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Dear Progressive Independents Group,

As the Cabinet member with responsibility for the Biosphere, thank you for your questions and I have set out below answers to the points the group has raised. As members you will know a lot of the background from previous Council reports in May 2022 and March of last year, where application preparation was unanimously supported.

- 1. Can you confirm that, given Biosphere status does not introduce any additional legal environmental protections, it is not simply a branding exercise—and how the associated cost to taxpayers is justified on that basis?*

Biosphere status is often misunderstood as purely symbolic, but it is not simply a branding exercise. While it's true that designation (through UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme) does not in itself create new legal environmental protections, its value lies in how it coordinates and enhances existing efforts.

Biosphere status provides an internationally recognised framework that brings together local authorities, businesses, researchers, and communities to co-ordinate the management of resources more sustainably. It can strengthen funding bids, attract investment and tourism, develop skills and support education, research, and innovation projects that might not otherwise occur. These outcomes can deliver tangible environmental and economic benefits over time.

In terms of cost to taxpayers, the justification typically rests on long-term return on investment. This includes increased visitor spending, access to external grants, improved coordination in land management practices, and stronger regional identity, all of which can contribute to local economic resilience. The designation can also act as a catalyst for partnerships that reduce duplication of effort and make existing environmental initiatives more effective.

- 2. Given that evidence indicates it is not the designation itself but subsequent investment and management that drive economic benefits, what concrete guarantees can be provided that Biosphere status will deliver measurable economic growth rather than simply rebranding existing activity?*

It is important to be clear that biosphere designation does not in itself guarantee economic growth; it is the level of investment, governance, and strategic management that follows which determines whether meaningful economic benefits are realised. These are more likely to be successful under the biosphere designation due to the comprehensive framework which is provided.

Biospheres respond to changing economic conditions and opportunities within their overall framework and the locally set objectives. The social, economic and environmental benefits are built from this base. This will include a delivery strategy with defined and measurable targets. This could include specific indicators such as job creation, increases in visitor spending, growth in local enterprises, and expansion of skills and training opportunities. These targets must be time-bound and regularly monitored, enabling progress to be tracked and ensuring that economic gains can be attributed to biosphere related interventions.

Strong governance arrangements are also essential for success. We are proposing a comprehensive bottom-up approach to governance which is representative of the history of the Forest of Dean. Representation from local communities, businesses, and public authorities helps ensure that economic initiatives are grounded in local needs while maintaining transparency through regular reporting and independent evaluation.

Direct support for businesses is another critical factor in generating new economic activity. Incentives such as grants and access to markets can encourage enterprises to align with biosphere objectives, particularly in sectors like sustainable tourism, agriculture, and green innovation. Targeted support for small and medium-sized enterprises can help ensure that benefits are distributed locally and contribute to long-term economic resilience.

In taking all of the above into account, the Office for National Statistics have projected a £3.89 return for every £1 with biosphere status, which can be found in the Forest Economic Partnership's report 'The Economic Case for the Biosphere'.

I would also add that there is no evidence that biospheres detract from the economic activity of an area, in fact the reverse is true as illustrated above. Therefore, the risk to the local economy from designation is very low to negligible.

- 3. Can you give a clear assurance that Biosphere status will not result in any restrictions on tourism—whether through policy, management plans, or future decisions—and that increasing visitor numbers will remain a priority for the district?*

Biosphere status is not designed to restrict tourism. The goal is actually to support sustainable tourism encouraging more visitors, but managing how, where, and when they visit to protect the environment, local communities and support a long-term economy.

That said, the value of biosphere will hopefully influence future strategies and opportunities, such as building on our eco-tourism and encouraging longer stays or higher-value tourism rather than simply higher volume.

So, while increasing visitor numbers often remains an objective, it's usually balanced with sustainability goals to protect the local area from over tourism allowing for a sustainable future. In the application, we have made a deliberate focus on 'slow tourism' for this reason. It is also notable that the local tourism association is a partner in the Biosphere Steering Group.

- 4. Can you provide independently verified evidence from UK biospheres—such as North Devon Biosphere Reserve or Dyfi Biosphere—demonstrating measurable, long-term economic benefits and unchanged traditional land-use practices, rather than project-based or short-term outcomes?*

At a country wide scale in 2020 the report on the National Value of UNESCO designations in the UK found that the designations, which include biosphere, added a minimum of £151m of financial benefits to the UK in a year.

