

HERITAGE COASTS REVIEW 2022



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1. Introduction to the Review

England's 32 Heritage Coasts were defined between 1973 and 2001 as stretches of our finest coastline. They are recognised for their exceptionally fine scenic quality, their undeveloped character and for the special significance of the environment and cultural features they contain. The objectives of Heritage Coasts include the conservation of their natural beauty and heritage, the enhanced of public enjoyment and understanding, the improvement of the health of inshore waters and supporting the needs of their businesses and communities.

It is sixteen years since the last review of Heritage Coasts in England. National funding for Heritage Coasts came to an end in 2005 and activities since

then have been maintained from local authority budgets supported by external project funding. Over this period, much has changed in the coastal environment, with new policy priorities for nature, communities and natural processes, not to mention the growing urgency of climate change.

As an island nation, our coastline continues to loom large in the public consciousness. There is renewed interest in its abundant nature and its role in our health and leisure, as well as in our trade and national security. This review provides a timely stocktake of the state of England's finest coastal landscapes, as defined by its Heritage Coasts.

2. The extent and character of Heritage Coasts

Location and area: Heritage Coasts occupy about a fifth of England's coastline. They have defined landward boundaries which are typically 2km from the coast (but in places are as narrow as 100m or as wide as 7km). They are unique as a spatial definition in straddling the terrestrial–marine boundary and extending below Mean Low Water, although their seaward boundary is not defined.

Co-location with the designated landscapes: The large majority of Heritage Coasts lie within designated landscapes (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty - AONBs - and National Parks). Only Durham, Flamborough Headland, Spurn, Lundy and St Bees Head lie entirely outside a designated landscape. Heritage Coasts make up all or a large proportion of five AONBs (the Isles of Scilly, Northumberland Coast, North Devon Coast, Cornwall and South Devon AONBs) and cover all of the coastline of two National Parks (Exmoor and the North York Moors) and the large majority of the South Downs'. However, significant parts of some of these Heritage Coasts lie outside the designated landscapes they are associated with, creating anomalous boundaries.

Substantially undeveloped but close to large populations: Only 2% of Heritage Coasts are built-up, and Heritage Coasts represent a high proportion of England's undeveloped coast. However, some Heritage Coasts have large populations on their doorstep (e.g. Durham, North Yorkshire and Cleveland, Purbeck, West Dorset and South Devon). Nationally, a fifth of England's population live within an hour's drive of a Heritage Coast, making them highly accessible for recreation and enjoyment. In relative terms, many Heritage Coasts are both less developed but more accessible to people than many of the designated landscapes.

Patterns of land use: A feature of most Heritage Coasts' landscape is the narrow coastal strip (often around 500m wide) which consists of biodiverse habitats such as cliff and foreshore, salt marsh, mudflats, coastal heathland and unimproved pasture. A high proportion of their 'features of special significance and interest' and recreational activity are in this strip and it is likely to coincide with the statutorily defined coastal margin being created as part of the England Coast Path. Inland of this strip, land use tends to be dominated by productive farmland (arable or improved pasture) typical to the region.

3. The status and relevance of Heritage Coasts to national policy

Definition: Heritage Coasts are not a statutory landscape designation like AONBs and National Parks but are instead defined through voluntary agreement between Government and local authorities, subject to national criteria and objectives.

Origins: During the 1970s, 80s and 90s, Heritage Coasts were a key part of England's place-based environmental policy, with a significant national funding programme supporting activities by local authorities to deliver the four national objectives of Heritage Coasts.

Since 2000: The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which enhanced the status of AONBs, and the ending of the Countryside Agency's national funding of Heritage Coasts in 2005, effectively diminished their status. These factors have (inadvertently) placed them in a second league of protected landscapes.

Local authority interest: There continues to be interest from local authorities in the Heritage Coast definition, including in the extension of an existing Heritage Coast (St Bees Head) and the creation of a new one (on the Lincolnshire Coast). Local authorities see the definition as providing an important 'place making' cache which recognises their environmental quality as places to live, work and visit, and as an opportunity to give greater planning protection in the face of high development pressure.

Environmental significance: Heritage Coasts are rich in designated sites, with over a quarter of their area designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, a high concentration of Scheduled Monuments and high levels of ownership and management by environmental bodies, particularly the National Trust. Heritage Coasts' marine extent means that their seascape character is just as important to their scenic value as their landscape character. However, the newness of Seascape Character Assessment as a discipline means that few of the Heritage Coasts have had their distinctive seascapes described.

