

Canal & River Trust

The Vital Connector for healthier lives, places and society

The canal network's role in improving health inequalities and outcomes

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Foreword: Canals as vital connectors for health, communities and resilience

At Canal & River Trust, we believe that good health and wellbeing should not be determined by where you live, your background or your circumstances, and that access to nature should be available to all.

The Trust manages, on behalf of the nation, a 2,000-mile network of canals and towpaths, navigable rivers, docks and reservoirs. This canal network provides free, accessible and inspiring blue spaces at the heart of communities across England and Wales.

As we face growing challenges from physical inactivity, poor mental health and widening health inequalities, as well as further impacts from climate change, blue infrastructure has an increasingly important role to play. Rooted in communities, the canal network delivers significant social value. New data from Intelligent Health reveals just how vital canals and towpaths are in supporting health in the nation's most disadvantaged communities.

The evidence is compelling. Blue spaces can improve physical health and mental wellbeing, reduce stress, encourage social connection and support healthier lifestyles. At the same time, the canal network helps communities adapt to a changing climate by managing water, cooling urban areas and providing valuable environmental benefits. The canal network is in a strong position to support the Government's ambitions around prevention, access to nature, the creation of healthier places and health security.

This report explores that contribution through three interconnected themes:

- **How canals support preventative health by helping improve physical health, mental wellbeing and social connectedness.**
- **The role of the canal network in creating healthy, connected communities and places people can thrive.**
- **How canals can be part of the solution to the impacts of climate change through sustainable urban living.**

None of this can be achieved in isolation. The greatest impact can be achieved through partnership, with local health systems, local authorities, community organisations, schools, environmental partners and funders. Through collaboration, we can unlock even greater value from this national asset and extend its benefits to more people and communities.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Dr William Bird MBE for his contribution to this report. Dr Bird is a pioneer in social prescribing, 'health creation' and an internationally respected authority on the role of physical activity in improving health and wellbeing, advising the World Health Organization and Sport England. His insight and expertise have been invaluable in strengthening the evidence and ambition that underpin this report.

This report is both a celebration of what the network already delivers and a call to action for the future. By working together, we can optimise the value of this extraordinary national resource, improving health, strengthening resilience and ensuring that the benefits of the canal network are realised by generations to come.



Campbell Robb
Chief executive



Summary

Our canals, towpaths, river navigations, docks and reservoirs represent nationally significant blue infrastructure that delivers substantial health, social and environmental value. Canals are uniquely embedded within the heart of towns and cities, placing them within easy reach of millions of people, including communities experiencing the greatest levels of deprivation, health inequality and environmental disadvantage.

This proximity to urban populations is a distinctive strength of the canal network and as a public health asset, the canal network contributes across the spectrum of prevention, healthy place-making and health security.

When intentionally designed, enhanced and integrated into local planning, public health and climate adaptation strategies, the canal network can play a transformative role in creating healthier, fairer and more resilient communities, while delivering lasting social value for individuals, places and society as a whole.

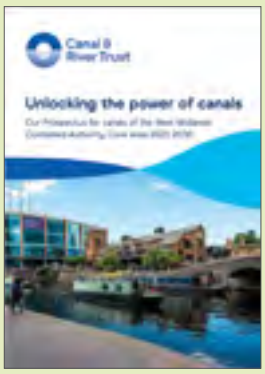
Enhancing and unlocking the value of canals

The canal network is one of the UK's most valuable public assets. Stretching through the heart of our towns and cities, it connects people with nature, supports healthier communities, strengthens climate resilience and creates the conditions for sustainable, inclusive growth. As devolution gathers pace, its potential to help deliver regional priorities has never been greater.

"The more we work with Canal & River Trust, the clearer it becomes that our waterways can play a vital role in creating a fairer and healthier West Midlands. The Vital Connector for Health report shows how access to nature and water can improve wellbeing, bring communities together, and help more people live healthy, active lives. By creating welcoming spaces for everyone, regardless of background or circumstance, we can tackle inequalities and ensure no one is left behind."



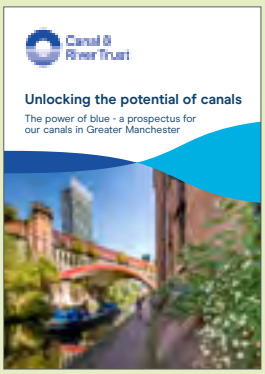
Richard Parker,
Mayor of the West Midlands



"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."



Andy Burnham,
Former Mayor of Greater Manchester



Blue spaces, such as canals, are associated with improved mental wellbeing, reduced stress, increased physical activity, and stronger social connections.[2,3] The canal network, which is free and open to all, offers access to nature and provides opportunities for recreation, active travel, nature recovery, water management, urban cooling and climate adaptation.[4,5]

> “We are increasingly recognising that our natural environment is fundamental to the health of people and places. Blue spaces such as canals are not simply amenities, they are critical infrastructure that can help address the interconnected challenges of health inequality, climate change and community resilience. By investing in and valuing these shared spaces, we have a powerful opportunity to create healthier, more equitable and sustainable futures.”
>
> **Katherine Jane Willis, Baroness Willis of Summertown, CBE, FRS, Professor of Biodiversity**



The challenge

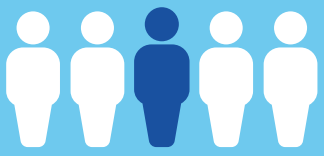
Across the UK, preventable ill health is profoundly unequal, shaped by the wider determinants of health and by individual behaviours. Factors such as income, employment, education, housing quality, and access to safe and supportive environments all play a critical role in influencing health outcomes.[6]

Physical inactivity, poor mental health, and obesity remain among the leading drivers of avoidable ill health, yet their impact is not experienced evenly.[7] In the most disadvantaged communities, these structural inequalities compound risk, resulting in significantly poorer outcomes: people are not only dying younger but also spending more of their lives in ill health.[8]

The state of health in England and Wales



People in the most deprived areas of England experience a healthy life expectancy at birth that is almost 20 years shorter than those in the least deprived areas.
(ONS 2022)



1 in 5 adults (20.2%) in England have a common mental health condition with prevalence increasing to over 26% in the most deprived areas.
(NHS, 2025)



In 2022, nearly 50% of adults in the UK reported feeling lonely occasionally, sometimes, often or always.
(Campaign to End Loneliness)

Adults living in the most deprived areas are more likely to report feeling lonely.
(DCMS 2025)

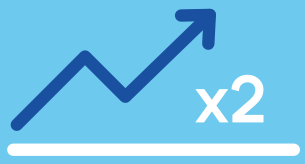
Adults living in urban areas are more likely to report that they feel lonely.
(DCMS 2025)



46% of adults have at least one longstanding illness or condition.
(Health Survey for England, 2024)



Sport England estimates that inequalities in activity levels cost society nearly £20 billion every year through untapped social value.
(Sport England, 2025)



Obesity is over twice as high for children living in the most deprived areas.
(NCMP, 2025)

Addressing inequalities requires a focus on health behaviours, but also on the social and environmental conditions that shape them. However, for many communities, particularly in urban and deprived areas, there is a green space deficit – a lack of accessible, safe, and well-maintained outdoor spaces where people can be active, connect with others, and experience nature.[9]

Two-fifths of Britons say the mental health benefits of green spaces are the most important benefit to them, rising to almost 6 in 10 of people who live with mental health conditions.[10]



However, the recent Green Gap report[11] indicates that changes to planning regulations may lead to the largest reductions in green space occurring in England's most deprived areas, potentially exacerbating existing health inequalities linked to access to nature.

At the same time, many places are experiencing a progressive decline of community connection and cohesion. Opportunities to come together, share spaces, and participate in community life are essential to building strong, connected communities. When these opportunities are lacking, the impact is felt not only in increased loneliness and poorer wellbeing, but also in weakened community resilience and a reduced capacity to respond collectively to local challenges. As social isolation and weakened community ties are increasingly recognised as key drivers of poor mental and physical health, the importance of fostering connection and participation within communities has never been clearer.[12]

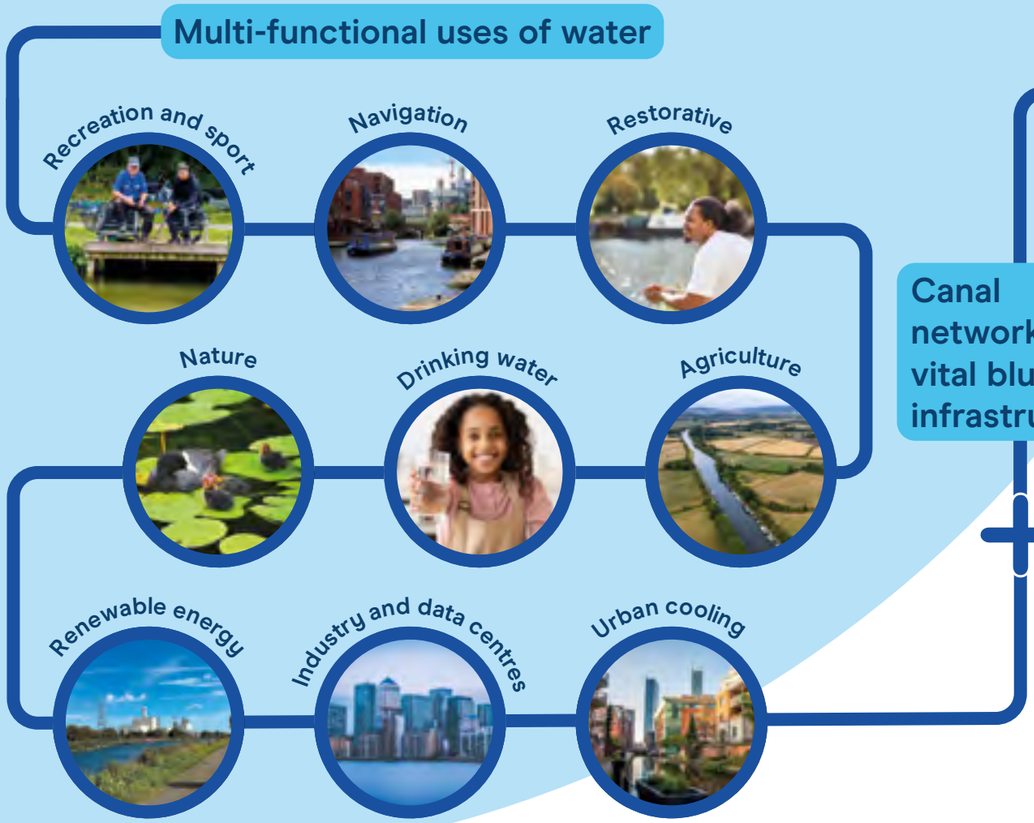


31% of Britons think their local area is in decline.
(RTPI, 2025)

Alongside these challenges, the accelerating impacts of climate change are placing additional pressure on communities, often amplifying existing inequalities and reinforcing patterns of disadvantage. Rising temperatures, increased flooding, and more frequent extreme weather events disproportionately affect those already facing the greatest social and economic barriers. Communities with fewer resources are less able to adapt, less protected from environmental risks, and more exposed to the health impacts of a changing climate.[1]

