

# AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION STATEMENT



---

## The future of the Public Forest Estate in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths

---

### 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

The Public Forest Estate, owned by the Forestry Commission (the estate), in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB totals 3,107 hectares<sup>1</sup> and is primarily made up of Rendlesham, Tunstall and Dunwich forests. All are predominantly coniferous forests, originally planted in the 1920s on what was once Sandlings heathland. All contain significant elements of broadleaf woodland, having been planted or, in many cases, regenerating naturally.

A public consultation on the future ownership of the entire estate in early 2011 sparked much debate about the future of the nation's public forests and such controversy ensued that the consultation was withdrawn. For the time being the estate remains in public ownership, although the future is far from clear given the budget cuts that the Forestry Commission (FC) face and that there is still a commitment to the sale of 15% of FC's 258,000 hectare estate in England.

This position statement deals only with the issues that concern the AONB Partnership, that of the environmental value and opportunity of the public forest estate within the Suffolk Coast and Heaths, its value as an asset for tourism and recreation and its future role in helping to meet AONB objectives.

### The importance of the forests

At over 3000ha, the estate is by far the largest area of land, under one owner, within the AONB. Given its size, single public ownership and that the forests lie on former Sandlings heath, they present the most significant opportunity within the AONB for major enhancements of landscape quality, wildlife conservation and public access.

All are important for public access, Rendlesham & Tunstall particularly so, with c.950,000 person-visits per year<sup>2</sup>. They provide a wide range of public access opportunities including walking, cycling, horse-riding, carriage-driving and husky racing. Under section 16 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act (2000) the public forest estate in England has been dedicated for open access in perpetuity. However this is only for pedestrian access.

At 3,000ha Rendlesham, Tunstall and Dunwich are an important timber resource producing various grades of softwood timber including; pulp, fencing and construction. Clearly, as with the whole the estate in England, this is an important economic factor, although the scale of the estate and the fact that some sites are more productive than others means that individual forests, such as those in the AONB do not have to have timber production as their primary aim. Biomass from the forests should also not be overlooked and the forests provide an enormous local opportunity for wood fuel developments.

All are important for nature conservation, Rendlesham and Tunstall particularly, which are both Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) as well as Special Protection Areas (SPA) under UK law and EU Birds Directive respectively. Dunwich Forest is at the centre of one of Suffolk's most inspirational landscape-scale projects.

---

<sup>1</sup> Suffolk Biological Record Centre (2008) AONB Management Plan Section 6 Appendix B

<sup>2</sup> Suffolk Wildlife Trust (2011). South Sandlings Living Landscape report.

Rendlesham Forest and the forest centre at Tangham is one of the focal points for tourism and recreation in the Sandlings, as well as being designated for its wildlife value. In addition to a campsite, there are numerous walking and cycling routes around the forest, with a special UFO trail, as a legacy of the world-renowned "close-encounter" in 1980. In recent years the Red Rose Chain theatre company have successfully run an open air-theatre at Tangham throughout the month of August.

Tunstall Forest consists of coniferous plantations, broadleaved belts and heathland areas which link up with both Tunstall and Blaxhall Commons. These areas are very important for ground nesting birds such as the nightjar and woodlark and it is these species for which both Tunstall and Rendlesham are designated as SPAs under the EU Birds Directive. Tunstall is very popular with walkers, cyclists and horseriders alike.

Dunwich Forest is currently undergoing a process of 're-wilding' with a long term plan to recreate and regenerate the heathland landscape, including broadleaved wood pasture habitats, that existed prior to the establishment of the conifer plantations. The management of Dunwich forest is now through a partnership between the FC, Suffolk Wildlife Trust and RSPB.

The true archaeological importance of the forests has yet to be recognised, although the presence of a number of scheduled sites in the vicinity is indicative of this potential.

### **Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Partnership's view**

1. Regardless of ownership, the public forests, in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths, perform an important role in conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area. It is vital this continues and that future owners maintain the outward-facing approach that FC currently does.
2. At over 3,000 ha the estate provides the most significant opportunity for habitat and landscape enhancement, as well as public access improvement, in the AONB. Planted on former Sandlings heath, the forest soils remain largely unmodified and provide an excellent opportunity for heathland restoration (in accordance with FC's open habitats policy). Furthermore, given their location in the AONB the forests could act as the building blocks for a future ecological network across the area.
3. Development of the access and recreation facilities in the forests may help reduce the people-pressure on other more sensitive areas of the AONB, less able to withstand large numbers of visitors, such as some coastal and estuary locations. However Sandlings forest wildlife, particularly ground nesting birds such as woodlark and nightjar, are also sensitive to disturbance so management of visitors and greater awareness of wildlife sensitivity in the forests is vital.
4. The cost of running these AONB forests for their multiple objectives is approximately £187,000 per annum. This is only made possible by the size of the public forest estate outside the AONB. The scale of the public forest estate, and the profits made on some sites, enable FC to deliver greater levels of public benefit in forests like Rendlesham, Tunstall & Dunwich.
5. While wood fuel products from the AONB's forests provide an enormous local economic opportunity this should only be supported if it can go hand in hand with the environmental opportunity of enabling the large-scale landscape restoration of the forests.
6. The AONB Partnership has significant concerns about the criteria that described the AONB's forests in the public consultation of spring 2011. Only Tunstall was described as a 'heritage' forest, while Rendlesham and Dunwich were described as 'small commercial'. Given the high value for wildlife and landscape conservation and the number of visitors these sites attract, they should all be categorised as heritage forests, or at the very least multi-objective forests, in any future consultation.
7. The **Independent Panel on Forestry**, set up in March 2011, whose role it will be to make recommendations about future forestry policy in England, should take this opportunity to consider:
  - a. the comparative cost, to the tax payer, of running the public forest estate versus the cost of running the private forest estate,
  - b. the role of FC in relation to ownership of the estate. FC currently owns a larger area of SSSI than any other owner in England and also has more of these SSSIs in 'target condition' than any other owner, including Natural England,
  - c. re-focussing FC as a forest and wildlife service, better reflecting society's expectations of them, similar to the model in the USA.

Figure 1: FC's public forest estate in the AONB, marked in pink.

