

Northern forest takes root

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Community Forests and the Woodland Trust have put forward a bold proposal for new forestry in the north of England. Paul Nolan, Michael Norbury and Tom Butlin explain the vision and the challenges

The Northern Forest is a 25-year initiative supported by the UK government to plant 50m trees across the M62 corridor. Stretching from Liverpool and Chester in the west to Hull in the east (see Figure 1), the forest will require an estimated investment of ?500m but could also generate natural capital benefits of ?2.4bn or more. The Northern Forest builds on Community Forests? and the Woodland Trust?s record of planting millions of trees and the wide-ranging partnerships they have with the public, private and community sectors to offer an environmental complement to plans for the Northern Powerhouse.

Currently, more than a million companies create 18% of England?s GDP in the area the forest will cover. There are 13m people living there, and the population is due to rise by 9% in the next 20 years. Yet a combination of industrial legacy and business as usual has meant that the north faces a nexus of environmental challenges.

Cities such as Liverpool rank in the bottom 10 in the UK for air quality, while Leeds and Greater Manchester suffered millions of pounds of losses from 2015?s Boxing Day floods. Meanwhile, climate change predictions suggest that urban heat island effects will be compounded in our cities, with monsoon-like rainfall events predicted to increase in intensity and rate. Much of the north?s resilience to natural hazards has been lost, with tree-felling rates outstripping planting.