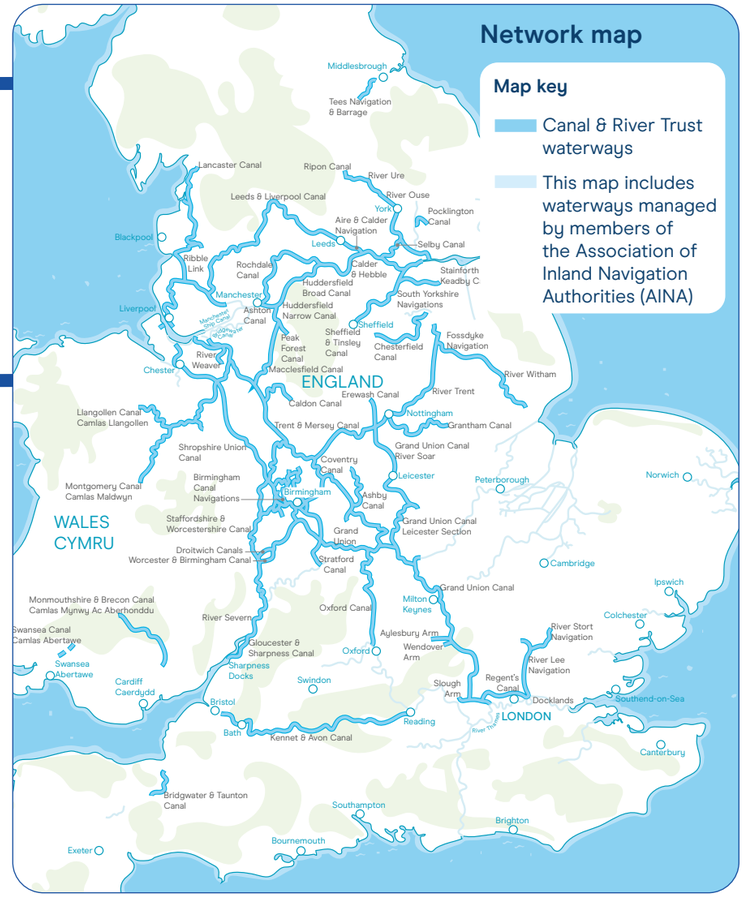
Without intervention, these inequalities will continue to deepen, shaping not only health outcomes but opportunity, resilience, and quality of life for generations to come.

The canal network plays a critical role as a vital connector for improving health, tackling inequality, strengthening community connection, and building resilience in the face of climate change.

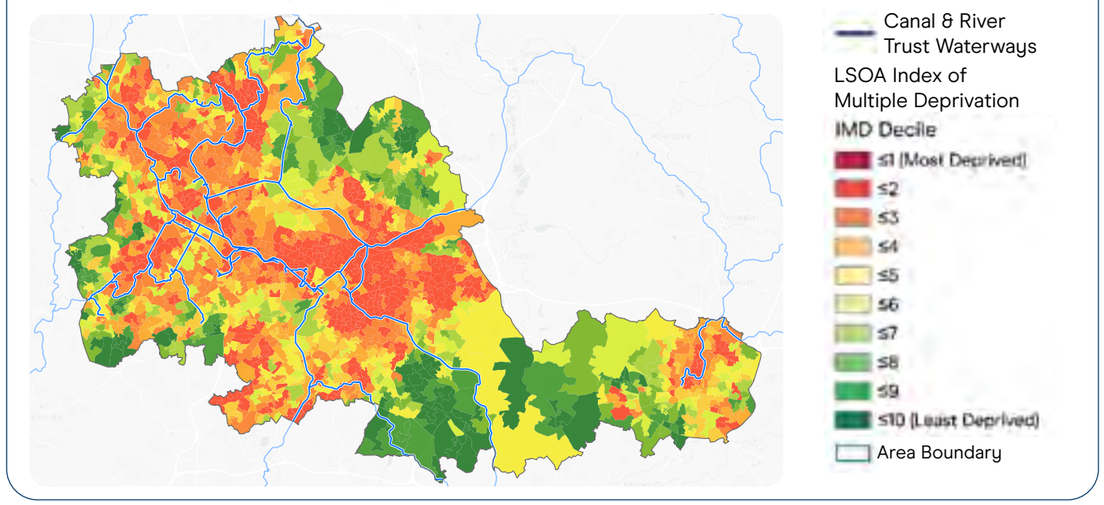


Canal network: vital blue infrastructure

Forming part of UK national infrastructure



Being embedded in place and rooted in communities



Contains National Statistics data, © Crown copyright and database right, 2026. Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, OpenStreetMap, and the GIS User Community.

The opportunity

The challenges of inequality and the impact of climate change provide powerful justification for the strategic role of the canal network as vital blue infrastructure.

At a moment of converging crises, the canal network represents one of the greatest untapped opportunities for England and Wales: to transform the health of people, revitalise the places they live, and reshape the future wellbeing of society.

With the right investment, the canal network as vital blue spaces and routes can help address today's challenges to realise a healthier, fairer and more resilient future.

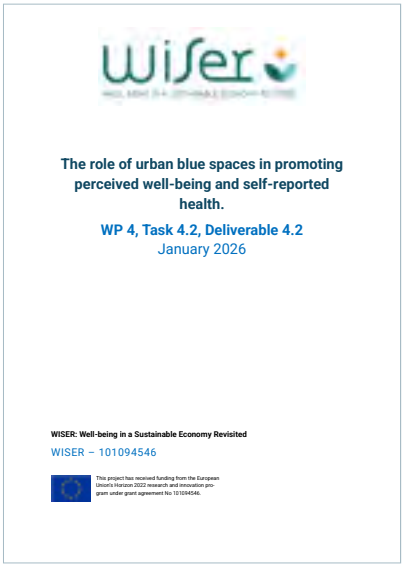
Urban blue spaces significantly enhance health by improving mental wellbeing, encouraging physical activity and supporting social interaction, however these benefits depend on equitable access, quality and maintenance.[13]

Canal network: a vital connector for building inclusive health and climate resilience for individuals, communities and society

Building upon the learnings from the EU funded 'Well-being in a Sustainable Economy Revisited' (WISER) research project (January 2026) and our own work, we have developed a Health and Climate Resilience Framework for the Canal Network. This framework illustrates how the canal network functions as a vital piece of national infrastructure, shaping health, wellbeing, and equity across communities. It highlights the interaction between environmental conditions, climate-related pressures and the vulnerabilities of population groups, affected by socio-economic disadvantage, with limited access to urban green space, or wider inequalities.

The framework recognises that vulnerable groups are often more exposed to environmental stressors but may also face barriers to accessing high-quality canal spaces.

By improving accessibility, safety, and environmental quality, the



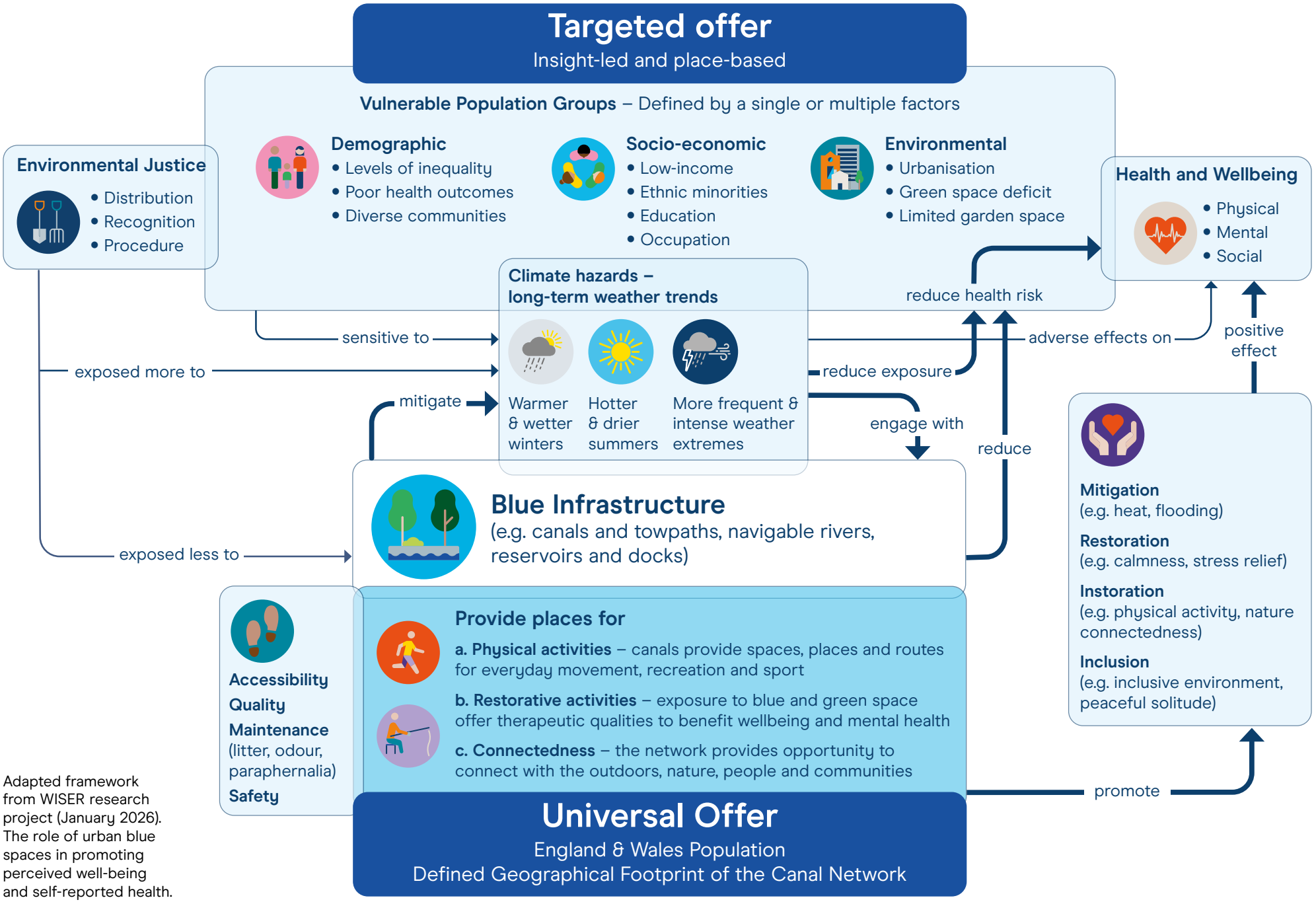
canal network can help address these disparities, contributing to more equitable health outcomes and stronger, more connected communities. The framework presents canals as levers for reducing inequality, enhancing resilience to climate change, and delivering wide-ranging public value across society.



When asked for their favourite thing or biggest source of pride about where they live, Britons overwhelmingly say the green space, parks and nature.

(More in Common, 2025)





Adapted framework from WISER research project (January 2026). The role of urban blue spaces in promoting perceived well-being and self-reported health.

Canal network: strategic and local asset for the future

Spanning more than 2,000 miles and woven into the fabric of metropolitan areas and conurbations, cities and towns, the canal network is one of the most inclusive examples of blue infrastructure across England and Wales.

