

Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill: Briefing for Commons Committee

New clause 45: Health & wellbeing

Summary

This briefing is on behalf the [Better Planning Coalition](#), representing 29 organisations across the housing, planning, environmental, transport and heritage sectors. It covers [new clause 45](#) on health and wellbeing which has been tabled by Rachael Maskell MP.

The new clause has been tabled to address a significant gap in the Bill, which fails to include any targeted measures on health and wellbeing, despite these areas respectively comprising levelling up mission 7 (health) and levelling up mission 8 (wellbeing) in the [Levelling Up White Paper](#). The new clause would require authorities to contribute to these two missions by preparing plans to reduce health inequalities and improve wellbeing, including through support for active travel and increased access to nature, and having regard to these measures in the exercise of their planning functions. Enhancing communities to improve health and wellbeing outcomes should be at the heart of levelling up, to ensure that someone's physical environment does not reduce but enhances the length, quality and happiness of their life.

The role of planning in improving health and wellbeing

The 2010 Marmot Review [Fairer Society, Healthy Lives](#) recommended integrating health with planning, transport, environment and housing departments in order to address the wider determinants of health. Since 2010, evidence of the relationships between health and the built and natural environments has grown¹ and the role geographies play in influencing health and wellbeing is now better understood. Research shows that the unequal distribution of high-quality built environments and access to natural space contributes to health inequalities in England.² These inequalities have grown over recent years.³

Spatial planning can address these inequalities, shaping sustainable, thriving and healthy places where everyone can be physically active in their daily lives, accessing services and natural spaces by walking, wheeling and cycling, and enjoy a healthy natural environment. This in turn can improve physical and mental health and well-being, particularly among communities historically deprived of high-quality walking, wheeling and cycling routes, clean air, and accessible natural spaces.⁴

Public authorities can actively support delivery of the Government's levelling up missions on health (7) and wellbeing (8) and reduce geographical disparities in health outcomes through exercising their planning functions. The failure of the Bill to legislate for this through enforceable legal duties is a significant missed opportunity.

¹ [The Marmot Review 10 Years On](#), p103

² PHE. Health Profile for England: 2018. [Wider determinants of health](#).

³ [Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On](#)

⁴ [Spatial Planning for Health An evidence resource for planning and designing healthier places](#) PHE (2017)

New clause 45

The new clause would address the health and wellbeing gap in the Bill by enshrining in law a new objective to reduce health inequalities and improve people's wellbeing. It would require public authorities to actively participate in delivering that objective, by preparing and publicising a health inequalities and wellbeing improvement plan, identifying what actions the authority will take to further the new statutory objective.

Recognising the important role of spatial planning in facilitating levelling up, the new duty requires local planning authorities to have regard to both the new statutory objective and the health inequalities and wellbeing improvement plan when they are exercising their planning functions.

Although there is an existing legal duty on local authorities and the Secretary of State to improve public health in England⁵, there is no corresponding legal duty to reduce health inequalities or improve wellbeing on the part of local authorities. The new health inequalities and wellbeing duty fills this gap, complementing existing legislation. It would ensure that the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill results in meaningful reduction of health and wellbeing inequalities.

Legal duties on public authorities to prepare and publish plans to deliver specific improvements and objectives are commonly used in legislation.⁶ To further the general health and wellbeing objective, the health inequalities and wellbeing improvement plan would be the primary means by which public authorities would integrate health with planning, transport, environment and housing departments in order to address the wider determinants of health. Public authorities would have to identify, prioritise, and plan for reducing health inequalities and improve wellbeing, setting out how they would approach this in the exercise of their functions in England.

The clause would require authorities, when drafting health inequalities and wellbeing improvement plans and applying them through the exercise of their planning functions, to have special regard to the desirability of:

The 20-minute neighbourhood principle

Councils are starting to recognise the strong link between levelling up and the delivery of neighbourhoods which accord with the [20 minute neighbourhood](#) principle.⁷ Research shows that people are generally happy to walk for 20 minutes⁸ to get to and from the places they need to go and 65% of UK adults agree that people should be able to meet most of their everyday needs within a 20 minute walk from their home.⁹ Creating places where people can meet most of their daily needs¹⁰ within

⁵ Section 12 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 inserted new section 2B into the NHS Act 2006 to give each relevant local authority a new duty to take such steps as it considers appropriate to improve the health of the people in its area (and for the Secretary of State, in England).

