



The Mersey Forest: a transformational initiative

The Mersey Forest is an environmental regeneration initiative spanning 2000 square kilometres of Merseyside and North Cheshire, making it the largest of England's ten Community Forests.

The Mersey Forest brings environmental, social and economic benefits to the area, using community forestry to set the scene for investment, involve local communities, improve people's health and boost tourism.

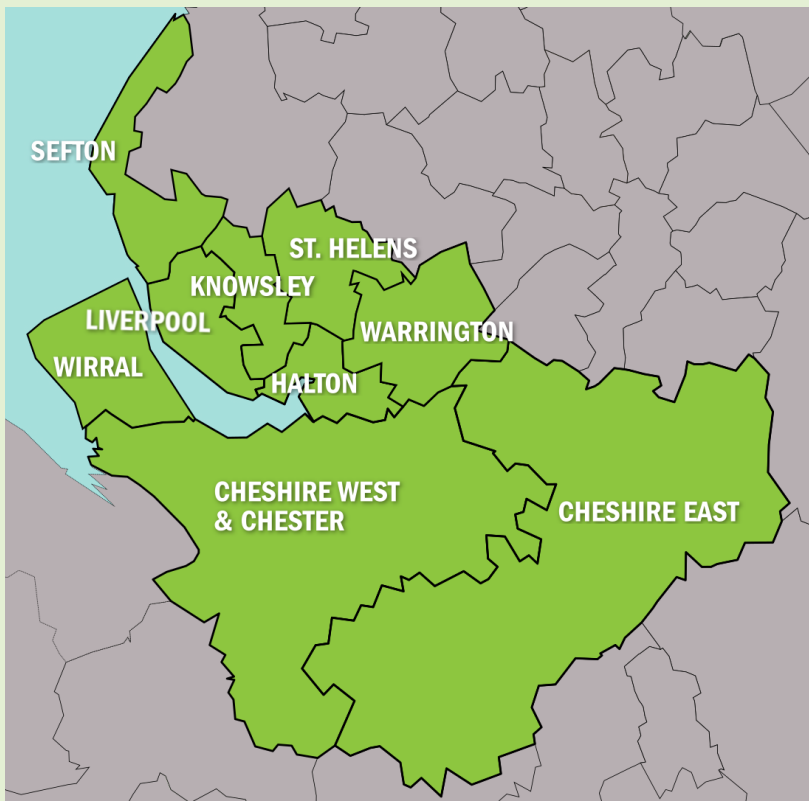
The Mersey Forest was created as a response to changes in land use policy in the late 1980s. At that time, forestry policy was very much focused on timber production and rural areas rather than on community engagement or urban forestry. Simultaneously the post-industrial landscape around some of England's major cities was suffering real environmental and landscape deficit.

Against this backdrop, the opportunity to bring forestry "down from the hills" to regenerate large areas in and around towns, involve people in decision-making, enabling the economy and communities to thrive was championed by the (then) Countryside Commission. A national call for candidate Community Forests was the outcome of this radical policy shift.

The Mersey Forest concept was created by a partnership of local authorities immediately to the north and south of the River Mersey. Their bid to become a Community Forest was based on the fact that the area had many economic, social and environmental problems that The Mersey Forest Plan could help to address.

The submission by The Mersey Forest Partnership to the government was approved in October 1994 when implementation began. The submission consisted of an economic

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analysis, scrutinised by the Treasury, and a long term Mersey Forest Plan – setting out the ethos, targets and focus for actions to deliver regeneration and transformation of land.

This plan has been updated periodically, with the latest Plan approved by Partners in January 2014. www.merseyforest.org.uk/plan

In recent years, Cheshire East and Wirral have joined our Steering Group, although are not incorporated into our Forest Plan as yet.

The Forest Partnership, after 25 years, is still seen as a leading edge partnership, innovating and providing leadership in urban and community forestry and supporting the network of environmental organisations and groups in the area.

The Forest objectives are perhaps more aligned to the current policy agenda than

ever before. Climate Emergency, species loss, impact of green spaces on wellbeing are becoming mainstream policy and are objectives that the Partnership has championed for a long time.

The components of The Mersey Forest have remained constant over the period of its implementation. In simple terms:

- The Mersey Forest is a Place, a designated area covering local authorities in Merseyside and North Cheshire
- The Forest Partnership consists of a core of local authorities, with the Forestry Commission, Environment Agency, Natural England and Community Forest Trust as national supporters. Around this core partnership are a wide range of other stakeholders who play an active role in delivery of the Forest Plan
- The Forest Plan remains the core document that binds the partnership and stakeholders to the objectives set out to achieve the long-term changes it describes
- The Mersey Forest Team was created by the Partnership and is funded to coordinate, facilitate and enable delivery of the Forest Plan on behalf of the Partnership

The Mersey Forest Team is based at Risley Moss, Warrington, employed on behalf of the Partnership by Cheshire West and Chester Council and work across the Forest area. The purpose of the team is to enable delivery of the Forest Plan.

In achieving this purpose the team has five main activities:

- Working with landowners to provide advice and guidance to enable land transformation to take place
- Working with communities to engage them meaningfully in the changes that are taking place
- Generating the funds to enable activity to happen

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- Marketing and promotion of the aims, objectives and achievements of the Forest Partnership
- Research and development, finding more cost effective and/or new ways to achieve the Forest Plan objectives

Progress to Date

Great progress has been made by the Partnership since the inception of the Forest Plan and Partnership:

- Planted more than 9 million new trees, increasing woodland cover by 70%.
- Transformed over 4,000 ha of land into community woodland and associated habitats
- Provided 600 km of new access routes
- Delivered 42,000 community events
- Brought in over £65M of external funding - regularly gearing partner contribution by a factor of 6
- Developed and delivered award winning education and health programmes

92% of people in the area support the work of the Forest Partnership, 64% say that they have noticed improvements in their local environment as a result of delivery of forest projects.