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The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
House of Commons
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Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 29 September on behalf of your constituents about access to nature. I apologise for the delay in responding. Defra is currently dealing with high volumes of correspondence due to COVID-19. Thank you for your understanding during this challenging time.

Defra recognises the important role that access to nature can have in improving health and wellbeing. As well as improved mental health outcomes, it can also deliver important benefits for recreation, physical health, social wellbeing and employment. Our 25 Year Environment Plan sets out our ambition to connect more people with the natural environment, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to improve health and wellbeing, reduce health inequalities and alleviate pressure on the health and care system. As your constituents rightly point out, this is even more important in the context of COVID-19.

In our recent policy paper "Environment Bill - environmental targets" the Government set out how it will use ambitious, legally binding targets under its landmark Environment Bill to combat the environmental and climate challenges we face. The Environment Bill requires the Government to set at least one target in the four priority areas of air quality, biodiversity, water and waste, as well as a target for fine particulate matter (PM2.5), by 31 October 2022. The four priority areas were chosen to complement the chapters of the Bill, build on the vision of the 25 Year Environment Plan and facilitate the delivery of comprehensive measures across the natural environment.

The Bill allows for additional long-term targets to be set in the future, on other aspects of the natural environment or people's enjoyment of it. We expect any future long-term targets to be set in a similar way to the first suite, through expert advice, stakeholder engagement and public consultation as part of the robust, evidence-led target-setting process. The natural environment is complex and we see target-setting as an iterative process, built upon over time as our evidence base and understanding develops. We want to use targets meaningfully to drive the environmental outcomes that we need.

RT HON GEORGE EUSTICE MP