

Design and defence on our ever-changing coastline

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John Grant

john.grant@archant.co.uk

Suffolk's dynamic coast is under siege from the sea and is subject to constant, wave-scoured change - but its beauty is also constant and is recognised by international and national designations.

Protecting this fragile interface between land and sea from the immense forces of nature while still retaining the area's landscape qualities can be quite a challenge - sea defences have to do their job but their appearance also has an impact on the coast's widely treasured character.

Reconciling any potential conflict of interests is not an easy task for decision-makers - but a major report commissioned by the Touching the Tide Heritage Lottery Funded Landscape Partnership Scheme, which ended in July, was published in a spirit of helpful guidance. It was the subject of a detailed presentation by its lead author, Alison Farmer, at the Suffolk Coast & Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Joint Advisory Committee and Special Partnership meeting at Rendlesham Community Centre last week.

Ms Farmer, of Cambridge-based landscape architecture and environmental planning specialists Alison Farmer Associates, told guests the report had been prepared by her practice in partnership with specialist consultants HR Wallingford and the Cambridge Coastal Research Unit.

It aimed to bring landscape considerations to the fore "right from the start" of coastal sea defence planning processes rather than treating them as "mitigation" later on.

It was important to "build in" a broader understanding of the landscape issues involved in planning such defences, she said, and to appreciate that they involved a wide range of factors, such as the form and colour of the structures and the impacts they would have at all states of the tide.

"Cost may be the primary force that drives the outcome but it is important to have the debate about landscape impacts too," said Ms Farmer.

The report points out that there is "currently no systematic framework to enable the visual and other impacts of coastal defence options on landscape character to be formally considered alongside the potential impacts on nature conservation and the historic environment."

There were particular difficulties in areas such as the Suffolk Coast & Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty where landscape was recognised as having national importance and yet there was such great potential for coastal change.

In its conclusion, the report advocates



■ Main photo, Alison Farmer, of Alison Farmer Associates, at the Suffolk Coast & Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty meeting at Rendlesham Community Centre. Inset, clockwise from top right, coastal defence work under way in recent years at Slaughden, near Aldeburgh, Felixstowe, and Corton, near Lowestoft, and the December 2013 sea wall breach at Hazlewood Marshes, near Aldeburgh.

Main photo: SARAH LUCY BROWN.



that "the landscape and visual effects should be understood and evaluated during the selection of a preferred option for the treatment of the coast, and described, classified, evaluated and assessed during the design and assessment process."

It adds: "Coastal Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty form some of our most valued landscapes in England."

"Coastal defences should be designed not to devalue this resource, by considering landscape and visual impact early in the design process, building in mitigation as part of the iterative design

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process, and so helping to reduce the need for secondary mitigation which is difficult to achieve effectively.”

Coastal sea defences should be designed "with care, giving consideration to form,

size, colour, material and location. They should be integrated with other coastal elements and obtrusive ancillary features should be minimised.

"The deliver of high-quality coastal landscapes ultimately requires all parties to be mindful of landscape and visual effects and to work together to find landscape-friendly solutions."

■ Viewing of the full report, Suffolk Coastal Sea Defences, Potential Landscape and Visual Effects, can be arranged by contacting Bill Jenman, who was the manager of the Touching the Tide project, at Bill.Jenman@suffolk.gov.uk