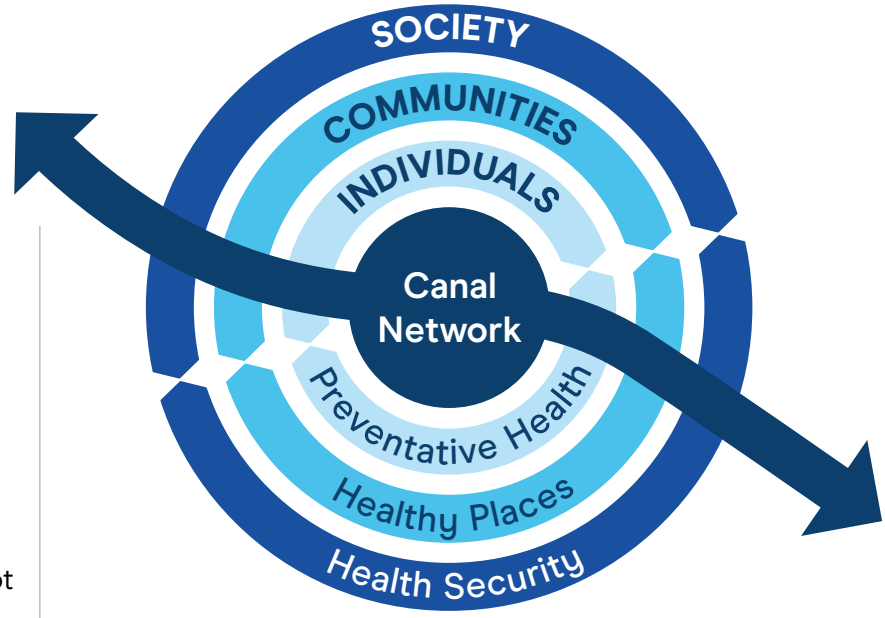
Many canalside communities face deep-rooted challenges that cannot be addressed through single-issue interventions. They require place-based, system-wide approaches that recognise the links between environment, society and health.

The canal network forms an integral part of the national health preventative infrastructure; delivering upstream solutions that reduce long-term pressure on health systems while improving quality of life. Through greater investment in canals there is an opportunity to simultaneously:

- **address structural inequalities in access to blue-green space**
- **improve physical and mental health**
- **build stronger, more connected communities**
- **reduce exposure to climate risks**

As a widespread, accessible and adaptable form of blue infrastructure, the canal network offers a practical, scalable and equitable response, delivering benefits now while building resilience for the future.

Responding to the UK's health and climate challenges, this report sets out the conditions under which the canal network can realise its full potential as vital national and local blue infrastructure supporting preventative health.



This report is structured around three interconnected sections that together set out the health and wellbeing value of the canal network at individual, community and societal levels.

> "Improving health outcomes requires a shift in how we think about the role of place in policy. Creating accessible, inclusive environments that support connection, activity and community is essential to tackling inequality. Our canals demonstrate how everyday infrastructure can contribute to healthier, more resilient communities at scale."
>
> **Dr Simon Opher, MBE, MP**







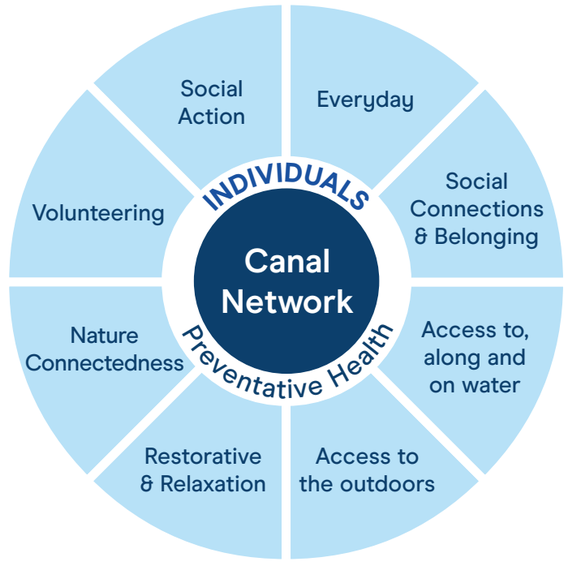


The Trust commissioned research, which concluded that engagement with our canals and river navigations was helping older people tackle isolation and loneliness. It also provided people experiencing mental health challenges with opportunities to connect, fostering informal support networks within their communities.



Individuals

This section explores how the network of canals and towpaths, navigable rivers, docks and reservoirs supports preventative health through everyday experiences, enabling physical activity, fostering social connections and belonging, and providing restorative spaces that promote mental wellbeing and nature connectedness.



Supporting preventative health and healthier lives



Urban green space deficit

85% of the UK population lives in an urban environment.

8 million households do not have access to green space.

In a third of local authorities, more than **70%** of the population is further than a 15-minute walk to a natural space.

(Alliance of Green Groups, 2023)

The equity advantage: the canal network is on the doorstep of communities with greatest need

Access to high-quality blue and green space is a core component of a preventative health system. However, access remains unequal. People living in deprived urban areas are far less likely to have access to such spaces, despite standing to benefit the most.

The canal network spans across many of the communities experiencing the greatest health needs and highest levels of deprivation, with nine million people living within 10-15 mins of a canal and 53% of these households experiencing wellbeing inequalities. These neighbourhoods are also diverse, with almost 35% of residents from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Canals and towpaths provide safe, accessible routes for recreational activity, sport and daily use, helping to reduce chronic disease, improve mental health and extend healthy life.[14] Active use of the canal network generates £1.1 billion in cost saving to the NHS.[15] Unlike traditional health interventions, canals integrate physical activity into everyday life, enabling people to move more often as part of their daily routine.



Insights from Beat the Street evaluation[16]

Many of the people living closest to canals (400 metres) are in the most disadvantaged communities.





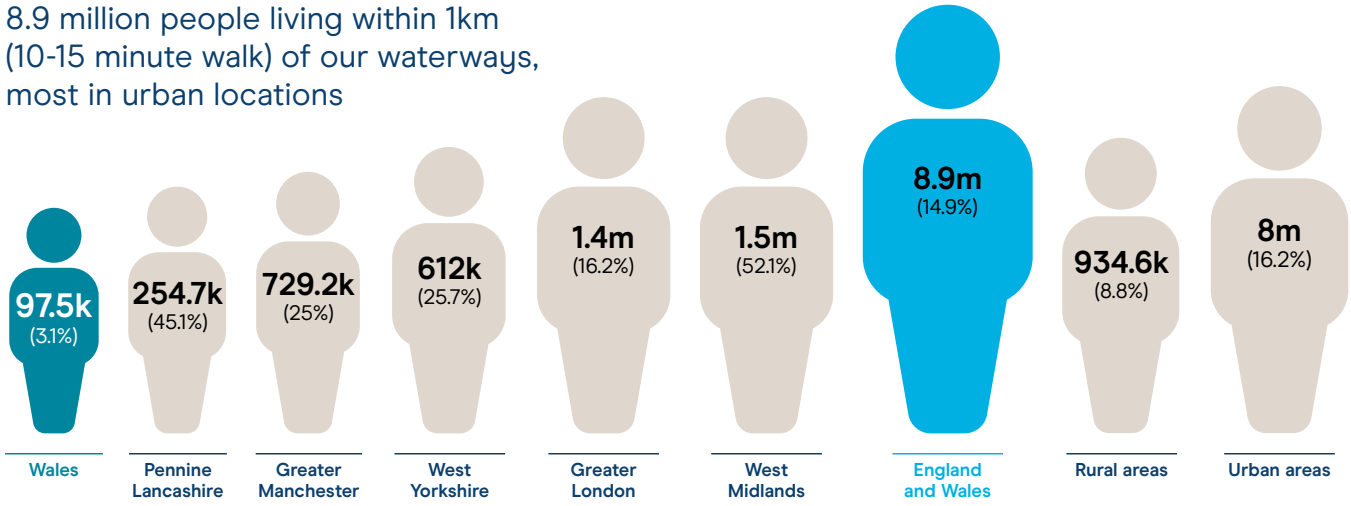
Among people who were already using green spaces, those who also started using canal towpaths experienced a bigger improvement in life satisfaction than those who continued with green space only. People who began using both green space and towpaths, having used neither before, reported the largest increase in wellbeing.

Participants who used towpaths but not green spaces (to start with) tended to have lower life satisfaction than other groups. This reinforces that towpath use may be particularly beneficial for groups beginning from a lower wellbeing baseline.



Our reach

8.9 million people living within 1km (10-15 minute walk) of our waterways, most in urban locations



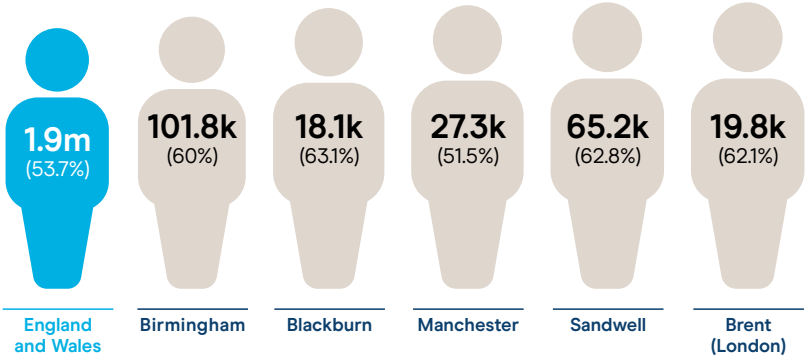
Diverse communities

34.9% from an ethnic minority (including White minority) background, versus 25.6% nationally – ranging from 12.8% (Sefton) to 85.1% (Brent)



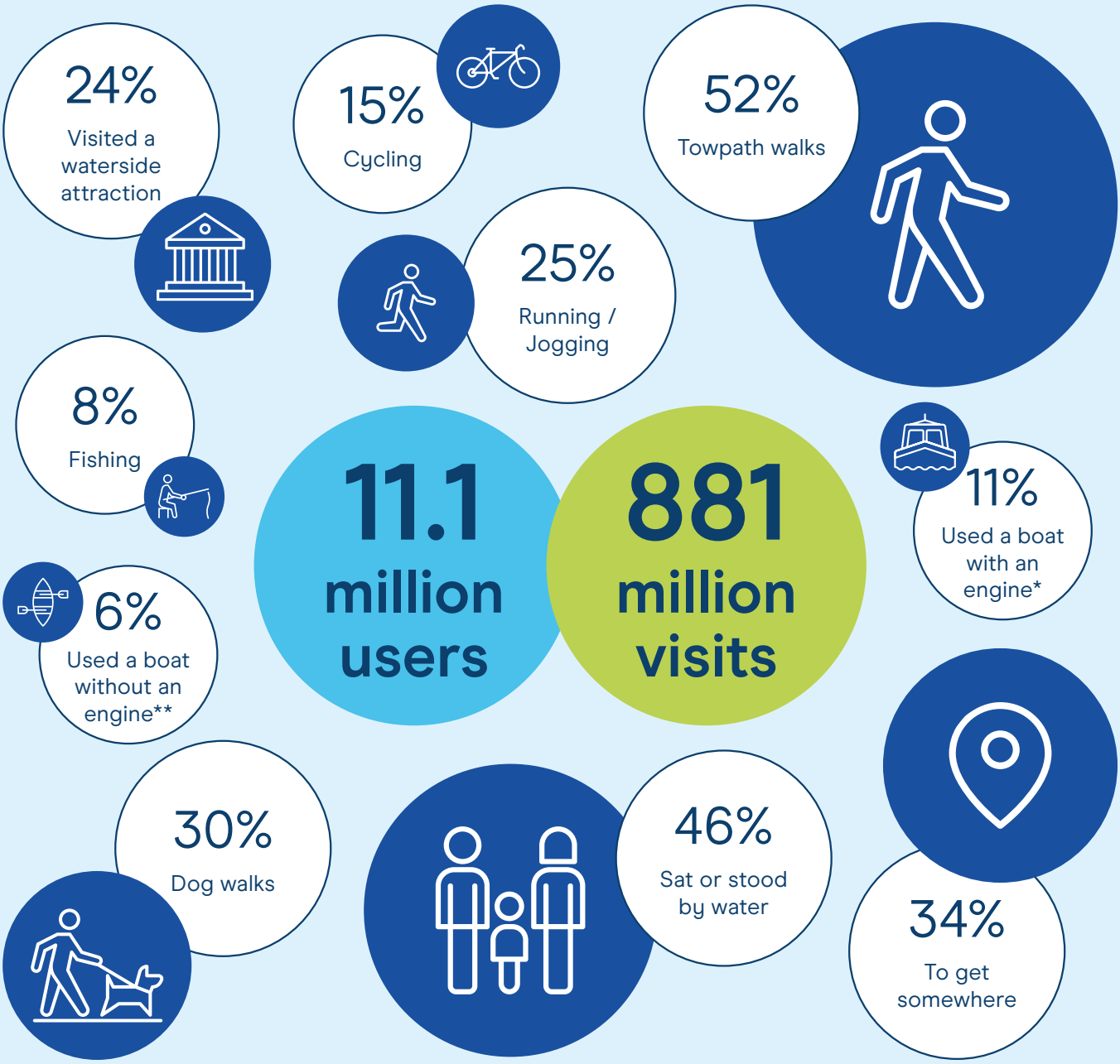
Wellbeing inequalities

53.7% of households (up to 63%) living within 10-15 minute walk (1km) of our network have health and wellbeing challenges



How people use and enjoy our network of blue spaces

The different ways that people are spending their time on and by water.



