

Assessment of Coastal Access Proposals between Birkenhead and the Welsh border on sites and features of nature conservation concern Version 2.0 Revised & updated: May 2021

About this document

This document should be read in conjunction with the published Reports for the Birkenhead to the Welsh Border 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:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-coast-path-birkenhead-to-the-welsh-border-comment-on-proposals

An HRA is required for European sites (SPA, SAC and Ramsar sites). The HRA is published alongside the Coastal Access Reports.

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, with a map for each site showing the location of the site and the proposed ECP.

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.

Version 2.0 May 2021

Changes in this version:

Addendum inserted from page 41 giving an Assessment of coastal access proposals on Little Neston Reed Bed within Dee Estuary SAC, SPA, Ramsar site and SSSI.

Certification of changes

Revisions made by: Sarah Wiseman on behalf of the Coastal Access Programme Team

Date: May 2021

Revisions authorised by:  Senior Officer with responsibility for protected sites

Date: May 2021

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Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Mersey Narrows SSSI

Is this site also part of a European site? **Yes**

There may be interactions between the Coastal Access proposals and the designated features listed below. These features of the SSSI are also features of Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore SPA and / or Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore Ramsar site. An assessment of the impacts of our proposals on these features, and any mitigation required, is undertaken in the HRA published alongside our coastal access proposals.

- Aggregations of non-breeding birds: Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo* Wintering non - breeding birds
- Aggregations of non-breeding birds: Redshank, *Tringa tetanus* Wintering non -breeding birds
- Aggregations of non-breeding birds: Turnstone, *Arenaria interpres* Wintering non -breeding birds

There may be interaction between the Coastal Access proposals and the designated features listed below. These features of the SSSI are **NOT** features of any of the European sites, and the impact of the coastal access proposals are considered here.

- Lagoon - freshwater and saline
- Saltmarsh - Pioneer saltmarsh SM9 *Suaeda maritime* salt marsh community
- Sands and Mudflats

Risk analysis

Table 1: Risk analysis on features of Mersey Narrows SSSI

Feature	Location	Risk analysis
Lagoon - freshwater and saline	Seaforth Lagoon.	Seaforth Lagoon is on the eastern side of the River Mersey and outside the project area. Therefore the Lagoon feature is not affected by the proposals.
Saltmarsh	Along the western edge of Seaforth Lagoon.	Seaforth Lagoon is on the eastern side of the River Mersey and outside the project area. Therefore the saltmarsh feature is not affected by the proposals.
Sands and mudflats	In the coastal margin between Seacombe Ferry Terminal and Marine Lake (New Brighton).	<p>Access is not expected to increase in the coastal margin as a result of the proposals (see below). Therefore the risk of an impact on this feature from our proposals is negligible.</p> <p>Trail: In this area, the proposed England Coast Path (ECP) is aligned on existing pavements and promenades. The route is already popular with walkers, runners and cyclists. We do not anticipate any change in the levels and patterns of use on this part of the trail.</p> <p>Margin: The foreshore from Seacombe to New Brighton is relatively narrow. It is quite rocky but public access is currently available and there is evidence that people do like to walk along the foreshore when it is available.</p>

Feature	Location	Risk analysis
		Much of the proposed coastal margin on this section can already be directly accessed by the public via ramps and steps. We do not anticipate any obvious changes in the levels and patterns of use on this part of the margin.

Establishment works

Is SSSI assent needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works? **No**. The proposed ECP is landward of the SSSI and no works are planned within the site.

Map showing Mersey Narrows SSSI and proposed route of ECP



North Wirral Foreshore SSSI

Is this site also part of a European site? **Yes**

There may be interactions between the Coastal Access proposals and the designated features listed below. These features of the SSSI are also features of Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore SPA and / or Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore Ramsar site or Dee Estuary SAC. An assessment of the impacts of our proposals on these features, and any mitigation required, is undertaken in the HRA published alongside our coastal access proposals.

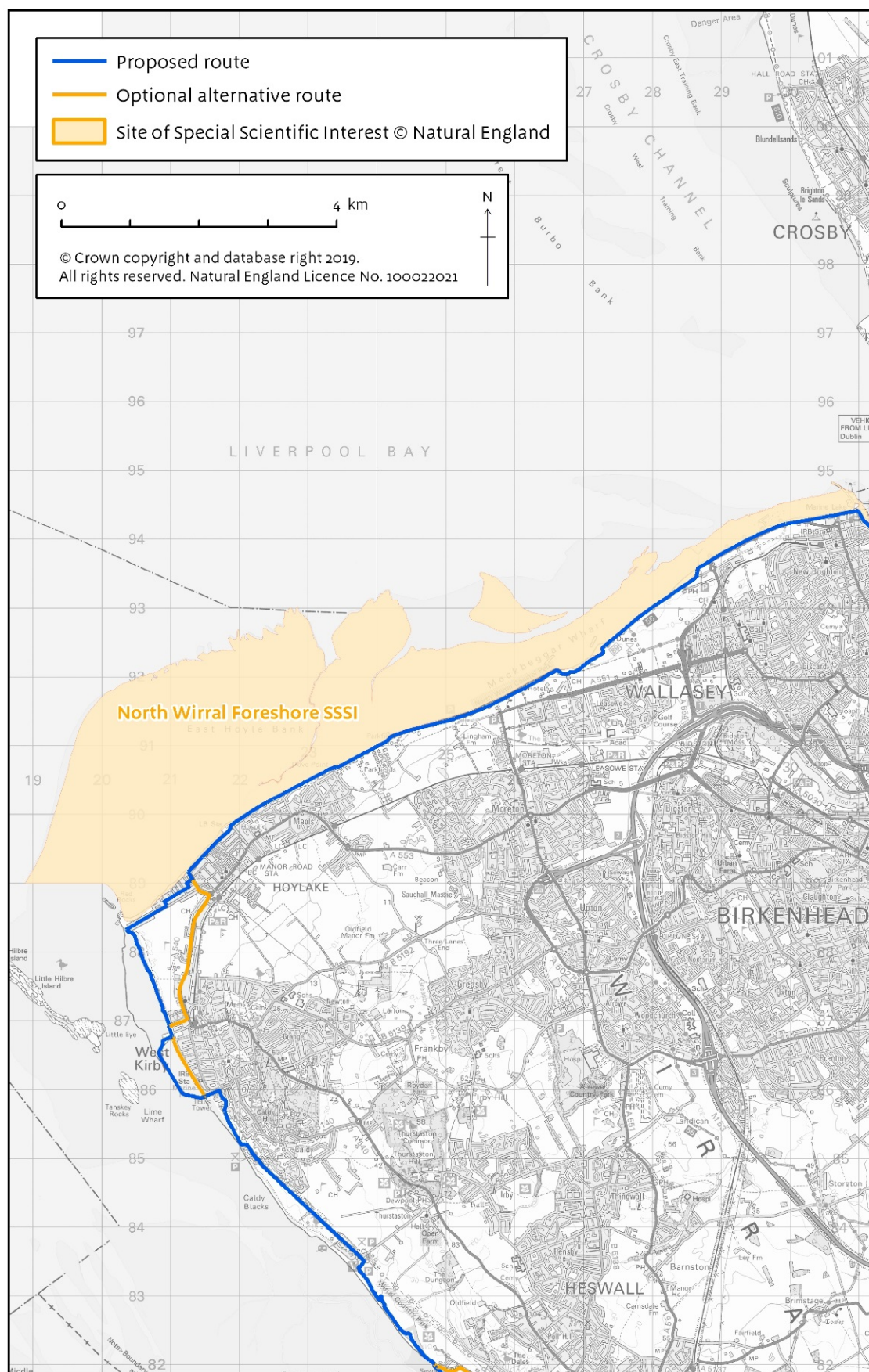
- Aggregation of non-breeding birds Bar-tailed Godwit, *Limosa lapponica*
- Aggregation of non-breeding birds Dunlin, *Calidris alpina alpina*
- Aggregation of non-breeding birds Knot, *Calidris canutus*
- Aggregation of non-breeding birds Turnstone, *Arenaria interpres*
- Saltmarsh (SM10 *Puccinellia maritima*, *Salicornia europaea*, SM6 *Spartina anglica*)
- Intertidal Sandflats and mudflats (Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide)

Establishment works

Is SSSI assent needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works? **Possibly.**

The path is adjacent to the SSSI and no works are planned within the site. Local authority to check with NE prior to establishment whether assent is required.

Map showing North Wirral Foreshore SSSI and proposed route of ECP



Red Rocks SSSI

Is this site also part of a European site? **Yes**

There may be interactions between the Coastal Access proposals and the designated features listed below. These features of the SSSI are also features of Dee Estuary Ramsar site. An assessment of the impacts of our proposals on these features, and any mitigation required, is undertaken in the HRA published alongside our coastal access proposals.

- Natterjack Toad *Bufo calamita*

There may be interaction between the Coastal Access proposals and the designated features listed below. These features of the SSSI are **NOT** features of the Ramsar site, and the impact of the coastal access proposals are considered here.

- Coastal sand dunes: Strandline embryonic shifting dune, mobile dune (yellow dunes).
 - SD5 *Leymus arenarius* Mobile Dune Community
 - SD6E *Ammophila arenaria* Mobile Dune Community
- Fixed dune grassland
 - SD7 *Ammophila arenaria*-*Festuca rubra* Semi-Fixed Dune Community
 - SD8 *Festuca rubra*-*Galium verum* Fixed Dune Grassland
 - SD9A *Ammophila arenaria*-*Arrhenatherum elatius* Dune Grassland
- Sand dune system (including wet slacks and reedbeds)
 - S4 *Phragmites australis* Swamp and Reedbeds

Current situation

The SSSI is owned by the Royal Liverpool Golf Course and managed by Cheshire Wildlife Trust. The dunes are popular with walkers (and some cyclists) who access the area from the end of Stanley Road or walk out from West Kirby along the foreshore. There are several informal paths through the dunes with the most popular route being located through the centre of the site. The site is in unfavourable condition due to the encroachment of reeds and invasive species. Management measures are in place to manage the vegetation.

