



Growing Transformative Tourism in the National Forest



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Introduction

The National Forest is a place of transformation, led by people who believe in a positive future—a future made better with trees.

Over the last 30 years, this 200-square-mile landscape in the Midlands has transformed from black to green, evolving into a thriving tourism destination where the planting of more than 10 million trees has brought lasting benefits to nature, communities, and enterprise.

This framework, initiated by the National Forest and developed in collaboration with an expanding network of ‘Transformative Tourism Champions’—including businesses, local authorities, community groups, and passionate individuals—provides a unique opportunity to build on past tourism strategies and advance the National Forest’s vision. It aims to support the continued growth of the visitor economy across both rural and urban areas of the Forest, while addressing the urgent challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and wellbeing.

Our vision is for the National Forest to thrive as a destination where tourism helps nature, communities, and enterprise grow stronger together. We call this approach Transformative Tourism: a model that drives positive change.

This framework is a shared call to action, inviting partners to embrace its Transformative Tourism pathways. It is adaptive, not fixed or time-bound, and strengthens impact by supporting collaboration and coordinated action across the entire tourism ecosystem of the Forest.

Through this framework and the partnerships it inspires, we can work together to develop solutions and take decisive action that drives meaningful and lasting change, benefiting everyone.

The journey so far

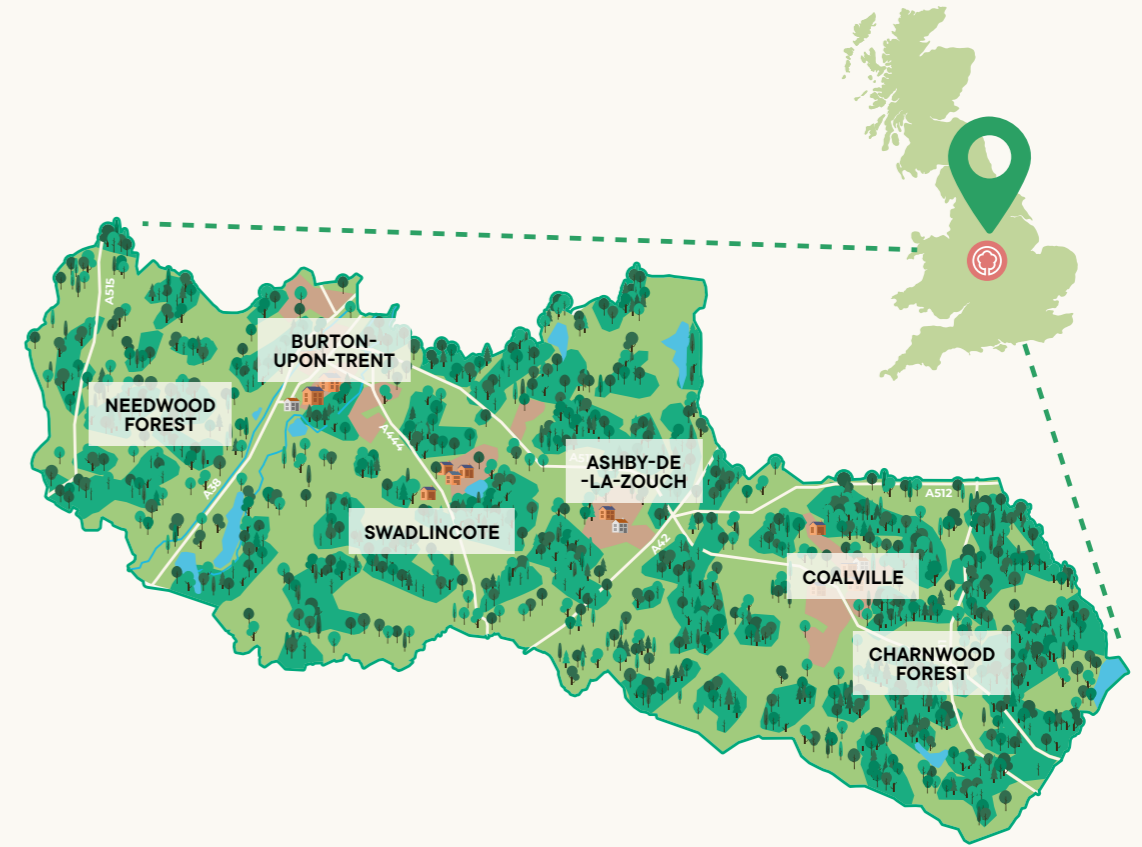
Located in central England, the National Forest is home to four main towns and is surrounded by some of the Midlands' largest cities. Over the past 30 years, more than 10 million trees have been planted, transforming a landscape once scarred by coal mining and clay extraction into a rich tapestry of woodlands, diverse habitats, revitalised economies, and thriving communities.

