

## **Item 8: Funding Review of the Biosphere Reserve**

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

**Summary:** This paper sets out the proposed approach to the review of the future funding likely to be available to support the Biosphere Team and the implications for the delivery and co-ordination of biosphere-related activities.

**Recommendation:** The Partnership is requested to:

- Endorse the approach to this review and engage with it in the manner proposed.

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### **1. Background**

There have been an on-going series of review processes over recent years relating to the partnership and funding arrangements for the North Devon Biosphere Reserve and the AONB. These have resulted in a series of changes in the structure, composition, name, work priorities and practical arrangements for the dedicated staff team(s). However, a common recent theme has been a need to adapt to reduced funding available from the three local authorities (Devon County Council, Torrridge District Council and North Devon Council) and other sources, which has resulted in a gradual contraction of the staff complement.

The most recent exercise, in late 2011 / early 2012, failed to achieve the restructuring and financial savings originally proposed by the County Council and, instead, resulted in the separation of former North Devon AONB and Biosphere Service into two distinct teams. However, both have continued to be hosted by the County Council and co-financed by the two District Councils, with a clear mandate to support the achievement of the strategic objectives of their respective partnerships, whilst working jointly to benefit mutual interests where practical.

### **2. Need for Current Review**

In the light of the current financial climate and the increasing budgetary pressure on public bodies, the three local authorities agreed in early 2013 that there was a need to embark upon a further review of the funding and delivery arrangements for the Biosphere Reserve. There are similar processes being undertaken for most local authority services, particularly those which are discretionary in nature, to inform future priorities and the possible adoption of new operating models.

There are, currently, no specific savings targets to inform this process. Instead, there are shared expectations between the three authorities of having to make very significant additional savings over the remainder of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review period and beyond, with these likely to affect the Biosphere Reserve from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014. These cuts could, potentially, be anywhere between 15% and 100% over a number of years; however, even in the event of a complete withdrawal from the current funding and operational model, there are likely to be other ways in which the local authorities might continue to provide enduring practical support for biosphere-related activity.

The particular focus on the Biosphere Reserve, compared to the AONB, reflects the absence of clear, statutory obligations, the very limited external funding for its core functions and the lack of a formal / signed funding agreement between the local authority partners. In addition, at least from the County Council's perspective, there is pressure to explore the potential externalisation of the service.

In recognition of this, an informal approach was made to the Directors of Biosphere Foundation, to establish their willingness and ability to assist in such adaptation and, thereby, help to sustain the on-going management of the Biosphere Reserve. At the last Partnership meeting in February, the Chairman reported on this initial discussion and suggested that this might be continued through an informal Working Group, which should include his Vice-Chairs; two, subsequent, meetings of this Group were held. However, in order to clarify the purpose and approach to such a review, a revised framework for taking forward this process is proposed through the remainder of this paper.

### 3. **Framework for the Review**

#### a) Objectives

Although the prompts for this review are outlined above, its objectives might be described as:

- To proactively plan the adaptation of operational arrangements in the light inevitable budgetary pressures so as to sustain the viable, future co-ordination and delivery of biosphere-related activity.
- To consider potential new and externalised models for the Biosphere Team, which will make it less reliant upon local authority hosting and funding.

#### b) Structures to Support the Review Process

The approach taken to the review process should properly reflect and build upon the existing governance arrangements for the Biosphere Reserve. On this basis, the following roles are suggested:

- The **Partnership** will oversee the process to ensure that any resulting changes will allow it to continue its strategic co-ordination and delivery of the Biosphere Strategy.
- The **Biosphere Executive** (i.e. Partnership Chair & Vice-Chair plus officer representatives from the three local authorities and Natural England) will lead the main work involved in the review, with the intention of reporting back to the Partnership and to the constituent funding authorities with recommendations and options for future adaptation and operation, including

any structural or staffing changes. [Note: although not formally part of the Executive Group, the DCC Environment Manager will directly input to their role in the review process.]

- A **Working Group** (or Groups) will be convened, as required, to enable representatives of the Biosphere Foundation and others to input to the detail of the review process. If anything more than one-off meetings of the Working Group(s) are required, terms of reference will be agreed and its practical operation co-ordinated by DCC staff on behalf of the Executive.
- The **Biosphere Manager** (and wider Team) will need to have an active part in the process to advise and inform others and to contribute to the required research, analysis, reporting and coordination.

c) Review Tasks

A detailed programme for review will be compiled by the Biosphere Executive, but is likely to include the following tasks (with the likely lead shown in brackets):

- A brief assessment of current operational arrangements / models applied by a selection of other Biosphere Reserves or comparable designations (Biosphere Manager).
- Preparation and consideration of various funding scenarios for the coming three years and their likely implications for the Biosphere Reserve and, specifically, for the Biosphere Team (Biosphere Manager / Executive)
- Investigation of potential new sources of funding / income to support biosphere-related activity, either through the existing Biosphere Team or based on alternative operating models. (Executive / Working Group)
- Detailed consideration of externalised operating models and associated funding arrangements and their potential relevance / applicability to the Biosphere Reserve. (Executive)
- Linked to externalisation options, an assessment of the mechanics and practicalities, including contracts, TUPE etc.
- Possible involvement in a broader investigation of the potential role of social enterprises in supporting biosphere-related activity, undertaken in collaboration with other Biosphere Reserves. (Biosphere Manager)
- Independent or peer review process to critically assess the current operational arrangements for the Biosphere Reserve. (Executive)
- If required, commissioning of external advice on and support for the review process. (DCC / Executive)
- Detailed discussion with Biosphere Foundation, Tarka Trust and other organisations on future approaches to the management of the Biosphere Reserve. (Working Group)

DCC is making some budgetary provision to support the work involved in this review process.

#### 4. Timescales

There is no set or precise timescales for the review process. In all likelihood, it will need to have a number of phases.

The most urgent requirement is to assess the likely implications of any budget reductions next financial year and ways in which the implications of these might be avoided or mitigated. This will mean having initial information available during the early autumn months.

The current hope is that the expected cuts in local authority contributions might be staged across a two or three year period. Such a tapered reduction might allow time to explore more significant approaches to adaptation and, if appropriate, to implement required changes in a stepped or progressive manner.

The Executive will devise a more detailed timescale for this review. It is anticipated that regular reports will be made to the Partnership through its planned meetings or through additional briefings as may be required.