

# **Governance of the UK's Biosphere Reserves: Origins, Successes and Challenges**

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## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Contents</b> .....   | 1  |
| <b>List of Tables</b> .....   | 2  |
| <b>Executive Summary</b> .....  | 3  |
| <b>1. Introduction</b> .....  | 5  |
| <b>2. UNESCO Biosphere Reserves</b> .....   | 6  |
| <b>3. The UK’s Biosphere Reserves</b> .....                                       | 9  |
| 3.1. North Devon.....   | 10 |
| 3.2. Dyfi .....   | 11 |
| 3.3. Galloway and Southern Ayrshire .....   | 13 |
| 3.4. Brighton and Lewes Downs.....  | 14 |
| 3.5. Wester Ross .....  | 15 |
| 3.6. Isle of Man .....  | 17 |
| 3.7. Isle of Wight .....  | 18 |
| <b>4. Themes in the Establishment of UK Biosphere Reserves</b> .....              | 20 |
| 4.1. Aims in the establishment of biosphere reserves.....                         | 20 |
| 4.2. Length of time taken to establish biosphere reserves.....                    | 21 |
| 4.3. Who started the process? .....   | 22 |
| 4.4. Who (else) was involved? .....   | 23 |
| 4.5. Themes in the establishment of governance structures .....                   | 24 |
| <b>5. Themes in Current Governance of UK Biosphere Reserves</b> .....             | 25 |
| 5.1. Top-down, bottom-up, or a matter of interpretation? .....                    | 25 |
| 5.2. Common features/differences within governance structures .....               | 25 |
| 5.3. Formal legal status .....  | 27 |
| <b>6. Success and Challenges in the Governance of UK Biosphere Reserves</b> ..... | 28 |
| 6.1. Success of engaging stakeholders.....  | 28 |
| 6.2. Examples of successful governance strategies .....                           | 29 |
| 6.3. Challenges of biosphere governance .....                                     | 30 |
| 6.4. Visibility and identity of biosphere reserves.....                           | 32 |
| 6.5. Sharing success: Ideas for improvement of biosphere reserve governance ..... | 34 |
| <b>7. Summary and Conclusions</b> .....   | 36 |
| <b>References</b> .....   | 38 |

## List of Tables

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Table 3a: Years in which each UK Biosphere Reserve was established and whether these were expanded from “first generation” reserves ..... | 10 |
| Table 4a: Length of time taken to establish each of the UK’s Biosphere Reserves .....   | 21 |
| Table 5a: Types of governance structure in each UK Biosphere Reserve .....  | 25 |
| Table 5b: Formal legal basis of UK Biosphere Reserves .....   | 27 |
| Table 6a: Reported success of stakeholder engagement in the UK Biosphere Reserves .....   | 28 |
| Table 6b: Reported “visibility” of UK Biosphere Reserves .....  | 33 |

## Executive Summary

- This report presents the findings of a survey into the governance structures of the UK's UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (BRs).
- The report has three inter-connected aims: 1. To take stock of the process(es) by which the UK's BRs were established, and the governance structures now employed in their ongoing management; 2. To identify the successful aspects, as well as the challenges, of the governance of these BRs; 3. To identify lessons to be learned from the establishment of the BRs and their governance structures, and offer suggestions for their improved governance.
- Biosphere Reserves (BRs) are areas designated by UNESCO that are internationally recognised for both biodiversity conservation and the promotion of sustainable ways of life among local populations. The World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) currently consists of 701 sites across 123 countries.
- The UK now has seven BRs, the first of which (North Devon) was designated in 2002, and the most recent (the Isle of Wight) in 2019. The others are Dyfi, Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, Brighton and Lewes Downs, the Isle of Man, and Wester Ross.
- Key themes in terms of the processes by which the UK's BRs were established include the similar aims of the seven BRs cited by all respondents, the establishment of a "steering group" with representation across a variety of organisations, and some form of community consultation, such as meetings with community councils. The establishment of governance structures would then include (some if not all of) local authorities, town and community councils, community members, government agencies, NGOs, and local businesses.
- Common features across the *current* governance structures of the seven BRs included a form of "Biosphere Partnership" with representation from a range of stakeholders; "thematic groups" working on specific projects; a Board or "Steering Group"; and "membership" of the BR that is open to the public. An important difference between BRs, however, was that some have a core "Biosphere Team" of paid staff, while some do not.

- Successful aspects of BR governance reported by survey respondents included having diverse and locally-based Board and/or Partnership membership, and local involvement in BR-related decision-making and subsequent feelings of “ownership”.
- Stakeholder engagement in the process of establishing the BRs and their governance structures was generally perceived to have been successful. Respondents also, however, pointed to a lack of “visibility” of their BRs among local residents, local businesses, and visitors.
- Challenges with BR governance identified by respondents can be summarised as: securing and maintaining funding (and associated time constraints); challenges of cohesion stemming from diverse representation in governance structures; a lack of prioritisation and proactivity by partner organisations; sustaining long-term interest from partners; and a lack of awareness of and misunderstandings around the concept of biosphere reserves.
- Suggestions for the improvement of BR governance made by respondents can be summarised as: improved or more regular involvement of existing partners; engagement with a wider range of partners (although this creates potential tension with the challenge of cohesion cited above); and the formalisation of BRs so that they have a legal basis.

## 1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a survey into the governance structures of the UK's UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (BRs). The UK now has seven of these BRs, the first of which (North Devon) was designated in 2002, and the most recent (the Isle of Wight) in 2019. The report has three inter-connected aims: Firstly, now that these seven BRs are established, to take stock of the process(es) by which they were established, and the governance structures now employed in their ongoing management. Secondly, to identify the successful aspects, as well as the challenges, of the governance of these BRs. Thirdly, based on the successes and challenges identified, it seeks to identify lessons to be learned from the establishment of the BRs and their governance structures, and to offer suggestions (based on survey responses) for the improvement of their governance.

The report begins in section 2 by introducing the concept of UNESCO biosphere reserves, and the changes to the ways these are designated that have taken place in recent decades. Section 3 then details the processes by which each of the UK's reserves, and their respective governance structures, were established. The report then reflects upon the key themes in the establishment of governance structures (section 4), and current governance of (section 5), these BRs. Section 6 then highlights particularly successful aspects of the governance of these BRs, as well as challenges, before considering ways in which this governance might be improved.

## 2. UNESCO Biosphere Reserves

Biosphere reserves (BRs) are areas that are internationally recognised for both biodiversity conservation and the promotion of sustainable ways of life among local populations, and aim to encourage increased collaboration between these. BRs are designated by UNESCO through its Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme – an intergovernmental scientific programme established in 1971 with the aim of “establish(ing) a scientific basis for the improvement of relationships between people and their environments” (UNESCO, n.d. a). BRs may encompass terrestrial, marine and/or coastal ecosystems, and now (as of 19<sup>th</sup> June 2019) constitute the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR), currently with 701 sites across 123 countries (UNESCO, 2019).

Within the overarching aim of its MAB programme, UNESCO describes BRs as aiming to promote “solutions reconciling the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use” (UNESCO, n.d. b). A number of common objectives across different BRs are then cited in various literature. These include acting as “sites of excellence” for biodiversity conservation (Reed and Price, 2019) and as “living laboratories” for practices supporting sustainable development (Starger, 2019), being “model regions” for sustainability transitions (Kratzer, 2019), and capacity building for research, education, and learning at regional scales (Reed and Price, 2019). Crucially, then, BRs are not “only” sites for biodiversity conservation, instead seeking to place these within the context of the socio-economic development of regions, and the sustainable use of resources in pursuit of this. For Price (2017, p.30), this joined-up approach can be seen as part of a “fundamental reappraisal of both the concepts and the practice of conservation” in the last quarter of the twentieth century, moving away from what is often termed “fortress conservation” (Heatherington, 2012) to instead “consider conservation in the context of sustainable development” (Price, 2017, p.30).