An individual is only counted once in the 'total' figure, they may however have done more than one activity during their visit and therefore the percentage total does not sum to 100%.

* Both trip or excursion boats as well as private boats.

** Includes activities such as canoeing, rowing boats and sailing boats.

Source: Waterway Engagement Monitor 2025/26, conducted on behalf of Canal & River Trust by DJS Research. The WEM is a year-round, online survey amongst a representative sample of 20,400 adults (16+) across England and Wales.

The COVID-19 pandemic made the health value of local outdoor environments unmistakably visible and, during lockdowns, access to canal and other blue spaces became vital for many people.

During this time, the role of the canal network as a vital connector was evident when canal usage accelerated exponentially, increasing by over 300% in urban locations. Furthermore, this left a behavioural legacy, increasing the use of our canal network with estimated visits c 30% higher (2025/26) than pre-pandemic.



The UK Government reaffirmed in its 2025 Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) its commitment to everyone having access to blue and green spaces within a 10-15 minute walk from home as originally made in the previous EIP (2023).

Frequent recreational visits to canals/rivers were associated with higher self-reported physical activity levels.[17]



Increase in towpath and canal usage between 21 March 2020 to 5 July 2020

Burnley – 306%
Sandwell – 277%
Ilkeston – 208%
Blackburn – 181%
Torfaen – 186%
Tottenham Hale – 159%

The Trust's collaboration with King's College London[18] led to the publication of an academic study (August 2022) which found that **visiting canals and rivers was associated with a 6% improvement in mental wellbeing, and this association is statistically stronger when compared to just green spaces alone.**

The Urban Mind study also revealed that these increases in mental wellbeing were still evident after the visit had taken place, suggesting a lasting positive effect rather than just a momentary uplift.

Blue spaces offer unique and amplified benefits for mental wellbeing, including stress reduction, improved mood, stronger social connection and restorative or stress-reduction effects that are bespoke to these places.[19]





> “Canals invite us to explore new ways of engaging with nature – linking past, present, and future in every step. Along the towpath, the perceived boundaries between people and nature soften, revealing accessible wildness where nature connectedness can flourish for all. In these unexpected places and moments, canals reconnect us, uniting both human and nature’s wellbeing.”



Professor Miles Richardson, University of Derby

Our Let’s programme

‘Let’s’ gets people active and outdoors, building confidence, social connections and encouraging pride in local canals, leaving participants happier and healthier.



Let’s Fish!

5,314 participants

336 events

Let’s Walk!

8,290 participants

529 events

Let’s Paddle!

1,358 participants

115 events

Llangollen Canal Innovation Project

Designed to improve the health, wellbeing, and physical activity levels of girls and women (aged 11-25), this project was co-designed with participants and delivered through strong local partnerships.

The project engaged 83 young women in activities including canoeing, walking, paddleboarding, archery, and bushcraft. Participants reported increased confidence, new skills, stronger connections to their local environment, and greater motivation to be active.

GOGLEDD CYMRU ACTIF NORTH WALES



Advancing Greencare in Europe: an integrated multi-scalar approach for the expansion of nature-based therapies to improve Mental Health Equity (GreenME).

University of Kent

A major European research project is exploring how nature-based therapies and wider green care approaches can be expanded to improve adult mental health and wellbeing, particularly for communities facing the greatest health inequalities.

The project brings together government bodies, environmental organisations and health partners, including Canal & River Trust.

The research is examining how nature can support mental health through three areas: everyday engagement with nature, nature-based therapeutic interventions, and nature-based health promotion activities.

By strengthening the evidence base and identifying effective delivery models, the project aims to make nature-based mental health support more accessible, equitable and sustainable, while also delivering wider environmental and social benefits.



Blue social prescribing transforms people's wellbeing

A two-year programme allowing people to self-refer or be referred via NHS pathways to supported paddle sessions on local canals.

These paddling sessions were designed for people experiencing poor mental health, isolation, or inactivity. Evaluation showed an increase in wellbeing and reported improvements in confidence, feeling calm and social connection.

25.4%
The average wellbeing score before participation

28.6%
The average wellbeing score after participation

> "I found I relaxed and responded to the quietness of the water. I was in a different zone, the distinction between the land and the water was incredible. Being on the water I could switch off – it was like meditation."
>
> **Let's Paddle! participant**

Working in partnership with

Leicestershire County Council · Active Together · Active · Active Blaby · Active Together Harborough

The network of canals and towpaths, navigable rivers, docks and reservoirs matter – they are an integral part of the urban fabric and rural landscapes, rooted in communities, local, familiar and already embedded in everyday life.

The canal network is increasingly being recognised as part of the UK infrastructure that supports preventative health, particularly within neighbourhood health, active travel and environmental policy. When combined they offer a practical and scalable way to improve health and reduce inequalities through everyday environments.



> “Health is shaped far more by the conditions people live in than by treatment alone. When people are connected to their local environment, to nature and to each other, the benefits for wellbeing are profound. Places like our canals provide accessible, everyday opportunities for this connection – supporting healthier communities and helping people to live well.”
>
> **Sir Sam Everington, OBE, GP**



> “Our partnership brings culture to places, such as Hinterlands in Sheffield and Super Slow Way in Lancashire, supporting creative activity that engages with the environments around waterways and the communities who live near them. Our continuing work with the Trust brings the benefits of creativity and culture to even more people across the country.”
>
> **Dr Darren Henley, CBE**
> **Chief executive, Arts Council England**



Innovation through ‘health creation’

The proximity of the canal network to disadvantaged communities is a strategic advantage that is particularly suited to a ‘health creation’ approach, going beyond a narrow focus on prevention.

Preventative health has traditionally focused on reducing risk behaviours. While essential, this approach often does not consider the broader conditions such as safety, belonging, agency and confidence, that sustain healthy lives over time. The concept of health creation reframes the question of not only how to prevent illness, but how to create the conditions in which people can live well.

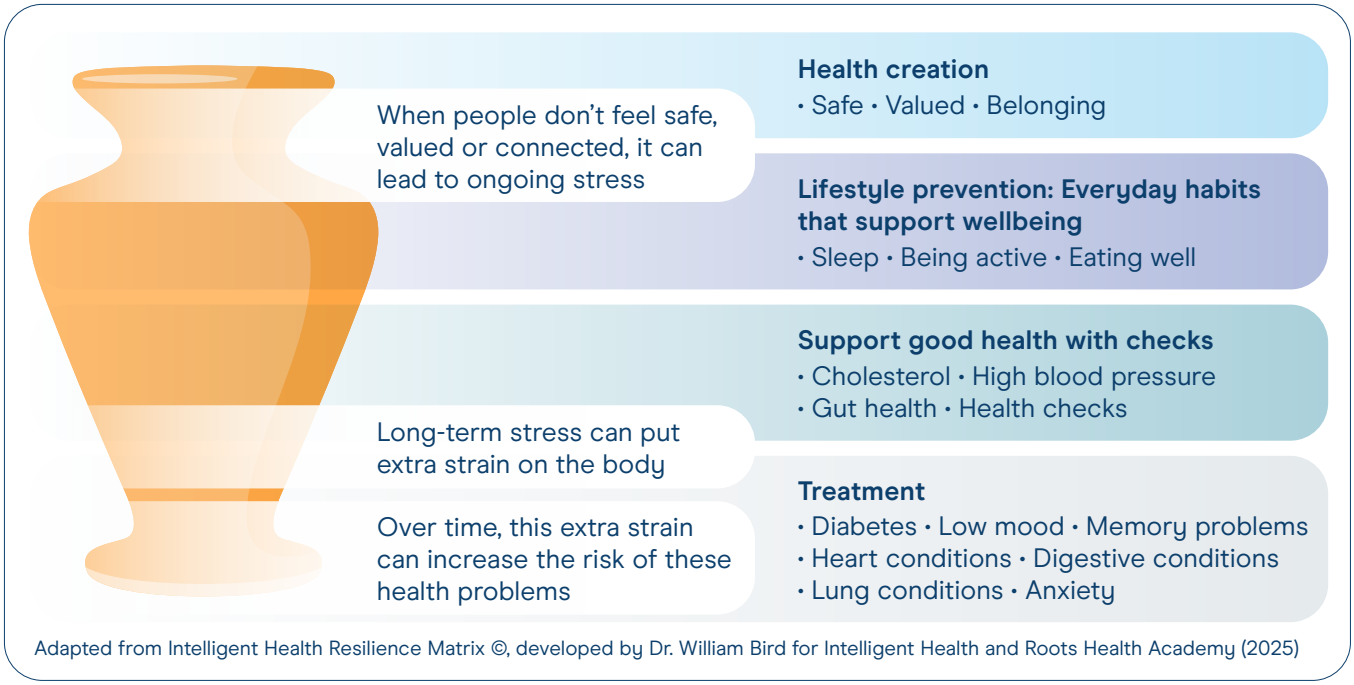
The canal network offers health benefits when it feels easy to navigate, valued, scenic and includes safe, shared spaces. Canals provide a strong sense of place, belonging and identity.

The ‘health creation’ perspective suggests that wellbeing arises from environments that support safety, trust, participation, agency and connection, rather than from risk reduction alone.[20]

‘Health creation’ is a transformative process that empowers individuals and communities to take control of their own health and wellbeing. Rather than just treating disease, it focuses on building personal agency, hope, and resilience by fostering meaningful social connections and supportive environments.[21]

Opportunities for innovation include:

1. Canals, towpaths and other waterways/bodies that can be used as platforms for activation
2. The Health Creation Index provides a way to capture outcomes that are often overlooked by traditional prevention measures
3. Canals, towpaths and other waterways/bodies offer scope for hyper-local intelligence



Adapted from Intelligent Health Resilience Matrix ©, developed by Dr. William Bird for Intelligent Health and Roots Health Academy (2025)

Creating safe and valued spaces with local communities

Through our Community Roots programme, players of the Postcode Lottery have enabled us to bring together different communities to shape and care for their local canal.

