

Nature Conservation Assessment for Coastal Access Proposals between Tilbury and Southend-on-Sea



Assessment of Coastal Access Proposals between Tilbury and Southend-on-Sea on sites and features of nature conservation concern Thursday 27th February 2020



(Sanderling wintering in Southend-on-Sea – Darren Braine)

Nature Conservation Assessment for Coastal Access Proposals between Tilbury and Southend-on-Sea



About this document

This document should be read in conjunction with the published Reports for the Tilbury to Southend-on-Sea Stretch and the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) for:

Special Protection Areas (SPAs):

- Thames Estuary and Marshes SPA
- Benfleet and Southend Marshes SPA
- Outer Thames Estuary SPA

Ramsar Sites:

- Thames Estuary and Marshes Ramsar
- Benfleet and Southend Marshes Ramsar

The Coastal Access Reports contain a full description of the access proposals, including any additional mitigation measures that have been included. These Reports can be viewed here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/england-coast-path-tilbury-to-southend-on-sea>

A HRA is required for European sites (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 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 features in question.**

The NCA is arranged site by site. Maps 1 to 3 shows designated sites along this stretch of coast.

See Annex 1 for an index to designated sites and their notified features for this stretch of coast. This also identifies features that have been considered within any HRA, due to the overlap of notified interests.

Nature Conservation Assessment for Coastal Access Proposals between Tilbury and Southend-on-Sea



Contents

<i>About this document</i>	2
<i>Contents</i>	3
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Mucking Flats and Marshes SSSI</i>	5
<i>Vange and Fobbing Marshes SSSI</i>	6
<i>Holehaven Creek SSSI</i>	8
<i>Pitsea Marsh SSSI</i>	9
<i>Benfleet and Southend Marshes SSSI</i>	10
<i>Canvey Wick SSSI</i>	12
<i>Leigh National Nature Reserve</i>	12
<i>Conclusion</i>	13
<i>Maps of Designations</i>	14
<i>Appendix 1: Designated Features of the Sites</i>	17

Nature Conservation Assessment for Coastal Access Proposals between Tilbury and Southend-on-Sea



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 Essex coast between Tilbury and Southend on Sea. 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 landowners, 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 landowners 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.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Mucking Flats and Marshes SSSI

The majority of the site (the saltmarsh and intertidal habitats) overlap with the Thames Estuary and Marshes SPA and Ramsar. The grasslands of the SSSI are not part of a European site and therefore not considered by the HRA.

Current situation

Mucking Flats and Marshes comprise of an extensive stretch of Thames mudflats and saltmarsh, together with sea wall grassland. The mudflats form the largest intertidal feeding area for wintering wildfowl and waders west of Canvey Island on the north bank of the Thames. The saltmarshes provide important high tide roosts, which are also found at the disused silt lagoons at Coalhouse Fort. Between the sea wall and mean high water line lie areas of high-level saltmarsh of a type uncommon in Essex. Vegetation is dominated by sea couch and sea purslane with sea aster, common sea-lavender and common saltmarsh grass.

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1006131.pdf>

The grasslands of the SSSI are concentrated in the disused silt lagoons, areas of ponds and depressions grading onto much drier areas, of interest in its own right as a significant and rare habitat resource between the engineered sea defence structures and the intertidal zone and notified for the invertebrate assemblage.

The SSSI is partly notified for its non-breeding shelduck population, not a designated species in the overlying SPA or Ramsar notification for this site. Recent site records suggest that overwintering waterfowl are above favourable condition thresholds but on a precautionary basis it should be noted that the 5-year peak means for shelduck, redshank and ringed plover are only marginally above the threshold. There is a need for ongoing vigilance and monitoring to assess whether low populations are site-based or linked to more widespread declines.

The saltmarsh structure is in favourable condition. Brackish grassland and scattered scrub and wetland habitats (ditches and low-lying areas) were found to be overall unfavourable recovering. This site was found to contain the habitat structure for invertebrates associated with free draining brackish grassland and wetland and was considered to be borderline favourable to due appropriate scrub cover.