Policy relevance: Over the 16 years since the last review, England's coastline and coastal communities have received renewed attention in national policy and there has been increasing partnership working by organisations at the coast. Furthermore, the national objectives of Heritage Coasts remain as relevant to current national policy priorities, especially those at the coastal interface, as they did when they were developed.

Low profile in national policy: However, with very few exceptions, the recent national reviews and statements of England's landscape and environmental policy make no reference to the Heritage Coast definition or objectives. Most Heritage Coasts are invisible in national programmes related to these policies. The complete absence of Heritage Coasts from the Landscapes Review (2019) and Government's response to this (2022) is the most obvious example of this. The lack of a national 'champion' for Heritage Coasts, in comparison to AONBs and National Parks is likely to be one reason for this.

Social challenges: Communities in and close to Heritage Coasts face significant social and economic issues, including high levels of multiple deprivation (e.g. Durham, North Northumberland and North Yorkshire & Cleveland) and a lack of affordable housing for local workers (e.g. South Devon, Cornwall Heritage Coasts and the Isles of Scilly).

Stakeholders are aware of the relevance of the definition (through its fourth national objective) to these issues and, especially, its potential to promote a high-quality place-based identity that stimulates sustainable economic development and recognises the needs of the sectors that sustain this identity. The poor health outcomes present in many coastal communities and the opportunities to enhance these through environmental investment and action was highlighted by many stakeholders. However, practical use of the Heritage Coast definition to achieve these goals is currently limited.

4. Strategic approaches and planning in Heritage Coasts

Strategic partnerships and management plans:

Unlike the designated landscapes, formal partnerships involving a range of stakeholders were not a core feature of most Heritage Coasts when they were defined. Heritage Coasts originally developed their own Management Plans, but most have not maintained one since the early 2000s. The Durham, Sussex and Lundy Heritage Coasts are exceptions on both counts, currently having Heritage Coast Partnerships and a dedicated Management Plan (although the status of those in Sussex is under review).

Reliance on designated landscapes plans: The overwhelming majority of Heritage Coasts, being in designated landscapes, are in principle covered by the remit of their AONB or National Park statutory management plan. However, in practice there is usually little evidence of these addressing the Heritage Coast to any significant extent, with the consequences that:

- Heritage Coasts' inshore marine areas are usually not covered;
- The importance and needs of "the features of special significance and interest" for which Heritage Coasts were defined may be overlooked;
- They usually do not have the benefit of an agreed strategy for engaging with stakeholders and attracting external funding to deliver Heritage Coast objectives; and
- The terrestrial areas of those Heritage Coasts that are associated with designated landscapes but actually lie outside their boundaries are effectively 'orphaned'.

Protection in land use planning: Heritage Coasts are recognised by paragraph 178 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which enhances previous Government planning guidance and protection. All Local Plans covering Heritage Coasts contain policies reflecting its requirements. A key element of NPPF paragraph 178 is the importance given to the 'special character' of Heritage Coasts but these are often either poorly defined or their description is difficult to locate. In practice, for the

large majority of Heritage Coasts that lie within designated landscapes, NPPF paragraphs 176 and 177 take precedence.

Protection in marine and national infrastructure planning:

The status of Heritage Coasts is somewhat ambiguous in the Marine Policy Statement that govern the licensing of marine activities, and they gain no formal protection in the National Policy Statements that govern national infrastructure planning. However, in both there are case examples where the presence and special character of Heritage Coasts have been taken into account and given a level of protection.

Brand recognition and place-making: Tourism businesses at the coast continue to use the term 'Heritage Coast' to promote their area. Contributors to the study felt that the public may understand it better than the two statutory landscape designations, perhaps because the term is succinct and its meaning is clear.

The place-making role of the Heritage Coast brand is a factor in the interest by some local authorities to extend or define new Heritage Coasts. However, contributors to this study highlighted the risks of confusion and dilution that arise from overlapping place-branding. They emphasised the benefits of more local identities, including those of the individually named designated landscapes which are better known than the individual names of Heritage Coasts. The international status of Heritage Coasts as Category V Protected Landscapes/Seascapes (recognised by IUCN) is unclear and risks being lost.

