

AM 631/22

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 14 July 2022

ACCESS UPDATE – THE ENGLAND COAST PATH AND PROMOTED WALKING ROUTES

Report by: Adam Vasey, National Park Access Ranger

Summary:

As the Access Authority for the National Park area, the National Park Authority (NPA) has agreed to carry out establishment works to create the new infrastructure for the England Coast Path. A paper to members at the Authority meeting in January 2017 set out the background, and members resolved that the Authority agree to establish the England Coast Path within the New Forest National Park on behalf of Natural England, once the route had been established.

We have started works on the NPA part of the Calshot to Gosport section (CCG), a short 3-mile section from Ashlett Creek to Calshot. A low-key opening of CCG is planned for early August (scheduled for 3 August 2022) in partnership with Hampshire County Council, Southampton City Council and Natural England. Also scheduled to open on the same date is the adjoining stretch Gosport to Portsmouth (GPM).

The principle stretch of the England Coast Path through the New Forest between Highcliffe and Calshot (HCS) has been assessed through a Habitats Regulations Assessment. This is now complete and has been passed to Defra along with Natural England's comments on the representations and objections. After this an official route will be determined by the Secretary of State. Once the stretch is approved and in liaison with landowners we will start the establishment. There are no official timescales regarding this section but our estimate is that the route will be approved in 2023 after which establishment works will start, lasting roughly one year.

The Recreation Management Strategy seeks to divert recreational pressure on designated habitats through a variety of means. One of those methods is through the improvement of walking routes utilising public rights of way within the National Park. The routes are for those to reach from home on foot or via public transport and are ideal for dog walking or anyone wishing to access the countryside on their doorstep. We work to physically improve the routes through access infrastructure and signage and have route guides available via a wide range of media.

This paper provides an update on the above access work.

Recommendation:

Members are asked to note and support the approach taken with respect to the England Coast Path and other promoted walking routes.

1. ENGLAND COAST PATH BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The creation of a public right of access along the English coast for open-air recreation on foot is provided for by the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (MCA 2009). The Act places a duty on Natural England (NE) to secure this access by means of a route and an associated margin of open access land for the public to enjoy. The coastal margin includes both the 'trail' (also referred to as the Coast Path) and 'spreading room' (those parts of the margin other than the trail).

2. LIABILITIES, STATUTORY DUTIES AND DISCRETIONARY POWERS

- 2.1 Much of the England Coast Path (ECP) will follow existing rights of way. Where access infrastructure is added onto a public right of way the liability remains the same (a mix of landowner and the Highways Authority, in this case Hampshire County Council). Where new access is created it follows the same precedence as CRoW (Countryside and Rights of Way Act) Access Land, where the Access Authority will often buy and install the infrastructure, but it legally belongs to the landowner. The NPA will take on responsibility for any new infrastructure on new access land for the five years of the Rural Development Programme grant. The NPA will check the ECP infrastructure regularly over the five years to ensure it remains in good condition and usable.
- 2.2 The MCA 2009 states that on coastal open access land landowners (or by extension the Highways Authority or Access Authority) are not liable for any injury caused by any physical feature on the land, whether natural or man-made.
- 2.3 Section opening in August is paid for through a RDPE grant. Future sections will be funded through the Defra Grant in Aid (GIA), referred to as the ECPEG- England Coast Path Establishment Grant (essentially the same as previous RDPE grant aiding). Through this we agree to keep all infrastructure in place and in good repair for five years. We have used high-specification design and construction materials to ensure that the gates and signposts will have a normal lifespan of at least 10 years. After this five-year period, the responsibility will revert to the Trail Partnership, or if no TP is formed, the Highways Authority (see section 4 below).
- 2.4 The following powers enable us to carry out our responsibility to ensure that the public has reasonable access to the coastal margin. They also provide us with optional powers to establish and maintain the path. These powers are:
- to undertake, or to make an agreement with an owner/occupier to undertake, works associated with the establishment and/or maintenance of the coastal route and associated margin (note that whilst there is no requirement to enable access into spreading room within coastal margin, we can do so if considered appropriate);
 - to erect and maintain signs and notices, appoint wardens and make byelaws

At the invitation or discretion of NE, an NPA may:

- undertake preliminary activities
- manage and maintain established coastal access land under a partnership agreement
- remove signs and notices
- manage directions to restrict or exclude access

3. ESTABLISHMENT WORKS

- 3.1 All the infrastructure is in place on the NPA part of Calshot to Gosport (CCG) section. We have installed 14 signposts, 5 new gates, 14 interpretation posts and 10 m of surface improvements. The signposts and interpretation posts are made from New Forest oak and we have used local contractors for production and installation. All landowners were informed of the works and are happy with the subsequent results.