Risk analysis

The feature groups specific to the SSSI and considered here can be sensitive to concentrated trampling or disturbance. Localised impacts could occur if changes in access lead to more frequent trampling of vegetation in sensitive areas.

Our proposed route is on the landward edge of the SSSI and does not interact directly with the notified features. However, the spreading room associated with the trail covers the area of land from the trail down to mean low water. The saltmarsh and mudflat will have access restricted through S25A as a public safety consideration. This year-round access restriction has the consequence of also reducing the impact from the establishment of the trail on the wildlife of these habitats as there is no increased or enhanced right of access to the intertidal zones.

The wet grasslands of the SSSI will not have an access restriction. These habitats are currently part of the area of the local tourist attraction of Coalhouse Fort and visitor pressure is managed through fences, gates and advisory signs. Although the establishment of the England Coast Path will bring a right of access over these areas through spreading room, the expectation is that it will not lead to an increase existing access level. It is unlikely any new users will leave the trail and explore this area as there is no particular feature of interest to draw walkers away from their onward journey. Access in this area is judged to not be significantly enhanced, due to the current high level of use and the existing public rights of way, car parks and facilities such as toilets and café.

We therefore conclude that our proposals will not have a significant impact on the integrity of the site or its features.

Establishment works

Is SSSI assent needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works? Yes, due to proximity of site to alignment of trail.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Vange and Fobbing Marshes SSSI

This site not part of a European site.

Current situation

Vange and Fobbing Marshes lie on an alluvial plain of the lower River Thames. The unimproved coastal grassland and associated dykes and creeks support a diversity of maritime grasses and herbs. Many of these species are nationally uncommon or rare, and together form an outstanding assemblage of plants. The grassland is dominated by a range of grasses, along with a range of coastal species which are inherently restricted in their distribution and are therefore nationally uncommon. The combination of grazing land, water courses and fringing saltmarsh also provide an ideal habitat for numerous invertebrates and birds.

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1003849.pdf>

The notified area of the site covers two separated and distinct areas – those of Vange to the north and those of Fobbing to the south. The England Coast Path affects these areas differently as noted in the risk analysis.

The site is notified for two specific features, its vascular plant assemblage and for the rare least lettuce (*Lactuca saligna*).

When condition assessed in 2010, it was noted that the site was generally in a favourable or recovering condition with a good mix of habitats supporting a range of species.

Risk analysis

The notified features (vascular plant assemblage and least lettuce) could be sensitive to concentrated trampling or inappropriate cutting.

The England Coast Path for the southern part of this SSSI over Fobbing Marshes passes to the seaward side of the site. This means there is no new access created over the significant majority of this site as it is landward and therefore not spreading room. The trail will pass along the very eastern edge of the site along Fobbing Creek. At this location new access is to be created over the engineered structure of the dam and sluice at this location, then along the landward side of the seawall (on the folding). This area is currently not noted as of significant interest for its vascular plants or least lettuce and is in the management of the Essex Wildlife Trust. At establishment the alignment will only require a small path to be cut if there has been sufficient vegetation growth, width to be determined by local ground conditions and wildlife interest.

On the northern part of the site over Vange Marshes, the trail passes along the existing public right of way and no establishment works are thought necessary different to the current practices. The inland nature of this right of way will create spreading room over the grazing marshes between the trail and mean low water. No restriction on access is currently proposed over the grazing marsh as it is anticipated that there will be no increase in access to this wider area by users of the England Coast Path. This is because the land lies seasonally wet, is fenced so it can be grazed by livestock and horses and has no feature of interest to draw users away from the trail. It is remote from the local populations and not readily accessible. If this assumption of no increase in usage of the spreading room between the trail and mean low water is proven wrong after the trail is opened, a restriction can be considered.

The saltmarsh and mudflat will have access restricted through Section 25A as a public safety consideration. This year-round access restriction has the consequence of also reducing the impact from the establishment of the trail on the wildlife of these habitats as there is no increased or enhanced right of access to the intertidal zones.

