Assessment of Coastal Access Proposals on sites and features of nature conservation concern between East Cowes Ferry and Wootton Bridge on the Isle of Wight.

(Nature Conservation Assessment – NCA)

Date of publication August 2025

Nature Conservation Assessment for Coastal Access Proposals between East Cowes Ferry and Wootton Bridge on the Isle of Wight

About this document

This document should be read in conjunction with the Coastal Access Report for the East Cowes Ferry and Wootton Bridge Stretch (IOW 1) of the King Charles III England Coast Path and the associated Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA).

The Coastal Access Report contains 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-isle-of-wight.

A HRA is required for European sites (SPA, SAC and Ramsar sites). The HRA as a separate document is also published alongside the Coastal Access Reports.

This Nature Conservation Assessment (NCA) covers other aspects **in so far as any HRA does not already address the issue for the sites or features in question**. The NCA (and HRA) that accompanied the previously published sections (IoW2 to IoW10) for the rest of the Island stretch noted that there would be a separate report for this single section. This is that report.

Contents

Introduction

This is the last section of the Isle of Wight coastal access reports to be published. The report covers the section of coast from the intersection with the Isle of Wight report for The Medina (IoW 10) where it stopped/started in East Cowes to the intersection with the report for Wootton to Culver Down (I0W 2). Therefore, this is the Nature Conservation Assessment for the singular report Isle of Wight 1.

There are two marine influenced European sites along the intertidal area of this section that are within the coastal margin created by the England Coast Path alignment. These marine sites, unlike terrestrial sites, are not underpinned by a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). These two sites, Solent Maritime Special Area of Conservation and the Solent and Dorset Coast Special Protection Area are not considered further within this Nature Conservation Assessment.

The majority of the northern element of this section has no statutory/national wildlife designation (SSSI). There are two SSSI on the southern element of this section around Wootton. These are coincident with each other and also with the Trail proposals and fall within the associated coastal margin spreading room. The feature interests of these two SSSI (King's Quay Shore SSSI and Ryde Sands and Wootton Creek SSSI) that are shared with the overlapping European sites features of interest are covered within the associated HRA.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on King's Quay Shore SSSI

King's Quay Shore comprises the confluence of Palmers Brook with the sea and the intertidal zone extending east and west from the brooks mouth flanking low cliffs and ancient woodland. Ecologically the site is of considerable importance in displaying a great diversity of estuarine habitats ranging from freshwater swamp, brackish reedbeds, saltmarshes, shingle spits and intertidal mudflats all in close proximity. Geologically the site is nationally important for its shoreline exposure of Osborne Beds in which abundant fossil fish are found. At Chapel Corner there are unique deposits holding fossil fruits and seeds from the Osborne Beds. The sequence of flora at Chapel Corner and the palaeobotanical and palaeoenvironmental information it reveals is unrivalled elsewhere in rocks of this age.

The SSSI is within the seaward coastal margin of the proposed coast path alignment. No part of the proposed trail alignment passes within the SSSI, with one of the closest interactions of trail users and the SSSI being at the holiday park at Woodside Bay where the trail passes along the boundary of the SSSI.

The King's Quay Shore SSSI shares a boundary with Ryde Sands and Wootton Creek SSSI at its eastern point.

https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/SiteDetail.aspx?SiteCode=S1000559&SiteName=king%27s+q&countyCode=&responsiblePerson=&SeaArea=&IFCAArea=

This SSSI is also part of the following European sites: Solent and Southampton Water SPA; Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar; Solent Maritime SAC.

Notified features of the SSSI that are also qualifying features of the European site are omitted from this assessment.

