

Estate Sandlands

Landscape Sensitivity & Change

This is a flat or very gently rolling landscape of sandy soils covering the Brecks and parts of the Suffolk coast, known as the Sandlings.

It has traditionally been sparsely settled with farmsteads because in most places it was not suitable for the establishment of more concentrated settlement. The only exception to this is in the north of the Sandlings. Here, where this landscape becomes a narrow strip between the river valleys and the heavier land to the west and north, there are significant village clusters. The sparse settlement means that this is a deeply rural landscape so some developments that could be accommodated in visual terms in these areas can still have a profound affect on the character of this landscape type.

In the post war period the Estate Sandlands has seen settlement expansion at Martlesham and Stutton Heath in the Sandlings; and Brandon, Lakenheath and Honington in the Brecks.

There is tree cover throughout this landscape, except in those areas that are still open heathland. The Brecks and the Sandlings have a comprehensive pattern of shelterbelts and small plantation woodlands running across them and there are large areas of state-owned forestry plantations created after WWI.

The character of the landscape is largely made up of C18th and C19th estate farms, irrigated arable crops, new woodlands and tracts of heathland. The poor quality flat land was also used to build and maintain airfields. These sites, both operational and non-operational, continue to be important foci for change and activity in this landscape. In recent years leisure activities have become increasingly important. The state forests are now a significant recreational area in both the Brecks and the Sandlings.

The soil type, agricultural and silvacultural practice, in combination with the areas of remnant heathland, has created important wildlife habitats for a small range of internationally significant bird species. In many cases, especially in the west, there are European designated sites for the protection of these species. Furthermore, much of the coastal part of this landscape type is included within the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Key Forces for Change

- Expansion of existing settlements into this landscape and creation of new settlement patterns and clusters associated with infrastructure development
- Changes in the management and use of landscape parklands
- Conversion and expansion of farmsteads for residential uses
- Large-scale agricultural buildings in open countryside

- Redevelopment of former airfield sites to new uses
- The introduction of new agricultural techniques
- Leisure as a driving force for changes in economic activity
- Mineral extraction

Development Management

Settlement form and expansion

In respect of *visual impact* the regular nature of this landscape means that it does have more potential capacity to accept significant settlement expansion than the ancient countryside of the claylands. The sandland plateau with its simpler and more modern land cover pattern and extensive regular pattern of tree cover can be adapted to accept larger growth.

However, the area does not have a history of substantial settlements. Therefore, the *impact on the character of the landscape* both directly and indirectly can be highly significant and damaging. Furthermore, given the extensive European ecological designations (SPA and SAC) and the national landscape designations (AONB) found across much of this landscape, the opportunities for significant settlement expansion are further constrained.

Finally, if developments encroach on landscapes located on river valley sides, fen edges or coastal slopes they will have a profound landscape impact on the character of these adjacent landscape types.

The majority of early settlement clusters are outside, or on the edge of, this landscape unless the sandlands are close to better soils. In these fringe areas the settlement pattern begins to take on some of the complex historic features of the claylands, with multiple clusters of settlement. In the heart of the landscape in both the Brecks and the Sandlings there are farms and small groups of estate cottages.

Barn conversions and extensions

Given the range of substantial and “late” historic farm buildings within this landscape type there is considerable demand for these to be converted to other uses, although this may not be acceptable in terms of policy. If, however, such applications are supported the result may be large and extensive complexes of multiple dwellings or offices and light industrial units. C19th (and later) farm buildings are capable of accommodating new uses while conserving the character of the landscape rather more easily than older farm structures.

Any new building should usually be close to the existing cluster of buildings and should be subordinate in size to the principal buildings. The design, including finishes such as tiles, brickwork, mortar, or wooden cladding should be appropriate for the style of buildings present. Staining used for exterior boarding should be capable of

weathering in the traditional way, as a permanent dark or black colouring is not locally appropriate.

The change of land use, especially to residential curtilage, can often be more disruptive to the wider landscape than modifications to the buildings. Changes to the surrounding land from agricultural to residential use, which entails the introduction of lighting and other suburban features, can be extremely intrusive. Unless the site is well hidden, it may be necessary to impose clear conditions relating to the extent of garden curtilage and how this is screened from the wider landscape. The impact of new garden curtilage in this landscape is potentially even more significant than that in a clayland landscape because of the characteristic settlement pattern found here, as discussed above.