Each BR must contain three types of inter-related zones: core area(s), buffer zone(s), and transition area. Core areas are protected sites - for example, existing nature reserves and national parks – that aim to conserve landscapes, species or ecosystems. Buffer zones are situated around or alongside these core areas, and are identified as being used for “activities compatible with sound ecological practices that can reinforce scientific research, monitoring, training and education” (UNESCO, n.d. b). Finally, transition areas are the surrounding areas where the majority of human activity takes place, which still aim at “fostering economic and human development that is socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable” (UNESCO, n.d. b).

While the concept of BRs originated in the 1970s, recent decades have seen changes to the aims of BRs, and subsequently, the ways in which they are designated. The concept of BRs was first formalised in 1973 and 1974, and the first areas were designated in 1974 (Reed and Price, 2019). The intention at this stage was already that BRs would contain the buffer zones discussed above. In practice, however, among the 208 BRs that had been designated in 54 countries by 1981, very few contained buffer zones. Instead, the “biosphere reserve designation” had often been superimposed on areas that were already protected at national level – including, in the UK context, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and National Nature Reserves (NNRs). This meant that often, BRs consisted only of what would amount to a small “core area”, thus failing to reflect the interconnectedness between conservation and local populations that is central to the concept of BRs. These have been referred to in the literature as “first generation” BRs (Reed, 2019).

Price et al. (2010, p.551) cite this “mismatch between concept and reality” as a key reason for the establishment of an Advisory Committee on Biosphere Reserves was set up in 1992, as well as key discussions that took place at the 1995 International Conference on Biosphere Reserves in Seville, Spain. In turn, these authors cite two key documents stemming from these developments, which have been key in bringing about the recent changes in the way BRs are designated and subsequently, what are often referred to as “second generation” or “new style” BRs . The first of these was the Seville Strategy (UNESCO, 1995) – a document produced following the above-named conference, that “set out a vision for BRs into the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, as well as a set of goals and recommendations aimed at achieving this (Bouamrane et al., 2019, p.30). The second was the Statutory Framework for the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) (UNESCO, 1996), which set out comprehensive criteria for sites’ inclusion in the network, as well as establishing a periodic review process designed to evaluate existing BRs against these criteria and/or to encourage their expansion to better conform to these criteria (Price, 2002). It was the intention that the relevant authorities in all countries in which BRs had been previously designated would conduct such a review, and reminder letters to conduct subsequent reviews would then be sent to each authority on the tenth anniversary of this initial review (Price et al., 2010).

The implementation of the periodic review process has nonetheless had several key impacts. These are, firstly, the withdrawal of a significant number of BRs and the significant extension of others; secondly, an increased focus on sustainable development as well as biodiversity conservation; and thirdly, bringing on board a larger range of stakeholders from within the designated areas (Price et

al. 2010; Bouamrane et al. 2019). The following section looks at how these changes can be seen in the UK context.

### 3. The UK's Biosphere Reserves

The first national review of UK BRs was carried out by the Environmental Change Institute (ECI) at the University of Oxford between 1997 and 1999 (Price et al., 1999). This approach was different to that taken in other countries, where individual BRs were evaluated in a periodic review, as required by the Statutory Framework (Price, 2019). At the time of this review, the UK had eleven BRs, which often consisted of one, or a combination of two, existing NNRs: Braunton Burrows in North Devon; the North Norfolk Coast; Moor House/Upper Teesdale in the North Pennines; Dyfi/Cors Fochno in Mid-wales; Caerlaverock in Dumfries and Galloway; Cairnsmore of Fleet, Merrick Kells and Silver Flowe, also in Dumfries and Galloway; Taynish in Argyll; Beinn Eighe in Wester Ross; Loch Druidibeg on the island of South Uist; and the Scottish islands of Rum and St Kilda (Price et al., 1999).

Since this national review, and a second one in 2009, the following changes to the make-up of UK BRs have taken place (Price, 2019):

- Five reserves were withdrawn from the WNBR: Claish Moss, Caerlaverock, Taynish, Rum and St Kilda. This was primarily due to there being a limited local population (or in the case of St Kilda and Claish Moss, no human population at all), and therefore, these sites not fulfilling any purpose additional to their existing designations as NNRs (Price et al., 1999; Price et al., 2010).
- Four of the existing BRs were expanded into much larger BRs. Of the above-named original BRs, Braunton Burrows expanded into North Devon Biosphere, Beinn Eighe became Wester Ross Biosphere, Dyfi Biosphere was expanded to encompass a much larger area, and Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere was expanded from the existing Cairnsmore of Fleet, Merrick Kells and Silver Flowe BRs. All of these, and the new BRs listed below, are described as 'Biospheres' (Price, 2019).
- Three further areas submitted nominations for, and were granted, BR status. These were Brighton and Lewes Downs, the Isle of Man, and the Isle of Wight.

The table below gives a summary of the year in which each current UK BR was designated, and the "first generation" reserves from which they were expanded (if any).

| BR                          | Year | Expanded from?                                      |
|-----------------------------|------|---|
| North Devon                 | 2002 | Braunton Burrows                                    |
| Dyfi                        | 2009 | Dyfi (smaller area in river estuary)                |
| Galloway and South Ayrshire | 2012 | Cairnsmore of Fleet; Silver Flowe and Merrick-Kells |
| Brighton and Lewes Downs    | 2014 |   |
| Wester Ross                 | 2016 | Beinn Eighe   |
| Isle of Man                 | 2016 |   |
| Isle of Wight               | 2019 |   |

**Table 3a:** Table summarising the years in which each UK Biosphere Reserve was established, and whether these were expanded from “first generation” BRs.

The sections below draw upon a combination of responses to a survey of UK BR coordinators, literature and internet sources to introduce each of these BRs, with a particular focus on their respective governance structures, and how these came to be established. Later sections provide analysis of the themes within this process.

### 3.1. North Devon

This area of 3,300 square kilometres (North Devon Biosphere, n.d.) in southwest England was re-designated in 2002 as a significant expansion of the existing BR, Braunton Burrows, a site in private ownership with a history of successful co-operative management (it is owned by Christie Estates), with potential for long-term scientific monitoring (Price et al., 1999). This is an area centred around the second largest sand dune system in the UK, and also contains areas of “slacks” (low ground), grassy plains, dense scrub and ponds. It includes a large variety of butterfly, bird and flower species, and is a popular site for recreation (Christie Estates, n.d.). It is designated both as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) (Explore Braunton, n.d.). It was previously also designated as an NNR, but was de-classified in 1996 following disputes over grazing (Price et al., 1999).

The 1999 review (Price et al., 1999) concluded that Braunton Burrows was effectively just a core area, and “if continuation of a biosphere reserve based on this site is deemed desirable, it should be considerably expanded” (p.32). The current BR Coordinator therefore completed a nomination form in his role at the time of Countryside Development Officer at Devon County Council. The process was a relatively quick one, taking around two years, and the BR was formally extended in 2002, and re-named North Devon Biosphere.

Braunton Burrows now forms the core area of North Devon Biosphere. The buffer zone is defined by the Taw-Torridge estuary, where these two wide rivers meet before entering the sea, and extends as far as the towns of Barnstaple and Bideford. The much larger transition area is defined by the catchment area of the rivers and streams that drain into the North Coast of Devon. It therefore extends as far as the North-Western edge of the NP of Dartmoor – an area characterised by open moorlands, rock outcrops and deep river valleys – and the Western edge of Exmoor. The transition area also includes a marine area as far out as the island of Lundy.

There are three parts to the current governance structure of North Devon Biosphere. These can be summarised as follows:

- **Biosphere Team:** Seven staff, all working for Devon County Council across areas of specialism such as farming, heritage tourism and the marine environment.
- **North Devon Biosphere Reserve Partnership:** A large body of stakeholders whose stated purpose is to “help the relevant local authorities to fulfil their commitments to North Devon Biosphere Reserve” (North Devon Biosphere, n.d.). This meets several times per year, and includes representatives from across local government, government agencies, NGOs, businesses, community, and others, which include universities, local colleges and secondary schools.
- **North Devon Biosphere Foundation:** A registered charity governed by a board of six directors, formed in 2014, which is “dedicated to furthering the aims of the UNESCO North Devon Biosphere Reserve Partnership” (North Devon Biosphere, n.d.).

