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# Assessment of Coastal Access Proposals between Shotley Gate and Felixstowe Ferry on sites and features of nature conservation concern

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## About this document

This document should be read in conjunction with the published England Coast Path Coastal Access reports for the Shotley Gate to Felixstowe Ferry 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.

A HRA is required for European sites (Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Ramsar sites). The HRA is published alongside the Coastal Access Reports.

This document, the Nature Conservation Assessment (NCA), covers all other aspects including where relevant Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) and undesignated but locally important sites and features. Note: these sites and features are only considered by the NCA in so far as they are not already considered by any HRA that has been produced. The NCA is arranged site by site. Map A 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.

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## Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

### The Orwell Estuary SSSI

This site is within and shares boundaries with the Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA and Ramsar sites.

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

The Orwell Estuary is of national importance for breeding avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, its breeding bird assemblage of open waters and their margins, nine species of wintering waterfowl (including black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa islandica*), an assemblage of vascular plants, and intertidal mud habitats.

The site supports a nationally important vascular plant assemblage, including at least nine nationally scarce plants. They are characteristic of intertidal mud, saltmarsh, shingle and coastal grazing marsh habitats. These are eelgrass *Zostera marina*, dwarf eelgrass *Z.noltii*, slender hare's-ear *Bupleurum tenuissimum*, golden-samphire *Inula crithmoides*, lax-flowered sea-lavender *Limonium humile*, shrubby sea-blite *Suaeda vera*, small cord-grass *Spartina maritima*, perennial glasswort *Sarcocornia perennis*, and divided sedge *Carex divisa*.

The Orwell Estuary supports a large area of intertidal mud habitat with very rich littoral sediments, particularly sandy muds. There is a high invertebrate species richness within the sediments. The estuary also supports an example of a nationally important tide swept algae community with sponges, ascidians and red algae.

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1002511.pdf>

### Current situation

The majority of the Orwell Estuary SSSI is intertidal. These areas have two main recreational uses depending on the state of the tide. The river estuary is a major haven and thoroughfare for commercial and pleasure boats and this activity will not be altered by the creation of the England Coast Path. At the time of publication 78.5% of the area of the site was considered to be in favourable condition. Of the remaining area of the site almost 10% was unfavourable and a further 12% was unfavourable and declining in condition. The unfavourable assessment concluded that in all cases this is due to coastal squeeze, typically where salt marsh is being eroded and the engineered hard defences prevent a transition in-land. In many areas the existence of the public right of way on the defences is noted, and the public access is not recorded as an issue of concern to the site integrity.

At low tide, extensive areas of mud flat are revealed. These are utilised by bait diggers, but the wider public tends not to venture out onto these areas for recreational activities. Around the high water mark there are a few beaches and more solid ground. These are principally used by walkers, with or without dogs, and have limited numbers of people that stay and undertake the more traditional seaside activities associated with beaches. 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 local conditions and tides (details are within the main report and supported within the HRA). Some of the beaches also host public rights of way and this will continue. There are limited features to draw the public away from their existing routes and it is expected they will continue to undertake journeys on to the next location rather than spreading across areas.

The area hosts the existing Stour and Orwell long distance locally promoted route, is a tourist destination and some of the areas noted of significant wildlife interest are nature reserves, such as Trimley Marshes <https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/trimleymarshes> and Levington lagoon <https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/levingtonlagoon>.

## Risk analysis for the Orwell Estuary SSSI

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	
Assemblage of breeding birds – lowland open waters and their margins	Along the length of the estuary (particularly at Trimley and Shotley Marshes and Loompit Lake)	No changes in pattern expected with minor increase in level of use	These features could be sensitive to disturbance during spring and summer	The principal areas of interest already have a degree of access either as nature reserves, country parks or with public rights of way.	The majority of the saltmarsh and flat will be subject to a S25A restriction, meaning no further rights of access will be granted to the public to these important feeding and fledging areas. Nesting areas along the margin are either currently flanked in most areas by public rights of way or will be avoided by the routing of the trail inland.	No impact on these features. (with any mitigation such as signage and screening for wintering birds noted in the HRA having a benefit for the breeding assemblage)
Sheltered muddy shores	Along the length	No change	These features could be sensitive to impacts year round	These areas are not currently used for wide spread recreation, but are subject to disturbance from boat users and bait diggers.	The majority of the saltmarsh and flat will be subject to a S25A restriction, meaning no further rights of access will be granted to the public to these areas. It will not influence the use of the area by boating and bait diggers.	No impact on these features.
Vascular plant assemblage	Length – higher limits of shore	Limited change through	These features could be sensitive to	These areas may be utilised by visitors to the reserves, country	Due to the existing levels of use and anticipated no significant change in use from seaward spreading room over these areas no restriction is currently proposed. The majority of the England Coast Path	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	
		spreading room	impacts year round	parks and beaches along the estuary.	users in this area are anticipated to remain on the signposted trail in order to complete their onward journey and the limited spreading room area (constrained by the S25A over the saltmarsh) is unlikely to influence use.	

