



The
Wildlife
Trusts

Unlocking nature for all

*How to increase access to nature
for a fairer, healthier country*

Fix nature.
Fix health.



Executive Summary

- This document has been published by The Wildlife Trusts, with input from the public, to give the UK Government a helping hand.
- Ministers had committed to publish proposals to increase public access to nature, an asset which makes people healthier, safer from climate impacts and prouder of their home towns.
- Those proposals have not yet come forward, and we can't afford to wait any longer.
- The Wildlife Trusts have asked the public for their views, and have drawn on those views to propose practical, deliverable, devolution-focussed policies to help more people access woods, meadows, riverbanks and parks.
- We offer these proposals to UK Government, with a request that Ministers act quickly to deliver them. Access to nature is an important part of living a good life, denied to too many people, for too long.

Introduction

The ability to access and enjoy nature, wild landscapes and open spaces has long been valued by the British public, from Victorians seeking the romance of nature in response to industrialisation to the post-war campaign for greater access to the countryside which led to the formation of our National Parks. Today, with rising mental health issues and climate change putting pressure on our infrastructure and our bodies, that need to connect with nature is perhaps stronger than ever. Yet barriers prevent many people from accessing nature—and often these are the very people who need nature most.

The UK Government was elected in July 2024 on a Manifesto which promised to *‘increase access to nature for families to enjoy, improving mental health and leaving a legacy for generations to come’*¹.

This promising commitment has the potential to transform people’s lives. We know, from a wide pool of evidence and from The Wildlife Trusts’ own data, that people who spend time in nature derive huge benefits from it, including improved physical and mental health, better protection against climate change and a deep sense of community pride. The evidence also shows that access to nature, and to these benefits, is not fairly distributed. People on low incomes are nearly twice as likely to live in a neighbourhood without accessible nature-rich spaces like parkland, woodlands, seashores and riverside walks as those earning above the average income².

Wildlife Trusts data analysis shows that 238 parliamentary constituencies in England (44 per cent of the total) still have low access to nature, and that this is having a negative impact on other aspects of people’s lives. Strikingly, the data shows strong overlap between the most nature-deprived constituencies and the most economically-deprived constituencies³. Separate polling with More in Common shows that only 20 per cent of young people describe their access to nature as very good, compared to 41 per cent of people aged 65 to 71⁴. This is also leaving some communities more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. As heatwaves strike with increasing regularity, everyone should have access to shady parks and cooling wetlands. Similarly, there are physical and health benefits to living near natural spaces—from enhanced wellbeing to breathing clean air—which should not be luxuries confined to wealthier postcodes.

In spring 2025, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)—the Government department responsible for access to nature—prepared to deliver on their promise. They held workshops with experts to inform proposals to increase access⁵, due to be published that autumn in the form of a ‘Green

Paper’; a government publication that combines policy proposals with consultation questions to gauge the public’s view on the ideas proposed.

But that Green Paper has not emerged. For reasons unknown, the Starmer administration stopped work on access to nature. In December 2025, Defra stated their intention to publish an Access to Nature Green Paper in the Department’s Environmental Improvement Plan, but no timeframe was given and no further progress has since been made⁶. Access to nature remains largely unchanged. Inaction from the Starmer administration can be added to the inaction of the Conservative Governments that preceded it.

The Wildlife Trusts don’t want the public to have to wait any longer. Access to nature is not a ‘nice to have’, it is a necessity.

As such, The Wildlife Trusts have picked up the job Defra began. We have asked the public for their initial views on access to nature, and how it can be improved, and have drawn on over 1,000 consultation responses to propose a policy blueprint for action⁷. The resulting Wildlife Trusts Green Paper on Access to Nature comprises:

- A summary of the evidence on access to nature and of public views submitted to us
- Cost-effective, devolution-focussed proposals to increase access to nature through three policy programmes:
 - More green spaces open to all
 - Better access to the countryside
 - Public sector provision of nature for health
- Further consultation questions on the specific proposals

We will formally submit the Green Paper to Defra in September 2026, along with public responses to the consultation questions, and will ask Ministers to use this work to move from delay to delivery.

The time is ripe for action. It is notable that the new Burnham administration has this summer committed to helping places *“forgotten or written off”*⁸ and giving everyone a *“sense that their place can be more than it is today”*⁹. More access to nature will deliver on this. Bringing trees, flowers and wildlife to people’s doorsteps means more health, more happiness and more to be proud of. More in Common polling shows that 46 per cent of Britons say nature and wildlife is the thing they like most about where they live—more than any other category¹⁰. Nature can help reconnect communities to each other: think community gardens tended by

volunteers all coming together for a common cause, and families spending time together in nature-rich parks while children discover the joy of a tickling ladybird or a dandelion clock. More people accessing nature is also good news for nature itself: it inspires action to save wildlife and helps build a society that seeks to lighten its footprint on the natural world.

The Wildlife Trusts stand ready to assist the UK Government in giving more people more nature to enjoy. The proposals in this Green Paper, if delivered, would improve public health, protect people against climate shocks and bring pride back to places forgotten by Westminster. Nature is here to help.