National guidance and liaison: There has been no national guidance on Heritage Coasts since 1992 and the definition has a relatively low profile within Natural England, its sponsoring body. Unlike the designated landscapes, there is no organisation that champions the definition. Frustration was expressed by some of the people working in Heritage Coasts at the lack of networking and sharing of information between them.

5. Management activities in Heritage Coasts

An emphasis on practical management activities: During the first three decades of the Heritage Coast definition, the focus of activity was on practical environmental and recreational management, involving staff working to manage and enhance the coastline at a grassroots level.

Many contributors to this study felt that the Heritage Coast definition continues to offer great potential for co-ordinated practical management work with landowners, and engagement with local residents, businesses and visitors.

Delivering the Heritage Coast objectives: As noted earlier, all four of the national objectives of the Heritage Coast definition remain highly relevant – indeed even more relevant than during the period of the last review in 2006. There is good evidence of activity to deliver the Heritage Coast objectives in all Heritage Coasts but, with few exceptions, this is not being done as part of specific Heritage Coast programmes. This activity is taking place *in* Heritage Coasts (as areas of particular value and need), rather than *for* Heritage Coasts (as a landscape with a defined national status).

Natural beauty, public enjoyment and health of inshore waters: Delivery of the first Heritage Coast objective (natural beauty and heritage) is regarded as the priority by most stakeholders and there are many examples of beneficial management projects taking place, most of them using time-limited external funding.

6. Future trajectories for Heritage Coasts

The Heritage Coast ‘journey’: The history of the definition can be characterised as one of pioneering advancement (1970s to early 2000s) and latterly – for many but not all Heritage Coasts – one of stagnation as they have lost national funding and recognition in national policy. Looking to the future, there are three possible scenarios:

1. Retain: If there is no deviation from the status quo, the Heritage Coasts that are in decline or are being overshadowed by a designated landscape will continue to become less influential and increasingly irrelevant.

The second objective (public enjoyment and understanding) is also strongly supported, with activities being split between the physical management of recreation and the enhancement of public understanding and appreciation.

Delivery of the third objective (the health of inshore waters) remains the weakest, being largely outside the remit of local authorities and designated landscape bodies.

The economic and social needs of communities: Much of the work to deliver the first two objectives contributes to this fourth objective. Contributors to this review also saw potential for Heritage Coasts’ high scenic qualities and natural capital to be used to promote sustainable and economic growth more widely, particularly in relation to the health and wellbeing and levelling-up agendas and to adaptation to climate change.

Responsibility for the Heritage Coast definition: Since Heritage Coasts are defined through agreement between Natural England and local authorities, responsibility for administering the Heritage Coast definition rests with the local authority. In designated landscapes this means the AONB Units and National Park Authorities. However, there is no formal recognition or requirement in the national funding arrangements for AONBs and National Parks for them to carry out this function.

Where local authority structures change, such as through Unitary Authority Status, there is no process for refreshing the new authority’s commitment.

2. Revive: This would involve a more energised and nationally supported approach to resurrect and reprioritise the national objectives of the definition, through an updated understanding of the special character and needs of Heritage Coasts within the context of their designated landscapes.

3. Re-imagine: With Government proposing to give AONBs and National Parks a new ‘unified mission’, now might be the right time to re-imagine the Heritage Coast definition, focussing on supporting high quality coastal landscapes close to where people live and visit to enhance place-making, and the opportunities for ‘green’ economic development.

7. Overall conclusion on the state of Heritage Coasts in 2022

Heritage Coasts continue to be coastlines of exceptionally fine scenic quality, rich in nature and cultural heritage, and highly valued as places to live, work and visit.

The objectives of Heritage Coasts, last updated 30 years ago, remain highly relevant to new national policy priorities. This is particularly the case at the terrestrial-marine interface where Heritage Coasts are unique as a spatial definition.

Notwithstanding the continuing relevance of its national objectives, the Heritage Coast definition is no longer referenced in national policy reviews and statements such as the Landscapes Review. An exception to this is the planning protection provided to Heritage Coasts through paragraph 178 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

Activities that deliver most of the national objectives of Heritage Coasts continue to take place, supported by a wide range of partners. But the definition's omission from recent national landscape policy means that these can be ad hoc and lack the benefit of a stated shared ambition, coordinated and channelled through the recognition of the nationally important and valued coast.

