

Outdoors For All

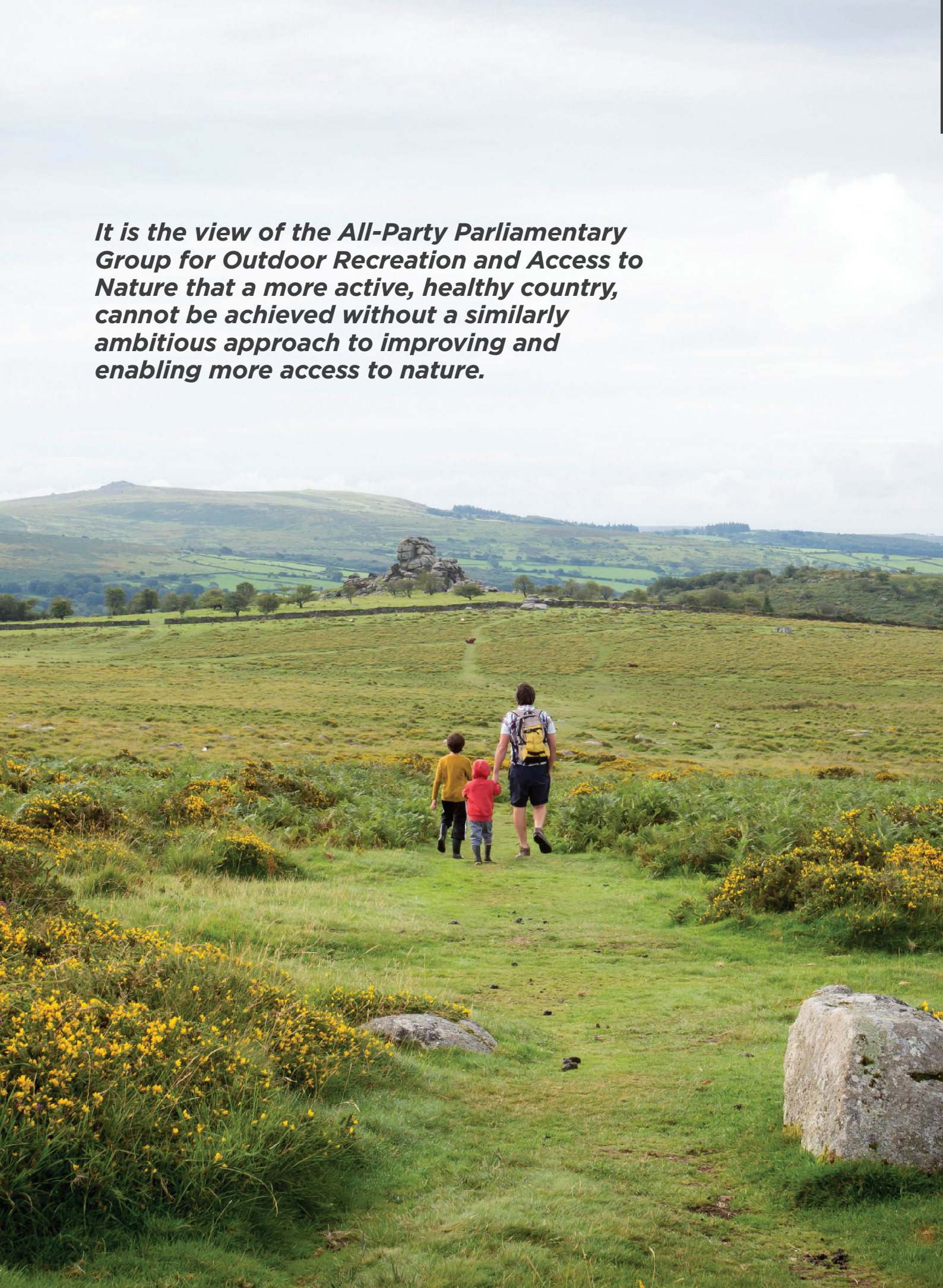
Recommendations to
Government on Access to Nature

September 2025



ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR
**OUTDOOR RECREATION
& ACCESS TO NATURE**

It is the view of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Recreation and Access to Nature that a more active, healthy country, cannot be achieved without a similarly ambitious approach to improving and enabling more access to nature.



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Introduction



Andy Macnae MP
Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for
Outdoor Recreation and Access to Nature



Outdoor recreation brings people together, opens up opportunity, builds resilience and improves mental health, particularly amongst young people.

We sometimes forget just what a beautiful country we live in. In England, we have an amazing variety of natural spaces – hills, mountains, moorland, woodland, urban parks, rivers, lakes and coasts – of which we should be rightly proud. And we know that spending time in wild and natural places is good for both mind and body.

Every day, people across the country are being active or simply relaxing in these spaces. Around this a £25bn+ outdoor industry has built up, supporting over 500,000 jobs and sustaining many rural communities. Outdoor recreation and access to nature also brings huge health and well-being benefits. Physical inactivity is associated with 1 in 6 deaths in the UK. Better access to green and blue spaces could save the NHS £2.1bn per year and the wider economy several times more, given the impact of sick days. Outdoor recreation brings people together, opens up opportunity, builds resilience and improves mental health, particularly amongst young people.

UK Governments have long recognised the importance and value of public access to nature. From the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, which provided the foundations for protected landscapes, long distance trails and public rights of way; to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) 2000, which opened many of the wildest and most beautiful areas in England for people to explore on foot; and the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 which introduced a right of access for walkers to beaches, foreshore and cliffs in England, along with a continuous coastal route, known as the King Charles III England Coast Path.

Despite these advances, we know that many people are still missing out on the benefits of outdoor recreation and access to nature. 20m people do not live within 15 minutes of an accessible green or blue space and only 4% of our rivers have an uncontested right of access. An estimated 23% of people cannot use local paths because of blockages and poor maintenance, rising to 35% for disabled people. Some parts of the network are disconnected and hard to

reach, sometimes resulting in inaccessible access islands. A lack of easily available public information, a fear of getting lost and a lack of signage and information are real barriers for 1 in 4 people, who do not know where they can walk.

For over 70 years, access legislation has helped improve where we can go and what we can do but too many people are still missing out. Now is the time to be ambitious and rise to the challenge, particularly given the Government commitment to improving access to nature and its recognition of the shift from treatment to prevention and active lifestyle through its 10 Year NHS plan.

It is the view of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Recreation and Access to Nature that the vision, for a more active, healthy country, cannot be achieved without a similarly ambitious approach to improving and enabling more access to nature. New, considered legislation is the only way to address this in a meaningful way and provide more practical opportunities to enable everyone to enjoy

the outdoors, whilst protecting the environment and respecting the rights of landowners, communities and other users.