⁶ Eg Rights of Way Improvement Plans, mandated by sections 60-61 of the [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000](#).

⁷ See LB Newham's [15 Minute Neighbourhoods Delivery Plan](#).

⁸ 80% of journeys under a mile are made on foot, which usually equates to around a 20-minute walk.

⁹ Sustrans-commissioned YouGov Survey, 2019

¹⁰ Including food shops, schools, health services and natural space.

a 20 minute return walk of their home will help significantly to reduce health inequalities and improve wellbeing. The new legal duty would ensure a joined up, integrated approach to applying the 20-minute neighbourhood principle to the provision of services and facilities.

Opportunities to enable everyday physical activity

In the words of the Department of Health and Social Care; *“if physical activity were a drug, we would refer to it as a miracle cure, due to the great many illnesses it can prevent and help treat”*.¹¹ Road transport is the largest contributor to poor air quality, and the health problems this inflicts (disproportionately borne by ethnic minorities and deprived communities).¹² Given that walking, wheelchair use and cycling improves physical health and mental health and reduces air pollution,¹³ enabling everyone to be physically active in this way is pivotal in terms of reducing health inequalities and improving wellbeing. The new clause would require authorities to plan and deliver the infrastructure needed to increase physical activity.

We would also draw the attention of committee members to **new clause 81**, which would require development plans to incorporate policies and proposals for cycling and walking infrastructure plans and rights of way improvement plans. This would align active travel plans and development plans, helping to provide the infrastructure required to increase physical activity. We hope that new clause 81 can also be supported.

New clause 45 would also require authorities, when drafting health inequalities and well-being improvement plans, to set objectives to:

Increase access to high quality natural spaces

There is now strong scientific evidence of the health and wellbeing benefits of having access to nature. A 2014 review of evidence found that people *“who are more connected to nature tended to experience more positive affect, vitality, and life satisfaction compared to those less connected to nature”*.¹⁴ A 2016 evidence review concluded that *“living in areas with higher amounts of green spaces reduces mortality”*.¹⁵ This combination of mental and physical health benefits reduces NHS pressures; current green space provision results in estimated savings for the NHS of at least £100 million a year from fewer GP visits.¹⁶

This provision is however concentrated in the wealthier areas where access to nature is highest. One in three people in England, mainly in economically deprived communities¹⁷, do not have access to a

¹¹ [UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines](#)

¹² <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/163408/ethnic-minorities-deprived-communities-hardest-pollution/>

¹³ [Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On](#) citing de Nazelle A, Nieuwenhuijsen MJ, Antó JM et al. Improving health through policies that promote active travel: A review of evidence to support integrated health impact assessment. *Environ Int.* 2011; 37 (4): 766–77

¹⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25249992/>

¹⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26540085/>

¹⁶ <https://www.fieldsintrust.org/revaluing>

¹⁷ <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/news-report-finds-severe-inequalities-in-access-to-parks-and-greenspaces-in-communities-across-the-uk/>

greenspace within 15 minutes' walk of home.¹⁸ By requiring authorities to set and deliver on objectives to increase access to natural spaces, with higher targets applying in areas historically denuded of accessible natural spaces, the clause would increase the availability of life enhancing, life extending tonic to the people most in need of it.

Summary

The levelling up agenda has been defined as ensuring that "*geography is not destiny*".¹⁹ Changing the geography of a space, through 20-minute neighbourhoods, more opportunities for active travel and increased access to high quality natural spaces, will improve health and wellbeing outcomes, transforming destinies. New clause 45 will place these powerful levelling up tools in the hands of authorities, to the benefit of the communities they represent.

About the Better Planning Coalition

The Better Planning Coalition represents 29 organisations across the environment, housing, planning, heritage and transport sectors with one common goal: a planning system fit for people, nature and the climate. The Coalition is working to improve the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill.

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14.10.22

¹⁸ <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2021/12/07/how-natural-englands-green-infrastructure-framework-can-help-create-better-places-to-live/>

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-prime-ministers-levelling-up-speech-15-july-2021>