These omitted features are:

Notified features for King's Quay Shore SSSI that are also qualifying features of European sites	European site name
Black-tailed godwit (Limosa limosa) - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Common tern (Sterna hirundo) - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Dark-bellied brent goose (Branta bernicla) - Wintering	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Estuary	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Little tern (Sternula albifrons) - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Ringed plover (Charadrius hiaticula) - Wintering	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Roseate tern (Sterna dougallii) - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Sandwich tern (Thalasseus sandvicensis) - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Sheltered channel between island/mainland	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Teal (Anas crecca) - Wintering	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Waterbird assemblage - Wintering	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Wetland invertebrate assemblage	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar

Wetland plant assemblage	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Black-tailed godwit (Limosa limosa islandica) - wintering	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Common tern (Sterna hirundo) - breeding	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Dark-bellied Brent goose (Branta bernicla bernicla) - wintering	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Little tern (Sterna albifrons) - breeding	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Mediterranean gull (Ichthyaetus melanocephalus) - breeding	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Ringed plover (Charadrius hiaticula) - wintering	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Roseate tern (Sterna dougallii) - breeding	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Sandwich tern (Thalasseus sandvicensis) - breeding	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Teal (Anas crecca) - wintering	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Waterbird assemblage	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Sandbanks which are slightly covered by sea water all the time	Solent Maritime SAC
Estuaries	Solent Maritime SAC
Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide	Solent Maritime SAC
Coastal lagoons	Solent Maritime SAC
Annual vegetation of drift lines	Solent Maritime SAC
Perennial vegetation of stony banks	Solent Maritime SAC
Salicornia and other annuals colonising mud and sand	Solent Maritime SAC
Spartina swards (Spartinion maritimae)	Solent Maritime SAC

Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae)	Solent Maritime SAC
Shifting dunes along the shoreline with Ammophila arenaria ('White dunes')	Solent Maritime SAC
Desmoulin's whorl snail, Vertigo moulinsiana	Solent Maritime SAC

These are omitted as the assessment of possible impacts on qualifying features of the European site are made in the accompanying Habitats Regulation Assessment.

The notified features of the SSSI that are not considered by the HRA process and therefore require further consideration in relation to any risk of impact from the coastal access rights are:

- Geological features
- Vascular plant assemblage
- Oak woodlands
- [Littoral sediment and Saltmarsh]

Littoral sediment and Saltmarsh habitats are components of the Estuary type habitats considered within the Habitats Regulations Assessment. They are noted in the above list to recognise that there are specific titles used that differ between the various designations that can refer to the same habitat types. The above littoral sediment (sands and mud of the intertidal zone) and saltmarsh (generally occupying the occasionally inundated zone of the higher tides) are two significant components of a broader estuary habitat. These components are therefore considered within the estuary features of the noted European sites.

The citation for the SSSI (the broad narrative that describes a site and a key component of its notification paperwork) also reflects that the intertidal muds are feeding grounds for modest numbers of wading birds, herons and brent goose (Branta bernicla), but these features do not appear to be part of the site monitoring programme or further recorded as features of interest in their own right. Citations often include a range of background and scene setting information, that are not key or specific reasons related to the site's formal notification.

Current situation

The condition of the features for which King's Quay Shore is notified is generally favourable.

King's Quay Shore SSSI is composed of three core habitats, all geographically zoned and with a resultant difference in current use by the public. There is a significant open coast intertidal habitat flanked with holiday parks. Palmer's Brook differs with its intertidal habitats in the valley bottom. Dense stands of oak woodland flank the landward side of these areas on gentle sloped banks and

are on the whole inaccessible to the wider public, with no local residential areas or facilities. The exception being the large area of Open Access land on the western flank of the southern end and covering the small SSSI units 12, 13 and 14 as well as a wider area of woodland to the west outside of the SSSI boundary. Although this area is available for public to walk over it is generally inaccessible as the woodland is fenced from the most likely public access point of Brocks Copse Road and its current management in some areas may be uninviting to wider public use.

The open coastal area and the associated beaches are generally only readily accessible to residents of the adjacent holiday parks. There is a low level of public activity on these small beaches, typified by casual recreational activities, dog walking and some evidence of small evening gatherings around makeshift campfires. (Google Maps photo records as posted by the public).

