



**Canal &  
River Trust**

# Unlocking the potential of canals

The power of blue - a prospectus for  
our canals in Greater Manchester



# Canals: Unlocking the potential

We know how much the canals mean to Greater Manchester. That is why we are delighted to be working with many partners on this prospectus - and the future that it illustrates. Through partnerships, we aim to keep the canals at the heart of Greater Manchester's communities, and to find innovative ways to use them to bring new life and growth to these areas.

There are few parts of our country where the canals are as interwoven with the past and present as they are in Manchester, and we look forward to new and exciting projects to realise their full potential.

Since taking over as CEO in October 2025 I have been struck repeatedly by the many ways the canals - and the water in them - are used. Looking after them, to modern standards and for modern uses, is always going to be a challenge - especially in a changing climate - but at the Canal & River Trust we are committed to finding ways to transform the canal network to bring maximum benefit to all who use it and to the communities it runs through.

We are grateful for the support of Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, and look forward to working with local authorities and other local organisations, along with businesses and of course all those who live by the canals, those who use them, and everyone who wants to see them thrive.



Campbell Robb  
CEO Canal & River Trust

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# Foreword

Canals are part of Greater Manchester's history and identity. They helped make us the world's first industrial city. Today they can help write the next chapter: unlocking and supporting the growth of the city-region and enabling everyone to live a good life.

In our Greater Manchester Strategy, we set out a clear shared vision for the next decade. Progress here only counts if it reaches every place and every person. Our canals can help us deliver that - connecting neighbourhoods and town centres, bringing people together, and strengthening the identity and pride of communities along their routes. Our canals help to tell the story of the places across the city region undergoing renewal and regeneration throughout their modern history.

That is why this prospectus matters. It is an invitation to work together - the Canal & River Trust, local authorities, businesses, community organisations and residents - to make the most of these incredible assets. As we build new homes, improve our town centres and bring forward growth locations, we should see our waterways as part of the solution: creating high-quality places, opening-up opportunity, and helping people get to jobs, education and green spaces.

We now have a ten-year Integrated Pipeline of priority projects supported by a £1Bn Good Growth Fund to pump-prime regeneration across Greater Manchester. Growth opportunities will be optimised in core locations such as the emerging Mayoral Development Corporations in canal side towns, including Leigh and Stalybridge.

Our canals are some of Greater Manchester's most important blue green corridors. They are places to walk, wheel and cycle; they link habitats and help wildlife move and they give people everyday contact with nature.

Greater Manchester's canals provide real benefits for health and wellbeing and have a big contribution to make to our Live Well agenda. They are central to delivering Nature for All, our Local Nature Recovery Strategy, and to strengthening the Greater Manchester Nature Network.

They also have a growing role in helping us adapt to climate change - from reducing flood risk to improving water quality - alongside our work with the Environment Agency and United Utilities through the Integrated Water Management Plan. Initiatives like Cyan Lines show how we can connect parks, rivers, canals and streets into a joined-up network of routes and spaces that work for people and nature.

If we take the same spirit of innovation and solidarity that built Greater Manchester in the past, we can unlock the power of our canals again - protecting their heritage, improving access and safety, and making them work harder for our communities.

Done right, our waterways can help fix the foundations of a good life: better homes and neighbourhoods, safer and healthier routes, a cleaner environment, and opportunity that is closer to where people live.



Andy Burnham  
Mayor of Greater Manchester

# Greater Manchester's canals

The canals of Greater Manchester are deeply intertwined with the region's explosive growth during the Industrial Revolution, when Manchester emerged as the world's first industrial city, often dubbed "Cottonopolis" for its dominance in textile production. Greater Manchester's canals formed the vital backbone of its economy, supporting the factories, warehouses, and communities.

Today, these historic waterways stand as living reminders of that era, cared for by the charity Canal & River Trust. Our mission is to unlock their potential as catalysts for growth, wellbeing, and environmental resilience, supporting the communities and industry of tomorrow.

More than just stretches of water, our canals are living heritage and green corridors that cut through towns, cities and rural areas, offering peace and space to breathe. They provide places for boaters, walkers, cyclists, anglers, and communities to connect with nature. They are also havens for wildlife, from kingfishers to rare plants, proving the waterways are as vital today as ever, though in new ways.

Over 130km of Trust waterways run through Greater Manchester, reflecting the scale of the network and its deep connection to the region's history. Canals have incredible potential to unlock solutions for climate change, water resilience, green energy, heating and cooling, and transport. They link towns, attract tourism, support businesses, and provide much-needed green and blue space. They are places where people exercise, relax, volunteer, and connect. Every visit, donation, and hour of volunteering helps protect this shared heritage.

Caring for this network requires constant dedication. The Trust works tirelessly across Greater Manchester to repair historic locks, strengthen towpaths, improve water quality, and create safe routes for leisure, recreation and active travel. Each project ensures the canals remain accessible and enjoyable for millions of people living and working nearby.

This effort is strengthened through partnership. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), recognises the unique role canals play in shaping the economy, health, and identity of the region, as reflected in the Greater Manchester Strategy "Together we are Greater Manchester", which sets out a vision for a thriving city region where everyone can live a good life, emphasising economic growth alongside wellbeing, nature recovery, and inclusive places.

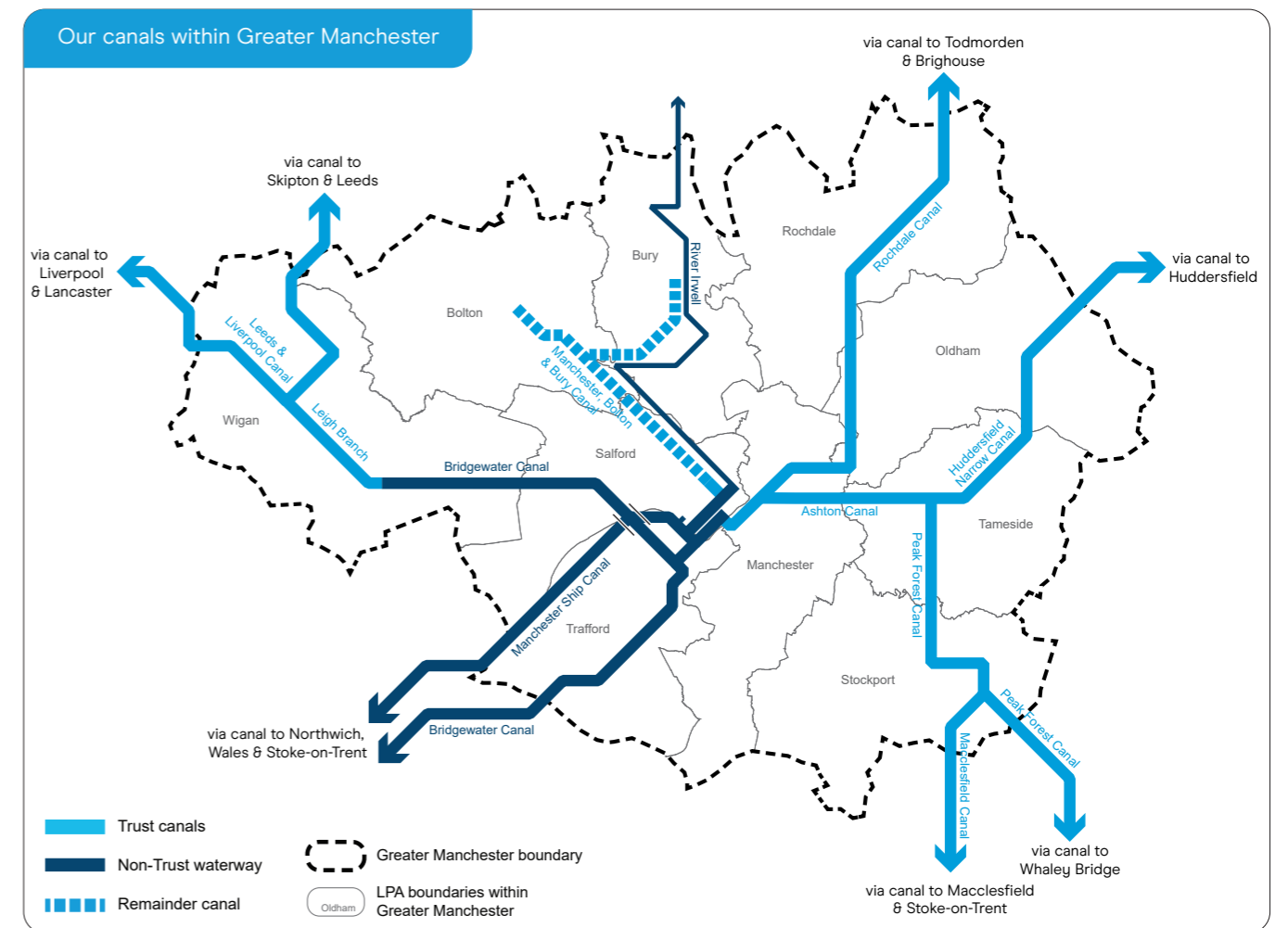
Aligned to the Greater Manchester's Local Nature Recovery Strategy, our waterways act as key habitats that support wildlife, improve mental health and wellbeing through accessible green and blue spaces. They form part of a connected Nature Network for resilience against climate change and help manage pressures like flooding and water quality.

Looking ahead, the challenge is not only conservation but unlocking full potential. As climate change and urbanisation bring pressures, canals offer natural flood defences, wildlife corridors, sustainable transport routes, and tranquil spaces that improve mental health. By working together, we can ensure they remain treasures to enjoy today and pass on tomorrow, contributing to the region's good growth and nature recovery goals.