We launched our Inquiry to take this challenge head on, asking the key questions around what good access looks like and how it can be delivered. We heard from over 750+ organisations and individuals and this report presents a wide range of recommendations arising from these submissions. And it goes further to consider how these recommendations can best be delivered. Overall, we believe this report delivers a blueprint for a new world class approach to equitable access and with a Government committed to expanding responsible access to nature, we now have an exciting opportunity to create a lasting legacy for the next generation.

Andy Macnae MP



The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Recreation and Access to Nature believes that achieving a more active, healthy country requires a similarly ambitious approach to improving access to nature, asserting that new, considered legislation is the only meaningful way to provide practical opportunities for everyone to enjoy the outdoors while protecting the environment and respecting other users and landowners.

The report highlights that England possesses a rich variety of landscapes, and spending time in natural places offers significant benefits for both mind and body. Despite this, much of England’s countryside and access network remains inaccessible and unconnected. Currently, 20 million people do not live within 15 minutes of green or blue space.

Our inquiry sought to understand how we can increase the extent and quality of access to nature for everyone in England as well as working to specify what good and inclusive access looks like. This report is designed to provide practical advice to Government, so includes what the policy and legislative options to achieve these goals might be.

We gathered insights from over 750 organisations and individuals from all sides of the debate, from sports bodies and access campaigners to farmers and other landowners. The APPG was determined to

hear all views and represent these equitably. The body of this report therefore seeks to identify consensus where it exists and detail differing views where they predominate.

The feedback received through the call for evidence points to an urgent need to protect, maintain and expand the public rights of way network. Public rights of way give people certainty – but they are severely underfunded and many remain unrecorded.

Alongside this, there was a clear message that people want to see access rights expanded through a greater freedom to roam. There was a strong consensus in favour of enabling the public to undertake a wider range of activities in more landscapes.

It is our view that both of these can be achieved through new legislation, but critically, any changes to our fundamental rights of access must be supported with a clear strategy, legally binding targets, focused investment, education and good practice information.

That is why, taken together, the recommendations within this report represent a bold, ambitious and holistic package of reforms.

There are 40 recommendations and 10 headline recommendations set out in several key areas.

Expanding Access:

This includes establishing new statutory rights for responsible access across a broader range of landscapes (e.g., inland waters, riversides, woodlands) and for a wider array of recreational activities (e.g., wild camping, paddling, swimming, cycling, horse riding). It also advocates for removing the 2031 deadline for recording historic public rights of way, in line with the Government’s existing commitment to do so. Environmental Land Management schemes should also provide sufficient incentives for access.

Headline recommendation 1: Establish statutory rights to responsible access across a broader range of landscapes, including inland waters and riversides, woodlands and other suitable natural environments.

Headline recommendation 2: Extend statutory access rights for a broader range of recreational activities, including but not limited to wild camping, paddling, swimming, cycling, and horse riding.

Improving Existing Access:

Recommendations here focus on supporting local highway authorities through an Access to Nature Investment Strategy, removing barriers like stiles on public rights of way within five years, simplifying the process for upgrading footpaths to allow cycling and horse-riding, and adding cycle tracks to Definitive Maps.

Headline recommendation 3: Legislate to establish an Access to Nature Investment Strategy enabling local highway authorities to apply for resources based on assessed local needs and opportunities aligned with national priorities.

Accessing Blue Spaces:

This section emphasises legislating to expand access rights for paddling, swimming and non-motorised craft on inland waters, strengthening the statutory Code of Practice on Conservation, Access and Recreation, and tackling water pollution from sources like sewage overflows and agricultural runoff.

Headline recommendation 4: Legislate to expand access rights for swimming and non-motorised craft on inland waters through new legislation or amendments to existing acts, such as the CRoW Act, an Access to Nature Bill, or the upcoming Water Reform Bill.

Executive Summary



Governance, Strategy and Accountability:

The report calls for a long-term Government plan with legally binding targets and an Access to Nature Investment Strategy. It also suggests adding “Access to Nature” as an indicator in the Index of Multiple Deprivation and making Environmental Land Management funding conditional on landowners complying with Public Rights of Way duties.

Headline recommendation 5: Publish a long-term Government plan to improve public access to nature, with a clear vision, strategy, legally binding targets, backed by an Access to Nature Investment Strategy to direct funding, however limited, where it is most needed.

Awareness and Education:

Recommendations include overhauling the Countryside Code to promote access and responsible behavior, developing activity-specific codes, implementing a National Ranger Service, and transforming the Ordnance Survey App into a free, universal tool for wayfinding and mapping.

Headline recommendation 6: Overhaul the Countryside Code and Land Managers’ Code to actively promote public access rights, inspire outdoor activity, and embed responsible behaviour, reflecting modern recreation and diverse landscapes.

Headline recommendation 7: Transform the Ordnance Survey App into a universal tool which is free to use to ensure that everyone has access to the information they need.

Children Spending Time Outdoors:

This area focuses on integrating opportunities to experience nature into the new Youth Strategy and the Curriculum and Assessment Review, and establishing a requirement for all children to experience at least one residential outdoor experience.

Headline recommendation 8: Establish a requirement for all children and young people to experience at least one residential outdoor experience, linked to curriculum outcomes at KS2, using Pupil Premium to ensure inclusion for all.

Promoting Health and Wellbeing Outcomes:

The report advocates for enshrining access to nature as a statutory public health responsibility by amending the Health and Social Care Act and mandating green social prescribing as a core component of NHS and public health strategies.

Headline recommendation 9: Enshrine access to nature as a statutory public health responsibility by amending the Health and Social Care Act.

Planning and Transport:

Recommendations in this section aim to describe how planning and infrastructure can deliver more for access to green and blue spaces. These include improving public transport links, ensuring major infrastructure projects deliver access improvements and requiring Spatial Development Strategies to identify areas needing better green/blue space provision.

Headline recommendation 10: Improve public transport links to and from green and blue spaces, including increased frequency, expanded routes and affordability.

Balancing the Needs of Everyone:

The report also acknowledges the diverse and sometimes conflicting views on issues like recreational use of off-road vehicles, dog control, and permissive vs. permanent access, emphasising the need for effective enforcement, education, and collaborative approaches to balance access with environmental protection and safety.

Conclusion

Overall, this report underscores the significant benefits of outdoor recreation for physical and mental health, the economy (a £25bn+ industry supporting over 500,000 jobs), and community resilience. England needs a bold, coordinated, and well-resourced strategy that modernises access legislation, invests in infrastructure, and builds a culture of responsible enjoyment. This requires ambitious, cross-departmental action from the Government to create a lasting legacy of equitable and responsible access to nature for future generations.

Fundamentally, our report makes a strong case for existing rights to be protected and expanded, whilst being complimented by a wider freedom to roam in new landscapes and for a wider range of users. These must be supported with a clear strategy, legally binding targets, focused investment, education and good practice information.

We therefore call on the Government to take on board the recommendations of this report and following an Access to Nature Green Paper, bring forward ambitious access legislation that can truly unlock the benefits of nature and outdoor recreation for all.



