

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

FROM: Head of Contract and Asset
Management

REPORT NUMBER **H16**

TO: STRATEGY COMMITTEE

DATE OF MEETING: 1 MAY 2008

**SUFFOLK COAST AND HEATHS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY -
PROPOSED MANAGEMENT PLAN (2008-2013)**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To seek adoption by Strategy Committee of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan (2008-2013), and to demonstrate support for the actions contained therein.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That:

- The Suffolk Coast and Heaths Management Plan 2008-13 (the Plan) be adopted
- The statement in paragraph 5.11 be approved for inclusion in the finalised Plan
- The actions identified in paragraph 5.6 are acknowledged as largely representing the Council's agreed commitments.

The Committee is able to resolve this matter.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 None, other than the Council's agreed annual contribution towards the running costs of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Unit, which stands at £17,720 for the current financial year and goes towards a total budget of more than £300,000.

4. **RISK MANAGEMENT**

Risk Description	Likelihood	Seriousness or Impact	Mitigation Measures
Failure to produce an updated Plan as statutorily required by Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.	Very low	Significant levels of funding provided by Natural England would not be forthcoming if the requirement to produce an updated management plan is not met. This could undermine the Council's legal obligations as set out in the Act, and result in collapse of the partnership working arrangements. Alternative structures would be needed which could work out to be less satisfactory and more expensive.	Regular meetings at officer and member level ensure that progress is made towards the required review and production of the management plan. Natural England provides specific guidance on the steps needed to fulfil the legal obligations.

5. **KEY INFORMATION**

- 5.1 Local Authorities covered by the AONB have a statutory duty to produce a management plan for the area under the terms of Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and to review it after 5 years. A new Plan is therefore required to replace the one adopted in 2002.
- 5.2 A new Plan has therefore been drawn up for adoption following the consultation exercise that took place between 5 September and 2 November 2007. (Paper G105 to this Committee on 27 September 2007 dealt with the Council's response to the consultation draft).
- 5.3 The consultation exercise resulted in relatively few comments, given the large number of stakeholders in the Plan area. On the whole these were supportive, but greater clarification on some aspects and improved cohesion between the aims, objectives and action points were sought by some respondents. The Plan has been significantly revised in parts but without losing its main thrust.
- 5.4 Additions have been made explaining the purpose of the Plan, and highlighting the responsibilities of the local authorities for conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB. The work of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Partnership and the AONB Unit is explained for the first time. The section on the character and special qualities of the AONB has been substantially revised to make it more consistent with current thinking on landscape character assessment. The section on the social and environmental policy context and issues has been expanded, covering topical items such as climate change, land use, biodiversity and geodiversity, development, access and recreation and understanding of the AONB.

5.5 A revised Vision Statement illustrates what the Suffolk Coasts and Heaths can look like in 2028, and is based on the primary purpose of AONB designation. It envisages:

- aHigh quality landscape with its special features retained and enhanced
- The full engagement of local communities with their environment
- A thriving economy
- The retention of tranquillity.

More detailed concepts for the key landscape areas of the coast, estuaries, river valleys, sandlings, heaths and agricultural land are expanded on.

5.6 A revised Action Plan identifies three requirements of the Plan arising from the primary purpose of AONB designation, as follows:

- Conserve and enhance natural beauty
- Manage the assets and resources of the AONB in a sustainable way
- Meet the demand for recreation where this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the management of land.

5.7 Further information can be obtained from the Countryside Officer (tel. no: 01473 825869), and a hard copy of the document is available in the Members Room, or see the Suffolk Coast and Heaths website – www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org

5.8 The Action Plan provides more detail on how the three requirements can be achieved, by whom and when, in the context of a three year rolling programme. Much of the work will fall to the Partnership as a whole but the Council will be expected to get more involved in a number of actions, including 2.2 on Integrated Coastal Zone Management, 3.1 Landscape Character Assessment in the Local Development Framework and on a raft of countryside management initiatives including interpretation.

5.9 An important feature of the process in finalising the Plan is for the formal observations of Natural England to be obtained, as required under Section 90 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and as amended under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. Natural England congratulates the Partnership and the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Unit in particular for the huge effort in producing the Plan, which is the first in England and Wales to go through the review process. They acknowledge that their delay in providing guidance on certain aspects has meant the Plan review process slipping back.

5.10 Natural England is satisfied that the Plan meets the statutory requirements for the AONB and the wider project area, that it follows their accredited guidance and that mechanisms are in place so that the Plan is published by the summer of 2008. They look forward to working with all the partners on further development of the Action Plan. They made substantive comments at the consultation stage which have largely been taken on board but suggest that in future years more policy provision and a stronger evidence base should be included.

- 5.11 The Council is asked to provide a statement of support to be included in the Plan, and the following text is suggested, to be signed off by the Chairman of the Committee:

“Babergh District Council values its involvement with the work of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Partnership, and in particular with the review of the Management Plan. It supports the overall provisions and will endeavour to work with its partners on the relevant Action Plan proposals”.

6. **CONCLUSION**

- 6.1 The finalised version of the Plan has been the result of nearly two years of work by all involved in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Partnership, and has undergone close scrutiny throughout the process. The Plan meets the Council’s corporate objectives and will be a useful document in support of other Council policies, such as planning policy and involvement with Local Strategic Partnerships. The Committee is recommended to adopt the Plan, together with the statement of support and agreement to follow up the relevant action points.

7. **APPENDICES**

None.

8. **BACKGROUND PAPERS REFERRED TO:**

Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Management Plan - March 2008

CONTACT: Peter Berry

DIRECT LINE: 01473 825869