Risk analysis

The proposed alignment of the ECP passes along the seaward edge of the SSSI on an existing path which is popular with walkers. We will install a new 3m long sleeper bridge to cross a wet area along the route; we also plan to install some information boards and carry out minor scrub clearance at the northern end, to widen the path. We do not anticipate any significant change in the levels of use on this part of the trail.

Most of the SSSI will fall in the landward coastal margin. There are already paths within the coastal margin, including a surfaced route (aggregate and boardwalk) that was installed many years ago by the local authority. Despite problems with the ongoing management of this route which runs along the boundary of the site with the golf course, it is still reasonably well used (although not in the same numbers as those using the path on which the ECP is proposed). We do not anticipate any significant change in the levels and patterns of use within the coastal margin.

Therefore there is a low risk that proposals will lead to an increase in trampling of the sand dune features.

Establishment works

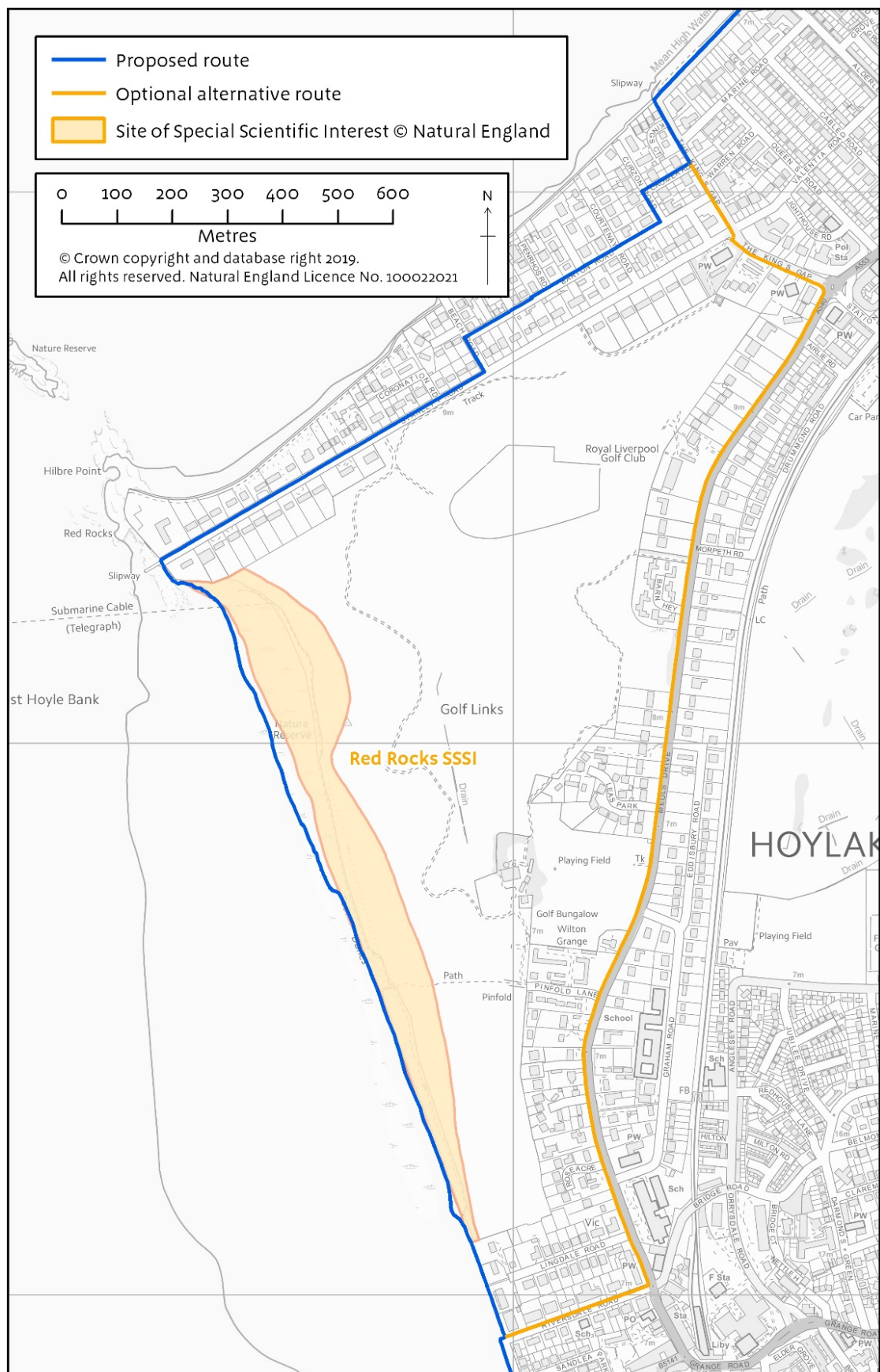
Is SSSI assent needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works? **Yes**

If yes, describe any special conditions that have been identified concerning how or when the works are to be carried out:

- Access routes, storage of materials and types of vehicles used must be agreed with NE, in order to minimise damage to the sand dune habitat.
- Reasonable avoidance measures will be used to avoid impacts to natterjack toad.
- Vehicles and machinery will be refuelled off-site.

Where necessary, Wirral Metropolitan Borough 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.

Map showing Red Rocks SSSI and proposed route of ECP



Dee Estuary SSSI

Is this site also part of a European site? **Yes**

There may be interactions between the Coastal Access proposals and the designated features listed below. These features of the SSSI are also features of Dee Estuary SPA / SAC / Ramsar site. An assessment of the impacts of our proposals on these features, and any mitigation required, is undertaken in the HRA published alongside our coastal access proposals.

- Estuaries
- Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide
- Atlantic salt meadows
 - Pioneer salt-marsh
 - SM6 *Spartina anglica* saltmarsh community
 - SM8 annual *Salicornia* saltmarsh community
 - SM9 *Suaeda maritima* saltmarsh community
 - SM11 *Aster tripolium* var. *discoideus* on salt-marsh community
 - SM12 Rayed Aster *Aster tripolium* on salt-marsh.
 - Low-mid marsh communities
 - SM10 Transitional low marsh vegetation with *Puccinellia maritima*, annual *Salicornia* species and *Suaeda maritima*
 - SM13 *Puccinellia maritima* salt-marsh community
 - SM14 *Halimione portulacoides* saltmarsh community.
 - Mid-upper marsh
 - SM15 *Juncus maritimus*-*Triglochin maritima* saltmarsh community
 - SM16 *Festuca rubra* saltmarsh community
 - SM18 *Juncus maritimus* saltmarsh community
 - SM19 *Blysmus rufus* saltmarsh community.
 - Drift-line
 - SM24 *Elymus pycnanthus* saltmarsh community
 - SM28 *Elymus repens* saltmarsh.
- Swamp vegetation and transitions to brackish and freshwater habitats
 - S4 *Phragmites australis* swamp and reed-beds, *Glyceria maxima* swamp
 - S21 *Scirpus maritimus* swamp
 - S28 *Phalaris arundinacea* tall-herb fen
- Annual vegetation of drift lines (Strandline vegetation SM 24)
- Strandline, embryo and mobile dunes
 - SD4 *Elymus farctus* ssp. *Boreali-atlanticus* foredune community
 - SD5 *Leymus arenarius* mobile dune community
 - SD6 *Ammophila arenaria* mobile dune community.
- Embryonic shifting dunes, Shifting dunes along the shoreline with *Ammophila arenaria* (white dunes).
- Fixed dune grasslands - Fixed dunes with herbaceous vegetation (grey dunes).
- Humid dune slacks - MC8 *Festuca rubra* – *Armeria maritima* maritime grassland
- Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coast (Maritime cliff and slope MC1, MC8, MC9 and MC10)
- Common tern (breeding)
- Bar-tailed godwit *Limosa lapponica* (wintering)
- Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* (wintering)
- Teal *Anas crecca* (wintering)
- Pintail *Anas acuta* (wintering)

- Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* (wintering)
- Grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola* (wintering)
- Knot *Calidris canutus* (wintering)
- Dunlin *Calidris alpina alpina* (wintering)
- Black-tailed godwit *Larus ridibundus* (wintering)
- Curlew *Numenius arquata* (wintering)
- Redshank *Tringa totanus* (wintering)
- Ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (wintering) (part of the SPA waterbird assemblage)
- Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* (wintering)(part of the SPA waterbird assemblage)
- Wigeon *Anas penelope* (wintering) (part of the SPA waterbird assemblage)

There may be interaction between the Coastal Access proposals and the designated features listed below. These features of the SSSI are **NOT** features of any of the European sites, and the impact of the coastal access proposals are considered here.

