

**Suffolk County Council  
Ipswich**

# **Brecks Options Study Advice on Options for the Long-Term Protection and Management**

**Tender Submission**



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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Alison Farmer Associates is pleased to respond to the invitation to tender from Suffolk County Council in relation to the Brecks Options Study, to provide advice on options for the long-term protection and management of this distinctive landscape.

**Alison Farmer Associates** ([www.alisonfarmer.co.uk](http://www.alisonfarmer.co.uk)) is a landscape architecture and environmental planning consultancy based in Cambridge, UK. Established in May 2003 the business has been engaged in a range of different projects throughout the UK and Ireland for government agencies, local authorities, non-governmental organisations, charities, residents' groups and private businesses. We are joined by **Resources for Change** ([www.r4c.org.uk](http://www.r4c.org.uk)) who are a consultancy that works at the interface of environment and community, **creating constructive interactions between people and places**. They deliver this through engagement, research and evaluation and have developed a reputation for innovative approaches to stakeholder engagement and co-production in respect to landscape and nature recovery.

AFA and R4C have worked together over many years engaging in projects such as the Winchester Landscape Study for the South Downs National Park and most recently the Surrey Hills AONB boundary review and Yorkshire Wolds AONB designation project.

We collectively bring a wealth of experience in protected landscapes from assessing and designating National Parks (NP) and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), through to landscape partnership working and assessment and definition of valued landscapes. This work requires a sound understanding of the different mechanisms, powers and duties which come with different types of landscape recognition and management arrangements and the benefits which flow from these. We also have excellent research and analytical skills, with an ability to distil key issues from large quantities of data and excellent communications skills to work with stakeholders to find consensus on the best way forward.

In all our work we recognise the importance of engaging with a range of stakeholders, of bringing people together to discuss issues and exchange ideas, and for people to find solutions by journeying together, through the process. The aim is to ensure project outcomes are **generated collectively** and that taking them forward is a **natural step** for stakeholders.

## 1.2 Background

The Brecks landscape or Breckland has long been recognised as a special area. Extending across both Norfolk and Suffolk, the relevant County Councils wish to secure, for the long-term, the unique and special qualities of the Brecks including its environmental, social and economic benefits.

The word 'Breck' is medieval and described an area of heathland broken up for cultivation, then allowed to revert to wilderness. Climatically the Brecks is one of the driest places in England and over the 20th and early 21st centuries, the extent of heathland has changed through the creation of Thetford Forest and through modern farming, to create the mosaic of heathland, forest and farmland habitat seen today. Its associated designations illustrate its importance of the area as a biodiversity hotspot, but it is also highly valued for its cultural

heritage resource, and the opportunities it provides for recreation and in supporting the local economy.

Historically there have been many studies which have researched and distilled the special qualities<sup>1</sup> of the area, including its emptiness and tranquillity, heathland mosaic, distinctive pine lines, secretive river valleys, plantations and hidden history. There are also many good conservation initiatives (such as landscape partnerships, nature recover networks and farm clusters) operating within the Brecks which seek to enhance the social, economic and environmental value of the area and which have successfully connected communities to place, celebrated the uniqueness of the area and improved sustainable management and farming activities. However, issues remain regarding the longevity and continuity of schemes, varied objectives between organisations and initiatives, overlapping or discrete focus areas, or missed opportunities for coordination and collaboration. This presents challenges for the long-term management of the area.

Nevertheless, the Brecks area has been very successful at obtaining funding to run not one but two multiyear landscape partnerships which have shown what is possible when stakeholders work collaboratively to delivery landscape and heritage improvements. This provides a strong foundation of collaboration upon which to build. R4C are currently contracted to run an element of the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers scheme, looking to build strong collaborative processes and social capital among stakeholder groups to enhance legacy. This work for BFER dovetails with the requirements of this brief and should lead to synergies and added value.

