The Forest of Dean Biosphere

Initial Draft UNESCO Nomination

Summary Note of the Application • 2026

This document summarises the Forest of Dean's draft nomination for UNESCO Biosphere designation. The full working draft currently extends to nearly 250 pages across 20 sections and two annexes. This summary is an interim document which aims to cover the main content whilst the draft continues to be developed. The structure of this summary note follows that as set out in the nomination guidance.

The draft nomination goes to the UK Man & Biosphere Committee for comment and feedback to inform the final submission in September 2026.

Further information and regular updates are provided through the biosphere webpages

Forest of Dean's UNESCO Biosphere Bid - Forest of Dean District Council

The Proposed Area

The proposed biosphere covers the whole of the Forest of Dean District in western Gloucestershire, between the River Wye to the west and northwest, the River Severn to the south and the city of Gloucester to the east. The total area is 74,718 hectares (roughly 747 square kilometres), of which 70,334 hectares are terrestrial and 4,384 hectares are marine. The River Wye forms a cross border boundary with Wales, and Natural Resources Wales has observer status on the Water, Rivers and Estuary governance group for cross border coordination. The district's population stood at 87,000 in the 2021 census. The principal towns are Cinderford, Lydney, Coleford and Newent, with numerous larger and smaller villages including Parkend, Drybrook and Mitcheldean.

The area has a predominantly rural economy with strong links to its industrial heritage. Mining, both coal and iron ore, shaped the main settlements over centuries; in 1945 half the male working population worked in the coal industry, and the last large colliery closed in 1965. In the 2021 census, the largest employment sectors were wholesale and retail trade (14.6%) and construction (11.1%), with an overall employment rate of 84.1% for working age residents. The district sits close to the Welsh border, sharing ties with Chepstow, Monmouth and Ross on Wye as well as Gloucester and Bristol.

The application divides the district into three zones as required by UNESCO. Eleven core sites totalling 628 hectares are designated for strict conservation; all are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and six are also Special Areas of Conservation (SAC). Twenty two buffer zones totalling 17,947 hectares surround the core sites, containing SSSIs, SACs, RAMSAR wetland sites and areas within the Wye Valley National Landscape and Statutory Forest. The remaining 56,143 hectares form the transition area where largest proportion of people live and work. The biosphere designation does not alter existing statutory protections in any zone.

Conservation

The district contains 48 SSSIs, has parts of four Special Areas of Conservation, two Special Protection Areas, two RAMSAR sites and two National Nature Reserves. The Statutory Forest managed by Forestry England covers over 10,000 hectares. There are 335 local wildlife sites within the district. The area supports internationally significant populations of greater and lesser horseshoe bats (the largest colonies in UK), the recently reintroduced pine marten (confirmed breeding in England for the first time in nearly 200 years), wild boar, otters, dormice, peregrine falcons and salmon. The Severn Estuary supports large populations of overwintering and migratory birds.

Conservation objectives currently include habitat restoration, species recovery, recovery of soils and water systems in the Wye and Severn catchments and encouragement of regenerative land management. The Forest's geology, formed during the Variscan orogeny around 300 million years ago, creates a geological dome where ancient carboniferous limestone, sandstone and coal measures produce a mosaic of habitats: broadleaf woodland, heathland, limestone grassland, karst landscapes, cave systems, river corridors and tidal mudflats. The Foresters' Forest landscape partnership delivered 38 projects across habitat restoration, species surveys and biodiversity monitoring. The Dean Green Team carries out seasonal habitat management, and the Dean Trail Volunteers maintain trails to prevent erosion.

The application identifies ongoing conflicts including agricultural runoff polluting rivers (particularly the Wye), recreational damage from growing visitor numbers and dog ownership, housing pressure on habitats, loss of hedgerows and field margins, wildlife road casualties, and illegal mountain bike trail building. National housing targets are noted as a particular challenge to achieve without significant detriment to habitats and species across the biosphere.