Note on coverage: Though this Green Paper primarily focusses on access to nature policy applied in England by the UK Government, the public has responded from across the UK and the case for support and evidence applies to communities everywhere. It does not however cover policy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in detail. The Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments have responsibility for the application of access to nature policy in their own nations.

The case for change

Nature creates the conditions that people need for healthier, happier lives. They provide safe havens for

children to play and grow up in and for people of all ages—and their pets—to exercise.

A healthy natural world puts food reliably on our plates. Productive farms depend on pollinators and healthy soil, and prices rise when yields are diminished by droughts and floods.

Nature is our greatest ally against the effects of climate change: better, wetter landscapes—like those engineered by beavers—hold back floodwater, protecting our homes, while filtering out pollutants for free. More trees, green spaces and water near where we live and work helps keep temperatures down when heatwaves hit, keeping us comfortable, healthy and productive.

The evidence is there too. The feel-good chemicals we get from daylight, from trees and from the soil, plus giving children the best start for healthy development, are all scientifically proven.

We know this matters because people have told us in their thousands.

Here, we present the case for nature being critical infrastructure through a combination of empirical evidence and the direct testimony of over 5,000 views of peoples' lived experiences.



“When nature thrives, so do we. A healthy environment is necessary for our wellbeing, our physical health, even our economy. What food security can we hope for without healthy soil in which to grow crops? How can we manage pressures on our health service, or our economy, when too many of us are sick, or unable to work? And, in a fractured world, nature can be the glue to bring us together as communities: a common interest and common ground across generational and political divides.”

Craig Bennett OBE

Chief Executive, The Wildlife Trusts

Protecting and improving public health

Nature doesn't just help people recover from illness; it actively creates good health. Spending time in natural environments reduces stress and improves both mental health and physical wellbeing¹¹. When people have easy access to safe, healthy nature spaces in their communities—parks, woods, canals and allotments, for instance—they are likely to be active, feel calmer and even build stronger relationships¹². This in turn helps to build resilience in neighbourhoods and communities up and down the country, protecting health before more problems and illnesses arise.

“Going into nature is as vital as breathing to me. If I don't spend time amongst trees on a daily basis I not only get insomnia but, more importantly, severe depression. Nature has saved my life more than once.”

“...(nature) makes me feel calmer, fitter and stronger. I can breathe when stressed and helped me heal when recovering from cancer”

Best start in life

The evidence is increasingly clear that being in and around nature-rich spaces during pregnancy, infancy and childhood supports healthier physical, mental and emotional development¹³. Having nature around means more play and movement: building confidence, curiosity and stronger bonds with friends and family. What's more, these early experiences help shape the foundations of life-long health. Children that have doorstep access to nature thrive and have a strong sense of belonging and emotional security¹⁴. Natural England's Children and People and Nature Survey¹⁵ found that 83 per cent of children said being in nature made them very happy.

Families sit by the river and enjoy picnics. Children paddle in the chalk streams. A community group litter-picks the woodlands and the streets between. Young people play football or sit together and chat in the parks. Neighbours work together in the local community garden.

A healthy immune system

Nature helps to build and regulate our immune systems throughout life. During infancy, playing in soil exposes children to healthy microbes that act as a training ground for the body to respond to harm and threats¹⁶. New and growing evidence shows that time spent in natural environments also reduces the risk of allergies, improves gut health and contributes to better long-term wellbeing¹⁷. This is an important and fast-moving area of research, which reinforces a simple truth: that access to nature is not just good for wellbeing, but it also helps people have healthier immune systems from birth onwards, potentially reducing the impact and burden of preventable illnesses throughout life.

“All the diseases I deal with in general practice have their origin, or certainly a lot of the exacerbation by the immune system causing this disruption.”

Dr William Bird

GP and Public Health Specialist

Nature prevents long-term health conditions

Nature is one of our most effective and under-used tools for preventing long-term health conditions. A growing body of research shows that regular access to high-quality natural spaces is associated with better mental health and lower rates of cardiovascular disease and chronic inflammatory conditions such as arthritis and breathing conditions. One study¹⁸ of 4.6 million London residents found that a 1 per cent increase in 'pocket parks' was associated with a 5.6 per cent reduction in the total number of deaths (all causes), and that there was a 8.4 per cent lower risk of death from respiratory diseases. By helping prevent avoidable illnesses, nature can reduce demand on over-stretched NHS services—freeing up resource where there is the greatest clinical need. Investing in healthy nature is an investment in healthy people.

“My husband and my dog are both unwell, so for us a short walk in the local woods is perfect. As soon as we enter the woodland and feel the cool breeze it immediately uplifts us. The sun slanting through the trees is so peaceful and calming.”

“As I have chronic heart disease, outdoor activities help me get the exercise I need. I have suffered short bouts of depression in the past and contact with nature definitely helps keep these at bay. So nature benefits both my physical and mental health.”



