



Access and Sensitive Features Appraisal: Executive Summary Coastal Access Programme

This document summarises the conclusions and procedure of Natural England's Access and Sensitive Features Appraisal, for the proposed Highcliffe to Calshot stretch of the England Coast Path. This document should be read alongside the complete Access and Sensitive Features Appraisal.

Executive Summary

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 Hampshire coast between Highcliffe and Calshot. We describe the conclusions of our appraisal and how we have modified our proposals to take account of potential impacts.

This appraisal should be read alongside Natural England's related Coastal Access Report in which the access proposal is fully described and explained.

Background

There are a number of protected sites along this stretch of coast, including SPA, SAC, SSSI, Ramsar and NNR designations (see section 2.2 for details of the sites involved). In our appraisal we have considered whether changes in recreation as a result of our proposals might have an impact on any of the features associated with these designated sites, or other protected species that occur along this section of coast. The main features of interest for this stretch of coast are summarised in Table 1 (see section 2.4 for a full list of designated features).

Scientific research in connection with building new homes around the Solent has found that disturbance arising from increased demand for outdoor recreation could have a negative impact if recreational activities are not carefully managed. Bird Aware Solent is a strategic initiative, funded by contributions from house builders, to increase awareness amongst recreational users of the needs of wildlife and to deliver on site visitor management. Throughout our work around the Solent we have worked closely with representatives of Bird Aware Solent to ensure that our proposals take account of and are designed to complement this initiative.

The coast between Highcliffe and Calshot is much less visited than places closer to the major conurbations of the Solent and so a particular challenge has been to align the path around several areas used by the birds that are relatively undisturbed.

Our proposals for coastal access around the Solent have been developed in this context. More people go for a walk when they visit the Solent coast than any other recreational activity. The Coast Path will be established and maintained to National Trail quality standards, which will enhance visitors experience and is a positive ongoing contribution to managing access. At the same time, it is important to ensure that the path is aligned and managed to minimise the risk of impacts on sensitive nature conservation features.

Description of the main features of interest

Interest	Description
Non-breeding waterbirds	A key feature for the Solent as a whole is that during the winter months, it supports an internationally recognised population of non-breeding waterbirds. The extensive areas of soft mud exposed at low tide are the main feeding areas but the birds also need suitable undisturbed places to roost and several species use inland areas that provide supporting habitat for feeding and resting.
Coastal breeding birds	The lowland grasslands, marshes and shorelines across the western Solent provide ideal nesting and foraging areas for breeding waders, wildfowl and seabirds. As well as these terrestrial sites there are several offshore shingle bars that support significant populations of gulls and terns.
Coastal habitats	Much of the shoreline along this stretch of coast is typified by shingle beaches and extensive areas of mudflat. The Beaulieu and Lymington estuaries include a complex network of salt marsh, lagoons, reed beds and grassland habitats.
Woodland	The ancient and semi-ancient woodlands close to the Beaulieu Estuary and inland by the New Forest heaths are extensive and well maintained. These woodlands support rare invertebrate and vascular plant communities.
Heathland flora and fauna	The New Forest heaths provide habitat for a range of breeding birds, reptiles, amphibians, invertebrate and rare plants. The heathlands extend across much of the inland New Forest National Park

Our approach

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 20131. We call our internal processes to support this approach 'Access and Sensitive Features Appraisal' (ASFA) and this document is a record of our conclusions. The appraisal includes our Habitats Regulations Assessment wherever relevant to the site in question.

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. In particular the BTO's Wetland Bird Survey and the local Brent Goose and Wader Strategy have both provided significant information on intertidal and nearshore field use. Recordings from the North Solent NNR team and Hampshire Ornithological Society have also greatly helped with specific areas. 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. We have held workshops with the relevant partners of the Bird Aware Solent group. In these ways, any nature conservation concerns are discussed early and constructive solutions identified as necessary.

The conclusions of our appraisal are certified by both the member of staff responsible for developing the access proposal and the person responsible for considering any environmental impacts. This ensures appropriate separation of duties within Natural England.

Where our proposals for the England Coast Path and associated Coastal Margin are relevant to a Natura 2000 site, this appraisal fulfils our duty under the Habitats Regulations to assess their potential implications in order to ensure no likely significant effect on the site. The formal conclusions relating to this are recorded in Section 6 of this document.

