

Written evidence submitted by the Yorkshire Humber & North Lincolnshire Regional Access Forum (EB42)

Yorkshire Humber & North Lincolnshire Regional Access Forum

The Forum is made up of the Chairs of Local Access Forums across our region, appointed under section 94 of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000, to advise decision making organisations (such as local authorities), about making improvements to public access for outdoor recreation and sustainable travel. Our membership is comprised of people with knowledge and experience of how public access to our rights of way network, open land and green spaces, are currently being delivered in both urban and rural settings. Therefore we confine our comments to matters affecting *'People's enjoyment of the natural environment'*.

Introduction

Statutory access to the natural environment is a hugely important national asset. The rights of way network in particular, provides the vital links by which people are able to reach green spaces. However, there is so much more that should be done to make it more accessible, durable and welcoming to everyone. Successive governments have acknowledged this; but in recent years improvements have practically slowed to a halt, due to lack of funding, and more significantly, lack of political will.

THE ENVIRONMENT BILL 2020 - People's enjoyment of the natural environment

The prominence given to *'People's enjoyment of the natural environment'*, at s. 1.1.b. of the Bill is very encouraging, especially as it is underpinned by the targets in Defra's 25 year Environment Plan, *'A Green Future'*ⁱ. The plan rightly recognises the importance of providing high quality accessible green spaces, their connection to people's health and wellbeing, and their significance to climate change.

CHAPTER 1

IMPROVING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Environmental targets

1 Environmental targets

- (1) The Secretary of State may by regulations set long-term targets in respect of any matter which relates to—
- (a) the natural environment, or
 - (b) people's enjoyment of the natural environment.

(2) The Secretary of State must exercise the power in subsection (1) so as to set
A long-term target in respect of at least one matter within each priority area.

(3) The priority areas are—

(a) air quality;

(b) water;

(c) biodiversity;

(d) resource efficiency and waste reduction.

It is important that this Bill is unambiguous in providing the clarity required to deliver positive results, which will be read alongside other legislation notably the Agriculture Bill, and any possible changes to local government and planning law or policy making. Unfortunately, it does not achieve this at present.

Crucially, 'People's enjoyment of the natural environment' has been omitted from the long-term target setting regime set out under sections 1.2. to 1.8. Chapter 1 goes on to set out provisions for measuring, reviewing and reporting on the effectiveness of these targets. We are concerned that this omission considerably erodes the government's stated intention to measure improvements to people's access to green space, through the 'Outcome Indicator Framework'ⁱⁱ, in which it is identified as a one of the 10 Headline Goals (G1 to G7).

We suggest therefore that two amendments are inserted into the Bill:

1. Clause 1. S. 2. is amended to: *"people's access to and enjoyment of the natural environment"*.

2. To add Clause 3. (e) *"people's access to and enjoyment of the natural environment"*.

These amendments would have the effect of ensuring that:

1. The public's access to green space is specifically identified and taken into account across other provisions affected by environmental law. This would help to minimise the impact of identified threats such as development and land scape change, and encourage improvements to our existing access network.

2. Meaningful monitoring can be carried out through existing Rights of Way Improvement Plans (RoWIPs) and Local Transport Plans, which already have a system for reporting back to central government. These have been marginalised and underfunded of late, but nevertheless are detailed constructive plans that have already been prepared with care by local authorities.

Conclusion

We respectfully ask that these amendments are included. The recent Covid-19 crisis has highlighted just how much the population needs and values access to the natural environment. It is essential to everyone's well-being. We call on the government to seize this opportunity to put public access at the heart of its environmental policies, by providing clarity in this Bill.

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ⁱ "A Green Future": Our 25 year Plan to Improve the Environment. 2018 – Chapter 3
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

ⁱⁱ "Measuring Environmental Change: outcome indicator framework for the 25 year environment plan" 2019
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/802094/25-yep-indicators-2019.pdf