



# More from Trees - a Green Recovery Through the Mersey Forest

## Final Evaluation



Green Recovery Challenge Fund

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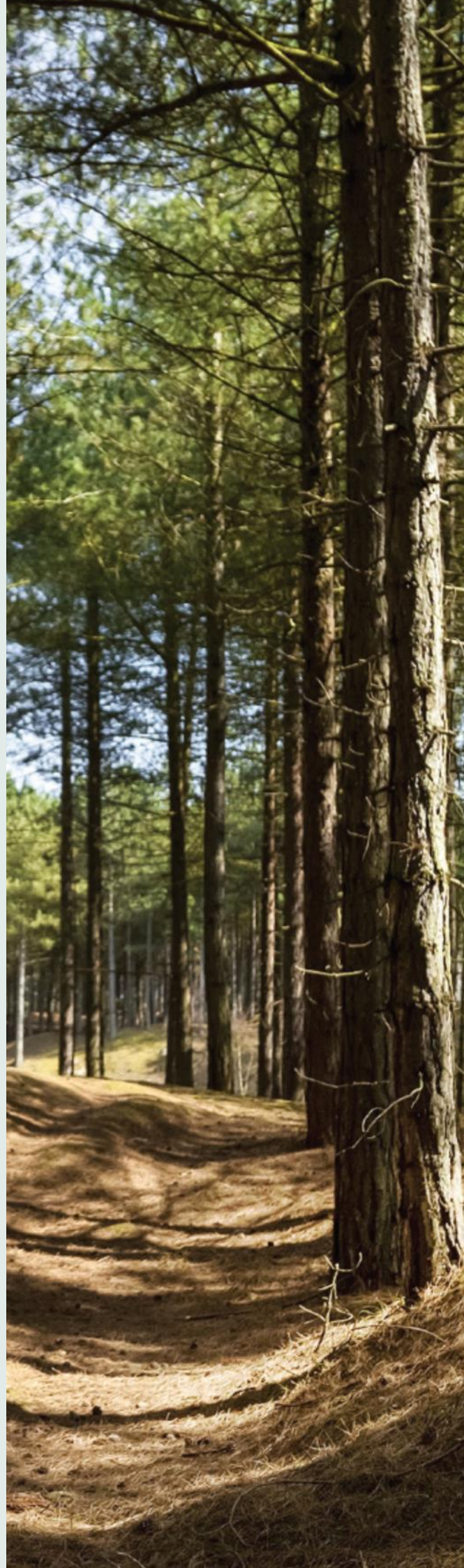
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# About the Project

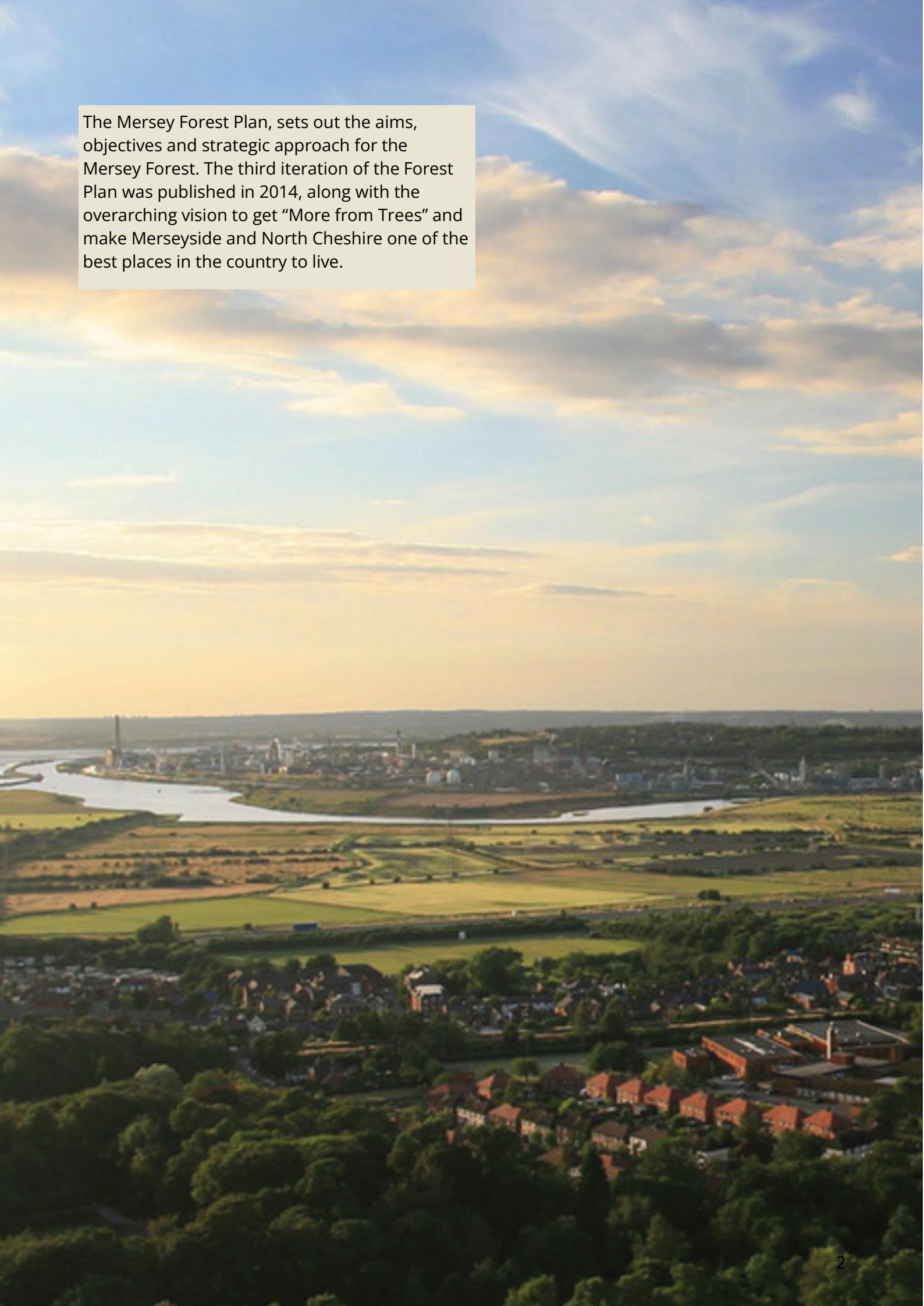
## Introducing the Mersey Forest

Mersey Forest is one of England's twelve 'Community Forests' set up in the early 1990's to create and manage large-scale woodland and other green spaces and to improve the environment, enhance biodiversity, and provide social and economic benefits for local communities. Since its establishment, various community and partnership tree planting programmes have successfully planted over 9 million trees, creating a network of woodlands and green spaces covering 1370km<sup>2</sup> across Cheshire and Merseyside. An area which is home to over 1.7 million people.

The Mersey Forest is delivering wide ranging benefits for nature, climate and people:



The Mersey Forest Plan, sets out the aims, objectives and strategic approach for the Mersey Forest. The third iteration of the Forest Plan was published in 2014, along with the overarching vision to get “More from Trees” and make Merseyside and North Cheshire one of the best places in the country to live.





# About More from Trees

## Background

The 'More from Trees - a Green Recovery through the Mersey Forest' project is an 18-month project led by the Mersey Forest and delivered in partnership with various partners and stakeholders including:

- Cheshire Wildlife Trust
- Liverpool City Council
- Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)
- Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)
- Plant A Tree Today (PATT) Foundation

The project is funded by the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) Round 2; a competitive fund to kick-start environmental renewal while creating and retaining a range of jobs in England, developed by Defra and its Arms-Length Bodies, and distributed and monitored by National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF).

## Motivation

Based on extensive consultation with stakeholders, including those from local authorities, Natural England, Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency, the Mersey Forest team identified specific areas of focus for interventions across Merseyside and Cheshire:

- Priority habitats across the Mersey Forest area are under pressure from habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation leading to a reduction in biodiversity.

- Liverpool City Centre is the most urban local authority within the Mersey Forest and contributes significantly to the urban heat island effect, increasing the threat of Climate Change on the natural environment and society.
- Woodlands are complex habitats which require significant attention through design and planting. However, specialist and native species are difficult to source and propagate.
- Opportunities within the green economy are increasing. Yet local people are not equipped with the correct skills to take advantage.
- The Mersey Forest covers over 500 square miles of Merseyside and Cheshire within which are some of the most disadvantaged (top 5%) areas in England. These communities face health and economic inequalities, exacerbated by COVID-19, and are typically less likely to engage in greenspace.

GRCF provided the opportunity to support existing tree planting and woodland creation schemes being delivered by the Mersey Forest team. It was a good opportunity to build on nature recovery elements to influence how these landscapes are managed going forward. The Mersey Forest team sought this opportunity to also deliver against other GRCF agendas such as connecting people to nature and demonstrating the importance of green skills and jobs in nature recovery, building on existing Mersey Forest partnerships and activities which have been delivered previously in accordance with the wider Mersey Forest Plan.





## Project Aims

Aiming to build on the success of other projects, 'More from Trees - a Green Recovery through the Mersey Forest' is part of the Mersey Forest team's long-term aim to work with partners, communities and landowners to revitalise the environment, whilst bringing economic and social benefits to local communities.

The More from Trees project will also complement the tree planting aspect of the Trees for Climate programme; sharing resources to deliver woodland creation.

In accordance with the GRCF themes, the Mersey Forest sought to deliver the following:



### Nature Conservation and Restoration

- Deliver a programme of habitat creation, restoration and access for priority habitats across Bold Forest Park, supporting a nationally important population of willow tit.
- Deliver a range of nature-based interventions to increase connectivity and diversity of species, focusing on Liverpool city centre.
- Create riparian woodland to reduce flood risk & tackle poor water quality.
- Recover threatened native tree and woodland pioneer species through creation of a specialist tree nursery.

woodland under active management creating more resilient woodlands across Merseyside and Cheshire.

### Connecting People with Nature

- Improve access to nature for under-represented groups, through access to evidence-based Natural Health Service activities.

### Jobs/local economic impact and financial sustainability

- Create new jobs and retain existing jobs, support CIC's and offer apprenticeships.
- Recruit and train veterans; offering paid job opportunities to deliver tree planting.

### Nature Based Solutions, particularly for Climate Change Adaption and Mitigation

- Install natural flood management interventions to reduce flood risk for target communities.
- Increase urban cooling and carbon capture through Nature Based Solutions (NBS) in Liverpool city centre.
- Create new woodland and bring existing

The More from Trees aims and objectives were delivered across eight projects:



### GR1 Bold Forest Park

The Mersey Forest

Restoration of four BAP habitats at Bold Forest Park, St. Helens, to support native species including Willow Tit. 15 young people with Special Educational Needs will be given the opportunity to develop habitat creation skills.