The programme is currently delivered in ten urban areas where the need and potential for impact is greatest. Through co-creation and inclusive engagement, we help communities rediscover the environmental, cultural and wellbeing value of their local canals, changing perceptions and creating pride in place.

> “‘Health creation’ is so much more than prevention. Health and wellbeing are about human flourishing and agency, the conditions and communities in which we live, learn, play, and work, our social relationships, and planetary health. Creating health depends on nurturing environments, communities, and, above all, relationships that enable people to grow and develop.[22]”

People taking part in Community Roots programmes and activities

22,930	4,890	25
participants	aged 25 and under	canal adoptions

Urban Nature Connector



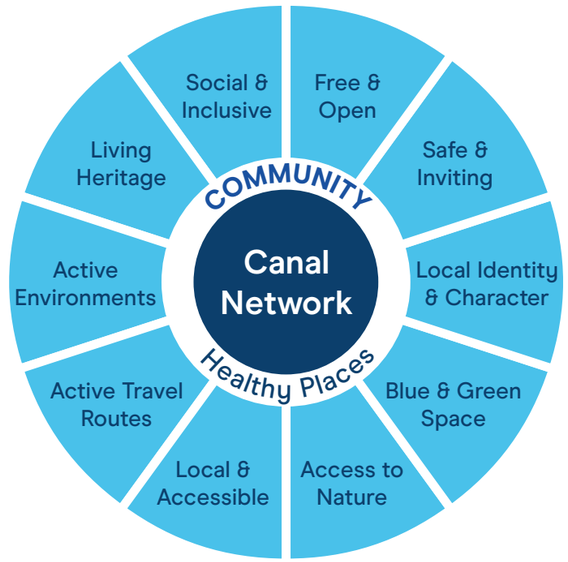
Supported by the Worwin UK Foundation, Urban Nature Connector builds on the strong foundations of our Community Roots programme to deliver a transformational four-year programme (2026–2030). By connecting people, place and purpose, the initiative will help communities across urban areas develop deeper relationships with nature, improve local environments and create lasting social impact.

The programme will focus on those experiencing inequality and offer a blend of community engagement, environmental activities, volunteering, and apprenticeships. It will create clear and inspiring pathways into nature.

By fostering a sense of belonging, stewardship, and shared responsibility, the programme will help ensure that people of all ages and backgrounds can benefit from nature’s restorative power, while protecting the canal network for future generations.

Communities

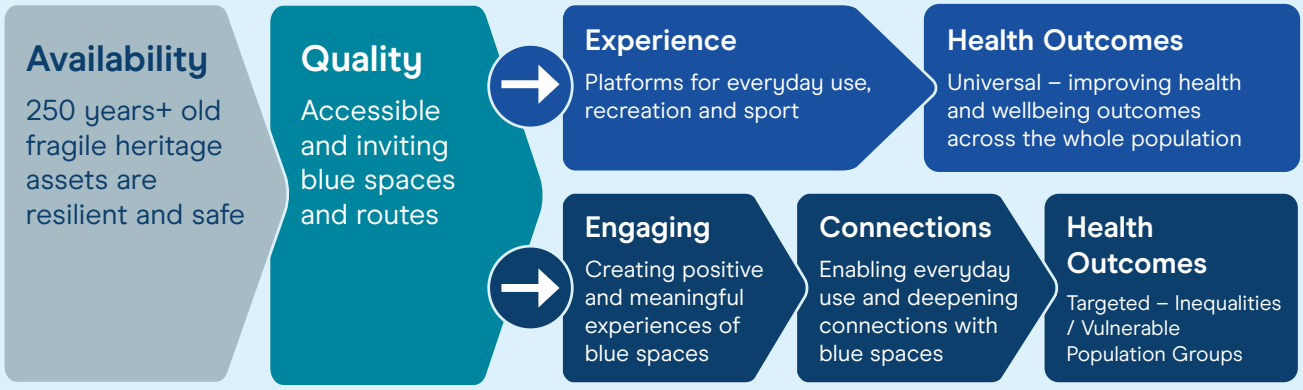
This section highlights the role of the network of canals and towpaths, river navigations, docks and reservoirs as healthy places that offer free, safe and accessible blue spaces that facilitate engagement and connection to deliver health outcomes and routes for active travel.



Creating healthy communities and connected places



Pathways framework to health outcomes



Health outcomes do not depend on individual behaviour alone. They are shaped by the places people live, move through and connect with every day. Across the UK, there is a growing recognition that 'healthy places' are fundamental to prevention: the design, quality and accessibility of neighbourhood environments directly influence physical health, mental wellbeing and life chances.[23]

Canal towpaths are free to use and traffic free – functioning as safe, accessible, active travel routes, providing a platform for regular physical activity as part of everyday routines.

As shared public spaces, canals provide opportunities for communities to meet, interact and build social capital – key components of wellbeing within place-based approaches to health.[24] Canals also reflect living heritage, reinforcing local identity and character of place, strengthening connections between people and place, sense of belonging and local pride – supporting long-term engagement and stewardship of local environments.

To help unlock and transform local canals into thriving blue spaces, we developed a pathway framework to health outcomes. This illustrates the required stages to support an intentional cycle of engagement that enhances and unlocks the value of the network.



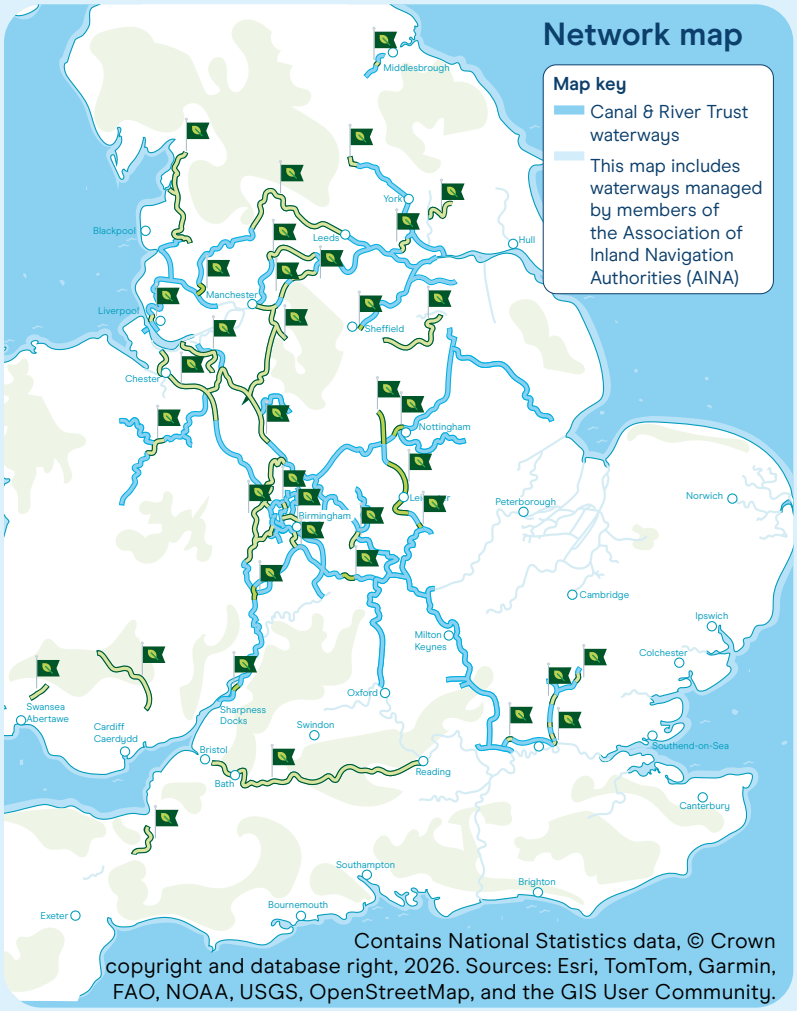
Active travel is widely recognised as a highly effective intervention, associated with reduced risks of chronic disease, improved mental wellbeing and lower premature mortality.[25, 26]



758 miles of award-winning Green Flag routes that link people, boats, nature and place







Placed-based impact: The difference we're making

Active communities

Projects are widening access to activity for children, adults, and underrepresented groups through a place-based approach. Evaluation shows a positive shift in physical activity levels, improved confidence and increased independent use of the canals for exercise.

> "I built confidence by borrowing a bike through them and, over time, that led to buying my own. Now I cycle to work every day."



Healthy communities

Projects designed for people who experience poor physical or mental health, isolation, or inactivity (such as Blue Social Prescribing) are helping to increase their physical and mental wellbeing, improve confidence, and create opportunities for supportive, informal social connections.

> "Initiatives like this help our patients access something which helps improve both their physical and mental wellbeing."
>
> **Macmillan manager**

Inclusive communities

Projects that are safe, supportive, and delivered by expert and supportive colleagues, volunteers, and partners are helping make activity more inclusive for people who may otherwise face barriers to participation. Outcomes of the projects included increased sense of belonging, confidence and sustained engagement.

> "We enjoyed exercise, being on the water, being able to take the kids along, including my disabled child. Very lovely to do something different. My son loved being close to the seagulls. Can't wait to do it again soon!"

Connected communities

Locally delivered group activity on and around the waterways is helping strengthen social ties through new relationships, improved community cohesion and a stronger connection to canals.



> "There are many families that take part – we are all local and now connected."



89,000
hours of Community Payback activity delivered by nearly 8,000 people at 40 sites

People on probation help transform the canals in England and Wales

Thanks to a partnership between Canal & River Trust and the Ministry of Justice, people on probation are helping to rejuvenate the nation's canals.

For probationers, being outdoors by the water is about more than just the physical work – it gives a real sense of purpose. 'Joe', a local participant, says: "I come here with my daughter. It's better than prison, we do a good day's work, and I go home knowing I've done something useful."

Each week, teams from East London to West Lancashire, and the Tees roll up their sleeves to care for our canal network. Their dedication is making a tangible impact, not only on the canals themselves but also on the communities that rely on them. Every cleared path and tidy bank is a small but meaningful step toward stronger, more connected neighbourhoods.