Furthermore, in 2021/22 a landscape character assessment and valued landscape assessment was commissioned by West Suffolk District Council, to review existing local landscape designations and to define Valued Landscape in NPPF terms. AFA in collaboration with Shiels Flynn, undertook this work which forms an evidence base for the emerging West Suffolk Local Plan. It is anticipated that policy within the local plan will relate to both landscape character as well as valued landscape, thereby giving recognition to the Brecks landscape in policy terms, where it lies within Suffolk. Similarly, the Breckland District Local Plan Policy ENV 05 Protection and Enhancement of the Landscape, makes specific reference, and gives recognition to The Brecks landscape in Norfolk. However, there remains scope for greater consistency in evaluation, policy wording and decision making across the Brecks area as a whole.

### **1.3 Requirements of this Study**

The purpose of the study will be to:

- Explore with partners and stakeholders, options for recognising the existing and potential value of the Brecks with reference to environmental, social and economic benefits.
- Identify the most suitable strategic, coordinated and sustainable management and delivery framework for the area.

In particular, the study will need to provide options for:

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<sup>1</sup> Especially set out in The Brecks Special Qualities Report, 2014

- Recognition of the area through designation.
- Enabling collaboration between stakeholders in pursuit of agreed purposes, objectives and actions.
- Facilitating and resourcing coordinated delivery.
- Engaging and empowering local people, communities and business in championing the area.

The study will require ongoing liaison with the client team and Steering Group Members who are understood to include:

- Suffolk County Council
- Norfolk County Council
- The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Manager
- Natural England
- Other relevant organisations (Forestry Commission/Wildlife Trust)

It is anticipated that a combination of virtual and face to face project meetings will be held and that face-to-face meetings will take place at a venue in/close to the project area.

## 2 Timing and Tasks

### 2.1 Overview

Our approach to this study will be guided by our appreciation of the issues and requirements outlined above. We recognise that there is a wealth of information on the Brecks landscape and why it is special, and we would not seek to revisit this as part of this project. Instead, we will focus on the current management of the area, the changing context in which conservation work is operating (especially in relation to climate change and push for nature recovery), and how existing management options may apply to the Brecks, and whether a bespoke solution is required.

We propose to divide the work into five stages:

- **first**, a face-to-face inception meeting and discussion on the purpose and scope of the study.
- **second**, a scoping study and engagement stage, gathering data through desk study and engagement.
- **third**, consideration of options through a one-day event with stakeholders.
- **fourth**, write up of the study findings.
- **fifth**, issuing of the final reports and presentation of the results of the study at a final stakeholder event.

### 2.2 Timetable and Breakdown of Tasks

*Table 1* below gives an overview of our proposed approach, summarising key tasks, outputs and timing.

We note in the brief that provision is made for three workshops at the end of the project. We have a concern that, given the workshops proposed during the course of stages 2 and 3 that a further 3 events in stage 5 may present stakeholder fatigue. We therefore propose three events spread out during the course of the project with a single event at the end of the process to report back the findings of the study and set out the next steps. We are of course happy to discuss this further with the Steering Group.

We also note in the brief that the project is due to commence in May 2023 with a completion date in September 2023. Due to existing project commitments, and the limited availability of people during the month of August, we would like to propose that the project programme is extended until the end of November as set out in the table below.

**Table 1: Tasks, Outputs and Timing**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Indicative Timing</b>	<b>Outputs</b>
<b>1. Inception</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Face to face briefing meeting</b> with Steering Group</li> <li>• Collation of background data, relevant GIS datasets and stakeholder contact list</li> </ul>	May	
<b>2. Scoping Study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of existing background documents</li> <li>• Build a project GIS</li> <li>• Telephone consultation with conservation bodies elsewhere in UK which could form potential models for future management</li> <li>• Stakeholder mapping – build upon what is already known to ensure we get the right people involved.</li> <li>• Issues/ideas workshop with key stakeholders associated with the Brecks</li> <li>• Prepare draft paper on management options</li> <li>• <b>Virtual meeting with steering group</b> to discuss paper and emerging options</li> </ul>	June/July	<b>Draft paper</b>
<b>3. Consideration of options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare presentations on preferred management options</li> <li>• Design and facilitate a stakeholder workshop</li> <li>• Attendance at day event</li> <li>• Preparation of workshop report and <b>virtual meeting with Steering Group</b> to discuss findings</li> </ul>	September	<b>Presentations Workshop report</b>
<b>4. Preparation of Draft Report</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparation of report setting out findings of the study</li> <li>• Preparation of summary report setting out the future management of the Brecks</li> <li>• Issue of draft reports</li> <li>• <b>Virtual meeting to receive comments</b></li> </ul>	October	<b>Draft reports</b>
<b>5. Final Report and Stakeholder Event</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporation of comments from Steering Group and final issue of reports</li> <li>• Presentation of findings of the study final stakeholder event</li> </ul>	November	<b>Final Reports Presentation at Event</b>