Ecosystem Services and Cultural Heritage

Ecosystem Services

The application maps ecosystem services across every major habitat type in the district: woodland, heathland and acid grassland, semi natural grassland, enclosed farmland, rivers and standing water, the Severn Estuary, and geological features. Woodland provides timber, biomass energy, wild game and foraged foods alongside regulating services including carbon sequestration, flood alleviation, water quality and air quality. Rivers and wetlands provide water availability, flood regulation, nutrient cycling and fish stocks. Agricultural land provides food, genetic diversity (including local orchard varieties such as Evans' Kernel, cultivated in Ruardean over centuries) and soil formation. The Severn Estuary provides fish nursery habitat, flood buffering and sediment regulation. Geological features provide mineral resources, water purification through filtration and education sites across 12 geological SSSIs and 66 local geological sites. Cultural services run across all habitats: recreation, sense of place, tranquillity, heritage interpretation and the traditions of commoning, freemining and forest law.

Cultural Heritage

The application describes the Forest's rich cultural significance as inseparable from its natural landscape. Material heritage includes ancient mining sites, Iron Age hillforts, Roman archaeological sites at Lydney Park, the Anglo Saxon earthwork of Offa's Dyke, historic railways, and buildings shaped by centuries of industrial and forest use. The Dean Heritage Centre in Soudley serves as the primary institution for the district's history, with five galleries, an 1830s colliery beam engine and the Forest of Dean Writers Collection preserving literary works including those in local dialect. Intangible heritage includes folklore, storytelling, community customs, traditional crafts and a strong local identity rooted in the Forest's distinctive legal traditions. The Verderers' Court still sits at Speech House. Freemining rights remain actively practised. Commoners continue to graze animals on common land. The area has inspired writers including Dennis Potter and J K Rowling and is frequently used as a filming location.

Climate Commitments and Rights of Rivers

The Forest of Dean District was the first district council in England to declare a climate emergency (December 2018), with a target of carbon neutrality by 2030. The council has installed solar panels on public buildings, introduced electric recycling vehicles, developed a net zero carbon toolkit replicated across the country, participated in the EU funded energy projectd and held Climathon events on energy, food and transport. In January 2026 the council adopted a Rights of Rivers charter recognising the Wye, the Leadon and the Severn as a living system with fundamental rights including the right to be free from pollution, to

sustain biodiversity, to regenerate to a healthy state and to flow freely. Both commitments are carried forward in the biosphere governance framework.

The Local Economy and Keeping Value in the Forest

The application describes a predominantly rural economy with a high proportion of small and micro enterprises, strong self employment, and sectoral strengths in manufacturing, engineering, construction, agri food and the visitor economy. The employment rate of 84.1% is higher than the South West average.

A central theme is economic containment. The evidence base shows that while the Forest of Dean District has high productivity per hour worked, total economic output is among the lowest in Gloucestershire. External ownership in key sectors means economic activity takes place within the district without commensurate local value capture, and a significant proportion of higher paid employment is located outside the district. The application frames this as an economy that is productive but economically leaky and argues that what the Forest of Dean District needs is not more output but better connection: shared processing, logistics, local procurement, incubation and community assets that keep value circulating within the district.

The council's Sustainable Economy Strategy (2024–2028) embeds Doughnut Economics as the governing framework, with eight prosperity indicators designed to distinguish between regenerative prosperity (where value circulates locally within ecological limits) and extractive prosperity (where output rises while value leaks out). Each indicator is mapped to biosphere objectives and aligned to UN Sustainable Development Goals, but most importantly is designed to keep the money made by the Forest in the Forest. Significant investment is underway including a £20 million Levelling Up programme, a £2 million restoration of Lydney Harbour and co working spaces in Cinderford.

Tourism and the Visitor Economy

In 2023, Visit Dean Wye recorded 5.1 million day visits and 2.6 million overnight stays. At Forestry England's four principal sites almost 1 million visitors were welcomed in 2024/25. National trends point to continued growth in nature led escapes and rural short breaks.