- Coastal grazing marsh (MG10, MG11, MG12 and MG 13)
- Vascular plant assemblage: Slender hare's ear (*Bupleurum tenuissimum*), Rock sea lavender (*Limonium britannicum*), Variegated horsetail (*Equisetum variegatum*), Portland spurge (*Euphorbia portlandica*), Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*), White mullein (*Verbascum lychnitis*)
- Sandhill rustic moth *Luperina nickerlii*
- Great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus* (wintering)

Risk analysis

Table 2: Risk analysis on features of Dee Estuary SSSI

Feature	Location	Risk analysis
Coastal Grazing Marsh	In the Welsh side of the SSSI.	The coastal grazing marsh is found in coastal fields along the Welsh shore and is therefore outside the project area and unaffected by the proposals.
Vascular Plant Assemblage	The species within the assemblage have very different habitat requirements, and are found in a variety of habitats through the SSSI, including sand dunes, cliffs, steep rocky slopes, shingle and disturbed sites.	<p>There is a very low risk of impact from our proposals on the vascular plant assemblage.</p> <p>Slender hare's ear (<i>Bupleurum tenuissimum</i>) is a colonist of thinly vegetated or disturbed coastal sites, including coastal banks, sea walls, drained estuarine marshes and the margins of brackish ditches.</p> <p>White mullein (<i>Verbascum lychnitis</i>) is primarily a plant of waste places and disturbed ground. [REF. 1] As these plants colonise disturbed sites, they are unlikely to be adversely affected by increases in access. However, we do not predict an increase in access within the habitats where these plants occur.</p> <p>Rock sea lavender (<i>Limonium britannicum</i>) Rock sea lavender occurs on Hilbre Island Local Nature Reserve. It is sensitive to trampling. We do not expect levels and patterns of access on Hilbre Island to change as a result of the proposals. See assessment of impact of our proposals on Hilbre Island LNR within this document for more details.</p>

Feature	Location	Risk analysis
		<p>Variegated horsetail (<i>Equisetum variegatum</i>). This species is found in the sand dunes at Red Rocks. We do not expect levels and patterns of access at Red Rocks to change as a result of the proposals. For more details, see the HRA, which discusses the impacts of our proposals on the sand dune habitat.</p> <p>Portland spurge (<i>Euphorbia portlandica</i>) occurs on cliff, rocky slopes, steep maritime grasslands, shingle and sand dunes. Horehound (<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>) occurs in open, exposed cliff top grasslands and slopes. We do not expect access to increase as a result of our proposals in the habitats where these species occur. For more details, see the HRA, which discusses the impacts of our proposals on the SAC habitats used by these species.</p>
Sandhill rustic moth <i>Luperina nickerlii</i>	Red Rocks. Embryo dune with sand couch grass <i>Elytrigia juncea</i> is their preferred habitat.	<p>Low risk</p> <p>Embryo dunes are sensitive to damage by trampling. The proposed ECP passed through the dunes at Red Rocks SSSI on an existing path which is popular with walkers. The saltmarsh and dune systems are expanding seawards, so the embryo dunes are now within Dee Estuary SSSI. The ECP is not aligned through embryo dunes, but they do fall within the coastal margin. This area, which is managed by Cheshire Wildlife Trust, is already popular with walkers. We do not anticipate any significant change in the levels and patterns of use on this part of the trail as a result of our proposals. Therefore there is a low risk of our proposals adversely impacting this species.</p>
Great crested grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i> (wintering)	This species spends most of its time on the water.	<p>According to WeBS data, the numbers of great crested grebe recorded on the Dee Estuary has increased over the last 20 years.</p> <p>As this species spends most of its time on the water, it is unlikely to be impacted by the proposals.</p>

Establishment works

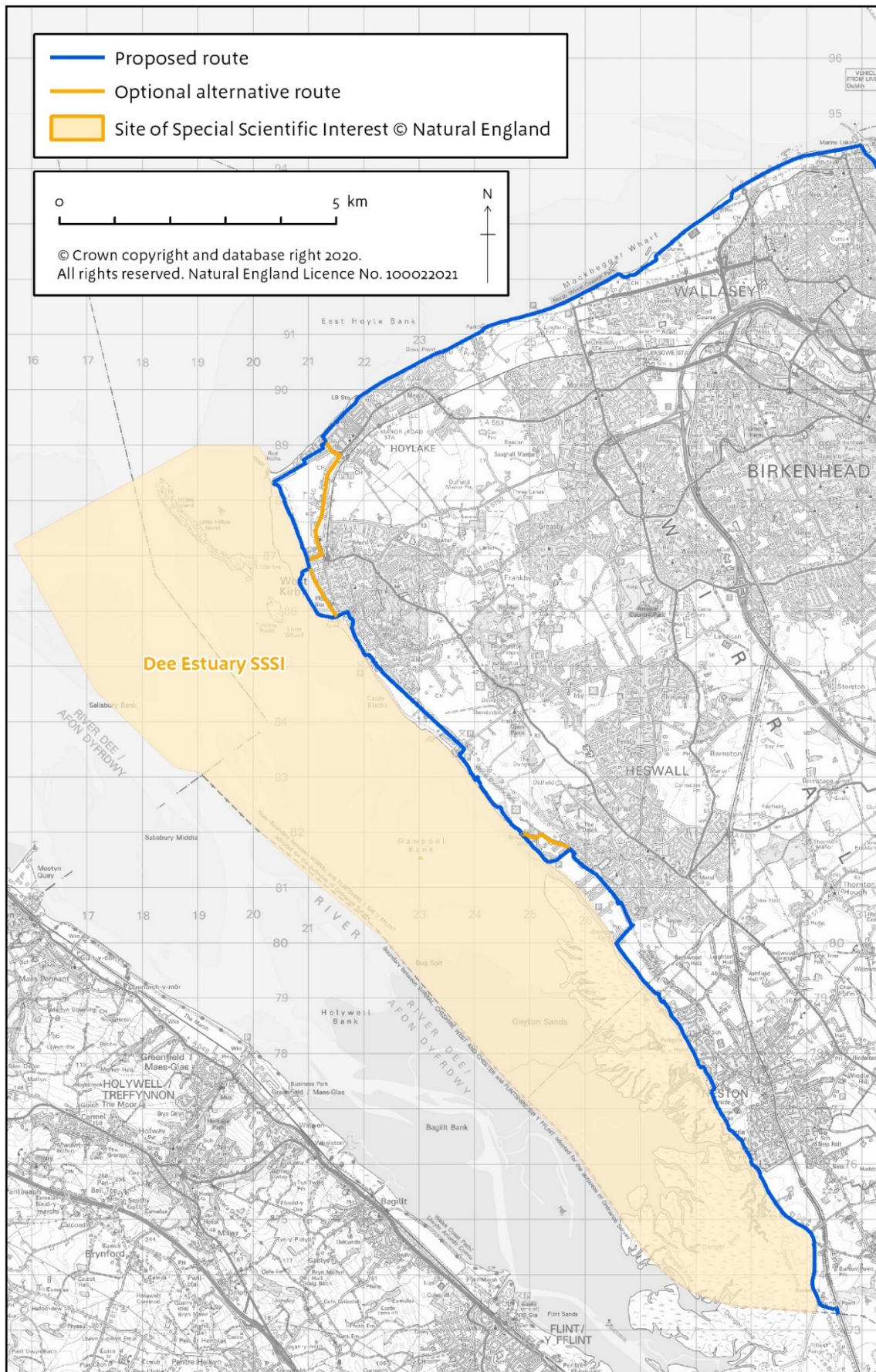
Is SSSI assent needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works? **Yes**

If yes, describe any special conditions that have been identified concerning how or when the works are to be carried out:

- Works in areas where birds breed should take place outside of the breeding season.
- Works close to areas where birds roost should not take place for 2 hours either side of high tide.
- For works on saltmarshes, access routes, storage of materials and types of vehicles used must be agreed with NE, in order to reduce the damage to the habitat.
- Reasonable avoidance measures will be used to avoid impacts to natterjack toad.
- Vehicles and machinery will be refuelled off-site

Where necessary, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and Cheshire West & Chester 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.

Map showing the English part of the Dee Estuary SSSI and proposed route of the ECP



Dee Cliffs SSSI

Is this site also part of a European site? **No**

SSSI features:

- Maritime cliff grassland. A mixture of various grassland types including : MC12 *Festuca rubra-Hyacinthoides non scripta maritime* and MG5 *Cynosurus cristatus-Centaurea nigra* grassland
- Marl Pits
- Quaternary of the Pennines and Adjacent Areas - Exposed coastal cliffs

Current situation

The Dee Cliffs SSSI support the best known example of a clay cliff and bank habitat in Merseyside. The cliffs support a diverse open grassland dominated by red fescue with a rich herb flora including a wide range of lime-loving plants some of which are at the northern limit of their British distribution. In addition to the cliff habitat there is an area of herb-rich neutral grassland containing a number of marl pits. The marl pits support a variety of communities including aquatic vegetation, emergent vegetation, marshy grassland and willow carr.

Parts of the SSSI are within Wirral Country Park at Thurston. The Country Park is already a very popular destination, with large numbers of walkers. Some of the paths and walks within the country park are already aligned through the SSSI.

Risk analysis

The proposed ECP is aligned on existing popular paths through the SSSI. Most of the SSSI falls within the coastal margin.

Table 3: Risk analysis on features of Dee Cliffs SSSI

Feature	Location	Risk analysis
Marl Pits	Wirral Country Park	The marl pits are landward of the proposed ECP and therefore outside the project area. There will be no new access rights created in the area with marl pits. Therefore they are unaffected by the proposals.
Quaternary of the Pennines and Adjacent Areas - Exposed coastal cliffs	Between Caldy golf club and southern end of Heswall Fields	The geological features of the site will not be affected by coastal access as people will not be able to access them. The cliffs are too soft for rock climbing.
Maritime cliff grassland. A mixture of various grassland types including : MC12	The ECP is aligned through the SSSI for a total of 180m. There is a 100m section and a 50m	<p>The ECP is aligned through the SSSI on existing popular paths. These sections of path are all through maritime cliff grassland habitat.</p> <p>Wirral Country Park</p> <p>The proposed alignment of the ECP extends for approximately 150m through the SSSI through Wirral Country Park. We will</p>