The impact has been dramatic, increasing forest cover from as low as 6% in 1991 to more than 25% of the land area today. This transformation has created a vibrant destination that welcomes over 8.5 million visitors annually, contributing nearly £620 million to the local economy, and supporting almost 5,500 jobs.

Popular destinations such as Calke Abbey and Bradgate Park have continued to grow, while newer attractions like Conkers and Rosliston Forestry Centre have played a key role in shaping a distinctive Forest experience.

Meanwhile, investments in facilities such as Hicks Lodge: The National Forest Cycle Centre and the National Forest Youth Hostel, along with the creation of the 75-mile National Forest Way and National Forest Green Network, have significantly enhanced the visitor experience—bringing benefits to both visitors and residents alike.

To date, the growing visitor economy has been positively welcomed by our Forest communities, who recognise its value in supporting local livelihoods and enhancing quality of life.



Before



Hicks Lodge opencast coal site

After



Hicks Lodge: The National Forest Cycle Centre

The Forest experience

The National Forest is a vibrant visitor destination in central England, offering enriching experiences that show a greener, healthier, and more positive future is possible.

With its central location, the Forest is easy to reach, and its varied landscape of gentle woodlands and open spaces welcomes people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds to explore. Many sites are free to access and offer a wide range of activities to suit different interests, needs, and budgets.

Here is a snapshot of the Forest's distinctive experiences, providing compelling reasons for both new and returning visitors to discover throughout the year.



Gentle adventures

where people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds can enjoy exploring nature together, including walking and cycling through the Forest, benefiting their physical and mental wellbeing.



Transformative experiences

mastering new skills such as bushcraft or green woodworking, or experiencing the calming benefits of forest bathing, promoting personal growth and discovery.



Thrilling adventures

offering high-energy activities such as archery, axe throwing, and treetop high ropes, providing exhilarating moments for couples, groups, and families seeking excitement in the Forest.



Forest-inspired arts and culture

offering unique, creative experiences that draw inspiration from the natural surroundings, connecting visitors to nature, with each other, and the Forest.



Immersive Forest breaks

offering tranquil getaways from cosy cabins hidden among the trees to low-impact lodges that bring visitors closer to nature.