### GR2 Natural Flood Management

The Mersey Forest

The installation of 20 natural flood management interventions, called Leaky Woody Dams, in the Lower Dane Catchment and Rivacre Valley.

### GR3 Nature Based Interventions

Liverpool City Council

The installation of a range of Nature-Based interventions in Liverpool City Centre.

### GR4 Green Task Force

PATT Foundation

Creation of a Green Task Force, comprised of a team of 30 veterans who will receive training and paid opportunities around green skills.







### **GR5 Community Tree Nursery**

Cheshire Wildlife Trust

Creation of a specialist Tree Nursery to deliver new Native Woodlands across Cheshire. Ten young people and a trainee will be upskilled in horticulture and conservation.

### **GR6 Connecting Communities to Nature**

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside & The Mersey Forest

The delivery of Natural Health Service activities and a NHS Cheshire & Merseyside Community Grants programme to encourage 1000 people from under-represented groups to access local greenspace and improve their health & wellbeing. Outdoor classrooms will also be created.

### **GR7 Natural Capital Hub**

Liverpool John Moores University

The creation of a Natural Capital Hub to coordinate, develop and deliver four training modules around Natural Capital to 100 people.

### **GR8 Woodland Management**

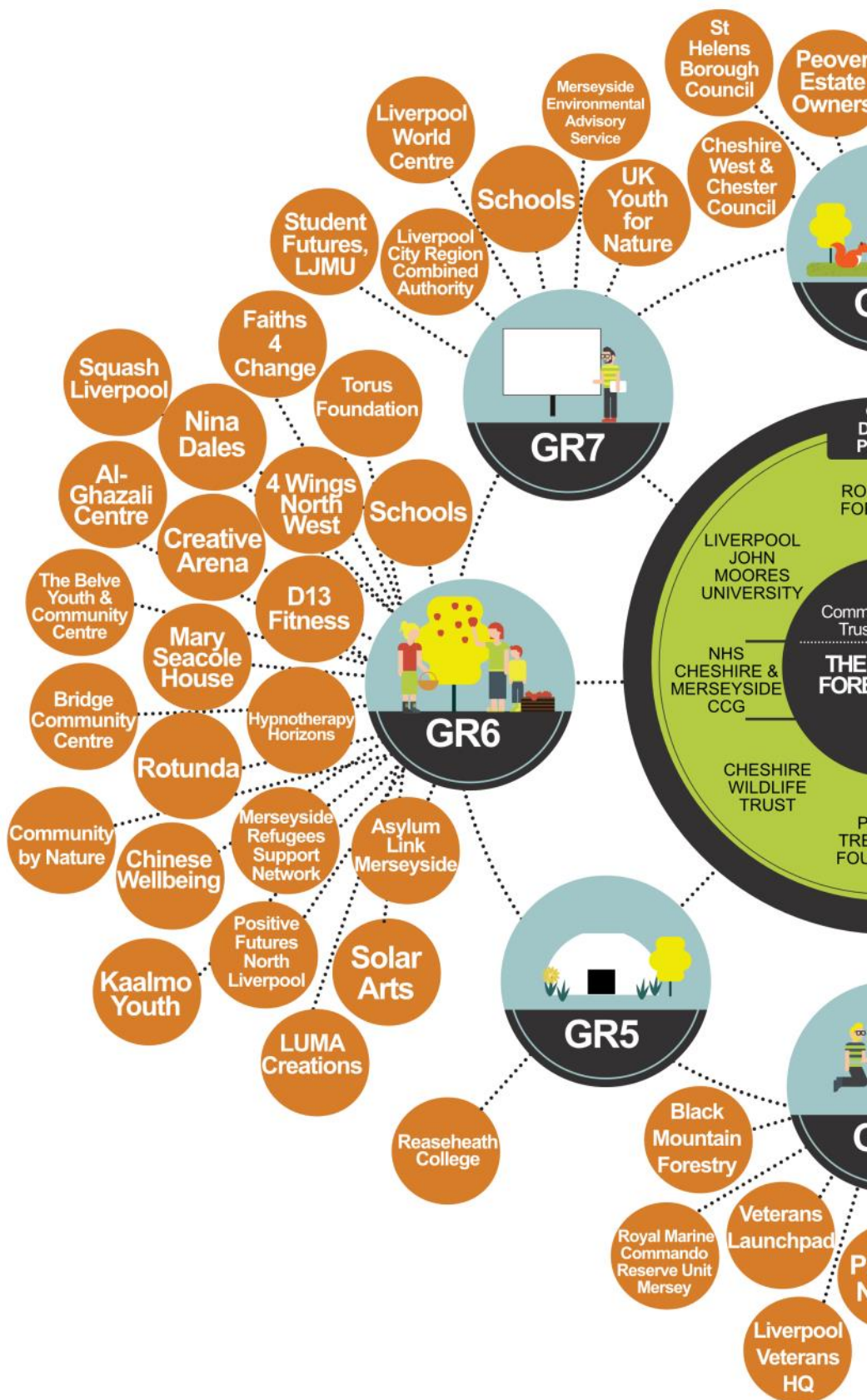
The Mersey Forest

The production of eight Woodland Management Plans to bring 700ha of undermanaged woodland into active management.

# Delivery Model

More from Trees is a complex, multi-strand project. Delivering a project of this level of complexity over an 18-month period required a pipeline of 'shovel ready' interventions and activities. These built on existing partnerships and also the establishment of new relationships to deliver viable projects based on best practise through the sharing of knowledge, resources and skills.

The project was overseen by a project manager employed by Mersey Forest, drawing on the relevant environmental and financial expertise to facilitate the co-ordination of eight projects and oversee delivery.







Delivery required a collaborative and supportive relationship between project management and partners. Each project has a designated project leader. Project leads were responsible for reporting directly to the project manager through monthly progress meetings and quarterly progress reports which set out progress against deliverables and budget, as well as identifying any mitigating risks.

Project leads were also responsible for engaging external partners to ensure the delivery of their projects. For capital delivery, project leads instructed contractors and built networks with various organisations to recruit volunteers across Merseyside and Cheshire. For activity delivery, project leads consulted with partners to design and develop training resources and events, or nature-based activities, as well as gain access to hard-to-reach groups.



# Evaluation

Community First Partnership (CFP) was appointed to evaluate the 'More from Trees - a Green Recovery through the Mersey Forest' project. Due to the complexity and intense delivery of the project, CFP were embedded within the project team. Attendance at monthly progress meetings allowed them to engage with stakeholders and monitor progress across all eight projects.

CFP have adopted a journalistic approach towards the evaluation, working alongside project leads to capture and reflect the progress, learnings and legacies of the projects. This is reflected in a series of case studies for each project, which can be shared internally and externally with funders, partners and local people. Learnings from the delivery provide an opportunity to inform future projects, strategies, funding and policy, to support the Mersey Forest Plan.





## Case study: Bold Forest Park

### Context

Bold Forest Park is a newly created resource south of St Helens Borough with smaller areas of the park also spanning Warrington and Halton Boroughs.

Comprising 267 hectares of land, much of which has been reclaimed from coalmining, over the last 30 years it has been landscaped and planted as community woodland. Two of the seven sites which make up the Forest Park are Colliers Moss and Griffin Wood.

Colliers Moss Common was created on the spoil and waste from the Bold Colliery and Power Station – once a highly industrialised landscape. Colliers Moss has now been transformed into a tranquil green space and Local Nature Reserve. The remnants of mossland around the fringes of the site have been restored. The 55-hectare site is of exceptional importance having a unique array of 4 priority habitats (lowland raised bog, lowland heathland, wet woodland, reedbed and ponds) and representing a third of Merseyside's remaining relic mosslands. The site supports a range of notable species including willow tit, water vole, common lizard and 16 species of dragonfly including black tailed skimmer and emperor. The willow tit population is nationally important, largely limited to brownfield sites in former mining areas, with less than 3000 pairs nationally.

Griffin Wood is a twelve-hectare community woodland, one of a cluster created as part of developing the Forest Park. Originally an empty field with a small corner of ancient woodland, The Mersey Forest worked with the local community to plan and then plant the woodland in 2007. With support from the Friends of Griffin Wood, the site was developed and now contains young woodland, wildflower meadows, a network of access paths, and a sculpture trail.

These priority habitats and the wildlife they support

were at risk of degradation, areas were also largely inaccessible to visitors. The More from Trees project used GRCF funding to deliver a programme of habitat restoration and creation through a funded project lead role, enhancing biodiversity and accessibility at Colliers Moss and Griffin Wood, whilst providing volunteering opportunities around conservation activities for young adults with autism.



## Motivations

Following the cessation of management of the site by Groundwork in the 1990s, Colliers Moss has been at increasing risk from habitat loss, particularly the lowland heathland habitat which is a haven for invertebrates and pollinators. Furthermore, the site suffered from a poor perception of safety amongst the public, the entrances were overgrown, and the park was lacking in visitor facilities, giving it an undeserved reputation amongst locals.

Griffin Wood was also lacking in visitor facilities. The site is located slightly further from settlements in St Helens and next to the M62 which has caused limited habitat connectivity and access issues for local people. With many other ancient woodlands in the area inaccessible to the public it is important to connect people with this rich habitat and its biodiversity.

## Delivery

Management at Colliers Moss & Griffin Wood had been not been sufficient to achieve the goals of the Mersey Forest team; the priority habitats and their wildlife were increasingly being lost and the site was perceived as unsafe. A set of recommendations to improve site management had been developed, but there were limited resources to deliver the works required. GRCF provided funding to restore the landscape through a partnership approach with volunteer groups. The project focused more heavily on volunteer engagement than originally anticipated. Strong partnerships have been developed with The Green Task Force, Community by Nature, TCV Volunteers, Groundwork, Murphy Construction and The Moss Fairy Crew, all working towards a shared, long-term vision for the site centred around habitat restoration and maintenance. The inclusive volunteer programme has offered opportunities to people regardless of skills and experience, and the impact has been profound:

- 15 autistic young people aged 18 to 25 developed conservation skills through a

partnership with Wargrave House, a school and sixth form for children aged between 5-18 with autism and co-existing diagnoses.

