



# Delivering access for all to green or blue space within a 15 minute walk of home

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## Introduction

Thriving nature nearby is a life-saving, life-enhancing tonic. A daily dose of nature boosts people’s health and wellbeing and can save the NHS millions of pounds.<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup> The positive impacts are even stronger for nature-deprived communities, who benefit disproportionately from improved access to nature.<sup>5</sup> People who are more connected to nature then take action to protect it.<sup>6</sup>

The welcome commitment in the Environmental Improvement Plan to provide all people with access to a green or blue space within a 15 minute walk of home recognizes the importance of access to nature.<sup>7</sup> It also gives weight to, and complements, the wider set of access to greenspace standards in Natural England’s Green Infrastructure Standards.<sup>8</sup>

However, it is not clear that the multiple welcome initiatives and proposed policies will add up to delivering the access to nature target or ensure the most nature-deprived areas are targeted for action. Nor will the current approach create the step-change needed to drive significant and long-term investment and action to improve access to nature for all.

In this briefing, we set out **a strategic and long-term approach that would ensure the Government’s access to nature target and wider access standards are delivered through local-led and cross-sector action.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26540085/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-44097-3>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fieldsintrust.org/revaluing>

<sup>4</sup> <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35009>

<sup>5</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/904439/Improving\\_access\\_to\\_greenspace\\_2020\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pan3.10117>

<sup>7</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/116837/2/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/116837/2/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx>



## Gaps in the current approach

To meet the Government's welcome access to nature pledge, significant and ambitious action will be needed. Recent Government figures show that 38% of people do not have access to green space within a 15 minute walk of home.<sup>9</sup>

It is not clear if and how existing Government initiatives will add up to ensuring all people have access to a green or blue space within a 15 minute walk of home. The EIP contains no published detail on how Government plans to meet this commitment, what policies and delivery actions are needed, who is responsible for delivering them, and what funding and support is needed. In our view, the current Government initiatives (e.g., the England Coast Path, the Access for All programme) and additional proposed policies (e.g., improving mapping to understand existing nature provision, a fund to increase access to nature, improved information standards) will improve access to nature but will not deliver access to nature for all within 15 minutes, nor create a step-change in access to nature policy and delivery across the country. The 15 minute to nature commitment and proposed approach to delivery includes access to and alongside blue space, but falls short of extending access opportunities in and on water – this is a significant missed opportunity to help deliver the pledge and provide people with the well-evidenced benefits of blue space.

**Without a strategic framework which evaluates existing local provision and circumstances, and then directs and coordinates local authority, other public body, and private sector funding and action towards the areas that need it the most,** it will be challenging to meet the national target in all local areas across the country, let alone in a cost-effective and equitable way.

In addition, **the existing funding pales in comparison to the £5.5 billion investment needed in urban green infrastructure.**<sup>10</sup> Local authorities in England are spending almost £330m less a year in real terms on parks and open spaces than they were a decade ago, with the most deprived areas experiencing the deepest cuts.<sup>11</sup> There has been some effort to re-invest in parks, for example the £39m through the Levelling Up Parks Fund, but this funding falls well short of replacing the funding lost from parks over the past decade. Existing funding is also often one-off and short-term, and investment rounds are not coordinated, leading to low take-up or smaller projects. Without a strategic framework to direct funding to priority areas and projects, even a new and significant funding pot could see small and only short-term impact.

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<sup>9</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1168372/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1168372/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/communities/new-research-reveals-need-for-urban-green-space>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/?LinkServID=6F6C3880-FBA4-259F-18889D4F13AC7765>



Finally, **any approach to delivering improved access to nature must be cross-sector, involving other public bodies, including other Government departments, and the private sector, including developers.** Without any new requirements on developers to embed minimum standards of green infrastructure and access to nature in new developments, there is no guarantee that new communities and developments will make a contribution to meeting the Government’s access to nature commitment. More recently developed neighbourhoods have up to 40% less green space provision than neighbourhoods dominated by late 19th- and early 20th-century housing.<sup>12</sup> Existing voluntary green infrastructure standards have not been sufficient to galvanize action from developers – but making the Green Infrastructure Standards, including the 15 minute access to nature standard, mandatory in all new developments would go a long way towards meeting the target (and benefit developers’ house prices at the same time).

### **Meeting the target through a strategic, local-led, and cross-sector approach**

To deliver the EIP pledge for all people to have a green or blue space within a 15 minute walk of home, the Government must take a strategic, local-led, and cross-sector approach.

**Green Infrastructure Strategies produced at a local authority level would act as a prioritization, implementation, and coordination tool to direct public funding and private finance, and public and private sector action to improve access to nature in an efficient and equitable way in every local authority area in England.** These local GI Strategies should assess existing local provision of green and blue spaces against the 15 min target, set local targets for delivery, provide a framework for local authority, developer, and other public body action towards rectifying inequalities in access to nature, target action towards the most nature-deprived areas, and monitor progress against local targets.

This approach must be underpinned by a legally-binding access to nature target and sufficient resources for local authorities to implement and deliver access to nature.