The Landscape Pioneer elevation covering the North Devon Biosphere (NDB) identified, as set out above (2), that designations act as enabling frameworks rather than economic drivers in their own right. A biosphere partnership can align, integrate and efficiently use funding to achieve better outcomes (social, economic and environmental).

For example, we understand that the NDB has been instrumental in the development of an aquaculture industry in the area and the development of the £15M Levelling up funded Appledore Clean Marine Innovation Centre that will support the longevity of the local shipyard as well as create new diverse economies in the area. The Biosphere has also developed a Biocultural Heritage tourism programme that is supporting over 100 businesses that engage visitors in experiential tourism that celebrates the natural and cultural practices of the area. The ongoing programmes of the NDB with its partners has drawn down funds from existing sources with greater success. For example the funding for Water framework directive from the Environment Agency has been significantly higher in North Devon catchments than in the rest of the Southwest due to the presence of a strong and effective partnership. Collectively those delivery partners employ over 40 people to supporting landowners and communities to deliver a locally determined environmental agenda.

As we set out above (1) biospheres in the UK need to adjust to changes in local conditions and the Dyfi estuary is a key example of that and the learning from which they have been keen to share with us. Their Forward Look report, which looked back at the last 10 years and opportunities for the future found that despite low levels of funding the biosphere had achieved:

- Widespread community awareness of the biosphere and environmental issues, largely achieved through events and local activities.
- A strong education group and connections with several schools in the biosphere.
- A range of innovative tourism initiatives, which have raised the profile of the area as an eco-friendly, green destination.
- A series of arts-based programmes which have had a lasting impact.
- The impact of high-profile research projects, such as COBWEB and hydro-citizenship

However, the report did recognise that the lack of resources had constrained the work of the biosphere and led to some missed opportunities. Some of the learning from this was about the importance of the wider partnership and governance structure, something that we are building into proposals.

5. *Can you provide a legally or constitutionally binding outline of the governance structure showing exactly which body has final decision-making authority over funding, land management priorities, and strategic direction, and how many voting seats Commoners and Freeminers will hold on that body?*

The Governance Structure is not yet legally or constitutionally bound because, by its nature, the final design has to be agreed by the communities who participate in the three groups proposed. However, we have drafted a suggested framework. We have suggested that in the Stewardship Assembly that Commoners and Freeminers have at least 1-2 representatives, with the majority of the Assembly being made of residents. In the Delivery Partnership we would hope that again they would have good representation as their deeper knowledge would be particularly valuable. As such, the Stewardship Assembly would set strategic direction and the Delivery Partnership would deal with funding and management of priorities (in line with the general direction set by the Assembly). There would be scrutiny of these decisions by the Custodians and Monitoring Panel (which we

hope the Verderers would be represent on) to make sure that the more technical decisions made by the Delivery Partnership are aligned with the direction set by the Assembly.

As such, the system as proposed is designed so no one group has greatest authority over another, but so each group has equal representation and the residents have a chance to truly participate in local priorities. While the Governance model can't be final until all have agreed, we have deliberately included several different groups in the proposals to illustrate our hopes for the potential of further formalising the history of self-governance in the Forest of Dean as a result of biosphere status.

6. *Who will have ultimate authority over allocating biosphere-related funding, and what safeguards will prevent external priorities (such as national or international environmental targets) from overriding locally determined land- use practices such as Commoning?*

Biosphere designation does not add any new legal responsibilities. Therefore, the current rights and practices as well as the legal responsibilities would remain the same. Biosphere's do not have any funding attached to the status and so all funding applications would need to be made by the partnership itself and therefore accountable or by a biosphere partner in which case responsibilities would need to be clearly set out in any application and endorsed by the partnership. The governance structure set out above (5) is designed to make this process transparent with appropriate checks and balances.