A dogs on lead all year-round restriction will apply to the small section of the SSSI that is in the RSPB reserve.

We therefore conclude our proposals will not have a significant impact on the integrity of this site or its notified features.

Establishment works

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

Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Holehaven Creek SSSI

This site not part of a European site.

Current situation

The site consists of Holehaven Creek and part of the connecting Vange Creek and East Haven Creek. The tidal creek system acts as the principle drain for the surrounding grazing marshes and forms a confluence at Holehaven with the River Thames. This site is linked geographically and functionally with the wider Thames Estuary. The intertidal mudflats and saltmarsh habitats of Holehaven Creek is notified for one species, as it supports a nationally important number of black tailed godwit. This species also regularly occurs in numbers of international importance.

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/2000467.pdf>

When condition assessed in 2011, it was found that the numbers of black-tailed godwits utilising this site was almost double the number required for the site to be judged as in favourable condition (about 1600 birds observed as a mean peak).

Risk analysis

The whole of the Holehaven Creek SSSI is saltmarsh and mudflat. The trail alignment has no direct interaction with the site. The SSSI is however seaward of the alignment and therefore potentially impacted as spreading room. It will have access restricted through S25A as a public safety consideration. This year-round access restriction has the consequence of also reducing the impact from the establishment of the trail on the wildlife of these habitats as there is no increased or enhanced right of access to the intertidal zones.

The land between the trail and the SSSI will be subject to spreading room from the England Coast Path and will not have any access restrictions imposed. However, a lot of this land is industrial and falls within the buildings and curtilage excepted category, preventing access to the coastline in these locations. The site is remote from local populations and has no features of interest to draw users away from the onward journey offered by the trail. Along the majority of the site's boundary, such as on Canvey Island the England Coast Path follows existing public rights of way and no significant increase in use is anticipated.

We therefore conclude our proposals will not have a significant impact on the integrity of the site or its notified features

Establishment works

Is SSSI assent needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works? Potentially, due to proximity of site to alignment.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Pitsea Marsh SSSI

This site not part of a European site.

Current situation

Pitsea Marsh comprises of a mosaic of habitats, including scrub, grassland, reedbed and fen, open water and saltmarsh. Geologically, the site is split in two. The grazing marsh dykes and reedbed lie on alluvial deposits, whilst the scrub, grassland and ponds are found primarily on London clay. The diversity of habitats supports an outstanding range of invertebrates, including a number of local and nationally rare damselflies, dragonflies, moths, flies and beetles. Reedbeds are dominated by common reed with some sea club-rush reflecting the brackish quality of the water. This supports a typical breeding bird community which includes large populations of reed and sedge warblers, as well as providing an important feeding and roosting site for passage migrants such as yellow wagtails. It is one of an increasing number of Essex sites where Cetti's warblers have been known to breed. The site is notified for its invertebrate assemblage interest and for its reedbeds and swamps

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1004095.pdf>

As noted, the site is geologically split, but it is also geographically split. Wat Tyler Country Park, with its local visitor attractions, pathways and educational resources covers a large area of the southern section of the SSSI. The northern section is dominated by grazing marshes, with a mixed stocking regime. Part of which is also within the RSPB Bowers Marsh reserve. This whole northern area has limited public access but does contain the main entrance road for the HGVs entering Pitsea landfill site with their potential for creating localised disturbance.

Overall, the condition of the site is judged to be that the mosaic of habitats was in favourable or recovering condition.

Risk analysis

The whole area of this SSSI is seaward of the trail alignment, and therefore has the potential to be impacted by spreading room. The trail alignment is not within the site boundary.

The spreading room is not expected to increase visitor numbers to any of the area. As noted, Wat Tyler Country Park is part of the SSSI, with its visitor attractions, services and car parks. This already draws users into the area, and the network of surfaced routes generally meets the needs of the majority of walkers, that there is little of interest to draw them off the paths.

