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**Assessment of Coastal Access Proposals
between Lowestoft and Hopton-on-Sea
on sites and features of nature conservation concern
29th January 2020**





Nature Conservation Assessment for Coastal Access Proposals between Lowestoft and Hopton-on-Sea

About this document

This document should be read in conjunction with the published Reports for the Aldeburgh to Hopton-on-Sea Stretch and the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA).

The Coastal Access Reports contain a full description of the access proposals, including any additional mitigation measures that have been included. These Reports can be viewed here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/england-coast-path-aldeburgh-to-hopton-on-sea>

An HRA is required for European sites (SPA, SAC and Ramsar sites). The HRA is published alongside the Coastal Access Reports.

This document, the Nature Conservation Assessment (NCA), covers all other aspects (including SSSIs, MCZs and undesignated but locally important sites and features) **in so far as any HRA does not already address the issue for the sites and feature(s) in question.**

The NCA is arranged site by site. Figure 1 shows a map of the designated sites along this stretch of coast.

The table on page 4 details of designated sites and features for this stretch of coast, including features that have been considered within any HRA.



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Introduction

Designated sites between Lowestoft and Hopton-on-Sea

Features of designated sites	SPA	SAC	Ramsar	SSSI
Corton Cliffs SSSI				
Earth heritage – EC – Quaternary of East Anglia				✓
Outer Thames Estuary SPA				
A195 Little tern <i>Sterna albifrons</i> - Foraging	✓			
A193 Common tern <i>Sterna hirundo</i> – Foraging	✓			
A001 Red-throated diver <i>Gavia stellata</i> (non-breeding)	✓			
Southern North Sea SAC				
Harbour Porpoise <i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		✓		

Outer Thames Estuary SPA

The qualifying feature for the **Outer Thames Estuary SPA** is the largest aggregation of wintering red-throated diver (*Gavia stellata*) in the UK, an estimated population of 6,466 individuals which is 38% of the wintering population of Great Britain.

The SPA has Additional Qualifying Features: foraging areas for breeding common tern (*Sterna hirundo*) and breeding little tern (*Sterna albifrons*).

The qualifying features are assessed as part of the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) which is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/england-coast-path-aldeburgh-to-hopton-on-sea>

Southern North Sea SAC

The Southern North Sea Special Area of Conservation has been considered alongside our proposals and we have concluded that there could not be an impact on the special interest (marine) features due to the spatial separation between them and walkers using the proposed route of the England Coast Path. Reference is also made within the HRA.

This assessment will therefore focus on Corton Cliffs SSSI and the designated Earth Heritage feature.



Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Corton Cliffs SSSI

Is this site also part of a European site? No

Current situation

The cliff at Corton is geologically important because it is the type locality for the Anglian Cold Stage during which the most extensive Pleistocene glaciation of the British Isles occurred.

The cliffs expose a clear sequence of two tills with non-glacial water-lain sands between, together with a third till and associated deposits above. The whole Anglian sequence here can be clearly related to the underlying Cromerian freshwater beds. It is a nationally important Pleistocene site. The Natural England document dealing with future management of the site, advocates exposure of the geological interest of the site by allowing natural processes, such as erosion, to proceed freely. However, such processes are currently curtailed by sea defences at the foot of the cliff: these obscure much of the outcrops of Cromer Forest Bed Series and Cromer Till.

Consequently the main processes leading to the maintenance of exposures is due to water moving through the cliff leading to slumping of material, and erosion caused by windblown spray, rain and climatic conditions. The site is currently in Favourable condition based on an assessment on 28 February 2008.



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Risk analysis

The feature could be eroded at a faster rate by recreational access than by natural processes alone if people were to walk on the unstable cliff and slumping material.

The proposal for the route of the England Coast Path (ECP) uses a mix of footway, existing walked routes (through the Azure Seas caravan park), public right of way and newly created path. The path avoids the SSSI.

