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Assessment of England Coast Path proposals between Grain and Woolwich on sites and features of nature conservation concern



About this document

This document should be read in conjunction with the published Reports for the Grain to Woolwich 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/publications/england-coast-path-from-grain-to-woolwich-comment-on-proposals>

A HRA is required for European sites (SPA and Ramsar site). The HRA can be viewed here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-coast-path-from-grain-to-woolwich-comment-on-proposals>

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 A shows designated sites along this stretch of coast.

Evidence has been 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. We have also drawn on wintering and breeding bird evidence from Kent Ornithological Society in liaison with local bird recorders; wintering and breeding bird surveys from consultants working on behalf of the London Resort Company Holdings at Swanscombe Peninsular; wintering and breeding bird survey results for Salt Fleet Flats undertaken for DP World; and breeding wader surveys undertaken for the North Kent Breeding Wader Project. The approach includes considering any current visitor management practices, either informal or formal. It also involved 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 were discussed early and constructive solutions identified as necessary.

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.

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Assessment of coastal access proposals on South Thames Estuary and Marshes SSSI

Is this site also part of a European site? Yes

Note that notified features of the SSSI that are also qualifying features of the European site are omitted from this assessment.

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	
Breeding birds on saltmarsh and grazing marsh (redshank, lapwing)	Grain Marshes, North Levels, Yantlet	Possible increase in access to coastal margin	Sensitive to disturbance between April and July	There are existing public footpaths along the coast between Allhallows Marshes and Denton. There is an existing borrow dyke separating the public footpaths from the coastal grazing marsh	<u>Alignment</u> Align the trail inland at Grain (between GWO-1-S001 and GWO-1-S019) to avoid sensitive breeding sites (see maps GWO 1a and GWO 1b) Align the trail behind the saltings bund at Dagnam Saltings (between GWO-2-S001 and GWO-2-S011) to avoid sensitive breeding sites (see maps GWO 2a) Align the trail along the existing public footpaths for the rest of the trail in the SSSI.	No impact on these features
	Dagnam Saltings	Possible increase in access to coastal margin			<u>Coastal Access exclusions</u> Much of the foreshore between GWO-1-S001 and GWO-2-S051 (saltmarsh and mudflats) is unsuitable for public access and will be excluded by direction	
	Allhallows Marshes, Cliffe Pools, Cliffe	Negligible change in access to sites landward				

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	
	Fleet, Shorne & Higham Marshes.	of the coastal margin		landward of the trail Important breeding sites at Cliffe Pools and Shorne and Higham Marshes are already being managed for access by RSPB, or there are existing barriers to access such as fencing.	Exclude access to the marshes and shoreline at Grain (between GWO-1-S008 and GWO-1-S017) all year round for nature conservation purposes. The disused and unrestored sand and gravel pit, between GWO-1-S001 and GWO-1-S007 (that also supports breeding birds) will be excluded from access on the grounds of public safety <u>Interpretation and waymarking</u> Install interpretation panels at either end of Dagnam Saltings (map GWO 2a) and one at Higham Marshes (map GWO 2k) to request visitors to stay on the path and keep dogs under close control Provide clear waymarking to ensure that visitors stay on the marked route.	
Breeding birds of bare or sparsely vegetated	Grain, Dagnam Saltings	Possible increase in access to coastal margin	Sensitive to disturbance between April and July	There are existing public footpaths along the coast between	<u>Alignment</u> Align the trail inland at Grain (between GWO-1-S001 and GWO-1-S019) to avoid sensitive breeding sites (see maps GWO 1a and GWO 1b	No impact on these features

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	
sand, shingle or shell banks (ringed plover, oyster catcher)	Cliffe Pools, Shorne & Higham Marshes	Negligible change in access to sites landward of the coastal margin		<p>Allhallows Marshes and Denton.</p> <p>Important breeding sites at Cliffe Pools and Shorne and Higham Marshes are already being managed for access by RSPB, or there are existing barriers to access such as fencing.</p> <p>Landowners of Salt Fleet Flats intend to install two interpretation panels in 2019</p>	<p>Align the trail behind the saltings bund at Dagnam Saltings (between GWO-2-S001 and GWO-2-S011) to avoid sensitive breeding sites (see maps GWO 2a)</p> <p>Align the trail along the existing public footpaths for the rest of the trail in the SSSI.</p> <p><u>Coastal Access exclusions</u></p> <p>Exclude access to the shoreline at Grain (between GWO-1-S008 and GWO-1-S017) all year round for nature conservation purposes.</p> <p>Exclude access to the sandy shoreline which is used for breeding at Dagnam Saltings (between GWO-2-S003 and GWO-2-S010)</p> <p>The disused and unrestored sand and gravel pit, between GWO-1-S001 and GWO-1-S007 (that also supports breeding birds) will be excluded from access on the grounds of public safety.</p>	

