

Written evidence submitted by the Canal and River Trust (PHS0392)

About us

The Canal & River Trust was set up in 2012 to manage and protect 2,000 miles of inland waterways in England and Wales and maximise their benefit to the nation. Today, they are used daily by thousands¹ of people as a space to visit, exercise and relax/ de-stress and our focus is to ensure that all communities can procure the benefits provided.

Green and blue spaces are needed now more than ever, and the Trust provides access on the doorstep to millions of people, including some of the country's most deprived communities where access to green space is at a premium.

We welcome the opportunity to provide a proposal for this Inquiry and highlight the role of the waterways in facilitating better physical and mental health outcomes, tackling inequalities, and improving access to nature. We hope our evidence is helpful and we stand ready to provide a more detailed submission in due course.

Why the Committee should focus on health outcomes and improved access to nature?

The Government's 25-year Environment Plan recognises the benefit of access to nature to national wellbeing, economic prosperity, and good mental and physical health.

There is strong and consistent evidence for mental health and wellbeing benefits arising from exposure to natural environments, including reductions in psychological stress, anxiety, and depression,² with potential pathways linking blue space and health;³ physical activity, restoration, social interaction, and environmental factors.

Natural environments such as our waterways therefore play a key role in improving the health and wellbeing of people and planet and continue to contribute to international research on urban blue spaces, climate, and health⁴.

The importance of our waterways and evidence on blue space engagement

We encourage the Committee to look at waterways and other inland waterbodies as part of the Inquiry.

Canal towpaths are already the most accessible free space for many communities, on the doorstep of nine million people who live within a ten to fifteen-minute walk (1km). Canals flow as arteries of nature through towns and cities, often through the country's most deprived communities where health inequalities, green space deficit and lack of gardens are most prevalent. They are used to walk, run, or cycle on towpaths, to provide a calm space for relaxation and contemplation, for angling and other activities to connect with nature as well as activities on the water such as boating, paddle boarding and canoeing. Under supervision, through organised clubs, many of our reservoirs support outdoor swimming and sailing.

¹ Canal & River Trust (2021-22) Total unique visitors in an average month, 786 million; Total volume of visitors on an average two-week period, 9.1 million

² [Hartig, T. et al., \(2014\) Nature and Health: Annual Review of Public Health](#)

³ [Georgiou, M. et al., \(2021\) Mechanisms of Impact of Blue Spaces on Human Health](#)

⁴ [University of Exeter, BlueHealth](#)

50% of the population in England live within 5 miles of our waterways and in some areas our waterways are within reach of the majority of the population e.g., over 90% of those living in the West Midlands' 'Black Country' and 70% in Greater Manchester.

Our role is making life better by water. Our network provides a ready-made means to address multiple health and wellbeing issues, with evidence demonstrating significant impact to-date and the potential to do more.

Evidence suggests that blue space engagement has a direct benefit for health with direct savings to the NHS:

- A recent Kings College London study⁵ showed that the real time effect of spending time on canals comes with a 6% improvement in mental wellbeing, compared to just green spaces alone.
- A Birmingham University study⁶ reported that frequent use of the canals was beneficial to life satisfaction and physical activity in the population.
- Another recent study⁷ reported that the annual social value generated by waterways and activities is £4.6 billion including £1.1 billion cost savings to NHS derived from active use of waterways and towpaths.
- The annual economic value⁷ of boating and wider water-based tourism expenditure generates over £1.5 billion worth of Gross Value Added with 80,000+ jobs being directly or indirectly dependent upon our waterways. This is of particular significance as employment is a wider determinant of health.

The impact of our work is maximised by working in collaboration at national and local levels, for example, Defra's Green Social Prescribing pilots, Active Travel England and as a System Partner of Sport England.

The Government's announcement in its Environmental Improvement Plan that every household is to be within 15 minutes of green space or water is welcome and we support the commitment to recognising the value of blue space access, particularly within urban environments, including support for future funding to support access improvements and awareness.

It is important these commitments are supported with funding, including for the Trust's waterways, given the impact of our network to make a real difference to health and wellbeing.

February 2023

⁵ [Bergou et al., \(2022\) The mental health benefits of visiting canal and river: An ecological momentary assessment study](#)

⁶ [Afentou et al., \(2022\) Inland Waterways and Population Health and Wellbeing: A Cross-Sectional Study of Waterway Users in the UK](#)

⁷ [Simetrica-Jacobs, \(2022\) Waterways & Wellbeing: Valuing our Waterways](#)