



West Midlands
Combined Authority

West Midlands Virtual Forest

Guide Booklet

www.WMVirtualForest.co.uk



What is the Virtual Forest?

The West Midlands Virtual Forest plays an important role in supporting our efforts to tackle climate change and improving the environment. The website will help chart the combined efforts of our region to plant a tree for every resident, which equates to more than 4 million trees being planted across the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) area.

The scale of the climate emergency that we face requires equally ambitious acts to halt the decline. It requires support from all parts of society, including community groups, charities, businesses and local authorities as well as individuals, land owners and residents. The Virtual Forest will be an online space for mapping and tracking where trees are planted. The analytics will also help local authorities and tree planting organisations to measure their own success, whilst contributing to the wider WMCA target.

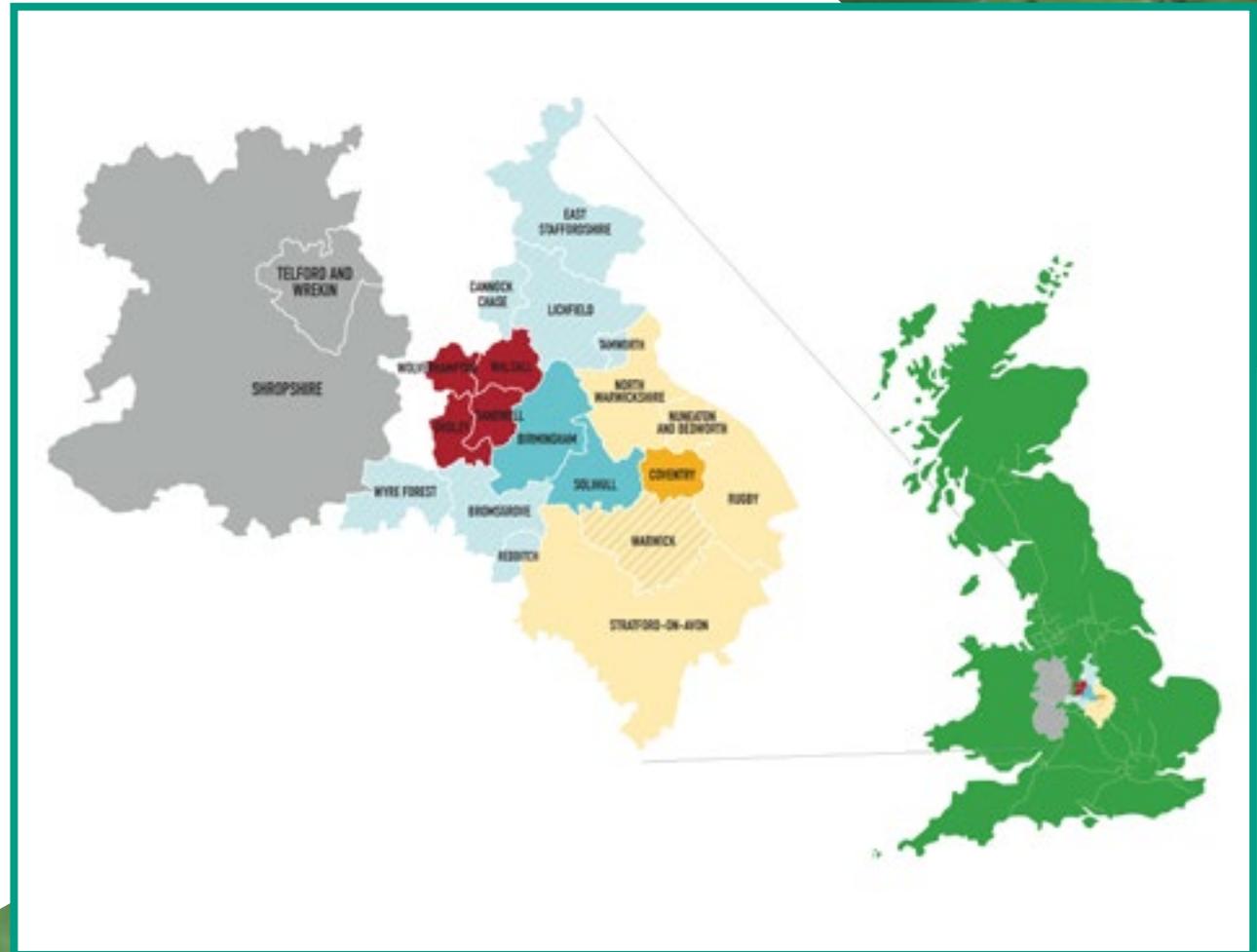
Why a Virtual Forest?

The WMCA developed the Virtual Forest to help bring people who wish to plant trees closer to organisations with trees to plant. This collaborative approach will help deliver the goal of reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2041 and the planting and tracking of 4 million trees by 2035.

Remember, the Virtual Forest launched officially in January 2020. We would encourage all groups to retrospectively register any tree planting that took place from January 1st 2020

Where is it?

The Virtual Forest will cover the three West Midlands Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP - Black Country, Greater Birmingham & Solihull, and Coventry and Warwickshire), as well as the WMCA non-constituent members.





