

Access to nature – how well is the Government doing?

October 2021

1. Introduction

Covid-19 has made us more aware than ever of the importance of being able to access nature. During challenging times, millions have benefitted from being active outdoors, engaging with natural world and experiencing all the health and wellbeing benefits this brings. But the pandemic also highlighted some stark inequalities across society – including the reality that for too many people, access to nature is far from guaranteed.

Our report [The grass isn't greener for everyone: why access to green space matters](#), published a year ago, revealed that only 57% of people had easy access to nature, falling to 46% for those with annual incomes under £15,000, and to 39% for people from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background. So, as the country emerges from the worst of the pandemic and the government's focus shifts from emergency response measures to planning for the future, it is time to make the most of every opportunity to help connect more people to the natural world.

Even before the pandemic struck, the government said it recognised the importance of improving access to nature. Its 25 Year Environment Plan – which will have legal force in a matter of weeks – includes a commitment to ensure that the natural environment “...can be used by and cared for by everyone”. But just how well is the government doing in making this a reality? Is it making the most of the opportunities in its grasp? For decades the Ramblers has fought to protect and expand the places people love to walk, so here we judge the government's progress in some important areas, and outline where there is room for improvement that will help ensure that everyone can access nature, whether in our towns and cities, the wider countryside or at the coast.

2. Summary scorecard

What's needed	Government performance	Areas for improvement	Grade
National leadership Achieving any ambition – including better access to nature for all – needs a proper strategy, including long-term plans and targets to guide government thinking and focus support where it's needed most.	New legislation to improve the environment, will soon be finalised. But the government has refused to include within this a requirement to support better access to nature.	Long-term targets are needed to improve access to nature, to focus resources and interventions in the places and communities where it's needed. The steps government will take to improve access to nature must be included in long-term plans introduced by the Environment Bill.	D

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<p>Access to nature in towns and cities Everyone should have easy access to great, green places to walk, without having to travel far or make a big effort. A network of green routes, weaving through and beyond a town or city, linking up natural spaces and features will help to bring the benefits of walking and nature directly to people.</p>	<p>Natural England is developing advice on greening existing spaces and streets, resulting not only in better access, but also supporting wildlife, improving air quality, cooling during heatwaves and reducing flood risk.</p> <p>The planning white paper set out an ambition for reform that delivers beauty, biodiversity, preserves and enhances nature, addresses climate change and boosts democracy. But it is hard to see how the proposals will achieve this.</p>	<p>Excellent work by Natural England, but the government needs to provide funding to local authorities to make use of it. Otherwise it risks being just more guidance that sits on a shelf.</p> <p>The new Secretary of State should set a vision for planning that delivers the sorts of places people want to live and work, that prioritise health and wellbeing and access to nature.</p>	C
<p>An accessible countryside The public rights of way network is the main way people connect with the countryside. It needs maintenance and protection, and additional routes in areas where there are deficiencies in access to rural landscapes.</p>	<p>Ministers have said public funding could go to farmers to improve public access. But there is no sign it will deliver on this promise, meaning communities will miss out on opportunities to connect with nature in the countryside.</p> <p>From 2026, it will no longer be possible to add historical rights of way to the legal record in England. The government can delay this by 5 years, giving more time for this critical work.</p>	<p>Funding must be made available to all farmers who want to improve public access. This can take the form of improvements to existing paths, making them more accessible to more people, or the provision of new routes which would be of value to the public.</p> <p>The 2026 deadline should be extended by at least five years, which is entirely within the government's gift.</p>	D
<p>Coastal access England has over 2,800 miles of coastline, home to over 3 million people. Improved public access to this fantastic asset will bring benefits to local communities and visitors alike.</p>	<p>Defra and Natural England have published proposals for nearly all of the England Coast Path route. Good progress is being made and the Path is likely to be completed in 2022/3.</p>	<p>The Path has weathered spending reviews, changes in law and a pandemic, yet it's still going. Now government needs to support coastal local authorities to install the path on the ground and give it secure, long-term funding.</p>	B