Feature	Location	Risk analysis
<i>Festuca rubra</i> - <i>Hyacinthoides non scripta</i> <i>maritime</i> and MG5 <i>Cynosurus cristatus</i> - <i>Centaurea nigra</i> grassland	section on existing popular paths in Wirral Country Park and 30m section at the southern end of Heswall Fields.	<p>improve the surfacing of the path in certain locations, install a new 10m section of revetment to prevent further slumping/erosion of the existing route and erect new signage where appropriate. There will be a negligible increase in use of the paths within the Country Park. The route will take into account for the need to maintain natural cliff processes, if necessary, the ECP will rollback to avoid areas of eroded cliff.</p> <p>South end of Heswall Fields</p> <p>Approximately 30m of the proposed alignment of the ECP is within the SSSI on an existing path. We expect that access could well increase on this section as a result of the proposals. There is some erosion on a sloping section of the path, and an eroded area where people spread out to cross a stream. We will regrade and re-profile a 20m section of the path (this will involve only moving materials within the eroded area, and will not affect any of the existing grassland vegetation). We will also install a 6m long footbridge over the small stream.</p> <p>The infrastructure will create a better surface for walkers, and will reduce the risk of future erosion and loss of grassland habitat. The route will take into account for the need to maintain natural erosion processes, if necessary, the ECP will rollback to avoid areas of coastal erosion.</p> <p>Coastal margin</p> <p>The maritime cliff grassland will fall within both the landward and seaward coastal margin. There are existing paths through the grassland in the proposed landward coastal margin (which is included within Wirral Country Park). Access to the grassland in the seaward coastal margin is currently low because it is on steep slopes and difficult to get to (particularly adjacent to the caravan sites); the various warning signs that have been erected within the country park seem to be effective in deterring access.</p> <p>Because this section of the coast is already very popular with visitors (i.e. sailing club, car parks, country park, caravan parks, Wirral Way, café, other facilities) we do not expect that the levels and patterns of access in the coastal margin will change as a result of the proposals.</p> <p>In conclusion, the proposals will not cause an increase in trampling of the maritime cliff grassland, as the trail will follow existing paths through the SSSI, and access in the margin is not expected to increase.</p>

Establishment works

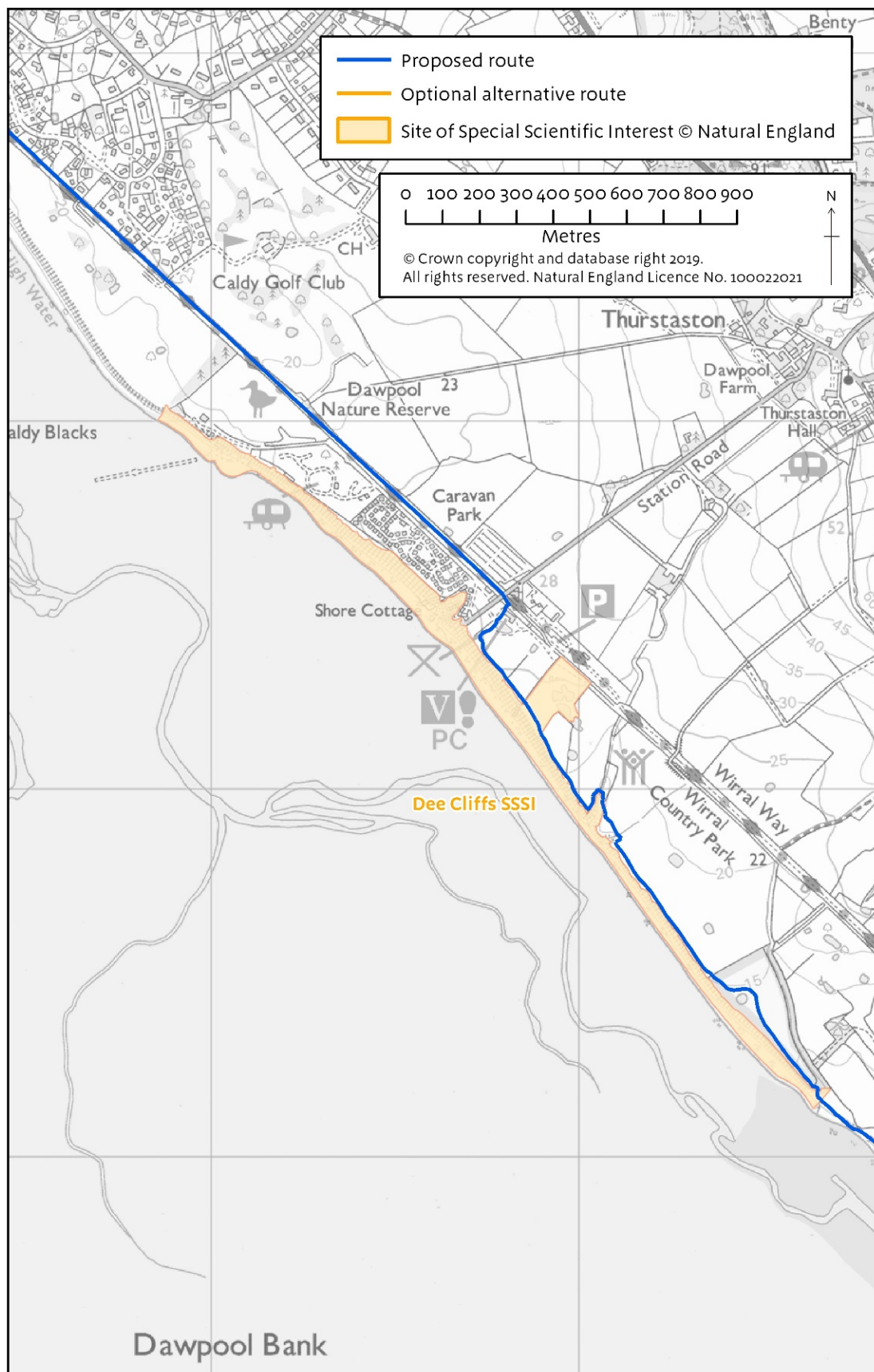
Is SSSI assent needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works? **Yes**

If yes, describe any special conditions that have been identified concerning how or when the works are to be carried out:

- Access routes, storage of materials and types of vehicles used must be agreed with NE, in order to reduce damage to the grassland habitat.
- Vehicles and machinery will be refuelled off site
- Ensure works do not impact natural processes of cliffs that help maintain geological feature access and grassland interest.

Where necessary, Wirral Metropolitan Borough 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.

Map showing Dee Cliffs SSSI and proposed route of ECP



Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Hilbre Islands Local Nature Reserve

Is this site or feature also part of a European site? **Yes**

Hilbre Islands LNR is within Dee Estuary SAC, SPA, Ramsar site and SSSI. The impacts of our proposals on the SAC and SPA features are considered within the associated HRA. The site is also important for species which are not considered within the HRA, such as grey seals.

Current situation

Hilbre Islands are owned by Wirral Council and managed by the Council and the Friends of Hilbre. It is possible to walk to Hilbre Islands across the sands from West Kirkby, when the tide permits, and it is a popular walk that many people follow on a daily basis.

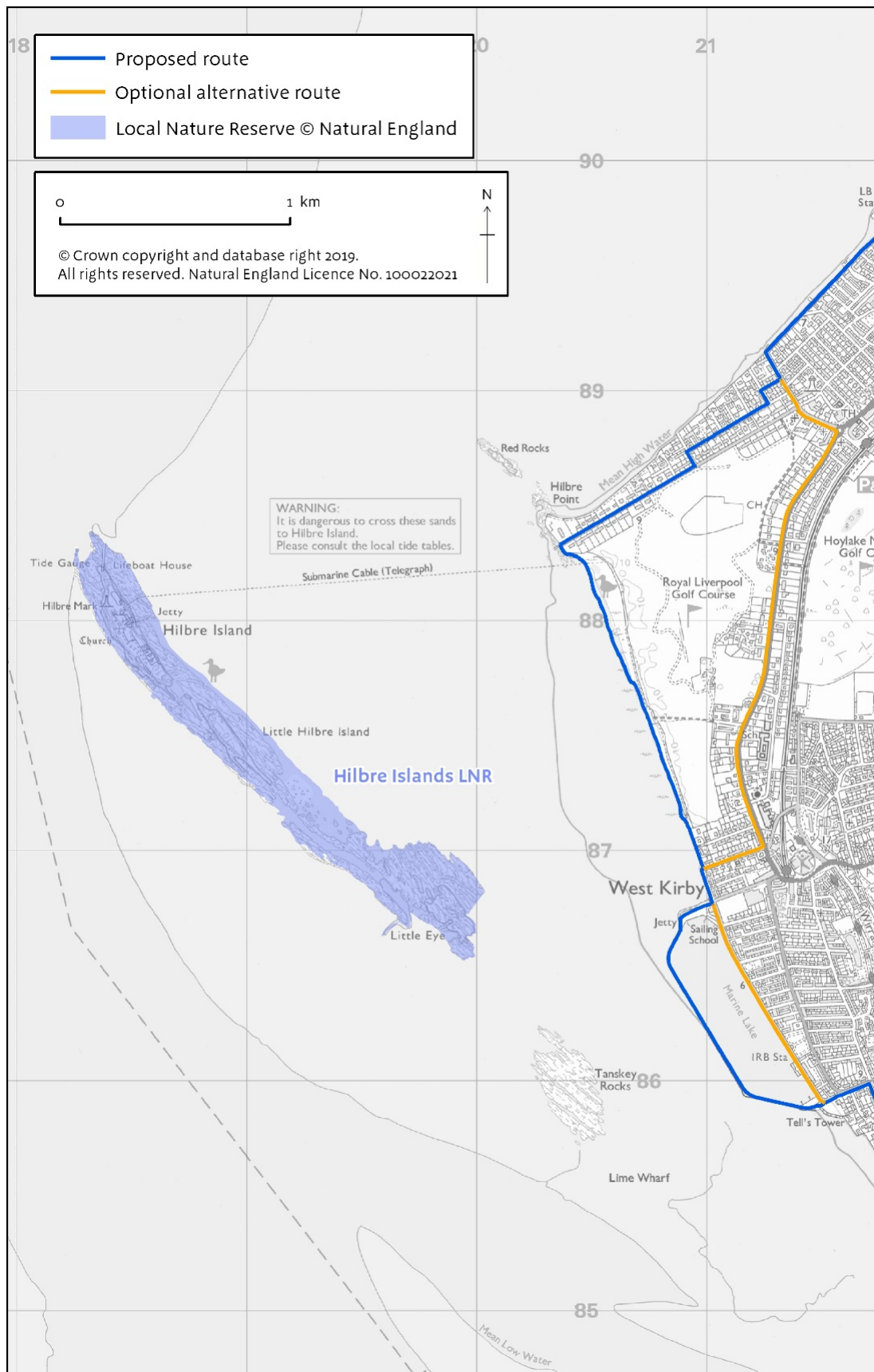
Access on Hilbre Islands is managed by a permit system. Individuals and groups of up to 5 people do not require a permit. Groups of between 6 and 50 people require a permit, and groups larger than 50 people are not allowed to visit the reserve. Bylaws to protect the sensitive wildlife govern what people can do on the island; this includes a requirement to have a permit, and dogs must be kept on a short lead at all times [REF. 2].

