

**AYRSHIRE JOINT PLANNING STEERING GROUP
25 NOVEMBER 2010**

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Update

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To advise and update the Steering Group on the work being undertaken to progress towards UNESCO Biosphere status for a large part of rural South and East Ayrshire and part of Dumfries and Galloway Council.

BACKGROUND

2. The Ayrshire Joint Structure Plan recognises the potential of natural and cultural assets to be economic drivers of regeneration and development. The quality of the environment and the promotion of cultural and natural resources – the coast, landscape, natural habitats, communities combined with locational advantages, improving connectivity and proximity to major international gateways are identified as offering a considerable platform and potential for growth. As part of the approved policies in the Ayrshire Joint Structure Plan four key tourism economic development opportunities were identified. One of the four was a proposition to explore the potential offered by the natural environment in relation to seeking UNESCO Biosphere status for southern Ayrshire in conjunction with Dumfries and Galloway and other agencies. Biospheres form a unique global network of special places for people and nature. They are designated by UNESCO with the aim of being sites of excellence to explore and demonstrate approaches to conservation and sustainable economic and social development at a regional scale. After initial work was undertaken by Scottish Natural Heritage, South and East Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway Councils asked AJPU to take the project forward through the formation of a Biosphere Steering Group. This report indicates current progress as the project enters a critical stage.

DEVELOPING THE PROJECT

3. Since 2005, the Steering Group has been pursuing the concept of a modern Biosphere in SW Scotland as result of the UNESCO requirement to review the two existing old style Biospheres that already exist in the area. To aid this understanding, two major studies have been undertaken. The first, “Working Towards a Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Reserve”, funded in part through LEADER and supported by partners, undertook an extensive consultation exercise aimed at engaging communities in understanding the opportunities that a Biosphere might bring. The conclusions were a very positive general support for the principle but a strong feeling that it should not be agency led.

4. The study also identified a potential fundamental barrier to any engagement with the Biosphere model in terms of the difficulty of quantifying the added value that Biosphere status can deliver and any consequential financial implications. This has been addressed through a further study by economists Mackay Consultants to identify the socio-economic potential Biosphere status can bring. In a series of future scenarios based on potential investment over a 10 year period a return or leverage of 6:1 could be expected, that is for every £1 spent an additional £6 could be generated. The conclusion to the study suggests that substantial financial benefit could accrue to the area with Biosphere status.
5. Prior to progressing the Biosphere Nomination to DEFRA and then UNESCO Scottish Government are required to give it their approval. After a meeting in 2008 with the previous Environment Minister the Group was asked to explore other possible spatial options. Having reviewed the options the partners remained convinced that Biosphere status offered significant potential benefits and that it was the best option for SW Scotland to pursue. However, if the Biosphere was to become a reality then in the light of earlier consultation it was recognised that it could not be entirely agency or council led and attention has therefore been focused on developing a more broadly based community driven process. This view coincided with Scottish Government thinking and was confirmed at a meeting with the current Minister in September last year. It is now the expectation that provided substantial community support can be demonstrated that Scottish Government will sign-off the Nomination.

CURRENT WORK

6. The Steering Group identified and endorsed a number of key tasks which have formed the priority for the work programme of the partners over the last year. The tasks relate to the fundamentals of the case which will be presented to the Minister in November. These are in summary:
 - to continue the process of consultation and engagement with communities; organisations; businesses and other stakeholders to raise awareness/understanding and where possible to secure support ideally in written form. This is an ongoing process which is anticipated will continue during the preparation of the UNESCO Nomination. So far 48 Community Councils out of 58 within the proposed Biosphere area have committed to support the application to UNESCO for Biosphere status;
 - to identify and secure a Biosphere delivery and funding mechanism through LEADER using a LAG to LAG Cooperation Project between Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway. Ayrshire LEADER LAG has now approved a £290,000 Cooperation Project aimed at “Building Opportunity in the Biosphere” during the period in which the UNESCO application is being progressed. A decision from Dumfries and Galloway LEADER LAG is currently awaited;
 - to identify and set up a governance structure in the form of a Biosphere Partnership Board working to the remit of a Biosphere Charter and seeking commitment in writing from suitable Biosphere stakeholders to be Partnership Board members. A

draft Charter has been approved by the Steering Group, Partnership Board members have been identified and an Interim Chair has been secured for an inaugural meeting scheduled for December 2010/January 2011; and

- to progress the UNESCO Biosphere Nomination in terms of completing the application form and defining a Draft Biosphere Vision/Framework Strategy. Southern Uplands Partnership have been engaged to coordinate the work of the partners in relation to the application. It is anticipated that the application will be completed by January 2011 for approval by the Biosphere Partnership Board, UK Man and the Biosphere Committee and then by Scottish Government in early March 2011 prior to the election in May. The application will be submitted to UNESCO during summer 2011 for a September deadline after which a decision is anticipated by late Spring 2012.

CONCLUSION

7. As the only global recognition and accreditation for an area demonstrating excellence in sustainable development practice, the Biosphere offer is unique. Biosphere status requires no new legislation, imposes no additional regulatory burden on activities and involves no onerous bureaucracy. It offers the potential to be an extremely cost effective inclusive, grassroots, partnership mechanism for regeneration, sustainable development and piloting innovative approaches to addressing EU, UK and Scottish Government priorities.

RECOMMENDATION

8. The Ayrshire Joint Planning Steering Group is asked to note the contents of this report.

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