## Establishment works

SSSI assent is needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works.

Existing public rights of way pass through the SSSI or very close to the boundary. Some establishment works will be necessary to improve existing structures and waymarking and the necessary assent will consider seasonal restrictions and working widths.

Where necessary, Suffolk County Council or any other land owner undertaking establishment works will instigate the SSSI assent or 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.

## Landguard Common SSSI

This site is not part of any European sites.

All SSSI features (or groups of features) are covered in the assessment and are listed in Annex 1. These are *Rumex crispus* – *Glacium flavum* Coastal Vegetated Shingle (SD-1-3) and Vascular Plant assemblage, and little tern and ringed plover.

Landguard Common is a sand and shingle spit protecting the northern entrance to the haven ports of Harwich and Felixstowe. It consists of a loose shingle foreshore backed by a stabilized, vegetated beach, earth banks and scrub. Pioneer shingle plants and vegetated shingle beaches are fragile and a nationally scarce habitat type. The site is also of considerable ornithological interest as a landfall site for passage migrants and for breeding shorebirds (with an adjacent Bird Observatory at Landguard fort).

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1004484.pdf>

## Current situation

All SSSI Units in Favourable condition despite the entire site being readily accessible and in receipt of over 500,000 visitors per year. The environmental pressures include trampling and bird disturbance to nesting and passage birds. The area has an active visitor management programme, including on site wardening, visitor information and walkways, active seasonal fencing and patrolling of bird nesting areas and a year round requirement for dogs to be on short leads in certain zones. Although little terns have not nested in recent years, ringed plover have done well in fenced areas, with 4-5 pairs in 2016/17 rearing good numbers of young (Suffolk Bird Reports).

<http://www.discoverlandguard.org.uk/attractions/landguard-nature-reserve/>



## Risk analysis for the Landguard Common SSSI

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	
Coastal vegetated shingle communities and Vascular plant assemblage.	Whole site.	Negligible change in access to the coastal margin	Sensitive to trampling and to disturbance of the substrate.	The whole site is currently readily accessible and utilised by over 500,000 visitors a year. There is a current wardening programme and sensitive areas are fenced as appropriate.	No mitigation measures are proposed. The site is within seaward spreading room and the trail follows existing walked lines within the site. Coastal Access is unlikely to see any significant change in visitor numbers to this already popular site.	No impact on these features.
Not a notified feature, but to be considered:  Passage migrants and nesting shore birds	Shingle areas along coastal side of site.	Negligible change in access to the coastal margin	Possible seasonal disturbance at critical times if year	As above	As above	No impact on these features, but will need to be reviewed if there is any change in wardening and temporary fencing on site.

## Establishment works

SSSI assent will be needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works.

Where necessary, Suffolk County Council will instigate the SSSI assent 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.

## Stour Estuary SSSI (SPA and Ramsar)

This site is generally outside of the proposed trail alignment for the Shotley Gate to Felixstowe Ferry England Coast path stretch. About 65m of the proposed trail alignment in Shotley Gate is along a roadside pavement and small community grassland area on existing walked routes. This alignment is outside of the designated site. The trail alignment from Harwich to Shotley Gate considers any interactions in its bespoke HRA and NCA. The small section of route within the Shotley Gate to Felixstowe Ferry that could potentially interact with the nearby Stour Estuary designations is considered at this location to have no impact, due to the existing and proposed levels of access and the restrictions proposed to areas of flat and saltmarsh in this area.

## Landguard Common Local Nature Reserve

This site is not part of any European sites.

Apart from a small area of hardstanding, Landguard Common Local Nature reserve is wholly within the boundary of the Landguard Common SSSI and any impacts are considered under this designation above. As the hardstanding is within spreading room and currently utilised by the public it is not considered further.

