the disabled. Relevant extracts include:

Site-based access – The most substantial public access gains will come through creating access to new woodlands. This also provides the best opportunities for creating multi-use access for walkers, cyclists, horseriders and disabled users.

All abilities access – The National Forest should be developed as a centre of excellence for all abilities countryside access. This will require site owners to make special efforts to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. All-abilities access to appropriate Forest sites and trails will be a prime consideration. A number of sites already provide all-abilities access and the Leicestershire Standing Committee on Disabled Access has helped the NFC to produce a disabled access sites guide. The NFC should continue to involve disabled user groups in the design and promotion of new all-abilities access.

Social Inclusion – The NFC will continue to adopt an all inclusive approach to community involvement. All socio-economic groups will be involved, including people of all abilities and ages. Special efforts will be made to involve minority interests, including ethnic minorities, disabled and inner city communities.

This Policy sets out our commitment to disabled people, whilst the action plan sets out our approach to addressing disability equality and for achieving an accessible organisation. This provides the framework within which the NFC can promote equality for,

and prevent discrimination against, disabled people, as employees of the Company and as users of the Forest.

The NFC's Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plan will be reviewed annually to monitor progress and to ensure that the needs of disabled people continue to be met. We will whenever appropriate consult with organisations representing disabled people and with individuals taking into consideration views expressed in relation to the formulation of policies and action plans.

Whilst the NFC's Chief Executive has overall responsibility for the Disability Equality Scheme, there is, across the Company, a shared ownership of, and commitment to, the Scheme and implementation of the action plan. Each member of staff has an agreed annual job plan that sets out responsibilities and programmes of work. Incorporated into these are the actions specified within the Disability Equality Scheme Action Plan.