To deliver the new approach to meet the 15 min commitment, the Government must:

- **Set a legally-binding target for access to nature** by putting the current Government policy commitment to provide access to high quality green and blue spaces for all people within a 15 minute walk of home on a statutory footing through the Environment Act 2021. A legally-binding target for access to nature would drive cross-Government action and investment. In addition, an access to nature indicator should

<sup>12</sup> <https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales>



be added to the Index of Multiple Deprivation to facilitate targeted support and level up access to nature for all people.<sup>13</sup>

- Produce a **national strategic plan for access to nature**, to set out how the Government will deliver on its target, including policies, actions, and required funding. This strategy should recognise the importance of local government for the Government to achieve the target and provide the policy solutions and funding required to local authorities. The strategy must be cross-Government and cross-sector, recognising the multiple benefits of green infrastructure and the multiple departments, sectors, and other stakeholders involved in planning, designing, delivering, and maintaining green spaces.
- **Require, support, and fund each local planning authority to produce, implement, and report on a local Green Infrastructure Strategy, according to the Green Infrastructure Standards.** This would involve assessing existing provision of green space in a local area against the GI Standards and setting locally targets to progress towards achieving the Standards in new and existing developments (including 40% green cover and 15 minute access to nature). This approach would require local authorities to take a strategic approach to improving green space, identifying opportunities to improve the provision and quality of green spaces and green routes, prioritising nature-deprived areas, in order to deliver the most benefits for local nature, people, and communities. A locally-produced strategy, with a requirement for public consultation, also provides an opportunity for local communities and people to have a voice to identify what green spaces are most important to them and how they should be designed and delivered. Local planning authorities should receive additional funding to develop and implement a local GI Strategy.
- **All public bodies should be required to contribute to the delivery of the local GI Strategy.** This will ensure key stakeholders and landowners, such as other Government departments, water companies and the Highways Agency, pull together with local authorities to increase access to nature.
- **Mandate all new development meet the Green Infrastructure Standards,** including 40% green cover and 15 minute access to nature. This will set minimum legal requirements on developers to deliver green spaces. Any new green spaces created as part of this requirement should be registered as town or village green so it is provided permanent protection from future development.
- **Pledge £5.5 billion to local authorities to level up green spaces.** Significant and long-term funding is needed for local authorities to deliver the improvements to quality and provision and long-term maintenance of green spaces. A longer-term programme of investment is also needed, making green infrastructure more akin to grey infrastructure investment. Core funding to support resource-stretched local authorities is also needed.

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<sup>13</sup> [Local-Green-Spaces-report.pdf \(cpre.org.uk\)](#)



### Additional policies needed to meet the access to nature target

Additional policies and action will be needed to support access to nature across the country and meet the 15 minute access to nature commitment. Local Green Infrastructure Strategies could play a helpful role in ensuring these and other access policies genuinely add up to ensuring equitable access for all in every local area.

The Government should also:

- Introduce new access legislation to create more and better legally protected physical means to access green and blue spaces for all people to enjoy – an Access to Nature Bill – which could include provision to:
  - Extend public access rights to waterways, woodland, riversides, and grasslands.
  - Create a more equal and inclusive freedom to enjoy land and water for other user groups, such as cyclists, horse riders, cavers, swimmers, paddlers, and disabled people.
  - Remove the 2031 cut-off date for registering historic rights of way.
  - Require the Government to publish a clear strategy for improving access to nature.
  - Establish an Access to Nature Investment Strategy.
- Introduce an Environmental Rights Bill, with a new human right to a healthy natural environment and access to environmental justice. This would require public authorities to act compatibly with this right, increasing the weight given to access to nature within policy-making and decision-making within central and local Government. It would also give communities new tools to protect their access to nature, through enshrining rights to environmental information, to participate in decision-making, and to access justice in UK law.
- Embed ambitious public access options with ELM schemes, enabled by a significant increase in ELM funding. This would incentivise farmers and land managers to improve and create more public access to nature and to the countryside. Means of doing this include improving existing public rights of way through additional waymarking or replacing stiles with gates or gaps to increase usability for disabled people, and making new permanent links between existing public rights of way and creating many miles of new paths. The lack of detail on plans to direct ELM funding to support farmers to improve and expand public access is despite interest from farmers and repeated promises from Ministers. This is a huge missed opportunity to provide a clear, direct public benefit from taxpayer support for the farming community.
- The public rights of way network in England is a unique and world class recreational resource which is a fundamental way for people to access nature. Unfortunately, it is chronically underfunded and neglected – around one third of local authorities cut their



maintenance budget for public rights of way between 2014 and 2019 (research by the Ramblers). We need further funding for local authorities to maintain, improve and create more public rights of way to facilitate access to nature.

- In addition, the Government should maintain, protect, and expand urban green routes, which are urban leisure walking routes that provide pleasant safe links to and between green spaces to provide access to nature close to where people live, such as the London Loop<sup>7</sup> and the Salford Trail.<sup>8</sup> Urban green routes do not benefit from increased funding for active travel, because they are primarily (but not exclusively) used for leisure journeys. Despite their wide appeal and contribution to public health and wellbeing, there is still no dedicated central government funding pot to maintain, protect and expand them.

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Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 80 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

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