Conversely there is a general absence of public on-line posts for the areas associated with Palmer's Brook and the associated woodlands. No public paths service this area and the large expanse of woodlands can be disorientating to the casual visitor. There are no settlements or residential properties along the banks or within the woodlands (with the exception of the properties and businesses on the extreme southern end adjacent to Brocks Copse Road). Overall, the area is remote, inaccessible and unused by the wider public.

Risk analysis

The notified features of the SSSI that are associated with the intertidal SSSI units are considered through the Habitats Regulations Assessment.

However the area of the SSSI is generally inaccessible to the wider public, due to the absence of a local population and no facilities for those that might otherwise travel into the areas. The river/brook also cuts off much of the western part of the SSSI to access from the foreshore to the east. The holiday parks themselves represent a large extent of excepted land preventing wider public access to the foreshore, except by following the two public right of way that cut through to the shore that will be utilised by the KCIIIECP. The foreshore itself is generally intertidal flats exposed at low tide with a rocky upper shore fringed with inaccessible woodland. Any onward journey from a point of entry to the foreshore is uninviting to those wishing to utilise their right of access and those that currently access the area tend to stay local to the more sandy influenced beaches with no attractors to draw them away from these zones of higher activity. The main features at risk of an adverse interaction are the wintering birds. The seasonality of increased visitor numbers during the summer tourism season reduces this risk of interaction, as numbers fall considerably over the winter.

It is widely accepted across the suite of geological Sites of Special Scientific Interest that public access is of limited risk to the interest feature. The occasional fossil hunter is generally accepted, and as above the area of interest sits within coastal access spreading room will be accessible as a public right, but this right will not be facilitated and the area will remain generally inaccessible

from key public access points. Other areas will have the access rights formally restricted, such as over the saltmarsh and flats for public safety reasons, and this will further isolate areas from the most likely point of access from the beaches to the east.

Woodlands tend to accommodate public access more readily, but there can be localised adverse impacts. With no local population to avail themselves of the new rights of access, and a large area of underutilised woodland with existing rights of access suggests that there is no driver for the public to explore further into these areas. The woodlands of the western end of the SSSI will be isolated from the public by the natural barrier of the river/estuary and the restriction on public access rights over this area preventing access to the woods from the more likely entrance point – the foreshore to the east.

The vascular plant assemblage is found throughout the area of the SSSI, and as noted for the other main features and habitats access pressures will not increase from the creation of the coastal access rights which is not creating any additional infrastructure to facilitate access over this wider area.

The interactions from local users are the existing environmental baseline that remains unaltered by the creation of the right of access. The coastal access rights will not increase user accessibility to the SSSI.

Establishment works

No establishment works are proposed within this SSSI.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on Ryde Sands and Wootton Creek SSSI

This SSSI is a strip of coast extending for some 10km between Fishbourne and Horestone Point on the sheltered north-eastern shore of the Isle of Wight. Collectively Ryde Sands and the adjacent coastline to the south-east are a shoreline of great diversity and of national importance to marine nature conservation. The SSSI also includes ancient semi-natural woodland, shingle banks, marshy grasslands and brackish lagoons. There is a rich and varied flora including six nationally scarce plants and 53 species of lichen in Fishbourne Copse. The nationally rare foxtail stonewort has been recorded from some of the lagoons. The intertidal habitats and adjacent wet meadows within this estuarine system constitute vital feeding and roosting grounds for internationally important over-wintering waterfowl populations.

The SSSI provides important feeding grounds for migratory and over-wintering bird populations. The sandflats of the open coast regularly attract nationally important numbers of sanderling (Calidris alba) and more than 90% of bar-tailed godwits (Limosa lapponica) to be found on the Isle of Wight coast. The open coast eelgrass beds are the favoured food of dark-bellied brent goose

(Branta bernicla) which can be present in flocks in excess of 200 individuals. Wading birds such as curlew (Numenius arquata), redshank (Tringa tetanus), grey plover (Pluvialis squatarola) and ringed plover (Charadrius hiaticula), and teal (Anas crecca) regularly feed on the mudflats exposed within Wootton Creek.

