



Thriving together

30 years of positive change
in the National Forest



A forest for the future

Over 30 years ago, a bold idea took root – to transform a landscape scarred by industrial decline into a thriving, green heart for the nation.

A group of visionaries, driven by public support, pioneered the idea of revitalising a 200 square mile area of the Midlands, spanning parts of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire, and dared to imagine something not seen in England for over 900 years – a new forest.

Today, that vision is alive. Woodlands are now on the doorstep, wildlife has returned, children are learning outdoors, and livelihoods are shaped by the Forest’s growth.

But this is not the end of the story. The National Forest stands as proof of what is possible when people come together to create change, and the best chapters are yet to be written.



Bath Yard before
Bath Yard after

Then and now: 30 years of progress

Foreword from the first Chief Executive

30 years of continuous success in the heart of England is indeed a cause for celebration. Great trees thrive when they are well-rooted and that is what the initial planning and development of the Countryside Commission’s wonderful concept provided for its proposed forest.

I was appointed, in 1991, to lead a small Development Team based in the area to draw up a strategy and business plan for the creation of an innovative new diverse forest in the Midlands.

A competition for sites had resulted in the present one stretching across well-populated towns, industrial landscapes and farmland virtually denuded of trees. Industrial decline had left communities there feeling lost, forgotten and uninspired. Not everyone shared our belief that a green, regenerative transformation was possible. Scepticism of the scale and ambition proposed was rife both within the proposed boundary and beyond.

As plans firmed up and landowners, local people and businesses became more involved and confident, belief grew. By the end, a well-researched and positive proposal, including the establishment of the National Forest Company itself, was accepted that had community support and political commitment.

30 years on, that same belief continues to drive its growth, shaping a greener, more sustainable future for generations to come. What once seemed impossible is not only happening—it’s just the beginning.

Susan Bell OBE
First Chief Executive of the
National Forest Company



1987

The Countryside Commission pioneer the concept of the National Forest as a national exemplar of environmental regeneration through trees.

1995

The first National Forest Strategy and Business Plan is endorsed by government, leading to the formation of the National Forest Company. Its preface declares, "The National Forest is a symbol of hope for the nation."

2005

Forest cover more than doubles, increasing from around 6% to 16% across the 200-square-mile area, marking a significant milestone in the Forest's transformation.

1990

The Midlands is chosen as the location for the National Forest —'a forest for the nation'—with a finalised boundary spanning 200 square miles across three counties.

2001

The derelict Ashby Canal is restored and reopened, while key visitor destinations, including the National Memorial Arboretum and Conkers, welcome their first visitors.

2014

The National Forest Way, a 75-mile, long distance walking trail linking key sites across the Forest, is officially opened, encouraging people to explore and connect with the evolving landscape.

2021

Forest ambassador Shaun the Sheep plants the nine-millionth tree following the pandemic lockdowns, as the National Forest receives an additional £12 million from the government's Nature for Climate Fund to accelerate tree planting.

2024

The National Forest reaches 25% Forest cover and government announces the intention to create 3 new national forests, setting the stage for the next phase of growth.

2012

The eight-millionth tree is planted by HRH The Duke of Cambridge at the opening of the National Football Centre at St. George's Park, and the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee wood is established, highlighting the Forest's growing national significance.

2016

The National Forest Company is granted charitable status, securing its future as an organisation dedicated to delivering environmental, social, and economic benefits through the Forest.

2022

The National Forest Company acquires the assets of the National Forest Charitable Trust including the Conkers visitor centre.

Foreword from the Chief Executive

In 1995, the National Forest Company (NFC) was setting out on a new venture. With an ambitious Forest Plan, government support and the enthusiasm of partners, the blueprint for creating a new National Forest was born.

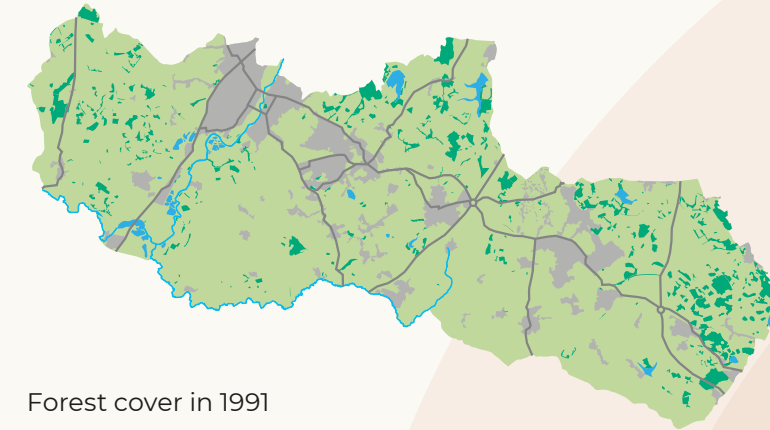
As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the NFC, that wave of optimism has continued, giving rise to the dramatic landscape change from planting nearly 10 million trees.