Chronic stress

Chronic stress is one of the biggest drivers of poor health because it keeps the body in a near constant state of alert, which increases inflammation, contributing to heart disease, poor mental health, obesity, diabetes and other long-term conditions. Nature acts as a powerful ‘buffer’ against chronic stress, improving mental health outcomes over long periods of time¹⁹ helping people to feel safe, calm and connected to each other. Spending time in natural environments helps us to slow down, switch off and calm ever-busy minds. A 2023 study²⁰ found that walking in a woodland versus an urban environment had a greater effect on reducing stress and improving mood.

“Spending time in green spaces like parks always makes me feel better, calming me down and making me feel brighter. It’s been especially helpful when I’ve been going through a bereavement.”

Loneliness

Loneliness is as damaging to health as many more ‘well-known’ risks. Being lonely affects mental wellbeing, physical health and people’s ability to live happy, healthy lives as they grow older²¹. Environments that appear unfriendly or unsafe can make this worse, whereas communal nature spaces—parks, allotments, canal paths—help tackle loneliness by giving people welcoming places to meet, connect, volunteer, exercise, or to simply ‘be’²². Greener neighbourhoods invite people to spend more time outdoors, interacting with others—even if it’s just a wave between neighbours from across a park—rather than secreted away in our homes. What’s more, seeing nature can bring joy to those who need it most. Connecting to wildlife regularly can inspire a sense of purpose, companionship and belonging that mustn’t be underestimated.

“I have an allotment and most plot-holders are friendly and we help each other out. I’m part of a small group who created a smallish nature site at the allotments. We regularly meet there to maintain the site, study and record the wildlife, and just chat about anything and everything over lunch. I regularly visit the local park which has a number of organised activities which my neighbours are involved in.”



Mental health and neurodivergence

Nature plays a powerful role in preventing and reducing anxiety, depression and the symptoms of neurodivergent conditions by making space for people to recover from the various pressures of life, and by its ability to change what's going on in our brains. Time spent in nature has been shown to lower stress, improve mood and support better mental wellbeing. In fact, a major UK Biobank study²³ of more than 400,000 people found that greater exposure to nature was associated with lower diagnosis rates of ADHD, and less severe symptoms for those with it. Wildlife-rich spaces, that are accessible to all, are part of the solution to the growing mental health challenges communities across the UK today; especially young people. It is also cost-effective, as independent economic analysis²⁴ of Wildlife Trusts health and wellbeing programmes found: if just one programme was delivered to 1.2 million people, it would save the NHS £100M a year.

"It keeps me sane and helps me to be more resilient living with ADHD, anxiety and depression. I feel part of nature, not separate."

For many autistic people, nature provides a calmer, less demanding environment that can reduce stress, support emotional wellbeing, and create opportunities to engage with the outside world in ways that feel comfortable and rewarding. Research highlighted by the National Autistic Society and other studies²⁵ suggests that spending time in nature can improve confidence, emotional regulation and overall wellbeing. The evidence also shows that nature-based programmes can improve social communication and attention in autistic children, making access to nature an important part of supporting health and quality of life.

"I've had lifelong depression and mental health issues, and also chronic pain, and getting out in nature always helps to give me a more positive outlook, and the ability to step outside and away from those problems by becoming totally immersed in where I am and what I can see and feel."

Adapting to climate change

As the climate warms and weather patterns become more extreme and unpredictable, nature is one of our most effective tools to protect people and communities. Healthy woodlands, wetlands, rivers, peatlands and urban green spaces help cool our towns and cities during heatwaves²⁶, clean the air we breathe, filter and store water, and slow the flow of rainfall to reduce the risk of flooding. Just as importantly, they help communities adapt to the growing impacts of climate change by making places healthier, safer, and more resilient. It is about creating a natural infrastructure that protects homes, supports public health, reduces pressure on services, and helps communities across the UK thrive in a changing climate.

We must adapt to keep pace with our changing climate, and harnessing the power of nature helps us do that. Again, the answer lies in restoring nature in the shape of more trees, more meadows, healthier soil and rivers, and more abundant wildlife keeping the balance of the natural world in check.

You need to pass on the message on how to make changes to keep biodiversity and reverse the effect of climate change to as many people as possible. Nature is not just nice to have, it's necessary for everyone.



Areas where targeted support is needed to fully unlock access benefits

More help for people that need it most

People with physical and mental disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health conditions, sensory impairments, long-term health conditions and social barriers often face greater challenges in accessing nature. Uneven paths, poor transport links, a lack of accessible facilities, concerns about safety, financial pressures and social exclusion can all make it harder for people to enjoy the benefits that nature provides. Yet these are often the very people who have the most to gain from spending time in nature. As a result, many vulnerable people are missing out on improved physical health, better mental wellbeing, stronger social connections and greater independence.

Of those who responded to our survey and who classified themselves as having a disability, 51 per cent said that they experience barriers in accessing nature. Nature should be there for everyone, irrespective of background or circumstance. Evidence shows²⁷ that by creating nature spaces in the most underserved areas, where incomes are lowest and health is poorest, it will have the greatest impact.

“Disability access can be difficult; I would like to get to more spaces but accessing them as a mobility aid user is hard. I tend to stick to the same walks as I know they are accessible (along the canal or River Lune), but I would love to feel confident enough to access more spaces. Transport is also a difficulty for me as I cannot drive due to my health issues.”