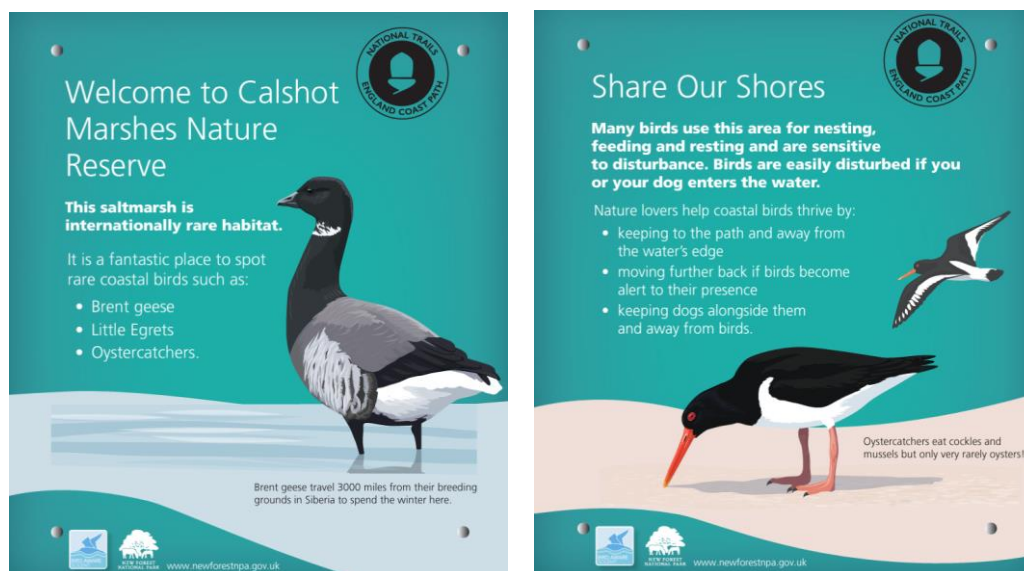


Fig 1- draft interpretive signs for the CCG section



Fig. 2- Photograph showing newly installed wooden kissing gate and sign next to accessible kissing gate.

- 3.2 A 'soft launch' opening of CCG is planned for 3 August 2022 which is the day the coastal access becomes legally implemented. One week prior to the opening we will attach all the necessary waymarkers and interpretation boards to fully brand the trail in preparation for the legal implementation of access rights.

4. ONGOING ECP MAINTENANCE

- 4.1 We intend to form a Trail Partnership with HCC and potentially other neighbouring access authorities. This Trail Partnership will draw down funds from the National Trails budget held by NE. The funding ratio is 3:1, with Access Authorities contributing £1 for every £3 NE contributes. The NPA contribution can include officer and volunteer time

and will essentially lead to an annual grant being given to the Trail Partnership, depending on the length of the ECP stretch. We can choose to allocate additional budget if required.

- 4.2 During discussions with HCC, they expressed an interest in leading that process and employing a Trail Partnership Officer to take responsibility for the management of the trail and any maintenance works, although this is not yet confirmed. The maintenance responsibility will then move from the NPA to the Trail Partnership.

5. PROMOTED WALKING ROUTES

- 5.1 The Recreation Management Strategy seeks to encourage recreation away from sensitive sites through a variety of means. One tool we have is our promoted walking route network which uses the Public Rights of Way network to create circular walking routes. These walking routes give excellent access into the countryside in robust habitats, perfect for regular dog walkers or others who are looking for a New Forest experience.
- 5.2 We improve this network of routes, in partnership with Hampshire County Council and Wiltshire Council, through signage improvements, stile to gate replacements and vegetation control.
- 5.3 Signposting is not only a directional aid but provides confidence for people unused to accessing public rights of way. We have added oak signposts to four promoted routes and plan to add signposts to two more routes. Digital signposting for all routes is provided by the New Forest Walks App which has been live since 2018. Vegetation control is done by NPA-led volunteer groups going out twice a month from April to October.
- 5.4 Route guides for all the walks are available from our website through a print screen function or a downloadable PDF. Physical copies of these route guides are available from Local Information Points at a modest cost. We recognise that there is no ‘silver bullet’ to alleviate the recreation pressure facing the New Forest and we hope that these promoted walking routes can be part of the solution.