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	
				advising walkers of sensitivities.	<u>Interpretation and waymarking</u> Install interpretation panels at either end of Dagnam Saltings (map GWO 2a) to request visitors to stay on the path and keep dogs under close control Provide clear waymarking to ensure that visitors stay on the marked route.	
Breeding birds of open waters and their margins (Bearded tit, garganey, shoveler	Cliffe Pools (avocet)	Negligible change in access to sites landward of the coastal margin	Marsh harriers and avocet are sensitive to disturbance between April and July	There are existing public footpaths along the coast between Allhallows Marshes and Denton.	No additional mitigation has been proposed.	No impact on these features

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	
marsh harrier, Cetti's warbler, avocet)	Salt Fleet (marsh harrier)	Negligible change in access to sites landward of the coastal margin	Bearded tit, Cetti's warbler, garganey and shoveler are less vulnerable to disturbance given their nesting habitat in reed beds and distance of their nesting habitat to the coastal trail	Important breeding sites at Cliffe Pools are already being managed for access by RSPB. Landowners of Salt Fleet Flats intend to install two interpretation panels in 2019 advising walkers of sensitivities.		

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	
Ditch Systems	Landward of the coastal margin	Negligible change in access to sites landward of the coastal margin	There will not be any physical changes to the ditches or their support systems.	There is an existing borrow dyke separating the public footpaths from the ditch systems of the SSSI which are landward of the trail	No additional mitigation has been proposed.	No impact on these features
Vegetated Shingle	Grain	Possible increase in access to coastal margin	Plants growing in shingle banks are sensitive to trampling by people walking along the shore	The vegetated shingle at Grain forms part of the shoreline of the disused sand and gravel pit. It is already fenced off from access.	<p><u>Alignment</u></p> <p>Align the trail inland at Grain (between GWO-1-S001 and GWO-1-S019) to avoid sensitive vegetated shingle (see maps GWO 1a and GWO 1b)</p> <p><u>Coastal Access exclusions</u></p> <p>Exclude access to the shoreline at Grain (between GWO-1-S008 and GWO-1-S017) all year round for nature conservation purposes</p>	No impact on these features

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	
					<p>The disused and unrestored sand and gravel pit, between GWO-1-S001 and GWO-1-S007 (that also supports breeding birds) will be excluded from access on the grounds of public safety</p> <p><u>Interpretation and waymarking</u></p> <p>Provide clear waymarking to ensure that visitors stay on the marked route.</p>	
Seagrass beds	Allhallows	Negligible change in access to the coastal margin	Intertidal seagrass beds are sensitive to surface abrasion by human trampling.	There are existing public footpaths along the coast at Allhallows	The foreshore at GWO-1-S026 (including the mudflats where there are seagrass beds) is unsuitable for public access and will be excluded by direction	No impact on these features

Establishment works

Is SSSI 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:

The timing of the culvert works at Dagnam Saltings should be undertaken outside of the breeding season (April to July).

Where necessary, Medway Council and Kent County Council 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.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on Swanscombe pMCZ

Is this site also part of a European site? No

Risk				Consideration		Conclusion
Attribute affected	Key Area	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	
Tentacled lagoon worm <i>Alkmaria romijni</i>	Intertidal habitat at Swanscombe Peninsular GWO-4-S006 to GWO-4-S041	No change in access to coastal margin	Tentacled lagoon worms are not sensitive to surface abrasion to mudflats by trampling as they are generally found closer to the lower reaches of the intertidal zone and are therefore less vulnerable to walkers	N/A	Much of the foreshore between GWO-4-S006 and GWO-4-S041 (mudflats) is unsuitable for public access and will be excluded by direction	No impact on these features
Intertidal mud	Intertidal habitat at Swanscombe Peninsular GWO-4-S006 to GWO-4-S041	No change in access to coastal margin	The intertidal mud habitat feature is not sensitive to being walked on occasionally.	N/A	Much of the foreshore between GWO-4-S006 and GWO-4-S041 (mudflats) is unsuitable for public access and will be excluded by direction	No impact on these features