### 3.2. Dyfi

The initial “first generation” biosphere reserve consisted of a small area including several SSSIs around the estuary of the river Dyfi in mid Wales. The review undertaken in 1999 concluded that the BR should be expanded to include the wider Dyfi catchment area, with the inclusion of more nearby SSSIs as core areas (Price et al., 1999, p.45). The much-expanded, bilingually named Biosffer Dyfi Biosphere is an area of 840km<sup>2</sup> (Dyfi Biosphere, n.d.). It is still centred on the Dyfi river valley, but also includes the town of Aberystwyth to the south. The core area remains similar to the original BR, and is centred around the Dyfi NNR. This consists of an estuary of mudflats, sandbanks and saltmarsh (Dyfi estuary); a large area of sand dunes (Ynslas sand dunes); and a large area of “raised

peat bog” and ash woodland with abundant small-leaved lime (Cors Fochno). The core area also includes Coed Cwm Einion, a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) consisting mostly of broadleaf woodland. The buffer zones include further SSSIs including a steep v-shaped valley (Ceunant Twymyn) and mature broadleaf woodland. The transition area includes a number of towns and villages, and extends into the hills either side of the Dyfi river valley. Its Northern side extends into the southern end of Snowdonia National Park.

A notable feature of the re-designation of Biosffer Dyfi was the establishment, in 1997, of local NGO Ecodyfi, described in the 1999 review as “(t)he most significant example of local involvement in sustainable development in the area.... with objectives that stress the sustainable use of natural resources and community-based economies” (Price et al., 1999, p.45). Presently, Ecodyfi describe themselves as a “bilingual locally-controlled organisation” that focuses on “fostering and supporting a greener economy and community” (Ecodyfi, n.d.).

It was primarily Ecodyfi who engaged with the review process, and subsequently began promoting the idea of a renewal and extension of the existing BR. Gaining the support of the Countryside Council for Wales, Ecodyfi received grant aid from the Welsh Government in order to fund a community engagement process. Following this, a steering group was formed that included representatives from the relevant local authorities (Gwynedd, Ceredigion and Powys), and a conference was held in 2004 that included speakers from other BRs – Entlebuch in Switzerland, and Rhon in Germany. A Project Officer was employed between 2005 and 2007, and engaged in a process of public engagement and consultation. This included public meetings, presentations to community councils and local clubs and societies, as well as press releases, a consultation document, and leaflets being sent to every address within the proposed BR. With sufficient support gained from this process, Ecodyfi coordinated the nomination process with the help of a student intern. The nomination documents were then submitted in 2008, and following on request from UNESCO for a revised map, the expanded area was officially designated in 2009.

There are no paid positions focused entirely on the running of the BR. Instead, Biosffer Dyfi is coordinated by a **Partnership** that oversees all activities and reports to UNESCO through Natural Resources Wales and the Welsh Government. The Partnership is made up of members from the three local councils, Snowdonia National Park, Natural Resources Wales, the Welsh Government, and Ecodyfi, as well as various community and business representatives. Numerous **thematic groups or networks** then come together to pursue common interests within the BR. These currently include

Dyfi Biosphere Education Group, and Dyfi Biosphere Tourism Association. Meanwhile, there is an **annual meeting**, which anyone with an interest in the BR is free to attend.

### 3.3. Galloway and Southern Ayrshire

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere consists of an area of 5,200 km<sup>2</sup> (Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere, n.d.) in South-Western Scotland, and was formed around two “first generation” UK BRs, with three elements (Merrick Kells and Silver Flowe were designated as one BR). Two of these are characterised by upland landscapes: Cairnsmore of Fleet is a 700-metre mountain, while Merrick, around which the Merrick Kells site is centred, stands at a height of 843 metres above sea level. The third, Silver Flowe, is a unique bog formation covering 191 hectares located next to Merrick Kells, formerly designated as an NNR (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2018). These sites form the core areas of the new BR, designated in 2012. The buffer zone surrounds all three of these sites, and corresponds largely with the forested areas of the existing Galloway Forest Park – an area managed by Forestry and Land Scotland (formerly Forestry Commission Scotland), that since 2009 has also been designated as a Dark Sky Reserve (Forestry and Land Scotland, n.d.). The transition area includes a mix of arable land and pasture, further forested and upland areas, and small towns and villages, as well as extensive areas of coastline (UNESCO, n.d. c).

The process of re-designation of this larger BR began following the 1999 review, with a Steering Group formed in 2004 to explore the case of an expanded BR. This group comprised representatives from three local authorities (Dumfries and Galloway, South Ayrshire and East Ayrshire), Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA). Having concluded that the designation of a “second generation” BR would be beneficial to the area, the Steering Group began a process of stakeholder and community engagement in order to gauge support and raise awareness and understanding. This process lasted around 3-4 years, and included a community engagement exercise carried out jointly by a local charity, the Southern Upland Partnership (SUP), and the council-funded organisation East Ayrshire Woodlands. SUP is a significant local charity within this BR, being set up in 1999 “by local people keen to keep the communities and countryside of the south of Scotland alive and healthy” (Southern Uplands Partnership, n.d.), and now working closely with the area’s Biosphere Team (see below). This period of engagement and consultation also saw a visit to a BR in France by group of community representatives; and the publication of a report by a private consultancy firm (MacKay Consultants and RSK Era, 2008).

Further consultation and engagement took place in 2010, with the launch of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere website, a series of presentations to community councils, the distribution of leaflets and mailshots to local businesses and the general public, and two public meetings held in towns within the proposed BR. With largely positive responses to all of the above, the nomination for an extended BR was completed, and the new BR was designated in 2012.

The governance structure can be summarised as follows:

- **Biosphere Team:** This is a small team of part-time paid staff - a Biosphere Coordinator (0.6 FTE) and Business Development Officer (0.6 FTE), as well as Secretariat support amounting to 0.2 FTE. This team is affiliated to the Southern Uplands Partnership.
- **Biosphere Partnership:** This group represents a range of stakeholders within the area. The Partnership has a Board consisting of members from SNH, Scottish Land and Forest (formerly Forestry Commission Scotland), the RSPB, the three relevant local authorities (Dumfries and Galloway, and South and East Ayrshire), various community councils, and several small businesses.
- The Partnership is also registered as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), which is governed by a **Board of Trustees**.

### 3.4. Brighton and Lewes Downs

Rebranded in 2017 as “The Living Coast”, Brighton and Lewes Downs Biosphere UNESCO World Biosphere Region is an area of both land and sea of around 390km<sup>2</sup> (UNESCO MAB Committee, n.d. a), centred around the city of Brighton on the South Coast of England.

The process of gaining designation as a BR was initially led by Brighton and Hove City Council, who notably put forward the idea of the area become the first *urban* BR. This idea was launched at a conference in 2008, after which a working group was established, again led by the city council. A full-time Project Officer was then employed in 2011 in order to develop the bid to be submitted to UNESCO. The bid was submitted two years later, following around eighty public events that aimed to engage the general public and a range of possible stakeholders. The BR was designated in 2014.

The area covered by the BR encompasses countryside, including part of the South Downs National Park; cities and towns including Brighton, neighbouring Hove, and other parts of the mostly urban

area stretching East and West along the coast, as well as the inland town of Lewes; and a marine area, part of which is designated as a Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ). The core areas within the BR are 14 SSSIs, almost all within the South Downs National Park. These areas, mostly located on the chalk downland landscapes of the South Downs, are “home to a rich mixture of rare orchid wild flowers, butterflies, birds and geological interest” (The Living Coast, n.d.). Buffer zones consist of the remaining areas of the South Downs NP within the BR, as well as the aforementioned MCZ. The transition area is formed of the remaining marine area within the BR, and the urban areas.