3. Policy master scorecard

Context	Opportunities to improve access, and government progress	What does government need to do differently	Government performance
<p>Leadership A national strategy – including long-term plans and targets – for improving access to nature is needed to guide government intervention.</p>	<p>The Environment Bill The Environment Bill introduces a new governance framework that will shape the future of the natural world for years to come. However, it only provides discretionary powers to set targets and develop long-term plans for improving enjoyment of nature. There is no compulsion for the government to develop these, and to date there is no evidence to suggest it has any interest in doing so.</p>	<p>The Environment Bill Long-term, legally binding targets are needed to drive progress towards improving access to nature for everyone, to target support where it is needed most.</p> <p>The steps Government will take to improve access to nature must be incorporated into Environmental Improvement Plans, long term plans introduced by the Environment Bill.</p>	<p>D - To show it is serious, government must make use of the powers it has given itself to increase opportunities so that ensure everyone can connect with the outdoors.</p>
<p>Towns and cities With 83%ⁱ of people in England living in urban areas, every town and city in England should have a network of green walking routesⁱⁱ.</p> <p>Everyone should have easy access to great, green places to walk, without having to travel far or make a big effort. A network of green</p>	<p>Green infrastructure (GI) standards Natural England is developing a toolⁱⁱⁱ ‘to advise local authorities and other stakeholders about including green infrastructure (GI)....and to green existing public spaces and streets where needed. These can bring benefits not only to access and recreation, but also increase wildlife, improve air quality, provide cooler areas during heatwaves and reduce the likelihood of flooding’.</p> <p>The GI framework could support local authorities to assess potential for and deliver high quality green routes and generally make cities greener. This is to be applauded, and the work being done on digital maps of GI (including the digitisation of the path network for the first time). This will be a fantastic resource but struggling councils will need support to make the most of it and so that we see practical changes on the ground.</p>	<p>Green infrastructure (GI) standards Excellent work by Natural England but the government needs to provide financial support to local authorities to implement it, or it risks being just another set of guidance that sits on a shelf.</p>	<p>C - good progress in some areas, but policy is disjointed and the importance of leisure/ recreational walking is being overlooked</p> <p><i>Breakdown</i> <i>GI standards: C</i> <i>Planning Bill: E</i> <i>Gear Change: D</i></p>

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<p>routes, weaving through and beyond a town or city, linking up natural spaces and features will help to bring the benefits of walking and nature directly to people.</p> <p>Many people want to enjoy the benefits of walking in nature, but they don't want to travel far to do it. We need more and better local green walking routes to support health, wellbeing, sustainable travel etc.</p>	<p>Planning Bill The government's planning white paper set out an ambition for a planning system^{iv} that delivers beauty, biodiversity, preserves and enhances the natural environment, addresses climate change and boosts local democracy.</p> <p>But it is hard to see how the proposals set out in the white paper could actually achieve this. We and our coalition partners believe the proposed changes would damage local planning and local democracy in a number of ways.</p> <p>While we recognise there is a clear demand for more homes, there is an equally pressing need for a planning system that supports the creation of healthy places to live. There is a wealth of evidence to show that healthy, successful places are places that are designed to encourage walking, are rich in natural features and green space and meet the expressed needs of local communities.</p> <p>Gear Change This document sets out the government's ambition for walking and cycling^v. Disappointingly, it is largely focussed on cycling, with a few commitments to support utility-type walking - e.g. walk to school. There is no acknowledgement of the value of or support outlined for urban routes that are mainly used for leisure.</p> <p>This is important because active travel journeys are way down by over 4 million since the start of the pandemic – people aren't travelling to work as much – and leisure walking has increased by more than 1 million journeys (see Sport England figures). Where is the support for</p>	<p>Planning Bill There is an opportunity, with a new Secretary of State, for the government to set a vision for an English planning system that delivers the sorts of places people want to live and work, and is wider than just the numbers of houses that can be delivered. The planning system should prioritise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public health and wellbeing: prioritising the delivery of high quality walking infrastructure, including green spaces, green routes and green infrastructure. - Access to nature: protecting existing publicly accessible green space and public rights of way from development, particularly in areas where opportunities to access nature are currently in short supply. - Democracy: ensuring democratic accountability and community involvement in local planning. <p>Gear Change We welcome the government's vision and ambition for active travel, but this plan does not address the need for better infrastructure for leisure walking and greening in cities. Improvements to streets that help get people to work and to shops are of course very welcome, but we also need routes that provide opportunities for recreation and enjoyment on our doorsteps.</p>	