However, there is potential for interaction between walkers and the interest feature because the proposed trail will be promoted, there will be newly-created or upgraded sections and there are visitor facilities nearby resulting in a potentially small increase in user numbers.

The SSSI can be accessed from Tibbenham's Score or Tramp's Alley which form part of the seaward margin and also enable access to the beach and promenade. The cliffs can be accessed, as they are not fenced. A promenade built across the SSSI in a north south direction, allows access across the site. There is no formal access to the cliffs from the promenade or from the cliff top caravan park or any evidence of people expressing a desire, or actively seeking to access the cliff face. But sediments on the beach are readily accessible.

Most of this section experiences a medium level of use which rises to high in the summer months. There is a car park adjacent to Tramp's Alley and informal, off-road bay parking adjacent to Gunton Warren in the south, and a car park at the Corton Inn public house in the north.

The coast path on this section is on footway, currently walked paths, rights of way, and includes some new access. Extra hard standing for additional caravan units and access tracks have been made in the caravan park which have impacted upon or replaced the route people used to walk. An improved surface and new line of the path will be made at the southern end of the caravan park, landward of the caravans.

There is a well-used route to the southern boundary of the caravan site. We propose creating a new route to link the exit from the Azure seas caravan park, across Tramp's Alley to Gunton Warren.

Much of the route passes through the Azure Seas caravan park, therefore the trail will comprise an access strip with no associated seaward spreading room.

The cliff is actively eroding and with no active intervention over 20-50 years, simple roll-back will be required.



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The trail

With the advent of the ECP, there will be an improvement to the current access provision: a new section of an existing waked route will be established with improved signage and infrastructure and the profile will be raised as the route becomes a promoted National Trail. There are visitor facilities nearby: a car park on the opposite side of The Street in Corton with public conveniences and some formal and informal off-road bay parking adjacent to Gunton Warren; there is a pub at the northern end of the site.

There are no plans for housing developments in the area and a small increase in numbers using the Azure Seas caravan park as more units (for sale) have been added. South of the site, Gunton Warren, provides attractive walking; but the section through the caravan park is less so and ends at the northern end on The Street footway through Corton. There are medium levels of use, which rises to high levels in the summer, at this location. On balance, there is likely to be a small increase in the numbers of users on the trail along this section.

The margin

Although there may be a small increase in the numbers of people using the trail, there will be no lifting of prohibitions: users are warned of the dangers of underwater hazards (sharp spikes) and not to climb on the groynes. In addition, the promenade/ sea wall further north is subject to seasonal/ weather-related closures. The surface itself, when the prom runs out, comprises shingle/ sand and is difficult to walk on.

There is no access (formal or otherwise) between the beach/ prom and the cliff top between Tibbenham's Score and Tramp's Alley. The trail will take walkers further landward along Tramp's Alley than the current walked route. Therefore the changes in access levels to the margin are likely to be negligible.

Future access is likely to reflect past use. There are no physical signs of attempts to scale the cliff face and the Access Authority has received no requests to aid such access. There is no access to the cliff face from the Azure Seas caravan park and the access strip does not give walkers seaward spreading room from the trail itself. Therefore it is unlikely that there will be any changes to the interaction between the special interest features of Corton Cliffs SSSI and walkers as a result of the ECP.



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Walkers are likely to stick to the paths but signage could be used to advise walkers not to climb cliff faces and geological exposures. Further signage to prevent this activity would however need to be carefully considered as there are a number of warning signs at the location already. As there is not predicted to be any change in access levels onto the beach itself, we anticipate the current measures to be adequate.

If access patterns do not follow our predictions and action is needed to protect the special interest features of the site, we can re-assess mitigation measures as required.

Natural England concludes that there will be no destruction of or damage to the special interest features of Coton Cliffs SSSI as a result of our proposals for the ECP.

Establishment works

Is SSSI consent/assent needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works? Yes

If yes, describe any special conditions that have been identified concerning how or when the works are to be carried out.

Once approval for a coastal access report is received from the Secretary of State, any necessary works can be carried out on the ground according to the funding process in operation to make the trail fit for use and prepare for opening.

