

Written evidence submitted by The Woodland Trust (UGS0084)

About us

The Woodland Trust is the largest woodland conservation charity in the UK, with over 1,200 sites in its care covering over 29,000 hectares. Access to its woods is free. The Woodland Trust has over 500,000 supporters. The Trust wants to see a UK rich in native woods and trees for nature and people. It has three key aims: i) protect ancient woodland which is rare, unique and irreplaceable; ii) restore damaged ancient woodland, bringing precious pieces of our natural history back to life; iii) plant native trees and woods with the aim of creating resilient landscapes for people and wildlife.

Executive Summary

1. Access to good quality urban green spaces, including trees and woods, provides a whole host of essential benefits to people and places nearby. [Urban trees and woods in particular](#), help to promote population's health and wellbeing, boosts air quality and reduces pollution, builds climate resilience and flood mitigation, and even attracts business and investment to an area.
2. Both the quantity and quality of urban green spaces in the UK, including urban trees and woods, is deeply unequal across the UK. Trees and woods are essential to public health and wellbeing, but for too many people and communities around the UK, access is severely lacking. The Woodland Trust's [Tree Equity Score tool](#), published in December 2023, highlighted the major differences in levels of tree cover between neighbourhoods and that these often follow socio-economic trends. The UK Tree Equity Score reveals many disparities including:
 - Neighbourhoods where tree cover per person is highest have roughly 30% less NO₂ pollution and 10% less particulate matter pollution than neighbourhoods where tree cover is lowest.
 - UK-wide, neighbourhoods with the highest income levels have more than double the tree cover per person than less affluent neighbourhoods and have nearly 20% less nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) air pollution.
 - Lower tree cover has a dramatic effect on neighbourhoods: for example, those with the highest number of trees have up to 330% less air pollution and are four degrees Celsius cooler during a heat wave than neighbourhoods where tree canopy is lowest.
 - UK-wide, neighbourhoods with fewest people identifying with minority ethnic groups have roughly double the tree canopy per person than neighbourhoods with the most, and experience 50% less NO₂ air pollution, 20% less particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) air pollution and are five degrees Celsius cooler.
3. Sadly, many urban trees and woods are also under [growing threat](#) from things like development, disease and climate change. The Woodland Trust campaigns to protect trees and through the planning system, ensuring their role as a public health resource is safeguarded for future generations.
4. To ensure better access to urban trees and woods essential benefits, the [Woodland Trust is calling for](#):
 - A new long-term target to increase native tree canopy cover in England to 16%, supported by a minimum canopy cover requirement of 30% for new development.

- A £100 million Woods for People Fund to buy land and create woodland that's accessible, publicly owned and wildlife-rich where this is currently lacking.
- Targeted funding to help local authorities produce and update their tree strategies and ensure they have the staff and skills to plant and manage trees.
- Investment in commercial, local authority and community tree nurseries to rapidly expand the supply of UK and Ireland sourced and grown trees. This will support objectives for conservation and the urban environment, mitigate the risk of introducing pests and diseases, and create viable green jobs.

How successfully are the Government and Local Authorities protecting and increasing urban green spaces, and what trends can be seen in the extent and quality of those spaces?

