

**Assessment of Coastal Access Proposals between  
Hunstanton and Sutton Bridge  
on sites and features of nature conservation concern  
November 2020**





## Nature Conservation Assessment for Coastal Access Proposals between Hunstanton and Sutton Bridge

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### About this document

This document should be read in conjunction with the published Reports for the Hunstanton to Sutton Bridge stretch of the England Coast Path 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 Coastal Access Reports and the HRA can be viewed here <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/england-coast-path-hunstanton-to-sutton-bridge>

A HRA is required for European sites (SPA, SAC and Ramsar sites).

This document, the Nature Conservation Assessment (NCA), covers all other aspects (including where appropriate 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.**

This NCA is arranged site by site. Map A 'Notified Sites' shows the designated sites along this stretch of coast considered in this Nature Conservation Assessment.

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



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### 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 Norfolk and Lincolnshire coast between Hunstanton and Sutton Bridge. 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.



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### Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

#### The Wash SSSI

This site is also part of a European site. The Wash SSSI in this location is wholly coincidental with the boundary of The Wash SPA/Ramsar. It overlaps in part with the Greater Wash SPA and is wholly contained within The Wash and North Norfolk Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1002591.pdf>

The whole area is of exceptional biological interest. The intertidal mudflats and saltmarshes represent one of Britain's most important winter feeding areas for waders and wildfowl outside of the breeding season. Enormous numbers of migrant birds, of international significance, are dependent on the rich supply of invertebrate food. The saltmarsh and shingle communities are of considerable botanical interest and the mature saltmarsh is a valuable bird breeding zone. In addition the Wash is also very important as a breeding ground for Common Seals.

Notified features of the SSSI that are also qualifying features of the European site are omitted from this assessment. Please refer to Annex 1 for details of the overlapping features. Those features, both habitats and species, that are not also qualifying features of the European site are considered further below.

The Wash SSSI has 43 notified features as listed in Annex 1. All but one of these features is also a feature of an international designation. The lone feature is the aggregation of non-breeding whooper swan.

Annex 1 notes there are a significant number of communities and habitats specifically identified as notified features. These communities can be brought together under broader habitat type listings and it can be noted that these are all features of the international designations.

The Wash SSSI is over 62,000 hectares of intertidal saltmarsh, flat and associated habitat. This figure also includes the areas always inundated by the estuarine waters. The Hunstanton to Sutton Bridge ECP report is the central one of three reports that flank this large SSSI.

99.6% of the area of The Wash SSSI is judged to be either favourable or in recovering condition. Only one area of the whole site is noted as unfavourable declining, and this is Snettisham Lower Shore an area of shore either side of the mean low water mark near Heacham. This 2009 assessment concluded that unsustainable fishing practices were the main impact on this area.



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### Current situation

Hunstanton and Heacham at the northern end of this stretch are the main holiday destinations, with their camp sites, hotels and typical British seaside facilities and attractors. These locations draw in hundreds of thousands of visitors over an extended summer season.

Further south and over the remainder of this stretch, particularly away from car parks, the visitor use is typically much lower.

Walking, with or without a dog, is one of the most popular past times currently undertaken along this coastline. Sitting on the beach, playing in the sand and bathing in the waters closer to high tide times create very busy locations at the seaside towns in summer. Out of season the area can feel remote and a sense of wilderness can prevail, particularly on the more remote stretches around Sutton Bridge and Ongar Hill. Sailing clubs, jet-skis, kite surfing and wind surfing provide more energetic recreational activities in certain locations. Some operators offer the public boat trips into the Wash to see the seal colonies and to disembark on the sandbanks that are revealed beyond mean low water.

### Risk analysis

The only feature not considered by the European designations, and therefore not specifically considered by the HRA is the non-breeding whooper swan. This bird species may be able to tolerate a low level of human disturbance depending on the conditions of the winter season. The impacts from the England Coast Path allow this bird to be considered with similar bird species (Bewick's swan, dark-bellied brent goose) as considered through the HRA and it is therefore not considered further in this Nature Conservation Assessment.

### Establishment works

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

### Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

#### Hunstanton Cliffs SSSI

This site is not part of a European site.

This is principally a geological SSSI and the scientific interest of this site lies principally in the cliff face, which erosion causes to retreat. The site is an important locality for the Red Chalk and the underlying Carstone which contains an exceptionally rich Albian ammonite fauna.



