

# Community Forest

Adopted Supplementary Planning Guidance

Adopted Swindon Borough Local Plan, 1999  
Swindon Borough Local Plan 2011 Revised Deposit Draft

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## Community Forest

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### **Section 1: Introduction**

1.1 The Local Planning Authority has produced Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance on the Great Western Community Forest to ensure that its aims and objectives are incorporated into development proposals, not compromised.

1.2 In accordance with Planning Policy Guidance Note 12 “*Development Plans*“, December 1999 (paragraphs 3.15 to 3.18 refer), this draft supplementary planning guidance will be:

- a) Consistent with national and regional guidance,
- b) Separate from the Local Plan and subject to public consultation,
- c) Reviewed on a regular basis, and,
- d) Cross-referenced to specific policies within the development plan

1.3 A fundamental point to note about supplementary planning guidance is that: *“While only the policies in the development plan can have the same status that Section 54A of the 1990 Act provides in deciding planning applications, Supplementary Planning Guidance may be taken into account as a material consideration.”* (Paragraph 3.16 PPG12 refers) Therefore, where development proposals are submitted in an area covered by this supplementary planning guidance, effectively the whole of the Borough, the guidance itself shall be a material consideration when determining a development proposal.

National and regional planning guidance appropriate to this issue is expressed through Planning Policy Statement 7 “Sustainable Development in Rural Areas” (2004), which states:

“local planning authorities should ensure that planning policies in LDDs address the particular land use issues and opportunities to be found in the countryside around all urban areas,

recognising its importance to those who live or work there, and also in providing the nearest and most accessible countryside to urban residents. Planning authorities should aim to secure environmental improvements and maximise a range of beneficial uses of this land, whilst reducing potential conflicts between neighbouring land uses. This should include improvement of public access (e.g. through support for country parks and community forests) and facilitating the provision of appropriate sport and recreation facilities.” (Paragraph 26 refers)

1.5 Therefore, this Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance will ensure that where development is acceptable in principle it should not prejudice the aims and objectives of the Great Western community Forest. Indeed, there may be instances where appropriate development can aid the realisation of these aims and objectives.

1.6 Although the Great Western Community Forest boundary is unlikely to change dramatically over the plan period (up to 2011), to ensure that this guidance remains up-to-date it will be reviewed on a regular basis. (The boundary of the Great Western Community Forest is identified at Appendix 1) Both in its conception and during each review public consultation will be an important input to the planning process.

1.7 As referred to in paragraph 1.2, all Supplementary Planning Guidance should be clearly cross-referenced to the development plan. In this instance policy ENV19 “Community Forest” of the Swindon Borough Local Plan, 2011 is the appropriate reference and states:

**“Development shall only be permitted where it does not prejudice the aims and objectives of the Great Western Community Forest.”**

In addition, paragraph 3.22.1 of the reasoned justification states:

“Consequently, Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance entitled “Community Forest” has been produced to provide the necessary detail and clarity to ensure that development proposals take the aims and objectives into account. Development proposals should not prejudice these aims and objectives, instead they should be incorporated into development proposals.”

1.8 Under the leading support of the Countryside Agency and Forestry Commission, the specific objectives of the Community Forest are fourfold:

- a) Landscape and nature conservation,
- b) Woodland management and creation,
- c) Lifestyle and health for communities,
- d) Economic regeneration.

1.9 These objectives are explained in greater detail through “*The Great Western Community Forest Plan*,” October 1994 (Revised 2000). This document sets out an holistic forest-wide vision, identifying six distinct forest areas with their own distinct vision and implementation strategy.

1.10 Clearly, the precise definition of the Great Western Community Forest’s aim, strategy and objectives will be necessary in order to assess the potential implications for development. Furthermore, in order to inform applicants and specify the criteria that the Local Planning Authority will use to assess development proposals, this Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance has been produced to identify development issues that should be reconciled.

1.11 All development proposals within the Borough should accord with the aim, strategy and objectives of the Forest Plan, not prejudice its delivery. However, it would be unreasonable to require all forms of development to contribute towards meeting these objectives, for example, residential extensions and advertisements. Therefore, only development proposals of a scale that can contribute a significant, quantifiable benefit, or conversely undermine the ability, i.e. a loss of tree

coverage, of the Forest Plan and Business Plan to meet its aims and objectives should be subject to this Supplementary Planning Guidance.

