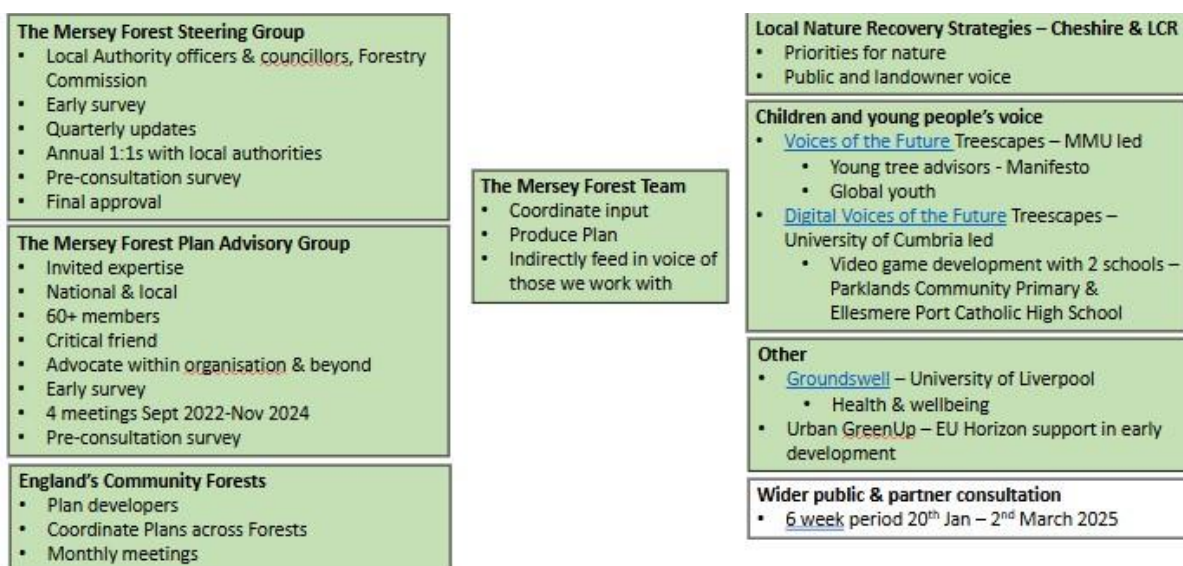


# Engagement and consultation on The Mersey Forest plan refresh for 2025

## Introduction

Engagement on the refresh of The Mersey Forest Plan for 2025 has been embedded throughout the refresh process, starting in 2022. A formal consultation on the draft Plan started on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2025 and runs until 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2025.

An overview of this process is set out in the diagram below. With the green boxes showing some of the pre-consultation engagement that has been undertaken. Further detail on the engagement and consultation phases are set out below.



## Engagement pre-consultation

Engagement started early on in the process of refreshing The Mersey Forest Plan in 2022 and has continued throughout, up to the consultation in January 2025. In particular, there have been two surveys as part of the engagement: an early survey in 2022, asking for thoughts on what people liked and wanted to change in the 2014 Plan; and a preconsultation survey in 2024 to see if any changes were necessary pre-consultation and to gather further amendments. A number of groups have fed into this, as set out in the green boxes in the diagram above and expanded on below.

**The Mersey Forest team** have been central to the refresh of The Mersey Forest Plan. The team have been kept updated throughout at regular team meetings. An away day meeting

was held in April 2023 to discuss the Plan in more detail. The team were also asked to input to the early and pre-consultation surveys. Further, the team have indirectly fed in the voice of the people that they work with on a day-to-day basis, including partners, landowners, and communities.

The existing **Mersey Forest Steering Group**, which governs The Mersey Forest, has been updated at their quarterly meetings about progress on the Plan refresh. The Steering Group consists of local authority officers and councillors (from Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens, and Wirral), as well as a Forestry Commission representative. They were asked to take part in an early survey, and officers to the pre-consultation survey in late 2024. In addition, annual 1:1 meetings (2022, 2023, and 2024) with each partner have given an opportunity to discuss issues in more detail, with wider invitees from the partner organisations involved in some of these. The Steering Group will be asked to approve the final Plan in April 2025, prior to its approval within each partner authority.