The areas of the SSSI that do not currently have access are unlikely to draw visitors into the area. The fences around the fields and the grazing itself makes areas less inviting for walkers (particularly with the resource of Wat Tyler Country Park readily available). Areas, such as the scrub and reedbeds are impenetrable and wet or waterlogged underfoot as to not be conducive to enhance access.

The saltmarsh and mudflat will have access restricted through S25A as a public safety consideration. This year-round access restriction has the consequence of also reducing the impact from the establishment of the trail on the wildlife of these habitats as there is no increased or enhanced right of access to the intertidal zones.

A dogs on lead all year-round restriction will apply to the small section of the SSSI that is in the RSPB reserve.

There we conclude that there will be little to no interaction with notified features.

Establishment works

Is SSSI assent needed to implement any specific proposals for establishment works? No, by virtue of the site not having any trail alignment through it.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Benfleet and Southend Marshes SSSI

The majority of the site (the grazing marsh, saltmarsh and intertidal habitats) overlaps with the Benfleet and Southend Marshes SPA and Ramsar. The grasslands of the higher slopes within the SSSI are not part of a European site and therefore not considered by the HRA.

Current situation

Benfleet and Southend Marshes comprise an extensive series of salt marshes, mudflats, scrub and grassland which support a diverse flora and fauna. The south-facing slopes of the downs, comprised of London clay capped by sand, represent the line of former river cliffs. At their foot lies reclaimed marshland, with its associated dyke system, based on alluvium. There are extensive salt marshes and mudflats, on which wintering wildfowl and waders reach both nationally and internationally important numbers. Nationally uncommon plants occur in all of the habitats and parts of the area are of outstanding importance for scarce invertebrates. The combination of scrub, grassland and open water with vegetated margins provides a habitat for many scarce and notable insects. The mudflat areas are colonised by eel grasses, along with rich invertebrate fauna provide food for thousands of birds which overwinter on the shoreline. The major high tide roosts for bird species found at this site are located at Two Tree Island and Canvey Point.

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1004414.pdf>

Benfleet and Southend Marshes SSSI has several notified features not considered by the overlying SPA or Ramsar designation. This includes shelduck, saltmarsh habitats, vascular plant assemblages and invertebrate assemblages.

Overall, the SSSI is in favourable or recovering condition. Some areas are declining due to coastal squeeze as areas of saltmarsh are eroded or because the landward edge cannot naturally retreat due to hard engineering defence structures.

Risk analysis

The trail alignment passes through this site in two locations. In the far western end on the mainland the trail is on a well-used public right of way, that is also within Hadleigh Castle Country Park. Towards the centre on Two Tree Island the trail follows existing promoted and permitted paths on the island that are also within the Leigh NNR.

Elsewhere the trail as it loops around Canvey Island on public rights of way is along the outer boundary of the SSSI. Between Leigh-on-Sea and the end of the trail at Shoeburyness the trail is on roads, public rights of way and for the majority of this distance on the popular destination of Southend promenade.

Overall access levels to the trail are unlikely to be significantly higher than at present due to the major tourist draws and services in these locations.

The saltmarsh and mudflat will have access restricted through S25A as a public safety consideration. This year-round access restriction has the consequence of also reducing the impact from the establishment of the trail on the wildlife of these habitats as there is no increased or enhanced right of access to the intertidal zones. However, it should be noted this restriction does not apply to Leigh and Southend beach areas and it will not curtail existing use of such areas along this popular coastline. It also does not apply to the leisure or commercial interests, such as watersports, fishing and bait digging.

Redshanks are a notified feature of the SSSI that is not part of the bird assemblage listed as significant in the SPA designation, could be disturbed whilst roosting, feeding or nesting. However, the impact on this bird species is likely to be the same as that considered for the bird assemblage of the SPA, and therefore it could be considered through the accompanying HRA to the Coastal Access Report.

The habitats of the SSSI, the saltmarsh and vascular plant assemblages and their associated invertebrate assemblages could be impacted. A larger part of the land where these interests are found is inland of the trail and therefore not impacted by spreading room or increased access from the alignment of the trail. For the seaward areas they will be subject to spreading room. The plants could be sensitive to localised trampling. As noted, large areas will be subject to an access restriction, whilst in other areas the ECP will not add significantly to the hundreds of thousands of visitors a year that already visit this stretch of coast all year round with seasonal peaks, but a warm winter or spring day can see thousands of people drawn to the seafront at Leigh or Southend.

