

Heart of National Forest Foundation and National Forest Company  
**UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL - VISION AND ACTION PLAN  
FOR HEART OF THE NATIONAL FOREST**



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Volume 1 - Executive Summary  
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## **The Study Documents**

The presentation of this study findings have been broken down into the following:

Volume One - Executive Summary

Volume Two - Context, Analysis and Vision

Volume Three - Action Plan

Volume Four - Self Catering Accommodation Outline Business Plan

Volume Five - Woodland and Countryside Management Outline Business Plan

Volume Six - Mobile Explorer Outline Business Plan

Technical Appendix - Technical information and case studies



# 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Unlocking the Potential Vision and Action to 2026

- 1.1 Sitting centrally within the National Forest, between Swadlincote, Ashby and Measham, the 10,000 acre Heart of the National Forest (HNF) is ready to enter into the next phase of works to become an exemplar of the National Forest and an asset of regional significance. Our vision for the Heart is clear. It envisages significant steps in the transformational change of the area. Unlocking its full economic potential, through place shaping to create a strategic green infrastructure and established visitor destination, which reconnects people and place, celebrating the cultural past and embracing a green future, delivering interesting places and a high quality, well managed environment.
- 1.2 Having established the physical transformation from an area of significant derelict land concentration to an area of substantial woodland coverage, the challenge now is to unlock the economic potential created by this new woodland canvas. The aspiration for the area is as a major visitor destination and strategic green infrastructure set within a new diverse forest economy; however to meet these aspirations, there are some key challenges that need to be addressed.

### *Our Approach*

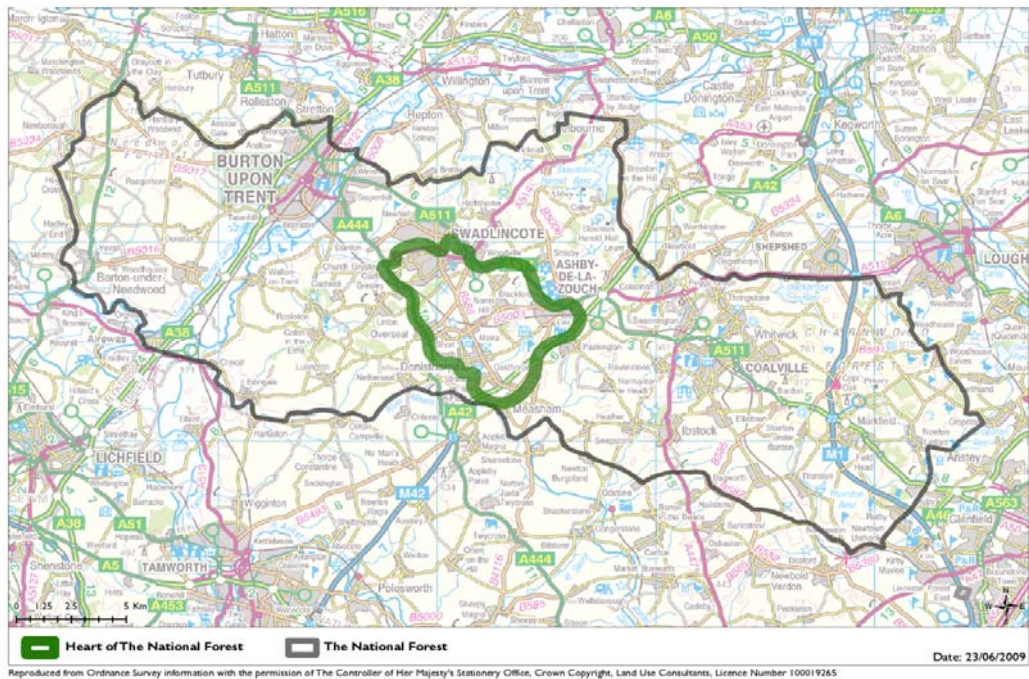
- 1.3 Our approach has been focused on understanding the uniqueness of the Heart, the path travelled, what has been delivered and taking stock of changes that are likely to impact on the future Vision and delivery. We have consulted with over sixty individuals, from a wide range of organisations in order to understand the future challenges and issues affecting the area and their aspirations. This was followed up with five workshops, with over fifty attendees, focused on exploring issues around tourism, woodland management, spatial and economic policy, connectivity, and skills, training and social enterprise. In addition to the workshops, we attended a number of local community group meetings to gauge support and ideas for the Heart from local communities.
- 1.4 Over fifty documents were reviewed, these included research commissioned by the client team, and other policy, business plans and strategies at regional and local level.
- 1.5 A draft Study Report and Technical Report was prepared. The findings and action tables (scored against a set of guiding principles) were presented to the Project Steering Group who selected three projects. The selected projects have been developed as Outline Business Plans to take forward as practical short term actions. These include:
  - Developing a Woodland and Countryside Management Community Interest Company.
  - Self Catering development options for three different sites for forest lodges, tepees and barge boat accommodation.
  - A Mobile Explorer project to improve orientation and interest.

