

Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DF

Sent by email

16th January 2023

Policy proposals to further boost nature and health

Dear Secretary of State,

Thank you for your recent announcements on increasing access to nature, including publishing the Woodland Access Plan and new funding for access to nature through Environmental Land Management payments for farmers.

We are writing to highlight further policy opportunities that will be needed to meet the Environmental Improvement Plan commitment to ensure all people live within a 15-minute walk of green or blue space.

Dedicated nature-nearby funding

The returns on further public investment in access to nature would be excellent value for money. The Government could [save £2.1 billion in health spending every year](#) by extending equitable access to nature. At the moment, 38% of people in England do not have access to a green or blue space within a 15-minute walk of their home. There is [robust evidence from Public Health England](#) that disadvantaged groups gain the most health benefit from improved access to nature. Prioritising investment and action towards improving access to nature in the most nature-deprived communities would thus deliver the most health benefits and cost savings.

We propose a targeted fund for levelling up access to nature in the most nature-deprived areas. Guided by Natural England's mapping, the Government could identify the top ten nature-deprived communities, where public benefits of better access to nature would be most pronounced.

Public funds could increase the amount of green space (with additional funds from Landscape Recovery projects), improve physical access to green space (with additional funds from the Highways Authority and other agencies responsible for public rights of way), and boost the quality of green space (with additional funds from by Levelling Up funding to enhance existing urban green spaces).

The [results of previous schemes](#) such as pocket parks and the Levelling Up Parks fund were promising. However, these funds were one-off and small in comparison to the scale of need. [Recent research](#) has shown that an investment of £5.5 billion is needed to level up access to urban green space. This investment would bring an estimated £200 billion in physical and mental health benefits.

Making use of the public estate

Another significant contribution to delivering the Government's access to nature ambition could be realised by improving public sector land. There are already great examples of public sector land maximising opportunities for public access and nature recovery, such as the Salisbury Plain Training Area owned by the Ministry of Defence and the [NHS Forest programme](#). This best practice could be extended across all MoD land, land owned by water companies, school grounds, and all NHS estates by embedding nature recovery and public access in the Greening Government commitments.

A Natural Health Service

We know you are personally committed to extending the huge benefits of green social prescribing in healthcare.

The green social prescribing for mental health pilots represented an exciting opportunity to create a step change in health care. Recent analysis found that nature prescribing programmes could [save the NHS £100 million per 1.2 million people involved](#).

The Environmental Improvement Plan was encouraging in its support for extending the positive trials on social prescribing, but no further actions have been announced. We urge the Government to commit to rolling out the green social prescribing across the country in due course, recognising the vast health benefits and potential return on investment this approach could create.

Taken together, targeted funding to improve access for the most nature-deprived communities, opening up public land for more people to enjoy, and expanding the hugely promising "nature-prescription" trials could be transformational for public enjoyment and benefit from a healthy natural environment. The public health and environmental benefits are hard to overestimate.

We hope these policy proposals are of interest and we stand ready to support you and your Department in policy development and implementation. We would be delighted to bring together nature and health organisations to discuss these proposals with you, if that would be helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Jayne Manley, Chief Executive, Earth Trust
Dr William Bird MBE, CEO, Intelligent Health
Leah Davis, Head of Policy and External Affairs, NPC
Rachel Stancliffe, CEO, The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare
Dom Higgins, Head of Health and Education, The Wildlife Trusts
Dr Elaine Mulcahy, Director, UK Health Alliance on Climate Change
Dr Richard Benwell, CEO, Wildlife and Countryside Link

Replies can be sent to matt@wcl.org.uk