Today, that same blueprint is in place, but the ambition has grown, moving to the next phase of transformation within the National Forest boundary, connecting outwards to form a Midlands Forest Network and replicating this success with new national forests across the country.

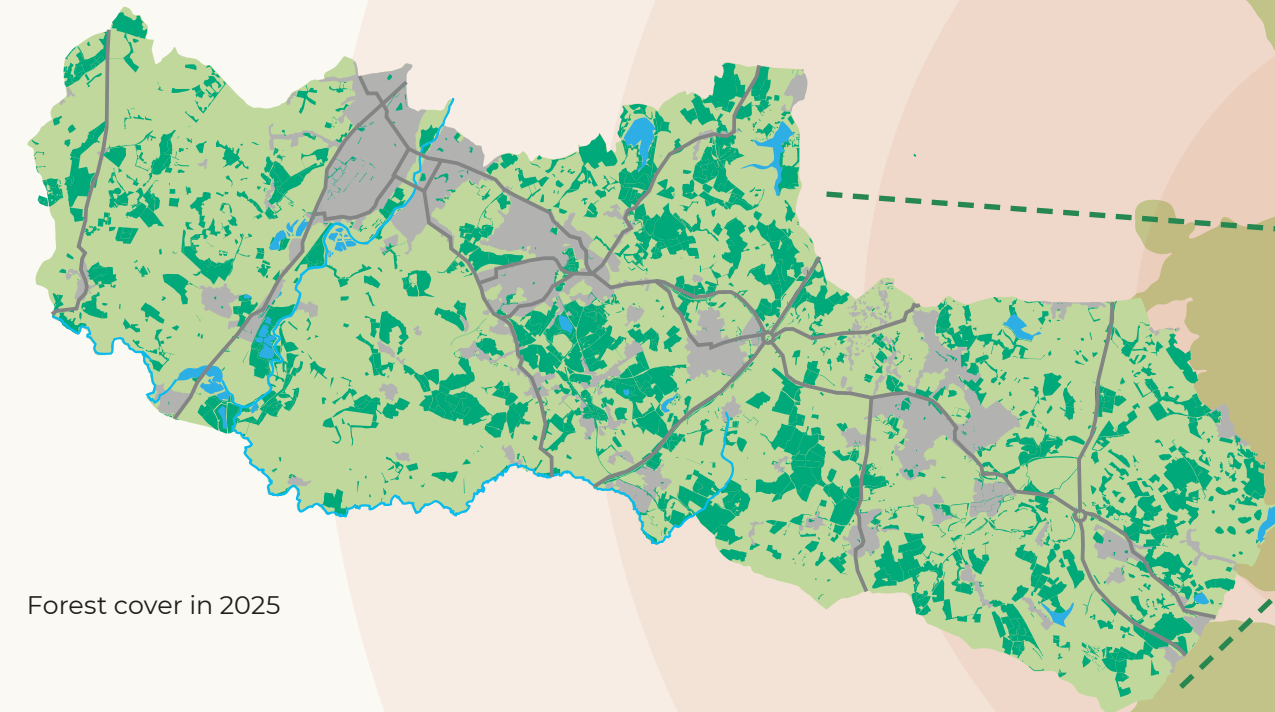
Over these 30 years, we celebrate not only what has been achieved, but the people who have made it happen – the farmers, businesses, councils and communities – passionate people who have all come together to make it possible, and of course all the staff, board members and volunteers that have made up the NFC.

To realise our bigger ambitions we will need that same level of support and more, to inspire the next generation to believe in the power of people to make positive change.

John Everitt OBE
Chief Executive of the
National Forest Company



Forest cover in 1991



Forest cover in 2025

Growing a forest

The National Forest landscape has transformed into a thriving and connected forest, one that continues to grow every year. Our forest creation work is at the heart of this transformation. Each year, in partnership with landowners, local authorities, businesses and communities, we establish around 150 hectares of new woodland and other habitats.