## **Section 2: Context**

2.1 The Great Western Community Forest covers the whole of Swindon Borough, extending into North Wiltshire, Vale of the White Horse and Kennett Districts, covering a total of 39,000 hectares. It is one of twelve Community Forests in England initiated in 1989 by the (then) Countryside Commission and Forestry Commission.

2.2 Each Community Forest was required to produce a Forest Plan after significant consultation (the Great Western Community Forest plan being approved by government in 1994, reviewed in 2000). Since then, further support for Community Forests has been identified in the Forestry Commission’s England Forestry Strategy and the recent Rural White Paper. In addition, the Great Western Community Forest is instrumental in delivering the England Rural Development Programme within its area, as well as contributing to urban renewal aims set out in the recent Urban White Paper. Furthermore, each Community Forest has to report to the Department of Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on a set of seven performance indicators on an annual basis, as stated in Appendix 2.

2.3 The guiding principle of all Community Forests is summarised by the key aim:

*“To develop multi-purpose forests which will create better environments for people to use, cherish and enjoy.”* (Forest Plan, October 1999, paragraph 1.8)

Multi-purpose forestry includes the provision of a diverse natural environment (including woodland, grassland, wetland, hedgerows, ponds and rivers) and a broad range of associated uses including agriculture, sport, recreation, tourism, public art, development of wood products and health promotion (in accordance with the adopted Local Plan). Thus, Community Forests are not just focused on realising environmental benefits,

but also social and economic benefits as well. It is an holistic approach.

2.4 Over the whole twelve forest areas, approximately 6.9% is currently under tree cover, with an overall target of 30% coverage within the next thirty years. However, in the Great Western Community Forest area current tree coverage averages approximately only 3%, the majority of which is concentrated around Faringdon and Purton, with a target of 28%-30% by 2025 (Forest Plan, October 1999, Table 21.2 refers). Specifically, within Swindon Borough the average tree cover is currently approximately 1%.

2.5 To achieve this aim and meet identified targets across the whole Forest area, a dedicated Community Forest Team has been established and is located within Swindon Borough Council. This Team is funded in part by contributions from developers as well as from a variety of sources including the: Countryside Agency, Forestry Commission, Vale of the White Horse District Council, North Wiltshire District Council, as well as Swindon Borough Council.

2.6 A key function of this team is the production of a clear strategy and objectives to deliver its core aim, whilst also linking into the statutory planning process through the production of supplementary planning guidance. To achieve this goal a series of shorter term Business Plans are being developed to implement to the strategic vision of the Forest Plan.

2.7 The overarching strategy reflects the multi-agency and multi-purpose nature of Community Forests, demonstrating their ability to deliver social and economic improvements as well as environmental benefits. For example, this may include the introduction of activities such as wood crafts, short rotation coppice to fuel local combined heat and power facilities, or

facility provision for disadvantaged sections of Swindon's community. This may have implications for the design of new woodland, be it size and scale, or the provision of interpretation boards for the visually impaired. Furthermore, the presence of tree planting can have a positive impact on the perception, aspirations and well-being of a community, particularly those communities experiencing poor environmental quality associated with social deprivation.

### **Section 3: Strategy & Objectives**

3.1 The underlying strategy of the Forest Plan is to increase tree coverage across the whole of the Borough to a target figure of 30%. However, achieving this target uniformly across the multitude of land uses within the Borough would not be practical. For example, the diverse spectrum of land uses encompasses urban Swindon out to the wider countryside, with planting opportunities and constraints varying accordingly, potentially having both positive and negative implications for achieving the overall coverage target.

3.2 In recognition of this wide disparity the Great Western Community Forest has been disseminated into six distinct forest areas, reflecting these different characteristics, opportunities and constraints. The six Forest Areas are:

- ✓ Upper Thames,
- ✓ White Horse,
- ✓ Swindon,
- ✓ Lower Down,
- ✓ Avon Vale,
- ✓ East Braydon.