- Two components of the Woodland Management Plan for Colliers Moss were delivered by Community by Nature volunteers, improving the health and resilience of the woodland.
- Volunteers have gained a wealth of green skills through structured training courses such as pesticide plugs training, which will also contribute towards ongoing maintenance of the site throughout the summer months.
- Local people and site users have noticed the difference the work has made, and the presence of volunteers has made them feel safer, resulting in an increased use by families and lone females.

GRCF funding was used to purchase and install two volunteer welfare units, which were put onsite at Colliers Moss. This enabled volunteer activity and contractual work to take place, delivering a range of interventions to enhance and link habitats specifically to benefit willow tit, water voles, butterflies, and moths. Unfortunately both units suffered in an arson attack and were damaged beyond repair. Mersey Forest will look to replace them once the insurance claim is settled.

A total of four priority habitats have been restored and enhanced. The works have taken a smaller compartment-based management plan approach utilizing volunteers and small contractors. This plan will deliver ongoing maintenance to further enhance the site and its biodiversity.

A new partnership was formed with the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), in which the project lead and a specialist licensed bird ringer from BTO have begun identifying willow tit nesting sites and monitoring breeding. The GRCF has provided funding to support year one of a three-year programme to monitor and manage Willow Tit habitats at Colliers Moss.





*Groundwork volunteers*



*Ombudsman volunteers*



*J Murphy volunteers collecting acorns*



*Heathland Restoration Work*



*Willow Tit monitoring*



*Woodland Restoration*

## Challenges and Issues

Delivering large scale habitat creation and restoration within the timeframe was a challenge. However, the GRCF provided funding for a project lead role, who was able to build important partnerships with local community organisations and gain access to numerous volunteer groups to deliver the works.

Bold Forest Park was selected to deliver several elements of the More from Trees programme and with differing priorities for the site, developing a collaborative and strategic approach at the outset was essential, but was challenging at times due to the project's short timescales.

The aim to deliver works through volunteer activity and improve visitor accessibility was initially challenging due to the lack of visitor facilities and infrastructure on site. The installation of the two welfare units offered an effective solution to this.

The scope of work delivered through Wargrave House partnership was limited due to the budget available. However, this was addressed by engaging other volunteer groups, that were not identified in the project scope.

## Legacy



The development of Colliers Moss Woodland Management Plan, for which delivery has already started, will ensure that the site is managed in a way that consolidates and increases the breeding population, whilst developing the woodland for recreation and longevity.

The three-year monitoring programme will continue in partnership with BTO, and will continue to be funded by the BFP Biodiversity Fund. It is envisioned that Colliers Moss will be adopted as a permanent site for bird monitoring through the BTO ringing scheme, in particular for Willow Tit and Reed warbler, but also for all species of bird that use the site. Colliers Moss will become a site for training future BTO ringing volunteers as part of their national ringing scheme, who will be committed to delivering the vision.

The project has changed the way that organisations, volunteers and local people are using and connecting with the site and new plans, that previously wouldn't have been possible, are being developed. These include:

- Establishing a wood allotment for the use and benefit of local people, whilst sustainably managing and maintaining the woodland.
- Establishing an events programme centred around connecting local people with nature and habitat protection, such as founding a photography group and clean up events.
- Establishing a growing scheme to recreate the ancient woodland floor at Griffin Wood, contributing towards ancient woodland restoration and connecting local people with this integral habitat.



## Case study: Natural Flood Management at Bold Forest Park

### Context

Colliers Moss Common is a tranquil nature reserve located in St. Helens borough and forms part of Bold Forest Park. The 55-hectare site saw over 9 million tonnes of colliery spoil and fuel ash tipped onto mossland for nearly 30 years. It is now comprised of four priority habitats including lowland raised bog, lowland heathland, wet woodland and reedbed and ponds. The site is a haven for a range of species including water voles, common lizard, butterflies, dragonflies, and willow tits, which are at threat from extinction in the UK.

Although the mossland around the fringes of the site has been restored, Colliers Moss is at increasing risk from habitat loss, particularly the lowland heathland habitat. GRCF provided funding to identify two watercourses which were potentially causing a flooding risk in the area. Posing a threat to the community of Moss Nook located around 500m downstream; the primary ditch flows heavily during peak periods of rainfall and the secondary ditch flows permanently.



### Delivery

The project has used Natural Flood Management (NFM) approaches to mitigate the flood risk while using monitoring to understand the impact of such work. Through the GRCF, the project has:

- Installed 21 leaky woody dams at Colliers Moss;
  - 11 multi stack dams located in series down a surface runoff pathway to the side of an access track, acting to slow the flow and temporarily store surface water during rainfall events, wetting up the areas behind each dam and increasing water storage during drier periods.
  - 10 stake and wedge logs dams constructed along the main watercourse draining the area, constructed to allow winter baseflows to pass beneath unhindered. As water levels rise during storm events the structures will 'activate' to interrupt and slow flows, causing water to back up behind the structures, spill onto the wet woodland floodplain and temporarily store water to reduce peak flows.
- Improved the bund in the wet woodland around the main watercourse, to hold flood water within the woodland habitat, which it is hoped will wet up the area and increase the resilience of the wet woodland during drought.

- Provided new data about the impact of leaky dams in this area by using hydraulic modelling to determine that approximately 1943m<sup>2</sup> of water will be attenuated as a result of the project.
- Further remedial works, to expose 100m of subsurface land drain in Griffin Wood, turning what was a underground culvert into natural ditches to reduce flood water velocity and increase biodiversity value on site.



## Legacy and Future Plans

- The leaky dams will become living structures. The willow structures will root and grow like hedgerows which will enhance the environment and require little maintenance.
- Long term hydrological monitoring of water flows and quality through water level loggers, an onsite rain gauge and trail cameras. These measures will help manage risk and guide adaptive management of the site.
- Data gathered at Colliers Moss will support flood alleviation modelling, building an evidence base for the impact of NFM and growing opportunities for to future investment.



## Case study: Making Space for Nature in Liverpool City Centre

### Context

Intensive agriculture has eroded biological diversity in large portions of the countryside. Green Infrastructure in cities can serve as a refuge for insect pollinators. The Making Space for Nature project has been delivered in Liverpool to support pollinators by improving habitat connectivity and diversity to support populations of insect pollinator species including bees. The project has been delivered through partnership working with Liverpool City Council.

### Delivery

The GRCF project has delivered a range of structures and interventions that improve biodiversity including;

- 2 pergola shady pollinator structures
- 3 small floating islands
- Pollinator space and pollinator climbers
- 10m green growing wall
- Nature SuDS system

### Challenges and Issues

Originally one large floating island was planned, more detailed planning during the delivery stage meant that this was changed to three smaller islands.

It was initially planned for trees in containers to be installed along Blundell Street in Liverpool City Centre. Multiple issues including manufacturing times for the containers, denied permission from one of the building owners and seasonality have meant that the trees could not be delivered within the project timeframe.

There were some delays in preparing the designs, work packages and in procurement. However, the team worked hard to minimise this impact and the project was completed in January 2023 rather than winter 2022 as anticipated.



### Legacy and Future Plans

Liverpool City Council as landowner will be responsible for ongoing maintenance of the improvements following project completion. Community groups through the Natural Health Service element of the project will be encouraged to take stewardship of the interventions where appropriate.

## Case study: Floating Ecosystem Islands at Greenbank Park Lake

Greenbank Park is a public park rich in nature and heritage dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The park is located four kilometres to the south-east of Liverpool city centre, in the suburb of Mossley Hill. It is situated in Greenland's Ward; a densely populated ward including a large resident student population and high levels of ethnic diversity. Greenbank Park is designated as a Conservation Area, boasting a selection of mature trees and an Old English walled garden. The Park also has a café, a children's playground, football pitches and lake. The lake is the focal point of the park and makes the site a popular destination for local anglers. The site is also primarily used by young families and local students.

Greenbank Park makes up part of an extensive network of open space in South Central Liverpool alongside Sefton Park where floating ecosystem islands have already been installed.

The lake like many in urban parks has suffered from water quality issues, causing habitat degradation and threatening the sites biodiversity and species which include Carp, Bream, Herons, Waterfowl and pollinators. The GRCF funding was used to install floating islands in the lake to improve water quality, restore the habitat and improve the sites biodiversity.

The project has been delivered over a short timescale and a challenging procurement process has increased pressures around project delivery. Delivery was initially delayed whilst tenders for the floating islands were awaiting legal approval. Once procurement had successfully completed, it was too late in the season to install and plant the floating islands within the initial project deadline and they were delivered in the extension period. Ideally, an increased timescale for the project would have allowed for these arrangements to be in place prior to the project start date.

Three floating islands each 6m<sup>2</sup> were positioned along the length of the lake. The floating islands were planted with a mix designed to provide habitat,



shelter and forage for pollinating insects to increase the biodiversity of the site. Seeds and flowering grasses include marsh marigold, forget me not, creeping jenny and water speedwell. Vegetative cover will be provided by plants, notably several species of sedge, a soft rush and horsetail. Flowering species providing summer colour, height and attracting pollinators include meadowsweet, ragged robin, yellow flag and purple loosestrife. Over time the floating islands will:

- Introduce new locations for aquatic emergent vegetation, attract pollinating insects and provide new habitat and biodiversity to the lake.
- Support bird breeding and waterfowl at the lake, through the built in nesting platforms.
- Improve water quality and reduce the likelihood of future algal blooms as the roots of the freshwater reeds and plants that hang below the water surface will take up and use excess water nutrients.
- Help to shade part of the lake, providing cooler areas in summer and increasing habitats to protect juvenile aquatic animals.
- Provide a visual improvement to the park lake and improve the offer for the parks Anglers.





The Friends of Greenbank Park have been actively involved in delivering the project. The group have helped to plant up and install the floating islands. They also fundraised for additional improvements including an additional covered bird nesting platform and a wider diversity of planting.

Future maintenance will be carried out by Liverpool City Council parks maintenance team, who will cut the vegetation annually.

The GRCF funding has delivered additional nature recovery work, including the installation of two pergolas in the walled garden. These will soon be covered by climbing pollinator friendly plants. The pergolas will provide a shady summer place to rest and enjoy the park, and the new flowering pollinators plants will enhance the biodiversity of the walled garden and attract pollinating insects.

The project has provided valuable learning around delivering NBS interventions. There is a good opportunity to apply this learning to other NBS

projects in Liverpool's green spaces and to build on the network of green space around Greenbank Park to create interconnected Nature Based solutions throughout South Central Liverpool .



## Case study: Green Task Force

### Background

There are over 18,000 forces veterans within the Cheshire and Merseyside region. It is estimated that 9% of these veterans who have served in an active zone, are currently suffering from PTSD. Service leavers are also at risk of stress and anxiety when transitioning from service, and there is significant unemployment amongst this group.