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Additional biological interest is provided by a breeding colony of fulmars on the cliff face. This is the largest colony on the east coast of England, south of Flamborough Head.

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1002810.pdf>

### Current situation

The proposals for the England Coast Path between Hunstanton and Sutton Bridge include a section of the trail within the SSSI.

This section of the trail follows an existing metalled pedestrian access ramp that has part of its width just within the boundary of the southern tip of the SSSI. This covers less than 5m<sup>2</sup> of the SSSI area.

The Hunstanton to Sutton Bridge section of the England Coast Path will create a small area of seaward spreading room in this location over the SSSI. The stretch from Weybourne to Hunstanton flanks the landward side of the Hunstanton Cliffs SSSI and considers any impacts arising from the alignment.

Hunstanton is a popular holiday destination and has many tourist attractions and visitor facilities including long sandy beaches. The existing Peddar's Way and Norfolk Coast Path National Trail along the cliff tops provides for a popular walking route.

The beach is regularly used by tourists and recreational users, being particularly busy during the summer months.

There are no records of organised climbing on the cliff faces, although the public clamber over the lower areas that can be accessed from the foreshore.

### Risk analysis

The geological interest of this SSSI will not be impacted upon by the proposed alignment of the England Coast Path in this location, as it utilises existing metalled tracks. The associated seaward spreading room is unlikely to see any significant change in use of this very popular publicly accessible area.

### Establishment works

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



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### Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

#### The Wash NNR

This site is also part of a European site. It is also wholly within the above Wash SSSI and as such is not considered for further assessment.

#### Other sites of local interest.

##### Snettisham RSPB Reserve

This site is also part of a European site. The majority is within the above Wash SSSI. One lagoon near Shepherd's Port is outside of the SSSI designation and is landward of the proposed ECP and therefore not considered for further assessment.

##### County Wildlife Sites.

County Wildlife Sites were reviewed, and all sites along this coast are landward of the proposed alignment so are therefore not impacted and required no further consideration.

<https://www.norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk/documents/cws/county-wildlife-sites-2018>

#### Undesignated species

This section covers species that are neither qualifying features of designated sites, nor constituents of species assemblages that are qualifying features, and so have not been considered in the HRA for this stretch or in the sections above.

##### Ringer plover

While ringed plover are considered to be part of the non-breeding water bird assemblage of the SPA and Ramsar site the breeding population is not. Evidence suggests that most of the breeding ringed plover





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over-winter elsewhere and therefore the breeding population does not form a significant part of the non-breeding population. Breeding ringed plover are therefore covered by the NCA.

At the main breeding location at Heacham, the trail is taking a route alignment away from the coastal edge in order to avoid nesting ringed plover.

### **Hen harrier and marsh harrier**

Breeding hen and marsh harrier are known along the length of this stretch. Because of the separation between the trail and the habitats used by these birds the risk of disturbance from the England Coast Path is judged as minimal, particularly considering the existing popularity of the beaches and public paths along this stretch and restriction on the Coastal Access rights that are applied.

### Conclusion

We, Natural England, are satisfied that our proposals to improve access to the English coast between Hunstanton and Sutton Bridge are fully compatible with our duty to further the conservation and enhancement of the notified features of The Wash SSSI and Hunstanton Cliffs SSSI, consistent with the proper exercise of our functions<sup>1</sup>.

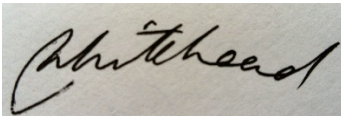
In respect of “Other sites of local interest” and “Undesignated Species” we are satisfied that in developing the new access proposals the appropriate balance has been struck between Natural England’s conservation and access objectives, duties and purposes.

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

The conclusions of this assessment have been checked by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sally Fishwick".