**Over 725,000 people live within 1km of our canals, that's 1/4 of the total population of Greater Manchester**



This map includes waterways managed by members of the Association of Inland Navigation Authorities (AINA). There are other inland waterways that have not been included, the information on this map is for guidance only, for accurate information please visit our website. © Crown copyright and database rights, 2025. Ordnance Survey 100030994.



# The future role of canals

Canals are uniquely placed to help deliver our shared vision. They provide modern solutions, from sustainable travel routes and flood-resilient infrastructure, to regeneration, boating and tourism, leisure, and community pride.

Our waterways connect with major areas of regeneration, offering ready-made infrastructure that supports housing, active travel, placemaking, public health, and climate adaptation. With over 130km of Trust managed waterways across Greater Manchester, canals continue to shape the identity of towns and cities across the region.

Working with local authorities, developers, stakeholders and communities, we aim to maximise impact across the region, ensuring canals complement and help to deliver Greater Manchester's Good Growth Strategy which embraces inclusive economic growth, housing delivery and environmental resilience. Looking beyond preservation, we see canals as dynamic tools to meet modern challenges, aligning closely with this strategy's emphasis on good growth that benefits every person and every place.

By also working closely with other partners including the Environment Agency, United Utilities, Peel and other canal operators the Trust will ensure canals are not only protected and enhanced but actively contribute to regeneration, sustainability, and wellbeing, remaining thriving assets for today and future generations. Together we can make a difference to the communities, economy, and environment of Greater Manchester.

Canals play a critical part across four key themes:



## Place & Prosperity

Supporting sustainable growth, boating, development & living

Canals drive economic growth through regeneration, housing, and sustainable transport, making towns and cities vibrant places to live, work, and visit. Through apprenticeship programmes and volunteer initiatives, the Trust also offers an excellent environment for people of all ages to develop and refine their skills and improve their confidence and employability, offering pathways to greater mobility, opportunity, and support.



## Nature & Biodiversity

Vital habitats & corridors for nature to thrive

Waterways support biodiversity, protect habitats, and enrich green and blue spaces. Collaboration with a range of partners allows these benefits to reach across the region, creating a more equal and greener future for all our people.



## Health & Wellbeing

Connecting people with blue spaces, routes & nature

Accessible spaces for walking, wheeling, cycling, boating, leisure, and volunteering improve activity levels, mental health, and social connections. Working together with partners, our canals can help support wider public health and transport initiatives and provide places where everyone is able to live well.



## Resilience & Security

Critical & interconnected part of the nation's infrastructure

Canals help build resilience by managing flood risk, helping with urban cooling provide climate-resilient infrastructure, help and support sustainable transport. They can also host critical infrastructure such as cables, pipes for services such as water, electricity and internet fibre. Coordinating with Risk Management Authorities and other key partners ensures that waterways are part of long-term planning for resilience and sustainability.

# Aligned strategic visions

The Trust's vision for "living waterways that transform places and enrich lives" strongly aligns with the Greater Manchester vision for a "thriving city region where everyone can live a good life."

By working closely with our partners across Greater Manchester, we can deliver positive impacts and contribute to the work already underway to create the conditions needed for people across the city region to fulfil their potential and lead healthy, happy lives, and for business to succeed. Alignment between these visions is illustrated below:





# Place & Prosperity

Supporting sustainable economic growth, boating, development and living

## PLACE: Creating Great Waterway Places and Neighbourhoods

Greater Manchester's canal network fosters a strong sense of place, delivering significant commercial and amenity value that makes developments more viable, desirable, healthier, and sustainable. Thoughtful planning and design extends these benefits, creating vibrant waterside communities.

The Trust works to celebrate heritage while enabling diverse uses including boating, angling, heating and cooling solutions, amongst other benefits. We also support growth by offering skills development via volunteering, apprenticeships, and community projects. These initiatives build confidence, reduce inequalities, and open access to good jobs, aligning with Greater Manchester's focus on inclusive opportunities.

Partnerships with schools, colleges, and employers, including the Trust's 'Inspiring the Future' programme, connect young people to STEM role models and pathways into green and blue careers.

This ties directly into the Greater Manchester Strategy which places emphasis on prosperous places, green and blue infrastructure, and shared benefits. The GM Good Growth plan highlights the importance of backing regeneration, jobs, and homes, and the GM Integrated Water Management Plan work seeks to leverage waterways for flood resilience, quality improvements, and economic support.

Canals also feature in nature recovery, transport and active travel, and re-industrialisation plans, reinforcing foundations of shelter, safety, mobility, opportunity, and support while harnessing waterways as living infrastructure for a thriving, equitable city region.

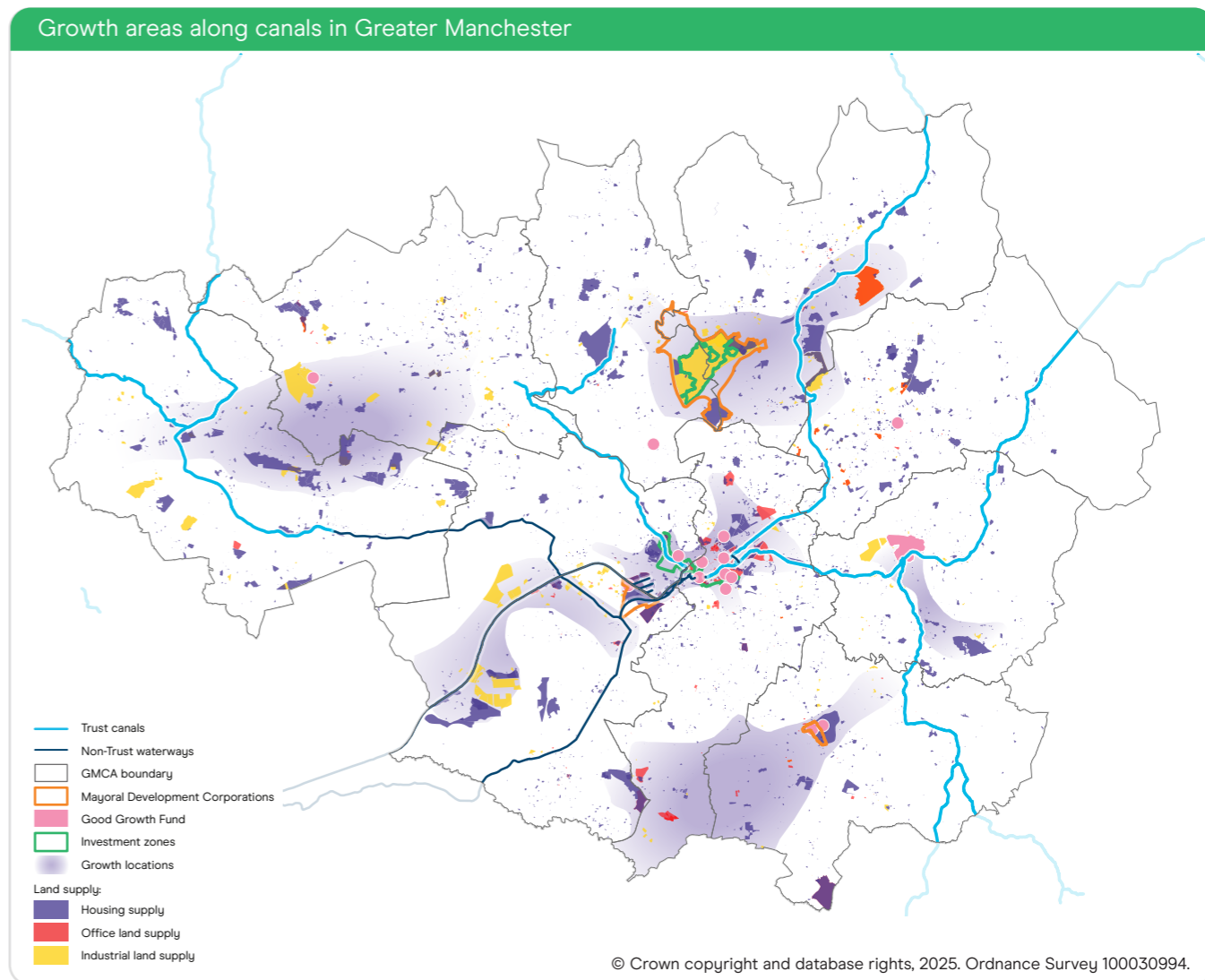
The Trust is a statutory consultee for planning applications, a prescribed consultee for nationally significant infrastructure projects and a consultation body on local plans, with a duty to assist in the plan making process when requested.

With only 4% of land adjacent to our canals in our ownership, we endeavour to safeguard our historic waterways and vulnerable earth structures and the communities through which they run.

As partners in place, early engagement in the design and planning stages ensures that new development is appropriately designed and developed to maximise the opportunities presented by our canals and to deliver wider environmental, economic and social benefits.

We have produced specific canal related guidance - Design Coding for Canals - to assist those involved in the production of design codes and master planning and see our network of canals and water spaces as having an integral role to play, with the potential to contribute to the areas future housing and growth plans.

**over  
100,000  
new homes  
are proposed  
within 1km  
of our canals  
in Greater  
Manchester  
between  
2024 to 2040**



### CASE STUDY: New Islington Regeneration

Situated in Ancoats, adjacent to Manchester's famous Northern Quarter, the New Islington regeneration has been named amongst the Sunday Times 'Best Places to Live'.