3.3 Each forest area will reflect its existing land use characteristics and contribute a different proportion of tree coverage, culminating in an average total of 30% for the Borough. (Therefore, some areas will be higher, some lower).

3.4 Although increasing tree coverage is a key element of the Community Forest, it should be increased in a manner that is meaningful, in social and economic terms;

for example, in relation to improving public access. Therefore, as well as achieving overall tree coverage values it would be prudent to provide tree coverage in blocks, ideally within an accessible distance of both existing and future residents. An example based on studies at Redditch, West Midlands, indicates that a minimum size of 2 hectares is required to encourage local use, ideally located within 400m of residents.

3.4 In conjunction with increased tree coverage throughout the Community Forest, the Forest Plan identifies a series of key objectives, including:

- ✓ Maintain the open character of rural buffers,
- ✓ Reclaim derelict, degraded land and improve landscape character,
- ✓ Protect existing landscape character, historical or archaeological interests,
- ✓ Increase opportunities for greater accessibility,
- ✓ Promote social and economic benefits to the local community,
- ✓ Promote and create sites for nature conservation,
- ✓ Identification of community access sites.

3.5 At a more detailed level, three year Business Plans are being prepared by the Community Forest Team to translate the Forest Vision into shorter term objectives. Initially, the first Business Plan will run to 2005, being reviewed throughout the duration of the Local Plan accordingly. This plan will identify particular areas (themes and/or locations) of work and thus identify the most appropriate opportunities for developer contributions. Therefore, whilst acknowledging the Forest Plan as providing the strategic guide, the Business Plans will identify the short/medium term priorities.

## **Section 4: Development Guidance**

4.1 As stated in paragraph 1.7, in accordance with policy ENV19 of the Swindon Borough Local Plan, 2011 development proposals should not adversely impact on the objectives of the Forest Plan. Therefore, all of these objectives will have implications for any development proposals within the Great Western Community Forest area, essentially anywhere in Swindon Borough.

4.2 However, it would be unreasonable to require all forms of development to contribute towards meeting these objectives, for example, residential extensions and advertisements. Practically, it may prove unrealistic for minor forms of development to make a measurable contribution towards the Great Western Community Forest objectives. Domestic extensions on restricted sites, potentially in upper floors, or change of use proposals with minimal amendments to the exterior facade/layout may not be able to physically accommodate potential requirements, or contribute the necessary financial commitment, without placing undue burden on an applicant. Therefore, only development proposals of a scale that can contribute a significant, quantifiable benefit, or conversely undermine the ability, i.e. a loss of tree coverage, of the Forest Plan and Business Plan to meet its aims and objectives should be subject to this Supplementary Planning Guidance. Such quantifiable, significant benefits could include:

- New woodland,
- Enhancing areas of poor environmental quality,
- Improving public access, or,
- Improving the management of existing woodland.

4.3 It should be noted that this guidance should not be read in isolation, but in conjunction with the Local Plan, as a whole. Complimenting the Local Plan are further pieces of supplementary planning guidance which, when read in totality, provide a raft of policies and guidance covering all forms of

development. For example, policy ENV18 “Habitat and Species Protection”, provides guidance and advice on the retention and replacement of existing flora and fauna, with additional Supplementary Planning Guidance covering “Tree Protection on Development Sites” and “Access for All”.

4.4 Development proposals considered by the Local Planning Authority to be of a scale that would significantly impact on the delivery of the aims and objectives of the Forest Plan, shall incorporate the following priorities:

#### **A - Tree coverage**

It is imperative that tree coverage is increased to meet the specified percentage level for the particular Forest Area that a proposal resides within, whilst also maintaining the intrinsic qualities of the Landscape Character Area (as defined in the appropriate Supplementary Planning Guidance, “Landscape Character Areas”). In addition, woodland planting should be in blocks of sufficient size and proximity to meet the needs of local communities.

Furthermore, increased tree coverage can raise the quality and profile of development by enhancing its visual appearance, as well as playing an important role in the removal of pollutants, thereby increasing air quality and health. The creation of “carbon sinks”, absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere can play a major part in reducing the rate of global warming.

