



Briefing: Nature for Everyone campaign Spring 2022

Executive summary

- Nature provides a significant boost to people’s mental and physical health.
- Access to these benefits is uneven across the country, with people living in poorer communities having less opportunity to connect with nature.
- Planning legislation expected for 2022 could address these inequalities, through inclusion of green infrastructure in levelling up programmes and the provision of new duties on local authorities, public bodies and developers to provide increased and more equitable access to nature.
- A new campaign, ‘[Nature for Everyone](#)’, has been launched with the support of over seventy nature, health and equality organisations to secure these reforms.

The need to increase access to nature

- Access to nature helps determine quality of life. For levelling up to be successful, disparities in access to a quality natural environment must be rectified.
- There is now 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 wellbeing.¹ 70% of UK adults find that being close to nature improves their mood.² This combination of physical mental health benefits enhances and extends life.
- A 2014 review of evidence found that people “*who are more connected to nature tended to experience more positive affect, vitality, and life satisfaction compared to those less connected to nature*”.³ A 2016 evidence review concluded that “*living in areas with higher amounts of green spaces reduces mortality*”.⁴
- The lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 further demonstrated the health benefits of access to nature. 73% UK adults surveyed in 2021 said that connecting with nature has been important in terms of managing their mental health during the pandemic.⁵ A 2020 RSPB poll found 4 out of 5 people in England believe that Government should increase the number of accessible nature-rich areas as part of a green recovery from Covid-19.⁶

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-44097-3>

² https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHAW21_NATURE%20REPORT_ENG_web.pdf p12

³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25249992/>

⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26540085/>

⁵ https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHAW21_NATURE%20REPORT_ENG_web.pdf p10

⁶ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/nature-and-a-green-recovery-from-covid-19/>



- However, this life enhancing, life extending tonic is not distributed equally. There are marked disparities in access to nature in the UK, which fall across social-economic lines - the poorer the area, the less the access to nature. One in three people in England do not have access to a greenspace within 15 minutes' walk of home.⁷ This access is concentrated in the wealthiest areas. Illustrative examples include:
 - Access to public green space stands at 17 square metres per person in central Bournemouth, over twice as high as in central Blyth (7 square metres per person).
 - Access to public green space stands at 35 square metres per person in central Basingstoke, ten times higher than in central Bradford (3 square metres per person).
 - Access to public green space stands at 17 square metres per person in Wandsworth, seventeen times higher than in Walthamstow (1 square metre per person).⁸
- These disparities have a disproportionate impact on minority ethnic groups. 40% of people from ethnic minority backgrounds live in the most green-space deprived areas, compared to 14% of white people.⁹
- This is not a uniquely urban problem. Many people in rural areas also find themselves unable to access a high-quality natural environment.
- The Prime Minister has defined his levelling up agenda as ensuing that geography is not destiny.¹⁰ Changing the geography of a space by increasing the amount of accessible nature in it helps change the destinies of people living there – by giving them access to a tonic that helps ensure happier, healthier, longer lives.
- The impact of levelling up access to nature will benefit people at an individual and community level. It will also boost our National Health Service, through improved health reducing pressure for services. Current green space provision results in estimated savings for the NHS of at least £100 million a year from fewer GP visits, concentrated in the wealthier areas where access to nature is highest.¹¹ Natural England have estimated that levelling up to give everyone in England good access to green space would reduce NHS pressures to such an extent as to save £2.1 billion in health spending every year.¹²

⁷ <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2021/12/07/how-natural-englands-green-infrastructure-framework-can-help-create-better-places-to-live/>

⁸ See FoE access to green space calculations: <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/access-green-space-england-are-you-missing-out>

⁹ <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/news-report-finds-severe-inequalities-in-access-to-parks-and-greenspaces-in-communities-across-the-uk/>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-prime-ministers-levelling-up-speech-15-july-2021>

¹¹ <https://www.fieldsintrust.org/revaluing>

¹² <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35009>



This matters for wildlife too

- At the moment, large areas of England are bereft of biodiversity, both in urban and rural settings.¹³ This matters for wildlife as well as people.
- The Government has committed itself to a legally binding target to halt the decline of species abundance by 2030.¹⁴ This cannot be achieved while significant “dead spots” remain in the landscape.
- The Lawton Review¹⁵ showed that nature cannot recover in isolated, disconnected protected sites. Our finest wildlife sites must be connected up by a latticework of habitats across the country. Levelling up access to nature, to ensure that no corner of England is left without a quality natural environment, will be critical in creating ecosystem resilience so that wildlife can recover.

Barriers to increasing access to high quality nature

- Discussion of levelling up since 2019 has been confined to grey infrastructure, such as new homes and workplaces, rather than the green infrastructure needed to make these places enjoyable to live and work in.
- The most recent Government consideration of access to nature benefits can be found in the 2018 *25 Year Plan for the Environment*, which contained a commitment to create more green infrastructure.¹⁶
- Local authorities are struggling to deliver this commitment. Some local authorities have developed Green Infrastructure (GI) strategies. However, GI strategies usually sit as planning guidance underneath a Local Plan, without the power to inform strategic decision-making to guide other local authority decisions. GI strategies have no influence over other public bodies, such as transport authorities and other landowning public bodies.
- Ongoing local government funding shortfalls provide a further barrier to GI strategy implementation. Many local authorities do not have the resources to maintain their existing greenspaces, let alone improve existing natural spaces and create additional spaces.¹⁷

¹³ <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-environment-bill-strengthened-to-halt-biodiversity-loss-by-2030>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/making-space-for-nature-a-review-of-englands-wildlife-sites-published-today>

¹⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf p77

¹⁷ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/?LinkServID=6F6C3880-FBA4-259F-18889D4F13AC7765>



Government action to increase access to nature

- For levelling up to be a credible commitment, it must include a measurable policy to make access to nature available to everyone. Success will require new duties on public authorities, combined with the funding to enable them to be met.

