

RECORD OF EXECUTIVE DECISION TAKEN BY AN EXECUTIVE MEMBER

This form **MUST** be used to record any decision taken by the Elected Mayor or an individual Executive Member (Portfolio Holder).

The form must be completed and passed to the Chief Officer responsible for Legal and Democratic Services no later than NOON on the second working day after the day on which the decision is taken. No action may be taken to implement the decision(s) recorded on this form until 7 working days have passed and the Chief Officer responsible for Legal and Democratic Services has confirmed the decision has not been called in.

1. Description of decision

That the Forest of Marston Vale Forest Plan be endorsed by the Council and the use of the Council logo in the Forest Plan be approved.

2. Date of decision

15 December 2025

3. Reasons for decision

The Forest Plan will support the Council's Policy in the Local Plan 2030 regarding the delivery of increased tree cover in the Forest of Marston Vale and the Developing in the Forest of Marston Vale Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document.

4. Alternatives considered and rejected

No alternatives have been considered as there is only one plan that has been prepared by the Forest of Marston Vale and submitted for endorsement.

5. How decision is to be funded

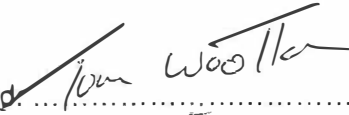
There are no resource issues as the Forest of Marston Vale has produced this plan and it does not require any resource implications for the Council.

6. Conflicts of interest

Name of all Executive members who were consulted AND declared a conflict of interest.	Nature of interest	Did Standards Committee give a dispensation for that conflict of interest? (If yes, give details and date of dispensation)	Did the Chief Executive give a dispensation for that conflict of interest? (If yes, give details and the date of the dispensation).

The Mayor has been consulted on this decision

Not Applicable

Signed 

Date: **15 December 2025**

Name of Decision Taker: **Mayor Tom Wootton**

This is a public document. A copy of it must be given to the Chief Officer responsible for Legal and Democratic Services as soon as it is completed.

Date decision published:15December2025.....

Date decision can be implemented if not called in:24December2025.....

(Decision to be made exempt from call in.....NO.....)

Bedford Borough Council – Executive Decision

Date of Report: 15 December 2025

Report by: Head of Planning & Building Control

Subject: FOREST OF MARSTON VALE FOREST PLAN 2025

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Forest of Marston Vale Forest Plan has been refreshed by the Forest of Marston Vale Trust to submit to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The Forest of Marston Vale has requested endorsement from Bedford Borough Council on their refreshed Forest Plan.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 **That the Mayor agree that the Forest Plan to be endorsed by Bedford Borough Council and approves for the Council logo to be used in the Forest Plan.**

3. REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 The Forest Plan will support the Council's Policy in the Local Plan 2030 regarding the delivery of increased tree cover in the Forest of Marston Vale and the Developing in the Forest of Marston Vale Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document.

4. THE CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 The Forest of Marston Vale Forest Plan was first published in [2000](#). DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) have requested that all of England's Community Forests refresh their Forest Plans. Work started over the last nine months to refresh the plan and a draft plan has now been completed following on from public engagement and reviewing the existing evidence base. DEFRA plan to launch all of the 15 Community Forest Plans reviews at the same time.

- 4.2 The draft plan which has been approved by the Forest of Marston Vale Trustees is included at **Appendix A** and will be desktop published before submitting to DEFRA.

5. DETAILS

- 5.1 The Forest of Marston Vale is one of 15 Community Forests in England and was designated in 1991. It covers 61 square miles to the south of Bedford which incorporates land within Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough.
- 5.2 The refreshed Forest of Marston Vale Plan provides for the progress to 2050 and supersedes the previous Forest Plan 2000. The purpose of the plan is to set out the vision and show how the forest will develop in the future.

6. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 6.1 No alternatives have been considered as there is only one plan that has been submitted to endorse.

7. KEY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Legal Issues – relevant legal power

There are no relevant legal issues and there are no statutory requirements to endorse this plan.

7.2 Policy Issues

The Local Plan 2030 includes Policy 36S Forest of Marston Vale and the subsequent Developing in the Forest of Marston Vale Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document that was jointly produced with Central Bedfordshire in 2023. The Forest Plan sets out the process and vision for the Forest of Marston Vale to 2050.

7.3 Resource Issues

No resource issues are relevant as the Forest of Marston Vale has produced this plan and it does not require any resource implications for the Council.

7.4 Risks

No risks are identified as the endorsement of this plan does not require any resources from the Council, other than support.

7.5 Environmental Implications

The Forest Plan will help to support the work that the Forest of Marston Vale Trust has undertaken over the last 25 years to increase the percentage of tree cover in the Forest of Marston Vale.

7.6 Equalities Impact

Not relevant.

7.7 Impact on Families

There are no direct impacts on families, however the Forest Plan includes the creation and maintenance of spaces that can be visited by families.

7.8 Community Safety and Resilience

There are no impacts on community safety and resilience.

7.9 Impact on Health and Wellbeing

The Forest of Marston Vale includes areas of open space that can be used by the public for recreation which will help with health and wellbeing being in nature and the open countryside.

8. SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS AND OUTCOME

8.1 The following Councillors, Council units, Officers and/or other organisations have been consulted in preparing this report:

Portfolio Holders for Economic Growth, Planning and Prosperity/Environment
Corporate Leadership Team

9. CONTACTS AND REFERENCES

Report Contact Officer:	Sonia Gallaher, Senior Planner– Sonia.gallaher@bedford.gov.uk
File Reference:	None
Previous Relevant Minutes:	None
Background Papers:	None
Appendices:	A: Forest of Marston Vale Forest Plan 2025



Forest Plan 2025



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- A – A Brief History of Community Forests in England**
- B – The Case for Trees**
- C – National Policy Context**
- D – Working with England’s Community Forests – A Guide for Farmers and Landowners**
- E – Forest of Marston Vale Progress and Impacts Executive Summary**
- F – Summary of Internal and External Consultation**

To view appendices please visit <https://www.marstonvale.org/forest-plan-appendices>



Foreward

The Forest of Marston Vale Trust works with its partners and the community to create and nurture the Forest of Marston Vale, designated in 1991 and one of England's Community Forests. As Chair of the Trust, I am pleased to introduce this document, the Forest Plan 2025, our third Forest Plan, which will guide us for the next 25 years. I encourage you to read it and refer to it.

The purpose of this document is to describe the Forest and the progress we have already made, confirm our Vision, objectives and strategies, and set out our ambition for the next 25 years. This review has involved comprehensive consultations and discussions, involving the Trust, our partners, residents and visitors, staff, and volunteers.



Since the Forest of Marston Vale was established, we have planted over 2.75 million trees and shrubs in and around the Forest. There has also been much change in the built environment with new infrastructure, housing and commercial premises and further developments planned. Local Authorities in the region are collaborating closely to prepare for significant growth and the Vision for the Forest of Marston Vale will complement that process.

People are more aware now than ever of the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. Trees and woodland will have an increasingly vital role in helping society to cope with these issues. There is now a considerable body of evidence for the wide-ranging benefits of trees and woodland, provided by Forest Research and compiled locally by the Trust and its advisers, and this is reflected in this latest version of the Forest Plan.

I am grateful to everyone who has been involved in creating and shaping the Forest of Marston Vale, including staff, volunteers, corporate supporters, and others – we are transforming the area for the better, adapting to change and supporting existing and future residents and visitors. On behalf of the Trust, I would like to thank you all, including our key partners at Bedford Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council, the Forestry Commission and Natural England.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Rod Calvert', written on a light blue background.

Rod Calvert OBE DL, Chair of the Forest of Marston Vale Trust

1. Introduction

This is the Forest of Marston Vale Forest Plan 2025, which looks ahead to 2050. It is the third edition of the Forest Plan, which supersedes the Forest Plan 2000, building on the work to create and deliver the earlier plans, and carrying forward their aims, ambition and legacy. It has been prepared by the Forest of Marston Vale Trust in consultation with its partners and the community (see Appendix F).

The purpose of the Plan is to show how the Forest will progress over the coming years and how the work of the Forest of Marston Vale Trust, its partners and volunteers will deliver the Vision for the Forest of Marston Vale, bringing benefits to people, nature and the planet and meeting the requirements of funding bodies, sponsors, regulators, and government. The intention is to review progress and set out future intentions. The Plan considers the place of the Forest of Marston Vale in the wider family of Community Forests, the benefits that the initiative brings, re-iterates aims and objectives and considers the influence that the Forest has on nature, the landscape, heritage, spatial planning and how people live, learn, play, and hopefully thrive.

The Plan looks to the future, addressing the changes that are taking place in the Forest, wider region and world. Urban development continues apace, and there is a growing recognition of the role of green infrastructure in general, and trees and woodland in particular, in helping us to adapt to climate change, halt and reverse the decline in biodiversity, improve health and wellbeing and increase prosperity. Natural England has recently issued advice on green infrastructure with its why, how, and what principles, standards, design guidance and suite of evidence and resources.¹

The Government has had a Community Forest programme, overseen by the Forestry Commission, since 1989,² and the number of Community Forests has now grown to 15. The Community Forests, which include the Forest of Marston Vale, are public, private, and voluntary sector partnerships that make a long-term commitment to create better places for people and nature by planting and caring for trees and woodland.

The Plan makes reference to local and national policies which are current at the time of its drafting. In preparing this Plan, the Forest of Marston Vale Trust recognises that policies will change over time. The Trust will make use of an executive summary and appropriate appendices, updated at regular intervals to reflect changes to policy. Similarly, ongoing progress and impact (including monetised values which are noted in this document based on 2024 rates) will be reflected in this way.

The plan uses the term “Forest Team” to reference those responsible for spearheading the creation of the Forest, not a specific group or organisation.

Chapter 2 introduces the Forest of Marston Vale, the benefits arising from a Community Forest and provides an overview of the Forest’s location, context, landscapes and people.

Chapter 3 presents the Vision for the Forest of Marston Vale and sets out objectives to achieve it and ensure this long-term partnership can continue to flourish and be effective.

Chapter 4 looks at the history of the Marston Vale, the origins of the Forest and key moments and achievements from the last three decades. It introduces England’s Community Forests and how the 15 Forests work together to amplify their impact and voice. The latter part of the chapter offers a summary of a detailed study of the benefits already enjoyed from the establishment and continuing management of the Forest (as at 2024).

Chapter 5 looks at the role that the Forest of Marston Vale plays in the local planning system and the value of the Forest Plan in providing a framework to drive environmentally led strategic placemaking. It

considers growth and sustainable development, and complementary green infrastructure projects in and around the Forest.

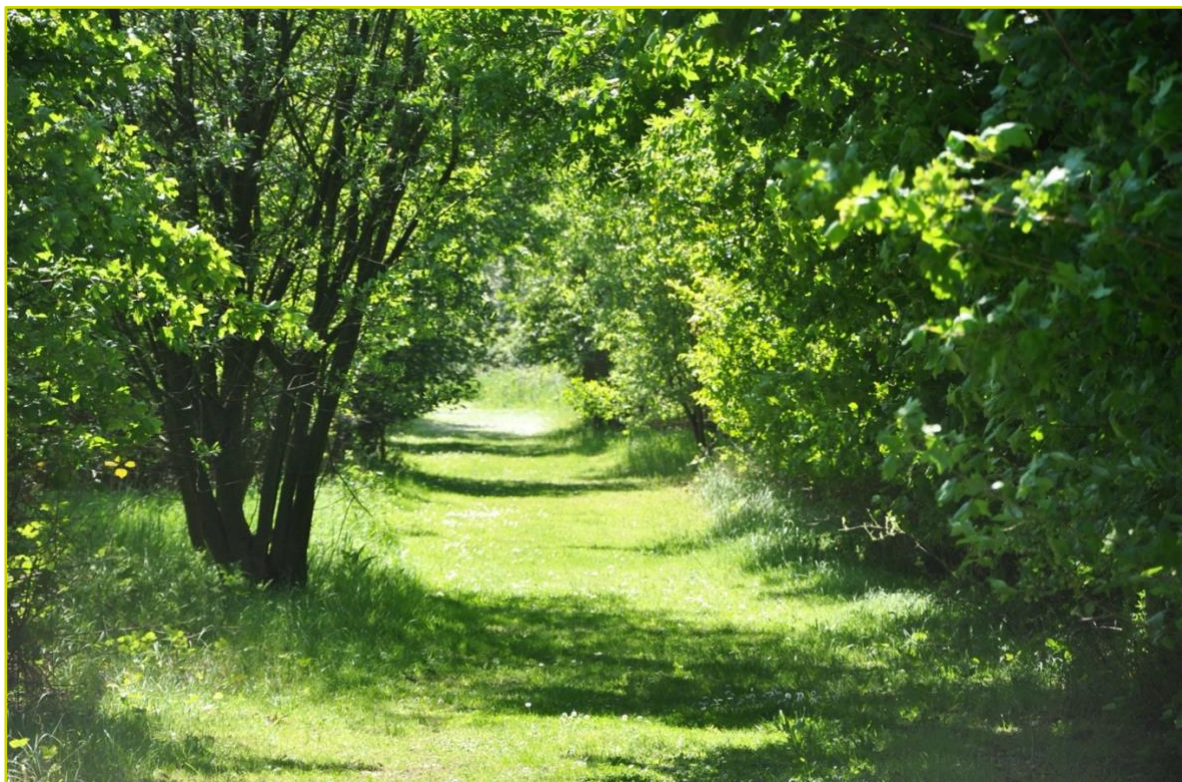
Chapter 6 considers landscape character zones and the cultural heritage of the area and describes the transformative change to the natural and built environments over the lifetime of the Forest. It celebrates distinctive landscapes and significant features and explores how the creation of the Forest will respect these.

Chapter 7 talks about the importance of trees, nature and the threats from the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis. Tree planting, habitat creation and sustainable management are fundamental to the creation of the Forest and the chapter describes how they will be approached, the benefits they deliver and the role of the Forest of Marston Vale in building resilience to climate change and supporting biodiversity.

Chapter 8 discusses how people are central to the creation and growth of the Forest of Marston Vale and explores how they might be engaged and inspired to participate. It looks at how awareness and understanding of the Forest can be strengthened, community engagement and volunteering promoted, and education and lifelong learning opportunities harnessed. The need to cultivate a new 'Forest' identity and sense of place is highlighted, along with the importance of engaging with people to achieve this, including through use of the arts.

Access, recreation, and leisure are considered in Chapter 9. It promotes increasing the physical links between urban areas and wider countryside, providing traffic-free routes that are safe for pedestrians, cyclists, and horse riders, and promoting enjoyment of the Forest's rights of way. The need to protect, expand and improve the network of accessible woodlands and greenspace is set out, and the role of the Forest in helping to promote sport and active recreation considered.

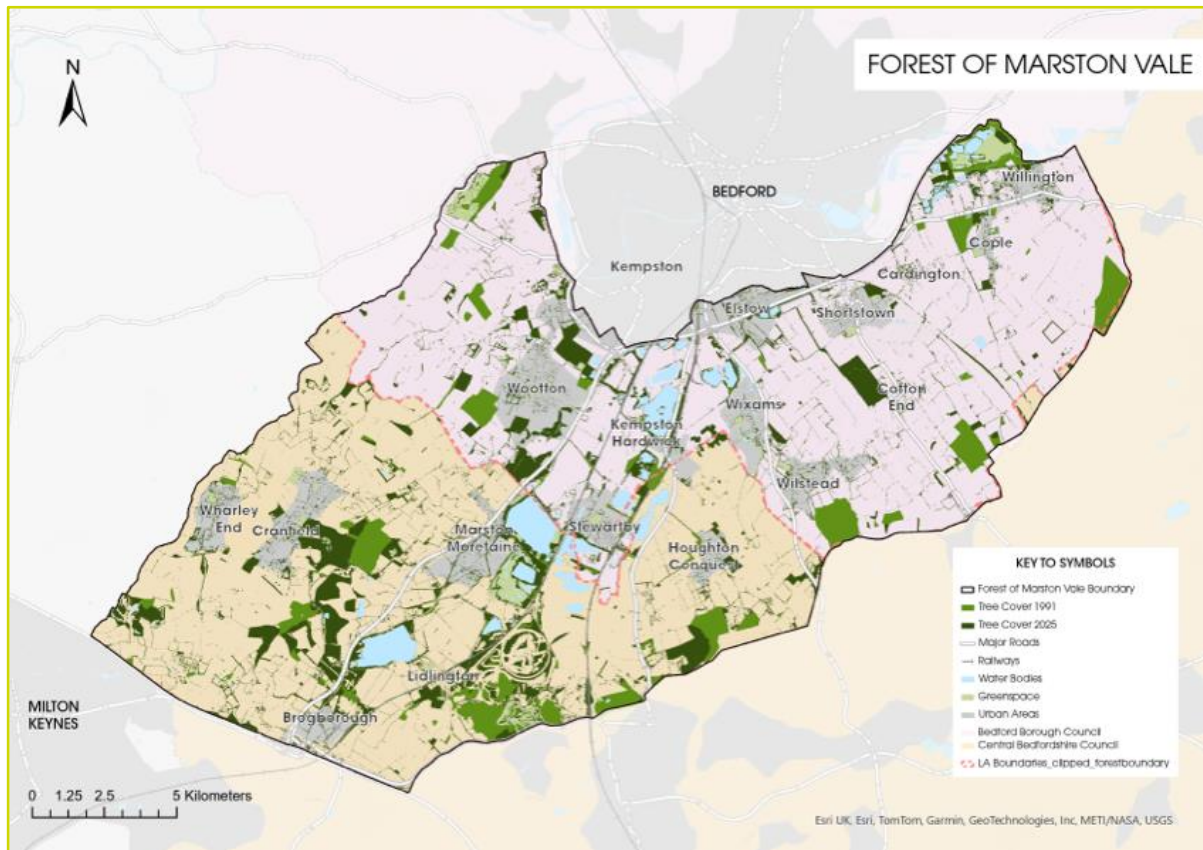
Finally, Chapter 10 looks at the next 25 years, how the Forest of Marston Vale is likely to change, the threats and opportunities, and how, by continuing to work with partners and the wider community, the environment and the lives of the people in and around the Forest can be improved.



