

ENVIRONMENT BILL 2nd READING

Briefing No 2 from Cycling UK:

TARGETS FOR ACCESS TO OR ENJOYMENT OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Cycling UK was founded in 1878 and has 68,000 members and supporters. Our central mission is to make cycling a safe, accessible, enjoyable and 'normal' activity for people of all ages and abilities. Our interests cover cycling both as a form of day-to-day transport and as a leisure activity, which can deliver health, economic, environmental, safety and quality of life benefits, both for individuals and society.

Cycling UK proposes two amendments to the Environment Bill, both of which relate to target setting:

- The first, which is the subject of a separate [Briefing No. 1](#), seeks to revive and regularise an existing duty for the Secretary of State to write **road traffic reduction reports**, which can either set targets to reduce road traffic or set out alternative measures, in order to tackle its adverse environmental, economic, health and societal impacts.
- This Briefing No.2 seeks to introduce at least one target to **increase public access to and enjoyment of the natural environment**.

Additionally, as a member of the Healthy Air Campaign (HAC), Cycling UK is supporting HAC's amendments to the Environment Bill which would:

- Commit to meeting WHO air quality standards by 2030 and generally strengthen the target-setting framework;
- Establish a more robust framework for making plans to ensure the targets are achieved;
- Introduce a new 'clean air duty' for all public bodies.

A [briefing from the Healthy Air Campaign](#) covers these issues more fully.

The case for promoting access to and enjoyment of the countryside

Defra's 25 year Environment Plan¹ sets out the Government's ambition to leave our environment in a better state than they found it, and the proposed steps to achieve this aim.

The Plan recognises the benefits of countryside access but notes that:

"The number of people who spend little or no time in natural spaces is too high. Recent data from the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment survey tells us that some 12% of children do not visit the natural environment each year.

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

"In healthcare and school settings, and despite some excellent examples of pioneering practice, the possible benefits of contact with nature to promote good mental health or support early interventions for mental health problems are often overlooked."

We believe that the Government is sincere in this ambition, and support it wholeheartedly.

A recent paper² published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology, and supported by Natural England researchers, found that visiting nature at least once a week was positively associated

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan

² www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272494419301185.

with general health and household pro-environmental behaviours, and that connection with nature was positive for both physical and mental wellbeing. The paper concluded that interventions increasing both contact with, and connection to nature, are likely to be needed in order to achieve synergistic improvements to human and planetary health.

Additionally, the recent Glover Review into protected landscapes showed the clear importance of the countryside to our social structure and wellbeing. The report recommended (proposal 23) that the purposes of 'National Landscapes' (including both National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) should be to:

1. Recover, conserve and enhance natural beauty, biodiversity and natural capital, and cultural heritage.
2. Actively connect all parts of society with these special places to support understanding, enjoyment and the nation's health and wellbeing.
3. Foster the economic and community vitality of their area in support of the first two purposes.

It goes on to recommend that "these strengthened purposes... must be the basis for ambitious targeted actions, with delivery to be driven forward by a new National Landscapes Service."

As such, we believe that the Glover Review creates a clear principle that Government action to improve the natural environment should go hand in hand with enhancing public understanding, engagement and enjoyment of the natural world.

In the long term, it is crucial that children now and in the future appreciate the natural environment and seek to protect it. If the public is to support (and indeed to voluntarily participate in) action to protect and enhance nature, it is vital that they are supported, from a young age, to appreciate and understand the world they live in. Targets to prioritise this aim are vital.

Targets in the Environment Bill

Clause 1 of the Bill relates to target-setting. As currently drafted, its first two subclauses are:

1. Environmental targets

(1) The Secretary of State may by regulations set long-term targets in respect of any matter which relates to—

- *(a) the natural environment, or*
- *(b) people's enjoyment of the natural environment.*

(2) The Secretary of State must exercise the power in subsection (1) so as to set a long-term target in respect of at least one matter within each priority area.