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Background to Our Approach

This section sets out in more detail the approach we would adopt for this project.

In our experience we believe that successful long-term management of special places requires the following:

- **Vision** and a clear purpose.
- **Continuity** in terms of administrative structure, partnership working and access to resources.
- **Flexibility** as a result of clear objectives and actions which are monitored and updated to meet changing needs and to secure new opportunities.
- **Support** with buy-in from stakeholders, achieved through meaningful engagement in the development of ideas and plans.

We fully recognise that AONB's bring the gravitas of a statutory designation which binds local and national bodies into a strategic partnership focused on conserving and enhancing the special qualities of an area. However, in exploring options for the Brecks we would wish to consider the following questions with stakeholders in order to identify a suitable way forward, which may well be bespoke.

1. Is it possible to provide some of the outputs/benefits of AONB status without designation, given the length of time it takes to determine if an area is worthy of designation, the current designation programme by NE and also the current debate on the relevance of the purpose of designation in the context of the Glover Review, climate emergency and nature recovery?
2. Can other AONBs with similar landscapes help to provide continuity, vision and resources to the Brecks through the 'adoption' of the area or through 'twinning'? This would require an existing AONB to work beyond their boundaries, which many do. There are existing AONBs within the East of England which share similar landscapes to the Brecks (heathland, forestry, farmland mosaics) and which share similar issues. Could they be a suitable partner, providing access to expertise and resources?
3. Can Valued Landscapes which are now specifically referred to in the NPPF and for which there is now Landscape Institute Guidance and case history, ensure suitable weight is given to special qualities of a landscape when making planning decisions? Can there be greater consistency in policy wording and decision making between relevant Local Authorities?
4. Can the preparation of Conservation Management Plans and AONB Management Plans provide clarity of values associated with a landscape – its natural capital. As well as a clear purpose and continuity in objectives, thereby enabling better partnership working?
5. Can the Brecks landscape secure sufficient funding for the longer-term and guaranteed commitment to conservation management, essential to nature recovery and climate resilience? In other words, how could the Core funding of AONBs from Defra (75%) and relevant Local Authorities (25%) be matched, if AONB designation



was not pursued, and given new funding streams related to nature recovery including ELMs? Should we be looking at funding in a new way?

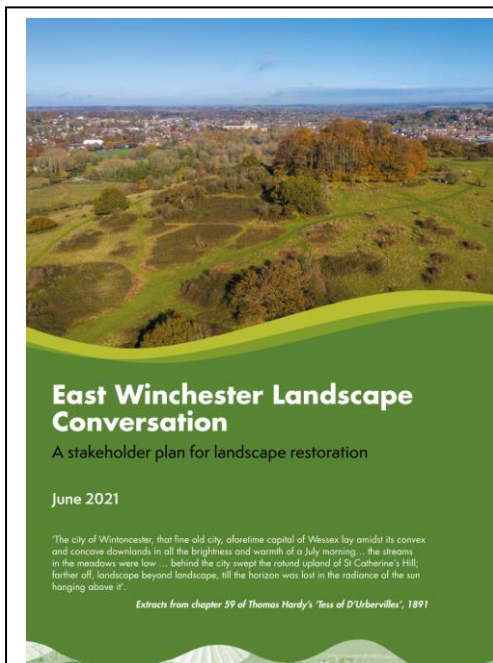
There is currently a lot of interest in the 'Landscape Scale' approach to addressing nature's decline and the impact of climate change. This idea of 'bigger', 'better' and more 'joined up' is seen as a key way of creating more resilient landscapes. However, more resilient landscapes don't just happen, they are facilitated by people who have a role and vested interest in those landscapes. How those people are engaged and how they work together will have a profound effect on the success of landscape scale working.