The SSSI is within the seaward coastal margin of the proposed coast path alignment. No part of the proposed trail alignment passes within the SSSI. It shares a boundary with King's Quay Shore SSSI at its northern point, whilst the possible impacts on the eastern shore and open coast of this SSSI have been considered in the previously published Coastal Access Report and associated NCA and HRA for Wootton to Culver Down (Isle of Wight 2). This report considers the western section of the SSSI. An area composed solely of the littoral sediment notified feature within units 1 to 3 of the SSSI.

https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/SiteDetail.aspx?SiteCode=S2000222&SiteName=ryde&countyCode=&responsiblePerson=&SeaArea=&IFCAArea=

Ryde Sands and Wootton Creek SSSI is also part of the following European sites: Solent and Southampton Water SPA; Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar.

Notified features of the SSSI that are also qualifying features of the European sites are omitted from this assessment. These are:

Notified features for Ryde sands and Wootton Creek SSSI that are also qualifying features of European sites	European site name
Black-tailed godwit, Limosa limosa - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Common tern, Sterna hirundo - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Dark-bellied brent goose, Branta bernicla - Wintering	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Estuary	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Little tern, Sternula albifrons - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Ringed plover, Charadrius hiaticula - Wintering	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar

Roseate tern, Sterna dougallii - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Sandwich tern, Thalasseus sandvicensis - Breeding	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Sheltered channel between island/mainland	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Teal, Anas crecca - Wintering	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Waterbird assemblage - Wintering	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Wetland invertebrate assemblage	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Wetland plant assemblage	Solent and Southampton Water Ramsar
Black-tailed godwit, Limosa limosa islandica - A616, nb	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Common tern, Sterna hirundo - A193, b	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Dark-bellied Brent goose, Branta bernicla bernicla - A675, nb	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Little tern, Sterna albifrons - A195, b	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Mediterranean gull, Ichthyaetus melanocephalus - A176, b	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Ringed plover, Charadrius hiaticula - A137, nb	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Roseate tern, Sterna dougallii - A192, b	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Sandwich tern, Thalasseus sandvicensis - A191, b	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Teal, Anas crecca - A704, nb	Solent and Southampton Water SPA
Waterbird assemblage	Solent and Southampton Water SPA

These ‘notified features for Ryde sands and Wootton Creek SSSI that are also qualifying features of European sites features’ are omitted as the assessment of possible impacts on qualifying features of the European site are made in the accompanying Habitats Regulation Assessment.

The notified features of the SSSI that are not considered by the HRA process and therefore require further consideration in relation to any risk of impact from the coastal access rights are:

- Aggregations of non-breeding birds - sanderling (Calidris alba)
- Lowland mixed deciduous woodland
- Population of Schedule 8 stonewort - foxtail stonewort (Lamprothamnium papulosum)
- Saline coastal lagoons
- Vascular plant assemblage
- [Littoral sediment]

Littoral sediment habitat is a component of the Estuary type habitat considered within the Habitats Regulations Assessment. It is noted in the above list to recognise that there are specific titles used that differ between the various designations that can refer to the same habitat types. The above littoral sediment (sands and mud of the intertidal zone) is a significant components of a broader estuary habitat. As a component it is therefore considered within the estuary features of the noted European site.

There is no lowland mixed deciduous woodland within the area covered by this report – the woodland being within the area of the SSSI covered by IoW2. Therefore, this habitat type needs no further consideration. Likewise saline lagoons and foxtail stonewort.

The vascular plant assemblage is a broad category of features, present in a range of habitats. These features are not noted from within the units of the SSSI (units 1 – 3) that are within the zone of this report.