The governance structure of the Living Coast BR has three elements:

- **Biosphere Programme Team:** A small team of staff in paid positions amounting to 1.5 FTE, (plus full-time administrative support), based within the City Council’s International and Sustainability Team.
- **Biosphere Delivery Board:** This consists of twenty people representing key partner organisations from a range of different sectors.
- **Biosphere Partnership:** This includes more than forty different voluntary, conservation, education, local government and private sector bodies, all with an interest in the operation of the BR. Within this, ad-hoc working groups are formed, focusing on – for example – nature conservation, research and monitoring, and arts. Membership of the Delivery Board is drawn from this Partnership.

### 3.5. Wester Ross

Wester Ross Biosphere represents a significant expansion of one of the UK’s “first generation” BRs - Beinn Eighe. This rugged, scree-covered massif, with areas of pine forest at its base, was the first NNR in the UK, being designated as such in 1951. Recently, in 2014, it merged with the nearby Loch Maree Islands to make one large NNR. These are a chain of islands within a large loch that are home to fragments of particularly ancient pine forest (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2015). This NNR, along with Coille Mhor – a designated Special Area of Conservation (SAC) that contains upland oak woodland (Nicholson, 2015) close to Kyle of Lochalsh – constitute the core areas of the BR.

Buffer zones include further SSSIs that encompass remaining pockets of ancient oak woodlands, as well as areas of crofting and farmland, moorland, villages, coastline, saltmarsh, lochs and small offshore islands. The transition area makes up the vast majority of the BR, and consists of “the major settlements and human activity of Wester Ross” (Wester Ross Biosphere, n.d.). This includes a

marine zone as well as a terrestrial zone, encompassing the sea along the whole coastline within the BR. The BR takes up a large part of the North-West Highlands of Scotland, and has a total area of around 5,300km<sup>2</sup> (Price, 2017). A large part of Wester Ross is designated as a National Scenic Area (NSA).

The national review in 1999 recommended the expansion of Beinn Eighe BR, although this change was not initially implemented (Price, 2017). The report found that the Beinn Eighe site alone met too few of the criteria laid out in the Statutory Framework, and recommended that the expansion should place a strong focus on rural development, yet warned that “(a)ny ‘relaunching of the biosphere reserve concept would have to be considered very carefully, given... local sensitivities to the implementation of conservation policy by SNH” (Price et al., 1999, p.64). The word “reserve” was indeed dropped from the title, as in the other BRs.

A significant organisation in expanding the BR was the Wester Ross Alliance (WRA), an NGO set up in 2002 “to bring together local people and organisations to promote sustainable development” (Price 2017, 35). Members of the WRA were involved in a scoping meeting in November 2008 during the second national review of UK BRs, in which most attendees appeared in favour of maintaining BR status or expanding the existing BR (Hambrey Consulting, 2009). Following this, in 2010, the Board of the WRA commissioned a feasibility study of extending the existing BR (Macleod and Price, 2012).

Following the publication of this study, a steering group representing various stakeholders was established, but lack of funding initially resulted a lack of progress being made with regard to the proposed extension of the BR. Price (2017) notes the involvement of Assist Social Capital (ASC), a community interest company working with BRs in the UK and other countries, in the next steps. ASC organised a conference on creating a framework for social enterprise in BRs in Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere In March 2013. This led to the Rural Communities Team in The Scottish Government recognising the potential of BRs and thus funding ASC to carry out a process of engagement to explore interest in an extended BR. A Development Officer began work in 2014, in order to raise awareness of, and to consult with the public on, the proposed extension. With significant support shown, and further support from Scottish Government, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Highland Council and SNH, a proposal for extension was submitted to UNESCO in September 2015 (Price, 2017). The expanded BR was officially designated in 2016.

The current governance structure can be summarised as follows:

- **Biosphere Team:** There are two part-time paid members of staff: a Coordinator (part-funded by SNH) and a Project Officer employed through the EU-funded project (with match-funding from The Scottish Government) “Sustainable Heritage Areas: Partnership for Ecotourism” (SHAPE), which aims to “share insights into sustainable tourism management across the Northern Hemisphere, including new ecotourism initiatives” (Wester Ross Biosphere, n.d.).
- **Board:** The strategic direction is steered by a Board representing a diverse range of stakeholders and geographical locations within the BR. Board members include crofters, owners of tourism businesses, local councilors, as well as staff from museums, a Fisheries Trust, a local primary school, and a Community Development Trust.
- **Membership:** Becoming a member of the BR is open to all residents of the area, either as individuals or representing organisations. The membership then appoint the Board at the AGM.

### 3.6. Isle of Man

The whole of the Isle of Man, a British Crown Dependency, and its territorial waters, were designated as a BR in 2016. This island in the Irish Sea is 53 kilometres long by 21 kilometres wide, encompassing 572 square kilometres (UNESCO MAB Committee, n.d. b) and over 160 kilometres of coastline. There is a variety of landscape types within this fairly compact area: Towns and villages, wetlands, cultivated farmland, lowland and coastal heath, and coast and sea.

Core areas are centred on number of terrestrial SSSIs and NNRs, as well as several marine areas. Most of the rest of the island is counted as the buffer zone, referred to locally as the “care zone”: “we prefer Care Zone as this describes more clearly what it’s about – i.e., taking good care of these areas” (Biosphere Isle of Man, n.d.). The transition area (known locally as the “Sustainable Development Zone”) consists of the towns and villages, plus manmade surfaces such as roads and railways, making up the rest of the island.

The process of establishing the BR began in 2012 with a research student assessing levels of awareness of UNESCO, BRs and the understanding of these terms within stakeholder groups, through conducting a series of interviews. The project was then added to the work programmes of key departments within the Isle of Man government, which enabled the project to be discussed

formally with local business groups and NGOs. The project was led by one government department, with other key stakeholders contributing to the nomination documents. The nomination also gained support from a broad range of stakeholders including Ministers, groups representing farming and fishing, as well as NGOs. Because of the Isle of Man's unique constitutional position, this support had to be gained before the nomination was forwarded to UK National Committee to UNESCO, as well as UK government departments.

The Isle of Man Biosphere is now attached to the Ecosystem Policy team, which forms part of the Isle of Man Government's Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture (DEFA). The Biosphere employs two Project Officers who make up the equivalent of 1.5 full-time paid positions. The wider governance of the BR is led by the government of the whole Crown Dependency, with the island's Chief Minister chairing the BR's **Stakeholder Partnership Group** (UBIOM SPG). This is the coordinating body for the Biosphere; members include representatives from government, education, business, and NGOs. Within this, it had been the intention to form **Thematic groups** to take forward specific tasks, although these have yet to be established (a Vision and a Strategy, however, are currently being developed, and potential thematic groups may be formed on the basis of these). A large number of organisations have become **project partners**, including businesses, charities, community organisations, and educational establishments. Being a "partner" requires organisations to sign a pledge that they will support the principles of the BR. Additionally, a Biosphere Youth Forum has now been created, and is currently under review in order that it can be more fully engaged within the existing governance structure.

### 3.7. Isle of Wight

The Isle of Wight Biosphere is the most recent UK BR, being designated in June 2019 (UNESCO, 2019). The Isle of Wight is an island off the South coast of England that describes itself as "a pocket version of southern England" (Isle of Wight AONB, n.d.). Like the Isle of Man, the entire island – an area of 380km<sup>2</sup> (Isle of Wight Council, 2011) - is now designated as a BR, together with surrounding waters. The island consists of a diverse patchwork of landscapes, including downland, salt marshes, beaches, as well as seaside (and inland) towns. Before gaining BR status, almost 75% of the island is designated for the purposes of nature conservation or the recognition of landscape quality. This includes the almost 50% of the island that makes up the Isle of Wight Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The AONB – which consists of five distinct areas of land - makes up most of the core areas and buffer zones.