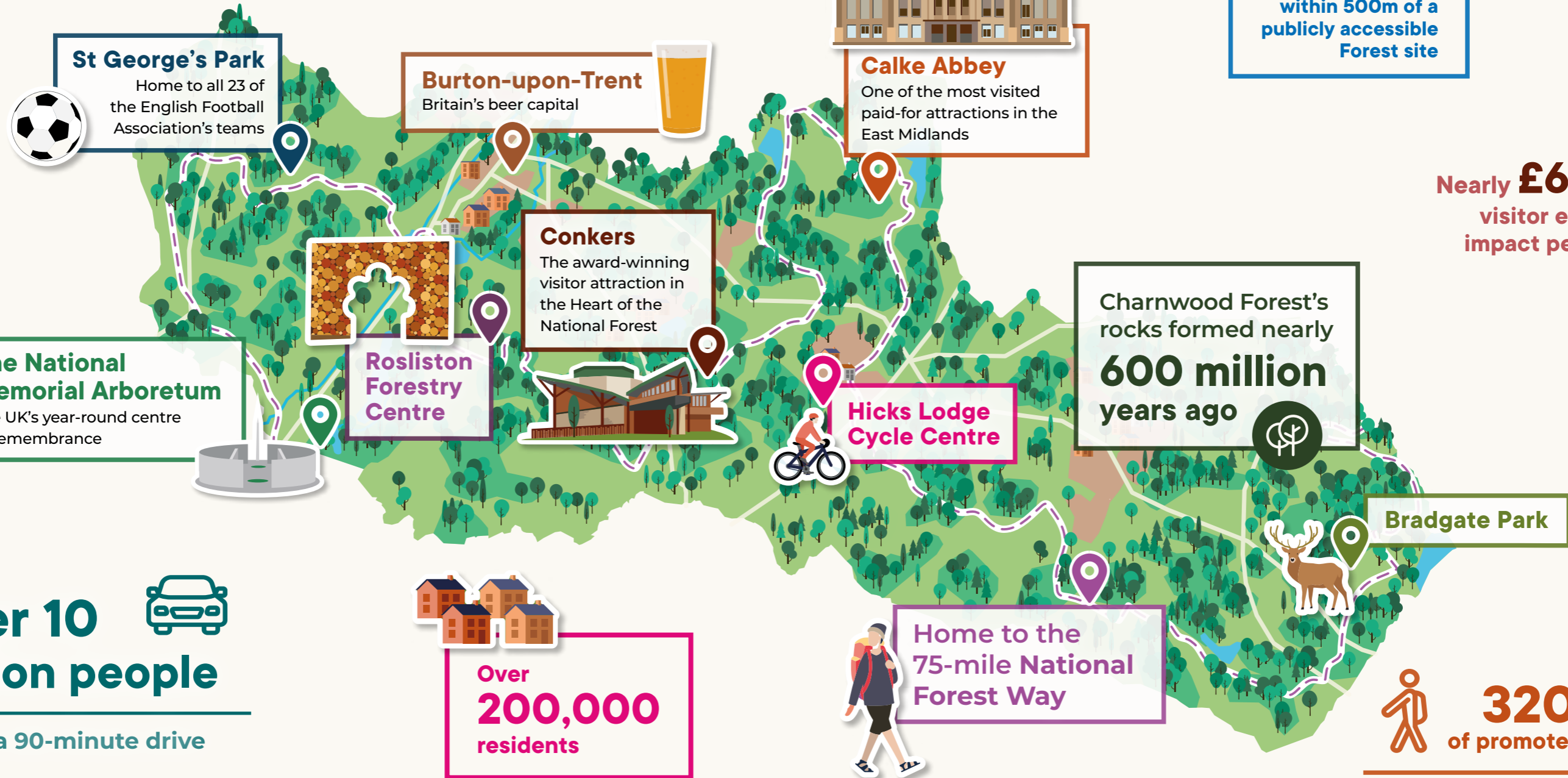
More than 10 million
trees have been planted



Over 8.5 million
visitors each year



70%
of households are
within 500m of a
publicly accessible
Forest site



Nearly **£620m**
visitor economic
impact per annum

Over 10
million people



within a 90-minute drive



Over
200,000
residents



Home to the
75-mile National
Forest Way



320km
of promoted walks

A new model for positive change

Tourism plays a vital role in the National Forest’s economy, attracting millions of people each year to explore its woodlands and Forest towns. To fully unlock its potential, we must harness tourism as a positive force for good—supporting growth that is responsible, inclusive, and enables visitors, communities, businesses, and nature to thrive together.

Our new Transformative Tourism model adopts a holistic approach to delivering meaningful and lasting change that benefits all. It moves beyond sustainability—enabling growth that supports thriving tourism businesses, benefits communities without overwhelming them, restores the natural environment, and accelerates the Forest’s transition to a low-carbon future.

This approach builds on the vision that has shaped the National Forest since its creation. From the outset, tourism has played a key role in creating jobs, supporting local enterprise, regenerating landscapes, and inspiring people to enjoy and care for nature.

Now, with three decades of environmental renewal and collaboration behind us, we are working closely with tourism businesses, communities, and public and third-sector partners to embed this new model of Transformative Tourism.

To guide this work, we have identified five priority pathways, developed in collaboration with our growing network of Transformative Tourism Champions. Rooted in the Forest’s values, these pathways provide a flexible yet focused framework to help nature, communities, and enterprise grow stronger together.





Grow a greener economy

The evolving landscape in the National Forest is inspiring the growth of new, greener enterprise, with local tourism businesses seeing the benefits of being part of this transformative story. By reducing their carbon footprint, tourism businesses can help combat climate change, protect the Forest ecosystem, and attract eco-conscious visitors. Through our collective efforts and shared knowledge, we can demonstrate how a low-carbon tourism sector is achievable.

Outcome:

A thriving and resilient visitor economy, with tourism businesses and partners advancing a low-carbon transition and growing in ways that support the Forest and its communities.

Together we will:

- Work in partnership to introduce sustainable business practices and transition to renewable energy, including signposting tourism businesses to expert advice and funding where available.
- Promote local produce and products to strengthen local supply chains, enhance Forest distinctiveness, and support the management of woodlands and regenerative farming.
- Embrace circular economy principles to reduce waste and lower carbon emissions by encouraging tourism businesses to use natural materials, recycle, and repurpose goods.



