

NORTH DEVON BIOSPHERE RESERVE

Report of Peer Review

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report was produced as the result of a peer review process commissioned by Devon County Council and led by Peter Moore, Environment Policy Group Manager at Dorset County Council. It forms part of a wider review of the North Devon Biosphere Reserve Partnership.

The report was produced following a workshop and subsequent interviews with key stakeholders in the North Devon Biosphere Reserve (BR) designed to identify the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the BR.

The peer review process was limited to analysing the conclusions of this SWOT analysis and making observations on these conclusions, rather than making conclusive recommendations on the future of the Biosphere Reserve (BR) or the Partnership (BRP). This said, it has been possible to make some initial recommendations on questions or issues which might be given further consideration at the next stage of the review process.

2. SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF THE SWOT EXERCISE

Sections 2.1-2.4 summarise the key conclusions of the SWOT analysis conducted at a workshop on 8th November (supplemented by subsequent interviews with other stakeholders), and pass brief comment on each of the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats identified. The comments are amplified where necessary in section 3, with associated recommendations where appropriate. A verbatim account of the comments made by stakeholders is included at Appendix A.

2.1 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS ON STRENGTHS

Key strengths identified could be summarised as:

- **The recognition of a world class environment which the BR represents:** the BR designation was identified by stakeholders as one of the things, some said the only thing, which puts North Devon on the global map. The UNESCO designation is seen by stakeholders as rare and special, and while most recognise it does not come without obligation, it is generally recognised as a something to be proud of. *Comment: a major strength. BR status is an important asset to the area, and it is difficult to envisage a scenario in which North Devon would be better off without it than with it. Maintaining it, however, inevitably involves some material as well as moral support.*
- **The effectiveness/track record of delivery of the team/partnership:** the BRP is seen to be strong on delivery in view of its leading role in e.g. the NIA and TRIP projects. While there were questions about the relevance of some other projects taken on by the BRP, these important projects, at the cutting edge of national policy, are seen by stakeholders as clear evidence of the benefits arising from the BR. The skills and resourcefulness of the staff team were also seen as a key strength underpinning this. *Comment: a significant strength – the BRP appears to punch above its weight given its modest-sized core. This should give funders some confidence that their contributions are well spent.*
- **The capacity to secure resources:** stakeholders cited the success of the BRP in leveraging modest core funding to secure significant external grant funding, citing £7.5 million worth of project funding secured and a ratio of 20:1 for external:core funding. *Comment: a major strength – these statistics are powerful illustrations both of the value for money, and the future potential, of the BRP to secure resources for North Devon which might not otherwise be available.*
- **The capacity to promote joined-up thinking:** a number of stakeholders identified the holistic approach taken by the BRP, its ability to span environmental, social and economic issues, promote projects at a landscape scale and apply the ‘eco-systems’ approach as a strength. *Comment: an important strength, though promoting joined-up thinking should not be the sole preserve of the BRP.*
- **The capacity for leadership and influence:** a number of stakeholders cited the leadership role of the BRP in promoting sustainable development and influencing, for example, Local Plans to this end as a strength. *Comment: an*

important strength though one which raises questions about the extent to which the BRP can and should assume the mantle of leadership (as opposed to being a 'learning laboratory' for) something as all encompassing as sustainable development in North Devon. This is addressed further in section 3.1.1 below.

- **The strength and diversity of the partnership:** a number of stakeholders cited the partnership itself as a strength, in terms of the diversity of interests it brought together, their combined expertise, its flexibility, approachability and the relatively small secretariat. *Comment: an important strength particularly as more and more public services need to be delivered in partnership as pressure on public funding continues.*

2.2 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS ON WEAKNESSES

- **Identity and clarity about purpose:** a number of stakeholders cited the low level of public recognition of the BR as a weakness, both among political audiences and the wider community. Linked to this was that even where there was recognition of the brand there was a lack of clarity about what the BR is for, and a concern that some deliverables were quite intangible and the added value difficult to define. Some perceived a focus on land management at the expense of communication, others a lack of delivery on socio-economic relative to environmental aims, and others cited confusion between the role of the BRP as a vehicle for education versus delivery. The name, confusion with other designations (e.g. AONB) and the activities pursued by the BRP itself were all cited as potential reasons for this lack of profile and blurred identity. *Comment: a significant weakness, but one can be addressed. This is discussed further in 3.1.1 below.*
- **Lack of focus/breadth of scope:** while some stakeholders saw the holistic approach taken by the BRP and the wide range of issues it covers as a strength, others saw it as a weakness in that it led to the Partnership being spread too thinly. *Comment: a significant weakness, but again one can be addressed. This is also discussed further in 3.1.2 below.*
- **Relationship with local authorities:** some stakeholders felt there was a lack of political buy-in to the BR concept (linked to its low profile and unclear remit), others citing a lack of trust or mismatch between local authority and BR aims and values. *Comment: obviously a major potential weakness given that local authorities are the main providers of core funding for the BRP team.*
- **Absence of statutory remit:** some stakeholders cited the absence of a defined statutory role for the BRP as a weakness in that, at a time when funders were resorting to providing a 'bare minimum' service, there was no such thing in the context of the BR, and no clarity about the sanctions in the event of obligations towards the BR not being fulfilled. *Comment: a weakness, but easy to overstate this as many of the most useful public services which people value most are 'non-statutory'. Also an issue over which the BRP can have little influence so little to be gained from dwelling on it.*

- **Governance and resources:** the resources available to the BRP relative to the size of the BR were considered a weakness by some (though could also be seen as offering good value for money). While some considered hosting by Devon CC a strength, others considered it now a weakness as funding pressures increased. Some also cited the cumulative impact of ‘constant review’ as a weakness, and a lack of clarity about the rights and responsibilities of partnership members. *Comment: a combination of issues involved here, but some at least can be addressed as set out in section 3.4 below.*
- **Absence of peer support:** lack of knowledge of, and contact with, other BRs was cited by stakeholders as a weakness. *Comment: a weakness which could potentially be addressed by improved networking with other BRs,, though inevitably there would be some cost to this.*