What will the WMCA do to lead by example?

The WMCA itself will be involved in planting some of these trees, however we know that many organisations are already well established across the region doing great tree planting work. Rather than reinvent the wheel, the WMCA will work together with these groups so that all tree planting counts.

Why is planting trees good for the West Midlands?

Tree planting is beneficial in many ways:

- Trees are great for the environment; they absorb carbon from the atmosphere, they help clean the air we breathe, trees provide shade on the hottest days and pathways for water to be absorbed into the surface on the wettest days, alleviating flooding.
- Trees help maintain and enhance the structure of the soil, preventing it eroding and degrading which is also good for locking up carbon and preventing our rivers silting up.
- Trees provide habitats for a multitude of other species, especially if, once they die, they are left for insects and other wildlife to take up residence.
- Trees are also good for us. Just being out and about walking, or cycling, in the woods is good for our physical and mental health, and so is planting them.





Who can get involved in the Virtual Forest?

The Virtual Forest is for everyone. The website has pages for different groups to get involved as follows:

- **Local Residents:** We want to **encourage** local residents to get involved in tree planting in a number of different ways. If they have the space and relevant permissions, this can include planting a tree in a garden. We know that this is not possible for everyone, and so we would like to **connect** anyone who wants to plant a tree with one of our partner tree planting organisations, or a local tree planting event.
- **Community Groups:** This encompasses a wide range of organisations from clubs and charities, to faith groups and parish councils. Some of these groups may have their own land on which to plant, but many may not. The website **signposts** community groups to the appropriate channels. Some, for instance, may be eligible to apply for free trees from The Woodland Trust. Other groups may wish to connect with a local tree planting session as a group activity or fundraiser/ sponsor some tree planting in their local area. Our aim here is to connect groups with the right people, and encourage them to record their trees on the website.



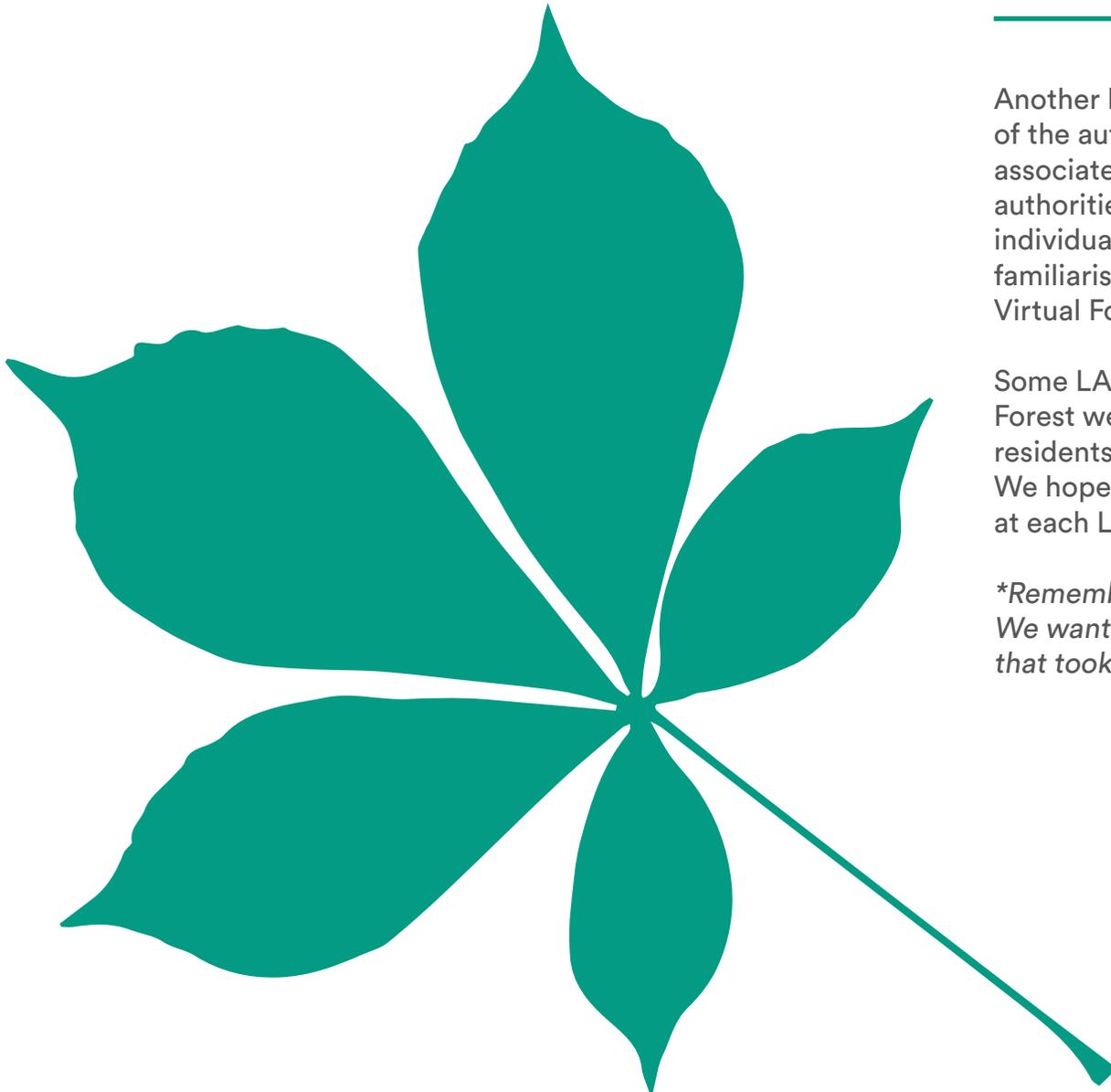
- **Schools:** Schools are eligible to apply for trees from The Woodland Trust, and in this instance the Virtual Forest website will encourage schools to do just that. The website also aims to signpost educators to tree planting sessions and external educational speakers/educational resources – subject to this information being available. Schools can then record their planting on the Virtual Forest website as an activity for children.
- **Corporate:** Businesses in the West Midlands, big or small, can get involved in tree planting. Some may have sites on their own land that is appropriate for tree planting, but many may not. For those that do not, the website signposts businesses to organisations and sites for them to sponsor trees to be planted, perhaps as part of their carbon offsetting strategies or CSR obligations. Businesses can also get involved by holding a corporate responsibility day. This is where employees are given a days paid leave to give something back to the community. Tree planting is an ideal avenue for this, and the Virtual Forest website signposts volunteers to relevant organisations and events.
- **Landowners:** Landowners, particularly in more rural areas, have significant potential for increasing tree planting; be this planting new woods, or re-instating previously grubbed out hedging. The Woodland Trust part fund several initiatives in this area and the website signposts landowners to these schemes. There are also other funding opportunities available. Landowners may just want some additional advice on what to plant and where, and the website provides signposting to sound guidance. It may also be possible to connect landowners with groups who have trees and volunteers to plant them.

