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Date: 30th April 2026

Dear West Dean Parish Council,

Thank you for your letter dated 20th April sent to Nigel Brinn, Chief Executive of the Council. As the Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Biosphere I am happy and most probably best placed to respond to your questions. For clarity I shall address each point you raise in turn.

The choice of a Biosphere explored in the FEP report of 2019 is but one option available to support and protect the Forest and the wider area. We believe that other designations, such as National Landscape, be examined and presented as an option.

There have been numerous requests and approaches over the past decades, across successive governments to see special recognition for the Forest of Dean. The last approach was through the National Landscape's review in 2022. None of these central government, top down, approaches have been successful.

Biosphere designation offers a community led, bottom-up approach to recognising the special qualities of the Forest of Dean District.

National Landscape designations and biospheres are not mutually exclusive; one does not restrict another. Indeed, some biospheres in the UK are also National Landscapes. The Council for Protection for Rural England (CPRE) organisation who have long been an advocate for protection of the Forest of Dean supports the UNESCO Biosphere application.

The 2019 report giving the economic case for a Biosphere can be questioned as to its validity in the current economic climate influenced by Brexit, Covid and political uncertainty caused by conflict.

The economic work undertaken by the Forest Economic Partnership (FEP) provides a basis to take the project forward. It is noticeable that several members of the Biosphere Steering Group such as Forest Economic Partnership (FEP), Dean Wye Tourism and local Universities have a strong local economic focus and support a biosphere nomination today.

Evidence from other UK biospheres, together with the opportunity to work collaboratively with and for the area all indicate that there is real potential for positive economic impacts from a biosphere designation.

About how the Forest Area will benefit from the emerging carbon trading markets and the requirements from the new BNG regulations. There needs to be a benefit to local community enshrined within the proposal to encourage support.

The biosphere designation is not about trading carbon assets. It doesn't have any legal powers or change the ownership or rights of these natural assets; they remain with the landowners or managers. Similarly, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is an existing regulatory framework and will continue in a biosphere as it does in other English biospheres today. Biospheres are focused on how to achieve a sustainable future for people and nature in a local area, by and for the local community. Biospheres can add resilience to places by providing a 'space' where tensions and opportunities for any number of thoughts or ideas can be discussed.

UNESCO's own Technical Guidelines requires a benefit for local people as well as the environment, that they have a clear understanding of why they want a biosphere and should have a say in the process and "participate collaboratively in supporting the vision for a biosphere reserve". This has not happened. The original report "The Forest we Want" in 2022 had a very low response from the 85,000 population being based solely on social media (with no guarantee of responses restriction to local community). We are aware of a local petition which has already attracted over 800 replies at the time of writing. There is no clear understanding from local people as to what the Biosphere means.

A significant amount of engagement has been undertaken since 2022 and will continue through to the summer.

- Events have been held at drop in venues as well as through other groups such as local Youth Groups.
- Every household in the district has received a leaflet with link to the regularly updated website for further information.
- Every Town and Parish Council was written to in November last year, there have been consultation events and media releases as well as regular social media items.
- We have met with a number of parish councils, including as you know, West Dean and further an all town and parish council meeting was held on the 27th April.
- Essential groups have been engaged with such as the Commoners, Freeminers and Verderers providing information to their questions as well as to allowing for their thoughts to be considered. This open narrative and collaboration will continue to occur throughout the process.
- Engagement doesn't stop now it as it will continue through to the summer.

We would welcome anything the parish council can do to direct residents to further information on biospheres found at [UNESCO MAB Programme in the UK | UNESCO in the UK](#) and our own website [Forest of Dean's UNESCO Biosphere Bid - Forest of Dean District Council](#) so that residents can access regular up to date information.

The 2022 report has 17 pages of comments from respondent's comments. In the conclusion it states that these would be "Carefully considered" before any proposal is progressed. (P14 Conclusion) This has not happened.

We acknowledge that the 2022 report included 17 pages of detailed respondent comments, and we recognise the importance of those contributions. In line with the commitment stated in the conclusion (p.14), these comments have been carefully considered and analysed.

This process has involved reviewing the full range of feedback, identifying key themes, concerns, and areas of support, and ensuring that these insights have informed our ongoing assessment of the proposal. The analysis of respondent input has played a meaningful role in shaping our understanding of local perspectives and will continue to do so as the project develops. This is still the case today where the Biosphere Steering Group, a partnership made up of local organisations and representatives to progress the application, carefully considers the evidence and information being brought together. There have been two FoDDC Council reports that have clearly set out the context of biospheres and how that could translate into the district. The last council report in March 2025 received unanimous support to submit an application to UNESCO.

We remain committed to a transparent and evidence-based approach, and the feedback received will be reflected in any future proposals brought forward.