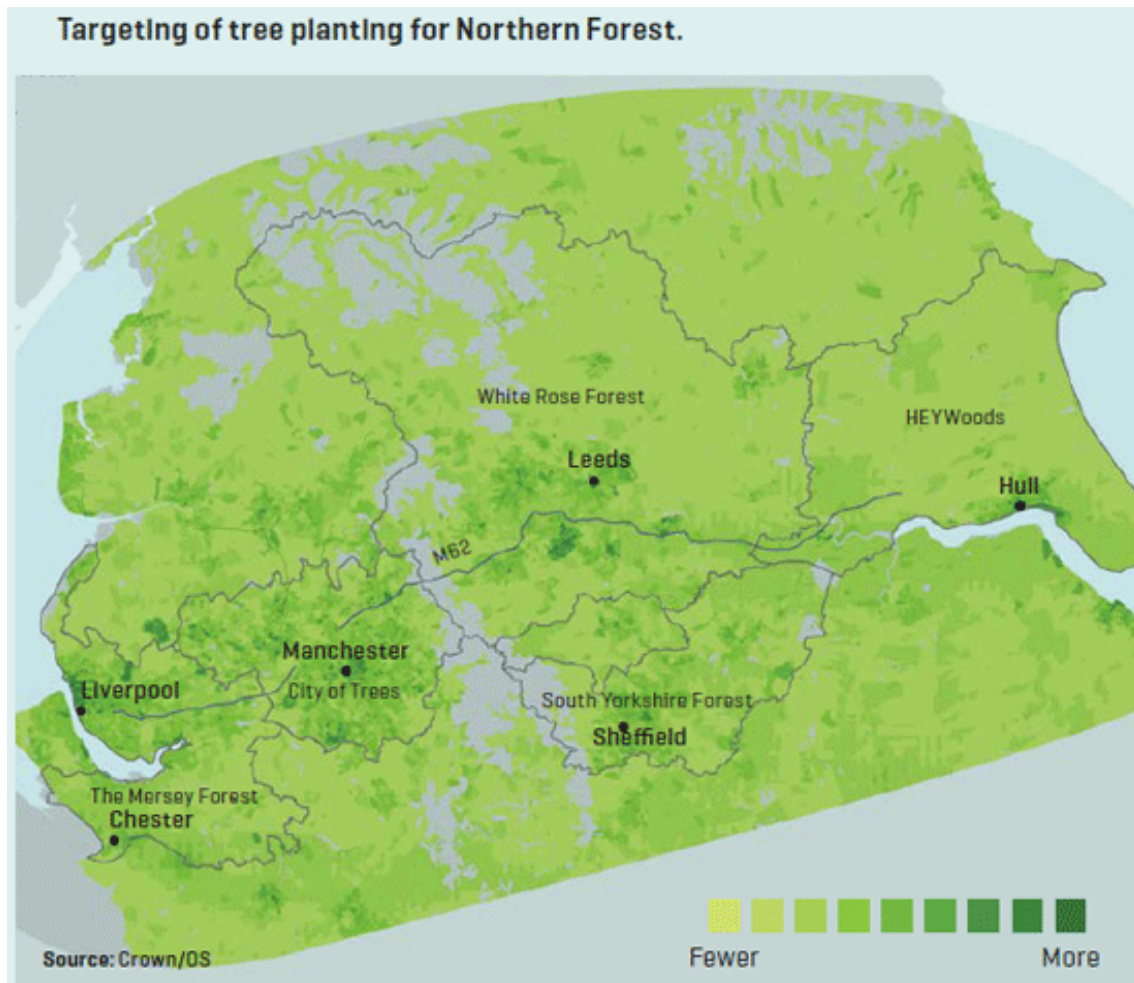


Figure 1: shows proposed tree planting from west to east

The Northern Forest is supported by the government's 25-year environment plan, but it is also an effective response to the Natural Capital Committee's call to plant 250,000ha of new woodland in and around our towns and cities. The government's industrial and clean growth strategies both seek increased natural capital aligned to sustainable economic growth. The arrangements for land management support after Brexit are also likely to focus on improving such capital and will be crucial to the forest's success. The initiative will prompt discussion about how trees and woodlands might be supported by a new land management programme in the north of England.

The rationale for the Northern Forest is simple: there is a strong and developing evidence base that increasing tree and woodland cover can help address a wide range of socio-economic and environmental issues and provide a range of benefits. There is an urgent need to improve air quality, reduce flood risk and tackle health inequalities, to increase connectivity between habitats and improve resilience in the ecological systems in and around our towns and cities. The Northern Forest is designed as an environmental programme to complement the £75bn of hard infrastructure development planned in the coming years, to improve quality of life and place for those living and working there and enhance ecological networks.

Valuing trees

We can monetise some of the Northern Forest's benefits, and there are many tools for specific or more general use in assessing natural capital values. A recent assessment of such tools identified and described 140 different models.

In developing the Northern Forest evidence base and prospectus, we used the GI-Val tool to provide indicative economic values for the planting of 50m trees. This suggests that the forest will:

- increase the north of England's gross value added (GVA) by ?1.3bn (see Figure 2)
- raise property value in the north of England by ?2.4bn
- lead to wider economic benefits of ?2.4bn.

RICS has also published research on natural capital, including the Insight paper [Value of natural capital](#) - the need for chartered surveyors and a [planning tool](#) for natural capital.

Other recent reports on natural capital have included Natural Infrastructure Schemes in Practice from environmental think tank Green Alliance, which estimates that ?4.7m profit could be made if there is a transition from business as usual to [such schemes](#).