The Green Task Force is a subsidiary of the UK Charity; the Plant A Tree Today Foundation (PATTF) and it aims to provide land-based opportunities for forces veterans, while contributing to positive environmental change.

Mark started out life as a gamekeeper, growing a knowledge of wildlife and conservation. He later embarked on a 12-year uniformed career; three years spent in the Fire Service, followed by seven years as a Royal Marines Commando, leaving the Military to pursue a career abroad within the Oil and Gas Sector along with Political/Official Security. Mark then returned to the UK and went onto serve two years in the police force. Mark found the Project Lead role for the Green Task Force and saw an opportunity to apply his knowledge and experience in a new environment and step away from the frontline.

### Aims and Objectives

Working in partnership, the Mersey Forest team and PATTF aimed to create a local Green Task Force in Merseyside and Cheshire who would be “employment ready” to take on roles in the green economy going forward. The GRCF funding was used to equip veterans with land-based skills, qualifications, and experience, while increasing their connection to nature and gaining benefits for their mental health through Nature Based Therapy.

### Project activities

Strong partnerships were formed with local organisations including Liverpool veterans HQ, Royal Marine Commando Reserve Unit Mersey, Project NOVA, Veterans Launchpad, Sefton’s Military Veterans and Sale Sharks Community Trust to recruit veterans. A total of 15 veterans were recruited into the Green Task Force and offered paid job opportunities around habitat restoration and woodland creation. As part of the More from Trees project, the Green Task Force have:

- Planted a total of 26,477 trees, equivalent to around 24 hectares of new woodland across Merseyside and Cheshire.
- Gained a wealth of green skills through structured training activities as part of the employment package, including brush cutter, pole saw, woodchipper, pesticides and woodland management training.
- Developed knowledge and skills around habitat restoration, including clear felling, working alongside volunteers at Bold Forest Park to deliver the peatland restoration elements of the GRCF project.
- Improved their health and wellbeing and gained confidence through a nature-based therapy retreat, continued support and advice and through opportunities to socialise with other veterans and volunteers involved in the More from Trees project.





*Brush Cutter Training*



*Pesticides Training*



*ATV Training*



*Woodchipper Training*



*Mower Training*



*Pole Saw Training*

## Key Successes of the Green Task Force Project

The primary objective of Green Task Force was to involve veterans in tree planting within Bold Forest Park. However, the early success of the project and the appetite for the trainees to develop new skills has meant that the scope of works has been significantly broadened.

12 veterans have been enrolled on the employment package, which has offered eight training courses, each with a different qualification available on completion. The employment package proved an attractive recruitment incentive for veterans and offered them a diverse and engaging experience. Upon completing the employment package, the veterans are well equipped to help address the UK's green skills gap and four have gone on to further develop their skills achieving a fast-track arborist qualification.

Towards the latter part of the project, a successful partnership has been established between the Green Task Force and the Bold Forest Park team. Both teams have been working on Colliers Moss and Griffin Wood together and sharing resources. This has provided a source of work for the Green Task Force outside of the planting season, but it has also been a great opportunity for the veterans to integrate with other volunteers. Integration with non-military communities is an important part of the recovery process, and also helps others to better understand the military lifestyle.

**“ OUR PLAN IS TO SUPPORT VETERANS AND CREATE A POSITIVE PATHWAY. THE EMPLOYMENT PACKAGE ALLOWED THIS AND BECAME A GREAT RECRUITMENT INCENTIVE... AS INDIVIDUALS, THEY'VE GOT AN EXTENSIVE ARRAY OF QUALIFICATIONS... AND FOR THE GREEN TASK FORCE THAT WILL HELP US TO CONTINUE WORK BEYOND THE TREE PLANTING SEASON ”**

*Mark West, GTF Project Lead*

## Key Challenges and Issues

The project has been delivered over a short timescale and the pressure around this has been magnified by the seasonal nature of tree planting. Ideally, such projects would have a 12 month lead in period which

which would allow for planning, recruitment and contractual agreements to be made prior to the delivery period. However, the team have overcome these barriers by providing an incentive for recruitment through the employment package and by building partnerships with other organisations, including the Bold Forest Park team, to continue work all year round.

## The Future of the Green Task Force

As it stands the Green Task Force consists of 12 veterans, and work will continue with partner organisations to recruit new veterans. Mark has been exploring ways to continue work streams for the Green Task Force all year round and to keep veterans on a positive pathway.

- Creating a highly qualified and skilled tree surgery team who could deliver work in the commercial tree surgery sector.
- The successful partnership with the project lead at Bold Forest Park project has opened their eyes to the importance of partnership working and together they have developed the veteran ranger project; offered to members of the Green Task Force to build on their current qualifications and help with the delivery of heathland restoration at Bold Forest Park.
- Establishing new partnerships with organisations including the Riverside Company, the Merseyside Rural Wildlife Climate Action Team to provide further training for veterans.
- Building partnerships with Black Mountain Forestry, Manchester City Council and the Woodland Trust to commit Green Task Force members to maintenance teams or woodland creation and management projects.
- Working with City of Trees, taking the learnings from this project to help develop their veteran organisation and open avenues for other Community Forests.







## Case study: A Veteran's Journey

### Cara's Story

#### Life Before

Cara joined the Royal Marines in 2002. In 2005, Cara experienced some family issues, which amongst other things, led to her being discharged from the Royal Marines after being declared temperamentally unsuited to service life. This experience left Cara with unresolved feelings of resentment and anger towards the military, and she was left trying to deal with these and recover from this unexpected disruption to her career path.

After her military service, Cara found herself in various roles, working as a petrol station attendant, an animal care worker, a children's swimming teacher, and finally in a bank. Cara was struggling with feelings of estrangement. She felt she couldn't be her authentic self in these roles and felt vulnerable in the office setting leading her to seek other work. In the meantime, Cara was also struggling in her personal life and found herself in troubling relationships, she felt she was often taken advantage of due to her military background and how this had shaped her into a 'yes' person. Cara felt her life was taking a downwards trajectory.

#### Becoming involved in the Green Task Force

After being arrested whilst on a night out, Cara was referred to Project NOVA, a specialist programme developed to support veterans in the criminal justice system. For Cara, a programme that she initially thought would be confined to legal advice became a strong support system, helping her to digest her military experience and address PTSD and mental health issues.

In 2021, Cara met Mark West, the Green Task Force project lead. Mark offered Cara the opportunity to train to become a tree surgeon. This presented itself as the perfect opportunity; Cara felt she needed a change of environment and due to Mark's military background, Cara felt as if she could trust him.



“ THE THING THAT APPEALED TO ME AT FIRST WAS DEFINITELY JUST GETTING OUT WITH A COUPLE OF LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE. HAVING THAT CAMARADERIE, KNOWING THAT I WAS SOMEWHERE I COULD FEEL SAFE AS WELL. AND TRUST THAT I WAS KIND OF IN GOOD HANDS. IT JUST DOESN'T NECESSARILY ALWAYS HAPPEN. AS I SAY BEING A VETERAN SOMETIMES YOU CAN BE VULNERABLE ”

#### The difference it made

At the end of November 2022, Cara became a fully qualified arborist after completing a three-week tree surgery course. Cara has developed a wealth of green skills throughout the course of the project and gained numerous qualifications, including brush cutter, PA1/PA6AW pesticides, aerial cutting of trees and woodland management for conservation qualifications.

Involvement in the Green Task Force has also had an overwhelmingly positive impact on Cara's personal life. The project has helped to rebuild Cara's confidence and feelings of self-worth and both Cara and her closest family and friends have noticed a significant improvement in her wellbeing. Cara believes that the opportunity has saved her life.

**“ I FEEL STRONGER AS A PERSON, AND I FEEL HEALTHIER. HEALTHIER MENTALLY, BUT I ALSO FEEL HEALTHIER PHYSICALLY... I DON'T THINK IT WOULD BE AN EXAGGERATION TO SAY THAT THIS WHOLE THING SAVED MY LIFE ”**

Before this experience, Cara suffered with feelings of isolation. The opportunity to work alongside other veterans, people who understand and with whom she has shared experiences, has created a strong emotional support system for Cara. As a result, she has a more positive outlook on life, and she now reflects on her military career in a more positive light.

### The Future

Cara feels very positive about her future; she plans to stay in the green sector and feels that she has finally found her niche. For now, Cara's ambition is to build on her arborist qualification, as she is keen to perfect her profession and skillset. Looking further into the future, Cara feels hopeful that there are plenty of opportunities for progression if she wishes; Cara would be keen to progress her skillset further and would consider a ranger qualification or a team leader opportunity.

**“ I WILL DEFINITELY BE STAYING IN THIS SECTOR, I LOVE IT AND IT'S A REALLY, I JUST WANT TO BE OUTDOORS... I'M ALMOST IMPATIENT TO GET TO WORK ”**





## Case study: A Veteran's Journey

### Dan's Story

Dan served in the army for 8 years. Upon leaving in 2018, he began working as a rope access technician on the wind turbines. Unfortunately, Dan suffered with severe mental health issues in the same year, which left him unable to continue working.

Dan became a member of the Green Task Force after seeing the employment package offer; his love for the outdoors combined with the opportunity to gain qualifications in the green sector presented itself as an attractive offer.

Dan completed the Green Task Force employment package in which he gained a breadth of green skills and eight qualifications, including brush cutter, pole saw, woodchipper and woodland management for conservation. The project has helped to rebuild Dan's self-confidence by spending time with other veterans and socialising, as well as, learning new skills that have improved his job prospects.



**“ BEING AROUND VETERANS AGAIN... IT WAS NICE. I THINK DURING THE COURSE LAST YEAR, IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'D SOCIALISED REALLY FOR A LONG TIME. SO, TO BE BACK IN AN ENVIRONMENT WITH LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE HAS REALLY HELPED ”**

The flexibility of the training and good rapport with his project leader also enabled Dan to attend important appointments, which he has found to be a great support in his personal life. Outside of work, Dan has felt able to be more proactive and now achieves tasks with ease, experiencing fewer barriers in day-to-day life.

Dan is keen to continue work with the Green Task Force and is feeling optimistic about the range of opportunities available. He would particularly like to achieve an arborist qualification and work as part of the tree surgery team.



## Case study: Community Tree Nursery

Woodland planting schemes often do not include locally scarce native tree species or pioneer woodland wildflower species – both of which are necessary to create the specialist habitats found in high quality and resilient woodlands. To address this, Cheshire Wildlife Trust used the More from Trees project to establish a specialist tree nursery at their headquarters in South Cheshire. The specimens being grown at the nursery will supplement the planting mixes used across the 2000 hectares of new native woodland that the Cheshire Wildlife Trust are aiming to plant with the support of local Community Forests.