At least 51 people (N.B. this figure needs updating, as it just includes people attending the first round of 1:1 meetings we held) from our local authority partners have been involved in shaping the Plan in the pre-consultation phase. This includes 7 people from Cheshire East, 11 from Cheshire West and Chester, 6 from Knowsley, 4 from Liverpool, 8 from Sefton, 4 from St Helens, and 11 from Wirral.

A **Mersey Forest Plan Advisory Group** was established for the Plan in 2022, with over 60 members (although membership has varied slightly throughout). People were invited into the group because of specific expertise that was considered relevant to the work of The Mersey Forest. Their expertise was mapped against the policies in the 2014 Plan, to make sure we covered all aspects of our work. This included both national and local expertise. The members were asked to be critical friends to inform the refresh of the Plan, and to be an advocate for The Mersey Forest within their organisations and beyond. 4 meetings have been held of the Advisory Group, in September 2022, May 2023, January 2024 and November 2024. The Advisory Group were also asked to contribute to an early and pre-consultation surveys.

The Advisory Group has included people from: Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership, Cheshire West and Chester Council, Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Creative Concern, Dartmouth College (USA), Defra, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), Elm Associates, Environment Agency, Faiths 4 Change, Forest Research, Forestry Commission, Friends of Anderton and Marbury, Grosvenor Estates, Groundwork, Institute of Chartered Foresters, Landscape Institute, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, Liverpool John Moores University, Manchester Metropolitan University, Merseyside Biobank, Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service, Myerscough College, National Farmers Union, Natural England, Nature North, NHS, Shropshire Council, Sylva Foundation, Town and Country Planning Association, Transition Wilmslow, Trees and Design Action Group, United Utilities,

University of Birmingham, University of the Highlands and Islands, University of Liverpool, University of Manchester, University of York, Wargrave House, Wild Rumpus, Woodland Trust.

The Plan has been developed alongside the development of **Local Nature Recovery Strategies** (LNRS) for Cheshire and Liverpool City Region. The Mersey Forest team has fed into the process of developing both of these, attending a number of workshops, being part of the technical advisory group for LCR and on the LNP Executive Board for Cheshire, commenting on drafts, as well as having individual meetings with the developers of these strategies to try and ensure alignment. We also invited the LNRS Responsible Authorities, as well as others involved in developing these, to be part of The Mersey Forest Plan Advisory Group so that they had the opportunity to influence its development. This has allowed us to feed priorities for nature into The Mersey Forest Plan, but also to draw on the wealth of **public and landowner voice** gathered as part of the LNRS development.

**Public voice** was also gathered at an event held in Liverpool to celebrate Lunar New Year in 2024. The Mersey Forest were present at the event and, as part of our stall, were asking for peoples thoughts on trees and woodlands.

We have also worked on the Plan alongside the UK Treescapes ‘Voices of the Future’ and ‘Digital Voices of the Future’ projects. This has allowed us to feed in **children and young peoples voice** in a number of ways: indirectly through interactions with the projects researchers and partners, through the creation of a ‘Manifesto for our treescape’ with primary school children, through a site visit to a local park with global youth, and through the development of a video game with primary and secondary school children. We also invited two researchers from the Voices of the Future project to be on our Mersey Forest Plan Advisory Group to give them the opportunity to feed in more directly to our Plan.

We have worked with the **Groundswell Consortium** team from the University of Liverpool in relation to health and wellbeing. The Groundswell team were invited to be on our Plan Advisory Group and felt that there was a lot of potential for us to collaborate further. Work has included feeding into some of our metrics.

We have worked alongside **England’s Community Forests**, as each of the fifteen forests has been refreshing their forest plans with support from Defra’s Trees for Climate Fund. We have had monthly meetings to coordinate activity and allow us to have a national voice. This has included collaboration on the supporting evidence review on the benefits of trees and woods, and developing common metrics.

The early development of and inspiration for our Plan was supported by the award winning EU Horizon funded **Urban GreenUp** programme.

