

Case Study: The National Forest



How Leicester Shire Promotions has supported the National Forest Company to help shape and deliver its vision for 'a forest in the making'



The National Forest is one of England's boldest environmental projects and covers 200 square miles of the counties of Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Staffordshire. Its objectives are to increase woodland cover within its boundaries from an initial six per cent to about a third and to demonstrate all the benefits that can come from a multi-purpose forest.

More than seven million trees have been planted so far, but it is about so much more than trees: it is one of the most wide-ranging projects based on a changed landscape that the country has ever seen, growing local pride and new economies, as well as the woodlands. To date the proportion of woodland cover in the Forest has already nearly trebled to almost 18 per cent and alongside that the tourism economy is worth £260 million a year.

To create the necessary infrastructure to support this new visitor destination, the National Forest Company embarked upon a number of tourism development projects with the support of local partners including Leicester Shire Promotions and East Midlands Tourism (EMT).

Enhancing the visitor infrastructure

Investment of more than £600,000 was awarded to fund the National Forest Visitor Gateway Project as part of EMT's Public Realm Challenge Fund. All work has now been completed across 17 sites. Woodland shelters, iconic archways and touchscreen kiosks are just some of the new facilities that greet visitors at attractions, service areas and lay-bys across the Forest to help people make the most of their visit. With EMT and Leicester Shire Promotions' support, the National Forest Company worked with tourism businesses to install the innovative information points for visitors.



In June 2008, Advantage West Midlands awarded the National Forest Company a grant of £249,680 to extend the Visitor Infrastructure Project across the Staffordshire part of the Forest. This enabled the National Forest Company to roll the project out across the whole of the destination, reinforcing the brand and ensuring consistency across the three counties.

The National Forest Company recently received news that its application for funding for the next stage of this tourism development project has been given the go ahead. The application for the 'National Forest Visitor Gateways (Stage 2) 2008-10' project was supported by Leicester Shire Promotions and agreed by East Midlands Tourism, the tourism arm of the East Midlands Development Agency (emda).

The 'National Forest Visitor Gateways (Stage 2) 2008-10' project is an extension to earlier work to provide high quality infrastructure including picnic benches, interpretation boards and leaflet dispensers to over 19 gateway sites. Phase II will introduce a number of new and developing attractions over eight gateway sites to engage and encourage existing and potential visitors.

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Physical infrastructure projects build a strong platform

Substantial donations from emda and (the former) Leicester Shire Economic Partnership, amongst others, also helped to create the YHA National Forest – next to Conkers Discovery Centre in the heart of The National Forest. The £1.78 million youth hostel is a flagship hostel, built to a VisitBritain four-star standard, with many sustainable features including a wood fuel system. It offers more than 70 beds and has had excellent occupancy since opening.

A 90 pitch camping and caravan club site has also been built alongside the YHA. Both of these developments increase the accommodation stock in the Forest that is essential if it is to grow as an overnight destination.

As a result of the completion of these and other major physical infrastructure projects, The National Forest has featured heavily in ongoing marketing campaigns, initiated and delivered by Leicester Shire Promotions to target the group travel and short break visitor markets.

New short break offers for visitors to The National Forest

As a destination, the niche for The National Forest is its green ethos, its accessibility to many urban centres, its family friendliness, an excellent terrain for easy walking and its value for money.

Reflecting this niche, visitors to The National Forest in Leicestershire can take advantage of a range of short break offers. To encourage visitors to extend their stay and take in more of activities ranging from walking, cycling, tree planting and bushcraft, through to historical sites such as the Moira Furnace and the interactive family attraction at Conkers, Leicester Shire Promotions and the National Forest Company have teamed up with local accommodation providers to offer some great accommodation rates from just £49 prpn (per room per night). These short break packages are being marketed by Leicester Shire Promotions through advertising, PR and online activity.

Promoting the Forest as a leading group travel destination

Twenty-five of the UK's leading coach tour operators visited Leicester and Leicestershire in 2009 to learn more about the destination's comprehensive range of opportunities for group travel organisations. The trip was organised by Leicester Shire Promotions and involved guided tours of some of the county's most popular group-friendly tourism attractions including The National Forest.

Partnership working enables open top bus tour

For five years, Leicester Shire Promotions co-ordinated the Heart of the Forest Tour. This is an open top sightseeing tour bus that takes in the breathtaking views and intriguing surroundings of the district, and showcases the best attractions the area has to offer.

Major journey towards an established visitor destination

Sophie Churchill, Chief Executive of the National Forest Company concludes: "The speed with which The National Forest is emerging as a regional and national destination really has been remarkable. After a short space of time, it attracts visitors from near and far, to this unique 'hidden gem'".

"emda and Leicester Shire Promotions, in particular, have had the imagination to come with us on the journey to accelerate the arrival of The National Forest as a tourism and visitor destination. I am immensely pleased to see short breaks featuring the The National Forest and I know that we have a robust partnership to keep the projects coming forward", concludes Sophie Churchill.