Health equity

The influential Marmot Reviews into health inequalities in England in 2010²⁸ and 2020²⁹ evidence that where people live shapes how healthy they are. It found that access to nature-rich, healthy places helps people live longer, healthier lives, while investing in greener and fairer communities can reduce health inequalities and improve wellbeing for everyone. The 2020 Marmot Review added the principle, to ‘Tackle racism, discrimination and their outcomes,’ because the evidence showed that racism and discrimination are not just social issues, they are major drivers of poor health and unequal life chances. This in turn connected with the other newly introduced principle 8, to ‘Pursue environmental sustainability and health equity together,’ because the benefits of green spaces, clean air and climate action must be shared fairly across all communities. If society wants healthier people and healthier places, then it must make sure that no one is left behind. These three principles must be central to any efforts to increase and improve access to nature— for all.

Participation and affordability

For many people, getting out into nature is not as simple as opening the front door and taking a walk. The cost of transport, lack of nearby green spaces, limited time, caring responsibilities, poor accessibility and concerns about safety can all create barriers that prevent people from enjoying the benefits of nature. These challenges often affect those who would benefit most, including people on lower incomes, those living in urban areas and individuals experiencing poor health. Decision makers must help to bring nature closer to where people live, make natural spaces more accessible and inclusive, and create free or low-cost opportunities for people to engage with wildlife and the outdoors. By reducing practical barriers and ensuring everyone can access high-quality nature close to home, we can help make the health and wellbeing benefits of nature available to all.

People having time to bring people together isn’t easy when most need to work. This is where leaders, or authorities who used to be funded have left a gap. It needs filling, then more people will participate. Good leaders deserve to be paid, not doing it for free.

Minoritised ethnic communities have less access to nature spaces

People from many minoritised ethnic communities often face barriers that make it harder to access and enjoy nature, including a lack of nearby high-quality green spaces and lower levels of investment in local environments in the places where they live³⁰. Many people also tell us that they do not see themselves reflected in the organisations and volunteering opportunities associated with nature, and this also requires action from the environment sector if we are to achieve a step change in true access to nature.

Inclusion and feeling safe

Nature should be for everyone, but too many people still feel that natural spaces are not designed with them in mind and are places where they do not feel safe or comfortable. Barriers such as poor accessibility, lack of inclusive facilities, fear of crime and harassment, and a lack of confidence can prevent people from enjoying the benefits of being in nature. For The Wildlife Trusts, creating inclusive natural spaces means designing them around the needs of diverse communities, ensuring they are physically accessible, easy to reach and welcoming to people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. When people feel safe, valued and that they belong, they are far more likely to spend time in nature, connect



with others and experience the health, wellbeing and community benefits that nature can provide.

"I've come across men who seem to think that I'm desperate for a boyfriend because I'm a woman walking alone, and it can make me feel very uncomfortable and a bit concerned when they want to walk me home."

Lakes Queer Adventures meet up for outdoor activities. It is an opportunity for queer people to meet up in an inclusive and supportive environment.

Help more people to take action

People who care for nature are not only helping restore nature and wildlife, they are improving their own health and wellbeing, and developing a greater sense of place, belonging and ownership. The challenge is to make nature recovery something everyone feels part of, not something left to a few passionate individuals. We need more opportunities for people from all walks of life to take action close to home through community volunteering, local wildlife projects and national days of action that bring neighbours, schools, businesses and public services together around a shared purpose. By making it easy, welcoming and rewarding for people to get involved, we can grow a culture where caring for nature becomes a 'new normal', as well as a source of local pride and collective action, helping both people and wildlife thrive.

"One woman in this area spends an hour, every day, checking for litter around the playing field and neighbouring pavements, which are

well used by pupils from four local schools. She carries a bag containing secateurs, a spray cleaner and a scrubbing brush, (for graffiti on equipment or the railway bridge), and a large black bag for litter, which is always full by the time she returns home. I do not know her name, but I intend to find out because, in my opinion, she deserves recognition."

"We have a thriving nature conservation group called the Bury Water Meadows Group. We do conservation work every month and run a Wildlife Festival every year. We also campaign with the statutory bodies for cleaner rivers and more wildlife."

Conclusion

Woodlands, parks, rivers, wetlands and wild neighbourhoods are places where good health is created every day. Being in and around nature reduces the harmful effects of chronic stress and supports healthy behaviours, helping people feel safe, happy and connected to each other. Investing in nature is investing in people and communities—both for now and the future. As we have shown, access to nature is far from equal, but with targeted action, we can level the playing field.

Take care of nature, and... in turn... nature will take care of you. Never underestimate the power of nature, towards mental health and how reconnecting with wildlife, forests, open coastal walks can help you de-stress and feel at peace... Nature is not just nice to have, it's necessary for everyone.

