

Response to the Blacon Neighbourhood Plan

The Mersey Forest Team welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Blacon Neighbourhood Plan.

Our specific comments are as follows:

- 3.1 and 3.2. We suggest that the vision and objectives go beyond keeping green spaces, to enhancing them and improving their functionality. It should include green infrastructure, such as street trees, which exist outside of green spaces and are critical for people, nature, and climate.

Functionality of this green infrastructure, beyond play, recreation and enjoyment, needs to also be considered. Green infrastructure plays critical roles in improving air quality, reducing flooding, regulating heat stress, improving mental and physical health and wellbeing, etc.

Trees outside of green spaces are important components of green infrastructure. Recent research we have been part of with the GroundsWell team at the University of Liverpool is demonstrating how important views of trees from households and within our immediate neighbourhoods are for our mental health.

- Policy 1: Sports & Community Hub Building, Cairns Crescent. We welcome the inclusion of SuDS. We would like to also see the inclusion of enhancements to the remaining green infrastructure and its functionality, beyond improvements to the childrens play area. For example, increasing tree canopy cover on site and elsewhere in the neighbourhood where it is needed.
- Policies 2: Community facilities and 3: Western Avenue Local retail centre. Community facilities and places where people gather should be key sites at which to increase tree canopy cover. In and around schools are other key locations. The cooling that these trees provide, through evapotranspiration and shading, can help with heat stress, anticipated to be more of an issue with climate change. Their presence within neighbourhoods also boosts mental health and wellbeing.
- Policy 4: Local green spaces. We suggest that this policy should look at ways to enhance these green spaces and increase their functionality. For example, by planting more trees and improving their value for wildlife through changed management practices such as grass mowing regimes.

Further context and key points for consideration in the Neighbourhood Plan

The Mersey Forest is Cheshire and Merseyside's Community Forest, established in the early 1990s. We work with trees for the benefit of people, nature, and climate. For the past 30 years, we have been growing the network of well looked after trees and woods, as well as other habitats, and encouraging people to get involved. As a result, more than 10 million new trees have been established, or 4 trees for every person living here. We work with lots of people and organisations to make this happen – partners, landowners, managers, and farmers, and local communities, businesses and schools. Together, we are bringing change

for the benefit of all. We are one of England's 15 Community Forests and part of the Northern Forest initiative.

The Mersey Forest Plan is the long-term and strategic guide to the work of The Mersey Forest team and partners, extending to 2050 and beyond. It has recently been refreshed with input from all local authority partners <https://merseyforest.org.uk/our-plan/>. Cheshire West and Chester Council is a core partner in The Mersey Forest.

Under paragraph 152 of the [National Planning Policy Framework](#): “Community Forests offer valuable opportunities for improving the environment around towns and cities, by upgrading the landscape and providing for recreation and wildlife... An approved Community Forest Plan may be a material consideration in preparing development plans and in deciding planning applications. Any development proposals within... Community Forests in the Green Belt should be subject to the normal policies for controlling development in Green Belts”.

The Mersey Forest Plan can contribute to neighbourhood planning, setting out and supporting local priorities and aspirations.

The Mersey Forest Plan vision

“More with Trees

Acting together to grow and care for trees and woods, as part of a thriving mosaic of habitats in and around Cheshire and Merseyside's cities, towns and villages.

Intertwining cherished trees with people's lives and livelihoods, flourishing nature, and strengthened climate resilience.

Inspiring action and spreading hope for our future.”

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: We would welcome reference to The Mersey Forest Plan in the Blacon Neighbourhood Plan.

The Plan also contains a number of key principles that are of relevance to this neighbourhood plan (there will be other relevant principles too):

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 4. Establish trees, woods, and other habitats

4.1 Aim to reach 15% tree cover across Cheshire and Merseyside by 2050 (from a 2025 baseline of 13.7%), pushing beyond this if possible towards our long-term ambition of 30% tree cover. Our “[Where principles](#)” map how this longer-term 30% tree cover ambition might look across The Mersey Forest (see principle 16 below).

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: Aiming to increase tree cover in the Neighbourhood Plan can contribute to the delivery of this wider ambition. We would be happy to calculate the existing tree cover for the Neighbourhood Plan area if needed.

4.2 Aspire to meet the 3+30+300 ambition, within our urban areas in particular. Where every home can see 3 trees, every neighbourhood has 30% tree cover, and everyone lives within 300m of an accessible green space with trees. Individual local authorities have their own adopted accessible greenspace standards, so this aspiration does not override these. Tree cover ambitions also vary across our area.