The priority areas are—

- *(a) air quality;*
- *(b) water;*
- *(c) biodiversity;*
- *(d) resource efficiency and waste reduction.*

The rest of the clause set out how these should be defined, what it meant by a "long-term target" and make provisions for the setting of regulations relating to the monitoring of targets.

We are surprised and concerned to note that the Bill omits to include "public access to and enjoyment of the countryside" as a priority area for target-setting. This appears to be a missed opportunity. Sub-clause 1(1) of the Agriculture Bill (also currently before Parliament) makes provision for the Secretary of State to offer financial assistance to secure the delivery of various public goods, as a condition of providing agricultural subsidies. One of these (subclause 1(1)(b)) is:

“supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland and better understanding of the environment”

Cycling UK strongly supports this provision. Yet if it is omitted from the ‘priority areas’ for target-setting in the Environment Bill, we fear that post-Brexit agri-subsidies are likely to be directed instead to other priority areas at the expense of public access to, and enjoyment of, the countryside. This would be a missed opportunity to broaden access to the countryside, providing huge benefits for the physical and mental health of individuals while boosting the rural economy.

We therefore urge that the Bill should be urgently amended, adding “public access to and enjoyment of the natural environment” to the list of priority areas for target-setting under subsection 1(2).

What targets could be set in practice

As the Defra 25 Year Environment Plan highlights, the Government already collects data on public engagement with the natural environment, through the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey.³ This could readily be used to set and monitor the public’s access to and engagement with the natural environment, including breakdowns by age-bands (e.g. children or older people) and other demographic groups (e.g. by people of different ethnicities, abilities and deprivation levels), thus reflecting the beneficial impact of improved access to nature in tackling health inequalities.⁴

Additionally or alternatively, targets could also be set for improvements in the physical and legal provision made for access to the countryside.

Cycling UK believes that a highly cost effective way to promote active access to the countryside would be to use agricultural subsidies to secure improvements to existing rights of way and open more high quality, well surfaced, well signed and well maintained multi-user routes, as identified through the Rights of Way Improvement Plan process. This could then be reflected in the Environmental and Land Management Subsidies (ELMS) process which is expected to replace Common Agricultural Policy subsidies in the aftermath of Brexit.

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW), Rights of Way Improvement Plans (RoWIPs) are statutory documents which local highway authorities must develop and periodically update in consultation with local stakeholders. They have the potential to identify and prioritise those improvements to countryside access in the area that would provide the greatest public benefit, varying from resurfacing footpaths and the replacement of stiles with gates through to the creation of new bridleways and cycle paths along disused railway lines, alongside the provision of accessible natural greenspace such public parks and access land.

At present, only 22% of England’s public rights of way network provides access rights for horse riding and cycling. These rights continue to be based on proven historic access rather than either physical suitability or community need. Moreover, the mechanisms for changing status or creating new routes are fundamentally unworkable (research by Cycling UK has shown that most local authorities are creating only one or two entirely new routes per year, and the backlog for processing the recording of existing routes often leads to many years of unnecessary delay).

³ www.gov.uk/government/collections/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-survey-purpose-and-results

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/828838/Monitor_of_Engagement_with_the_Natural_Environment_MENE_Childrens_Report_2018-2019_rev.pdf

Routes in and around the urban fringe are particularly important both for public access, and as traffic-free connections to the surrounding countryside and villages. Particular value is attached to linear features such as disused railway lines and riverside routes that often have limited agricultural value. Rewarding farmers for dedicating these routes as permanent rights of way would be unlikely to negatively impact on agricultural operations or productivity.

Cycling UK urges Parliament to press the Secretary of State to set clear targets for the maintenance and enhancement of the rights of way network through the delivery of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan - ensuring that local authorities took a proactive approach to the improvement of countryside access in their areas.

Amendment to the Environment Bill

We recommend that Section 1, Subsection 2 of the Bill is amended as follows:

In clause 1, insert at the end of subclause (2):

“(e) Public access to and engagement with the natural environment.”