2. Introducing the Forest of Marston Vale

The Forest of Marston Vale is a forest in the making; covering an area of 61 square miles between Bedford and Milton Keynes, it's one of England's Community Forests which together form the country's largest environmental regeneration initiative.

Working with local communities and partners, the Forest Vision is to deliver environmental transformation, inspiring a culture of trees and stimulating positive social and economic change, through providing major landscape, climate resilience, biodiversity, recreation, and quality of life benefits.

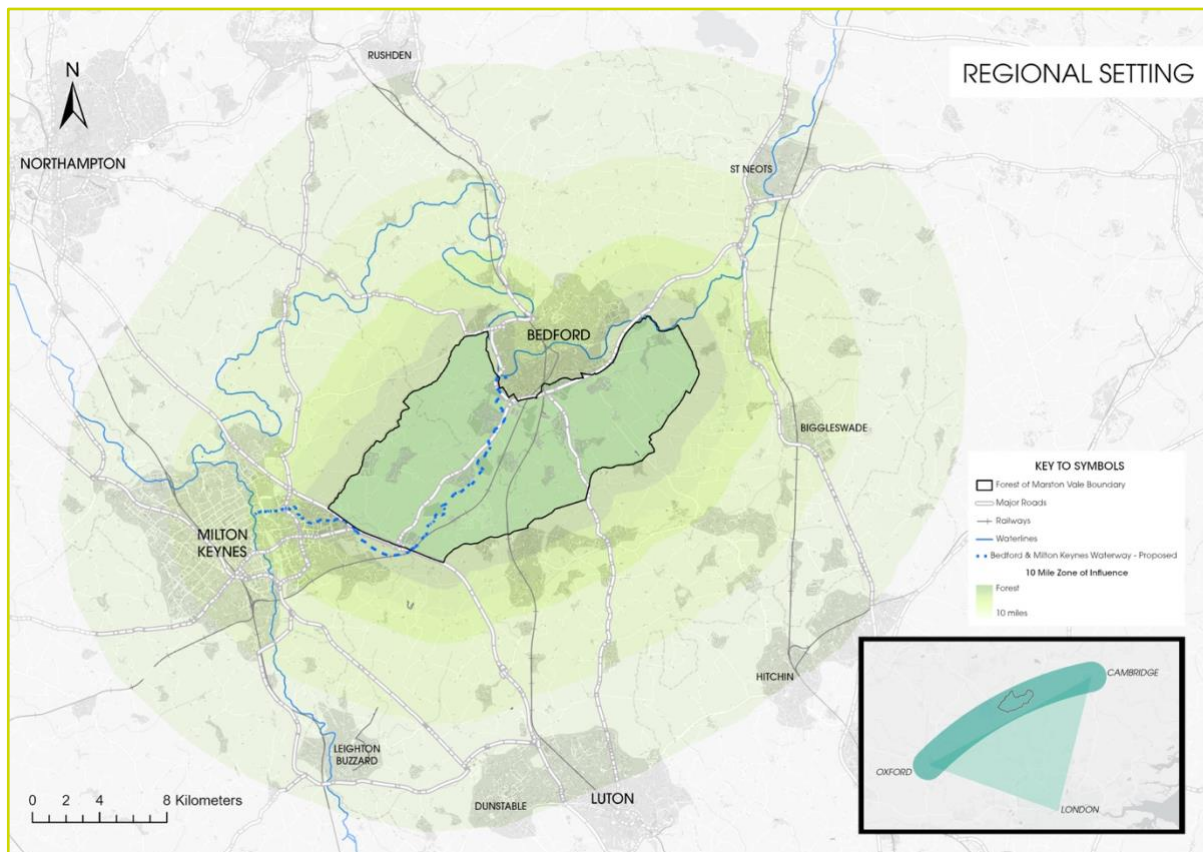


The 61 square miles (158 square kilometres) of the Forest footprint sit between Bedford to the north-east and the M1 near Milton Keynes, to the south-west. It is a gently undulating landscape around 40m above sea level, bounded by the Greensand Ridge to the south-east which rises gently to an elevation of 130m near Ampthill and by the Bedfordshire Clay Ridge to the north-west, which rises to 110m at Cranfield. (see Chapter 6 for more about the landscapes that make up the area).

Approximately 70% of the land within the Forest is in agricultural use and most land is privately owned. Arable production dominates. The Forest area also includes a range of habitat types, such as ancient woodland, neutral grassland, acid grassland, and a variety of wetlands including expanses of open water, with some used for recreation (see Chapter 7 for more about the natural assets of the area). Other land uses include settlements and industrial and commercial sites, Cranfield University and its airfield, the Bedford River Valley Park in the north, leisure facilities, former quarries and brickworks, a vehicle proving ground, landfill and transportation infrastructure, including major roads (the A421 and A6), local rail links and the section of the Midland Main Line railway between Luton and Bedford.

Within the Forest of Marston Vale, living in the scattered settlements, and on the fringes of Bedford, there are approximately 54,000 people. The number grows to over 1 million when all those living within 10 miles of the Forest boundary are included – this proximity is significant as previous Forest Strategies for England have indicated a 10-mile zone of influence for the Community Forests.

The Forest sits across two local authorities, Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council, with approximate half its area sitting within each authority. Both local authorities are partners to the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale and continue to offer strong policy support through their local plans.



Access to the Forest area is good, with the railway from London passing through its heart and the M1 and A1 close by. There are regular rail services from Bedford and Milton Keynes to stations within the Forest, and the proposed East West Rail project will follow the route of the existing Marston Vale Line. There are limited bus services to villages.

The strength of the transport links, combined with Bedfordshire's proximity to London and location in an arc between Oxford and Cambridge mean that the Forest and surrounding areas have been, and continue to be subject to significant development pressure.

With substantial residential and commercial development planned, including the proposed Universal theme park and resort, along with its associated infrastructure, and a growing demand for space for renewable energy projects, the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale continues to present an opportunity to influence and deliver a balance between the economic, social and environmental needs of local communities and the region.

Benefits of Community Forests



3. Vision and Objectives

The Forest of Marston Vale Trust and its partners, in approaching the delivery of the Vision for the Forest of Marston Vale, will be agile and flexible in identifying and embracing opportunities to grow the Forest, adapting to changing circumstances and maximising the benefits for people, nature and our planet which it provides. They will consider the need to balance the benefits to people, nature and planet, seeing those delivered for each as complementary rather than competing.

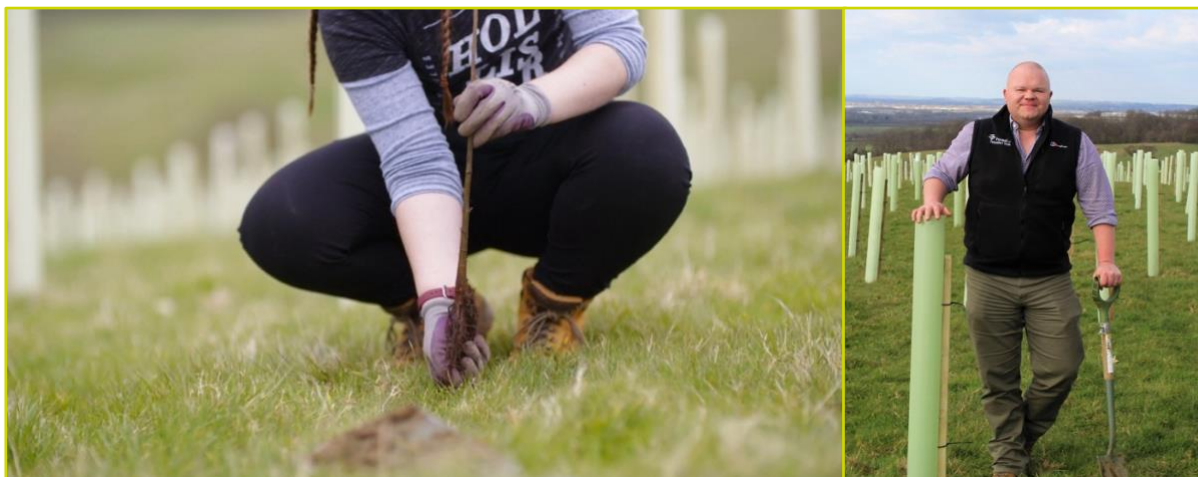
Vision

The Forest of Marston Vale is a place defined by the trees and woodlands which cover 30% of its 61 square miles, where communities, businesses and the natural environment thrive alongside each other in a balanced and sustainable way – benefitting people, nature and planet.

Strategic Objectives of the Forest of Marston Vale

1. to achieve the long-term target of 30% tree canopy cover by identifying and exploiting opportunities as they arise, promoting sustainable stewardship of the land and securing the resources to deliver tree planting, woodland creation and other complementary projects which help realise the Vision for the Forest;
2. to improve the landscape of the area, strengthening its character and sense of place and creating a visually exciting and functionally diverse environment;
3. to protect sites of nature conservation value and create new opportunities for nature conservation and restoration; recognising, valuing and nurturing high quality semi-natural habitats;
4. to improve the connections between woodland and other habitats, making the landscape more permeable to wildlife;
5. to improve access to trees, woodland and other green space across the Marston Vale and beyond, delivering these close to where people live and work, and advocating for safe, sustainable and accessible ways for people to explore and enjoy the countryside - promoting access for all;
6. to sustainably manage woodlands and other semi-natural habitats to ensure their health and resilience, and maximise the benefits they offer;
7. to respect the best agricultural land, supporting sustainable farming practices, and increase the opportunities for sustainable farm diversification elsewhere;
8. to protect areas of high-quality landscape and areas of significant historical or archaeological importance;
9. to attract investment from private, public and charitable sources to deliver the Plan and invest in leisure and other relevant service sectors;

10. to improve the environment close to where people live and work and give the public and private sectors confidence in the long-term prospects for the area, so providing a basis for investment;
11. to create jobs in woodland industries, both the management of woodland and the use of the raw materials; to create jobs in the leisure industry developed in and around the Community Forest; to sustain other local jobs by providing an outstanding environment as a comparative economic advantage over competitor areas;
12. to establish a sustainable supply of timber and other woodland products, supporting and adapting to emerging timber technologies and markets;
13. to secure meaningful benefits through the planning system that enhance the landscape, support the implementation of the Forest Plan and contribute towards the realisation of the Forest Vision;
14. to advocate for sustainable development and its pivotal role in shaping the future of the area;
15. to achieve a high level of local community commitment to the Forest and involvement in the implementation of the Forest Plan; encouraging participation in advocacy, planning, delivery and management;
16. to grow awareness and promote enjoyment of new and existing woodland and green space; fostering a culture which values and supports the Forest, boosting a sense of ownership and long-term commitment to the place;
17. to increase opportunities for sport and recreation, including artistic and cultural events;
18. to provide opportunities for the educational use of the area and ensure the mosaic of habitats in the Forest can be used to support the environmental education needs of the surrounding schools; working to ensure that urban schools are not disadvantaged;
19. to innovate and provide opportunities for innovation across all aspects of the creation and management of the Forest, maintaining and growing the scale and range of benefits delivered by adapting to changing circumstances, changing technologies and a changing climate;
20. to extend the benefits of the Community Forest approach by delivering complementary activity (including creating and managing woodlands and other habitats, engagement, education and advocacy) within the 10-mile zone of influence surrounding the Forest Boundary.



4. History, Progress and Impact

A Brief History

Historically, the Marston Vale was a major centre for brickmaking. The London Brick Company began operating in the area, which was already home to local brickworks, in 1889, with Stewartby brickworks eventually becoming the world's largest. At the height of production, there were 167 brick chimneys in the Marston Vale and the Stewartby brickworks was producing over 500 million bricks each year from local clay. The Lower Oxford Clay, which contains circa 5% marine organics, formed 150 million years ago when it was on the seabed. This reduced the coal requirement, as the organic material burned.

During the 1950s and 1960s many Italian, Pakistani, Indian and West Indian families came to the Vale to work for the London Brick Company, and the area remains remarkably diverse to this day.



In 1970, as the brickmaking industry began to decline, clay pits started to be repurposed as landfill sites, receiving household and industrial waste (examples include sites near Willington and Cople and then later Stewartby, Brogborough and Elstow).

In 2008, with the works unable to meet the UK limits for sulphur dioxide emissions, brickmaking ceased at Stewartby.

Over a century of clay extraction and brickmaking had made the Marston Vale somewhere to avoid, a place known for bad smells, poor air quality and a scarred landscape; a situation further exacerbated by the landfill sites which had followed.

The Forest of Marston Vale was designated by government in 1991, as part of the second tranche of Community Forests to be announced. It was a joint initiative of Bedfordshire County Council, Mid Bedfordshire District Council, Bedford Borough Council, the Countryside Agency, and the Forestry Commission. The project was administered by the Bedfordshire County Council, which employed a Forest Team to get the project underway, although it was recognised at the time that this would not be appropriate in the long term and alternative methods of managing the Community Forest and employing the Forest Team were investigated.

In 1993, The Marston Vale Partnership, which included the three local authorities, Shanks & McEwan, Hanson Brick and National Power proposed a programme of environmental improvement work, to be achieved through a private-public partnership – an ambition very much aligned with that of the Community Forest. Their area of interest was smaller than that of the Community Forest but was wholly contained within the Forest boundary.



The bid to the Millennium Commission to establish the Forest Centre & Millennium Country Park at Marston Moretaine, brought about an opportunity to set up a more permanent organisational structure. Advice at the time was to establish a charity which would own the land, and a trading company to run the Forest Centre. Thus, in November 1997 the Marston Vale Trust (later to be renamed the Forest of Marston Vale Trust) – a company limited by guarantee with charitable status – was formed to manage the Millennium Country Park and spearhead the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale on behalf of the

partners. In March 1998, Marston Vale Services Limited, a trading subsidiary of the Trust, was established to operate the Forest Centre.