2.3 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS ON OPPORTUNITIES

- **Scope of Partnership:** many stakeholders identified opportunities to review the scope of the Partnership. However, there was no consensus about how: some identified an opportunity for a more focused, targeted role; others the opportunity to do more on issues currently outside or on the periphery of the BRP’s work (local food chains, marine policy, socio-economic issues). *Comment: a vital opportunity to clarify scope – the review of the BRP strategy presents the obvious opportunity in which to address it.*
- **New sources of funding and support:** a number of opportunities were identified to access resources to support the work of the BRP. These included biodiversity or carbon off-setting; developing the relationship with ND+ (e.g. to develop joint projects); EU funding programmes post 2015; widening the partnership and seeking a broader range of small-scale funders. *Comment: outcomes will almost always be better if gaps in budget can be met through generating new sources of income rather than simply absorbing cuts, so vital that these opportunities are explored to the full, and that the opportunity cost of not accessing external funding is considered by funders when allocating resources to the BRP in relation to other priorities.*
- **Strengthening the identity of the BRP:** a variety of opportunities to strengthen the identity of the BRP were identified. These varied from developing the brand to make a more tangible contribution to the area’s economy, establish a world class brand for sustainable produce, and make more of UNESCO communications on BRs. *Comment: some important opportunities identified – the review of the BRP strategy presents the obvious opportunity in which to address them.*
- **Opportunities for the BR to develop exemplars:** a number of opportunities were identified for the BR to lead the way in terms of iconic development, sustainable construction, the eco-systems approach, urban biodiversity and localism. *Comment: important opportunities which fit squarely with the BRP’s role as ‘learning laboratory’ for sustainable development in North Devon.*
- **Partnership and governance:** a number of opportunities were identified to take a fresh approach to hosting and management of the BR, including the

opportunity for closer integration with the AONB Partnership, a stronger relationship with the LNP, and making more use of existing structures within the Partnership (e.g. Foundation and Tarka Trust). *Comment: some important opportunities identified here which will inevitably feature in the next stage of the review process. This is discussed further in section 3.2 below.*

- **Influencing the Local Plan:** this was identified as a specific opportunity as it is now at a critical point and, if it contains the right policies for the BR, would have significant influence on the plans and strategies of other partners. *Comment: a key strategic opportunity, particularly if the BRP is forced to operate with reduced resources in future: the more which can be resolved pro-actively via the Local Plan, the less reactive work there is likely to be for the BRP to 'fire-fight.'*
- **Catchment Management:** further involvement in catchment management was identified as a specific opportunity given the widespread benefits, and the exemplary work already underway. *Comment: an important potential opportunity which appears to sit well with the BRP's role but one which needs to be considered in the context of the review of the BRP strategy rather than in isolation.*

2.4 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS ON THREATS

Turning to potential future threats, the most commonly cited threats identified by stakeholders can be broadly divided into threats to the area covered by the BR and threats to the BRP specifically:

Threats to the area covered by the BR

- **Development pressures:** stakeholders identified concern that the integrity of the Biosphere could be undermined by major and/or inappropriate development. *Comment: the review of the BRP strategy presents the obvious opportunity in which to address this threat.*
- **Climate impacts:** stakeholders identified concern that climate change could alter the features for which the Biosphere was designated. *Comment: the review of the BRP strategy presents the obvious opportunity in which to address this threat.*

Threats to the BRP specifically:

- **Reductions in funding:** many stakeholders regarded the potential for funding cuts, both for core funding and projects, as a threat. Linked to this, concern was expressed at how project funding tended to be short-term while the mission of the BR was necessarily long term. *Comment: an obvious threat which can only be addressed by (i) continually assessing the value of the partnership and its work and demonstrating this to funders (ii) clarifying the ongoing commitment of key partners to the BR (see section 3.3 below).*
- **Political support (lack of):** many stakeholders identified this as a threat and expressed concern about disengagement of local authorities, concern that the BR would be seen as an 'obstacle to growth', partner local authorities pulling

in different directions, 'patchy' support from local politicians and a lack of recognition of the value of the BR among political audiences. *Comment: a serious threat given the reliance of the BRP on local authority funding which can only be mitigated by continuing to engage political leaders in the work of the BRP and demonstrating its value to them in meeting their own objectives.*

- **Lack of community engagement:** continued lack of engagement in the BR by the general public was seen as a threat by many, though it was noted that people often supported individual elements of the BRP's work. This was linked to lack of clarity about purpose and the complexity of the messages promoted by the BRP. *Comment: a serious but not insurmountable threat – see 3.1.1 below.*
- **Conflict/duplication with other organisations:** some stakeholders saw the continued existence of 'multiple designations' with 'competing brands' as a threat while others cited potential conflict or overlapping aims with other agencies, some citing the AONB designation specifically in this respect. *Comment: a threat but one which is perhaps capable of being over-stated on the basis that there is more to unite these partnerships than divide them (see 3.2.1 below).*
- **Loss of staff:** some stakeholders identified loss of key staff as a threat due to funding uncertainties, low morale leading to a loss of expertise and co-ordination. *Comment: a threat which would be best mitigated by arriving at a clear and enduring settlement on the role and scope of the BRP, underpinned by clear and enduring agreements on the governance and funding of the partnership going forward. See sections 3.1 and 3.4 below.*
- **Other threats highlighted included:** BR brand and uniqueness becomes diluted; lack of clear direction for the way forward; loss of focus on deliverables; BRP difficulty in standing up or coming to consensus view; 'centralisation' in Exeter.

3. KEY QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE SWOT EXERCISE

3.1 SCOPE, FOCUS AND IDENTITY OF THE BIOSPHERE RESERVE PARTNERSHIP

3.1.1 Clarity around the BRP's identity and remit

The current vision statement of the BRP in many ways sums up the challenge it faces in terms of developing a clear identity. The vision statement ('North Devon will be a superb place in which to live and work, and to visit, where an excellent quality environment underpins jobs, recreation and healthy living. The area will be a world class exemplar for sustainable development') while completely appropriate for a BR could equally be the vision statement for, say, a local authority Local Plan. Compare with the vision statement in the North Devon Local Plan 2006: 'To enhance the quality of life for its residents, workers and visitors by protecting the environment, creating a vibrant and diverse economy, tackling social exclusion and improving health and accessibility'.

