

# The Midlands Forest Network

The blueprint for a greener, healthier,  
more prosperous future.





# The Midlands Forest Network

## A bold plan for a better, greener future.

The Midlands Forest Network (MFN) is a region-wide vision to protect, restore and regenerate the Midlands through a connected network of woodlands, trees and hedgerows. By linking existing landscapes and creating new habitat corridors, the Network will restore biodiversity, improve health and access to green spaces, and drive green economic growth.

Rooted in a robust, evidence-based scoping exercise led by the Woodland Trust, the National Forest, and the Midlands Engine\*, with funding from Defra and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Midlands Forest Network demonstrates what is possible at scale. It offers a credible, deliverable pathway to meeting national targets while responding to the Midlands' specific environmental, social, and economic challenges.

This prospectus sets out the opportunity: a chance to position the Midlands as a national leader and environmental trailblazer in nature recovery, community wellbeing and green growth.

If you are a potential delivery partner, funder, or policymaker with an interest in transforming the Midlands, the MFN partnership would welcome the opportunity to explore how you can be involved in bringing this vision to life.



**Imagine a Midlands where wildlife thrives across a rich mosaic of woodlands and landscapes; where people can step outside their front doors into green spaces, breathe cleaner air, and enjoy better health; and where farming, forestry and leisure tourism grow side by side.**

**This is not a distant vision. It is a future we can create – together.**

## The vision

### A thriving Midlands, fit for the future.

The Midland Forest Network is a transformational proposal to create a resilient region-wide network of woodlands, trees, and hedgerows, designed to deliver environmental, social, and economic benefits for everyone who lives and works in the Midlands.



#### For nature

Large-scale woodland restoration and creation to improve woodland quality, reverse the decline of woodland species, and provide vital new habitats for wildlife, while also minimising flood risk and boosting carbon stores



#### For people

A larger and more diverse community of people able to engage with nature, more green spaces written into ambitious housing plans, and more urban tree planting, delivering major health and wellbeing benefits for over three million town and city dwellers in the most tree-deprived areas



#### For business

Sustainable investment opportunities in our natural capital and environmental services, that boost ecologically sustainable economic growth

This vision is underpinned by a clear, deliverable approach. The Midlands Forest Network will connect existing landscape-scale initiatives ('hubs') through the creation of woodland corridors ('spokes'), to create a regional network. This will be coupled with protection and restoration of the existing tree canopy and targeted urban planting in areas of greatest need to maximise social and economic impact.

Crucially, this approach can achieve ambitious national targets whilst also reflecting real-world land use pressures in the Midlands. By focusing efforts where they will have the greatest ecological, social, and economic impact, the Midlands Forest Network offers a credible pathway to deliver transformative change across the region.

## Why here? Why now?

**The Midlands has enormous potential, but its future resilience is at risk.**

Spanning 11 counties and 11,600 square miles (30,000km<sup>2</sup>) from the Lincolnshire coast to the Welsh border, the Midlands has often been overlooked for nature recovery and levelling-up initiatives, as well as underfunded by the government and private finance. With so much emphasis on the North and South, the Midlands is the 'missing middle'; alive with opportunity.

The Midlands Forest Network addresses urgent environmental, social, and economic challenges, while unlocking the Midlands' unique capacity for transformational change.

**If we don't act now, it will become ever-harder for the Midlands to respond to the challenges it faces - the opportunities for improvement will be lost.**



'We already know that trees and woods can regenerate the landscape and transform lives and livelihoods. Expanding this approach across the whole of the Midlands gives us real hope that we can adapt to a changing climate; reverse biodiversity decline and improve the health of communities while shifting to a low carbon economy.'

**Partner with us and be part of it.'**

John Everitt, Chief Executive, The National Forest Company

# The challenges

**Complex pressures across environment, society, and the economy that set the stage for urgent, transformative action in the Midlands.**

### Low woodland cover

Midlands woodlands cover just 7.7% of the region, below the national average (10.3%), requiring ambitious creation and restoration.

### Few urban trees

Canopy cover in urban areas is short of baseline targets, with low-income neighbourhoods impacted by heat, pollution and health inequalities.

### Under-protected landscapes

Only 3.3% of land is designated as protected sites, compared to the national average of 7.8%, leaving wildlife and habitats vulnerable.

### Rising flood risk

Climate change is driving more frequent extreme weather. The West Midlands experienced over 800 flood alerts and flood warnings per year between 2018–2023, the highest of any English region.

