

Local Context

2. Planning the Forest of Avon

3. The Forest area today



CHAPTER 2 - Planning the Forest of Avon

This part of the Plan briefly describes the Forest area as it is today in terms of its attributes and deficiencies as they relate to Forest objectives. It draws on local research carried out by the team, volunteers, partners, consultants and local groups.

It also describes how the Forest of Avon, originally named the Bristol/Avon Community Forest, has developed to date and how the Forest is being guided by the two national partners, the local authorities and other local organisations. The process of prior consultation and the involvement of key groups and organisations in producing the Plan is set out.

- 2.1 In 1990, consultants were asked by the Countryside Commission to identify the area in which a Community Forest could be established around Bristol and to indicate the potential time-scale for its achievement. Given that only some 4% of the land area identified as potentially available for woodland planting is in public ownership, the consultants recommended that a community forest around Bristol was feasible but that it might take 50 years to achieve. The need for adequate incentives to encourage the farming community to become involved was also highlighted.
- 2.2 Following the consultant's report, the Countryside Commission published, in 1990, a discussion paper, *A Community Forest for Bristol?*, which invited comment and support for the concept. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, particularly from local residents, though some reservations were expressed about the role of development in creating the Forest, about funding and the likely competition between organisations, and the potential threat to wildlife habitats. At this point the local authorities (Avon County Council, Bristol City Council, Kingswood Borough Council, Northavon District Council, Wansdyke District Council and Woodspring District Council) prepared a formal bid to the Countryside Commission and the Forestry Commission to establish a community forest for Bristol/Avon.
- 2.3 The bid was accepted by the Commissions and subsequently announced by the Department of the Environment and MAFF ministers as part of the community forest programme. A formal partnership of the six local authorities, the Countryside Commission and the Forestry Authority was created through the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement.

The local team

- 2.4 A small project team was appointed in early 1992 based with Avon County Council for an initial period of three years to:
 - prepare the Forest Plan;
 - promote the Forest concept;
 - seek the co-operation, involvement and partnership of private landowners, farmers and tenants;
 - provide advice, expertise and access to grants;
 - involve and work with schools, local communities, voluntary groups and individuals.

Consultation

- 2.5 In order to elicit views about the Forest, to open up debate and raise awareness and understanding, the partners launched a discussion document, *Opportunities for the Future*, in April 1993. This was distributed widely amongst farmer's groups, interest groups, local councils and community groups. Displays were toured round a number of libraries, shopping centres and supermarkets over a two-month period. The feedback from this exercise helped to guide the writing of a draft Forest Plan.

Launching the Draft Plan - June 1994

- 2.6 In parallel with the public displays, five topic groups were assembled in order to support in-depth discussion about key elements of the Forest concept as applied to the Bristol/Avon area. Over 40 locally based organisations were involved, representing community, farming, informal recreation, sports, landscape, wildlife, heritage, arts, education and statutory interests. These topic groups covered:
 - farming and woodlands
 - arts, education and culture
 - sport and recreation
 - access
 - landscape, heritage and wildlife

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- 2.7** Each group met on three occasions and produced brief reports on their area of interest, which provided valuable initial input to the draft plan. The groups met subsequently to discuss more detailed input to the draft plan and now form an important nucleus of people with a high level of understanding of, and commitment to, the Forest.
- 2.8** In June 1994 a Draft Forest Plan was published and an extensive public consultation exercise carried out. Events, presentations, displays and open days were held to raise awareness of the Forest and to invite feedback. Comments and suggestions from public consultation have helped in the production of the first edition of this plan which was adopted by the local authorities and approved by Government in early 1995.
- 2.9** As a requirement from the Department of Transport, Environment and the Regions (DETR) the Forest Plan was reviewed after five years. This did not involve a full scale public consultation but was a technical review, to update certain sections, to make minor boundary amendments and to reflect recent policy changes. The vision, overarching targets and strategy remain essentially unchanged. Implementation is dealt with largely through the partners' business plans.



Millennium Planting, Siston (Photo: Mark Simmons)

relating directly and indirectly to implementing the Forest. These posts are with the BTCV, the Wildlife Trust, FWAG, the local authorities and are funded through a range of mechanisms. The posts, their focus and funding will change through various stages of Forest implementation.

Implementation

- 2.10** Following approval, the Plan partners moved the project into its implementation phase. The project operates under the direction of the Joint Advisory Committee comprising three councillors from each partner local authority. The Countryside Agency and the Forestry Commission have observer status on the committee.
- 2.11** A Steering Group, chaired by the Countryside Agency, has been formed to provide day-to-day guidance to the team and to provide support, information and technical advice.
- 2.12** A joint funded Forest Team is employed by South Gloucestershire Council on behalf of the partners, comprising a Director, Projects Manager, Community Liaison Officer, Access Officer and Administrator. A Forestry Development Officer post is joint funded with the Great Western Community Forest.
- 2.13** A number of other posts and officer time is provided by other partners, with job functions
- 2.14** The partnership has approved the establishment of a charitable company to support the achievement of the forest plan and to engage new partners and audiences.
- 2.15** The day to day work of the partnership, focused by the Forest Team, is driven through meetings, working groups, seminars and joint projects.