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: We would encourage the neighbourhood plan to aspire to this 3:30:300 ambition. Often plans focus on the 300 part, considering proximity of green spaces. But research has demonstrated how vital the 3 and 30 aspects are for our wellbeing, regulating heat (and thereby heat stress), air pollution removal etc.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 7. The Mersey Forest team and partners

7.3 Work with a wide range of public, private, research, charitable, and community organisations, from local to national and international levels, and from delivery, to supporting work.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 8. Communities

8.1 Work alongside people to help them achieve what is needed in their local communities.

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: We would welcome the opportunity to work with you on this to ensure support for The Mersey Forest Plan and to enable delivery. Our mapping work, detailed in principle 16 below, can be used to help prioritise where increased tree cover may be most needed within the local area.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 16. Right tree, right place, right reason – area-specific principles

16.1 Use the area-specific principles, and their associated long term tree cover ambitions, to guide what our longer-term 30% tree cover ambition might look like across our area. They are not binding targets for each area, but they do help to guide our work. These area-specific principles are displayed in the map (at <https://merseyforest.org.uk/our-plan/principles-where/>) and in our [Tree Atlas](#). They:

- Use landscape character as their basis.
- Build on work from the original 1994 Mersey Forest Plan and subsequent development with our local authority partners.
- Take into account constraints to new trees and woodland, such as peatland, other habitats, high quality agricultural land, and urban areas.

The principle description for planting in the CW01 settlement area, of which Blacon is a part of, is to “Plant individual trees, groups of trees and small woodlands on appropriate and available urban areas, settlements and employment sites, such as school playing fields, open spaces, streets, highway verges, in the grounds of large institutions, derelict land, and development sites, including buffering their edges and the surrounding landscape. Target planting to meet identified needs”.

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: Blacon Neighbourhood Area falls largely within principle CW01 Settlement. This covers a larger area than Blacon, with an overall existing tree cover of 12% and a long-term ambition to reach 30%. It would be good if the neighbourhood plan aspired to this ambition, and identified local areas where tree planting may be most appropriate/desirable. Please see below points about constraints for tree planting, and areas where trees may be most needed.

16.2 Consider constraints for trees and woodland, as part of any tree and woodland establishment and management.

- Constraints have been built into our area-specific principles, and their associated long term tree cover ambitions.
- Further to this our team considers a full range of constraints for each potential establishment or management site. Some of these constraints are included in our Tree Atlas, but we consider a wider range including location of utilities, and using data that we are not licensed to display on the Tree Atlas.
- In some instances, a constraint will mean that trees and woodlands are not appropriate at a given location. In many, the constraint will influence the nature of the trees and woodlands that are appropriate.

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: Please refer to the [Tree Atlas](#) for constraints for the neighbourhood area. There are areas within the neighbourhood area and just outside the boundary that have been mapped by Forestry Commission as “low sensitivity to woodland creation”, which could be explored further for woodland establishment as they have fewer immediate constraints. There are some areas that are mapped as grade 2 and 3a agricultural land, which might be better to avoid significant woodland creation if wanted for agricultural production.

16.3 Consider what needs there are for trees and woodland, as part of any establishment and management.

- This can inform the nature of trees and woodland, and their management, as appropriate for each location.
- Some needs mapping has been included in our Tree Atlas, but it is not an exhaustive list.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 17. Cheshire and Merseyside

17.3 Take opportunities to deliver at scale, whilst prioritising areas of greatest need for people, nature and climate. Prioritise using the latest evidence and mapping.

Key points for this neighbourhood plan: Please refer to the [Tree Atlas](#) for needs mapping for the neighbourhood area. These include:

- Woodland Trust Tree Equity Scores vary across the area, with some having lower scores of 65 and areas with up to 100. The Tree Equity Canopy Goals vary across the neighbourhood as well, ranging from 24-36%. The Tree Equity Scores identify urban neighbourhoods with a combination of low tree cover and income, health, employment, age, heat, and air pollution disparities. Planting could be prioritised in areas with lower Tree Equity Scores.
- Some areas are highlighted as being both exposed to heat stress and socially vulnerable (in top 20%) which could be prioritised for planting; other areas are exposed but not as socially vulnerable. Trees can help to reduce temperatures, meaning less exposure to heat stress.
- Some areas have less access to greenspace, especially in the northern part of the neighbourhood area. Other areas have higher greenspace deprivation scores. If it is not possible to create new physical green spaces, then tree planting could be prioritised in these areas as a way to at least increase vegetation.
- Some areas have high Index of Multiple Deprivation scores. There are also significant areas in the top decile of health deprivation, as well as the top 20% and 30%. Again, tree planting could be prioritised in these areas to help improve outcomes.