Over the last 30 years,

700,000

tonnes of carbon dioxide
have been sequestered
by trees and woodlands
in the National Forest.



Promote low-carbon travel

Visitors are attracted to the National Forest to get closer to nature and experience this newly forested landscape. Encouraging active travel, such as cycling and walking, can reduce visitors' carbon footprint while also enhancing their overall experience. Reducing carbon emissions from travel to the Forest will require coordination and investment, but it will also deliver wider benefits for local communities and businesses.

Outcome:

Increased adoption of low-carbon and active travel by visitors and residents, enabling sustainable trips to and around the Forest, supported by improved infrastructure and public transport.

Together we will:

- Facilitate low-carbon travel choices through improved infrastructure, including EV charging points, e-bike hire schemes, and enhancing the network of walking and cycling routes.
- Connect our Forest towns and key visitor hubs with natural areas for walking and cycling by creating and promoting car-free, active travel itineraries.
- Advocate for improved rail connections to and across the Forest for both visitors and residents by championing the re-opening of the National Forest Line (Burton-upon-Trent to Leicester).

320km

promoted walking trails



connecting visitors and communities to local attractions and woodland sites.



Create a welcoming, accessible Forest

An accessible National Forest not only enhances the visitor experience but also creates a sense of belonging, making it a destination where everyone feels welcome. By improving infrastructure, offering a diverse range of activities, and providing inclusive opportunities that address physical, sensory, cultural, and other access needs, we will ensure everyone can fully enjoy visiting its woodlands, events, and attractions.

Outcome:

An inclusive and accessible Forest offering welcoming, affordable experiences that connect visitors and residents with its nature, culture, and identity.

Together we will:

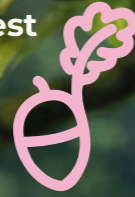
- Co-design activities and experiences to reach a broader audience, by actively engaging with underrepresented groups to better understand their interests and needs.
- Attract more people from underrepresented backgrounds, especially from our surrounding cities, by creating welcoming, affordable, and high-quality events and creative experiences inspired by the Forest.
- Create an accessible destination with attractions, accommodation, woodlands, and green spaces that offer inclusive infrastructure, facilities, and navigation for all visitors.



The National Forest welcomes over **8.5 million**

visitors each year from across the UK and beyond, over half of whom are repeat visitors.

95% of surveyed National Forest residents said they value young woodland and newly planted trees in their local area because they are good for their mental wellbeing.



Improve visitor and community wellbeing

The National Forest offers a space for relaxation where people can unwind and escape their daily routines. By offering activities like mindfulness, wildlife watching, woodland walks, and nature-inspired arts and crafts, it encourages visitors and residents to strengthen their connection with nature and one another, ultimately enhancing both their physical and mental wellbeing.

Outcome:

Improved health and wellbeing among visitors and residents through regular connection with nature, inspiring positive change in their daily lives.

Together we will:

- Encourage visitors and residents to spend time outdoors, connecting with nature and with each other, by offering a wide range of accessible activities and experiences.
- Engage our communities to help shape and improve the visitor experience, including through volunteering.
- Inspire visitors to make positive changes and instil hope for a greener and healthier future by sharing our story of transformation and future vision for the Forest.





Restore and protect nature

The National Forest's diverse habitats, woodlands, and wildlife not only attract visitors but also provide opportunities for outdoor activities and nature-based experiences. By restoring and protecting these habitats, we can ensure the Forest remains a popular destination for future generations, while encouraging both visitors and residents to appreciate, engage with, and care for the environment in a sustainable way.

Outcome:

A restored and diverse natural environment, with landowners and tourism partners enhancing Forest habitats and involving visitors and residents in their long-term care and protection.

Together we will:

- Continue to create and manage forest habitats, providing new opportunities for tourism businesses to diversify and spaces for visitors and residents to enjoy, by providing advice and funding for forest creation and management.
- Educate and raise awareness among visitors and residents about the importance of trees for our climate and wildlife by using effective interpretation, guided walks and talks, and by promoting responsible visitor behaviour.
- Engage visitors and residents to help create and protect woodland habitats through opportunities such as tree planting, woodland management, conservation, and wildlife monitoring.