We recognise that landscape is a complicated idea. It has layers of interest and meaning for people; geological, archaeological, historical, ecological as well as being a place of work, recreational and social space and fundamentally where people live. All these interests need to be given a voice. We see this as a 'landscape conversation' and a good conversation requires us to 'get the whole landscape in the room'.

Our experience has shown that when diverse groups of people come together in a room (or on a Zoom), who share a passion for a place, *stuff happens*. People start talking to complete strangers, make connections, find common ground and recognise the power of collaboration. A well-designed landscape conversation has three outcomes:

1. It increases people's understanding of a particular landscape and other people's views about how it should be managed.
2. It increases connections across the landscape as people experience working together
3. It generates solutions to address the challenges the landscape faces.

An example of this approach is the East Winchester Landscape Conversation, designed and facilitated by Mike King & Alison Farmer, along with Lepus Consulting



Winchester lies at the Western end of the South Downs National Park which should provide the community with access and recreational opportunities, leading to improved wellbeing and other health benefits. However, the M3 motorway lies between the city and the Downs. On behalf of the South Downs National Park Authority, R4C, working in collaboration with Alison Farmer Associates and Lepus Consulting designed and delivered a 'Landscape Conversation'. Through a series of workshops, we enabled local people; residents parish councils, landowners, farmers, recreational groups and wildlife organisations to participate in the development of a wide ranging landscape plan. This plan addressed issues of landscape quality, biodiversity, ecological connectivity, access and recreational opportunities

as well as the need to create a more resilient landscape in the face of changes to farming practices, climate and recreational needs.

Taking the above into account we have set out below our proposed stages of work for this project. We hope that by structuring it in this way we avoid trying to undertake engagement with stakeholders during the holiday month of August and we build in some flexibility with existing work commitments. We believe this slightly extend programme, and the clear division of project stages, will help to bring people with us on a journey, so that the findings of the study are endorsed by those who will ultimately take things forward.

### **3.2 Stage 1: Inception**

We would start the project with a face-to-face inception meeting with the Steering Group which we understand would be held at Thetford. During this meeting we would agree the purposes of the study and set out our approach to the work. We would request background information and importantly agree a list of key stakeholders and contact details for those who we would want to engage with on the project.

### **3.3 Stage 2: Desk Study**

We would start the desk study stage with a review of all immediately accessible documentation relating to the Brecks. Some examples of existing studies associated with the Brecks which we would wish to review include:

- National Character Area (NCA) No. 83
- The Breckland Pine Rows: History, Ecology and Landscape Character, Tome Williamson, Sept 21010
- The Warrens of Breckland, A Survey by The Breckland Society, 2010
- Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks, Landscape Character Assessment, 2013
- The Brecks Special Qualities Report, 2014
- West Suffolk LCA 2021
- West Suffolk Valued Landscape review 2021

We would build a project GIS which will bring together shapefiles of digital data which can be mapped and will inform our understanding of the issues and also help to locate the extent of existing initiatives operating in the area including the Breck Fen Edge & Rivers Partnership, Local Nature Partnerships and Farm Clusters.

We will also, during this stage, identify other organisations and initiatives elsewhere in the UK which are dealing with the management of special landscapes and may provide a relevant model to the future management of the Becks. Case studies might include:

- Forest of Dean
- Cambridge Nature Network
- Sommerset Wetlands super national nature reserve
- Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB and Additional Project Area

This is a provisional list at this stage, and we would discuss this with the Steering Group to ensure the selection of three or four most suitable case studies. We would then contact relevant organisations and individuals by phone to discuss their initiatives with the purpose of drawing parallels with the Brecks and identifying ideas which may be relevant to future management options for the Brecks.

