

## Access to Nature: Briefing

### The benefits of access to nature

Nature-rich spaces are a powerful ally in efforts to improve public health. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that physical exercise to access these spaces and the boost to mental health conferred by spending time in them combine to provide a powerful preventative healthcare tool. The consequent economic benefits of a healthier population and less demand on the NHS are matched by wider social gains. Public access to nature makes people happier, brings communities closer together, reduces inequalities and provides a source of joy and meaning in an age of disconnection.<sup>1</sup>

However, this powerful economic and social tonic is currently under-utilised. The Environmental Improvement Plan published by the last Government in 2023 contained commitments to improve access to nature-rich spaces and to provide access to “green” spaces (areas rich in vegetation like parks, woods, and meadows) or “blue” spaces (such as rivers, lakes, and the sea) within 15 minutes’ walk of their home. But while welcome, these commitments have not yet been delivered on the ground. Similarly, welcome plans from the current Government to publish a Green Paper on access have not yet come to pass. Most disappointingly, the new NHS 10 Year Health Plan for England published in July failed to mention nature’s potential for nature to boost health<sup>2</sup>, despite hearing from thousands of members of the public how important nature can be for well-being. Access to nature is a public health tool that risks gathering dust, to the detriment of health outcomes and wider wellbeing.

### Policy solutions to increase access to nature

If seized now, upcoming policy opportunities to increase public access to nature would deliver improved health outcomes by the end of this Parliament. The measures we propose below would utilise live legislation and initiatives to protect and expand accessible nature-rich spaces through nationwide policy, public service provision, local government provision and community action. These reforms would also allow measures to be targeted, to address the disparities in access to nature that contribute to unequal health outcomes amongst different socio-economic groups in England.<sup>3</sup>

#### A nation-wide right to a healthy environment

In 2022, the United Nations voted to recognise that everyone has a human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. The UK Government at the time supported the motion, but only on the basis that it did not consider the right to be legally enforceable.<sup>4</sup> This shortfall in ambition can and should be rectified by the current Government.

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<sup>1</sup> See [briefings and evidence](#) from Health Equals

<sup>2</sup> Wildlife and Countryside Link [briefing](#) on NHS 10-year plan

<sup>3</sup> See inequalities [data](#) from Health Equals

<sup>4</sup> UK Government [statement](#) on 2022 UN vote

Defra is expected to publish a new Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) this autumn. The new EIP should include a commitment to increase access to nature through Government support for new legislation that would put the 2022 UN declaration into UK law. This could be achieved via a legal duty on Ministers and local government to have regard to everyone's right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Such a duty would specify that the right to a healthy environment is fulfilled by the ability to access thriving green and blue spaces within 15 minutes' walk of home.

The duty could also require decision makers to declare when, having had regard to the right, they have decided to proceed with a decision that would compromise it (for example, by destroying an accessible nature rich space) in order to meet other objectives. This would retain flexibility for decision makers, whilst providing enhanced transparency. It would make it very clear when decision makers act in a way not compatible with a right to a healthy environment, informing public opinion about that decision. As a result, the duty would have a two-fold function – giving a legal steer and backing to decision makers seeking to do the right thing for public access to nature and ensuring full exposure and accountability when decision makers decrease public access to nature.

Building this mechanism into decision making would be a constructive way to boost public access to nature, yielding more accessible nature-rich, health-boosting spaces from central and local government decisions. By including this commitment in the new Environmental Improvement Plan and then either legislating directly or supporting a Private Members' Bill to achieve it, the Government could deliver on the access commitments not implemented under the previous EIP.