1. Expanding Access

While existing rights of access provide a foundation, there remain gaps in the access network – both linear routes and open country – and in opportunities to participate in diverse recreational activities. Legislative and policy measures are needed to expand statutory rights, improve connections, and ensure that both rural and urban communities benefit from a fairer and more inclusive access framework, while maintaining necessary protections for land management and nature conservation.

1.1 New Statutory Rights to Access Nature

1. Establish statutory rights to responsible access across a broader range of landscapes, including inland waters and riversides, woodlands and other suitable natural environments

There are currently no general statutory rights to access areas such as woodland, riversides and inland waters. However research¹ shows that, for example, extending access rights to woodland in England could create more spaces for recreation closer to where people live, reducing the distance to access land to just 20 minutes for deprived communities. Creating corridors of access along watersides could also provide a vital space for both recreation and nature, in many cases near to where people live.

The reduced occupiers' liability clause under the Marine and Coastal Access Act (that occupiers are excluded from liability arising from all physical features – not just natural features of the landscape) should also be applied to any new landscapes and activities where access rights are extended. This will help reassure landowners that outdoor recreation does not pose a threat of litigation on their land.

A range of views were shared on the subject of expanding the freedom to roam to a broader range of landscapes:

“Legislating for a right of responsible access is, in our view, the most comprehensive, most equitable, and most cost-effective way of improving responsible access to the English countryside.” - Right to Roam

We're very strongly in favour of universal, equitable but responsible access, and note that nuance will be needed to protect our most vulnerable habitats and species. Increasing access doesn't necessarily mean giving everyone the right to do everything everywhere.” - RSPB

“The Right to Roam argument we monitor... we don't feel there is a need for more right to roam because we don't think that the public at large are confident to use a right to roam. Public footpaths give people greater confidence when exploring the countryside, allowing for safe and responsible access alongside livestock and farming activities.” - National Farmers Union

2. Extend statutory access rights for a broader range of recreational activities, including but not limited to wild camping, paddling, swimming, cycling, caving and horse riding.

As well as expanding the types of landscape to which the public has freedom to roam away from public rights of way, the majority of submissions argued in favour of expanding the type of activities allowed. Cycling, horse riding, paddling, swimming, caving and wild camping do not currently enjoy rights of access, limiting opportunities for public enjoyment of the outdoors. Several respondents noted that the Secretary of State could amend Schedule 2 of the CRoW Act:

“Higher rights' like wild camping, horse-riding and swimming are explicitly excluded on CRoW Access Land under Schedule 2 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000)” - Right to Roam

“Currently the majority of access land as defined by section 1 of the Countryside and Rights of Way 2000 is only accessible to walkers, such land is often crossed by routes that would be ideal for horse riders, carriage drivers and cyclists to use”. “Making such land available to equestrians could easily be achieved by lifting the appropriate restrictions to be observed by persons exercising rights of access, as set out in Schedule 2 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.” - The British Horse Society

Photo credit: Frankie Dewar

¹ https://new-economics.files.svdcn.com/production/files/Who-has-a-public-right-of-way_web.pdf?dm=1694013806

1. Expanding Access



“Regional parks on urban fringes, supported by public transport, facilities, and funding for local authorities could provide opportunities for recreation on people, doorsteps.”
- National Trust

“There is a need to prioritise investment into improving the quality, quantity and access of existing green and blue spaces within deprived areas to improve feelings of safety, appeal and use.” – Street Games

6. Reform Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) targets so that they deliver new and improved local blue and green spaces and routes for people as well as nature

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) are an opportunity to deliver for people as well as for wildlife. While their primary focus is currently on nature restoration, they could also integrate public access provision but there is no requirement for them to do so. Well-planned paths, green and blue corridors, and open spaces can serve both people and wildlife, fostering public support for conservation while providing sustainable recreation.

In addition, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) aims for a 10% gain in biodiversity but currently falls short in recognising the value of undeveloped land and informal use by local people. ²BNG requirements should explicitly contribute to improved public access to nature, alongside ecological benefits.

“The Environment Act 2021 and regulations do not explicitly require LNRSs to improve inclusive public access, enhance rights of way, strengthen habitat connectivity, or embed community co-design beyond basic consultation. Nor is there a statutory duty to invest in the physical infrastructure, such as signage, footpaths, and accessible routes, that makes nature genuinely reachable for all.” – Anonymous.

² The comparative value of on-site vs off-site Biodiversity Net Gain for restoring nature. David Hill | Nina Pindham, Cornerstone Barristers | Jason Beedell, Strutt & Parker Neil Beamsley, Bellway Homes | Robert Hindle, Rural Solutions https://rural.struttandparker.com/article/new-report-highlights-value-of-off-site-biodiversity-net-gain/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

3. Legislate to remove the 2031 deadline for recording historic public rights of way to prevent the loss of unrecorded routes.

The 2031 deadline for applications to record historic public rights of way means that many opportunities to access nature risk being lost forever. After 2031, it will no longer be possible to claim rights of way in England based on historic evidence. The Government recently pledged to repeal the cut-off date, but primary legislation is needed to fulfil this commitment.

“These well-trodden routes, many of which have been in place for hundreds of years, are a part of our shared heritage and it is critical that we bring forward these measures to protect their long-term future.”
– Baroness Hayman, Minister for Access, Defra

1.2 Supplementing Statutory Access

4. Ensure that Environmental Land Management schemes provide sufficient incentives for farmers and land managers to enhance responsible access to nature on their land.

Many respondents highlighted the potential of financial incentives to encourage farmers and land managers to open up more of their land to enable people to access nature. Environmental Land Management currently provides payments for actions such as permissive open access and permissive paths, or improving the accessibility of existing public rights of way. However it is unclear whether the payment rates are significant enough to encourage uptake and whether or not the actions being taken are delivering genuine public benefit. The updated list of payment rates should be analysed as soon as possible to assess whether the offer needs to be improved and to ensure it is delivering new opportunities for the public to access nature where this is most needed.

“Our suggested scheme offers a payment per metre for creating and maintaining a new permissive path. This payment could be topped up where the new permissive route links to an existing public right of way, leads to open access land or creates a circular route. There could also be an additional bonus for new permissive paths close to settlements.” – The Countryside Landowners Association (CLA)

5. Introduce a duty for combined authorities to publish strategic leisure walking plans that map existing urban routes, green spaces, identify gaps, propose network improvements, and target urban greening efforts to connect and enhance access.

New urban green routes and orbital greenways at the urban-rural fringe can maximise the number of people granted everyday access to nature; examples include the Colchester Orbital, the Bristol-Bath railway path and the Greater Manchester Ringway. The Greater London Authority has a strategic leisure walking plan, and similar approaches are needed elsewhere.

