

FOREST OF DEAN BIOSPHERE INITIATIVE

Purpose

To seek support for the application to have the Forest of Dean designated as a UNESCO Biosphere.

Recommendations

That the JAC:

- A. Formally endorses and supports the Forest of Dean Biosphere initiative.
- B. Sends a letter of support for a Forest of Dean Biosphere to the Forest of Dean District Council for inclusion in the UNESCO application.
- C. The JAC to nominate a member or officer to be the point of contact to act as the liaison between the JAC and the Forest of Dean Biosphere initiative.

Key Issues

- A partnership led by the Forest of Dean District Council (FoDDC) and the Forest Economic Partnership is making an application to UNESCO for the Forest of Dean to be designated a UNESCO Biosphere.
- The proposal is for the designation to cover the FoDDC administrative area, including the Wye Valley National Landscape within the Forest of Dean District.
- The proposal to date has received candidate status from the UK Man and Biosphere committee.
- Biospheres overlap or are integrated into a number of National Landscapes in the UK, for example, North Devon Coast, Isle of Wight, Brighton and the South Downs.
- The draft application will be made in April 2026 with Final submission to UNESCO in September 2026 and a letter of support is requested from the Wye Valley National Landscape to be included in the application submission.

Reasons

Over a long period of time there has been extensive and repeated debate regarding considerations and efforts to secure formal recognition for the Forest of Dean's special qualities and value. The area remains on the long list to be designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty but national progress to advance the list has effectively stalled. The application for Biosphere designation is intended to secure formal recognition of the special and unique natural and cultural heritage of the Forest of Dean, enable socio-economic benefits, including greater employment opportunities, and support the sustainability of our communities,

environment and economy. The designation as a Biosphere will enable a partnership approach for a long-term framework vision for “People and the Forest Thriving Together”.

The five objectives for the Forest of Dean Biosphere are:

1. 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), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) 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.

2. To celebrate the social and cultural heritage of the area

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.

The cultural heritage is of such significance that it joins with nature as being worthy of recognition. Biosphere status provides an opportunity to protect and promote local cultural heritage. The public and stakeholder engagement has shown a need for a joined-up approach which provides the overarching coordination and local focus for a wide range of groups and organisations.

There is also a growing desire to ensure that formal designation in the context of Local Government Reorganisation. The prospect of administration at a much larger scale makes the case for safeguarding local identity. A new authority would be able to take on responsibility for the Biosphere and continue the initiative.

The Forest of Dean District Council has a fantastic opportunity to leave a legacy in securing Biosphere status. The designation recognises and celebrates the biodiversity and cultural identity of the area for future generations.

3. 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. The survey found broad community interest for the designation and so we have already progressed with working towards community buy-in. Over six hundred people and forty businesses took part in the ‘Forest We Want’ survey. The survey 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". Some survey respondents sought reassurance around: the economic effect on those already living within the district; what effects it will have on first time buyers; the affordability of suitable housing; the restrictions it might place on publicly accessible Forestry England land; overtourism and the effect it may have on road and parking infrastructure.

The evidence from other designated Biospheres and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) report for the Forest of Dean is that there are benefits to the local economy with a clear return on investment in setting up a Biosphere, including supporting job creation. Biosphere designation also aligns with promoting sustainable tourism where visitors make broader use of a destination for a richer experience. However, designation does not introduce any new legislation or statutory controls. It does not have powers to remove access rights and does not have powers to stop development.

Forestry England have written to confirm their support for designation. 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.

4. To Support 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 and premium local products.

There is evidence from other locations with Biosphere designation that premium products from within the Biosphere can be sold for a higher price than areas without designation through creating a Biosphere brand. With increase value in business activities there is an opportunity to grow and create new jobs.

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.

Biosphere designation also links with work being developed by Forest of Dean and Wye Valley Tourism to promote sustainable tourism and encourage people to learn more about the area's cultural history during their stay. Visitors are increasingly wanting to connect with a location, its heritage and culture and are mindful of their environmental impact. Many jobs in associated sectors, such as retail, hospitality and attractions benefit from an increase in visitor spend.

5. 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 made between researchers and nature conservation bodies will provide a new framework for projects that seek local solutions.

Work has been taking place with schools to raise awareness of what is special about the Forest of Dean and how to improve people's lives and protect the environment in a sustainable way. A primary school competition was completed asking students what they believe makes the Forest of Dean as a wider area unique in terms of its environment and cultural heritage.