Linked to both the Rochdale and Ashton Canals in the city centre, New Islington embraces its waterfront location and historic roots. Featuring its own marina, the site offers high quality moorings for those who wish to live in or visit the city centre by boat, as well as homes and plenty of shops and eateries.

As the regeneration of the nearby Northern Quarter has grown, so has its need for active travel routes and the canal towpaths provide an essential link into the city centre and outward towards key locations such as Sport City to the east. In 2025, New Islington Tram station was linked to the Ashton Canal towpath following the installation of a new footbridge over the canal, providing better access for work, education, and leisure.



## CASE STUDY: The rise of Ancoats and East Manchester

Ancoats & New Islington, a neighbourhood with significant industrial heritage on the edge of Manchester city centre, was identified by the city as a priority area for intervention, as previous regeneration efforts had stalled following the financial crisis. Manchester Life was set up in partnership with the Council to bring private investment and operate as a developer, placemaker, and landlord to restart regeneration and repopulate the community.

Manchester Life has focused on regenerating areas along the Rochdale and Ashton Canals. Developments include the restoration of historic mills, working with partners to create a thriving neighbourhood, and the delivery of high-quality homes to support the city's housing priorities, as well as spaces for local businesses. Recently completed Jersey Wharf and Eliza Yard mark around 2,000 new homes for Manchester since 2014. These schemes help revitalise underused sites, promote pedestrian-friendly links to green spaces, and complement the area's industrial heritage with modern living, connecting Ancoats to the Rochdale Canal.

Manchester City Council is also advancing its ambitious Holt Town project; a large-scale regeneration on land immediately adjacent to the Ashton Canal, positioned between the city centre and the Etihad Campus. Holt Town aims to create a pioneering low-carbon "woodland town in the city", a new eco-friendly neighbourhood with up to 4,500 homes, alongside green

public spaces, sustainable infrastructure, community facilities, and pedestrian-friendly streets. The Neighbourhood Development Framework (NDF) was approved in early 2025 following public consultation, with plans emphasising environmental sustainability, inclusivity, and strong ties to the Ashton Canal for enhanced connectivity and leisure.

In East Manchester, the Etihad Campus benefits from the Ashton Canal running through the heart of the site. Including the Etihad Stadium and the Co-op Live Arena (opened in 2024 as the UK's largest entertainment venue), these landmarks have boosted the area's profile, drawing visitors, events, and economic activity while integrating with the canal-side setting to improve accessibility and aesthetics.

The canals, particularly the Rochdale and Ashton, play a vital role in supporting further development. They provide natural corridors for walking and cycling, improve visual appeal and biodiversity, enable better transport links (e.g., new bridges and pathways), and enhance the overall liveability of these regenerating neighbourhoods. By integrating with the waterways, projects like those in Ancoats, the Campus, and Holt Town create cohesive, attractive urban environments that connect the city centre to east Manchester, fostering long-term community growth and economic vitality.

“The conservation and restoration of canals are once again helping to transform local communities, whilst providing a physical link to the region's industrial past.”

Dr Mike Nevell,  
Industrial Heritage  
Support Officer for  
England

“At Manchester Life, we recognise that the Rochdale and Ashton Canals are fundamental to the story of Ancoats. They shaped its emergence as one of the world's first industrial neighbourhoods and, through the preservation and management work of the Canal & River Trust and partners, continue to define its distinctive character today. We see the waterways as long-term community assets that support sustainable neighbourhoods and enhance quality of life.”

Rachel Downey, Managing Director at Manchester Life

## CASE STUDY: Middlewood Locks, Salford - Restoration and community development

The award-winning Middlewood Locks restoration project is a major £1 billion, 25-acre mixed-use scheme located in Salford, bordering the River Irwell and Manchester city centre. Led by Scarborough Group International the project has transformed a former brownfield site into a new neighbourhood, centred around the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal.

Part of the scheme involved reinstating a 500m-long section of the canal, which had previously been filled in, and included the restoration of locks and creation of new canal basins.

The Trust works in partnership with Scarborough Group International, Get Living, Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal Society, and Walk the Plank, to deliver an ongoing programme of wider community engagement, including the Middlewood Locks Fest. The festival began in 2024 as a neighbourhood event with boats, music, art workshops, water activities, and street food.

Other engagement activity includes working with local primary schools and the creation of 'Sound Walks', an immersive downloadable walking trail. Sound Walks were created by a group of artists and traces the 'hidden' route of the canal through Salford, connecting visitors with the industrial heritage of the partly restored canal, celebrating its future.



“Funding the restoration and maintenance of remainder canals in Greater Manchester, for example the Manchester, Bolton & Bury Canal remains an ongoing challenge for all stakeholders. It is only with constructive engagement of all parties in Greater Manchester that funding will be secured to deliver the multiple benefits of these valuable assets for both local communities and visitors.”

Chris Nash,  
Manchester, Bolton & Bury Canal Society

## CASE STUDY: Marple Wharf Heritage Centre

Situated on the Peak Forest Canal in Stockport, Marple's first heritage centre, The Wharf, will open later in 2026. This project involves the refurbishment and conversion of a Grade II-listed warehouse building into a community-run heritage centre, showcasing the story of how the Industrial Revolution transformed Marple from a quiet village into a thriving international industrial hub.

The Trust is proud to be working in partnership with The Wharf to deliver an inspiring and engaging outdoor learning programme in Marple.

Schools will benefit from a fully accessible indoor base at The Wharf, combined with hands-on learning experiences along the Peak Forest Canal and Marple Locks, inspiring young people to connect with their local waterways in meaningful and memorable ways.

“We are delighted to be working with the Trust on a new and exciting education programme. Our unique blend of traditional on-site exhibits and AI interactive digital innovations will make learning about the Industrial Revolution a fun experience.”

Susan Ingham, Director,  
The Wharf Marple CIC

### CASE STUDY: Manchester Pride

Canal Street, located along the Rochdale Canal, is best known as the famous “Gay Village” and is considered as home to one of the world’s most established LGBTIQ+ communities.

The city is also home to the world-leading Manchester Pride Festival, bringing together up to 250,000 people to the streets of Manchester to celebrate equality and diversity. Trust teams join with the communities of Manchester and beyond to support and celebrate this annual festival.

A highlight of the Trust events calendar, our colleagues and volunteers work closely with partner organisations to ready our city for Pride week and proudly participate in the famous Manchester Pride March.



### CASE STUDY: Wigan Pier development

Wigan Pier, famously referenced in George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, holds a significant place in Greater Manchester’s industrial heritage as part of the region’s “Cottonopolis” era. Historic mills in the town were once connected via the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, which facilitated the cotton industry’s growth. Today, the canal remains a vital asset, supporting the local economy through boating, fishing, walking, cycling, and active travel links. The canal also plays a key part in the new phase of regeneration.

The Wigan Pier redevelopment includes the Cotton Works at the Grade II-listed Eckersley Mill complex, which preserves industrial and cultural legacy while creating a modern mixed-use destination. Led by developers like the Heaton Group, the project delivers office space, and food and beverage outlets, including a food hall and pub.

The Cotton Works project has been awarded approximately £25m from the GM Good Growth Fund. This will support the redevelopment and will include nearly 800+ homes and commercial space, expected to create around 670 jobs, as part of a pipeline targeting vibrant neighbourhoods and economic growth across the city-region. The scheme complements Wigan’s Strategic Regeneration Frameworks, cultural strategies like *The Fire Within The Forge*, and regional priorities for connected infrastructure, active travel, and mixed-use places that boost local economies while honouring historical roots.



### PROSPERITY: Employability and skills

#### CASE STUDY: Community Payback

The Trust has a formal Community Payback agreement with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to provide supervised opportunities for low-risk offenders to contribute to maintaining and improving the canal network across Greater Manchester.

Around 1,000 people on probation have helped improve towpaths, paint locks, pick litter, and remove graffiti to give back to society, whilst also maintaining canals in the heart of their local communities.

By combining meaningful work with supervision and support, the programme creates positive outcomes for individuals while enhancing the safety, accessibility, and aesthetic appeal of the canal network.

For participants, it offers rehabilitation, practical skill development, and increased employability, giving individuals a structured pathway to reintegration into society. And for the community, and our charity, it delivers essential labour that supports the upkeep and preservation of our canals.



From April 2025 to March 2026 this partnership has delivered **over 10,000 hours** of work improving Greater Manchester’s canals

#### CASE STUDY: ALPINE After School Club Project - strengthening outdoor learning through partnership

Partnering with the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (CLOtC), the ALPINE project supports After School Clubs across Greater Manchester to transform their provision through nature-rich, outdoor experiences.

Nine schools have participated in a Sport England-funded pilot, designed to make after-school provision more active, playful, and rooted in nature. As delivery partner, CLOtC has been working with the Trust to support the clubs in using outdoor spaces more confidently.

The canals of Greater Manchester are uniquely suited as outdoor classrooms, rich in biodiversity, engineering heritage, and everyday stories that bring learning alive. Through ALPINE, we are helping children and staff use our waterways safely and creatively, nurturing pride in local spaces and encouraging families to rediscover what’s on their doorstep.





# Nature & Biodiversity

Vital habitats & corridors for nature to thrive

The UK is one of the most nature depleted countries globally, facing severe biodiversity loss, habitat fragmentation, low nature connectedness, and wellbeing inequalities.

