

Proposed changes to the England Coast Path between

Sheepway Lane and Portbury Wharf

Natural England's Variation Report to the Secretary of State

Coastal Access Variation Report VR8
March 2021

Part 1: Purpose of this report

1.1 Natural England has a statutory duty under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 to improve access to the English coast. The duty is in two parts: one relating to securing a long-distance walking route around the coast; the other to creating an associated “margin” of land for the public to enjoy, either in conjunction with their access along the route line, or otherwise.

1.2 On 9 July 2020 the Secretary of State approved Natural England's proposals relating to Avonmouth Bridge to Portishead Marina which formed part of our [proposals for the Aust to Brean Down stretch](#). Whilst the proposals have been approved, Natural England and North Somerset Council are currently working to prepare the trail for public use and as such the coastal access rights for this stretch have yet to commence.

1.3 Since the approval of the report, it has become clear that a change is necessary to the route of the England Coast Path. This report contains Natural England's proposals relating to that change between Sheepway Lane and Portury Wharf, which is at the location shown on the VR8 Variation Location Map below.

1.4 In order for this proposed change to come into force it must be approved by the Secretary of State.

1.5 The original stretch [Overview](#) provides vital context to the proposal set out in this Variation Report.

VR8 – Variation Location Map

1 Between Sheepway Lane and Portbury Wharf

Location of proposals

1

Approved route



0 1 2 Kms



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Part 2: Proposed variation between Sheepway Lane and Portbury Wharf

Start Point: Sheepway Lane (north)	Grid reference: ST 49147 76857
End Point: towards Portbury Wharf	Grid reference: ST 48965 76901
Relevant Original Proposal Map:	ABD 4d

2.1 Introduction

Reason for variation:

2.1.1 In our proposal, we identified the potential for the route between Sheepway and Portbury Wharf to be affected temporarily by works necessary to construct a new high voltage electricity connection between Hinckley C power station and Seabank Power Station ('the connection project'). The timescale for the work was not decided at the time of publication but has since been confirmed as due to be completed during 2025. The land owner, Bristol Port Company, have now identified a diversion route around the works which Natural England and North Somerset Council have agreed to.

2.1.2 The diversion could be a temporary route until the works are complete (until 2025) or, as we would prefer, become the permanent route for the ECP under this variation proposal. Having discussed the route with the Port Company, North Somerset County Council and National Grid (which leads the connection project), there is consensus that varying the approved route this way would make best sense for the reasons set out in the Proposals Narrative section.

Proposed variation:

2.2.3 The approved trail on route section ABD-4-S019 is on the landward edge of a grass field, with attractive countryside views. The proposed variation would remove route section ABD-4-S019 and move the route towards the seaward side of the field. The varied route would continue to follow the public footpath from route section ABD-4-S018, then follow what is currently a permissive section of path between the field fence and the security fence by the port's area of operation, before joining a new section of path across the grass field to route section ABD-4-S020. See VR8 Variation Location Map below.

2.1.4 As a consequence of the proposed change, a wildlife rich meadow will be removed from the coastal margin because it now falls landward of the proposed route.

Considering the options:

2.1.5 We worked closely with the landowner and the access authority to develop our proposal for the variation, and we have shared our draft proposal with North Somerset LAF and Portbury Parish Council. Because this is a small-scale variation that does not propose to alter the route in a significant way, or detract from the user experience, we chose not to undertake extensive pre-publication consultation with other national or local organisations. Part 4 of the Overview explains the process that we follow in more detail.

2.1.6 We considered aligning the trail along an existing informal path that is located landward of the proposed trail and passes through the centre of the field. This alignment would pass through an area identified as mitigation for great crested newts as part of the connection project. It was not supported as a permanent route proposal by either the environmental contractors for the project or the port company.

2.2 Proposals Narrative

The Trail:

2.2.7 The proposed variation to the approved trail:

- Provides a more direct route than the approved route, with comparable views of the surrounding landscape.
- Is aligned on bare soil or mown grass along its length.
- Avoids a sensitive area for great crested newts, recently identified as mitigation for the connection project.
- Will reduce the overall cost as fencing, access furniture and notices will only be required along one route, rather than on both a temporary route and an approved route
- Will commence alongside the rest of this stretch (2022/2023), whereas the current approved route would not open until the high voltage electricity connection works are completed in 2025.

Protection of the environment:

2.2.8 In this part of the report, we explain how we have taken account of environmental protection objectives in developing our proposals to vary the line of the trail.

2.2.9 The section of trail affected by this variation passes through an area of grazed grassland. There are no national or international nature conservation or heritage designations present in this area.

2.2.10 The land is managed for wildlife, including water voles and great crested newts:

- Great crested newts and their breeding sites or resting places are protected under Regulation 41 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 and Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.
- Water voles are fully protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and are a priority conservation species.

2.2.11 There is a risk that the promotion of a new route could increase disturbance from people and dogs to water voles and great crested newts. We have therefore agreed with the land owner to install stock proof fences either side of the new section of path across the field to prevent people and dogs from straying from the route.

2.2.12 Natural England is satisfied that the proposals for coastal access in this variation report are made in accordance with relevant environmental protection legislation

Accessibility:

2.2.13 The proposed trail consists of a path on bare soil or uneven mown grass that may become waterlogged in wet weather. Like the original approved route, the varied one is likely to be unsuitable for some people with reduced mobility because of the nature of the terrain.

