



# Savernake Forest A Way Forward?

## Our Shared Forest

Forestry England's strategy to address the twin biodiversity and climate change crises, alongside enabling people to enjoy and gain well-being benefit from the nation's forests is set out in the document 'Growing the Future' (<https://www.forestryengland.uk/growing-the-future>). Ahead of re-writing the Forest Plan for Savernake Forest, Forestry England are consulting stakeholders on a future vision under the working title 'Our Shared Forest'.

*Our Vision for Savernake is to nurture a shared forest unlike any other. By allowing the decisions we take to be guided by the natural potential of the land, as well as by the varied influences of our ever changing world, we will create a diverse and inclusive forest that is a global example of what can be achieved through forward-thinking forestry.*

The draft Our Shared Forest document is appended.

## Working with the Savernake Estate Trustees

Forestry England would like the Trustees, who represent our Landlord, to endorse and support the vision for Savernake Forest. The recent meeting between Forestry England and the Trustees showed that there are a number of common aspirations that could be enabled by the new vision and evolved ways of working.

By its nature, the vision is strategic. Management of beneficial public access to Savernake, alongside antisocial behaviour of a minority, is a sensitive issue, possible solutions to which are not set out in the public consultation document.

To aid the Trustees consideration of the vision, we have confidentially set out below some initial ideas around a future approach to recreation management for Savernake.

## Access to the Forest

Over many decades the public has enjoyed largely unrestricted access to the Forest, on foot, by bike, by horse and by car. The Forest is a highly valued and cherished green-

space where people can walk, exercise their dog, and ride in a largely unregulated way and free of charge.

## Formal Facilities

Formal recreation facilities have been provided by Forestry England at Postern Hill, with a large car park, small toilet block and a camp site (operated by Camping in the Forest). These facilities are extremely well used, and their popularity is having a detrimental impact on the ecological values, and aesthetic values, of the site. Probably the most significant of the ecological values is decline of the veteran tree interest in and around the car park, which is most likely due to soil/root compaction. There are no Forestry England provided waymarked trails of any description, the only trails provided previously have either been removed or were provided by third parties such as the Parish Council.

Across England, Forestry England's main visitor sites have grown and received investment to maintain them as regional or national visitor destinations. Savernake has not benefited from that investment because of historic and long-running uncertainties and contrary views expressed regarding the lease, resumption of land under the lease and the silence of the lease regarding visitor facilities. The type of investment / facility that is provided on similar sites around England would be:

- Quality pay and display car park, often now with ANPR payment systems;
- Café and play facilities;
- Toilet facilities, often with changing facilities (including specialist facilities for those with learning and / or mobility difficulties);
- Waymarked trails - including a surfaced all-ability route, walking and running trails. Most sites, but by no means all, will also have a family cycling loop.
- Where a cycle offer is made, sites will have a cycle hire, shop and workshop facility;
- Learning offer - trail based with self-guided trails and interpretation for schools, as well as young families (such as Superworm - see <https://www.forestryengland.uk/activities/superworm-activity-trails>)

## Grand Avenue and other Vehicle Access

The historic nature of the Grand Avenue, in terms of landscaped parkland; as well as the biodiversity and aesthetic values of the Forest are poorly served by the unregulated use of the Grand Avenue by the public for recreational access, anti-social activities and using the Avenue as a through route, or 'rat-run'.

The Grand Avenue is not the only access used by the public, albeit the entrances at Ashlade Firs, Amity Drive and Leigh Hill are signed as 'no public access'. Increased use of all of these access points by the public for recreational use, as well as to undertake anti-

social activities has grown as the surrounding population has grown. This is causing increased nuisance to residents in the Forest, as well as having the same negative impacts on the aesthetic and biodiversity values of the woods.

## Zoning & the Way Forward

Forestry England are considering using the Our Shared Forest initiative, and the re-writing of the Forest Plan (and attendant SSSI management plan) to zone the Forest using 3 categories:

- Recreation Investment Zone;
- Quiet Areas
- Nature Reserve / Conservation Grazing Areas

This possible Way Forward is predicated on Postern Hill being developed as the only visitor hub, where a new, larger car park (probably 300 to 350 spaces), is provided with proper toilets, play and café facilities. Leading out from the new car park would be a series of trails.

The redevelopment of Postern Hill would be coupled with the closure of the Grand Avenue, and indeed the rest of the Forest for vehicular access by visitors.

The trail network would be routed to stay out of the quiet areas, nature reserves (which would include the grazing units); and include:

- 1km all-ability well surfaced trail;
- 3k and 5km or longer walking trails; and
- 3 and 5km surfaced running trails.

Thought needs to be given to whether a family cycle trail is provided, if one is then a length of 6 to 10km is optimum.

If agreed, then our proposal to move forward with closure of the Grand Avenue would be shaped around the following strategy:

1. Initial / immediate review and upgrading of signage at access points emphasising 'No Public Access', coupled with public information linked to agreed narrative of what we are doing and why we are doing it;
2. After a period, and once the new car park and facilities are in place installation of some form of automated barriers on the Grand Avenue.

## Renegotiation of the Lease

The current lease was written in a different age, when the pressures on the Forest were very different. Over the decades there have been numerous agreements which depart from the lease to the extent that the original lease has been superseded in many respects and cannot be relied upon.

There is an opportunity to renegotiate the lease to the mutual benefit of the Trustees and the Beneficiaries of the Estate, Forestry England, responsible members of the public and the wildlife of the Forest. This would enable investment to be made, against a backdrop of certainty and agreement - and allow revenue streams to be developed and optimised.

Savernake Forest is a shared forest, but its future is compromised currently by ambiguity, disagreement and abuse. Can we agree a way forward?

Kevin Stannard  
Forest Management Director  
West Forest District  
Forestry England.