

# 1. QUALITY OF LIFE

1. Trees and woodlands can contribute in many ways to the quality of life of those people who live and work in the East of England. For the purposes of this Strategy, these benefits are taken to be: recreation and access, health, landscape and community engagement.



## A. Recreation and Access

(see also Health, Community Engagement, Tourism and Biodiversity)

2. It is estimated that there are about 55 million day-visits a year to woods in the East of England, mostly by regular visitors and of less than two hours duration. Some of the most widely recognised benefits of woodlands are recreation provision which comprise:

- **Leisure.** Visits to woodlands are made for a variety of reasons, from quiet contemplation to noisy, adventurous activities.
- **Health.** Benefits provided by moderate but sustained physical exercise and psychological well being (see Health section).
- **Lifestyle.** Visitors seek particular kinds of emotional and spiritual refreshment.

3. Woodland recreation is defined here as a frequent but generally short-duration activity undertaken close to home. It is usually informal in nature benefiting from the presence of general access or rights-of-way.
4. The pattern of recreation usage raises issues of social inclusion. A disproportionately small percentage of people from multi-ethnic, low-income areas and less than half of those without cars are involved in woodland recreation. With careful siting, design, planning and management it should be possible to adopt measures to balance participation rates, although there are also issues of people's perception and confidence that must be tackled.
5. Increasingly activity may be more organised and require travel to larger sites. Of particular relevance is the growth in interest in woodland cycling, paintball, archery and horseriding but also organised forest walks, forest drives, visitor centres and picnic sites.
6. Publicly accessible woodlands, both urban and rural, are key places where people feel they can 'get away from it all', and there may be a desire by some to get more actively involved with local woodlands.
7. The great variety of well-preserved archaeological monuments and features within woodlands merit presentation and interpretation as educational assets and visitor attractions.
8. The use of woodlands as a setting for art is becoming increasingly common and includes such events as concerts, plays and sculpture.
9. There is a lot of scope for attracting more families to woods, although individual requirements vary. For example mothers with young children want secure, low cost, accessible opportunities in which play facilities are provided whilst families with older children seek more strenuous activities.
10. The Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000, as well as providing the "right to roam" on heath, down and registered commonland, requires local highway authorities develop Rights of Way Improvement plans and sets the scene for strategic access.

### What is being done for recreation and access?

Many woodlands with public access are being established all over the region (particularly within the three Community Forest areas), but there is scope for much greater provision, especially close to residential areas both urban and rural.

All County Councils are establishing Local Access Forums to consider maps of open access land and registered commons that will be published and to providing strategic advice on access and rights of ways issues including strategic approaches.

A number of woods already make substantial provision for recreation.

Throughout the region, programmes of recreational activities, including many in a woodland setting, are prepared by Local Authorities, Community Forests, Forestry Commission, Wildlife Trusts and other organisations.

### Opportunities for recreation and access.

A number of opportunities exist to enhance the recreation provision of the region:

- improving the quality of recreation and information on the location of accessible woodlands,
- increasing access in existing woodlands, particularly those in leasehold by the Forestry Commission or in private ownership. This may require financial support and guidance on how to manage public access,
- planting of new woodland where existing accessible woodland is unavailable. This will particularly be in urban-fringe areas. It will be important to build on the expertise developed within the Community Forests,
- encouragement of public participation in woodland creation and management to foster a sense of involvement and responsibility,
- good design to ensure developments incorporate publicly accessible green space with substantial tree cover, and
- providing formal recreation facilities in larger woodland areas; these should be self-financing as far as possible.

### **Initiative for Recreation and Access**

QL1 Support a strategic approach to access provision, to ensure that woodland is an integral part of wider green-space and access strategies and programmes.

To support this initiative a series of actions will be taken. Each action will require resources and partners to achieve it. Please refer to the Action Plan that accompanies this Strategy ([www.woodlandforlife.net/wfl-action](http://www.woodlandforlife.net/wfl-action)).

## **B. Health**

(see also Recreation and Access, Community Engagement and Transport Infrastructure)

11. Trees and woods play an important part in physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. The health impacts are likely to be greater in well-designed, variable woodland. The major benefits are:

- psychological well being. Looking at, or travelling through, treed landscapes reduces states of stress and anxiety;
- regular moderate exercise in well-designed, accessible woods can lead to a reduction in heart disease and other physical illnesses;
- strenuous exercise, such as mountain biking and orienteering, can have greater beneficial health effects;
- some evidence for improved post-operative recovery rates in hospital wards overlooking wooded settings;
- improvements in air quality as trees filter pollutants; and
- provision of shade in urban areas so reducing ultraviolet radiation exposure.

12. A leading example of light outdoor exercise for health benefits is the 'Green Gym' promoted by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV). This uses the countryside as a health resource, involves the local community in practical conservation work and promotes conservation activities as beneficial to physical and mental health and as occupational therapy.

### What is being done for health?

The three Community Forests in the East of England have been at the forefront of promoting trees and health,

Forestry Commission organises a number of health related events from their High Lodge visitor centre in Thetford Forest. They have “Ladies Walking to Fitness”, “Kids in Trim” and a lifestyle course for retired people. Activities include walking, cycle riding, orienteering and the high-wire “Go-Ape” course.

The benefits of moderate exercise for health are being increasingly recognised.