This perhaps reinforces the impression that the BRP, with the very best of intentions, faces the risk of assuming greater responsibility for delivering sustainable development in North Devon than it can realistically deliver. The dangers of doing so are two-fold – (i) it creates a mismatch between expectations and the reality of the BRP's capacity to deliver and (ii) it potentially lets others who are better placed and have more capacity, resource and responsibility to deliver sustainable development in North Devon 'off the hook' – typically, but not exclusively, the local authorities.

It is understood that a review of the BRP strategy is underway, the strategy for 2008-12 having been extended to cover the 2013-14 financial year. It is vital, in light of the comments made by stakeholders about clarity of purpose and remit, that this process of review effectively engages the wider partnership so that the necessary clarity can be established. This requires more than simply making some changes to a document and sending it out for comment at a future meeting.

Strategy reviews are often seen as a chore to be dealt with as quickly and quietly as possible. However, the BRP's statement of strategy is possibly the most important document it will produce at this juncture. Moreover, an effective process of review can be as important as the result in terms of clarifying the purpose of the partnership, and creating a greater sense of ownership of the strategy. The first recommendation is therefore **that the partners treat the strategy review currently underway as (i) a key opportunity to better define the purpose of the partnership, and the breadth and scope of its work and (ii) an important opportunity for them to engage in, and commit to, the revised strategy.** The engagement of local authority elected members in this process is likely to be particularly important.

It would be beyond the remit of this review to suggest what the revised strategy should focus on, as this is a matter for the partners to agree through discussion, though it is recommended that **a key aim for the review should be to define much more clearly the specific contribution which the BRP can make to North Devon's plans for sustainable development, as opposed to being, or trying to be, the sustainable development plan for North Devon** (which is what the package of statutory spatial plans and Local Plans for the area should represent, as made clear in the legislation and national planning policy).

It would also seem sensible, in view of the comments made by stakeholders about the lack of clarity around the rights and responsibilities of partners, to revisit the question of a Partnership Agreement for the BRP, as discussion around this would be the obvious means of providing such clarity. On the basis that form should follow function, **developing a new Partnership Agreement to clarify the rights and responsibilities of partners should logically follow the conclusion of the strategy review process.**

The issue of profile and identity can clearly be influenced by good communications, and given the constituent partners within the BRP, **it ought to be possible for their combined experience and expertise to be brought together to develop a clear communications strategy for the BR without incurring undue expense.**

3.1.2 Breadth and depth of the BRP's remit

There was significant debate, but no clear consensus, between partners about the optimum scope of the BRP's work, and the areas on which it should focus in view of its limited resources. Many partners alluded to its lack of focus as a weakness, while others regarded its holistic nature as a strength.

The mission of a UNESCO BR is necessarily broad and ambitious. In view of the resources available to the BRP, it is immediately clear that it cannot deliver that mission on its own. Neither should it be expected to. The scope of the BRP's work therefore perhaps needs to be considered in two dimensions:

- 'Breadth' in terms of the span of thematic issues and sectors which it covers. In keeping with its mission to promote sustainable development, this, it is suggested, will be necessarily broad and holistic. That said, some partners were concerned that what they saw as the Partnership's tendency to chase the latest 'in vogue' ideas tended to result in a lack of focus. This issue of 'breadth' should obviously be addressed as a key consideration in the strategy review process referred to above. However, as part of this, one way in which the Partnership might help focus its efforts might be to **identify some clearer criteria which need to be met before engaging in issues or projects, based on its priorities as set out in the strategy.** Developing and applying these tests might also be one means of the Executive becoming more active in helping the team define its priorities and focus.
- 'Depth' in terms of the extent to which it performs a strategic influencing and policy-shaping role at the 'top' through to the extent to which it puts that strategy into operation at the 'bottom'. If there is limited room for manoeuvre in terms of the breadth of the BRP's work, there is significantly more room for manoeuvre in terms of this axis. This is discussed in more detail in 3.1.3 below.

3.1.3 Balance between strategic and operational functions

The BRP currently fulfils both 'strategic' and 'operational' functions. There is, however, on the face of it, a less than perfect match between the operational functions which the BR team performs (management of the SW Coast Path and Tarka Trail) which could be characterised as traditional countryside management functions, and the strategy it promotes, which is an holistic sustainable development agenda.

This is not to say the traditional countryside functions are not important – far from it, they are vital services and among the most used if not valued by local communities. As such it is understandable that the BRP should wish to carry on providing them as they provide links with ‘real’ people which might otherwise be harder to make. However, while they might provide this link, and while both SWCP and Tarka Trail should continue to be seen as key vehicles for promoting the aims of the BR strategy, the fact that they are directly managed by the BR team may not be helpful in terms of defining the identity of the BRP in the public mind: they may help give it *profile* but not help give it *identity*. It is conceivable that both SWCP and Tarka Trail could continue to represent key tools in delivering the BR strategy without being directly managed by the BR team.

It is also apparent that there are other agencies who might be as well, if not better placed, to deliver the countryside management functions currently performed by the BRP. This presumes, of course, that an alternative means of delivering these services would be more effective and efficient – not necessarily a safe assumption. But while there are understandable concerns about whether the other agencies who might otherwise take on these roles would do as good a job, it should at least be considered. **In the context of the review of strategy, therefore, it is recommended that the following questions be asked:**

- **Is the strategy sufficiently clear about the role of the BRP in terms of strategic and operational functions?**
- **Do the operational delivery functions flow clearly and logically from the strategy?**
- **Would the BRP be better off focusing on the strategic functions and leave others who are better placed to perform the operational delivery functions?**
- **Are there other operational delivery functions (and associated funding streams) which would flow more directly from the BRP strategy which the BRP could assume?**

3.2 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BRP AND OTHER PARTNERSHIPS

3.2.1 Relationship with AONB Partnership and designation

The SWOT exercise raised a number of questions about the relationship between the BRP and the North Devon AONB Partnership, some suggesting that there may be scope for closer integration and thus improvements in effectiveness and efficiency, while others cautioned that this was an area of considerable sensitivity which had been looked at previously.