The project to attain BR status was pursued by the existing Isle of Wight AONB team, who are hosted by the Isle of Wight Council and housed within the planning services section of the Environment and Neighbourhoods Directorate (Isle of Wight AONB, n.d.). The process began in November 2016 with a visit from representatives of the Isle of Wight to the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire BR. The Isle of Wight AONB team then put together a bid using background information provided by the existing AONB partnership.

The governance structure of the new Isle of Wight Biosphere is an extension to that of the existing Isle of Wight AONB. Funded by DEFRA, the **Isle of Wight AONB Partnership** was established in 2002, and from it, members of a **Steering Committee** for the AONB are democratically elected. This steering committee now provides the main governance structure for the Biosphere. Within the AONB Partnership are two other groups that are significant to the governance of the AONB and BR: an **Advisory Group**, which represents the interests of wider range of stakeholders, and the “**open forum group**”, which is for any people or organisations with an interest in the management of the AONB.

## 4. Themes in the Establishment of UK Biosphere Reserves

This section looks at the process(es) by which the UK BRs were established, reflecting on commonalities as well as differences in these. With reference to the survey completed by coordinators of all UK biosphere reserves, attention is given to the aims cited by respondents, the common features in the process(es) of setting up the BRs, as well as themes in terms of how the governance structures of each BR were established.

### 4.1. Aims in the establishment of biosphere reserves

This sub-section looks at the stated aims of applying for the formal designation of areas as BRs, and how these are presented, based on answers to the question “What were the aims of establishing your area?” Responses largely reflected the stated aims of BRs in general, and there are considerable commonalities across the aims cited by different respondents. The following three overarching themes can be identified across these responses.

#### **i) Reconciling stewardship of sensitive environments with economic development:**

There was a recognition across survey responses that conservation of biodiversity or valued landscapes need not be viewed as being in opposition to economic development. In fact, respondents identified potential benefits of a focus on the stewardship of such environments, and that designation as a BR would further increase this potential. Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, for example, stated that a key aim of establishing the area as a BR was “to demonstrate that the stewardship of highly sensitive environments can be the driver for economic and social development”, while North Devon recognised it as an opportunity to “(i)mprove the environment generally of North Devon and enhance its economy at the same time”. The Isle of Man, similarly, cited the aim of making the island “a special place for people and nature with a vibrant community, valued ecosystems and resilient economy”, once again recognising the benefits for both ecosystems *and* the local economy.

#### **ii) Attracting funding and resources:**

Closely related to the economic development discussed above was the aim of using the biosphere designation to attract further funding and resources to the areas in question. The Isle of Wight, for example, saw it as an opportunity to “attract new resources” in order to “manage the island’s natural capital”, while Brighton and Lewes Downs recognised BR status as a “potential ‘USP’ to attract funding and support”.

### iii) Bringing together different stakeholders in the sustainable development of an area:

Throughout survey responses, there was a focus on the biosphere ‘brand’, and governance, as a means of uniting people and organisations representing different interests under a common purpose and identity, thus helping to build links between them. For Biosffer Dyfi, for example, a key aim of establishing the BR was to “encourage discussion, agreement and co-ordination between people and organisations with different values and priorities”, while Brighton and Lewes Downs saw it as a chance to “offer a framework for partnership working of local stakeholders”. Wester Ross provided a similar response, stating that they “want(ed) to provide a framework for residents, organisations and businesses for the sustainable development of the area along with the conservation of its natural heritage” – a response that also fits clearly with the previous theme. Finally, on the Isle of Wight, given the island’s large proportion of previously designated or protected land, “UNESCO Biosphere Reserve was considered a unifying framework for the Isle of Wight, to guide the ways in which the population view, value, use and manage the Island’s natural capital”.

#### 4.2. Length of time taken to establish biosphere reserves

Respondents were asked how long the process of establishing the BR took. This was open to different interpretations – for example, did the process begin when the idea was initially considered, or when consultation had taken place and the process of completing the nomination documents began? Based on the full descriptions of the establishment processes in the survey responses, as well as supplementary information of the relevant BR websites, the approximate length of time taken to establish each BR is listed in the table below. This reveals considerable variation in the length of the process: from two to ten years. The table also lists whether the current BRs were entirely newly designated, or extensions of “first generation” BRs, and reveals that this did not, on the whole, impact upon the time taken by the process.

| BR                          | Old to new style? | Time taken |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| North Devon                 | Yes               | 2 years    |
| Isle of Wight               | No                | 2.5 years  |
| Isle of Man                 | No                | 4 years    |
| Brighton and Lewes Downs    | No                | 6 years    |
| Wester Ross                 | Yes               | 6 years    |
| Galloway and South Ayrshire | Yes               | 8 years    |
| Dyfi                        | Yes               | 10 years   |

**Table 4a:** Table summarising the length of time taken to establish each of the UK’s Biosphere Reserves.

Several of the time periods listed in the table were particularly difficult to determine – for example, when no time was given in the survey response. In most cases, however, the process was seen as beginning when a given organisation within an area began to officially investigate the idea of establishing or extending a BR. In the case of Wester Ross, for example, the time of six years is taken from 2010, when the Board of the Wester Ross Alliance began investigating the feasibility of extending the existing BR, until the establishment of the new BR in 2016. With Dyfi, meanwhile, the survey response indicates that Ecodefyfi began to “agitate for renewal (of the existing BR) with DEFRA, Welsh Government and local stakeholders” immediately following their involvement in the initial periodic review in 1999, thus making it ten years until the new area was formally established in 2009.

As the following sub-section will demonstrate, there were very similar features in the process of setting up each of the BRs, including a period of community consultation, holding public events, and completing the nomination documents. The length of time taken appears to reflect the level of priority given to the establishment of a BR by the organisations pursuing it, or those that they were trying to gain the support of. That is, the establishment of each BR involved largely the same processes, but over a longer period in some cases.

#### 4.3. Who started the process?

In terms of starting the process of establishing or applying for the extension of BRs, there was variation in terms of the organisations who first took the initiative with this. Most commonly, the process was officially begun by the relevant local authority or government. Brighton and Hove City Council, for example, are cited as having first put forward the idea of an “urban BR” centred around the city of Brighton; in North Devon, the current Biosphere Coordinator began the process of establishing the new BR, while working for Devon County Council. Similarly, the Isle of Wight AONB team - who began the process there - are hosted by the local authority. Finally, On the Isle of Man, it was the Isle of Man Government that first took forward the idea of a BR. (This is in fact a uniquely positioned organisation that, given the island’s status as a Crown Dependency, holds most of the powers of a national government as well as many of those of a UK local authority).

In two cases, beginning the process of (re)establishing a BR derived from a group representing diverse interests within an area. In Wester Ross, Board members of the Wester Ross Alliance began to investigate the feasibility of an extension to the original Beinn Eighe BR. In Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, the respondents cite a steering group of sorts as starting the process – this comprised the

local council, as well as Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Environmental Protection Agency. Biosffer Dyfi, however, was unique in that it was a local sustainable development NGO – Ecodyfi - that began to lobby for the extension of the existing BR following the first national review in the late 1990s.

#### 4.4. Who (else) was involved?

Following on from initial investigations started by the organisations listed in the previous subsection, a wide range of local and national organisations are cited as being involved in the subsequent establishment of the seven UK BRs. Typically the process of establishing these BRs, once begun, developed into a “steering group”, or similarly termed group, consisting of representatives from a variety of organisations. There was also, however, always some form of community consultation. This often took the form of meetings with community councils, but also involved a greater variety of public events in most cases. For Brighton and Lewes Downs, for example, a series of around eighty public events were held, while in Dyfi, presentations were given to various clubs and societies, public meetings were held, and leaflets were sent to every address within the proposed BR inviting people to comment.