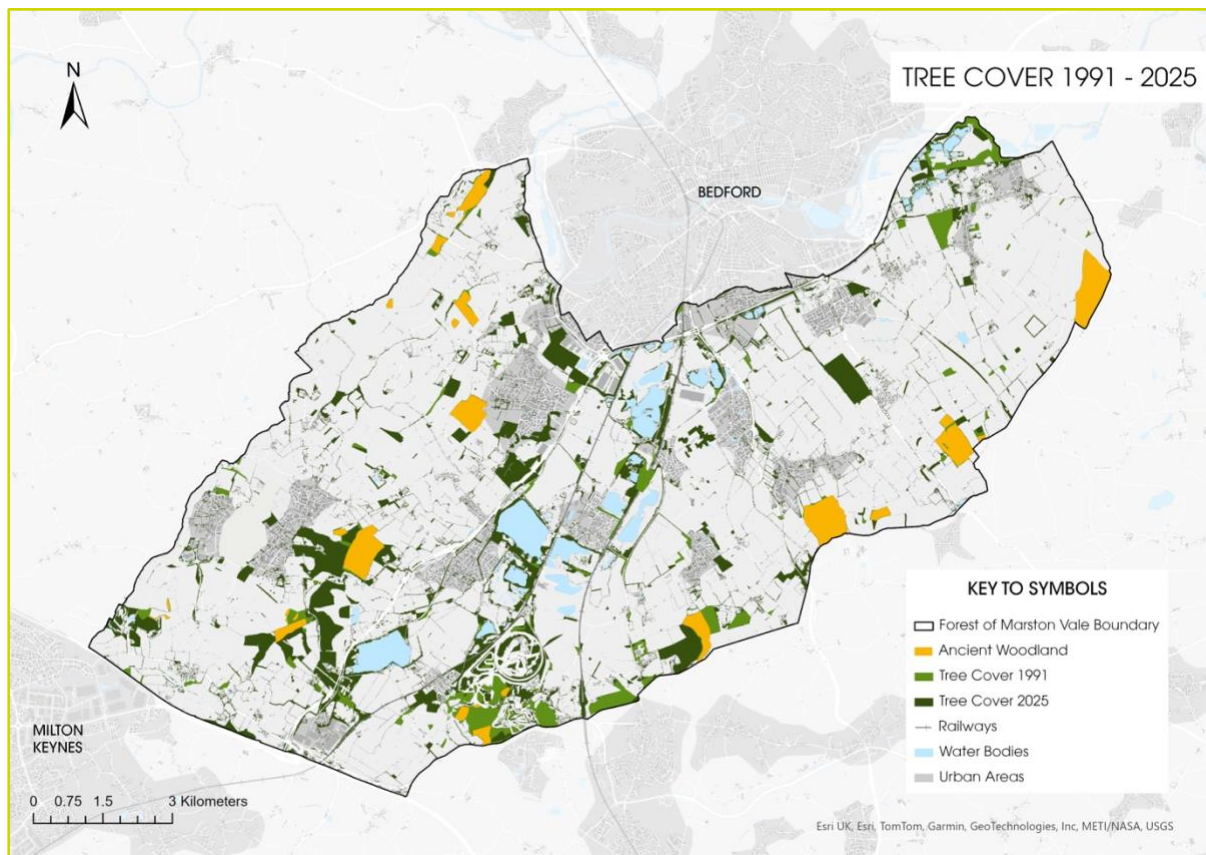
The ongoing creation of the Forest has drawn in substantial funds from sources such as landfill tax, developers' contributions through the planning system, corporate partnerships and charitable trusts.

In the 1980s, sand and gravel quarrying had been initiated in the valley of the Great Ouse to the east of Bedford, with part of that area being within the Forest of Marston Vale. The former gravel workings in the area were later to become the Bedford River Valley Park, launched in 2008, as another significant partnership project, spearheaded by the Forest of Marston Vale Trust and delivering social, environmental and economic benefits to communities in and around Bedford.³

The Forest of Marston Vale continued with its programme of tree planting, increasing canopy cover from 3.6% in the early 1990s to more than 15% by 2015.



In 2020, Trees for Climate, a multi-million-pound tree planting and woodland creation programme conceived and delivered by England's Community Forests and supported by Defra was launched. The ambitious national target was to plant 6,000 hectares in the first 5 years, with the Forest of Marston Vale committed to deliver a challenging 450 hectares locally and ultimately delivering over 500 hectares.

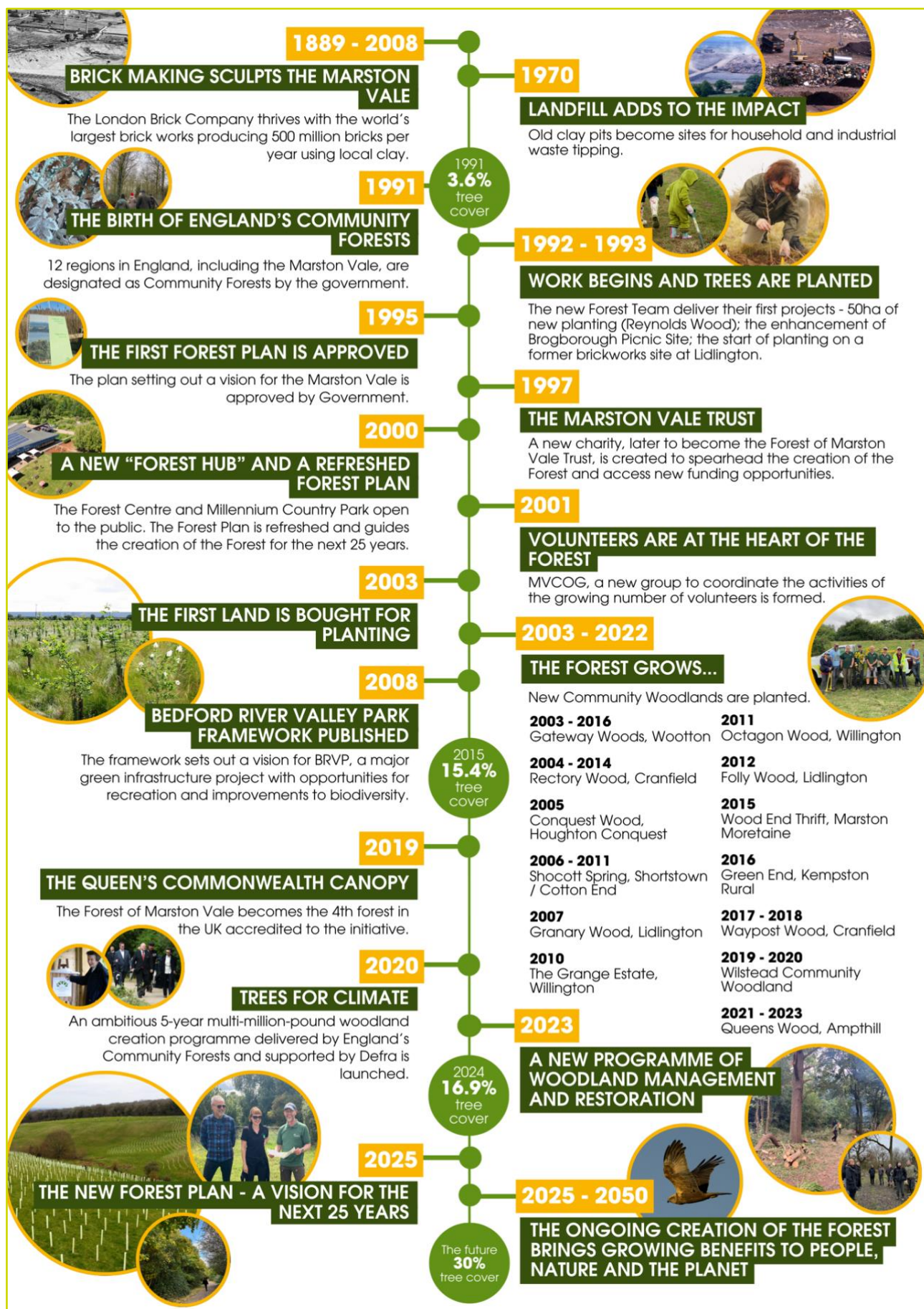


The creation of the Forest of Marston Vale has been rooted in change and in positively exploiting the incredible power and versatility of trees and woodlands to deliver myriad benefits for people, for nature and for the planet.

Over the 25 years since the last Forest Plan was published, the approach to creating the Forest has adapted, responding as the landscape, policies and circumstances have changed.

The Vision for the Forest and the positive impact for communities and wildlife the work to deliver it brings to the Marston Vale and beyond is unchanged and will continue to offer solutions to changing needs and priorities, including climate change and biodiversity loss.





England's Community Forests

The Forest of Marston Vale is part of England's Community Forests, the leading woodland creation force in the country.

England's Community Forests is a diverse and growing network of 15 unique Community Forests, each working in partnership with their local communities, landowners and businesses to help nature recover and regenerate the landscapes in and around our largest towns and cities. The Forests work together to support each other and deliver an amplified national voice.

With roots going back over 30 years, Community Forests now form the biggest environmental regeneration initiative in England. Recognised in the Planning Policy Framework and highlighted as part of the Government's 25 Year Plan for the Environment, Community Forests play a key role in shaping woodland creation and nature recovery policy both nationally and locally.

England's Community Forests provide free advice and support to landowners and land managers to help plan, fund, and plant new woodland of all sizes in both rural and urban settings, drawing on local expertise and people power. Each Forest's long-term commitment to the area in which it works is ensuring that trees and woodlands are at the very heart of communities up and down the country, unlocking countless benefits for people and planet.

The aims of England's Community Forests are:

- **Supporting regeneration and growth:** Making towns and cities more attractive places in which to live, work and do business; attracting new investment and creating jobs.
- **Supporting local communities:** Harnessing the enthusiasm, commitment, and knowledge of local people; helping them improve their local area and enhancing health and wellbeing.
- **Creating better places:** Enriching and enhancing biodiversity and the environment, creating new facilities for recreation and leisure and making towns and cities more sustainable and resilient to a changing climate.



England's Community Forests work in and around towns and cities where most people live, work and travel, and where the need is greatest; connecting urban populations with the wider landscape to improve wellbeing, help tackle climate change and create places for nature.

Progress and Impact

In 2024, Natural Capital Solutions issued their report on the environmental, economic, and social impacts of the Forest of Marston Vale.⁴ They noted that the extent of woodland assets in the Forest in 2015 was 1,710.8 ha (10.6%), and in 2024 was 1,826.1 ha (11.3%). In 2015, tree canopy cover (woodland and individual trees outside of woodlands) was an estimated 2,475 ha (15.4%) and by 2024, this had grown to an estimated 2,733.2 ha (16.9%). The woodland is predominately broadleaved.

The increase in trees and woodland of 1,287 hectares in the period from 1995-2024 has led to an increase in all 11 ecosystem services that were measured (see descriptions below). Ecosystem services are the services provided by nature, that benefit people.⁵ The annual value of the ecosystem and biodiversity benefits is £30.73 million (2024 prices) which is equivalent to £880 million on a present value basis (assumes a 50-year project life).

In terms of value for money, for every £1 invested in creating the Forest, it is estimated that £18 of additional ecosystem service benefit is generated.

The Forest Team has also planted new woodland outside of the Forest boundary since 2021 – an annual value of £3.9 million of ecosystem services and biodiversity at 2024 prices.

The benefits provided by planting within the Forest between 1995 and 2024 are as follows:

- Air quality regulation: The additional woodland can adsorb 40.5 million tonnes of particulate matter (2.5µm in diameter or smaller) per annum, which is an annual value of £1.4 million.
- Local climate regulation: A cooling effect in surrounding areas, which can help avoid productivity losses due to hot weather (there are also unquantified health benefits from this service). This benefit was estimated at £2 million annually.
- Additional trees sequester 6,220 tonnes of carbon dioxide annually at a value of £1.8 million.
- The increase in woodland area can produce an estimated 7631 m³ per year of timber that sold as fuel would fetch £412,720.
- The woodland created mitigates noise pollution, with an estimated annual value of £200,000.
- Water quality improves as woodland area increases, and for the Forest this service is estimated at £150,000 per annum.
- The additional woodland is estimated to result in a reduction in peak water flow of surface water runoff, with annual benefits estimated as £250,000 per annum.
- The creation of the Forest supports recreation that has an estimated annual value of £10.1 million, one of the highest values of all the ecosystem services.
- The benefit to physical health reflects the value of active visits to the Forest. The value of this service is estimated to be £5.5 million annually. The Forest also plays a part in reducing depression and anxiety in visitors and therefore, in reducing NHS costs. The mental health benefits are estimated at £250,000 annually.
- The presence of trees and woodland can provide a visual aesthetic that is part of creating a sense of place. Part of this benefit are improvements to the views from people's homes (the amenity value). It is estimated that proximity to woodland could provide a value via average house prices in the region by up to £360,000 annually.

- New woodland that replaces certain other land uses, such as arable land or improved grassland, increases biodiversity. It was estimated that this service delivers around £8.2 million in benefits annually.



These benefits will continue to increase as the Forest works towards the 30% tree canopy cover target

"No one will protect what they don't care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced"

Sir David Attenborough



5. Planning, Placemaking and Sustainable Development

The creation of the Forest of Marston Vale offers a blueprint for environmentally led social and economic transformation; planting trees and shaping landscapes; attracting inward investment and encouraging community participation; creating a home for wildlife and delivering biodiversity; providing opportunities for leisure and employment; engendering a sense of place and pride in those who live and work in and around the Forest.

Creating the Forest of Marston Vale is about strategic, landscape-scale placemaking; using trees and woodlands to transform the landscape, redefine an area and transform its prospects. The Forest area has long been identified as a strategic location for growth and significant housing and employment development have already been delivered. Development and the planning system have a key role to play in creating the Forest of Marston Vale. The designation as one of England's Community Forests and the agreed Vision and proposals set out in this Forest Plan, provide an important mechanism for influencing whatever change may come. Crucially, the Forest Plan provides the key framework for driving forward an environmentally led approach to strategic placemaking.

The Forest Plan

The Forest Plan is a non-statutory document. The Plan presents an agreed framework and approaches to the ongoing creation of the Forest of Marston Vale. It builds upon and complements the previous editions of the Forest Plan (published in 1995 and 2000). Development and land use planning decisions will remain important for the future of the Forest and such decisions will be taken by the appropriate planning authorities, in the context of the prevailing statutory development plans. No proposals in the Forest Plan can override the policies contained in these statutory plans. However, the Forest Plan is:

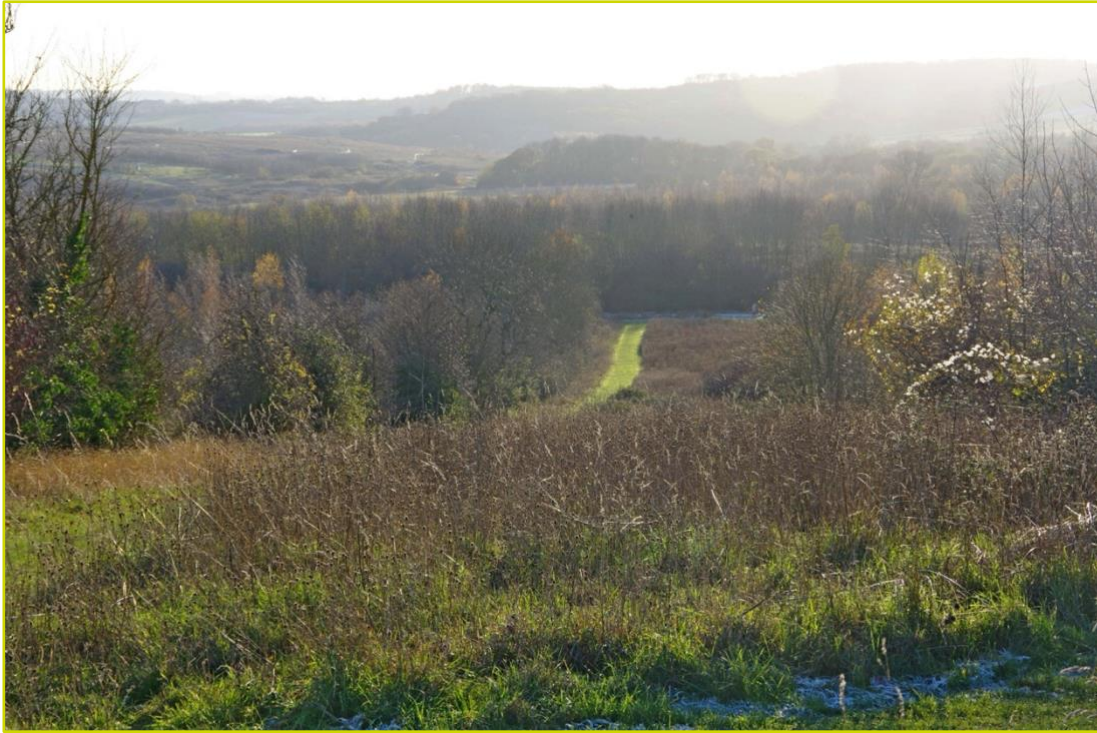
- a material consideration used to inform the preparation of statutory development plans;
- a material consideration in determining planning applications for development within the Forest area;
- a tool to achieve Forest objectives through programmes of action and implementation;
- a tool to promote and support the environmentally led approach to strategic, landscape-scale placemaking through the creation of the Forest.



The Forest of Marston Vale Trust will continue to work with local planning authorities and other key partners to ensure that the Forest Plan remains the definitive framework for creating the Forest of Marston Vale as a nationally designated Community Forest, and provides the agreed approach to strategic, environmentally led placemaking across the Forest area.

