

The National Forest: An exemplar of Sustainable Development

1st Update: 2007-2010

This report presents an update of The National Forest's sustainable development progress. In 2007, the National Forest Company (NFC) defined and measured the National Forest's activity against 20 sustainable indicators¹. This report updates on progress made since 2007 and on the overall progress since the Forest's inception in 1995 (subject to data availability). It is the NFC's intention to monitor the sustainable development of the Forest every 3-5 years.

Sustainable Development and The National Forest

The National Forest is a national exemplar of sustainable development, demonstrating how wide-ranging environmental, economic and social objectives can be achieved at a landscape-scale for present and future generations. The Forest area spans 200 square miles of the East and West Midlands. Its creation is enriching the landscape, biodiversity and local economy of the area and the lives of local residents (211,000) and visitors (currently 7.8m). It is also making a significant contribution to tackling climate change through the sequestration of carbon in the trees and soils of growing woodlands and by providing resilient habitat networks.

The creation of The National Forest has been underway since 1995 and, in that time, over 60km² of new woodlands have been created through the restoration of derelict and mineral worked land, farm diversification and development-related tree planting. In addition 1,750ha of other wildlife habitats have been created or brought into management.

Sustainable development has been at the heart of the Forest's creation since the publication of the first National Forest Strategy in 1994. In 2007, the NFC collated evidence against 20 sustainable development indicators which showed significant and consistent progress against a range of environmental, social and economic factors. These indicators were chosen to measure the Forest's contribution to national sustainable development indicators and the UK Sustainable Development Strategy, as well as measuring progress against the objectives of the National Forest Strategy 2004-14. In 2008, The National Forest won the inaugural Sustainable Development UK Award for the transformation of the Ashby Wolds coalfield landscape into a new woodland resource for leisure and tourism.

Sustainable Development progress 2007-2010

Since 2007 the Forest has made substantial, positive progress against 19 of its indicators with only one showing little or no change (see Table 1). The quality of the Forest environment continues to significantly improve; community enthusiasm for the Forest and interest in engaging with it continues to grow; and the local economy has remained relatively robust in the face of the economic recession, demonstrating an underlying resilience.

Environment

The Forest is a major demonstration of landscape-scale environmental change and habitat connectivity. Woodland cover has more than trebled from 6% of the Forest area in 1995 to 18.4% (6,230ha) in 2011 and a further 1,750ha of wildlife habitats have been created or brought into management. This is helping to reverse past habitat and species losses. Evidence of species recovery is demonstrated through increases in bird populations, a growing diversity of wildlife species at surveyed Forest sites and the return of iconic species such as otters to the Forest's major rivers. The Forest also continues to have a major impact upon diversifying the environmental quality of farmland, with 12.6% of the area now covered by National Forest or Higher Level agri-environment schemes. All this activity is helping the Forest adapt to and help mitigate the effects of climate change, with the Forest's woodlands now sequestering growing amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (66kctc).

Economy

The Forest has developed a strong and diverse economy, which has maintained its relative position despite the economic downturn. Whilst unemployment has risen by 2.2% since 2007 it remains below regional and national averages. There continues to be strong growth in tourism, leisure and the woodland economy, with tourism now worth £287m to the local economy. Since 1995 the Forest has also benefitted from £163.8m of investment in Forest-related projects and wider regeneration programmes, with £40.4m of this total added since 2006. In 2010 an independent study estimated the overall net public value of the Forest (public expenditure

analysed against positive public benefit) at £140m. The total benefits of the Forest will rise to an estimated £721m net public value when it is mature in 2100.

Whilst the overall economic evidence points to a generally healthy economic performance across the Forest, areas of economic disadvantage remain in parts of the former coalfield and Burton upon Trent.

