



The Forest of Dean Biosphere

Summary of the Emerging Proposed Governance Structure

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This document summarises the Forest of Dean's emerging proposed governance structure for the biosphere. The Governance structure as currently proposed is not set in stone, it remains for discussion and development.

The emerging governance structure will be included in the initial draft nomination which 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](#)

I. What Is This About?

The Forest of Dean district is being nominated as a UNESCO Biosphere. To gain that designation, the district needs to show UNESCO how it will govern the biosphere over the long term: who makes decisions, who delivers on the ground, who checks that things are working and who speaks for the Forest to the outside world.

Future governance needs to be seen in the context of what a biosphere can do. Remember designation brings no new powers or direct funding. The legal responsibility found today remain unchanged. UNESCO biospheres are there to provide help and support, but they too have no powers nationally or locally. UNESCO provide an umbrella framework for biospheres to determine priorities and future activities locally on the basis that communities and the environment can prosper together. The level of decision making may well grow over time, initially it might be preparing a share future vision for the area, identifying key areas for funding bids or priorities for study and research. The biosphere gets its power from its partnership and the legitimacy that brings and governance structures are essential for this. A biosphere can't create new rules or laws.

UNESCO does not tell nominated sites exactly how to organise themselves. But it does require certain things to be in place: a clear structure with defined roles and accountabilities; genuine participation by local communities, businesses, landowners and institutions; governance that covers the three biosphere functions (conservation, sustainable development and learning from what works); and the capacity to keep going beyond any single political cycle. Biospheres are reviewed by UNESCO every ten years, so the governance has to be built to last and to adapt.

This document sets out a proposed governance model. It is a proposal, not a done deal. Residents, community groups and organisations across the district can help shape and finalise it so that it is a genuine expression of local democracy, rooted in the culture and heritage of the Forest of Dean.

2. Why the Forest's History Matters

The governance proposal draws on institutional patterns that have been part of the Forest of Dean district for centuries. The reason for this is straightforward: the Forest already has a deep tradition of self-governance, distributed authority and the defence of rights against external encroachment. A governance model that ignored that tradition would lack credibility with the people it is supposed to serve.

Several strands of that history are directly relevant to what is being proposed.

Forest Law and the Separation of Roles

In the medieval Royal Forest, different institutions performed different functions. The Crown, through the Warden, managed timber and revenue. The Court of Verderers safeguarded common rights and ecological balance. The Warden also served as the Forest's representative to external authority. These were separate roles: management, guardianship and representation. That separation is one of the oldest structural features of Forest governance, and it runs through the model proposed here.

Customary Rights and Local Economic Self-Organisation

The freemining system is a remarkable example of locally governed economic life. Freeminers held rights grounded in birth and experience within the Hundred of St Briavels. Their rights were registered, regulated and eventually formalised in the Dean Forest (Mines) Act 1838. Mining lodges organised labour, shared risk, settled disputes and preserved technical knowledge. Friendly societies and benefit clubs built schools and welfare systems. All of this was self-organised, peer-governed and rooted in place.

The Rivers: Customary Rights and Embedded Knowledge

The governance traditions of this district are not confined to the woodland interior. The Severn Estuary sustained fishing methods going back thousands of years: putcher ranks, lave netting, elver harvesting. These practices carried the same structural features as freemining — domain-specific knowledge passed down through families, customary holdings and materials sourced from managed riverside plantations.

The River Wye, historically one of Britain's finest salmon rivers, now illustrates what happens when governance fails. Salmon catches have fallen by roughly 95%. Water-crowfoot has declined by an estimated 90% or more. The river's status has been downgraded to "unfavourable declining." The Wye crisis is also a cross-border governance failure: the river flows through both England and Wales, with no single body able to act for the whole system. The biosphere governance model has to hold both forest and river traditions together.

Conflict, Enclosure and the Importance of Legitimacy

The Forest's history includes repeated confrontation between central authority and local rights, followed by negotiated settlement. The 1831 Dean Forest Riots were rooted in opposition to enclosure, restriction of customary access and governance seen as externally imposed. The subsequent legislative settlement, including the 1838 Act, formalised rights and clarified governance mechanisms. The lesson is consistent across centuries: when governance in the Forest proceeds without recognised legitimacy, it destabilises. When rights and voice are institutionalised, conflict subsides.

