

Part 3: Policy, Objectives & Rationale



View across the Wyre Forest: Phil Rudlin

This 10 year management plan represents a new episode in the history of the Wyre Forest. An episode guided by new policies that will help bring about a more diverse, species-rich, resilient Wyre Forest for all to enjoy.

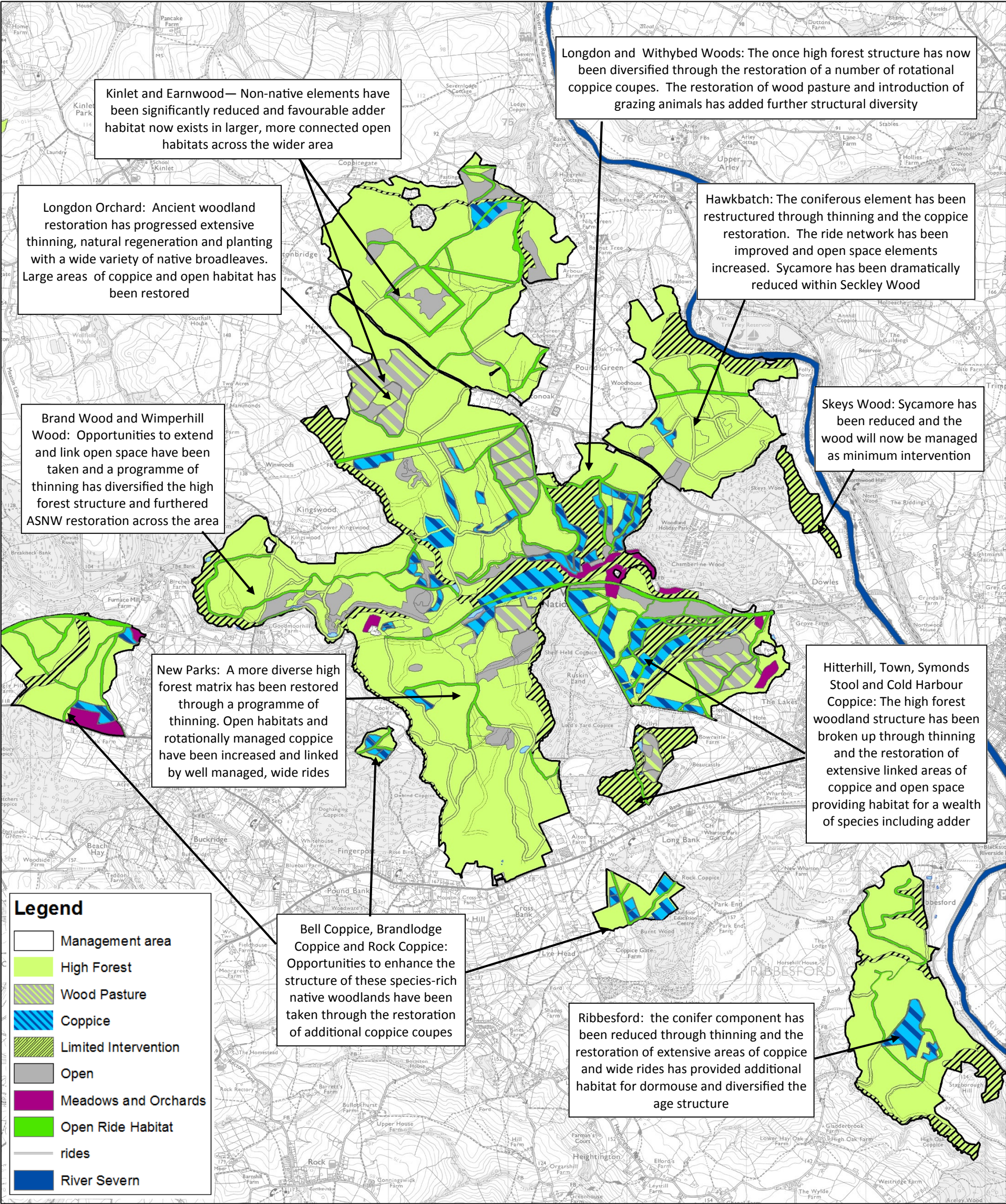
These policies, agreed by a wide range of stakeholders are outlined in the following section. Under each policy are a number of more detailed objectives. The objectives provide greater clarity around the desired outcomes and allow progress against delivery to be more effectively monitored.

Also included in this section is the rationale behind these new policies and associated objectives; the reasoning and evidence behind the proposed change in direction detailed within this management plan.

