

North Somercotes Parish Council

Renewal of Application for Nomination of RAF Station/Land at Donna Nook as an Asset of Community Value

1. Introduction

In December 2018 the land at Donna Nook formerly known locally as the RAF station, and currently part of the East Coast Air Weapons Ranges Defence Training Establishment, which is administered by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, was listed as an Asset of Community Value.

During the last 5 years the community and visitors have continued to demonstrate that the use of the land is most definitely not ancillary to the main use of the property, and that use continues unabated – especially during COVID lockdown – when it substantially increased. The ability to access the dunes and beach, as well as the historic footpaths, for recreation during lockdown were of considerable importance to the local inhabitants, particularly when travelling further afield was not permitted, and played a crucial part in maintaining and improving the social and mental well-being of the community.

The parish council have continued to work hard on pressing forward with satisfactorily resolving the position over the differing opinion as to the extent of the route of the Public Right of Way NSFP 28 to reach the historic walked beach paths in consultation with the DIO and Lincs County Council Footpaths officers. This has now been agreed and in addition the proposed route of the English Coastal Path at this location is now in the final stages of consultation and official formal recognition of these long-used beach paths, which will join up with FP28, is therefore expected to be confirmed shortly.

The parish council therefore formally requests that the listing of this land is renewed in the Assets of Community Value originally granted in December 2018.

2. Background

There is a long historic association of access and use of the outmarsh, beach and dunes at Donna Nook by the public and inhabitants of North and South Somercotes. The beach has been used for recreation including playing cricket, beach-combing, fishing, picking samphire, gathering cockles, kite flying, walking, picnicking, etc for many generations – see Doc A1.

Public Rights of way Footpaths NS18 and NS28 traverse the dunes, and the connection of FP28 to join the foreshore path has now been resolved by agreement and will be added to the Definitive Map. This historic route will now officially connect with the old walked beach paths which will shortly be confirmed as the route of the English Coastal Path – see Doc A2, Doc B, Doc C, Doc 1, Doc 14, and Doc 15 attached.

Loss of access to and use of this recreational land area would constitute a significant negative impact on the amenity of local people and visitors, and this right of access and use was recognised and protected when the Air Weapons Range relocated here from Theddlethorpe in the 70s following a great deal of campaigning by local residents and the parish council and the involvement of Mr Antony Lambton MP, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (RAF) and Mr Jeffrey Archer MP for Louth and Horncastle (Doc B- Appendix 1 refers).

It is understood that it is possible that the Air Weapons Range may be decommissioned in the future and - in keeping with the arrangements that were discussed with the Parish Council when this was previously broached in October 1981 by Flight Lieut Gray – see Doc 2 attached, the parish council believes that the area should continue to be listed as a Community Asset to reflect its enduring significant cultural, historical and recreational/social value to the local community.

North Somercotes Parish Council

3. Recreational Use and Social Wellbeing

The Lincolnshire coast provides a variety of seaside holiday and recreation opportunities ranging from the 'fun and organised activities' at Skegness to the 'natural rural wildlife' experiences.

At Donna Nook, which is within the designated Coastal Conservation Zone and East Lindsey Heritage Coast, the dunes and beach offer the epitome of the 'natural rural wildlife' experience, providing an important recreational amenity. The big skies and wide-open grassy spaces and sand dunes with coastal marsh, access to the beach and sea and a variety of natural habitats offer year-round interest along this stretch of unspoilt coast. The area also contains a wide range of natural habitats for flora and fauna; the area was declared a National Nature Reserve in July 2002, as well as being a SSSI site.

This area, currently owned by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO)/RAF, is used regularly and extensively by many members of the community and numerous visitors – both those who are staying in the village or staying elsewhere and coming from further afield, such as the Ramblers or those undertaking long and short distance coastal walks as well as those from neighbouring coastal and inland villages and towns. For example, in winter during the seal season there are often in excess of 5,000 visitors per day, or around c60,000 over the season, from all over the UK and overseas. The Lincs Wildlife Trust often hosts visitors to Donna Nook, keen to observe the huge variety of wildflowers and bird and animal life on the Range and adjacent Realignment site and Nature Reserve.

The dunes, beach paths and beach are used for a variety of social wellbeing and cultural interests by a wide selection of the local community, who come here for recreation including walking, cycling, jogging, horse riding, visiting war time remains, bird watching, ship watching, dog walking, picnics, aircraft spotting, boating, fishing, samphire collecting, beach combing, firewood collecting, kite flying, nature spotting and playing by children. In effect, the land has been very much used as a village green would be elsewhere, providing an unsurpassed feeling of freedom and space for all who use it.

The car park at Donna Nook has a long and well documented history and the long-standing historic access from Marsh Lane dating back to the King Charles 1st Charter enables visitors to access the beach, one of only two access areas with parking on this stretch of coast - the other being at Howdens's Pullover to the South. – see Lincs County Council Information in Doc 3 attached.

When the Range is in active use, access across the beach to the sea is limited to the area outside of the Range Danger Boards – see Doc 4 attached. Access to the beach is available in the evenings, weekends and bank holidays apart from when the Range is active on some Mondays and Wednesday evenings. The Red Flag at the entrance at Donna Nook and the other access points along the coast denotes when the Range is active and should not be entered.

However, there is always access to the old section of the Public Right of Way NS18 from Stonebridge to Pye's Hall, and the area at the Northern end of the Range outside of the Danger Boards, even when the Range is active. Or to access the new sea bank to progress on to Grainthorpe and beyond around the realignment site. South from the Stonebridge access, the dune path goes past the RAF work area entrance and the Public Right of Way NS28 – also always open, then continues down past Merrikin's Pullover (which provides South Somercotes' access to the beach and sea), Howden's Pullover, and Sea Lane Saltfleet – see Doc 1.