Sally Fishwick on behalf of the Coastal Access Programme Team, 1 November 2020

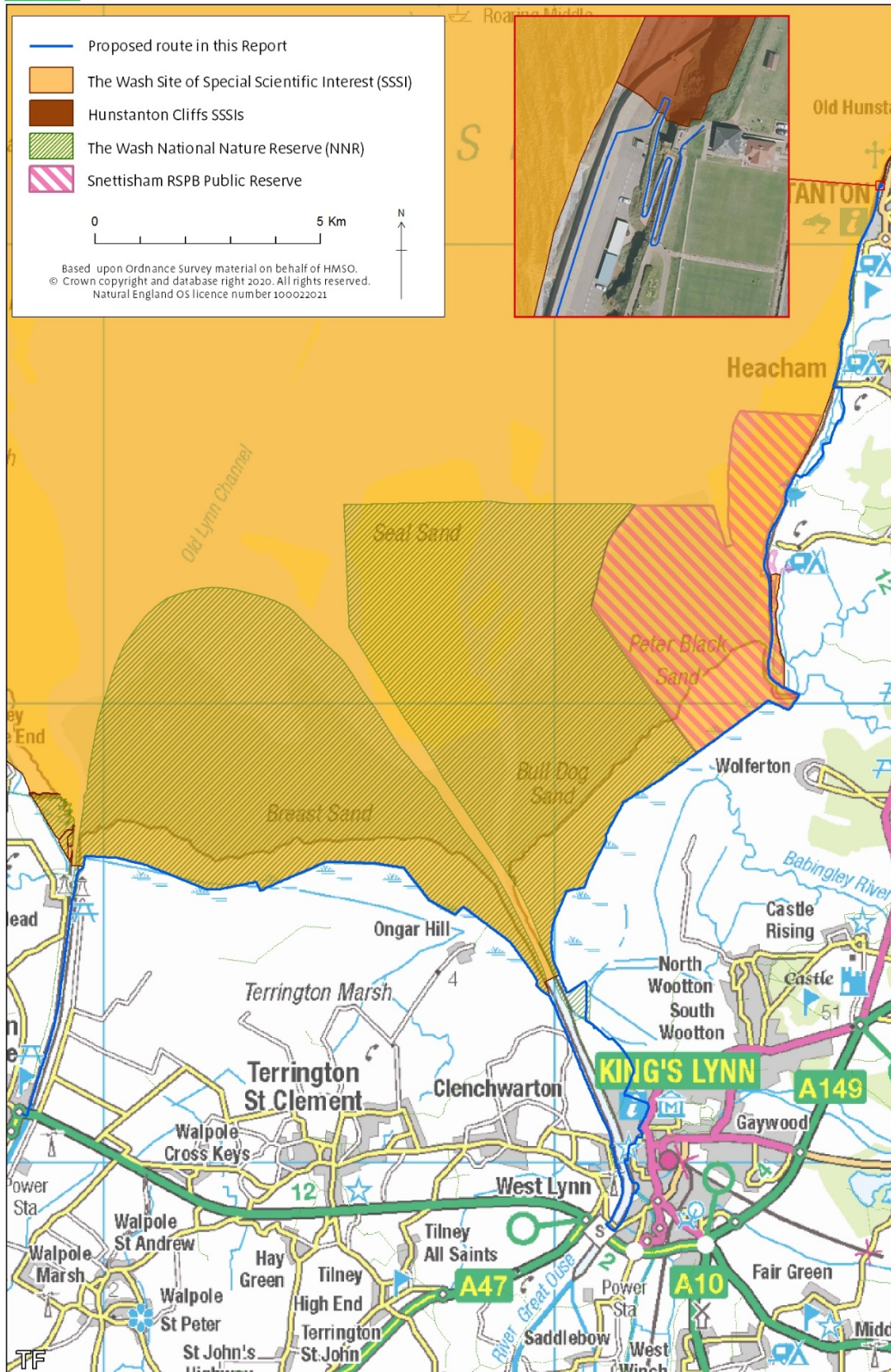
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kate Whitehead".

Kate Whitehead, Senior Officer with responsibility for protected sites, 2 November 2020

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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.

