

Public access and the Environment Bill

What are we asking for?

Cycling UK has joined with other organisations (see list on final page) to form the Outdoor Access Alliance, which is proposing [two amendments](#) to the Environment Bill:

- to include “public access to and enjoyment of the natural environment” as a priority area for target-setting
- to include public access in future environmental improvement plans

The first amendment has been tabled by Caroline Lucas, and the second by Richard Graham. These are due to be discussed in Parliament around the week of 18 January.

What can you do?

We need you to talk to your MP about why access to the countryside matters to you and ask them to support the amendments proposed by the Outdoor Access Alliance.

A face-to-face conversation can have a much bigger impact than sending an email and leave a real impression.

Coronavirus restrictions have made it simpler to talk to your MP, as most meetings are now conducted online rather than having to go to their office in person.

We've put together some [guidance on meeting your MP](#) to give you the skills to talk to them with confidence.

If you'd like to have a chat about it first, we'd be very happy to speak to you – just get in touch at campaigns@cyclingsuk.org or leave a message on 01483 328 321 and we'll give you a call.

Background to the Environment Bill

Leaving the EU means the UK will no longer be covered by EU environmental regulations, so the UK needs to set its own laws. The Environment Bill is currently passing through Parliament and focuses on four main areas: waste reduction and resource efficiency, air quality, water, and nature and biodiversity.

Environmental policy is devolved, so much of the Bill only relates to England, although some parts also extend to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The proposed amendments would only relate to England.

Currently, the Bill says that long-term targets **must** be set for four main priority areas:

- air quality
- water
- biodiversity
- waste reduction

Additional targets **may** be set relating to “people’s enjoyment of the natural environment”.

The Outdoor Access Alliance is concerned that if public access to and enjoyment of the countryside is not made a priority area for target-setting, it will be neglected in terms of targets and funding.

Why is this important?

The Covid-19 outbreak showed how much people value the natural habitats around them. Unfortunately, it also highlighted the inequalities around access to nature.

There is a growing body of evidence that spending time in nature benefits our physical and mental healthⁱ, and can reduce the societal costs of poor health and the burden on the NHSⁱⁱ.

However, in the most deprived areas of England, people tend to have the poorest health and significantly less green space than wealthier areasⁱⁱⁱ.

It can also be difficult for disabled walkers, horse riders, and cyclists to access nature, and we need to do more to ensure that access is equitable for everyone.

The Environment Bill provides an opportunity to make improving access to nature a priority on a national scale, with binding targets.

Key points to make

Covid-19 restrictions have highlighted the importance of being able to spend time in the natural environment, but access to nature is very unequal.

The off-road network for cycling is fragmented, and improvements take a long time because of bureaucratic processes and a lack of incentive for local authorities or landowners to do it.

Improving access to nature would be an easy way to benefit people's physical and mental health and reduce the burden on the NHS.

Talk about your own personal experience – what would make it easier for you to spend time in nature?

Ask them for specific action – will they give their backing to these amendments?

Follow up with an email thanking them for their time and sharing the [Outdoor Access Alliance briefing](#) to provide more information, and ask again if they will support the amendments.

If they seem supportive, please let us know at campaigns@cyclingsuk.org so we can contact them about tabling or supporting these amendments.

Useful facts and policy links

Only 22% of rights of way in England are open to cyclists and horse riders.

The Environment Agency recently published a report which highlighted that the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has exposed and amplified green inequality in societyⁱⁱ.

Spending time in green spaces is associated with reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and fatigueⁱⁱⁱ.

91% of off-road cyclists say that it benefits their mental health^{iv}.

12% of children do not spend any time in natural spaces each year^v.

Defra's 25 Year Environment Plan^{vi} reflects the Government's recognition of the benefits of access to nature, and the Environment Bill establishes a commitment to improving access to nature.

Prioritising access to nature in the Environment Bill has the potential to strengthen the function of the Agriculture Act 2020^{vii}, which gives the Secretary of State new powers to provide financial assistance to land managers for supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside.

The recent DEFRA Landscapes (Glover) review of National Parks and AONBs^{viii} recommends that all parts of society should be actively connected with special natural environments.

Access to nature benefits the economy – the public spent £5.8bn on visits to the natural environment in 2015^{ix}.

References

- i [Public Health England, 2016, Green space, mental wellbeing and sustainable communities](#)
- ii [Environment Agency, 2020, State of the environment: health, people and the environment](#)
- iii [Public Health England, 2020, Improving access to greenspace: A new review for 2020](#)
- iv [Cycling UK, 2017, Rides of Way survey](#)
- v [Natural England, 2019, Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment \(MENE\) Children's Report 2018-2019](#)
- vi [Defra, 2019, A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#)
- vii [Agriculture Act 2020](#)
- viii [Defra, 2018, Landscapes Review](#)
- ix [Natural England, 2019, People's Engagement with Nature](#)

The Outdoor Access Alliance:

