

# The Forest of Dean UNESCO Biosphere Application



Forest of Dean District Council unanimously voted to apply for UNESCO Biosphere status on the 20 March 2025. This decision allows the district to celebrate its unique qualities. A Biosphere is a celebration of the socio-economic, environmental and cultural heritage of an area.

## To Recognise what is Special and Valued about the Forest of Dean

The value of the natural environment in Forest of Dean is widely recognised and has existing conservation protections such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Ramsar sites (wetland sites of international importance). The unique geology, historical land use, woodlands and the location of the rivers has helped establish the landscape and biodiversity we have today. The rich mosaic of habitats makes the district a stronghold for nature and a range of species, including the international significance of the largest colonies of Greater and Lesser Horseshoe Bats in Europe. It is also a nourishing environment that is recognised for its value in supporting people’s health and wellbeing. Biosphere designation also responds to the call to action to address environmental degradation and the poor state of the natural environment. Concerns about river pollution, loss of species, pressure from leisure activities and responding to a changing climate are current and pressing issues.

## Cultural Heritage

In addition to the unique environment, the identity and character of the Forest of Dean has a rich cultural heritage including Verderers, Freeminers and Commoners and has a local dialect. The area has a long history of resilience and community led campaigns such as ‘Hands off Our Forest’. The area has a rich heritage of creatives including artists, writers, musicians and composers.

## Sustainable Development and Prosperity for Forest of Dean

Biosphere designation is not about stopping growth and development but is a way of making sure that development acknowledges and recognises the value of the natural world and works with it. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) worked with Forest Economic Partnership to research the economic effects of adopting a Forest Biosphere. The ONS report indicated that for every £1 spent creating a Biosphere there would be a £3.89 return over a 30-year period. This includes developing industries such as use of timber products and premiums local products. It has been reported that the UNESCO designations added a minimum of £151 million of financial benefit to the UK economy in one year. Biosphere status helps to attract additional funding to the area. Money also goes back into the local economy through the visitor economy which is working to promote slow tourism and sustainable tourism.

## To Support Resilience, Adaptation & Self-Sufficiency

Designated Biospheres are “learning places for sustainable development”. They are sites for testing interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and managing changes. The links being made between researchers and nature conservation bodies will provide a new framework for projects that seek local solutions. Biosphere status also opens up opportunities for socio-economic benefits by accessing funding streams to support work on new approaches to conservation and sustainable development.

## To Facilitate Community and Stakeholder Participation

In 2019 the Forest Economic Partnership started work on answering the question “What if the Forest of Dean became a Forest Biosphere”. They sought feedback in a public survey “The Forest we Want” on the principles of pursuing UNESCO Biosphere Designation. Over six hundred people and forty businesses took part in the ‘Forest We Want’ survey. The survey found broad community interest for the designation and concluded that “the data shows clear support for a number of initiatives and concepts that respondents would back which aligns with both the economic and environmental aims of a Biosphere”.

Support for designation has been received from stakeholders such as Forestry England, Forest Economic Partnership, The RSPB and many more. The wider consensus from stakeholders is the need to continue to protect the environment and cultural heritage of the Forest of Dean district to ensure a sustainable future. A more collaborative approach is recommended where groups are more united and working together to achieve common aims.

Universities both locally and internationally are keen to partner with the Biosphere initiative to work collaboratively, contributing towards building a synergy between all parties and work towards a sustainable future.

