



The  
**Wildlife**  
Trusts

# A Vision for Health

---

Healthy, green neighbourhoods  
and communities



## Introduction

Our health is shaped by the world around us: from good quality homes to stable jobs, social connections, and neighbourhoods with green space, clean air and water.

Evidence shows that a thriving, wildlife-rich environment benefits both physical and mental health. People with nature on their doorstep have better mental and physical health. They are more active and have lower levels of obesity. Being close to parks, canals or other natural places that feel safe have also been shown to reduce feelings of loneliness.

However, just 35% of households with annual incomes below £10,000 are within a 10-minute walk of a publicly accessible natural green space<sup>1</sup>. This is why The Wildlife Trusts are working to bring wildlife to more people and more people to wildlife.

### We would like to see:

- Greener communities and neighbourhoods – with easy access to safe natural places for all.
- A 'Natural Health Service' – nature prescribing available to everyone that wants it, connecting more people to their natural places, and saving the NHS time and money.

### What needs to happen?

Ensuring everyone has access to natural greenspace 15 minutes from their door. In order to achieve this, the next UK Government must:

1. Increase investment in creating and maintaining green spaces for people everywhere.
2. Establishment a legal right for people to have access to a healthy, natural environment.

This would require authorities to uphold the right to a healthy environment in their decision making and allow citizens and communities to have more control to challenge failures to do this. This should ensure Local Authorities can address inequalities in access to green space as well as giving communities greater control over local public land to create more doorstep access to nature.

## Creating greener communities and neighbourhood

Right now in the UK, poor quality living conditions are damaging people's mental and physical health and well-being and actually cutting lives short. Too many of us live in polluted, nature-deprived neighbourhoods, at a great cost. This is shocking – but it is also preventable:

- One third of us do not have nature-friendly places near home. That's nearly 9.5 million households in England.
- 6.7 million children are living in areas of the UK where air pollution has breached legal limits. Two million of these children are also living in poverty.
- Human-made air pollution is causing 36,000 deaths every year in the UK<sup>2</sup>.
- People from black and ethnic minority groups are twice as likely to live in nature-poor neighbourhoods<sup>3</sup>.
- Access to safe natural spaces for play is unequal: with children in affluent areas being nine times more likely to have green places<sup>4</sup>.

The health of the environment in our communities enables people to live healthier, happier, more prosperous lives – and provides people with an important sense of pride in their neighbourhoods. Polling shows<sup>5</sup> that local green space is the most important thing to foster pride in people's communities – even more than pubs and high streets – better enabling people to feel in control of their communities and become active citizens.

Greener communities give children the best start in life, with walkable neighbourhoods and natural places that are safe to explore and play in. Neighbourhoods like these help build a lasting connection with nature, instilling healthy habits, and positively shaping their adult lives and attitudes towards wildlife, climate change, and how they choose to live. In other words, happier, more confident children who understand their impact on our natural world.

There is strong scientific evidence of the health benefits of a healthy natural environment. Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature leads to a significant increase in well-being. In 2009 Natural England estimated that if everyone in England had access to greenspace, the resulting health benefits would mean that the NHS could save £2.1 billion<sup>6</sup> per year. Updated for inflation that figure would now be £3 billion.

1 Environment Agency: *The state of the environment: the urban environment*

2 GOV.UK: *Air pollution: applying All Our Health*

3 Friends of the Earth: *Access to green space in England*

4 GOV.UK: *Improving access to green space*

5 Public First: *Levelling Up Poll*

6 GOV.UK: *Improving access to green space*

## Preventing ill-health through a Natural Health Service

The NHS was never designed to go it alone. It also cannot cope with the ever-increasing demands on it – especially every winter. Social Prescribing is a community-based health service that can help take the weight out of the health system, relieving the burden. With the right policy and investment in prevention, this cycle can be broken.

New economic analysis in *A Natural Health Service: Improving Lives and Saving Money*<sup>7</sup>, has found that green prescribing – supporting people to take part in social activities in nature – benefits health, well-being and saves money. The research found potential annual cost saving benefits of £100 million for every 1.2 million people reached.

This can only happen with increased investment in green social prescribing. To enable the NHS to benefit, the next UK government should:

1. **Integrate green prescribing into community health and social care services everywhere.** The Wildlife Trusts and other organisations in the environment, creative arts, sport and physical activity sectors delivering ‘social prescribing’ must be integrated into health and social care services in the community. It makes economic sense and has the potential to deliver improved health, well-being, and cost savings at scale. We need policies that result in investment across government departments concerned with housing, employment, community cohesion, transport and culture. In this way, the NHS is not shouldering the burden alone, and preventing ill-health is a shared responsibility that is achievable.
2. **Ensure community-based health services become more widely available and properly targeted.** The NHS is an incredible institution; the first Universal Health System in the world, free at point of access. However, people’s health and well-being, life expectancy, and overall quality of that life is shaped by the world around them. The NHS needs organisations to work alongside it to prevent illnesses caused by social factors like loneliness, physical and economic inactivity. Local health services must be much more closely aligned with the organisations that are able to work quickly and effectively, targeting and reaching people much earlier. Policies that enable and strengthen partnership working between local health and social care services and community-rooted organisations like Wildlife Trusts are needed.

Putting people at the heart of their own health and well-being – asking people what matters to them – and connecting them with support and social activities makes sense to prevent ill health. It also works. A recent review<sup>8</sup> of the impact of social prescribing services on NHS acute care in Kent, from a study of nearly 6000 patients, showed 20% reductions in A&E attendances (23% for the frail elderly cohort).

Four in ten<sup>9</sup> people say that nature and wildlife are more important than ever to their well-being. Many of us instinctively feel that nature is good for us, but there is plenty of evidence to support these positive impacts – which in turn will help relieve the burden on overstretched health services.

Nature is vital to us all – for the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the space to help us feel secure, happy, and healthy. Without decisive and urgent action to halt the decline of nature by the end of the next Parliament, communities across the UK risk bearing an unimaginable cost. The next UK Government has a huge opportunity to tackle these interlinked social, economic, and environmental crises, and in doing so, improve the future and livelihoods for everyone across Britain.



VOLUNTEER © CHRIS GOMERSALL/2020VISION

<sup>7</sup> [The Wildlife Trusts: A Natural Health Service](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Social Prescribing Academy: Building the economic case for social prescribing](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Natural England: People and Nature Survey: How has COVID-19 changed the way we engage with nature?](#)

The Wildlife Trusts are a federated movement of 46 charities, supported by a central charity, the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts. Together we have more than 900,000 members, 35,000 volunteers and 3,000 staff across the UK. We share a vision of nature in recovery, with abundant, diverse wildlife and natural processes creating wilder landscapes where people and nature thrive.



Wildlife Trusts care for – and have restored – some of the most special places for wildlife in the UK. Collectively we manage more than 2,300 nature reserves, operate 123 visitor and education centres and own 29 working farms. We undertake research, we stand up for wildlife and wild places under threat, and we help people access nature.

We work with businesses who are committed to being nature positive and take action to help restore 30% of land and seas for nature by 2030.

### **The Wildlife Trusts**

 [enquiry@wildlifetrusts.org](mailto:enquiry@wildlifetrusts.org)

 [wildlifetrusts.org](http://wildlifetrusts.org)

 [@WildlifeTrusts](https://twitter.com/WildlifeTrusts)

 [@wildlifetrusts](https://www.facebook.com/wildlifetrusts)

 [@thewildlifetrusts](https://www.instagram.com/thewildlifetrusts)