## Early survey 2022

The early survey in 2022 was sent to the team, Steering Group and Advisory Group. It asked for thoughts on: whether people were aware of the existing 2014 Plan, if they used it and how, what people liked in the existing Plan, what changes they'd like to be made, the best way to get the new Plan adopted and used by partners, and the format that the new Plan should be in.

In total there were 59 responses: 15 from the team, 9 from local authority partners, and 35 from other partners or organisations.

## Pre-consultation survey late 2024

The pre-consultation survey in 2024 was sent to the team, Steering Group and Advisory Group. It was intended to see if any changes were necessary pre-consultation and to gather further amendments.

There were 11 responses submitted using the online form, but further responses were sent via email. There were also discussions at the November 2024 Advisory Group meeting and 1:1 partner meetings Nov 2024-Jan 2025 that fed into this process. As a result of this a few key amendments were made to the draft Plan. Further changes will be ongoing during the consultation and pre-consultation phases.

The key changes made were:

- 30% tree cover in vision – supporting text was added to explain it is a long-term ambition, over centuries, rather than a target per se. This set it in the context of other pressures on land such as housing and food security. It also outlined shorter-term scenarios to 2050:
- High confidence – 14.6% tree cover, establishing 100 ha/yr
- Medium confidence – 14.9% tree cover, establishing 140 ha/yr
- Low confidence – 15.2% tree cover, establishing 175 ha/yr.
- Similarly, the area-based “indicative tree cover targets” were renamed as “long-term tree cover ambitions”.
- 3:30:300 aspiration – added text to acknowledge that local authorities may have their own adopted access standards and, while an aspiration, this may not be appropriate in all neighbourhoods.
- Specific amends to WHERE principles in Wirral as suggested by officers.

## Consultation

The consultation on The Mersey Forest Plan is taking place for six week period from 20<sup>th</sup> January 2025 until 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2025. During this period the new-look Mersey Forest website is

showcasing the consultation version of the Plan, with a link to an online form to complete the survey. There have been 31 responses as of 30<sup>th</sup> January, which currently seem to be very positive (e.g. 90% of responses agree/strongly agree with the vision, 10% neither agree nor disagree, and no responses disagree/strongly disagree). A full analysis of the results will be required once the consultation ends.

There are a range of communications to promote the consultation and try to gather more responses, including:

- An email that has been sent out to 2,571 recipients, including the team, Steering Group, and Advisory Group. Recipients also include people who have previously been in contact with The Mersey Forest or are linked to an organisation within the area who may be interested in our forest plan. Recipients were asked to complete the survey and to share it with anyone who might be interested in responding, including their networks, friends and families.
- The team has been asked to share widely with further contacts. This has included the Cheshire Tree Alliance.
- A separate email was sent to local authority school officers, asking them to share with schools to get both their and the pupils thoughts. We have suggested that pupils might want to share their thoughts on trees and woods through creative means, recognising that children will not complete a formal survey. A response for the Wirral officer has invited us to speak at a meeting with teachers on 6<sup>th</sup> February at Birkenhead Park Visitor Centre; a team member is following up on this.
- Social media communications via our channels, which we have asked our Plan Advisory Group and local authority partner comms teams to share. Woodland Trust have confirmed they have done this.
- Press release sent to local news outlets.
- Newsletter copy has been shared with the Plan Advisory Group and local authority comms teams. This has been included in Forestry Commission's regional newsletter, and NFU plan to include in their members newsletter.
- Promotional postcards are being created. These will be handed out by the team and at in person events.
- In person events are being planned. It is intended to have four of these, with dates still being confirmed. Including: Storyhouse in Chester (14<sup>th</sup> February), Liverpool One, St Helens College, and at a rural auction house in Cheshire East.

## Post-consultation

When the consultation ends The Mersey Forest team will analyse all responses, including any pre-consultation survey responses that had not yet been implemented, and make changes accordingly. It is intended to take the final Plan to the Mersey Forest Steering Group on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2025. If the Steering Group approve the Plan, then each of the Steering Group partners will seek approval of their respective organisations. This process is being led by each partner organisation, with support from The Mersey Forest team, as appropriate.