The Wildlife Trust wanted the project to also provide a paid opportunity for an individual to learn specialist horticultural skills and provide the first step towards a career within the conservation/horticultural sector. Daniel Nash, a recent graduate from Reaseheath College, took on a 12-month traineeship.



**“ I’VE DONE A GREAT NUMBER OF DIFFERENT THINGS IN ADDITION TO WORKING AT THE NURSERY, FROM HEDGEROW HEALTH CHECK TRAINING TO VEGETATIVE GRASS IDENTIFICATION TRAINING. I FEEL LIKE I’M GETTING A REALLY WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION WHICH IS AN EXTENSION OF MY DEGREE... IT’S BEEN A GREAT OPPORTUNITY . ”**

*Daniel Nash, Tree Nursery Trainee*

When Daniel was recruited in May 2022, he took on maintenance of two polytunnels housing 9000 wildflowers for meadow creation projects and planning for the upcoming seed collection season.

With the support of the wider Trust team, Daniel has enjoyed being responsible for organising and overseeing the volunteer programme. Building on his own experience of volunteering, the programme was designed to upskill local 18 – 24-year-olds and support the establishment and management of the nursery.

Six volunteers recruited from local colleges were given the opportunity to develop skills from seed collection through to woodland management.

Despite timescale pressures, Daniel and the volunteer team have successfully sown 11,700 trees including:

- 3000 oak
- 4000 Crab Apple
- 3000 Rowan
- 1500 other native species such as Sweet Chestnut, Hawthorn, Hazel, Hornbeam, Silver Birch, Bullace, & Field Maple.

The project also went beyond its primary objective of planting native trees and has experimented with meadow and woodland floor creation, having planted 10,000 wildflower and woodland ground flora including bluebells, wild garlic and lesser celandine.

The GRCF support has enabled the infrastructure of the nursery to be set up, including an additional polytunnel, the construction of pest proof covers for root trainers and the installation of a new irrigation system to enable stock to be watered efficiently and effectively. Through a process of self-teaching, Daniel built poly tunnels and successfully installed a complex watering system. The GRCF funding has also enabled Daniel to gain a pesticide qualification and tractor license which has contributed towards the maintenance of the nursery.





*Volunteers preparing acorns*



*Volunteers tree planting*



*Volunteers discussing tree planting and  
woodland creation*



*Volunteers preparing beds*



*New polytunnels*



*Shading at the nursery*

The project has also exceeded expectation when it comes to volunteering– six sessions were delivered in total centred around horticultural skills such as seed collecting and tree planting.

Volunteers were asked to share their favourite activity from the volunteer programme. They said...



Of volunteers either agreed or strongly agreed that they had learnt new skills through the programme.

“ GOING THROUGH THE AREAS ADMINISTERED BY THE WILDLIFE TRUST AND LEARNING ABOUT HOW THEY'RE MANAGED. IT'S A FASCINATING SUBJECT THAT I NEVER CONSIDERED BEFORE. GETTING SOME ACTUAL WORK DONE WITH PLANTING TREES WAS ALSO FULFILLING ”

Of volunteers agreed that they had a greater understanding of the environment around them as a result of the programme.



“ EXPLORING DELAMERE WOODS AND THE TALKS THE VOLUNTEERING COORDINATOR'S GAVE SHARING THEIR USEFUL EXPERIENCES ”

## Legacy



The Community Tree Nursery project has produced a considerable body of learning for Cheshire Wildlife Trust who are keen to build on the lessons learnt to improve the management of their own spaces. For example, through embedding improved irrigation systems which reduce pressure on staff resources and refining site management plans.

Staff have also started to think about a business opportunity selling wildflowers and whips from the nursery, which would generate funds for the charity while enabling the public to plant woodland species which support biodiversity and build habitat resilience against climate change.



## Case study: Natural Health Service

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health services within Cheshire and Merseyside were struggling to cope with demand. Wait times have increased, as both the direct impacts and the unintended consequences of the pandemic continue to be felt. The More from Trees programme used the Natural Health Service (NaHS) delivery model to make the most of the green and blue space assets on people's doorsteps in a systematic way - reducing the pressure on the health services, whilst mutually benefitting the local environment.

Through the GRCF funding, the Mersey Forest formed partnerships with local community organisations across Liverpool to deliver a total of 46 nature-based activity programmes, and to connect with priority groups most at risk of poor mental health, including ethnic minority groups, people from economically disadvantaged communities, children who live in deep urban locations, over 55s, young people aged 18-25 with autism and the unemployed.

Sessions included:

- Healthy Conservation sessions at Griffin Wood, St. Helens delivered in partnership with Community by Nature. Sessions were advertised for adults and children through community centres and job centres. Activities included tree planting, woodland management, sowing wildflower and maintaining wildlife ponds.
- Healthy Conservation sessions at Whitby Park in Ellesmere Port, delivered by The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) who helped regenerate the lake and park area for local residents to use.
- Bushcraft sessions for young adults with additional learning needs, delivered in partnership with Community by Nature.
- 'Reconnecting with Nature' health walks in St. Helens for over 55's. Delivered in partnership

with Creative Arena and Torus Foundation.

- 'Gardening for all' horticultural therapy sessions for ethnic minority groups, delivered in partnership with Nina Dales and Faiths4change at community gardens in Liverpool. Activities included planting, growing and woodwork.
- 'Mindful Contact with Nature' sessions for people with poor mental health, delivered in partnership with Hypnotherapy Horizons and D13 Fitness. Activities included relaxing in nature and Tai Chi.
- A meadow regeneration programme at Leftwich delivered by Wilder Things. The meadows were poorly maintained due to housing developments and limited capacity of local rangers. The programme was positively received by local residents who reported using their local greenspace more as a result.



423 people from priority groups accessed local green spaces and engaged in nature-based activities. Based on WEMWBS scores, participants reported significant improvements to their health and wellbeing as a result of the project:

- **28.4%** are feeling more optimistic about the future.
- **35.8%** are feeling more useful.
- **39.6%** are feeling more relaxed.
- **40.6%** reported an improvement dealing with problems.
- **34.9%** reported an improvement thinking clearly.
- **42.9%** are feeling closer to other people.
- **29.8%** reported an improvement with making up their mind about things.

Participants also said:

**“ I FEEL A LOT MORE CONFIDENT IN MYSELF, I FEEL IT HAS GIVEN ME MOTIVATION AND ENCOURAGED ME TO GO OUT MORE OFTEN. ”**

**“ I FEEL LESS ANXIOUS AND AM SLEEPING MUCH BETTER WHICH WAS AWFUL WHEN I STARTED AND ONE OF THE MAIN REASONS OF COMING. ”**

**“ I ENJOY BEING WITH OTHERS IN THE GROUP. I HAVE MADE FRIENDS. ”**

**“ (I ENJOYED) SPENDING TIME WITH PEOPLE. GETTING OUT INTO NATURE. VISITING NEW PLACES AND RECONNECTING WITH NATURE. ”**

**“ JOINING THE GROUP IS ONE OF THE BEST THINGS I HAVE EVER DONE IN MY LIFE. AT A TIME WHEN I WAS FEELING DESPONDENT AND ON THE SCRAP HEAP, IT HAS TRULY GIVEN ME A NEW LEASE OF LIFE. ”**

**“ THE COURSE HAD MADE ME APPRECIATE NATURE MORE AND THE BENEFITS OF BEING MORE MINDFUL. I HAVE USED A LOT OF THE THINGS I HAVE LEARNT TO BECOME LESS STRESSED IN SITUATIONS I WOULD HAVE STRUGGLED WITH IN THE PAST. I FEEL MORE POSITIVE AND HAPPIER IN LIFE. ”**





## Case study: Community Grants

Cheshire and Merseyside

Through the More from Trees programme, NHS Cheshire & Merseyside Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) sought expressions of interest to form partnerships with local community organisations across Liverpool. They worked collaboratively to enable community activities to improve the physical and mental health of people from priority groups, including ethnic minority groups, economically disadvantaged communities, and people experiencing poor mental health. Each of these groups are less likely to engage in greenspace.

Partner organisations set out their own objectives in accordance with the aims agreed in the project bid. Delivery approaches were then devised to suit the interests of participants through a process of direct engagement with participants and feedback.

A total of £168,665 has been distributed through NHS Cheshire & Merseyside Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to support the work of 13 local community organisations and improve access to nature and on average, just under £13,000 was distributed per programme.

Community Organisation	Target Groups	Activities Delivered
4Wings Northwest CIC	Ethnic minority groups, asylum seekers, people experiencing poor mental health	Weekly women's language and walking group around Liverpool's Parks and green spaces.
Al-Ghazali Centre	Ethnic minority groups & economically disadvantaged communities	Weekly allotment sessions, including general maintenance and crafts activities for children.
Asylum Link Merseyside	Ethnic minority groups, asylum seekers, economically disadvantaged communities	Tree planting, weekly allotment project and cycling.
Bridge Community Centre	Ethnic minority groups & economically disadvantaged communities, people experiencing poor mental health.	Weekly allotment project, growing 'mood foods' for those with poor mental health.
Chinese Wellbeing	Ethnic minority groups & economically disadvantaged communities	A Nordic Walking group exploring Liverpool's Parks and greenspaces.
Kaalmoo Youth Development	Ethnic minority groups & people experiencing poor mental health	Organised group walks and talks with mentors and young people with poor mental health.
Mary Seacole House	Ethnic minority groups, asylum seekers, economically disadvantaged communities	Weekly luncheon group, food hygiene and cooking skills training and mental health awareness sessions.
One Latin Culture	Ethnic minority groups & economically disadvantaged communities	Outdoor dance and drum sessions, and guided woodland tours.
Positive Futures	Ethnic minority groups, economically disadvantaged communities, people experiencing poor mental health	Allotment sessions, wellbeing walks, litter picking, First Aid training Forest School and a residential wellbeing retreat.
Rotunda	Ethnic minority groups & economically disadvantaged communities	Wellbeing Garden sessions and cooking and eating in the Kitchen Garden.
Sola Arts	Ethnic minority groups & economically disadvantaged communities, asylum seekers, people experiencing poor physical and mental health	Community garden sessions, developing craft skills and nature-based activities for children.
Squash Liverpool	Ethnic minority groups & economically disadvantaged communities	Weekly community food garden sessions, including harvesting and cooking.
The New Belve	Ethnic minority groups & economically disadvantaged communities	Community Garden sessions including maintenance, growing and cooking.