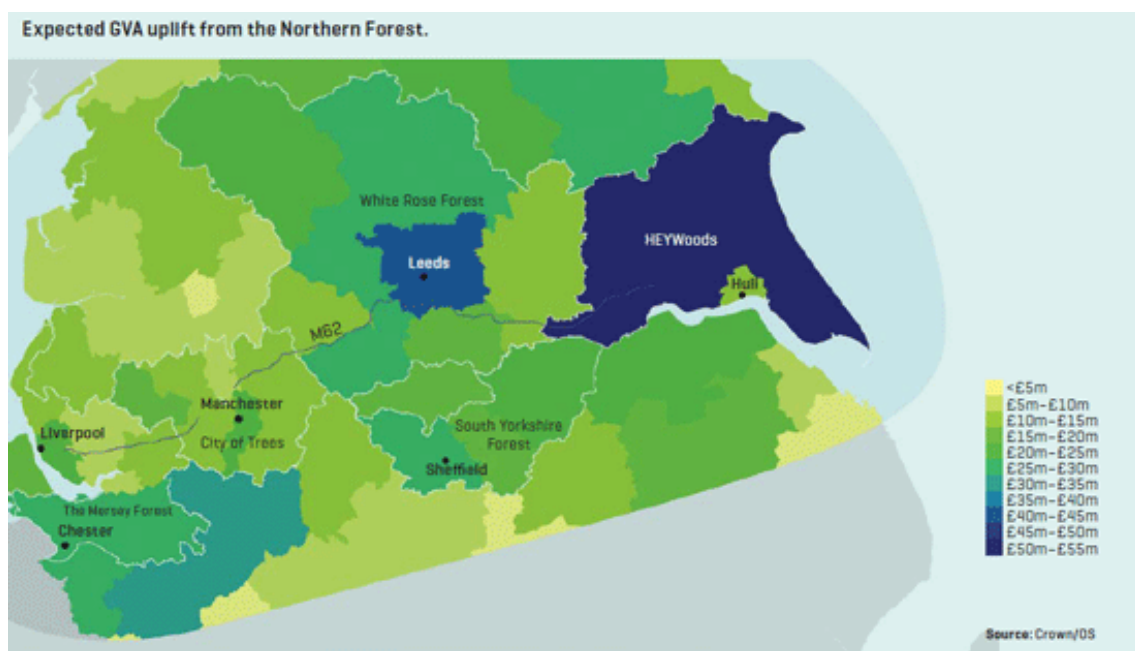


Figure 2: shows the suggested increase in the northern GVA

There are 650,000 new homes projected to be built across the Northern Forest area. A [study by BE Group for the Mersey Forest, Green Infrastructure ? Added Value](#), showed how well-planned green infrastructure could transform the financial viability and profitability of some development projects. RICS is also currently developing a paper on the factors that have an impact on the market and investment values of natural capital. Northern Forest, if well planned and implemented, could provide a setting for high-quality, sustainable homes that help to stimulate the local economy and meet the aspirations of a revitalised north of England, which could match the south of the country's GVA and productivity.

It has been suggested that surveyors may not yet recognise the monetary value of natural capital and, at present, it does not play a part in the Red Book valuation process. Indeed, environmental charity the Sylva Foundation recently asked landowners and agents whether they knew the economic value of their land for any of the following ecosystem services: pollination; soil erosion protection; water flow regulation; culture; carbon storage or sequestration; and recreation. In all cases, the [majority of respondents](#) ? in the range of 76?85% ? did not know or were uncertain.

Making it happen

Paying the ?500m price tag for the Northern Forest will be a challenge, and a mixture of traditional and new funding mechanisms and resources will be required. Planned investment in housing and transport infrastructure linked to the forest can also play an important role: an investment in natural capital of 0.5% of the ?75bn of planned investment in built infrastructure will secure 70% of the funding required.

New funding for new forestry schemes that focus on locking up carbon has already been launched by the Forestry Commission. These targeted schemes may continue and develop if, as seems likely, there is fear that national targets for carbon reduction will not be met. New mechanisms and ideas are being explored to bring in long-term funding for the Northern Forest. We have also considered the technological changes that are taking place, or which are likely to take place; the use of drones to appraise land and inform planting and maintenance of trees while monitoring and measuring natural capital is now possible, and a commitment to the Northern Forest plan would enable investment in developing this technology.

The government?s [A Green Future: Our 25-Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#) sets out an ambition to increase natural capital and hand over a better environment to the next generation. Of the plan?s 44 objectives, one is increasing woodland cover in England to 12%, and Northern Forest will help achieve this. Meeting the challenge to the plant 50m trees for the forest will require partnerships and the perseverance of multiple agencies, landowners and stakeholders.

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Further information

- Related competencies include [Forestry and woodland management](#)
- This feature was taken from the [RICS Land journal](#) (October/November 2018)
- Related categories: [Woodlands](#) , [Trees and TPOs](#)