



Improving public access to nature

Briefing from Wildlife & Countryside Link

Executive summary

- Nature provides a significant boost to people’s mental and physical health.
- Access to nature, and the health benefits it provides, is uneven across the country, with people living in poorer communities having less opportunity to connect with nature.
- These inequalities could be addressed through a package of measures, including Government acceptance of amendments to the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill.
- Improving public access to nature would deliver a range of public health benefits, as well as boosting nature’s recovery. This briefing, prepared ahead of a backbench debate on access to nature expected in May 2023, sets out the policies required to deliver these benefits.

Improved public access to nature improves public health

There is strong scientific evidence of the health benefits of a healthy natural environment. Survey work suggests that spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature leads to a significant increase in wellbeing.¹ Polling conducted for the Mental Health Foundation has found 70% of UK adults find that being close to nature improves their mood.²

This combination of mental health benefits, and the physical activity required to access nature, enhances and extends life. 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*”.³ A 2016 evidence review concluded that “*living in areas with higher amounts of green spaces reduces mortality*”.⁴ A 2017 evidence review found “*a positive association between greater exposure to outdoor blue spaces and both benefits to mental health and well-being*”.⁵

These accumulated health benefits are such that existing green space provision results in estimated savings for the NHS of over £110 million a year from fewer GP visits.⁶ Separate 2017 research suggested overall savings of £860 million per year, in London alone, due to health benefits from green space provision.⁷

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-44097-3>

² https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHAW21_NATURE%20REPORT_ENG_web.pdf p12

³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25249992/>

⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26540085/>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1438463917302699>

⁶ <https://www.fieldsintrust.org/revaluing>

⁷ <https://www.vivideconomics.com/casestudy/natural-capital-accounts-for-public-green-space-in-london/>



In 2009 Natural England estimated that giving everyone in England good access to green space would reduce NHS pressures to such an extent as to save £2.1 billion in health spending every year.⁸ Updated for inflation, this analysis (recently used by Public Health England⁹) means that the more equitable provision of green space would deliver savings of £3 billion per year.

There is public demand for improved access to nature

Given these clear health benefits, it is perhaps not surprising that people appreciate access to nature and would like to enjoy more of it, especially following the shared experience of Covid-19 lockdowns.

A 2020 RSPB poll found 4 out of 5 people in England wanted the Government to increase the number of accessible nature-rich areas as part of a green recovery from Covid-19.¹⁰ 73% of UK adults surveyed in 2021 said that connecting with nature has been important in terms of managing their mental health during the pandemic.¹¹ Polling conducted by Link in January 2022 found that 80% of people want a 'legal right to local nature', with 83% saying having access to local natural spaces is more important post-pandemic.¹²

Inequalities in access to nature feed through into health inequalities

Despite high levels of public demand, accessible nature is not currently distributed equally across England. There are marked disparities in access to nature which fall across social-economic lines - the poorer the area, the less the access to nature.

Natural England analysis suggests that one in three people in England do not have access to a greenspace within 15 minutes' walk of home.¹³ Access to nature is concentrated in the wealthiest areas; 2021 research from Groundwork UK suggests that people on low incomes are nearly twice as likely to live in a neighbourhood without nature-rich spaces as those earning above the average income.¹⁴

These disparities have a disproportionate impact on minority ethnic groups. 2020 Friends of the Earth Greenspace Gap research suggests that 40% of people from ethnic minority backgrounds live in the most green-space deprived areas, compared to 14% of white people.¹⁵ This is supported by separate

⁸ <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35009>

⁹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/nature-and-a-green-recovery-from-covid-19/>

¹¹ https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHAW21_NATURE%20REPORT_ENG_web.pdf p10

¹² <https://www.wcl.org.uk/nature-for-everyone-polling.asp>

¹³ <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2021/12/07/how-natural-englands-green-infrastructure-framework-can-help-create-better-places-to-live/>

¹⁴ <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/news-report-finds-severe-inequalities-in-access-to-parks-and-greenspaces-in-communities-across-the-uk/>

¹⁵ <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/englands-green-space-gap>



survey work from the Ramblers, which found that just 39% of people from ethnic minority backgrounds reported living within five minutes' walk of a local park, field or canal path, compared to a national average of 57%.¹⁶

Friends of the Earth research has also highlighted north-south divide to access to nature in communities. When mapping the spread of woodland and trees, they found the vast majority of the top 20 local authority areas for tree cover to be in the South of England, with the vast majority of the 20 local authorities with the lowest tree cover being in the North of England.¹⁷ It is notable that this distribution runs parallel to life expectancies, which 2020 analysis by the Health Foundation found to be significantly lower in the North of England.¹⁸

2021 research from Imperial College London found that communities with a less healthy environment suffered more severe Covid-19 outcomes,¹⁹ suggesting a direct link between human health and the condition of the local environment.