- 1.6 Since the first draft, the action plan tables have been amended, to provide a long list of project actions that are to be developed further with various partners.

*What is unique about this area?*

- 1.7 The area is centrally situated within the National Forest and is a microcosm of the National Forest (see Figure 1 below). It has undergone a physical transformation, from mining decline to a new developing Forest. Once some sites are restored, woodland coverage will reach 27% to 30%. There is an unusual land ownership with a high level of land in public/charity ownership. These landowners have a greater desire to provide public access and recreation on the land. Given the young age of the new landscape, there are opportunities to introduce sports and facilities. Landowners have identified recreation as higher priority than biodiversity. The area has a concentration on trails and networks, and tourism attractions already in place. The wider area is due to grow considerably in housing numbers, but interestingly the demographic forecasts predict a growth in young people, which goes against general trends. There are some very deprived communities within very close reach of the Heart. The National Forest (and hence the Heart) has been acknowledged in a number of regional strategies and there is very strong partnership working in this area.

*Figure 1 Context of the HNF within the NF*



*What are the aspirations for the HNF?*

- 1.8 Stakeholder aspirations for this area are high and these are complemented by regional policy. The general view is that the *job is not done* yet, and further targeted interventions are required to unlock the full potential of the HNF in terms of:

- Securing a high quality landscape, built development and visitor experience.
- Becoming a major tourism and leisure destination.
- Meeting its economic potential in terms of generating wealth, jobs, business start ups, and skills and contribution to health and well being.
- Developing the woodland environmental economy potential of the area.
- Improving the cohesiveness of the area between place and people.
- Increasing the sense of orientation, interest, information and confidence in using the area.

## The Challenges

1.9 The area has significant economic potential as a major tourist destination, in developing a woodland and environmental economy and in developing the leisure opportunities. However, to unlock this potential, there is a need to move from the current 'emerging visitor destination' to an 'established destination'; and to create a highly connected, multi functional, well managed green infrastructure asset with a variety of leisure pursuits to serve the existing and growing regional population and wider tourist catchments. This in turn will bring considerable new Forest based wealth generation, employment, skills and business opportunities and help to create strong and healthy communities. Some of the challenges are:

- Seek to gain explicit recognition of the Heart of the National Forest within key emerging spatial, economic and green infrastructure policy at a regional, sub regional and local level in order to ensure that the full potential of the area gains appropriate policy recognition and support.
- To move from an emerging visitor destination to an established destination.
- To develop a creative mechanism for managing and paying for a high quality woodland and countryside management, by identifying cost reduction measures and revenue generation from the woodland produce and land assets.
- Support the development of a woodland and environmental economy and skills training.
- To ensure the viability and sustainability of CONKERS, through the refreshment of facilities, extending the catchment market and addressing seasonality of demand.
- To extend the catchment draw and stay to the area through new tourist attractions (complementary to CONKERS), improved linkages between existing and increasing overnight accommodation.
- Help to tackle the challenges of multiple deprivation faced by pockets of communities close to the Heart by developing health and skills initiatives based on the Forest.
- To develop a new exciting leisure economy building on the tremendous opportunities presented by the new landscape.
- To ensure that much more is made of what has been created, by improving virtual and physical connections, so that the sum of the whole is much greater.
- Address the fact that this is an emerging Forest landscape and introduce a sense of interest, orientation, and confidence in the area by creating interesting spaces to move through, using technology, art, heritage, landmark features,

signage and 'local champions' through a 'proud to be part of the Forest' campaign.