#### Tree Coverage Targets

Swindon Forest	35%
East Braydon Forest	30%
White Horse Forest	30%
Lower Down Forest	5%
Upper Thames Forest	20%
Avon Vale Forest	25%

#### Good practice points could include:

- ✓ Retain existing trees and hedgerows,
- ✓ Plant new, local species, bolstering the existing stock,

- ✓ Link isolated species to create continuous corridors and woodlands, enhancing wildlife movement,
- ✓ Planting to be either singularly, or cumulatively, in blocks of at least 2 hectares, ideally within 400m of existing/future residents to ensure greater accessibility,
- ✓ Incorporate landscaping schemes into the wider environment,
- ✓ Retain important vistas, both into and out of a proposal including identified local landmark buildings or key landscape elements,
- ✓ Improve environmentally poor urban areas,
- ✓ Incorporate opportunities for public access, where appropriate.

#### **B – Rural Buffers**

Tree planting within rural buffers (policy ENV13 “Rural Buffers” refers) should maintain and reinforce the physical separation between Swindon and the identified rural settlements, ensuring that coalescence does not occur. Within rural buffers there is a stronger presumption against development than in the countryside, due to their critical anti-coalescence role. Where opportunities arise for increased planting, either through the reuse of existing buildings, off-site mitigation measures or through financial grants, the design of the planting should reinforce this principle.

#### Good practice points could include:

- ✓ Enhance the rural setting of the settlement,
- ✓ Consolidate planting to reduce noise and visual intrusion.

#### **C – Land Reclamation**

Where development brings previously underused land back into use whether contaminated, derelict, vacant, or through regeneration, tree coverage shall be maximised to improve the amenity of the locality, appropriate to the site area and location.

However, due to a sites location or categorisation, i.e. within a Conservation

Area, there may be instances where lower levels of tree coverage may be more appropriate. Town centre regeneration sites, or locations that have a recognised historical tradition of hard landscaping may be more appropriately serviced by planting specimen trees rather than block planting. Such specimens should be utilised as a focus point complimenting their surroundings.

Good practice points could include:

- ✓ Use of specimen trees/planting,
- ✓ Use of planting to highlight the intrinsic quality of the urban form,
- ✓ Planting to reflect the context of the local environment,
- ✓ Planting to reduce noise and air pollution,
- ✓ Planting to reduce the rate of run-off from areas of hard landscaping,
- ✓ Incorporate opportunities for public access, where appropriate.

**D – Archaeological/Historical Remains**

Sites of known, or suspected archaeological importance will require special consideration to ensure that their intrinsic qualities are not adversely affected by additional tree coverage. For those areas suspected of containing archaeological remains site investigation surveys should be conducted to ascertain the potential implications and effects of additional tree planting.

Similarly, historical landscapes, features, vistas and context should be protected and enhanced, with additional tree coverage able to demonstrate that no unacceptable impacts will be created. This may include reflecting the traditional character of planting, i.e. tree clumps on the High Downs hilltops but not the introduction of inappropriate large scale block planting. Particular importance should be given to the species of planting to reinforce historical references.

Good practice points could include:

- ✓ Avoid planting on known, or suspected sites of archaeological importance,

- ✓ Consideration of site investigation surveys to ascertain underground conditions in areas of suspected archaeological remains,
- ✓ Planting should not adversely affect the historic setting of both settlements and the landscape,
- ✓ Avoid introducing planting which could be “out of historical context” within urban areas,
- ✓ Avoid introducing “alien” planting schemes (shape, size, type and scale) into an existing locality,
- ✓ Retain historical vistas.

**E – Accessibility**

A key objective of the Forest Plan is to engage people in all aspects of the development and use of the Forest. Critical to this objective is maximising public accessibility. Wherever practicable, public access across the whole of a development proposal will be sought. However, it is acknowledged that public accessibility could be constrained upon due to various issues such as private ownership, security, commercial sensitivity and sensitive wildlife habitats.

Consequently, a compromise may have to be negotiated which still enables a degree of accessibility, ideally linking key destinations, local and Boroughwide, but also respects both future occupier concerns and any intrinsic site qualities.

