

Biosphere Partnership – 27th June

Item 4; Biosphere Review: Options Appraisal Report (Staff Team asked to leave the room)

The Chair introduced the report by thanking PC and LG for the substantial work that had been done in getting to this stage. He initially drew attention to the last two sections outlining the further processes that would need to be undertaken once the view of the Partnership had been sought. A large number of options had been put forward but he suggested focussing attention on Options 8 to 12 initially as clearly 1 to 2 were not desirable and the status quo of continued public sector hosting was not realistic.

PC drew attention to the further proposal outlined in Appendix 3; as this had come to light late in the process it had not been given proper consideration by the Review Group. He explained that DCC did see some merit in the integration approach but the AONB Chair felt that the only viable way was as in the new proposal; if there is support for this approach, it will need to be discussed at the AONB Partnership.

Comments on the Options Appraisal can be summarised under a number of headings:

The Process

- Appreciation of, and confidence in, the work that was being done which had resulted in an excellent paper.
- Recognition that Exec will take the final decisions, but grateful that the views of the Partnership are being taken fully on board.
- Support for the way the options had been narrowed down from 12 and some agreement that should be looking at the four options, or some combination of them, that are set out in detail in the paper.

Other Biospheres

- Other Biosphere structures had been looked at as part of the background for the Review; as bottom up organisations they do vary considerably. They all rely to some extent on public sector funding and did not offer a viable alternative. There is a paper on the website outlining the findings:
<http://www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/biosphere-review.html>
- At recent UKMAB meetings the Chairs had discussed the issue of ongoing public sector funding and the possibility of Universities becoming involved, including in the Arts sector. The Galloway and South Ayrshire Biosphere is managed through the Southern Uplands Partnership, a social enterprise.

Resources

- The T&F Group had tried to define the core roles as shown in Appendix 1 but they are difficult to cost as could be delivered at differing levels.
- There is no certainty over public funding but do know there will be a decrease of at least £25k (from £125k) from DCC and the £40k contribution from the two districts is very vulnerable. The key thing is the multiplier effect.
- There is a distinction between the service and the function. The latter could be done in a lower cost way, just focusing on core work. Difficult to be precise at this stage as depends on what is externalised.
- The right model should be explored first and then costings would be subject to negotiations with the external partner

AONB Issue

- Although the AONB does not have any mandate outside its boundary, some felt that its proposal does have some merit in that getting the benefit of a strategic partner. Integration in this way is innovation, a key approach for Biospheres.
- Integration was explored a few years ago and at that time was not supported by the AONB Partnership. AONB is a statutory designation and the Biosphere is not; any sharing would diminish both. Both are symbiotic organisations with different obligations. Unfortunately, the two appear to be arguing against each other.
- Biosphere is not a designation per se, but needs to take a more bottom up approach. Communities and parishes need to be more enthused and involved. The Partnership had failed to find a Biosphere Champion within each Parish; if it had the Partnership would now be very different. Transition zone would become less significant with the AONB arrangement.
- Suggestion that the catchment based approach was valuable and nationally recognised as beneficial rather than a solution based on designation boundaries.
- The AONB has most support and a higher profile. Integration with an external partner may be valuable.
- North Norfolk AONB used to have responsibility for the North Norfolk Coast Biosphere but this has now been de-listed.

Preferred Options

- Biospheres, by their nature, are experimental laboratories and should go with one option now, recognising there may be change in a few years' time. There will be continuous uncertainty if the Biosphere remains within the public sector. If there is a five year plan and settlement, then can work to this.
- In developing a strategic partnership, Devon is blessed with NGOs with a good track record that would have the energy to help delivery. However, an external partner might push in a particular direction rather than sustainable development generally; it was agreed that there was not one organisation that was a perfect fit. There would be a need to ensure best value and there would be a competitive tendering process for a suitable strategic partner.
- The benefit of the mixed approach of Option 8 is that any formal arrangement with LAs would help guarantee a minimum level of funding.
- DWT is happy to be considered as a partner to take the Biosphere forward. A defined resource is difficult at this stage but it is not just about finance but is also concerned with organisational culture and how the Biosphere would fit with the DWT governance structures.
- The North Devon catchment is co-hosted by DWT and WCRT. WCRT may have issues in taking on staff, and could not guarantee that they might not be moved within its wider regional work areas, but it would like to have the opportunity to look at this.
- Options 8 and 9 seem most relevant and there isn't a sharp line between them.

The Chair summed up the discussion by proposing that the preferred solution was some combination of Options 8 and 9 and that the T&F Group would now have to determine what this meant in practice; DWT, WCRT and ND+ could all be possible strategic partners. This was seconded by the Vice-Chair.

PC thanked the Partnership for giving a clear steer but wondered whether the Partnership could also endorse the other options presented? This was not agreed and the Exec was requested to try and deliver the preferred solution.

The Chair then sought the view of staff whose main concern was to have a clear picture and timetable for the direction of travel and when key decisions would be taken.

ACTION: The T&F Group

- i) to further develop a proposal with a suitable external partner within the parameters set out in Options 8 and 9.***
- ii) to report back on progress to the autumn Partnership and with a clear timetable for implementation***