The whole of the area of the SSSI that is within scope of this report is littoral sediment.

Sanderling is a winter visiting bird distributed widely around the British coastline, preferring long sandy beaches and sandbars. The British Trust for Ornithology records that the population has been steadily increasing over past decades and notes it as a common bird. Sanderling can be found along most stretches of coast but are most abundant away from estuaries. The section of the SSSI in scope of this report, as noted is an estuary dominated by the intertidal littoral sediments and as such not of special significance to sanderling.

Current situation

Fishbourne, at the entrance to Wootton Creek is one of three car ferry terminals for the Isle of Wight that runs to and from Portsmouth. Adjacent this in the mouth of the creek is the Royal Victoria Yacht Club, offering mooring facilities and recreational and social activities as usually associated with such establishments. The west side of the creek is similar to the east side with its privately owned slipways and gardens running down the mean high water, that separates the Trail

from the potential spreading room as it runs along New Road from the intertidal zone. The west side of the creek is also mostly lined by resident's properties, gardens and slipways which run to mean high water. On this side of the creek there is an outdoor adventure centre and holiday village with log cabins on the banks of the creek. The adventure centre has private access to the creek and offers a variety of water sports activities. The creek itself offers tidal moorings along its length, with a popular pub and beer garden at its head.

The muddy uninviting tidal areas, flanked by private residences and associated fenced gardens further limits the amount of public access from the local roads and paths to the shore.

The condition of the SSSI units for the west of Wootton Creek is unfavourable no change (as assessed in 2019). The reason for unfavourable condition is due to the habitats being affected by water pollution particularly from agricultural run-off and discharges.

Risk analysis

The notified features of the SSSI that are associated with the littoral zone (wintering birds) that the three SSSI units on this western side of the creek are considered through the Habitats Regulations Assessment. There is potential for a risk from the right of public access on foot created over this area of coastal margin to SSSI features not considered through the HRA and which are not found in significant numbers or extent within these units. However, the area is generally inaccessible to the wider public, due to the large extent of excepted land such as the buildings/private dwellings and their curtilage and gardens preventing access to the foreshore. The foreshore itself is intertidal mudflats and not especially inviting to those wishing to utilise their right of access and those that currently access the area appreciate the risks and generally act accordingly to maintain their safety staying on existing hard areas and pathways. Because the area of intertidal mud is considered unsafe for the wider inexperienced public to have access to their rights will be removed via the S25A coastal access restriction. Therefore, the KCIIIECP will not be increasing access rights over this part of the SSSI. The interactions from local users are the existing environmental baseline that remains unaltered by the creation and removal of the right of access. The coastal access rights will not increase user accessibility to the SSSI.

Establishment works

No establishment works are proposed within this SSSI.

Assessment of coastal access proposals on Ancient Woodland

Ancient woodland is woodland that can be identified as still being woodland when compared to records from maps compiled around 1600. It can be in two distinct forms:

- ancient semi-natural woodland mainly made up of trees and shrubs native to the site, usually arising from natural regeneration or

- plantations on ancient woodland sites which are areas replanted with conifer or broadleaved trees that retain ancient woodland features, such as undisturbed soil, ground flora and fungi.

2.5% of the UK land cover is ancient woodland, and almost 20% of the UK woodland cover is composed of ancient woodland. The majority of ancient woodland is located within England.

There are pockets of ancient woodland throughout the area influenced by the proposals for the King Charles III England Coast Path between East Cower Ferry and Wootton Bridge. The majority have no formal (legislative) wildlife-based designation, except the small areas that fall within the King's Quay Shore SSSI. The location within the likes of the Registered Parks and Garden will offer a degree of protection to some, although this does not control or dictate the way the woodlands are managed.

Ancient woodland classification is a material planning consideration for local authorities, when considering the impacts of development. But likewise, this does not dictate or control the management of such woodlands by the owners or occupiers.

