

Forest of Dean – The Forest’s Future Story

Dialogues and Group Conversations about a potential Forest of Dean District UNESCO Biosphere.

January-March 2026



Background

Wylderne Ltd., a local community benefit society based at the Wilderness Centre in Mitcheldean, and the Forest Voluntary Action Forum were commissioned by the Forest of Dean District Council on behalf of the Biosphere Steering Group in January 2026 to design and facilitate a citizen engagement project to gather additional grass roots evidence that might support a UNESCO Biosphere application. Given the Biosphere’s low profile, the approach taken was appreciative and participatory, starting with people’s stories of connection to place, and then exploring if a future Biosphere designation might support the next chapter in the Forest’s story as they saw it. The project was conducted not only to answer the need for community data, but to activate the field of deep and shared caring for the Forest in advance of multiple forthcoming challenges: local government reorganisation, significant new housebuilding, growing youth inactivity and unemployment, and childhood obesity. And should a Biosphere designation be awarded – and even if it were not - for this well of care to enable the considerable potential in the Forest borne of its long history to further unfold.

Executive Summary

Not surprisingly the people who contributed to this exercise celebrated the unique qualities of the place: it's proud independent spirit; the resilience, kindness and resourcefulness of its communities; the beauty of the landscape, the freedom to explore it; and the joy as well as healing qualities this access brings.

Ancient and hard-won customary rights are woven into the appreciations both of those originating from the area, and those who have moved here from elsewhere. However, shaped by a history of struggle for these rights, there is vigilance at any real or perceived threat that they will be encroached upon. Nevertheless, it was clear that keepers of ancient customs and rights care profoundly for this place - and their appreciation of the opportunity to protect and grow the biodiversity, to celebrate the fruits of the land, to include local people in having their say in whatever is decided, as well as a desire to see a more holistic approach to development across the Forest - is widely shared across the district.

Among the retired population, the possibility of a Biosphere designation was associated with just such a vision and was generally positively regarded, with participants 'reasonably' hopeful it would draw out more of the potential of the Forest. The younger generation of the Forest expressed deep affection for their home, a strong sense of belonging, and a powerful desire to protect and nurture the environment that shapes their identity. Their aspirations seem to align closely with the principles of a UNESCO Biosphere: sustainability, community engagement, cultural vitality, and ecological stewardship. Their insights offered a roadmap for what a youth centred, environmentally conscious future could look like for this special place.

Among Town and Parish Councillors who engaged there are hopes for a local circular economy that uses local resources like Forest timber for construction, and among the wider public too, an aspiration for 'nature recovery' to be at the heart of every decision; for access and self-sufficiency in fresh food; for creating opportunities for art to make a bridge between culture and nature; and for the Forest to be a beacon of nature education

During the workshops of this process, it became apparent that more detailed information needed to be shared with Commoners and other groups within the Forest. They hungered for more to better understand what a Biosphere designation might imply for freedom of access, even while a majority responding to the online forum did not believe a designation would constitute an imposition of 'more top-down' rules that would 'ignore the needs of real Foresters'. Necessarily, these conversations continue.

A majority agree that the essence of the Forest is 'stewardship': an example of sustainable living, a "shining jewel" for balancing nature and human needs. This comes to life as an "educational centre of excellence" to teach children and adults about nature, playing a positive role in climate change by better utilising local resources (e.g., local timber), managing waterways to prevent flooding, as well as offering a model for community regeneration (e.g., managing housing for all ages) and continuing to be an example of how communities can unite and win against threats, maintaining its unique working-class identity. This story of active stewardship and community regeneration could become the guiding light for how a Biosphere serves the district, for the kinds of businesses and tourism the district attracts, and even how the Forest could serve the wider country once more.