More than 250



landowners and farmers in the National Forest have planted trees and publicly accessible woodland

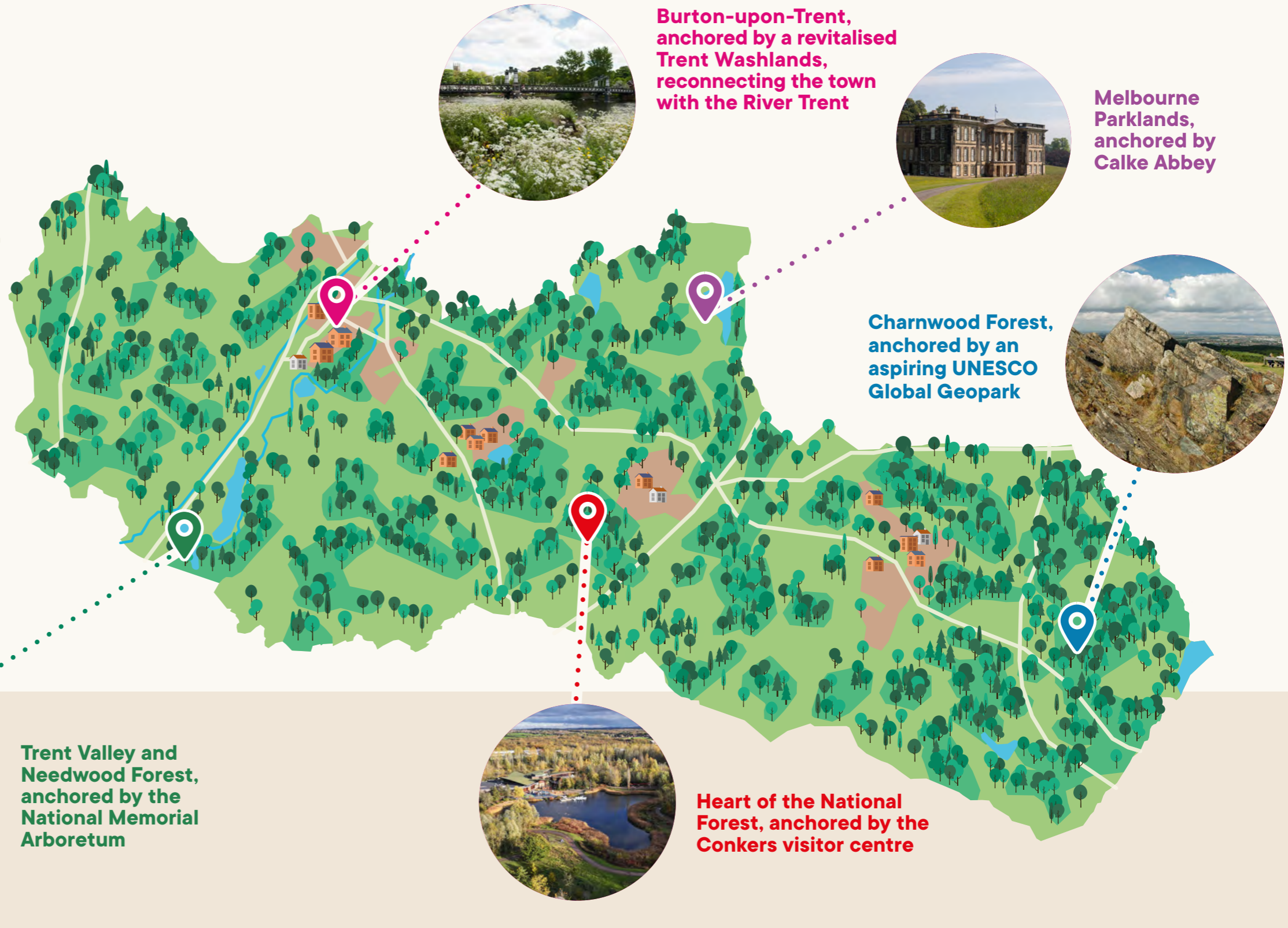
spaces for visitors and residents to enjoy.

Transformative Tourism clusters

The National Forest is home to distinct landscapes that are developing as tourism clusters in their own right.

These unique landscapes provide opportunities to adopt a more localised delivery approach. For example, Charnwood Forest, supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, is working with partners towards securing UNESCO Global Geopark status. Meanwhile, the Heart of the National Forest has its own vision and steering group, and the National Trust leads the Melbourne Parkland area.

The network of clusters will leverage their unique strengths and opportunities to deliver the Transformative Tourism vision with a shared sense of responsibility and purpose. By encouraging knowledge sharing, initiatives adopted in one cluster can be scaled and implemented across the entire Forest, helping to build a resilient Transformative Tourism ecosystem.