- Work with key partners who have a stake in the area, especially land owners, community, service providers, and established and emerging partnerships to realise the full potential of the Heart.



## Vision and Themes for the Heart of the National Forest

1.10 To meet these challenges the vision for the HNF is:

### *The Vision*

*The Heart of the National Forest in 2026 is an exciting new forest landscape. It supports a successful forest economy and is a major tourist and leisure destination. The former industrial landscape has been successfully restored to create a highly attractive, well managed environment, providing an employment base for local people. The Heart of the National Forest celebrates its heritage, supports strong communities, and is adapted to climate change. It has a strong sense of place and identity which is inspiring for its residents and visitors.*

### *The Themes*

1.11 There are four themes to guide the delivery of the Vision; some of these have sub themes. These are listed below and summarised in Figure 2:

### *Policy Matters*

*Aim: Ensure the potential of the Heart is recognised in key policy documents*

This has one sub theme: *Mainstream potential into policy.*

### *Partnership Matters*

*Aim: Continue to work in Partnership to realise the Vision*

This has one theme: *Symbiotic partnerships*

### *Prosperity Matters*

*Aim: Unlock the new economic potential of a diversified Forest economy.*

This has four sub themes which are:

- *Tourism* - Moving from an emerging visitor destination to an established destination.
- *Woodland and Environmental Economy* - Developing a woodland and environmental economy.
- *Leisure Economy* - Developing a new exciting leisure economy.
- *Stronger Communities* - Addressing inequalities and building strong, healthy communities.

