

# Trees and woods are prescription for healthy communities

***With an emphasis on public space being a valuable contributor to public health, The Woodland Trust highlights the benefits of increased woodland access and argues councils have a critical role to play.***

**A**ccessible woodland is moving higher up the policy agenda across the UK, thanks to its recognised credentials for boosting both mental and physical health and overall quality of life.

Indeed, the recent launch of Natural England's new 'Natural Health Service' acknowledges the role of woods and trees in its action planning.

And the way is now open, through the Sustainable Communities Act, for local people to lobby for greater access to and more planting of native woodland to increase local green space.

The Woodland Trust's latest research, however, shows how much work remains to be done to improve the public accessibility of woodland in many parts of the UK.

A new league table shows the North East topping the league with more than 90% of its woodland accessible, right to the other end of the regional league table, with the West Midlands having just 33% accessible.

It throws up some interesting anomalies. In the South East, woodland cover is predictably the highest of anywhere in the UK (14%), yet only 35% of it is accessible, leaving it third from bottom in the regional league.

That's against a grim statistic showing the UK as one of the least wooded places in Europe with only 12 per cent of the UK wooded compared with an average of 44 per cent in other European countries.

And less than half of this is native broadleaved woodland, according to James Cooper, Trust head of government affairs.

"We have increasing evidence and recognition of how good trees and woods are for us," he says. "Woodland defines our landscapes and townscapes, regulates our climate, clears our air and water and helps us adapt to climate change."

"From a practical health perspective, the arguments are more compelling. A simple walk in the woods lowers heart rate, blood pressure and inner stress. Woodland is known to encourage exercise."

"For children, woodland offers a place of adventure, and

planting a tree offers a first environmental experience that stays with a child for ever."

The Trust has encouraging evidence of how the message of woods and trees as valuable green space is getting through. In Essex, the county council is directly funding tree planting on a major scale, its Essex Works programme planning to plant 250,000 new trees across the county.

In South Devon, South Hams District Council has committed £250K to plant new native trees near Plymouth.

It's progress, says James, but much more needs to be done to make the most of our natural assets. "Our experience of planting more than 500 community woods over the past two decades has shown us how this opens up opportunities for people to use their local landscape in different ways and how new woods can help make a healthier, richer and more beautiful country for us to live in."

The Trust's new Visit Woods programme of promoting accessible woodland takes a star billing with Natural England alongside a new NHS Forest, promotion of both green and blue



gyms, the successful Walking the Way to Health Initiative and Care Farms - opening up farms to those with significant mental health or addiction issues.

Two key calculations lie at the heart of the Natural England research:

- ♦ Every £1 spent on establishing healthy walking schemes will be saved sevenfold in the cost of treating conditions such as heart disease and diabetes
- ♦ If every household in England were provided with good access to quality green space it could save an estimated £2.1 billion in health care costs

Added to that, says the Trust, is the key health role that woods and trees can play in reducing potentially harmful 'heat islands' in towns and cities.

Its research confirms that people who live closer to green spaces are more physically active and less likely to be overweight or obese, woods and green space can help in closing health gaps between rich and poor, and that contact with nature is restorative and stress reducing.

With its own target of planting 15K trees a year, backed by increasing recognition of the community value of established woodland, the Trust cites the Sustainable Communities Act as a way to give local people the chance to influence local council proposals for the environment.

The Trust has created a new area on its web site with a step-by-step guide to explain how people can lobby any authority which has opted in, and even a 'model proposal' for people to use.



The Woodland Trust believes this could be the perfect opportunity for communities to call for more accessible local woodland and places rich in trees in their neighbourhoods – an effective and pro-active dose of preventive medicine!

A full step by step guide on to best use the SCA through citizens panels is on <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/sca>

Contact: [DebbieNicholls@woodlandtrust.org.uk](mailto:DebbieNicholls@woodlandtrust.org.uk), Press Officer, Woodland Trust