An estimate of the total cost of works needed to establish the trail is given in our coastal access report for the stretch. The cost of establishment works will be met by Natural England.

We have held preliminary discussions with Suffolk County Council about the works required and believe that it is feasible for them to be carried out without adverse effect on the designated sites considered in this appraisal. This is on the basis that the following special conditions are observed:

Legally protected species are an important consideration where works involve the destruction or maintenance of existing features, or the construction of new features. Where these species are known to be present, or are likely to be, any works carried out should include appropriate mitigation in line with legislative guidelines.

The main considerations with regard to protected sites and species, and on-site working methods, are summarised in the bullet points and table below.



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- European Protected Species are those species of plant and animal listed in Annex IV to EC Directive 92/43/EEC ('the Habitats Directive). For a complete list of European Protected Species in England & Wales refer to Schedules 2, 4 and 5 of the Conservation of Habitats & Species Regulations 2010.
- The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended, affords protection to wild birds, their eggs, young and nests (the latter whether complete or under construction). Those listed in Schedule 1 of the '81 Act receive additional protection against intentional or reckless disturbance while they are nest building or at a nest containing eggs or young. Dependant young are also protected from intentional or reckless disturbance. The timing of any works on habitats which may support birds (particularly breeding birds), and the methodologies employed, should take these factors into account.
- Plants and animals included in Schedules 5 & 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) are protected from killing or injuring, and protection may also apply to their place of shelter.
- Badgers and their setts are protected under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992. Under the '92 Act it is an offence to damage, destroy or obstruct a badger sett, or to disturb a badger when it is occupying a sett.
- All bat species, their breeding sites and resting places are fully protected by law and they are European protected species. The presence of bats is often overlooked and it should be remembered that they inhabit crevices in tree trunks and branches as well as built structures (both above and below ground). Where there is uncertainty about their presence, surveys should be carried out beforehand by suitably qualified individuals.
- Activities which may affect any of the above species may require a licence from Natural England's licensing team, from which advice should be sought, as appropriate.

Where necessary, Suffolk County Council or another Natural England approved person or organisation will instigate the SSSI assent process by writing to us to confirm the timing of works and how operations to be undertaken in line with these conditions. Natural England will provide further advice as necessary.



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Conclusion



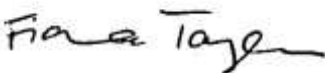
We, Natural England, are satisfied that our proposals to improve access to the English coast between Lowestoft and Hopton-on-Sea are fully compatible with our duty to further the conservation and enhancement of the notified features of Corton Cliffs SSSI consistent with the proper exercise of our functions¹.

In respect of Gunton Warren and Corton Woods Local Nature Reserve, we are satisfied that in developing the new access proposals the appropriate balance has been struck between Natural England's conservation and access objectives, duties and purposes.

