

NATIONAL TRAILS.UK

NATIONAL TRAILS – a Manifesto for People and Nature

Our National Trails are a valuable shared resource; a network of over 6000 miles, used by over 305 million people each year¹ to enjoy the great outdoors. National Trails not only connect us to nature, they also make a vital contribution to the economy and the nation's health and wellbeing. The combined economic impact of the National Trails is over £1.8 billion², and our health and wellbeing contribution is worth over £300 million a year.³

However, repeated underinvestment in our National Trails over the last 10 years has meant that they are fighting to maintain their high standards of access to green and blue spaces, and National Trails lack the capacity to deliver on their aspirations to also make meaningful contributions to nature restoration. This has been compounded by the lack of recognition by Government for what National Trails can offer, resulting in National Trails being excluded from areas where they could really help, such as active travel, social prescribing, habitat protection and climate change.

To realise their full potential, our National Trails need secure, multiyear investment and proper recognition throughout Government for the many solutions National Trails can offer to some of the most important crises we face. That's why we're calling on Government to deliver on the previous promise of three-year funding agreements for National Trails, a statutory purpose for the National Trails, and supporting a National Trails nature corridors project. Only if these three asks are delivered will the potential of the National Trails be fully unleashed.

1. Secure, long term investment in our National Trails

Our National Trails are amazing natural assets; they attract over 309 million visits a year, worth in excess of £1.8 billion to the economy, and save the NHS over £300 million a year through the physical and mental health benefits of people using and volunteering on the National Trails. However, National Trails have not received a meaningful increase in funding since 2013, a real terms financial loss of 34% for our highest standards of access. With increased usage of the National Trails network since the Covid Pandemic, and the ravages of climate change, the costs of maintaining the standards of the National Trails. Funding is already stretched to breaking point, and as each section of the King Charles III England Coast Path is opened, we get closer to losing the quality of access that many have worked so hard to achieve and maintain.

That's why we're asking Government to invest in the National Trails by increasing their funding at least in line with inflation and give the National Trails 3 year funding agreements. Without this, the National Trails are in very real danger of falling below the quality standard, and people losing access to nature. With Government support, together we can make sure that the National Trails can maintain their internationally high standards and deliver more for people and nature.

2. Recognition of the importance of National Trails through a Statutory Purpose

¹ Research by the PLP, number of visits to the protected landscapes done through the National Trails

² Sustrans research for ECP

³ SWCP research extrapolation

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As the Glover Landscapes Review identified, the National Trails have long been the 'Cinderella' of the Protected Landscapes Family, with their current value and potential not understood. While this has started to change, thanks to the work of NTUK, National Trails are hampered by not being properly protected or referenced in key legislation alongside the National Parks and National Landscapes. Unlike the other Protected Landscapes, National Trails do not have a statutory purpose. In too many places, this places them at a lower status to National Parks and National Landscapes, and the lower level of protection for National Trails puts people's access to the outdoors at risk. We are asking for Government support a Statutory Purpose for National Trails, which complements the statutory purposes for National Parks and National Landscapes. With a statutory purpose, a duty to protect and enhance people's access to the outdoors and experience of the National Trails, we can better protect the National Trails and the access then give people to green and blue spaces.

3. Trialling Nature corridors for National Trails by supporting Coastal Wildbelt

National Trails are vital connections for people and nature; links between habitats which are crucial for species movement and nature recovery. However, National Trails are currently held back from their full potential to support nature recovery and 30x30, as funding for nature recovery in protected landscapes is locked to designations, and the designation for most of the National Trails is the width of the route itself.

The exception is the King Charles III England Coast Path, which includes a 'Coastal Margin', land between the National Trail and the sea. This Coastal Margin not only adds over 850km² of new open access land, an area the size of Dorset,⁴ it also gives a once-in-a-generation chance to trial National Trails as nature corridor, and design methodology for nature recovery which could be replicated on other National Trails. NTUK has led on this; we are currently scoping what a 'Coastal Wildbelt' programme of coordinated nature recovery and access work could deliver. With Government support, a National Trail corridor will ensure stronger management, more opportunities and greater recognition of what National Trails are delivering and have the potential to deliver. Already, work by 'Coastal Wildbelt' is showing the potential of National Trail Nature Corridors to unlock access to funding opportunities, such as Farming in Protected Landscapes, that are currently only available to sections of National Trails that are within Protected Landscapes. By supporting this work, Government can help National Trails to build the evidence for other National Trails Nature Corridors, ensuring that the National Trails can deliver for both people and nature.

Background

The UK's National Trails are an inspirational network of designated long-distance routes that provide a gateway to the UK's most incredible rural and urban environments. We are facing a global climate and biodiversity crisis, and national mental health and loneliness crisis. Since their designation under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, the National Trails have offered people a chance to connect to nature, connect to their place, and connect to each other. Today, the network of 20 National Trails covers over 6000 miles of the UK, allowing millions of people to experience spectacular habitats, diverse communities, and unique heritage. They offer people important health and wellbeing benefits, are central to nature restoration and biodiversity net gain, and create jobs and economic growth. If properly supported and valued, these National Trails can offer solutions to national and international crises.

⁴ Research done by Natural England