During this desk top review, we will start to collate data on existing conservation management and the organisations engaged in projects in the area, as well as their focus, purpose, funding, structure, activity and success.

We would develop a stakeholder map, building on what the Steering Group already knows and we would endeavour to identify all the key stakeholders and develop an understanding of their interests and motivations. This will enable us to ensure that the right people are engaged in workshops and that the process is designed with the stakeholders needs in mind.

We would then run a half day workshop with key stakeholders in the Brecks (many of whom we already know through our work with the Brecks Fen Edge & Rivers Partnership). This workshop will give stakeholders an opportunity to discuss the issues associated with the management of the area and concerns they have for the future. Experience tells us that giving stakeholders the opportunity to set out what is current wrong frees them to move on to problem solving. During this workshop we will also ask them to brain storm ideas on how they feel the Brecks landscape could be management in the future (which will be the focus of the second workshop in stage 3).

At the end of stage 2 we will have a good understanding of current management of the area, current issues and concerns regarding the future and options for management in the future. We would then distil this into preferred options for more detailed consideration in stage 3.

### **3.4 Stage 3: Workshop**

During this stage of the project we will invite stakeholders to attend a further one day workshop to specifically discuss options which have been identified in stage 2. The workshop would be designed and facilitated using R4C's engagement protocols set out below.

We anticipate this day event will include speakers from other special places in the UK providing real rather than simply theoretical options with the aim of inspiring stakeholders to look creatively at a future for the Brecks.

Case studies will set out practical and lived experience in management including management structures, funding sources, policy development, partnership working and longevity. We would also present the preferred options<sup>2</sup> identified in stage 2 and in the afternoon ask stakeholders to break into smaller groups to considers the pros and cons of each option and to identify a preferred option or hybrid option. This will be a qualitative assessment based on a structured, facilitated conversation that will be designed to help us develop a deeper understanding as to the suitability of each option to the local situation.

The day will conclude with a summary of findings from each group and the reporting back of any consensus reached. It will be important to manage expectations at the time to ensure that this workshop is not seen as a decision-making forum.

We will record the findings of the day event in a short report which will be appended to the main report output of the project set out in stage 4.

Following completion of the workshop event we will hold a virtual meeting with the Steering Group to discuss the key findings, and the write up of the reports.

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<sup>2</sup> At this stage it is not possible to predict how many options would be considered but for the purposes of this submission we have assumed no more than three.

## The R4C protocols for running effective stakeholder events

Key components of effective organisation and logistics that we will address include:

- Timely communication with stakeholders
- Fit for purpose venue and facilities
- Clearly articulated joining instructions and briefing papers
- Being 'accessible' via phone, email etc to address stakeholder concerns
- Welcoming registration process on day of event

Key components of effective process design which we will consider include:

- Clarity around objectives and outcomes
- Presentation of complex issues in accessible ways, ensuring a level playing field of information
- Experts on 'tap not on top'
- Techniques for ensuring everyone can make an input
- Techniques for dealing with high levels of contention/ emotion
- Transparent and comprehensive recording of the meetings output.
- Clarity around reporting arrangements.
- Opportunity for stakeholders to evaluate the engagement process in order to understand its effectiveness and promote confidence in it.

Key components of effective facilitation which we will use include:

- Setting clear expectation as to what the event is and what it is not, especially relating to decision-making
- Establishing working agreement (ground rules) to help guide behaviour
- Clarity around the agenda, identifying when there are opportunities for input and how this will be managed
- Flexible approach to ensure new issues/ ideas/ suggestions can be incorporated
- Personal presence to intervene and manage areas of contention
- Good mixture of techniques for both small group and plenary work
- Effective support facilitation and recording when appropriate
- Good timekeeping
- Clarity around 'next steps'; how will the participants know that their input is being valued and used.