Therefore, we conclude that there will be little to no adverse impact on the notified features of the Benfleet and Southend Marshes SSSI from our proposal.

Establishment works

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

Assessment of coastal access proposals on:

Canvey Wick SSSI

Canvey Wick is landward of the trail alignment and not subject to any enhanced access through landward spreading room. The site is notified for its invertebrates which will not be impacted on by increased usage of the trail along its southern boundary. Therefore, this site is ruled out for any further consideration.

Leigh National Nature Reserve

Leigh National Nature Reserve (NNR) is wholly within the boundary of Benfleet and Southend Marshes SSSI and as such any impacts on this reserve are considered by the entry above for this SSSI.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on Local Wildlife Sites and geological sites

We have screened lists of geological sites identified by GeoEssex and listed on the group's website (<http://www.geoessex.org.uk/index.html>).

Only one GeoEssex site, Shoeburyness Foreshore (TQ 920 840), is either impacted by the trail alignment or seaward and this is considered further below.

Current situation and risk analysis: Local Geological Sites

Shoeburyness Foreshore (TQ 920 840 approx.)

Current situation: A foreshore platform of London Clay has sometimes been visible at low tide at various points between Southend and Shoeburyness. Until sea defences were built, fossils could be found here such as sharks' teeth and fruits and seeds preserved in pyrite.

Risk analysis: This site lies within the foreshore just off Shoebury Common promenade. This area, within spreading room, is already well used by the public and promotion of the Coast Path is only expected to result in a small increase in levels of use, at most. Therefore, adverse effects on the site are unlikely.

Current situation and risk analysis: Local Wildlife Sites

There are numerous local wildlife sites along this stretch of coast. The trail is aligned on public rights of way where it overlaps with these sites. The saltmarsh and flats will be subject to the S25A public safety access restriction noted above for the suite of SSSI. Many also contain habitats that are not conducive to public access such as reedbeds and lagoons. Overall, and as far as practicable with the publically available information about these sites it is judged they will not be adversely impacted by the trail alignment and associated spreading room between Tilbury and Southend on Sea.

Conclusion

We, Natural England, are satisfied that our proposals to improve access to the English coast between Tilbury and Southend-on-Sea are fully compatible with our duty to further the conservation and enhancement of the notified features of Mucking Flats and Marshes, Vange and Fobbing Marshes, Holehaven Creek, Pitsea Marsh, and Benfleet and Southend Marshes SSSIs consistent with the proper exercise of our functions¹.

In respect of Leigh NNR, Canvey Wick SSSI and sites of local wildlife and geomorphological interest 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:

