

Does the District want to enhance its **Heritage** through a **Forest Biosphere Reserve Proposal**

Introduction

This paper seeks to approval to proceed with the Lottery Heritage **HFBR** project. This project seeks to gain £10,000 of funding to undertake initial scoping and engagement work for a potential UNESCO Biosphere Reserve based upon the District to enhance and protect our unique environment.

This project builds upon the work undertaken in 2019 for FEP by the Office for National Statistics which established that under the most prudent approach a Biosphere Reserve option for the district yields a Benefit-Cost Ratio of 3.89:1.

It responds to the draft Local Industrial Strategy where “Gloucestershire has the potential to be the greenest place to live and work in England” and there is a need to “establish Gloucestershire as a leader in sustainable growth by developing a baseline to determine how best to protect, maintain and enhance our natural capital assets.” And to the Glover Report declaration that the District is a National Landscape.

Acceptance of this proposal enables key stakeholders **and** the population of the Forest to be engaged to understand their first thoughts and be involved in the potential design of the Biosphere Reserve. The results of this can be used to prepare a business case and roadmap to seeking accreditation subject to further funding and that it is seen to be desirable.

Issues Identified and Addressed

HFBR relates to issues raised in the agreed FEP SWOT:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural beauty • Geographical location • Ecologically diverse • Attractive environment for children/families • Range of outdoor activities available • Diverse businesses • Tourism • Forestry Commission • Private land ownership • Strong cultural connection and pride • Strong local communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport & infrastructure • Division between main settlements • Areas that ‘drop off’ planning radar (border areas) • Sports/recreational facilities decreasing • Lack of variety of different types of business premises • Resistance to change/growth/development • Insular communities/thinking inside the box • Ingrained lack of aspiration • External perception of FoD
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridge Toll abolished – people can live here for less, easier place for people to do business • Space for large developments • Natural resources to mitigate against climate change • Renewable energy potential/Tidal power • Eco-tourism • Making the FoD a centre of excellence for Forestry/Forest products – fuel, construction • FEP – sharing good practice/joined up thinking/improved cross border relationships • Commercial relocation/inward investment opportunities • New mixed economy work-life balance achievable with new digital technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridge toll abolished – pushing house prices up, more people commute outside of District, • Too much development could destroy USP • Major businesses leaving the area • Lack of one dominant town/centre can inhibit external investment • Danger of not addressing issues of poor communication links, inward looking mentality, lack of investment in FoD • Young people leaving/more attractive lifestyles for young people outside of the Forest • Rising water levels and temperatures due to climate change

Proposal

In 2019 FEP approved an investigation and preparation of a model by the Office for National Statistics to establish whether there was an Economic Case for a Forest Biosphere Reserve. On the most prudent of models this showed that for each £1 invested £3.89 would be returned over a 30-year period based upon the modellable presumptions. With an economic case proven the next questions are:

- How can we introduce BR to the districts community and gain their views?
- What are the necessary further steps to make a robust and good application to UNESCO?

Answers to these questions enable an informed choice on whether and/or how to achieve that status.

Biosphere reserves are designated by UNESCO. There are some 686 sites in 122 countries. The Isle of Wight is the latest biosphere reserve in UK following a 2 year designation process. The designation would sit alongside current and proposed AONBs as it demonstrates international significance. The UK biospheres typically incorporate an AONB.

A biosphere provides solutions for sustainable use where sustainable development is defined as: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." FEP has an overriding objective to ensure a balance between future economic development without throwing away the natural environment currently enjoyed in the District and also to futureproof that development against issues such as climatic change. This definition is therefore a suitable one to explore.

A biosphere has 3 zones:

- **Core zones:** has high biodiversity value and act as reference points on the natural state of ecosystems like SSIs. Information from these zones may be used to assess the sustainability of activities, or the maintenance of environmental quality, in surrounding areas. Managers of the core areas may contribute resources to projects developed with residents, businesses and other partners of the biosphere reserve.
- **Buffer zone:** surrounds or is contiguous to the core area. Activities are organized so they do not hinder the conservation objectives of the core area, but rather help to protect it. The buffer zone might be an area for experimental research, or may involve ways to manage natural vegetation, agricultural land, forests, or fisheries to enhance overall quality of production, while conserving natural processes and biodiversity. This zone may also accommodate education, training, tourism, and recreation facilities. In many biosphere reserves the buffer zone is regarded as an area in which human use is less intensive than what might be found in the transition zone perhaps akin to proactive green belts.
- **Transition Zone, or Area of Cooperation:** the large outer area of a reserve where most people live and work, using the natural resources of the area in a sustainable manner. The term 'area of cooperation' underscores the role of cooperation as the main tool to achieve the objectives of the biosphere reserve. It is here that the local communities, conservation agencies, scientists, civil associations, cultural groups, businesses and other stakeholders would agree to work together to manage and use the area in a sustainable way that will benefit the people who live there.

At this stage the whole of the District is considered part of a potential Biosphere. As the project develops it will be necessary to review and define boundaries which could result in larger or smaller areas.

To develop an application with a good chance of success support from a number of key partners is vital. Such as District and County Council, Statutory bodies such as: Forestry England, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Wye Valley AONB, Tourism Association, Gloucestershire County Council and GFirst LEP.

SMART Aims

To enter the nomination process for a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve evidence is required of community engagement, stakeholder support and basic viability. The anticipated outputs of this project include:

1. Engaging c76 key stakeholder organisations, and gaining evidence of their feedback and support through 4/5 facilitated sessions for a total of 80+ people in February, March and early April 2020.
2. Raising the profile of the Biosphere Reserve concept and its potential application to the Forest of Dean district within the general community through web-based and upto14 face to face events. Provision of on-line and hard copy questionnaires to quantify views and support levels, May & June 2020.
3. Develop the high level vision and strategic goals for a Forest of Dean Biosphere reserve, elicited directly from stakeholder engagement and confirmed in a facilitated event in late July 2020.
4. Scoping the next steps -including challenges and opportunities- and mapping a route forward towards a nomination undertaken by the Biosphere Reserve Action Group. This takes on board best practice through contact with existing BR to learn from their experience July 2020.
5. Business planning and preliminary modelling and scenarios of how a Biosphere Reserve could be financed to deliver on identified goals undertaken by the Biosphere Reserve Action Group *if* the District is in favour.

The completion of the SMART aims enables a 3-year project to be scoped and funding applications to be raised to proceed with the potential designation. The project will update progress at each Stakeholder meeting and on-line.

Resourcing

HFBR is a 6-month project, subject to funding, running from February to July 2020. It is collaboratively resourced between FoDDC and FEP to cover staff costs. The funding from the Heritage Lottery bid will cover £10,000 of fees, materials, promotion and event costs. These include:

Facilitation fees	£2,500	Professional facilitator for stakeholder sessions
Materials	£700	Photocopying, paper
Room hire/catering	£2,700	6 number events for 25-35 people per event
Promotion and awareness	£3,600	Video, web, print, social media
Software	£422	Licence to handle breadth and depth of questions
Miscellaneous	£78	Public liability and event insurance,

Next Steps

Following approval:

1. Finalise the proposed bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund.
2. Respond to their decision within 8 weeks of submission.
3. Review of Governance agreement.
4. Proceed with project as soon as able following a review of timings.