5. There are many challenges threatening existing urban green spaces and inhibiting the creation of new ones. These problems are exacerbated in deprived urban neighbourhoods, with research by the National Trust finding that almost 300 deprived urban areas in the UK lacked any accessible provision, and for those that had green space access, these areas were found to be hugely underperforming¹. Further, Policy Exchange found that in Greater Manchester, people in the 25% richest areas enjoyed, on average, 2.7 times as much green space per head as the 25% most deprived areas². According to findings from Wildlife and Countryside Link, these figures are the norm when looking at the UK as a whole – “area of natural space per person seems to be closely correlated with deprivation”³. The UK Tree Equity Score also found that Neighbourhoods with the highest income levels have more than double the tree cover per person than less affluent neighbourhoods, and they have nearly 20% less of the toxic pollutant nitrogen dioxide (NO₂)⁴.
6. Reduced funding is a key contributor to these issues as Local Authorities (LAs) have less budget for green space maintenance, which risks many green spaces falling into disrepair. This is particularly challenging for urban trees and woods, as they require significant upkeep and management. Alongside this, reductions in staff numbers and a lack of structured professional qualifications, with the loss of experienced parks professionals through retirement, has led to some reported gaps in knowledge, for example arboriculture skills and knowledge⁵. Offering accessible and practical training and making the sector more inclusive and attractive would begin to address these gaps in the long-term and would provide local employment opportunities for communities. The [National Trust found](#) that a £5.5 billion commitment from Government to an urban green infrastructure fund would level up access to urban green space, this, accompanied with maintenance of steady levels to ensure sustained consistency in quality and quantity.
7. At present, only 6% of parks and green spaces have legal protection, with no minimum provision that local authorities are required to designate and protect in their area⁶. Making it a legal requirement to protect and enhance public green spaces would begin to halt and reverse the

¹ [Levelling Up and Building Back Better Through Urban Green infrastructure: An Investment Options Appraisal](#) National Trust et al., 2020

² [Green Society: Policies to improve the UK's urban green spaces](#), Policy Exchange 2016

³ [Mapping access to nature in England](#), Wildlife and Countryside Link 2023

⁴ [Tree Equity Map shows less affluent areas have less tree cover](#), the Woodland Trust 2023

⁵ [Local government: Skills shortages and workforce capacity](#), Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) 2021

⁶ [Green Space Index](#), Fields in Trust 2023

current negative trends. In addition, many of our oldest heritage trees sit in urban areas and face multiple threats, but do not have the legal protection they deserve. That is why the Woodland Trust are supporting a [Heritage Trees Bill](#) to strengthen their protection, and the many benefits they bring to communities across the UK.

8. There are also competing demands on land, which reinforces the need for a robust Land Use Framework in England to both protect and create green spaces as part of new developments. This needs to be embedded into all Governmental departments and incorporated into their policies. The effective use of streets and existing grey infrastructure would also increase urban green space, the National Trust found that there are 10,000km of streets where street tree or a street park would create greater green connectivity⁷.
9. Towns and cities with lots of trees are happier, healthier and more resilient places to live. Trees bring beauty, wildlife and a range of essential benefits including cleaner air and shade that can lower summer temperatures by 12 degrees⁸. But access to trees is hugely unequal. Canopy cover in England ranges from 45% in Farnham, Surrey, to 3% in Fleetwood, Lancashire. At district level, Surrey Heath boasts canopy cover of 36% while South Holland in Lincolnshire has only 2.2%⁹.
10. While the use of local green space has grown steadily over the last decade, the percentage of people who live near woods where they are free to walk is decreasing. Projects like the [Northern Forest](#) are pointing the way to a better future with 300,000 households – equivalent to the size of Leeds – now benefiting from access to woodland that didn't exist previously.
11. The number of people with easy access to woodland has declined since 2016. In 2020 16.2% of people in the UK had access to a wood of at least 2ha within 500m of their homes (down from 21.1% in 2016), and 66.6% had access to a wood of at least 20ha within 4km of their homes (down from 72.7% in 2016). Also, 13% of people in the UK don't have access to a garden, meaning woodland and green spaces are more essential than ever¹⁰.