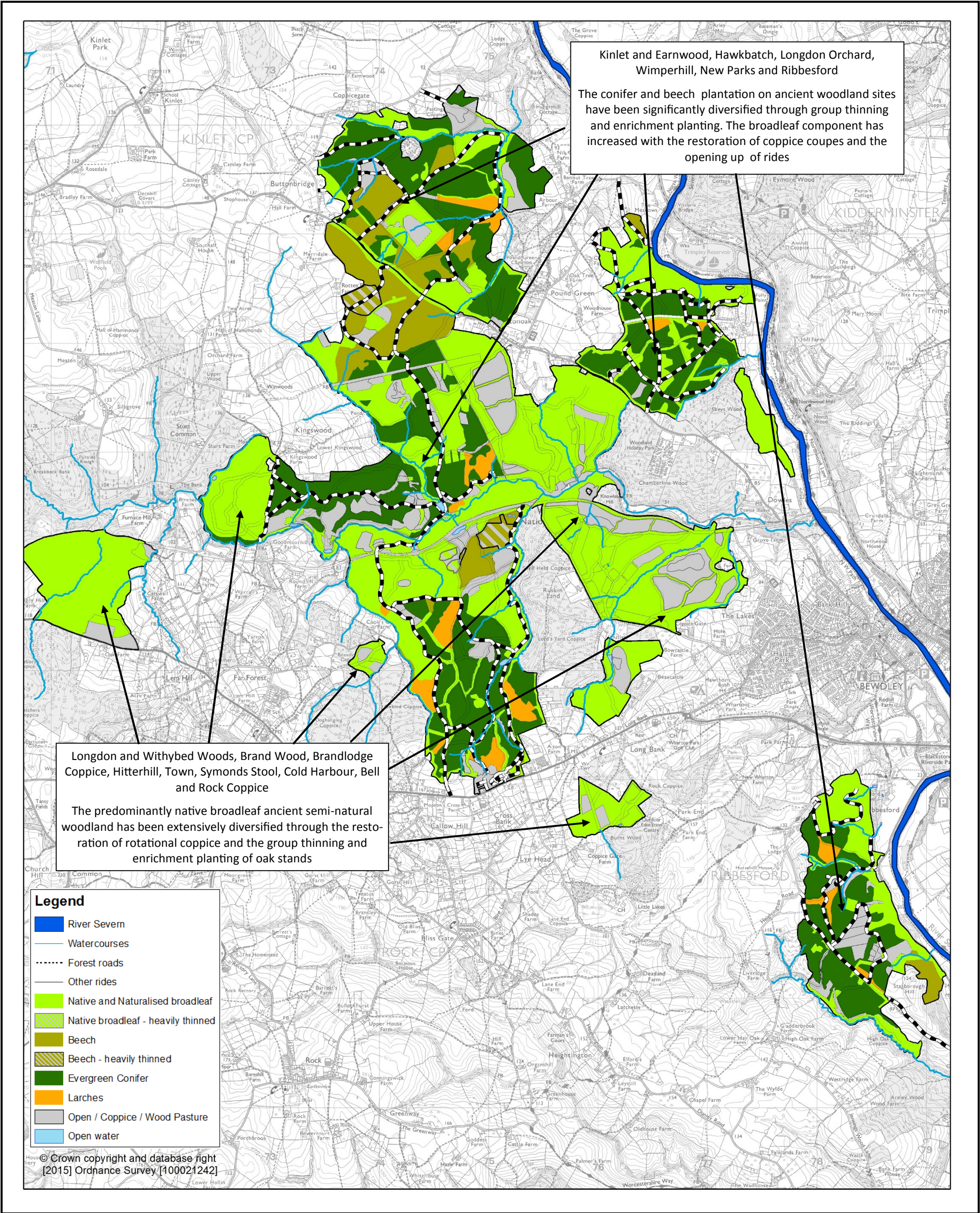
The two maps on the following pages (Habitats of the Wyre: 2026 and Woodland Composition of the Wyre: 2026) look ahead to the end of the 10 year management plan and illustrate the habitats of the Wyre Forest and the diverse woodland composition that will have been restored and created through the operations outlined within this plan.

Comparison of these maps with the current habitat and woodland composition 2016 maps in part 2 allow the changes that will take place on the ground to be more clearly envisaged.

3.1 Habitats of the Wyre: 2026



3.2 Woodland Composition of the Wyre: 2026



3.3 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Woodlands

Policy

To create a diverse and more natural woodland composed of site native tree species with a complex age structure and increased presence of decaying wood habitats.

Objectives

To create a woodland composed of site native tree species, promoting a high canopy composition of oak, silver birch and small-leaved lime, with beech, hornbeam and Scots pine as minor elements along with any remaining ash. A sub-canopy of yew, wild service, aspen, rowan, alder, crab apple and wild cherry, growing above a diverse understorey containing hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, holly, willow, guelder rose, dogwood and alder buckthorn.

To create woodland stands with a greater diversity of tree species and a permanently irregular structure, in which canopy cover is present over 30-90% of the stand area with an under-storey (2-5m high) covering at least 20% of the stand area.

To ensure that at least 3 clearly defined age classes of the most common tree species are present within each stand.

To create a diversity of broadleaved tree seed sources and ensure that no one tree species makes up more than 75% of the cover in any one layer.