### High deprivation and inequality

Nearly a quarter of the population (24.5%) lives in areas of highest deprivation; compared to 20% nationally in England.

### Health inequalities

Healthy life expectancy in the Midlands is below the national average.

### Limited access to nature

Physical, financial, and social barriers reduce opportunities for communities to benefit from and access woodlands and green spaces.

### Underfunded public services

The Midlands receives below-average government investment per capita.

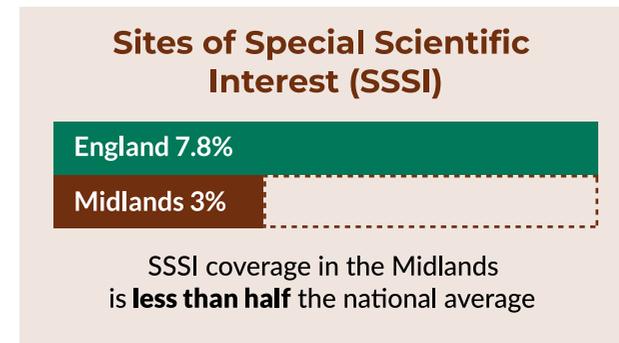
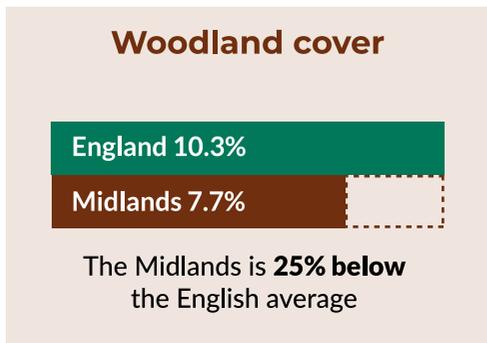
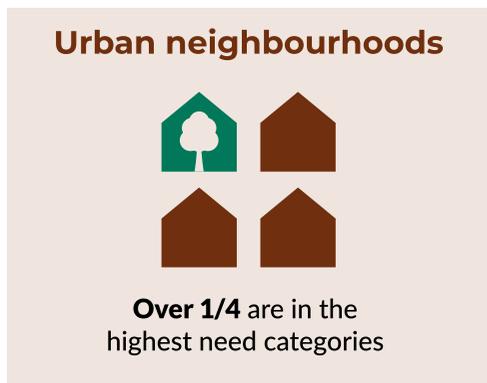
### Climate targets at risk

Without large-scale woodland creation, the region will struggle to reach net zero by 2050.

### Limited finance for woodlands

Private investment in woodland creation is limited, with most projects below investor thresholds.

**Together, these challenges create a clear imperative and an equally clear opportunity: to restore nature, improve lives, and build a greener, more prosperous Midlands.**



# The opportunity

## An ambitious vision rooted in local strengths, national priorities, and global imperatives.

The Midlands Forest Network builds on the region's unique strengths and existing initiatives, offering a once-in-a-generation chance to restore nature, improve lives, and grow a greener economy.

### Strong foundations to build on

Existing landscape-scale initiatives (e.g., the National Forest, Community Forests, Rockingham Forest) have already achieved tree cover up to 20%, showing what's possible. Connecting these 'hubs' with new woodland corridors ('spokes') unlocks collective impact for biodiversity and carbon storage.

### Plenty of land for woodland creation

Almost a third of the Midlands is low-sensitivity land suitable for woodland, allowing expansion without impacting farming or food production.

### Reaching the communities that need it most

Over three million city dwellers live in neighbourhoods with low canopy cover; targeted planting can improve health, wellbeing, and climate resilience.

### Supporting planned housing growth

Woodland restoration and urban tree planting can create greener, healthier places to live while complementing plans for 315,000 new homes across the region by 2031.

### Untapped natural capital

The Midlands' natural assets generate £11.1bn in annual benefits; strategic woodland investment can increase this value and attract public and private finance.

### A proven investment model

The National Forest demonstrates that multi-benefit woodland projects can attract investment and deliver environmental, social, and economic returns.

### Momentum is building

National targets, including the 25-Year Environment Plan and Environmental Improvement Plan, provide policy support for large-scale woodland creation now.