Large scale agricultural buildings in open countryside

The right choice of siting, form, orientation and colour of these buildings can make a considerable contribution to mitigating their impact. The plantations, shelterbelts, and tree lines found throughout this landscape provide opportunities to design locally appropriate planting schemes to reduce the visual impact further.

The siting of buildings should relate to an existing cluster of buildings whenever possible. Usually, although not in all cases, using a shade of the colour green is preferred as this will integrate well with vegetation. The correct orientation of the building can also significantly change the visual impact of the development, and this consideration should always be explored.

In addition to new planting to mitigate the impact of a development, the location of the development in relation to existing trees that act either as screening or as a backdrop should be carefully considered. The planning authority should ensure these trees are retained for the lifetime of the development. The option to modify the management of existing hedgerows should also be explored. New planting should be designed to integrate the development into the character of the landscape, and may consist of both backdrop and screening planting.

The care and maintenance of the planting should be made a condition of these developments. In many cases the landscape impact of these projects is only acceptable if it is mitigated by effective planting. The applicant should therefore provide a detailed scheme of planting and aftercare, which can form the basis of a condition. Furthermore, depending on the risks to be controlled, the planning authority may need to consider a 106 agreement to secure the landscaping and design requirements for an extended period.

Redevelopment of former airfield sites

In most cases a specific master-plan approach is the most effective way to deal with development of these sites. It is then possible to implement strategic planting schemes to mitigate the visual impact of long-term growth on the site, rather than dealing with proposals and mitigation on a piecemeal basis.

Specific issues relating to airfield development also include the preservation of cultural and historic features, such as bunkers and control towers, and the need for a design that retains them in an appropriate setting. Also, the alignment of runways etc can be echoed in the layout of buildings and the arrangement of planting.

Landscape of leisure - golf courses, holiday complexes, caravan sites, tourist centres

The regular and recent nature of this landscape means that it does have more potential capacity, in respect of *visual impact*, to accept these developments but effective design and mitigation measures will be vital.

However, the *impact on the character* of the landscape both directly and indirectly may be highly significant and it may not be possible to effectively mitigate these impacts. Therefore such developments would constitute a profound and undesirable change to landscape character.

Changes in the management and use of landscape parklands

Any proposals for change could have a negative impact on these historic landscapes. The majority of sites, regardless of designation status, will require an overarching management plan or strategy to guide changes. This should cover the maintenance, preservation and management of existing features, as well as the restoration or creation of new or lost ones. When sufficient information is not available the applicant should undertake detailed background research. Planning applications that affect historic parklands should therefore be accompanied by a suitable management plan or other detailed evidence, to support the proposals.

Visual impact of cropping and production, and land use changes

The changes in cropping practices that have taken place across much of the Estate Sandlands, such as the use of fleece and plastic as well as outdoor pig production, have had a significant effect on the landscape. The siting and style of structures subject to planning control, such as static feed bins for pigs, poly tunnels or reservoirs should be appropriately conditioned to minimise their landscape impact.

Mineral extraction and post working uses

As the location for mineral operations is dictated by the availability of economically viable aggregates, alternative siting is not an option. However, careful design and mitigation proposals during extraction, together with effective management and oversight of the restoration of sites, can minimise the impact of mineral extractions.

The post extraction uses of minerals sites can often be problematic. They can make ideal recreation centres, often based around fishing but these can neutralise the wildlife benefits and be a source of intrusive landscape clutter on the valley side. In some cases former mineral workings can be the focus for large-scale development because the land is perceived to be of low value. The visual impact of such developments can be very significant in a confined valley landscape.

Land Management Guidelines

- Reinforce the historic pattern of regular boundaries.
- Restore, maintain and enhance the pattern of locally distinctive “pine lines”.
- Restore, maintain and enhance the network of tree belts and pattern of small plantations found across much of this landscape type.
- Extend the cover of heathland paying particular attention to areas of commercial forestry as these have lower nutrients and a residual seed bank.
- Develop opportunities for locally distinctive species such as the rare Brecks plants.
- Protect distinctive geomorphology such as patterned ground.