Social

The Forest’s community engagement activity is making a major contribution to ‘Big Society’. Since 1995, 340,000 people have been involved in Forest-related projects and 186,000 children involved in environmental education. Around 16% of those involved come from socially excluded groups – a rise of 3% since 2007. Public perceptions surveys show high satisfaction levels with the Forest and increasing evidence of community pride and belonging. There is growing recognition that the Forest has greatly benefitted the local area in terms of public access, recreation and wildlife, making it a more attractive place to live in, work and visit. Evidence shows that 81% of the woodlands created have some form of public access and over two thirds of the Forest’s population (200,000 people) live within 500m of an accessible woodland. The proportion of the Forest’s population living in areas amongst the most deprived in England continues to decline and healthy life expectancy remains on a par with national averages.

TABLE 1 – NATIONAL FOREST SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS – SUMMARY OF PROGRESS 2007-2010.

Indicator title	Progress	Indicator title	Progress
Greenhouse Gas Emissions	✓	Investment	✓
Land Use	✓	Deprivation	✓
Woodland Cover	✓	Life Expectancy and Health	⚡ ✓*
Land Recycling	✓	Active Community Participation	✓
Biodiversity Conservation	✓ ...*	Sustainable Development Education	✓
Bird Populations	✓	Access and Mobility	✓
Farming and Environmental Stewardship	✓	Environmental Equality	✓
River Quality	⚡	Social Justice (Inclusion)	✓
Employment	✓	Satisfaction in Local Area	✓
Economic Growth	✓	Wellbeing	✓

KEY TO INDICATORS:

Change in the indicator over time.

✓ Clear improvement ⚡ Little or no change ... Insufficient data for the Forest area

* Two symbols - varied progress against certain indicator aspects.

Data sources:

- 1) The National Forest: an exemplar of Sustainable Development - National Forest Company [2007] www.nationalforest.org/document/research/sustainability_report.pdf

Guide to The National Forest's Sustainable Development indicators

This guide should be read in conjunction with the 20 separately updated indicator reports.

Selection of the Indicators

In 2007, 20 indicators were selected from the suite of 68 national sustainable development indicators, with reference to local indicators also used by partner organisations. The set of 20 most closely relate to the particular circumstances of The National Forest. Two of the indicators are bespoke to the Forest area – Woodland Creation and Deprivation. Individually the indicators contribute towards meeting the objectives of 21 of the national set of sustainable development indicators.

The indicators were chosen to:

- Provide a range of environmental, economic and social indicators, which reflect the multi-purpose benefits of the Forest's creation.
- Include a mix of UK Framework and Supporting indicators.
- Monitor results against 10 of the 20 key national indicators which provide an overview of some of the important goals for sustainable development.
- Supply a variety of indicators which demonstrate contributions towards the UK Shared Priorities for Sustainable Development Action.
- Measure progress against key objectives of the Forest's creation, set out in The National Forest Strategy, 2004-2014.

Indicators were also selected for which data was easily available, reliable, regularly collected, easy to update and obtainable at reasonable or no cost.

Presentation of the Indicators

Individual indicator sheets show:

- Contextual or comparative data where relevant (eg: national or local authority data), followed by facts and figures from the Forest area.
- Where possible, trends over time.
- Direction of change, using the traffic light system for the UK sustainable development indicators.
- How they contribute to the UK Shared Priorities for Sustainable Development Action; and whether each indicator is a UK sustainable development framework or supporting indicator or a bespoke National Forest indicator.
- Environmental, economic and social categorisation, recognising that some indicators may have relevance to more than one category.
- Actions to take forward, further development work and monitoring activity.

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- ≈ Little or no change
- ⋮ Insufficient data for the Forest area

Type of indicator:

- F UK Framework Sustainable Development indicator
- S UK Supporting Sustainable Development indicator
- NF Bespoke National Forest indicator

Sustainable Development Focus:

- En Environmental
- Ec Economic
- So Social

Contribution to shared priorities for UK Sustainable Development Action:

- SCP Sustainable consumption and production
- CCE Climate change and energy
- NRP National resource protection
- CSC Creating sustainable communities