The application describes the Forest's tourism as non extractive by character: its value depends on landscape intactness and is retained through short supply chains and locally owned enterprises. Accommodation providers typically source within 20 miles, with supply chain nodes including Forest Bakehouse, Plump Hill Farm, Forest Milkmaid, Bespoke Brewery and Suma Cooperative amongst others. Repeat booking rates reach 30% at some sites and 35 to 40% of guests arrive with electric vehicles. Operators report that guests plan extensively but do much less once they arrive, leaving replenished by the landscape.

Pressures include traffic congestion, limited public transport, user conflicts (including mountain biking and feral wild boar), ecological impacts at high footfall sites and the risk that external commercial interests develop tourism products that extract value without contributing to the local economy. Forestry England is developing a long term visitor strategy due late 2027. The biosphere provides the coordinating framework to align tourism management and monitor impacts.

Education and Research

The application documents education activity across all age groups. Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust runs Forest Explorers (ages 4 to 13) and Nature Tots (ages 0 to 5). Ten schools participate in the Eco Schools programme with multiple Green Flag accreditations. The Wilderness Centre delivers residential and day programmes across 30 acres. The Dean Heritage Centre offers workshops on industrial heritage, prehistory and habitat studies. The AccXel Construction School delivers apprenticeships in green construction.

Hartpury University contributes research through its Digital Innovation Farm, Agri Tech Centre and field courses. The University of Gloucestershire's Countryside and Community Research Institute undertakes applied research on community engagement, citizen science, governance and climate adaptation. Biodiversity monitoring includes volunteer led surveys, and Bioblitz events. The council delivers climate engagement including a bi monthly newsletter, three Climathons, a Citizen Visioning Project (funded by Innovate UK) and a Community Climate Action Plan developed with the community. Wylderne at the Wilderness Centre is developing sustainability indicators and citizen science training.

