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Dear Progressive Independents Group,

Please find set out below responses to your further biosphere questions received 27th April 2026.

Can you identify the specific provisions in UK law that ensure Commoning and Freemining rights cannot be directly or indirectly altered through biosphere-related policies, funding conditions, or land management agreements?

Biosphere designation introduces no new legal powers and therefore rights afforded to Commoning and Freemining remain as they are today. Whilst we are unable to give a definitive legal view on Commoning and Freemining, that is ultimately for the courts to determine, our understanding is that their rights in the Forest of Dean are protected by multiple layers of UK primary legislation and public law, including, as examples and noting they have not been subject to a legal view given the timescale of response, the 1217 'Charter of the Forest, the Forest of Dean Reafforestation Act 1667, Dean Forest (Mines) Act 1838, and express Parliamentary exemptions. UNESCO Biosphere designation has no legal mechanism—direct or indirect—by which it could alter or constrain those rights.

We continue to engage with both the Commoners and Freeminers who obviously have a clear view on how these rights have come about and operate today.

In the event of a conflict between conservation objectives, tourism strategy, and traditional land-use practices, which body or authority will hold final decision-making or veto power?

Biosphere designation introduces no new decision-making authority over land use, conservation, or economic activity. The biosphere partnership/guidance structure (once established) will not have a statutory "veto" over lawful land use. Decisions with legal effect will continue to sit with the relevant competent authorities under existing law (for example, the local planning authority for planning matters, the highway authority for public rights of way matters, and landowners/rights holders for private land-management decisions), and any statutory consultees as required.

The biosphere governance arrangements are intended to coordinate, convene, and support joint working; where competing objectives arise, the approach will be to seek agreement through published terms of reference, transparent decision-making, and escalation to the appropriate statutory decision-maker where a formal determination is required.

Will Commoners and Freeminers have guaranteed voting representation within the governance structure, with a defined proportion of seats set out in a formal constitution? If so, could you provide details?

The intention is that the governance arrangements will include meaningful representation from key stakeholder groups, including Commoners and Freeminers, alongside parish/town councils, land managers, businesses, community groups, and relevant public bodies. For example, the Stewardship Assembly proposal includes a minimum of 1–2 Commoner / Freeminers representatives.

The precise composition (including whether voting seats are allocated by sector and any defined proportions) will be set out in the partnership's constitution/terms of reference, which will be agreed locally, by parties prior to their formal implementation. We will be sharing the emerging draft governance proposals shortly once key stakeholders such as the Commoners, Freeminers & Verderers have had time to feedback.

Could you please provide the full methodology and underlying data for the stated £3.89 return per £1, including assumptions, timeframes, and how outcomes are attributed specifically to biosphere designation?

The £3.89 figure originates from the Forest Economic Partnership report "*The Economic Case for the Biosphere*", drawing on Office for National Statistics (ONS)-aligned valuation methodologies. My understanding from report is that it follows the methodology set out in *The Green Book: Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation*, at that time (2018).

In summary:

- It was based on comparative economic analysis of UNESCO designations across the UK.
- Returns included tourism uplift, grant leverage, employment effects, supply-chain impacts, and skills investment.
- Timeframes assessed are medium- to long-term (10–20 years).
- Attribution is not to designation alone, but to designation-enabled investment, partnership maturity, and programme delivery.

What are the current baseline metrics (for example employment, tourism revenue, and business activity), and what specific, time-bound targets will be used to measure success? Additionally, what mechanisms are in place should those targets not be met?

Baseline metrics currently include:

- Employment rates by sector
- Visitor numbers and tourism spend
- Business density and start-up data
- Skills and training participation
- Environmental indicators already monitored by partners

The Delivery Strategy will establish time-bound targets (e.g. 3-, 5-, and 10-year milestones). Performance will be reviewed annually, with outcomes published.

If targets are not met:

- Strategic priorities can be revised by the Stewardship Assembly.
- Delivery programmes can be re-scoped or discontinued.
- The partnership retains the option to reduce activity or, ultimately, recommend withdrawal from Biosphere status.

Prosperity Indicators:

Baseline metrics

The Forest of Dean can already draw on numerous existing evidence sets that would underpin biosphere monitoring across all eight prosperity indicator domains recommended in the nomination. These are designed to ensure that biosphere status can be used to deliver any direct economic benefit from a designation to residents.

Household prosperity and in work poverty: Median gross pay and pay distribution at local authority level (ONS earnings series). Fuel poverty prevalence (15.6% of Forest of Dean households on the most recent National Energy Action estimate, up from a 2013 baseline of 11.6%). Warm and Well service data, including a 25% increase in households supported during 2022/23. Council Tax Support and related administrative datasets.