The same pattern is visible in the river traditions. Victorian regulation of elver fishing provoked sustained resistance. The closure of putcher fisheries represents a contemporary version of the enclosure dynamic. On the Wye, the failure of the regulatory framework to prevent catastrophic pollution is a governance failure in which institutions proved unable to protect the ecological foundation on which communities depend.

The Charter Tradition

The Forest of Dean is connected to one of the most significant traditions in English constitutional history: the making of charters to protect communities' rights.

The Charter of the Forest (1217) re-established access rights eroded since the Norman Conquest. Its special courts, including the Verderers' court, still exist in the Forest of Dean. The Charter remained in force until 1971, making it the longest-standing statute in English law. Legal scholars consider it one of the world's earliest pieces of environmental legislation.

The Chartist movement (1830s–1840s) took the charter form and applied it to political rights. The People's Charter of 1838 was published in the same year as the Dean Forest

(Mines) Act, linking the defence of Forest rights to the national demand for democratic representation. The Chartist National Land Company acquired 268 acres at Snig's End on the northern edge of the district, building 85 cottages as a model settlement. The Chartist tradition speaks directly to the northern parishes that might otherwise feel peripheral to a forest-centred narrative.

The 2010 defence of the Forest saw the Forest of Dean Commoners Association invoke the Charter of the Forest by name in its successful campaign against the Coalition government's proposal to sell publicly owned forests.

Each generation has extended the charter's scope: from commons rights (1217) to economic rights (1838), to political rights (Chartism), to public ownership (2010). Most recently, the Forest of Dean District Council adopted a Rights of Rivers Charter, declaring specific rights of the district's rivers. This proposal takes the next step: a Forest Charter that extends those river rights to encompass the whole living system, woodland and water together.

3. Why Three Bodies, Not One?

Most UK biospheres operate through a single partnership board with thematic working groups. That is administratively simple and politically familiar. The Forest of Dean needs something more.

The historical evidence shows that governance in the Forest has been stable when three conditions are met at the same time: civic voice is formally recognised; operational delivery is coordinated through embedded local expertise; and long-term oversight is exercised independently of those responsible for day-to-day management. When any of these weakens, governance destabilises. The historical record on this point is remarkably consistent.

A single partnership board conflates all three functions. It deliberates, delivers and monitors its own performance within the same structure. That might work somewhere without strong governance traditions. In the Forest of Dean, where communities have demonstrated both self-governance and hostility to perceived imposition, it risks exactly the kind of legitimacy failure the historical record warns against.

What Separation Achieves

Independent assessment. When the same body that runs a programme also evaluates its success, there is a structural incentive towards optimism. Separating oversight from delivery ensures that performance assessment is honest. UNESCO's ten-year review will test whether monitoring is credible.

Democratic legitimacy. Partnership boards tend over time towards institutional representation, with seats allocated to organisations rather than communities. The proposed Stewardship Assembly maintains a direct connection to the wider population.

Specialisation without concentration. The Delivery Partnership can focus on coordination — aligning funding, managing cross-sector delivery, working with statutory partners — without also bearing the burden of democratic legitimation or self-scrutiny.

Alignment with how the Forest already works. The Forest's institutional culture has always been one of layered, negotiated, distributed authority. Three interdependent bodies fit that tradition. A single board would be structurally alien to it.

4. The Forest Charter

The Forest Charter is the founding document of the biosphere. It declares the rights of the Forest's living system — both woodland and water — and provides the principles within which all three governance bodies operate. It is the thing all three bodies serve, and none of them own.

The Charter would build on the District Council's existing Rights of Rivers Charter, which declares six rights of the district's rivers including the right to be free from pollution, to biodiversity, to flow and perform natural functions, to be supported by a healthy catchment, to regenerate and to representation. The Forest Charter would extend these principles to the whole living system: the right to ecological integrity, to regeneration and to the continuation of the conditions that sustain its biodiversity and its human communities. The Severn and the Wye would be named alongside the forest as entities whose health the governance structure exists to protect.