Through grant schemes, land acquisition, planning policies, and direct support, we ensure that tree planting is carefully planned to provide the greatest benefit – targeting less productive land and sites that will provide most public benefit.

Having the Forest in the ownership of so many different landowners means that it is supported by both private and public sectors as well as voluntary and community organisations.

Ambition:
33% Forest cover



Communicating with landowners
Creating new woodlands and habitats

9.8 million
trees planted



25%
Forest cover
reached in 2024

Up from 6% in
the early 1990s

More than **8,000 hectares**
of habitat transformed



Why?

Expanding our woodland cover is essential in tackling climate change and restoring nature. By connecting and buffering existing woodlands, we can increase resilience, reduce pollution, and protect soils. In urban areas, more trees mean cleaner air, reduced surface

water runoff, and better green spaces for communities to enjoy. As the Forest grows, so too do its benefits—creating a healthier, more vibrant landscape for people to access, wildlife to thrive and businesses to grow.

The Deer Park

How farming can meet a modern vision of sustainability

“The National Forest Company – the people who have supported us through this process - they’ve helped every stretch of the way. We have created something here that we could only dream of doing.”

Lesley Prince, Director at Deer Park Farm



Farmers Lesley and Charles Prince have planted 15,500 trees at The Deer Park, turning what was once a traditional dairy farm into a thriving, multi-faceted business. Faced with declining milk profits, they embraced diversification like many landowners in the National Forest, using a forest creation grant to plant parkland trees and shelter belts.

This has not only enhanced the landscape but also established a 5km woodland walk to encourage visitors to the farm and allowed for a small herd of Red Deer hinds to be released back into the park.

Alongside the tree planting, they have now established a farm shop and café, selling local homegrown produce, as well as renting other converted spaces for independent retailers.

The woodland walk has become a key attraction, drawing regular visitors to the farm, while an all-weather tramper vehicle ensures accessibility for all.

This diversification means they can still farm with grass-fed beef and lamb, milk from the dairy cows and artisan cheeses, providing high quality produce and a flourishing business.



Red Deer
Established
farm shop
and café

Caring for a forest

Ambition:

90% woodlands in active management

Ensuring that woodlands and other habitats continue to thrive is just as important as tree planting. The trees we plant today will stand for generations, but without careful management, their full potential for nature, people and the economy cannot be realised.

We work with a network of landowners, farmers, and businesses, supporting management and enhancement work on more than 400 hectares of woodland and other habitats each year. Through grants, advice and guidance we help to bring these sites into good

condition, alongside targeted species recovery projects that protect and restore our most threatened wildlife. Bringing habitats into active management is also helping to grow green jobs and supports our vibrant volunteering community.



Why?

Well-managed woodlands and other habitats are key to unlocking the full potential of the Forest. Careful management creates the diverse habitat structures for nature's recovery, while reducing the risk of pests and disease. It also helps to balance public access, ensuring that people can enjoy and benefit from the Forest while

protecting its long-term health. For many landowners, woodland management provides new opportunities, supporting sustainable timber production and integrating woodlands into farm and business diversification. By looking after the Forest today, we secure its future for generations to come.



70%

woodlands in active management

Up from 20% in the 2000s

Purple Emperor butterfly sighted for the first time in nearly 200 years



29%  **habitat cover supporting biodiversity**

Dormouse reintroduction

A biodiversity success story

“The National Trust has worked extensively with the National Forest Company and other partners to sympathetically manage the landscape so that it supports an array of native wildlife, which we’re thrilled will now include hazel dormice.”

Jon Lewney, Countryside Manager
for the National Trust

The dormouse is a UK priority species that has seen a 51% decline nationally since 2000 and has been extinct in Derbyshire for more than 100 years.

Like many woodland species, loss of habitat, lack of management and wider threats have severely fragmented populations. The extensive work on woodland connections and habitat management in the National Forest has meant that areas are now in suitable condition for the reintroduction of this iconic mammal.

Through a partnership between the National Trust, People’s Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), Natural England, Twycross Zoo and the National Forest Company, a population of dormice has now been reintroduced into woodland on the National Trust’s Calke Abbey estate.

Following the successful release, discussions are underway to see whether further reintroductions can take place in the Forest to extend their range.