Cost of living and access to essentials: IMD 2025 Barriers to Housing and Services data at neighbourhood level, including the fact that the Forest contains the most deprived small area in Gloucestershire on that measure (Dymock, ranked 91st of 33,755 in England). Census 2021 car ownership and travel data. Inform Gloucestershire access, transport and digital connectivity indicators. Off gas grid exposure and housing age data.

Work, skills and local opportunity: Employment rates by sector and workplace containment data (ONS/Nomis), including out commuting levels showing a significant proportion of residents travelling outside the district for higher paid work. The Forest's distinctive economic profile: highest GVA per hour worked but second lowest total GVA in Gloucestershire, indicating a productive but economically leaky district. Apprenticeship starts and completions data (Nomis). Employer reported recruitment and retention evidence.

Local wealth retention and community economy: Business density, survival rates and start up data (ONS/Nomis business demography). Local authority procurement and social value reporting. Forest Economic Partnership economic evidence, including the independently modelled figure of £3.89 return per £1 invested (ONS modelled, conservative, excluding tourism uplift). Community and cooperative enterprise registers.

Housing, land and living conditions: Local authority housing delivery and homelessness data. EPC rating distributions and housing condition indicators. Census 2021 tenure, overcrowding and concealed household data. Temporary accommodation and housing insecurity indicators.

Natural capital, regenerative economy and species stewardship: Habitat and land use mapping held by the Council and partners. Forestry England woodland management data. Environment Agency water quality and catchment data. Local Environmental Records Centre species records. Agricultural land use and environmental land management scheme uptake data. Applied research inputs linked to Hartpury University.

Tourism, wellbeing and carrying capacity: Visit Dean Wye data (5.1 million day visits and 2.6 million overnight stays in 2023). Forestry England site visitor data (nearly 1 million visitors at Forest sites in 2024/25). Operator evidence of year on year booking growth (including Premier Cottages 23% increase). Local authority transport, parking and highways data.

Community strength, safety and participation: Inform Gloucestershire community and wellbeing indicators. Voluntary sector data including FVAF operational reporting (over 1,000 volunteers recruited annually). Parish council and community forum engagement evidence. Rural crime and safety partnership data.

These are datasets that already exist and are already being used by the Council, the Forest Economic Partnership and partner organisations. The accompanying Cultural and Economic Resilience paper sets out how these eight domains function as an interdependent system and why they have been selected.

Time bound targets

The Delivery Strategy would establish targets at 3, 5 and 10 year intervals across these indicator domains. These would focus on distribution and trend (who benefits and where conditions are improving or deteriorating) as well as headline averages, because district level averages can mask persistent disadvantage in specific communities. Performance would be reviewed annually and outcomes published.

If targets are not met

Under the draft governance model for the biosphere, strategic priorities could be revised by the proposed Stewardship Assembly. Delivery programmes could be rescoped or discontinued. The partnership would retain the option to reduce activity or, ultimately, to recommend withdrawal from biosphere status. UNESCO periodic review provides an additional external accountability mechanism: designation is not permanent and must be justified through evidence of continued progress.

Can you confirm whether any new access restrictions, zoning measures, or visitor controls are being considered that do not already exist under current UK law?

No new access restrictions, zoning measures, or visitor controls are proposed beyond existing UK law. Biosphere designation does not introduce new powers in this respect. Any future changes to access or visitor management would require separate statutory processes and be decided by relevant authorities, not the Biosphere partnership. Our hope would be that where statutory bodies consider making any changes they would consider both the objectives of the biosphere and utilise the biosphere partnership to engage with stakeholders.

Is it possible for external funding bodies associated with biosphere-related projects to impose conditions that could influence land use, land management practices, or traditional rights? If so, how would this be managed?

Most external funders apply conditions to funding as a way of ensuring their funding objectives are met, they are usually clearly set out in funding guidance or application packs and therefore known in advance. Such conditions would be relevant to groups who agree to be party to funding agreements. This would not compel participation by groups such as the Commoners or Freeminers and could not override statutory rights.

What is the formal process, threshold, and timeline required for withdrawal from biosphere status, and what role would local stakeholders have in initiating such a process?

UNESCO Biospheres are subject to 5-year periodic reviews and 10-year full reviews. If continued designation is no longer supported, the partnership can formally withdraw through UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme. Local stakeholders would initiate this

through the governance structure, with a clear evidential and consultation process preceding any decision.

In summary, Biosphere status is intended as a framework for collaboration, not control. It cannot amend law, constrain rights, or impose policy. Its value lies in whether local communities choose to use it to attract investment, coordinate effort, and celebrate the Forest of Dean's unique cultural and environmental heritage. We shall make the content of this letter available through the biosphere website as others may find the questions and answers useful.

Yours sincerely

Chris McFarling

Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency & Biosphere