Stewardship in the way that local people explain it, (borne out by GVA¹ figures in the Council’s analysis of the local economy) reveal its bones to be graft, gratitude, and community self-reliance. Add to that the ancient customary rights - including those of river workers – and the access to land championed two centuries ago by the Chartists in the north of the district, and there is a story for the whole country to be inspired by. Such a story could cause each UK region to remember, even recover its own commoning traditions. Forest stewardship in this era of regenerative thinking is summed up in participants’ words as including a local food system that ‘regenerates local soils’; a region producing its own green energy, promoting a quality ‘Forest brand’ (eg. ‘meat, timber, cider’); inviting tourists to engage with the local heritage and biodiversity; ‘researching new industries’ that work in sympathy with the landscape and provide employment for the young; taking action to bring alive the decision to award all three local rivers legal rights so people can again enjoy pollution-free swimming and fishing; and celebrating the legacy of commoning by making this the centre of a compelling future story. This then is a narrative that community leaders can communicate into the future, one that draws on the potential of the Forest rooted in its essence to meet head on the coming challenges, connecting the Forest back to its own proud story of community governance. Oh, and while you’re at it, let’s address the littering, remind the Forest’s young people.

Audiences and Engagement

It was agreed that we would work through existing community hubs and clubs in order to reach a wide range of local residents both in 1:1 as well as group conversations across as broad a geography and demographic as could be reached within the limited timescale and budget. The 1:1 dialogues were conducted with generally though not exclusively, an older retired demographic at drop-in centres across the district; five sets of conversations were facilitated with groups of young people at their regular get-togethers; town and parish councillors were called together from across the 40 parishes, invited directly and through their clerks, and they too were facilitated as a group; and the wider public was engaged through a concerted online marketing campaign that directed them to two online options, one text-based, the other a video chat room. Finally, local business groups were also invited through their town associations, and through the Forest Economic Partnership. We were unsuccessful in engaging businesspeople face to face.

Audience	Locations	Output
Adults – FVAF drop-in centres <i>Generally older</i>	Twelve drop-in centres across Sedbury, Coleford, Lydney, Cinderford, Newent and Staunton Corse;	35 one-to-one conversations.

² The group consensus at the Ow Bist workshop led by the commoners present was that it was impossible to focus on the future without knowing more detail of what a Biosphere designation would mean in practice. The group as a whole then agreed to draft specific questions they wanted answers to. These questions are in the Appendix. They were passed on to the Council’s biosphere team for their response.

Parish and Town Councillors Meeting at the Wilderness Centre	Representatives from Huntley; Ruardean; Staunton; West Dean; St. Briavels; Mitcheldean; Newland; Lydbrook; Coleford	13 Councillors attended (one group)
Young people's groups	Groups in Coleford (15-21yr olds) , Newent (15-17yr olds), Ruardean (11-13yr olds), Blakeney (9-11yr olds) and Cinderford (13-15yerolds) including an LGBTQ+ group	40 young people (in groups)
Joint workshops	FODCAP (Climate Action Partnership), Food Forest Network and Commoners ² Group workshop at Ow Bist, Cinderford	25 participants (one group)
General public	Online text-based forum Polis	61 participants 2,302 votes cast
AI-moderated video sessions	Two sessions designed with Stanford University's Deliberative Democracy Unit	6 bookings, no participants
Communications		
All engagement options were promoted through FVAF channels: website, Facebook groups and pages, and shared by FODDC. Printed materials were produced and distributed and bespoke Eventbrite events set up.		

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Structure of Engagements

Each group was engaged slightly differently according to age group and whether we were connecting with participants face to face, 1:1, in a group, or online.

With the older and the younger groups we began by asking people for their stories or sentiments that reminded them why they lived in the Forest, why they were proud, or glad to call it home. All these encounters also faced the question: could you describe the whole Forest of Dean as a person, someone who has grown and changed over time, and what qualities, characteristics might they have? By this question we wanted to establish the Forest not simply as an administrative district defined by lines on a map, but as a living community enmeshed with the land that had the capacity and resources to evolve in the face of change.