The establishment of most BRs involved all, or almost all, of the following types of stakeholder:

- **Local authorities**, or sometimes a combination of several neighbouring local authorities (for example, Dumfries and Galloway, East Ayrshire and South Ayrshire councils in the case of Galloway and South Ayrshire BR; and Gwynedd, Powys and Ceredigion in the case of Dyfi).
- **Town and community councils** within those local authorities, meaning engagement took place at an even more local level.
- **Community members**, usually through involvement with community councils or attendance of public consultation events.
- **Government agencies**, such as SNH, SEPA, Forestry Commission Scotland, Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature, the Environment Agency, and National Park Authorities such as Snowdonia and South Downs.

- **NGOs**, including various county-level Wildlife Trusts and other locally-based organisations, as well as national NGOs such as RSPB, Scottish Land and Estates, National Trust and National Trust for Scotland.
- **Businesses**, often through business groups (such as Wester Ross Alliance), but also individually from (for example) bus companies, private estates, and tourism businesses.
- **“Others”** cited in the survey included individual residents (Dyfi); Gairloch and Ullapool Museums and the local Deer Management Group (Wester Ross); and education establishments such as schools and universities (Brighton and Lewes Downs).

#### 4.5. Themes in the establishment of governance structures

The establishment of governance structures within all UK BRs appears in all cases to reflect the diversity of organisations that were involved in the establishment of the BR as a whole. The survey asked the question “How was this governance structure established and who were the key actors?”, and all responses indicated that the governance structure had developed from the range of organisations that had been part of the BR’s initial “steering committee”. Dyfi, for example, indicated that the governance structure “evolved from the steering group established to oversee the engagement and nomination process”; in Wester Ross, “the structure was determined by an interim committee made up of people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, including local government, NGOs, community groups, local businesses and individuals”.

However, there are now differences in the *current* governance structures between different BRs, as explored in the following section.

## 5. Themes in Current Governance of UK Biosphere Reserves

Having looked at the processes by which the seven UK BRs were established, this section looks at the *current* themes in their governance structure and practices.

### 5.1. Top-down, bottom-up, or a matter of interpretation?

The survey asked “How would you describe the governance structure (of your area)?”, with respondents given the options “top-down”, “bottom-up” and “other” to select from. Responses showed a range of different types of governance structure, with two selecting “bottom-up”, two as “top-down”, and three as “other”. These responses are shown in the table below.

|                                |           |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Brighton and Lewes Downs       | Top-down  |
| Isle of Wight                  | Top-down  |
| Wester Ross                    | Bottom-up |
| Galloway and Southern Ayrshire | Bottom-up |
| North Devon                    | Other     |
| Isle of Man                    | Other     |
| Dyfi                           | Other     |

**Table 5a:** Table summarising types of governance structure in each UK Biosphere Reserve.

In reality, however, these choices were open to considerable interpretation, and there appear to be similar characteristics across the governance structures of all UK BRs. Respondents who selected “other” were asked to explain their choice, and their responses demonstrate the possibility of different interpretations. In these cases, selecting “other” referred mostly to the involvement of a “partnership” of many different organisations working together, with no one organisation being at the “top” in terms of decision-making. This, however, was a feature of the governance structures in *all* BRs, as already outlined in section 2, and further explored in the following section.

### 5.2. Common features/differences within governance structures

This section begins by describing the clearest difference between some of the BRs – the presence or otherwise of dedicated team of paid staff – before exploring the commonalities that exist across the governance structures of all or most UK BRs.

#### i) Variation in existence of a core “Biosphere Team”:

Among the UK BRs and their governance structures outlined in section 2, one of the most striking variations was the presence in some, but not others, of a core “Biosphere Team” (or similar) dedicated to the implementation of BR-related activities. North Devon, Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, Brighton and Lewes Downs, and Wester Ross all have such a team within their governance structure, and in all these cases, these include paid members of staff.

Within this, however, there is variation in the *number* of staff employed in roles dedicated to the BR. North Devon has seven paid staff in positions relating to the BR, Galloway and Southern Ayrshire has two (plus secretarial support). In Brighton and Lewes Downs, there are positions equivalent to 1.5 paid positions (plus full-time administrative support); and in Wester Ross, there are two half-time positions.

The recently-established Isle of Wight is a slight variation on this, since what would elsewhere be called a Biosphere Team appears to be an extension to the remit of the existing AONB team within the council.

#### **ii) “Partnership” with representation from a range of stakeholders:**

All UK BRs have a “Partnership”, consisting of representatives from a range of stakeholder organisations, as a key aspect of their governance. In most cases, this is referred to as the “Biosphere Partnership”, though there are slight variations – on the Isle of Man, for example, this is referred to as the “Stakeholder Partnership Group”. On the Isle of Wight, the Partnership is an extension of the existing AONB governance structure, with the existing “AONB Partnership” being central to the governance of the BR.

Wester Ross has another slight variation on this, with a Board and a wider “membership”, without mention of a “partnership”. Effectively, however, these appear to overlap to form something essentially the same as the “partnership” in other BRs. The Board, as outlined in section 2, includes owners of tourism businesses, local councillors, and members of staff from (for example) museums and schools. In all cases, however, there is representation of organisations including local councils, businesses, NGOs, community councils, government agencies, and so on.

#### **iii) “Thematic groups”:**

In the survey, respondents from both Dyfi and the Isle of Man both pointed to the forming of “thematic groups” within their Biosphere Partnerships, although the Isle of Man have thus far not

taken these forward. Thematic groups are ad-hoc teams that are formed to take forward particular projects or areas of interest stemming from the work of the Partnership.

#### iv) Board or “Steering Group”:

As well as the Biosphere Partnerships discussed above, most of the BRs also have a Board or a “Steering Group” within their governance structure. In the cases of North Devon and Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, the BR is, or is connected to, a registered charity, and the Board are its directors. There are also variations in terms of where Board members are drawn from. In all cases, however, the Board appears to be drawn from the range of stakeholders represented in the Partnership, or in the case of Wester Ross, by its “membership” (which appears to be very similar to the Partnerships in other BRs).

#### v) Open membership:

As well as the Partnerships and Boards discussed above, another feature of the governance structures of BRs is the openness to any local residents, or simply those with an interest in the BR, joining a looser “membership”, or otherwise being given opportunity for input. Such input is often through AGMs that anyone is free to attend.

### 5.3. Formal legal status

Respondents were asked whether their BR had a formal legal basis. This revealed a range of different statuses among BRs, with four having no official legal basis, while the two that do are registered differently. Details of this are given in the table below.

| BR                             | Formal legal basis? | Legislation/details   |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| North Devon                    | No                  | Although the BR itself does not have formal legal status, an independent charity has been established – the North Devon Biosphere Foundation. |
| Dyfi                           | No                  |   |
| Galloway and Southern Ayrshire | Yes                 | The Biosphere Partnership is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO).  |
| Brighton and Lewes Downs       | No                  |   |
| Wester Ross                    | Yes                 | Wester Ross Biosphere is a Company Limited by Guarantee, registered with Companies House.   |
| Isle of Man                    | No                  |   |
| Isle of Wight                  | No                  |   |

**Table 5b:** Table summarising the formal legal basis of the UK’s Biosphere Reserves.

## 6. Success and Challenges in the Governance of UK Biosphere Reserves

### 6.1. Success of engaging stakeholders

As discussed in the previous sections, a key aspect of the setting up of all UK BRs was the engagement of a range of stakeholders, and this continues to be reflected in their current governance structures. Respondents were asked to report on how successful they felt this engagement had been, as follows: “Please rate the success of participatory engagement processes for engaging stakeholders in the governance of your area, where one is not at all successful, and 5 is highly successful”. The table below presents the reported scores and, on the whole, demonstrates a high level of perceived success.

| BR                             | Reported success (1-5) |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| North Devon                    | 4                      |
| Dyfi                           | 4                      |
| Galloway and Southern Ayrshire | 4                      |
| Brighton and Lewes Downs       | 2                      |
| Wester Ross                    | 3                      |
| Isle of Man                    | 4                      |
| Isle of Wight                  | 4                      |

**Table 6a:** Table summarising the reported success of stakeholder engagement in the UK’s Biosphere Reserves.

Respondents were then asked to provide reasons for the scores given – that is, *why* they felt that the engagement of stakeholders had been a success or otherwise. Two of those who had given a score of four viewed the early public engagement events they had held as being particularly important. North Devon pointed to the value of “(l)ots of engagement events and planning events for people to be involved”, while for the Isle of Man, “(e)arly in the project a facilitated workshop took place, the results of which were significant enough to feature in nomination paper appendices”. Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, meanwhile, focused on the current structure of the Board, which has gone through several iterations to reach its current structure. The application to UNESCO was largely driven by staff working within the public sector in order to achieve funding and “strategic buy-in”. Following this, however, a new Board structure was established that was “far more representative of the bodies living and working in the Biosphere, and following a further revamp, now actively involve(s) partners in the decision-making process”. This once again points to the importance of

engaging a wide range of stakeholders – that is, before taking steps to set up a BR and its governance structure, fully accounting for who the diverse stakeholders might be.