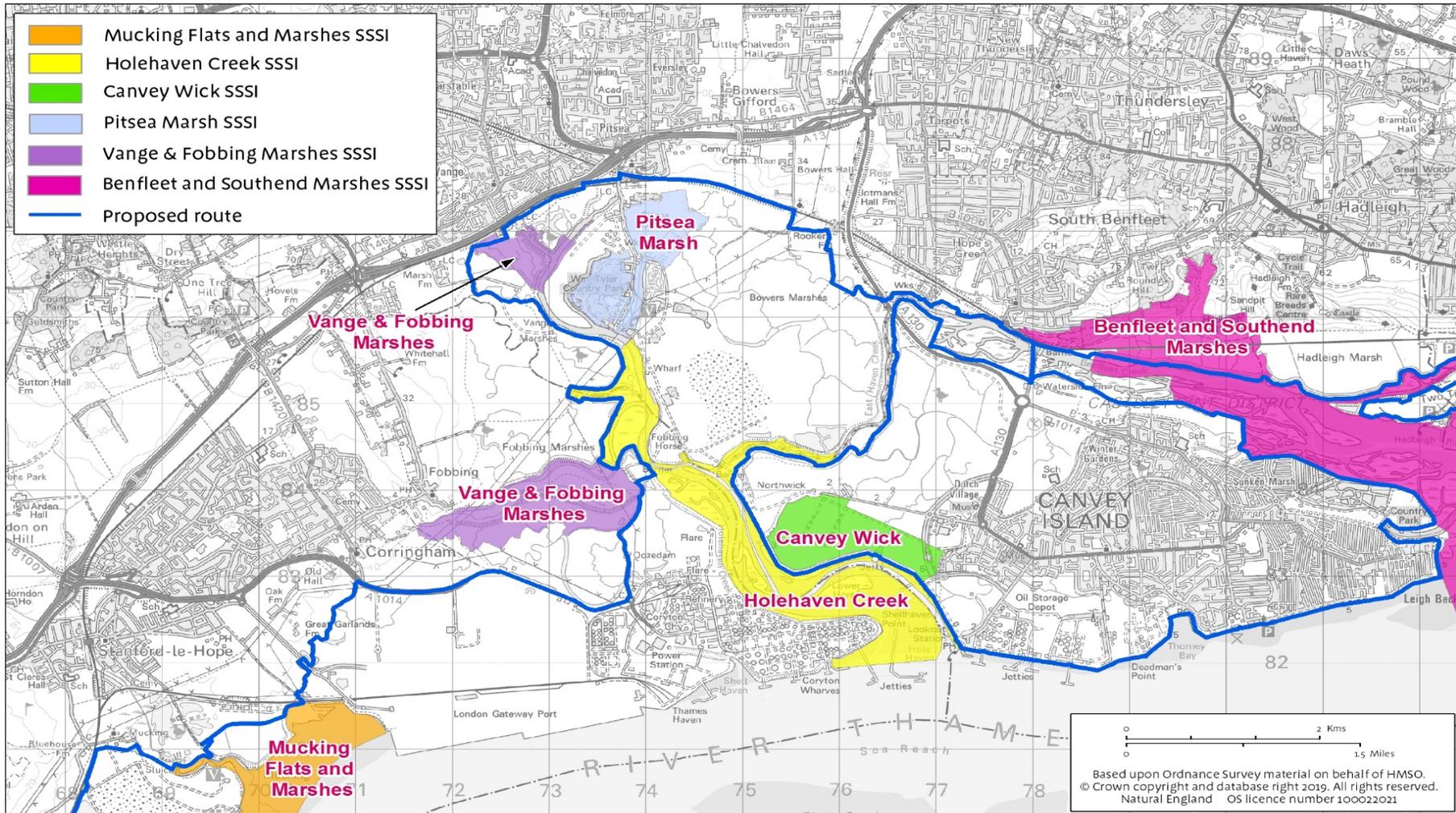
	18 February 2020	On behalf of the Coastal Access Programme Team
	18 February 2020	Senior Officer with responsibility for protected sites

¹ Natural England's functions include 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 - Tilbury to Southend-on-Sea - Nature Conservation Assessment