The Charter would be adopted through a dedicated Charter Assembly — a one-off founding process using citizens' assembly methodology, with volunteer residents and community groups from across the whole district and structured evidence drawn from what will become the other governance functions. This is the constitutive democratic act of the biosphere: the moment the community formally establishes the governance framework on its own terms. It would essentially be a Constitution for the Forest.

The Charter also incorporates the Rights of Nature doctrine. This is a logical extension of the Forest's own tradition: from the rights of Commoners (1217), to Freeminers (1838), to citizens (Chartism), to the living system itself.

5. The Four Governance Functions

The governance model has three core bodies and one complementary role. Each is grounded in a specific strand of Forest tradition and designed to fulfil a distinct function.

5.1 The Stewardship Assembly (Deliberation and Direction)

The Stewardship Assembly is where the community's voice enters the governance system. It carries forward the tradition of the commoners: the collective assertion of rights, the expectation of consultation and the insistence that decisions affecting the Forest require the consent of the people who live in it. It sets strategic priorities, reviews how the biosphere is performing, surfaces trade-offs between economic and ecological objectives and provides democratic legitimacy.

It would combine randomly selected (from a pool of volunteers) residents (through sortition, the same method used in citizens' assemblies) with parish, sectoral and community representatives. It would operate in periodic cycles (annual or biennial), receive structured evidence, deliberate and issue recommendations. Those recommendations must receive a formal published response from the Delivery Partnership. This last step matters: citizens' assemblies fail when they are advisory without obligation. The Custodians Panel would review whether the responses are adequate.

Historical root: The Forest has long relied on collective civic voice and negotiated settlement. Authority has historically emerged from community recognition. The Stewardship Assembly formalises this tradition within a modern framework.

5.2 The Biosphere Delivery Partnership (Operational Coordination)

The Delivery Partnership is where things get done. It carries forward the tradition of the freeminers and the mining lodges: locally organised, practically grounded, coordinated through embedded expertise and shared risk. It aligns councils, land managers, ecologists, enterprise networks and institutions. It coordinates action across conservation and development, integrates funding streams and strategies and maintains momentum between deliberative cycles.

Sociocratic principles inform how the Partnership works: clearly defined domains of authority, thematic circles (such as land stewardship, enterprise, visitor economy and wellbeing), consent-based decision processes and continuous feedback loops. These are practical tools for preventing both paralysis and the concentration of decision-making.

The Partnership is composed of councils, land managers (including Forestry England), enterprise representatives and community organisations. Statutory and national partners operate within this framework, and the Partnership itself remains the coordinating authority. The Partnership would be accountable to the Stewardship Assembly for strategic direction and required to publish progress reports reviewed by the Custodians Panel.

Historical root: Economic life in the Forest has historically been organised through embedded, place-based institutions with practical expertise and shared risk — from freemining and mining lodges to contemporary business networks. The Delivery Partnership reflects this tradition of locally organised delivery.

5.3 The Custodians and Monitoring Panel (Oversight and Integrity)

The Custodians and Monitoring Panel is the body that watches, measures and reports. It carries forward the tradition of the Verderers: guardianship that stands apart from day-to-day management, holding the long view on behalf of the whole Forest. It monitors ecological and social thresholds (including the Prosperity Indicators), publishes annual public reports, reviews the Delivery Partnership's response to Assembly recommendations and prepares evidence for UNESCO's ten-year periodic review.

The Panel's authority is reputational and evidential: it publishes what it finds, and transparency is its instrument. This layer exists to prevent the biosphere from becoming rhetorical — to ensure that what gets claimed also gets measured.

Historical root: The Court of Verderers embodies long-term guardianship and the principle that operational management must be balanced by independent oversight. The Custodians Panel extends this logic to the full range of ecological, economic and social indicators relevant to the biosphere.

5.4 The Biosphere Envoy (External Representation)

The three governance bodies address the internal functions of the biosphere. External representation requires something additional. A biosphere exists within a network of

international designations and national policy frameworks. It needs someone who can speak for it to UNESCO, to government, to funders and to the wider public.