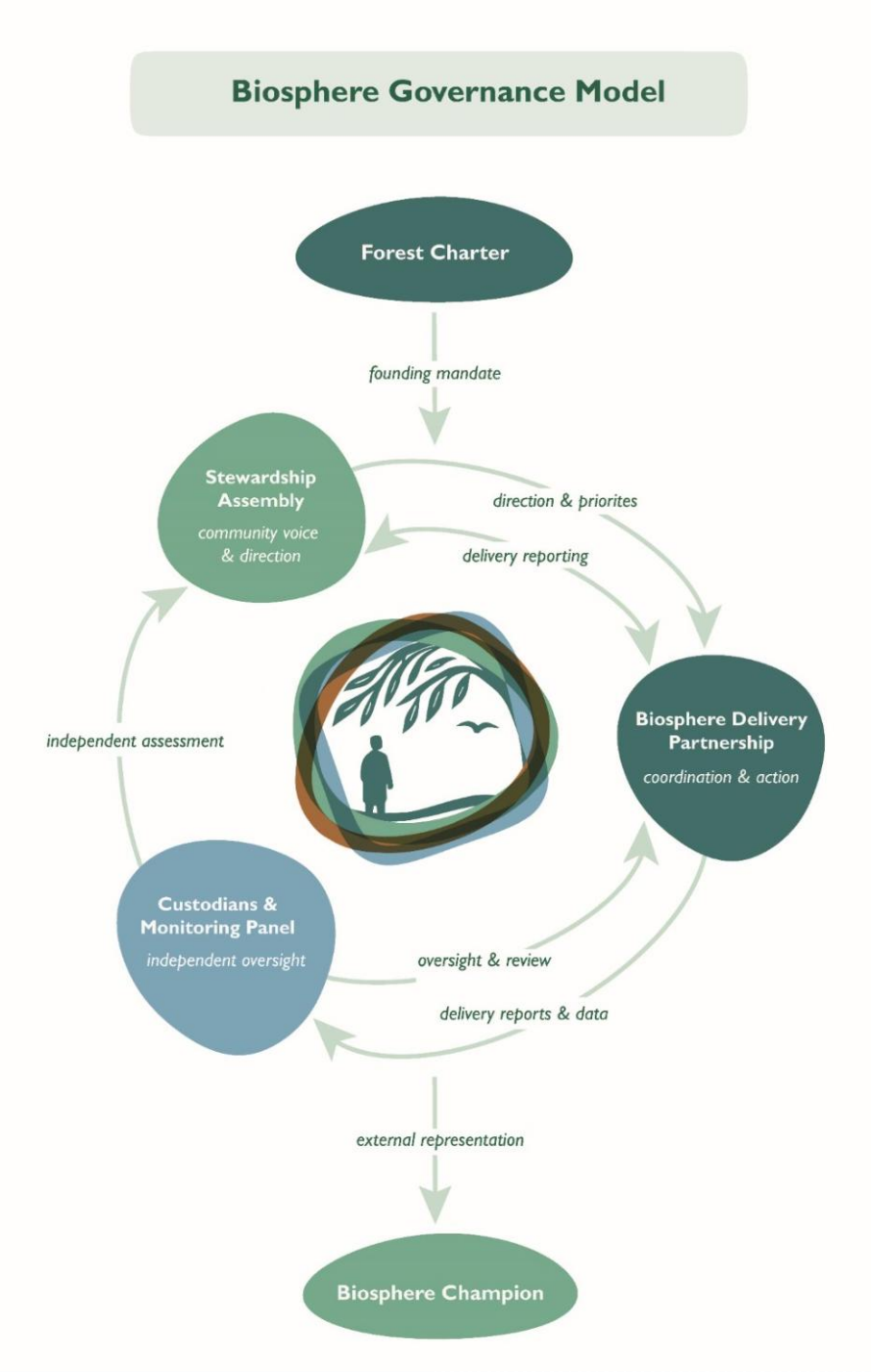
Governance and Management

UNESCO Biosphere designation carries no statutory legal status in UK law. It does not create a new regulatory authority, alter planning designations or confer additional powers. The biosphere's governance functions are transitionally hosted through the Forest Economic Partnership CIC, with a statutory asset lock, until the new structures are established. All existing responsibilities of councils, Forestry England, Natural England and the Environment Agency remain unchanged. Importantly, the Governance proposal for the Forest of Dean biosphere is not final, as it relies on community participation and design, so will be finalised by local people.

The application proposes that a Forest Charter will serve as the founding document, declaring the rights of the Forest's living system. It draws on the Charter of the Forest (1217), the Dean Forest (Mines) Act (1838), the Chartist movement and the 2010 community defence against forest sell off. It will be adopted through a Charter Assembly of approximately 50 to 60 people, the majority randomly selected, and reviewed on a ten year cycle.

Three governance bodies operate across the whole biosphere. The Stewardship Assembly (40 to 50 members, approximately 60% randomly selected via civic volunteer lottery) sets strategic priorities and is modelled on the history of the Commoners; its recommendations carry formal weight and the Delivery Partnership must publish a written response. It meets on a biennial full assembly cycle with an annual plenary. The Biosphere Delivery Partnership, modelled on the Freeminers, coordinates operational action through a quarterly Partnership Board with 'Domain Circles' to explore topic areas, such as land stewardship, the local economy, the visitor economy etc as required. Board members could include community and cultural representatives, councils, statutory bodies such as Forestry England, Natural England, the Environment Agency, together with NGO's such as the Wye Valley National Landscape, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, Hartpury University and the Forest Economic Partnership.

The Custodians and Monitoring Panel (7 to 9 members including ecological and river scientists, an economic resilience specialist, a Verderer, a river heritage representative and two community members drawn from previous Assembly participants) is modelled on the Verderers and provides independent oversight. It monitors indicators, publishes half yearly bulletins and an annual condition report, and holds one open public session each year at Speech House or another venue with historical resonance. A Biosphere Champion serves as the external representative. The governance structure is autonomous. A full review will take place two years after designation.