“Every combined authority should follow the lead of London, where Transport for London has published the London Leisure Walking Plan, the first of its kind in the world. The Plan contains an ambition to “create the world’s largest, greenest and most accessible leisure walking network,” by improving existing green routes and creating new ones in areas of greatest need.”
– The Ramblers



2. Improving Existing Access

Photo credit: Alberto Casetta

There are existing opportunities for the public to access nature in England, but in many places and for many people, there are barriers preventing greater use and enjoyment. In part, this stems from a lack of resources available to local highway authorities to fulfil their legal duties and make use of powers to protect and improve public rights of access. It is also a result of legislative blockers which need to be resolved to help make the most of the access we have.

2.1 Support for Local Highway Authorities

7. Legislate to establish an Access to Nature Investment Strategy enabling local highway authorities to apply for resources based on assessed local needs and opportunities aligned with national priorities.

A new national Access to Nature Investment Strategy should be established to support local authorities to improve public access provision. A national investment strategy, reviewed periodically, would enable local highway authorities to access additional resources based on a clear assessment of local needs and how these relate to national priorities. Allocations could be made dependent on local highway authorities having up-to-date Rights of Way Improvement Plans (ROWIPs) in place, which are existing statutory requirements. Without consistent implementation and financial backing, ROWIPs often remain aspirational documents that cannot be delivered.

“Rights of Way Improvement Plans (RoWIPs), required by the Countryside Rights of Way Act (CROW) 2000, with specific concern (amongst other issues) for accessibility improvements, are guidance only and without weight. Local Access Forums (LAFs), also established by the CROW Act, have brought together wide-ranging lay and professional expertise on countryside issues alongside PROW teams, but failed to give them any teeth to effect significant change. Neither LAFs nor RoWIPs have any funding.”

– Anonymous.

2.2 Opening the Way for More Users

8. Legislate to end landowners’ right to retain stiles on public rights of way, requiring all to be replaced with accessible alternatives within five years.

A recurring theme from our call for evidence sessions was the barrier presented by stiles and other inaccessible structures on public rights of way. Many submissions supported the view that the right of landowners to retain stiles on public rights of way should come to an end, and unnecessary barriers replaced with accessible alternatives which still support the management and control of livestock. Public rights of way are one of the primary means by which people can get outdoors, yet too many are missing out. Over 20% of England’s population is unable to use the network due to mobility issues, and the Equality Act 2010 and associated guidance have not achieved the desired universal access. A five-year deadline for replacing all stiles with inclusive alternatives would ensure a more accessible network, reinforcing the principle that places accessible for those with disabilities benefit everyone else.

“The Ramblers has estimated that over 20% of England’s population are currently unable to make use of public rights of way because of mobility issues which suggests that the Equality Act and its associated advice has not had the desired effect.”
– Dorset, Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole Joint Local Access Forum

“Disabled people must feel they belong and have more choice in the places and spaces around us. Legislation must ensure new or replacement structures default to more accessible solutions (self-closing gates, wide kissing gates, or compliant gaps), rather than stiles or squeeze stiles. These (stiles or squeeze stiles) with steps can create barriers to truly enjoying the outdoors.”
– Activity Alliance

9. Legislate to simplify the process for upgrading suitable public footpaths to allow cycling and horse-riding.

Many footpaths are physically capable of accommodating a wider range of users, including cyclists and equestrians, yet their current legal status restricts their use to walkers only. This forces vulnerable



cyclists and equestrians onto busy roads, even though viable off-road paths are sometimes available. While it is possible to upgrade footpaths to bridleways to allow cycling and horse-riding to take place, the process can be slow, expensive and complex. For example, councils in England³ upgraded on average only one new right of way for cycling every two years between 2009 and 2019. Reclassifying suitable footpaths to bridleways or restricted byways would open thousands more miles of linear routes.

“It is difficult to regard a route classification based solely on historic use as a rational basis to meet current needs.”
– Byways and Bridleways Trust

10. Legislate to add cycle tracks as a category of official public right of way on Definitive Maps.

One of the main ways cycling opportunities can be increased is by changing the status of a suitable public footpath to a cycle track, using provisions in the Cycle Tracks Act 1984. However, cycle tracks are not a category of path required to be shown on the definitive map, the legal record maintained by local highway authorities of public rights of way in their

area. As such, cycle tracks are not afforded the same legal protections enjoyed by other public rights of way, including public footpaths. The effect of converting a public footpath into a cycle track is therefore to require its removal from the definitive map and, in turn, all Ordnance Survey maps. This means that proposals for the creation of cycle tracks on footpaths, designed to increase opportunities for cyclists, are often met with opposition from local communities. Understandably, they are concerned about the loss of legal protections for public rights of way in their area, and from Ordnance Survey maps. The only way to address this barrier is to amend legislation so that cycle tracks are recorded on the definitive map as are other public rights of way.

11. Ensure under-represented community organisations are adequately funded to support their community groups to access blue and green spaces

Under-represented community organisations who have built years of trust and relationships with communities should be adequately funded and engaged to ensure they can continue to support their community groups to access green and blue spaces. More statutory partnerships (e.g., with Natural England) are required to reduce inequality through

joint planning and localised delivery of existing and future access opportunities.

“There is a need to prioritise investment into improving the quality, quantity and access of existing green and blue spaces within deprived areas to improve feelings of safety, appeal and use.” *– Street Games*

“Underrepresented/minoritised groups tend not to be part of governance/policy issues from our lived experience working with them. Those tasked to communicate government policy/legislation tend to be disconnected from these groups and only undertake work with them as a form box ticking exercise.”
– Sheffield Environmental Movement

2.3. Protected Landscapes

12. Bring forward reforms to revitalise National Parks’ purposes and governance for health and connectivity of people and nature.

Covering a quarter of England’s land area, access to nature in our National Parks and National Landscapes is vital for the health and well being of the millions of people who visit these iconic landscapes, helping them to also support a thriving rural economy. If National Parks and National Landscapes are to survive into the future and give stronger emphasis on supporting nature recovery, fighting the climate crisis and improving public access, they need a major system reboot. This must include implementing the Government’s commitment to new law to overhaul National Park governance.

13. Strengthen National Trails protection in planning legislation to protect these routes from development.

There are 16 National Trails, passing through some of our most dramatic and wildest landscapes, with the King Charles III England Coast Path being the newest and longest National Trail when it is complete. Any mental and physical health benefits people gain from using the National Trails can only be delivered by strengthening National Trails protection in planning legislation. Sections of the newly created King Charles III England Coast Path for example, have already been lost due to both developers and planning authorities not realising the significance of National Trails, and we are in danger of losing more access to the outdoors.



Photo credit: Annie Spratt

A full-page background image showing a man in dark swim trunks jumping into a clear blue lake. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The water is calm, reflecting the sky and the man's jump.

3. Accessing Blue Spaces

The longstanding confusion around public rights of access on unregulated inland waters must be resolved by creating a clear, consistent right in legislation. Currently, just a tiny proportion of our inland waters have a clear, uncontested right of access. This is the biggest barrier preventing people from having the confidence to enjoy local blue spaces. Voluntary access agreements have proven to be impractical and inconsistent. Negotiation across thousands of landowners is restrictive, time-consuming, and creates inconsistencies from river to river.

