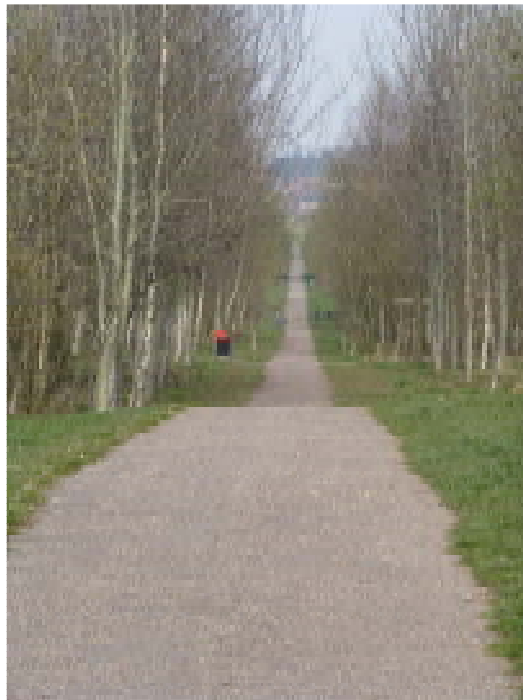


The National Forest Company

Community Perceptions of The National Forest 2014 Update



**Executive Summary
16 May 2014**

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Purpose of the 2014 Community Perceptions Survey

In 2014 the National Forest Company (NFC) set about updating its Strategy for the further development and management of The National Forest from 2014-24. As part of the evidence gathering to inform the updating, NFC commissioned independent research to examine community perceptions (of local residents and visitors) on how the creation of the Forest was changing the landscape and impacting on individuals and communities.

The 2014 research utilised the same methodology as was used for the community perceptions research undertaken in 2008, to allow comparisons to be made with the 2008 study and so identify trends. The same mix of focus group meetings and a questionnaire survey (face to face and online) were used, based on the same core set of questions, so that the datasets could be combined to maximise the sample size. The core questions were:

1. *Which parts of the Forest do you visit most?*
2. *What are your reasons for going to these particular places?*
3. *How you would rate these places (for landscape maintenance, paths, car parks, interpretation, safety, and signage)?*
4. *Are there any parts of the Forest where you think there may now be enough trees?*
5. *In what ways has your local community benefitted from the creation of the Forest?*
6. *How would you sum up the impact the Forest's creation has had on you personally?*
7. *What if any concerns do you have about the growth of the Forest in the future?*
8. *How could the NFC make it easier for people to get involved in the future development of the Forest?*

Data gathering had to be completed within in a short, six week period between March and April 2014. In the event a total of 238 responses were achieved (compared to 202 in 2008). The sample included more incomers, local business representatives and a higher percentage of young people, providing a broader range of perspectives than in 2008. A total of 181 questionnaires were completed and 57 people took part in one of seven group discussions. Evidence gathering was focussed on Woodville, Ibstock and Walton on Trent and included children and young people.

Perceptions of landscape change

All the respondents recognised that there had been a major change in the landscape around them, and change for the better.

Everyone could now see the trees and although they did not always know whether their settlement or a given woodland *"was part of"* The National Forest, they no longer had to respond to sceptical questions from their visitors of the *"what forest where"* type.

"It has been wonderful that someone has had a vision greater than something beyond the next election. To see that vision take shape over the last ten years or so has been a real privilege. I am very grateful to the people who have worked hard to make this happen."

Questionnaire

“It gives all of us some pride in the area. You’re not afraid to go away from South Derbyshire and shout about it now as The National Forest.”

Woodville Parish Council

“You can stand on the balcony [at Ibstock Palace] and look across the tree line. I’ve seen it grow from little saplings right down here and you can’t see the buildings now.”

Ibstock Palace session

“I love trees... I absolutely love trees... and I can see trees from where I live... towards Nailstone. I would hate not to be able to see trees.”

Ibstock Palace session

Everyone supported the notion of planting still more trees and were content for the NFC to keep to its target of 33% woodland cover.

Having said that, there were also some who were sad that access to, and views of, the new woodlands and the fields around them had recently become obscured by new housing and retail developments. This was especially the case around Ibstock.

Getting the balance right between the area covered by trees, the area of fields protected as open space and for food production, and the area given over to housing and other built development, was a recurring theme in responses (and from the young people in particular).

Most frequently visited places

The most frequently visited sites by the 2014 sample were Rosliston Forestry Centre, Conkers, Bradgate Park and Moira Furnace. Sites with water features were also popular including Foremark and Thornton Reservoirs, the canals, Hicks Lodge, Albert Village and Sence Valley. Of the smaller, less formal woodlands Diana, Tunnel, Sarah’s, Donisthorpe and the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Woods were each mentioned by around 10% of respondents.

