

Embedding nature recovery in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

Agile Initiative Policy Brief

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Summary

1. **There is strong scientific evidence that natural green space plays a vital role in supporting human health and wellbeing while delivering many economic benefits.** However, not everyone has access to nature-rich spaces and the UK's most deprived communities tend to have less green space. It is important to provide more accessible nature-rich green spaces that benefit everyone, as a core part of levelling-up and regeneration.
2. **The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill currently neglects the important role of natural green space** for boosting local economies, improving human health and wellbeing, tackling social inequalities, contributing to community cohesion and pride of place, and providing climate resilience. It also threatens to weaken nature protection and thus undermines government targets for Net Zero and Nature Recovery.
3. **There are opportunities to redress this omission and strengthen the Bill** so that it delivers lasting benefits for communities and the economy, and contributes to delivering the wider government agenda on climate and nature.

Introduction

The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill sets an ambitious new framework for planning and development, but it fails to recognise the strong links between nature recovery, levelling-up, and other government goals (Box 1). A joined-up approach is needed, embedding nature recovery into the levelling-up and regeneration agenda in order to deliver multiple benefits for people, nature and the economy, while making sure that these benefits are equitably distributed. This policy brief summarises evidence from the academic literature to demonstrate the vital role that nature can play in securing health, wellbeing and socio-economic benefits for the deprived communities targeted by the levelling-up programme. It also identifies opportunities for embedding nature into the Bill. For further information and references see the accompanying Evidence Brief.

Box 1: Problems with the current Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

It neglects the value of nature for improving and sustaining human physical and mental health and community cohesion, boosting local economies, delivering climate resilience and addressing socio-economic inequalities.

It weakens environmental protection, replacing the comprehensive system of Environmental Impact Assessments and Strategic Environmental Assessments with undefined 'environmental outcome reports' to be specified by the Secretary of State. There is no guarantee that these will maintain the same level of protection as the current system, or provide the stronger protection needed to halt the ongoing loss of nature-rich green spaces to development.

It undermines the Government's Net Zero and Nature Recovery policies by failing to protect and restore nature. This risks the loss of wildlife habitats and the release of large amounts of carbon stored in soils and vegetation.

Health and wellbeing outcomes of natural green space

There is now substantial evidence that nature-rich and accessible green spaces deliver significant benefits for human health and wellbeing. This occurs through several pathways:

Recreation: Green spaces provide pleasant places for recreation and encourage physical activity, leading to physical and mental health benefits.

Interaction with nature. Being in green spaces and interacting with nature can reduce stress and improve mood, also leading to physical and mental health benefits.

Social interaction and cohesive communities. Green spaces can encourage integration and community cohesion, with benefits for mental health and wellbeing, combatting loneliness and isolation, reduced crime, encouraging pro-environmental behaviours, and fostering pride of place.

Microbiome regulation. There is evidence that the human immune system can benefit from (or requires) exposure to the natural microbiota found in soils, vegetation and air.

Air quality. Trees and other vegetation absorb air pollution, reducing the incidence of asthma, cardiovascular disease and lung cancer.

Cooling and shading. Green spaces, especially trees, can help to cool the air and provide shade, reducing heat stress during hot weather.

Trees can also act as a noise barrier, reducing stress and improving health, especially by improving sleep at night.

There is strong academic evidence that people who live in greener neighbourhoods tend to be happier, healthier and live longer lives than those who live in less green places, with the benefits being even greater for more disadvantaged communities.

Health benefits provided by contact with nature

Mental health benefits	Physical health benefits
Reduced stress	Improved cardiovascular health
Better sleep	Improved congestive heart failure
Reduced depression	Lower blood pressure
Reduced anxiety	Reduced obesity
Greater happiness, wellbeing, life satisfaction	Reduced diabetes
Improved concentration and memory	Better eyesight
Restoration from mental fatigue	Improved pain control
Reduced ADHD symptoms	Improved immune function
Reduced aggression, less crime	Improved general health
Reduced schizophrenia	Reduced mortality
Increased social connectedness	Improved birth outcomes
Increased pro-social behaviour	Improved child development

Nature can also play an important part in COVID-19 recovery and future resilience

Evidence is growing that access to nature helped people to cope physically and mentally with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, and prevented further mental and physical health deterioration on a large scale. The People and Nature Survey has revealed that nearly half of adults in England reported spending more time outdoors during the pandemic than before, with four in ten stating that nature and wildlife were more important than ever for their wellbeing. Volatile compounds emitted by plants (phytoncides) can enhance the activity of natural killer cells (lymphocytes) that underpin the immune system, and exposure to beneficial microbiota in the environment can boost the immune system and reduce stress.

Quality and biodiversity of green space is important, as well as quantity.

Higher quality green spaces attract more use and therefore deliver more benefits. Quality also increases the benefits delivered by each usage of green space. Important factors typically include obvious qualities such as safety and cleanliness (i.e. no litter or vandalism), but there is also mounting evidence that more biodiverse and natural green space provides greater benefits. Wildlife-rich areas with semi-natural habitats that support native species are likely to have far greater benefits than sterile green spaces, because encounters with wildlife are an important aspect of delivering wellbeing benefits. Biodiversity tends to be far higher in long-established habitats than in newly created areas, so it is important to protect existing ecosystems.