The proposed Biosphere Envoy carries forward the tradition of the Deputy Warden: the recognised figure who represented the Forest’s interests to the Crown and to the world beyond its boundaries. The Envoy represents the Forest of Dean Biosphere externally but holds no executive, deliberative or oversight powers within the governance structure. The role is diplomatic and ambassadorial: public face, advocate, connector.

The Envoy would be appointed by the Stewardship Assembly on the recommendation of the Delivery Partnership, ensuring the role carries legitimacy from the deliberative body while reflecting operational judgement about who can be most effective.

Historical root: The Warden of the Forest, and later the Deputy Warden, served as the Forest’s representative to external authority. The Envoy draws on this tradition: a recognised figure whose role is to ensure the Forest has a voice where decisions affecting it are made, without exercising power over its internal governance.

6. The Governance Model at a Glance

The table below shows how each governance function connects Forest tradition to a modern biosphere body, with defined responsibilities aligned to UNESCO requirements.

Function	Forest Tradition	Modern Body	Core Responsibilities	UNESCO Alignment
Deliberation and Direction	Parish governance, commoner voice, civic assemblies	Stewardship Assembly	Set strategic priorities; review performance; surface trade-offs; provide democratic legitimacy	Participatory governance; sustainable development; resident benefit
Operational Delivery	Freemining, mining lodges, cooperative and mutual self-organisation	Biosphere Delivery Partnership	Deliver agreed priorities across zones; align funding; coordinate land management and enterprise; report progress	Sustainable development; conservation; cross-sector coordination

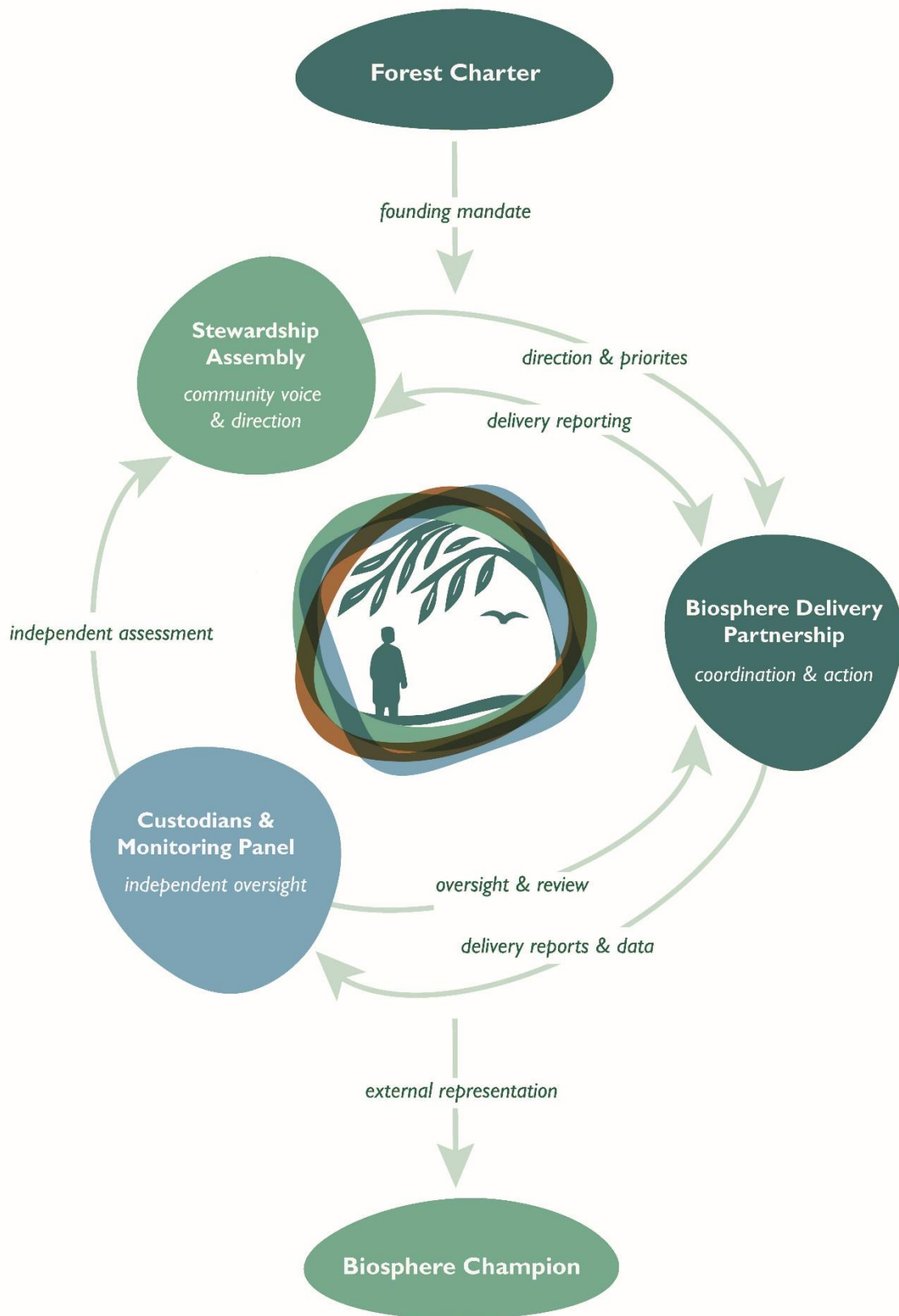
Oversight and Integrity	Court of Verderers: guardianship of rights and ecological balance	Custodians and Monitoring Panel	Monitor thresholds; publish annual reports; review delivery responses; prepare evidence for periodic review	Logistic support (monitoring and learning); adaptive management; periodic review
External Representation	Warden / Deputy Warden as representative to the Crown	Biosphere Envoy	Represent the Forest nationally and internationally; advocate to government and funders; raise profile	International cooperation; visibility within World Network of Biosphere Reserves