**Together, these opportunities show what's possible. By acting now, we can utilise this growing momentum and maximise the benefits for nature, people and business.**

**Natural Capital**



**£330bn natural capital asset value**  
currently generates  
**£11.1bn annual benefits**

**Conversion to woodland**



**Almost 1/3** of the Midlands has the potential for woodland creation

**Impacts on water**

Cleaner water



Less flooding



**Supporting green planning**



**Over 300,000** new houses needed in the Midlands

**Urban tree opportunity**

**4 million new trees = 15,185ha**



**requiring ~£1bn investment**

Improving conditions for **~3 million people**



# The approach

The need for a partnership to expand and restore woodland cover across the Midlands emerged from early discussions under the Midlands Engine's\* Green Growth agenda.

Having identified this need, the Midlands Engine\*, together with the Woodland Trust and the National Forest identified where woodland planting and restoration would have the maximum beneficial impact, while also supporting other land uses such as housing, energy, infrastructure, farming, and priority habitats.

## Connecting the network

An evidence-based approach called Systematic Conservation Planning (SCP) was used to determine how best to connect the existing landscape-scale initiatives (the 'hubs') via high priority habitat corridors (the 'spokes'). This approach creates a network across the Midlands where trees and woods can be integrated with other land uses and targeted to areas where they provide most benefit and have the least constraints.

The SCP process highlighted a total of 1,353,250ha of land as having the potential to contribute to woodland creation and restoration across the Midlands. This land was then ranked by priority level for both creation and restoration, and land inside the hubs and spokes targeted for MFN action.