Risk analysis

The proposed route for the Coast Path does not cross the foreshore to Hilbre Islands. There is an established right by long-standing permission for the public to access the Islands and the creation of coastal access rights will not change this situation that is already widely advertised through signage, literature and digital media. Existing bylaws are unaffected by the access proposals and any buildings on the island will be excepted land. This means that the nature reserve can continue to be managed as it is currently.

There is a low risk that our proposals will have an impact on the features of the site or on the ability of the Council and Friends of Hilbre group to manage the island for nature conservation.

Map showing Hilbre Islands Local Nature Reserve and proposed route of ECP



Leasowe Common Site of Biological Importance

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

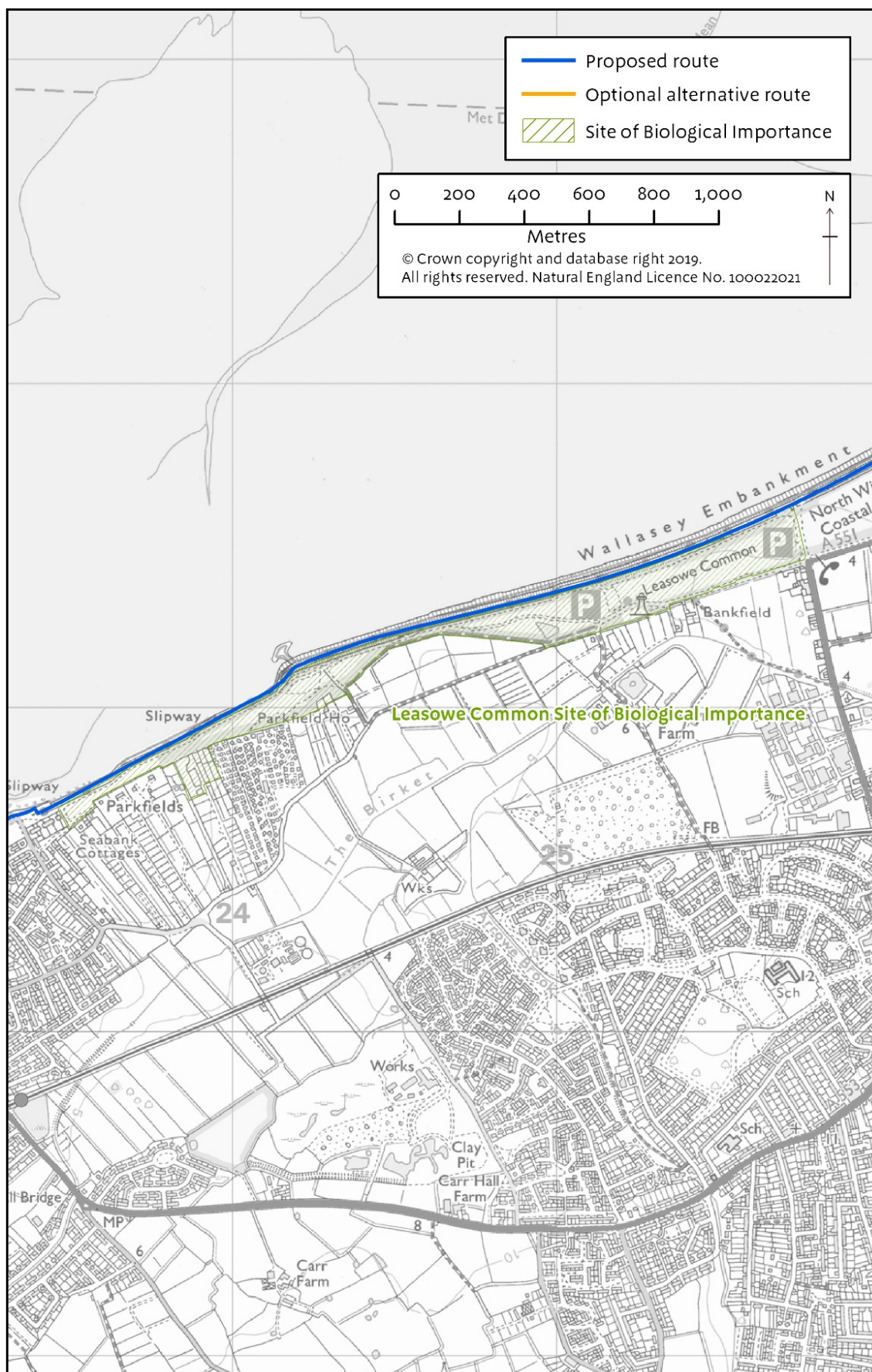
Current situation

Leasowe Common is on the North Wirral coast and forms part of the North Wirral Coastal Park. It is an area of sand dunes, grasslands and hay meadows [REF. 3]. It is registered common land and as such has CROW access rights. The coastal park is very popular with walkers, cyclists and horse riders. It is well promoted and publicised by Wirral MBC and has several car parks, coastal viewpoints and a network of paths and tracks running through the site.

Risk analysis

The proposed ECP is aligned on the promenade which runs just seaward of Leasowe Common. Because Leasowe Common is already open access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act and is immediately adjacent to the proposed ECP, it would become part of the landward coastal margin (and existing CROW access rights would be replaced by new coastal access rights). Because the area is already openly accessible and is very popular, we expect that there will be negligible change in levels and patterns of use as a result of our proposals.

Map showing Leasowe Common SBI and proposed route of ECP



Caldy Golf Course Site of Biological Importance

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

Current situation

This site is currently a golf course

Risk analysis

Part of the Site of Biological Importance (SBI) falls within the proposed coastal margin. As this site is a golf course, it is classed as 'excepted land' under the legislation; therefore there will be no new coastal access rights created in the SBI.

[illegible]

Wirral Way – Caldy to Heswall Site of Biological Importance

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

Current situation

This SBI is a disused railway line, along which the Wirral Way is aligned. The Wirral Way is a very popular walking, cycling and horse-riding route.

The Wirral Way extending from West Kirby to the boundary between Wirral and Cheshire West and Chester has been completely resurfaced, providing good access opportunities for all, including mobility scooters, wheelchairs, prams and buggies.

The Wirral Way provides a wildlife corridor extending along the west Wirral peninsula. Wildflower species attract invertebrates whilst the hedgerows provide food and shelter for small mammals and birds.

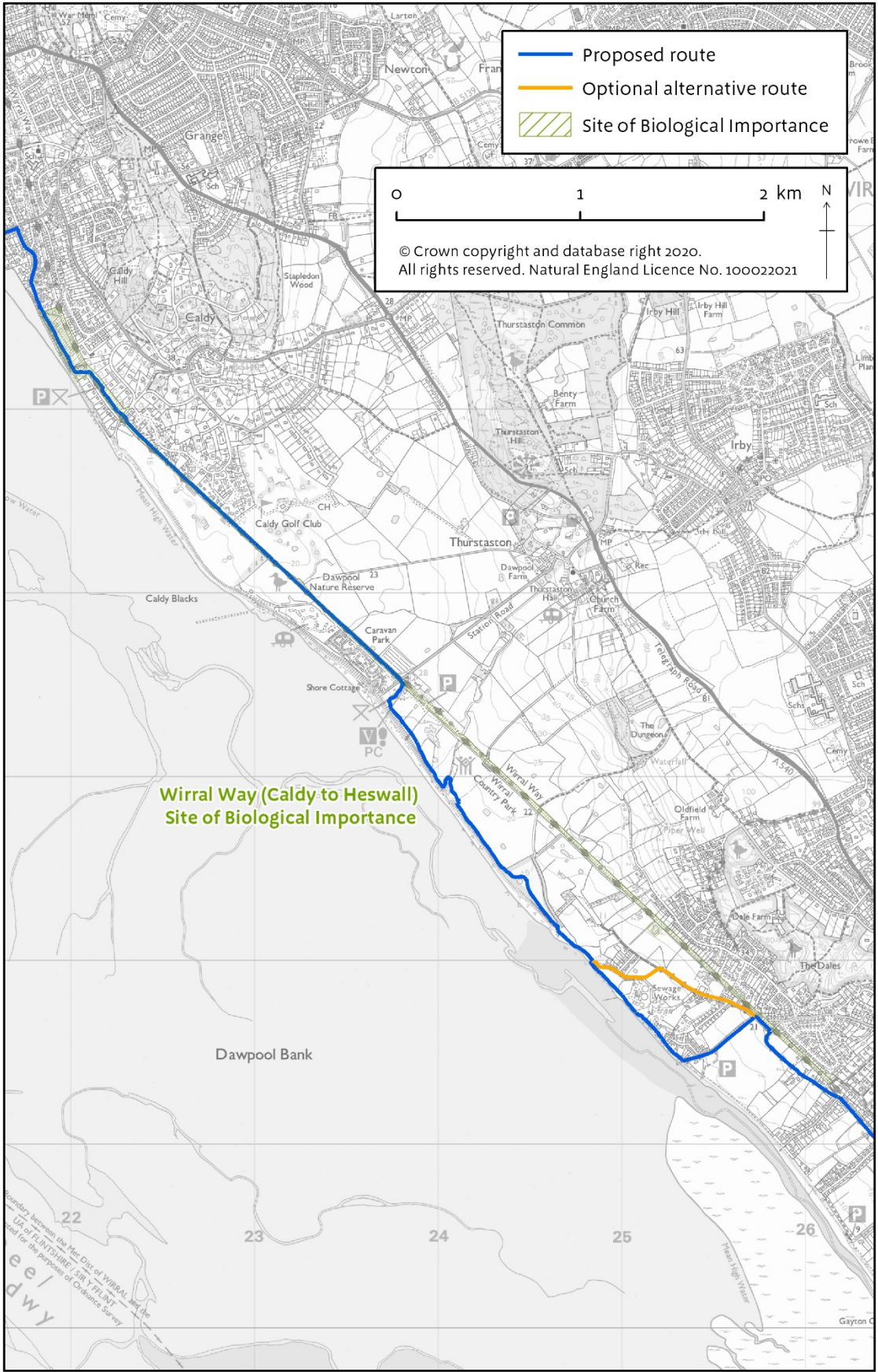
A Wirral Way 10 Year Tree Management Plan (2018 – 2028) has been drawn up to bring the park into a more favourable condition by restoring lost biodiversity, reducing invasive encroachment of woody species and reducing the amount of bankside erosion.