Proposals for change

The below policy proposals have been drawn up from responses to The Wildlife Trust's Fix Nature: Fix Health consultation, from the Trust's extensive work on the ground to improve nature access and from ideas put forward by access experts³¹. The proposals identify distinct policy levers Government can readily pull to increase public access to nature, with a focus on improving outcomes for communities where access to nature is currently low. Given ongoing constraints on public finances and the weight of upcoming business in Westminster, proposals for sizeable Government spending commitments and primary legalisation are deliverable. Where possible, the identified policy levers build on existing legislation and policy programmes.

Many of the policies are suggested for local government delivery, in line with the Government's commitment to English devolution. This Green Paper would rewire access responsibilities, transferring power to people and the places where they live, work and invest. Local leaders know what it will take to drive access to nature and therefore improve health in their areas better than anyone. They are also best placed to integrate public services so that local people have every opportunity to access to nature.

The Government has the opportunity to empower councils and public bodies to increase green space provision in built up areas, to improve access to the countryside and to embed access to nature in public service provision. We urge Ministers to explore swift delivery of each of these policy programmes.

More nature spaces open to all

Accessible greenspaces like parks are the foundation of fair public access to nature in built-up areas. However, there are sharp disparities in the provision of these, with almost twice as many being found in the south of England as there are in the north³². Parks are concentrated in wealthy areas, with the most affluent 20 per cent of council wards having five times the amount of parks per person than the most deprived 10 per cent of wards³³. Even in places with parks, years of austerity and outdated management in some places have reduced the amount of nature found there. More, wilder, greenspaces can be delivered in the places they are needed most by:

Giving local authorities compulsory purchase powers for park creation

Local authorities have the power to compulsorily purchase land, but the high compensation cost puts many off. These high costs are driven by hope value, which allows the landowner to be compensated to the value the land might have commanded if developed for another purpose. Reforms in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 and the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 made the process slightly easier for councils, and removed hope value for public housing, education and health developments³⁴. These reforms should be extended to park creation projects led by local authorities. This should be complemented by a targeted Defra fund to support local authorities in areas with low access to nature and/or economically underserved areas, to deliver such park creation projects. This could become a national version of Manchester's successful Green Spaces Fund, which funded the creation of new green spaces across the city³⁵.

By making it easier for councils to purchase land for parks, and providing extra financial support for the areas in greatest need of more public greenspace, the Government would usher in a new wave of health-boosting, pride-giving public parks. These might range from sweeping country parks that link cities to the wider countryside, all the way through to overlooked, unloved corners of land being turned into community gardens. All should have a requirement to serve both people and nature, with places to play, exercise and relax blended with wilder areas and other nature-friendly features like ponds and nestboxes, allowing nature to thrive. The Victorians gave England thousands of public parks in response to industrialisation and associated ill health³⁶. We should return to this level of ambition, in response to the environmental threats and deprivation of our own century.



Enabling capital funds for park maintenance

For more than a decade, councils have faced pressure on day-to-day operational spending, reducing the money available for park maintenance³⁷. The Government should help by issuing guidance that makes clear councils can use commuted sums to fund this work. Commuted sums are lump sums or assets set aside by developers or other contributors, which councils can draw on over time to cover maintenance costs³⁸.

Commuted sums can form part of capital spending—usually a less pressured, more flexible part of council budgets than operational spending. The Government could also offer capital funding of its own to help local authorities in certain areas to provide sustained greenspace maintenance, where it is needed most to improve access to nature. Capital expenditure is often used to support essential infrastructure, but given that nature-rich spaces secure public health and climate resilience, it is appropriate to treat greenspace maintenance as such. This devolution of funding to make places better is exactly the type of policy approach Andy Burnham has promised.

Establishing a community right to buy land for nature access

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 gives community groups first opportunity to buy listed assets of community value when they are put up for a sale. This should include land that is of value to the community because it provides access to nature. However, under the Act, assets can only be listed (and therefore be eligible for community right to bid) on the basis of furthering the economic or social interests of the community. This is very narrow wording, that is likely to rule out bids on access to nature grounds. Despite efforts by parliamentarians during the passage of the Act to explicitly allow listing on the grounds of access to nature value, the Starmer administration refused to widen out listing criteria³⁹. This should be rectified by the Burnham administration. By giving communities first opportunity to buy land that allows them to improve their access to nature, new community led and owned parks could be created, and access secured for future generations.

These powers should be accompanied by new freedoms for councils to support community groups to use vacant land for environmental purposes, such as community gardening. When land lies empty for a long time, why shouldn't the community gain some benefit from it? Environmental activities like community gardening bring multiple benefits without ruling out future uses for the land. Some councils in urban areas are pioneering this approach, but concerns about legal challenge inhibits action from other councils. Clarity from Government that vacant land can be used for community gardening

and similar purposes could provide helpful reassurance and encourage more councils to adopt the practice⁴⁰.