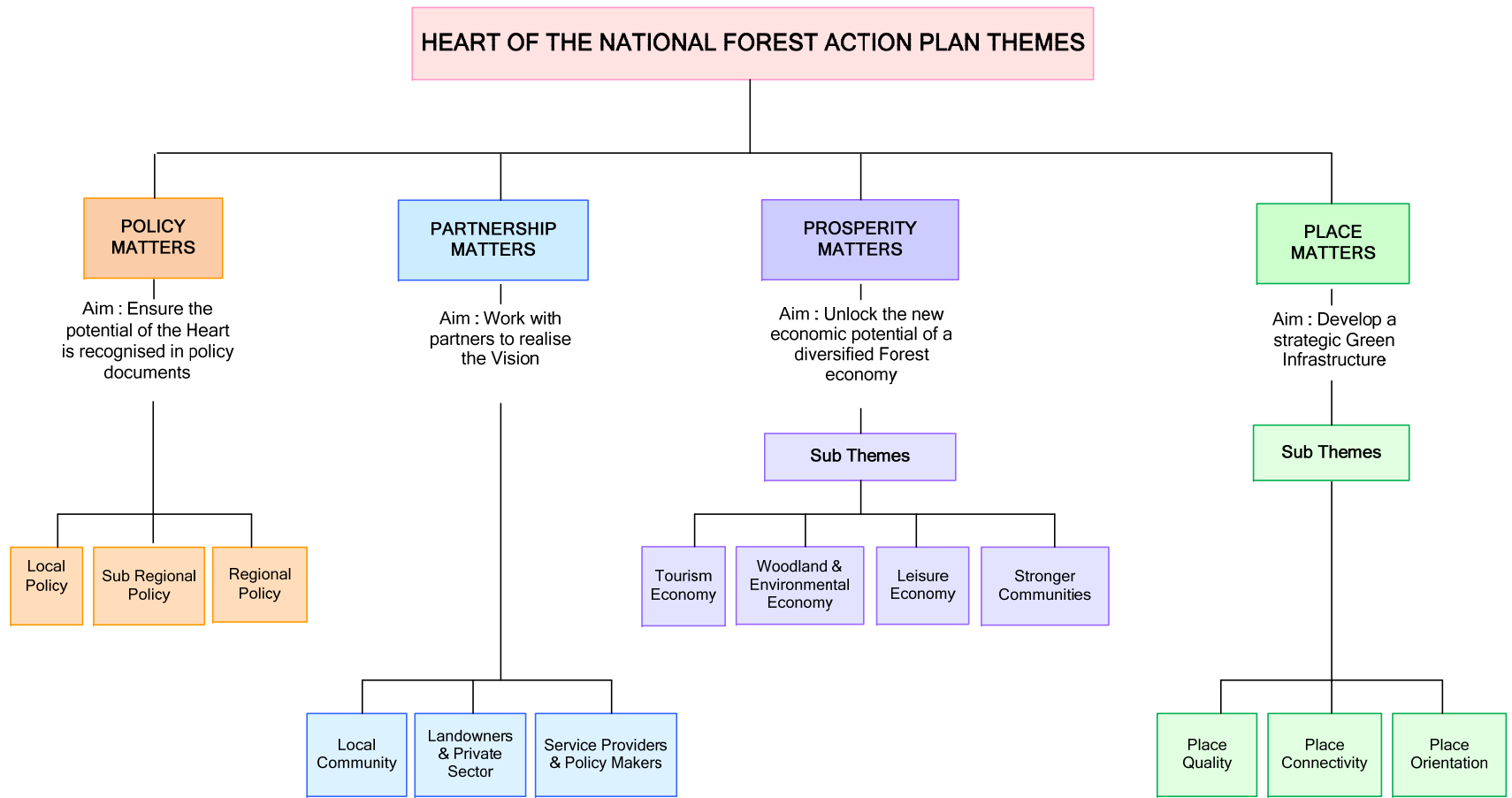
### *Place Matters*

*Aim: Develop a strategic green infrastructure.*

This has three sub themes:

- *Place Quality* - A well managed attractive woodland and countryside setting.
- *Place Connectivity* - A well connected and multi-functional place
- *Place Orientation* - An easy to orientate, fun, interesting and exciting place.

Figure 2 Heart of the National Forest Action Plan Themes Diagram



### *The Heart of the National Forest Outcomes*

- 1.12 As a result of concerted action within the HNF, project delivery will lead to the following outcomes:
- An exemplar of the National Forest, an established visitor destination and a strategic green infrastructure.
  - An additional 300<sup>1</sup> jobs based within tourism, recreation and woodland economy jobs.
  - A sustained increase in the visitor numbers to CONKERS to at least 275,000, of which an additional 12,500 will be from outside the East Midlands<sup>2</sup>;
  - An additional 20,000 new visitors, eventually rising to 40,000 new visitors to the proposed family cycle centre, as part of the overall National Forest visitor expenditure growth targets
  - 150,000<sup>3</sup> visitors attracted to the Heart as a result of the completion of Phase 2 of the Ashby Canal.
  - A sustained increase in the use of the woodlands, trails and associated facilities in the Heart of the National Forest by residents and visitors (once benchmarks are established)<sup>4</sup>
  - Up to 500<sup>5</sup> bed spaces in self-catering and serviced accommodation created to serve visitor market and additional camping and touring pitches
  - 30% of the area to have woodland coverage, with over 150 hectares<sup>6</sup> of former mineral workings and landfill sites restored to new economic after uses.
  - Establishment of Forest Futures Trust to secure quality land management and spin off new woodland enterprises and develop stronger healthy communities.
  - Development of the Heart of the National Forest Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) training initiatives aimed around woodland management.
  - New businesses set up to delivery woodland, environmental, leisure and tourism economy.
  - A range of water sports, and active / adrenalin sports developed.
  - Revitalisation and additional impetus provided to the regeneration of Swadlincote, Coalville, Burton on Trent, Ashby and Measham town centres as key services centres serving the needs of visitors to the HNF.
  - Exemplar eco/green design standards and woodland context reflected in built development quality.
  - Land mark features and interesting places based on a series of arts and community heritage projects creating an improved sense of place, fun and orientation.
  - Technology innovation used to improve connectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on 2004 Action Plan For Forest Park and additional economic proposals

<sup>2</sup> As a direct result of investment in the Aerial Walkway project and future refreshments

<sup>3</sup> Ashby Canal Business Plan

<sup>4</sup> Reflecting the original 2004 aspirations for the Forest Park of 600,000 visitors by 2013 and up to 1 million following the restoration of Donington 2 and the Albion

<sup>5</sup> Based on original 2004 Action Plan

<sup>6</sup> Based on original 2004 assessment.

