

BIOSPHERE PARTNERSHIP – 27th February 2014

ITEM 4(i): BIOSPHERE REVIEW UPDATE AND PROPOSED GOVERNANCE APPRAISAL

Provenance: This report has been prepared by Devon County Council, on behalf of the three local authority funding partners

Summary: This paper updates the Partnership on work that has been done since the last meeting in November 2013 and suggests how the findings from the Peer Review might be taken forward.

Recommendation: The Partnership is requested to:

- Note the progress of work undertaken to date and the findings of the Peer Review Report;
- Endorse the approach that governance options will be pursued through an Executive Task and Finish Group.
- Debate the role and purpose of the Partnership and the governance structure required to achieve this;

1. BACKGROUND

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- 1.1 At the Partnership Meeting in June 2013 a report was tabled looking at the implications for future delivery and co-ordination of Biosphere related activity with reduced reliance on local authority funding and hosting in future years, and increased reliance on other suitable locally based bodies. The Partnership accepted the need for Review in the light of inevitable further public funding cuts and agreed that the work programme should be co-ordinated through the Executive.
- 1.2 The first phase of the work programme is now complete. This has included four key areas of work:
 - i) The implications of various funding scenarios has been examined including budget reductions from the local authority partners. However, in order to provide short-term security to the Team and to allow the review work to formulate conclusions as to the way forward, the three local authorities, through agreeing a joint approach, have largely been able to maintain their budget contribution to the Biosphere Service for 2014/15. However, it has not yet been possible to secure a longer term commitment; this will be related to the outcomes of the Review work.
 - ii) An examination of the operational arrangements of other Biospheres internationally and other similar environmental related services in the UK has been undertaken. The over-riding conclusion from this initial work is that there is no one perfect model, that most struggle to sustain a viable operation and that they are all heavily dependent on local authority or other public support for core staff and work. This

justifies the concerns expressed by the Partnership about any externalisation process and the paper will be used as part of the evidence base for the Review.

- iii) An independent Peer Review has been carried out by Peter Moore of Dorset County Council to critically assess the current operational arrangements. This was finalised early in the New Year and the report circulated well in advance of this meeting to allow Partnership members, and the organisations they represent, to consider the findings. The Executive has been careful not to attempt to influence the essence of these independent observations and summary of the views expressed at the Workshop event. This report is just one element of the Review process and as such, the recommendations have no particular status; they are simply an independent view offered to those involved in the Review process and will be taken into consideration as a framework as the Review process progresses.
- iv) A draft brief for a contract, to be funded by Devon County Council, to assist the Biosphere Foundation to undertake additional Biosphere related activities has been prepared. This will focus on identifying the help required and an audit of where it might be found eg external funding sources, skills gaps, recruitment etc.

2 GOVERNANCE

2.1 The key focus of the Review work relates to Governance, both of the Partnership and the Service and to the related organisations, the Biosphere Foundation and the Tarka Country Trust. Consideration of these issues is critical as arrangements for an effective governance structure for both the Partnership and the Service, needs to be put in place to ensure it is fit for purpose to deliver and monitor the new reviewed Biosphere Strategy and Delivery Plan for 2014-19.

2.2 Governance issues should be looked at in two parts, firstly the Partnership itself and secondly the Service.

a) Partnership Governance

2.3 The Peer Review clearly identified a number of issues specifically around the governance of the Partnership which need to be considered and addressed. The relevant recommendations, in summary, include :

- Define the purpose of the Partnership and its breadth and scope of its work within the context of the review of the Strategy **(R1)**.
- Define in its Strategy the contribution that the Partnership can make to sustainable development through the Local Plan (rather than the Strategy trying to be the sustainable development plan) **(R2)**.
- Define the responsible bodies for the strategic functions and the operational delivery functions and that these flow clearly and logically from the Strategy **(R3)**.
- Define clear criteria for engaging in issues or projects, clearly based on the priorities set out in the revised Strategy **(R4)**.
- Draft a new Partnership Agreement for wider discussion to clarify the rights and responsibilities of partners **(R5)**.
- Ensure that there is a clear Funding Plan to (i) prioritise engagement with current and future projects in line with the revised Strategy and (ii) consider

alternative sources to generate income to supplement delivery of the Strategy **(R12/R14)**.

- 2.4 Andy Bell has prepared a paper looking at these recommendations in more detail; this will be discussed in the second part of this agenda item.

b) Biosphere Service Governance

- 2.5 The established intention is for the Partnership, through the Executive, to identify and develop a suitable structure for the future operation of the Service to ensure a sustainable solution to the management of the Biosphere. The key considerations in developing options for the Service relate to funding, hosting and relationships with the Partnership, the Foundation and other partnerships already operating in the north Devon area.
- 2.6 Although the Partnership has already challenged the assumption that it would be beneficial to externalise the Service, this still does need to be considered alongside the Partnership's preferred model of retaining a public-funded and hosted Service.
- 2.7 The relevant recommendations from the Peer Review report which need to be taken into consideration are, in summary:
- Examine ways in which there could be closer integration with the North Devon AONB Partnership and how both Partnerships might have closer working with North Devon Plus and the relationship with the Devon Local Nature Partnership **(R7/R8)**.
 - There should be an agreed approach between the local authority funding partners **(R9/R11)**.
 - There should be open discussion with potential alternative hosts **(R13)**.

3 METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 To take forward the work related to governance, rather than establish a Working Group whose representation would be very similar to the existing Biosphere Executive, it is proposed that a small focused Task and Finish sub-group of the Executive should undertake this Governance appraisal over the next few months.
- 3.2 As its core, this T&F Group should comprise representatives of each of the three local authority funders, Natural England and the Chair or a Vice-Chair of the Partnership. Secretariat will be provided by Devon County Council.
- 3.3 The first task will be to brainstorm possible options and then further examine the pros and cons of potentially realistic options. There should then be specific discussion with representatives of other external bodies on the Partnership, including the Foundation and the AONB Partnership, who could provide specialist input and advice on how any suggested model or alternative host might work in practice.
- 3.4 It is proposed that an initial paper on the possible options for future Governance and the detailed implications should be presented to the Biosphere Partnership in June for consultation.

- 3.5 At the same time as the governance appraisal is being carried out, a financial appraisal will be undertaken, based on the scenario development work that has already been started. For each scenario, a strategy will need to be developed as to how the funding shortfall will be addressed.
- 3.6 Concurrent with this work, the capacity building of the Foundation will be progressed to establish if, or how, it might take on an enhanced role.

4 COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

- 4.1 The remaining recommendations from the Peer Review report relate to the need for improved communication. These address the concerns about low profile and unclear identity (ie related to brand development), as well as lack of communication and accountability between the local authorities, the Executive and the wider Partnership.
- 4.2 At the same time as the Governance work is being undertaken, it is proposed that the Executive should address the following Peer Review recommendations:
- Endorse a clear Communication Strategy to create a higher and sharper profile for the Biosphere **(R6)**.
 - Ensure regular engagement with decision makers within local authorities of the benefits and future potential of the Biosphere **(R10)**.

5 PROVISIONAL TIMETABLE

- 5.1 A draft timetable for the next stages of the Review work is outlined below:
- 27th Feb Biosphere Partnership endorses approach to governance review
 - 18th March Initial meeting of T&F Group to brainstorm options
 - April Discussion with partners to develop potential model
 - May Initial draft of Governance Options Report
 - 17th June Agreement of options by full Executive
 - 27th June Review paper to Partnership for consultation