Natural England recognises the importance of ancient woodland and that there is a risk of direct impact on ancient native woodland to the south of Brocks Copse Road and through the area of replanted ancient woodland to the north.

In the replanted ancient woodland, the trail will utilise existing trackways and desire lines to minimise any damage to woodland trees and ground flora over and above that present. This woodland block is already subject to Open Access Rights and as such the trail and associated spreading room do not introduce new access to the woodland. Although the alignment of the Trail itself is a defined line of access. The National Trail standards and associated funding for ongoing maintenance will allow for enhancements to the trail to reduce any impacts from both Trail and other users if they were to become critical in the future. In this way the Trail can help protect and enhance the ancient woodland.

The section of Trail in the woodland to the south of Brocks Copse Road, will weave its way along this section to meet the new footbridge necessary to cross Palmer's Brook. There is no public right of access currently to this area and no evidence that the public have otherwise utilised the area. The creation of the National Trail recognises this is new access and will provide support to reduce any negative impacts to a minimum. This includes fencing to the landward side of the trail to reduce the risks of public ingress to the woodland areas they would have no right to access. Natural England have built on their own experiences of managing access and habitats and also sought the informal advice of Forestry Commission colleagues with experience in creating new access routes.

The creation of access routes in any habitat creates the risk of point damage to the habitat. This is not destruction, but a change in localised influence and pressures that many habitats, including ancient woodland can absorb if the trail is constructed in a sustainable way. It is recognised large

areas of woodland have public access, with limited direct effect from this access. But there can be point pressures. These pressures can differ through the year and depending on the pressure can 'heal', with the likes of frosts heaving the soils reducing compaction and leaf fall adding humus to the benefit of soil microbes.

Creating rides through woodlands is an encouraged management technique, to create areas of different vegetation height, to allow light to penetrate the woodland floor and ground flora to flourish or to flower at slightly different times to extend the time that nectar is available to insects in the early spring.

A trail, on a linear route, if it has a risk of impact from soil compaction this is to one side of the tree allowing the roots on the other sides to be unaffected. Trees are adaptable.

Visitor numbers are anticipated to be low to this section of the coast path for the reasons described. Footfall will be therefore below. Footfall is also not uniform, as walkers have different stride lengths and each user's foot falls to one side, and multiple users may not always step into the same spot. Some features may concentrate footfall, but as noted this may cause some damage, some change in ground flora and a point pressure for a tree, but it will not destroy the ancient woodland.

Management techniques can be employed if damage becomes at risk of being unsustainable. But even these methods have to prioritise one habitat component over another. A boardwalk may protect tree roots, but it may shade out ground flora or remove bare ground that is important to invertebrates and bird species. Any such access management must carefully consider the impacts and balance the needs of the walkers and the wildlife in this multi-functional system.

The adjacent metalled road will be exerting an influence over this woodland area, from the restriction of nutrients and water into the woodland edge to the added pollution from passing vehicles and road wash. This influence will reduce the interest of the edge of this block of woodland for small mammals and nesting birds. Some invasive species are noted in this strip, which can be removed by the creation of the Trail.

The woodland edge would appear to be generally unmanaged. To sustain and often to improve their interest, woodlands need to be managed. Diseased trees and limbs should often be removed. A publicly accessible strip, set back from any responsibilities to the Highway will allow trees to be monitored and restorative/preservative surgery to be undertaken.

Conclusion

We, Natural England, are satisfied that our proposals to improve access to the English coast between East Cowes and Wootton Bridge are fully compatible with our duty to further the conservation and enhancement of the notified features of King's Quay Shore & Ryde Sands and Wootton Creek SSSIs, consistent with the proper exercise of our functions[1].

[see on for Map A]

[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.

Map A. Designated sites

Coastal Access - Isle of Wight

SSSI between East Cowes Ferry and Wootton Bridge