### **3.5 Stage 4: Write up**

This stage of the project will bring together the findings of the preceding stages in the preparation of a single report detailing consultations, case studies from elsewhere and the outcome of the workshops. We anticipate that the draft report will set out the following:

1. Introduction and context
2. Current management of the Brecks Landscape (supported by mapping)
3. Case studies from other special places in the UK
4. Issues identified through stakeholder consultation
5. Introduction to options for consideration
6. Pros and Cons of Options
7. Preferred Option for future long-term management of the Brecks
8. Recommendations for next steps

The report will be supported by graphics and mapping as appropriate and include an appendix of the results from the workshop events.

A separate summary report will also be prepared which it is anticipated will be more of an advocacy document and will set out the preferred management option and next steps.

We would issue both draft reports to the Steering Group for review and comment and then hold a virtual meeting with the Steering Group to receive feedback.

### **3.6 Stage 5: Final Report and Stakeholder Events**

Following receipt of comments from the Steering Group, we would amend and finalise the reports. We would also make any necessary amendments to graphics. We would then issue the final reports in digital form only.

The final event of the project will be a stakeholder event during which the findings of the study will be presented, and the likely next steps set out.

## 4 Experience and Team

### 4.1 Alison Farmer

Alison is Director of Alison Farmer Associates and is a qualified landscape architect and environmental planner with over 30 years of experience.

She has exceptional skills in undertaking landscape conservation and evaluation work throughout the UK and at a range of scales. Clients include local authorities, government bodies such as Natural England and charities such as the National Trust. She has an in-depth knowledge of best practice and of published assessment guidance in England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. In recent years Alison has specialised in protected landscape work giving her familiarity with issues surrounding defining boundaries to protected areas, development of policies, preparation of management plans and establishing suitable governance. She recently contributed to the development of the Landscape Institute's Technical Information Note for practitioners on Valued Landscapes as a member of the Working Group.

Alison is familiar with the landscapes of East Anglia having worked in the area for many decades and having undertaken a number of the landscape character assessments for the region including the East of England Typology, Suffolk Coastal LCA, West Suffolk LCA and numerous landscape appraisals to support community neighbourhood plans. Her landscape assessment work has often led to the preparation of policy objectives and design guidance as well as the development of management plans for particular areas of importance. Specifically, Alison is able to distil and articulate the special qualities and significance of place - be that of a nationally valued landscape such as a National Park or AONB or areas of local value.

Throughout her work she is mindful of the need for policies and action to stem from, and clearly link back to, analysis and evidence in order for it to be robust and justifiable.

Alison is experienced at leading teams of sub consultants on complex projects and has all round communication skills. She draws on her strong organisation when undertaking assessment projects, and this enables her to work in a concentrated and high effective way, managing significant volumes of data and distilling key information and trends.

Alison will be the day-to-day contact for the client.

### 4.2 Mike King

Mike is a Director of R4C and is a landscape ecologist and environmental scientist with close on 40 years' experience of engaging people in the natural world. He is R4C's lead on landscape and biodiversity. In this role he has worked extensively with protected landscapes, recently running the stakeholder engagement programme for the Big Chalk partnership of chalk landscape AONB's, delivering landscape conversations for the South Downs National Park and evaluating a considerable number of Landscape Partnerships.

Mike has considerable experience and expertise, both in the UK and internationally of designing and delivering constructive interactions between people and the issues that impact their lives. With considerable knowledge and practical expertise in facilitation, stakeholder engagement and public participation he works with organisations to help them develop the strategies and delivery plans that engage people in ways that lead to productive outcomes

for all concerned. This includes past work designing and facilitating stakeholder dialogue around both oil field and nuclear decommissioning and more recently acting as stakeholder engagement advisor for the Kent Wildlife Trust Bison reintroduction project and the RSPB's Wareham Arc Landscape Recovery programme (ELMS funding)

Mike is currently leading the R4C team that are working with Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership and delivering Surrey Hills AONB Boundary Review.

Before becoming a consultant, Mike was Chief executive of The Environment Council, the organisation that pioneered the use of Stakeholder Dialogue to resolve contentious environmental issues. He has also been Director of Conservation for The Conservation Volunteers, responsible for the policy and practice of the UK's largest practical conservation organisation.

