

Public Parks: Follow Up Inquiry

Evidence for the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee by Wildlife and Countryside Link

28 June 2022

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 65 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature.

Summary

1. A healthy natural environment and thriving local natural spaces are vital for people's health and wellbeing. This fact was highlighted during the pandemic, when both actual visits to natural spaces and the value that people placed on nature increased. Despite this, parks and greenspaces are in decline due to cuts to local authority and parks budgets, loss to new development, and the long-term decline of nature in the UK.
2. The health and wellbeing benefits of access to and connection with nature are significant and well-evidenced. It is also clear that people highly value nature. A 2016 evidence review concluded that "living in areas with higher amounts of green spaces reduces mortality."¹ There is strong scientific evidence that spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature leads to a significant increase in health and wellbeing.² A 2014 review 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 People also highly value nature: 82% of UK adults said that being in nature makes them happy and 92% of UK adults felt that spending time outdoors was good for their mental health.⁴
3. Everyone should have access to nature. A network of wildlife-rich, well-managed, accessible natural spaces will spread the benefits of access to nature across different communities, support nature's recovery across the country, contribute to reducing health inequalities and create healthy, thriving communities – fostering a truly green recovery from the pandemic.
4. To support and drive ambitious action to provide equitable access to nature for everyone, the Government should set a new levelling up mission for access to a high quality natural environment. This mission should be supported by a new duty on public bodies (including local authorities) to set local objectives to increase equitable access to nature and sufficient funding through levelling up funds.

Responses to selected questions:

What has been the impact of the pandemic on parks and what should the priorities of central and local government be during the recovery?

1. The pandemic highlighted the important health and wellbeing benefits of nature and the importance of nature to people. 83% of UK adults feel it is more important to have access to local

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

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

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

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-data-and-publications-from-adults-survey-year-1-april-2020-march-2021-official-statistics>

natural spaces since the lockdowns and working from home.⁵ 73% UK adults surveyed in 2021 said that connecting with nature has been important in terms of managing their mental health during the pandemic.⁶ People reported that both nature/wildlife (40%) and visiting green and natural spaces (43%) had been more important to their wellbeing during the pandemic.⁷

2. These findings from surveying people were supported by statistics on park and greenspace usage. Visits to parks and greenspaces were up 25% in May 2020 compared to May 2018. This forms part of a more long term trend, over the last decade, park visits have nearly doubled, from 1.2 billion visits in 2009-10 to 2.1 billion visits in 2018-19.⁸
3. The pandemic also served to highlight the inequalities in health outcomes and in access to nature. The health gap has grown between wealthy and deprived areas in England since 2010.⁹ One in three people in England do not have access to greenspace within 15 minutes' walk of home.¹⁰ 40% of people from ethnic minority backgrounds live in the most nature-deprived areas, compared to 14% of white people.¹¹
4. Despite the well-evidenced health and wellbeing benefits and importance to people of nature, natural spaces are being degraded and disappearing. In urban settings, 11% of urban greenspace has been lost in the last 15 years.¹² Greenspaces that persist are slipping into poor condition: between 2013 and 2021, the number of parks in 'good condition' declined from 60% to just over 40%.¹³ Across the country, many areas across England are bereft of biodiversity.¹⁴ Not only are greenspaces being lost to development, but new developments are also not delivering access to nature: recently published NEF research found that neighbourhood green space provision has declined by one third in 21st century developments, resulting in 9 million fewer trips to green space every year.¹⁵
5. The pandemic has only further stretched local authorities' capacity and resources in general and with particular respect to parks and greenspaces. Several subsequent 'State of UK Public Parks' reports have identified the impact of the loss of finance on the quality, availability and future sustainability of the UK's parks. £500 million in parks funding was lost between 2010 and 2016, to a further £190 million in 2021.¹⁶
6. A recovery from the pandemic must include providing access to nature for everyone. Levelling up access to high quality natural spaces across the country will help tackle health inequalities, contribute to nature's recovery and the creation and regeneration of healthy, happy communities

⁵ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/nature-for-everyone-launch.asp>

⁶ https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHAW21_NATURE%20REPORT_ENG_web.pdf

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-data-and-publications-from-adults-survey-year-1-april-2020-march-2021-official-statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-data-and-publications-from-adults-survey-year-1-april-2020-march-2021-official-statistics-main-finding>

⁸ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/press-release/new-research-shows-55bn-fund-needed-to-level-up-access-to-urban-green-space-as-part-of-uks-green-recovery>

⁹ <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

¹⁰ <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2021/12/07/how-natural-englands-green-infrastructure-framework-can-help-create-better-places-to-live/>

¹¹ <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/news-report-finds-severe-inequalities-in-access-to-parks-and-greenspaces-in-communities-across-the-uk/>

¹² Urban green space in England [declined from 63% of urban land area to 56%](#) (see table 5, p3) between 2001 and 2016. This represents an 11% decrease in greenspace land area in 15 years.