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	<p>urban/semi-urban routes, like the ones in and around parks which were so well used and suffered terribly from erosion last winter/spring? If we want to encourage people to maintain walking levels seen during the pandemic, we should look to leisure routes as it's uncertain whether active travel will ever get back to previous levels.</p>		
<p>Countryside The public rights of way network is the primary means by which people can connect with the countryside. This needs continual maintenance and protection, and expanding in areas with deficiencies in access.</p> <p>Many historic routes were never recorded on maps but would be valued assets today if they were mapped and restored.</p>	<p>Environmental Land Management (ELM) Government has enabled taxpayer funding to go to farmers to improve countryside access through its new Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme, established through its Agriculture Act. But to date there is no sign in its policy development that it will deliver on this. Without this, the public will miss out on a new 'contract' between them and the farming community, which sees public payments go to the delivery of public goods.</p> <p>Cross compliance The government has committed to ending cross-compliance^{viii}, whereby public payments to farmers are subject to them meeting a range of good agricultural and environmental conditions. This includes keeping existing rights of way clear and offers a degree of protection to the existing path network.</p> <p>Farming in Protected Landscapes The Farming in Protected Landscapes^{ix} programme provides limited opportunities for farmers in AONBs and National Parks to apply for short-term funding (to 2024) for new permissive access or infrastructure improvements. These</p>	<p>Environmental Land Management (ELM) With agriculture accounting for significant proportion^{vi} of land use in England, there is a fantastic opportunity to enable more people to connect with and understand the countryside. Funding must be made available via ELM to farmers who want to improve public access. This can take the form of improvements to existing paths, making them more accessible to more people, or the provision of new routes which would be of value to the public^{vii}.</p> <p>Cross compliance Future public payments to farmers should be conditional upon their compliance with existing duties to keep paths clear.</p> <p>Farming in Protected Landscapes Farming in Protected Landscapes is not part of ELM. As the programme is already underway, the government should use this as an opportunity to learn more about what will make a tangible difference on the ground to the public and apply this learning to ELM policy development which will be</p>	<p>D – the foundations are there for action to be taken to improve countryside access. But there's no evidence to suggest the government wants to make use of these. Much will depend on choices made in the near future.</p> <p><i>Breakdown:</i> ELM: D Cross compliance: E FiPL: D 2026: E Freedom to roam: D</p>

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<p>The freedom to roam (open access) gives people the confidence to explore the landscape off-path without trespassing or fear of confrontation.</p>	<p>are however unlikely to make a significant difference to most people.</p>	<p>available to farmers across the countryside, not just protected landscapes.</p>	
	<p>2026 From 1 January 2026, it will no longer be possible to add historical rights of way to the legal record (the definitive map) in England. The Ramblers is supporting the public to identify and claim thousands of miles of unrecorded rights of way^x. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can delay this cut-off date by up to five years, giving more time for this critical work.</p> <p>Any extension is being consulted on with stakeholders and would be introduced alongside provisions of the Deregulation Act which are designed to make the process of recording rights of way easier. These provisions have still not come in effect, six years about the Deregulation Act was passed.</p>	<p>2026 The 2026 deadline should be extended by at least five years^{xi}.</p> <p>Improvements to the process for recording public paths should be implemented within first three months of 2022.</p>	
	<p>Freedom to roam The Countryside and Rights of Way Act gave us open access in mapped, mainly upland, areas and later some woods and coastal margin was added. But the signs and access points are ageing and government has twice postponed updating the open access maps. Many people live where there are no areas where they can roam freely and, if trees are planted on the land, the public's rights could be lost^{xii}.</p>	<p>Freedom to roam The government should complete the open access mapping review by 2024, with the scope of the review focusing on gaining the best value for the public, helping people enjoy their freedom to roam and protecting the public's rights in new areas of woodland.</p>	
<p>Woodland Everyone should have access to a wood close to home, but</p>	<p>Government has a target of planting 30,000 hectares of trees a year across the UK by 2025. Its England Trees Action Plan commits to creating new community forests, ensuring the provision of safe and appropriate public access is a</p>	<p>If public money is used to plant trees on land with the freedom to roam, public access must be designed into the woodland from the start and for the lifetime of the wood. Ideally, the woodland should be dedicated for open access.</p>	<p>C – a vast improvement - it's only ten years ago since the plans to sell off public forests -</p>