- We have mapped the 3-30-300 metric (discussed above in relation to principle 4.2 of The Mersey Forest Plan). This is an ambition for every home to see 3 trees, every neighbourhood to have 30% tree cover, and everyone to live within 300m of an accessible green space with trees. It is increasingly used internationally to guide increases in tree canopy in urban areas. From our mapping of the different components:
 - 3: There are addresses where households cannot see 3 trees (trees within 25m of an address). Planting could be targeted to the proximity of these addresses.
 - 30: No addresses are in neighbourhoods with 30% tree cover (within 500m of address points), most have a neighbourhood canopy of 11-20%, but a significant number have 0-10%. Planting could be prioritised in areas with the lowest canopies.
 - 300: Many of the households are within 300m of a greenspace, but pockets are further away, especial north west edge, which are over 500m away from a greenspace. If it is not possible to create new physical green spaces, then tree planting could be prioritised in these areas as a way to at least increase vegetation.
- Proximity to schools
- In areas with poorer air quality, water quality, or in need of noise regulation.
- Other mapping, using Environment Agency data, which is not currently in the Tree Atlas, shows that Blacon and Abbott's Field are at risk of fluvial and surface water flooding, and highlights watershed areas to the north and east that The Mersey Forest considers high priority for woodland creation and other Natural Flood Management (NFM) interventions to protect these communities. Whilst largely outside of the neighbourhood plan area, interventions here could help to protect the community. The Mersey Forest is in the unique position of having in-house technical expertise on appraisal, design, project management of delivery and monitoring of NFM schemes through our NFM Manager, and we would welcome the opportunity to work with new and existing partners to further reduce flood risk, improve water quality and enhance water resources in the area.
- Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) mapping <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/5356942a5aa54cb0a656379a65a25947/> shows that there are Core Nature Sites within the neighbourhood plan area, as well as opportunity areas for nature recovery. This includes significant mapped actions for trees, woodland and hedgerows. Buffering and connecting existing trees and woods should be a consideration. The LNRS mapping also maps actions for other habitats: grassland and heathland, watercourses, and for urban and nature based solutions. These should also be taken into consideration in the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 20. Call for locations

20.1 Encourage people to use our Tree Atlas to suggest locations where they would like to see more trees and woods.

20.2 Follow up on suggested locations to see if there is potential to establish trees and woods there or nearby and, if possible, work with the people who suggested it to make it happen.

Key points for this neighbourhood plan: Our Tree Atlas already has a location suggested for tree planting in this area, indicating some local demand. The location is: “Recreation field - would like to see more trees incorporated to attract wildlife”. (The pin was added in the cemetery to the south of Blacon Avenue, but could be referring to nearby recreation fields). There is potential for the Neighbourhood Plan group to add other locations to this map.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 12. Strategy and policy

12.4 Contribute to neighbourhood planning, setting out and supporting local priorities and aspirations.

Key points for this neighbourhood plan: We see neighbourhood plans as a key opportunity to set out local aspiration with regard to the establishment and management of trees, woods, and other habitats. Regard to The Mersey Forest Plan can help to frame and provide context for some of these aspirations.

12.3 Contribute to place making, new development, regeneration and restructuring, by securing recognition to it within Local Plans.

- Paragraph 152 of the National Planning Policy Framework says “Community Forests offer valuable opportunities for improving the environment around towns and cities, by upgrading the landscape and providing for recreation and wildlife... An approved Community Forest Plan may be a material consideration in preparing development plans and in deciding planning applications. Any development proposals within... Community Forests in the Green Belt should be subject to the normal policies for controlling development in Green Belts”.
- Trees and woods should create the setting for, and be a key part of, new development, regeneration and restructuring.
- Existing irreplaceable and mature trees should be retained wherever possible, and appropriate replacement ratios developed for any trees lost.
- Trees should be incorporated as an effective and safe part of new street scenes and highways.
- Secure private sector conditional funding for this green infrastructure and its maintenance (principle 13.2 specifies that this includes funding secured through the planning system, such as section 106 agreements, Community Infrastructure Levies, and Biodiversity Net Gain).

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 13. Funding and financing

13.2 Secure and effectively manage additional funds from a range of public, private, and charitable sources, ensuring that they are used to deliver benefits for people, nature, and climate. Funding sources include a mixture of:

- Grants.
- Unrestricted donations.
- Consultancy income.
- Private green finance, including Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental, Social and Governance funds.
- Funding secured through the planning system, such as section 106 agreements, Community Infrastructure Levies, and Biodiversity Net Gain.
- Funds secured by registering new woodlands for the Woodland Carbon Code.