The tragic loss of the leader at Friends of Walton Hall Park (FoWHP) meant the project was not able to start. Our deepest respect for Chrisie Byrne and heartfelt sympathies for all at FOWHP.



*Asylum Link litter picking*



*Chinese Wellbeing farm trip*



*LUMA Creations outdoor dance*



*Positive Futures tree planting*



*SOLA Arts group*



*Squash Liverpool outdoor kitchen*



Local voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations are uniquely placed to deliver tangible benefits for the project, being highly experienced in addressing wellbeing issues and able to connect with participants. The project has successfully reached priority communities across Liverpool whilst benefitting local green spaces:

- 1,783 people from under-represented groups have participated; 862 of which have engaged on a frequent monthly basis.
- 547 people accessed training and improved their green skills and knowledge.
- 644m<sup>2</sup> of new green space was created in areas of need.
- 3077m<sup>2</sup> of green space was improved.

Furthermore, participants reported a wealth of benefits as a result of the project:

- On average, wellbeing scores increased by 4.4
- 83% reported feeling confidence in going to green spaces as a result of the project, compared to 50% prior.
- 90% feel connected to nature as a result of the project, compared to 45% prior.
- 99% visit green spaces weekly or more frequently as a result of the project, compared to 64% prior.

## Case study: Holy Trinity Catholic Primary School

Holy Trinity Catholic Primary School is a voluntary aided school catering for 232 mixed pupils from reception age to year 6. The school is situated in an area of Liverpool that experiences high levels of deprivation and limited access to greenspaces.

The school approached The Mersey Forest to look at creating an accessible greenspace on the school grounds. The majority of the schools existing greenspace areas were built on high banks due to previous site developments, making the spaces inaccessible for the children. Therefore, the school did not have access to suitable areas for play or Forest School Provision. Working with The Mersey Forest Woodland Advisory Team, the raised areas were investigated for their potential to be developed as an outdoor classroom through the More from Trees project. Alongside the development of the classroom, DEFRA's Trees for Climate fund would be used to develop a new woodland to improve the pupils access to greenspace and to enhance the Forest School provision.

The school were keen to develop the area into an outdoor classroom, but it was key that it should meet the needs of the school and be usable for as many pupils as possible. They were also keen to ensure that the pupils were involved in as much of the woodland creation as possible. The school felt that there should be several key features vital to their outdoor classroom, including:

- Suitable and secure access.
- Seating that can be used for Forest School activities.
- A fire circle.
- Canopy cover to offer some protection from light rain whilst the trees are establishing.
- Management of the risk posed by the steep slopes.

- Suitable cover to allow children to play and sit on the ground.

To meet these requirements, the Mersey Forest team:

- Created a staircase and handrail up to the woodland area via a secure access point that could be controlled by the school.
- Developed a walkway marked by rope and a post fence line that leads pupils through a wooded area onto a large flat space on top of the raised areas.
- Installed an outdoor classroom on the raised area, featuring a stone fire circle surrounded by bark flooring and two sturdy sleeper seats / wooden benches.
- Installed posts along the boundaries that allow a tarpaulin to be fixed over the classroom making the site accessible on both hot sunny days and on rainy days.



The Mersey Forest engaged 30 year 6 pupils and 30 year 4 pupils to increase their understanding about the role that outdoor spaces play in increasing wellbeing, health and sense of place. They also undertook their first lesson learning about the carbon capture process of trees, locking it away and helping to tackle climate change. As part of this lesson, children were taught how to plant trees. The pupils planted 133 trees alongside the 147 planted as part of the classroom creation, meaning the school now has



0.09 hectares of new woodland to use as part of their outdoor education activities.

**“THE PROJECT HAS ENABLED US TO CREATE OUR OWN FOREST SCHOOL SITE, WHICH WILL HAVE HUGE BENEFITS FOR OUR CHILDREN. WE WILL NOW BE ABLE TO PROVIDE OUTDOOR FOREST SCHOOL SESSIONS FOR ALL OF OUR PUPILS, PROVIDING BRAND NEW EXPERIENCES FOR OUR CHILDREN. EXPERIENCES THAT WE BELIEVE WILL HELP OUR CHILDREN TO LEARN NEW SKILLS AND SUPPORT THEIR WELLBEING. FOREST SCHOOL WILL ALSO HELP OUR CHILDREN TO DEVELOP CONFIDENCE, SELF-ESTEEM, CREATIVITY AND INDEPENDENCE. WE CAN'T WAIT TO GET STARTED!”**

*Laura Callaway of Holy Trinity Catholic Primary School*

The school can now use this growing resource to explore outdoor education and to also actively promote the maintenance and care of the trees to educate pupils of their importance and their role in helping to tackle the challenges posed by climate change.



## Case study: Natural Capital Literacy Training with Planners

### Background

The Mersey Forest worked with Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) to establish a Natural Capital Hub (NCH). The purpose was to increase awareness of natural capital approaches and how this can be used to contribute to a more co-ordinated response to Nature Recovery across Merseyside and North Cheshire.

The UK Government's 25 Year Environment Plan commits to using natural capital approaches, which will identify flows of finance for nature's recovery, restoring our natural habitats and building green economic growth. Local planning authorities will play a significant role the environmental enhancement of our towns and cities, which requires a good understanding of these approaches and how to embed them into local strategy. The hub is a research and knowledge exchange centre working with stakeholders across a range of sectors to improve understanding of natural capital and how it can be used to attain multiple benefits to society. LJMU has years of experience in mapping and modelling natural capital, developing natural capital markets, and applying this within decision making and policy.

Through the GRCF project the university has started to deliver training and outreach to build capacity in the area, with the first session delivered to 28 professionals from six local authorities across the Liverpool city region.

### The Training

The training session provided an introduction to natural capital, highlighted relevant policies and funding streams, and explored how natural capital approaches can be evidenced using mapping and metrics. The team developed interactive tools to allow for the translation of their natural capital mapping work in a user-friendly format. The event has provided reassurance that local authorities within the Liverpool City Region are becoming cognizant of natural capital

approaches, meaning that policies can confidently be progressed as part of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority's Spatial Development Strategy. It has also established a 'bedrock' of knowledge for future training sessions to build on.



**100%** of participants felt confident to explain how the natural capital approach links to policy and legislation after the training, compared to 13% prior to the training.

**83%** of participants felt confident to explain the role of mapping tools in the natural capital approach, compared to 34.8% prior to the training.



**83%** of participants felt confident to explain examples of projects that use a natural capital lens and how natural capital links to finance streams, compared to 17.4% prior to the training.

**83%** of participants plan on applying their learnings within their work.



“I HAVE GAINED A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF A NUMBER OF ISSUES INCLUDING I) HOW THE NATURAL CAPITAL APPROACH CAN BE USED IN PRACTICE, II) WHAT SORT OF THINGS (CAPITAL) IT LOOKS AT AND MEASURES AND III) HOW THE FINANCIAL ASPECTS OF THIS MIGHT WORK; THE DEVELOPING 'GREEN FINANCE MARKET'”

*Senior Planner*

“I HAVE GAINED A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF THE LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND, HOW THIS WILL BE APPLIED IN DEVELOPMENT MANAGER (DM) AND WHAT PREPARATION IS NEEDED PRIOR TO THIS IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES”

*DM Team Leader*



## Challenges and Issues

Delivering four training sessions within the project timeframe was a challenge. Project leads struggled with capacity to recruit, design training elements and apply for ethical approval before the training could be delivered. Consequently, fewer training sessions were delivered than anticipated. However, project staff utilised their skills and experience to explore other, more feasible ways of exchanging Natural Capital knowledge to wider audiences within the timeframe, including a Natural Capital webinar, a schools Climate Conference and an online panel with the University.

university is enabling them to introduce these concepts to a range of age groups and develop a pipeline of green skills for the Liverpool City Region.

## The Future

Following a positive response from this event, the Natural Capital Hub will continue to support development plans for the Liverpool City Region. There is scope to do so through both written guidance and more technical training workshops.

The team are also identifying further training opportunities, developing this content into a webinar and delivering bespoke sessions based on organisational needs. Their position within the



## Case study: Woodland Management

Creation and restoration of woodlands is essential for both ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and nature recovery networks. However, lack of funding for woodland management is leading to less resilient woodlands; vulnerable carbon stores and threats to wildlife that depend upon a rich woodland flora. The More from Trees project supported the development of eight woodland management plans for undermanaged woodlands across Merseyside and Cheshire. This will be a catalyst to bringing a total of 987.71 hectares of woodland under management and ensuring the long-term health and resilience of the woodland and ground flora. The Woodland Management Plans focus on four main themes:

- Biodiversity and nature – improving and restoring habitats which will increase biodiversity, namely important Red Squirrel populations.
- People and accessibility – improving access to the woodlands and increasing people’s connections to nature.
- Resilience – increasing resilience and health of woodlands against the impacts of climate change, pests and diseases.
- Income – managing woodlands to sustainably produce high-quality timber

Site Location	Hectares Managed	Main aims/objectives	Planned Delivery
Colliers Moss	11.66	People/Nature/Access	Thinning/ Access works/ Biodiversity Improvements
Griffin Wood	51.37	People/Nature/Access	Thinning/ Access works/ Biodiversity Improvements
Ainsdale Dunes NNR	136.43	People/Nature/Access/ Resilience	Thinning/ Access works/ Red Squirrel Habitat Improvement / Biodiversity Improvements
Sefton Coast Strategic Plan	408.28	People/Nature Access/ Resilience	Landscape Scale Delivery / Red Squirrel Habitat Improvements / Access Networks / Active Woodland Management
Sefton LA WMP	55.05	People/Nature/Access	Thinning/ Access works/ Biodiversity Improvements
St Helens LA WMP	158.45	People/Nature/Access	Thinning/ Access works/ Biodiversity Improvements
Peover Estate	63.99	Nature/Landscape/ Timber	Thinning/ Access works/ Biodiversity Improvements
Northwich Woodlands	102.48	People/Nature/Access	Thinning/ Access works/ Biodiversity Improvements





## Case study: Northwich Woodlands

Northwich Woodlands is a 102 hectare site located on the edge of Northwich in Cheshire. At the heart of the woodlands lies Marbury Country Park, the grand 18th century estate of the Smith-Barry family. What was once largely derelict and industrial land has since been transformed into a rich ancient semi-natural woodland, comprised of native broadleaves, with small pockets of new plantations under the ownership of Cheshire West & Chester Council. The entire site is designated as a Local Wildlife Site, with smaller areas designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Conservation Area. It supports a wide range of priority plant and animal species, including kingfishers, red squirrels, water voles and adders to name a few. The south of the site could be classed as peri-urban; bordered by settlements and prominent from nearby roads and a Public Right of Way network.

