

**Report to Forest Economic Partnership**

## **The Forest We Want consultation – review**

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Levett-Therivel have been commissioned by the Forest Economic Partnership to comment on the consultation process regarding the Forest of Dean becoming a Biosphere Reserve.

### **Background**

The Forest Economic Partnership consulted in autumn 2021 (4 October 2021 to 18 December 2021) on the idea of the Forest of Dean becoming a Biosphere Reserve. Biosphere Reserves promote conservation of countryside, ecosystems, species and genetic variation; aim to protect and improve the local economy for the local population; and build capacity for research, monitoring, learning and education related to the promotion of conservation and sustainable development.<sup>1</sup>

An economic report<sup>2</sup> of 2019 found that designation as a Biosphere Reserve could provide a range of benefits to the Forest of Dean District:

- Improved carbon sequestration
- Reduction in other pollutants
- Increases in agricultural, forestry and other Gross Value Added
- Reductions in the costs of flooding
- Improvements in research efficiency
- Increased working from home delivering lower commuting costs
- Housing values rise
- Health benefits
- Increased happiness of local population.

The economic report's analysis focused on the economic benefits of improved coppicing, sustainable farming practices and branding of forestry and agricultural outputs. It notes that "Other levers, including increased ecotourism and increased carbon sequestration and improved wildlife from 'green corridors', are expected to deliver quantifiable benefits, but at this time this analysis has not been able to cost these."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://fep2050.co.uk/the-forest-we-want/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://fep2050.co.uk/assets/Papers/economic-case-forest-of-dean-biosphere-reserve-final-report-091019.pdf>

Half of the expected benefits would come from branding of forestry products, and another quarter from carbon sequestration through better farming practices:

Benefit Stream	Nominal Benefits (£m)
Carbon capture lost through coppicing	-£4.5m
Carbon capture gained through coppicing	£5.2m
Carbon capture gain from sustainable farming	£42.3m
GVA agricultural sector – branding	£8.9m
GVA forestry sector - coppiced timber	£3.9m
GVA forestry sector – branding	£80.1m
GVA other sectors	£17.3m
Multiplier effect	£6.5m
Total Nominal Benefits	£159.7m

## Consultation

The consultation process lasted 11 weeks, from 4 October 2021 until 18 December 2021. Information about Biosphere Reserves, the economic report, six short videos and three podcasts were made available as background information. The videos had been commissioned through funding from the Arts Council, and showed benefits of forests and discussed management of the Forest of Dean. In total, 16,683 ‘views’ of material about a Biosphere Reserve took place, primarily on Facebook and Twitter: one person may have had more than one ‘view’.

The consultation survey asked about people’s age and residence; how they had learned about the survey and Biosphere Reserves; how important a range of economic, environmental and social aspects of Biosphere Reserves are to respondents; perceived benefits and costs of the Forest becoming a Biosphere Reserve; and open questions about respondents’ concerns and questions about the Forest becoming a Biosphere Reserve.

602 people responded to the survey, with 519 complete responses. Respondents were very supportive of the economic and ecological benefits of a Biosphere Reserve, although with greater emphasis on sustainable farming/forestry and local products than tourism and branding. Fewer respondents (23%) felt that a Biosphere Reserve will put unnecessary constraints on local residents than those who felt this would be unlikely (44%); and many more respondents felt that, as a whole, the Forest of Dean District would benefit from becoming a Biosphere Reserve (87%) than those who disagreed (5%).

Respondents’ main concerns centred around over-tourism, lack of affordable housing, and over-development in the district.

## Review

*Number of people engaged:* 494 (out of 519 total survey responses) were from residents of the Forest of Dean: this represents 0.6% of the total population of the district (86,543 in 2018). However, many more people – perhaps 10-20% of residents – viewed information about the Biosphere Reserve on Facebook, Twitter etc.: a total of 16,683 views. If there had been huge concern about the proposal, more people are likely to have filled in the survey.

*Videos/podcasts:* 43% of respondents had seen/heard videos or podcasts about the Biosphere; 21% were engaged by them; and 23% found the videos or podcasts informative. In other words, about half of those respondents that had seen/heard a video or podcast felt engaged and informed by

them. Given that the aim of the videos and podcasts was to make information about the Biosphere Reserve more engaging and informative, 'about half' is quite low.

*Overall results:* The survey results are clearly and unambiguously in favour of the Forest of Dean becoming a Biosphere Reserve: 87% of respondents (282 highly likely, 163 likely) felt that the district would benefit from becoming a Biosphere Reserve, with only 5% disagreeing (11 highly unlikely, 17 unlikely) and 8% neutral. In other words, for every person opposed to the idea of a Biosphere Reserve, 16 are in favour. Respondents felt that a Biosphere Reserve would be a better place to live, would enhance the relation between people and nature, would increase the emphasis on sustainability, and would encourage balanced development. It is unusual for a proposal for change to be so positively seen by local residents.

*Concerns about Biosphere Reserve:* There were many survey responses to the open questions, which will need to be taken into consideration when details of the Biosphere Reserve are fleshed out. Over-tourism is a key concern, although most of the survey responses use the term without specifying what is meant: too many visitors coming by car, day trippers, the impact of many cyclists, and housing being used for tourist accommodation seem to be the main issues. The economic report does not include any assumptions about changes in tourism, only about how the forest is managed, but a Biosphere Reserve could clearly draw in more tourists. It may be possible to keep the same number of tourists (or indeed fewer) but shift the emphasis to longer-stay tourism, more walking and cycling if managed well, and limits on housing being used for tourist accommodation.

Lack of affordable housing is another key concern raised by respondents, conflicting somewhat with concern over too much new development raised by others. The Local Plan is primarily responsible for this issue.

## **Conclusion**

The consultation on whether the Forest of Dean should become a Biosphere Reserve was remarkably successful, both in respondent numbers and particularly in the clarity of feeling in favour of a Biosphere Reserve.