The recovery of the dormouse shows how, by working in partnership across the landscape, habitat improvements can support the return of our most threatened species. Ongoing woodland management work and programmes such as the Severn Trent Great Big Nature Boost are helping to contribute to the national target of 30% of land managed for biodiversity by 2030.



Inspiring future generations

Ambition:

100% of primary schools undertaking regular outdoor learning

Creating a new culture inspired by the Forest is essential to its long-term success. Whether in our urban or rural communities, or our most deprived or affluent areas, we believe the Forest can foster a new sense of place and belonging for all.

Each year we work with our communities to improve understanding, enjoyment and use of the Forest, encouraging outdoor learning within our schools and supporting outdoor activities that increase participation. We also believe that arts and creativity can

deepen connection to the Forest, shaping a new identity that is inspired by trees and woods. Through these activities we are creating a place that reflects the Forest itself as well as building the skills for the foresters and land managers of the future.



Woodland activity



90%

of primary schools undertaking regular outdoor learning

Up from 9% in the early 2010s

Why?

If our communities better understand the Forest, they are more likely to be its future custodians. Many young people spend little time outdoors and levels of natural play and exploration have reduced. Likewise, many adults are disconnected from their local area, with many experiencing isolation and reduced social interaction.

Introduction of Level 1 Forestry in the Community Award in secondary schools

OVER 50K

people reached each year through arts and creativity programmes

Our work to inspire communities aims to break down these barriers, bringing the Forest into the day to day lives of everyone and encouraging them to adopt more sustainable behaviours.

Burton Fields School

A transformative journey with outdoor learning

“Thanks to the National Forest’s grants and support, I have children who have not always come to school willingly, and through outdoor learning we’ve seen those children go ‘okay, I’m going to do something that I really enjoy’ and they have started to come to school. It’s a really exciting thing that we do here.”

Jennie Lowry, Outdoor Learning Teacher at Burton Fields

Burton Fields is a primary school with around 200 pupils that sits on the edge of the town of Burton-upon-Trent. Like many schools in the National Forest, they faced the barriers of lack of experience and confidence to run outdoor learning sessions for their children.

With help and support, they now have a dedicated, trained outdoor learning teacher and have created outdoor learning spaces, wildlife areas and a pond.

Every pupil now gets an outdoor learning session each week, with hands on activities meaning that some of the children that don’t do so well in the classroom are able to come into their own. Outdoor learning is now embedded in the school curriculum and the school

has been graded outstanding in behaviour, attitudes and personal development.

Their experience shows that with just a small amount of financial support and guidance from the National Forest Company, schools can embrace outdoor learning with lasting benefits to children’s education and confidence, as well as improvements to the school environment.



Outdoor learning

A forest for everyone

The benefits of woods and trees should be felt by everyone, so increasing access to green space and having woodlands on the doorstep of all our residents is central to the ethos of the National Forest.

Each year we create and maintain access to woodlands through grants and advice, connecting up path networks and mapping proximity to households. We work with communities to design and plant new community woodlands, such as the development of a woodland next to NHS Burton Hospital to support staff and patients.

To encourage regular use and enjoyment of woodlands, we also work with individuals, volunteering groups and organisations through a range of practical conservation tasks, social prescribing and leisure activities.



Walking in the forest
Tramper vehicle

Ambition:

90%

of households within 500m of a publicly accessible Forest site

71%



of households are within 500m of a publicly accessible Forest site

Up from <10% in the early 1990s



70 volunteer groups managing woodlands

320km



promoted walks including the 75-mile-long distance walking trail, the National Forest Way

Why?

We know that having publicly accessible woodlands close to where people live can increase use of these spaces for enjoyment, leisure and wellbeing. At a time when levels of physical inactivity, obesity and anxiety are increasing, the Forest can provide

a natural and cost-effective health service. Increasing volunteering and access to woodlands can also bring people together, through training and skills, creating new products, events and business opportunities.

Peveril Homes

A model for green infrastructure and housing

“Our Woodcroft development sits in picturesque surroundings of the National Forest, so it was important to us to ensure our homes and green spaces reflected this. We’ve collaborated closely with the National Forest team to create special areas aimed at bringing residents together and to experience the pleasure of nature and the outdoors – complete with fruit hedges, natural planting, and areas of wildflower.”