The Wirral Way Widening and Safety Improvements Scheme has also encouraged diversity through maintenance of a grass/wildflower edge along the surfaced pedestrian/cycle route [REF. 4.].

Risk analysis

The ECP is aligned on the Wirral Way between Cubbins Green and Wirral Country Park at Thurstaston. The high tide optional alternative route of the ECP is aligned on the Wirral Way between Broad Lane and Cottage Lane, Heswall. This route is already extremely popular with walkers, and there will be a negligible increase in access along the Wirral Way as a result of our proposals. Therefore our proposals will not impact on the features of the SBI.

Map showing Wirral Way – Caldy to Heswall SBI and proposed route of ECP



Dawpool nature reserve

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

Current situation

Dawpool nature reserve is part of Wirral Country Park. The Wirral Way passes landward of the site. The reserve is an old landfill site with rough grassland with scrub cover, a hedgerow boundary with the Wirral Way and a seasonal wetland area. The site can be accessed from the Wirral Way and along the private road that provides access to the caravan sites and to Dee Sailing Club, Thurstaston Slipway and a small surfaced car park. There are paths through certain parts of the site, which are managed as part of the country park [REF. 4].

Risk analysis

The proposed ECP will be aligned on the Wirral Way and the nature reserve will fall within the coastal margin. As Wirral Country Park (including Dawpool nature reserve) and the Wirral Way are already very popular with walkers, we do not expect levels and patterns of use to increase as a result of the proposals. Therefore the proposals will not impact upon the management or features of Dawpool nature reserve.

Wirral Way, Heswall to Borough Boundary Site of Biological Importance

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

Current situation

This SBI is a disused railway line, along which the Wirral Way is aligned. The Wirral Way is a very popular walking, cycling and horse-riding route.

The Wirral Way provides a wildlife corridor extending along the west Wirral peninsula. Wildflower species attract invertebrates whilst the hedgerows provide food and shelter for small mammals and birds.

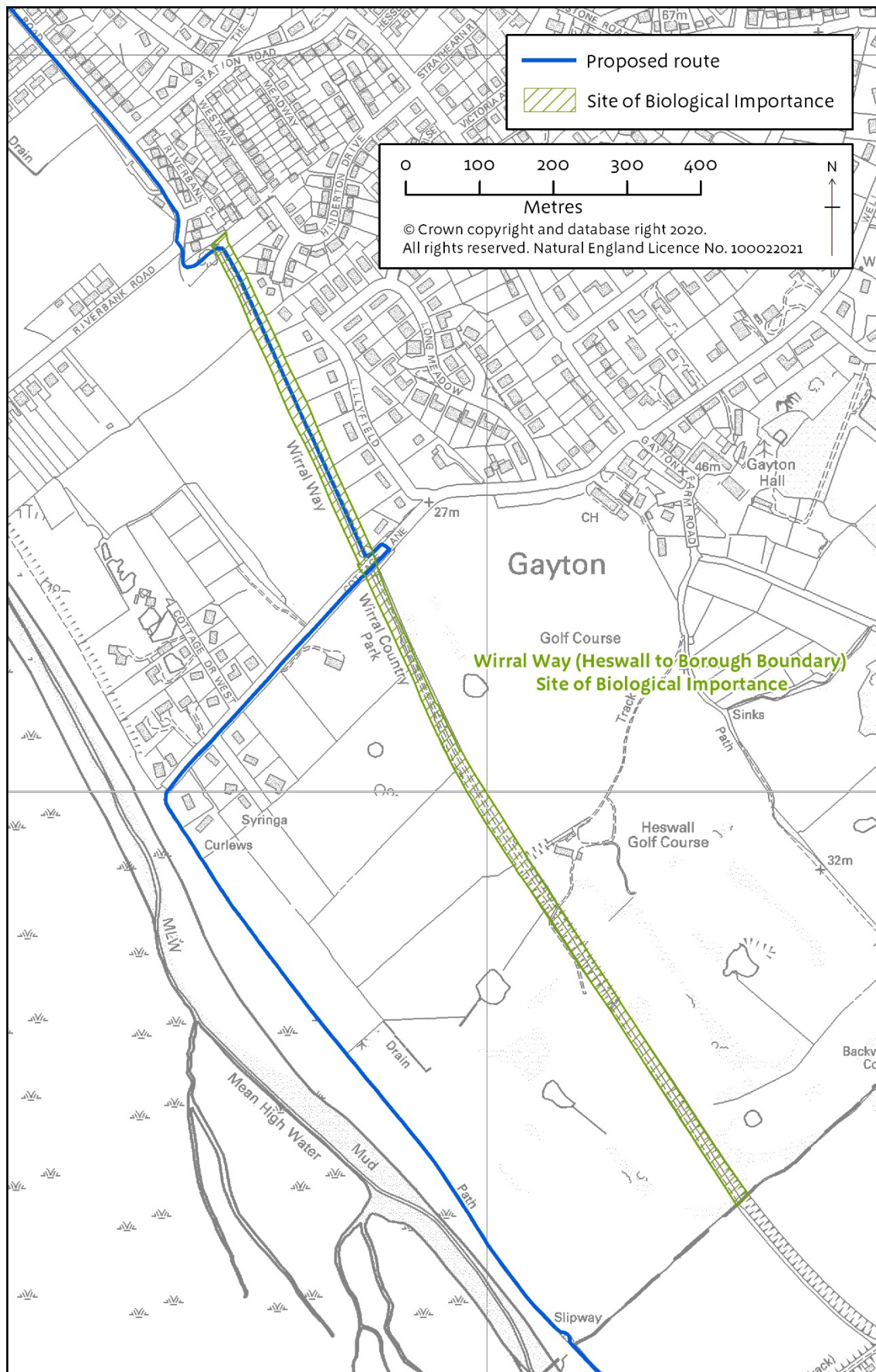
A Wirral Way 10 Year Tree Management Plan (2018 – 2028) has been drawn up to bring the park into a more favourable condition by restoring lost biodiversity, reducing invasive encroachment of woody species and reducing the amount of bankside erosion.

The Wirral Way Widening and Safety Improvements Scheme has also encouraged diversity through maintenance of a grass/wildflower edge along the surfaced pedestrian/cycle route [REF. 4].

Risk analysis

The ECP is aligned on the Wirral Way between Riverbank Road, and Cottage Lane, Heswall. This route is already extremely popular with walkers, and there will be a negligible increase in access along the Wirral Way as a result of our proposals. Therefore our proposals will not impact on the features of the SBI.

Map showing Wirral Way, Heswall to Borough Boundary SBI and proposed route of ECP



Heswall Fields Site of Biological Importance

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

Current situation

Heswall Fields are owned and managed by the National Trust.

The low-intensity management of the fields and the collection of marl pits, dense hedgerows and grassy field margins make this property important for many species, notably brown hare and grey partridge. Many thousands of wading birds use the Dee Estuary in the winter months and the fields afford safe roosting sites at high tide [REF. 5].

There are various unsurfaced paths through the site, and the whole area is currently managed as open access by the National Trust. Access to the site is currently publicised and promoted on the National Trust website [REF. 6].

Risk analysis

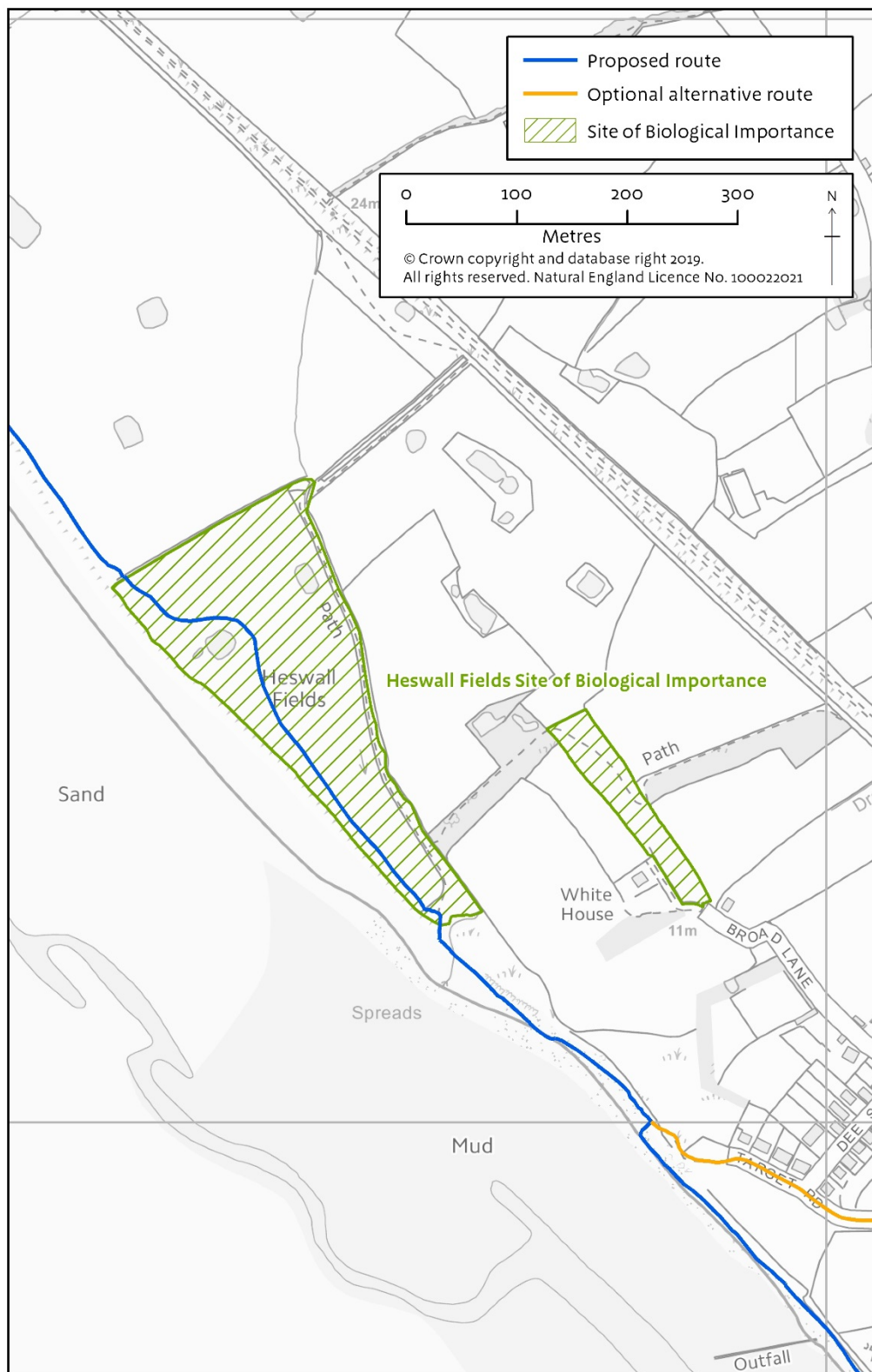
The proposed ECP is aligned on a popular path through the SBI. No infrastructure (other than way-marking) or path surfacing is required. The entire site will fall within the proposed coastal margin.