The North Devon AONB designation sits entirely within the Biosphere Reserve area, and, *prima facie*, there are some similarities between the purposes of both designations. As well as having overlapping geography, the two partnerships promote complementary strategies and policies, and work jointly on a variety of projects. The main differences are perhaps that the AONB is a smaller geographic designation (though the setting of the AONB overlaps significantly with the BR area); that the purposes of the AONB are more clearly defined in statute; and that the AONB’s primary (but not sole) purpose relates to natural beauty. The apparent differences have, however, perhaps reduced over the last decade as successive iterations of Countryside Agency, Natural England or Defra guidance on the production of AONB Management Plans have emphasised the need to embed the

principles of sustainable development within them, promote enhancement on a landscape scale, and reflect the eco-systems approach – all principles which also inform the work of the BR.

There are a small number of issues where the potential for conflict between the two partnership is present – the most obvious example being large scale renewable energy schemes which offer benefits in terms of sustainable energy, but at the same time significant potential impacts on natural beauty – but these are the exception rather than the rule. The two partnerships clearly have more to unite than to divide them, and, it is suggested, a greater interest in emphasising their similarities rather than their differences. The only sense in which this is not true is that if emphasising similarity and synergy leads to less resources being available to either or both, it will inevitably increase the pressure to emphasise difference. In meeting their legitimate desire to reduce the costs to the public purse of supporting both partnerships, therefore, the local authority funders need to approach the question of closer integration from the point of view of increasing the effectiveness, as well as the efficiency of, both partnerships. If partners can be persuaded that funders are sincere in this, they are less likely to be resistant to closer integration.

It is understood that a proposal for a joint manager post for both the AONB and BR teams has been looked at before, but for a number of reasons it was concluded that this was not possible. The light touch approach to local management of AONB Partnerships is well-established as Defra's preference and it would be very surprising if it opposed the principle of integration.

The participation of senior figures in the AONB Partnership in the workshop on 8th November, however, gave the strong impression that there is goodwill and an open mind within both partnerships, and as such the question of closer integration would be worth revisiting. This may be more fruitful if 'integration' is seen as a spectrum of options rather than two extremes of 'separation' or 'full integration', and if the scope for integration is examined at a number of levels – governance arrangements, staffing arrangements, funding arrangements etc. For example, it is conceivable that the independence of the two Partnership boards to take decisions in the best interests of their respective designations could be retained whilst achieving closer integration of the staff teams. There are clearly sensitivities around this question, and possibly some residual ill-feeling from the last time it was addressed, so it does need to be handled both openly and sensitively, and with the full and equal participation of both Boards. However, **without prejudging the conclusion of the debate, there would appear to be a case for revisiting the question of closer integration of AONB and BR partnerships with a view to achieving more effective and efficient delivery of those aims which are common to both.**

3.2.2 Relationship with Devon Local Nature Partnership

A view was expressed in conversation with one partner that in some ways the BR was an idea '10 years ahead of its time' and that in a sense the rest of the world had now caught up. This was a reference to the focus on the eco-system approach, the need for landscape scale approaches to improving natural areas and the need to integrate economic and social objectives better in 'traditional' conservation and countryside management. All these concepts have since become embedded in national policy, and embodied in the form of the national network of Local Nature Partnerships.

As well as considering its relationship with the North Devon AONB Partnership locally, therefore, it is **recommended that the BRP clarify its relationship with,**

and role in respect of, the county-wide Devon LNP as a matter of priority. A close dialogue between the two Partnerships is a necessary first step in this, and it is beyond the remit of this review at this stage to suggest how that dialogue might be initiated or conclude. However, given the issue of potentially closer integration with the AONB Partnership, the relationships between all three partnerships should probably be considered together rather than in isolation.

3.2.3 Relationship with North Devon Plus

A number of stakeholders highlighted a closer relationship with the North Devon Plus (ND+), the economic delivery body for north Devon, as a clear area of opportunity. On the assumption that ND+ recognises the significance of north Devon's environment to the economic wellbeing of the area, closer working with it would indeed appear to be **an important opportunity to channel resources into delivery of those aims which are shared between ND+ and the BRP**. This does not necessarily mean that the BRP should or could become an adjunct to ND+, rather that, recognising the reality that ND+ has significant resources, it may be possible to identify proposals or projects for joint working which the BRP would be unable to deliver with its own limited resources. As with the question of the BRP's relationship with the AONB and LNP, the issue of its relationship with ND+ should not be considered in isolation.

3.3 THE COMMITMENT OF PARTNERS TO THE BIOSPHERE RESERVE

3.3.1 Local authorities

The Biosphere nomination was made primarily in the name of the local authorities and the local authorities provide the main source of funding for the BRP. The ongoing commitment of the local authorities is therefore a critical consideration in the future of the BR.

Local authorities obviously face difficult decisions about which services to protect from cuts and which to reduce or cut altogether. Continued support for the BR by the local authorities can clearly not be justified solely on the basis of 'statutory requirement' (in as much as this is a useful criteria for prioritising local authority spending), so perhaps need to be considered on the basis of value delivered relative to cost. The BRP's Annual Report 2012 says that the BR delivers some £20 in investment in the area for every £1 invested by the local authorities. This represents a good return on investment by any measure, but it is not clear that this kind of benefit has been articulated fully or persuasively to local authority decision-makers. **Clearer and more regular communication to decision-makers within the local authorities of the economic, social and environmental benefits arising from the BR would therefore be advisable.**

This is not to say that local authority decision makers can or should continue to support the BR to the current financial extent *ad infinitum*, merely that their decisions about the extent to which they do support it should be informed by good evidence of the full costs and benefits of doing so, so that they can be considered on a level playing field with other services. The benefits also undoubtedly need to be considered in terms of the *benefits to the areas served by the local authorities*, rather than *benefits to the local authorities* themselves. The indirect benefits of BR status in terms of investment, prestige etc will primarily be felt in the community, not the coffers of the Councils. This makes them harder to quantify, and perhaps less visible, but does not mean they are not there.

