

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION STATEMENT

Landscape and management of the coast

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



Landscape and management of the coast

The AONB Partnership

The Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB was designated as a protected landscape in March 1970. The AONB Partnership was set up in 1993 to ensure efficient and co-ordinated management of the AONB. It is made up of 26 organisations, who work together to conserve and enhance the designated landscape.

Background

Suffolk is characterised by 47 miles of unspoilt coast and 120 miles of tidal edge in its estuaries. This interface between land and sea is what makes Suffolk's coastal landscape so special, what attracts so many people to the area and is a key part of the area's designation as AONB.

The Suffolk coast is dynamic; it has been changing for thousands of years. This dynamism is a key component of its special interest. Erosion of soft sands and sediments from the coast, and post-glacial isostatic realignment (tilting of the land), makes the undeveloped coast particularly susceptible to the emerging effects of climate-induced sea level rise. These changes can place both man-made sea and river walls (which in some places have a history dating back as far as the 12th century) and natural dunes and cliffs under great pressure and so increase erosion and/or flood risk. The dynamic nature of the coast can also see large amounts of sediment moved, which can often increase the flood protection of certain areas. Coastal erosion and increased flood risk have implications for people and wildlife. Mitigation and adaptation of communities, businesses, infrastructure and heritage and cultural interests, in erosion and flood risk areas, is now being given urgent consideration.

The importance of landscape

- Landscape is the result of our interaction with, and footprint on, the natural environment over time. The way that we have shaped and used the land around us creates a landscape that expresses the natural environment, our culture, our economy and the history of how we have lived and worked here.
- Landscape character assessment was first championed by the Countryside Agency in the 1990s. Suffolk County Council has led further local assessment work more recently¹. The process describes what makes one landscape different from another. It describes an area's sense of place. Our coastal landscape character types are fundamental parts of the AONB designation and are largely the result of man's interventions. They are what sets this landscape apart from others.
- Recent research by Natural England² shows that landscape delivers a wide range of cultural services. This social research showed that;
 - People feel a great sense of ownership over their local landscape.
 - It provides a place to take exercise, find peace and solitude and to enjoy wildlife.
 - The coast is an iconic place for many, a key facet of Britain.
 - Coast walks are important to many people at a fundamental point in the lives.
- While the AONB is designated for the landscape's natural beauty, the very fact that it is protected demonstrates its deep cultural significance to the nation. The 'natural' and the 'cultural' are deeply intertwined in landscape.
- This cultural value is demonstrably shown by the fact that the AONB itself brings in £166 million/yr from tourism and hosts over 2.4 million day trips³.

Policy context

Flood risk management and coastal erosion

Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs) set broad policies for coastal management, taking into account coastal processes and some of the wider implications on the neighbouring coastline and the environment. Estuary strategies are a mechanism the Environment Agency uses to guide Government investment in Flood Risk.

¹ www.suffolklandscape.org.uk. Suffolk County Council 2008

² Natural England 2009. Experiencing Landscapes: capturing the cultural services and experiential qualities of landscape.

³ East of England Tourism 2006. Economic impacts of tourism- East of England Protected Landscapes.

There is currently much debate on the Suffolk coast about flood risk and coastal erosion and the need for a more integrated approach to coastal zone management (ICZM).

The Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009)

The Marine and Coastal Access Act will provide better protection for marine wildlife and habitats and improve the planning and governance of the coastal and estuary waters below mean high water spring tides. The Act also includes provision of a continuous coastal route around England.

Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) ACT (2000) and duties to have regard to AONBs

The statutory purpose of AONBs is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of their area. The CRoW Act places a general statutory duty on all relevant authorities to take account of the purpose of AONBs when coming to decisions or carrying out their activities relating to land, or affecting land, within these areas⁴.

Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Partnership's view

1. Suffolk's coast, being made up of sand, shingle and soft cliff has always changed due to natural processes. This dynamism is part of what makes this coastline special, it adds to its uniqueness and history and should be celebrated, understood and worked with.
2. The designation of the AONB places duties on all relevant authorities. The AONB's nationally protected landscape should be a key consideration in coastal management decision-making.
3. Landscape and visual impact assessments of coastal management options, be they realignment of estuary walls or construction of hard coastal defences, must be carried out before decisions are made, in line with appropriate statutory agency guidance⁵.
4. Policy decisions that will see significant changes to our coastal landscapes should be made with timescales that allow time for environmental, social and economic adaptation.
5. The estuaries are a fundamental part of what gives the AONB its sense of place, as are the freshwater coastal levels that lie behind their river walls. The landscape mosaic is a key characteristic of the area.
6. Decisions that would result in re-alignment of river walls to create new intertidal flats and mitigate the loss of saltmarsh due to coastal squeeze, may present significant opportunities for coastal habitats and wildlife. These decisions would also lead to loss of freshwater levels, an important landscape character type, some of which may be high quality grazing marsh. In such cases a full assessment of landscape and visual impact should be carried out⁵. In some cases it may be more appropriate for new intertidal areas to be created elsewhere, either inside the AONB or further afield.
7. Coastal defences are located in one of the most sensitive types of landscape. Coasts, and particularly the foreshore and sea, will often have little capacity to accommodate change without detrimental effects on landscape or seascape character due to their often simple, unspoilt and natural condition⁶. The coastline of Suffolk is of great landscape and economic importance. It should, as far as possible, be protected or managed in a way that complements or strengthens the particular character of the landscape, and enhances, or does not adversely affect, people's views of, and access to, the coast and sea.
8. Defences proposed in natural landscapes should be designed to appear natural. In landscape terms the management, or use, of materials naturally found on the coast, in the form of salt marshes, sand dunes, shingle banks or sand/shingle beaches will almost always be the preferred solution.
9. The visual impact of hard coastal defences in the AONB can have a profound and long-lasting impact on the natural beauty of the landscape. The visual impact should be fully assessed⁵ where such schemes are considered an imperative and steps taken to reduce and mitigate the landscape and visual impact.
10. A suite of soft, hard and innovative defence options should be researched and developed for the Suffolk coast, to enable erosion and flood risk management to be undertaken, where appropriate, with minimal visual impacts on the designated landscape. Research in Wales may be of use in the meantime⁶. The Suffolk Landscape Character Assessment (2008), the AONB's landscape character guidelines (2001) and the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Landscape Assessment (1993) all provide valuable guidance in assessing landscape impacts.
11. Strategies and plans for coastal management need to integrate the range of social, economic and environmental issues, relevant to the coast, and not simply be based on flood and erosion risk management.

⁴ Defra 2005. Duties on relevant authorities to have regard to the purposes of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (.pdf copies available from the AONB Unit)

⁵ Countryside Agency & Scottish Natural Heritage (2002) Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland and associated topic papers, particularly Topic paper 6 – "Techniques and criteria for judging landscape capacity and sensitivity".

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/landscape/englands/character/assessment/default.aspx>

⁶ CCW 2003. Guidance for coastal defences in relation to their landscape and visual impact. (.pdf copies available from the AONB Unit)