These footpaths and access points are all in the 'safe corridor', which can be used even when the Range is Active, and which was agreed in the 1970s to accommodate long standing historic use prior to the Range transferring to Donna Nook from Theddlethorpe. This is further detailed in the copy of the letter to The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson and the Appendix 1 referred to above in Docs A2, B and C.

North Somercotes Parish Council

The potential loss of access to these traditional paths, which are not yet shown on the Definitive Map, but which are important public amenities, resulted in an agreement to define an agreed path (with a winter alternative for this PROW and the English Coastal Path to avoid the breeding seals) rather than pursue a Public Right of Way claim. Similarly, the proposals by the Environment Agency in 2012 to divert and remove a large beach-front section of FP18 (between Stonebridge and Pye's Hall) as part of the Donna Nook Realignment Works resulted in over 50 objections, strongly supported by the Parish Council. This culminated in a Public Inquiry held in June 2018, which resulted in FP18 remaining as a Public Right of Way with stubs up to the section of the breach across the Eau at each side of the bank at the former Pye's Hall sluice bridge site.

The potential loss of future access to these paths and beach/sea access, or the introduction of restrictions on the type or frequency of future use, were of great concern to the community and the Parish Council and we are therefore pleased that they have been satisfactorily resolved with public access preserved for the future. As well as the loss to the public at large, a significant number of local businesses providing bed and breakfast, holiday cottages and caravans, as well as those relying on passing trade such as the restaurants shops and pubs, could have been negatively impacted if all access or any form of restricted access to the dunes, paths and beach areas were to occur in the future. This in turn could create serious negative consequences for the long-term viability of this coastal community and others who are reliant on and/or enjoy the availability of this natural amenity area.

The attached Appendix 1 at Doc B compiled in June 2018 as part of the work on the preferred route for the English Coastal Path provides further evidence of the strong historical and cultural ties of the community with this traditional recreational area and the degree of importance attached to it. This is further amplified by the historic details and stories contained in the previously submitted book 'Yan Tan Tethera' – the story of North Somercotes which was produced by the North Somercotes and District Study Group, and amplified in Doc A1.

The use by the community of this traditional area of wild coast is expected to continue and grow as recreation of this nature which provides an escape from urbanisation and an opportunity to freely access and experience the natural environment are becoming rarer yet are increasingly sought. In addition, local tourism and businesses need to be able to continue to rely upon the availability of this asset, and further their economic aspirations to develop their year-round businesses while protecting the amenity and features which make this such a unique area of the Heritage Coast.

Given the importance of this natural asset to the community, it is fully expected that sufficient interest and resources – with the full support of the Parish Council – could readily be generated in order to be in a position to bid for either the whole or any part of the land, should the DIO/RAF choose to dispose of it in the future, as they have done with other similar assets.

This in turn would be in keeping with the Parish Council's strong desire to retain and safeguard this important social and recreational amenity for the future; it is also strongly aligned with Lincolnshire County Council's economic aim for the Heritage Coast of focusing on nature tourism and year-round opportunities for local businesses, generating interest and support for the conservation of nature and wildlife for the benefit of everyone, and promoting a strong visitor economy while encouraging sustainable use of heritage/cultural assets.

Submitted on behalf of North Somercotes Parish Council

Sheila Pearce
Parish Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer

North Somercotes Parish Council

Enclosures:

- Doc A1. Memo from [REDACTED] regarding historic beach usage in response to the NSFP18 Inquiry
- Doc A2. Letter 18-10-18 to The Right honourable Gavin Williamson CBE MP, Secretary of State for Defence
- Doc B. Appendix 1 – Background to the long standing and historic use of the coastal path in the parish of North Somercotes – June 2018
- Doc C. Appendix 2 – Aerial view of walked routes
- Doc 1. Aerial image of Donna Nook illustrating historic walked paths currently being claimed as PROW
- Doc 2. Letter from Theddlethorpe Parish Council dated 1 October 1981 confirming Flt Lieut Gray's intention to hold a meeting of interested parish councils regarding the future release of the foreshore at Donna Nook.
- Doc 3. Lincs County Council – details of Coastal Access points listing Donna Nook as giving access to the quieter part of the coast
- Doc 4. Map showing Range Danger area and Danger Board locations
- Doc 5. Yan Tan Tethera – the story of North Somercotes produced in 2018 by the North Somercotes and District Study Group: particularly pages 16/17 Porters Marsh, pages 25/26 Pye's Hall and Claribel, Page 35 Cockling and Shrimping, pages 66/67 The Ark, page 92 RAF Donna nook, and pages 107-123 Beside the Sea.
- Doc 6. A Short Guide to the North Somercotes Landscape – see particularly the points 8, 9 and 10.
- Doc 7. Example range of flora – including Pyramid Orchids amongst the dunes by FP18 at Donna Nook
- Doc 8. Expansive view out to sea, with Range Danger Board in the background and annual samphire and sea lavender in the foreground, after high tide
- Doc 9. Walkers enjoying the extensive views out across to Spurn Point and shipping in the Humber
- Doc 10. Sunset over the Range looking towards Grimsby Dock Tower - summer 2002
- Doc 11. Enclosure Map extract showing 40ft access from Marsh Lane and the footpaths marked either side of the access
- Doc 12. North Somercotes Businesses as of June 2023
- Doc 13. Parish Council Annual Parish Meeting Notes 6-4-22 regarding the English Coastal Path Proposals
- Doc 14. English Coastal Path Key Map A – Mablethorpe to Humber Bridge
- Doc 15. English Coastal Path Map E3 – Donna Nook to Humberstone Stretch