There may be an increase in use of the trail due to the new access being created to the north of this site which will connect Heswall Fields to the Wirral Country Park and which may open up the potential for different circular routes to be followed by using the Wirral Way and other existing paths.

We expect that there will be negligible change in the levels and patterns of use in the coastal margin. We would expect that the additional users of the ECP will be walkers using the path as part of a longer linear or circular route, rather than walking in the margin.

Although there may be an increase in people walking on the existing path once it becomes the ECP, this is unlikely to have an impact on the features of the site such as roosting birds, as the path is already popular with walkers. We expect that there will be negligible change in use of the coastal margin, which is already managed as open access. Therefore the proposals are unlikely to impact the features on the SBI.

Map showing Heswall Fields SBI and proposed route of ECP



Dee Rifle Ranges Local Wildlife Site

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

Current situation

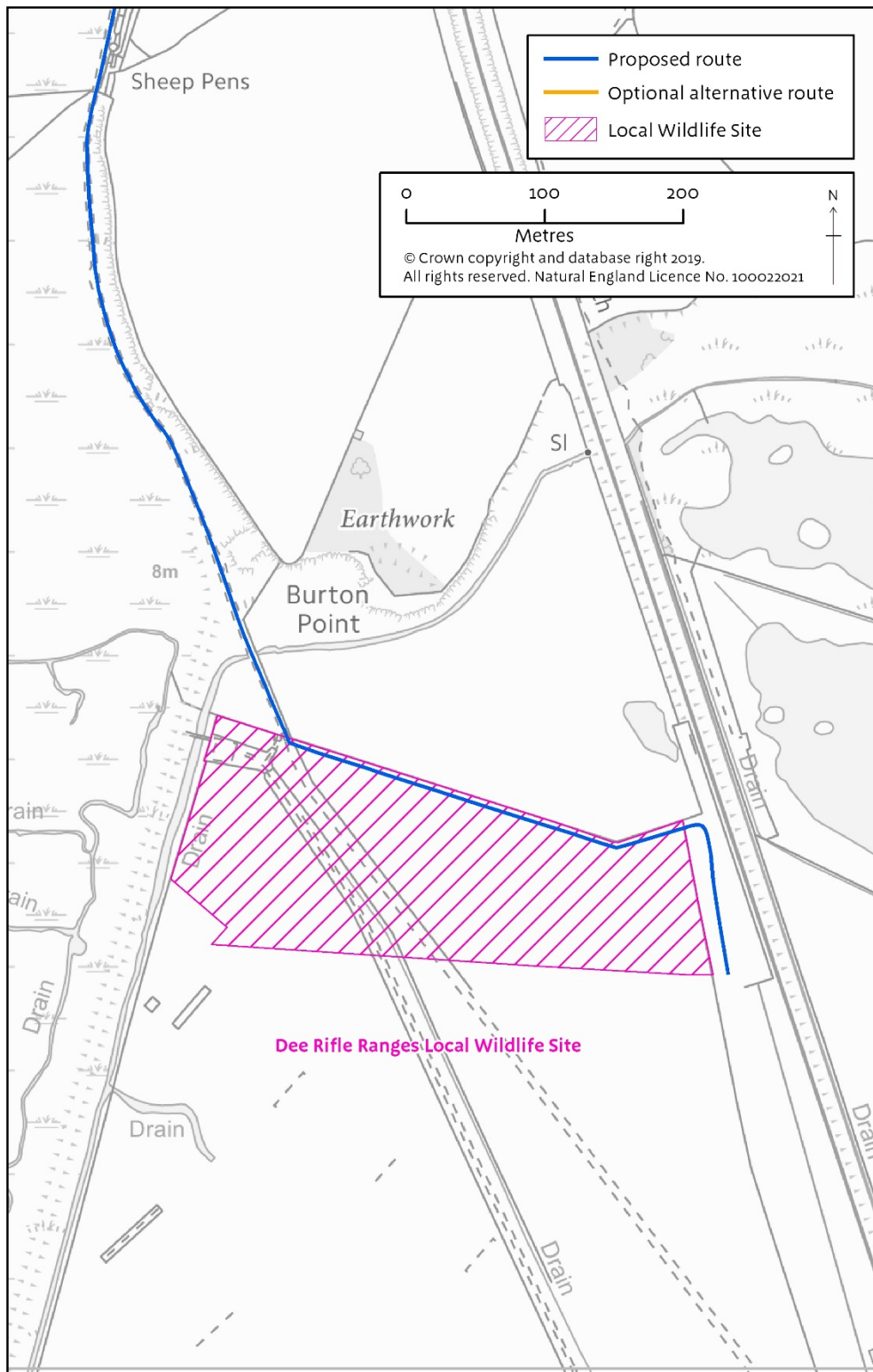
An existing popular surfaced walking and cycle track runs along the edge of the Local Wildlife Site. The wildlife site is within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) danger area. Due to the alignment of the existing walking / cycle track with tall vegetation at the edge, people stay on the track and do not access the rest of the site.

Risk analysis

The proposed ECP is aligned on the cycle track. Because this route is already very popular with cyclists and walkers it is expected that there will be negligible increase in access on the line of the ECP.

It is likely that MOD will use their powers under s28 of CRow to exclude access from the coastal margin, so no new access rights will be created on the site. Even if this does not happen, we expect the existing patterns of access to continue; people will stay on the cycle track rather than entering the coastal margin, as the margin is not attractive for walking and the tall vegetation at the side of the track helps to discourage access.

Map showing Dee Rifle Ranges Local Wildlife Site and proposed route of ECP



Conclusion

We, Natural England, are satisfied that our proposals to improve access to the English coast between Birkenhead and the Welsh Border are fully compatible with our duty to further the conservation and enhancement of the notified features of Mersey Narrows SSSI, North Wirral Foreshore SSSI, Red Rocks SSSI, Dee Estuary SSSI and Dee Cliffs SSSI, consistent with the proper exercise of our functions¹). Implementation of the route will, where necessary be subject to consideration by the relevant access authorities and subject to SSSI assent in consultation with Natural England.

In respect of Hilbre Islands Local Nature Reserve, Leasowe Common Site of Biological Importance, Caldy Golf Course Site of Biological Importance, Wirral Way – Caldy to Heswall Site of Biological Importance, Dawpool nature reserve, Wirral Way, Heswall to Borough Boundary Site of Biological Importance, Heswall Fields Site of Biological Importance and Dee Rifle Ranges Local Wildlife Site 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:

Name: Sarah Wiseman

Date: 11/11/2020

On behalf of the Coastal Access Programme Team

Name:



Date: 08/12/20

Senior Officer with responsibility for protected sites

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.

References

1. Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland and the Biological Records Centre. Online atlas of the British and Irish Flora <https://www.brc.ac.uk/plantatlas/>
2. Wirral Council Parks and Countryside Service. Hilbre Islands Local Nature Reserve Management Plan 2011-2016 (Updated January 2015).
<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/sites/default/files/all/Leisure%20parks%20and%20events/parks%20and%20open%20spaces/Hilbre%20Islands%20Management%20Plan%202011-2016.pdf>
3. Wirral Council. North Wirral Coastal Park Leaflet
<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/sites/default/files/all/Leisure%20parks%20and%20events/parks%20and%20open%20spaces/North%20Wirral%20Coastal%20Park%20natural%20history.pdf>
4. Wirral Council Parks and Countryside Service. Wirral Country Park Management Plan 2017-2022
<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/sites/default/files/all/Leisure%20parks%20and%20events/parks%20and%20open%20spaces/Wirral%20Country%20Park%20Management%20Plan%202018.pdf>
5. National Trust. Our Diverse Wirral Landscape.
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/our-diverse-wirral-landscape>
6. National Trust. Wide wild skies at Hewswall Fields.
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Annex 1. Index to designated sites and features

