

AJ Forest of Dean Economic Opportunity Review

The scrutiny report rightly frames the Forest of Dean as **a test case for whether Gloucestershire's Local Growth Plan can respond to a rural, polycentric and environmentally constrained district.**

The scrutiny report is right that **But it also has structural assets.** and in listing many of these. Its core diagnosis is that the district has relatively good resident employment but a weaker local job base, so that many residents' economic lives are organised across district boundaries, a temporary phenomenon in the present circumstances. That distinction matters because it shifts policy away from unemployment alone and towards spatial mismatch, commuting resilience, transport exclusion, local value capture and enterprise scale-up.

I think a strategic portfolio approach might use many of the currently mentioned initiatives but have a more cohesive strategy and some new or varied initiatives. [Ref UN Sec Gen]

Core conclusion: the Forest of Dean's best economic proposition is not to imitate urban growth districts, but to become a high-quality rural living and enterprise district that captures more value from its landscape, residents, visitors, small businesses, hybrid workers and neighbouring labour markets.

The main underused opportunities are forest wellbeing, slow tourism, distributed work hubs, retrofit and green construction, woodland products, agritech and agritechnique (regenerative agricultures and nature-friendly food/forest cultivation), Severn/Wye enterprise, local procurement and a practical Biosphere economy. Sustained and improved transport is also important.

The Forest of Dean **should not be treated as a weak version of an urban growth district. Its strongest economic proposition is as a high-quality living landscape with a distinctive forest, river and border identity, connected selectively to neighbouring labour markets and capable of growing more value from nature, culture, local enterprise, retrofit, land-based innovation and hybrid work.** The district's own Sustainable Economy Strategy already names the main platform for this: workforce skills, infrastructure, circular economy, business support, natural capital preservation and sustainable towns.

The opportunity is therefore not simply "more jobs anywhere." It is to build a district economy that captures more value from people who already live there, people who might choose to live there, and visitors who already come for the landscape.

- Gloucestershire's 2024 **visitor economy report** implies that the important strategic question is how to shift from extractive day visitation to higher-value, lower-impact, longer-stay, locally supplied and skills-rich activity.
- The "live in the Forest, work in neighbouring areas" proposition is credible but uneven. It is strongest around Lydney and the southern/eastern edge, where direct rail links make Gloucester, Cheltenham, Newport and Cardiff realistic for hybrid workers.
- The **most promising unexploited opportunities are a portfolio rather than a single sector** bet: forest health and wellbeing, distributed hybrid-work hubs, off-season slow tourism, sustainable construction and retrofit, woodland products and repair, agri-tech and regenerative land management, screen and creative place-making, Severn/Wye blue-green enterprise, local food and procurement, and a carefully framed Biosphere economy.

The following **GESSC Recommendations** were made:

1. That the potential within the Forest of Dean is built on recognition of the global and local demand for the nature-based and rural-based assets that the Forest of Dean has, and that opportunities for leverage be identified.
 - a. *NOTE: Within the scope of a new unitary that would no longer have district boundaries, the Forest of Dean provides a unique social and natural ecosystem and consequently that the paradigm for economic development should be reframed to take account of its considerable nature-based potential.*
 - b. *Many of the following individual recommendations then fall as consequences to this approach. It relates also to the "elephant in the room" that was mentioned.*
2. That the opportunities for hybrid working within the Forest of Dean are recognised and facilitated.

3. That the strategic constraints of the Forest of Dean are recognised and that a plan be developed to address them.
4. That an extractive economy, such as mining and tree cutting, is NOT developed within the Forest of Dean.
5. That as much emphasis as possible is placed on public transport links within the Forest of Dean as well as in and out of the Forest of Dean.
6. That there is investment into the rail links in the Forest of Dean, focused particularly at Lydney.
7. That a new integrated minibus service going between villages, railway stations and towns within the Forest of Dean is established, and that the service is provided to the public for free for the first six months.
8. That regular multiagency meetings involving members of the Forest of Dean community, councillors and local authority officers are established to promote the biosphere designation in order to attract entrepreneurs to the Forest of Dean to develop existing sites.
9. That a fully integrated approach to the development of eco-tourism infrastructure within the Forest of Dean is developed.
10. That the minimum number of houses are built within the Forest of Dean, in recognition that the Government's housing targets for the area are not appropriate.
11. That the possibility of a satellite technology park in the Forest of Dean, linked to the Cheltenham Cyber Park, as well as the potential for data centres by the river, be considered.
12. That the plausibility of a satellite grammar school in the Forest of Dean be considered.
13. To consider the possibility of a Forest of Dean satellite university site, linked to the University of Gloucestershire.
14. We should be asking the young people from the FoD through a skilled process about their own aspirations for themselves and the area - after all it is they that will be most affected by the work ahead. It was clear from report and responses that no such consultation has been undertaken or commissioned.

