

# Brighton & Hove City Council

## City Environment, South Downs, and the Sea Committee

## Agenda Item 55

**Subject:** Building on our UNESCO World Biosphere designation for the next decade

**Date of meeting:** 12 March 2024

**Report of:** Executive Director, Economy, Environment & Culture

**Contact Officer:** Name: Melanie David-Durand  
Email: melanie.david-durand@brighton-hove.gov.uk

**Ward(s) affected:** All

**For general release**

### 1. Purpose of the report and policy context

1.1 The Living Coast was designated as a Biosphere by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in 2014. It operates as a cross-sector partnership, with Brighton & Hove City Council as a lead partner. In June 2022, the Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee confirmed their support for The Living Coast Biosphere to complete the periodic review process and concurrently develop the next 10-year action plan. Every decade, UNESCO requires a periodic review to renew the designation. This work has been undertaken in 2023-2024 and will be officially submitted to UNESCO in September 2024, who will respond in Summer 2025.

1.2 The purpose of this report is to seek endorsement from the Committee to submit the review and renewal documentation to UNESCO, including the forward priorities for a strengthened Biosphere Partnership emerging from the detailed review of the first ten years informed by community and stakeholder engagement.

### 2. Recommendations

2.1 That Committee notes the value brought by The Living Coast Biosphere Partnership in the past decade as set out in the Report at Appendix 1.

2.2 That Committee agrees to officers submitting the necessary documents to renew and refresh the UNESCO Biosphere status.

2.3 That Committee agrees to endorse the report as attached in Appendix 1 on behalf of Brighton & Hove City Council as lead partner of the Biosphere Partnership, which includes the emerging vision and strategic goals for the next decade, as set out in paragraphs 3.8-3.10.

### **3. Context and background information**

#### **The UNESCO Biosphere designation and how it operates**

- 3.1 Biospheres are designations awarded by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. They are places of international best practice, living and working examples of sustainable development in three main areas:
- Conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity.
  - Economic development that is socially and environmentally sustainable.
  - Education, training, research, and monitoring.

The World Network of UNESCO Biospheres counts 748 sites, with seven in the UK.

- 3.2 The Living Coast was designated in 2014 and is the only urban Biosphere in the UK. It spans from the South Downs to the Marine Conservation Zone in the Channel, and from the Adur to the Ouse River. It provides local, national, and international recognition to both the region's outstanding natural environments and capacity to foster cooperation for excellence in sustainable development. It operates as a partnership, with over 40 cross-sector organisations encompassing businesses, conservation, education, voluntary and community, arts and culture, and local government partners, with Brighton & Hove City Council as the lead partner.

#### **The value of such a designation for our area**

- 3.3 As mentioned in [the Council Plan for 2023-2027](#), there is a shared ambition to “Use our UNESCO Biosphere designation to support the city to thrive” to “Develop Brighton & Hove as a place where people want to live, work and learn”, contributing to making residents proud to live in Brighton & Hove.
- 3.4 The UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) issued a report in 2020 to assess “The National Value of UNESCO Designations to the United Kingdom” (See Background document 2):
- This outlines that they bring financial value and a driver for tourism, which the UKNC aims at enhancing by facilitating “more links between designations and creating opportunities to raise their profile and potentially increase access to funding”. In 2023/2024, there has been an increased collaboration with a national launch of a UNESCO UK map, shared best practices, and the upcoming creation of regional clusters encompassing World heritage sites and biospheres.
  - They also create a more intangible value, with “a far-reaching impact on communities, building bridges between people, culture and nature.” They also contribute to the local realization of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- 3.5 The Living Coast has successfully accessed external funding over recent years and intends to further prioritise fundraising actions. Beyond its partners' contributions, outstanding examples include The Biocultural Heritage Project (£500k from Interreg EU), National Trust/Changing Chalk

urban rewilding (£105k National Lottery Heritage Fund), The Aquifer Partnership (~£2m National Highways and other partners), a UNESCO research programme (\$25k), which have brought significant value to the region.

### **The review: a comprehensive stakeholder engagement process**

- 3.6 UNESCO requires a formal review of every global Biosphere designation every 10 years. In June 2022, the Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee confirmed their support for The Living Coast Biosphere to complete this review.
- 3.7 As required by UNESCO, we have undertaken a focused robust review intent on learning from the last 10 years and the changed circumstances we now face to maximise the potential of the designation for the city's community and partners in the coming decade and beyond. We have captured views from a wide range of stakeholders (see paragraph 5). Key points included:
- Despite external challenges such as COVID-19, Brexit and the cost-of living crisis, The Living Coast has achieved impactful change: “flagship projects have contributed to successfully restoring our unique ecosystems and bringing nature back into our towns and our city; promoting environmental research and education for all ages; and inspiring sustainable business action and cultural ecotourism in the region.”
  - There was a higher awareness of projects such as the City Nature Challenge, The Living Coast England Coast Path from Shoreham to Eastbourne, and the focus on making clean water accessible.
  - The Biosphere played an important role in bringing diverse groups together under a single vision, developing supportive networks, raising awareness, promoting understanding of the important interaction between communities and the living world around them, and signposting funding opportunities.
  - A stronger focus should be given to raising awareness of the UNESCO Biosphere, pursuing more tangible objectives, reaching out to more deprived communities, and involving a wider community approach and more public events.