Table 4: avian and non-avian features of the designated sites

Features	Liverpool Bay SPA	Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore SPA	Dee Estuary SPA	Mersey Narrows SSSI	North Wirral Foreshore SSSI	Dee Estuary SSSI	Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore Ramsar	Dee Estuary Ramsar
Bar-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa lapponica</i> (non-breeding)		X	X		X	X	X	X
Black-tailed godwit, <i>Limosa limosa islandica</i> (non-breeding)			X			X		X
Common scoter <i>Melanitta nigra</i> (Non-breeding)	X							
Common tern <i>Sterna hirundo</i> (Breeding)	X	X	X			X	X	
Common tern <i>Sterna hirundo</i> (non-breeding)		X						
Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> (non-breeding)				X		X		
Curlew, <i>Numenius arquata</i> (non-breeding)			X			X		X
Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina alpina</i> (non-breeding)			X		X	X		X
Great Crested Grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i> (non-breeding)						X		
Grey Plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i> , (non-breeding)			X			X		X
Knot <i>Calidris canutus islandica</i> (non-breeding)		X	X		X	X	X	X
Red-throated diver <i>Gavia stellata</i> (Non-breeding)	X							
Little gull <i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i> (Non-breeding)	X	X					X	
Little tern <i>Sternula albifrons</i> (Breeding)	X		X					
Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i> (non-breeding)			X			X		X
Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i> (non-breeding)			X			X		X

Features	Liverpool Bay SPA	Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore SPA	Dee Estuary SPA	Mersey Narrows SSSI	North Wirral Foreshore SSSI	Dee Estuary SSSI	Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore Ramsar	Dee Estuary Ramsar
Redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i> (non-breeding)			X	X		X		X
Ringed plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> (non-breeding)						X		
Sandwich tern, <i>Sterna sandvicensis</i> (non-breeding)			X					
Shelduck, <i>Tadorna tadorna</i> (non-breeding)			X			X		X
Teal, <i>Anas crecca</i> (non-breeding)			X			X		X
Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i> (non-breeding)				X	X			
Wigeon <i>Anas Penelope</i> (non-breeding)						X		
Non-breeding waterbird assemblage	X	X					X	X
Aggregations of non-breeding birds				X	X	X		
Annual vegetation of drift lines	X			X				
Atlantic salt meadows	X		X	X				
Embryonic shifting dunes	X			X		X		
Estuaries	X			X				
Fixed dunes with herbaceous vegetation (`grey dunes`)*	X			X		X		
Humid dune slacks	X			X				
Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide	X	X	X	X				
Salicornia and other annuals colonising mud and sand	X	X	X	X				
Shifting dunes along the shoreline with <i>Ammophila arenaria</i> (`white dunes`)	X			X				

Features	Liverpool Bay SPA	Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore SPA	Dee Estuary SPA	Mersey Narrows SSSI	North Wirral Foreshore SSSI	Dee Estuary SSSI	Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore Ramsar	Dee Estuary Ramsar
Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts	X			X				
Petalwort <i>Petalophyllum ralfsii</i>	X			X				
River lamprey <i>Lampetra fluviatilis</i>	X							
Sea lamprey <i>Petromyzon marinus</i>	X							
Swamp vegetation and transitions to brackish and freshwater habitats				X				
Coastal grazing marsh				X				
Vascular plant assemblage				X				
Natterjack toad (<i>Bufo calamita</i>)						X		X
Sandhill rustic moth <i>Luperina nickerlii</i>				X				
Maritime cliff grassland					X			
Marl Pits					X			
Coastal Cliffs and Foreshore (Geological feature)					X			
Mobile Dunes (yellow dunes)						X		
S4 <i>Phragmites australis</i> Swamp and reedbeds						X		
Lagoons freshwater and saline		X						

Addendum: Assessment of coastal access proposals on Little Neston Reed Bed

Is this site or feature also part of a European site? **Yes**

The Little Neston reed bed is within Dee Estuary SAC, SPA, Ramsar site and SSSI. The reed bed is important for bird species that are not covered within the SSSI and SPA features, including:

- Marsh Harrier (breeding)
- Hen Harrier (**RSPB red list**)
- Bearded Tits (breeding, **RSPB amber list**)
- Bittern (2 individuals, **RSPB amber list**)
- Reed Warbler (30-50 individuals)
- Cetti's Warbler (3 breeding pairs)

Current situation

Three of the birds routinely found in the Little Neston reed bed are on the RSPB's 'Birds of Conservation Concern' list. Hen harrier is on the red list, meaning it is a species of highest conservation priority, and therefore needing urgent action. Bittern and Marsh Harrier are on RSPB amber list, which is the next most critical group of concern. Due to the categorisation of these species, the proposed alignment of the England Coast Path (ECP) at the rear of the reed bed has generated some concerns.

The reed bed itself is highlighted in the citation of the SSSI, as an important area of transitional habitat, where swamp vegetation occurs dominated by common reed *Phragmites australis*. This reed bed is important habitat within the SSSI.

Therefore, it can be established that Little Neston reed bed is an important habitat for bird species. The reedbed and surrounding site is currently managed by RSPB. In the past, the reedbed has suffered from incidents of recreational disturbance due to walkers leaving the PROW and creating new routes into the reed bed; and also from arson attacks (two serious events in the last 5 years).

The public right of way, along which the ECP is proposed, runs directly adjacent to the reed bed and is already a popular walk that many people follow on a daily basis. Over the last year, use of the path has increased significantly – perhaps due to the COVID pandemic. Partly in response to this increased use, the landowners (RSPB) are particularly concerned that further sustained increase in use of the route as part of the ECP may create additional recreational disturbance to the species using reedbed.

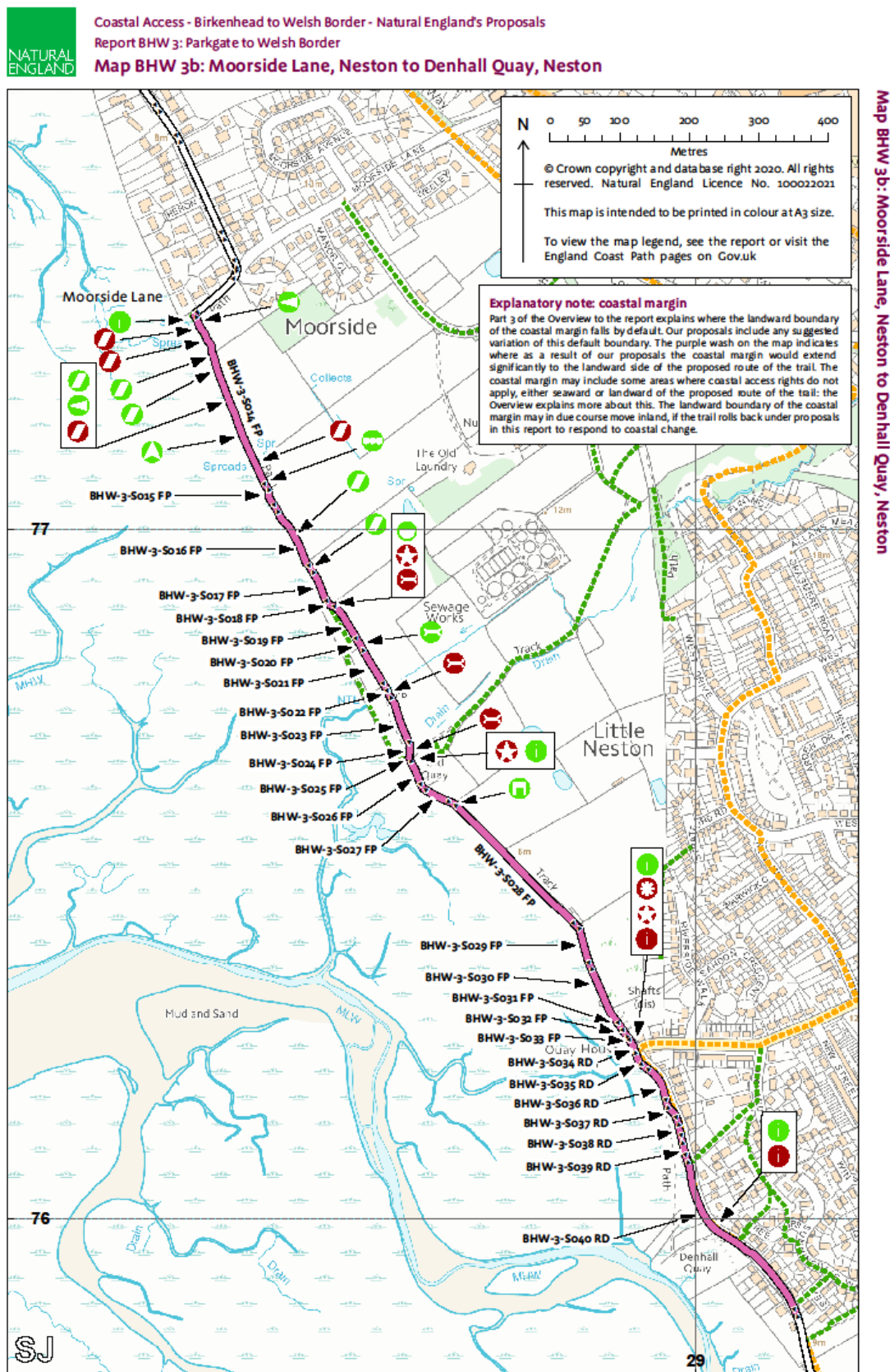
Risk analysis

The proposed route for the England Coast Path (ECP) follows an established Public Right of Way (PROW) between Moorside Lane and the sewage works near Little Neston (route sections BHW-3-S014 and BHW-3-S017). This PROW has always been well used but it has seen additional use during the COVID lockdown. This additional use has led to the poaching of the path surface and braiding of routes which have led to loss of habitat loss due to trampling.

The ECP proposals include provision for surface improvements, with a modified scheme (updated post publication of the ECP proposals) involving the installation of a raised boardwalk for much of its length (approx. 600m). The boardwalk will also accommodate a handrail. This work (new, improved surface and associated handrail) should help to prevent or at least minimise the widening of the original path and therefore, reduce future trampling and recreational disturbance of the site.

There is a low risk that our proposals will have an impact on the features or the important species (listed above).

Map showing published ECP proposals in the vicinity of Little Neston



Maps showing location of reed bed in the vicinity of Little Neston