Enabling mandatory design requirements for new developments

With extreme weather like heatwaves, drought and flooding on the rise, new developments should harness the power of nature to ensure the buildings themselves, and the people they support, are futureproofed against the effects of climate change. This should also include a requirement to enhance nature, thus creating attractive, nature-rich spaces for the whole community to benefit from. In January 2026 the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government published a document to help secure this, entitled 'Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance'⁴¹. The Guidance sets out standards for developers to meet, including making open spaces in developments publicly accessible and filling them with climate-friendly and nature-boosting features, such as trees and water. The guidance also contains helpful direction on how to make new homes cool and safe for residents living in them, and to encourage planting of native species to best help local wildlife. The problem, however, is that these standards are optional and developers can still choose to proceed without any of these features. The opportunity to secure more climate-adapted new homes and nature-rich spaces for all alongside new development could slip away⁴².

Local authorities should be given the option of making the standards mandatory in their area. Councils in built-up areas, keen for any new source of cooling spaces for their community, or those in areas prone to flooding or fire, are likely to find these new powers particularly useful. It would provide a new way for councils to use the planning system to better boost the climate resilience of their area.

Supporting more people to get out into nature

England's countryside is a cherished part of our national life, but accessing its wonders is sometimes difficult. Accurate information on rural footpaths, and how accessible they are, can be challenging to find and in some parts of the country walking routes remain rare. These barriers to access can be tackled by:

Providing better access information online

A striking trend from The Wildlife Trusts' consultation that informed this paper was the number of respondents who said they wanted to get out into the countryside, but found cost and information barriers in the way. Those wanting to find out how best to access the countryside have to navigate a fragmented information landscape, with key information behind paywalls.

Natural England have responsibility for the two official sources of access guidance: the Countryside Code (advice on how to access the countryside responsibly) and National Trails (mapping 16 long distance walks), both of which are maintained on separate, free-to-access websites. Information on shorter distance footpaths—the vast majority of footpaths—are held in various forms on local authority websites. The quantity and quality of this information varies hugely. Ordnance Survey maps—the most reliable and detailed maps—can only be accessed for a fee. Private providers offer walking apps with detailed information, for high fees.

The Government should intervene to create an accessible one-stop-shop for information on how to access the countryside. Additional funding for Natural England could support them to integrate National Trails and Countryside Code websites with local authority footpath information and OS mapping. The new combined website could be made available in app form as well, so countryside users can easily access it when out and about, and report accessibility issues with footpaths in real time. The presentation of information could be guided by existing best practice guidance from the charity sector on how to give the public workable accessibility details⁴³. The new website could also provide an opportunity to update the Countryside Code, to reflect the increased risk of wildfires since its last update in 2021. Whilst it may be necessary to charge for some levels of access to the new combined website, free access could be provided for underserved communities, such as people on disability benefit.

The UK Government has rightly received plaudits for its digital transformation over the past decade, through the pioneering GOV.UK website, which brings official information together in a clear way in single online location⁴⁴. This successful approach should now be applied to information on how to access the countryside.

Creating new river walks, underpinned by a statutory right of access

Defra has made some progress in delivering a Government commitment to create new river walks for the public to enjoy, with the 21km Mersey Valley Way announced in December as the first of nine: one for each region of England⁴⁵. Whilst this is welcome, there is more potential to open up more riverbanks to public access, in response to growing public interest in our waterways. The Government is currently relying on a permissive approach for its nine river walks, which requires negotiation with individual landowners to secure voluntary agreements for the footpaths. One riverbank can have hundreds of landowners, and just one refusal can doom a whole project. As a result, the current permissive approach will produce a limited number of river paths.

A precedent for a more ambitious approach can be found in the King Charles III England Coast Path, established by the Marine and Coastal Act 2009. The Act gave a statutory right of access along the coast. This was delivered by Natural England consulting on proposed routes for stretches of the new coast path, and the Secretary of State deciding on each stretch proposal, sometimes overriding landowner objections. Councils were then funded to build the footpath and accompanying infrastructure on the approved stretch. The Coast Path is now over 95 per cent completed, opening up 1,000 miles of previously inaccessible land for the public to enjoy⁴⁶. The forthcoming Clean Water Bill gives the Government the opportunity to do the same along riversides. A statutory right of access to major rivers in England could be included in the Bill, with a focus on rivers which pass through urban areas where access to nature and cooling spaces are urgently needed. Natural England could then be tasked with drawing up delivery proposals for Secretary of State approval, replicating the successful King Charles III England Coast Path process.

Offering new rewards for farmers who increase access

Under the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) farming support system, farmers should be rewarded for delivering public goods, including access to nature. Recent progress has been made, with the Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier support scheme now offering farmers payment for things like providing and maintaining footpaths on their fields and ensuring



access for people with reduced mobility⁴⁷. Support for more ambitious actions should be now added to the scheme. This should include payment for multiple farms coming together to deliver and promote new cohesive access routes across large areas of land (the one-stop shop for information could help with advertising these new routes). The Government should also reward farmers for making space on their land for small-scale community growing schemes, allowing people to learn about and access food production first hand. Land managers should also be discouraged from removing footpaths, with local authorities given more powers and funding to rigorously enforce the provisions in the Highways Act 1980 that prevent the obstruction of public rights of way. Fines from prosecuted offenders should then be ringfenced for authorities, to support their further enforcement work.