What environmental challenges are urban areas facing, and how could wider access and inclusion to green spaces (including dog-friendly spaces) address these challenges? Areas to consider but not limited to:

- 1. Increased temperatures and the 'urban heat island' effect**
- 2. Flooding risks and water quality in urban watercourses**
- 3. Air pollution and the associated health implications**
- 4. Noise pollution**
- 5. Climate change and carbon storage**
- 6. Pressures on biodiversity and ecosystems in urban centres**
- 7. Resource and waste management**

⁷ [PowerPoint Presentation](#)

⁸ [The role of urban trees in reducing land surface temperatures in European cities](#), Jonas Schwaab et al 2021

⁹ [UK Tree Equity Score Insights](#), American Forests 2023

¹⁰ [State of the UK's Woods and Trees](#), the Woodland Trust 2021

12. Like most countries, the UK is becoming increasingly urbanised with 84% of people now living in urban areas, making them highly exposed and vulnerable to the impact of climate change¹¹, and the environmental challenges listed above. Concurrently, urbanisation is a key contributor to climate change, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that cities are responsible for 75% of global CO₂ emissions, with transport and buildings being among the largest contributors. These problems are expected to be exacerbated as local authorities face increasing pressure to find more space for homes and infrastructure, inevitably resulting in the further loss and fragmentation of urban natural areas.
13. It is widely accepted that good quality green spaces can play an important role in combatting various environmental challenges in urban areas and in England deliver £6.6 billion of health, climate change and environmental benefits every year¹². Urban woodlands, forests and street trees are increasingly recognised as providing substantial regulatory ecosystem services for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The UN Economic Commission for Europe has said that the urban forest is “critical infrastructure” due to its ability to reduce local ambient temperature, sequester carbon, reduce land degradation, delay stormwater runoff, as well as playing an important role in providing stormwater volume and pollution control through rainfall interception and intensity reduction.
14. Green spaces are also vital for human health and wellbeing and the health of ecosystem services and biodiversity. Poor air quality, for instance, is linked to many health conditions, including cancer, asthma, stroke, heart disease, diabetes and obesity while excess nitrogen, including ammonia, is one of the most widespread and significant threats to woodland ecosystems in the UK¹³. Increased tree and vegetation coverage when planted in the right places can help improve urban air quality on a local scale by forming a barrier between people and pollutants. They also remove some particulate pollution from the air by catching particles on their leaf surfaces. Research has found significantly lower asthma rates among children aged 4-5 in areas with more street trees.
15. Densely planted trees and vegetation also offer an aesthetically pleasing method for reducing noise pollution, with research indicating their combined effectiveness. Noise pollution is considered the third most hazardous pollution after air and water pollution by the World Health Organization with short and long-term exposure being linked to psychiatric disorders such as anxiety and depression, hypertension, hormonal dysfunction, and blood pressure rise leading to cardiovascular disease¹⁴. For biodiversity, studies have shown the widespread impact of anthropogenic noise pollution on animal communication and other complex ecosystem processes, such as predator-prey interactions¹⁵.

Will the Government achieve its aims to increase the amount of green cover to 40% in urban residential areas? What other additional measures should the Government take to increase green urban space?

¹¹ [Sustainable Urban Forestry Policy brief](#), United Nations 2021

¹² [Natural England unveils new Green Infrastructure Framework](#), Natural England 2023

¹³ [Tackling air pollution with trees](#), The Woodland Trust 2023

¹⁴ [Investigating changes in noise pollution due to the COVID-19 lockdown: The case of Dublin, Ireland](#), Basu B et al. 2021

¹⁵ [Hunting at the highway: traffic noise reduces foraging efficiency in acoustic predators](#), Siemers, B. M., Schaub, A. 2010