7. How It All Fits Together

The three core bodies create a continuous feedback loop. The Stewardship Assembly sets direction within agreed boundaries. The Delivery Partnership implements and coordinates. The Custodians Panel evaluates and feeds evidence back. Data and evidence flow between all three. The adaptive governance system lives in this loop — in the circulation of evidence, direction and accountability across all three bodies. The Biosphere Envoy operates outside this loop, representing the Forest externally without intervening in its internal governance.

Citizens' assembly methodology and sociocratic principles address different potential failure modes. Citizens' assemblies address legitimacy failures and contested decision-making. Sociocratic principles address coordination failures and concentration of authority. Neither replaces the three-body architecture. Each strengthens a different layer of it.

Biosphere Governance Model



8. Design Principles and Risks

Several principles guide the design:

No rival authority. The model sits alongside existing democratic structures — it does not compete with them.

Locally rooted. The framing emphasises continuity and formalisation of existing governance culture.

Administratively viable. The model requires a small coordinating capacity, a clear reporting cycle, defined terms of reference and defined interaction between the three bodies. If it becomes an unfunded committee structure with no administrative capacity, it will fail.

The whole district. The governance model must reflect the identity and traditions of the river and estuary communities alongside those of the forest interior. A biosphere whose governance story is exclusively about woodland and mining will fail — both with UNESCO and with the district's own residents.

Deliberation must carry weight. The Stewardship Assembly must not become tokenistic. Its recommendations must receive a formal published response, and the Custodians Panel must review whether those responses are adequate.

Oversight must be independent. The Custodians Panel's credibility depends on its separation from the Delivery Partnership.

The main risks are over-complexity, duplication with existing council scrutiny, unrealistic administrative burden and the perception that the whole thing is constitutional theatre. These are mitigated by keeping the structure lean, clearly distinguishing it from statutory functions and anchoring it consistently in Forest governance tradition.

9. What This Means

The Forest of Dean already possesses the institutional architecture this model describes. Civic deliberation, local economic delivery and long-term custodianship have operated as distinct but interdependent functions across several centuries, complemented by recognised representation of the Forest's interests to the outside world. What is required is formalisation: clarity of role, transparency of process and structured participation that meets UNESCO's requirements.

This governance model demonstrates to UNESCO a capacity the Forest has had for centuries. The biosphere designation is an evolution of longstanding constitutional logic, adapted for contemporary sustainability.

This is a proposal. It is designed to be shaped by the people and communities of the Forest of Dean district. If you want to contribute to the governance design, contact the biosphere team.