Economic outcomes of natural green space

Protecting and restoring natural green spaces brings multiple benefits for national and local economies.

Business investment. Attractive green space helps to improve the image of an area, create a sense of place, and encourage investment by businesses.

Staff recruitment and retention. High quality staff are more likely to gravitate towards (and stay in) jobs in areas with a range of attractive green spaces nearby.

Direct employment. Jobs can be created directly in maintaining and improving green spaces. Habitat restoration creates more employment per £1 invested than many other sectors usually targeted for economic recovery, such as fossil fuel energy projects. Investing in nature recovery creates both low-skilled and high-skilled jobs, making this a flexible response to economic downturn. One study showed that investing in nature recovery and urban green infrastructure

could create over 16,000 jobs in the 20% of constituencies likely to face the most significant employment challenges post-COVID.

New business opportunities can be created, such as in tourism and hospitality. As NbS often have large up-front costs, from buying the equipment, materials and services needed to create or restore ecosystems, they also create growth in the wider economy (via high multiplier effects) and generate high gross value added (GVA).

Reduced healthcare costs. The health benefits of green spaces can reduce the burden on national and local health and social care budgets. If everyone in England had access to good quality green space, there could be annual savings of over £2bn for the NHS.

Labour productivity. Access to nature can improve productivity, reduce absence from work due to sickness, and reduce antisocial behaviour.

Property values. Property in areas with more natural green space can have a higher value. One study indicates a 1% increase in house prices for a 1% increase in green space within a ward, higher house prices close to nature reserves, and 17% higher house prices in National Parks.

Lower crime rates can be found in areas with more green space, leading to savings for victims of crime as well as a reduced burden on the police and criminal justice systems.

Flood protection. Well-designed green infrastructure including Sustainable Drainage

Inequalities in access to green space

Disadvantaged groups and people living in socio-economically deprived areas benefit more from access to green space, and health inequalities between different socio-economic groups tend to be lower in greener urban areas. However, one in three people in England do not live near a local green space, and only 3% of the most disadvantaged people have access to local green space within a 15-minute walk zone. Creating new green infrastructure as part of regeneration can play a key role in addressing these striking inequalities. However, this must be carefully designed in partnership with local communities and other key stakeholders to avoid

Schemes (SuDS) can reduce surface water flooding and associated damage to homes and property, as well as reducing the costs for hard drainage and flood defences.

Water treatment costs can be reduced by using nature-based solutions such as habitat restoration, buffer strips and SuDS to reduce soil erosion and water pollution.

Energy cost savings. Green infrastructure such as green roofs and walls, parks and street trees can provide cooling and shading, reducing the need for costly air conditioning and thus saving money on energy bills.

problems associated with 'green gentrification', where improving green spaces increases house prices and thus leads to social exclusion.

94% of adults who had visited a green and natural space in the previous 14 days agreed that spending time outdoors was good for their physical health.

Firs Farm Wetlands, Enfield, were restored by de-culverting a hidden river. They now protect 100 houses from flooding, filter out pollution from surface water runoff, and provide beautiful natural spaces for local people.

Photo: SUSDRAIN



Opportunities to strengthen the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

There are major opportunities to strengthen the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill by ensuring that future development protects existing natural assets, restores degraded ecosystems and creates new urban green infrastructure. There is overwhelming evidence that this will improve public physical and mental health and wellbeing, boost resilience to future outbreaks of disease such as COVID-19 (reducing the social cost of healthcare), improve resilience to future climate threats such as floods, droughts and heatwaves, and deliver a wide range of economic benefits. This will help to redress existing inequalities in health and access to nature faced by the communities targeted by the Bill. Specific opportunities to strengthen the Bill and address its current omissions are listed below.

The Bill needs to explicitly recognise the role of nature in supporting human health and cohesive communities, climate resilience and the economy, and ensure that national and local planning policies, assessment processes and individual planning decisions put nature recovery and protection of existing natural assets at the heart of the planning system.

A Net Zero clause should be added, to ensure that all new developments are consistent with the government's Net Zero goals.

A strong and consistent national approach for protecting existing natural assets

Nature recovery clauses should be added, to ensure the delivery of the government's commitment to protect 30% of land for nature, to establish a new designation to safeguard land for nature's recovery, and to address the contribution development makes to freshwater pollution through nutrient negativity measures.

A health, wellbeing and community cohesion clause should be added, with a new duty on local authorities to address existing inequalities in health and access to green space and equal

distribution of benefits, including ensuring that communities are served by active travel networks of footpaths and cycleways.

The new Environmental Outcome Reports must be strengthened so that they provide a minimum level of protection at least equivalent to the existing system, including Strategic Environmental Assessments, Environmental Impact Assessments, the Habitats Regulations Assessment process, Species protection, cultural heritage and landscape protections. These protections should be explicitly retained in the Bill, and not subject only to the decisions of the Secretary of State.

The proposed National Development Management policies need to set a strong and consistent national approach for protecting existing natural assets (habitats, species, water and air quality), a minimum standard for access to natural green spaces, and criteria for building in new high quality climate-resilient green and blue infrastructure to new development. This could be based on the new [Green Infrastructure Standards](#) being developed as part of the government commitments in the 25 Year Environment Plan.

The Infrastructure Levy and developer contributions proposals should state that these should contribute to nature recovery and net zero alongside wider social objectives.

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