This link is recognised by Public Health England, who concluded in a 2017 report that:

*"An ever-increasing body of research indicates that the environment in which we live is inextricably linked to our health across the life course. For example, the design of our neighbourhoods can influence physical activity levels, travel patterns, social connectivity, mental and physical health and wellbeing outcomes."*²⁰

Differing levels of access to a healthy natural environment, and the health benefits this access provides, is a contributing factor to health inequalities between different communities.

Commitments to improve access to nature need to be delivered

The analysis set out above - that access to nature delivers significant health benefits, that people appreciate those benefits, and that the lack of them contributes to health inequalities - is now broadly accepted across academia, civil society and policy makers.

The Government has acknowledged this consensus by committing to improve public access to nature. The Environmental Improvement Plan published on 31.01.23 contained a promise to *"work across government to fulfil a new and ambitious commitment that everyone should live within 15 minutes walk of a green or blue space"*.²¹ This follows on from the international target, agreed by the UK at UN Biodiversity Conference COP15 in December, to *"significantly increase the area and quality and*

¹⁶ <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/news/latest-news/2020/september/the-grass-isnt-greener-for-everyone.aspx>

¹⁷ <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/mapping-english-tree-cover-results-ranking-and-methodology>

¹⁸ <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

¹⁹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/toxic-air-linked-to-severity-of-covid-19>

²⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/729727/spatial_planning_for_health.pdf

²¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133967/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf



connectivity of, access to, and benefits from green and blue spaces in urban and densely populated areas” (target 12).²²

These commitments are welcome, but not legally binding. Ambitious legislative changes are needed to deliver them and ensure more equitable access to nature. To-date, we have not seen the policies required for delivery on access from the Government; the decision to renege on previous commitments to get rid of the deadline for recording historic rights of way represents an active policy set-back for access.²³

The EIP commitment needs to be a springboard for a programme of ambitious, funded policies to deliver on the 15 minute promise. The extent of the delivery challenge should not be underestimated – Link research published in May 2023 suggests that in more than 1 in 10 neighbourhoods 90%-100% of the population currently have no access to nature within 15 minutes’ walk.²⁴ The extent of nature-deprivation in communities across the country requires policy intervention on a significant scale.

Improved access to nature can be delivered through the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill

An appropriate legislative vehicle for delivering on access to nature commitments is currently before Parliament, in the form of the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill. Access to nature is a powerful levelling up tool, capable of delivering better health outcomes in disadvantaged communities. The Bill is also the only legislation on the horizon concerned with the planning system, where key changes need to take place if public access to nature is to be meaningfully improved.

A number of amendments have been tabled during the Bill’s passage through Parliament, which would improve public access to nature. As the Bill moves to report stage in the House of Lords and then to ping-pong over the coming months the Government should make changes to it, incorporating the following amendments:

A Levelling Up Mission on access to a healthy environment:²⁵ This would require the Secretary of State to set and deliver on a levelling up mission to increase access to a healthy environment, including an objective to maximise the number of people who live within 15 minutes’ walk of a high-quality natural space. The inclusion of access to nature within the levelling up missions legislated for by Part 1 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill would provide legal underpinning for the Environmental Improvement Plan’s 15 minutes target, helping to ensure that it is delivered.

²² <https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-cbd-press-release-final-19dec2022>

²³ <https://www.oss.org.uk/environment-minister-breaks-government-pledge-to-save-historic-paths/#:~:text=The%20deadline%20means%20that%20on,then%20be%20lost%20for%20ever.>

²⁴ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/huge-nature-access-gap-for-15-minute-nature-promise.asp>

²⁵ See amendment 28 from Lords committee stage:

<https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/49859/documents/2958>



A local authority duty to reduce health inequalities including through improving access to nature.²⁶ This would require local planning authorities to include policies to reduce health inequalities in their local development plan, including policies to improve access to nature. This local authority duty could include a requirement to implement a Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, to set out exactly how an authority will deliver the Environmental Improvement Plan 15 minutes target across the area it covers. The preparation of Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategies is already recommended in Natural England's voluntary Green Infrastructure Framework²⁷, the duty could make these strategies mandatory. We would strongly recommend that funding commensurate with the demands of administering the new duty be made available to local authorities.

