

APPG for Outdoor Recreation and Access to Nature - Call for evidence

NTUK Response

Introduction

National Trails are one of the UK's most valuable national assets, offering outdoor access to nature and culture for over 309 million visits every year. Established in 1949, the network of 20 National Trails now spans nearly 3,630 miles, connecting cities, towns, villages, and every National Park and National Landscape; 84% of people who live within a 15 min walk of National Trails live in urban areas.

National Trails are important for outdoor recreation, both as places for recreation in their own right, and as connecting routes as part of the wider public rights of way network. 5.7million people live within a 15 min walk of a National Trail, 8% of the UK's population. National Trails also connect millions of people in rural and urban areas; while 80% of the National Trails network in the UK is in rural areas, 20% is in urban areas.

This extensive network supports both our physical and mental health and the economy, contributing £1.8 billion annually, while generating over £300 million in NHS savings.

There are currently 13 National Trails in England, each designated by a Secretary of State for DEFRA due to a combination of the historic and cultural importance of the route they follow, and the importance of the landscapes they give people access to.

- 30% of the National Trail network passes through priority habitat, and as a network the National Trails could contribute 275,000Ha to 30by30, the Government's target of protecting 30% of England's land by 2030.
- National Trails include 1,113 scheduled monuments, 13,353 listed buildings pass through 30 (of 32) Heritage Coasts, 17 (of 28) World Heritage Sites, and 3 listed battlefields.

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, which millions of people a year value. Furthermore, the individual National Trail partnerships lack the capacity to deliver on their aspirations to increase the diversity of users, and make the trails more accessible, and improve the quality of the landscapes they pass through. This has been compounded by the lack of recognition by the 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, mental and physical health, habitat protection and climate change.

While there are policy and legislative recommendations that could make a difference, to realise their full potential, our National Trails need secure, multi-year 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 the 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 asks are delivered will the potential of the National Trails be fully unleashed.

National Trails UK, (NTUK), is the independent champion for National Trails in the UK. We exist to strengthen the National Trails, advocate on their behalf, and inspire more and different people to enjoy the National Trails.

Policy and legislation proposals

1. Protection of the National Trails through a Statutory Purpose

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. Thanks to the work of NTUK, this has started to change, but 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 than 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 to support a Statutory Purpose for National Trails, which compliments 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 they give people to green and blue spaces. A statutory purpose would also mean that section 245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act would apply to National Trails, and all public bodies and statutory undertakers would have to 'further the purposes of National Trails.

2. Protection of the National Trails in Planning Policy

Currently, National Trails are not properly protected by our planning policy. Any mental and physical health benefits people gain from using the National Trails can only be delivered by strengthening National Trails protection in planning legislation. To realise the full potential of National Trails for health, wellbeing, and nature recovery, there are some small but significant changes needed. We have already lost sections of the newly created King Charles III England Coast Path due to both developers and planning authorities not realising the significance of National Trails, and we are in danger of losing more access to the outdoors if our recommended changes are not made.

Firstly, the definition of National Trails must be changed to recognise their designation. We strongly recommend that the definition of National Trails in the glossary of the

National Planning Policy Framework is changed to 'long distance access routes, designated under the 1949 National Park and Access to the Countryside Act and the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.' This would signal to developers the appropriate legislation that they need to consider when planning works which might impact a National Trail or the coastal margin.

Secondly, the NPPF needs to be revised to make it clear that any variation to a National Trail needs to be approved by the Secretary of State for DEFRA, and that Natural England are a statutory consultee for any planning proposals that impact a National Trail and the Coastal Margin.

In line with this change, we also strongly recommend that a revised NPPF should be explicit in stating that where a variation to a National Trail is consented to, that variation should be separate to vehicular routes. In many developments, there have been attempts to vary the route along new roads, which diminishes the experience of a National Trail and limits health outcomes due to pollution.

We strongly encourage inserting an additional new paragraph and footnote into chapter 15, after 191, as below:

'Great weight should also be given to conserving and enhancing the route and experience of the National Trails, and the coastal margin. (1) Any development which would impact the route of the National Trail must seek approval for a variation from the Secretary of State. Where a variation is consented to, it should be a route separate to vehicular traffic and should maintain the experience of that National Trail.'

(1) The Coastal Margin is defined in the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. Natural England has a statutory duty under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 to improve access to the English coast. The duty is in two parts: one relating to securing a long-distance walking route around the coast; the other to creating an associated "margin" of land for the public to enjoy, either in conjunction with their access along the route line, or otherwise.

3. Recognition of National Trail Nature Corridors and support for Coastal Wildbelt

It is just as important to safeguard access to green and blue spaces as it is to restore our nature. National Trails provide vital connections for people and nature; links between habitats which are crucial for species movement and nature recovery. National Trails connect millions of people to over 800 protected nature sites in the UK, giving them countless opportunities to benefit from what should be some of the highest quality nature in the country. 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. National Trails UK is developing a nature recovery framework which would automatically recognise a nature corridor of 1km on either side of a National Trail. If government supported this recognition and through a policy change enabled National Trails to apply for funding to

restore nature in these corridors, over 275,000 Ha of land within the National Trails would be unlocked, 36% of which could count towards the 30x30 target.

The exception is the designation of 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 850km of new open access land, an area the size of Dorset, it also gives a once-in-a-generation chance to trial National Trails as nature corridors, and design methodology for nature recovery which could be replicated on other National Trails. National Trails UK is currently developing the Coastal Wildbelt programme, which will deliver nationwide benefits for people and nature at the coast.

There is very little understanding or awareness of the coastal margin across government departments, and this means that vital open access land is being lost to development.