Priority audiences

With around 10 million people living within a 90-minute drive of the Forest, it is important that we strengthen the Forest’s connection with both current visitors and those who have yet to discover the restorative benefits of connecting with nature here.

We will prioritise a more inclusive approach to audience development, ensuring that everyone, regardless of background or circumstances, can access and enjoy the enriching experiences the National Forest offers.

Here is a snapshot of the types of visitors we would like to attract more of.

City dwellers

The Forest serves as a green lung for the nearby cities of Birmingham, Derby, Leicester, and Nottingham, providing city dwellers with an ideal escape into nature. These urban areas offer great potential to attract loyal repeat visitors, including families on day trips and couples seeking short breaks.



Local residents

Visitors who call the Forest home are vital to our visitor economy. Promoting local tourism builds pride, supports businesses year-round, and reduces the environmental impact by minimising travel to the destination.

Special-interest enthusiasts

The rise in wellbeing, fitness, and learning new skills offers great prospects for attracting special-interest enthusiasts to the National Forest. Activities related to nature, outdoor pursuits, and arts and crafts align well with our brand. We will support experience development that strengthens the Forest brand, create greener jobs, and make the most of all four seasons.



New short break markets

The growth in short break holidays presents a major opportunity to attract domestic visitors. To compete nationally, we will create diverse, high-quality experiences that appeal to all age groups and interests, including eco-conscious travellers. To minimise travel impact, we will target near markets within a 90-minute drive of the Forest.

Welcome to the National Forest



It is a living example of how people and nature can thrive together - showing that a positive future is possible.

nationalforest.org

Promoting the Forest

The unique visitor offer in the National Forest is a growing market, with increasing numbers of visitors looking for low-carbon holidays, domestic short breaks, and quality time outdoors in nature.

To raise the profile of the National Forest as a Transformative Tourism destination and to deliver the five pathways, we will:

- Create a compelling destination brand narrative that can be used by tourism businesses and partners.
- Promote the unique Forest character and nature-connected visitor experiences as a reason to visit.
- Share our pioneering story of Transformative Tourism to attract new investment and enterprise to the Forest.
- Engage visitors through destination marketing to support stewardship and inspire responsible behaviour.
- Achieve an internationally recognised sustainability accreditation for the destination.

Enablers

This framework presents a compelling model for growing Transformative Tourism in the National Forest. It embraces a whole-system approach that delivers lasting, wide-reaching benefits for nature, communities, and enterprise both within the Forest and in other destinations that choose to adopt it.

Enablers to support the successful delivery of this model include:



Leadership

The National Forest will lead delivery of the framework by uniting public, private, and voluntary partners under a shared vision for Transformative Tourism. Through our Tourism Champions and geographical clusters—both comprising local authorities, attractions, businesses, and communities—the National Forest will drive collaboration, expertise, and advocacy, inspiring local engagement and positioning the Forest as a national exemplar.

Policy

Our place-based approach spans economy, transport, planning, environment, and community, requiring national and local policy support. With tourism already prioritised in local plans, we will advocate for policies that advance Transformative Tourism, supporting a circular, low-carbon economy, active travel, and nature recovery. Partnering with VisitEngland and LVEPs, we will champion skills, business support, and recognition of destinations shaped by place or landscape, not solely by political boundaries.



Funding

Delivering this framework's ambitions will require investment from public, private, and third sectors. Guided by our place-based approach, all funding will align with the National Forest vision for a greener, healthier, and more prosperous future. We will pursue funding opportunities, develop robust proposals, build partnerships, and promote responsible investment through visitor giving, business contributions, and reinvestment in existing attractions.

Measuring success

To fully capture the impact of Transformative Tourism in the National Forest, we must go beyond purely economic indicators and adopt a holistic set of success measures.

These measures will closely align with the outcomes detailed in the five priority pathways and will be refined with input from our Transformative Tourism Champions.

To ensure we remain on course, we will utilise various data sources, including carbon baseline assessments, visitor surveys and insights, STEAM data, and mobile data. We will assess not only the economic benefits but also how tourism supports the transition to a low-carbon economy, promotes nature recovery, enhances wellbeing, and helps grow a strong sense of place and community identity.

Additionally, we will conduct periodic primary research to monitor changes in visitor and business perceptions and behaviours around Transformative Tourism issues. This will allow us to measure our progress towards realising the National Forest's overarching vision for transformation through forests, creating a greener and healthier future.

Together, these actions will ensure Transformative Tourism delivers lasting environmental, social, and economic benefits for the National Forest while contributing to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals worldwide.





