

## Proposed Extensions to the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

This factsheet provides summary information with regard to the consultation currently under way on proposed extensions to the Suffolk Coast & Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (SC&H AONB). It also explains how to find further information about the project. The consultation will run until 13 April 2018.

### Natural England

Natural England is a government agency with special responsibilities for creating National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and for reviewing their boundaries. We are currently considering a variation to the southern boundary of the SC&H AONB. We also have other responsibilities for the natural environment, including creating the England Coast Path (the stretch between Harwich to Shotley Gate is currently being planned: see England Coast Path: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/england-coast-path-improving-public-access-to-the-coast>) and administering agri-environment schemes.

You can find out more about our work at [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england).

### Suffolk Coast & Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

You can find out more at [www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org](http://www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org).

### Natural England and AONBs

Natural England has powers to designate or vary the boundary of AONBs, as set out in the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000.

Section 82(1) of the CROW Act defines an AONB as "an area which appears to Natural England to be of such outstanding natural beauty that it is desirable that the protective provisions of Part IV of the Act should apply to it for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the area's natural beauty."

### How does Natural England decide which areas should be designated as AONB?

In deciding whether to designate an AONB, or to vary an existing AONB boundary, Natural England must first consider whether the land has outstanding natural beauty and then whether designation is desirable for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the area's natural beauty. This decision requires Natural England to address three questions:

1. Does the landscape have sufficient natural beauty to be considered outstanding?
2. Is it desirable for the purpose set out above, to designate this landscape as AONB?
3. Where should the boundary be drawn?

### How does Natural England consider the above questions?

Natural England has produced Guidance which sets out how we evaluate natural beauty as well as the desirability of designation and the criteria we use to identify detailed boundaries: Guidance for Assessing Landscapes for Designation as a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) (Revised, March 2011): [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140605090108/http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/B1DesignationGuidanceMar11\\_tcm6-26242.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140605090108/http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/B1DesignationGuidanceMar11_tcm6-26242.pdf)

If Natural England decides that an area has sufficient natural beauty and that it is desirable to designate, the next step is to identify a suitable detailed boundary. Landscape and scenic quality rarely change suddenly and one of the criteria states that where there is an area of transition in landscape or scenic quality, a boundary should be drawn towards the high quality end of the area of transition, to include areas of high quality land and exclude areas of lesser quality. In other words the boundary should be drawn conservatively.

The CRoW Act also requires that Natural England undertakes a statutory Local Authority consultation prior to reaching a final decision. This is the current stage reached by the project and we have decided to also invite the public and other organisations to comment.

#### **Which areas are being consulted on as proposed extensions to the SC&H AONB?**

- the Stour Estuary including the estuary itself, northern estuary valley slopes at Brantham and the majority of the southern estuary valley slopes;
- The Freston Brook Valley, a tributary of the Orwell Estuary which extends inland from the existing AONB boundary westwards and includes surrounding plateau woodlands; and
- The Samford Valley, a tributary of the Stour Estuary, which extends further inland from the existing AONB boundary at Stutton Bridge and includes some areas of neighbouring Shotley Peninsula Plateau.

#### **Who makes the final decision?**

It is Natural England's responsibility to decide whether to designate an area as AONB. Any decision will be made by our Board, having considered the evidence and the results of the statutory consultation. The Orders do not take effect however unless and until they are confirmed by the Secretary of State (Defra), after the draft legal Orders have been placed on deposit. The Secretary of State has the power call a Public Inquiry if minded to do so.

#### **What is the expected timescale?**

Assuming that Natural England determines that a boundary variation should be made following the consultation, we expect to submit the legal Orders to the Secretary of State for a decision later in 2018. It is not possible to say how long the Secretary of State's decision will take.

#### **What are the implications if designation goes ahead?**

Any areas that become a part of the SC&H AONB will have the benefit of the national status that designation brings and the statutory protection this provides. They will be fully reflected in future AONB

Management Plans and benefit from the resources and skills of the AONB Management Unit. Although the areas under review are currently managed as part of the 'Additional Project Area', they do not have this national status or statutory protection.

Ownership of land remains unchanged within an AONB, and there is no restriction on how land is farmed, although some Permitted Development Rights would change; nor is there any impact on the Single Farm Payment, Cross Compliance, or the Countryside Stewardship scheme. All planning decisions continue to be made by the existing local planning authorities, albeit with specific policies which reflect the national importance of the AONB. There is no presumption against development in an AONB and nor are there any changes to access rights over and above those that already exist.

#### **How to comment on Natural England's proposals**

If you wish to send us your comments about these proposals, you can find more information about the proposed extensions to the SC&H AONB and complete the online response form by going to <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/natural-england/suffolk-coast-and-heaths-aonb> or by completing the response form in the Consultation Pack and returning it to Natural England in the pre-paid envelope.

Further copies of the Consultation Pack can be obtained by contacting Jonathan Dix (email: [Jonathan.Dix@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:Jonathan.Dix@naturalengland.org.uk) tel. 0208 0265 774)