There is no current national monitoring of Heritage Coasts, leading to the risk that actions may be less joined up and outcomes less effective than they could be.

Planning policy appears to be effective in maintaining their undeveloped nature on

land, but there is ambiguity over their status in marine and national infrastructure planning.

In most areas, the Heritage Coast definition itself is becoming lost and is receiving little dedicated attention within the designated landscapes in which most Heritage Coasts occur. A past strength of Heritage Coasts as a mechanism for engaging in practical environmental and recreational management with business and communities appears to have fallen out of favour, in part due to reduced funding.

Despite these shortcomings, the definition offers significant new capacity, reflecting national policy priorities, as a voluntary place-based status that complements designated landscapes.

Its key potential is in recognising coastal landscapes of high scenic and other environmental value which in turn provide opportunities for sustainable economic development, the growth of social capital within communities, and enhancement of personal health and wellbeing.

Unless there is reconfirmation by Government of the role of the Heritage Coast definition, and new national guidance on how this role can be delivered by local authorities alongside the designated landscapes, it is likely that the Heritage Coast definition will continue to decline, diminishing the valuable opportunities it offers to the nation's stretches of finest coastline.

8. Recommendations to address these findings

The current status of Heritage Coasts

- A. Defra should reaffirm the status of Heritage Coasts in the family of national protected landscapes, including their importance as defined areas of England's finest stretches of undeveloped coast and their distinctive role in delivering national policy priorities in these areas.
- B. There should be liaison between Natural England and local planning authorities, following local authority reorganisation or the creation of designated landscapes, to ensure Heritage Coast agreements and commitments are reaffirmed.
- C. The alignment between the boundaries of Heritage Coasts and designated landscape boundaries should be given a priority in Natural England's designations review, ensuring that designation boundaries encompass all parts of the Heritage Coast they are associated with.
- D. Defra, through Natural England, should consider whether the status of Heritage Coasts as internationally recognised IUCN Category V protected landscapes/ seascapes should be reconfirmed and, if so, should support the relevant local authorities in achieving this.

The role of Heritage Coasts in delivering national policy priorities

- E. The role of Heritage Coasts in the delivery of the national Nature Recovery Network (and for example the 30by30 target) should be clarified, including the ways in which Heritage Coasts should be recognised and supported through Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
- F. Priority should be given in Environmental Land Management schemes, particularly the Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery schemes, for projects in Heritage Coasts to protect and enhance their exceptional scenic quality and features of special significance and interest.

Planning protection of Heritage Coasts

- G. In view of the ambiguous references to Heritage Coasts in the Marine Policy Statement (2011) and the National Policy Statements, the status of Heritage Coast as a material consideration in Marine and National Infrastructure Planning should be clarified so that it matches that in the NPPF.

- H. Technical guidance to local authorities should be provided on how and where the 'special character' of Heritage Coasts should be described so that it can be used effectively in planning decisions, including on a non-statutory basis in NSIPs through Natural England's advice.

The Delivery of Heritage Coast objectives

- I. Guidance should be prepared for designated landscape bodies on how Heritage Coast should be recognised, and their objectives included in their statutory Management Plans, and in the preparation of specific Heritage Coast documentation where appropriate.
- J. Guidance should be provided to local authorities and designated landscape bodies on how they can use their influence to support Heritage Coast objectives outside their LA / landscape designation boundaries - including and particularly offshore.
- K. Guidance to national agencies, statutory partnerships (e.g. Regional Flood and Coastal Authorities) and utility companies should be provided on how they can support the delivery, with local authorities, of Heritage Coast objectives. This is particularly relevant to the third objective (health of inshore waters), which relies on their involvement.
- L. Consideration should be given to how any new national funding that becomes available to local authorities, AONB teams and National Parks can be directed to 'on-the-ground' delivery of Heritage Coast objectives, recognising their broad environmental, economic, social and health benefits and their high value and profile with local communities and visitors.
- M. Progress towards achieving Heritage Coast objectives should be included in existing national monitoring frameworks, for instance as spatial subsets of the indicators in the 25 Year Environment Plan, the Outcomes Framework for Protected Landscapes and the People and Nature Survey.
- N. Natural England should consider how a regular programme of networking amongst organisations and lead staff working in Heritage Coasts could be developed.

Note: The Heritage Coast review was commissioned to provide Natural England with evidence and analysis. These independent recommendations are not agreed actions.