Transformative Tourism in action case studies

Inspired by the work of our Transformative Tourism Champions, we have gathered a collection of real-life projects that demonstrate the five Transformative Tourism pathways in action.

These examples show how people, places, and enterprises are growing the economy, restoring landscapes, enhancing wellbeing, inspiring care for nature, and reducing carbon emissions.

Together, these examples highlight how our Transformative Tourism model drives responsible, inclusive growth that benefits everyone and helps to create a thriving, positive future.



Grow a greener economy Case Study

The National Forest's visitor economy is growing, and expanding low-impact overnight accommodation is essential to meet demand. By prioritising developments that reflect the Forest's environmental and community values, tourism can drive economic growth, support nature recovery, and help the sector transition to a low-carbon future.

To help landowners and developers deliver the right kind of sustainable tourist accommodation, the National Forest, with local authority support, launched a Design Guide and Accelerator Programme to create a strong pipeline of opportunities.

The guide, designed for both new-build and retrofit projects, offers practical advice to integrate sustainability and boost market appeal. Its seven design principles promote low-carbon design and operation, reflect the Forest's character, strengthen local economies and communities, and support nature recovery.

Beyond environmental gains, the guide outlines long-term benefits such as operational savings, increased resilience to future legislation changes, and improved returns on investment.

Developed with local planners, it may be used as a material consideration in planning applications, with future local plans expected to align with its principles.

To support delivery, the National Forest offered free advisory visits and 12 hours of consultancy to help landowners and developers build strong business cases and seek pre-application planning advice.

The programme has supported over 30 businesses, with a third of sites progressing through planning. An early market engagement exercise promoting 15 sites attracted 65 expressions of interest.

Together, the Design Guide and Accelerator Programme underline the National Forest's commitment to enabling Transformative Tourism.

Building a positive future

The National Forest Design Guide and support for sustainable tourist accommodation development



Promote low-carbon travel

Case Study

The Heart of the National Forest, spanning 10 square miles across Swadlincote, Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Measham, is a positive example of environmental transformation. Once scarred by coal mining and clay extraction, this landscape now flourishes with over 40% forest cover, up from as little as 2% in 1991. This change, driven by partnerships between local authorities, landowners, and communities, has created a vibrant forested environment and a dynamic visitor destination, showing how trees can drive real, positive change.

Located in central England, the Heart of the National Forest is within an hour's reach of Birmingham, Nottingham, Derby, and Leicester, serving a population of over five million.

The proposed reopening of the National Forest Line for rail passenger use will further improve accessibility, linking Leicester and Burton-upon-Trent to new gateway stations and visitor hubs. These gateways, along with the development of a coordinated 'Green Network' of trails, will offer sustainable transport options and help reduce CO₂ emissions.

The Green Network will feature upgraded linear and circular trails, connecting key settlements,

attractions, and natural spaces, and encouraging exploration without the need for cars. Future developments include artistic and interpretive elements, including sculptures and wayfinding to further enhance the visitor experience. Conkers, a flagship attraction, will also be reimagined as a must-visit 'basecamp', inspiring wider exploration of the National Forest.

Through continued partnership working, the Heart of the National Forest will evolve into a transformative, sustainable destination where nature thrives, businesses innovate, and both visitors and residents are connected to the landscape. As a regional and national learning hub, it will inspire visitors to reconnect with nature, unwind, and learn.



Greening the heart

Enabling low-carbon travel in the Heart of the National Forest

Interconnected

A creative journey connecting people, nature, and place at Calke Abbey



Create a welcoming, accessible Forest Case Study

Arteria was a collaborative project between the National Trust, the National Forest, and artist collective INSTAR. It was designed to invite audiences to explore Calke Abbey, a key visitor attraction in the National Forest, in a new, imaginative, and inclusive way.

Building on INSTAR's earlier community project OFFLINE, which took nature-inspired artworks to streets and schools in Forest towns including Burton-upon-Trent, Coalville, and Swadlincote, Arteria brought the same creative, accessible spirit to Calke Abbey. While OFFLINE paired species with digital terms to spark curiosity, Arteria reimaged Calke's landscape and collections through symbolic, tarot-inspired artworks that explored a deeply intertwined narrative of interconnectedness—biological, cultural, and social.

