

**Assessment of Coastal Access Proposals between
Wallasea Island and Burnham-on-Crouch
on sites and features of nature conservation concern
January 2020**





Nature Conservation Assessment for Coastal Access Proposals between Wallasea Island and Burnham-on- Crouch

About this document

This document should be read in conjunction with the published Reports for the Wallasea Island to Burnham-on-Crouch Stretch and the accompanying 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/publications/england-coast-path-plan-of-the-wallasea-island-to-burnham-on-crouch-stretch>

A HRA is required for European sites (SPA and Ramsar site). 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. Map C1 shows designated sites along this stretch of coast.

See Annex 1 for an index to designated sites and features for this stretch of coast, including features that have been considered within any HRA.

Contents

<i>About this document</i>	2
<i>Contents</i>	3
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Crouch and Roach Estuaries SSSI</i>	5
<i>The Cliff, Burnham-on-Crouch SSSI</i>	9
<i>Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Estuaries Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ)</i>	11
<i>Kendal Park (Hullbridge Foreshore) LNR</i>	12
<i>Conclusion</i>	12
<i>Map C1. Designated sites for Wallasea Island to Burnham-on-Crouch (From Overview Report)</i> .	14
<i>Annex 1 – Index to designated sites and features</i>	15

(Front cover photo – lone common seal on mudflats along Crouch Estuary by Darren Braine)

Introduction

Natural England has been asked by government to make proposals for a National Trail that will be a continuous walking route around the coast of England. This report concerns the potential impacts on nature conservation of establishing the new route for the stretch of the Essex coast between Wallasea Island and Burnham-on-Crouch. We describe the conclusions of our appraisal and how we have modified our proposals to take account of potential impacts.

This report aims to assess the potential environmental impacts on designated features which are not examined through the HRA process. This allows for a comprehensive overview of the features in relation to the coastal access plans.

Natural England's approach to ensuring the protection of sensitive nature conservation features under the Coastal Access Programme is set out in section 4.9 Coastal Access: Natural England's Approved Scheme 2013.

Our final published proposal for a stretch of England Coast Path is preceded by detailed local consideration of options for route alignment, the extent of the coastal margin and any requirement for restrictions, exclusions or seasonal alternative routes. The proposals are thoroughly considered before being finalised and initial ideas may be modified or rejected during the iterative design process, drawing on the range of relevant expertise available within Natural England.

Evidence is also gathered as appropriate from a range of other sources which can include information and data held locally by external partners or from the experience of local land owners, environmental consultants and occupiers. The approach includes looking at any current visitor management practices, either informal or formal. It also involves discussing our emerging conclusions as appropriate with key local interests such as land owners or occupiers, conservation organisations or the local access authority. In these ways, any nature conservation concerns are discussed early and constructive solutions identified as necessary.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Crouch and Roach Estuaries SSSI

This site is within and shares concurrent boundaries with a range of international designations. Namely the Crouch and Roach Estuaries (Mid-Essex Coast Phase 3) Ramsar, Crouch and Roach Estuaries (Mid-Essex Coast Phase 3) SPA, Essex Estuaries SAC and Outer Thames Estuary SPA.

Notified features of the SSSI that are also qualifying features of these sites are covered by the separately published, but accompanying, HRA and are therefore omitted from this assessment. Please refer to Annex 1 for details.

The rivers Crouch and Roach are situated in South Essex. The River Crouch occupies a shallow valley between two ridges of London Clay, whilst the River Roach is set predominantly between areas of brickearth and loams with patches of sand and gravel. The intertidal zone along the rivers Crouch and Roach is 'squeezed' between the sea walls of both banks and the river channel. This leaves a relatively narrow strip of tidal mud in contrast with other estuaries in the county. This however is used by significant numbers of birds, and together with the saltmarsh and grazing marsh which comprise the Crouch and Roach Estuaries SSSI regularly support internationally important numbers of dark-bellied brent geese, and nationally important numbers of shelduck, shoveler and black-tailed godwit. Additional interest is provided by the aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates and by an outstanding assemblage of nationally scarce plants.

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1002160.pdf>

This assessment will cover the notified features of Crouch and Roach Estuaries SSSI which are not considered within the Habitats Regulation Assessment. These features are lowland ditch systems, vascular plant assemblage and invertebrate assemblage.