There was broad support in the evidence submissions for the introduction of new legislation toward a default in favour of public access, backed by a clear code of conduct.

3.1 Expanding Access to Inland Waters

14. Legislate to expand access rights for swimming and non-motorised craft on inland waters through new legislation or amendments to existing acts, such as the CRow Act, an Access to Nature Bill, or the upcoming Water Reform Bill.

According to Swim England, “No other nation around the world takes such a piecemeal and restrictive approach toward the use of water or recreation.”

To overcome this paralysis, we must legislate to expand access rights for paddling, swimming and non-motorised craft to and on inland waters. Options for legislation are a new Access to Nature Bill; an amendment to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000; or a through the planned Water Reform Bill in 2026.

“A clear right of public access on unregulated inland waters would give people confidence to explore our waterways, without the fear of being challenged. It will open the door to investment in accessible infrastructure on our watersides.”
– Paddle UK

15. Strengthen, publicise and enforce the statutory Code of Practice on Conservation, Access and Recreation, requiring the Environment Agency and water authorities to plan and invest in improved access to green and blue spaces.

16. Require the Environment Agency to reinstate its role in supporting recreation on inland waterways, improving entry, exit, and portage points for swimming and paddling, particularly for underrepresented and mobility-impaired users.

Beyond legislative reform, many of the responses to the call for evidence suggested that strengthening and enforcing existing statutory guidelines would be a critical quick win. Current statutory guidelines within the Code of Practice on Conservation, Access and Recreation (CAR), established under sections 3 and 4 of the Water Industry Act 1991 and sections 6 (1), 7 and 8 of the Environment Act 1995, are not being enforced. The Environment Agency’s capacity to support safe, responsible recreational use of water, outside of their own statutory navigations, has been eroded over the last decade.

“The UK’s abundant reservoirs, many of which are close to centres of population; are potentially a wonderful resource for water-based activity. Strategy often appears to be based on exclusion and restriction rather than information to enable safe and sustainable recreation. The injustice of restricting access to those with the ability to pay, and/or to meet the requirements for fixed session times; is untenable. All too often, bluespace recreation is put out of the reach of those whose need is greatest: people on low incomes, those with work or family responsibilities, or with special needs which limit the range of activity they can pursue.”

– Pam Bell, Blue Space Access Conservation Trust

Furthermore, those who manage bodies of water are often reluctant to provide access to water, through fear of liability for accidents. Action is needed to break this paralysis and unlock opportunities for blue space recreation. Clear access rights and reduced manager liability would open the door to private and public investment in accessible waterside infrastructure.

Photo credit: Eleanor Carter

3. Accessing Blue Spaces

“Ensure that riparian landowners are exempt from civil liability where access occurs without charge and in line with reasonable signage or codes of conduct. This aligns with successful access models in New Zealand, Canada, and Scandinavia, where public access to natural spaces is balanced with landowner protections.” – The Angling Trust

17. Deliver a network of at least nine new River Trails designed for multi use, beyond upgrading existing riverside paths.

There were a wide range of respondents who called for Defra to be ambitious with its proposals to improve riverside access. Water sports groups in particular, urged that instead of “river walks”, Defra should be tasked with delivering “river trails” - multi-user routes benefiting a wider range of users.

3.2. Water Quality and Environmental Protection

18. Strengthen regulation and enforcement to tackle water pollution from sewage overflows, agricultural runoff, and industrial discharge to protect human health.

The pervasive issue of water pollution poses a significant threat to public health and the accessibility of England’s blue spaces. Pollution is a major concern amongst water users and the wider public, impacting rivers, lakes, and coastal areas alike. Sources such as sewage overflows, agricultural runoff, and industrial discharge critically compromise water quality. Legislation should strengthen monitoring, regulation, and enforcement, with agencies equipped to deliver real-time data and review contamination thresholds for vulnerable groups.

Funds from water sector penalties should be ring-fenced for projects that restore and protect waters, creating a direct link between breaches and remediation. This would provide a sustainable stream for improving water quality and waterside infrastructure

“Working together with whatever the Water Commission’s new recommended body for governing water to create a clean and safe environment would go a long way towards encouraging a broader range of people to take part.” – British Rowing



Photo credit: Paddle UK



4. Governance, Strategy and Accountability

The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) includes the development of a previous commitment regarding the aim to have as much of the population as possible within 15 minutes' walk of green and blue spaces

There is however, no clear strategy in place to guide the actions and spending required to meet this aspiration. Nor is the commitment afforded the same priority as statutory environmental targets to help hold the Government to account. At the local level, there is little transparency relating to the performance of local highway authorities in fulfilling their public access obligations, and landowners are no longer required to meet their duties to keep access clear as a condition of receiving funding from the public purse. Addressing these issues in the following ways would establish a firm foundation to improve access to nature.

4.1 A Clear Commitment from Government

19. Publish a long-term Government plan to improve public access to nature, with a clear vision, strategy, legally binding targets, backed by an Access to Nature Investment Strategy to direct funding, however limited, where it is most needed.

Many submissions highlighted that there is no national strategy or governance arrangements to drive improvements in access to nature, particularly for those facing the most barriers. A multi-pronged approach is needed:

- A clear vision from the Government to demonstrate that it fully grasps the crucial role that access to nature has to play in fulfilling a wide range of policy objectives.
- A sound strategy setting out the Government's priorities for protecting and improving access to nature and the steps it commits to taking to deliver against these.
- Legislate to introduce an Access to Nature Investment Strategy, reviewed on a periodic basis, to guide available spending in the most efficient way possible and support local government to contribute to national priorities.

- The establishment of statutory targets (as exist for other areas of environmental policy), developed in consultation with academia, stakeholders and government departments and agencies, against which performance can be assessed by the independent Office for Environmental Protection.
- A dedicated Director General role within Defra, supported by an Access and Recreation team, to champion a coordinate across the department and government.

"Government must: 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...The strategy must be cross-Government and cross-sector." – Wildlife and Countryside Link.

"Government treats access to green and open space, recreation and sport and quality green infrastructure as a 'nice to have,' not a prerequisite for quality development, health improvement and other opportunities (skills, learning etc)."
– Friends of the Earth

"Government must pursue an ambitious, cross-departmental approach to outdoor recreation and access to nature policy. This should explicitly connect policy across key departments including DEFRA, DCMS, DHSC and relevant agencies to ensure there is a clear line of sight between participation in outdoor recreation and the benefits it delivers and Government's core missions." – Sport and Recreation Alliance

20. Add "Access to Nature," as an indicator in the Index of Multiple Deprivation to enable targeted support.

The Government should also add 'Access to Nature' as an indicator to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, to target investment in areas with poor provision and expand access where it is most needed. The Living Environment Deprivation Domain measures the quality of the local environment. However, the indicators cover housing conditions, air quality and road traffic accidents. While these are valid indicators, they fail to capture the wider context and how important access to nature is as part of efforts to tackle multiple deprivation.