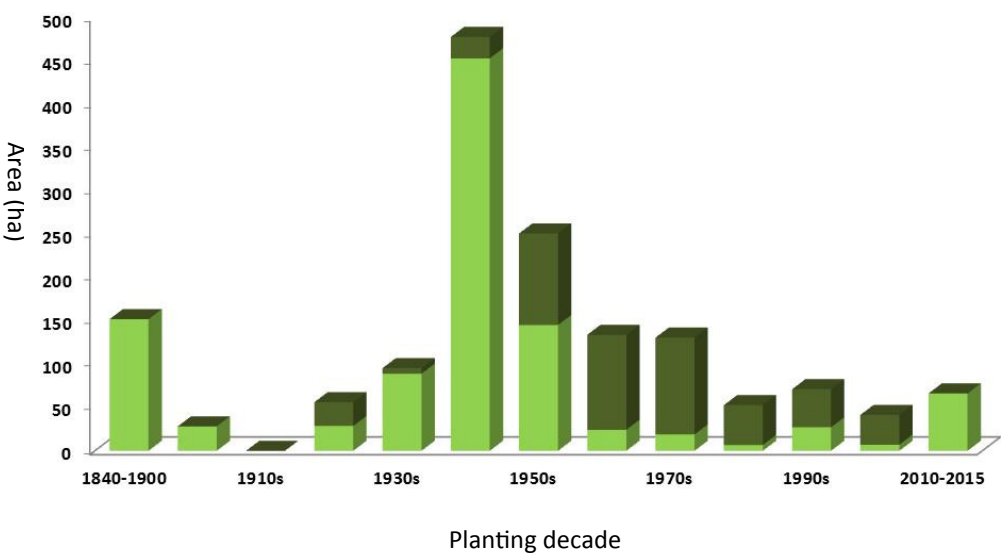
To ensure that 95% of cover in any one layer is composed of site native species (80% on non-SSSI land)

To enhance habitats of dead and decaying wood through the selection and management of future veteran trees and through increasing the quantity and variety of deadwood within the woodland stands.

To take specific measures in areas of plantation on ancient woodland to secure remnant ecological features including individual mature trees, wet flushes, areas of natural regeneration and patches of woodland ground flora as well as historic environment features of the ancient woodland.

To provide areas that are left as minimum intervention, where woodland management takes place at a slower pace via natural processes such as tree fall and decay, gap creation and natural regeneration.

Conifer and Broadleaf Age Class by Decade across the Wyre Forest



The graph above illustrates the composition of conifer and broadleaf across the Wyre Forest Management Area by the decade during which it was planted and illustrates the large increase in planting of oak and beech after World War 2 and the increase in conifer planting in subsequent decades.

From 2010 the planting ratio has shifted to one of increased broadleaf planting reflecting the new ancient woodland policy.

The pie chart illustrates the current woodland composition of the Wyre Management Area in 2016 illustrating the need to further diversify through thinning and enrichment planting

Rationale

Ancient Semi Natural Woodland

Ancient semi-natural woodland (ASNW) covers approximately 37% (600 hectares) of the management area. It exists in areas that have escaped afforestation with conifer or non-native broadleaves such as beech.

Historical land tenure or the practicalities of planting steep ground with non-native species usually contributed to its survival. This is illustrated by the fragments of ASNW that now exist along the Dowles Brook or on the steeper ground leading down to the River Severn.

Prior to the advent of large-scale coppicing, the Wyre would have supported a diverse range of native tree species including small-leaved lime, oak, wild service tree, aspen, rowan, alder, crab apple and wild cherry. Now, the majority of ASNW has limited tree species diversity with a canopy almost exclusively composed of oak.

This is a result of previous woodland management where oaks were coppiced to produce charcoal for iron smelting and bark for the tanning industry. As those industries waned and the oak matured, the woodland became more shaded and cool. The resulting woodland is now dominated by overstood oak coppice and the lack of light and increased deer numbers have led to a significantly reduced understorey, shrub and ground layers.

Another consequence of large scale coppice management and its sudden decline is that the early and late stages of woodland succession are now poorly represented. The oak have a uniform age structure, with the majority of trees being in the range 100 – 120 years old.

Lack of open space created by early rotation coppice as well as an under-representation of open grown veteran trees and their associated dead wood, fungi and invertebrates has led a loss of diversity and interest throughout the ancient woodland resource.

Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites

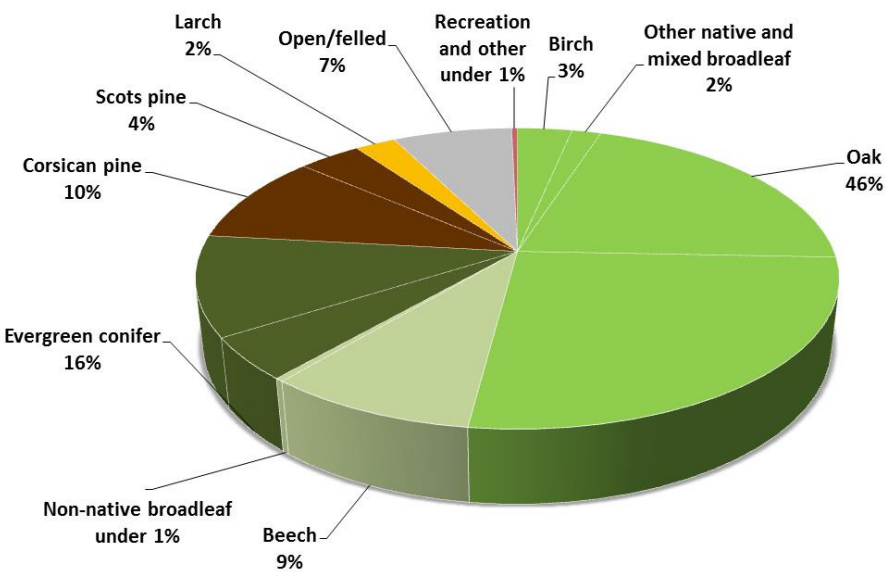
63% (1006 hectares) of the management area is composed of woodland stands which were planted in the 1920s with a range of tree species not native to the Wyre Forest. This includes extensive stands of beech plantation within which oak is retained in varying degrees, as well as stands of conifer species, most of which are approaching maturity.

Conifer stands include Corsican and Scots pine, Douglas fir, European larch and also a variety of minor species including western hemlock, western red cedar and Lawson cypress. Conifer plantations are usually dominated by one or two species with any broadleaves present often being out-competed by the fast-growing conifer, or existing on the edges of rides.

Beech and conifer plantations have reduced the overall structural and species complexity of the forest, reduced light levels under the tree canopy, effected soil pH and caused the build-up of deep layers of leaf and needle litter on the woodland floor.

As the planted stands have matured ground flora and the natural regeneration of native trees has been suppressed and wildlife populations have declined, as illustrated by the recorded declines of adders and pearl-bordered fritillary butterflies.

Current tree species composition—2016



3.4 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Coppice

Policy

To restore coppice management to significant areas of the forest.

Objectives

To bring a further 70 hectares of woodland into active coppice management, building on the 35 hectares already undergoing restoration.

To manage coppice on rotation to provide the necessary structure for a range of species that depend on the habitat conditions provided by coppice within the matrix of the high forest woodland.

To ensure key SSSI features such as Pearl bordered fritillary and adder are provided with a network of connected open space to allow them to move around the forest

Rationale

It is likely that the full extent of the forest was managed under oak dominated coppice systems for at least three hundred years when local industries such as leather tanning and iron smelting created markets for coppice products. In turn the long history of coppicing profoundly influenced the wildlife of the Wyre forest.

The practice of coppicing gradually declined in the early part of the twentieth century as markets for coppice products waned. Over the last 100 years much of the previously coppiced areas have since been converted to plantation forestry, other areas were ‘singled’ and have developed into a high forest structure dominated by oak. This has resulted in a reduction in the amount of connected mosaic of early successional habitats across the Wyre Forest and serious declines of certain open-woodland species that make the Wyre so important for species such as pearl-bordered fritillary and adder.

3.5 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Wood Pasture

Policy

To establish areas of wood pasture within the forest, grazed by cattle at low densities.

Objectives

To introduce grazing across 60 hectares of the management area to provide suitable conditions for a range of species dependent on open woodland and old growth.

To ensure that grazing leads to the development of a diverse structure in the canopy, scrub and ground layers within each wood pasture area, with 20-40% canopy cover and understorey present over at least 20% of the grazed area.

To seek to maintain species rich heathland and grassland structure over 40% - 60% of the area interspersed with areas of closely grazed turf and taller tussocks.

Rationale

Rough grazing with cattle and other livestock is likely to have been common practice in the forest before the development of widespread coppice management. Cattle grazing would have allowed the establishment of a more open woodland structure allowing trees to develop a fuller, open grown canopy than those which were managed on rotation for coppice.

These trees would have been repeatedly pollarded to prevent cattle from grazing their branches and to provide a source of fuel. Over time the trees would have developed characteristics of veteran trees – with cavities and holes and large quantities of deadwood which would have provided habitat for bats, birds and saproxylic invertebrates and fungi.

The grassland and heathland communities that were allowed to flourish underneath the sparse woodland canopy would have added considerably to the diversity of the wider habitat mosaic across the forest. Cattle in particular may also act as a proxy for the large herbivores of the ancient forest creating bare ground, disturbance and opportunities for colonisation by a range of species.

With a change in how the ancient semi-natural woodland was managed, first through large-scale coppicing, then through conversion to plantation conifer and beech, the number of ancient, open grown broadleaf trees is very limited in the Wyre. This has had important consequences for a range of woodland species such as redstarts and pied flycatchers for which the SSSI and NNR has been designated.

3.6 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Resilience

Policy

To promote a healthy woodland, resilient to threats of climate change, pests and diseases.

Objectives

To gradually diversify both the tree species and structure of the Wyre Forest so that it is more resilient to a range of threats associated with climate change.

To control deer populations in the forest to the extent that there is no significant suppression of natural regeneration of site native tree species by deer browsing, indicated by tree saplings growing above the browse line (c. 2 metres) in less than 10 years.

To control the grey squirrel population to ensure that there is no significant impact on the development of timber trees.

