



Committee	Strategic Planning Committee
Date	12/01/2026
Subject	Specialist Services Update
Cabinet Member	Councillor Mark Packard Cabinet Member with responsibility for Planning and Coastal Management
Report Author(s)	Chris King Design and Specialist Services Manager chris.king@eastsoffolk.gov.uk
Head of Service	Ben Woolnough Head of Planning and Building Control ben.woolnough@eastsoffolk.gov.uk
Director	Nick Khan Strategic Director nick.khan@eastsoffolk.gov.uk

Key Decision?	No
Is the report Open or Exempt?	OPEN

Category of Exempt Information and reason why it is NOT in the public interest to disclose the exempt information.	Not applicable
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Purpose/Summary

This report provides an overview of the role, structure, and strategic activity of the Specialist Services team. It highlights key areas of progress across the disciplines of Design, Heritage, Ecology, Landscape, Arboriculture, Rights of Way, and RAMS/Wildlife Wise, outlining how the team supports delivery of the Council's Local Plans and the ambitions of Our Direction 2028.

Recommendation(s)

That Strategic Planning Committee notes the contents of the report.

Strategic plan

How does this proposal support Our Direction 2028?

Environmental Impact	The team drives environmental resilience through Biodiversity Net Gain, conservation advice, tree protection, and habitat restoration. RAMS/Wildlife Wise protects East Suffolk's most sensitive landscapes, while the Design and Heritage teams ensure long-term environmental quality through sensitive place-shaping.
Sustainable Housing	Design, ecology, and heritage advice ensures housing developments are well-designed, distinctive, and sustainable. The Design Code, Article 4 reviews, and green infrastructure guidance all contribute to better outcomes for future communities.
Tackling Inequalities	Through accessible design, Rights of Way improvements, and inclusive place-making, the team supports health and wellbeing objectives. Their work improves access to nature and ensures developments are welcoming, safe, and connected.
Thriving Economy	The team supports economic vibrancy by shaping attractive environments, safeguarding heritage and landscapes, and providing strategic advice on NSIPs and infrastructure. Well-designed, characterful places support tourism, inward investment and community resilience.
Our Foundations / governance of the organisation	Specialist Services support strong governance, cross-team collaboration, and innovation across the council. The team: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provides statutory consultee responses across planning and infrastructure processes, ensuring legal compliance and transparency.• Champions digital innovation through GIS mapping tools, interactive public engagement, and accessible online guidance (e.g., RAMS, Tree Management, Heritage Assets).• Offers internal training, mentoring, and policy input to enhance capability and resilience across the Planning Service and beyond.

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aligns closely with corporate projects and strategies, supporting regeneration, climate adaptation, nature recovery, and placemaking at scale.• Facilitates proactive communication between council services, statutory agencies, and communities to streamline delivery and build trust in planning decisions. |
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Justification for recommendations

1. Background

- 1.1. The Specialist Services team is a dedicated in-house service comprising professionals in design, heritage, ecology, landscape, arboriculture, public rights of way, and strategic mitigation (RAMS/Wildlife Wise). The team was established to ensure that development across East Suffolk delivers on the Council's ambitions for high-quality, sustainable, and well-integrated places.
- 1.2. Operating at the interface between policy, planning applications, infrastructure projects, and corporate priorities, the team has become an essential strategic and delivery partner within the Planning Service. The service has grown in scope and influence, delivering both statutory duties and proactive placemaking initiatives aligned with the Council's adopted Local Plans and the ambitions set out in Our Direction 2028.
- 1.3. Please refer to Specialist Services Prospectus which provides more detailed information on the structure and approach of the service - [Specialist-Services-Prospectus.pdf](#)

2. Introduction

- 2.1. This report provides an update on key milestones achieved over the past three to four months since the last update report to Strategic Planning Committee and also sets out the key milestones over the next three months or so.

Design

- 2.2. The East Suffolk Design Code project has entered its delivery phase, marking a major step forward in embedding design quality and consistency across the district. Following the successful appointment of David Lock Associates through a competitive tender process, Stage 1: Foundations and Insight is now underway.
- 2.3. This stage is focused on evidence gathering, officer workshops, and engagement with developers, community representatives, and partner organisations to shape a shared understanding of East Suffolk. The work includes workshops, roundtables, community panel, and mapping of existing policy and guidance to identify where the Design Code can add most value
- 2.4. East Suffolk Design Officers continue to provide input and support to major applications across East Suffolk. Emerging pre-applications and evolving outline plans for many of the major Garden Neighbourhoods.
- 2.5. Suffolk Design is currently creating a training programme for 2026 which will offer free training to officers and members from across all Authorities in Suffolk. The training programme will be released in early January 2026.

- 2.6. The Suffolk Design Collective was also launched in early December 2025. The Collective brings together public and private sectors to work towards better standards of design and placemaking across the County. The Collective is free to join for private sector businesses with a commitment of time dedicated to supporting Suffolk Design.
- 2.7. Chris King (Design Manager) continues to chair the East of England Place Network on behalf of MHCLG and Planning Advisory Service (PAS) to provide a network for Local Authority Officers involved in placeshaping and design. The sessions set to support and train officers from across 52 Local Authorities in the East of England.