The respondent from Brighton and Lewes Downs gave a significantly lower score for their engagement of stakeholders. The focus here was on the difficulty of maintaining stakeholders' engagement levels. Their perception was that participation levels of potential stakeholders had been "higher... during the bid development stage, when we had more focus on and resources for explicit engagement against a specific goal". The challenge, instead, is *keeping* people and organisations engaged during the actual running of the established BR, where "increases in public engagement are of a more of a passive/ less direct way through our improvements in communications channels and activities". This response resonates with some of the challenges highlighted in section 6.3, below.

## 6.2. Examples of successful governance strategies

Following on from self-reporting on the success or otherwise of stakeholder engagement, respondents were asked to provide examples of "good practice in the governance" of their areas. The overarching themes in their responses can be summarised as local buy-in, and the representation of a wide range of stakeholders within governance structures. These are expanded upon below.

### **i) Diverse and locally-based Board and/or Partnership membership:**

Several respondents pointed to both the importance of *local* involvement in the Partnerships and/or Boards outlined in section 3. Dyfi stated that "the Partnership has a wide-ranging and locally-weighted membership", while in Wester Ross, the "Board is made up of a cross-section of people with a range of backgrounds and experiences as well as geographic spread" (geographic spread being important in a large area where many locations are very remote).

Additionally to people's backgrounds and locations within a given BR, Brighton and Lewes Downs pointed to the importance of "developing a broad *multi-sectoral* Biosphere Partnership" – that is, one that has representatives from a range of sectors including government agencies, local authorities, charities, and local businesses. This respondent also pointed to the importance of the BR, outside of its own governance structure, "establishing formal links with other local 'umbrella' governance structures in city strategy and economic development spheres".

## **ii) Local involvement in decision-making and feelings of “ownership”:**

Across responses, there was a clear focus on the importance of involving local people in both the establishment of, and decision-making related to, BRs – of “responding to the public” through “open decision-making and communication”, as the respondent for North Devon phrased it.

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire describe further the development of their governance structure, as discussed in the previous sub-section. They describe how, while reducing the number of Board members from 26 to 16 during 2017/17, they “elected new trustees who were all non-public sector individuals”, which “moved the decision-making away from the funders (public sector) and into the hands of local people/organisations which has generated a positive uplift in feelings of ‘ownership’ towards the Biosphere”.

The Isle of Man refer in particular to the importance of engaging potential stakeholders early on in the process of establishing a BR. They point to specific examples of decisions that were made as a result of local consultation, including changing the local wording of the project from “Biosphere Vannin” (Ellan Vannin is the Manx-language name for the island) to “UNESCO Biosphere Isle of Man”. They also point to input from farmers as being “critical to the zonation approach”, as well as the use of the term “care zone” rather than “buffer zone”.

## **6.3. Challenges of biosphere governance**

Alongside the successful strategies employed in the governance of UK BRs, respondents were asked to identify the “main challenges for governance” of their areas. The themes across their responses are explored here. Potential improvements to governance strategies are then explored in section 6.5, but the overall challenges can be summarised as follows:

### **i) Securing and maintaining funding (and subsequent time constraints):**

UNESCO designates BRs, but does not provide any funding for them. Instead, sources of funding vary between different BRs. In some cases, limited funding is often provided by agencies of national governments or local governments (sometimes core funding; often for time-bound projects); in others, there is no core funding and it is hoped that the BR designation will itself provide a boost to the local economy. Indeed, Biosfer Dyfi cited their lack of core funding as a key challenge, adding that in a financial climate of “austerity”, cutbacks to local authorities and government departments mean that “public bodies are finding it more difficult to spend the time”. Elsewhere, in two BRs that *do* have small core teams of paid staff, “dealing with budget cutbacks” (North Devon) and “securing

yearly funding contributions from key partners to pay for our core costs” (Brighton and Lewes Downs) are still listed as key challenges. Linked to these financial challenges is the challenge cited by Brighton and Lewes Downs, of “enabling a voice for an environmental agenda amongst the primacy of economic concerns”.

#### **ii) Challenges of cohesion:**

Two BRs cited challenges relating to the number of different interests and positions represented within their governance structure. This is particularly notable because, as highlighted in previous sections, having a diverse and wide-ranging membership of Partnerships or Boards is both a common feature of BRs’ governance structures, and cited as an example of a successful governance strategy. As will be highlighted in the following sub-section, having *more* diverse representation is also cited by several as a potential improvement to BR governance. Clearly, however, engaging a high number of perspectives and interests can result in somewhat unwieldy decision-making processes, as highlighted in the following response from Galloway and Southern Ayrshire: “In the beginning because we wanted to include everyone we ended up having too many Board members. This meant that it was difficult to achieve quorum on decision making and was also challenging to have active discussion and participation of all members”.

Meanwhile, having cited the broad “cross-section of people” on the Board as an example of successful governance, Wester Ross cite similar challenges of cohesion for reasons of geographical distance: “The area is vast and comprised of remote communities. The size and scattered nature of the area makes it difficult to form a cohesive entity as well as the practical problem of Board members having to travel large distances to attend meetings”.

#### **iii) Lack of prioritisation and proactivity by partner organisations – “nobody is responsible”:**

Related to the lack of cohesion discussed above is the lack of prioritisation and decisive action being taken by partner organisations that was cited as a challenge of governance in several BRs. This can be attributed in part to the multi-sectoral representation in governance structures, which means there is often no one organisation that is clearly “in charge” of the BR. In turn, there can often be a lack of prioritisation of the BR by *any* of the organisations involved. Dyfi focus in particular on local authorities, whose elected members “find it difficult to afford the time”. They point to this as being indicative of the underlying challenge that “the area consists of the corners of three geographically very large counties, and, and therefore is not a priority for any of them”. In response to the following question around potential improvements to BR governance, the same respondent suggests better

communication between partners such as community councils, but points out that “nobody is responsible for this, or has resources to do it”.

Similarly, Galloway and Southern Ayrshire describe how the Biosphere Coordinator was also working in another role within the local authority at key times during the establishment of the BR’s governance structure, and “this meant that facilitation of the Trustees/Board members took second place and so wasn’t as active as it could be”.

#### **iv) Sustaining interest from partners:**

Another challenge relating to the number and spread of people involved in the governance of BRs, and the lack of prioritisation by any one organisation, is simply keeping partner organisations involved and interested. As noted above, Brighton and Lewes Downs reflected that stakeholder engagement appeared to become more “passive” once the common goal of establishing the BR had been achieved. North Devon similarly point to the difficulty of “keeping some of the local authorities in the mix”, while the Isle of Wight point to the challenge of “ensuring all portfolios within the Steering Group are occupied”, indicating a lack of willingness among partner organisations to take on certain responsibilities. In response to an earlier question, meanwhile, the respondent from Dyfi reflected that thematic groups within its Partnership “tend to go quiet or dormant when not actively supported by Ecodefy or grant aid”.