1) Make equitable access to a high-quality natural environment a key measure of the success of the levelling up agenda

- There is no real levelling up without levelling up nature. The success metrics for the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) should reflect this. By explicitly committing to equitable access to nature for everyone within its wider levelling up programme, DLUHC can coordinate and accelerate progress across the country.
- This target could be set as a legally-binding target under the Environment Act 2021.

2) Provide funding for green infrastructure

- In line with this prioritisation, the Levelling Up Fund should be extended to green infrastructure projects. It should target additional funding to deliver the improvements and additional provision in those communities that are the most greenspace-deprived.
- This should be in addition to the additional funding required for local authorities to maintain and improve existing natural spaces and implement their Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategies (see below).

3) Introduce a triple duty to increase access to nature in forthcoming planning legislation

- The new planning and levelling up legislation expected in 2022 should include three linked duties to increase access to nature on the ground.
1. **A duty should be placed on local authorities to develop, implement and monitor a local Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy.** The strategy should apply minimum provision and quality standards for green and blue infrastructure in the area, informed by a common England-wide baseline drawn from Natural England's Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards.¹⁸ Strategies should assess current provision against these standards, and outline action to meet them, with the overall aim of growing publicly accessible green and blue spaces for residents to enjoy. Quality of natural spaces should be assessed through criteria including the Green Flag standard, Defra biodiversity and ecological condition indicators, water quality standards, and visitor surveys to measure use and enjoyment. This would make the extend the patchy coverage of Green Infrastructure Strategies (which are currently not mandatory), and ensure they cover

¹⁸ ANGSt recommends at least 0.5 hectares of greenspace within 200 metres of homes.



opportunities to increase blue space, such as rivers, canals and lakes, as well as green space in all new developments. The duty should require local authorities to consider Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategies within Local Plans and in individual applications, so they are not disconnected from planning decisions. Government should commit to funding all burdens on local authority arising from the new mandatory duty. Strategies should be developed and adopted by the local authority within one year of new planning and levelling up legislation receiving royal assent, with a requirement to review every four years.

2. **All public bodies should be required to contribute to the delivery of the local Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy.** This will ensure key stakeholders and landowners, such as water companies and the Highways Agency, pull together with local authorities to increase access to nature.
3. **All housing and infrastructure developers should be required to meet the standards set out in the local Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, and to contribute to the wider delivery of that Strategy.** Funding adequate to cover long-term maintenance and management of access measures and spaces created from new development should come from developer contributions. In exceptional cases where minimum standards cannot be met in development, developers should be required to make extra contributions, to be used by the local authority to further the local Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy by creating new accessible nature spaces or improving access to and the quality of existing ones.

How an increase in access can be achieved

- The above measures would knit together to deliver a significant increase in access to nature, to meet a new target set through the Environment Act.
- A green infrastructure element of the Levelling Up Fund would allow extra attention to be given to the most nature deprived communities, allowing resources to be directed to the areas where increased access to nature is most need.
- Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategies across the country would see new developments provide new accessible green and blue spaces for residents, and provide the impetus for existing green and blue spaces to be improved for nature and people. These improvements could include improving access to nature-rich spaces (such as putting in a footpath leading to woodland), daylighting rivers in city centres to allow public access to the banks, and measures to improve the biodiversity and quality of parks (such as wildflower meadow planting and actions to work towards achieving Green Flag status).
- A linked network of new accessible nature-rich spaces and enhanced existing ones will spread the benefits of nature access across different communities, as well as providing a latticework of habitats for wildlife species to recover in.



How you can help

- Link's 'Nature for Everyone' campaign [launched](#) on 21.02.22, [supported](#) by over seventy organisations, including The Wildlife Trusts, the Ramblers, NHS Forest, and the Royal College of Psychiatrists.
- Polling conducted by Link in January 2022 found that 80% of people want a 'legal right to local nature', with 83% saying having access to local natural spaces is more important post-pandemic.¹⁹
- If you are keen to champion this cause, we would like to add your name to our petition and to our list of supporters that are backing this campaign. As planning and levelling up legislation proceeds through Parliament, we hope to work with parliamentary champions on amendments to secure the new duties on access.
- If you are interested to helping secure these vital reforms, please contact us – we would be delighted to set up further discussion.
- Together, we can ensure that more people benefit from life enhancing nature.

Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 65 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world.

Link is pleased to be a partner to the [Better Planning Coalition](#), a group of organisations working together to improve the planning system.

*For questions or further information please contact:
Matt Browne, Advocacy Lead, Wildlife and Countryside Link
T: 020 8078 3586 | E: matt@wcl.org.uk*

¹⁹ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/nature-for-everyone-polling.asp>