



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Dear Guy and Nick,

Thank you for your open letter of 30 November to the Prime Minister entitled 'For the health of our nation, let's give people more access to nature: let's extend the Right to Roam'. Your letter has been passed to Defra as the Government Department with responsibility for countryside and access policy. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area and I would be grateful if you would share this reply with the other signatories.

I would like to begin by thanking you for taking the time to highlight this very important issue and reaffirm the Government's understanding of the benefits that access to the countryside and to the natural world can bring. Accordingly, our programme of central reforms has an explicit focus on 'green recovery'. This philosophy underpins a number and variety of policies and initiatives which aim to protect, enhance and increase our green and blue spaces, and public access to those spaces.

Considering the issue in the round, the Environment Bill's targets, plans and policies for improving the natural environment are complemented by the 25 Year Environment Plan (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>).

Published in January 2018, this makes major new commitments to connect people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing. The 25 Year Environment Plan sets out that spending time in the natural environment can improve our mental health and feelings of wellbeing. It can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. It can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases.

As you mention, a variety of studies have demonstrated this link between time in the natural environment and improved health and wellbeing. For example, living in urban areas with more green space in the UK is associated with lower mental distress and higher wellbeing. The quantity of green space in the living environment is associated with improved mental health including reduced stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. People who visit nature regularly feel their lives to be more worthwhile, after allowing for other factors. The relationship is similar in children, with access to green space being associated with improved mental wellbeing, overall health and cognitive development.

We recognise too that access to waterways brings positive public benefits, including health and wellbeing from exercise and recreation in the open air, as well as connecting communities more widely with the natural environment. Our waterways are used enthusiastically by many people with differing interests, including pedestrians, cyclists, anglers, paddle craft, and motorboaters amongst others.

The situation around open access to waterways is complex. It is essential that all interested parties work together when considering how the accessibility of waterways might be improved, through exploring and establishing voluntary access agreements between riparian landowners and those with an interest in using the waterway, to ensure that local circumstances are taken into account. The Government has no statutory role in enforcing voluntary access agreements.

We are supporting national landscapes in their aim of helping everyone, including children and young people, to discover and engage with protected landscapes to benefit the health and wellbeing of the whole nation. We understand the value of creative engagement in national parks to reach new audiences. For example, The Sill: National Landscape Discovery Centre at Northumberland National Park exceeded its first year ambition to attract 100,000 visitors and 50,000 overnight stays on and off site, with over 30,000 individual activity days to connect people with the landscape, in one of the region's two World Heritage Sites and the region's only National Park. The opening year welcomed 175,000 visitors and this project continues to grow and evolve.

We will continue working with partners and across Government to develop initiatives co-designed with underrepresented groups, minorities, and those living with health inequalities, with the goal of creating greater opportunity for equity of access to, and discovery and experience of, National Parks.

One other significant means of encouraging use of, and greater access to, outdoor spaces is within the financial provisions of the Agriculture Act 2020, through the Environmental Land Management scheme. This will reward land managers for the public goods that they will deliver, including beauty, heritage and engagement with the environment. Public access is key to public engagement with the environment and so supporting access is an important aspect of achieving this goal. We are looking at how the Environmental Land Management scheme could fund the creation of new paths, such as footpaths and bridleways to provide access for cyclists, horse riders and pedestrians as well as wider access opportunities to water and waterways, such as lakes and rivers for canoeists, anglers and swimmers. Further details of the Agriculture Act are available online at: <https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2019-21/agriculture.html>

Another initiative that is providing greater access is the England Coast Path. When completed, this will be the longest waymarked and maintained coastal walking route in the world. Comprising a 2,700-mile National Trail around the whole of the English coast, it will pass through some of our finest countryside and some of England's most dynamic, challenging and internationally famous coastal scenery. It will allow people to walk around the whole English coast, linking up the best existing coastal paths and creating new ones where there were none before. There will also be new public rights of access to areas of coastal land such as beaches, cliffs and foreshore, in many places for the first time.

The Government is also providing funding to develop a new northern National Trail between St. Bees in Cumbria and Robin Hood's Bay in North Yorkshire. Often named Wainwright's Coast to Coast after Alfred Wainwright who first devised the walk, this 192-mile trail showcases three of the UK's most scenic and visually stunning National Parks: the Lake District, the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors.

Turning to open access land specifically, under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 we will review and confirm the conclusive maps prepared under the Act showing all open country (mountain, moor, heath and down) and registered common land. This will provide certainty on the open access land in England and thus to the public on their right of access to that land. Further, the independent national landscape review focuses on five overall areas, one of which relates to 'landscapes for everyone', and will consider expanding open access rights in national landscapes. Details of the review, including the final report, is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review>.

The Government will also provide greater certainty for landowners and access users by bringing up to date and finalising the legal record of rights of way and reforming rights of way legislation to make it easier for these rights to be recorded.

Finally, as you mention in your letter, it is vital that public access is supported by relevant and timely information. To help with this, Natural England is currently leading a review and refresh of the Countryside Code using recent experience and drawing feedback from a wide range of stakeholders. This aims to ensure that the Code can be the means by which people from all walks of life enjoy the countryside and green spaces confidently and happily, and in ways that are both appropriate for them as recreational users and for others who need the countryside for all sorts of other reasons.

Yours sincerely,
John Gardner