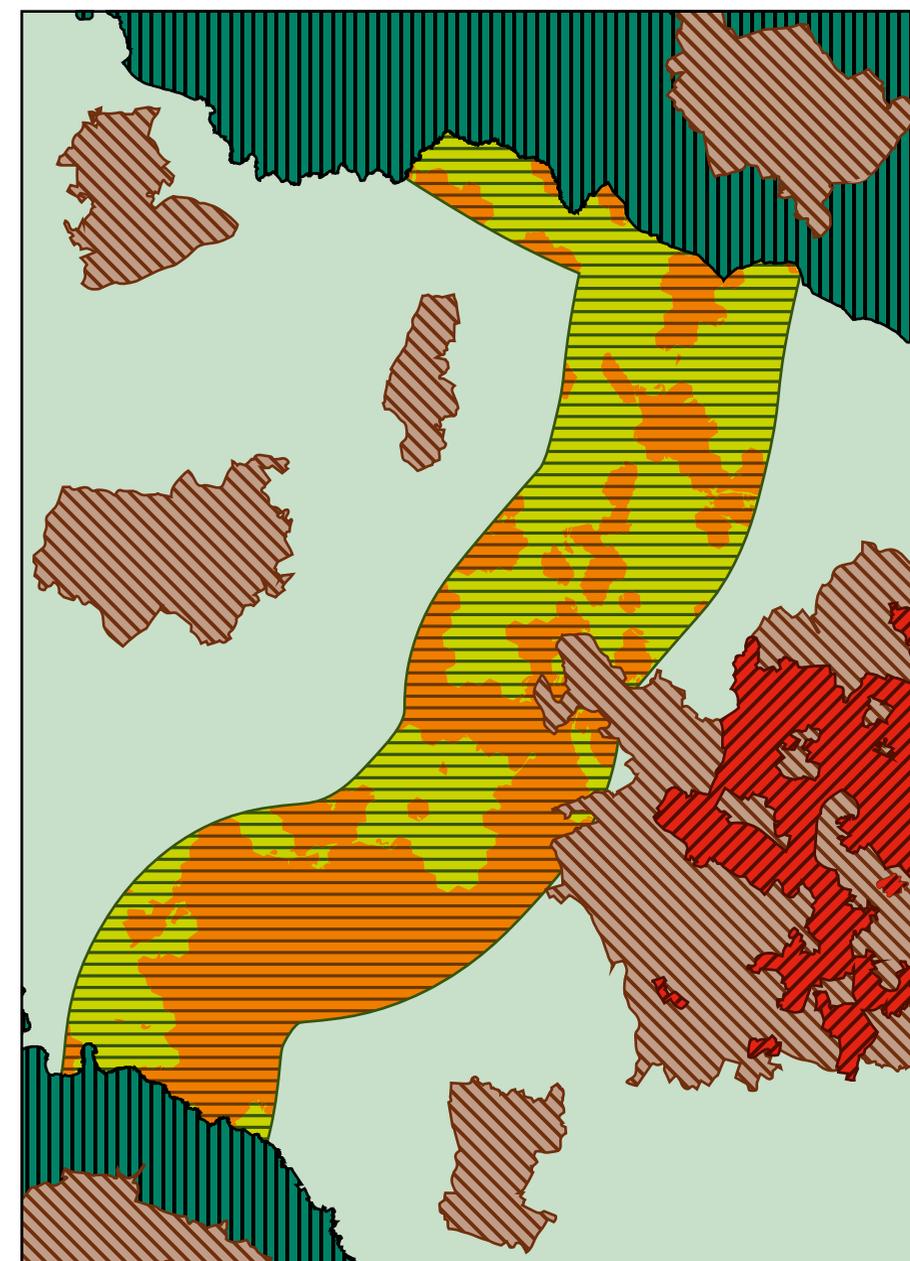
## Trees where people need them most

Alongside the SCP analysis, Tree Equity Scores were analysed to understand local canopy cover targets for all urban neighbourhoods. This revealed significant need, with over 3 million people living in areas identified as "high" or "highest" priority for urban tree planting across the Midlands.

## Moving from data to action

This work has provided landscape-level priority areas, but detailed local knowledge provided by partners will be vital to turning this ambition into action.

## The hub and spoke approach



\*The Midlands Engine ceased in 2025 and its functions transferred to other bodies.

# The evolving Midlands Forest Network

## Woodland creation

109,948ha of land has been identified as a priority for woodland creation in the hubs and spokes.

## Urban planting

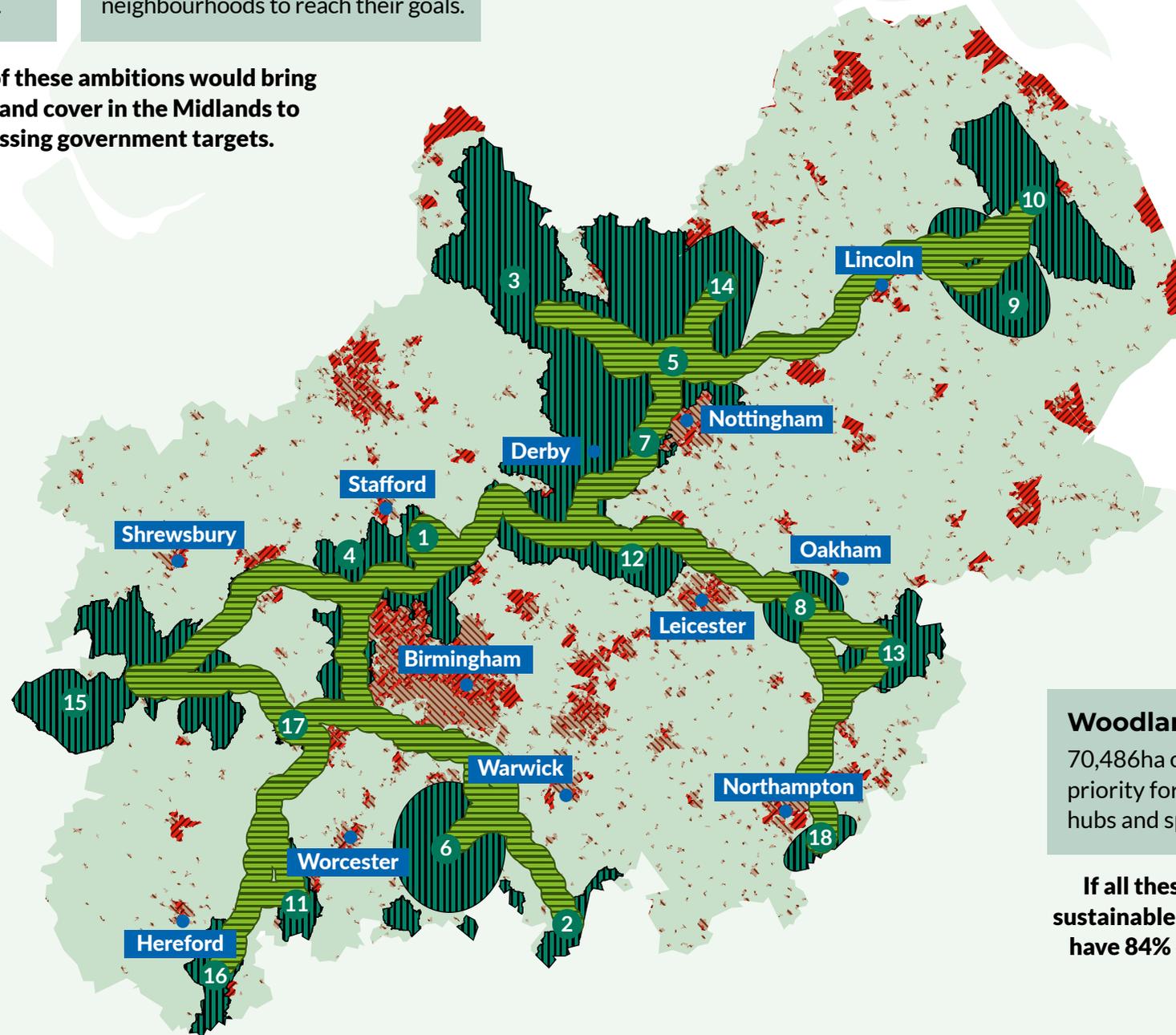
15,185ha of additional urban canopy cover is needed for top priority neighbourhoods to reach their goals.