Photo credit: VERONICA MELKONIAN

4. Governance, Strategy and Accountability

4.2 Landowners and Managers Meeting Their Obligations

21. Make Environmental Land Management funding conditional on landowners and managers complying with legal duties for Public Rights of Way, including removing obstructions and reinstating paths after ploughing and cropping

Before Brexit, under the Common Agricultural Policy and the regime of cross-compliance, farmers in receipt of subsidies were expected to fulfil their legal obligations to keep paths clear on their land as a condition of receiving financial support. Failure to do so could result in inspections or penalties and this was a useful tool for hard-pressed local highway authorities in enforcing landowner/manager obligations.

Several submissions supported the reintroduction of similar conditions attached to Environmental Land Management payments to help ensure existing public rights of way remain open and useable and to ensure fairness for the taxpayer and across the farming community.

“Re-instate cross compliance as a condition of receiving public funding or tax relief. Where landowners/farmers are receiving payments under the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) there needs to be some kind of cross compliance which penalises claimants where they are knowingly obstructing public rights of way and routes on access land.”
– The British Horse Society.

4.3 The Performance of Local Highway Authorities

22. Require local highway authorities to publicly report performance against statutory duties and new quality standards to improve transparency and identify where additional support is needed.

Legislation and national policy governing public access is the responsibility of Defra, but it falls to local government, specifically local highway authorities, to assert and protect the rights of the public to use and enjoy the public rights of way network. This principle, enshrined in the Highways Act 1980, is underpinned by various statutory duties including definitive maps, signposting, management and maintenance. However, there is no widespread, publicly available information relating to the performance of local government to help communities hold them to account. Nor are there any quality standards for signage, maintenance and accessibility. Local highway authorities should be required publicly to report against their statutory duties and meet quality standards, established through consultation with stakeholders, to help identify areas where greater support is needed.

“Require reporting about PROW and access to access land by LHAs against national standards of the condition of signage, waymarking, structures, surfaces, (undergrowth), accessibility, engagement with volunteers and parish councils.”
– Anonymous



5. Public Awareness and Education



Photo credit: Chris Holder

England's outdoors offers significant potential for public health outcomes, but not everyone is aware of what is required for a sustainable and successful outdoor experience or the leave no trace principles. Many people are unaware of the Countryside Code for example, mapping and signage are inconsistent and some people have limited opportunities for structured engagement with nature.

5.1 Promoting Responsible Access

23. Overhaul the Countryside Code and Land Managers' Code to actively promote public access rights, inspire outdoor activity, and embed responsible behaviour, reflecting modern recreation and diverse landscapes.

The Code should be revised to inform the public about its rights and responsibilities in the countryside. Many of the submissions received by the inquiry indicated that they felt the Countryside Code is not fit for purpose, has low public awareness and does not reflect the changes in recreational experience being sought by so many including wild camping, mountain biking and wild swimming.

"The Countryside Code is not sufficiently clear or promoted, leading to public misunderstandings about access rights, such as believing they can roam freely on private land."

- Nature Friendly Farming Network

"Countryside Code should be properly funded, and introduced as part of the national curriculum, alongside essential skills for enjoying the countryside and connecting with nature."

- Mountain Training

24. Develop activity-specific codes in partnership with representative bodies to increase relevance across the full range of responsible outdoor activities and landscapes.

Many of the submissions praised activity specific codes, such as The Paddlers' Code, which Paddle UK developed in partnership with Natural England. This approach could be replicated with other outdoors activities, and be advertised at the point of sale in outdoor shops.

25. Implement the Landscapes (Glover) Review recommendation to introduce a National Ranger Service, to support education, stewardship, and responsible use of the outdoors across England.

Current enforcement mechanisms for the countryside are often under-resourced, leaving both land managers and the public without clear authority to address any issues that may arise. To address this, the Landscapes (Glover) Review recommended establishing a 'National Ranger Service'. This service would further support education, stewardship, and responsible use of the outdoors by providing a visible, on-the-ground presence to inform and guide visitors.

5.2 Improving Wayfinding and Mapping

Currently, there is no single source of information about outdoor access. Details on Public Rights of Way (PRoW), cycle routes, greenways, permissive paths, commons, open access land, parks, green lanes, waterways (places to launch and land), and unclassified routes are scattered across numerous records. Without a clear, unified mapping system showing where people can go and what activities are permitted, public confidence suffers, and access is inequitable.

26. Transform the Ordnance Survey App into a universal tool which is free to use to ensure that everyone has access to the information they need

Currently the Ordnance Survey (OS) app, which can help the public navigate and plan where to go, requires users to pay for a subscription. This is despite the access-related data used by the OS originating in the work of publicly funded local highway authorities. In addition, a more comprehensive digital mapping of our network, including routes such as permissive paths, navigations and cycle routes which are not currently shown, would help create a better-connected and accessible outdoors. Much of the information for this could be built using open-source approaches similar to OpenStreetMap.

Information on route accessibility including gates, widths, slopes and surface types, depending on needs of different groups, would also help provide people with certainty and more opportunity. Alongside this, a free, national digital tool for real-time reporting of highway (including public rights of way) and surface conditions could be implemented, enabling users to flag obstructions or maintenance issues directly to local authorities.

"I believe comprehensive digital mapping of green/blue space and PRoW asset data could make an important contribution towards the planning of a better connected and accessible PRoW network, by i) empowering disabled people to make informed choices about where they can travel along the PRoW network in the same way non-disabled users may do, and ii) helping to identify where smaller interventions and investments may have the greatest impact"

- Walk Colchester

27. Provide clear and consistent signage across the path network to improve clarity and encourage greater use.

Use of the existing outdoor access network faces can be challenging for many due to inconsistent and unclear signage. The public often encounter insufficient, misleading or incorrect information, which impacts user confidence and the overall enjoyment of the countryside. This fragmented and unclear information system often leads to a perception of inaccessibility and feeling unwelcome, particularly for those who may lack familiarity with the system of access rights.

6. Children Spending Time Outdoors



Photo credit: Annie Spratt

The current lack of equitable access to nature for many young people, especially those from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds, is a serious societal concern. In England, 74% of children now spend less time outdoors each day and at the same time, screen time is rising steadily. Children aged 8-14 spend nearly 3 hours a day online across smartphones, tablets, and computers.⁴ Many of the submissions also noted that outdoor learning is currently considered as optional and the cost of trips, lack of accessible transport and socioeconomic challenges further limit participation in outdoor learning.

6.1 Opportunities for Young People

28. Ensure opportunities to experience and learn in and about nature are integral to the new Youth Strategy.

⁴ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-children/top-trends-from-our-latest-look-at-uk-childrens-online-lives?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Support the teaching of skills and nurture confidence for outdoor recreation and green careers by enabling a progression of opportunities through education, work experience, volunteering, and placements.

