

# ENABLING HEALTHIER AND GREENER COMMUNITIES



Produced for the Labour Party by



The  
**Wildlife**  
Trusts

Evidence shows that a thriving, wildlife-rich environment benefits both physical and mental health. People with nature on their doorstep are more active, mentally resilient and have better all-round health. However, just 35% of households with annual incomes below £10,000 are within a 10-minute walk of a publicly accessible natural green space<sup>1</sup>. This is why The Wildlife Trusts are working to bring wildlife to more people, and more people to wildlife and would like to see:

- Greener neighbourhoods, with easy access to safe natural places for all.
- A Natural Health Service – nature prescribing available to everyone that wants it, connecting more people to their natural places, and saving the NHS time and money.

Our health is shaped by the world around us – from good quality homes, to stable jobs, social connections, and neighbourhoods with green space and clean air and water. The landmark 2010 study ‘Fair Society, Healthy Lives’ by Professor Michael Marmot shone a light on the direct relationship between the built and natural environment, how long people live and the quality of those lives.

Marmot’s review set out the objective to “Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities” by prioritising policies and interventions that reduce health inequalities, mitigate climate change, and improve access to good quality open and green spaces. Despite Marmot’s recommendations, health inequalities have widened and, a decade on from the Review, the team found that:

Access to nature is worse for people in poorer areas & those with higher proportions of minority ethnic groups.

- Health harm from climate change is increasing and will likely affect under-served communities most.
- Air quality and related health risks have emerged as a major equity issue since 2010.
- Climate change affects health and worsens inequalities; older people and lower income groups are most at risk.
- The unhealthiest high streets are likely to be in areas where communities are marginalised.

# CREATING GREENER COMMUNITIES

The current situation is unfair. Right now in the UK, poor quality living conditions are damaging people's mental and physical health and wellbeing and actually cutting lives short. Too many of us live in polluted, nature-deprived neighbourhoods, at a great cost. This is shocking – but it is also preventable:

- One third of us do not have nature-friendly places near home. That's nearly 9.5million households in England.
- 6.7 million children are living in areas of the UK where air pollution has breached legal limits. 2 million of these children are also living in poverty.
- Human-made air pollution is causing 36,000 deaths every year in the UK<sup>2</sup>.
- People from black and ethnic minority groups are twice as likely to live in a nature-poor neighbourhoods<sup>3</sup>.
- Access to safe natural spaces for play is unequal: with children in affluent areas being 9 times more likely to have green places<sup>4</sup>.

It is the most disadvantaged and the most vulnerable who bear the brunt of pollution and a lack of access to green space. It crushes economic and human health – widening inequalities and limiting people's aspiration and horizons.

The health of the environment in our communities enables people to live healthier, happier, more prosperous lives – and provides people with an important sense of pride in their neighbourhoods. Polling shows<sup>5</sup> that local green space is the most important thing to foster pride in people's communities – even more than pubs and high streets – better enabling people to feel in control of their communities and become active citizens.

There is now strong scientific evidence of the health benefits of a healthy natural environment. Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature leads to a significant increase in wellbeing. In 2009 Natural England estimated that if everyone in England had access to greenspace, the resulting health benefits would mean that the NHS could save £2.1 billion<sup>6</sup> per year. Updated for inflation that figure would now be £3 billion.

Decade after decade we have continued to see declines in our wildlife and green spaces. It must be a national mission of the next Government to halt the decline of nature by the end of the next Parliament.

Ensuring everyone has access to natural greenspace 15 minutes from their door is an effective way to support this mission whilst addressing systemic health inequalities – and will disproportionately benefit marginalised communities.

This should ensure Local Authorities can address inequalities in access to green space as well as giving communities greater control over local public land to create more doorstep access to nature.

Examples such as Allestree Park in Derbyshire, which is being transformed from a golf course into the UK's largest urban rewilding space, demonstrate the support from local residents for projects such as these and the benefits they bring – including directly helping to reduce the climate crisis, protecting families from flooding, and restoring the habitats we need to safeguard the UK's food and water security.

Scaling up greater investment in green spaces for people everywhere should also be supported by the establishment of a legal right for people to have access to a healthy environment. This would require authorities to uphold the right to a healthy environment in their decision making and allow citizens and communities to have more control to challenge failures to do this.

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<sup>2</sup> GOV.UK: [Air pollution: applying All Our Health](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Friends of the Earth: Access to green space in England](#)

<sup>4</sup> GOV.UK: [Improving access to green space](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Public First: Levelling Up Poll](#)

<sup>6</sup> GOV.UK: [Improving access to green space](#)

# A NATURAL HEALTH SERVICE

The NHS was never designed to go it alone. It also cannot cope with the ever-increasing demands on it – especially every winter. Social Prescribing is a community-based health service that can help take the weight out of the health system, relieving the burden. With the right policy and investment in prevention, this cycle can be broken.

New analysis, *A Natural Health Service: Improving Lives and Saving Money*<sup>7</sup>, has found that green prescribing, an evidence-based pillar of social prescribing that harnesses the health, wellbeing, and social benefits of spending time in nature, can deliver annual cost saving benefits to the NHS of £635.6 million.

To increase access to green social prescribing projects and enable the NHS to benefit, the next UK government should:

## **1. Integrate green prescribing into community health and social care services everywhere.**

The Wildlife Trusts and other organisations in the environment, creative arts, sport and physical activity sectors delivering 'social prescribing' must be integrated into health and social care services in the community. It makes economic sense and has the potential to deliver improved health and wellbeing at scale. This research has shown the potential impact on the 'mainstream' NHS.

We now need policies that enable shared investment from government departments concerned with housing, employment, community cohesion, transport and culture. This would create the 'engine room' for community-based health services and would also enable private, public and philanthropic investment at a local level. There are existing bodies such as the National Academy of

Social Prescribing through which the investment can flow, growing the number of organisations involved, and continued innovation.

## **2. Ensure community-based health services become more widely available and properly targeted.**

The NHS is an incredible institution; the first Universal Health System in the world, free at point of access. However, people's health and wellbeing, life expectancy, and overall quality of that life is shaped by the world around them. The NHS needs organisations to work alongside it to prevent illnesses caused by social factors like loneliness, physical and economic inactivity.

Local health systems must be much more closely aligned with the organisations that are able to work quickly and effectively, targeting and reaching people much earlier. Policies that enable and strengthen partnership working between local health and social care services and community-rooted organisations like Wildlife Trusts are needed.

Putting people at the heart of their own health and wellbeing – asking people what matters to them – and connecting them with support and social activities makes sense to prevent ill health. It also works. A recent review<sup>8</sup> of the impact of social prescribing services on NHS acute care in Kent, from a study of nearly 6000 patients, showed 20% reductions in A&E attendances (23% for the frail elderly cohort).

With four in ten<sup>9</sup> say that nature and wildlife are more important than ever to their wellbeing. Many of us instinctively feel that nature is good for us, but there is plenty of evidence to support these positive impacts – which in turn will help relieve the burden on overstretched health services.

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<sup>7</sup> [The Wildlife Trusts: A Natural Health Service](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Social Prescribing Academy: Building the economic case for social prescribing](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Natural England: People and Nature Survey: How has COVID-19 changed the way we engage with nature?](#)