Biosphere status also opens up opportunities for socio-economic benefits by accessing funding streams to support work on innovative approaches to conservation and sustainable development.

National Landscape and the Biosphere

There is a strong relationship between National Landscapes and Biospheres that co locate in the England (see Isle of Wight, North Devon Coast and South Downs and Brighton Living Coast). There is good alignment in objectives and management plan alignment between designations, focused around shared objectives of sustainable development, local communities and the natural environment. Where both designations co-exist there is a considerable amount of joint working and collaboration. It is likely that, through its management plan, the Biosphere will draw attention to and support the Wye Valley National Landscape Management Plan.

There are no additional legal constraints or 'rules' that come with the designation. It is very much about agreeing shared long-term sustainable objectives through partnership working and aligning organisational goals. The Wye Valley National Landscape could be a member of the Biosphere Partnership and likewise, once established the JAC could invite the Biosphere to be a place on the JAC and/or TOWP as appropriate.

Organisationally the Forest of Dean Biosphere proposes to have a partnership and steering group consisting of relevant national, local and community representatives and stakeholders which will formulate a management plan or joint framework to support the objectives of the Biosphere. Operationally it is expected that there will initially be 1-3 staff who would co-ordinate the work of the Biosphere supporting the partnership, projects and long-term monitoring. The partnership will seek some core 'start up' funding with increasing partner, project and income streams progressively supporting the secretariate over time.

Background

UNESCO Biosphere designation is a way of valuing the natural environment and cultural heritage where people and nature can work together with future generations in mind. It acknowledges existing protections and supports sustainable development, recognising the natural world and working with it. It is a way of supporting a thriving economy by bringing money back into the local economy.

An important starting point is to understand that UNESCO designation does not add any new legislation or controls to an area. It is about recognising and celebrating what is unique and special about an area in terms of the environment, culture, heritage, and economy. Biospheres are seen as 'learning places for sustainable development'.

Biosphere Boundary and Zones

Biosphere designation is an accolade for locations with a strong sense of identity, where biodiversity and the environment are globally recognised for its quality and where there is a commitment of a wide range of stakeholders to work together towards a sustainable future.

There are three linked functions of a Biosphere:

- Conservation of biodiversity – including culture, heritage, community, and sense of place,
- Sustainable development – for a sustainable future for people – that sustains economy, environment, and society,
- Learning – research and monitoring. Learning about the natural environment, culture and heritage and the interdependent relationship between nature and people.

Biospheres are focused on three zones known as the core zone, buffer or care zone and the transition or sustainable development zone. A Biosphere and its identified zones are not a restriction imposed from the UN or from UK government. A Biosphere is not a statutory protection measure and therefore does not provide additional protection, it is just a status designation. Instead, existing designations help to make up the zones.

Core zones must be of bioregional significance and protected for biodiversity in the long term. They comprise of existing designations such as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Ramsar Sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) for example, which contribute to the conservation of landscape, ecosystems, species, and genetic variation. For the Forest of Dean, the existing SACs, SSSIs and Ramsar Sites within the district, are the starting point for the Biosphere designation.

Buffer zones ideally are designated for the long term and should surround or adjoin the core zones. Within these areas activities which are compatible with sound ecological practices such as scientific research, monitoring, training, and education are encouraged. For the Forest of Dean this would look for instance at the Statutory Forest of Dean, National Landscapes, Flood risk zones, other SSSIs and SSSI buffer/consultation zones.

Lastly, transition zones are areas where communities' foster socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable economic and human activity, and that forms the remainder of the designated area. The boundary of the Forest of Dean Biosphere follows that of the Council District boundary.

UNESCO are not prescriptive of the language used in terms of the naming of the Biosphere, with locations deciding to drop the word 'Reserve'. The descriptive language of the three zones is also adapted to suit local context and sensitivities. The Isle of Man renamed the buffer zone the 'care' area and the transition zone as the 'sustainable development' area. The buffer zone can also be known as the support zone. This is all about responding to the local context and connecting with what makes sense to a locality.