Furthermore, accessibility should encompass both cycling and walking opportunities, as well as creating an environment which can cater for all sections of Swindon Borough’s society, specifically including those people who have impaired mobility (“Access for All” Supplementary Planning Guidance gives additional guidance on this matter), or other disabilities such as visual impairments or mental health problems. However, the materials used and their layout should respect the intrinsic qualities of the existing natural environment. Detrimental environmental effects due to increased accessibility should be avoided.

Good practice points could include:

- ✓ Maximise public accessibility,
- ✓ Provide appropriate signage and interpretation boards,
- ✓ Ensure, wherever practicable, access includes provision for people with both impaired mobility or other disabilities,
- ✓ Minimise the impact of ancillary facilities, i.e. lighting,
- ✓ Link into the existing footpath and cycleway network,
- ✓ Improvement of access to woodland within the urban area,
- ✓ The creation of routes within planted areas as well as linking destinations,
- ✓ Ensure the materials and layout are not detrimental to their setting,
- ✓ Enable links to the wider countryside.

**F – Habitats**

The opportunity to strengthen existing natural habitats through additional tree coverage should be maximised, relating the species of planting to existing wildlife and habitats (the Draft Wiltshire Biodiversity Action Plan currently provides the appropriate detail). Proposals should demonstrate that development can be accommodated on site in a manner which minimises any potential adverse impacts, whilst protecting and enhancing existing features.

Where this cannot be achieved, mitigation measures to reduce potential adverse impacts of development on its surroundings will be sought on at least a pro-rata basis (as per policy ENV18 “Habitat Protection” of the Swindon Borough Local Plan), including additional tree coverage.

Tree planting can also be used to create different types of habitats to meet the needs of different species of wildlife/fauna. A mixture of habitats will increase the variety and quality of species present. In addition, planting can be used, through its design, to increase or reduce accessibility. In some instances it may be prudent to reduce public accessibility to retain a “tranquil” wildlife sanctuary, whilst other

areas may benefit from increased accessibility.

Good practice points could include:

- ✓ Plant native species to complement the existing wildlife,
- ✓ Create new areas for wildlife,
- ✓ Provide a full range habitats including tree planting, meadows and ponds to create a balanced environment,
- ✓ Create areas of public/wildlife interaction as well as areas dedicated specifically to wildlife only,
- ✓ Maximise the retention of existing natural resources,
- ✓ Mitigation for any potential loss of natural resources on site at least on a pro-rata basis, or as near to the proposal site as practicable.

**G – Community Woods**

The fundamental aim of the Great Western Community Forest states:

*“To develop multi-purpose forests which will create better environments for people to use, cherish and enjoy.”* (Forest Plan, October 1999, paragraph 1.8)

This aim clearly places great emphasis on people becoming actively involved with the Community Forest. It will not just be a visual addition to the environment, but a resource for everybody to experience on a daily basis, for a multitude of activities.

Consequently, access points enabling people to interact with the forest will be important first contact points. Of these, several will become key, either taking the bulk of the customers, or strategically located on access routes within the Borough.

Although the majority of these sites will be in the countryside, hence subject to the countryside policies of the Local Plan, there may be the opportunity to create small scale focal points, providing an interaction point between the Community Forest and the public. Such activities may include small scale craft workshops where the emphasis is placed on education and public interaction, not commercial enterprises. In essence

these sites should become exemplar sites. Any development would have to satisfy the planning legislation, as stated through the Local Plan.

Good practice points could include:

- ✓ The provision of facilities should balance the locational restrictions, i.e. countryside policies, whilst enabling the needs of customers to be fulfilled, according to the Forest Plan,
- ✓ Provision of interpretation points,
- ✓ Creation of interaction points between the Community Forest and the public,
- ✓ Non-commercial activities, only those directly related to the Community Forest.

## **Section 5: Design**

5.1 This Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance does not describe detailed design guidance on how to realise the aims and objectives of the Forest Plan. Instead, it identifies the key issues that should be reconciled, through good practice points, whilst also drawing attention to the following policies, documents and contact names. A combination of all these components will, through appropriate negotiations, achieve a development proposal that will accord with the aims and objectives of the Forest Plan.