> "Probationers are painting locks, cutting back brambles and keeping the canal tidy. It's hard graft, unpaid and they've got to hit our standards. They give up weekends and work long days, but you can see the difference they make – it feels great for them and the local community."
>
> **Ian Hodgkin, community payback supervisor**

> "We established a national partnership with Canal & River Trust in 2022, and it's gone from strength to strength. Together, we deliver thousands of hours of Community Payback each year, helping maintain waterways and benefit local communities and the environment. It also gives people on probation the chance to learn new skills and connect with nature."
>
> **Caroline Morrison, head of policy for community payback**

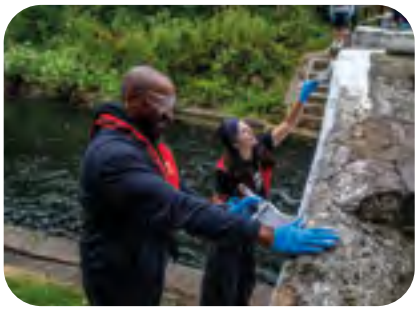


With our volunteers, we're creating great places

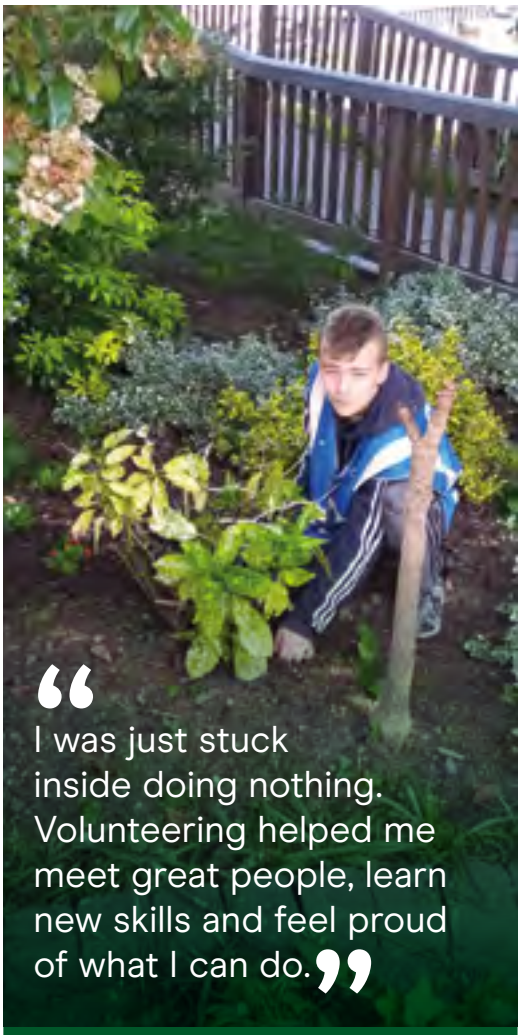


Credit Nicky Johnston









"I was just stuck inside doing nothing. Volunteering helped me meet great people, learn new skills and feel proud of what I can do."

Cameron joined the Beeston Towpath Taskforce as a volunteer in 2023. He was recognised for his energy and dedication and the optimism he brought to every task when he won Young Volunteer of the Year in 2024.



"I've been really lucky to find a role which I find interesting, challenging, varied and rewarding."

Penny, water management volunteer



Planning and design for healthy places

The location of the canal network offers a strategic advantage that is particularly suited to good waterside and waterspace planning and design. Supporting sustainable urban living, jobs and the economy is essential to unlocking the full potential of the canal network as a preventative health infrastructure.

Healthy design can shape everyday behaviour, perceived safety, social contact and access to nature, and UK policy increasingly treats these outcomes as core planning concerns rather than optional extras.

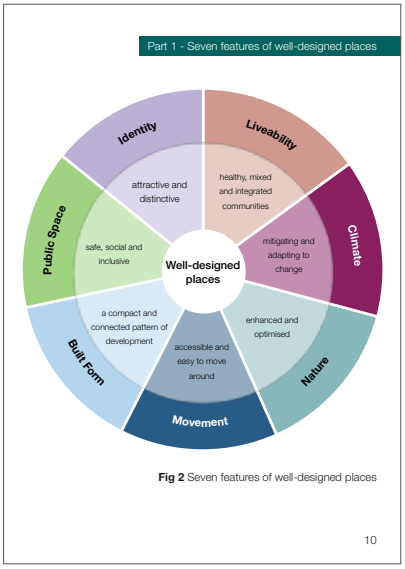
The UK Government promotes the use of design codes to improve design quality by setting out clear, locally created guidance and codes for new developments. The Trust has developed canal design guidance for local planning authorities and developers to ensure that through good design, the potential of the canal network and the opportunity to create great waterside places is realised.

Healthy design works partly by normalising beneficial behaviour and Sport England's Active Design guidance frames this through connected walking and cycling routes (including canal towpaths), and spaces that facilitate activity for all. This emphasises that environments should make the active choice the easy choice.[27]

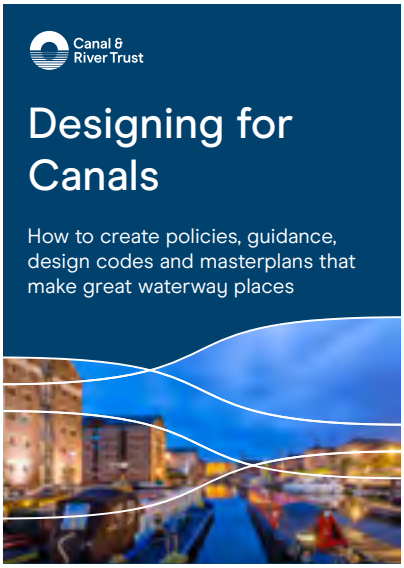
Canal specific guidance makes the same point in spatial terms.



1. Active Design
(Sport England, 2023)



2. Seven features of well-designed places (MHCLG, 2026). Draft for consultation – Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance



3. Designing for Canals
(Canal & River Trust, 2026)

Shaping vibrant waterside places together

The Trust's 2,000-mile canal network helped drive industrial growth in the 18th and 19th centuries by connecting ports, mines and factories. Although overtaken by road and rail transport, canals now offer opportunities to support solutions to the UK's housing crisis.

Highlighted in a recent Financial Times article by Anna Tyzack, published 2 May 2026, "blue urbanism" describes the regeneration of brownfield land along canals and waterways to create new residential communities. This model of development is already gaining momentum in cities including Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool and Glasgow.

A canal's superpower is that it is a place to get close to water, nature and heritage. It has the potential to be both a community hub and a 'regeneration corridor'. It can provide safe routes for schoolchildren and commuters, and can connect a new neighbourhood to existing parts of the city.

A study by the University of Exeter's BlueHealth project, which analysed data from 19,000 people across 18 countries, found that living near "blue space" such as rivers, canals or the coast is linked to higher wellbeing and better mental health.

At the £3 billion King's Cross regeneration project in London, a fund was set up in partnership with British Waterways London (now Canal & River Trust) to care for and rejuvenate the 1.8km stretch of the canal passing through the development.

Marcus Chaloner, Canal & River Trust, said: "The fund is a recognition of the value of canal to the development and in recent years in addition to maintenance, we have been able to use it to cover the cost of activities that enhance and enrich the area."

At King's Cross on a summer's day, the steps connecting the towpath to tree-lined Bagley Walk are a popular place to chat, picnic and play.





> "Canals are breathing space in a city – an attractive place to walk, cycle and hang out."
>
> **James Whittaker, Peel Waters**





Sheffield towpath community improvement

Funding enabled improvements to surface quality, safety and accessibility, converting the towpath into reliable local infrastructure used year-round for walking and cycling (both as recreational and active travel options), as well as providing access to water-based recreation and sport activities.

Delivered in partnership with The Friends of the Blue Loop volunteer group, the project embedded the towpath as a valued community asset, supporting routine physical activity, social interaction and everyday wellbeing.

POSTCODE LOTTERY

POSTCODE EARTH TRUST

> “It meant we could actually work properly with Canal & River Trust rather than just doing what we could afford. Once the funding was in place, it became much more of a joint effort.”
>
> **Daniel Hazard, Sheffield towpath volunteer**



Lock 50 community paddle hub, Rochdale Canal

Sport England capital investment supported the installation of an accessible pontoon, secure storage, an adaptive launch system and long-term site licence.

Funding helped to transform an underused canal arm into an inclusive paddlesport hub, providing a paddle offer for the whole community.

SPORT ENGLAND

115 unique participants

397 attendances across 50 sessions



> "The highlight of the project has definitely been getting on the water."
>
> **Female, Rochdale**



Sport England and Canal & River Trust: Driving health outcomes

Through our partnership with Sport England, we are transforming local canal spaces into accessible, welcoming places where people can be active, connect with others, and improve their wellbeing.
Over the past three years, £1.67 million of investment has helped unlock the potential of canal corridors in communities that need it most.

SPORT ENGLAND

“Sport England’s partnership with Canal & River Trust continues to activate local blue spaces across the canal network through co-creation, collaboration and a strong alignment in place. By working with communities and partners, the partnership is unlocking the potential of canals as accessible, inclusive environments for physical activity and wellbeing. The partnership is addressing inequalities and driving meaningful change, strengthening connections between people and place, and creating more active, inclusive and connected communities where it is needed most.”



Lisa Dodd-Mayne, executive director, partnerships and place, Sport England

Activating blue spaces for inclusive, place-based activity



Contains National Statistics data, © Crown copyright and database right, 2026. Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, OpenStreetMap, and the GIS User Community.

35 locations

19 projects

1,397 sessions

14,057 attendances

6,522 participants

3,713 adults

2,809 children and young people

> “It’s shown me new places to go and I’ve learnt how to connect with people in a really positive way and I love motivating others to get involved in activities in the local community.”
>
> **Participant, Poplar**



SPORT ENGLAND

Reach

Over **half** of adult participants came from ethnically diverse backgrounds

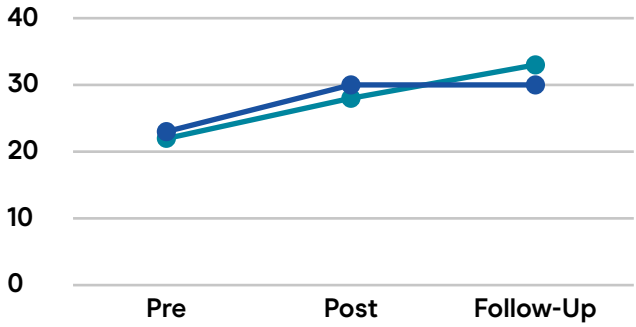
32% were living with physical or mental health conditions

12% increase in average life satisfaction among participants

6% increase in feeling safe overall

Impact

Data highlights a positive shift in physical activity levels for adults and children.



> “It’s shown me new places to go and ways to be active on the canals.”
>
> **Adult participant**

Let’s Go Outdoors! programme

Using canalside spaces as natural settings for outdoor learning, mindfulness, family bonding and nature connection.

Activities included creative exercises, walking, boat making, sensory exploration and storytelling. The pilot evaluation reported improvements in confidence, calmness and happiness as well as an increase in pride in place.





> “I enjoyed the canal story; it brought the canal to life and made me feel calm, peaceful, and grateful.”
>
> **(Family, Foxton Locks)**

SPORT ENGLAND

Swim Sista Swim

Our award-winning Swim Sista Swim project was designed for women from African and African-Caribbean communities in Nottingham to improve swimming ability and boost water confidence, enabling the community to engage with their local canal.



> “Prior to doing the Swim Sista Swim programme I had an immense fear of water which has significantly reduced since taking part in the programme. The canoeing gave me a different view of the outdoors, and I now enjoy walks by the canal. My physical and emotional health has improved, and I feel more confident taking the grandchildren by the water.”
>
> **Sharon Thomas, participant**

> “Having people that represent us, having instructors that represent us, I think that’s what works.”
>
> **Project lead, Swim Sista Swim**



Water safety: creating safer communities through prevention, education and partnership

For millions of people across England and Wales, canals and towpaths, river navigations, docks and reservoirs are valued community assets. However, these waterspaces also present significant risks, particularly for children and young people, who may be unaware of the hidden dangers associated with being on the water or by the water's edge.

Prevention

Responding when communities need it most

Following a series of tragic drowning incidents on inland and coastal waters during the 2026 heatwaves, schools sought immediate support to help children understand how to stay safe around water.

Thanks to the dedication of the Trust's education volunteers and Learning & Skills teams, an unprecedented level of activity was delivered in a single month.