To carry out extensive control of invasive plant species in order to eradicate rhododendron, Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed from the forest within 10 years.

Select planting material that is locally native and well adapted to the planting site within the boundary of the SSSI. Outside the SSSI planting material may be supplemented with a proportion of non-local native material to increase the resilience of the woodland to climate change

To ensure exemplary biosecurity in the sourcing and propagation of trees for planting in the forest.

Rationale

Climate projections for the UK indicate increases in mean summer temperature of 3–4°C by the 2080s. Projections also suggest that, although there will be little change to total annual rainfall, summer rainfall will decrease while winter rainfall will increase. As a result summer droughts may become more frequent and severe.

It is well recognised that climate change is likely to have an impact on forest ecosystems - these impacts may include changes in tree species composition, tree mortality, fire, extreme weather events and pest and disease outbreaks.

Tree diseases are already impacting on the management of the Wyre Forest in terms of the health of individual trees and the loss of major opportunities to diversify the broadleaved component of Wyre Forest. For example, ash is no longer being planted in the Wyre Forest due to *Chalara fraxinea*.

Pests such as grey squirrel and fallow deer currently pose a significant threat to the successful establishment of broadleaved woodland and the health of trees due to the damage they cause to the bark of a number of broadleaved tree species.

In addition, invasive species such as rhododendron and Himalayan balsam form monocultures, shade and cool woodlands and reduce the ability of woodlands to naturally regenerate.

Research suggests that forest resilience can be enhanced by diversifying tree species and provenance, undertaking more proactive woodland management to create more uneven age structures and complexity and reducing the impacts of pests such as grey squirrel and deer.

A careful balance will be required to maintain the integrity of the existing forest ecosystem whilst actively adjusting management so that adaptation to a changing climate can occur.

3.7 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Open Habitats and Scrub

Policy

To create a rich mosaic of open habitats incorporating areas of heathland and scrub.

Objectives

To significantly increase the area of permanent open habitats to 106 hectares by 2026 through extending existing areas of quality heathland and through the creation of new areas of open habitat.

To promote the development of patchy scrub across a range of successional stages over 10-15% of the open habitat to provide a range of nesting habitat, shelter and nectar sources.

Rationale

Heathland vegetation dominated by heather, bilberry and gorse occurs frequently across the forest in patches of varying size. However, these areas are often temporary, being gradually shaded out as the tree canopy develops.

Larger areas of heathland are therefore needed to provide more permanent open habitat, providing cover and food sources for reptiles and small mammals, nesting sites for ground nesting birds and habitat for specialist invertebrate assemblages.

Many of the species that depend on open space within the forest matrix are declining due to a loss of connectivity between sites as open habitats have succeeded to more wooded habitats or been planted with densely shading conifer.

Mature scrub forms a key element of the woodland, ride side, meadow and heathland habitats. Well-developed scrub with a diverse age structure and species composition provides important sources of food, nectar and shelter for a wide range of invertebrates, reptiles, birds and small mammals. The scrub edge, particularly where it borders open, short sward habitats is a particularly important element of the habitat.

3.8 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Woodland Rides and Railway

Policy

To extend the woodland ride network to improve connectivity across the habitat mosaic and manage the network to maximise its habitat value.

Objectives

To develop and manage the woodland ride network to provide connectivity between key areas of open habitat and coppice

To maintain a dynamic eco-tone with a diverse structure ranging from bare ground through to the early stages of succession from scrub to woodland vegetation throughout the rides and railway network.

Rationale

With the abandonment of large-scale coppicing the network of connected open space declined. As the coppice gradually developed into high forest and planted with conifer and beech many of the original rides became shaded, cool and dark. Species such as the pearl-bordered fritillary, for which the Wyre is designated depend on connected, sunny rides to breed and move around the forest.

The woodland rides contribute a significant proportion of the open and woodland edge habitats that are important for so many of the notable species of the Wyre Forest. In addition rides and the embankments of the disused railway provide essential linkages between meadows, glades and other more open areas of the Forest. The ride network will be extended to provide connectivity of open habitats and coppice across the forest.

3.9 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Meadows and Orchards

Policy

To maintain and enhance the flower-rich meadows and orchards within the forest.

Objectives

To maintain appropriate grazing of the species rich neutral and acidic grasslands in the meadows and orchards, with 80% of the grassland area grazed to a height of 2-5cm at the end of the growing/grazing season.

To ensure that the meadows that are cut for hay are managed consistently to promote the development of a characteristic hay meadow plant community.

To encourage and maintain a complex and varied scrub element over up to 10% of the grassland area along with appropriate management of bordering hedgerows.

To ensure the continuity of the veteran orchard tree habitat through management of existing trees and planting of appropriate orchard species.

Rationale

The ‘meadows’ (few of which are actually cut for hay) along Dowles Brook, around Lodge Hill Farm, in Hitterhill Coppice, at Park House and in Bell Coppice provide a species rich, open habitat which contrasts with the surrounding woodland. The proximity of nectar sources in the flower rich meadows to the dead wood habitats of the woodland and the warm micro-climates which are found particularly along boundaries between open sward and scrub in the meadows are key reasons for the importance of the meadows as sites for butterflies and other invertebrates.