5.2 There are many relevant publications which will more than adequately address the specifics of design, including:

*"Swindon Borough Local Plan 2011"*, SBC  
*"Access for All"*, Supplementary Planning Guidance, SBC, 2005

*"Landscape Character Areas"*,  
Supplementary Planning Guidance, SBC, 2005

*"Tree Protection on Development Sites"*,  
Supplementary Planning Guidance, SBC, 2005

*"Lowland Landscape Design Guidelines"*,  
The Forestry Authority, 1992, HMSO

*"Forests and Water Guidelines"*, The Forestry Authority, 1993, HMSO

*"Forests and Nature Conservation Guidelines"*, The Forestry Authority, 1994, HMSO

*"Forests and Archaeology Guidelines"*, The Forestry Authority, 1995, HMSO

*"Community Woodland Design Guidelines"*,  
The Forestry Authority, 1996, HMSO

5.3 The quality of design of new woodland is a critical factor in ensuring the overall success of the Community Forest. The design of new woodland should reflect the specific objective(s) for each site (e.g. biodiversity, public access, wood products etc). It is important that good design is used to provide and promote accessibility to the Great Western Community Forest for everybody in the Borough. This will ensure that new woodland is used and cared for, helping to raise awareness of the Great Western Community Forest within the community itself. In turn, this will help to promote the economic vitality and viability of the area. Consequently, applicants attention is drawn to the need for early contact with the Great Western Community Forest Team when considering the provision and design of new planting.

## **Section 6: Funding**

6.1 One of the key aspects of the Community Forests is that they are based on a partnership between the private, public and voluntary sectors, and the local community. Community Forests can be developed using a number of funding sources including:

- ✓ Major local employers,
- ✓ Forestry Commission's Woodland Grant Scheme,
- ✓ Countryside Stewardship.

6.2 The Community Forest Team at Swindon Borough Council or the Forestry Commission are best placed to advise on the potential funding mechanisms for the development and management of sites.

## **Section 7: Conditions & Planning Obligations**

7.1 When planning permission is granted for development, it is usually subject to one or more conditions, sometimes also to a planning obligation. Planning obligations can be entered into through an agreement between the developer and the Local Planning Authority, or the developer alone, a unilateral undertaking. In all circumstances, the Local Planning Authority has the power to enforce a condition or planning obligation. Specific advice on the content of planning obligations and their appropriateness is stated in Circular 1/97.

7.2 In accordance with government guidance, planning conditions and obligations will only be used to overcome planning objections to development proposals. This means that without the condition or planning obligation, the proposal would not be acceptable. It is important to note that offering extraneous benefits for the Community is not a means of obtaining planning permission by inappropriate development. However, these mechanisms are a very important way of making sure that development accords with the Development Plan policies and contributes towards delivering the aims and objectives of the Community Forest.

7.3 Specific advice on the content of planning conditions and their appropriateness is stated in Circular 11/95.

7.4 It is important to note that any contribution (either works to be undertaken, or in monetary terms) to the Community Forest, which is either a condition or planning obligation relating to a planning permission, must relate specifically to the Great Western Community Forest. Any contribution requested shall be used:

- ✓ to contribute to the costs of the establishment and ongoing maintenance of new woodland, and / or
- ✓ to contribute to Community Forest core costs for administrative and management purposes.

Furthermore, any contribution (either works to be undertaken, or in monetary terms) to the Community Forest may be in addition to any landscaping required as part of the development. Planning conditions or obligations are dependent upon the individual circumstances of the development and may include:

- ✓ Where there is a loss of amenity in an area provision is made to compensate the loss, for example by providing land, trees or access either on site, or on an alternative site,
- ✓ To screen the visual impact of a proposal through the planting and retention of woodland,
- ✓ Where a development is close to the existing Community Forest, provision of new planting or other habitats, to reduce the impact of the development on the setting, and/or enhance the existing site,
- ✓ To provide for public access, including information boards and signs,
- ✓ To promote the future management of the Community Forest (over a specified timescale) which may be for the benefit of the developer as well as the forest,
- ✓ To protect existing trees and habitats from the processes of construction, restoration and after use,
- ✓ To help provide new wildlife habitats.

## **Section 8: Contacts**

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