Further Reading

FoDDC Council Report:

<https://meetings.fdean.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=115&MID=4433#AI28357>

The Forest We Want: <https://foresteconomicpartnership.co.uk/projects/previous-fep-projects/the-forest-we-want/>

UK Man & Biosphere: <https://www.unesco.org/en/mab>

UNESCO: <https://unesco.org.uk/>

Appendix



FOREST OF DEAN
BIOSPHERE

Candidate Biosphere—Forest of Dean

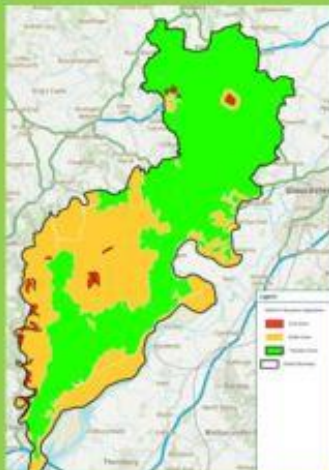
UNESCO Biosphere designation is a way of valuing the natural environment and cultural heritage where people and nature can work together with future generations in mind. It acknowledges existing protections and supports sustainable development, recognising the natural world and working with it. It is a way of supporting a thriving economy by bringing money back into the local economy.

UNESCO designation does not add any new legislation or controls to an area. It is about promoting and celebrating what is unique and special about an area in terms of the environment, culture, heritage and economy. Biospheres are seen as 'learning places for sustainable development'.

Biospheres are focused on three zones or areas known as the Core zone, Buffer or Care Zone and the Transition or Sustainable Development Zone. A Biosphere and its identified zones are not a restriction imposed from the UN or from UK government, they are selected locally based on a set of biosphere criteria. A Biosphere is not a statutory protection measure and therefore does not provide additional protection, it is a designation recognises the special qualities and ambitions of an area.

Key objectives of Forest of Dean Biosphere

- Recognise and safeguard what is Special and Valued about the Forest of Dean
- Celebrate the natural, social and cultural heritage of the area
- Facilitate Community and Stakeholder Participation in the future
- Support Sustainable Development and Prosperity for Forest of Dean
- Respond to the Climate Emergency supporting Resilience, Adaptation & Self-Sufficiency



Zones or Areas

Core areas—Comprise existing strictly protected zone that contributes to the conservation of landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic variation (e.g. Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's) etc.)

Care (buffer) areas— Surround or adjoin the core area(s) and are used for activities compatible with safeguarding core areas and are areas that can reinforce scientific research, monitoring, training and education (e.g. Statutory Forest, AONB (National Landscapes) Floodplains, Local wildlife sites)

Sustainable Development (Transition) — Areas where communities' foster socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable economic and human activities (The District).



The UN are working towards a sustainable future through looking towards achieving these 17 goals to help make the planet sustainable. Becoming a Biosphere helps us work towards not only environmental goals but also socio-economic goals as people and enterprise are at the heart of the Biosphere.

What is a Biosphere?

Biospheres are 'learning places for sustainable development'. They are sites for testing interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and managing changes and interactions between social and ecological systems, including conflict prevention and management of biodiversity. They are places that provide local solutions to global challenges.

Biospheres are nominated by national governments and remain under the sovereign jurisdiction of the states where they are located. Biospheres are designated under the intergovernmental MAB Programme by the Director-General of UNESCO following the decisions of the MAB International Coordinating Council (MAB-ICC). Their status is internationally recognised.



Why is Biosphere Status important?

What are the functions of a biosphere?

Each biosphere should fulfil three interconnected functions that work together and reinforce one another.

Conservation of biodiversity- to preserve genetic variation, species, ecosystems and landscapes.

Sustainable development – for a sustainable future that sustains our economy, environment and society.

Learning, research and monitoring - to support research, monitoring, education and information exchange related to local, national and global issues of conservation and development.

What are the benefits of biospheres?

Biospheres provide a framework for projects that improve people's lives and protect the environment in a sustainable way. Communities, local stakeholders and government officials gain an increased awareness of environmental and development issues.

Biospheres may attract funding to demonstrate approaches to conservation and sustainable development that can provide lessons to be applied elsewhere.

Who is in charge?

The Biosphere is run and governed through a partnership of key stakeholders. Local communities are integral element ensuring the Biosphere meets its functions and objectives.

The Three Areas of a Biosphere

Different designations allow for different approaches within areas of the Biosphere.

Core area

They comprise a strictly protected zone that contributes to the conservation of landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic variation

Care (buffer) area

They surround or adjoin the core area(s) and are used for activities compatible with sound ecological practices that can reinforce scientific research, monitoring, training and education.

Sustainable Development (Transition) area

The transition area is where communities' foster socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable economic and human activities.

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

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Sustainable Development and Prosperity for Forest of Dean

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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.