The artworks featured species like the song thrush, brown long-eared bat, and oak wasps, which were once used to make ink. They were displayed on mobile cycle trailers that travelled along Calke's accessible trail network, using movement and landscape as part of the storytelling. This approach aligned with Calke's vision to encourage

inclusive, low-impact exploration of the estate. By combining art, storytelling, and movement, it encouraged visitors to experience the estate's stories in a thoughtful and engaging way.

Together, Arteria and OFFLINE demonstrated how creativity can expand access—inviting visitors and local residents to see, feel, and relate to the Forest in new ways. INSTAR's innovative approach shows how arts and creativity can help people discover their own place within the Forest's stories and landscapes. This inclusive approach, rooted in creative collaboration, connects people, place, and the natural world, and aligns closely with the priorities of both the National Forest Arts and Culture Strategy and the Transformative Tourism Framework.



Improve visitor and community wellbeing

Case Study

Whistlewood Common, a ten-acre site in Melbourne, South Derbyshire, is an inspiring example of community-led Transformative Tourism in the National Forest. Managed by Whistlewood Common Ltd, a community-owned, not-for-profit Community Interest Company (CIC), the site follows permaculture principles to create a sustainable space that benefits nature, communities, and enterprise.

Whistlewood inspires a deep connection with nature by inviting visitors to engage with the environment, rather than merely observe it. Its volunteer-driven success earned The King's Award for Voluntary Service, recognising its significant impact.

Aligned with the National Forest's vision, Whistlewood prioritises ecological restoration and community participation. Thousands of native trees have been planted, contributing to the Forest's tree cover goals. The cooperative model ensures decisions reflect community values, with profits reinvested to support further development of the site.

The site is fully accessible, featuring inclusive design elements for visitors with diverse needs, and offers subsidised workshops to reach a broad audience.

A community-built roundhouse symbolises the collective effort of the Whistlewood movement and serves as a venue for events, including firewalking, wildlife-themed gatherings, and wellbeing activities. Whistlewood also offers immersive workshops on permaculture and traditional crafts, as well as seasonal events such as dawn chorus walks and yoga retreats. Off-grid accommodation, including yurts, provides a peaceful, sustainable retreat for staying visitors.

As a champion for community-owned enterprises, Whistlewood highlights the transformative power of such initiatives, making a meaningful impact on both visitors and the local community, inspiring positive change and strengthening connections with nature.

Nurturing nature and community

How Whistlewood Common inspires positive change

From dairy farm to destination

Tree-led diversification at The Deer Park



Restore and protect nature

Case Study

Located in the ancient Forest of Needwood at Hoar Cross in Staffordshire, the Prince family has transitioned The Deer Park from a traditional dairy operation to a multi-purpose destination prioritising sustainability, community, and nature. In response to financial pressures in dairy farming, the Prince family pivoted by opening a farm shop and café and developing a five-kilometre walk around the farm and woodland.

Supported by the National Forest, the initiative included planting 15,500 trees and creating new paths through the parkland, offering visitors an immersive nature-based experience.

The carefully planned walk encourages visitors to reconnect with nature and provides opportunities for wildlife watching. Accessibility is key, with an all-terrain Trampler vehicle enabling visitors with limited mobility to explore the woodland and parkland.

This transformation was made possible through grants from the National Forest, which funded tree planting and habitat creation. These efforts contribute to the Forest's goal of expanding forest cover to 33%, promoting nature recovery, and enhancing climate resilience.

Beyond the walk, the on-site farm shop and café feature local artisans and sustainable produce, contributing to regional economic growth. The addition of community spaces strengthens local ties by offering venues for groups and businesses to collaborate and meet.

Visiting The Deer Park offers a connection to nature, with opportunities for exercise, reflection, and learning. The Prince family's innovative approach has transformed their farm into a vibrant destination that supports environmental goals and enhances health and wellbeing, all while continuing as a working dairy farm. This example shows how Transformative Tourism can drive positive change, support rural diversification, and complement sustainable food production.





Thank you

The National Forest would like to thank everyone who contributed to the development of this framework, including destination consultants Blue Sail and the steering group of Transformative Tourism Champions—a coalition of individuals, businesses, and organisations.

These Champions are leading innovations in nature recovery, carbon reduction, inclusivity, wellbeing, and community benefit. Through workshops and discussions, they shared ideas and examples that demonstrate how well-managed Transformative Tourism can create a net-positive impact for the Forest. Their recommendations, refined through additional insights from community and tourism business surveys, have helped us prioritise and strengthen the framework.

While this framework does not have a fixed endpoint, it will be reviewed every three years to ensure it remains relevant and effective.



THE NATIONAL FOREST

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