In Greater Manchester, canals offer a unique opportunity to address these interconnected challenges. As linear urban connectors, they provide free, accessible green corridors that support nature recovery while enhancing community wellbeing and equitable access to nature.

In our Vital Connector Report, we explain how our 2,000-mile network of canals acts as a continuous blue-green corridor, connecting fragmented habitats across the country. Through careful maintenance, our historic waterways are essential infrastructure for the future, helping to tackle environmental challenges, strengthen communities, and create a more sustainable and connected society.

This aligns directly with GMCA priorities in the Five-Year Environment Plan (2025–2030), the statutory Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), and related natural environment strategies, which emphasise:

- Halting and reversing biodiversity decline
- Building a resilient Nature Network through habitat connectivity and enhancement
- Prioritising rivers, canals, and waterbodies for cleaner, more natural, biodiverse, and accessible spaces
- Improving green infrastructure, reducing ecological pressures, and delivering nature-based solutions for people and wildlife

Greater Manchester’s canal network, positioned in areas of high nature deficit, has been undervalued for its ecological role. These corridors host diverse, interconnected habitats such as towpaths, banks, and water edges. They fill urban green voids, countering fragmentation from urbanisation and climate pressures, and linking fragmented landscapes.

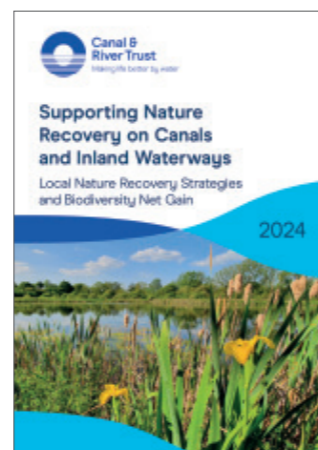
In line with objectives set out in Greater Manchester’s LNRS, targeted investment and partnerships can help the region’s canals to:

- Become the region’s longest linear nature network
- Connect towns and cities as vital wildlife and people corridors
- Create and enhance habitats for threatened and protected species
- Function as an inclusive, inspiring ‘linear park’ for local communities
- Support environmental education, stewardship, and greater nature connectedness

By restoring and enhancing these waterways we can enrich urban settings and deliver benefits for biodiversity, health, and equity, directly supporting Greater Manchester’s vision for a greener, more resilient, and nature-rich city-region.

## Our canals support many different habitat types:

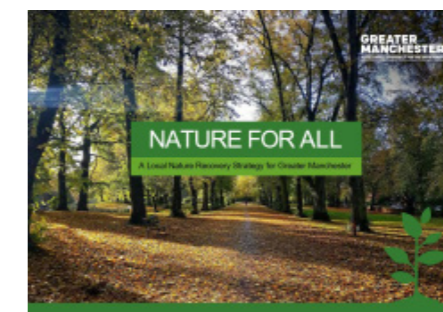
- Open water
- Heathland
- Woodland
- Orchards
- Grassland
- Hedgerows
- Aquatic fringe (canal banks)



## Greater Manchester LNRS: ‘Nature for All’

Greater Manchester’s LNRS includes headline targets for three key aims, to drive forward nature recovery over the decade, to ‘Enhance and Protect’, ‘Create and Connect’ and ‘Build Resilience’.

Specific priorities have been highlighted for rivers, canals and waterbodies, recognising the wider benefits these offer. The Trust will collaborate with partners to deliver Greater Manchester’s LNRS, restoring biodiversity and enhancing canals as green and blue wildlife corridors in urban areas, contributing to a nature-rich city region.



### Rivers, canals and waterbodies:

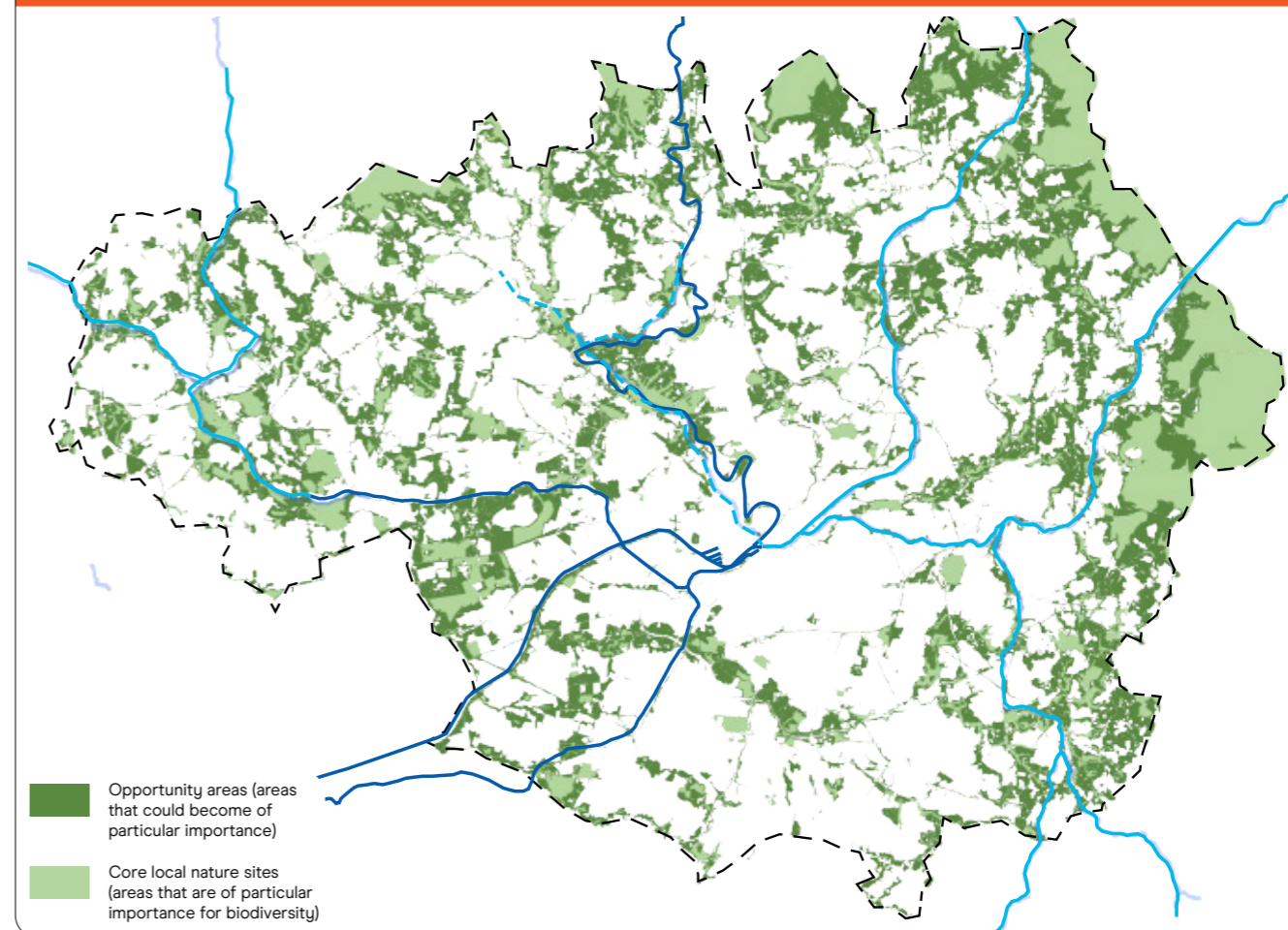
#### Priorities:

- More accessible/visible waterways.
- Cleaner, more resilient waterways.
- More natural/biodiverse waterways.
- Increased habitat connectivity along corridors.
- More space for water/natural flood management.
- Restored/well-managed canals.

**Wider benefits:** Rainwater management, flood risk reduction, recreation, health, temperature regulation, water supply.

**Species supported:** Daubenton’s bat, otter, common frog, great crested grebe, kingfisher, Atlantic salmon.

## Greater Manchester Nature Network



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### CASE STUDY: Species Survival Fund - Medlock Valley Restoration Project

The Trust has worked in partnership with Groundwork Greater Manchester, The Conservation Volunteers, City of Trees, Mersey Rivers Trust, and Manchester, Oldham and Tameside councils to deliver the Medlock Valley Restoration Project. Funded by the UK Government's Species Survival Fund, the project aimed to halt the decline of important species such as bats, water voles, willow tits, great crested newts, and waxcap fungi by improving vital habitats of the River Medlock Valley, including the Ashton and Rochdale canals.

Working alongside local communities and volunteers in Manchester, Oldham and Tameside, this project has provided the opportunity for people to get involved in practical conservation work and learn about these important waterway habitats across Greater Manchester.



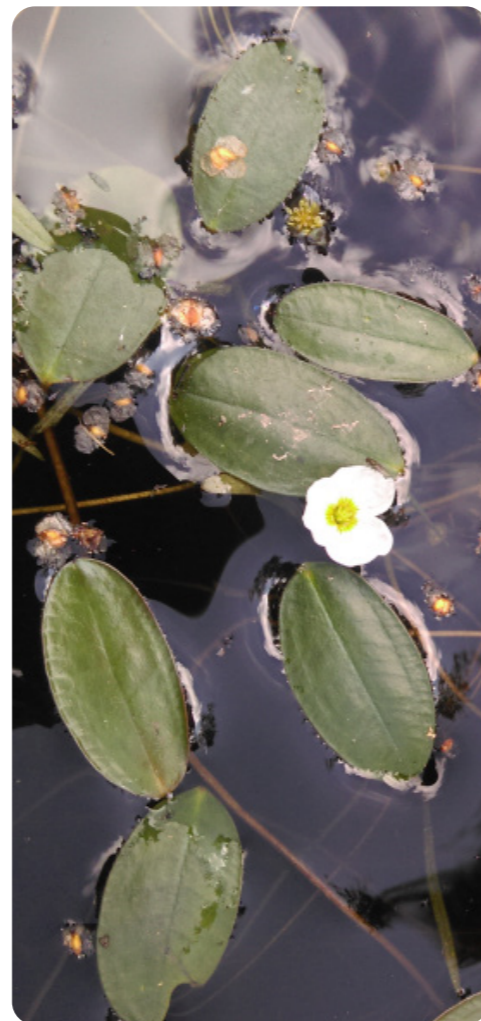
### CASE STUDY: Ecologically important sites

In Greater Manchester around 184 hectares of our canals are designated as locally important for wildlife, as well as this two canals are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This formal conservation designation is given to land or water areas of national importance for their rare flora, fauna, or geological features.