Current situation

The majority of this 1,800 hectare SSSI (over 99%) is in favourable (28%) or unfavourable but recovering condition. The Crouch estuary component of the Crouch and Roach Estuaries SSSI is composed of a fairly even split of intertidal habitats, such as flats and saltmarsh, and terrestrial habitats such as grazing marshes and brackish/freshwater lagoons and ditch systems.

These areas have two main recreational uses depending on the state of the tide. Except in the outer mouth at Wallasea Island, where a small international dock operates, the estuary waters are mainly utilised by pleasure craft. Many marinas and boat havens operate along the length of the river estuary as well as yacht clubs. This activity will not be altered by the creation of the England Coast Path.

At low tide extensive areas of mud flat are revealed. In some areas the substrate is sufficiently solid to allow users access to wander around, but these areas tend to be small and with the absence of sand or shingle recreational activities tend to be to exercise dogs or to walk to the water edge, with associated feeding of ducks and swans. Some, but limited, bait digging is undertaken along with wildfowling in the more extensive area of saltmarsh. The flats and saltmarsh areas will have a S25A restriction in place as it is

suggested these areas present a danger to users that may not appreciate the local conditions and tides (details are within the main report and supported within the HRA). There are limited features in the intertidal zone to draw the public away from their existing routes, with new access created by the ECP being further inland and it is expected most users will continue to undertake journeys on to the next location rather than spreading across the coastal margin.

The grazing marshes and associated ditch systems of the SSSI are inland of the majority of the route alignment, due to its proximity to the estuary running along the seawall. This means it is unaffected by the proposals as there is no access created over these areas. In one or two locations in order to negotiate around local land uses and to create an onward journey the trail is inland from the coastal edge, this creates a larger expanse of spreading room over the land between the trail and mean low water and may create a right of access over some of the grazing marshes. There is no requirement to facilitate access to this area of land and it is expected few users will wander off the alignment of the trail to explore fenced grazing land. Many of the more sensitive areas of grazing marsh and ditch systems are within Essex Wildlife Trust reserves.

Risk analysis

Annex 1 at the end of this document identifies the notified interest features that are specific to the SSSI notification. Many of these are also features of interest for the site to qualify for SPA, SAC and Ramsar statuses. These features that overlap are therefore not considered further in this Nature Conservation Assessment.

Saltmarsh habitats of the SSSI notification are within the saltmarsh habitats for the SAC and are not considered further here, having been detailed in the HRA. These areas will be protected from increased human disturbance from the coastal access rights through a long term restriction, based on public safety but having the mitigating effect of not creating new access over these areas. This long term exclusions and restrictions will not prevent existing rights or tolerate access to these areas – as explained in the Overview for Wallasea Island to Burnham on Crouch.

Risk				Consideration		Conclusion
Attribute affected	Key areas	Predicted changes in pattern and/or level of use	Possible impact(s)	Existing factors	Relevant features of the access proposals, including any additional mitigation measures	
Lowland ditch systems	Within grazing marshes	No changes in pattern expected	These features could be sensitive to impacts	The principal areas of interest already have a degree of access either as nature reserves, county parks or with public rights of way	The majority of the ditch systems in the grazing marshes will be landward of the proposed trail alignment. There is no right of access created over any of this land and therefore no interaction between the England Coast Path and the interest features.	Minimal impact on these features, as many are landward of the trail or are within remote areas of coastal margin
Vascular plant assemblage	Throughout site, concentrated in grazing marshes, ditch systems and intertidal zone	No changes in pattern expected	These features could be sensitive to impacts	The principal areas of interest already have a degree of access either as nature reserves, county parks or with public rights of way. Some low level access to the foreshore is undertaken on firmer substrate	<p>The majority of the ditch systems in the grazing marshes will be landward of the proposed trail alignment. There is no right of access created over any of this land and therefore no interaction between the England Coast Path and the interest features.</p> <p>The seaward areas of the intertidal zone will be subject to a section 25A long term access restriction, meaning no further right</p>	No impact on these features

					of access will be granted to the public to these sensitive areas.	
Invertebrate Assemblage	Throughout site, concentrated in the ditch systems and intertidal zone	No changes in pattern expected	These features could be sensitive to impacts	The principal areas of interest already have a degree of access either as nature reserves, county parks or with public rights of way. Some low level access to the foreshore is undertaken on firmer substrate	The majority of the ditch systems in the grazing marshes will be landward of the proposed trail alignment. There is no right of access created over any of this land and therefore no interaction between the England Coast Path and the interest features. The seaward areas of the intertidal zone will be subject to a section 25A long term access restriction, meaning no further right of access will be granted to the public to these sensitive areas.	No impact on these features

Establishment works

SSSI assent or consent will needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works?