4. Limiting Motor Vehicle use

Some of the National Trails, especially the North Downs Way, the Ridgeway, and Pedder's Way, face a huge challenge to their budget and the accessibility of the National Trail due to motor vehicle use. This is not the legitimate use of farmer vehicles and machinery, but the recreational use of offroad vehicles. While some sections of National Trails are subject to Traffic Regulation Orders, an order that may be made by the local traffic authority to control traffic on roads of any kind, the majority of the network is not. This means that sections of the National Trails can legally be used by recreation 4x4s and other off-roading vehicles, causing huge damage to the National Trail, and disturbance to other users. Our members spend a disproportionate amount of funding fixing damage to the National Trails caused by a tiny minority of motorised users. For example, The Ridgeway used a £12K NE Capitol Projects Grant on 'soft re-grading' 3km of trail in 2024. This involved an operative with a digger levelling the ruts which will last 2-3 years before becoming difficult to traverse again.

The presence of motorised vehicles is a known barrier to participation for walkers/ cyclists/ horse riders and carriage drivers. Vulnerable people with mobility issues are particularly impacted – all of the current DEFRA Access for All funding to improve access is undermined by the presence of motors on the National Trails.

As well as traditional offroad vehicles, current electric bike technology is outstripping legislation – on bridleway sections of the North Downs Way, they have reported E-bikes on bridleways at 30mph, intimidating walkers and other users; this is only expected to increase.

We strongly support GLEAM, the Green Lanes Environment Action Movement, in its objective is to ensure that unsurfaced highways in the countryside carrying public rights of way are preserved from damage caused by inappropriate use, particularly by recreational off-road motor vehicles of all kinds. This is to protect both the environment and the right of walkers, riders, pedal cyclists and horse-drawn carriages to use and enjoy Green Lanes in the manner to which they are entitled by law. Removing recreational motor vehicles from the National Trails would ensure that more money can

be spent on effective access projects rather than expensive, repeated surface repair, and make vulnerable users feel more welcome on the National Trails.

5. **Secure, long-term investment in National Trails and the PROW network**

While the above policy and legislation changes would increase the number of people accessing green and blue spaces along the National Trails, the single biggest factor that would enable more people to make use of these existing access routes is long term, secure funding.

Under current funding, the National Trails are funded 3:1 each year, with each National Trail raising over a quarter of their budget through match funding. However, the current funding model for National Trails is under severe strain due to several factors beyond the control of National Trail Partnerships:

- The National Trail network has increased over the last decade and will have doubled in size by the end of 2025. In the last 10 years, Government has designated and commenced work on two new National Trails; the King Charles III England Coast Path, (KCIIIIECP), and the Coast-to-Coast Path, both due to be completed in 2025. Sections of the KCIIIIECP have been opened since 2014, but Government funding has not kept pace with the increase in open mileage. Government has also yet to provide the promised funding for the completion of the Pennine Bridleway, despite it being approved in 2002 by DEFRA. This is all putting huge pressure on an already stretched budget.
- National Trails funding remained flat for a decade from 2013, despite rising costs and inflation. This resulted in a 30% real terms cut to the National Trails budget. While there has been an uplift in 2023, this has only increased National Trails funding in line with inflation for the original National Trails allocation in 2013. It does not take into account the growth of the National Trail network, nor the impact of frozen funding for the last 10 years. National Trails have also seen increased use in recent years, (see figure 1), with some reporting up to 50% more users since 2016. While this should be celebrated, as more people are enjoying the benefits of the National Trails, increased use does result in increased maintenance and repair work.
- Of the newly designated KCIIIIECP, 7 – 10% is on open access land, meaning it is ineligible for match funding. The significant portion of match funding for National Trails comes from Local Authority budgets, who contribute to National Trails as part of the delivery of their statutory commitment to maintain public rights of way. However, sections of the KCIIIIECP pass through open access land, designated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Local Authorities do not receive funding for open access land, and it is not part of their statutory duties. Open access land gives people the right to access these places and removes it from the public rights of way network. Therefore, National Trails cannot generate match funding for works on any stretches through open access

land. To ensure that the funding for the KCIIIECP sections going through open access land is equitable, these should be funded at 100%.

- As a result of increasing impacts of climate change, National Trails are having to do more work to repair damage from storms, floods, and other environmental incidents. While Natural England does have an allocation of funding for 'environmental incidents', this only covers coastal retreat incidents and riverbank erosion. At the least, this pot of funding needs to increase with inflation, with analysis done to properly understand the additional cost of climate change. This will ensure that in the future, appropriate funding can be provided to manage the impacts of climate change such as storm damage, wildfire damage, flooding and heavy rainfall erosion, based on evidence.

All of the above is further compounded by the underinvestment in the wider Public Rights of Way network. Due to cuts in Highway Authority Budgets, there is less money to maintain the crucial link routes that connect National Trails. If these routes are lost, National Trails risk becoming access islands, inaccessible due to the poor state of the surrounding Rights of Way network.

Without adequate revenue funding for National Trails and the PROW, people will lose chances to access and enjoy nature: the National Trails' quality will decrease, sections will become unsafe and will have to close. If there is not investment now, Government will jeopardise the capital investment that the Government has made in National Trails over the last 75 years, and the jobs that ensure proper maintenance of the National Trails.

Summary

In summation, while National Trails already connect millions of people a year to nature, they are not currently reaching their full potential. By protecting the National Trails through a statutory purpose and proper recognition in planning legislation, recognising National Trail nature corridors, restricting motor vehicle use, and properly funding the National Trails, this government would deliver a more accessible, high-quality network of National Trails. By enacting our recommendations, the government would safeguard the access to nature for millions of people, for years to come. give millions more people access to nature.