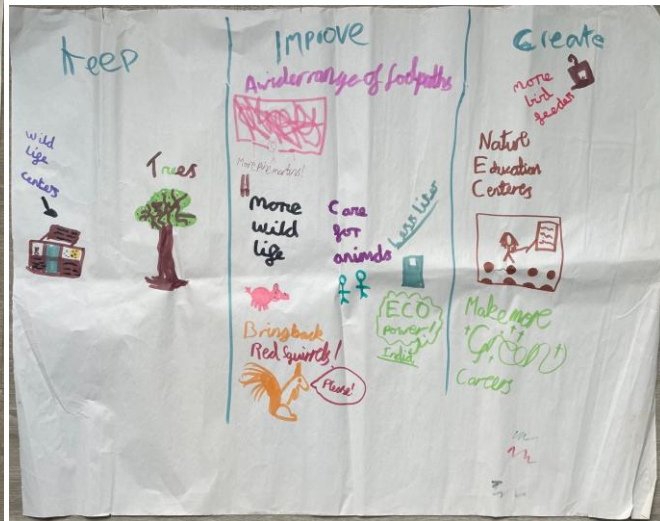
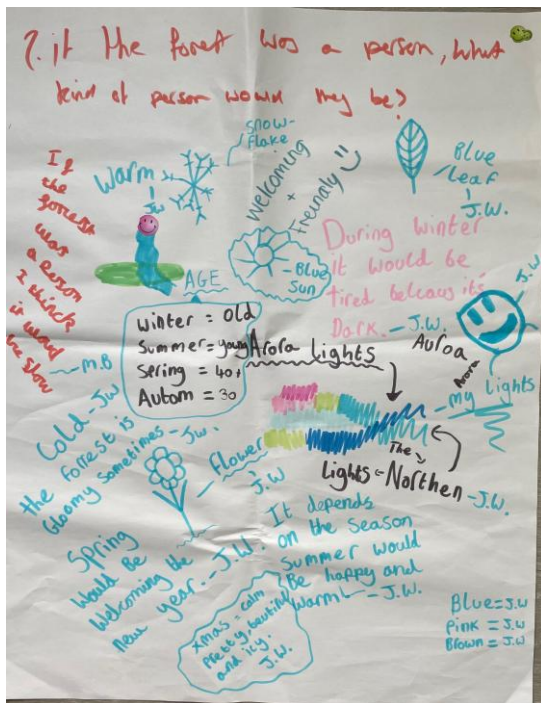
To the (larger) and time constrained group of Councillors we put the question as follows: 'What qualities/characteristics distinguish the enduring spirit, the essence of the Forest?' With this group we followed up by asking them in smaller groups to draw a dynamic picture of what the Forest could look like in 10 years' time, drawing on this essence.

Online we put it to people as follows: 'The Forest is facing a lot of changes...What is the spirit of the Forest, the essence of this place that can inspire the next chapter for this 'working Forest' and enable it to face the future well? Do you think becoming a 'Biosphere' could help bring out the best of that so that future generations here can prosper?' For the video platform we designed a set of provocative statements along similar lines with 'agrees' and 'disagrees' to get the conversation going. For the groups of young people we asked it in three parts: what do you want to 'Keep', to 'Improve' and 'Create'. We were able to draw on FAVF's valuable experience with this 'rich picturing' process, tried and tested with young people across the district.

Outputs

1. Why People Live Here

Theme The power of nature <i>Older people and Youth groups</i>	Natural beauty, greenery and woodlands: “it feeds your body and soul”; even a “source of salvation”. Abundant wildlife and freedom of access to open spaces: “My daughter in law was amazed by the freedom of the sheep and can’t wait to come back”. Many happy memories for children and grandchildren. “I care about our community garden”; “kids grow up more feral here”
Resilient community spirit <i>Older people and Youth groups</i>	Small, welcoming communities where people feel “accepted as family” where “people take time to say hello to each other”. Strong mutual aid: examples of communities coming together around flooding; restarting a community hub.
Activities in Nature <i>Youth Groups</i>	Wild camping; bike trails; swimming and fishing, water sports, long walks, getting out with pets, enjoying the wildlife and the “changing of the seasons”.
Local amenities <i>Youth Groups</i>	Local shops, small local businesses, cinema, local music, “safe places to hang out”, access to “fresh fruit and veg”
Unique identity and resistance <i>Older people, the most senior group of young people</i>	A “stubborn uniqueness” and toughness rooted in freemining and farming traditions, alongside pride in local campaigns such as HOOF/FOOF that successfully “faced down external threats”.