Assessment of coastal access proposals on marsh harrier at Grain Pit Local Wildlife Site

Is this site or feature also part of a European site? No

Risk				Consideration		Conclusion
Attribute affected	Key Area	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	
Breeding marsh harrier	Reedbeds at Grain Pit	Possible increase in access to coastal margin	Sensitive to disturbance between April and July	The Local Wildlife Site at Grain forms part of the disused sand and gravel pit. It is already fenced off from access.	<p><u>Alignment</u></p> <p>Align the trail inland at Grain (between GWO-1-S001 and GWO-1-S019) to avoid sensitive vegetated shingle (see maps GWO 1a and GWO 1b)</p> <p><u>Coastal Access exclusions</u></p> <p>Exclude access to the shoreline at Grain (between GWO-1-S008 and GWO-1-S017) all year round for nature conservation purposes</p> <p>The disused and unrestored sand and gravel pit, between GWO-1-S001 and GWO-1-S007 (that also supports breeding birds) will be excluded from access on the grounds of public safety</p> <p><u>Interpretation and waymarking</u></p> <p>Provide clear waymarking to ensure that visitors stay on the marked route.</p>	No impact on these features

Assessment of coastal access proposals on breeding birds landward of Salt Fleet Flats

Is this site or feature also part of a European site? No

Risk				Consideration		Conclusion
Attribute affected	Key Area	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	
Breeding little ringed plover and ringed plover	Little ringed plover and ringed plover breed on the new scrapes (that were inadvertently created during the construction of Salt Fleet Flats) and little ringed plover also breed on the gravel track which forms the public footpath. They have bred successfully in 2017 and 2018.	Small increase in access to trail Strava Heatmap shows a very low existing usage for the coastal path in this location. Anecdotal evidence from the contractors building the new sea wall at Salt Fleet Flats saw a maximum of 2 people using the public footpath per day, which is unsurprising given the lack of car parks and adjoining public footpaths from elsewhere.	Sensitive to disturbance between April and July	London Gateway, the landowner of Salt Fleet Flats, intend to install 2 interpretation panels in 2019 to inform visitors of the sensitivities of the site and the requirement to stay on the path. They will develop these panels in liaison with the England Coast Path team. They have also installed temporary signs for visitors to keep to the paths to ensure there is no conflict with the breeding features.	New coastal access rights on the sea wall at Salt Fleet Flats between April and September will allow for informal management to divert walkers on to the seawall and away from breeding birds near the footpath.	No impact on these features

Assessment of coastal access proposals on Swanscombe Peninsular including Botany Marshes Local Wildlife Site

Is this site or feature also part of a European site? No

Risk				Consideration		Conclusion
Attribute affected	Key Area	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	
Breeding marsh harrier, cetti's warbler and bearded tits	Swanscombe Marshes and Botany Marshes	No change in access to sites landward of the coastal margin	These features could be sensitive to disturbance between April and July. However they are less vulnerable to disturbance given the protection provided to them by their nesting habitat, reedbeds	The reedbeds are of a sufficient extent to provide adequate protection from disturbance to the breeding birds.	We have aligned the Coast Path away from key breeding areas	No impact on these features
Wintering redshank	Northern and eastern tip of the peninsular	No change in access to the coastal margin	Sensitive to disturbance between October and March		<u>Alignment</u> We have aligned new access away from key wintering feeding areas on the northern and eastern tip of the peninsular at Swanscombe	No impact on these features

Risk				Consideration		Conclusion
Attribute affected	Key Area	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	
					<p>The ECP will follow the existing rights of way in the remainder of the site</p> <p><u>Coastal Margin Exclusions</u></p> <p>Much of the foreshore (including saltmarsh and mudflats) is unsuitable for public access and access will be excluded by direction.</p> <p>Access will be restricted year round at the northern and eastern tip (preferred wintering area for redshank) of the peninsular by a formal direction on public safety grounds</p>	
Invertebrate Assemblage	Whole peninsular	Medium increase in access to the trail and no change in access to the coastal margin	The invertebrate assemblage at Swanscombe Peninsular is vulnerable to loss of habitat through trail improvements.		The proposals will minimise the installation of new access management infrastructure that would result in a loss of habitat for the invertebrate assemblage. No new surfacing will be carried out.	No impact on these features

Conclusion

We, Natural England, are satisfied that our proposals to improve access to the English coast between Grain and Woolwich are fully compatible with our duty to further the conservation and enhancement of the notified features of South Thames Estuary and Marshes SSSI consistent with the proper exercise of our functions¹.