29. Ensure that the Curriculum and Assessment Review as well as the new Enrichment Framework reflects that teaching and learning in education settings (early years, schools, colleges and alternative provision) can and should happen ‘beyond’ as well as in the classroom.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review and the new Enrichment Framework should recognise that teaching and learning in all education settings can take place beyond the classroom. Government guidance must make clear that teachers have the freedom to choose where learning happens and should encourage regular, high-quality outdoor experiences at every key stage. This can be on school grounds, in local learning areas, and through external visits. Barriers to outdoor learning should be addressed by providing teachers with training and stronger links to outdoor sites and service providers.

“Educate children at grass root levels dovetailing curriculum and activities to outdoor learning, to provide further confidence and knowledge on how to access, use and enjoy the outdoor areas responsibly. Children are key to future sustainability and protection of outdoor spaces.”
– Mojo Active

30. Establish a requirement for all children and young people to experience at least one residential outdoor experience, linked to curriculum outcomes at KS2, using Pupil Premium to ensure inclusion for all.

Children benefit greatly from outdoor residential experiences as they promote independence, confidence, and social skills through new challenges and teamwork. Outdoor learning improves physical and mental well-being and a break from routines, while also fostering environmental awareness and practical life skills. These experiences create lasting positive impacts on behaviour, academic success, and overall happiness by offering hands-on learning and exposure to nature. Opportunities should include a night under the stars in a designated landscape, as recommended in the Glover Landscapes Review (2019).

“Create a “Nature Premium,” modelled on the PE and Sport Premium, targeting disadvantaged pupils and schools with high levels of pupil premium eligibility. This premium should support those who are the most excluded from access to nature and provide guided walks, activities and sessions until pupils feel comfortable accessing blue and green space on their own.”
– Dave Jackson, London Youth Rowing

“A statutory requirement for every child to have outdoor learning experiences, including a residential trip at both primary and secondary level, would ensure consistent, supported use of access opportunities across the country. This must be backed by funding to support participation, particularly for those with the least access.”
– Access Unlimited Coalition

31. Ongoing investment in the National Education Nature Park as a valuable strategy in encouraging access to green and blue spaces for all children and young people within their communities, and support for other funding initiatives such as a Nature Premium to guarantee regular time in nature for all children and young people.

Outdoor learning policy should be grounded in evidence from existing programmes, ensuring lessons from previous Government funded initiatives are applied and schools are supported to deliver effectively.

“Further support and financial backing for the National Education Nature Parks initiative, to make school grounds greener and wilder, and embed nature connection into curriculum and teaching, with more opportunities for children in nature.”
– Nature Connectedness Network



7. Promoting Health and Well-being Outcomes

The UK faces chronic physical and mental health challenges, and there is a compelling case for expanding and embedding exercise as well as access to nature referrals as a critical component in the shift from treatment to prevention. This would significantly reduce the burden on the NHS. However, the current health system fails to formally recognise nature as a health-promoting asset, leaving its potential unrealised, and the uneven distribution of accessible green and blue spaces compounds health inequalities, as those who could benefit most often face the greatest physical, economic, and cultural barriers.

7.1. Nature and Health Integration

32. Enshrine access to nature as a statutory public health responsibility by amending the Health and Social Care Act.

To address these systemic issues, new legislation should enshrine access to nature as a statutory public health responsibility by amending the Health and Social Care Act. This would embed nature as preventative health infrastructure within national policy and NHS Green Plans, recognising its vital role in improving mental and physical wellbeing.

Going further, the Government must integrate access to nature into local health and care planning frameworks, including Local Health Strategies, Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), Joint Strategic Needs Assessments, and workforce training with funding available to support voluntary sector groups delivering green social prescribing.

7.2 Embedding Green Social Prescribing

33. Mandate green social prescribing as a core component of NHS and public health strategies, and disseminate best practice from successful pilots and programmes, including models that improve access for underserved populations.

Many people face preventable health issues linked to inactivity and limited contact with nature. Green Social Prescribing has the potential to address these challenges by connecting individuals to outdoor activities, but provision is patchy and often short-term. Current Green Social Prescribing initiatives, while promising, remain fragmented and underfunded. They struggle to align with current NHS strategies or broader public health frameworks. This limits access to quality green and blue spaces, especially for disadvantaged, underrepresented, and disabled communities. Public outreach and advocacy to raise awareness of GSP opportunities in all communities is needed with regular and community feedback to ensure provision remains inclusive, adaptive, and impactful.

The current system also suffers from a disconnect between health professionals and nature-based service providers, hindering effective referral pathways and optimal use of available resources. One way to address this currently is through the Green Social Prescribing Innovation Community to support the spread and scale of green social prescribing nationally.

“Provide local grants for training community leaders and volunteers to deliver safe, inclusive outdoor walking sessions for older people and people with health conditions.”
– Nordic Walking



8. Planning and Transport

There is a need to ensure that planning and transport infrastructure actually contributes to the delivery of consistent, high-quality access to green and blue spaces as a core outcome by making standards clear, measurable, and enforceable. For example, the Government's planning reforms present several opportunities to support public access to nature, which are currently being missed.

8.1 Access Opportunities in Infrastructure and Development

34. Ensure all major infrastructure projects, including airports, power stations, major roads, and HS2, deliver demonstrable access improvements to surrounding countryside through multi-user green routes that connect with existing networks.

35. Require Spatial Development Strategies to identify areas where accessible green and blue space provision needs improvement, in line with Natural England's Green Infrastructure Framework and the commitment that no one in England should live more than 15 minutes from an accessible green and blue space.

We need to bring nature to where people work, live and move for daily journeys. To achieve this there must be greater consideration given to how nature is integrated into planning. Major infrastructure projects can often affect the outdoor network, where new major developments (e.g. airports, power stations, major roads, HS2) frequently fragment existing public rights of way or offer insufficient green space provision.

Natural England's Green Infrastructure Framework should also integrate lived accessibility such as safety (both within and en-route to greenspaces), maintenance, and time poverty into their planning metrics, not just proximity.

36. Where a need for accessible green space is identified, require developers to register this land as a town or village green, giving local people permanent rights of recreation and protecting the land in perpetuity.

37. Use planning obligations, such as Section 106 agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy, to create and enhance green and blue spaces, paths, and active travel routes in new developments.

To give communities pride of ownership in their neighbourhood, new green spaces identified for provision should be registered as town or village greens. This legal designation gives local people enduring rights of

recreation and permanently protects the land from future development. More money from developers needs to be spent on the built environment in the communities they serve. There are already strong planning obligations such as Section 106 agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) - but they must be better utilised to create and enhance green spaces in new developments.

38. Ensure participatory planning and design with underrepresented communities so spaces reflect their experiences and cultural needs.