Where we have proposed exercising statutory discretions:

2.2.14 **Landward boundary of the coastal margin:** We have used our discretion on some sections of the varied route to map the landward extent of the coastal margin to an adjacent physical boundary such as a fence line or track to make the extent of the new access rights clearer. See Table 2.3.1 below.

2.2.15 The Proposals Tables show where we are proposing to alter the default landward boundary of the coastal margin. These proposals are set out in columns 5b and 5c of Table 2.3.1.

See part 3 of the Overview to the original report - ‘Understanding the proposals and accompanying maps’, for an explanation of the default extent of the coastal margin and how we may use our discretion to adjust the margin, either to add land or to provide clarity.

2.2.16 Restrictions and/or exclusions: Access rights to the seaward margin would be subject to the excepted land rules and the national restrictions on coastal access rights. We do not propose any additional local restrictions or exclusions.

2.2.17 Coastal erosion: Natural England is able to propose that the route of the trail would be able to change in the future, without further approval from the Secretary of State, in response to coastal change. This would happen in accordance with the criteria and procedures for ‘roll-back’ set out in part 7 of the Overview.

Natural England may only propose the use of this roll-back power:

- as a result of coastal erosion or other geomorphological processes or encroachment by the sea, or
- in order to link with other parts of the route that need to roll back in direct response to such changes.

2.2.18 Column 4 of Table 2.3.1 and Table 2.3.2 indicate where roll-back has been proposed in relation to a newly proposed route section. Where this is the case, the route, as initially determined at the time this report was prepared, is to be at the centre of the line shown on Map VR8 - Route between Sheepway Lane and Portbury Wharf as the proposed route of the trail.

2.2.19 If at any time in the future any part of a route section upon which roll-back has been specified needs, in Natural England’s view, to change in order for the overall route to remain viable, the new route for the part in question will be determined by Natural England without further reference to the Secretary of State. This will be done in accordance with the criteria and procedures described under the title ‘Roll-back’ in part 7 of the Overview and section 4.10 of the Coastal Access Scheme. If this happens, the new route will become the approved route for that section for the purposes of the Order which determines where coastal access rights apply.

Establishment of the trail:

2.2.20 Below we summarise how our proposed route for the repositioned part of the trail would be physically established to make it ready for public use before any new rights come into force along it.

2.2.21 Our estimate of the capital costs for these works is £3,500. This would have the effect of decreasing the overall establishment cost for Report ABD 4: Avonmouth Bridge to Portishead Marina by £1,500. These estimates are informed by information from the owners of the land, their environmental contractors and the access authority.

2.2.22 There are two main elements to the overall capital costs:

- Vegetation cut to create the route.
- Installation of fencing to discourage people and dogs from straying off the path.

2.2.23 If the Secretary of State approves our report, North Somerset Council will liaise with the affected land owners and occupiers about relevant aspects of the establishment works and installation of new signs that are needed on their land. Prior to works being carried out on the ground, all necessary permissions, authorisations and consents will be obtained. All such works would conform to the published standards for National Trails and the other criteria described in our Coastal Access Scheme.

Maintenance of the trail:

2.2.24 Ongoing maintenance of the varied section of trail would be necessary from time to time. This variation would make no significant change to the annual costs associated with maintaining the approved route as set out in our original report.

2.3 Proposals Tables

See Part 3 of Overview for guidance on reading and understanding the tables below

Table 2.3.1: Map VR8 - Route between Sheepway Lane and Portbury Wharf

Key notes on table:

1. Column 4 – ‘No’ means no roll-back is proposed for this route section. ‘Yes – normal’ means roll-back is proposed and is likely to follow the current feature (e.g. cliff edge/beach) for the foreseeable future as any coastal change occurs.
2. Column 4 – ‘Yes – see table 2.3.2’ means roll-back is proposed, but refer to that table below about our likely approach to implementing it for this route section. This is because a more complex situation exists in this case and consideration must be given to how roll-back may happen in relation to excepted land, a protected site etc.
3. Column 5a - Certain coastal land types are included automatically in the coastal margin where they fall landward of the trail if they touch it at some point. The relevant land type (foreshore, cliff, bank, barrier, dune, beach, flat or section 15 land – see Glossary in Annex B to the 2017 Overview) is shown in this column where appropriate. “No” means none present on this route section.
4. Columns 5b and 5c – Any entry in these columns means we are proposing to align the landward boundary of the coastal margin on this route section with the physical feature(s) shown in 5b, for the reason in 5c. No text here means that for this route section the landward edge of the margin would be that of the trail itself - or if any default coastal land type is shown in 5a, that would be its landward boundary instead.

1	2	3	4	5a	5b	5c	6
Map(s)	New route section number(s)	Current status of route section(s)	Roll-back proposed? (See part 8 of report Overview)	Landward margin contains coastal land type?	Proposal to specify landward boundary of margin	Reason for landward boundary proposal	Explanatory notes
VR8	ABD-VR8-S001	Public footpath	Yes – see table 2.3.2	No	Fence	Clarity and cohesion	
VR8	ABD-VR8-S002	Existing walked route	Yes – see table 2.3.2	No	Fence	Clarity and cohesion	
VR8	ABD-VR8-S003	Not an existing walked route	Yes – see table 2.3.2	No	Fence	Clarity and cohesion	

Map VR8 - Route between Sheepway Lane and Portbury Wharf

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