Traditionally the meadows would have been managed using consistent grazing regimes and supplementary hay-cutting to result in grassland sward with rich species diversity and complex height structure.

Grazing kept scrub restricted to core areas of mature bramble, gorse and thorn that could not be penetrated by the cattle – these in turn provide pockets of diversity important for nesting birds and invertebrates. Without cattle grazing the meadows would have been encroached by scrub and eventually succeed to woodland.

A number of these grazed sites have at some point in their history been planted as orchards. A number of veteran orchard trees survive, providing valuable decaying wood habitats for invertebrate populations with a strong association with orchard trees.

3.10 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Wet Flushes, Streams and Pools

Policy

To sensitively manage the wet flushes in the forest to maximise their value for their unique communities of trees and plants and assemblage of beetles, flies and snails of wetland habitats.

To manage the streams and pools of the Dowles Brook catchment to improve water quality and maximise habitat value.

Objectives

To restore and manage areas of wet flush and seepage to maintain varied light conditions with a minimum of 60% of the areas of wet flushes in managed habitats maintained free of tree and scrub cover.

To conserve the geomorphological features of Dowles Brook and its tributaries and pools, allowing space for natural processes to occur.

To maintain the largely dappled shaded character of the streams and brooks in the catchment.

To invite national specialists (ecologists, hydrologists, engineers) to the Wyre to undertake a study of the brooks and associated riparian habitat and to make recommendations regarding the restoration of more naturally functioning hydrological systems.

Compile a work programme of the engineered infrastructure (dams, culverts and artificial pools) that need to be maintained in good condition and those that can be allowed to fall into dis-use/be removed based on specialist recommendation

Rationale

Wet Flushes

Wet flushes provide unique and often over-looked habitat for a diverse assemblage of invertebrates and plants in the Wyre Forest.

Areas of ground water seepage, rising from the underlying limestone and coals, create pockets of base rich seepage which differ dramatically from the surrounding acidic soils of the Wyre Forest. The constant supply of well oxygenated ground water ensures a relatively stable surface temperature and high rates of decomposition. Thin films of surface water create a niche habitat with a strongly associated invertebrate assemblage. In some instances these seepages are tufa depositing, resulting in a calcified ground surface.

A warm microclimate with good light levels maximises the development of the exceptionally diverse flora associated with base rich seepages and suits the majority of the invertebrate species present. A minority of seepage associated invertebrates and bryophytes thrive in more shaded areas, often requiring an element of submerged dead wood.

Wet flushes have often been afforested or allowed to naturally regenerate which has the effect of drying and shading.

In addition, the past practice of creating drainage ditches for forestry purposes channels rainwater off the land into watercourses and negatively impacts the natural hydrology of the forest and the presence and extent of wet flushes.

Streams

The plateau of the Wyre Forest is dissected by a number of fast flowing streams. These streams run over largely stony beds and where they are in good condition support important populations of fish, white-clawed crayfish, invertebrate assemblages and birds.

The dappled shade cast on most of the length of streams gives them and their banks their biological character, providing the ideal conditions for mosses, liverworts and ferns to thrive.

In many instances the streams have been modified through the use of engineered dams and culverts. This has had an impact on the natural hydrology of the forest, effectively channelling water quickly through the catchment, drying out woodland habitats and leading to scouring and increased sedimentation, reduced water quality and flooding downstream.

Natural hydrological processes such as the formation of shallow gravels, deep pools, riffles, meanders and wet riparian habitat have been interrupted, reducing niche availability for many species of wildlife and having a negative impact on the riparian habitat due to scouring and bank erosion.

In addition, dams and culverts often act as barriers to migratory fish species such as eel and salmon and white-clawed crayfish, reducing their ability to reach the upper reaches of the catchment to breed.

Pools

A number of pools, including seasonal pools, are found across the forest at various stages of siltation and succession. These natural pools provide habitats for a range of invertebrates, amphibians and flora.

A lack of woodland management around the pools has often led to them becoming unsuitable for a number of species including great -crested newt which depend on clusters of suitable ponds within a matrix of open habitat and scrub.

Many of the pools have been highly modified where it has proved necessary to control rates of flow in streams and to maintain access routes into the forest, dams and culverts have been constructed. Again, this has had a negative impact on the hydrology of the forest.

3.11 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Species Management

Policy

To ensure viable populations of key wildlife species associated with the forest by taking specific measures to protect existing populations and where necessary through managed reintroductions.

Objectives

To support the recovery of key populations of species through the identification and protection of important breeding, shelter and feeding sites across the forest.

To introduce specific measures to reduce the likelihood of disturbance to key populations of declining species.

To carry out managed reintroductions of species previously lost to the forest or extending their range to include the forest in response to climate change.