The More from Trees project commissioned a local specialist to work alongside Cheshire West & Chester Council to produce a management plan for Marbury Park & Northwich Woodlands. The plan consists of a set of recommendations, which once implemented, will ensure the long-term health and resilience of the woodland for nature, people and the climate.

The Mersey Forest team has identified Northwich Woodlands as an area for intervention. The woodlands are one out of only two accessible woodland habitats in Northwich town and some of the wider area is within the top 20% most deprived nationally according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (2019). Therefore, it is an important resource for local people to connect with nature, where access to other valuable woodland habitat is limited.



Northwich Woodlands have seen a mixed history of management, with no clear history of active coppicing. The survey identified that the woodlands have an uneven and poor age structure; the dense canopy is dominated by Elder, Hawthorn and Briar species which limits understorey and causes low levels of biodiversity. Northwich Woodlands is also at increasing risk from numerous disease and invasive threats, particularly ash dieback, a disease which causes widespread mortality in woodland and wider landscapes.

The management plan set out the following objectives to bring Northwich Woodlands into active management:

- To manage the woodlands in accordance with the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS), to create diverse, healthy and resilient woodlands to combat future threats from climate change, pests and disease.
- To maintain and enhance biodiversity value throughout the estate woodlands.
- To increase public enjoyment and use of the woodlands.
- To maintain and enhance the woodlands landscape value into the future.
- To use sound silvicultural techniques to develop a varied age structure across the estate woodlands.
- To generate a sustainable timber resource from the woodlands.
- To move the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) towards favourable condition.

The GRCF project has resulted in the successful application of a felling and thinning license which will significantly impact the biodiversity value at Northwich Woodlands; felling, thinning and restocking programmes will improve the age structure and result in a diverse mixture of species. Furthermore, it will

facilitate the removal of Ash and minimise the threat of ash dieback.

The management plan also seeks to add value to existing habitats; there are currently significant quantities of deadwood material on the forest floor which provide valuable habitats for wildlife. It is proposed that deadwood resource will be maintained where practical and in line with UKFS guidelines and small areas will be left unmanaged to develop as natural wildlife reserves.

The plan seeks to maintain the good condition of access infrastructure at Northwich Woodlands, including several car parks and a good Public Right of Way network. Under active management, the site will become more attractive to visitors, with a greater mix of species to enjoy. It is proposed that interpretation around the site will increase to engage visitors with the site's biodiversity and its importance, and there will be an increase in visitor numbers and a more diverse visitor profile at Northwich Woodlands.



## Legacy

The Mersey Forest team and Cheshire West and Chester Council will continue to work together to provide ongoing support through the next steps of funding applications and to ensure the implementation of the Marbury Park and Northwich Woodlands Management Plan.



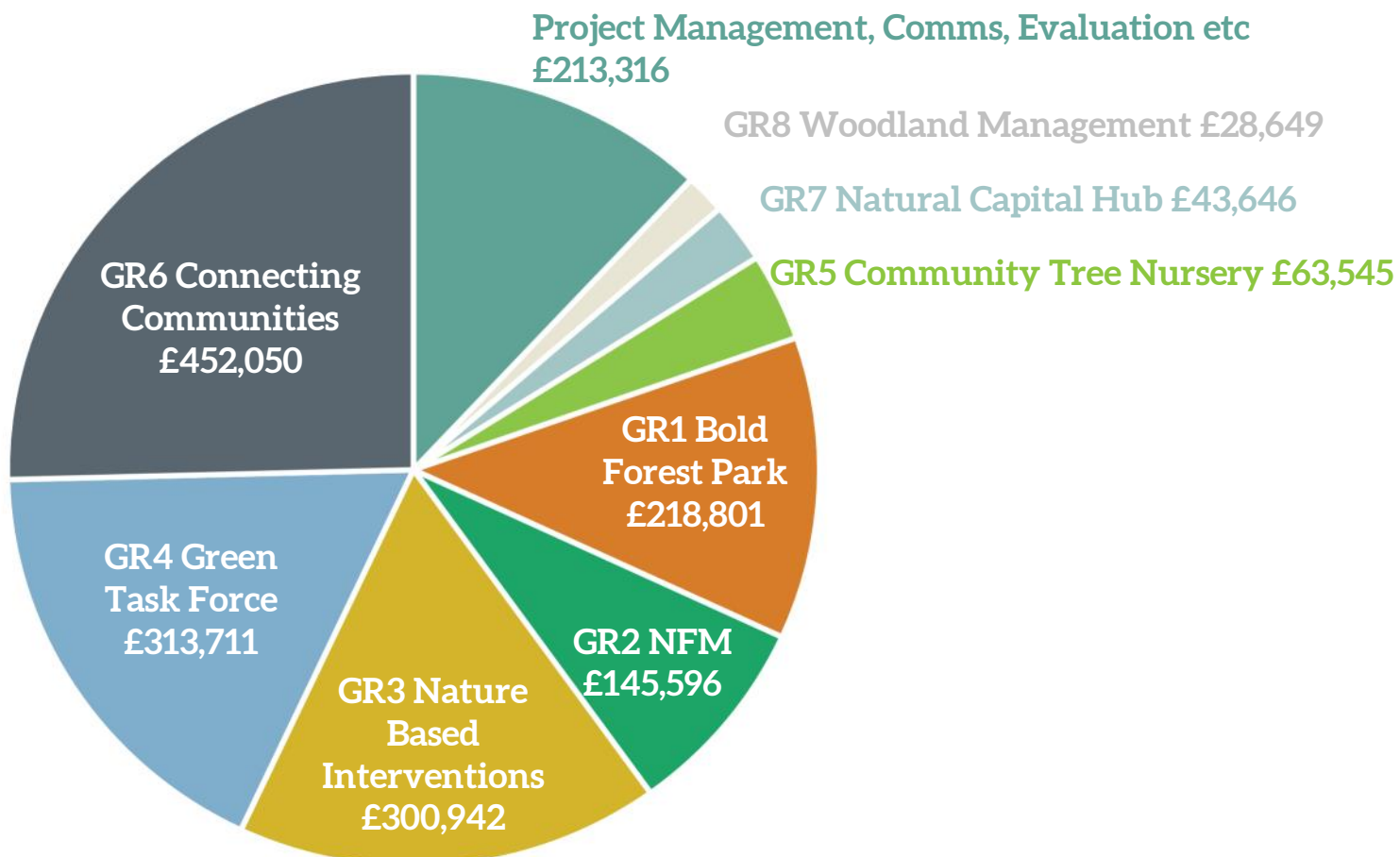
# Project Delivery

## Project Funding

More from Trees had a total project delivery budget of £1,776,700 with 75% of this funded by the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (£1,326,700). Other sources of funding included fundraising by two organisations securing contributions from Mersey Forest Foundation (£40,000) and Arbor Day Foundation (£50,000). £350,000 from the Trees for Climate Fund was secured to contribute towards the tree planting element of the More from Trees project.

## Actual Spend

Actual project spend allocated 88% (£1,566,941) of the total budget across the eight projects responsible for project delivery . 12% (£213,315) of project spend was allocated to cover project management, communications and, evaluation.



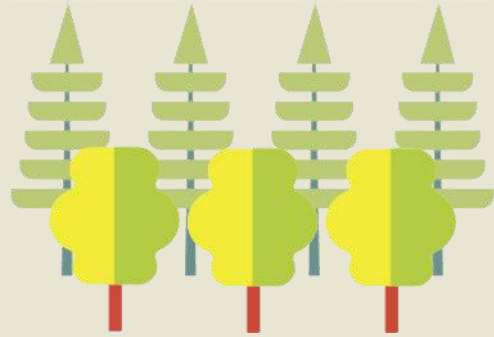
# Summary of Achievements

## The More from Trees project has...

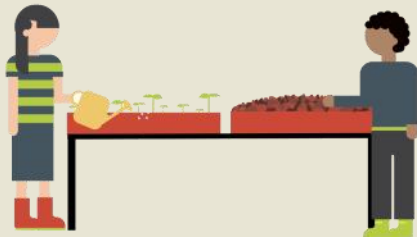
Made a tangible difference to the condition of priority habitats, kick-started the restoration and management of existing woodland habitats and worked with nature to combat biodiversity loss, flood risk and climate change.



PLANTED **30,032** TREES,  
EQUIVALENT TO **27.3** HA OF  
NEW WOODLAND. EXCEEDING  
**10**HA TARGET,



BROUGHT **987.71** HA OF  
UNDERMANAGED WOODLAND  
UNDER ACTIVE MANAGEMENT,  
EXCEEDING **700**HA TARGET



CULTIVATED **11,700** RARE,  
NATIVE TREES, WHICH WILL  
CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS  
**2000**HA OF NATIVE  
WOODLAND



ENHANCED **4** BAP PRIORITY  
HABITATS (LOWLAND RAISED  
BOG, LOWLAND HEATHLAND,  
WET WOODLAND, REEBED  
AND PONDS)



INSTALLED **20** LEAKY  
WOODY DAMS, ATTENUATING  
**1943**M<sup>3</sup> OF FLOOD WATER.



INSTALLED **7** NBS  
INTERVENTIONS ACROSS  
LIVERPOOL CITY CENTRE



Built successful partnerships with local communities and organisations to engage a diverse group of individuals with their local greenspaces and to improve their health and wellbeing and enhance their connection to nature.



ENGAGED **2206** PEOPLE FROM UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS, IMPROVING THEIR HEALTH AND WELLBEING THROUGH NATURE-BASED ACTIVITIES, EXCEEDING TARGET OF **1000**.



ENGAGED **1107** VOLUNTEERS, WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE PROJECT, **487** OF WHICH THROUGH THE COMMUNITY GRANTS PROGRAMME.



CREATED **14** OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS, ENGAGING **405** SCHOOL CHILDREN AND ADULTS, EXCEEDING TARGET OF **10**.

Upskilled local people around habitat conservation and restoration, increased the knowledge of local authority planners around Natural Capital and supported and sustained existing jobs in the sector to create a skilled and diverse green workforce across Merseyside and Cheshire.



ENGAGED **604** PEOPLE IN STRUCTURED TRAINING AROUND GREEN SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE, INCLUDING **15** VETERANS.



CREATED **7.8** JOBS AND RETAINED **7.6** JOBS.