There is an old adage that 'a dog is for life, not just for Christmas'. The same could be said for UNESCO designations. The BR designation, like WHS status, attracts significant prestige but very little resource in terms of financial support for its management. There is no secret about this and nominating bodies were presumably aware that this was the nature of the 'deal' at the time BR status was being sought. It is obviously difficult when political representation and leadership changes, with incoming politicians not necessarily feeling as bound by earlier commitments of their predecessors, and the commitment was of course made in a less stringent financial climate than faced at present. Nevertheless, having made the nomination, there are clearly continued political and moral obligations on the local authorities to support the BR concept and a reasonable expectation that this commitment will be matched by financial support. This does not mean that current levels of public funding can or should be guaranteed. Rather, it suggests that it would be difficult for – and some would say simply wrong of – the local authorities to simply walk away without finding some alternative means of funding delivery of the agreed strategy for the BR should their own financial commitments reduce to the point where the ability to do so is fundamentally threatened.

It was not clear from the review process whether the political commitment of the local authorities is as strong as it could be. This said, some individual local authority members and officers seemed very committed to the idea, and there is very little doubt that the commitment would be much stronger if it did not have a financial cost attached. Unfortunately for local authority decision-makers, such is the nature of commitment! **The ideal situation to work towards is perhaps, therefore, one in which the local authorities continue to provide sufficient financial commitment to enable a transition to a service which is less dependent on (but not wholly independent of) public funding, enabling the local authorities to meet their need to make savings, while being able to demonstrate their continued, meaningful commitment to the BR.**

Although this could be over-stated it was also evident that there was in some respect a lack of trust between the constituent local authorities in the BRP. While this phenomenon is not unique to Devon, one would hope that these inter-authority tensions could be overcome in pursuit of something as ambitious as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, as they come together in pursuit of a bigger picture.

3.3.2 Central Government and its agencies

While it is not unreasonable of local partners to look to central Government for support for BRs which are, after all, nominated ultimately by HMG, the prospect of financial support, for core funding at least, must be regarded as extremely unlikely.

While core funding from central Government seems unlikely, Government in the form of Defra and its agencies have demonstrated a willingness to provide significant financial support for projects led by the BR which deliver against national priorities. It seems very likely that this potential will continue. This said, there is some evidence that Defra and its agencies would like to see a clearer focus on the part of the BRP on its strategic role to feel comfortable about supporting further projects.

However, if local authority funding partners can maintain a sufficiently robust core resource (including the staff capacity to prepare and submit project bids) then there is likely to continue to be significant potential to draw down project funding in a variety of areas which could improve delivery of the BR strategy.

3.3.3 Other partners

It was clear from the workshop that commitment to, enthusiasm for and pride in the BR remains strong among a wide range of partner organisations. As such the prospects for securing its future in the face of financial pressures should still be good. This is an important, and very positive, starting point for the process of review. Some of these partners may be in a position to help directly in bridging any funding gap which may emerge as a result of possible reductions in public funding; others will not, but may still be able to help in other ways.

3.4 GOVERNANCE AND RESOURCES

3.4.1 Alternative options for hosting the BRP

A number of stakeholders commented on whether hosting by Devon CC was a strength or a weakness for the BRP, some suggesting it had previously been a strength but was now less so as pressure on DCC's budgets persisted. Some suggested that there might be opportunities to develop the capacity of other bodies within the partnership (such as the Foundation or Tarka Trust) to assume the host role. **If the County Council were unwilling to continue to perform the role of host, then these options might indeed be worth developing. At this stage, however, it is now known whether either of these organisations would be willing to, let alone have the capacity to, assume the role as host. Moreover, such a transition should not be seen as a 'silver bullet' answer to the funding question,** as this which would continue to present a key challenge for the partnership.

3.4.2 Alternative sources of funding for the BRP

If public funding available to the BRP continues to reduce as seems likely, outcomes for the BR will almost invariably be better if this funding gap can be bridged by securing alternative sources of funding rather than simply absorbing a cut. **Any subsequent process of review should therefore give thorough consideration to the potential to generate income from alternative sources.** Again, there is unlikely to be a single 'silver bullet' solution to meeting the BRP's funding needs, but as suggested in 3.3.2 above, there would appear to be continued potential to draw in significant project funding from national sources, particularly for projects in the BRP's sphere of interest if a meaningful core funding base can be maintained.

A range of other potential sources of funding have been identified for, for example, the Jurassic Coast WHS Partnership, and it would be worth reviewing these in detail to assess which might also be applicable to the BRP. For example, while the potential for merchandise is probably low at present in view of the BR's low profile, if this can be addressed through more effective communications, the potential of this as a source of income could increase.

Finally, it is worth saying that a larger number of smaller funding contributions from a wider range of funding partners might help improve the resilience of the BRP compared to the current reliance on a small number of larger funders. There can be no guarantee that this will succeed, of course, but it may be worth asking the question.

4. SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The SWOT analysis conducted by partners suggested that:

- BR status is an important asset to the area, and that it is difficult to envisage a scenario in which North Devon would be better off without it than with it
- There is a relatively healthy balance of strengths to weaknesses in the current arrangements for managing the North Devon Biosphere Reserve
- Many of the strengths are unique to the Biosphere Reserve, or at least would be unlikely to exist if there were no Biosphere Reserve, while many of the weaknesses are generic and not unique to the Biosphere Reserve or the Partnership.

These are important, positive starting points for the next stage of review.

This said, it is clear that there are significant threats, not least around the core funding of the Biosphere Reserve Partnership which enables much of the good work done in the name of the Biosphere Reserve to be undertaken. Linked to this, the Biosphere Reserve, and North Devon in general, clearly has significant opportunities, not just to improve environmental, social and economic wellbeing in the area, but to continue to draw in resources from elsewhere to deliver improvements at low cost to local council tax payers. The balance of opportunity to threat would certainly appear to be in favour of opportunity - another important starting point for the process of review. To take advantage of these opportunities, however, it will be important for local authority funding partners to see value in the Partnership and continue to invest in it in some form.