Planning Policy

The Forest of Marston Vale was designated in 1991 as part of a pioneering and ambitious national programme to create Community Forests. Whilst much has changed since that time, including planning policy and wider policy agendas, the core proposition of ‘environmentally led regeneration’ has remained extremely relevant and contemporary over time. Both England’s Community Forests and the specific creation of the Forest of Marston Vale continue to benefit from well-established and strong planning policy support at national and local levels.



National policies

A summary of the key aspects of national policy which England’s Community Forests respond to and deliver against is provided in Appendix C. Policies of particular relevance and importance include those highlighted below.

The *National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)* was last updated in 2024.⁶ This is an overarching document which sets out government’s planning policies for England and how these policies should be applied. The NPPF recognises the importance of trees in new developments. Paragraph 131 states: ‘Trees make an important contribution to the character and quality of urban environments and can also help mitigate and adapt to climate change. Planning policies and decisions should ensure that new streets are tree-lined, that opportunities are taken to incorporate trees elsewhere in developments...’. The NPPF specifically acknowledges the role of Community Forests. Paragraph 152 states: ‘...Community Forests offer valuable opportunities for improving the environment around towns and cities, by upgrading the landscape and providing for recreation and wildlife...’ and confirms that ‘...an approved Community Forest Plan may be a material consideration in preparing development plans and in deciding planning applications.’

The *National Design Guide* is the government’s practical guidance on how to create well-designed places that are beautiful, enduring, and successful.⁷ It emphasises the important contribution that nature makes to the quality of a place and to the quality of life. Paragraph 90 states: ‘Nature contributes to the

quality of a place, and to people's quality of life, and it is a critical component of well-designed places. Natural features are integrated into well designed development.' The National Design Guide also confirms the vital role that trees play in new developments.

The government's *25 Year Environment Plan* explicitly supports Community Forests.⁸ It states: 'they can play a leading role in urban tree planting, to bring trees and green infrastructure to towns and cities across England. The 25 Year Plan, 'puts the environment at the heart of planning and development, to create better places to live and work', seeks 'high environmental standards for all new builds' and 'wants to establish strategic, flexible and locally tailored approaches that recognise the relationship between the quality of the environment and development.'

Natural England's *Green Infrastructure Framework* was launched in 2023⁹, delivering on a commitment in the 25 Year Environment Plan to support the greening of towns and cities and connections with the surrounding landscape. The Community Forest programme epitomises this aspiration. The Framework sets out principles, the 'why, how and what' of green infrastructure, describes green infrastructure standards (including access and urban tree canopy cover) and presents useful tools. The *Green Infrastructure Design Guide* provides advice on the diverse types of green infrastructure, including trees and woodland, and various settings in urban areas and countryside where these interventions can be applied.¹⁰

As part of the *Environment Act 2021*, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) became mandatory in England in 2024 under Schedule 7A of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990.¹¹ The purpose is to ensure that developments result in 10% net gain for biodiversity. This means that a development will result in more or better-quality habitat than there was before development. New trees and woodland established to contribute to the creation of the Forest can play a role in helping developers to meet their obligations under the BNG regulations.

In the context of national policy, it is also important to note that the Forest of Marston Vale lies within the geography described as the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford Arc by the National Infrastructure Commission in 2016, which identified it as a corridor where more, better connected, knowledge-intensive industries and businesses could be established and where up to a million new homes could be built.¹² This concept of an 'economic geography' stretching between the globally-renowned University Cities of Oxford and Cambridge was not new when identified in 2016; it was a revisiting and development of previous strategic, cross-boundary ideas about boosting economic growth across this part of England. In January 2025, the government reiterated its commitment to developing new plans to deliver an Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor.¹³

Local planning policies

Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council are the local planning authorities covering the Forest area; they are both founding and long-standing partners in the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale. Both authorities have policies in their Local Plans that explicitly support the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale, and they have had similarly supportive policies in previous Local Plans for over 25 years.

The Bedford Borough Local Plan 2030 includes Policy 36S: Forest of Marston Vale and the Central Bedfordshire Local Plan 2035 includes Policy EE9: Forest of Marston Vale. Both policies confirm a commitment to supporting the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale to deliver environmentally led regeneration of the area. Both councils expect development proposals within the Forest of Marston Vale to demonstrate how they will deliver 30% tree canopy cover across development sites, through a combination of new planting of trees, woodlands, and hedgerows within development sites. Both

councils also expect developers to demonstrate how their proposals reflect relevant design guidance for development within the Forest of Marston Vale.

The Minerals and Waste Local Plan 2005 also supports the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale. Policy GE2 states: 'All mineral and waste proposals in the Marston Vale should contribute to the improvement of the environment of the Vale. Proposals must demonstrate how they will assist in achieving the aims and objectives of the Forest Plan.' The policy notes that mineral and waste proposals for development within the Forest of Marston Vale area must still consider other relevant policies in the adopted Local Plan, including green infrastructure, trees, biodiversity net gain and sustainability for example. Consideration must also be given to relevant Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) and guidance. In 2014, the Bedfordshire authorities updated their development plans through the Minerals and Waste Local Plan: Strategic Sites and Policies. Policy GE2 from the 2005 plan was saved and continues to be used for decision-making. The Forest is further referenced in Bedford Borough Landscape Character Assessment May 2014 (Updated October 2020) and the Central Bedfordshire Landscape Character Assessment 2024.

The creation of the Forest of Marston Vale, as set out in the Forest Plan, is therefore strongly endorsed by both local planning authorities, Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council. In recognition of the significance of planning and development matters to the Forest, both local planning authorities have collaborated with the Forest of Marston Vale Trust to jointly produce the 'Developing in the Forest of Marston Vale' Design Guidance Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).¹⁴ The SPD sets out detailed, illustrated design guidance for all types of development – residential, industrial, commercial, leisure, transport infrastructure and minerals & waste proposals – within the Forest of Marston Vale. The SPD goes on to provide detailed guidance on design options for providing the 30% tree canopy cover requirement set out in Local Plan policies, including advice on species and stock selection, and how to plant woodland, shelterbelts, spinneys and copses, trees in parkland, orchards, street trees and trees in gardens. The SPD also provides useful information on integrating the Forest Plan approach with green infrastructure in general, sustainable drainage, biodiversity net gain, provision of access, the built environment and buildings, sustainability and how to create a 'Forest Identity.'

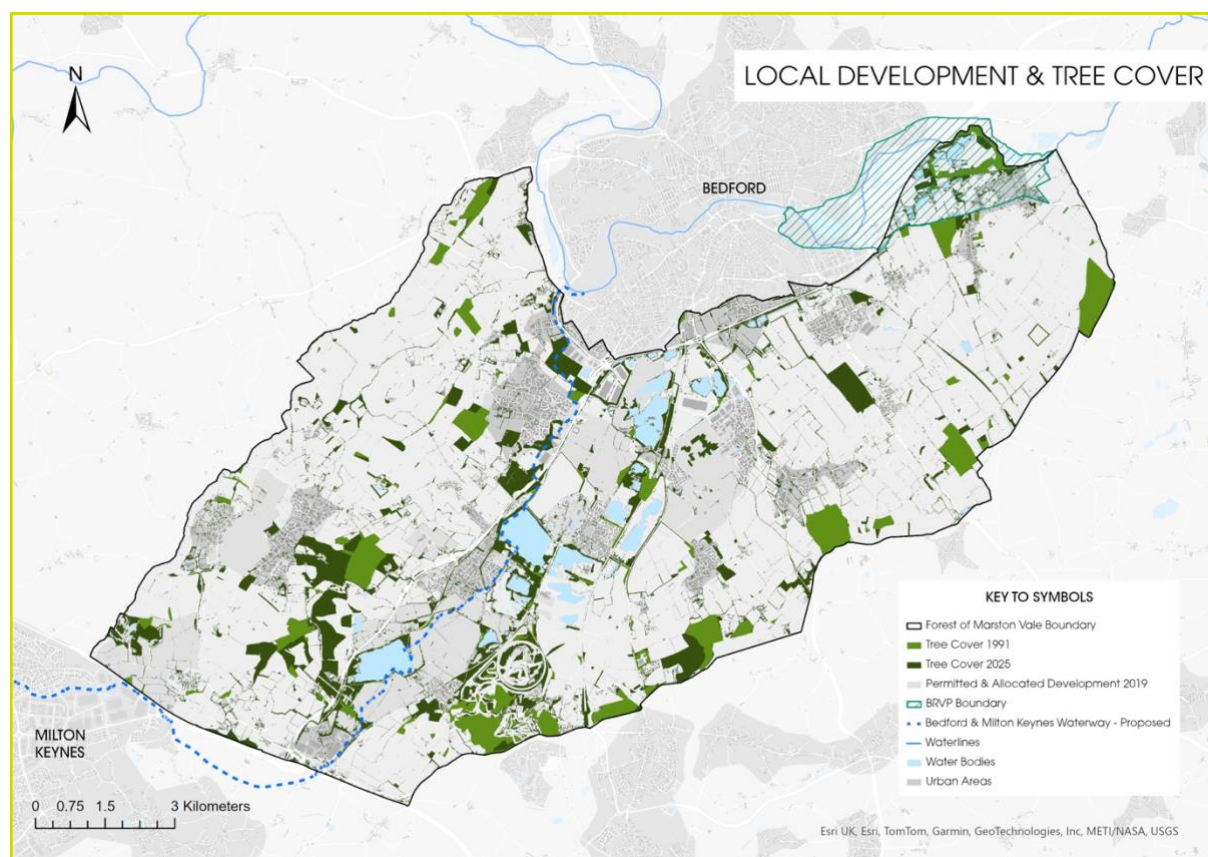
Growth and Sustainable Development

The Vision for the Forest of Marston Vale clearly states the need to ensure that '*...communities, businesses and the natural environment thrive alongside each other in a balanced and sustainable way – benefitting people, nature and planet*'. The concept of sustainable development is pivotal to achieving this. It's often defined as adopting an approach whereby development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.¹⁵ Sustainable development calls for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and planet. For sustainable development to be achieved, it is crucial to harmonize three core elements: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. These elements are interconnected and all are crucial for the well-being of individuals and societies. For the Forest of Marston Vale, the national-level designation as a Community Forest, the Forest Plan and all supporting national and local policies, provide a powerful framework for asserting, promoting and pursuing sustainable development as the default approach.

As noted earlier, the Forest area has long been identified as being of strategic importance for growth and this is likely to continue. The Forest Plan sets the tone for high-quality, strategic placemaking that will play its role in ensuring that trees and woodland form the setting for new infrastructure, homes, and places of work. The local planning authorities strongly support the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale, and their Local Plans recognise the importance of integrating any new development into an enhanced, high quality landscape. The SPD shows how all forms of consented development have the

potential to help create the Forest of Marston Vale and provide meaningful benefits to deliver Forest Plan objectives. Successfully achieved, this will demonstrate sustainable development and bring substantial benefits to the area in the form of new jobs, a more diverse economy and better facilities for local communities, as well as creating a more attractive, tree-rich landscape and richer natural environment that delivers increased biodiversity, improved climate resilience, and better health & wellbeing. Adopting approaches such as the “3+30+300 rule”¹⁶ can be useful tools to help planners and developers create healthier and greener places to live. As can be seen from the evaluation of the impacts of creating the Forest to date, presented in Chapter 4, the scale of the many potential benefits to local people, nature and the planet is profound.

The Forest of Marston Vale Trust will continue to work closely with the planning authorities, developers, and partners to accelerate the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale, promote and embed the principles of sustainable development locally, and demonstrate how the Forest Plan can influence planning and design in a way that benefits all.



Major Green Infrastructure Projects within the Forest

Alongside other forms of development and land use change, there are major green infrastructure projects proposed locally. These fall largely within the Forest of Marston Vale and are highly complementary to the creation of the Forest as they will deliver significantly against Forest Plan objectives.

Bedford River Valley Park

Bedford River Valley Park (BRVP) is an area of 868ha (3½ square miles) to the east of Bedford on the River Great Ouse floodplain destined to become a major new area of greenspace. Considerable mineral

extraction (sand/gravel) scarred the local landscape yet provided the opportunity for creative restoration across a large area on the urban fringe to deliver major biodiversity, landscape, flood storage, access and recreation benefits. First designated by Bedford Borough Council in 2002, BRVP became more of a reality in 2005, when the Forest of Marston Vale Trust purchased land at the heart of BRVP and undertook extensive consultation work to produce an agreed vision and strategy to guide the future delivery of BRVP. The resulting BRVP 'Framework' document was published in March 2008¹⁷, and is endorsed by central government, local authorities, government agencies and private sector partners.

The Framework provides a shared vision for the 868ha Bedford River Valley Park, and defines a set of 'key principles' to guide all future work. An area of c.240ha is proposed for conversion to 'floodplain forest' (a mosaic of woodlands, wetlands and grasslands) to provide an 'ecological heartland' to BRVP. Proposed watersports facilities are identified as a major potential asset to BRVP, whilst the existing and well-used National Cycle Route 51 forms the recreational 'spine' through BRVP from which additional access routes within BRVP will flow. The project as a whole will provide a major new area of multi-functional greenspace on the urban fringe of Bedford to serve the recreational needs of an expanding population and provide an attractive 'green gateway' to Bedford from the east.

Bedford River Valley Park will transform Bedford. It will cost millions of pounds, take decades to complete and will bring together a range of people, businesses, government and non-government organisations working in partnership. Bedford River Valley Park has the potential to provide the only area of green infrastructure of sub-regional importance within Bedfordshire¹⁸.



The Forest of Marston Vale Trust will continue to work with key partners to promote and support the creation of Bedford River Valley Park, ensuring delivery of Forest Plan objectives.

Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Park

The Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Park is a long-standing proposal to establish a 26km long green corridor along which a new waterway will link the Grand Union Canal at Milton Keynes with the River Great Ouse in Bedford, creating Britain's first major new waterway in a century. It will run through the heart of the Forest area and will provide a multi-functional green corridor, creating new places for walking, cycling, boating and fishing, and new wildlife habitats. Strategically, the £300m project will enable water transfer from wetter parts of the country to the drier areas of East Anglia, while also bringing opportunities for improved flood risk management to help increase flood resilience in the Upper Ouse catchment.

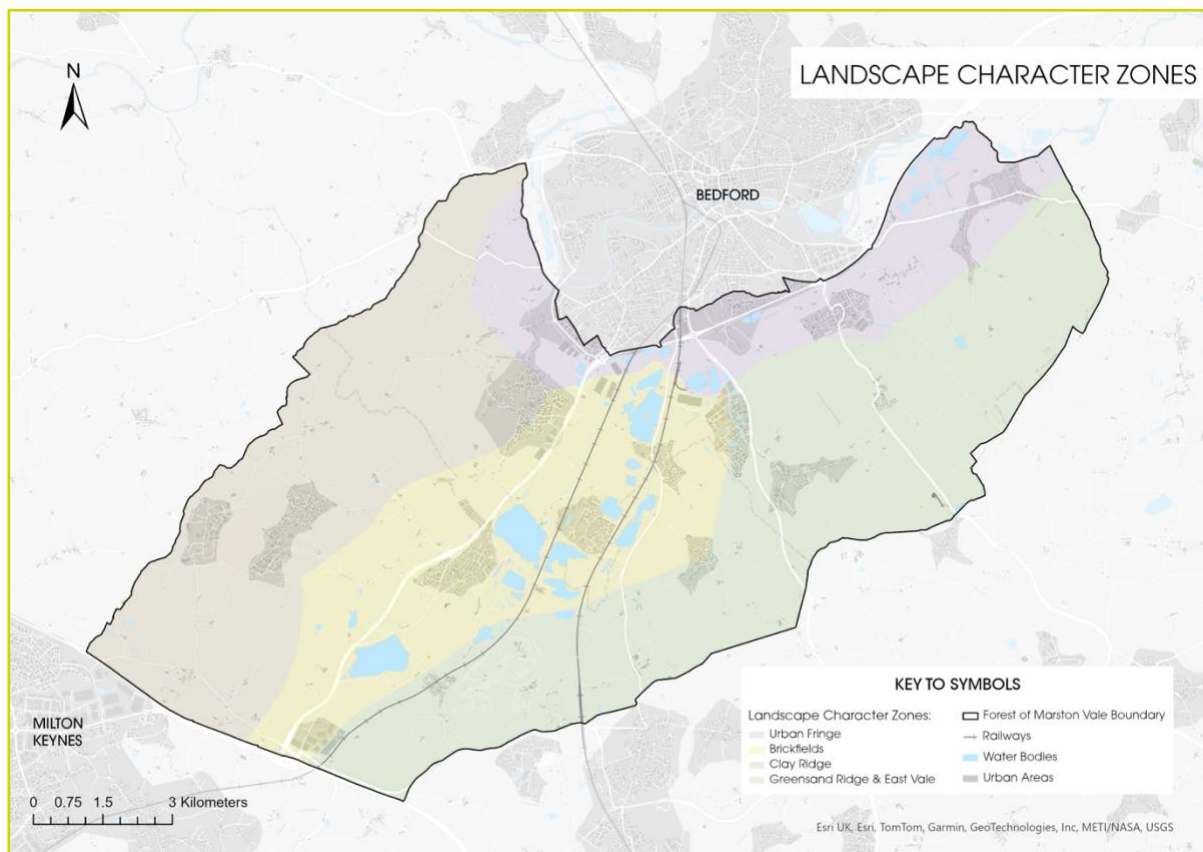
The Vision is that the Waterway Park will open up a significant new route for active travel, become an asset for recreation and tourism, benefit biodiversity and boost the health and wellbeing of local communities. It will provide for a broad range of leisure pursuits including the opportunity to close a small but very significant gap in the East of England's navigable waterway network. It is a major 'green infrastructure' project which has the potential to deliver significant social, economic and environmental benefits to the area in a way which delivers against many of the core objectives of the Forest Plan.