- Local residents participating in sports, informal recreation and 'green gym' projects to improve health.
- Local communities 'proud of the Forest' and volunteering in a range of activities contributing to well being and stronger communities, and spreading interest and enthusiasm about the Heart.
- Improved biodiversity generated from linkages in woodland assets and proactive woodland management.
- Accessible routes, with non car based travel promoted as a movement feature for the area - a place where you can park the car and move around using alternative modes to get in touch with nature.
- A well connected and well managed network of public rights of way and Greenways.

## Delivery

1.13 We do not consider that a major new tourist attraction should be created in the Heart of the National Forest. Rather our analysis based on a review of evidence, strategies and stakeholder consultation points to the need to:

- **Realise the full benefits** of the area by making more of what has already been created through greater inter-linkages both physical and virtual.
- **Secure the future economic potential** of this area by establishing a mechanism for managing the landscape, to ensure it is of the expected high quality going into the future.
- **Mainstream the potential** by securing appropriate policy recognition of the area in key policy documents in terms of its economic, environmental and social potential.
- **Continue with planned actions**, introducing a range of pragmatic actions in the short to medium term to develop existing facilities and address the current weaknesses of the area, especially in terms of overnight accommodation and the need to provide a 'regularly refresh' CONKERS.
- **Initiate market testing** to introduce new commercial leisure and visitor accommodation opportunities in readiness for implementation (taking account of the current economic climate).
- **Initiate creative visioning** through regional art and cultural bodies to inform thinking on making interesting spaces during a 'developing Forest' and new refresh ideas for CONKERS.
- **Create cohesion between place and people**, with much greater emphasis on community involvement, particularly young people.
- **Develop symbiotic relations** with partners to secure joint aspirations for the Heart, working within existing and emerging Partnership agendas rather than seeking to create stand alone structures.
- **Ensure long term financial viability** of projects and of the area as whole by carefully selecting complementary projects.
- **Create an environmentally sustainable** and high quality microcosm of the National Forest.

1.14 The focus of the new actions in the short term is about works that will help to secure the future potential of the area in terms of policy, land management and market testing. This

- will require resourcing especially in terms of staff time and finance. There will be some immediate change through the delivery of planned new attractions such as the Family Cycle Centre and the Aerial Walkway. There will be medium term change through the phased implementation of the Ashby Canal, the introduction of new creative self catering accommodation and possibly some more 'fun art' installations that improve orientation and sense of place. This will complement the National Forest Delivery Plan 2009 - 2014.
- 1.15 There are already organisations in place such as the Heart of the National Forest Foundation and the National Forest Company, Forestry Commission, Local Authorities and Charities such as the Woodland Trust, and the Ashby Wolds Regeneration Forum, who are involved in the delivery of initiatives within the Heart. Through this Vision and Action Plan it will be important for these and new organisations, communities and land owners to meet on an ongoing basis to consider new actions and ideas to secure the delivery of the Vision and take ownership of specific projects. A refresh of the Action Plan is likely to be needed in five years to take stock and develop new pragmatic actions for the next five years.
- 1.16 The momentum established within the HNF needs to be maintained in order to fully unlock the potential of this new transforming area, and enable the area to become self sustaining as a vibrant economic and environmental asset for the region. It is critical for the future of the area that a diversified strategic Forest economy is created and a quality landscape secured. It is also important that key facilities and linkages are created across the area to maximise the impact of what has already been achieved and to move towards becoming an 'established visitor and leisure destination of national significance'

## Action Plan

- 1.17 Volume 3 provides an Action Plan to accompany the study. The Plan provides a list of actions by theme / sub theme and is accompanied with an explanation of the project and how to take this forward.