Consultation and Community Engagement (to date)

The application documents engagement from before 2019 to early 2026. Pre 2019: longstanding debate dating back to the 1938 National Forest Park designation and the 1947 Hobhouse Report. 2019–2021: an ONS economic case was presented to the Forest Economic Partnership; a public survey (The Forest We Want) drew responses from 600 people and 40 businesses; the Glover Review noted local support. 2024: Candidate Status was awarded by the UNESCO UK Man and Biosphere Committee. 2025: the District Council voted unanimously to proceed; a stakeholder conference was held at the Wilderness Centre with representatives from Biosffer Dyfi and North Devon Biospheres; the Verderers' Court and Freeminers were briefed; Gloucestershire County Council formally expressed support.

In 2026: a Nature and Climate Strategy workshop with FoDCAP; the Forests Future Story community engagement programme run by FVAF and Wylderne (January to March), designed as participatory conversations beginning with people's personal connections to the Forest; a Polis Digital Platform; a leaflet delivered to every household; BBC Radio Gloucestershire coverage; a Town and Parish Councillor workshop; and a primary school poster competition. Letters of support were received from the RSPB, Forestry England, Natural England, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, the Wye Valley National Landscape, the Severn Estuary Partnership, the Forest Economic Partnership, the Dean Heritage Centre, Hartpury University and others.

The Forests Future Story engagement found deep pride in the Forest's identity alongside caution rooted in historical struggles about external control. A shared vision emerged centred on stewardship: strengthening local food systems, supporting land based employment, promoting biodiversity and developing a circular local economy. Young people emphasised the need for better jobs, skills training and a stronger voice. Despite concerns about housing pressures and over commercialisation, the overall finding was cautious optimism alongside a clear message that continued dialogue and community involvement will be essential.

Roots

- National Forest Park (1938), Hobhouse report (1947) long standing debate on landscape protection
- ONS economic case study, Forest Economic Partnership

2019-2023

- 'The Forest We Want' survey 600 responses and 40 business
- Glover Review – noted biosphere options
- Formation of Biosphere Action Group (Later Biosphere Steering Group)

2024

- District council supports further investigation
- UNESCO UK Man and Biosphere Committee awards candidate status

2025

- District council unanimously supports application to UNESCO
- Stakeholder conference
- Partners support including GCC, Hartpury University & the tourism association
- Primary school poster competition
- Town & parish council survey letter
- Verderers Court & Freeminers briefed

Spring 2026

- Engagement with Commoners Association
- Forest Future Story engagement programme
- Household leaflet

April 2026

- Briefings to groups, parish councils & district councillors
- Submission of draft nomination to UK Man & Biosphere Committee for feedback

Summer 2026

- Continued engagement & development of proposal (nomination)
- Review and feedback from Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

September 2026

- Submission of nomination to UNESCO

Spring 2027

- Application outcome

FOREST OF DEAN
BIOSPHERE

Management Plan and Funding

A detailed Biosphere Strategy will be developed after designation. The application states this is a deliberate choice: the governance framework is still being socialised with communities, and producing a fixed plan before that process matures would undermine the participatory principles on which it is built. The strategy needs to be shaped by the Stewardship Assembly once convened, not presented to it as a finished product. In the interim, the biosphere operates within existing plans including the council's Sustainable Economic Strategy, the emerging Nature and Climate Strategy, the Wye Valley AONB Management Plan, Forestry England's forest plans, Environment Agency catchment plans, Natural England's management plans and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy being developed across Gloucestershire. The biosphere governance provides the coordinating architecture within which these existing plans can be aligned toward shared objectives.

Funding is expected from council contributions, national funding streams (DEFRA, Arts Council, UK Shared Prosperity Fund), in kind contributions from statutory bodies, philanthropic sources and earned income from sustainable tourism and biosphere branded products. The application notes that the biosphere aligns at national level with the UK government's 25 Year Environment Plan, at regional level with the Gloucestershire Local Nature Recovery Strategy, and at local level with the Council's plan priorities and the Forest Economic Partnership's prosperity framework.