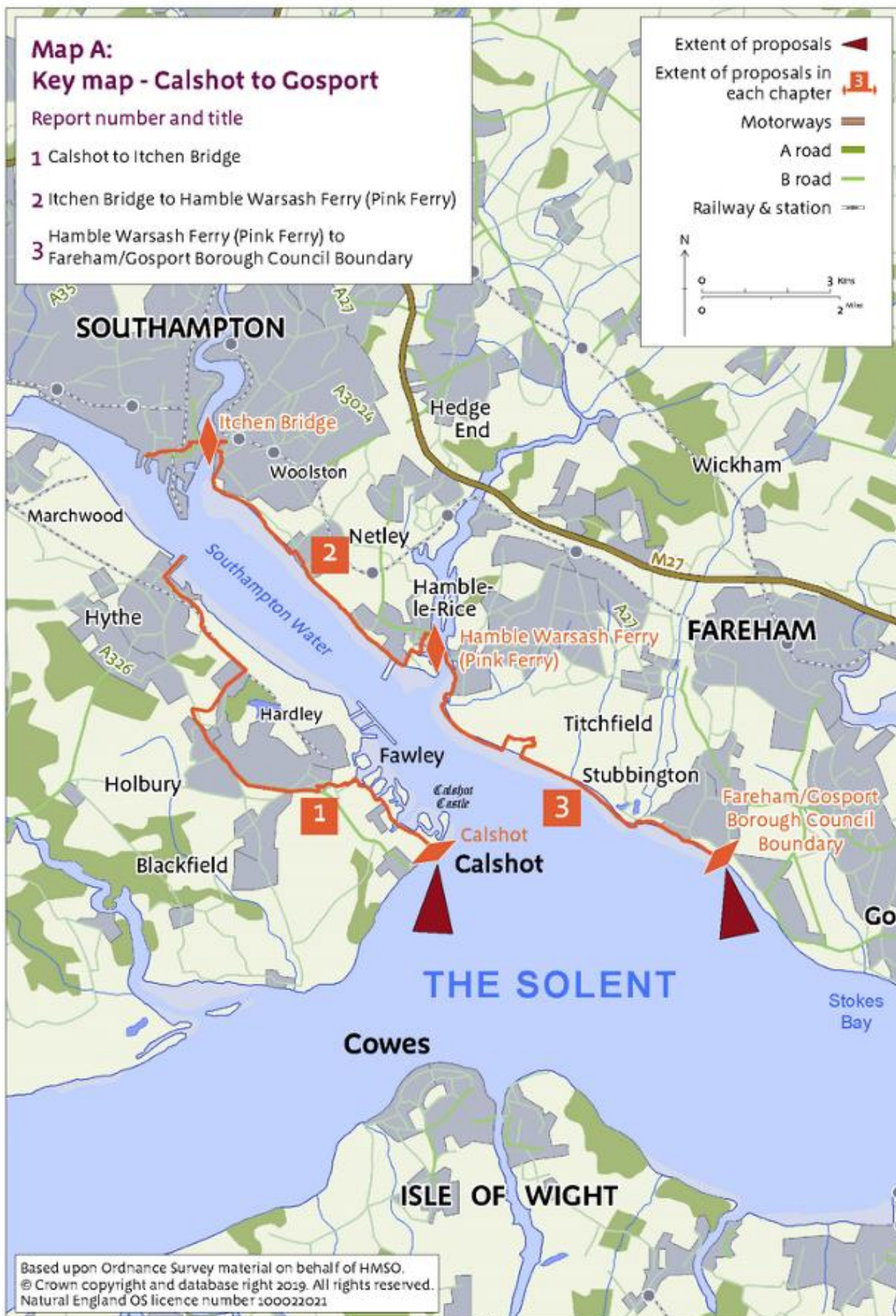
RECOMMENDATION

Members are asked to note and support the approach taken with respect to the England Coast Path and other promoted walking routes.

**Contact: Adam Vasey, National Park Access Ranger
07384 517633 adam.vasey@newforestnpa.gov.uk**

Equality Impact Assessment: There are no equality implications relating to the Authority carrying out the establishment role. The England Coast Path scheme has an accompanying Equality Impact Assessment.

Annex 1- Map of Calshot to Gosport route



Annex 2- Map of Highcliffe to Calshot route (not yet determined)