2. The Forest as a Person (its Essence)

Character qualities

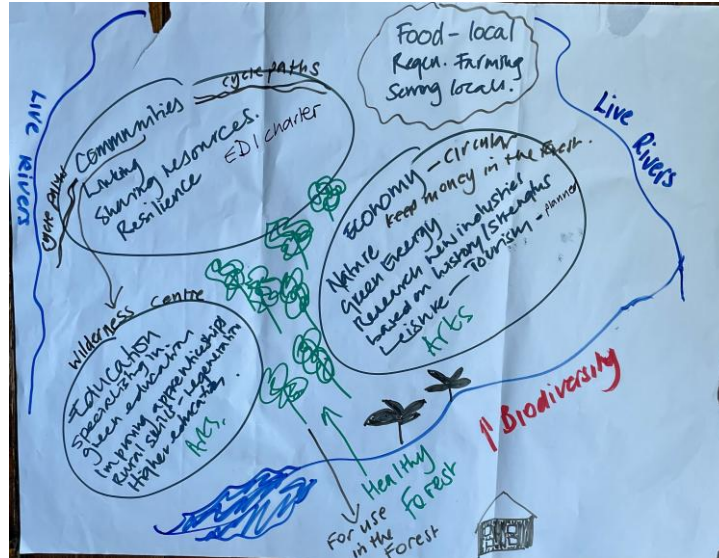
Proud, warm, **vibrant heart**, friendly and **loyal**; Resourceful, **dogged** and practical; **deeply connected** to its industrial past, kind and loving, **soothing**, queer/binary – like nature, **dark and mysterious**, protective. Often described as the Green Man – **freedom-loving**, gentle, **folk knowledge** rooted in the land, also **Wise Woman**, the healer of the Forest, **eccentric**, resilient – trauma informed.

*Both Elders and Youth groups use very similar language. The Councillors on the other hand described the essence more succinctly as **Access to nature**; Resilience; **Resistance**; and Freedom*

Resources to draw on

History of survival, adaptation, a return to self-sufficiency (e.g. Chartist ideals), preserving a strong identity and acting as an example to other places.

Concerns include rapid social change, fragmenting communities, youth unemployment and unchecked development. The central tension is protecting what exists while responding to climate change and over-commercialisation: “Disneyfication”.



3. The Future Story: The Forest’s Potential

Area	Potential opportunities
Economic and social revitalisation <i>Elders</i>	Expanding small holdings with land (Chartist-style); support for small farming; creating a self-sufficient local food economy; positioning the Forest as a place of “healing and learning”; greater visibility for arts and local artists, culture and tourism; better use of buildings for markets and small businesses preventing money from leaving the Forest
<i>Youth Groups</i>	Improve local music scene; think about alternative schooling; provide access to training for high skilled employment including green careers as well as jobs in local shops; opportunities to learn on the land; can we learn from other biospheres; and can we have a voice on a community panel? “We’re worried about the removal of trees”
<i>Councillors</i>	Communities linking and sharing resources; A Forest Charter declaring a self-sufficient circular economy using Forest timber; generating Forest energy; training young people in regenerative farming; research new industries based on history /strengths; more carefully planned tourism; higher education; reviving the arts

Environmental and infrastructure needs	
<i>Elders</i>	Addressing urgent shortages in healthcare, schools and “reliability of buses”; ensuring “a working Forest” is less environmentally damaging.
<i>Youth Groups</i>	Improve amenities: increase range of footpaths; more nature education centres, more local shops and restaurants with healthy and fresh food; more (better maintained) bike trails; clear up eye sores and pollution; widen narrow roads; better and cheaper access to tourist attractions; free parking; renewable energy production; bigger ponds and better fish health and more fish stocks; more youth clubs; more swimming places (in and outdoors); and “stop the littering!”
<i>Councillors</i>	Increase biodiversity; specialise in ‘green education’ (Wilderness Centre); improve apprenticeships and regenerate rural skills; link the district via cycle paths; move heavy traffic off roads; more farmers markets; bring the rivers alive

4. Could the Forest be in service to the wider Country again?

This question was put to both older people at the drop in centres and Councillors, on the assumption that they hold a deeper knowledge of the region’s history. Since the Forest of Dean has played a role on the national stage from time to time we were curious to find out was there an outward facing ambition as a counterweight to the inward facing instinct to protect.