¹³ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/>

¹⁴ <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales>

¹⁶ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/#>

for people to live, work and play. 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-19.¹⁷

7. Levelling up access to nature will also generate significant savings for the NHS. 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.¹⁸
8. To deliver more and more equitable access to nature, central and local government must identify and prioritise increasing access to greenspace in those areas that are the most nature-deprived, ensure that all new development includes access to natural spaces, connect people with nature, and foster nature's recovery across the country. This will require ambitious, strategic and well-funded cross-Government planning and action.
9. Equitable access to a high quality natural environment should be made a key measure of levelling up.¹⁹ 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 in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, DLUHC can coordinate and accelerate progress across the country.
10. A duty should be placed on public bodies in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill to take steps to reduce health inequalities and improve wellbeing through increased and more equitable access to nature through the exercise of planning functions.²⁰ Local authorities should set specific objectives to access to high quality accessible natural green and blue spaces, using Natural England's Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards as a baseline, and going beyond these minimum standards where possible. All new development should meet the local standards and contribute to the aim of increasing local provision of high quality natural spaces. Local authorities should set policies and take action to increase the provision and quality of natural spaces in existing developments and communities, for example by creating pocket parks, putting in a footpath leading to a woodland, improving the biodiversity and quality of existing natural spaces, and supporting communities in connecting with nature.
11. Funding should be provided to support local authorities in fulfilling new burdens resulting from this new mandatory duty. Funds to support the levelling up of access to nature will also be raised from housing and infrastructure developers and other public bodies, e.g., water companies and Highways England, who should be required to contribute to the delivery of the new duty. As well, central Government should extend the Levelling Up Fund to include green infrastructure projects. It should target additional funding to deliver the improvements and provision in the most greenspace-deprived communities.
12. A new levelling up mission for access to a high quality natural environment, a new duty on public bodies (including local authorities) to increase equitable access to nature, supported by sufficient funding, should be included in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill in order to enable and drive forward ambitious, cross-departmental, national and local action to increase access to nature.²¹ A

¹⁷ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/nature-and-a-green-recovery-from-covid-19/>

¹⁸ <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35009>

¹⁹ https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Advocacy_Briefing_Nature_for_Everyone_campaign_Spring_2022.pdf

²⁰ https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Advocacy_Briefing_Nature_for_Everyone_campaign_Spring_2022.pdf

²¹ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Better%20Planning%20Coalition%20briefing%20for%20the%20Commons%20second%20reading%20of%20the%20Levelling%20Up%20and%20Regeneration%20Bill.pdf>

network of wildlife-rich, well-managed, accessible natural spaces will spread the benefits of access to nature across different communities, support nature's recovery across the country, and contribute to reducing health inequalities –.

What has been the impact on parks and green spaces, including in bolstering access for disadvantaged groups, of Government initiatives such as pocket parks and the Levelling Up Fund?

13. Government initiatives such as pocket parks and the Levelling Up Fund are welcome, but do not provide the step change needed to rectify the past decline in parks and greenspaces and to set central and local Government up to address the important challenge of levelling up access to nature
14. The 'State of UK Public Parks' most recent report found that financing and support for parks and greenspaces remains inadequate. One-off and small-scale grants to support initiatives such as pocket parks and small renovation projects are welcome, but they require time and resources to access through bidding and are too small to make up for the long-term decline in central government support which has led to continually under-resourced parks budgets.²²
15. Instead, significant and long-term funding is needed to level up access to nature. Recent National Trust research found that an investment of £5.5 billion in green infrastructure was needed to level up access to urban greenspace, bringing £200 billion in physical health benefits through disease prevention and mental wellbeing benefits and an estimated 40,000 jobs in local economies.²³ As stated above central Government should extend the Levelling Up Fund to include green infrastructure projects.
16. Increased funding should be accompanied by legislative and policy changes in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill to ensure that access to nature is delivered strategically, targeted towards the most nature-deprived communities, contributed to by all public bodies, and embedded in the planning system and across government departments to ensure that all new developments contribute to access to nature.²⁴

How would you assess the effectiveness of the Parks Action Group and what should its future role be?

No response.

How have local authorities engaged with their communities, including friends group forums, about the planning, effective resourcing, and managing of parks?

No response.

²² <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/#>

²³ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/press-release/new-research-shows-55bn-fund-needed-to-level-up-access-to-urban-green-space-as-part-of-uks-green-recovery>

²⁴

https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Advocacy_Briefing_Nature_for_Everyone_campaign_Spring_2022.pdf

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