7. *What legally enforceable protections will be put in place to guarantee that Commoning rights, grazing levels, and traditional practices cannot be altered—directly or indirectly—through biosphere-linked policies, funding conditions, or management plans over time?*

Biosphere designation does not add any new legal responsibilities. Therefore, the current rights and practices as well as the legal responsibilities would remain the same. Commoners' activities, grazing, would continue unchanged. In fact, it would be one of the core practices celebrated within a biosphere. It's one of those activities that makes the Forest of Dean special. It's the relationship between people and place that biospheres seek to acknowledge and support. It is hoped, and there is the opportunity for, representatives of the Commoners to be involved in the biosphere governance structures (see above) so that the practice and role of Commoning is embedded in the work of the biosphere. Biosphere could also benefit commoners by providing funding for habitat restoration, grazing infrastructure, or support for future generations of commoners.

8. *If Biosphere designation leads to outcomes that local communities oppose, what formal mechanism exists for withdrawal or reversal, and has any UK biosphere ever successfully exited or substantially rolled back its designation?*

The governance structure is community led and a bottom-up approach, therefore there should not be a situation where the whole community opposes decisions as the decisions will be made by the local community for the residents. There is a five and a ten-year review period for all biospheres where the option to leave the UNESCO Biosphere Group should it no longer be supported.

9. *What assurance can you give that this is not simply a political badge for the authority, rather than a measure that delivers tangible and measurable benefits for residents and businesses?*

UNESCO Biosphere is a community led designation which aims to ensure collaboration of all local groups and that the community celebrates their local culture and identity whilst ensuring a sustainable future for all.

10. If Biosphere status is primarily advisory and non-statutory, what concrete, enforceable benefit justifies the cost, governance effort, and potential long-term policy influence on the district?

For the Forest of Dean District, the justification rests less on direct regulatory power and more on practical leverage across funding, future direction or policy, and long-term coordination. The benefits are real but often indirect and they only materialise if actively used. There is more detail about the benefits social, economic and environmental on the frequently asked questions section of the website. Broadly the main potential advantages to biosphere status are:

Preferential access to funding streams

Biosphere status strengthens bids for UK and international funding (e.g. sustainable business environmental restoration, climate resilience). While UNESCO doesn't provide direct funding, the label can act as a credential that improves success rates in competitive grants.

Coordinated governance across agencies

The biosphere model requires structured collaboration between councils, landowners, NGOs, communities and businesses. This reduces fragmented decision-making and can lead to:

- Pooled or aligning resources for better or more efficiently delivered outcomes
- Shared objectives and targets
- Greater funding success through partnership or consortium type projects

While not legally binding, these agreements often translate into formal partnerships and contracts, which have targets and performance measures.

Economic value through branding and tourism

The UNESCO label is globally recognised. For a place like the Forest of Dean District, that can:

- Attract higher-value, eco-conscious tourism
- Support local businesses aligned with sustainability
- Strengthen regional identity in marketing

This has measurable economic outputs (visitor numbers, local revenue).

Long-term policy shaping

Biosphere frameworks can:

- Influence future land-use priorities
- Embed sustainability criteria into decision-making
- Shape eligibility for future funding or partnerships

11. Have the Commoners Association alongside certain Parish Councils requested a pause of the application process citing a failing in the consultation process?

No formal requests from groups such as the Commoners have been received. We have received one request from Westdean Parish Council and we shall be responding to that shortly. We are working with the Commoners Association and attending Town and Parish and Council meetings to help answer any questions which people have. The frequently

asked questions on the website are also being continually updated. 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.

12. Is the Cabinet aware of a petition signed by over 700 people in three weeks that demands the complete pause of the application process, and does he agree that this outweighs the recorded support FOR the application?

The Cabinet is aware that a petition has been submitted expressing concern about the application process and reflecting the views of some residents. Public feedback, including petitions, is an important part of the decision-making process and is considered alongside all other relevant information.

However, it is also important to ensure that decisions are made based on a balanced assessment of all material considerations, including formal submissions of support, statutory requirements, policy, and the broader interests of the community. While the petition represents a level of engagement, it is not the sole determining factor, and it would not be appropriate to weigh it against other forms of feedback purely on numerical terms.

Since 2021 there has been a wide variety of engagement and information dissemination activity including regular social media items, press releases, presentations and events as well as leaflets to all households, committee reports, writing to all parish councils and information through the website. 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.

I note the sense of concern from the Progressive Independence Group and hope the all member presentation on the 21st April provided additional information and helped allay some of those concerns. 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