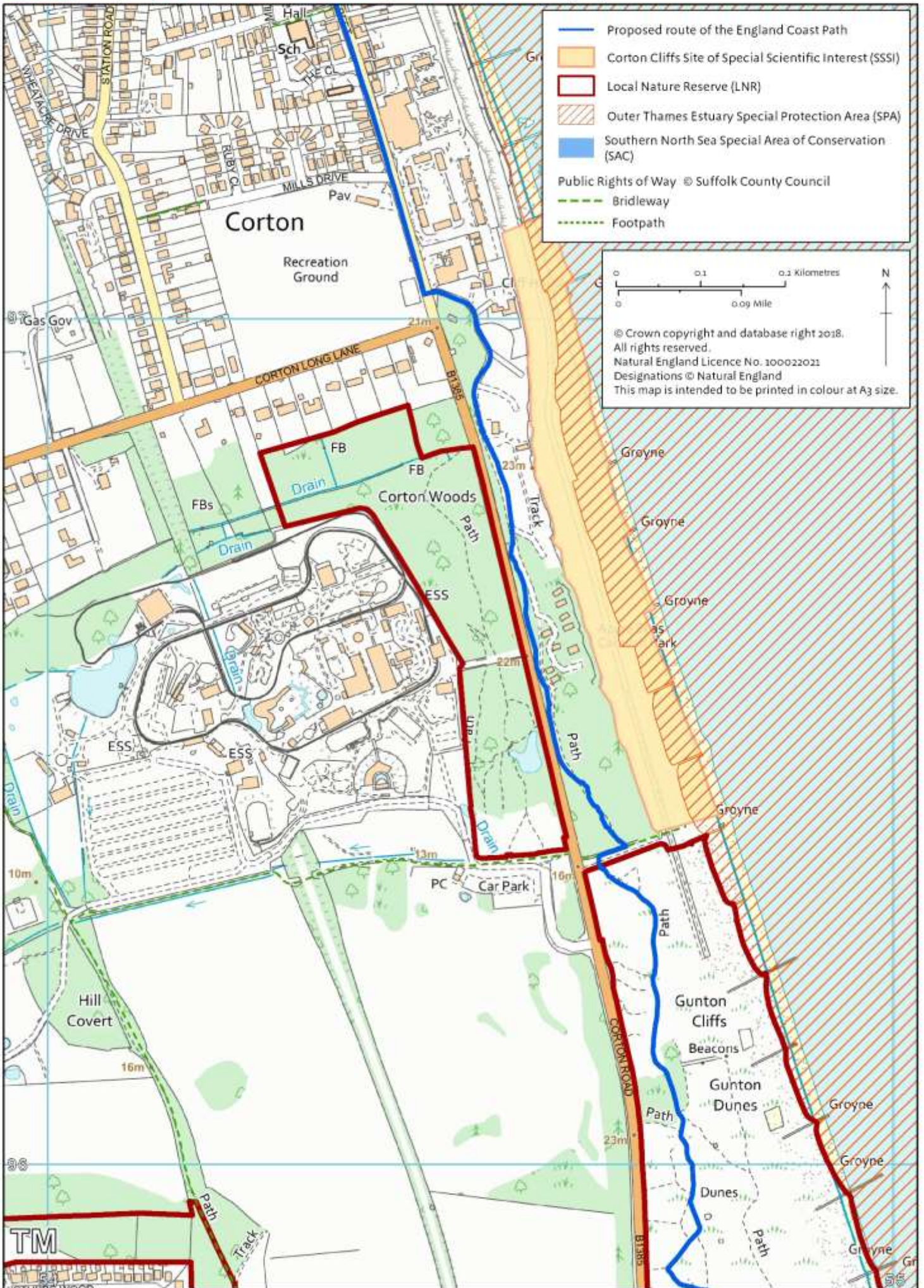
If our proposals are agreed by the Secretary of State and after commencement of the coastal access rights, further restrictions, exclusions or temporary routes may be necessary locally, if situations arise that could not be foreseen initially. People with a legal interest in the land will have powers to apply to us later for directions to restrict or exclude access, and can appeal to the Secretary of State against our decision if they disagree with it.

See also, where relevant, the conclusions of the separate HRA relating to common features.

The conclusions of this assessment have been checked by:

	6 Jan 2020	On behalf of the Coastal Access Programme Team
	6 Jan 2020	Senior Officer with responsibility for protected sites
	6 Jan 2020	Stretch lead Aldeburgh to Hopton-on-Sea

¹ Natural England's functions includes its balanced general purposes for access, nature conservation and landscape under the NERC Act 2006, any specific statutory duties it may have to deliver specific improvements to public access, and the access-related policies and priorities it periodically agrees with Defra.



Key designation - Corton Cliffs Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)



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Glossary of terms

ECP	England Coast Path
HRA	Habitats Regulations Assessment
MCZ	Marine Conservation Zones
NCA	Nature Conservation Assessment
RO	Responsible Officer from Natural England
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SPA	Special Protection Area
SSSI	Sites of Special Scientific Interest