Stuart Brookes, Director of Sales and Marketing at Peveril Homes



Woodcroft, a new development by Peveril Homes in Moira, is setting a benchmark for sustainable housing by integrating green infrastructure and biodiversity into residential design.

Peveril Homes collaborated with the National Forest team to shape the development, ensuring it aligned with environmental goals.

The result is a thoughtfully designed community with woodland planting, wildflower meadows, fruit hedges, and green corridors—enhancing biodiversity while creating inviting spaces for residents.

With shaded, pedestrian-friendly streets and cycle trails linking to Hicks Lodge cycle centre, Woodcroft

promotes outdoor recreation and wellbeing. Residents benefit from nature on their doorstep, fostering a stronger connection to the environment.

Woodcroft's success shows how sustainable planning can create healthier, greener communities. Future developments will continue to prioritise woodland creation, climate resilience, and urban greening—demonstrating how housing can work in harmony with nature.



Planning
with trees

Woodcroft
development

Building a net zero future

Planting trees and woods can create the backdrop for a green and growing low carbon economy, with new business development opportunities that align with the National Forest. Each year we provide support, advice and grants for low carbon businesses, with a particular focus on the tourism, land-based and creative sectors.

As new businesses develop with the Forest, a more circular economy is evolving, linking woodland products with retailers, contracting services with farms and leisure opportunities with sites and venues.

Our planting of around 100,000 trees each year is also helping to store carbon in the trees themselves, in woodland soils and through other habitats, to accelerate the path to net zero.

Ambition:
**Net Zero Carbon
by 2050 or sooner**



Low carbon businesses



In the last 30 years

**200,000
tonnes of carbon**

**have been sequestered,
more than triple
since 1995**

Arts and recreation activity
has increased by 14%
over the last 8 years



Visitor economy has
**increased by
nearly 30%**
over the last 20 years

Why?

Moving to a low carbon economy is essential in our response to both mitigate and adapt to climate change. It is also important to grow the businesses and jobs that will support the National Forest into the future, with an expansion of land-based skills and services, a sustainable tourism sector

that is bringing investment into the area and emerging enterprises linked to health, learning and arts. Greening the economy also has the wider benefit of improving the quality of the place, enhancing air and water quality and providing regeneration opportunities.

Hicks Lodge

A thriving destination for visitors and the local economy

"I love being able to support at Hicks Lodge, since my time as a volunteer ranger (in the National Forest) - seeing the sense of community that thrives here, built on watching the transformation of the site from black to green; from industrial scar to buzzing community space full of wildlife, varied habitats and timber production. It continues to grow and develop, with the help of passionate volunteers, and now the Feel Good in the Forest programme, giving more opportunities for improving health and wellbeing and allowing people to be nourished by nature in this unique landscape."

Callum Smith, Active Forests Coordinator at Hicks Lodge:
the National Forest Cycle Centre

The National Forest Cycle Centre is a prime example of how a former coal mining site can be transformed into a thriving visitor destination. Opened in 2011, this 150ha site was carefully developed in partnership with the National Forest Company and Forestry England, creating a hub for outdoor recreation that benefits both people and the local economy.

With a variety of cycling and walking trails, it caters to all abilities—from gentle, family-friendly routes to more challenging trails.

The site also features a café, cycle hire, picnic areas, and natural play areas, making it an ideal location for a day out. Visitors can enjoy lakeside hides, unique wildlife such as sand martins, and take part in 'Feel Good in the Forest', a Forestry England programme supporting health and wellbeing.

Hicks Lodge welcomes over 100K visitors per year, boosting tourism and supporting jobs.

Future plans include the expansion of on-site facilities such as a new pedal and play area, and aspirations to improve connections to nearby Ashby de la Zouch, ensuring even more people can enjoy this vibrant outdoor space.



Cycling group



Kids cycling



Looking forward



The next chapter for the National Forest

1 From creation to sustainability A resilient Forest

With the National Forest reaching the milestone of

25% of the landscape as Forest cover, the challenge is to increase to 33%

and ensure that this becomes sustainable, both environmentally and financially.

This means more targeted woodland creation within the 200 square mile boundary to connect sites, and planting trees outside of woodlands on farms and in urban settings. The NFC will also support the growth of land-based businesses that use the Forest and continue to embed forest-related activities into social and health policy.

2 A world class visitor centre The transformation of Conkers

The transformation of Conkers is an exciting scheme to

re-imagine the current visitor centre as a gateway to the National Forest that can inspire the next generation.