Rationale

The large-scale restoration of broadleaved woodland and associated mosaic of open habitat will support the recovery of a number of species dependent on these habitats, however there will be instances when specific measures are required to support key species that require more prescriptive management through the protection of important breeding and over-wintering sites or through providing linkages between isolated populations.

More research is required to fully understand the impacts of different recreational activities on wildlife populations and to develop suitable strategies to mitigate these impacts. However with the number of visitors to the Wyre increasing year on year and additional provision for increased recreational facilities being proposed, precautionary measures to reduce disturbance may be required.

Additionally the increased woodland management and habitat restoration that will take place throughout the duration of this management plan could increase disturbance levels in some key areas.

A number of species have become locally extinct during the last fifty years due to a loss of the required habitats in the forest. For more mobile species or for species which are still present on adjacent landholdings, the habitat restoration proposed within this plan will allow these species to flourish once again in the Wyre Forest.

3.12 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Landscape & Historic Environment

Policy

To value and conserve the landscape and archaeology of the forest.

Objectives

To conserve the landscape character of the Wyre Forest ensuring it maintains its diverse mix of important habitats of unique significance to the Mid Severn Sandstone Plateau NCA.

To manage, restore and safeguard key historical and archaeological features and to ensure they are not damaged during forest management operations.

To enhance on-site visitor interpretation and support research into the history of the forest.

Rationale

The Wyre Forest is a remnant of the extensive tract of woodland that once covered much of South Shropshire, southwest Staffordshire and north Worcestershire.

Though much reduced in area, the Wyre Forest is important in the landscape with its unique and intimate mixture of woodland and open habitats in the wider landscape of fields and scattered woods.

Although not so obviously influenced by man as the matrix of fields and scattered settlements that surround it, the Wyre Forest, has, nevertheless, been shaped over the centuries by man to provide food, fuel and timber. This use by man has had a profound influence on the Wyre and is reflected by the range of habitats and species using the forest today. The archaeological features and industrial heritage scattered throughout the forest are more obvious links to the past.

Our understanding of the Wyre forest has been greatly enhanced by research such as a Lidar survey carried out by the Worcestershire County Council Archaeology Service and through study carried out by groups such as the Wyre Study Group. However much of the history and ecology of the forest is still poorly understood. As the Wyre Forest landscape continues to be used by increasing numbers of people, conserving and interpreting the Wyre remains an important objective of this management plan.

3.13 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Site Enhancement & Acquisition

Policy

Both the Forestry Commission and Natural England will continue to seek to develop their estates in the Wyre Forest through acquisition and the strengthening of existing tenure arrangements.

Objectives

Consider acquisitions through lease or purchase of land, particularly that of high conservation value such as ancient semi-natural woodland, traditional orchards and unimproved pasture or those that could be enhanced through sustainable woodland management.

Strengthen existing tenure arrangements, securing longer term, more comprehensive lease agreements as current leases expire.

Rationale

Although dominated by the main block of the Wyre Forest, significant parts of the management area such as Skeys Wood, Rock, Bell and Brandlodge Coppice and Ribbesford exist as isolated blocks of woodland within the wider landscape.

These woodlands support species that are now scarce in the wider landscape that depend on large areas of well-connected habitats in order to successfully colonise new areas of suitable habitat.

Through the acquisition and subsequent management of suitable land, woodland outliers could become linked at the landscape scale creating a more species rich, visually aesthetic, resilient landscape and enhancing the value of the Wyre Forest Management Area for people, nature and the economy.

3.14 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Visiting the Forest

Policy

To provide a high quality range of facilities and activities built around a varied and extensive access network making the forest an excellent place to visit.

Objectives

To further develop Callow Hill as the gateway to the forest.

To develop and manage an integrated access network to encourage and enable all visitors to enjoy the forest.

To minimise the impact of visitors on the wildlife of the forest by identifying and maintaining tranquil areas and providing effective information to visitors.

Rationale

The Wyre Forest lies within close proximity to large urban settlements, just 24 miles from the centre of Birmingham and receives a large number of visitors on a daily basis. The forest is very much seen as a day trip destination, especially for the West Midlands, and although this has value, it has an underplayed wider offer for the region built around its environmental and cultural appeal.

The visitor hub and main car park at Callow Hill receives in excess of 150,000 visitors a year. Visitor numbers continue to grow and there is a need to upgrade the café, toilet, play area and car parking facilities to reflect this increased use.

The existing infrastructure offers or supports a range of activities including the Go Ape treetop and junior courses, activity and sensory trails, horse riding trails, family cycle and informal mountain bike trails. There is an opportunity to develop the access infrastructure, integrating way-marked trails, public rights of way and other promoted routes to provide a more varied and cohesive network.

There are a number of smaller parking areas and numerous other entry points into the forest. In many cases these connect the forest to the wider public rights of way network. Links to the network will be improved and promoted to encourage increased access by local communities.

There are parts of the forest which are equipped for and can sustain more intensive recreational use. They are near to entry points, less sensitive, or have established recreational uses. Development in access infrastructure and facilities will aim to contain increases in visitor numbers in these areas, retaining quieter more remote areas to provide refuges for wildlife populations.

