

Outstanding views

Latest news from the Suffolk Coast & Heaths and Dedham Vale Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty with AONB manager

Simon Amstutz



As manager of the staff team at the nationally designated Dedham Vale and Suffolk Coast & Heaths Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) I had the opportunity to run a workshop at the excellent East Suffolk Partnership conference recently.

My workshop was on the stewardship of the natural environment and my opening comments referred to the fact that over 50% of wildlife species has been recorded as in decline for the period 1970-2016. The fact that the amount of farmland, forests, gardens and greenfield land lost to housing development each year has increased by 58% over the past four years made people sit up.

During the participative element there was an overwhelming feeling that we needed to do something. Not someone else, not a charity, not the council, not the Government, although it was recognised that all these needed to work towards improved stewardship of the environment. Participants recognised that they as individuals need to do something to help the environment.

There were some outstanding suggestions. Volunteer for an hour a month; engage with young people about environment matters via a medium they use; buy less stuff. Many were suggestions that we could do and would make a difference.

I was impressed with the suggestions but I was most heartened to know that so many other people, from many different walks of life, value the environment and understand that we need to do something to ensure future generations can enjoy it as much as we do.

I hope the AONBs can help meet this aspiration.



Encouraging development that is fit for people and the natural world

The East Anglian Planning and Biodiversity Seminar sought to share the latest thinking around building design and planning that conserves natural assets and promotes healthy living. **Ross Bentley** reports.

The encroachment of new housing developments represents a potential major threat to our natural places and the look and feel of our communities.

But, like it or not, it seems the houses are coming - in 2015 it was estimated Suffolk will need an additional 70,000 new homes built by 2031 to accommodate the county's growing population. That's to say nothing of the accompanying infrastructure - the schools and roads - as well as the new spaces for workplaces to meet current and future requirements.

Mitigating the impact of all this construction and ensuring nature and wildlife are given a high priority before the diggers move in was the theme of the East Anglian Planning and Biodiversity Seminar, which saw planners and ecologists congregate for a day of presentations at the University of Suffolk's Waterfront building in Ipswich on Thursday.

Host, Mike Oxford, a consultant ecologist from the Association of Local Government, introduced the event by pointing to some of the key moments of 2018 including the publication of the revised draft of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which includes extra protections for "irreplaceable habitats" such as ancient woodlands and says planning authorities and developers should look to provide "net gains for biodiversity" with any development, considering

upfront how a project can boost natural assets.

Mr Oxford said this change of emphasis was "hugely positive" and "could be a game changer".

Ground rules

For an example of how a progressive nature-friendly approach to development looks, landscape architect Lindsey Wilkinson was on hand to advise on the ingredients required to make sure "natural potential is fulfilled in schemes".

Ms Wilkinson said it is important that "natural assets are thought about at the beginning and are embedded in schemes, and not added at the end as a tick-box exercise."

Traditionally, many developers have preferred to work from "a blank slate and produce a development with a wow factor that looks good in a brochure," she added.

What's more: "developers have prioritised the viability of the scheme and whether it is delivered on time" over conserving any natural assets in a location.

But Ms Wilkinson said there was a growing understanding of how sites themselves can shape development and a greater creativity among some designers who are looking to create "bespoke and site specific developments that build a sense of place".

It is to be hoped that much of this thinking influences the Suffolk Design guide - a document



Speakers at the East Anglian Planning and Biodiversity Seminar (from left) Lindsey

that is intended to lay out the ground rules for development in Suffolk in the future. Philip Isbell, acting chief planning officer for Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils, gave an overview of the project, which is currently a work in progress that is due to be published spring/summer 2019.

He said the guide will take in the views of professionals and communities alike and replace a previous "aged document that doesn't refer to biodiversity".

He added: "We want to ensure that development responds better to the context [of a location] - that hasn't always been the case in the past".

Designing for climate change

The ability or inability to access green and blue spaces from your home, and how that can impact human health, was the subject of a fascinating presentation by Carl Petrokofsky of the Healthy Places team at Public Health England.

Events like today won't change the world but they are a step in the right direction



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Wilkinson, Philip Isbell, Mike Oxford, Colin Hawes, Paul Cantwell, Gavin Siriwardena, David Dowding Picture: ROSS BENTLEY

His talk was enhanced by numerous statistics - that in the UK men living in the most affluent areas are likely to live over nine years longer than those in the most deprived; and that people in the most affluent 20% of areas in the country have access to five times the amount of green parks and spaces nearby compared with those in the most deprived 10%.

Living near green spaces can boost the immune system, and reduce noise and air pollution - "the largest environmental risk facing society today", said Mr Petrokofsky, who said people who can't get to green spaces easily exercise less - a problem that costs

the NHS up to £2billion annually.

He also called for housing design that takes into consideration climate change such as homes that can be kept cool without air conditioning and living spaces that enable older and vulnerable people to feel more comfortable in the heat.

"This will be a significant challenge going forward and this is the time to look at it," he said.

Reflecting on the content of the presentations, host Mike Oxford said he has seen a lot of progress toward more nature-friendly developments in the decade or so since this annual event was first held.

"When we first started this seminar, the presentations were more aspirational but now we are hearing about people actively doing things - that is incredibly encouraging," he said.

Speaking after the event, Nick Sibbert, an associate at Woodbridge-based landscape architecture practice The Landscape Partnership said; "Much of what has been said today is still aspirational but we are edging toward changes in culture [in development]."

"Events like today won't change the world but they are a steps in the right direction."



Natural assets need to be considered before the diggers move in Picture: SONYA DUNCAN



Picture: GREG HITCHCOCK

The unusual life cycle of stag beetles

The distinctive stag beetle is a protected species found mainly in the southeast of England where the temperature is to its liking and the sandy soils enable it to burrow. But its numbers are declining, due mainly to habitat loss, and a clue to why stag beetle colonies may not be identified in ecological surveys was given by Colin Hawe from the Royal Holloway University of London, who presented at the Planing and Biodiversity seminar. The insect's unusual life cycle means it spends 97% of its life underground as a larvae feeding off decaying wood with the beetles emerging between mid-May and the end

of July for a short period during which time it does not feed. Mr Hawes said stag beetles are crepuscular - emerging at dusk - and only take to the wing if night-time temperatures hit 16°C or above. "Surveys should take place after 8:30pm using a head torch," he said. "If you are surveying during the day it is hopeless." Creating new habitat for stag beetles is as straightforward as creating vertical log piles with some of the wood buried underground. "There is a need to ensure the continuity of dead wood or the population will die off," added Mr Hawe.



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