#### **v) Lack of awareness of and misunderstandings around the concept of biosphere reserves:**

In terms of challenges, the Isle of Man pointed to a remaining “lack of awareness that such a thing as UNESCO Biosphere Reserves exist, and misunderstandings about what ‘it’ is and what it means”. They point to the FAQs on their website as being particularly important for redressing this. As the following sub-section demonstrates, however, there remains a perceived lack of awareness of BRs across all UK BRs.

### **6.4. Visibility and identity of biosphere reserves**

One survey question highlighted the added challenge of raising awareness of the BR, and the wider concept of UNESCO BRs, among the area’s wider population. Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, how well-known they felt the area’s designation as a BR was among local citizens, local businesses, and visitors respectively. Responses indicate that awareness of the BRs could be considerably improved among local populations as a whole. In other words, a high proportion of residents are unaware that they live in a BR, and this designation is also not well-known among

visitors (and therefore, presumably not a key reason for their visit). The responses across the seven UK BRs are summarised in the table below.

|                                | Local citizens | Local businesses | Visitors |
|--------------------------------|----------------|------------------|----------|
| North Devon                    | 2              | 2                | 2        |
| Dyfi                           | 3              | 3                | 2        |
| Galloway and Southern Ayrshire | 2              | 2                | 1        |
| Brighton and Lewes Downs       | 2              | 2                | 2        |
| Wester Ross                    | 3              | 3                | 2        |
| Isle of Man                    | 2              | 2                | 1        |
| Isle of Wight                  | 2              | 2                | 1        |

**Table 6b:** Table summarising reported “visibility” of UK Biosphere Reserves among local citizens, local businesses, and visitors.

The overall lack of awareness among local citizens and businesses would appear to contradict the findings presented in section 6.1, which indicated a high level of self-reported success in engaging local stakeholders. It is possible, however, that while considerable numbers of interested individuals and organisations *were* engaged in the process of establishing the BRs, there remained at least an equally high number of people who were unaware of it. It is also possible that, now the BRs are established, more work needs to be done in order to increase the visibility of the concept. This brings to mind the comment from Brighton and Lewes Downs cited earlier, where the respondent reported high levels of engagement during the establishment of the BR, but that this has become more “passive” now that the BR is actually established.

The reported overall lack of awareness of the BRs is in spite of the use of a number of different means of promotion. Respondents were also asked “What means have you used to establish the local/regional identity of your area?” Responses indicated that all sites have promoted their area’s new identity as a BR through the use of a logo or brand, a website, community consultation and events, and media such as press, television and radio. Meanwhile, all except the very recently-established Isle of Wight have issued a newsletter as part of their promotional activities. Other means of promotion listed in response to this question included the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as physical banners and panels for use at events and in key locations.

It is also notable that the perceived visibility among local populations does not appear to increase according to the length of time that BRs have been established. The BRs in the table above are listed in order of the year in which they were established. While Dyfi has one of the higher levels of

perceived visibility, North Devon has the same scores as the more recently-established Isle of Man and Isle of Wight in terms of awareness among local citizens and businesses. This indicates that further work is needed to promote the identity of the area as a BR. This may include (re)engagement with the general public through further events, wider circulation of a regular newsletter, and further engagement through the media.

### 6.5. Sharing success: Ideas for improvement of biosphere reserve governance

Respondents were asked the question “In what ways could your governance model be improved?”

Although they generally considered their BRs’ governance structures and engagement with potential stakeholders to have been a success (as highlighted in section 5.1), some notable suggestions were still made. These can be summarised under the following three themes.

#### **i) Improved or more regular involvement of existing partners:**

Despite the perceived success of engaging stakeholders, this was the most commonly suggested type of improvement by respondents. Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, for example, feel that they “now have a good model” of governance, but are still “working to find ways of involving Board members more actively with decision making, without over burdening them with requests for involvement”. They accept, however, that this “can be a fine balancing act”. Elsewhere, Dyfi suggest that their governance model could be improved through “better communication, whether with formal partners or others such as town and community councils”, while North Devon also suggest a “stronger emphasis on communications”. Finally, Brighton and Lewes Downs, with the “passive” engagement of the public in mind, suggest that “more structured engagement with partners, stakeholders and perhaps the public” would be beneficial, in order to “encourage greater collaborative and/or integrated working”.

#### **ii) Engagement with a wider range of partners:**

Despite the challenges with engaging a wide range of stakeholders, two respondents suggested that their governance model would be improved by further widening the range of people and organisations represented. Both of these focus on specific groups that have been thus far under-represented, with the Isle of Wight suggesting “wider engagement with business”, and Wester Ross suggesting “engaging more with the younger generation so that they are involved more”.

### iii) Formalisation of biosphere reserves:

As highlighted in section 5.3, only two of the seven UK BRs (Wester Ross and Galloway and Southern Ayrshire) have a formal legal basis, while North Devon is represented by an independent charity. These BRs are their own independent entity, separate from local authorities and government agencies. Brighton and Lewes Downs, who do not have this independent status, recognise the benefits of this, and point to the “potential formalisation and/or independent status” of their own BR, “enabling it to raise its own income from a wider range of possible sources”, rather than relying on government or local authority funding. It should be noted here that although no respondents mentioned asking for Biosphere Reserve status to be incorporated into the statutes of either the UK Government or Devolved Administrations, these routes to formalisation do exist in principle.

## 7. Summary and Conclusions

Drawing upon responses to a survey into the governance structures of the UK's seven UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (BRs), this report has sought to reflect upon the process(es) by which these BRs were established and the governance structures now employed in their ongoing management, and to identify the successes and challenges in terms of the governance of these BRs. In light of these successes and challenges, the report has also sought to identify lessons to be learned from the establishment of the UK's BRs and their governance structures, and to offer suggestions for their improved governance.

This report has identified a number of key themes in terms of the processes by which the UK's BRs were established. These include the similar aims cited by respondents from different BRs, which can be broadly summarised as reconciling stewardship of sensitive environments with economic development, attracting funding and resources, and bringing together different stakeholders in the sustainable development of an area. Additionally, although the length of time taken for setting up BRs varied between two and ten years, and there was variation in terms of the organisations that *started* the process, the establishment of all seven BRs tended to involve the same processes spread over different time periods. These processes included the establishment of a "steering group" with representation across a variety of organisations, and some form of community consultation, such as meetings with community councils. The organisations subsequently involved in the process always included (some if not all of) local authorities, town and community councils, community members, government agencies, NGOs, and local businesses.

The report has also identified a number of common features across the current governance structures of different BRs. These included some form of "Biosphere Partnership", with representation from a range of stakeholders; "thematic groups" working on specific projects; a Board or "Steering Group"; and "membership" of the BR that is open to any local residents or interested individuals. An important difference between BRs, however, was that some have a core "Biosphere Team" of paid staff, while some do not.

A number of successful aspects of BR governance have been identified in this report, based on survey responses. These include having diverse and locally-based Board and/or Partnership membership, and local involvement in BR-related decision-making and subsequent feelings of "ownership" over the reserve. Related to this was the self-reported success of stakeholder

engagement across the seven BRs, which was generally high among all respondents. A number of challenges with BR governance, however, were also identified. These can be summarised as securing and maintaining funding (and associated time constraints); challenges of cohesion stemming from such diverse representation in governance structures; a lack of prioritisation and proactivity by partner organisations, none of whom are responsible for the BR alone; sustaining interest from partners who were involved in the establishment of BRs; and a lack of awareness of and misunderstandings around the concept of biosphere reserves. Related to this final point is a reported lack of “visibility” and identity of the seven BRs among local residents, local businesses, and visitors.

Although respondents generally considered the governance structures of their BRs and engagement with potential stakeholders to have been a success, they nonetheless offered suggestions for the improvement of BR governance. These can be summarised as improved or more regular involvement of existing partners; engagement with a wider range of partners (although there is a potential tension here with the challenge of cohesion cited above); and the formalisation of BRs so that they have a legal basis, meaning that income can be raised from a variety of sources rather than just from government or local authorities.

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