

Gloucestershire Economic Growth Joint Committee - 17th November 2021

Forest of Dean Biosphere Reserve

Background

Biosphere Reserves are an international designation allocated by UNESCO. These sites promote solutions reconciling the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use. They are learning areas for sustainable development under diverse ecological, social and economic contexts, touching the lives of more than 250 million people.

There are currently 714 biosphere reserves in 129 countries across the globe, with 7 within the UK, including North Devon, the Isle of Man and the Isle of Wight.

Forest of Dean District Council (FoDDC) declared a Climate Emergency in Dec 2018 and in so doing became the first rural local authority to do so. A biodiversity emergency was also declared in 2020 as global warming and the decline of nature are interdependent. The FoDDC Corporate Plan 2019-2023 includes an action to explore Biosphere Reserve designation for the district within the Environment Key Area of Focus.

FoDDC is working closely with Forest Economic Partnership (FEP) stakeholders and the wider community to test local appetite to pursue the UNESCO designation. Support for this approach could set a new strategic direction and bio-economy approach for FoDDC. New research will be shared with GCC, Gfirst LEP and neighbouring local authorities as we learn more about this subject and the issues and opportunities involved. A Forest of Dean Biosphere has the potential to offer an evidenced based alternative to the Glos 2050 “big idea” for some form of Regional Park designation for the Forest of Dean but we are only at the start of this journey.

Research

A voluntary team of Office for National Statistics economists worked with FEP & FoDDC to research the economic effects of adopting a Forest of Dean Biosphere Reserve. Using HM Treasury’s Green Book, their report indicates that for every £1 spent creating a Biosphere Reserve there would be a £3.89 value return on investment.

On the positive side, the status would protect the district’s Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and ancient monuments. It would not introduce any new sets of plans, but work with those already in place to drive sustainable development.

Biosphere Reserves enable the community to work together to create a shared vision for future developments in their area. They encourage the wise use of human and natural resources, and can include education and research, where local schools are better able to develop workshops and universities to carry out research. There is also potential for community-led projects such as sustainable coppicing that promote healthy woodland growth. Most urgently, protected areas around the world have the potential to deliver climate change mitigation and adaptation, particularly through nature-based solutions. These include flooding mitigation using natural processes, regenerative farming and the sequestration of carbon in soils and the identification and protection of ecosystem services.

On the negative side, formal designation can constrain certain activities and have some negative effects. For example, constraints on built development and business expansions around any SSSI or which are harmful to the natural environment being protected; increase in local house prices and has the potential to lead to over tourism.

Funding

Funded by Arts Council England and FoDDC, the Forest Economic Partnership is leading an exercise to gauge public opinion on a Forest of Dean Biosphere Reserve and to raise awareness for people about what it really means.

Artists Steve Geliot & Elle Ireland were commissioned in June 2021 to produce film and audio artworks on the subject. This has resulted in a number of video clips and podcasts linked to a survey to gather public opinion. Using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Vimeo and Linked-In platforms this engagement piece will run from Oct-Dec 2021 and report findings in Feb 2022. A minimum of 430 survey responses are required by the Arts Council and some 460 responses have been logged in the first month.

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ForestWeWant>

Next steps

Survey results will be analysed in the New Year and if there is demonstrable community support, FoDDC will be seeking to move forward with formal UNESCO designation.

Based on the experience of other UK Biosphere Reserves, this process tends to take about two years to complete. This formal application process will require some £150,000 funding which will be needed to commission further research to evidence the potential costs and the social, economic and environmental benefits of securing this designation for the Forest of Dean.

Recommendations

- 1) Committee members to note the report,
- 2) Committee members to help publicise *The Forest We Want* Survey to increase awareness and participation at this important early stage.