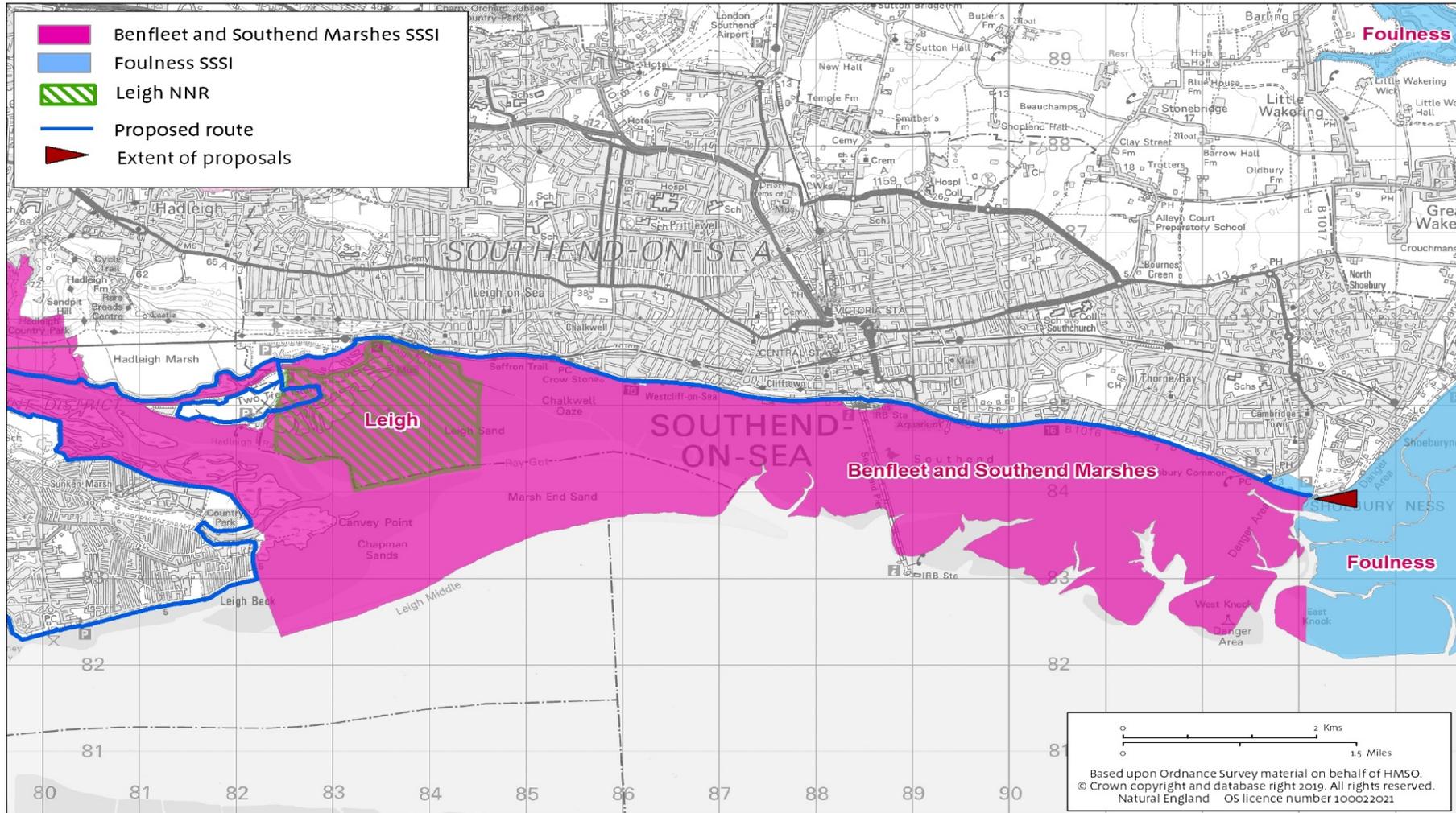
Map 2 - Designations (SSSIs) - Mucking to Two Tree Island





Coastal Access - Tilbury to Southend-on-Sea - Nature Conservation Assessment

Map 3 - Designations (SSSIs and NNR) - Two Tree Island to Shoebury Ness



Appendix 1: Designated Features of the Sites

Features – of the designated sites listed	Thames Estuary SPA (and Ramsar)	Mucking Marshes and Flats SSSI	Holehaven Creek SSSI	Vange and Fobbing Marshes SSSI	Pitsea Marshes SSSI	Benfleet and Southend SPA (and Ramsar)	Benfleet and Southend SSSI
Dark-bellied brent goose						x	X
Dunlin	x	x				x	X
Grey plover	x	x				x	X
Knot	x					x	X
Redshank	x	x					X
Ringed plover	x	x				x	X
Invertebrate assemblage		x			x		X
Saltmarsh habitats							x
Vascular plant assemblage				x			x
Black-tailed godwit	x	x	x				
Shelduck		x					
Avocet	x						
Hen harrier	x						
Least lettuce				x			
Phragmites australis swamp and reedbed					x		