In respect of any duties that may arise under section 125 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, Natural England has concluded for Swanscombe pMCZ 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 at Grain Pit, Salt Fleet Flats and Swanscombe Peninsular 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.

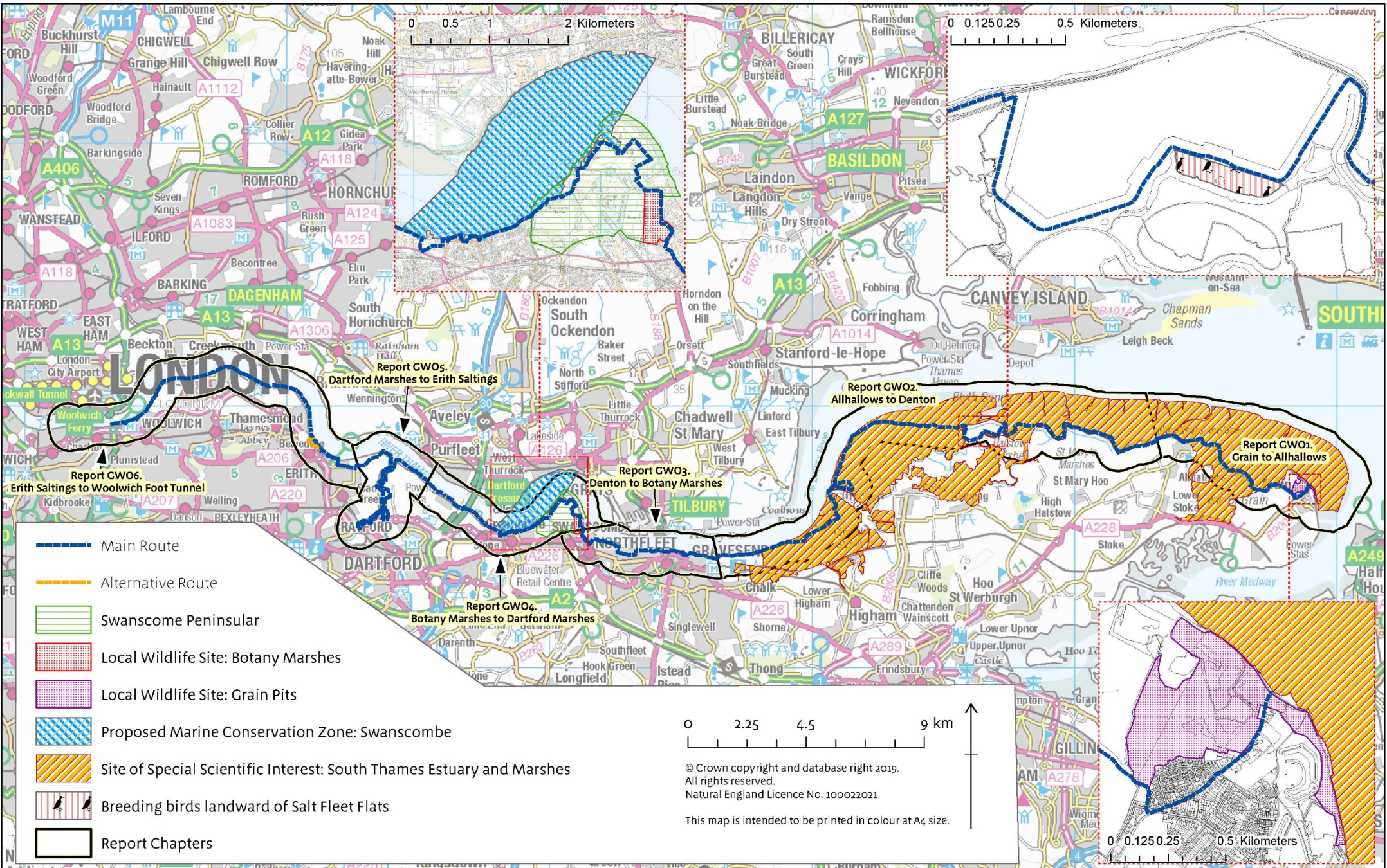
The conclusions of this assessment have been checked by:

Jenny Bowen	4 April 2019	On behalf of the Coastal Access Programme Team
Kristoffer Hewitt	4 April 2019	Senior Officer with responsibility for protected sites
Francesca Sanchez	4 April 2019	Lead Adviser for England Coast Path stretch

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.