For approximately 19km from Failsworth to Littleborough, the Rochdale Canal is designated as a SSSI due to the presence of Floating water-plantain (*Luronium natans*) and other aquatic plants. This stretch of canal is also designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), meaning it is amongst the most important sites for nature in the UK and Europe. Floating water-plantain is of key interest since it is rare nationally and across Europe but can thrive in canals under the right conditions. To ensure the survival of this special species, the Trust monitors boat numbers throughout the year, checks water quality, undertakes annual surveys of the aquatic plant communities, addresses invasive species, and take steps to ensure that work activities do not adversely impact the SSSI/SAC. This can include translocating plants, if deemed to be at risk.

On the Huddersfield Narrow Canal, the SSSI designated section extends for approximately 10 km from its junction with the Peak Forest Canal, through Stalybridge, until just north of Mossley. The SSSI was designated in 1988 due to the rich variety of aquatic plants, including Floating water-plantain, with aquatic fauna such as freshwater sponge also recorded. Freshwater sponges can be important for water quality, as they are each able to filter litres of water per day.

The Trust manages and maintains these important sites - whilst facing external challenges such as pollution, invasive species and impacts from climate change - to ensure that these valuable habitats are protected and that people can access and enjoy them.



### CASE STUDY: Urban Nature Connections

In April 2026, part-funded by Postcode Lottery, the Trust launched an exciting new Urban Nature Connections programme, working with communities along the Huddersfield Narrow Canal and Ashton Canal and in Tameside and East Manchester.

Urban Nature Connections will create meaningful opportunities for people to discover and explore green and blue spaces on their doorstep through wellbeing activities such as walking, cycling, and canoeing. We will also work with partners to establish community adoptions so groups can be empowered to care for and improve their local canal, creating outdoor spaces for everyone to enjoy. Using a collaborative approach, we will co-create with communities who experience inequalities to grow an inclusive programme.

The programme has been awarded funding for four years and will be led by a dedicated community engagement coordinator.

Urban Nature Connections also supports growing skills and learning programmes and creating new volunteering opportunities.



### CASE STUDY: Green Spaces Fund

The Greater Manchester Green Spaces Fund provides grants to community groups across Greater Manchester who want to increase the amount of accessible, nature-rich green space where people need it most.

Launched by Andy Burnham in 2022, the fund has invested over £4 million and enabled 122 community groups to develop projects across the city region, including canals, orchards, green alleyways, allotments and community gardens.

So far, over 28,000m<sup>2</sup> of new green space has been created and nearly 400,000m<sup>2</sup> of existing green space has been improved.



### CASE STUDY: Green Flag

As part of our work to protect and enhance our green and blue spaces, we have been working with Keep Britain Tidy to secure Green Flag status across our region's waterways. The Green Flag scheme recognises spaces that boast the highest possible environmental standards, are beautifully maintained, and play an important role in the local community.

In Greater Manchester, the Trust has been awarded prestigious Green Flag status for:

- The Ashton Canal
- The Leeds & Liverpool Canal in Wigan
- The Peak Forest Canal incl. Combs Reservoir
- The Huddersfield Narrow Canal at Saddleworth

The Rochdale Canal, in central Manchester, will be entered for an award in the next submission period 2026/27.

The Green Flag awards are an international benchmark for well-managed green spaces, demonstrating the significant role the 250-year-old canal network plays for local communities, bringing nature into the heart of Greater Manchester's urban and rural waterways.



### CASE STUDY: CyanLines

Launched in 2025, CyanLines is a partnership project between the public and private sector with a vision to connect Greater Manchester's green and blue spaces.

Over the next ten years, CyanLines aims to bring together over 100 miles of existing and proposed linear parks, offering high quality green spaces for walking, wheeling and cycling.

A symbol of the region's rich industrial past, our canal network provides the ideal historic green and blue corridors, linking the cities and boroughs that make up Manchester City Region and supporting residents, workers, and visitors to our region to Live Well.

The Trust will work with CyanLines to identify opportunities to ensure that our canals are an integral part of the CyanLines network.

“ Manchester is on a mission to make our city greener. CyanLines is an exciting new initiative over the next decade to connect and create over 100 miles of connected parks, green spaces and waterfronts.”

Councillor Bev Craig, Leader, Manchester City Council

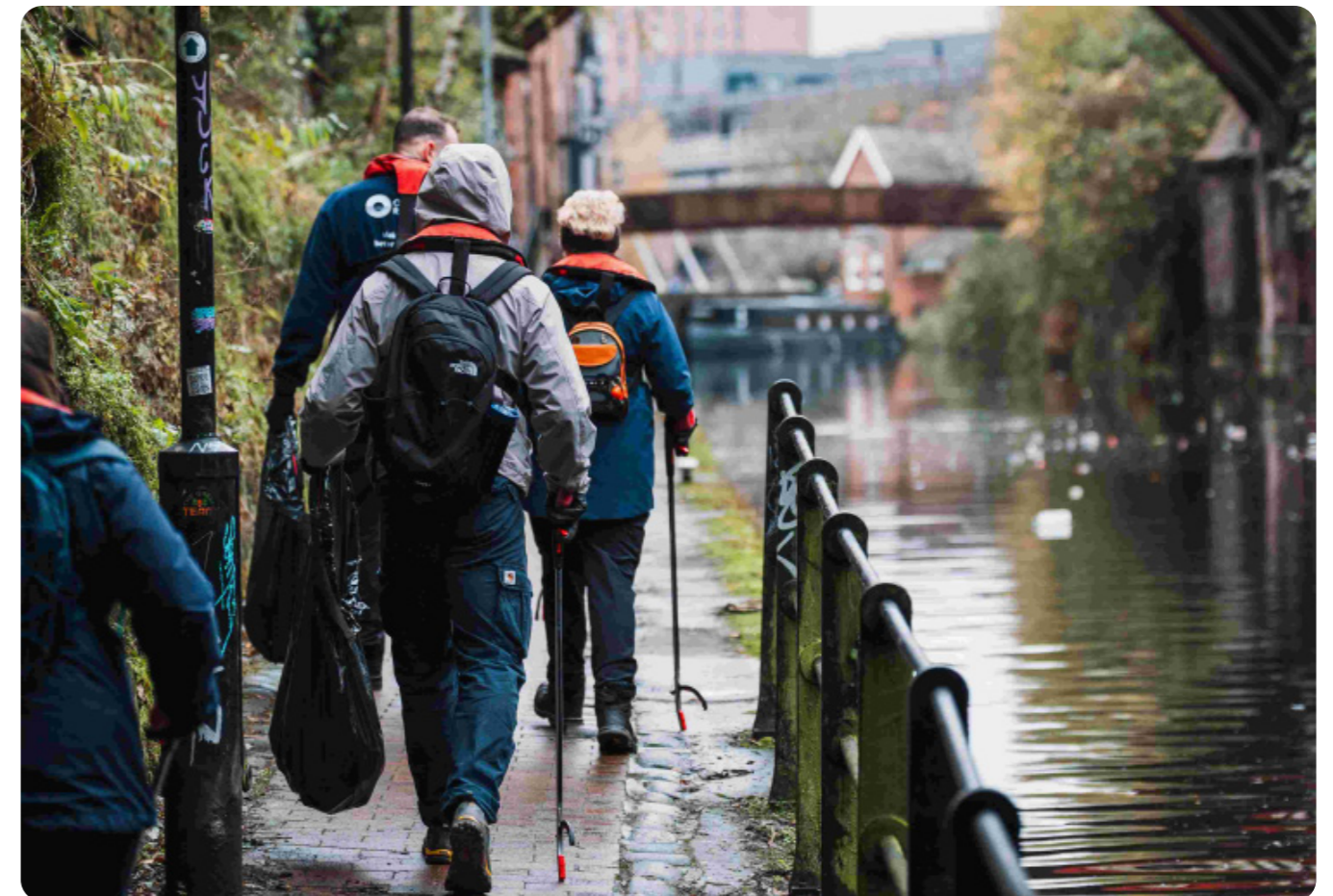
“ By reclaiming our urban spaces, connecting them up and creating green vibrant life, where people and nature can thrive, we will deliver a truly incredible legacy for Greater Manchester and the millions living across its ten connected boroughs.”

Pete Swift, CEO, Planit

“ Having access to green spaces has never been more important, with their known benefits to physical and mental health, and when green spaces are combined with blue spaces, we know those benefits are enhanced further. They also provide an excellent opportunity to engage communities in volunteering and create pride in where people live.