### Opportunities for health.

A wide range of initiatives could be undertaken that would have health benefits, among which are:

- promote moderate outdoor exercise and conservation work for health,
- facilitate new hospital developments being set within well-landscaped grounds,
- increase the availability of accessible woodland near to where people live and work, thereby increasing accessibility to a wider range of socio-economic and other groups.

### **Initiative for Health**

QL2      Raise the awareness of the benefits of woodland for health and well-being.

To support this initiative a series of actions will be taken. Each action will require resources and partners to achieve it. Please refer to the Action Plan that accompanies this Strategy ([www.woodlandforlife.net/wfl-action](http://www.woodlandforlife.net/wfl-action)).

## C. Landscape

(See also Site Restoration, Urban Fringe and Built Environment and Biodiversity)

13. Perhaps the ubiquitous public benefit of trees and woodlands is their impact on landscape. Attractive landscapes benefit the general quality of life of local residents, can influence inward investment and underpin a significant part of the tourism industry. Whilst there are some places where attractiveness is partially dependent on the absence of tree cover, landscape evaluation techniques generally view trees and woodland as major positive components.
14. The scenic quality of the East of England is very diverse, as illustrated in the Countryside Agency's *Countryside Character Initiative*, which has delineated 17 character areas for the Region. There are also nationally important landscape areas within the East of England: the Broads, the Chilterns, Dedham Vale, Suffolk Coast and Heaths, the North Norfolk Coast, and the Brecks.
15. A number of landscape studies have been undertaken throughout the East of England, from which it is clear that:
16. Trees and woodland are thus contributing to both the structure and fine grain of important regional landscapes. There are, however, open landscapes (e.g. much of the coast of the region) that should be retained largely free of tree cover. In other areas the lack of trees diminishes the landscape quality and they should be increased. Elsewhere the existing patterns of land boundaries are of very ancient origin.
17. To take account of these factors, woodland and tree planting may require careful design and planning.

- ancient woodlands are important features in a number of areas;
- existing plantations, for example in Brecks and along the Greensand Ridge, are of major regional significance;
- tree presence is critical in terms of defining certain landscape types, such as parkland, river valley with wet woodlands, and the carr woodland of fen edges;
- woodland and hedgerows can be of considerable importance as historic features;
- farmland shelterbelts/tree lines and wooded areas are of importance in giving character to the more open parts of the region;
- there are several specific landscape types affording opportunities for new/regenerated woodland areas.

### What is being done for landscape?

The existing varied landscape of the East of England as a whole makes it an attractive place to live and work.

Most counties of the region have produced or are producing landscape character assessments and strategies which will be used to inform development proposals, including the acceptability of woodland planting, to ensure landscape quality is maintained or enhanced as appropriate.

Environmental Impact Assessments are required for new woodland planting or clearance that may have significant environmental effects. This ensures the effect on the landscape and biodiversity can be taken fully into account in the decision making process and opportunities taken to mitigate adverse impacts.

### Opportunities for landscape.

- In light of possible climate change and the roles trees and woods may play in flood control and energy production, existing landscape strategies may need to be reassessed, including the current general presumption against woodland planting in river valleys.

### **Initiative for Landscape**

QL3 Enhance, with trees and woodland, the aesthetic qualities of areas of the East of England that have suffered landscape degradation.

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## ***D. Community Engagement***

(see also Health, Urban Fringe and Built Environment, Lifelong Learning and Biodiversity.)

18. One of the most important indicators of quality of life is the extent to which people feel that they have a stake in the community in which they live and work. Engaged communities are much more likely to take pride in their neighbourhood, which in turn can reduce vandalism and antisocial behaviour. This may include an attachment to a particular settlement or neighbourhood, opportunities for involvement in local decision making, or direct involvement in community based activities.
19. A sense of place and community can be greatly influenced by a clear understanding of the local historic environment which may be influenced by tree and woodland cover.
20. The establishment and management of trees and woodland are prime activities in which people can be involved and are frequently their first experience of community engagement. Opportunities exist for participation from the initial planning of woodland creation, through planting and subsequent management to utilisation of woodland products.
21. Local involvement is not just a benefit in itself. Particularly where woodlands are to be created or managed primarily for the public benefits they provide, the input and engagement of local people can greatly enhance those benefits and engender a sense of ownership and responsibility.
22. Greatest benefits can accrue where there is a sense of ownership of the resource being managed. This can be achieved by delegating responsibility, particularly of publicly owned woodland, to a local community, or by direct ownership of land.
23. To co-ordinate action at a local level, the Government promotes the establishment of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). These bring together public, private, voluntary and community sectors. A key role of these partnerships will be the development of Community Strategies to promote or improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area.

#### What is being done for community engagement?

The Community Forests, Woodland Trust and Forestry Commission are leading the way in involving all sectors of the community in woodland creation, management and use.

A number of village design statements have been prepared around the region, some of which have considered the possibility of the creation of new woodland for the community.

Local communities have been involved in the establishment of significant areas of woodland around the region.

#### Opportunities for community engagement.

- The lessons learned and expertise gained in community involvement and participation could be widely disseminated.
- Greater community participation in the management of woodlands could be encouraged.
- Ensure tree and woodland issues are actively considered in Community Strategies and by Local Strategic Partnerships.
- Establish funding sources to allow community purchase of land for woodland creation

#### **Initiative for Community Engagement**

QL4 Support community engagement in woodland issues.

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