Where necessary Essex County Council will instigate the SSSI assent (or in the case of a private owner, consent) process by writing to Natural England to confirm the timing of works and how operations are to be undertaken in line with these conditions. Natural England will provide further advice as necessary.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

The Cliff, Burnham-on-Crouch SSSI

The Cliff is a geological SSSI, of approximately 4 hectares, located between the villages of Creeksea and Althorne on the northern bank of the Crouch Estuary.

The Cliff has yielded a fossil avifauna of the Lower Eocene age. This includes the type material for two small species, *Coturnipes cooperi* (a game bird) and *Parvicuculus minor* (a protocuculid). The site is of considerable value in expanding our knowledge of small Eocene bird species and avian evolution

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1003868.pdf>

The Cliff SSSI is wholly contained within the Crouch and Roach Estuaries (Mid-Essex Coast Phase 3) Ramsar Crouch and Roach Estuaries (Mid-Essex Coast Phase 3) SPA and Outer Thames Estuary SPA all considered within the associated Habitat Regulation Assessment for the England Coast Path proposals between Wallasea Island and Burnham on Crouch.

This assessment will cover the features of The Cliff SSSI which are listed below:

Notified features to be assessed for the Cliff, Burnham-on-Crouch SSSI –

- Fossil avifauna, inc. *Coturnipes cooperi* and *Parvicuculus minor*
- Mesozoic - Tertiary Fish/Amphibia (fossil)

Current situation

The cliff face is slowly eroding, revealing new finds that can be found on the foreshore. The majority of fossil interest is expected to be buried within the substrate behind the exposed face and of little risk of damage.

The whole site is considered to be in favourable condition.

Risk analysis

This feature groups listed will not be directly affected by the proposed access route as this will be on land above the buried fossil remains. The coastal spreading room will create a right of access on foot to the foreshore, where coastal erosion reveals fossil remains. The right of access does not allow for collecting of fossils, but levels off access to this remote site are unlikely to significantly increase.

Risk				Consideration		Conclusion
Attribute affected	Key areas	Predicted changes in pattern and/or level of use	Possible impact(s)	Existing factors	Relevant features of the access proposals, including any additional mitigation measures	
Fossils	Exposed cliff face and foreshore	Trail aligned inland. Negligible change in use of coastal margin	Increased access to site could see more fossils removed	Site is currently accessible on the foreshore. Public rights of way lead to site, but limited local population. Site citation and Views on Management accommodate for small scale collection	No mitigation measures are proposed. Coastal Access is unlikely to see any significant change in visitor numbers to this already popular site.	No impact on these features.

Establishment works

SSSI assent is unlikely to be required to implement any establishment works as the trail will be on land over the interest features and inland of the face. No infrastructure is proposed and the trail will need occasional seasonal cutting to control vegetation growth if obscuring the path.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Estuaries Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ)

This site also part of a European site, either wholly overlapping where the sites (such as the SPA) include the breadth of the estuary, or overlapping in the intertidal zone, such as with the Ramsar designation for all sites as listed above.

<https://jncc.gov.uk/mpa-mapper/>

This assessment will cover the features of Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Estuaries MCZ, which are not part of the overlapping SSSI, SPA or Ramsar along the Estuary of the Rover Crouch as potentially impacted upon by the Wallasea Island to Burnham on Crouch extent of the England Coast Path.

Notified features to be assessed for the Crouch and Roach Estuaries MCZ: Native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) beds and single specimens.

Current situation

The Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Estuaries MCZ is located on the Essex coast and extends from the mean high water mark to where the estuary mouths join the North Sea, and is the largest inshore MCZ in England. The MCZ builds upon existing designations by offering protection to features which are not already protected, such as the native oyster.

<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5218720070762496?category=1721481>

Risk analysis

The main threats faced to oysters and oyster beds are the introduction of invasive species and overfishing. These however are not threats whose likelihood would be increased by the implementation of the coastal access route. There will be little to no interaction with these features as the features are submerged, along with the habitats that support them. Our proposed route will be inland of the MCZ. Coastal margin and spreading room over majority of the intertidal mudflats will be restricted by a long term access exclusion. Coastal Access rights do not apply below mean low water.