16. Given the myriad of ongoing threats to urban green spaces and trees, without urgent action and investment, the Government will not achieve its aims regarding green cover in urban residential areas. According to [Fields in Trust](#), in 2023 6.1 million people have no park or green space access within a ten-minute walk from home, in 2019 this was 2.6 million people. The Government's pledge that everyone will live within a 15 minutes' walk of a green space is welcome, however this is not legally binding, and no assessment has yet gone to ministers on options for how to progress towards the commitment. It is therefore unclear as to how the Government will effectively achieve this target without the legal backing to require developers to incorporate this Accessible Green Space Standard, a lack of central direction and a lack of long-term funding for local authorities.
17. To increase green urban space, the Government should:
- a. **Plant new trees and protect the existing tree stock by creating a legally binding target of a minimum of 30% tree-canopy cover** in all new housing developments to ensure that tree-lined streets and access to nature-rich woodlands are guaranteed. This would include retaining mature trees. For existing housing estates, the Government should increase tree-canopy cover in those areas where it is below the England urban average (16%) to ensure ecologically and locationally appropriate species, diverse in age and structure. Within this, new and retrofitted infrastructure should be designed to accommodate the growth of trees (roots and crown) over their whole lifespan.
 - b. **Ensure that Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) deliver the nature recovery of woods and trees.** Ensure that LNRS creation includes the active participation of local communities. Local authorities have a key leadership and convening role to play in enabling inclusive community and stakeholder engagement and promoting community understanding of, and participation in, nature recovery. Embed LNRSs in Local Plans and other relevant policies such as green infrastructure strategies, neighbourhood plans, wellbeing strategies and tree strategies.
 - c. **Introduce a woodland nature-recovery funding package** which includes £350 million Woodland Nature Resilience Fund for landscape-scale projects which will tackle the key drivers of biodiversity loss for wooded habitats and associated species, a £100 million Woods for People Fund to support the creation of a new generation of accessible, publicly owned, wildlife-rich woodland in locations where this is currently lacking and a £50 million initial investment to help the sector develop the infrastructure, skills and capacity it will need for confidence and assurance in its ability to deliver woodland habitat restoration, management, and creation projects at scale.

Is access to urban green spaces equally distributed across all sectors of society? Do the environmental and associated health risks disproportionately impact certain groups? What barriers to access exist and how can they be addressed?

The Woodland Trust is committed to making the case for accessible woods close to where people live. While a variety of accessible green space is important for people, woods provide unique opportunities. Their visual prominence can create a balance between the built and natural environment, especially in urban areas. Woods can also welcome large numbers of visitors without detracting from the experience and as they are such rich natural habitats, they make for exciting and inspiring places to visit. Trees outside woods in urban areas are also important for a variety of reasons (outlined above).

The Woodland Access Standard aims to widen access to woods, so that:

- no person should live more than 500m from at least one area of accessible woodland of no less than 2ha in size; and
- there should also be at least one area of accessible woodland of no less than 20ha, within 4km (8km round trip) of people's homes.

Access to good quality urban green spaces in the UK, including urban trees and woods is deeply unequal across the UK. Urban trees and woods in particular provide a whole host of essential benefits (as outlined above), but for many people and communities, access to them is severely lacking. The Woodland Trust believes that everyone should have access to woods and trees within reach of their home, so they can access the essential benefits they provide.

The [Tree Equity Score tool](#), published in conjunction with American Forests and the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare in December 2023, highlighted the major differences in levels of tree cover between neighbourhoods and that these often follow socio-economic trends. It found that neighbourhoods with the highest income levels have more than double the tree cover per person than less affluent neighbourhoods, and they have nearly 20% less of the toxic pollutant nitrogen dioxide (NO₂). In England, regional differences are present, with the 10 local authorities with the highest scores in the south and the 10 with the lowest scores in the north. Some coastal areas also have lower levels of tree cover.

The Tree Equity project is an approach that should be used to understand and protect trees as a vital resource, and to target investment so that everyone can enjoy the multiple benefits of trees regardless of background.

In addition to the inequities around socio-economic status, [Friends of the Earth research](#) shows that people from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background are twice as likely to live in a neighbourhood with minimal access to green space showing an intersectional and robust response is required.

The benefits of outdoor access for both physical health and mental wellbeing are well recognised. People spending time in natural green spaces could deliver considerable cost savings for the health service. Suitable green space, including woodland, near to where people live, is necessary to provide such opportunities.

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