The two groups see the Forest's most meaningful future role as a leader in sustainability and community action:

A Model for Sustainable Practice:

- Become an example of **biodiversity** and sustainable living—a "**shining jewel**" for balancing nature and human needs.
- An educational **centre of excellence** to teach children and adults about nature, shifting our role from extraction to learning.

- o Play a positive role in **climate change** by better utilising local resources (e.g., local timber) and managing waterways to prevent flooding.

A Model for Community & Identity:

- o Offer a model for **community regeneration** (e.g., managing housing for all ages).
- o Continue to be an example of how communities **can unite and win** against threats, maintaining its unique working-class identity.

To the older people, we also put the question had they heard of the Biosphere application?

Biosphere: Current Awareness

Awareness	Count	Percentage (of 30)
No	17	57%
Yes	8	27%
Heard a little	5	16%

These older participants were next shown a video with Cllr Chris McFarling explaining his view of the benefits of a biosphere designation, and underlining that ‘we want to know what you think?’ Following showing of the video, participants were asked whether they believed a biosphere could be of benefit to the potential they’d described as present in the Forest?

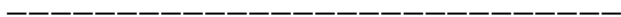
Biosphere: Will it help bring out Forest’s Potential?

This question was asked in different ways in all face-to-face encounters. With youth groups, using a continuum with emojis; with and Councillors standing along a continuum of 1-5 (from low to high support for a biosphere) The majority in each case landed, as did the majority of older people (see the chart below) in the ‘reasonably hopeful’ category.

Hopeful	Count	Percentage (of 19)
Extremely hopeful	5	26%
Reasonably hopeful	9	47%
Somewhat hopeful	4	21%
Not very hopeful	1	5%

Future Biosphere: Continued Engagement

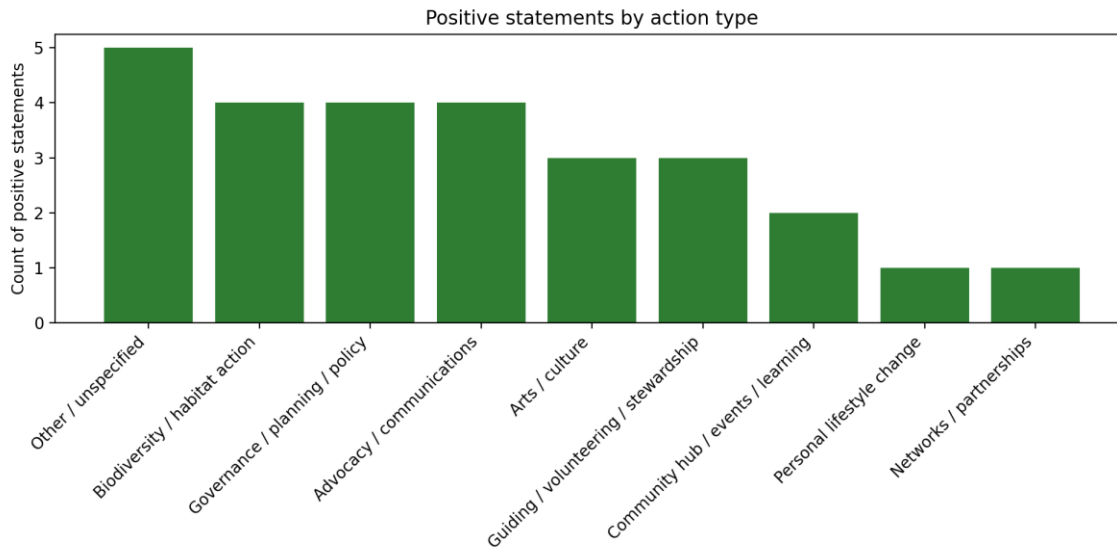
Continue to Engage?	Count	Percentage (of 25)
Yes, to more information	19	76%



5. Older people’s positive pledges to Play a Role in Manifesting the Forest’s Potential

26 out of 29 Responses

Role	Examples of action
Direct environmental action	Tree planting, wildlife habitats, growing produce, biodiversity surveys and personal sustainability changes.
Community and education	Using local hubs for information, events and courses; sharing materials through local networks.
Strategic and civic influence	Influencing housing policy and planning decisions through professional or councillor roles.
Volunteering and support	Volunteering, joining action teams, networking and partnership-building.