Knowledge and use of sites was highly localised to just one or two sites by the indigenous population. Incomers, retired locals and families that cycled, were more likely to visit “all over” and regularly visit several sites across the Forest area.

Main reasons for visits

To walk, take exercise, walk the dog, enjoy scenery, cycle, find peace and quiet, take the children out and see wildlife, were the main reasons people gave for visiting woodlands in the Forest.

Perceptions of landscape quality and personal safety

Woodland sites were rated as good or very good by at least 85% of respondents (as in 2008) for landscape maintenance, car parking, path maintenance, personal safety and signage. The results indicated a small rise in the proportion of ‘very good’ scores (31% compared to 27% in 2008).

Paths were generally considered to be in good condition for walkers and horse riders and the cyclists appreciated places with a variety of path terrain. Smooth paths were valued by respondents because they enabled whole families to enjoy visits together, even when one or more had mobility problems or were dependent on buggies or wheelchairs.

The lack of knowledge about local woodlands and the lack of signage *to them* frustrated several respondents, and from around Ibstock in particular.

"I've lived in Ibstock 14 years and it took me 10 years to find Sence Valley...there are 500 new residents expected in the village soon and they need to know... Still need people to champion it [the Forest]... to spread the message face to face... leaflets, websites... you can't rely on one medium... use the TV screens in community buildings."

Ibstock Business Centre users

"It's quite a safe environment where there are paths. If there weren't any paths or The National Forest didn't maintain them I imagine it would be a lot less safe and people just wouldn't bother... because no one would really know their way around."

Woodville Youth Forum

People valued interpretation boards and had learnt a lot from them. Whilst they understood that they were sometimes lost to vandalism, some commented that many seemed to have also just disappeared from view as the woodland had grown up around them.

"It's good to have information that you can use to spark the imagination of children. What kind of tree is it and what is it used for."

Ibstock Palace session

The problem of dog owners leaving behind their dog mess was frequently mentioned in all three locations and the recent removal of dog bins was a particular cause of consternation.

Whilst no one said that they had become fearful of using the new woodlands because of the growth of the trees, some commented that they had become increasingly fearful of dog on dog attacks from dogs off the lead in the woods.

Benefits to local communities

The most frequently mentioned ways in which people felt their community had benefited from the creation of the Forest were:

- Better places for walking
- More things to do/places to visit
- More wildlife to see
- Good for children
- A more attractive setting in which to live
- Brings tourists to the area
- Civic pride
- Community spirit from involvement
- More opportunities to meet neighbours
- Increased house values.

A broader range of social and economic benefits were mentioned in 2014 than in 2008:

"It's changed the community in its makeup. It's brought new people in and potentially new prosperity; people with new ideas and skills."

Woodville Parish Council

"It's encouraged more people to go out... and it's increased the wildlife dramatically... such as buzzards and small birds."

Ibstock Palace session

"Tourism figures are going up [due to] the attractiveness of the area and the decent opportunities to do things. It used to be very, very grey and now it's very, very green."

Woodville Parish Council

“My Mum walks the dog at Sence Valley every morning and it kind of brings the community together because you speak to people and get to know them.”

Ibstock College pupil

“Our kids love it. They come home from school, go in the garage and in two seconds are at the bottom of the road [on] the Miners Walk and we can go round there. It’s on my doorstep which I didn’t have before.”

Ibstock Business Centre user

Impact on individuals

The impact the creation of the Forest has had on individuals is perhaps best illustrated in the quotes from the questionnaire and focus groups, but the general themes focussed on:

- A greater number and choice of places to visit to suit preferred activities, personal mood, family members’ needs and those of the dog
- A facility that stimulates more people to go outside for fresh air, exercise and contact with wildlife
- A facility that is free to use
- A better place to live, and pride in the area, from the improved environment
- Hope that the regeneration of the former mining settlements will make them just as desirable to visitors and incomers as Ashby and Bosworth
- Income from visitors – tourists and visitors with a professional interest in the Forest.

“Thirty years ago we had slagheaps, derelict areas and we visited the Peak District for a day out. As I drive around the area now I am so inspired by the beauty of our local area. I feel my family have been privileged to have grown up alongside the trees and country parks and I have encouraged them to participate in the many, many activities in the area. We have planted trees and appreciate how the new woodlands encourage more wildlife. All my extended family enjoy living in an area that has been thoughtfully created, and they don’t need to go to the Peak District for a day out in the countryside.”