Achieving both of these ambitions would bring tree and woodland cover in the Midlands to **16.8%**, surpassing government targets.

## Hubs:

- 1 Cannock Chase
- 2 Cotswolds
- 3 Derwent Living Landscape
- 4 Forest of Mercia
- 5 Greenwood Community Forest
- 6 Heart of England Forest
- 7 Heartwood Community Forest
- 8 Leighfield Forest
- 9 Lincolnshire Limewoods
- 10 Lincolnshire Wolds
- 11 Malvern Hills
- 12 National Forest
- 13 Rockingham Forest
- 14 Sherwood Forest
- 15 Shropshire Hills
- 16 Wye Valley
- 17 Wyre Forest
- 18 Yardley Chase

-  **Hubs:** priority for woodland cover expansion
-  **Spokes:** connecting area between hubs
-  **Urban areas**
-  **Urban areas:** High priority to increase tree equity



## Woodland Management

70,486ha of land has been identified as a priority for woodland management in the hubs and spokes.

If all these woodlands were brought into sustainable management, the Midlands would have **84%** of its woodlands in management.

# Working together across the Midlands

The Midlands Forest Network partnership will work in four key ways to maximise benefits for nature, people, and business across the region.

## Enabling collaboration:

### Connecting delivery organisations, funders, and policymakers

Through the Midlands Forest Network, previously fragmented woodland and forestry initiatives will be brought together into a joined up regional programme, underpinned by the evidence-based approach. This will provide a clear framework for collaboration, enabling partners to align around shared spatial priorities, co-produce strategy, and develop joint funding bids that accelerate impact across the Midlands.

## Building capacity:

### Strengthening local partnerships and initiatives

The Network will provide a shared focus for local partnerships, helping them align activity, amplify their voice, and engage more effectively with regional and national decision makers. Collaborators will be connected to funding intelligence, peer learning, and practical problem solving support, enabling access to tools, shared learning, and skills development that increase delivery capacity. Building capacity in local partners will also support inclusive, locally tailored responses that reflect place-based priorities.

## Developing investment readiness:

### Aggregating projects and unlocking finance

The Midlands Forest Network will showcase the scale of opportunity for investment in woodland creation and nature recovery. A growing regional investment portfolio will support collaborative funding bids and improve access to public, private, and blended finance, while enabling partners to co-develop investment ready project packages aligned with regional priorities.

