

## **BIOSPHERE PARTNERSHIP – 12<sup>th</sup> November 2012**

### **ITEM 4a: FUNDING REVIEW OF THE BIOSPHERE**

**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 June on how the Biosphere might adapt in the light of future funding that will 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:

- Note the progress of work undertaken to date including a verbal report on the Peer Review Workshop.

**NOTE: This update report is provided for information purposes only.**

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## **1. BACKGROUND**

At the Partnership Meeting in June 2013 a report was tabled looking at the implications for future delivery and co-ordination of Biosphere related activities in the light of the likelihood of reduced funding from the local authorities in future years. Following discussion, Partnership decided that it:

- Accepted the need for review in the light of inevitable further public funding cuts;
- Strongly challenged the assumption that it would be beneficial to externalise the Service and requested further consideration of retaining a public-funded and hosted Service;
- Agreed that the review work should be co-ordinated through the Executive, with consideration given to a possible role for a Working Group.

Following this meeting, and in agreement with the Chair, the local authorities and Biosphere Co-ordinator discussed a provisional work programme taking account of these decisions. Thus, in the short term the adaptation work will focus on proactively planning how to sustain the viable, future co-ordination and delivery of biosphere-related activity. This work programme formed the basis of the Executive meeting agenda in August.

## **2. UPDATE ON WORK PROGRAMME PROGRESS**

The draft work programme addresses a number of issues which are being taken forward through the Executive. It should be noted that most items are work in progress:

### **i) Budget Considerations**

All local authorities will, inevitably, have to find significant savings over the next three years; for example, the County Council is anticipating budget reductions of over 20%. However, in order to allow time for the review process to be completed and potential new operating

approaches to be established, the three local authorities have agreed to see whether cuts might, as far as possible, be delayed until the latter part of this three year period

#### **ii) Implications and Options for Reduced Funding**

The Executive has considered a paper looking at the implications for various funding scenarios. This will need to be refined and given further consideration through the Review process. However, the initial conclusions indicate that it should be possible to maintain the status quo in the team structure for 2014/15 and 2015/16, if any significant reduction in budget can be delayed.

#### **iii) Peer Review of Governance**

Following Executive agreement of the brief for an independent peer review to critically assess the current operational arrangements of the Biosphere structures Peter Moore, the Environment Policy Group Manager at Dorset County Council, has been appointed to undertake this task. He has an excellent understanding of how partnership arrangements operate and their relationships with local authorities having responsibility for a number of similar environmental partnerships. As part of this work a workshop was held on 8<sup>th</sup> November, facilitated by Peter, giving the wider Partnership an opportunity to identify the current strengths and weaknesses of, and the opportunities and threats facing, the Biosphere and the current arrangements for its management. This work should inform future development of potential options. Approximately 20 members of the Partnership attended the Workshop representing the key interests. A verbal update on the proceedings will be given at the meeting.

#### **iv) Models of other Operational Arrangements**

As part of the background information addressing the longer term requirement to look at other operational arrangements, a paper has been produced looking at models adopted by other Biospheres internationally and at other similar environmental related services in the UK. 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.

#### **v) Political Engagement and Communication**

A Communication and Engagement Strategy has been prepared addressing political, key stakeholder, and more general public, audiences. Different approaches are needed for the different type and composition of these audiences eg some may need evidence of strategic benefits whereas others might need more evidence of local delivery. The Annual Report has been produced and is being widely circulated. A short lobbying Prospectus is being updated for use with key stakeholders. The opportunity to engage with Tim Jones Chair of the Heart of the South West LEP was taken by the Partnership Chair and Coordinator during a visit to North Wyke.

### **3. KEY NEXT STEPS**

Following decisions by the Executive at its August meeting, the work programme has been revised with the next key stages being:

#### **i) Budget Finalisation**

In order to provide confidence to the Team and to allow work programmes to be planned, the budget for the Biosphere Team, ideally for the next three years, needs to be agreed as soon as possible although final confirmation is unlikely until the spring. The three local

authorities are keeping each other updated on budget discussions and will hopefully be able to agree a joint approach.

**ii) Peer Review Report**

Following the recent Workshop, the findings will be written up and analysed, follow-up phone conversations will be held with key stakeholders who were unable to attend and the final report drafted and submitted by 22<sup>nd</sup> November. Its findings will then be considered by Executive and reported to the next meeting of the Partnership.

**iii) Working Group**

The Executive agreed that any decision on the formation of a Working Group should be postponed until the funding situation is clearer and the Peer Review has been undertaken. However, its' likely role could be to look at the existing structures (Partnership, Foundation and Trust) and how these might be strengthened.

**iv) Income Generation**

As Core funding for the Biosphere team reduces there is an increasing necessity to investigate potential increased or new sources for income generation through the Biosphere Partnership eg visitor gifting, licences, charging for services, sponsorship. This remains a key priority.

**v) Political Engagement**

A meeting is being arranged with the key County portfolio holders, local Cabinet members and the County Partnership representatives together with potential presentations to the County Locality Meetings this autumn. Opportunities will also be taken to engage with district members at suitable times.

**vi) Partnership Reporting**

A further report on progress will be brought to the next Partnership meeting in February.