Establishment works

Permissions and licences are unlikely to be needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works as the trail is on land some distance from the notified site. No establishment works are to be undertaken in the Coastal Margin.

Kendal Park (Hullbridge Foreshore) LNR

This 2.8 hectare site is sandwiched on a thin strip of remnant semi-natural estuarine fringe woodland between housing and the River Crouch Estuary.

It has many pathways established and maintained throughout the woodlands and small glades and provides a valuable local recreational resource.

Although of interest as undeveloped land on the estuary fringe and is one of the last remaining stands of oak woodland along the river edge, it has limited significant wildlife interest.

The England Coast Path proposals include adopting the public right of way through the site as the alignment of the trail. This would benefit from roll back, as the area does not have significant coastal defences. The area is also proposed to include discretionary inland spreading room to the site boundary, providing coastal access rights over the whole area.

Access levels are likely to remain unchanged, and the existing network of paths and desire lines through the woodlands are expected to continue.

Conclusion


We, Natural England, are satisfied that our proposals to improve access to the English coast between Wallasea Island and Burnham on Crouch are fully compatible with our duty to further the conservation and enhancement of the notified features of Crouch and Roach Estuaries SSSI and The Cliff Burnham on Crouch SSSI.


In respect of any duties that may arise under section 125 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, Natural England has concluded for Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Estuaries MCZ that the access proposal (including any mitigation measures specified) is the one that, consistently with the proper exercise of its functions under section 296 of the same Act, is least likely to hinder the achievement of the conservation objectives for the Marine Conservation Zone - and accordingly may proceed.

In respect of important features listed above 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.

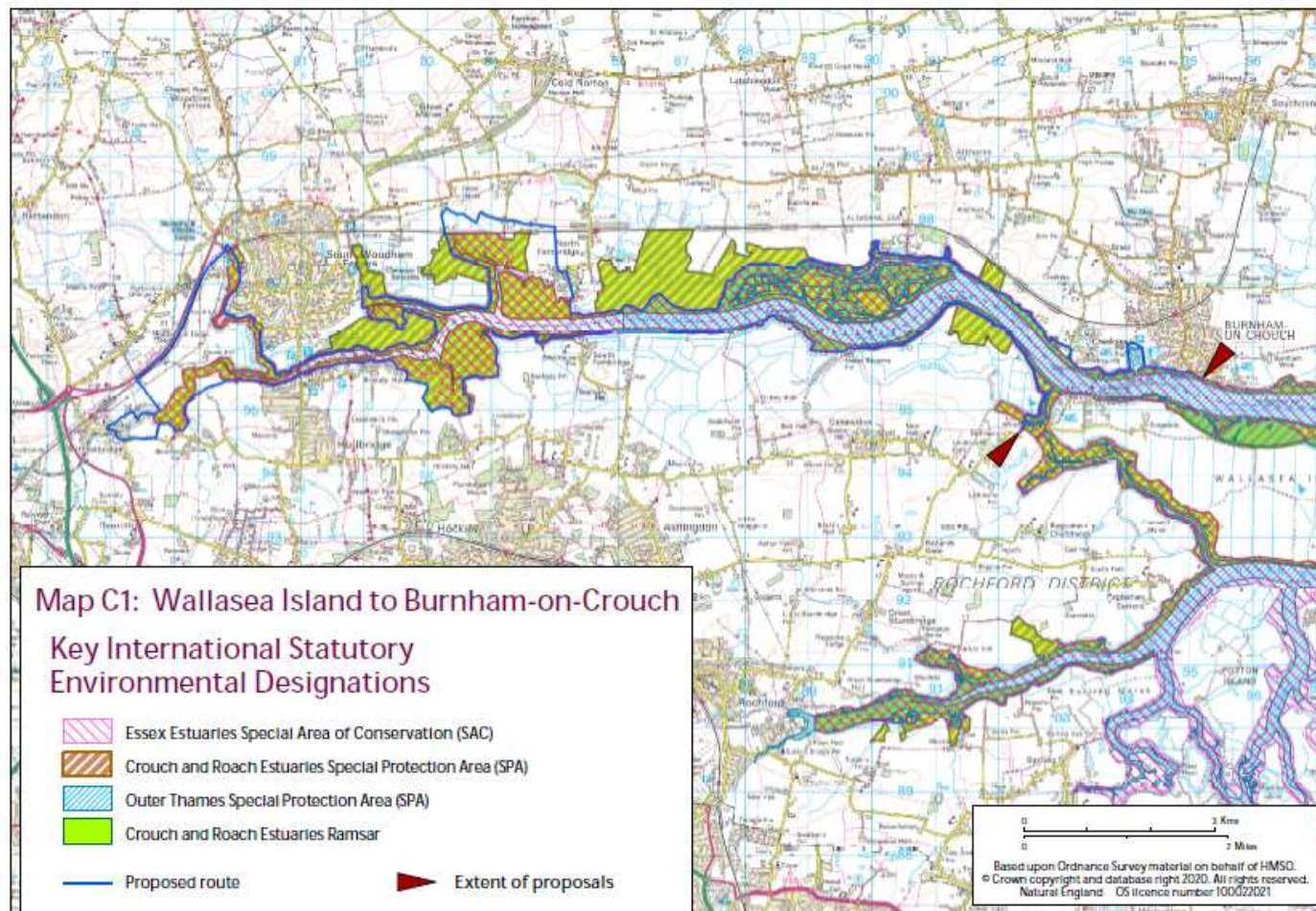
See also, where relevant, the conclusions of the separate HRA relating to common features.

