

Cycling UK Cymru briefing – Senedd election 2026

Paths to green spaces for better health

Wales is known for its beautiful landscapes, yet too many people still struggle to access nature and even local greenspaces without relying on a car. While many communities live close to coastlines, woodlands, fields or parks, limited access rights and poor or poorly maintained paths mean these spaces may as well be miles away. Improving access to nature is not only a matter of recreation, it is also central to public health, environmental justice and equitable mobility.

Cycling UK's manifesto ask

The next Welsh Government should deliver:

- A clear **delivery plan to get more people active in green and blue spaces**, including through better access to the rights of way network and wider natural space.
- A full **review of the rights of way network**, with the aim of increasing access for cycling, horse riding, walking, wheeling, and people with limited mobility.

Context

In the Welsh countryside, it's not always clear where you can cycle, because only 22% of rights of way are open to cyclists, and they don't always link up.

In 2019, the Welsh Government promised to allow cycling and horse riding on most rights of way, and enable more activities on open access land. Since then, there has been little progress to make this commitment a reality or enable people to access greenspace for their health.

Wales has high rates of obesity and low physical activity levels – putting pressure on the NHS. Improving public health is a high priority in Wales with prevention seen as key and new legislation requires public bodies to consider the health implications of all decisions.

Evidence and Impact

- Health and wellbeing: A substantial and growing body of evidence shows that spending time in nature improves physical and mental health. A long-term study in Wales found proximity or access to greenspace is associated with better mental health. Accessing nature increases physical activity, improves cardiovascular health and overall wellbeing, and is a preventative health measure that can reduce long-term pressures on the

NHS. [74% of people in Wales](#) say access to nature and outdoor spaces has a positive effect on their health.

- Economic value: For every £1 spent on outdoor health interventions in Wales, [£5.36 of social value is generated](#). A [report from 2023](#) calculated that the outdoor activity sector in Wales generates a net annual contribution of about £1.6 billion to the economy and supports approximately 31,000 jobs.
- Inequalities in access: In Wales there is unequal access to nature and green space. [People in the most disadvantaged areas](#) have least access and there is an association with worse health.
- Not fit for purpose: 80% of respondents to a [Cycling UK survey](#) said that it was 'often' or 'sometimes' difficult to put together a 'legal' route on the existing rights of way network, and 75% felt that the network is not suitable for modern cycle use.
- Policy change: Outdoor Alliance Wales – a group of 50+ organisations – has called for [a series of measures](#) to open up the Welsh countryside to enable more people to enjoy and benefit their health and local economies.

Conclusion

Improving and creating new cycling routes to the countryside and greenspace can transform public health and reduce pressure on the NHS. Access to nature should not be a luxury – it should be open for everyone.