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currently only 16% ^{xiii} do.	<p>feature of as many woodlands as possible and that existing rights of access are protected.</p> <p>Government is offering payments to landowners to plant new woodlands but public access is optional.</p> <p>Landowners can apply for government grants to plant trees on open access land. Open access rights could be lost when the maps are updated.</p>	In all other woods there should be a presumption in favour of appropriate public access and mechanisms to deliver this. If voluntary subsidies are used, there should be active monitoring of uptake to ensure that the public's access to woodlands is expanded and well-connected.	but still a long way to go before we can all enjoy our local woods.
<p>Coast England has over 2,800 miles of coastline, home to over 3 million people and a major part of the nation's visitor economy. The England Coast Path^{xiv} must be completed.</p>	Defra and Natural England have published proposals for nearly all of the England Coast Path route but only some of the stretches are open to the public. Good progress is being made and the Path is likely to be completed in 2022/3. The Path must be completed as soon as possible.	Support is needed for coastal local authorities to install the path. A long-term funding settlement is required for the England Coast Path once complete, to ensure it lives up to its promise.	B – the Path has weathered spending reviews, changes in the law and now a pandemic, yet it's still going. Now government needs to support coastal local authorities to install the path on the ground and give it secure, long-term funding as befits a national asset.
<p>National Trails We love our National Trails. They connect people to nature</p>	The Glover review ^{xv} of protected landscapes recommended that the Trails were brought into the family of National Landscapes.	Implementation of Glover review recommendation.	C - welcome ambition but need to ensure government looks

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<p>and landscapes. The iconic long-distance routes attract tourism and boost the rural economy. The Trails should be properly funded to secure their future.</p>	<p>Natural England is developing proposals to turn the northern coast-to-coast route into the next National Trail.</p> <p>Funding for National Trails has declined over 30% since 2010, with yearly funding settlements for maintenance arriving so late in the year, staff have been put at risk.</p>	<p>Long-term funding settlement required that recognises the value and importance of the National Trails.</p>	<p>after what it already has.</p>

ⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation#englands-urban-population-is-growing-faster-than-the-rural-population>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/greenroutes>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2020/09/30/enhancing-englands-urban-green-spaces/>

^{iv} <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/news/latest-news/2021/july/ramblers-join-campaign-to-protect-people-and-nature-from-damaging-planning-reforms.aspx>

^v <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gear-change-one-year-on-review>

^{vi} [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/900910/Land Use in England 2018 - Statistical Release.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/900910/Land_Use_in_England_2018_-_Statistical_Release.pdf)

^{vii} <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/help-us-ensure-everyone-can-enjoy-walking-in-nature/cap-payments/enhancing-public-access.aspx>

^{viii} https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/954283/agricultural-transition-plan.pdf

^{ix} <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/funding-for-farmers-in-protected-landscapes>

^x <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/dont-lose-your-way-2026.aspx>

^{xi} <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/dont-lose-your-way-2026/2026-and-the-case-for-postponement.aspx>

^{xii} <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/policy/england/access/access-to-wild-open-countryside-or-the-right-to-roam.aspx>

^{xiii} <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/49731/state-of-the-uks-woods-and-trees-2021-the-woodland-trust.pdf>

^{xiv} <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/england-coast-path.aspx>

^{xv} <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/news/latest-news/2021/june/protected-landscapes.aspx>