<http://www.discoverlandguard.org.uk/attractions/landguard-nature-reserve/>

## Bridge Wood Local Nature Reserve (LNR), County Wildlife Site (CWS) and Ancient Woodland and Suffolk Geo-diversity site.

This site is not part of any European site, nor is it a domestic designated site (SSSI).

The proposed alignment is on the seaward edge of the LNR and associated classifications. The trail follows existing paths within the site and seaward spreading room is generally steep river cliff faces, heavily wooded and unlikely to be utilised by the public. Bridge Wood is part of the popular visitor destination of Orwell Country Park, and currently receives significant visitor numbers with many path and route options, good car parking and public transport links. The England Coast Path alignment and small area of land as coastal spreading room will not significantly increase the user numbers on this site – trail improvements may have a positive impact of encouraging users away from the more sensitive wildlife of the foreshore. Therefore no impact is expected from the alignment of the England Coast Path.

## Conclusion

We, Natural England, are satisfied that our proposals to improve access to the English coast between Shotley Gate and Felixstowe Ferry are fully compatible with our duty to further the conservation and enhancement of the notified features of both the Orwell Estuary SSSI and Landguard Common SSSI, consistent with the proper exercise of our functions<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore in respect of Landguard Common LNR and Bridge Wood LNR, CWS and Ancient Woodland 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:

Darren Braine 	Date 6 <sup>th</sup> January 2020	On behalf of the Coastal Access Programme Team
Andy Millar 	Date 6 <sup>th</sup> January 2020	Senior Officer with responsibility for protected sites

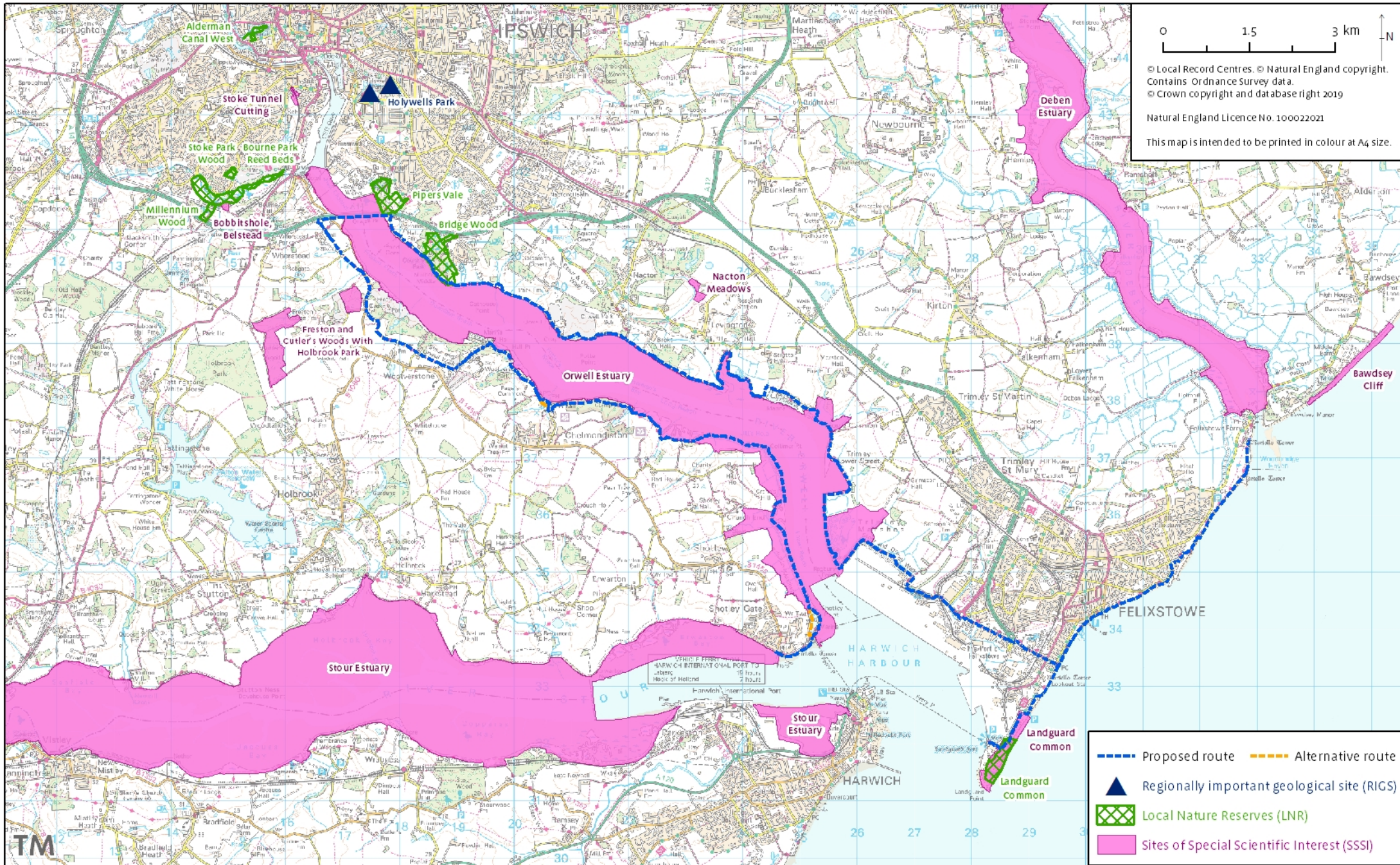
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<sup>1</sup> Natural England's functions includes its balanced general purposes for access, nature conservation and landscape under the NERC Act 2006, any specific statutory duties it may have to deliver specific improvements to public access, and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