Heritage

- 2.8. Mark Wilson has begun his new role as Heritage Officer. Mark started on 24th November and has made a positive start to the Design and Heritage Team. Mark has previously worked as a Conservation Officer, stonemason and stained glass restorer.
- 2.9. The team is allocating increasing resource to NSIP projects, ensuring heritage and design considerations are fully embedded at the strategic stages of these large-scale proposals.
- 2.10. Year Three of the Article 4 direction review is coming to its conclusion (see report for Making of new Article 4 directions in Bungay and Wrentham for this meeting). The review and reappraisal of the Halesworth Conservation Area have nearly concluded (see report for Halesworth Conservation Area Appraisal for this meeting). The review and reappraisal of the Wangford and Somerleyton Conservation Areas are well underway, with public consultation planned for early spring 2026. Preparation for the review and reappraisal of the Beccles Conservation Area in 2026/27 will be put in hand after the New Year.
- 2.11. In Q2 (July and September), the Design and Heritage team responded to 286 planning applications, a 47% increase compared to the previous year.

Ecology

- 2.12. Ecology support continues to be provided to Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils through a formal consultation service. This is generating income while strengthening cross-authority collaboration and resilience in specialist provision.
- 2.13. Additional capacity is also being directed towards NSIP work, particularly to ensure early ecological considerations are integrated into major infrastructure proposals and to support the Council's work for the examination of the Sealink Development Consent Order (DCO).
- 2.14. Work continues to collate the information required to support the Council's first Biodiversity Duty reporting return (under Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act (2006) (as amended), to be published by March 2026. This reporting will also be included as part of the updated ESC Environmental Impact Strategy.

- 2.15. In Q2 (July and Sept), the team responded to 278 planning applications, representing a 21% increase compared to the previous year.

Landscape and Arboriculture

- 2.16. The renewed Landscape Character Assessment has now been completed. The project combined both the Waveney and Suffolk Coastal Assessments into a combined report to ensure consistency and district wide consideration. GIS Layers have also been worked up to allow Character Areas to be presented spatially for the Authority and community. The report will be presented at the Local Plan Working Ground in December.
- 2.17. Additional capacity is also being directed towards NSIP work, particularly to ensure early ecological considerations are integrated into major infrastructure proposals.
- 2.18. Landscape Management Officer has established a post planning monitoring and enforcement process with site visits and checked undertaken to over 50 sites across East Suffolk.
- 2.19. The review of Tree Preservation Orders in the former Waveney District area is virtually complete and will be so in the next 6 months. In the former Suffolk Coastal area, a substantial start has been made with our external consultants carrying out the fieldwork. Officers are currently working through the follow-up paperwork. The consultant's contract ends at the end of March 2026 and the review will then be taken forward by officers as time permits.
- 2.20. In Q2 (July and September), the team responded to 252 planning applications, a 29% increase compared to the previous year.

Rights of Way

- 2.21. 6 Public Path Order applications are currently live and being progressed.
- 2.22. Additional capacity is being directed towards NSIP work, ensuring early Rights of Way considerations are appropriately factored into large-scale proposals.

3. Proposal

- 3.1. Areas of work underway are outlined above and it is proposed that Strategic Planning Committee note the contents of the report.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1. The service operates within existing budgets, with cost recovery achieved through pre-app advice, Public Path Orders, and developer contributions (e.g. RAMS). Additional grant funding supports posts and projects (e.g. DEFRA for BNG).

5. Legal Implications

5.1. All functions are delivered in line with legal duties, including the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, Environment Act 2021, and Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

6. Risk Implications

6.1. Staff capacity and recruitment remain national challenges. However, structured planning, a strong in-house model, and strategic alignment mitigate operational risks and ensure continuity.

7. Options

7.1. This report is for information only.

8. Recommendations

8.1. That Strategic Planning Committee notes the contents of this report.

9. Reasons for Recommendations

9.1 This report is for information only.

10. Conclusions/Next Steps

10.1. The team will continue to deliver statutory and strategic functions, advance the Design Code and Article 4 reviews, support RAMS implementation, and lead on BNG and nature recovery work. A further update will be presented in early 2026.

Areas of consideration comments

Section 151 Officer:

The Section 151 Officer has been consulted and has no additional comments.

Monitoring Officer:

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted on this report and has no additional comments.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion/EQIA:

The report is for information only

Safeguarding:

The report is for information only

Crime and Disorder:

The report is for information only

Corporate Services implications:

(i.e., Legal, Finance, Procurement, Human Resources, Digital, Customer Services, Asset Management)

The report is for information only

Residents and Businesses consultation/consideration:

The report is for information only

Appendices:

None

Background reference papers:

Date	Type	Available From
2025	Specialist Services Prospectus	Specialist-Services-Prospectus.pdf
2025	East Suffolk Place Review	East-Suffolk-Place-Review-Report.pdf
2025	Suffolk Design website	Home Suffolk Design
2025	Quality of Place Awards	Quality of Place awards » East Suffolk Council
2025	East Suffolk Specialist Services	Design, heritage, ecology, trees, landscape and Rights of Way » East Suffolk Council
Various	East Suffolk Conservation Areas	Conservation area appraisals » East Suffolk Council
Various	East Suffolk Article 4 Directions	Article 4 Directions » East Suffolk Council
Various	East Suffolk Historic Building Grant Scheme	Historic Building Grant Scheme » East Suffolk Council