#### Public service provision

The Green Social Prescribing Programme was established in 2021, to support the NHS to prescribe access to nature to patients whose health could be improved by more time spent in wild spaces and by participation in related community activities. An initial Defra-led evaluation of the programme concluded that it reduced anxiety and depression symptoms for those who took part and led to significant improvements to well-being.<sup>5</sup>

The Wildlife Trusts were extensively involved the programme and continue to run 'natural health services' which allow patients to access nature. Our cost-benefit-analysis of these schemes suggests that an annual investment of £533 million in natural health services could result in NHS savings of £636 million.<sup>6</sup> After a two-year extension, the Green Social Prescribing Programme has now come to an end. Although an increasing number of health providers are prescribing natural health services at a local level, there is a need for renewed national support to give policy backing to those doing so and to encourage providers who are considering this approach. A new 'National Community Health & Wellbeing Fund' has been proposed bring together funding from health budgets, local authorities, businesses and philanthropic sources to create permanent infrastructure to deliver green social prescribing at scale.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Defra [evaluation](#) of green social prescribing

<sup>6</sup> Wildlife Trusts Natural Health Services [report](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Briefing](#) on the National Community Health & Wellbeing Fund from the National Academy for Social Prescribing and Social Finance.

An increase in NHS funded natural health services would provide new funding to connect people and nature. This is an objective to which other public services could also contribute. The Wildlife Trusts continue to call for schools to be supported to provide and share access to biodiverse spaces and grounds. This would both increase nature-rich spaces and to allow more children to benefit from the improved wellbeing and boosted learning outcomes that access to nature provides.<sup>8</sup>

### Local authority provision

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, currently before the Commons, will establish new strategic authorities across England. Clause 43 of the Bill gives strategic authorities, and the mayors who will lead most of them, a duty to have regard to the need to improve the health of and reduce health inequalities between people living in their area. This is welcome but fails to specify the role that increased access to nature could play in achieving these health outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

Clause 43 should be amended to specific that fulfilment of the health duty must include the provision of accessible nature-rich spaces to boost local health outcomes. This change to the Bill could further specify that the duty requires the publication of data by the strategic authorities on how many nature-rich spaces, and similar spaces like allotments, are accessible to people living in the authority area, with a requirement to act should provision fall below a set threshold.

By amending the Bill in this manner, the new authorities would be given an in-built capability to increase access to nature, helping them to achieve their health objectives.

### Community empowerment

The Devolution Bill also contains provisions to create a ‘community right to buy’, building on the current community right to bid on assets listed as having social value to local people. This provides an opportunity to empower communities to buy and protect spaces that have value because they provide access to nature.

The current definition of social value fails to explicitly include land that is of value because of the accessible nature it provides. This means that groups keen to list nature-rich spaces as having community value are not unable to do so and will not benefit from the right to buy provisions in the Devolution Bill.

An amendment to schedule 27 of the Bill would resolve this, by allowing assets to be listed on the grounds of their environmental value to the community, resulting in an updated listing criteria that covers assets of social, economic and environmental value. This would allow communities wishing to list a community asset due to its nature-richness to do so, and then to benefit from the new right to buy powers should the asset come up for sale.

Such a change to the Devolution Bil would empower communities to take action to protect accessible nature-rich spaces important to local health and wellbeing. This sort of community action is

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<sup>8</sup> See Wildlife Trusts [briefings and evidence](#) on benefits of access to nature within education

<sup>9</sup> Wildlife Trusts Devolution Bill [briefing](#)

particularly associated with positive health outcomes, giving people a sense of agency, forging new links between neighbours and nurturing local pride.

Four policy actions – legislation to enshrine a right to a healthy environment, a National Community Health & Wellbeing Fund, a nature for health duty for new strategic authorities and the extension of assets of community value to cover environmental assets – would protect and increase access to nature to boost health outcomes. The Wildlife Trusts would be delighted to work with parliamentarians over the coming months to unlock these public health benefits.

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For more information on this note, please contact:

Matthew Browne, Head of Public Affairs, [mbrowne@wildlifetrusts.org](mailto:mbrowne@wildlifetrusts.org)  
Dom Higgins, Head of Health and Education, [dhiggins@wildlifetrusts.org](mailto:dhiggins@wildlifetrusts.org)