Aim and objectives for the design of our proposals

The new national arrangements for coastal access will establish a continuous well-maintained walking route around the coast and clarify where people can access the foreshore and other parts of the coastal margin. These changes will influence how people use the coast for recreation. A particular concern during the development of our proposals for this stretch of coast has been disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds as a result of recreational activities. Our aim in developing our proposals for the Solent coast has been to secure and enhance opportunities for people to enjoy their visit whilst ensuring appropriate protection for non-breeding waterbirds. Objectives for design of our detailed local proposals have been to:

- avoid exacerbating disturbance at sensitive locations by making use of established coastal paths
- where there is no suitable established and regularly used coastal route, develop proposals that take account of risks to sensitive nature conservation features and incorporate mitigation as necessary in our proposals
- clarify when, where and how people may access the foreshore and other parts of the coastal margin on foot for recreational purposes
- work with local partners to design detailed proposals that take account of and complement efforts to manage access in sensitive locations
- where practical, incorporate opportunities to raise awareness of the importance of the Solent for wintering waterbirds and how people can help efforts to protect them.

Conclusion

We have considered whether our proposals might have an impact on any of the features associated with these designated sites, or other protected species that occur along this section of coast. We have taken our time to consider all of the features that might be affected. Where necessary we have carried out an impact assessment and, with input from specialists, modified our proposals to minimise the risk of a detrimental impact. These measures are summarised in Table 2 below. We have paid special attention to European sites and included specific measures which would in our judgement be necessary to prevent any likely significant effect on the European Sites involved.

Summary of risks and consequent mitigation built in to our proposals

Location	Risk	Mitigation
Pitts Deep: Tanners Lane to Browns Lane	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds feeding on the foreshore or roosting on shingle banks (SPA). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The trail will be aligned away from sensitive areas, landwards of the shoreline bank. The route will be clearly waymarked and where it passes closest to the shore, along the top of

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using arable fields landwards of the proposed route (occasionally used SPA supporting habitat). • Increased disturbance in areas that provide suitable habitat for nesting shorebirds (SSSI). • Excessive trampling of the narrow strip of strandline vegetation (SAC). 	<p>the bank, we propose to enhance the existing physical barrier of scrubby vegetation seawards of the path.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new viewing and interpretation area will be installed midway between Tanners Lane and Browns Lane, to provide a focal point for walkers away from more sensitive areas. • Walkers will be separated from the fields landward of the trail by existing fences. Where necessary, low screening will be added so that dogs on the path are not visible to birds in the field. • Use of the trail will be restricted by direction on nature conservation grounds such that dogs will be required to be kept on a lead at all times. Notices will be installed onsite to indicate where this restriction applies. • Much of the foreshore is unsuitable for walking and access will be excluded by direction. An additional direction will be made on nature conservation grounds to exclude access to an area of shingle banks.
Sowley Marsh and Shoreline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using the Sowley marshes area (SPA). • Increased disturbance along the shore in areas that provide suitable habitat for ground nesting birds (SSSI). • Excessive trampling of vegetation growing on a shingle spit (SAC). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our proposed alignment for the trail avoids Sowley Marsh, and makes use of existing hedges to provide a physical barrier and screening between walkers using the trail and birds on the marsh. • The foreshore is unsuitable for walking and access will be excluded by direction. An additional direction will be made on nature conservation grounds to exclude access to a shingle spit and area of coastal grassland at the seawards end of Sowley Marsh. • Signage will be installed where the path joins Browns Lane to clarify the route of the trail and that there is no access to the shore at this location.
Sowley Fields	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using the shoreline and marshes (SPA). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An inland route for the Coast Path avoids the most sensitive areas. • A new cross field path will be established at Sowley Fields. These fields are not recorded as being used by non-breeding waterbirds and are