Our canal network provides an excellent opportunity for communities to access nature and provides habitats and corridors to increase biodiversity, while improving resilience to climate change. All these benefits are recognised by the Green Flag Award Accreditation which now extends to over 720 miles of the canal network across England and Wales.”

Paul Todd MBE – Accreditation Manager, Green Flag, Keep Britain Tidy





# Resilience & Security

Critical & interconnected part of the nation's infrastructure

Canals play a critical and interconnected part of the nation's infrastructure. They can help to support climate resilience by storing and moving water to help mitigate urban flooding and manage drought risks.

In urban heat islands, like central Manchester, canal corridors provide vital ambient cooling effects through evapotranspiration and shading. This can be important for public health and comfort, especially as climate change threatens to make summers in many urban areas intolerably warm.

Canals also support decarbonisation, contributing to global efforts to address climate change and transition to a more sustainable, environmentally friendly future. They can provide low-carbon energy systems for building heating and cooling, and low-carbon transport modes, walking, wheeling and cycling, which supports broader net zero goals.

Our canals and reservoirs can play a part in alleviating flood risk by intercepting drainage, holding up flows and directing water away from properties at risk. Our network safeguards a wide range of businesses such as telecommunications, utilities, and other national infrastructure, transport links, and schools. However, our ageing canal network is under immense strain from the impacts of severe and increasingly frequent weather events.

A major challenge is the rising frequency and duration of extreme weather events, both floods and

droughts, which affect the resilience of our structures and habitats, as well as our customers and waterway-dependent businesses.

Our network endured 12 storms during 2023/24 alone, heightening risks of subsidence and collapse to historic canals, reservoirs, and bridges. In summer 2025, prolonged drought and dry conditions led to canal closures and stoppages.

Working with partners across Greater Manchester, we will work together to build climate-resilient communities through integrated water management, green and blue infrastructure for wellbeing and collaborative action to mitigate risks from flooding, droughts, and climate change, while ensuring growth benefits people, places, and the environment.

This work will also drive inclusive, sustainable regeneration and high-quality places across all boroughs. By investing in resilient infrastructure like canals, the plan promotes a safer, healthier, climate-resilient city region where economic progress is paired with environmental protection, nature-rich spaces, and equitable benefits for communities.



The impacts of summer droughts in 2025



The national canal network is made up of thousands of connected and interdependent structures, from aqueducts and reservoirs to locks and culverts, all monitored and maintained to keep canals open, vibrant, and protective of the communities they serve.

This infrastructure also carries vital services and communications beneath towpaths, while canal bridges often support critical electricity, gas, and water lines, underscoring the structures' importance to local communities and the wider region.

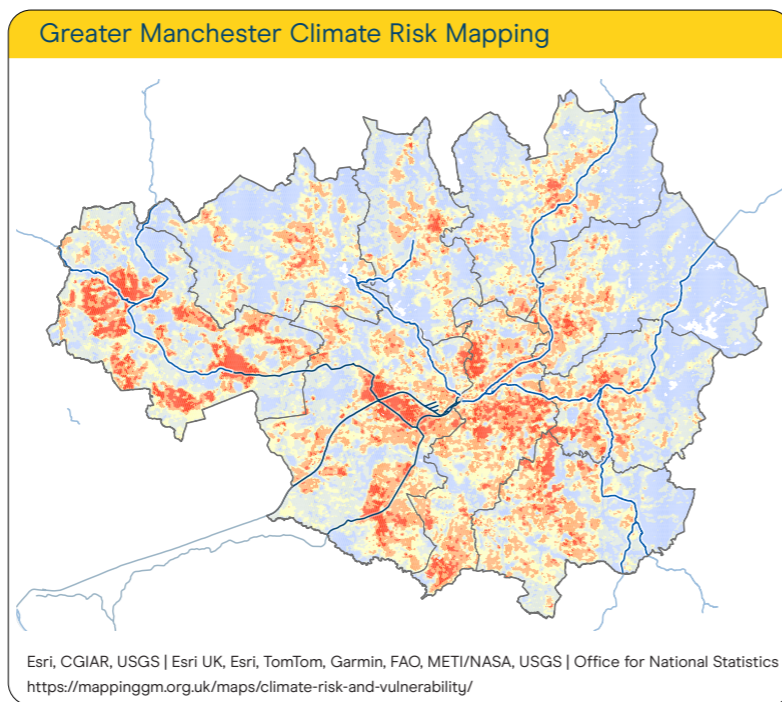


**CASE STUDY:** Urban cooling research project with the University of Manchester

The Urban Heat Island effect increases temperatures in city centres and this is set to worsen as temperatures rise. By 2050, extreme heatwaves are expected to happen every other year in the UK causing difficult living conditions across the country but particularly in urban areas.

Water has a natural cooling effect, making urban areas next to waterways pleasant and cooler spaces to live and work. Trees along our canals also provide much needed shade for people and wildlife.

The Trust worked with University of Manchester to look at the cooling effects of waterways in an urban environment. This research demonstrates that the urban network of canals and docks can absorb heat and reduce the temperature of the surrounding area by an average of 1°C. With temperatures predicted to rise by 1.5°C over the next 25 years, our canals are helping to make city living bearable for millions of people.



This plan from Greater Manchester's Climate Risk mapping dataset contains a calculation of the average summertime land surface temperature across a 5-year period (2020 – 2024) and highlights areas that consistently experience higher temperatures during summer months, helping to identify urban heat islands and communities that may be more vulnerable to extreme heat. This illustrates how canals can play an important role in making urban areas more pleasant and cooler spaces to live and work.



**CASE STUDY: Greater Manchester's Integrated Water Management Plan (IWMP)**

Greater Manchester is connected by water. The rivers and canals played a vital role in the industrialisation of the city region. The rivers Irwell, Medlock and Irk, along with the Rochdale and Ashton canals, were at the heart of Manchester's rise to become the world's first industrialised city.

Today Greater Manchester faces a series of significant and interconnected water management challenges. Climate change and an expanding population mean that the impacts of floods and water shortages are becoming more serious and frequent. Meanwhile, water quality across the city region is generally classified as moderate.

To tackle these challenges GMCA, the Environment Agency and the Northwest's water company, United Utilities, formed a strategic partnership in 2021 to influence and deliver sustainable growth and development in Greater Manchester by improving flood resilience, enhancing the environment, driving circular economy approaches and supporting regeneration. Following a Mayoral round table in 2022 the three partners agreed to produce a joint Integrated Water Management Plan (IWMP) to outline a collective vision and collaborative approach to managing water across Greater Manchester.

Since then, the partnership has developed place-based water management plans aimed at tackling complex flooding issues in Wigan and produced an integrated drainage strategy for Stockport's town centre regeneration zone. The partners have also built a detailed understanding of, and mapped, the combined flood risk hotspots across Greater Manchester.

The canals of the city region offer an opportunity to drain surface water and reduce localised flood risk across Greater Manchester; whilst they can also play a part in moving water from areas of plenty to areas of shortage during drought conditions.

“ The Trilateral partners are currently working with Trust colleagues in the North West to explore how Greater Manchester's canals can play a more active role in the complex and integrated water management challenges faced by Greater Manchester. ”

Mark Atherton,  
GMCA Director of Environment





# Health & Wellbeing

Connecting people with blue spaces, routes & nature

Greater Manchester's canals and towpaths serve as vital blue and green corridors for both nature and people, delivering accessible public health assets in areas where green space is limited and private gardens may be rare.

These spaces provide essential lifelines for movement, mental wellbeing, relaxation, and meaningful connection to nature, particularly in deprived communities disproportionately affected by limited access to safe walking routes and outdoor opportunities.

Canals and towpaths support everyday active recreation, including walking, wheeling, cycling, angling, contemplation, and on-water activities like boating, paddleboarding, and canoeing. They connect urban communities to the countryside and the wider National Trails network.

Towpaths form key traffic-free routes for active travel, promoting physical activity integrated into daily routines, helping address obesity, reduce public service pressures, and deliver preventative health benefits.

Canals also provide valuable blue spaces that support mental wellbeing; spending time beside canals is known to reduce stress and improve mood. Their calm waters and natural surroundings promote relaxation, social connection, and mindfulness, while also supporting biodiversity and creating peaceful environments within busy urban communities.

Supporting these important blue green spaces aligns with GMCA priorities in the Five-Year Environment Plan (2025–2030), which promotes active travel, green infrastructure, and health improvements; the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), emphasising accessible, biodiverse waterways for recreation and wellbeing; and the

Greater Manchester Strategy, which supports modal shift to walking/cycling for healthier lifestyles, reduced congestion, and lower emissions.

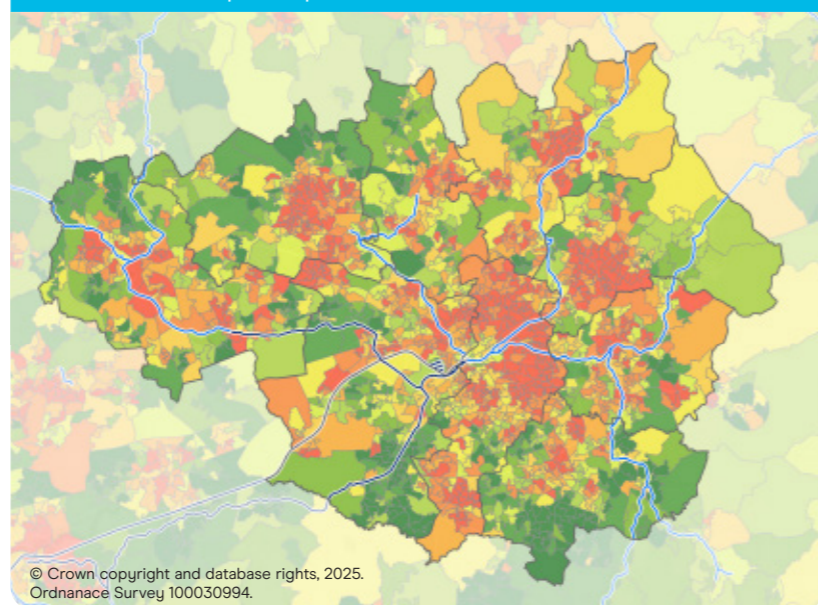
Past investments, including the Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) Bee Network schemes, have upgraded towpaths through resurfacing, widening, and creating accessible access points.