Increasing public access to the Government Estate

In June 2026 Defra published a 'Government Estate Nature Plan'. This document set out for the first time the full extent of Government landholdings in England, totalling 560,000 hectares, or around 4 per cent of England⁴⁸. The Nature Plan requires departments with landholdings to maintain nature-recovery plans, a tentative but welcome step forward. Notably, the Plan fails to give Departments any responsibility to increase public access to nature on their land—a missed opportunity. Although not all Government land will be appropriate, much more could be opened up for public enjoyment. The Prime Minister should reissue the Government

Estate Nature Plan, with a personal foreword to drive up departmental engagement, requiring all departments to map current public access to their land and publish a plan to increase it, ahead of a 2030 review date. The document, if reissued from the new No. 10 North, would demonstrate how access to nature is fundamental to the new administration's place-based approach to policy. This reissuing could also be an opportunity to strengthen the nature recovery requirements on departments.

Public service provision of nature for health

We know from evidence and from what the public has told us, that greater access to nature improves mental and physical health, reduces stress, lifts mood and supports people to be more active and connected to others. Formal nature prescription programmes give people practical support to spend time outdoors in ways that improve confidence, wellbeing and recovery, alongside other health and care support. Having nature-rich spaces in and around NHS and other health and care settings can create calmer, healthier environments that support patients, staff and visitors, helping people feel better and recover well. This all means that, with nature in their lives, people stay healthier for longer, reducing demands on the NHS. This can be done by:

Establishing a permanent NHS Green Social Prescribing Programme

Between 2021 and 2023, GPs and NHS Primary Care staff were able to give patients suffering from poor mental health a pioneering new form of treatment—referral to take part in a nature-based activity. Over 8,000 people received referrals and most reported reduced anxiety and depression as a result of their treatment. Time in nature-rich spaces worked to improve mental health, and costs came to less than the alternative treatments (such as cognitive behavioural therapy)⁴⁹. The scheme, a pilot funded by the Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund, was extended by two years but came to an end in 2025.

Following the pilot's demonstration of medical efficacy and cost-effectiveness, Green Social Prescribing should now be enshrined permanently across the NHS, as a treatment option GPs and Primary Care staff can prescribe to patients. Key learnings from the pilot, echoed in responses to our own consultation, could be worked in to the new permanent scheme. These include the need for some referred patients to be supported with transport to reach activities in nature-rich spaces, which can prove challenging for people living in built-up areas a long way from nature, and for those who don't drive. Similarly, a range of nature-based activities should be offered, to suit the varying needs and circumstances of patients – for instance, offering time in



quiet, wild spaces, for patients anxious about communal activities, or tailoring options to suit and build on an existing interest in a particular element of nature.

Building nature into school life

Time spent in nature helps pupils by increasing physical activity, supporting mental resilience, and improving behaviour, attendance and attainment^{50, 51}. An increasing number of schools and alternative education settings such as Pupil Referral Units are recognising these benefits and building it into their curriculum. Time spent in, and learning about nature—not least in how it helps people and communities to adapt to a changing climate—should not be overlooked or treated as ‘downtime’. Nature needs to be treated as the serious subject that it is. The Department for Education needs to set the expectation that all pupils have at least one hour’s outdoor learning per day throughout primary and secondary settings. This should be accompanied by targeted support for schools without nature-rich spaces on their grounds, to help them bring nature into their teaching space, wherever that is. It is particularly important for teachers to receive support and training so that they have the skills, knowledge and confidence to communicate about nature to young people, inspiring them to respect and care for it. A greater focus on nature at school age can also open the doors to rewarding green careers. Routes to these must be made clear and students supported in accessing them post-16⁵².

Making a success of new public health duties

Clause 45 of The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 imposes a new duty on Strategic Authorities, to improve the health of the population the authority serves⁵³. The duty directs authorities to achieve this through action on factors that determine health outcomes. During the passage of the Act the Government listened to a request made by MPs, supported by The Wildlife Trusts, and added ‘access to nature’ as one of those determinants of health⁵⁴. This was a welcome concession and means that Strategic Authorities, the new and powerful tier of local Government that will sit above unitary authorities, are directed to use access to nature to improve public health. However, as with all duties on public bodies, there is a risk that the access to nature duty will not be used proactively, and will be left to gather dust on the statue book.

To avoid this outcome and to support strategic authorities to make the most of this duty, Defra should swiftly publish guidance on how it can be effectively fulfilled, presenting case studies and options for delivery. Through this guidance, Ministers should make it clear that the duty is an active one and that they expect Strategic Authorities to prioritise increasing local

access to nature to achieve better health outcomes. The guidance could set out ways in which authorities could deliver on the duty, including employing wardens to help people and groups who feel uncomfortable about accessing nature to do so, through guided walks, supervised access sessions and organised transport for people with access needs. Respondents to The Wildlife Trusts consultation said that such support would enable them to start accessing nature more, to the benefit of their health. Similarly, guidance could set out how nature spaces can be made safe, accessible and inclusive, following charity sector best practice⁵⁵. Guidance could also encourage authorities to maximise local employment opportunities from improving access to nature, through the creation and maintenance of new parks and greenspaces.