The conclusions of this assessment have been checked by:

	22 January 2020	On behalf of the Coastal Access Programme Team
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	22 January 2020	Senior Officer with responsibility for protected sites
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Map C1. Designated sites for Wallasea Island to Burnham-on-Crouch (From Overview Report)



Nature Conservation Assessment for Coastal Access Proposals between Wallasea Island and Burnham-on-Crouch

Annex 1 – Index to designated sites and features

Features of the designated sites	Crouch and Roach Estuaries SSSI	Crouch and Roach Estuaries SAC	Crouch and Roach Estuaries SPA	Crouch and Roach Estuaries Ramsar	Essex Estuaries SAC	The Cliff, Burnham-on-Crouch SSSI	Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Estuaries MCZ	Outer Thames Estuary SPA
A156 Black-tailed godwit (<i>Limosa limosa islandica</i>) (Non-breeding)	✓		✓					
A046a Dark-bellied brent goose (<i>Branta bernicla bernicla</i>) (Non-breeding)	✓		✓	✓				
A149 Dunlin (<i>Calidris alpina alpina</i>) (Non-breeding)	✓		✓					
A140 European golden plover (<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>) (Non-breeding)	✓		✓					
Lapwing (<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>) (Non-breeding)	✓		✓					
A162 Common redshank (<i>Tringa totanus</i>) (Non-breeding)	✓		✓					
Shelduck (<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>) (Non-breeding)	✓		✓					

Shoveler (<i>Anas clypeata</i>) (Non-breeding)	✓		✓					
A195 Little tern (<i>Sternula albifrons</i>) (Foraging Area)								✓
Red-throated diver (<i>Gavia stellata</i>) (Non-breeding)								✓
A193 Common tern (<i>Sterna hirundo</i>) (Foraging Area)								✓
Waterbird assemblage *(Non-breeding)			✓	✓				
H1110 sandbanks which are slightly covered by seawater all the time; subtidal sandbanks					✓			
H1130 estuaries		✓			✓			
H1140 Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide. (Intertidal mudflats and sandflats)		✓			✓			
H1310 <i>Salicornia</i> and other annuals colonising mud and sand.		✓			✓			
H1320 <i>Spartina</i> swards (<i>Spartinion maritima</i>); cord-grass swards					✓			
H1330 Atlantic salt meadows (<i>Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritima</i>) including SM13 <i>Puccinellia maritima</i> saltmarsh community and SM14 <i>Halimione portulacoides</i> saltmarsh community					✓			

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H1420 Mediterranean and thermos-Atlantic halophilous scrubs (<i>Sarcometea fruticosi</i>); Mediterranean saltmarsh scrub					✓			
Lowland ditch systems	✓							
SM13a - <i>Puccinellia maritima</i> saltmarsh, <i>Puccinellia maritima</i> dominant sub-community	✓							
SM14 - <i>Atriplex portulacoides</i> saltmarsh	✓							
Vascular plant assemblage	✓			✓				
Invertebrate assemblage	✓			✓				
Native oyster (<i>Ostrea edulis</i>) beds							✓	
Native oyster (<i>Ostrea edulis</i>)							✓	
Fossil avifauna, <i>Coturnipes cooperi</i> and <i>Parvicuculus minor</i>						✓		
Mesozoic - Tertiary Fish/Amphibia (fossil)						✓		