The Forest of Marston Vale Trust will continue to work with key partners to promote and support the creation of the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Park through the heart of the Forest area, ensuring delivery of Forest Plan objectives.

6. Landscape and Cultural Heritage

Whilst the ongoing creation of the Forest of Marston Vale is rooted in a vision to positively transform the area, most notably by increasing tree canopy cover tenfold to 30%, there is a need to guide this transformation so that it respects any significant features of landscape and cultural heritage that remain. The Forest area has already been subjected to many changes in recent decades. The once-dominant structures of the brick chimneys which had peppered the landscape have all gone; the major landfill sites are all closed and largely restored to integrate them into the surrounding landscape; new lakes have been created in former mineral extraction sites; existing villages have expanded, some doubling in size, and an entirely new one is taking shape in Wixams; Urban and Suburban land use (built up areas and gardens) now accounts for 10.3% of the Forest area, whilst major new road infrastructure has been constructed through its heart. In addition, the area's tree canopy cover has more than quadrupled (from 3.6% to 16.9%), over 100km of hedgerow have been planted and restored, and over 1,000 hectares of new accessible woodland and other greenspace created to benefit local people and wildlife. Significant landscape change has already begun; as the overall 'Forest' landscape character strengthens and matures over time, it remains important that the most notable and significant features of landscape and cultural heritage should be protected wherever possible.

Landscape



The Forest of Marston Vale is a gently undulating, largely arable, landscape, which can be divided into four distinct landscape character zones (see map), which are described in turn below. As noted above, this is an area that has been subjected to significant and rapid change, with recently added roads, housing, and commercial developments, particularly in the heart of the Vale and on the urban fringe. Whilst work to create the Forest has already increased tree cover substantially, this hasn't as yet fully

compensated for the dramatic loss of elm trees in the 1960s and 1970s, compounded by the more recent and ongoing losses of ash trees since ash dieback arrived in the 2010s.¹⁹ New village edge development, which is also part of the change, can present a stark contrast with the surrounding countryside. New developments like the logistics sites adjacent to the A421, the energy from waste plant at Stewartby and the wind turbine in the Millennium Country Park have become dominant features in their landscapes. Some villages, such as Cardington and Stewartby, retain much of their original character, but development pressure continues to cause concern for many communities in the Vale.

Forest-wide considerations for landscape are:

- The need for all tree planting and woodland creation proposals to demonstrate that they meet the requirements and best practice guidelines of the UK Forestry Standard²⁰ (the technical standard for sustainable forest management across the UK) regarding landscape. The use of landscape character assessment and strategies from the local planning authorities may help the Forest Team and partners in achieving this.²¹
- The acknowledgement that high quality agricultural land will continue to be used for farming and that agroforestry, small scale tree planting and hedgerow improvements will typically be most suitable in these areas.
- A diversity of habitat types has landscape, wildlife and amenity benefits. Where appropriate, tree planting proposals will be complemented by species-rich grassland, waterbodies, wetlands, scrub, and hedges to achieve this.
- Existing woodlands are to be expanded (wherever feasible) by planting or natural regeneration. The linking of woods also helps to strengthen ecological networks.
- Improved hedgerow management is encouraged throughout the area. This includes the planting of new hedges, including suitable hedgerow trees, the provision of conservation field margins and the encouragement of more relaxed cutting regimes.
- As set out in the 'Developing in the Forest of Marston Vale' Design Guidance SPD (see Chapter 5), the Forest Team will work to secure meaningful on and off-site landscape gains from development schemes in the Community Forest. These should be appropriate to the scale and location of the development and relate to the entire extent of the development proposal.
- Supporting the establishment of new woodlands and accessible greenspace close to settlements. These screen new developments and provide recreation and amenity for residents. Villages will require strong perimeter planting and tree planting within the built areas. Forest identity in settlements will be developed by tree planting. The Forest team will continue to work with local communities, Parish Councils, and others in developing tree planting and 'village greening' programmes.
- Transport corridors are an important focus for tree planting and other landscaping work. This will usually be a mix of tree belts, new woodland blocks, species-rich grassland, sustainable drainage elements and other features to create screening, biodiversity gain, and interesting views for travellers. Key views of points of interest should not be obscured.

The Clay Ridge and associated plateau is to the west of the Forest of Marston Vale. This is an undulating rural landscape with the built-up areas of Cranfield (including the University campus) and Wootton. Farms have retained a significant part of the earlier field patterns in some areas, and tree cover is largely comprised of spinneys, farm woodlands and screen planting, apart from a handful of ancient woodlands such as Holcot, Kempston and Hanger Woods.

Tree planting and other landscape changes in this area must consider farming and villages. The strengthening of the hedgerow network will improve field patterns and provide wildlife corridors. Promoting agroforestry will help to increase tree cover appropriately. Particular attention needs to be given to trees on the skyline and associated slopes where strong features such as woodlands can add interest and emphasise landforms.

The slopes south and east of Cranfield are an important backdrop to the Vale. Here, substantial areas of young woodland at Reynolds and Rectory Woods are combining with the restoration of Brogborough landfill, plus the ancient woodlands of Holcot and Marston Thrift, to create an extensive mosaic of woodland, scrub and grassland extending to nearly 400ha. The slopes south-west of Cranfield afford strong views to Milton Keynes, and increasing tree cover here will be important to mitigate the stark and potentially advancing edge of Milton Keynes' continued expansion.



Villages such as Wootton and Cranfield have expanded significantly and will continue to grow. It is important that building design and landscaping combine to provide an attractive interface with the surrounding countryside – they should not detract from the pleasant views both in and out of the villages. Significant areas of new community woodland around both Cranfield and Wootton now provide recreational and amenity value as well as enhancing the local landscape.

Specific landscape initiatives for the Clay Ridge include:

- The area to the south-west of Cranfield will be targeted for tree planting to help filter and screen views of major development near Milton Keynes, and to create improved tree and woodland links between Holcot and Salford Woods.
- The broad area stretching between Wootton, Kempston and Hanger Woods will be targeted for tree planting, hedgerow restoration and creating wildlife corridors to improve the tree and woodland links between these ancient woodlands. Connecting this with the extensive areas of community woodlands north and south of Wootton would be highly desirable, creating a sizeable area of 'Forest' landscape close to expanding communities and the urban fringe of Kempston and Bedford.

The Brickfields are at the heart of the Forest area, between the A421 and the A6 and stretching from the M1 to Kempston. In landscape terms, it encompasses the core of the 'Vale', and is dominated by former clay pits, transport infrastructure and expanding village settlements. Obvious signs of the previously dominant brick industry are fading, with the remaining flooded pits and poplar belts the most visible features. The impact of the industry on the landscape is perhaps now only evident from the views gained from the two railways and the raised ground of the ridges. The use of several clay pits as major landfill sites has created large, domed landforms in the Brickfields area.

This core area of the Forest has been subject to significant landscape change; expanding settlements, major road infrastructure, and large logistics and other commercial development increasingly shape the landscape character. The creation of Wixams as an entirely new, and substantial, settlement has seen the remediation and redevelopment of the almost forgotten 'Elstow Storage Depot' site. Further major residential development is proposed between Marston Moretaine, Lidlington and Brogborough. Overall, the Brickfields area of the Forest requires substantial tree planting to counteract this, and offer landscape, wildlife, recreation and amenity benefits. Maturing young woodlands near Wootton,

alongside the A421, are already positive forces in establishing the desired Forest landscape, whilst the Millennium Country Park provides a major 'oasis' of young woodlands, wetlands and grassland at the very heart of the Forest of Marston Vale, helping transform perceptions of the area.



The domed landfill sites at Elstow, Stewartby and Brogborough are strong features of the Brickfields and will need careful attention. Substantial tree planting is occurring through the restoration of these sites and this should be integrated by additional planting on adjacent low-lying areas. Tree planting and other landscape improvements will play a significant role in softening the impact of transport corridors in the Brickfields. Routes such as the A421 and the Midland Main Line railway (Bedford to London St Pancras) offer the first views of the Forest of Marston Vale for many people approaching the area; it is important that first impressions are positive and reflect the 'Forest' landscape vision. Substantial tree planting will be useful,

but wider views need to be retained particularly where features such as lakes, the Greensand Ridge and local landmarks can be seen. Alongside the expanding villages, other development and emerging young woodlands, farming remains important in this landscape and is characterised by large, open fields surrounded by ditches and sparse hedges. More woodlands, copses, spinneys, hedgerows and trees, and a wider diversity of grassland, could all help to improve the remaining farmed parts of the Brickfields landscape, and help soften and 'frame' existing and future development.

Specific landscape initiatives for the Brickfields include:

- The Brickfields will remain a priority area for securing significant tree planting, looking at opportunities for a variety of types of planting across all land types in this core part of the Forest. The visual impacts of any major planting proposals should be considered from both the Vale floor and the elevated ridges.
- Within the Brickfields landscape, the scale and visual impact of existing development, plus the potential impacts of significant further development, require a substantial tree planting response to ensure the integrity of the Vision of the 'Forest' landscape setting. Using the adopted SPD, substantial on and off-site tree planting will be secured from new development. Completed development sites and their environs will be targeted as locations to increase tree cover and strengthen tree planting post-development.
- The new landforms of Brogborough, Stewartby and Elstow landfill sites will become mosaics of woodland, scrub and grassland, with additional tree planting being targeted in the surrounding areas to better integrate these major features into the wider landscape.
- The new settlement at Wixams has become a major new feature in the landscape, and the surrounding area will be targeted for tree planting to reduce its visual impact and provide landscape, wildlife and amenity benefits.

The Urban Fringe wraps around Kempston and Bedford. It includes the expanding urban edge, transport infrastructure and the valley of the River Great Ouse and its tributary the Elstow Brook. This area includes the emerging Bedford River Valley Park to the east of Bedford, which includes former gravel pits, grassland, and woodland. Bedford's urban fringe has changed dramatically over recent decades, with the construction of the southern and western bypasses and substantial infill development that has followed. These changes present a raw, noisy edge to the landscape to the south. The Urban Fringe is the

area of the Forest where the intensity of land use change has been the greatest, and it is also the interface between the Forest of Marston Vale and its main population centre of Bedford.



Substantial areas of new community woodland have been planted within the Urban Fringe since 2000. A network of community woodlands serves as a 'green wedge' between the expanding settlements of Wootton and Kempston, whilst near Shortstown, the planting of 'Shocott Spring' has introduced substantial woodland on the edge of major development and in the shadow of the impressive Cardington Hangars. All such community woodlands bring landscape, biodiversity and amenity benefits. Planting undertaken along the southern bypass has helped enhance this major road corridor and begin to create a buffer zone between the urban edge and the

countryside beyond. Gateways such as the A6 need to be enhanced by planting and other works to create attractive links into the wider Forest area. This work could be planned in conjunction with the improvement of road and rail corridors. Other roadside features such as sustainable drainage features and roundabouts can provide contrast to tree planting. More buffer planting will be needed as the Urban Fringe landscape continues to be subject to ongoing change.

The riparian land to the south and east of Bedford, home to sand and gravel extraction, contrasts well with the clay heartland of the Brickfields. The Bedford River Valley Park, to the east, already has an agreed vision to create extensive 'floodplain forest' and recreational opportunities, including a major watersports lake. Existing networks of floodplain, grassland, scrub, pollards, shelter belts, small woods and wetland habitats throughout the Urban Fringe need to be maintained and strengthened.

Specific landscape initiatives for the Urban Fringe include:

- The Urban Fringe will remain a priority area for securing significant tree planting, looking at opportunities for a variety of types of planting across all land types to create a strong 'Forest' landscape setting in this important interface between the Forest of Marston Vale and the main population centre of Bedford.
- Gateway sites within the Urban Fringe to the south of Bedford will be identified and targeted for appropriate tree planting to deliver stronger 'treespaces' that will enhance the transition from urban areas into the surrounding Forest of Marston Vale landscape.

The creation of Bedford River Valley Park (BRVP) will be supported to deliver substantial landscape and biodiversity benefits through establishing a 'floodplain forest' mosaic of open water, wetland, riparian grassland, and woodland. Proposals for a watersports lake and associated development within BRVP will be supported and the Forest Team will work with planners and developers to ensure significant landscape enhancement and other Forest Plan objectives are delivered as part of the scheme.

The Greensand Ridge and Eastern Vale features the escarpment of the Greensand Ridge and arable land to the east of the Brickfields. The Greensand Ridge is a notable and highly recognised landscape feature²² and historically the most wooded part of the Forest of Marston Vale, containing several ancient woodlands. This well-wooded ridge provides an attractive vista from lower lying areas to the north and is an important backdrop for the delivery of substantial tree cover across the wider Forest area. The Eastern Vale comprises extensive arable farmland, punctuated by small copses, spinneys and mature hedgerows. Overall, the landscape is quite open in nature, offering excellent views of the Cardington Hangars from the wider area.

Along the Ridge, there are opportunities to strengthen the existing woodland character, improve the hedgerow network and promote improved and expanded heathland and grassland habitats – the Ridge contains nationally and locally important heathland and associated wildlife. The extension of existing woods by regeneration or planting will be appropriate in this area. Ensuring a diversity of features on the skyline and the slope will offer interesting longer views from the north and enhance the immediate area for those on the Ridge. Points of topographical and landscape interest, such as outcrops of greensand, small valleys and landmarks such as Houghton House²³, should not be obscured by insensitive planting.

The landscape between Houghton Conquest and Willington has a large open scale and is good, productive agricultural land. Substantial blocks of new woodland may be less appropriate here, but landscape enhancement and increased tree cover can be achieved through agroforestry, improving the hedgerow network, planting hedgerow trees and planting more small woodlands, copses and shelterbelts. Within this open landscape, farm buildings, villages and infrastructure such as roads can appear exposed, and planting well-designed screens or adjacent blocks of woodland will help to integrate them into the wider countryside, noting that long-distance views of the Greensand Ridge should not be obscured. A common feature of the villages are complexes of pony paddocks around the perimeter, where there is scope for creating a more intimate landscape by planting hedges and individual trees.

Specific landscape initiatives for the Greensand Ridge and Eastern Vale include:

- The distinctive geology and landforms of this area will require a different landscape approach to others used elsewhere within the Forest. Where appropriate, opportunities to deliver proposals that both strengthen and diversify the landscape character of the Greensand Ridge will be taken forward.
- Tree, woodland and hedgerow planting will be used to create and strengthen links between landscape features on the Vale floor, the lower slopes and the upper, well-wooded slopes of the Greensand Ridge. The expansion and linkage of existing woods by regeneration or planting will be prioritised in this area of the Forest.
- The creation and restoration of non-woodland habitats will also be an important feature of project work on the Greensand Ridge, noting the landscape and ecological value of locally characteristic habitats such as heathland and acid grassland.
- Within this open landscape, areas near to farm buildings, villages and transport infrastructure will be targeted for more significant tree planting to reduce their visual impact. Well-designed planting proposals will be used to help integrate existing and future built development into the wider countryside, providing landscape, wildlife and amenity benefits.
- The majority of the most productive farmland in the Forest lies within the Eastern Vale landscape zone. Here, in the more open arable areas, the focus for increasing tree cover will be on using small-scale planting, creating and enhancing hedgerows and agroforestry.

Cultural Heritage

By valuing and protecting cultural heritage, such as historic buildings, monuments and archaeology, local communities can help ensure that unique characteristics, history and traditions of an area can be preserved, understood and celebrated for generations to come. The cultural heritage of the Forest of Marston Vale area is reflected in many features evident throughout the landscape. Village churches, the Cardington



Hangars, brickworks and associated settlements, historic buildings including Elstow Abbey, Houghton House and Ampthill Park House, the National Trust properties at Willington and old field patterns all provide evidence of how people have worked and lived in this area over the centuries.