The level of engagement with local parish and town councils or interested community groups such as the (historically recognised) groups such as Commoners and Freeminers has been sadly lacking.

Town and Parish Councils including West Dean received a letter in November 2025 outlining the project and provided opportunity to feedback on how they would like to be communicated with in the future. Since this time there have been regular press and social media items and we continue to meet with parish councils and interest groups. As mentioned above we have also recently provided an all parish council briefing.

We have been engaging with essential groups who have a long standing history of governance within the Forest of Dean District such as the Freeminers, Verderers and Commoners. We continue to engage with them and support them with information on biospheres in the UK. All three groups have been given first sight of a draft governance model for their feedback to ensure their voices are heard and reflected in decision making and that we are ensuring a bottom up approach to the governance model.

This project has deliberately obscured its purpose by leaving out the word 'Biosphere' from the few invitations to the few meetings and surveys.

We did not intend to obscure the purpose of the project, and we are sorry if the absence of the term "Biosphere" in some invitations or materials has caused concern or confusion.

Our approach to engagement has been deliberately focused on understanding what people value most about the future of the Forest of Dean and what they would like to

see sustained or improved. This is because a biosphere designation should reflect the priorities, aspirations, and lived experience of the communities it represents. In this way we are seeking a bottom-up approach to align biosphere to local priorities and vision rather than starting from preconceived perspectives of what a biosphere might be.

By starting with these conversations, we are working to ensure that any biosphere vision is shaped from the ground up aligning with what matters most to local people rather than imposing a predefined concept. In this way, the process aims to echo the voices of the community and build a proposal that is both locally meaningful and widely supported.

Under the UNESCO Technical Guidelines the way land is used and accessed within Core, Buffer and Transition Zones focuses on environmental protection. How this will work in practise in a working Forest where tourism is a major income stream and a wider area needing economic development and a centrally imposed housing figure is not clear. Until properly explained and safeguarding of local rights of Commoning, Freemining and a Right to Roam is given support will not be given, to this project.

The concern you raise reflects a common misunderstanding of what a UNESCO Biosphere designation is intended to achieve. It is important to stress that this is part of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, whose core principle is not exclusion or restriction, but the relationship between people and their landscape.

A biosphere is designated specifically because of how communities have shaped and interacted with their environment over time. In the case of the Forest of Dean, that includes long-standing cultural and land-use practices such as Freemining, Commoning, and open access. These are not seen as conflicts with the designation they are part of what makes the area particularly special, meriting recognition and safeguarding for the future.

Rather than limiting these traditions, the designation recognises and celebrates them as living culture. It provides a framework to support sustainable economic activity, including tourism, while ensuring that the landscape and its cultural identity are maintained for future generations. In practice, this means encouraging responsible development, not preventing it.

Importantly, biosphere status does not introduce new planning laws, remove rights, or impose top-down restrictions on housing or land use. Indeed, existing rights including Commoning, Freemining, and access remain fully protected under current primary legislation and the cultural practices such as Commoning and Freemining are exactly the kinds of human environment relationships that biosphere designation seeks to recognise and support.

In short, this is not about restricting the Forest it is about recognising the unique way people and place have evolved together and ensuring that continues in a sustainable and economically viable way.

There is no indication of the type and design of governance and how this will operate. There is no information of how the local area will be safeguarded including the

protection of historically recognised groups. We consider this of great importance and do not understand how a project of this magnitude can be instigated; nor accepted by the community without it being in place.

There is a governance framework in development, but it is not yet in a final draft form. The draft governance model has been prepared and is currently with the Verderers, Commoners, and Freeminers for their review and feedback, recognising their status as historically protected and significant groups within the local area.

Their input is an essential part of ensuring that the governance arrangements properly reflect long-standing rights, local heritage, and appropriate safeguards. Once this feedback has been received and incorporated, the governance model will be shared publicly via the website.

This staged approach is intended to ensure that the governance structure is robust, inclusive, and sensitive to the unique historical and community context before it is finalised and presented more broadly.

We are preparing a draft application for review and feedback from the UK Man & Biosphere Committee. The draft submission is still being worked on by the Biosphere Steering Group and we plan to make this draft available in due course. Submission of a final application is not made until later this summer and therefore there remains a significant amount of time to continue engagement and inform the design of the biosphere.

We shall make the content of this letter available through the biosphere website as others may find the questions and answers useful. I do wish to convey that biosphere presents a real opportunity for the special qualities of the Forest of Dean District to be recognised and provides a framework for our communities to shape its future and respond to challenges

Yours sincerely

Chris McFarling

Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency & Biosphere
Cc Nigel Brinn
Cllr Adrian Birch