New statutory purposes for National Parks.²⁸ This would implement a key proposal from the Glover Review of Protected Landscapes (agreed but not yet delivered by the Government²⁹), which recommended that National Park authorities should be given a range of new purposes, including one to improve people's connection to nature. National Parks can play a greater role in allowing people from all backgrounds to enjoy the benefits of accessing nature – a new statutory purpose is needed to enable this.

A new right to a healthy environment.³⁰ This would establish that everyone has a right to a clean and healthy environment. This was recognised by the United Nations in a July 2022 resolution³¹, which subsequently underpinned the Global Biodiversity Framework agreed at UN COP15 in December 2022. The Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill could help practically deliver this right in UK legislation, setting a duty on public bodies to have regard to the right to a healthy environment in decision-making, requiring them to take steps to help people access and enjoy a healthy environment. The establishment and enforcement of this right is the main ask of Link's Nature for Everyone campaign, backed by 80 nature, health and community organisations.³²

Taken as a whole, these measures would add up to an effective legislative package to deliver on commitments to improve access to nature; requiring central Government to sustain progress towards meeting a legal target and requiring local Government to deliver towards that target on the ground (with appropriate financial assistance). Enabling National Park authorities to do more to connect people

²⁶ See amendment 241 from Lords committee stage:

<https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/50270/documents/3123>

²⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/natural-england-unveils-new-green-infrastructure-framework>

²⁸ See amendment 387 from Lords committee stage:

<https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/50270/documents/3123>

& new clauses 8-11 from Commons report stage:

https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-03/0169/amend/levelling_up_rep_rm_1209.pdf

²⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/landscapes-review-national-parks-and-aonbs-government-response>

³⁰ See new clause 13 from Commons report stage:

https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-03/0169/amend/levelling_up_rep_rm_1209.pdf

³¹ <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12437.doc.htm>

³² <https://www.wcl.org.uk/nature-for-everyone.asp>



with nature, and creating a legal right to healthy environment, would further support these efforts. We would be very grateful if MPs could make the case for accepting these widely supported amendments to Government, as the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill approaches ping-pong (expected for June 2023).

Other measures to improve access to nature

A number of other measures are urgently required to deliver the Environment Improvement Plan commitment that everyone should live within a 15 minute walk of a green or blue space.

These include:

- Embedding public access options in the new Environmental Land Management system of farm support, helping farmers to create more opportunities for people to enjoy the outdoors.³³
- Removing the new 2031 deadline for footpaths to be registered under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.³⁴ The re-imposition of this deadline risks thousands of footpaths being lost.
- Investing in widely publicising the Countryside Code, to promote greater environmental responsibility and good practice.
- Considering the case for expanding the right to roam to more habitats, to increase accessible spaces close to where people live. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (Amendment) Bill³⁵, a Private Members Bill proposed by Caroline Lucas MP on this topic, is due to have its second reading in the House of Commons on 1 December 2023.
- Ensuring the new Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) system of developer mitigation for nature impacts is delivered to a high quality. BNG has the potential to create new and accessible natural spaces, including wetlands, for nature and people, but only if new and enhanced habitats delivered on the site of new developments are high quality. The Government should make sure the delivery of on-site net gain is entered into the national register so that it can be properly monitored and enforced, improving quality.

Improving public access to nature will help people live happier lives, address ingrained inequalities, and reduce long term demands on the NHS. The final stages of the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill over the next few months and the above policies present opportunities to deliver on the EIP 15-minute commitment and realise these benefits.

The Government must seize this moment to improve public access to nature.

³³ <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/help-us-ensure-everyone-can-enjoy-walking-in-nature/environmental-land-management.aspx>

³⁴ <https://dontloseyourway.ramblers.org.uk/>

³⁵ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3221/stages>



Appendix: The environmental benefits of improving public access to nature

If delivered appropriately, increased public access to green and blue space can boost nature's recovery as well as helping people.

The [Lawton Review](#) of wildlife sites (2010) showed that nature cannot recover in isolated, disconnected protected sites. Our finest wildlife sites must be connected up by a latticework of habitats across the country. Restoring green and blue spaces so that people can access high quality natural environments can play an important role in providing these connections, linking together important wildlife spaces to create lifelines for nature across the country. More natural space for people to enjoy can also mean more natural spaces for wildlife to thrive in.

Improving public access to nature can therefore help to deliver on the [Environment Act target](#) to halt the decline of species abundance by 2030, as well as realising the Environment Improvement Plan commitment that everyone should live within a 15 minute walk of a green or blue space.

Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 70 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world.

For questions or further information please contact:

Matt Browne, Head of Policy & Advocacy, Wildlife and Countryside Link

T: 020 8078 3586 | E: matt@wcl.org.uk

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