Water Safety Education (June 2026)

17,642 children received dedicated water safety education

via **154** schools, group or partner events



"It's never too early to talk to children about water safety. It's so important that young people continue to receive age-appropriate water safety messages as they grow and become more independent. These are vital life skills."

Annette Simpson, learning & skills manager, Canal & River Trust

Drowning remains one of the leading causes of accidental death among children and young people in England.

Inland waterways such as rivers, lakes, canals, docks and reservoirs are common locations for fatal incidents.

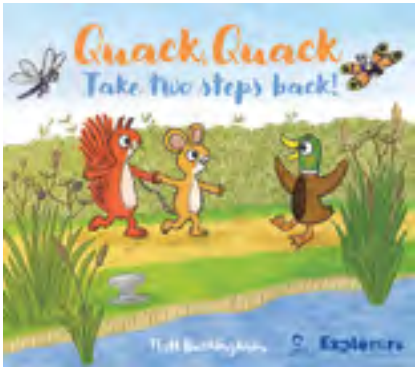
- Boys account for 71% of child drowning deaths.
- Children under 5 and young people aged 13-17 are at greatest risk.
- Children living in the most deprived areas experienced more than double the drowning risk of those in the least deprived areas.

(NCMD 2024; RLSS 2024)

Education

The Trust's Water Safety Education programme places the safe use of waterways at its heart. By combining curriculum-linked education, community engagement and volunteer-led outreach, the programme equips children and young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to recognise risk, make safer decisions and enjoy canals and other waterways safely.

One of the programme's innovations has been Quack, Quack, Take Two Steps Back, a storybook and accompanying resources designed for preschool children and their families. The initiative helps introduce simple, memorable safety behaviours in a positive and engaging way, with thousands of books distributed to nurseries located close to canals and other waterways.





The book has been adapted for the stage by Chickenshed Theatre Company!

Water Safety Education (2025/26)

The Trust:

delivered water safety messages to **67,896** young people

distributed **48,000** water safety booklets

5,317 Quack Quack books supplied to schools, nurseries and libraries





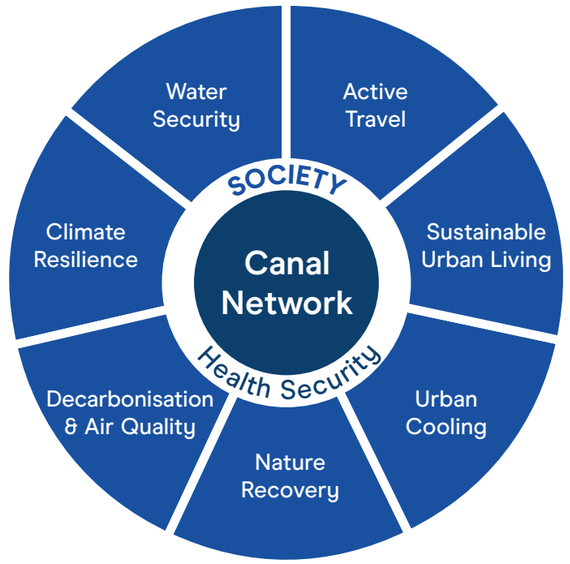
Partnership

The Trust works closely with organisations including Fire & Rescue Services, RNLI, RLSS UK, Swim England, RoSPA and members of the National Water Safety Forum, Water Safety England and Water Safety Wales to ensure that water safety education reaches children wherever they learn, play and socialise.

national water safety forum

Society

The next section presents the societal benefit of the network of canals and towpaths, river navigations, docks and reservoirs in contributing to health security. This includes climate resilience, water security, urban cooling, nature recovery and sustainable urban living.

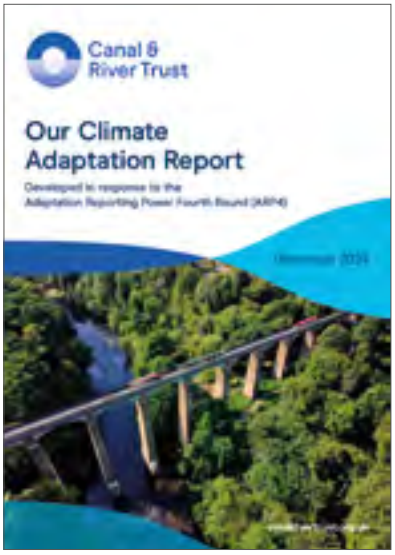


Improving health security in changing climate



The World Health Organization identifies climate change as a fundamental threat to health because it increases heat exposure, worsens air pollution, intensifies flooding, and disrupts the environmental and social conditions on which health depends.[28] People living in deprived communities across the UK are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This is driven by a combination of factors, including urban heat islands, limited access to blue and green spaces, lack of private outdoor spaces and poor housing conditions.[29]

As cities become denser and hotter, blue infrastructure such as the canal network plays a critical role in cooling urban environments, reducing flood risk and building resilience.



The Trust's Climate Adaptation Report (ARP4, December 2024) highlights both the risks that climate change poses to the canal network and the important role waterways can play in helping communities adapt to a changing climate.

As extreme weather events become more frequent, canals and their surrounding green spaces can help build community resilience by managing water, supporting biodiversity, reducing urban heat, and providing accessible spaces that benefit health and wellbeing. The report identifies the Trust's most significant climate-related risks and outlines the actions being taken to protect the canal network, its infrastructure and habitats from the impacts of flooding, drought, extreme temperatures and severe storms.

Importantly, the report recognises that the canal network is not only vulnerable to climate change but can also form part of the solution.

Well-maintained canals can help mitigate environmental risks, support nature recovery, and provide valuable green and blue corridors that enhance the resilience of the communities they serve, particularly in urban and more deprived areas that are often disproportionately affected by climate change.

The Trust's ARP4 action plan sets out current and future measures to strengthen the resilience of the waterways network and maximise its contribution to protecting people, places and nature from the growing impacts of climate change.

Climate hazards – long-term weather trends


Warmer and wetter winters


Hotter and drier summers


More frequent and intense weather extremes



The role of canals in health security

1. **Sustainable urban living:** Through urban cooling and routes for active travel, the canal network contributes to high-quality, sustainable urban environments.

2. **Water transfer and supply:** As a vital part of the UK's water infrastructure, our canal network facilitates efficient and sustainable water transfers. By working alongside water companies, it strengthens supply security, supports essential services, and helps avoid the environmental and financial costs of building new reservoirs.

3. **Flood mitigation and adaptation:** The canal network provides an adaptable mechanism for managing extreme weather, helping to redirect water flows and protect communities and infrastructure during periods of heightened risk.

Canal corridors can act as cooling spines through cities, shaping healthier, more liveable sustainable neighbourhoods.



In London, mortality risk at temperatures above 29°C has been estimated to be around three times higher than at optimal temperatures and in 2022 an estimated 4,507 deaths in England were associated with the hottest days.

Canals are keeping cities and urban areas cool as the temperature rises. 'Urban heat island effect' plus a warming climate threatens to make summers intolerable in many metropolitan and urban areas of UK.

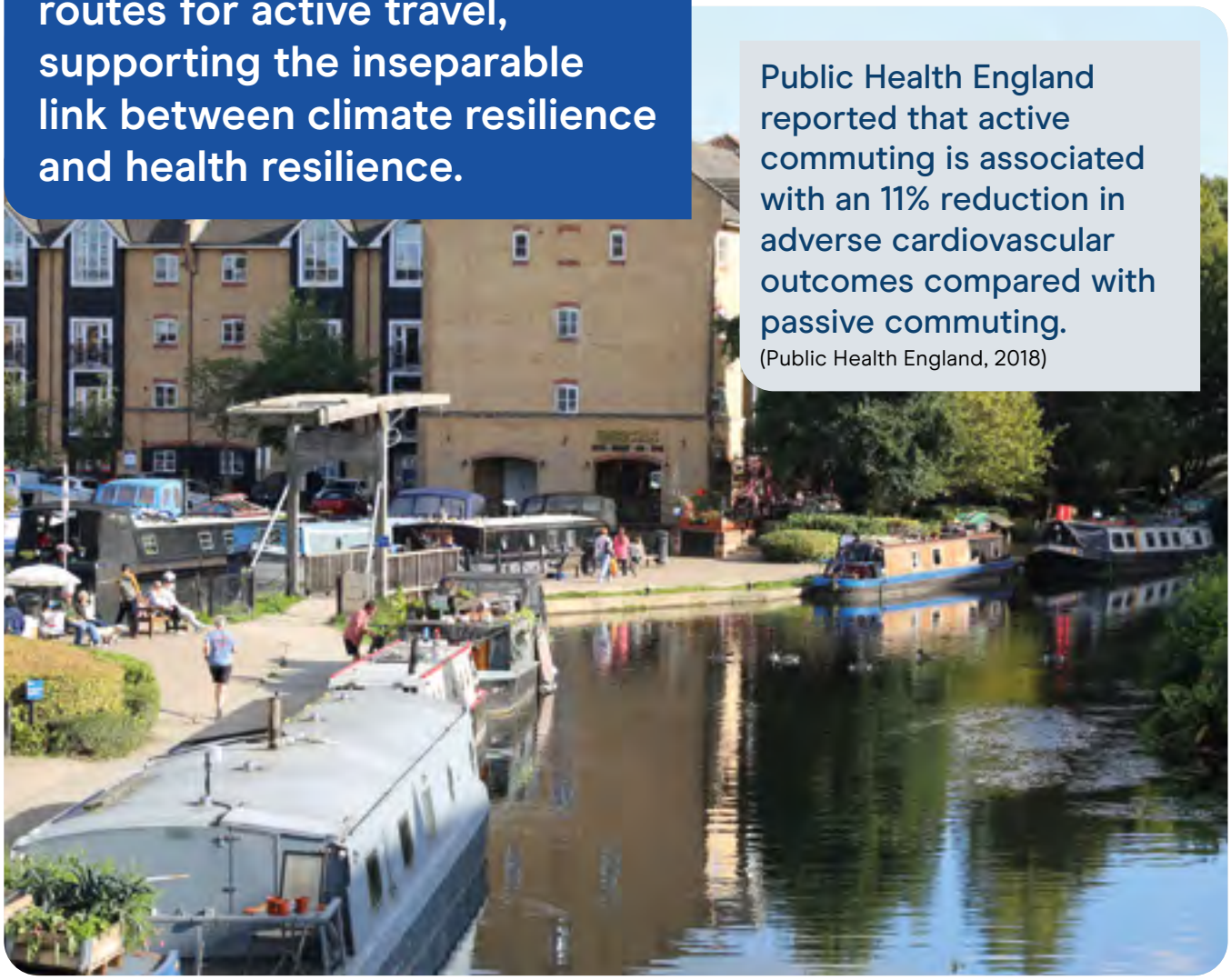
"The canals in our cities were a product of the Industrial Revolution, a time of great innovation. Adapting to climate change will require new thinking and ways of working, and this research shows the importance of working across disciplines and in partnership. Bringing together our industrial heritage with new technologies and cutting-edge research like this can help us create urban areas where people and nature thrive in a more sustainable future."