## Providing advocacy and evidence:

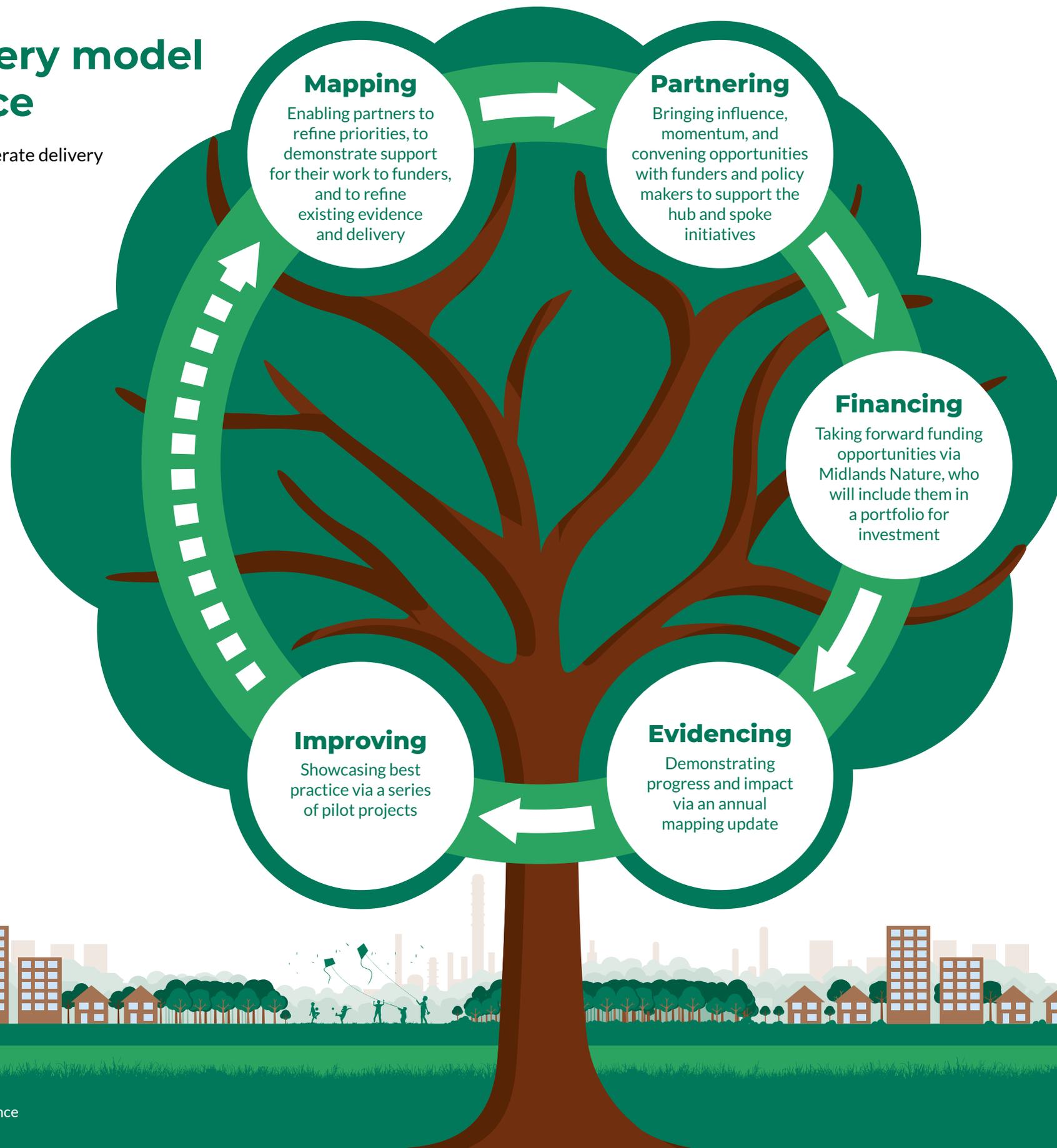
### Aligning local action with national outcomes

As a coherent programme spanning the Midlands, the Network will provide a strong platform for advocacy and policy influence. Work will focus on raising the profile of the Midlands as a leader in nature based solutions, making the case for sustained investment, and ensuring local voices shape decision making. Over time, collaborators will develop a shared framework for monitoring progress, demonstrating regional change and the Network's role in accelerating woodland creation and nature recovery.



# The delivery model at a glance

How the MFN can accelerate delivery across the Midlands.





## How to get involved

The Midlands Forest Network is a collaborative effort, and there are many ways to contribute. Whether you are a delivery partner, funder, or policymaker, your involvement can help transform the region.

### Delivery partners

Become part of a connected regional partnership that strengthens your capacity and unlocks funding opportunities for woodland creation and management.

### Funders and investors

Access an emerging pipeline of investible, evidence-based projects at scale that deliver real returns and impact.

### Policy makers

Align local priorities with a regional strategy and demonstrate national leadership on nature recovery.

**Now is the time to act on your ambition and see it realised.**

**We'd love to hear from you.**

### Get in touch

For further details on supporting evidence referenced or to find out more email: [midlandsforestnetwork@nationalforest.org](mailto:midlandsforestnetwork@nationalforest.org)

and visit: [www.nationalforest.org/about/our-vision/mfn](http://www.nationalforest.org/about/our-vision/mfn)



‘As with many people, trees and nature were a crucial part of my childhood, growing up in the Midlands. Today, with nature and climate in crisis, more of us feel the urgency to act. Armed with our most powerful weapon – the tree – using the best available science to guide investment, we know we can change lives for the better.

**Join us so every generation – young and old – can shape a more resilient, prosperous and nature-rich Midlands.** Together we can achieve healthy communities benefiting from trees and woods.’

Darren Moorcroft, CEO, Woodland Trust.



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