# Coastal Access - Shotley Gate to Felixstowe Ferry

## Map A: Nature Conservation Assessment Sites



0 1.5 3 km N

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This map is intended to be printed in colour at A4 size.

- - - Proposed route
- - - Alternative route
- ▲ Regionally important geological site (RIGS)
- Local Nature Reserves (LNR)
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)



## Annex 1. Index to designated sites and features

Features of the designated sites	Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA	Stour and Orwell Estuaries Ramsar Site	Orwell Estuary SSSI	Landguard Common SSSI	Landguard Common LNR	Bridge Wood LNR
A132 Pied avocet <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i> (breeding)	✓	✓	✓			
A675 Dark-bellied brent goose <i>Branta bernicla bernicla</i> (non-breeding)	✓	✓	✓			
A054 Northern pintail <i>Anas acuta</i> (non-breeding)	✓	✓	✓			
A141 Grey plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i> (non-breeding)	✓	✓	✓			
A143 Red knot <i>Calidris canutus</i> (non-breeding)	✓	✓				
A672 Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina alpina</i> (non-breeding)	✓	✓	✓			
A616 Black-tailed godwit <i>Limosa limosa islandica</i> (non-breeding)	✓	✓	✓			
A162 Common redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i> (non-breeding)	✓	✓	✓			
Gadwall <i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓	✓			
Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> (breeding and non-breeding)	✓	✓	✓			
Shelduck <i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓			
Assemblage of breeding birds – lowland open waters and their margins			✓			
Invertebrate assemblage / rare animal species  The Ramsar Information Sheet lists five British Red Data Book (saltmarsh) invertebrates as being among noteworthy fauna: the muscid fly <i>Phaonia fusca</i> , the horsefly <i>Haematopota grandis</i> , two spiders <i>Arctosa fulvilineata</i> and <i>Baryphema duffeyi</i> , and the endangered swollen spire snail <i>Mercuria confusa</i> .		✓				

Features of the designated sites	Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA	Stour and Orwell Estuaries Ramsar Site	Orwell Estuary SSSI	Landguard Common SSSI	Landguard Common LNR	Bridge Wood LNR
Vascular plant assemblage  Ramsar criterion 2 /nationally scarce : stiff saltmarsh-grass <i>Puccinellia rupestris</i> , small cord-grass <i>Spartina maritima</i> , perennial glasswort <i>Sarcocornia perennis</i> , lax-flowered sea lavender <i>Limonium humile</i> , and the eelgrasses <i>Zostera angustifolia</i> , <i>Z. marina</i> and <i>Z. noltei</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sheltered muddy shores (Estuaries and Littoral sediment)			✓			
<i>Rumex crispus</i> – <i>Glacium flavum</i> shingle community (Coastal vegetated shingle)				✓	✓	
Ringed plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> (breeding)				✓	✓	
Little tern <i>Sterna albifrons</i> (breeding)				✓	✓	
Passage and migrant birds				✓	✓	