Questionnaire

Concerns about the growth of the Forest in the future

The main concerns people had about the future growth of the Forest included:

- Loss of trees to new development
- Lack of woodland management
- The narrowing of paths
- New housing cutting off people’s visual and physical access to the woodlands
- Achieving a good balance between different land uses (farmland, housing, trees and more open wildlife habitat)
- Certain species of wildlife being lost as open areas become wooded (grass snakes, newts, skylarks)
- Investment in community (and woodland) infrastructure and transport links not keeping up with new development and the influx of more people (including into the woodlands).

Over 30% of questionnaire respondents had no concerns at all.

Some concern was expressed about future funding for the NFC. It was felt that the company’s role in coordinating the further development of the Forest and protecting the woodlands from development and illicit harvesting was important for securing the benefits the communities currently enjoyed from the Forest for the future. Questions were raised about who was looking after the trees that had been planted and who would be maintaining the paths etc. because *“everywhere needs maintenance”*.

There was general and widespread concern about the amount of housing development underway in the area. Several respondents reported losing a degree of visual and physical access to the new woodlands. Few people other than the parish councillors were aware of the local plans for their area and the strategy being used to guide the scale and location of new housing and retail developments.

Involvement in the future development of the Forest

Half the respondents expressed a personal interest in being involved in the future development of the Forest. Of these, the main ideas suggested revolved around first enticing people (and every new generation) to use the woodlands, by engaging them in healthy walks, tree planting, cycling events, school activities and practical conservation activities. Festivals and craft markets that were free to access and enjoy (even if you needed to pay for specific activities once inside) were considered important for people on low incomes like teenagers and pensioners to feel involved.

Trends in perception change from 2008-2014

Perceptions of the Forest had changed since the 2008 survey and the positive perceptions had intensified.

In 2014 the growth of the Forest was evident to all and there was no longer any embarrassment associated with telling people, friends and family that they lived in The National Forest, indeed there was a definite sense that people were proud to make it known to anyone who would listen.

There was much interest in the maps that showed how woodland cover had increased from 6% in 1991 to 19% in 2011, though knowledge of the new informal woods in people's immediate neighbourhoods remained limited (as in 2008) and even more so of the woodlands further away.

Cycling had become a more significant activity for families and young people, across the whole Forest area, than was the case in 2008.

People were still getting lost within the woodlands in 2014, and would appreciate some additional signage to guide them back to their settlements. Having said that everyone considered that there were always enough friendly local people around to point lost souls in the right direction. A few users had begun to avoid the more popular 'people' sites, in their search for more tranquillity in the less frequented woodlands.

There was much more interest in how the relative balance of woodland to farmland and built development was changing, stimulated by a significant increase in house building in the area and around Measham and Ibstock in particular. Several people reported that they had lost their view of the new woodlands and a degree of physical access to them as more and more fields around them were being built over with houses.

As in 2008, respondents still felt that the Forest could be better promoted to people within and outside the area. The business community in particular felt that there should be reciprocal promotional activity between the Forest providers and local traders.

The Forest continues to be a great place to meet neighbours, take visitors to and for families to take their children and grandchildren to enjoy.

As in 2008, people were interested to know more about what was happening to wildlife across the area and the NFC's strategy towards protecting and enhancing it. There was a sense that with more visitors and incomers, there would be more disturbance to wildlife from people, cats and dogs.

The 2014 survey confirmed people's belief that it should be a priority to entice every new generation into the woodlands through a rolling programme of a wide range of educational and leisure activities. Free time was too limited for many to consider getting involved in voluntary work, but there was a keen interest in the NFC working more closely with community groups to cascade out information on events, activities, business and training opportunities.

Summary of recommendations for 2014-2024 Strategy

1. Keep on planting trees.
2. Increase dissemination of information to households about the locations of new woodlands (and what there is to see there), using a variety of media formats and regular feeds to local groups who will cascade it out to members.
3. Protect and develop people's access to woodlands through new housing developments.
4. Work to increase the connectivity of key paths through the area and with the canals and disused railway lines.
5. Feedback information on the status of changes to wildlife and the rise in tourism.
6. Publish more on the approach to woodland and habitat management.
7. Work more closely with local authorities to address people's concerns about the removal of dog bins.
8. Work more closely with the business community to develop economic benefits to local traders.

2 Acknowledgments

Alison Millward Associates would like to thank all the people of The National Forest who took part in the 2014 research, encouraged others to do so and helped us to arrange venues and refreshments. We were made to feel very welcome and it was our privilege to learn so much about how the creation of The National Forest was affecting people's lives.

Our sincere thanks also go to Simon Evans, Sophie Churchill, Beverly Fairbrother and the rest of the team at the National Forest Company, who commissioned and supported this research and will act on its findings.

The full report can be found at www.nationalforest.org.