3.15 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Volunteering & Community

Policy

To develop a programme of volunteer opportunities to enable local communities to contribute to the conservation and management of the forest and to contribute to the quality of life, health and wellbeing of local residents.

To deliver a programme of events and activities which promote the forest, educate and inform local communities and celebrate the history, landscape and wildlife of the forest.

Objectives

To develop a diverse range of volunteer opportunities including woodland conservation management, wildlife survey and monitoring and visitor management.

To ensure that volunteering is a rewarding experience through a coordinated programme of recruitment, induction, supervision and training.

To provide a varied programme of activities in the forest targeted at families and other groups of visitors.

To deliver and support key events across the year which celebrate and raise awareness of the forest.

Rationale

The local communities have a great affinity to and identification with the forest. These local residents are part of a population of nearly four million people living within 45km of the Wyre Forest that can have a significant impact upon the forest through the combined effect of their direct actions, influence and purchasing decisions.

Active programmes of volunteering are already operating, contributing to both the management of the forest and the monitoring of its wildlife. There is also a successful programme of regular and seasonal activities, however the majority of visitors experience the forest as a purely recreational space. There is the potential to engage more deeply with visitors and local communities to enrich the visitor experience and to help to protect and manage the forest.

The development of volunteer opportunities along with a more extensive programme of activities and events will engage more people directly in the life of the forest. These people can act as supporters in local communities, assist directly in the management of the forest and support the economy of the forest through purchasing local produce.

There is scope within the forest to host or directly deliver a more extensive programme of activities and events to draw a wide range of audiences into the forest and to help them to appreciate, explore and interact with it.

The successful delivery of the practical forestry and habitat management described in this plan will require an increase in volunteer input, as will meeting the objectives for monitoring the forests habitats and wildlife.

3.16 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Education & Interpretation

Policy

To continue to develop the role of the forest as a centre for learning about the natural environment and woodland management making a significant contribution to the provision of opportunities for learning outside the classroom in the region.

To ensure that all visitors to the forest are able to access information about the landscape, wildlife and management of the forest to enrich the visitors experience and to help visitors to understand and value the forest.

Objectives

To increase the range of learning opportunities for local residents and other visitors, including school children and young people

To provide facilities and resources to support educational visits to the forest, focusing particularly on the requirements of Key Stage 1 and 2 children

To provide stimulating and informative on-site interpretation at Callow Hill and throughout the Wyre Forest

Rationale

The Forestry Commission is an established education provider and more than 8,000 children a year attend educational visits to the forest. School visits are largely, but not exclusively, from primary schools involving

children at key stages one and two.

The education team currently delivers most of the educational visits directly although over the next two years there will be a move to enabling self-led school visits through the provision of the classroom facilities in the Discovery Centre and the development of further educational materials and resources for school groups. An independent education provider is now operating from the Discovery Centre offering a programme of educational visits.

Sandwell Council also operates in the forest, running the small bunkhouse at Coopers Mill under a lease agreement with Natural England. This facility is operated as a satellite to Sandwell Council 'Frank Chapman' outdoor education centre which is located adjacent to Rock Coppice.

Through maintaining the educational facilities at the Discovery Centre and working with partner organisations the range of educational experiences will be extended to engage a larger and wider audience.

There is a range of on-site interpretation across the forest. Much of this was developed through Grow with Wyre ensuring a reasonable level of consistency in terms of content despite distinct organizational branding. Interpretative panels at Callow Hill and other car parks are complemented by panels staged along the Butterfly Trail and by a range of interpretative sculptures at Callow Hill and elsewhere in the forest.

3.17 Policy, Objectives and Rationale: Survey, Monitoring & Research

Policy

To maintain a broad range of survey, monitoring and research projects providing a robust measure of changes to the woodland, habitats and wildlife populations.

Objectives

To establish long term monitoring of vegetation composition and structure within different habitat throughout the Wyre

To establish long term monitoring programmes for a range of key indicator species, providing a robust measurement of changes in population and distribution throughout the forest

To support and promote research projects that inform key management decisions in the forest

Rationale

Extensive change to the structure and composition of the woodland and the mosaic of open habitats will be observed over the next fifty years. Understanding the effects of these changes on the wildlife of the forest is essential, both to inform management delivery and to ensure that the Wyre Forest plays a national role in developing the understanding of the relationship between woodland management and wildlife.

A combination of established long term monitoring programmes and periodic survey is needed to provide clear and robust evidence on changes to the composition and structure of forest stands, the development of the habitat mosaic and the population and distribution of key indicator species across the forest.

Monitoring programmes are also required to help ensure that management aimed at delivering national targets on favourable condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the restoration of Priority Habitats can be clearly articulated.

A proactive approach to strengthening links with academic institutions and local experts and to directing and where possible funding priority research work in the forest will help inform management decisions.

The Wyre Forest Biological Records Centre, supported by the Worcestershire Biological Records Centre and housed in the Discovery Centre provides a much needed resource to enabling the gathering and collation of species records from across the forest. This presents considerable opportunities to improve the information available to support management decisions in the forest.