Map A - Notified Sites



Map A - Notified Sites

## Annex 1. Index to designated sites and features

Features – of the designated sites listed	The Wash SSSI	The Wash SPA	The Wash Ramsar	The Greater Wash SPA	The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC
Aggregations of breeding birds - common tern	X	X		X	
Aggregations of breeding birds - little tern	X	X		X	
Aggregations of breeding birds - redshank	X		X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - bar-tailed godwit	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - Bewick's swan	X	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - dark-bellied brent goose	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - curlew	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - dunlin	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - grey plover	X	X	X		

Features – of the designated sites listed	The Wash SSSI	The Wash SPA	The Wash Ramsar	The Greater Wash SPA	The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - knot	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - oystercatcher	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - pink-footed goose	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - pintail	X	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - redshank	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - sanderling	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - shelduck	X	X	X		
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - turnstone	X	X			
Aggregations of non-breeding birds - whooper swan	X				
Black-tailed godwit – non-breeding		X			
Common scoter – non-breeding		X		X	
Gadwall – non-breeding		X			

<b>Features</b> – of the designated sites listed	The Wash SSSI	The Wash SPA	The Wash Ramsar	The Greater Wash SPA	The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC
Goldeneye – non-breeding		X			
Wigeon – non-breeding		X			
Little gull – non-breeding				X	
Red-throated diver – non-breeding				X	
Sandwich tern – breeding				X	
Black-headed gull – non-breeding			X		
Common Eider – non-breeding			X		
Common seal, <i>Phoca vitulina</i>	X				X
Otter, <i>Lutra lutra</i>					X
<u>Broad habitats of the designated site</u>					
Saltmarsh habitats	X		X		X
Intertidal habitats	X		X		X
Reefs	X				X
Saline coastal lagoons	X				X

Features – of the designated sites listed	The Wash SSSI	The Wash SPA	The Wash Ramsar	The Greater Wash SPA	The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC
<p><u>Specific habitats of the designated site</u></p> <p>The communities below are the detailed interests in the broad habitats above.</p>					
MC5 - <i>Armeria maritima</i> - <i>Cerastium diffusum</i> ssp. <i>diffusum</i> maritime therophyte community	X				
MC6 - <i>Atriplex prostrata</i> - <i>Beta vulgaris</i> ssp. <i>maritima</i> sea-bird cliff community	X				
Moderately exposed sandy shores (with polychaetes and bivalves)	X				
S4 - <i>Phragmites australis</i> swamp and reed-beds	X				
SD1 - <i>Rumex crispus</i> - <i>Glaucium flavum</i> shingle community	X				
SD2 - <i>Cakile maritima</i> - <i>Honkenya peploides</i> strandline community	X				
SD3 - <i>Matricaria maritima</i> - <i>Galium aparine</i> strandline community	X				

Features – of the designated sites listed	The Wash SSSI	The Wash SPA	The Wash Ramsar	The Greater Wash SPA	The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC
Sheltered muddy shores (including estuarine muds)	X		X		
SM10 - Transitional low marsh vegetation with <i>Puccinellia maritima</i> , annual <i>Salicornia</i> species and <i>Suaeda maritima</i>	X				
SM11 - <i>Aster tripolium</i> var. <i>discoides</i> - saltmarsh	X				
SM12 - Rayed <i>Aster tripolium</i> on saltmarsh	X				
SM13f - <i>Puccinellia maritima</i> - <i>Spartina maritima</i> sub-community	X				
SM14 - <i>Atriplex portulacoides</i> saltmarsh	X				
SM15 - <i>Juncus maritimus</i> - <i>Triglochin maritima</i> saltmarsh	X				
SM16f - <i>Festuca rubra</i> saltmarsh <i>Carex flacca</i> sub-community	X				
SM17 - <i>Artemisia maritima</i> saltmarsh	X				
SM21 - <i>Suaeda vera</i> - <i>Limonium binervosum</i> saltmarsh	X				
SM25 - <i>Suaeda vera</i> drift-line	X				



Features – of the designated sites listed	The Wash SSSI	The Wash SPA	The Wash Ramsar	The Greater Wash SPA	The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC
SM27 - Ephemeral saltmarsh vegetation with <i>Sagina maritima</i>	X				
SM8 - Annual <i>Salicornia</i> saltmarsh	X				
SM9 - <i>Suaeda maritima</i> saltmarsh	X				
Sandbanks which are slightly covered by sea water all the time			X		X
Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide			X		X
Coastal lagoons					X
Large shallow inlets and bays			X		X
<i>Salicornia</i> and other annuals colonising mud and sand					X
Atlantic salt meadows ( <i>Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae</i> )					X
Mediterranean and thermo-Atlantic halophilous scrubs ( <i>Sarcocometea fruticosi</i> )					X

### Key to Annex 1

	Feature unique to SSSI notification and not within European designation
Community	SSSI notified community, considered under broader habitat aggregation.