Archaeological investigations have revealed evidence of human activity going back to Neolithic and Bronze Age times particularly along the Ouse corridor. Other features such as farm moats and ponds, and the outlines of woodlands are also historic survivals. Many of these features are Scheduled Monuments or are of local importance and registered on county records. Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas are examples of other heritage designations that need to be considered when creating the Forest of Marston Vale.

Specific Cultural Heritage considerations include:

- The need for all relevant tree planting and woodland creation proposals to demonstrate that they meet the requirements and best practice guidelines of the UK Forestry Standard²⁴ regarding the historic environment.
- The protection and, where appropriate, enhancement of significant archaeological and historical sites within the Forest of Marston Vale.
- The industrial heritage of the Brickfields is of great interest, and efforts should be made to conserve this where appropriate and to plan planting and other works with sensitivity. Methods to interpret the local significance of the brick industry and its impacts should be promoted and adopted on relevant sites open to the public.



7. Trees, Nature and Climate Resilience

The UK has been identified as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world,²⁵ and in 2019, the UK Parliament declared ‘an environment and climate emergency’. According to the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis are inextricably linked and must be addressed in tandem.²⁶ Trees and woodlands are amongst the most powerful natural assets we have in addressing both the biodiversity crisis and climate emergency, as well as providing many other benefits (see Appendices B and E).

The creation of the Forest of Marston Vale is a bold, ambitious and landscape-scale nature recovery initiative – creating, restoring, managing and linking habitats to benefit people and wildlife.

Trees and nature are central to the Vision for the Forest of Marston Vale. Tree planting, habitat creation and the long-term, sustainable management of such natural assets are of major importance to the people, landscape, and wildlife of the area, now and into the future, bringing all the benefits described and quantified in earlier chapters of this Forest Plan. Only 8% of the Forest area benefits from local or national wildlife designations.

Many of the Forest Plan objectives echo those found in the Forestry Commission Strategy (2023-2028) which looks to tackle some of society’s biggest challenges with thriving trees, woods, and forests.²⁷ The Forestry Commission wants to see more trees of many species, growing and thriving. It wants better management and more benefits for nature, people, and the economy.

The Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies (Procedure)) Regulations 2023, part of the government’s 25 Year Environment Plan, requires responsible bodies to prepare local nature recovery strategies which must contain a habitat map and a statement of biodiversity priorities.²⁸ The Bedfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (expected to be adopted in early 2026) will include support for the ongoing creation of the Forest of Marston Vale and the Forest Plan.²⁹ It is being prepared by Central Bedfordshire Council on behalf of the Bedfordshire authorities (Central Bedfordshire Council, Luton Borough Council and Bedford Borough Council), working with Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership and other partners and stakeholders, including the Forest of Marston Vale Trust. The process of preparing local nature recovery strategies is guided by Natural England.

Tree Planting

Tree planting is fundamental to creating the Forest and delivering the core objectives of the Forest Plan; abundant and thriving trees and woodlands will provide the framework and landscape context for other habitats and land uses. Considerable progress has already been made against the headline target of achieving 30% tree canopy cover, increasing it from 3.6% in the early 1990’s to 16.9% in 2024.³⁰ Further tree planting will be secured to progress towards the ultimate 30% target, spanning a wide variety of forms of planting – from carefully located individual trees in villages and streets to large-scale plantations forming productive woodlands.



Tree and woodland planting proposals will be developed in accordance with the UK Forestry Standard, where relevant, and be informed by landscape considerations (in Chapter 6) and local nature recovery strategies.

Trees and woodlands are one of the most versatile and valuable natural assets. They are ‘nature-based solutions’ that help to cool and clean our air and water, lock up carbon and slow the flow of water to reduce flood risk. They provide places to relax and exercise, which improve our physical and mental wellbeing. They provide homes for wildlife, whilst producing renewable raw materials for building and fuelling a more sustainable future. The productive potential of trees and woodlands is of particular importance in the context that the UK is the second largest net importer of timber and forest products in the world.³¹ The design and nature of tree planting and woodland creation proposals needs to vary (e.g. in species, density, and layout) to ensure that the desired outcomes and benefits are achieved. Overall, to maximise the benefits from creating the Forest and achieving 30% tree canopy cover, there will need to be a diversity of types of planting utilising native and other broadleaves, conifers and emerging forest species that might help woodlands adapt to climate change and new pests and diseases.

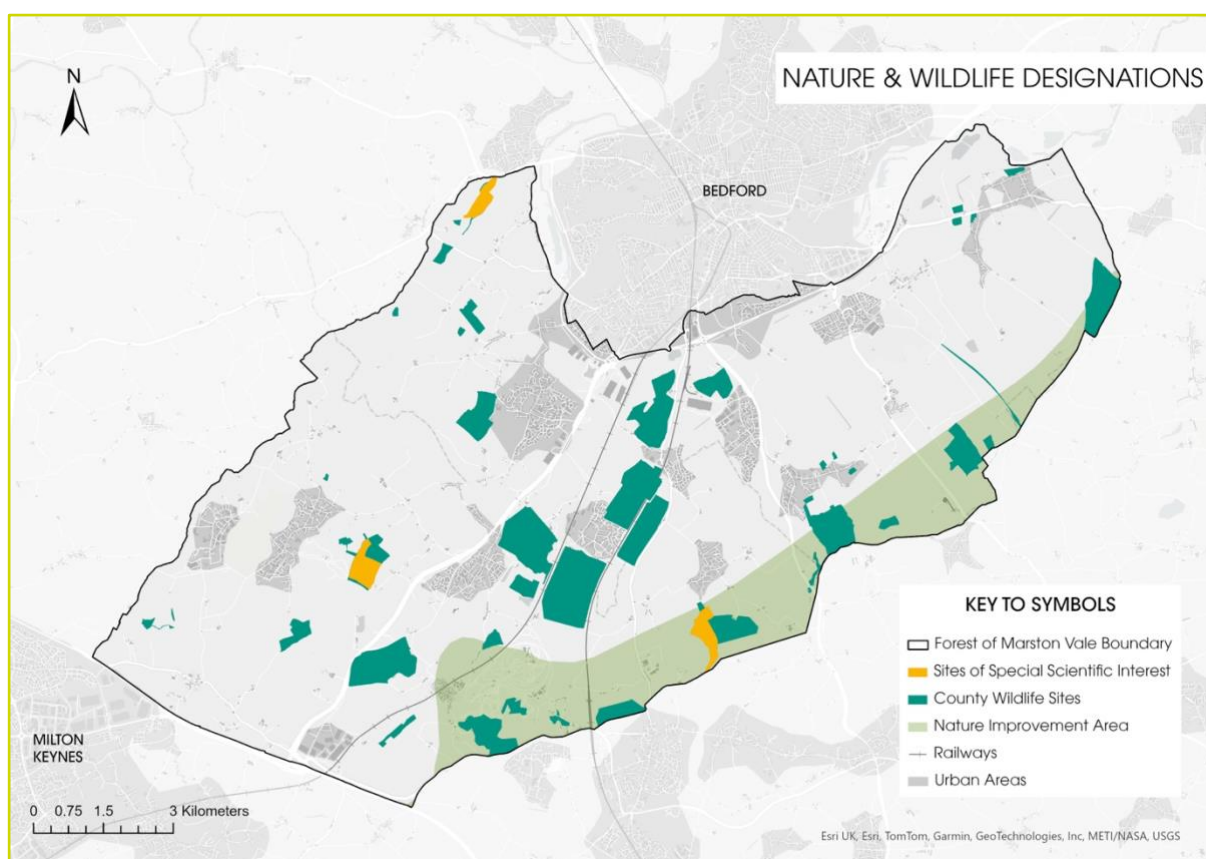
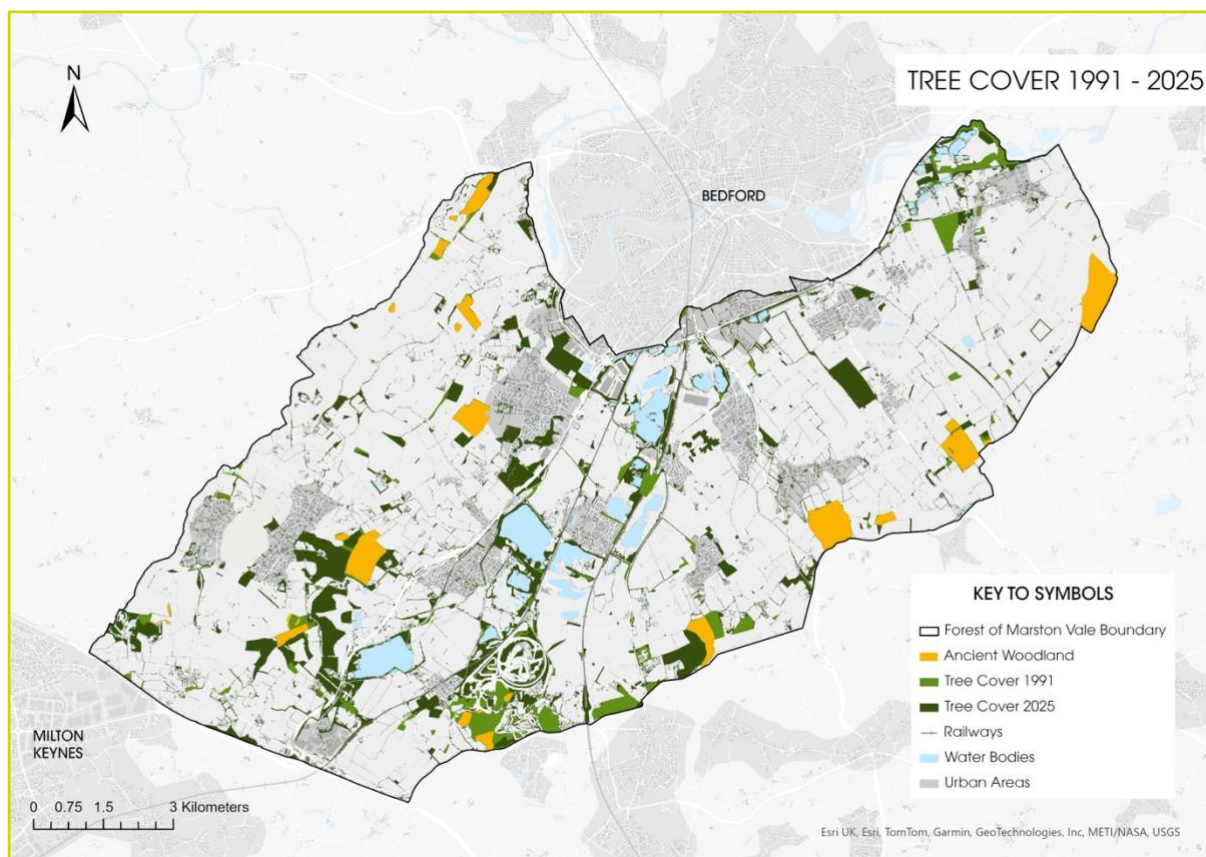


Annual progress on woodland creation and tree planting will be achieved by developing and implementing a range of projects and programmes, working in partnership with a wide variety of partners and harnessing available funding from public, private and charitable sources. To maximise multi-functionality and benefits, and make the landscape more permeable for wildlife, it is important that larger-scale and better-connected woodland planting projects are secured and delivered wherever possible. The predominance of agricultural land use in the Forest means that opportunities will be sought to work with farmers and landowners to plan and deliver farm woodlands, improved hedgerow networks (with more hedgerow trees), and agroforestry projects (where trees are deliberately integrated into food production systems).³²

The delivery of Forest Plan objectives through tree planting and woodland creation will be achieved by:

- Planting well-designed new woodlands, to deliver the full range of landscape, economic, social, and environmental benefits, guided by the UK Forestry Standard. Emphasis will be placed on securing larger woodlands; those that reduce fragmentation and build ecological networks; those at the urban fringe which provide community woodlands that improve access for people.
- Working with farmers and landowners to promote and deliver opportunities for tree planting across farmed landscapes, using woodlands, copses, hedgerows and agroforestry systems.
- Seeking opportunities to secure land for woodland creation. This could be through acquisition, leasing, management partnerships or other suitable mechanisms.
- Working with landowners, planning authorities and developers to explore opportunities for large scale woodland creation in appropriate areas associated with development, and to ensure that restoration schemes for derelict land and landfill sites meet Forest landscape, nature recovery and recreation objectives.
- Working to achieve a balanced, variable approach to species composition and design in tree planting and woodland creation that ensures delivery of the full range of social, environmental and economic benefits. Promoting and adopting the principle of planting ‘the right tree, in the right place, for the right reasons’ will be key to achieving this.
- Working to ensure that all newly planted trees and woodlands are successfully established, well maintained, and remain resilient against significant pests, diseases and the impacts of climate change.

- Attracting and securing funding from a wide range of public, private and charitable sources to develop and implement projects, programmes and mechanisms to enable and accelerate tree planting and woodland creation.



Managing Woodlands

The sustainable management of woodlands – young, mature and ancient – is vital to ensuring their health, resilience, ability to capture and store carbon, and their biodiversity value. Well managed woodland can deliver more natural capital benefits than most other habitats.³³ Young trees lock up carbon faster than mature trees, compensating for the carbon reduction caused by felling and removing trees as part of sustainable management. The Forest of Marston Vale area now has 11.3% woodland cover, over three times larger than the woodland resource when designated as one of England's Community Forests in 1991. This growing woodland resource is largely broadleaved, dominated by ash, and comprised of a broad spectrum of ages – from young, to established, mature and ancient. Forestry Commission data shows that currently only 53% of this woodland resource is sustainably managed, below the national average of 57%.³⁴ Ensuring the sustainable management of the growing woodland resource within the Forest, including responding to the impacts of ash dieback, is important and presents an opportunity to demonstrate good forestry practice and highlight the benefits of sustainable woodland management to landowners and the public.



Landowners will be encouraged and supported to improve the management of existing woodlands. Existing well managed woodlands should be identified for use as demonstration sites, and new examples encouraged elsewhere. Showcasing different types of approaches to woodland management, delivering different objectives will be important, both to woodland owners and to local communities. Coppice restoration, thinning, felling and restocking, and continuous cover forestry all have their value and place, and primary objectives can encompass biodiversity, firewood production, timber production and long-term resilience. Whilst woodland management objectives will be specific to individual woodlands and their managers/owners, the full range of management objectives should be promoted across the woodland resource within the Forest.

Nurturing a thriving local market for the products of woodland management – firewood, coppice material, timber – will help provide a financial incentive to motivate landowners to plant new woodlands and actively manage existing ones. Likewise, supporting the growth of the relatively small local forestry sector will be important to boost capability and capacity for increasing sustainable woodland management.

Regenerating and safeguarding the heritage and ecological value of the few remaining ancient semi-natural woodlands in the Forest of Marston Vale is an important objective. Only 400ha of ancient woodland lies within the Forest area, representing just 2.5% of the overall woodland resource, yet these ancient woodlands are our most complex and valuable biodiversity assets and irreplaceable habitats.

The sustainable management of the growing woodland resource in the Forest will be secured by:

- Promoting and supporting the sustainable management, in accordance with the UK Forestry Standard and other best practice guidance, of all woodlands in the Forest of Marston Vale through guidance, site visits, educational work, and by providing advice to individuals and organisations.
- Working in partnership with the Forestry Commission, local authorities, landowners and other partners to demonstrate examples of sustainable woodland management that deliver a range of different objectives, both in and close to the Forest of Marston Vale.
- Supporting the development and growth of a local ‘woodland economy’, in which local markets for timber and woodland products are strengthened and the capacity and capabilities of the local forestry sector is expanded, all to facilitate increased sustainable woodland management.
- Working to ensure that the ancient woodland resource within the Forest is sustainably managed to protect, restore and maintain its value, and to strengthen its resilience against climate change, pests and diseases.
- Continuing to support community involvement in sustainable woodland management, through engagement with volunteers and other approaches, and promote increased awareness and understanding of the importance of sustainable woodland management within local communities and wider population.

"The living world is a unique and spectacular marvel. Billions of individuals, and millions of kinds of plants and animals... Working together to benefit from the energy of the sun and the minerals of the earth. Leading lives that interlock in such a way that they sustain each other. We rely entirely on this finely tuned life-support machine. And it relies on its biodiversity to run smoothly."