With continued targeted investment and partnerships, we can further develop these corridors as frontline preventative health infrastructure, encouraging modal shift from cars, boosting physical and mental health, and contributing to a greener and healthier city-region.

**54.4%**  
of households  
within 1km  
of our canals  
in Greater  
Manchester  
experience  
inequalities

(average across all 10 GM local authorities, compared to UK average of 51.7%)

Indicies of Multiple Deprivation in Greater Manchester



## CASE STUDY: Active Travel – Wigan Bee Network towpath improvements

The Leeds & Liverpool Canal runs through the borough of Wigan, starting in Appley Bridge to the west, then running along the edge of the city centre, before heading up past Haigh, and reaching Red Rock to the east.

In partnership with TfGM and Wigan Council, the Mayor's Cycling & Walking Challenge Fund supported 5.5km of towpath improvement works from Appley Bridge to Martland Mill.

The towpath was widened, resurfaced and access points improved, to create a fully accessible off-road route for walkers and cyclists, linking key residential areas to employment and leisure zones.



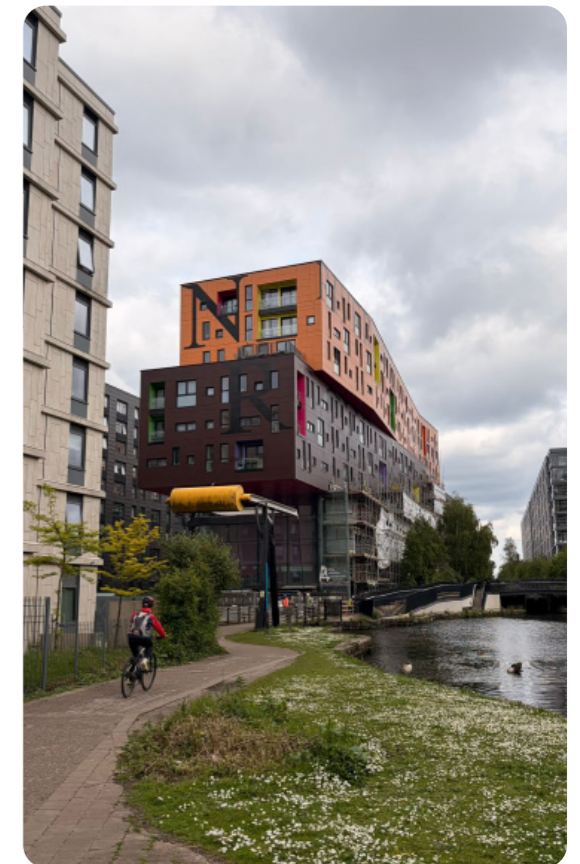
## CASE STUDY: Cycling on canals in East Manchester

Since 2022 the Trust has worked in partnership with Manchester Libraries and Jigsaw Homes to create a community bike library, based at Miles Platting Library. The aim is to get more people active through wheeling and cycling on the Rochdale and Ashton Canals in East Manchester. We have also collaborated with experts from BikeRight, British Cycling, and Your Trust Rochdale, with funding and support from TfGM.

The project has delivered a range of activities to promote wheeling and cycling in an area where over 45% of households do not have access to a car or van. The Trust has worked to promote our towpaths as cheaper, healthier, and sustainable routes for everyday movement.

Working with BikeRight and YourTrust we have hosted 'Dr Bike' cycle maintenance sessions, providing free check-ups to ensure people have a safe and roadworthy bike to use. British Cycling have supported cycle skills sessions for local young people, including a guided bike ride along the canal. Throughout these activities we also promote the Towpath Code and the Trust's shared space campaigns to encourage responsible cycling on the towpath.

We have also created maps to encourage people to use the canal to explore the local area linking destinations such as the city centre, Etihad Campus, and the National Cycling Centre.





### CASE STUDY: Getting active by water, our work with Sport England

Our work with Sport England aims to remove barriers to physical activity. By providing access to green and blue spaces for communities who face the greatest inequalities, we can improve mental and physical wellbeing through increased physical activity on our canals. The initiative centres on co-creating opportunities with local partners to increase engagement with the waterways for improved and sustainable health & wellbeing.

With funding support from Sport England, we have delivered amazing projects, working alongside local organisations to keep communities active and connected. Projects include improving women’s wellbeing through water-based activities in Oldham and Rochdale, walking and cycling activities with isolated residents from the Chinese community in Manchester, and water safety with paddle activities for young people in Wigan.

In Rochdale the community has contributed to the design for new storage facilities and an accessible pontoon, providing safe access to the canal to engage in water sports and promote physical activity, especially in young people. Delivered in partnership with the Youth Service and Outdoor Education teams, among others, this facility will allow sustainable access to water-based activity. Local mosques, scouts and community organisations have been taking advantage of the scheme by getting out on the canal.

#### Currents of Connection: Canal & River Trust and Love Her Wild collaboration

Between October and December 2025, Sport England funded a ten-week women-only programme that brought participants together to walk, paddle and explore Manchester’s canals and surrounding green and blue spaces, supporting both physical activity and mental wellbeing during the darkest months.

For many women, winter evenings bring more than cold weather. Darkness, short days, and concerns about safety lead to reduced activity and isolation. Nationally, 72% of women change their outdoor routines when the clocks go back. This project directly reflected Sport England’s ‘This Girl Can: Let’s Lift the Curfew’ initiative, showing how women can safely stay active outdoors when it matters most. Over the course of the programme, participants gained skills and confidence, with all achieving their Paddle Start certificate from Paddle UK.

The emotional impact of the programme was powerful with one participant reflecting:

“ I loved having a reason to go out in the evening as the nights got progressively darker. It felt very empowering to have a group of women exploring urban areas... I don’t feel like my days have been shortened at this time of year anymore. ”

### Empowering Girls Through Youth Work and Water Activities

Tanzila is a South Asian Muslim youth worker at a mosque in Rochdale, leading both girls’ and boys’ youth clubs. She is passionate about creating safe, supportive spaces where young people can connect, be active, and feel confident. Every Friday evening, Tanzila runs sessions for girls that include sports, baking, and guest-led activities, while boys’ sessions focus on football. These clubs are more than just activities. They provide a safe space for young people from different schools to meet, build confidence, and express themselves. Over time, Tanzila has built trust with both participants and parents, helping girls access activities they might not have experienced otherwise.

Tanzila’s personal journey mirrors the challenges faced by the girls she works with. Initially, she feared water and had never participated in swimming. She joined swim confidence sessions and progressed to swimming lessons, motivated by a desire to get in the water with her children.

Through these experiences, and by training as a paddle sport instructor with Sport England-funded sessions via the Trust, Tanzila has gained confidence and skills to model empowerment for the young women she supports.

“ Before, I wouldn’t even get in the pool. Now I’ve swum with my kids and even got in the sea with my family on holiday - it was amazing. ”

Tanzila



#### Neeli Mosque: Paddling, walking and scavenger hunts along the canal

Neeli Mosque youth club took part in a ten-week programme to engage girls aged between 10-14 in physical activity along Rochdale Canal.

A girls-only session with female leaders provided a welcoming and safe environment. By providing diversity amongst the session leaders, both participants and parents were comfortable to get involved.

We now aim to train up more female leaders to be able to provide their own walks and paddle sport activities in line with Paddle UK guidelines.



#### Getting Active by Water in Wigan

Through our partnership with Sport England, we have been able to create a new paddle sport hub on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal in Wigan.

The project has provided storage, paddling equipment, and training for community partners, such as Wigan & Leigh College, to enable delivery of paddle sports on a long-term basis.

As well as removing barriers to help the local community to get active, the programme includes important water safety messages.

### CASE STUDY: Beat the Street in Salford

Created by Intelligent Health, an organisation dedicated to improving public health and creating active communities through behavioural change, the Beat the Street programme is a national tool designed to connect individuals with the local environment and make physical activity and active travel an enjoyable integral part of everyday life. Since 2020, the Trust has been working with Intelligent Health in diverse communities across the network, encouraging people to explore their local canals and embrace active travel to improve their health and wellbeing through physical activity.



In Salford the programme was delivered in partnership with the Bupa Foundation, Salford City Council and the Trust and engaged 18,337 players, around 7% of the local population, who travelled more than 88,654 miles across the city. Participants completed surveys at key points during the programme. Green and blue spaces, especially canals, were valued as popular places where people could enjoy walking, running and cycling. Participants reported visiting canal and river paths more regularly as part of the game, especially children and young people, who visited the canal 16% more during the game period.