For those in disadvantaged urban communities, establishing proximity to green spaces does not guarantee access; psychological and socio-economic factors are also prevalent, and they are often functionally or socially inaccessible. Participatory planning and design with underrepresented communities to ensure spaces reflect their lived experiences and cultural needs is required.

8.2 Improving Transport Links to Nature

39. Improve public transport links to and from green and blue spaces, including increased frequency, expanded routes and affordability.

Popular recreational areas in the countryside are overcrowded with traffic and parked cars, contributing to localised disruption like pollution and overcrowding – often in areas designated for their natural beauty. In extreme cases, excessive car use at beauty hotspots is pushing local infrastructure beyond its capacity, resulting in delays to emergency services. A key reason for this is the current lack of reliable public transport networks to and from rural areas. Targeted funding to address geographical disparities, particularly in rural or deprived areas, and improve infrastructure such as transport to green and blue spaces is essential if we are to support more people being active outdoors. Improve information about recreational opportunities from railway stations and bus stops, and about public transport to visitor attractions.

40. Provide safe, segregated active travel routes to reduce car dependency and help improve access to outdoor spaces.

Many existing multi-user routes are interrupted by busy roads or have incomplete links, making journeys off-putting for walkers, cyclists, and equestrians. Evidence shows that people reduce car use and switch to sustainable transport when active travel is integrated into daily life. The growing active travel network should be better integrated to wider opportunities and strategies to access nature.

Photo credit: Rose O'Neill



9. Balancing the needs of everyone

There were several diverse and often conflicting views expressed on a number of issues. These issues deserve more detailed analysis than can be explored within this report. Below we have summarised these issues.

9.1. Responsible Access

Responsible access to nature is broadly defined in the sources as the ability to enjoy green and blue spaces while upholding a set of behaviours that ensure the protection of the natural environment and respect for other users and land managers.

Some individuals were concerned with the term “responsible” in access policies or codes, suggesting it can be off-putting and implies a pre-emptive blame on users, potentially hindering broader engagement. However, there was broad support for education campaigns and codes that help mitigate negative impacts, such as littering, wildlife disturbance, and habitat degradation, by encouraging visitors to follow best practices.

It was also accepted that not all landscapes are suitable for all or more activities, but collaborative approaches can lead to solutions that enhance access while safeguarding environmental integrity, and proportionate regulations and / or restrictions may be needed to cater for the sensitivity of the particular location.

9.2. Outdoor Recreation and Wildlife Protection

Balancing outdoor recreation and wildlife protection in the countryside is a complex issue, with various perspectives and proposed solutions presented in the sources. The core challenge lies in enabling public access and activity while safeguarding the natural environment, its inhabitants, as well as the agricultural landscape. Many good practice examples, however, were presented including behaviour codes, education and clear signage, well maintained path networks, effective waste management, and seasonal and area-specific restrictions in environmentally sensitive areas, such as during bird nesting seasons, to protect wildlife, which are proportionate and based on the least restrictive approach.

While local authorities and landowners are often considered as custodians, the submissions received collectively advocate for a holistic approach where government bodies, outdoor and conservation organisations, along with the general public all share in the responsibility for the management, maintenance,

and respectful use of our green and blue spaces. This includes balancing increased access with environmental protection, often through education and collaborative efforts.

9.3. Permissive or Permanent Access

Many individuals and organisations strongly advocate for expanded and more permanent access rights, arguing that the current system is restrictive, unequal, and complex, hindering public engagement with nature and limiting health and wellbeing benefits. While some landowners are open to providing permissive access, others expressed concerns over anti-social behaviour, and disturbance to livestock and crops if access were to be increased or made permanent without sufficient safeguards.

In essence, while permissive access offers flexibility and can augment access, the overwhelming sentiment in the evidence received is a call for more robust and widespread permanent access through reformed legislation and better-resourced management, while still emphasising responsible use and environmental safeguards.

9.4. Recreational use of off-road vehicles

Many individuals and groups expressed significant concerns about the recreational use of off-road vehicles on green lanes. In conclusion, the debate centres on balancing the right of access for all users with the imperative to protect the environment, ensure safety, and maintain the tranquillity of our natural landscapes. While many advocate for restricting or banning recreational motorised use due to environmental damage and safety concerns, others highlight the legitimacy, health benefits, and accessibility provided by such activities for certain groups. The discussion points to the need for effective and proportionate enforcement (for example, more regular reviews of Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) to ensure they are appropriate and proportionate, improved signage, and a more inclusive approach to recreational planning that considers all user types.

9.5. Tighter Control of Dogs

The issue of dogs in the countryside was also a significant concern raised by many, primarily focusing on control, safety, disturbance to wildlife (including ground-nesting birds), the risk to livestock and hygiene. To address these issues, a multi-faceted approach involving stronger legislation for dog control, education, and improved infrastructure is needed.

Photo credit: Carl Winterbourne



Photo credit: Paddle UK

Limitations of Current Access Legislation

In this report, we use the term Access to describe the legal and practical means by which people can reach and enjoy green and blue spaces. Barriers are the physical, legal, informational, or cultural obstacles that prevent people from benefitting fully from these spaces. Together, these concepts frame our analysis and recommendations throughout the report.

Public access in England is shaped by a patchwork of legislation built up over decades. Key laws include the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW), which grants public access on foot to mapped “access land,” such as mountains, moorland and registered commons; the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, which created National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and long-distance trails; and the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, which established the England Coast Path. Other laws, including the Highways Act 1980 and Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, underpin the 120,000 miles of public rights of way (PRoW), while planning and commons legislation protect urban green belts, town and village greens, and common land. Legislation related to access on inland waters is complicated, with public rights of navigation on a small proportion of waters, created via many individual Acts of Parliament.

Despite these existing rights, there are significant gaps and inconsistencies. Only a fraction of PRoW are open to cyclists and horse riders, and up to 41,000 miles remain unrecorded. CRoW land provides almost a million hectares for walking but excludes cycling, paddling and camping. Access to blue spaces is particularly limited: only about 7% of all inland waterways offer a clear public right of navigation, compared with the broader rights to water established under Scotland’s Land Reform Act (2003).

Barriers to access are common and varied. Around 20 million people live more than a 15-minute walk from a green or blue space. Stiles, gates, and poorly maintained paths exclude around 20% of people, especially disabled users, older adults and families with young children. Water-based activities are constrained by physical hazards, limited access points, and safety concerns. Information is also a barrier: one in four adults, and over a third of disabled people, – are unsure where they can legally go. These gaps underline the need for consistent legal frameworks, improved maintenance and infrastructure, and better information to make access safe, inclusive, and reliable for all.

For a full overview of the legal means by which people can get outdoors and into nature, it is recommended to view our explainer document from outdoors.inparliament.uk

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Recreation and Access to Nature wishes to thank everyone who took part in the call for evidence.

With thanks to the British Mountaineering Council, Paddle UK and The Ramblers for their support in producing this report.

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Outdoors For All

Recommendations to Government on Access to Nature

Version 1.0, September 2025



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