Outputs and Themes From Polis

Background

The outputs from this online platform are presented separately not only because this channel will likely have drawn in the widest range of views from across the community, but because the algorithm is expressly intended to enable a community to witness its division of opinion *and* its so-called 'uncommon ground'. Namely it both values difference, and highlights areas of agreement between different opinion groups despite their disagreement with many, if not most of, the other groups' statements. See the graphic 'Majority' below.

The Biosphere steering group supported the use of Polis not as a replacement to longer standing engagement methods but to explore the use of new approaches alongside the more traditional ones.

The invitation was to vote on short statements that participants submit: agree; disagree; pass. And if you wish to, submit your own statement. The platform was continually moderated for duplicated statements. Out of 69 statements, one was rejected.

The preamble to the voting included a question, a video, and a link to further resources on the Biosphere page on the FODDC website.

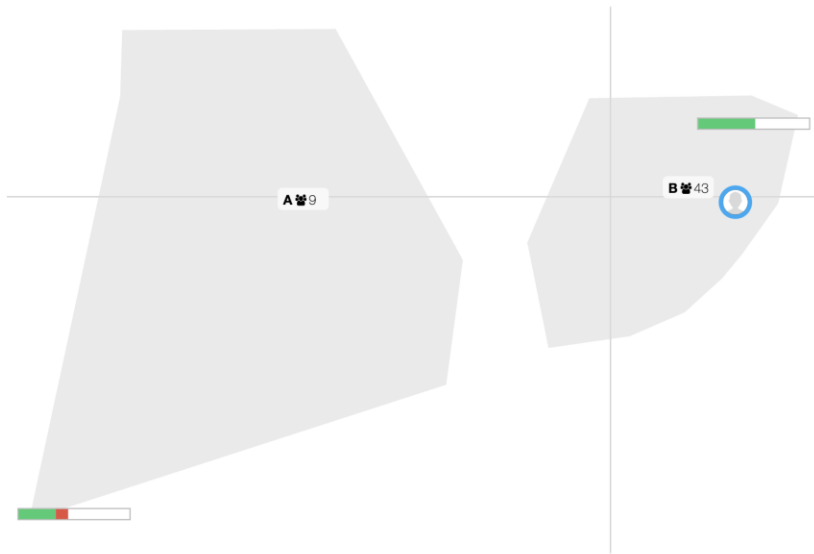
Question: How will we be living in the Forest in 10 years' time in a way that both we and nature are prospering?

Output

61 people voted; 72 statements were submitted; 2,302 votes were cast; and there were 37.74 votes on average cast by each person who voted. The image below was available to all participants on the platform. Two distinct opinion groups emerged; one characterised as more coherent with a higher level of agreement on statements voted on, the other a more fragmented group with significantly lower levels of agreement.

Opinion Groups

You are represented by the blue circle and grouped with others who share your perspective.