Dr Joanne Tippett, lead project researcher from the University of Manchester

MANCHESTER 1824
The University of Manchester

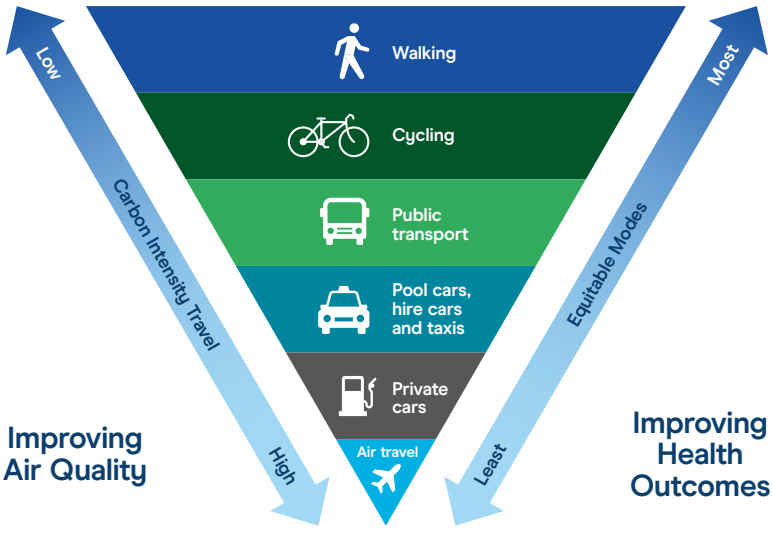
Towpaths provide traffic-free routes for active travel, supporting the inseparable link between climate resilience and health resilience.



Public Health England reported that active commuting is associated with an 11% reduction in adverse cardiovascular outcomes compared with passive commuting.
(Public Health England, 2018)

Canals support climate and health outcomes through cleaner and healthier movement networks. Climate resilience and health resilience are closely linked with benefits cited as a combination of factors: increased physical activity, psychological restoration, social interaction and improved environmental quality.[30]

Towpaths provide flat, attractive and traffic-free routes for walking and cycling, increasing the likelihood that short journeys shift away from car use, making everyday walking and cycling more practical, appealing and restorative. In doing so, canals support reduced emissions, increased physical activity and improved cardiovascular and mental health simultaneously.



Transforming our towpaths into active travel routes

We partnered with East Staffordshire Borough Council, completing a £2 million project improving a 5.5 mile stretch of the Trent & Mersey Canal in Burton upon Trent.

Funded by the Government's Towns Fund, the project resurfaced and widened the towpath, creating a puddle-free, accessible route for walkers, cyclists and boaters. Additional support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund enhanced wildlife habitats.

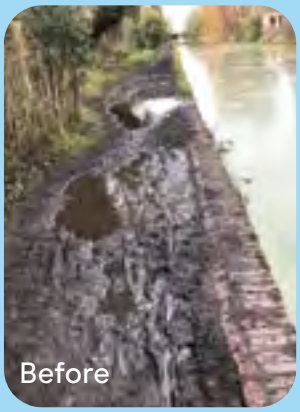
Burton upon Trent

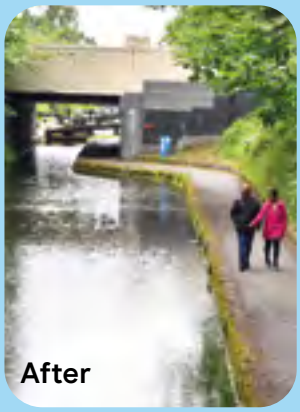




77% of users increased their frequency of use after the improvements were made

Walsall





Walsall towpath improvement scheme improved nine miles of active travel routes, including towpaths, access and solar lighting.

In total over **18.6** miles (30 kilometres) of towpath improved

Working in partnership with

Department for Transport

Active Travel England

Heritage Fund

East Staffordshire Borough Council

Flowing forward: how the Grand Union Canal will keep communities supplied



The Grand Union Canal Transfer is a partnership between Canal & River Trust, Severn Trent and Affinity Water, working to secure clean, reliable water for communities for decades to come.

Treated, recycled water will travel 120km along canals to reach homes in the South East. Construction starts in 2030, with water flowing by 2032-33. The project will strengthen canals, support wildlife, and bring lasting benefits to people and local communities.

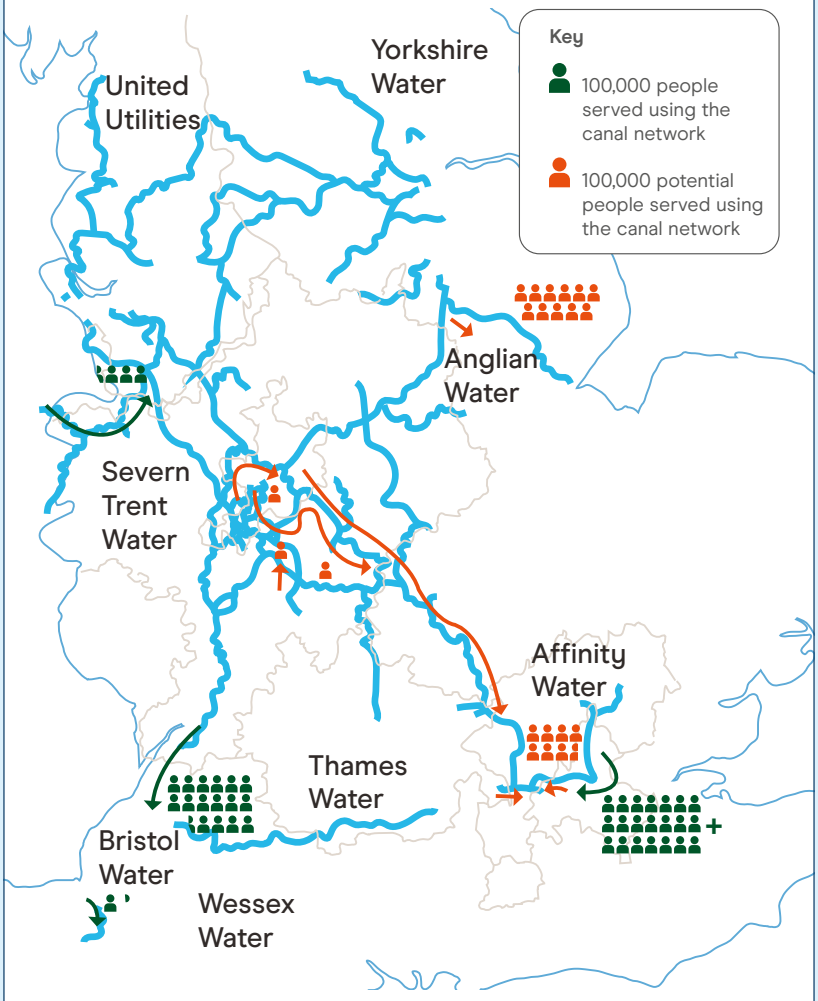
Working in partnership with

Grand Union Canal Transfer

SEVERN TRENT

Affinity Water

Water transfers using the canal and river network



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The movement of water is fundamental to the operation of canals and, as such, they are also critical to society's adaptation to climate change.

Supplying drinking water for
5 million
people each year





The UK Government has launched a first-of-its-kind climate security taskforce to advise on the national security risks of climate change and nature loss and to identify gaps in the UK's preparedness. It follows the 2025 National Security Strategy's framing of climate and nature loss as core drivers of instability.



Partnership opportunities

Through alignment with health systems, active travel, planning, climate strategies and local growth priorities, we can unlock a step change in access, quality and engagement to deliver better outcomes and improve lives now and for generations to come.

With the right partnerships and investment, canals can become a frontline asset for preventative health, healthier places and health security.

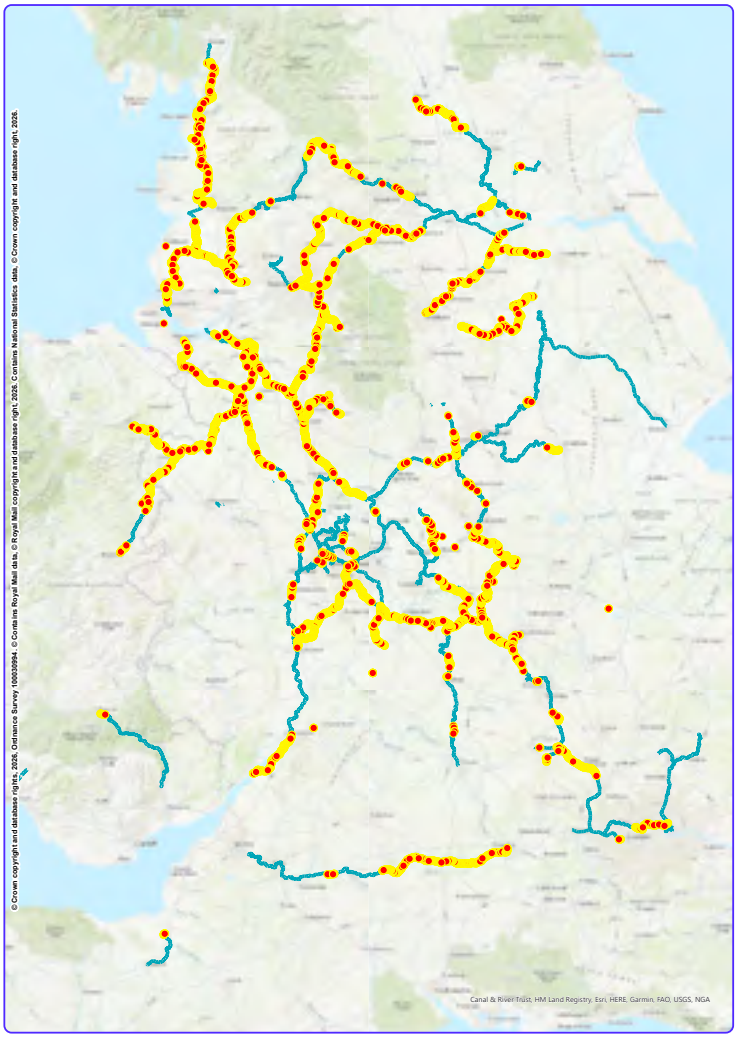
Towpath improvements



Opportunity: A volunteer-led programme is surveying towpath condition, dimensions and character across the canal network. With over 16,000 surveys completed, it provides a robust evidence base for future towpath improvements and investment.

Ask: Through investment in towpath infrastructure and design, we can create accessible, high-quality blue-green corridors that support healthier, more resilient communities.





Map shows current survey coverage across the network

Water safety



Opportunity: Through curriculum-linked learning, partnerships and volunteer-led outreach, the Trust is helping children and young people to stay safe around water.

Ask: By investing in education and prevention, we can help reduce the risk of water-related incidents among children and young people.

Community programmes



Opportunity: Through place-based and thematic programmes, the Trust helps people connect with each other, canals and nature, building stronger communities and improving health and wellbeing.

Ask: Funding could support the expansion of partnership programmes focused on recreation and sport, outdoor learning, arts and culture, environmental action, volunteering and community leadership.

Research & evaluation



Opportunity: Through research, insight and evaluation, the Trust can generate evidence that informs policy, improves practice and demonstrates the social, environmental and economic value of canals and other blue spaces.

Ask: Funding could support collaborative research programmes, longitudinal studies, impact evaluations, policy development and knowledge-sharing initiatives. Delivered in partnership with universities, research organisations, public bodies and funders, this work would help build the evidence base needed to inform delivery, influence policy and attract further investment.

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For too long, the canal network's role as preventative health infrastructure has been overlooked. Now is the time to recognise its true worth and act to enhance and unlock its full potential. This report draws upon evidence on the unique contribution of canals as valuable assets in delivering healthier people, stronger communities and a more resilient future.

October 2026

Help secure the future of the canal network – for people and nature, today and for generations to come.

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