### **The emerging strategic priorities for the next decade**

- 3.8 To strengthen the Biosphere Partnership and further the work on biodiversity, aligning to local authorities' biodiversity duty to conserve and enhance, decarbonisation and inclusive health & wellbeing objectives, the suggested vision for the Biosphere is to
- Improve livelihoods, health, and wellbeing,
  - Partner for sustainability excellence,
  - Foster pride in the sustainability of the place we live and work.

with the following 4 strategic goals:

- Protect our natural heritage to ensure sustainable living for all,
- Promote sustainability education for all, to empower local citizens to be the change for their own health and wellbeing,
- Use our UNESCO designation as a vehicle to promote a sense of local pride, fostering sustainable economic development and tourism,
- Ensure stronger funding and governance to support the Biosphere's goals.

3.9 To achieve such goals, it has been identified that a strengthened link with strategic delivery partners and programmes could help achieve tangible goals together, such as:

- The Aquifer Partnership and the City Downland Estate Plan in the light of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the need to deliver on our statutory Biodiversity duty, together with Biodiversity Net Gains.
- The environmental education programme, with the Youth target audience at the heart of UNESCO's priorities.

3.10 Other strategic recommendations encompass a widened geography, to include the neighbouring local authorities of Lewes District Council and Adur & Worthing City Councils, as UNESCO recommends working with local authorities' boundaries, a reviewed governance, a strengthened Research & Data collaborative work (that already benefits from extensive collaboration with local Universities) and a youth engagement programme.

3.11 The report in Appendix 1 has been produced on behalf of the partnership and partner organisations, having been prepared after an extensive stakeholder engagement process described in section 5. Partner organisations may take similar relevant recommendations to their governing bodies in due course.

#### **4. Analysis and consideration of alternative options**

4.1 Not endorsing the renewal of the UNESCO designation and the emerging recommendations for the future could put the international status for our region and cross sector partnership at risk. The value of this status has been described above in paragraphs 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5.

#### **5. Community engagement and consultation**

5.1 As part of this review, a comprehensive stakeholder engagement has been undertaken, including Biosphere partners, local councils and government officials, educational institutions, NGOs, local conservation and community groups, businesses, students, and the wider public (Please see pages 22-26 in Appendix 1 for more details):

- **3 Task & Finish groups** have been established with Biosphere Partnership Board members on the following themes: strategy and finance, research and data, and communications and engagement, with regular online and in person meetings throughout 2023.

- **4 Thematic workshops** were organised to consult local experts and partners on the following themes: education & communities, conservation and biodiversity, business and tourism, and strategy.
- **An online public consultation** was widely shared via social media, a press release and various local community groups and events, reaching an estimated 50,000 people. The 350 respondents represent a wide variety of backgrounds including local students, working professionals, retirees, and volunteers. The wording, electronic access and promotion of the survey were designed to be as inclusive as possible.
- **Other local strategic stakeholders have been involved** such as the Greater Brighton Economic Board members in July 2023, councillors from Brighton & Hove City Council, Lewes District Council and Adur & Worthing Councils, and members of the UNESCO UK Commission.

## 6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The UNESCO Biosphere is a strong asset for our region: not only does it recognize internationally our outstanding natural heritage and local changemakers, making Brighton & Hove a city to be proud of, but it also brings to life a dynamic partnership, with access to national and international best practices. With Brighton & Hove City Council as a lead partner, the Biosphere is able to work complementarily and supportively of the Council's objectives in relation to health and wellbeing, statutory biodiversity duty, net zero, equality and inclusion.
- 6.2 The continuity of this designation and the identified emerging priorities for the next decade enables the promotion of a forward-thinking dynamic, pursuing sustainable living for all. It provides a vehicle embodying our area as a desirable place to live and work. It will lead to the submission of two detailed reports to UNESCO by September 2024, reflecting the depth of the work that has been undertaken in the past decade and the upcoming directions. The renewal of this designation by Summer 2025 should enable our region to celebrate a refreshed commitment to being a destination for sustainable living and open economic opportunities for our city.

## 7. Financial implications

- 7.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations of this report. The council as lead partner had dedicated budgeted resource for work on the Biosphere with member contributions collected on an annual basis to part fund a proportion of this dedicated resource.

Name of finance officer consulted: John Lack    Date consulted: 22/02/2024

## 8. Legal implications

- 8.1 No direct legal implications have been identified in this report.

Name of legal officer consulted: Victoria Simpson    Date consulted 21.02.24

## **9. Sustainability implications**

- 9.1 The renewal of The Living Coast Biosphere designation will continue to support the promotion and delivery of a sustainable living development model across our region, where everyone has access to a healthy life, and where our natural heritage is respected, providing the resilient life supporting system needed for all to thrive.

## **10. Other Implications**

### **Social Value and procurement implications**

- 10.1 A consultancy was appointed to support the work described in paragraphs 3.6, 3.9 and 5.1. Social Value was part of the criteria in the procurement process, in alignment with the Council's Social Value framework. The consultants demonstrated that it is embedded in their daily operations (using the National TOMs Framework, establishing alignment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and as members of the Social Value Portal).

### **Public health implications:**

- 10.2 The purpose of the Biosphere is for all residents and visitors to benefit from an improved livelihood, health and wellbeing. This is why the key goals include raising awareness on the benefits of outdoors activities, encouraging people to travel by bus, train, foot or bike, and to volunteer in community groups enhancing their local access to nature and improving mental health. The cross-sector Partnership also works hand in hand with the local organisations that have a direct impact in public health (transport, water, energy, education, food, conservation). A member of the Public Health team sits on the Biosphere board.

## **Supporting Documentation**

### **1. Appendices**

1. "A review of the past decade & a vision towards a sustainable future for our area".

### **2. Background documents**

1. [UNESCO Periodic Review of The Living Coast Biosphere report and minutes to Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee, June 2022](#)
2. National Value of UNESCO to the UK report - [National Value UNESCO UK](#)