Coastal Access - Grain to Woolwich

Nature Conservation Assessment Sites



Annex 1. Index to designated sites and features

Features – of the designated sites	South Thames Estuary and Marshes SSSI	Thames Estuary and Marshes SPA	Thames Estuary and Marshes Ramsar	Swanscombe Proposed Marine Conservation Zone
Aggregations of breeding birds – Bearded Tit <i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	X			
Aggregations of breeding birds – Garganey <i>Anas querquedula</i>	X			
Aggregations of breeding birds – Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Avocet <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Black-tailed Godwit, including on passage <i>Limosa limosa</i>	X	X	X	
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i>	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i>	X	X	X	
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Gadwall <i>Anas strepera</i>	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i>	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Grey Plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	X	X	X	
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Hen Harrier <i>Circus cyaneus</i>	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Knot <i>Calidris canutus</i>	X	X	X	
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i>	X	X	X	

Features – of the designated sites	South Thames Estuary and Marshes SSSI	Thames Estuary and Marshes SPA	Thames Estuary and Marshes Ramsar	Swanscombe Proposed Marine Conservation Zone
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> , including on passage	X	X	X	
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Shelduck <i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds – White-fronted Goose <i>Anser albifrons</i>	X			
Aggregations of breeding birds – Lowland damp grasslands	X			
Aggregations of breeding birds – Lowland open waters and their margins	X			
Aggregations of breeding birds – Sand dunes and saltmarshes	X			
Invertebrate Assemblage	X			
Lowland ditch systems	X			
SD1 – <i>Rumex crispus</i> – <i>Glaucium flavum</i> shingle community	X			
SM1 – <i>Zostera</i> communities	X			
SM10 – Transitional low marsh vegetation with <i>Puccinellia maritima</i> , annual <i>Salicornia</i> species and <i>Suaeda maritima</i>	X			
SM12 – Rayed <i>Aster tripolium</i> on saltmarsh	X			
SM13a – <i>Puccinellia maritima</i> saltmarsh, <i>Puccinellia maritima</i> dominant sub-community	X			
SM14 – <i>Atriplex portulacoides</i> saltmarsh	X			

Features – of the designated sites	South Thames Estuary and Marshes SSSI	Thames Estuary and Marshes SPA	Thames Estuary and Marshes Ramsar	Swanscombe Proposed Marine Conservation Zone
SM26 – <i>Inula crithmoides</i> stands	X			
SM6 – <i>Spartina anglica</i> saltmarsh	X			
SM7 – <i>Sarcocornia perennis</i>	X			
SM8 – Annual <i>Salicornia</i> saltmarsh	X			
SM9 – <i>Suaeda maritima</i> saltmarsh	X			
Vascular plant assemblage	X			
A Wetland of International Importance by supporting 75,019 waterfowl at citation: including redshank <i>Tringa 21Ipine21</i> , black tailed godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i> , dunlin <i>Calidris 21Ipine</i> , lapwing <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> , grey plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i> , shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i> , pintail <i>Anas acuta</i> , gadwall <i>Anas strepera</i> , shelduck <i>Tadorna tadorna</i> , white-fronted goose <i>Anser albifrons</i> , little grebe <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> , ringed plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> , avocet <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i> , whimbrel <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		X	X	
The site supports one endangered plant species and at least 14 nationally scarce plants of wetland habitats. The site also supports more than 20 British Red Data Book invertebrates.			X	
MCZ Features				
Tentacled lagoon worm <i>Alkmaria romijni</i> and supporting habitat (intertidal mud)				X

Front cover photo: Queen Elizabeth Bridge, Dartford
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Natural England is here to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity it brings.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/england-coast-path-improving-public-access-to-the-coast>

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