14 specific recommendations are therefore offered in the four main areas identified in section 3 above:

Scope, focus and identity of the Biosphere Reserve Partnership

Many questions were raised by partners about clarity of purpose. The obvious place to address these is through the Biosphere Reserve Strategy. It is therefore recommended that ***(R1) the partners should treat the strategy review currently underway not as a paper exercise, but as (i) a key opportunity to better define the purpose of the partnership, and the breadth and scope of its work and (ii) an important opportunity for them to engage in, and commit to, the revised strategy.***

The Biosphere Reserve's vision is laudable but the Partnership cannot, and should not be expected to, assume sole responsibility for sustainable development and social, economic and environmental wellbeing in North Devon, which remains the primary responsibility of the local authorities. ***R2: A key aim of the strategy review should therefore be to define much more clearly the specific contribution which the BRP can make to North Devon's plans for sustainable development (and particularly the Local Plan) as opposed to being, or trying to be, the sustainable development plan for North Devon.***

R3: In the context of the review of strategy it is recommended that the following questions be asked:

- *Is the strategy sufficiently clear about the role of the BRP in terms of strategic and operational functions?*

- Do the operational delivery functions flow clearly and logically from the strategy?
- Would the BRP be better off focusing on the strategic functions and leave others who are better placed to perform the operational delivery functions?
- Are there other operational delivery functions (and associated funding streams) which would flow more directly from the BRP strategy which the BRP could assume?

R4: Having better defined its scope and remit in the strategy review process, in terms of ensuring that the Partnership stays 'on plan', it is recommended that the partners identify some clearer criteria which need to be met before engaging in issues or projects, based on its priorities as set out in the strategy.

R5: To address the lack of clarity, and in some senses the lack of trust, which appears to exist between partners about their respective responsibilities it is recommended that a new Partnership Agreement be developed to clarify the rights and responsibilities of partners. This should logically follow the conclusion of the strategy review process and, like the strategy review itself, should be seen as an iterative process which engages stakeholders rather than a paper exercise to be left to the team.

R6: The concerns about low profile and unclear identity can clearly be influenced by good communications, and given the constituent partners within the BRP, it ought to be possible for their combined experience and expertise to be brought together to develop a clear communications strategy to create a higher and sharper profile for the BR without incurring undue expense.

The relationship between the Biosphere Reserve Partnership and other partnerships

R7: There would appear to be a case for revisiting the question of closer integration of AONB and BR partnerships with a view to achieving more effective and efficient delivery of those aims which are common to both. Integration should, however, be seen as a continuum and considered at a number of levels (funding, staffing, governance) rather than the two extremes of full separation or full integration.

Moreover, **(R8)** the potential for integration with the AONB Partnership should not be considered in isolation from the BRP's relationship with the Devon Local Nature Partnership and North Devon Plus, with whom there is also significant common ground.

The commitment of partners to the Biosphere Reserve

The commitment of local authority funding partners is a key issue facing the Partnership. Having made the nomination for the Biosphere Reserve in the first place, it is difficult to see how the local authorities can escape some ongoing obligation towards it, and realistically this is likely to involve some financial cost: such is the nature of commitment made in the context of an international, prestige designation. If the local authorities really see no benefit in the Biosphere Reserve then they should probably put it out of its misery, but at the moment, even a cursory examination suggests there is considerable value and future potential for the Biosphere Reserve to contribute to many of the stated aims of the local authority funding partners. This does not mean they can or should maintain current funding levels, rather that **(R9)** any reductions should be managed and reached through

agreement between them rather than through unilateral action, and that strenuous efforts should be made to make up any shortfall which would fundamentally weaken delivery of the Biosphere Reserve's agreed strategy.

There does also appear to be scope for improved communication and accountability between local authority funders/decision-makers, the Partnership Executive and wider Partnership. Elected members in funding partners may not be as aware as they could be of some of the benefits accruing from their support for the Biosphere Reserve. Therefore **(R10)** *clearer and more regular communication to decision-makers within the local authorities of the economic, social and environmental benefits – and future potential - arising from the BR would be advisable.*

This said, pressure on local authority budgets look set to continue so **(R11)** *the ideal situation to work towards is perhaps one in which the local authorities continue to provide sufficient financial commitment to enable a transition to a service which is less dependent on (but not wholly independent of) public funding, enabling the local authorities to meet their need to make savings, while being able to demonstrate their continued, meaningful commitment to the BR.*

If local authority funding partners can maintain a sufficiently robust core resource (including the staff capacity to prepare and submit project bids) then there is likely to continue to be significant potential to draw down project funding in a variety of areas which could improve delivery of the BR strategy. While there will always be an element of opportunism about securing external funding, **(R12)** *it may be that the BRP would benefit from developing a clearer plan to secure project funding to take forward key elements in its strategy, and from more concerted efforts to ensure there is either continuation of, or an agreed exit strategy from, its existing portfolio of projects.*

Governance and resources

There are, logically, a wide range of options for alternative hosting and leadership of the Biosphere Reserve Partnership. None of these, however, should be seen as a 'silver bullet', and all will come with some cost and disruption. Local authorities are as well placed as any partner, and better placed than many, to play host to partnerships like the BRP. If the County Council were ultimately unwilling to continue to perform the role of host, then these options might indeed be worth developing. At this stage, however, it is now known whether other organisations would be willing to, let alone have the capacity to, assume the role as host. Therefore **(R13)** *the partnership should encourage open discussion with potential alternative hosts to assess their appetite and capacity for taking on a greater share of the responsibility for the work of the partnership.*

If public funding available to the BRP continues to reduce as seems likely, outcomes for the BR will almost invariably be better if this funding gap can be bridged by securing alternative sources of funding rather than simply absorbing a cut. Therefore **(R14)** *any subsequent process of review should give thorough consideration to the potential to generate income from alternative sources to supplement delivery of the agreed strategy.*

OTHER THOUGHTS

One criticism levied was that the BR was perceived as too academic in its approach. Clearly, if the BR is to fulfil its role as a 'learning laboratory' it is not surprising that its work should be characterised by academic rigour and pioneering research. At the same time it cannot be an ivory tower of well-meaning but impractical theory. For what it is worth, the impression formed by the reviewer was that it is not.