Through exhibitions, experiences, adventure and arts, this scheme will deliver a landmark visitor attraction and centre of excellence for outdoor learning. The NFC will create a masterplan for the indoor and outdoor spaces, and secure public, private and philanthropic investment with partners that can bring these ideas to life.

3 A sustainable destination The Heart of the National Forest vision

The Heart of the Forest is a 10 square mile area that has been

the most transformed from heavy industry over the last 30 years – literally from Black to Green.

With key development sites, investment opportunities and continued restoration, this area has the potential to become a truly sustainable destination for visitors and residents. The NFC will drive forward the vision for the Heart of the National Forest with opportunities for tourism accommodation, new and updated outdoor attractions, a sustainable travel network and a major new Forest Hub.

4 Connecting the Midlands The Midlands Forest Network

The Midlands Forest Network is a partnership scheme to expand and connect woodland and forest projects from across the Midlands, increasing woodland creation, habitat management, access for communities and carbon storage. Its aim is to create a resilient network of woodland habitats to adapt to a changing climate, improve wellbeing and support low carbon growth.

The NFC will convene and support partners and projects with an initial focus on creating woodland corridors between the National Forest and neighbouring forest landscapes.

5 Replicating the approach New national forests

The government's announcement of three new national forests marks an opportunity to share the learning of the last 30 years in other parts of the country.

A network of new national forests can demonstrate how landscapes can be transformed by trees whilst enhancing wellbeing and enabling economic growth.

The NFC will work with Defra and other partners to help identify, mentor and support new national forests.

A group of children are participating in a tree-planting activity. In the foreground, two children are focused on planting a small sapling. One child, wearing a grey jacket and a green and grey beanie, is kneeling and holding the base of the tree. The other child, wearing a blue jacket and a yellow beanie, is also kneeling and holding a shovel. In the background, other children and adults are visible, some standing and some working. The scene is set in a grassy field under a clear blue sky.

Let's grow together

The National Forest is not just about trees; it is a story about people. Every woodland planted, every habitat restored, and every life enriched has been made possible by those who believe in the vision—from the landowners and farmers who dedicated their land to tree planting, to the volunteers, businesses, and communities who have shaped and sustained it and all the funders that have supported it.

Our story is far from over

As we embark on our next strategic phase of work and growth, we are looking for like-minded individuals and organisations to join us. If you share our vision and want to be part of shaping a greener, healthier and more sustainable future then **we would love to hear from you.**

Partners

Ambitious partners with shared values who believe in making a big difference through long term relationships.

Funders

Strategic funders who want to effect lasting change, setting up the foundations for more sustainable lifestyles.

Entrepreneurs

Forward thinking entrepreneurs to grow the next generation of green businesses.

Policy makers

Innovative policy makers to test new ideas and integrate policy in a real place.

Other ways to support

Donate

Whether you can make a significant financial contribution, give to us regularly or give a one-off donation, every donation matters.

Plant a tree

You can help us grow the Forest by planting a tree at one of our events or dedicating a tree online.

Visit

From ancient woodland to newly planted trees, wildflower meadows to rugged, rocky outcrops, there is lots to explore in the Forest.

Give your time

Help to plant trees, learn a new skill or create habitats for wildlife by joining a volunteer group.

As we mark 30 years of the National Forest Company, we thank those who have been part of driving positive change.

- Defra has supported the NFC with just over **£90m of public money over 30 years to create the National Forest** - that's equivalent to the cost of just a couple of miles of new motorway.
- More than **250 farmers and landowners have helped create the Forest**, from the early pioneers back in 1991 when the first trees were planted to now.
- **Three county councils and six district councils have supported the Forest** with bespoke planning policies for **more than 30 years** – funds from development and restoration have **created 1,400 hectares of forest cover**.
- **Over 70 volunteering groups and 108 schools in the Forest** have created opportunities to engage communities and young people helping to develop a woodland culture.
- **Hundreds of corporate partners, funders and businesses** have supported the National Forest from tree planting to nature recovery, access, learning and tourism.
- **Over 100 members of staff, 43 board members/trustees and 7 chairs have made up the NFC over its 30 years**, dedicating their time and energy to champion the cause.
- **Over 209,000 residents and 7,000 businesses are part of the Forest**, each playing a vital role in shaping its future.





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