The Virtual Forest and Local Authorities

Another key group of partners are local authorities (LA). Many of the authorities undertake tree planting themselves and have associated targets. In addition, as the local planning and highways authorities, they may mandate the planting of trees as part of individual projects and developments. It is essential that we familiarise all relevant employees in local authorities with the Virtual Forest, to ensure that all tree planting is recorded.

Some LAs also host public tree planting sessions, and the Virtual Forest website can be an important tool in linking up local residents who wish to get involved with an appropriate session. We hope to keep in regular contact with the appropriate officers at each LA.

Remember, the Virtual Forest launched officially in January 2020. We want all groups to retrospectively register any tree planting that took place from January 1st, 2020 to reflect real progress.



Registering Tree Planting

The registration of tree planting using the Virtual Forest should be a straightforward process. Here's how to do it:

1 Go to www.wmvirtualforest.co.uk.

2 Click onto the 'Register your tree' page.

3 Take a moment to read the instructions on the right hand side of the mapping tool.

4 Select the appropriate tool from the right hand side:

a Single tree: For those who have just planted one tree, this is just a pin drop.

b Hedgerow: For those who are planting hedging, this is a straight line tool.

c Area of trees: For those who have planted multiple trees over an area.

5 Find your location on the map and mark on the map where you have carried out tree planting using the appropriate tool.

6 Complete the form on the right, whether registering on behalf of an organisation, or as an individual, number of trees and types of species (if known).

7 If you want to record trees, but do not want them to appear on the map (because they are in a private garden, for example) then you can tick the option for them to not appear. They will still be counted.

8 Upload a picture of your day (optional).

One issue that has been raised is that it can be difficult to register a large number of trees planted in one space, for example along a footpath, canal or roadside. It is suggested that you either:

- a) register the trees as you go, in real-time, using the website on a mobile device, or
- b) you can mark a small area on the map, and record all of the trees planted within that area of trees (say, 50, for example) and then tick for that area to not be included on the map.

This will ensure that the trees are still included in the total but that the map will not be misleading.

Feel free to contact wmvirtualforest@wmca.org.uk with any difficulties you experience registering your activity.

Our Progress

In the 'Our Progress' section, you can get a more detailed breakdown of all the tree planting activity that has taken place across the region. This is updated every 24 hours rather than 'live'.

The following details are displayed:

- Total number of trees planted
- Total area of trees planted (hectares)
- Total distance of hedging planted
- Top 10 species planted
- Number of trees planted by organisation

It will also be possible to request a further breakdown of the number of species planted, and a breakdown of activity by local authority area.

Our Partners:

This section will help to promote the groups which are planting trees in the West Midlands. This includes local and national charities, local authorities, tree planting groups and others. Each of these groups will be able to include their logo and a link to their own website for people to find out more. We also hope that partners will send us through plans for the forthcoming tree planting season, any photos of events, and feedback on how we can improve and develop the Virtual Forest website.

The more we know about the services offered by each organisation, the better prepared we are to be able to connect potential volunteers/sponsors in your direction.

To find out more contact wmvirtualforest@wmca.org.uk



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