Guidance this year should be complemented by a report to mark the first two years of the duty being in effect. Such a report could be published in May 2028, and highlight success stories and lessons to be learnt. By proactively progressing the duty, the Government and Strategic Authorities can enable a wave of locally-led actions to increase access to nature, boosting public health. This will also increase local pride in place, since polling from More in Common shows that parks and green spaces are Briton’s biggest source of pride in their local area⁵⁶. By making a success of the access to nature duty, Strategic Authorities can both improve health outcomes and give local people more to be proud about.

Conclusion

There is good news for the Government in these recommendations. In England, time spent in nature is low, but the appetite to engage with nature is high. We also know that access to natural spaces is unfairly distributed across society, with those who would benefit most from getting closer to nature missing out. Closing this gap and enabling better access to nature—and all the benefits it provides—can be achieved through eminently deliverable policies. These in turn would further No10’s devolution agenda.

Many of these policies are based on the good work already done by Defra. By empowering local government to deliver and maintain new, nature-rich parks in built-up areas, by improving footpath accessibility and abundance in the countryside, and by enshrining nature in public services across the country, access to nature can be increased, bringing with it huge benefits to society as a whole. When improving our ability to get out into nature leads to healthier, more well-connected communities, that are better protected against climate change and more closely attuned with nature, then the case for ignoring this opportunity is weak indeed.

Your views

The above policy proposals have been drawn from over 5,000 views from people who responded to the 'Fix Nature: Fix Health' consultation The Wildlife Trusts ran in the summer of 2026. We would welcome further views from the public, community groups and other environmental groups on the detailed proposals we have now put forward.

Fix nature. Fix health.

Our suggested Government Green Paper questions

Question 1

Do you agree that the UK Government must act now to increase access to nature?

Question 2

Of the three policy programmes proposed (more green spaces open to all, improved access to the countryside and access to nature built into public services), which do you think would make the most difference to you and your community, and why?

Question 3

Across all the policy programmes, do you have a favourite? Please select one and explain why it is your favourite.

Question 4

Across all the policy programmes, are there any individual policy proposals you think might not work? Please say why.

Question 5

Are there any additional policy proposals you would like to suggest?



You can respond to these questions by email, which can be sent to **dhiggins@wildlifetrusts.org**

Thank you for reading The Wildlife Trusts' Access to Nature Green Paper, and for any response you have been able to make to the consultation process. The full document will be formally presented to Government in November.

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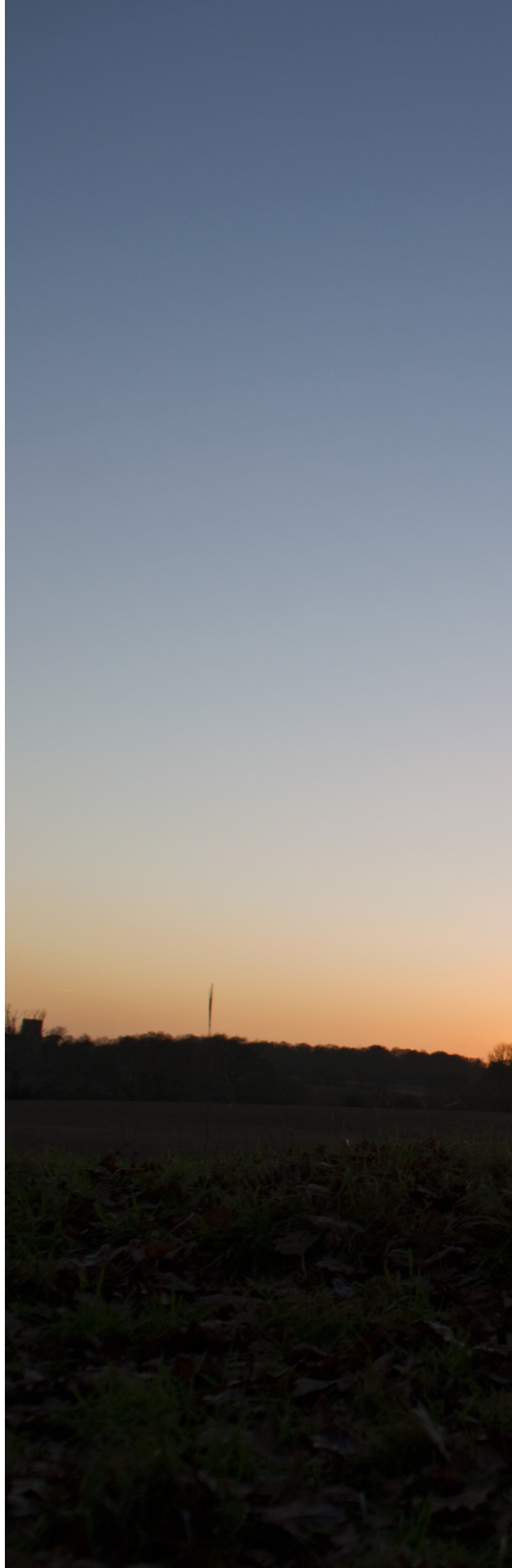
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