Sir David Attenborough

Non-woodland Habitats

Understandably, the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale centres on trees and woodlands; these are the very tools that transform the area into a ‘Forest’ landscape defined by substantially increased tree cover. However, the work to deliver the Vision for the Forest also requires action to increase the

abundance and quality of non-woodland habitats to boost biodiversity and support strategic nature recovery.



The creation and management of a range of habitats other than woodland, including species-rich grasslands, ponds, wetlands, and scrub, is important. The Local Nature Recovery Strategy will guide this work, by confirming where the existing valuable sites are, seeing if they could be extended or linked together and where there are sites with good potential for the restoration of non-woodland habitats. To support such work, the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management

(CIEEM) has prepared good practice guidance for ecological restoration, as well as a list of key references.³⁵ Examples of priority non-woodland habitats in the Forest include acid grasslands on the Greensand Ridge, floodplain grazing marsh in Bedford and the Ouse Valley, lowland meadow near Wilstead, reedbeds at the Millennium Country Park, and lakes in flooded pits. At the Millennium Country Park, opened in 2000, the benefits of significant non-woodland habitat creation are already evident and enjoyed by local communities; the reedbeds and other wetland habitats created only 20 years ago now frequently support breeding bittern and marsh harrier - national priority species.

Farm conservation management plans and similar approaches will be encouraged as effective tools in helping to enhance the landscape and wildlife value of the farmed landscapes within the Forest.³⁶ The best methods of integrating on-farm conservation work with productive farming will be promoted to help increase the creation or conservation of features such as hedges, field margins, ponds, and meadows. The potential growth of 'regenerative' farming practices will help restore soils and natural ecosystems, benefiting both people and nature.



The hedgerow network within the Forest area is an important landscape feature and provides valuable wildlife habitat and corridors. Planting new hedgerows and managing existing ones will be encouraged using all available grants and other support mechanisms. Priority will be given to opportunities on farmland and alongside transport corridors where there will be the most landscape impact, and wherever possible, hedgerows will be used to link other habitats.

Where there are rare habitats or species, work will be done with the relevant partner organisations to protect and conserve them.

Non-woodland habitats will be managed and created by:

- Seeking opportunities across the Forest area, working in conjunction with organisations, such as the Wildlife Trust and Natural England, and guided by the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and CIEEM's guidance.
- Promoting on-farm conservation projects and good practice in managing features such as species-rich grassland, ponds, orchards, and watercourses. Advice and support will be provided, working directly and in partnership with organisations with shared or complementary goals.

- Promoting, harnessing and deploying grant funding and other mechanisms to secure new hedgerow planting and enhanced management. Networks of well-managed hedgerow that link other habitats will be developed or strengthened.
- Utilising the existing Forest of Marston Vale Millennium Country Park, and the creation of Bedford River Valley Park, for the demonstration of good conservation practices over a range of habitat types including species-rich grassland, reedbeds, wet woodland, scrub and open water bodies.
- Working with the Wildlife Trust, Natural England, the local authorities, and other partners to ensure that rare species are conserved and their status improved. Sites of Special Scientific Interest and County Wildlife Sites will be particularly important in this area of work.

Climate Resilience

Human activity, particularly the burning of fossil fuels for industry, heating, electricity production and transportation, has been causing carbon dioxide and methane to be released into the atmosphere. This is changing the climate, with the Met Office predicting hotter drier summers and warmer wetter winters, more extreme weather events and rising sea levels.³⁷

In 2008, the UK passed the Climate Change Act, and in its latest response to this, the UK joined the COP27 initiative in 2022, which commits the nation to producing net zero emissions by 2050.³⁸

Local authorities are playing their part. In September 2020, Central Bedfordshire Council adopted a Sustainability Plan which sets out how the Council will become carbon neutral by 2030.³⁹ Bedford Borough Council also declared a climate emergency in 2019 and pledged to make its own operations carbon neutral by 2030. It has developed a Carbon Reduction Delivery Strategy setting out how it will achieve this aim.⁴⁰

Forest Research, the research arm of the Forestry Commission, has issued advice on how woodland creation can mitigate climate change.⁴¹ Trees and woodland absorb carbon dioxide and sequester the carbon into wood and soil. The factors that influence this include tree species, site characteristics, management, and use of harvested wood. UK woodlands sequester an estimated 391 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per hectare during their lifetime. The total carbon stock of UK forests was estimated at 4 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2020.⁴²

As well as their role in mitigating the effects of climate change by sequestering carbon, trees and woodland also play a significant role in helping society to adapt to the impacts of climate change, which are already being felt. Trees and woodland help to reduce temperatures in heat waves and slow the flow of surface water following rainstorms. Forest Research recommends that the diversity of planting should be increased, the provenance of seed or plants should be considered (to ensure a reduction in risk from drought, frost, pests and diseases) and that changes in woodland establishment and management may be required.⁴³ Trees in urban areas will become increasingly important for the shade they provide in summer. Larger modified tree pits in urban areas can also contribute to the efficacy of sustainable drainage systems, which will be increasingly important as rainstorms become more severe.⁴⁴

The Forest of Marston Vale Trust and its partners will ensure that they follow the latest advice on climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation as they develop and implement planting schemes and other projects.

8. People, Learning and Sense of Place

The Vision for the Forest of Marston Vale is as much about people as it is about trees. There are significant social benefits that arise from the creation of the Forest – everything from improved health and wellbeing to social cohesion, community engagement and volunteering, to educational opportunities, forging new partnerships and collaborations, and a renewed sense of place.

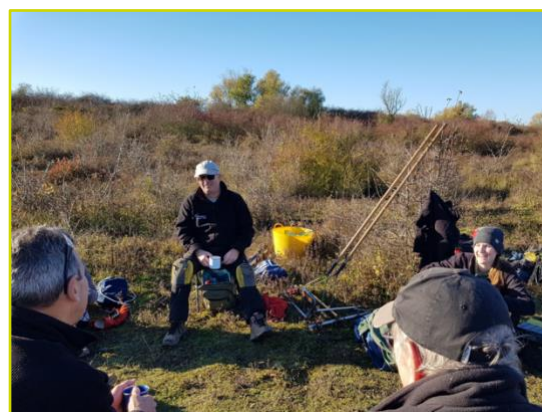
Community Engagement



It takes both people and trees to create a *Community Forest*; community engagement is vital to the growth and success of the Forest of Marston Vale. Continued efforts will be made to encourage the involvement, enjoyment and participation of people who live or work in and around the Forest area. Experience over the past 30 years shows that there is considerable interest in the Forest and a willingness to work with the Forest Team. This has been further illustrated by the encouraging level of public participation in the process of updating this latest Forest Plan (summarised in Appendix F).

The approach adopted during the ongoing creation of the Forest, and delivery of the Forest Plan objectives, will need to reflect and be guided by the priorities of the local communities over time. There will continue to be a focus on themes that are of most concern to people. There is widespread interest and enthusiasm amongst local people with many eager to see the overall landscape and environmental quality of the Forest improved. Community consultation done to inform preparation of this Forest Plan identified three key priorities from local communities – tree planting and woodland creation, work done to engage schools and local communities, and continuing to provide volunteering opportunities.⁴⁵

Working with local communities to identify planting projects and other Forest-related community activities will be important. Continued support and encouragement will be provided to schemes that are locally identified and reflect a particular community's priorities. A focus will be placed on working with partners to help local people to make decisions and act themselves. Resources will be directed towards helping to provide groups with the right information, practical help, and access to funding, with more emphasis placed on identifying and securing alternative sources of funding, for example sponsorship and external grants.



A key aim will be to develop an integrated approach to initiatives. This will involve collaboration with relevant organisations and partners to utilise a variety of specialist skills such as community development, access, arts, and conservation to help establish community-led, self-sustaining projects. Neighbourhood Plans, as introduced by the Localism Act in 2011,⁴⁶ and other community-led planning and design initiatives, will often include greening elements that the Forest Team can assist with. Partnership with parish councils has proven to be a particularly valuable way of encouraging a higher level of involvement from local people.

Communities will be proactively engaged in the Forest of Marston Vale by:

- Continuing to promote the Forest, the Vision and the objectives of the Forest Plan, to individuals, local communities, Parish Councils and community organisations and encourage them to identify and promote projects that reflect the Forest Plan's objectives.
- Working with partners across the public, private and charitable sectors to encourage and help local communities establish self-sustaining, locally determined projects, providing advice, information on funding and where appropriate, practical help.
- Continuing to target community projects and village enhancement schemes within the Forest area, in partnership with local communities and partners. Developing shared proposals with local communities to identify how their locality, village and/or parish can work towards achieving 30% tree canopy cover will be important and ensuring that Neighbourhood Plans and other forms of community-led planning embrace the Forest Plan as a material consideration will help implement these.
- Continuing to promote a wide range and variety of volunteering opportunities to allow direct involvement and action by local communities in supporting the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale.
- Encouraging people, businesses, and organisations to become 'Friends of the Forest,' facilitating a greater sense of 'ownership' and responsibility towards the Forest as they support it financially and in other active ways. Such 'Friends of the Forest' networks can help provide insights into local opinions and priorities regarding the creation of the Forest and delivery of the Forest Plan objectives.
- Identifying and attracting sources of investment and funding, including sponsorship from business, grants, and lottery funds, to help engage and empower local communities in the creation of the Forest.



It is essential to increase levels of awareness and understanding within the community to ensure continued support for the creation of the Forest over time; it is a very long-term initiative. The full impact on the landscape and society may not be fully realised for generations to come, and it can be challenging to communicate the full range of benefits. There will be a continued need to effectively promote and publicise the aims of the Forest using a wide range of methods. Increased awareness will help increase understanding of the Forest and encourage more people to become

involved. The Forest Team will continue to promote the Forest Vision and highlight progress and work to create the Forest through websites, social media, the legacy media, exhibitions, and events. A full range of activities is organised, at the Forest Centre and across the wider Forest area. These include craft clubs for children, play facilities, music and shows, talks and demonstrations.⁴⁷

Information signs indicating destinations in the Forest help increase visitors' confidence by providing a sense of welcome and orientation. National Highways and other highway authorities have previously provided Forest gateway signs in some locations and further opportunities will be pursued. There is also

an agreement with the operator of the Marston Vale Line rail route, due to be upgraded as part of East West Rail, to promote the Forest in the stations along this route.

Improved awareness and understanding of the Forest will be communicated by:

- Promoting the Forest through local, national and specialist digital and legacy media, including that produced by the local authorities, parishes, and partner organisations.
- Working to build communities via social media and other digital channels, engaging and conversing, instead of simply broadcasting.
- Offering multiple touchpoints to visitors to the Forest Centre, including via digital and analogue content and through face-to-face engagement.
- Producing and distributing newsletters tailored towards different target audiences.
- Publishing both annual reports and regular progress and impact studies.
- Hosting a varied programme of events – including walks, talks, activities and entertainment – to target and attract a variety of audiences and encourage them to engage.
- Participating in partner organisations’ promotions, attending events and embracing the opportunity to present the Forest of Marston Vale widely to potential stakeholders, partners and the public.
- Maintaining regular contact with Parish Councils, schools and community groups within the Forest; and seeking opportunities for wider outreach activities.
- Planning and providing information for a range of Forest trails and walking routes.
- Distributing information to libraries, local businesses, and other publicly accessible venues.
- Promoting and encouraging the provision of more destination and gateway signs on key transport corridors and infrastructure.
- Presenting a consistent brand identity with clear messaging.
- Monitoring the effectiveness of communication to ensure target audiences continue to be reached and that messages are understood and adjusting our approach if necessary.

Education and Lifelong Learning

Education has increasingly been broadened to encompass the principles of lifelong learning, where learning continues in both a personal and work context throughout our lives. The Forest seeks to provide an excellent resource for this, including opportunities for schools to visit, for students to undertake research projects, teacher training or work associated with volunteering. The Forest Centre & Millennium Country Park provides an ideal base for educational activities, seminars, and training. The growing number and network of community woodlands provide accessible sites for environmental education. Good links have been established with local higher education establishments including Cranfield University, the Open University and the University of Bedfordshire.





Engaging young people is of key importance. Schools have been encouraged to visit and study woodland, nature reserves, country parks and heritage sites in the Forest area. There are 45 schools in the Bedford area and over 300 within 30 minutes' drive of the Forest. The Forest Team will continue to offer advice on appropriate sites to visit and, where possible, support will be provided on school field visits on the ground or through preliminary planning visits. The opportunity for schools to be involved in the Forest will continue, through school grounds improvement schemes, field visits and provision of educational support and advice.

Forest Schools,⁴⁸ where a certified practitioner leads teaching sessions in a woodland setting, have become increasingly popular, with some established, usually in schools, in the area. There may be opportunities to establish more Forest Schools within the Forest of Marston Vale.

Education and lifelong learning opportunities arising from the Forest will be harnessed by:

- Working in partnership with local education authorities, the Wildlife Trust and other education providers to promote and co-ordinate activities in a way that complements and enhances the overall environmental education offer within the Forest.
- Promoting the educational potential of the Forest of Marston Vale – across the full range of social, economic and environmental topics – to students, teachers, local education authorities, schools, colleges and Universities, as well as to the wider community.
- Promoting and enabling accompanied and self-led educational visits by schools, colleges, youth organisations and community groups to sites in the Forest such as community woodlands, nature reserves, heritage sites and country parks.
- Working to increase the number and distribution of Forest School activities and sites across the Forest area. The use of appropriate existing woodlands as locations to establish regular Forest School activities will be promoted. Creating new Forest School facilities in school grounds will be encouraged and advice provided on tree planting, design and resources to make this happen.
- Working with partner organisations to develop and implement education and lifelong learning projects, programmes and initiatives to engender a greater understanding of the Forest of Marston Vale across all facets of local communities.

Growing a Forest Identity and Sense of Place

Sense of place refers to the feelings that inhabitants and visitors have about a location, which could be one property or an entire region. This can be positive or negative and is more strongly felt by some than others. There are areas that are particularly distinctive, with notable characteristics, and this can foster a stronger sense of place, which induces feelings of attachment and meaning. The relationships that people have with a place will depend on their own experiences as well as the qualities of the environment.

In places like the Forest of Marston Vale, which has diversity of landscape and cultural heritage (see Chapter 6), sense of place can be affected by dominating features like transport infrastructure, the often-stark contrast between urban and rural, the new and the old, and rapid changes in the post-

industrial landscape. There is population growth and waves of inward and outward migration, which further complicates the picture.



The Forest of Marston Vale is a powerful force for improving the sense of place, and through doing so to cultivate a new 'Forest' identity for the area. This is being achieved by carefully conserving and enhancing important aspects of traditional countryside alongside substantial, well-designed tree planting to screen and transform some of the less attractive parts of the Forest area. In the urban fringe and new developments, tree planting will continue to soften the harsher elements of urban development and help people to feel more at home. Through design guidance, developers are encouraged to create sustainable, design-led schemes that reflect that the creation of the Forest is defining a new sense of place for the area. Well-designed, sustainable development that integrates extensive tree planting, the use of timber and naturalistic approaches can contribute towards developing a 'Forest' identity across the area. The arts, including public art, can be a way of celebrating the Forest and particular locations within it. The use of local materials for sculpture and outdoor furniture and the involvement of local artists will help to strengthen sense of place.

Another important aspect of sense of place comes through education. Giving people time and opportunity to spend time in nature and become more aware of their surroundings, brings both physical and mental wellbeing (see Chapters 2 and 3) but also improves understanding, appreciation of the positive aspects of place and increases attachment.

'Putting down roots' is an expression that means settling down and becoming established. Planting trees and nurturing them, in both town and country, strengthens our sense of place because we become part of the positive change that comes about through that process. The Forest of Marston Vale, through its education and volunteering programmes, helps people to find out more and get involved in planting and maintenance. This is making a difference to how people feel about the area and therefore strengthening and improving sense of place.