Majority Opinion

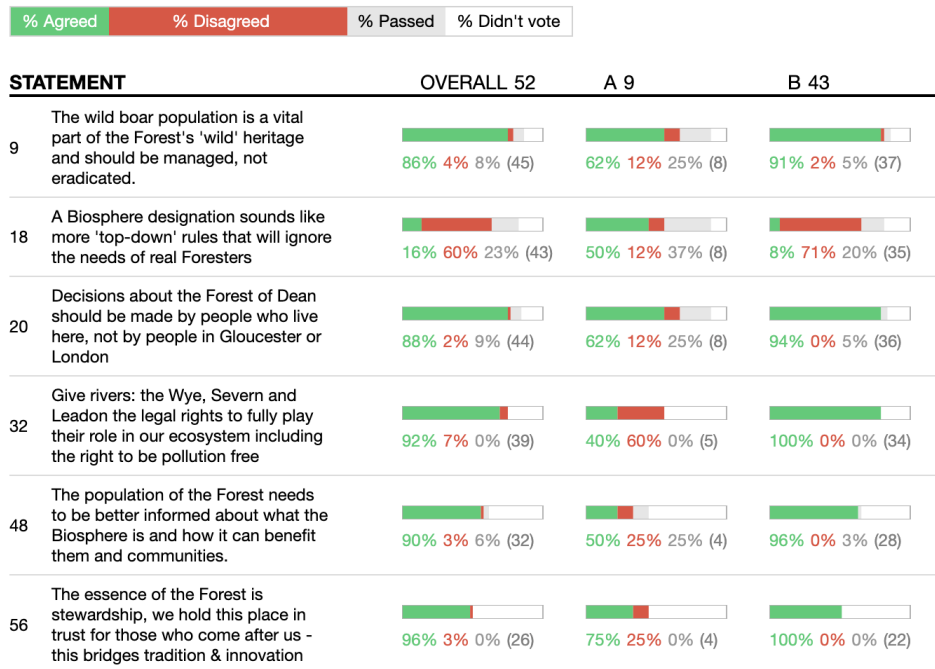
Group: A B

Statement: 9 18 20 32 48 56

Majority

Here's what most people agreed with.

60% or more of all participants voted one way or the other, regardless of whether large amounts of certain minority opinion groups voted the other way.



Conclusion

It is difficult to draw hard and fast conclusions from what is a very small sample of the Forest population. Nevertheless, given the extent of the marketing campaign to promote this exercise over a relatively short period (6 weeks or so) to a wide range of interest groups, through email, (newsletters reaching 1690 local subscribers), posts on social media (reaching a following of 2.6K with much wider sharing and engagement), and face to face with a range of ages and social backgrounds as well as through broadcast media, the similarity in responses to questions about the Forest's essence and its potential drawn from that essence are striking. Further, the intensity of Polis voting (37+ votes per participant on average) suggests a high level of engagement with the question of the Forest's future, and the contested issue of a future Biosphere designation. At the outset, the online options of Polis and the AI moderated video chat room seemed as though they might be outliers to this process. This turned out to be true for the chat room. No feedback has yet reached us to explain this. As for Polis, as the weeks rolled on and the requests grew among many local people for more information about the Biosphere, this channel offering anonymity, began to take off. The platform's algorithm highlighting areas of agreement may have been experienced as a steady hand in response to calls to 'pause the biosphere'. The most positive conclusion for the

Biosphere Steering Group, and the Council as the body leading the Biosphere process, is that participants in the engagement overall have generally given it a green light. Generally, they see its overall mission to enable humanity to learn to live better alongside nature as entirely congruent with a region where the essence of place can be summed up as ‘stewardship’: holding this place ‘in trust for those who come after us’. Nevertheless, given that a Biosphere designation for the Forest was first mooted in 2019 the fact that there continues to be disquiet suggests that opportunities for persistent and open communication and engagement have been missed.

Recommendations for continuing engagement

1. Communicate a ‘vocation’ for the Forest of Dean that broadcasts a confident message that the region has a national role in regional revival and the transition to a more resilient nature connected economy.
2. Consider the ‘majority’ statements from Polis as opportunities to build trust and momentum.
3. See also the ‘areas of uncertainty’ below as opportunities to open further dialogue and offer clarification.
4. Consider keeping the Polis platform open and conducting a further communications drive to engage with it, highlighting the submission deadline for the Biosphere application.
5. In the light of LGR and consequent loss at some level of a coherent regional identity, convene stakeholders across the district in support of a ‘Forest Charter’ (referred to by Councillors at their workshop).

Areas of uncertainty

Across all 49 participants, there was uncertainty about the following statements. Greater than 30% of participants who saw these statements ‘passed’.

Areas of uncertainty can provide avenues to educate and open dialogue with your community.

STATEMENT	OVERALL 49	A 8	B 41
14 We should use the Forest's industrial heritage (mines and quarries) as sites for innovative underground farming	44% 7% 47% (38)	16% 33% 50% (6)	50% 3% 46% (32)
41 A Biosphere has no legal standing - please do not get misled	37% 15% 46% (32)	40% 20% 40% (5)	37% 14% 48% (27)
10 We should focus on restoring the 'Wet Moors' and ancient ponds that once defined the Dean's industrial landscape	46% 9% 43% (41)	37% 37% 25% (8)	48% 3% 48% (33)
13 The Forest of Dean should transition from a timber-export economy to a high-value 'wood-tech' hub	53% 5% 41% (39)	14% 28% 57% (7)	62% 0% 37% (32)
46 What will a biosphere status do for us living in the Forest.	22% 11% 66% (9)	0% 0% 100% (2)	28% 14% 57% (7)

APPENDICES

1. Questions recorded from the Ow Bist workshop (Commoners, Freeminers, Verderers, FODCAP, FFN) Tuesday 10th February 2026

a) The bigger picture

What's the context for going for a biosphere – is it for example the last time the Forest was carbon neutral?