# GRCF Themes

The More from Trees project set up eight projects, utilising differing skills and experience of project leads and delivery partners to specifically deliver a wide variety of activities in accordance with the GRCF themes, as shown in the table below:

	Nature Conservation and Restoration	Nature- based solutions particularly for Climate Change adaptation and mitigation	Connecting People to Nature
GR1			
GR2			
GR3			
GR4			
GR5			
GR6			
GR7			
GR8			



# Conclusion

## Successes



### Nature Conservation and Restoration

Growing partnerships with community organisations, landowners and contractors have been vital and a key success in delivering extensive habitat conservation and restoration over a short timescale:

- Targets for volunteer engagement have been substantially exceeded. By establishing new and enhancing existing relationships with community organisations, project staff have gained access to numerous volunteer groups. At Bold Forest Park, creating a shared vision of habitat restoration for the site allowed for effective collaboration between project staff and volunteers. Project staff utilised differing skills, experience, and capacity of volunteer groups to deliver this vision effectively.
- The NFM interventions were delivered in a new partnership with local contractors. Open communication, sharing learnings and knowledge, and a shared ethos for using natural resources were crucial to delivering capital works in a sensitive habitat.
- The woodland management project engaged both public and private landowners and established a new working relationship with a private estate owner, sharing knowledge and skills around active woodland management. A collaborative process with landowners allowed for tailored information and advice, and wider stakeholder consultation established a strategic approach to woodland conservation and restoration.

Furthermore, the project has empowered

landowners and volunteer groups, increasing the capability of those involved through support, advice and provision of resources to facilitate the long-term maintenance and conservation of habitats. Key successes being the introduction of new facilities to support ongoing management and maintenance activities at Bold Forest Park and the successful application for a felling license at Northwich Woodlands which will ensure the long-term health and resilience of the woodland. Project delivery partners, such as Cheshire Wildlife Trust, have also benefitted from the provision of infrastructure and resources to propagate and grow native trees, which are otherwise difficult to source.

### Nature Based Solutions for Climate Change

Woodland creation has significantly exceeded project targets. Project staff have utilised skills and experience to engage participants and successfully design projects with a combined offer, in which participants receive training, skills or resources whilst bolstering the tree planting elements of the project.

### Connect People with Nature

The project has proven the ability to engage new audiences and hard-to-reach groups in nature:

- Through partnerships with local community organisations, the project has engaged target groups and improved access to nature for ethnic minority communities, economically disadvantaged communities, people with special educational needs, children and young people, and older people. Respondents have reported increased health and wellbeing as a



result of the project.

- The Green Task Force has engaged new audiences and target groups through training opportunities. The project has improved access to nature for those who suffer from poor mental health and ongoing support for participants has been a built in element of the project.
- The habitat restoration at Bold Forest Park and increased presence of volunteers has transformed a site with limited accessibility and poor perceptions of safety. A new and more diverse audience have been using the site, including lone females and families.

The success of the school's engagement has been far reaching. The project team utilised the budget to create additional outdoor classrooms as they have proven to be a valuable asset for local schools. The classrooms were an instantly usable space, which went beyond tree planting and woodland creation. This created an engaging offer for schools in urban areas, as it provided a beneficial opportunity for school children who have less access to green space to connect with nature.

### Jobs, Local Economic Impact and Financial Sustainability

Project staff and volunteers have made significant

progression around skills development, personal development and employability, contributing towards a highly skilled and diverse green workforce across Merseyside and Cheshire:

- The employment package for the Green Task Force has been an overwhelmingly positive experience for the veterans involved. It has enhanced their skills and knowledge through structured training and increased their confidence and wellbeing. Furthermore, one of the veterans has utilised their qualifications to gain employment outside of the Green Task Force and is thankful for the experience and continued support which helped him progress considerably through his mental health recovery.
- The Natural Capital Hub will be a valuable resource going forward as the project has built the infrastructure needed to address the knowledge gap around Natural Capital, particularly for local authorities and the commercial sector in the North West region.
- The traineeship with the Cheshire Wildlife Trust has been a valuable opportunity for Daniel to enhance his skills and knowledge in horticulture. The trust are now looking to extend Daniel's contract to further enhance his



experience and skillset.

New opportunities for income streams have been identified and are under development, contributing towards the long-term sustainability of the Mersey Forest and partner organisations, whilst supporting biodiversity, including selling wildflowers at Cheshire Wildlife Trust. Furthermore, elements of the UKFS-compliant woodland management plans should enable sales of timber on a number of sites.

The Mersey Forest team have been exploring ways to extend project staff contracts and continue delivery elements beyond the life of the More from Trees project, including:

- A 12-month contract extension for the NFM project lead.
- Building the outdoor classrooms element into a forward plan to ensure that classrooms continue to be created across the Mersey Forest through an extended contract for the project lead.
- Using future budgets and funding, including Northern Forest and Trees for Climate to extend activities at Bold Forest Park.
- Using UKRI bid to extend the contract for the Natural Health Service project lead and continue delivering nature-based activities.

# Challenges

Delivering a complex, multi-stranded project within the project timescales has been demanding and timescale pressures and seasonal constraints for conservation work have exacerbated other challenges faced by project staff.



## Delivering to the Bid

There have been some key disparities between the initial bid and project delivery. Targets for some of the projects, including the number of veterans employed and the number of Natural Capital training modules and participants fell just short. The Mersey Forest team have struggled with capacity to recruit, induct and train new staff within the timeframe. Although the team worked well to get project staff up to speed, in some cases the Mersey Forest team did not have sufficient time to extensively consult with project leads prior to delivery to better inform the project scopes versus what could realistically be delivered on the ground, especially in the planned delivery time. This also caused project delays, and particularly created challenges around delivering outputs.

Project staff were provided quarterly progress reports to update quantifiable outputs against the projects approved outcomes. However, project staff struggled to reflect their progress using this structure. Project outputs were back end loaded meaning that the majority of time at the beginning was spent planning and preparing for activity and project leads could only measure activity rather than the outputs, which would come later in the project. It was understood by the Mersey Forest team that measuring the success of the project through certain quantifiable outputs would be unrealistic given the short timescale. Consequently, ways of monitoring and recording project outputs had to be reconsidered and information needed to evaluate the project has come as an additional task for

project staff rather than integrated throughout the project.

## Project Readiness

Some elements of the More from Trees project were shovel-ready, having been in development prior to the submission of the bid or having been 'tried and tested' previously. However, even ready projects can be challenging to deliver within a short timescale. Certain projects struggled to recruit staff or to define the project scope for works which were commissioned from external parties, such as contractors. Roles which required a highly technical skillset for delivery, such as the NFM elements or the Natural Capital Hub project, were harder to recruit for and recruitment for short term contracts lasting 12 months and under is less attractive to candidates, limiting the number of applications. For the woodland management elements, it was initially planned to enhance the Mersey Forest team through the recruitment of a specialist. However, requirements for a niche skillset given the timescale pressures, meant that it was more feasible to commission a consultant through the Mersey Forests existing partnership with the Forestry Commission. This approach however has proved effective as the consultant commissioned was much more highly skilled and experienced than what was originally advertised; with eight woodland management plans produced within the required timeframe and project target for hectares of woodland under active management exceeded.

Furthermore, projects struggled with capacity to oversee contracts, design and deliver training elements, apply for ethical, statutory and other



approvals, and commission contractors or deliver contractual works. For several projects, this caused delays in starting and once systems were in place, it was the wrong season to deliver project elements, such as tree planting. For the Nature Based Solutions in Liverpool City Centre, project staff experienced significant delays due to issues around the procurement process for interventions, and once resolved it was too late in the year to install or plant the features.

### Working in Partnership

The partnerships formed through the More from Trees project were key to the success of delivering a project of such complexity over an 18-month period. However, in some circumstances timescale pressures did hinder communication between partners. More time at the outset to develop a more strategic approach between project partners may have helped resolve issues and resulted in a clearer understanding between staff where multiple delivery elements were planned for one site and allowed for the execution of differing priorities, objectives and timescales. Furthermore, this approach may have helped project partners identify opportunities earlier in the project to work collaboratively and to share resources where their delivery elements were similar.

Whilst the Mersey Forest have proven that they harness extensive partnerships within the green sector. Questions arise around success of embedding these partnerships to result in organisational change. Given timescale pressures and unforeseeable circumstances within the Mersey Forest team, elements of the project such as woodland management, may not have as been as collaborative as planned, in which skills and knowledge were transferred between organisations or long-term working relationships were consolidated. A longer timeframe for delivery would have allowed for a more collaborative approach and would have contributed to building greater organisational resilience for both the Mersey Forest team and partners. The Mersey Forest team are

conscious of activities and partnerships losing momentum beyond the life of the GRCF project and are keen to start exploring ways to extend delivery; the team hope to maintain the relationship with the woodland management project lead as a long-term consultant to build organisational resilience.

### External Factors

As with any project, external factors beyond the control of the project team added a level of complexity to the More from Trees project. Within the Mersey Forest organisation, some project staff either left or had to take time off for personal circumstances. As the Mersey Forest operates as a small, strategic organisation, this created capacity and resource pressures for remaining staff, particularly trying to deputize a highly proficient position. If there was flexibility in the programme or an opportunity for greater resource, then staff changes could have been accommodated. However, project timeframes meant that the project was vulnerable to such factors. For projects such as the Natural Capital Hub, project development was susceptible to frequent staffing changes in partner organisations. The funding currently available for green skills and jobs resulted in partners and stakeholders moving organisations or changing job roles frequently. This created uncertainty for the project staff and more time had to be allocated to re-building relationships with contacts.

## Lessons Learnt

The challenges of the project have provided some valuable learning opportunities which will inform the legacy planning element of the More from Trees project and future projects. These include:



- An increased timeframe is required for projects of this complexity; a three-year programme would ideally be delivered over five years.
- Build in a lead in time to the project for recruitment of highly skilled staff, design and delivery of training elements and overseeing contracts.
- The correct balance of skills and capacity is required for delivery in which any internal expansion must be sustainable. Maintaining the core team and bringing in partners or consultants should be the preferred option if feasible.
- Develop a wider strategic approach to facilitate a collaborative approach to delivery amongst project staff and partners.
- Delivering projects of this complexity requires agile project management; to work flexibly and identify priorities. This style of management is fairly new to the team and required elements of 'trial and error'. Ahead of future projects, the team should receive further training in agile project management and this style should be built into any future bids.
- Increased support for central project management is required, particularly to counter act staffing changes and other external factors.
- Commissioning highly skilled consultants in future projects should prioritise collaboration, in which skills and knowledge are transferred and embedded into the Mersey Forest team.