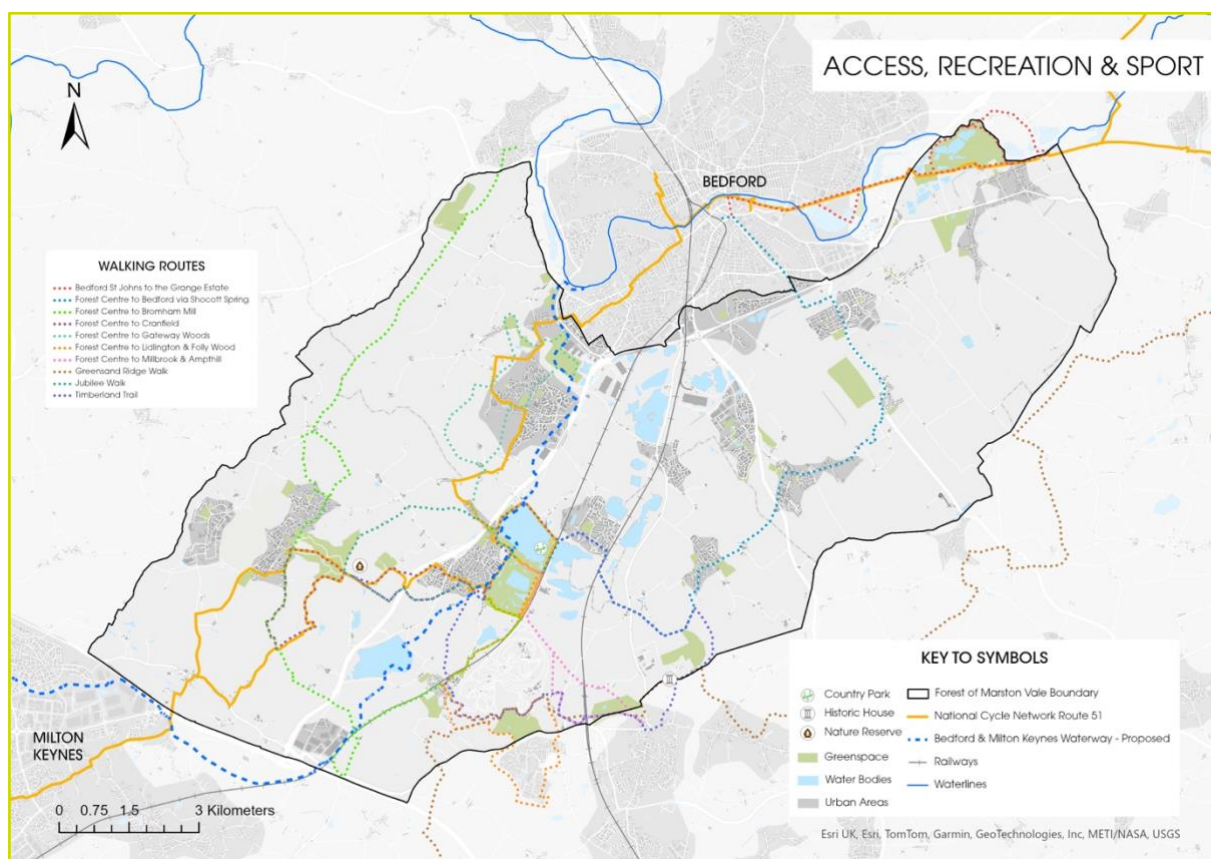
An emerging Forest identity and sense of place will be developed by:

- Using a broad range of communications and engagement activity (as already described in this chapter) to help individuals and communities to understand, value and take pride in the Forest.
- Fostering opportunities for local groups and organisations to develop and deliver projects to celebrate local distinctiveness, the emerging Forest identity and encourage engagement and participation in Forest-related activities by a wide range of people.
- Promoting the embedding of a clear and strong Forest identity and sense of place within new developments in the Forest, using tools such as the 'Developing in the Forest of Marston Vale' Design Guidance SPD.

9. Access, Recreation and Leisure

The rights of way network is crucial to people's enjoyment of the countryside and its functionality is fundamental to the accessibility of the Forest. Some 240km (about 150 miles) of public footpaths, bridleways and byways exist in the area, managed by the local authorities, which have a statutory role regarding rights of way in the Forest. The existing rights of way network has potential to become a more important and widely used recreational facility. Most of the public paths cross private land, so a close working relationship with the farming community and other landowners is vital.

Rights of Way Improvement Plans are prepared by local authorities to identify changes and improvements to local rights of way networks in order to meet the Government's aims of better provision for walkers, cyclists, equestrians and people with disabilities. The Government provides guidance on the preparation of these Improvement Plans,⁴⁹ and there are Rights of Way Improvement Plans for both Bedford Borough⁵⁰ and Central Bedfordshire.⁵¹ Many of the access improvements included in the Forest Plan reflect and reinforce the proposals set out in these local Improvement Plans.



Access to the countryside within the Forest will be improved by:

- Working with local authorities and others to maintain and improve the public rights of way network and develop opportunities to improve urban-rural connectivity, particularly those that offer sustainable and accessible transport solutions.
- Installing high quality gates and other similar structures, especially in cases where accessibility to a path will be improved and access for people with disabilities will be enhanced. Regular

advice will be sought from a range of path users, through the relevant Local Access Forum or other bodies as appropriate.

- Improving path surfaces where appropriate on promoted routes, especially on paths connecting to accessible woodlands and greenspace sites and close to settlements.
- Continuing to work with farmers and landowners to improve standards of paths across arable land.
- Improving waymarking and signage on public rights of way and other non-statutory routes.



The rights of way network is largely comprised of footpaths. There are some bridleways, which also provide access for cyclists. These tend to be isolated, lacking interconnections and sometimes offer poor surfaces, especially for wheelchair and mobility scooter users. Major roads in the area are busy and minor country lanes can be hazardous for horses, riders, pedestrians, and cyclists. There is, therefore, a need for more traffic-free routes. There are locations where significant improvements could be achieved by creating new connections within the network.

Safe routes for walking, cycling and horse-riding and wheelchair and mobility scooter users will be provided by:

- Creating new traffic-free routes.
- Improving selected bridleways to make them more accessible to cyclists, ensuring no detriment to equestrians or other user groups. Access improvements need to benefit all types of user.
- Working with local authorities to seek to create new routes and links within and connecting into the Forest, particularly public bridleways which provide access for a greater range of user

groups. New routes and links should be created maintained and protected under the Highways Act by local authorities.

Land use change and development within and around the edge of the Forest area presents considerable threats and opportunities to public rights of way and the wider access network. The Forest Team will continue to monitor applications and seek opportunities for improvement.

New opportunities to improve the access network through development will be sought by:

- Working with local authorities and developers to protect existing rights of way and to create new definitive rights of way and other non-statutory traffic-free routes through the planning process.

Guided walks and promoted routes for cycling and horse-riding are effective and enjoyable ways of attracting people into the Forest and onto the rights of way network. This can include those who might not otherwise have the opportunity or confidence to enjoy these facilities. Combined with regular talks and presentations, these will continue to serve as a useful tool to educate people in enjoying and understanding the countryside.

The rights of way network will be promoted by:

- Continuing to promote and encourage people to use the rights of way network and give them increased confidence to do so. Methods will include leading guided walks, hosting events, producing trail guides, and making presentations to groups.

Many areas of accessible woodland, greenspace and countryside are available to the public for informal recreation throughout the year. These are owned and managed by various agencies including the local authorities, conservation charities, private landowners and the Forest of Marston Vale Trust.



The Forest Centre & Millennium Country Park (created, owned and managed by the Forest of Marston Vale Trust) provides the strategic 'destination' site within the Forest; is recognised as one of the best sites in the country; is a model of highly multi-functional green infrastructure; and has helped seed a new leisure economy within the Forest area. It serves as the recreational 'heart' and hub for the Forest of Marston Vale and has the potential to develop further to meet the needs of a growing local population.

There is currently an extensive range of signage, interpretation and promotional material in place relating to accessible woodlands and greenspaces within the Forest of Marston Vale. However, many of these sites provide only limited access to people with mobility difficulties. Efforts will be made to improve access for all to sites managed by the Forest of Marston Vale Trust, wherever this is feasible. Managers of other sites in the Forest area will also be encouraged to improve their sites' accessibility.

Land use change and development can impact on the Forest area's network of accessible woodland, greenspace and countryside sites. Resources such as land and funding for creating new sites can be provided as part of development proposals, or new sites may be brought forward and established directly as part of such proposals. Housing growth and other development can pose threats to existing sites, their condition, sustainability and carrying capacity.

Access for all to high-quality greenspace will be improved by:

- Ensuring sites managed by the Forest of Marston Vale Trust are well signed, well publicised, welcoming and provide high quality interpretation. They will also have well-surfaced paths where feasible and a high standard of site furniture design and construction. Other site managers will be encouraged to adopt similar standards.
- Ensuring sites managed by the Forest of Marston Vale Trust provide access and opportunity for people with as wide a range of needs as possible and encourage other site managers to do the same.
- Seeking opportunities and resources to secure the creation of new accessible woodlands and greenspace sites that complement, expand and connect the existing network of such sites.
- Working with local planning authorities, planners and developers to ensure that development proposals protect and are not detrimental to existing accessible woodlands and greenspace sites within the Forest and provide resources to fully mitigate any potential impacts to such sites and generally improve them.



There is an extensive range of sports and other activities on offer within the Forest. These include football, hockey, tennis, cycling and orienteering as well as water sports and angling on the lakes (themselves a driver of leisure visits). Cycling for leisure and commuting continues to increase in popularity. An important asset is the Sustrans National Cycle Network Route 51, which is traffic-free through to the Bedford River Valley Park, through Bedford, and then mainly on quiet roads through Cranfield to Milton Keynes.⁵²

Recreation and sport in the Forest of Marston Vale will be promoted by:



- Working with Sport England, local authorities, sports clubs and others, and supporting complementary initiatives which encourage active and passive recreational activities and support their associated health and wellbeing benefits.
- Encouraging those using sports facilities, within and close to the Forest area, to use public transport and traffic-free routes as an alternative to the car.

10. The Next 25 Years

The Forest of Marston Vale has made impressive advances in the last 30 years, increasing tree canopy cover from 3.6% in the beginning to almost 17% in 2025; engaging individuals, communities and a diverse range of partners and stakeholders to participate in the creation of the Community Forest; delivering environmental regeneration and stimulating positive social and economic change, through the major landscape, climate resilience, biodiversity, recreation, and quality of life benefits it provides; changing perceptions of the area through an emerging Forest identity.

Extensive experience across England's Community Forests has proved the Community Forest concept; the work of Forest Research⁵³ and others nationally, and Natural Capital Solutions⁵⁴ locally have helped validate it; an overwhelming majority of the respondents to the recent public consultation endorsed it and advocated for more (see Appendix F).

The creation of the Forest of Marston Vale, already 3 decades in the making, is a long-term commitment to transforming the area and the Marston Vale of today would be unrecognisable when compared to that of the early 1990's.

Climate change and biodiversity loss are the major crises of our time. As floods, droughts and storms intensify, more people will come to realise the importance of nature-based solutions for mitigation and adaptation. Trees and woodland play a role in reducing the risk of flood, but also in maintaining moisture in the landscape during drought. Wiser use of water will become a strong theme in the coming years as demand for it grows. More space will be required for solar panels and wind turbines. The Forest Plan will play a role in guiding the best scale and locations for these installations. In addition, there will be more work addressing the problems caused by pests and diseases, predicted to be compounded by climate change.

The reversal of biodiversity loss is yet to reach the top of the political agenda; however, this will change as more people begin to understand how nature underpins the economy, and that nature needs its diversity to be fully functional. Impacts on nature will be exacerbated by urban growth and the provision of more homes, businesses, and infrastructure, not only locally but also within the wider region, with large scale developments planned both inside and outside the Forest boundary. The Forest of Marston Vale will play its part in addressing this issue and in influencing development within the Forest area.

Being at the centre of a major growth area will present more opportunities for the Forest of Marston Vale Trust and its partners, to work on even more projects outside the Forest boundary. The zone of influence of the Forest will spread as it builds on its success, helping it radiate outwards. Experience and learning gained in the Forest of Marston Vale will continue to be shared with the wider family of England's Community Forests.

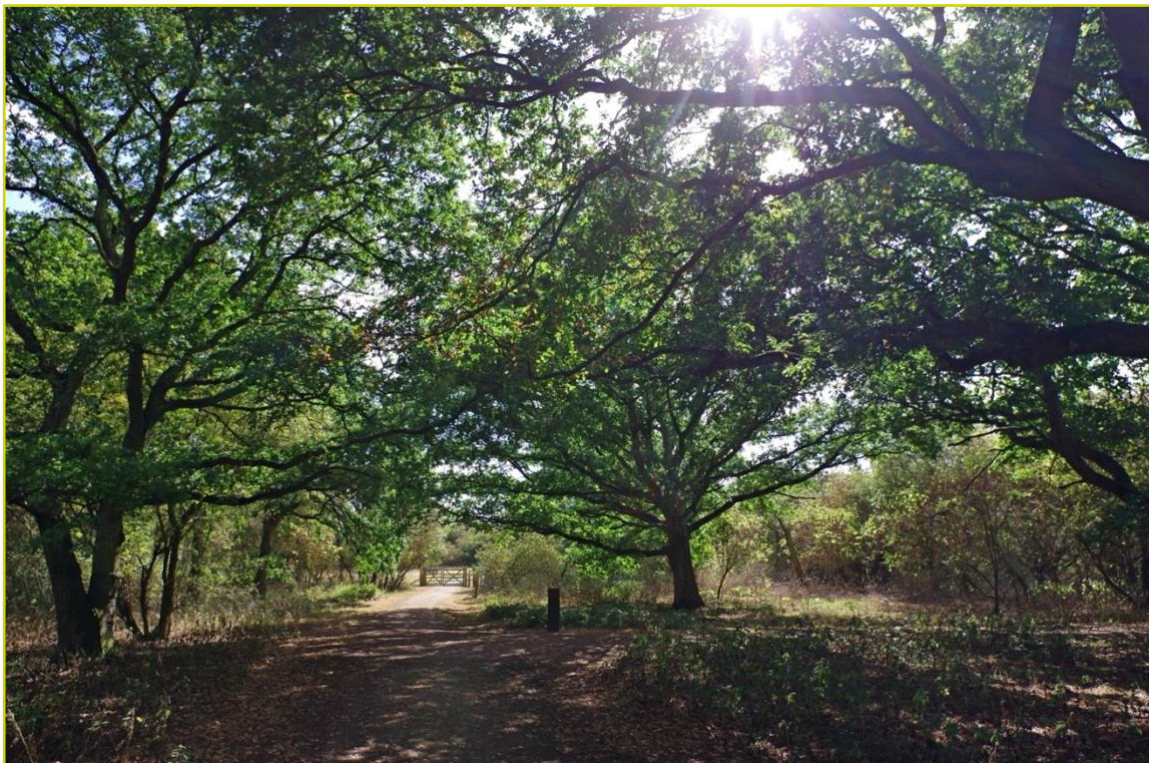
Over the next 25 years, with continuing focus on the target of 30% tree canopy cover, the Forest will play its role in ensuring that even more trees and woodlands are established and nurtured. There will be continued emphasis on providing more trees and accessible greenspace close to where people live and work. Public interest in the therapeutic value of nature will increase. Communities will actively engage in shaping the growth of the Forest – it will be a 'people-powered' forest. More people will come to value and enjoy cycling and walking and there will be less reliance on the car. As has already been seen in places like the Netherlands, there will be a change of mindset away from the provision of car parking and a stronger demand for traffic-free routes. Creation of the Forest is well underway, and this will continue apace; efforts will increasingly look to combine more planting with a strong focus on managing those assets that have already been created, as the Forest matures. A growing woodland economy will

be developed, more people will work in the local forestry sector, new businesses and technologies will develop around this and new career opportunities be presented to future generations.



All these demands will drive the trend towards multi-functional land use, where trees and other natural features will be found in more places in the landscape and deliver more benefits. These features will vary from larger and better-connected woodlands to more utilisation of trees in agriculture (agroforestry). Most of the land within the area will continue to be farmed and those working to create the Forest will continue to work closely with farmers. In urban areas, greener, low carbon housing schemes with more room for sustainable drainage and nature, more trees in streets and even trees on buildings, as has been seen with, for example, the Bosco Verticale in Milan⁵⁵, will become more common.

The Forest of Marston Vale Trust will continue with enthusiasm to work with its partners, planners, designers, builders, managers, volunteers, and the wider public, innovating and adapting to changing circumstances and emerging opportunities to make all this happen for the benefit of all – for the benefit of people, nature and planet.



And finally...



As work continues towards the target of 30% tree canopy cover...

More trees will be planted – the right tree, in the right place, for the right reason;

Woodlands and green spaces will be more abundant, better connected, more permeable to wildlife, and more accessible to people; boosting biodiversity and allowing more people to enjoy time spent in nature and all the benefits that can bring;

Trees, woodland and other habitats will benefit from high quality management, making them healthy, better for biodiversity and more resilient to the impact of climate change; there will be more job and business opportunities in a growing woodland economy;

Through a growing awareness and understanding, the creation of the Forest will inspire a culture which respects and values trees and nature, recognises their importance to the health, wellbeing and prosperity of people and helps to develop an enduring sense of ownership and place;

A thriving Forest of Marston Vale will continue to attract investment and become an ever more desirable location to live, work and do business.

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