		unlikely to be suitable, due to their being small and enclosed, close to residential properties and used for shooting.
Thorns Marsh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using the shoreline and marshes (SPA). Increased disturbance close to the shore in areas that provide suitable habitat for ground nesting birds (SSSI). Excessive trampling of vegetation growing on a shingle spit (SAC). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our proposed inland alignment for the trail avoids Thorns Marsh, and walkers will be separated from sensitive areas by existing hedges and fences.
Needs Ore, Park Farm Fields and Park Shore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using the foreshore at the mouth of the Beaulieu Estuary and lagoons and marshes at Needs Ore (SPA) Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using the pasture fields at Park Farm (important SPA supporting habitat). Increased disturbance to breeding birds using the marshland, fields and shoreline in Needs Ore (SSSI) Interference with environmental stewardship over Park Farm fields, including to provide suitable habitat for waders and farmland birds. Excessive trampling of coastal habitats along Park Shore (SAC). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An inland alignment for the Coast Path avoiding sensitive areas. Signposts and waymarking will be used to ensure the route of the trail is clear and easy to follow. Walkers will be asked to stick to the path and dog proof fencing will be used in the open fields adjacent to Sowley Lane, to ensure dogs do not access the fields when circumnavigating north of Park Farm Access to Needs Ore will be excluded all year round by direction on nature conservation grounds (existing permit controlled access to Warren Lane and the car park at Needs Ore Point will be unaffected). In addition, access will be excluded from Park Farm fields that form part of Needs Ore NNR from 1st September to 15th March each year. The boundary of the excluded areas follows existing hedges and fences. Access is currently permitted to Park Shore but dogs must be kept on a lead. Access with dogs to this part of the coastal margin will be similarly restricted by direction on nature conservation grounds. Existing on-site notices will be upgraded to indicate where this restriction applies.
West bank of the Beaulieu River at Keeping Copse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased disturbance of non-breeding waterbirds feeding on the foreshore or resting on the shore at the edge of the woods (SPA). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improvements to make the existing path easier to use and follow, and thereby discourage people from leaving it, including signage and sections of boardwalk with guard rails Existing interpretation panels will be replaced and improved

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased disturbance to breeding waders using the upper saltmarsh and banks of the Beaulieu River estuary (SSSI). 	
Moonhills and New Forest Heaths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased disturbance of heathland breeding birds by people or their dogs (SPA). Increased trampling causes new areas of bare ground to develop (SAC). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alignment along an established and regularly used recreational route. Installation of additional panels where the trail enters the New Forest with maps and information to guide visitors (similar to panels installed by the Forestry Commission at other locations in the Forest)
East Beaulieu River (including Sims Wood, Steerleys Copse and Spearbed Copse)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds feeding and resting on the foreshore and banks of the Beaulieu River estuary (SPA) Increased disturbance to breeding waders along the river bank (SSSI) Careful alignment of path through woodland would be needed to avoid impacts on plants, invertebrates and amphibians (SSSI). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An inland route following existing tracks and roads avoids the woodland and more sensitive areas closer to the river. The woodland is separated from the proposed route by and fence and tracks joining the route are gated.
Exbury Fields	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using the shoreline and marshes (SPA) Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using fields alongside the path (including some secondary supporting habitat) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An inland route for the Coast Path avoids more sensitive areas. The route will be clearly marked to make it easy to follow. Existing hedges and fences provide a physical separation between the path and adjoining fields. Some additional screening will be added at key locations.
Lepe and Cadland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using the shoreline and Stone Marsh (SPA) Increased disturbance to non-breeding waterbirds using fields alongside the path (including some secondary supporting habitat) Increased disturbance to breeding birds using the shoreline and marshland (SSSI) Excessive trampling of vegetated shingle at the shoreline at Cadland Shoreline (SAC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An inland route for the trail avoids possible impacts on coastal vegetated shingle, non-breeding and breeding birds. Existing fencing and notices at Stone Marsh Nature Reserve and Cadland Shoreline deter access to these areas Much of the foreshore is unsuitable for walking and access will be excluded by direction. An additional direction will be made on nature conservation grounds to formally exclude access Stone Marsh Nature Reserve and areas of shingle along Cadland Shoreline.

Implementation

Once a route for the trail has been confirmed by the Secretary of State, we will work with Hampshire County Council and the New Forest National Park Authority to ensure any works on the ground are carried out with due regard to the results of the appraisals and that all relevant statutory requirements have been fulfilled. During establishment stage, we will liaise with local interest groups about detailed aspects of design (e.g. the wording of notices) to help ensure consistency in messages to the public.

Thanks

The development of our proposals for Highcliffe to Calshot has been informed by input from people with relevant expertise within Natural England and other key organisations. The proposals have been thoroughly considered before being finalised and our initial ideas were modified during an iterative design process. We are grateful to RSPB, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, Bird Aware Solent, Hampshire Ornithological Society, New Forest National Park Authority and other organisations and local experts whose contributions and advice have helped to inform development of our proposals.