“

The Trust’s network of canals and navigable rivers provide the ideal space for Beat the Street games as they are on the doorstep for so many communities and offer open and accessible places for people to walk, cycle and run, helping them to make healthy choices and build healthy habits for life. ”

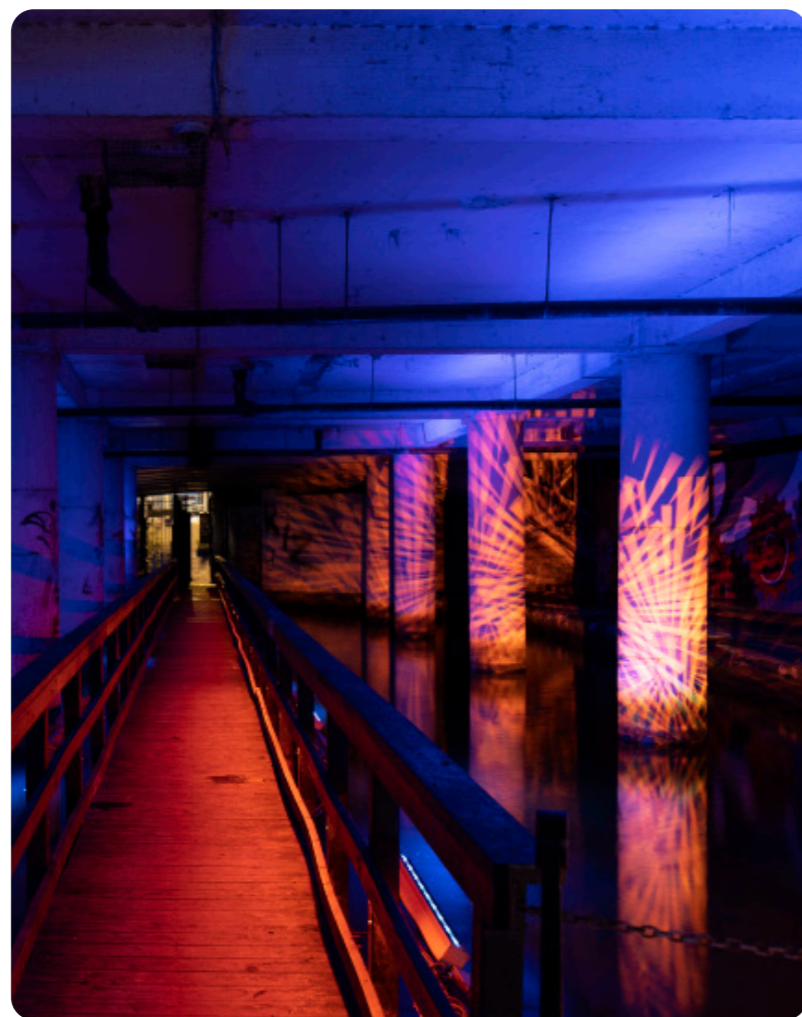
Dr William Bird, CEO, Intelligent Health

### CASE STUDY: Reimagining the Piccadilly Undercroft

During the redevelopment of Piccadilly Plaza in the 1960s, Dale Street and Rodwell Towers (now 111 Piccadilly), was constructed over the Rochdale Canal, creating the Piccadilly Undercroft. Over time, the area has become a challenging space, attracting antisocial behaviour. Featuring two Grade-II listed locks and raised walkways, this unique space has tremendous potential to become an exceptional walking route unlike any other.

This project aligns with Greater Manchester’s shared vision of building a thriving city region where everyone can live a good life, as set out in the Greater Manchester Strategy (Together we are Greater Manchester). It also supports the Good Growth Plan, which drives regeneration, inclusive economic progress, and high-quality places across all boroughs, ensuring growth benefits people and communities through collaborative, sustainable development.

We have been working closely with partners, community groups, and local businesses to reimagine the Undercroft. This has involved community consultation and a pop-up guerrilla lighting event to demonstrate the transformative possibilities for this space when partners work together.



### CASE STUDY: Water Safety Partnerships

Safety is very important to the Trust, and we work alongside organisations across the country to reach more people with vital water safety messages. We’re part of Greater Manchester Water Safety Strategic Partnership (GMWSSP), which aims to make Manchester’s waterways safer, with a key focus on the city centre.

The first partnership was established in Manchester in 2015, with the GMWSSP being established in 2023. This group is made up of representatives from the Trust, all the relevant Local Authorities, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue, Greater Manchester Police, Royal National Lifeboat Institution, and the Royal Life Saving Society UK. The Trust is also involved in local water safety partnerships in Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, and Wigan.

Being involved in these partnerships, we work hard to promote water safety messages and campaigns throughout the year, helping to educate the local community. Working together we deliver targeted water safety messages through our youth engagement and skills & learning teams. The partnership’s also look at physical measures to help keep people safe near water.

We take our role within these partnerships extremely seriously and value working together to promote water safety, helping to make Greater Manchester’s waterways a safer place for everyone.

“

This pioneering collaboration brings together local and national partners, all 10 Greater Manchester local authorities, and major landowners - with one clear mission: to reduce drowning and make our waterways safer for everyone.

At the heart of our approach is a commitment to consistency, collaboration, and community. The Trust was involved in the establishment of the GMWSSP project from its inception. They provide invaluable insight, local knowledge and experience and help us to design and implement our prevention activity.

We have collaborated on many public awareness and educational initiatives as well as supporting national campaigns such as World Drowning Prevention Day, Don’t Drink and Drown Week and Be Water Aware. They have also co-operated in the installation of Public Rescue Equipment, infrastructure and signage at water risk locations. Senior Trust managers have been ever present at GMWSSP meetings, helping to set the strategic direction of the project. The Trust is a vital partner in the GMWSSP, and we will continue to work closely with them. ”

Jim Bridge, Water Safety Development Officer, Greater Manchester Water Safety Strategic Partnership



# Together we will:

Working together with our partners and stakeholders, we will continue to develop the canals of Greater Manchester as places for inclusive and sustainable growth, places for people, nature, health and wellbeing, as well as helping build climate resilience.



## Working together for 'Place & Prosperity' we will:



- PP1:** Work with local authorities, developers, stakeholders and communities to enhance our canals and develop attractive and connected canalside neighbourhoods that celebrate the unique character of our canals, attract investment and support a thriving local economy.
- PP2:** Work with partners, such as the Ministry of Justice and local education providers, to create positive outcomes for both people and the canal network. Canals offer a local platform to deliver programmes that provide practical skills development through apprenticeships and education programmes, bringing learning alive and increasing opportunities.

## Working together for Nature & Biodiversity we will:



- NB1:** Collaborate with partners to deliver Greater Manchester's Local Nature Recovery Strategy, restoring biodiversity and enhancing canals as green and blue wildlife corridors in urban areas, contributing to a nature-rich city region.
- NB2:** Support the provision of equitable access to nature – especially for those living in areas with an urban green space deficit.

## Working together for Resilience & Security we will:

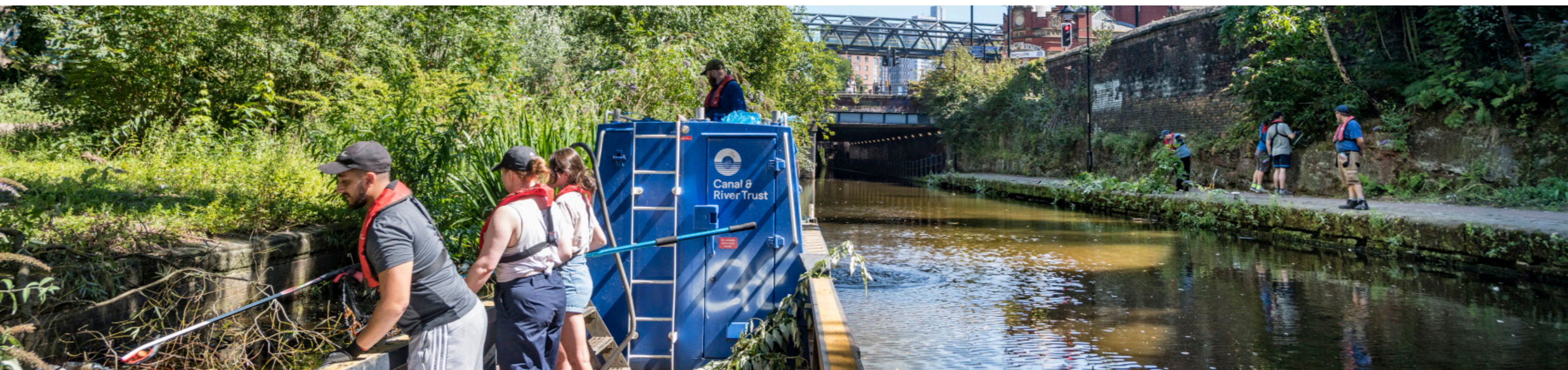


- RS1:** Continue to work with the Greater Manchester Integrated Water Management Plan Partnership to build climate resistant communities; mitigating the effects of climate change by managing drought and flood, enhancing water storage, supporting resilient ecosystems, and protecting communities and infrastructure.
- RS2:** Work with developers to explore and utilise our canal network's potential for renewable energy generation, such as heating and cooling, solar and micro-hydro power, and for other innovative solutions to contribute to Greater Manchester's carbon neutral target.

## Working together for Health & Wellbeing we will:



- HW1:** Identify investment and create active travel solutions using canal towpaths to connect communities across Greater Manchester to traffic free, clean air, sustainable routes for everyone.
- HW2:** Support the Greater Manchester Live Well plan and work with partners such as Sport England and CyanLines to provide connected access to high-quality blue and green spaces close to home and across Greater Manchester.





## More information

If you would like further information please contact:

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