What is the master plan up to 2126: how does the biosphere link with transport; industry; different industries

How does the biosphere link in with infrastructure water building energy planning and education

We need to understand the zones and what are the KPI's for the biosphere

The boundary of the biosphere is rumoured to be that of the statutory forest this is the same as the commoners grazing area can you clarify

Who will manage the biosphere and what is the nature of the organisation that will manage it

b) Control and governance

Who is going to have a say and who will have control

Could each person in the wider Forest have a vote on the biosphere itself - the survey of 400 people done so far is inadequate

How will the biosphere have a duty of care to protect the generations of foresters who currently live here

How will it protect the people and their work without displacing them

c) Zones and consequences

By what criteria have the red zones been chosen?

Please clarify what each core zone is and why it is important

In future can we expand core areas as species thrive and grow and habitats improve and can these core areas be connected up

Will core areas include people and settlements in a way that development is restricted to protect these rural settlements?

What are the long term consequences of zoning for for commoning and freemining

What sorts of activities will there be in the buffer areas

d) Housing

Where will housing be located in which zones

Will biosphere status protect areas from large housing developments

Will public transport link up new housing as well as existing towns and be affordable

We are concerned about the Scarr in Newent there is land work happening in a core zone

e) Education

Will the biosphere enhance education to include learning about nature customs and language to support a sense of place and belonging so our young people appreciate the Forest as being unique and special

a. Local business

Will small businesses get planning permission on the small adaptations

Will there be a differential on local prices and taxes for residents as compared to visitors

2. Follow up questions post Town and Councillors Workshop 7th February 2026 (email from the clerk of West Dean on behalf of Parish Council):

Forest of Dean Biosphere

1. How are the boundaries of the biosphere to be set?
2. The Core areas shown on the map are unclear. Exactly how have they been set and what criteria is used for their boundaries?
3. What protections have the Core area to have and what current legislation provides what protections?
 1. A subsidiary question – If the Core areas are known SSI's why are other SSI's known in the Forest and the District not shown/defined?
 2. How can this biosphere work when only one side of National Landscape of the Wye Valley and the western bank of the Severn RAMSAR are not included? Why does the biosphere not extend to the opposite shores?
4. Exactly how have The Buffer areas shown on the map they been set and what criteria is used for their boundaries?
5. How are the boundaries of the Statutory Forest of Dean been provided for in the Biosphere plans?
6. What are the expectations of living, working and leisure within the Buffer zones and will current activity need to be curtailed, restricted or changed, including ancient rights and traditions, to meet the criteria for UNESCO Biosphere accreditation?
 1. A subsidiary question – If changes are to be made how will these be legislated and enforced?
7. What impact on development will the Biosphere have to other areas outside of core and buffer zones?
8. With sustainability a core principle for development how will this be upheld within current planning law?

9. The FoDDC are currently consulting on their new local Plan for the next 20 years. How are the plans for the Biosphere achievable within the context of having to provide for 12000+ new homes and the pressures on infrastructure and land use that brings?
10. Several communities in the wider District have Neighbourhood Plans written with community input. How will you accommodate the local ambitions contained within these plans (and their links to the District Plan)?
11. Your list of stakeholders contains only two democratic bodies, the FODDC and the GCC. Others are mainly charities. How will you extend the information provision in terms of hard information to ensure wider community engagement across the whole area?
12. Has there been any direct talks with the Forest Verderers, Freeminers and Commoners Associations? Are they supportive of the plans?
13. Can you engage in proper information sharing and briefings with Parish Councils to explain your objectives and to ask for their views within your timeframes for the current stage of the Biosphere's development?
14. The district has three main industries, Forestry, Farming and Tourism. How will they, and the people who rely on them be included in the planning of the Biosphere?
15. How is this bid funded?
16. What are the key performance indicators that the biosphere will be monitored against? And who judges this to ensure continued success?