WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The Forest of Dean and Wye Valley was declared as a National Forest Park in 1938, and has steadily developed as a national visitor destination. Early provision of recreation infrastructure focused on camping and hostel accommodation, picnic areas, promotion of nature trails and rambles, and scenic drives. A series of official guide books were produced during the 1950s and into the 1970s to promote the area and support visitors after arrival.

The current visitor offer is focused upon ‘visitor hub sites’ where car parking, café, toilet and additional facilities are provided for day visitors. All of the cafés, cycle hire provision and more adventurous charged facilities are operated by third party commercial tenants from the hub sites. These are linked to a number of waymarked walking, cycling and running routes. A specialist cycle centre is provided to focus the cycle offer of the family cycle trail and the specialist downhill trails in a dedicated facility. The ‘hub sites’ in the Dean (Symonds Yat, Cannop Cycle Centre, Beechenhurst and Mallards Pike) collectively support over a million day visits each year.

The hub sites are supported by a second tier of car parks, such as Cannop Ponds and Speculation, to act as both ‘overflows’ when additional parking capacity is required, and as facilities for local people who would prefer to use ‘quieter’ sites to access the Forest. Some of the second tier sites currently provide direct access on to the waymarked routes and some don’t.

Overnight accommodation is provided by the Bracelands Campsite (now run by Camping in the Forest, a joint venture between the Commission and the Camping and Caravanning Club); the Christchurch Cabin site that has evolved from a camp ground into Forest Lodges operated by Forest Holidays (a company part-owned by the Forestry Commission); and Biblins Youth Camp (now operated for the Forestry Commission by Woodcraft Folk, a registered charity).

The waymarked trail network has reduced over the years to lower costs, but the flagship Sculpture Trail (managed by the Forest of Dean Sculpture Trust) at Beechenhurst remains the most popular and well used of our walking trails.

While we aim to provide facilities for all users, specific provision for those with mobility needs is restricted mainly to our hub sites. Disabled access toilets, cafés and better surfaced trails are provided at those hub sites, and we encourage our tenants to make additional provisions as well.

The Forest hosts a growing number of organised events each year, ranging from national mountain bike competitions to horse riding and orienteering events. These events bring in large and growing numbers of competitors from across the country and provide additional revenues for accommodation providers and other visitor businesses in the area.

The capacity of the Forest to absorb people is huge, but, on more and more days each year, our hub sites are at – or over – capacity. This leads to crowding of car parks, queuing for toilets and cafés and conflict on multi-user trails. The capacity issues are most acute at Cannop Cycle Centre, with that site reaching capacity by mid-morning on most weekend days all year round. The popularity of the Forest as a venue for national, regional and local events also challenges capacity, and we are increasingly refusing permission for events for this reason.
We are a member of the Outdoor Recreation Network, a multi-partner body that promotes research into outdoor recreation, and establishes and shares best practice.

The area also supports a much greater array of tourist facilities and overnight accommodation providers. Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Tourism Association provides an excellent vehicle for networking and promotion of an integrated visitor offer. Other organisations promote a variety of guided walks and trails on the public forest estate, some with our knowledge, and many without.

WHERE DO WE WANT TO GET TO?

In 100 years, we want the Forest to be a distinctive and cherished landscape loved and enjoyed by people who can experience nature and wildlife, and learn about our story in an engaging and inspirational way.

Our facilities will be well maintained and of a quality that meets the expectations of our diverse visitor base, supporting and encouraging healthy lifestyles as people enjoy a varied range of activities.

However, the Forest will not be a manicured theme park. It will feel like a wild place where nature retains the upper hand and trees loom large. It will be a place where a person can immerse themselves, get lost, and be at one with nature.
1 Maintain and enhance our main hub sites as the focus for day visitors to the Forest

We will maintain our network of hub sites (Beechenhurst, Symonds Yat Rock, Mallards Pike, and Cannop Cycle Centre) providing a consistent level of site maintenance and quality of offer so that visitors have an enjoyable, active and safe visit, connecting with nature and our heritage, and are encouraged to return.

To keep pace with visitor expectations in our modern world, we will seek to steadily enhance our sites with improvements to surfacing, signage, electric vehicle charging and car park payment systems, for example. All of our hub sites will have direct access on to the refreshed trail networks.

Our hub sites all have capacity issues, yet the simple response of expanding the number of parking spaces, café seating and toilet facilities, for example, is not sustainable in the long-term. Different approaches to managing total demand need to be considered. However, in the short- and medium-terms we will look to expand parking (and attendant facilities) at those sites we believe can sustain higher peak visitor numbers. In addition, we will critically examine new potential hub sites in the future where land currently used for purposes other than woodland or nature conservation may come forward for leisure development.

2 Maintain and enhance our second tier car parks

A second tier of car parks in strategic locations around the Forest will be maintained and enhanced to act as ‘overflows’ for peak periods when the hubs are full, or as alternatives for those who don’t wish to use the extra facilities at the hubs. Over time, we expect all car parks operated by us to be charged, albeit at different rates to reflect demand and facilities provided. Second tier car parks won’t necessarily align to the trail network, although we will review the waymarked trails (see commitment 3) with the intention of linking sites where possible.
Recreation

3 Review and extend our network of waymarked trails for people of all abilities to walk, run or ride

We aim to provide a network of multi-user trails that start and finish at our hub sites.

The walking trail network will be planned to provide a minimum of a short all-ability circular surfaced route on relatively level ground, and a longer circular route. We also aspire to introduce a new circular Forest Trail to be suitable for walkers and horse riders.

The waymarked downhill cycling trails will be confined to the Cannop Cycle Centre / Sallow Vallets area of the Forest, and the Family Cycling trail (and community links) will be retained largely as it currently is.

New waymarked running trails will be introduced as part of our Active Forests programme.

The trail routes will be designed to take in different Forest habitats and sites of built and cultural heritage which respect and respond to the ‘quiet zones’. The trails will be supported by an interpretation strategy that utilises digital technologies, such as mobile phone apps, so visitors can learn about our natural, cultural and built heritage without reliance on traditional panels.

4 Focus our visitor interpretation on our hub sites and core network of waymarked trails using digital technologies

Our interpretation strategy will include a focus on visitors using the hub sites and formal trail network. The digital interpretation will focus on ‘telling our story’, and will variously cover woodland management, natural, cultural and built heritage. This will allow for seasonal changes to the messaging, and be able to respond to forest operations more flexibly. On site signage will be focused on directional and orientation signing, and ‘tasters’ of the story telling to encourage people to engage with the digital mediums.

5 Publish a framework for managing public events

The increasing popularity of the Forest as a venue for national, regional and local events, such as running and mountain biking, is such that a framework to guide decision making is necessary. This framework will guide decisions on event locations and routes, frequency and capacities. The framework will be published to aid event organisers arrange their events, and provide greater transparency regarding our decision making.

6 Identify recreation zones around each main hub site

To support the spatial management of the Forest, recreation zones will be identified around each visitor hub site. These zones will be managed in a more intensive way to provide a safe, welcoming gateway to visitors who are unused to visiting the countryside. However, in doing so we will work to ensure that the Forest environment is is not overly manicured.

7 Establish a Visitor Advisory Group for the Forest of Dean

This group will provide a forum to help shape delivery of facilities and event management, and improve customer services within the Forest of Dean. The terms of reference need to be developed, but we will seek representation from Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Tourism Association, our recreation business tenants, and user groups. In addition, the group may wish to set up smaller task groups to explore the potential around specific recreation activities.

These are our principles of land management to maintain and enhance our recreation facilities for all.