Appendix 1: Report of the North Devon Biosphere: Review Workshop

8th November 2013

Attendees

Andrew Austen	North Devon Council (Planning)
Harry Barton	Devon Wildlife Trust
Andy Bell	Biosphere Co-ordinator
Juliet Bidgood	Partnership Vice-Chair / NEAT Design
Richard Butler	Biosphere Ambassador
Cllr Rodney Cann	Cabinet Member for Environment, North Devon Council
Peter Chamberlain	Devon County Council Environment Group Manager
Tony Collyer	Biosphere Foundation (Finance)
Robert Down	Coastwise / Biosphere Foundation
Dave Edgcombe	North Devon AONB
Matt Edworthy	Biosphere Team (Access and Outreach)
Fiona Fraser Smith	Biosphere Foundation (Arts)
Lesley Garlick	Devon County Council (Environment Group)
Hannah Harrington	North Devon Council (Community Services)
Malcolm Harris	Torrige District Council (Community Services)
Tom Hynes	Biosphere Team (Biodiversity)
Gigha Klinkenborg	Biosphere / AONB Teams Administrator
Peter Moore	Facilitator
Mike Moser	Forestry Commission / Past Chair
Steve Pitcher	North Devon AONB Partnership Chair
Cllr Derrick Spear	North Devon Plus, NDC (Cabinet Member)
Mark Wallace	Biosphere Partnership Vice-Chair / Beaford Arts
Eirene Williams	FWAG

Apologies

David Appleton	Natural England
John Balls	North Devon Fishermans Association
Cllr Caroline Chugg	Devon County Council
Elaine Hayes	North Devon AONB Manager
Tony Pratt	Taw Torridge Estuary Forum
Michael Winter	Biosphere Partnership Chair

Introduction and Context

Peter Moore appointed to undertake an independent peer review of the governance and operation of the Biosphere. The Biosphere has been operating for 10 years and the Partnership has agreed to embark on a review process to look at future options for the delivery of the Biosphere functions. This peer review is the first step in this Review process as it was felt to be helpful to have someone to take an independent look at the existing structures. PM has much experience of other environmental partnerships in his role with Dorset CC where he has responsibility for three partnerships, Jurassic Coast, Dorset AONB, and Dorset Coast Forum, together with input into the Local Nature Partnership.

The purpose of the day was to give stakeholders an opportunity to identify the strengths and weaknesses of, and the opportunities and threats facing, the Biosphere and the current arrangements for its management. This will inform the subsequent development of ideas and options for its future. It was not intended that the Workshop will provide solutions or come to firm conclusions about the way

forward.

1. Strengths

Service Delivery

- Inter-discipline / holistic
- Broadscale delivery across environment and economy sectors
- Eco-system scale
- Leadership
- UNESCO designation
- Landscape scale projects
- Local distinctiveness reflected in Local Plan (mentioned but not in policy)
- Delivery visible on the ground
- Core funding for strategy innovation
- Innovation – forward long-term thinking

Outputs

- Environmental benefits / opportunities
- Other related projects – NIA, TRIP, TRIP
- 20:1 funding (multiplier)
- Consensus in marine sector
- Influence other Plans / Strategies
- Successful brand after 10 years

Relationship:

- Part of global network- benchmark,
- Good at academic and arts
- Common aim
- Collaborating
- Influence / enabler for the positive change, not negative
- Delivers LA corporate priorities

Priorities

- Agreed strategies / aims / action plan
- Nothing excluded
- Delivers LA corporate priorities
- Number of individual partner bids based on Biosphere
- £7.5mill of environmental projects.

Governance:

- Hosting by local authorities
- Partnership board delivers on ground
- Archive partnership to align with localism agenda
- Localism; vehicle for moving forward
- Bodies in place eg Foundation, Trust

Team structure/Partnership:

- Strong partnership across sector
- Not top down or bottom up- inclusivity
- Light secretariat- active partnership
- Approachable
- Combined expertise
- Role of co-ordinator
- Flexible and adaptable

Other:

- Credibility
- Only international facility for ND
- World class environment
- Geographic scope of NIA, TRIP
- Resource for bringing funding into the area

2. Weaknesses

- Remit- confusing? Not 'Neat'. Name?
- No 'statutory' remit
- Recognition but lack of awareness about purpose (especially in farming)
- Low level of recognition
- Resources relative to size
- Lack of knowledge of other Biospheres
- Lack of clarity about sanctions?
- Lack of Biosphere peer group?
- Ever decreasing resources
- Constant review (time-consuming and demotivating) (More a threat than a weakness)
- Perception/ diffuse delivery/ expectations as deliverables intangible
- Lack of clarity around the designation
- Confusion between AONB + Biosphere (public and political)
- Profile and recognition (community and political)
- Lack of clarity around rights and responsibilities of Partnership members
- Interaction with partners (eg.L.A.'s)
- Mismatch alignment between L.A's on Biosphere- lack of trust?
- When funding is tight, there is no 'Bottom Line'
- Lack of political buy-in to B.R (linked to profile + remit)
- Broad diffuse aims + scope
- Defining added value
- Hasn't touched enough people or made itself indispensable
- Focus on land management, not on communication
- Partners bought in to concept, public not
- Lack of delivery on social/ economic objectives
- Variance between B.R values + those of conventional agencies
- Clarity about priorities
- Vehicle for education or delivery
- Focus on environment or social/economic factors
- Being holistic is both a strength and a weakness
- Hosting by D.C.C (and level of commitment and resources) (formerly a strength)

3. Threats

Initial unstructured post-it comments led to a number of emerging themes:

Funding:

- Reduced LA funding for team / delivery (x14)
- No external funding for projects
- Reduction in funding opportunities
- Switch to project (C.F core) funding leads to loss of core staff
- End of NIA + TRIP funding
- Limited opportunity/scope for generation
- Decreasing amounts of funding leads to reduced delivery capacity
- Less funding/resources of partners reduces engagement with Partnership
- Core funding keeps service operating and pays for staff.
- With coordination then no partnership
- Uncertainty- so long term planning difficult
- Funding of partners who are key to delivery
- How much funding is needed?- Never enough
- Collaboration needed for strong partnership
- External funding for projects – short-term, Biosphere is long-term
- More pressure on project funding then core
- April 2015 is critical point
- Lack of funding- Biosphere won't be able to move forward
- Funders need to understand

Lack of community engagement:

- Lack of public understanding
- Seen as a club for academics
- The community isn't buying in though, often supporting individual aspects/ elements of work
- Amorphous nature of identity
- Complexity of message- man in the street doesn't understand
- Non coherent message
- Need staff to engage with community

Political support (lack of):

- Disengagement of local authorities
- Seen as irrelevant or an obstruction by politicians/ business
- Dismantled as an 'obstacle to growth'
- Lack of political support (x5)
- Partner local authorities pulling in different directions
- Political misalignment amongst funding partners
- Messages from central government- barriers to growth.
- Local politicians- support needed but is patchy. NDC reinstated funding.
- What has been achieved?- Understanding of work
- Needs to be made 'sexy' for politician

Direction/Focus:

- Over institutionalising of projects
- Biosphere reserve brand becomes diluted or invisible
- Lack of clear direction for the way forward
- Loss of focus on deliverables
- Implementation less targeted

- Strength of partnership is does a lot of things- lack of clarity of what things

Conflict/Duplication with other Organisations:

- Multiple designations adds to confusion.
- Competing brands
- Conflict between AONB and Biosphere partnerships
- Needs 'to be put to bed'
- 2 partnerships have different purposes- threat or opportunity eg Atlantic Array
- Right for each to have different viewpoints-
- Conflict with other agencies
- Overlapping aims with other organisations

Staff/Loss of:

- No coordination for active partnership
- Low staff morale
- Loss of expertise (x2)
- Funding uncertainty leads to loss of core staff (x2)
- Contractors cost more but know less

Development Pressures:

- Integrity of the Biosphere undermined by major development
- Political pressure from the outside causing inappropriate developments
- Poor quality housing development
- Loss of local distinctiveness.
- UNESCO interest is how not what
- A lot in LP that says development should be sustainable.
- Lack of adopted LP
- Partnership difficulty in standing up or coming to consensus view.

Climate Impacts:

- Climate change altering the features the Biosphere was designated for

Hosting:

- Hosting by LA's with reducing budgets
- Centralisation in Exeter

Recognition:

- Other Biospheres in UK designated so uniqueness diluted
- Failure to achieve recognition

4. Opportunities

Initial unstructured post-it comments led to a number of emerging themes:

Scope of Partnership

- Area too large to do everything – beyond scope of Team
- Define narrower and more focused role
- Link the core and the periphery “journeys into the interior”
- Partners need to do more co-ordinated by a Team
- More focused strategy
- Do more on social and economic agenda
- Relationship with ND+ to build on promoting the ‘world class environment’
- Do more on Marine element – MCZs, marine planning
- Further develop landscape scale working eg NIA,WFD, CSF
- Biodiversity / carbon off-setting should be new funding source
- Opportunities to communicate with public on key topics eg climate change, energy
- Climate change is an opportunity and a threat
- Opportunity to make local food chains paramount
- Opportunity to become involved in educating future generations for sustainability
- Clear link with economic agenda- to reflect Government thinking
- Use the Biosphere to deliver Green infrastructure

Identity

- Could re-brand to become the lead agency for the environment
- Develop brand to make tangible contribution to ND economy
- Strengthen identity and public recognition
- Establish a world class brand for sustainable produce
- Raise profile by promoting best practice
- Multiple messages for different audiences
- Use the Periodic Review and new Strategy to relaunch
- Tap into UNESCO’s communications on Biospheres eg Terra firma

Exemplars

- Improve signage for Biosphere
- Need iconic ‘thing’ in Barnstaple / Bideford like Verity
- Build on the active nature of ND visitors eg Surfers Against Sewage
- Sustainable construction - green showpieces
- Further develop eco-systems approach – persuade the LEP that ND should be a test bed for this.
- Classic example of ecosystems servicing human populations
- Build an exemplary project: urban biodiversity eg Oceanic Centre
- Current Partnership already an exemplar of co-ordinated localism

Partnership and Funding

- Need a crisis to make things happen differently
- Fresh approach to hosting and management
- Opportunity to integrate with the AONB while appreciating both designations, not in competition – needs to be carefully managed
- Build on existing structures and use them to greater degree eg Foundation, Tarka Trust – with political pressure to externalise
- Coordinate localism

- Needs to have impact on political class whose interest is economy and growth – needs to be more specific eg marine European project – includes an economist.
- Turn work into something more marketable.
- Secure further project funding
- Relationship with LNP should be stronger.
- Seek broad range of small-scale funders
- Widen the Partnership
- EU funding programmes post 2015
- Environment is rising up Government agenda – need Defra funding

Local Plan

- Succeeded in integrating Biosphere into Local Plan – pressure needs to be kept on
- LP reached critical point – now is the time to feed in
- LA's should use 'Design Review'- Biosphere specific or generic.
- Sustain and enhance the unique biodiversity of ND, mitigating the effect of "development"
- Influence plans/ strategies of partner organisations

Catchment Management:

- Exemplar for biodiversity and flood prevention
- Drive catchment management as benefits for all

Next Steps

The purpose of the independent peer review is not to make decisions but to make constructive observation on the thoughts that have been shared in the Workshop. A draft report will be submitted by the end of November but this is not a consultation document and there should be no external influence on any observations or conclusions. This report will be shared as part of the evidence base in setting out future options.

This peer review is just one part of overall review process and a paper on behalf of the local authorities, presented to Partnership on 12th November, sets out the next steps. A series of options will be developed, initially with funding partners, and then for wider discussion with Partnership.

