



Engaged People and Cohesive Communities



Our network of canals and towpaths, navigable rivers, docks and reservoirs are within a 10-15 minute walk of over 9 million people in England and Wales, providing vital blue space and access to nature on the doorstep.

The UK is experiencing an urban green space deficit. 8 million+ people having no private garden or no/limited access to public open space and nature. Many communities are feeling increasingly fragmented and individual loneliness and social isolation is on the rise – with c50% of adults in the UK reported to be feeling lonely occasionally, sometimes, often or always.



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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.

(Research (2023) by Alliance of Green Groups)

In May 2023, the UK Government pledged that everyone in England will be within a 15-minute walk of green space or water (EIP 2023). Our canals and towpaths, river navigations, docks and reservoirs provide ready and easy access to nature, particularly within urban communities. Also, volunteering and engagement opportunities connect people to place, nature and each other, enhance the physical environment, build social connections and a sense of belonging.

For people in the most deprived and disadvantaged communities, canals, other waterways and waterspaces are often the only green and blue space available 'on the doorstep'. In many of these areas, barriers to participation, both real and perceived, mean these green/blue spaces are not being widely used although the rise in use during the Covid pandemic highlights the scale of the potential they have in providing access to outdoors space and nature.

By working with volunteers, local communities and partners we are transforming our network of canals, other waterways and waterspaces into safe, attractive and thriving green and blue spaces on the doorstep of over 9 million people across England and Wales.

Loneliness and social cohesion



Research shows the most important factor for community wellbeing is feeling safe (**82.3%**). (ONS 2022)



49.6% of adults in the UK in 2022 reported feeling lonely occasionally, sometimes, often or always.



People in communities with higher levels of social cohesion experience lower rates of mental health problems than those in neighbourhoods with lower cohesion.

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



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

Creating accessible, safe & inviting places on and by the water

Case study: Our research

Our research tells us there are two major, related barriers to non-users visiting and enjoying our canals, other waterways, and waterspaces that we need to address: a concern about perceived personal safety and security, and not being an appealing environment. These barriers cut across all demographics but are more acute among older, female and people from ethnically diverse communities, and amongst non-users living within 1km within urban areas – our very target groups and areas for making the greatest impact. These findings mirror research by Public Health England (PHE, 2020) into the importance of quality of green and blue spaces.

Making our canals accessible, safe and inviting is our priority and we have developed a range of programmes that are helping to drive improvements including 'Beauty and Wellbeing on the Doorstep' where we are taking a

placed-based approach, working with communities and partners to better understand the barriers they face, and co-creating interventions and activities that empower local people to take action and ownership.



Discarded syringes, human excrement and piles of rubbish – the 'disgusting' sights which greeted visitors along Ashton Canal



The beautiful birds, fish, flowers and people you can find at Ashton Canal



Perceptions & Barriers



Caring & Loved



Micro Benefits

Case study: Plastics Challenge

We know that litter is a major factor in people perceiving a space to be unclean and unsafe.

In 2019 we undertook a detailed analysis of the plastics and litter found on our canals and rivers. Working with Coventry University, we examined the scale of the problem and the actions that we need to take.

Our Plastics Challenge Campaign is raising awareness of the issue and encouraging people to join plastics challenge litter picks. The campaign has had great support from the public, partners and celebrities and in 2023, we won the 'Drops in the Ocean' advertising fund award, receiving £250k of billboard advertising in towns and cities.



Credit, Mark C Baker

Our research found that there are:

24 million items of plastic and other litter entering our waterways every year.

14 million items (59%) are plastics such as bags, bottles, disposable cups and food wrappers.

½ million items of plastic are reaching the ocean.

We are spending **£1 million+** a year on removal.



Since launching **#PlasticsChallenge**, there have been:

210 million opportunities to see our marketing and communication.

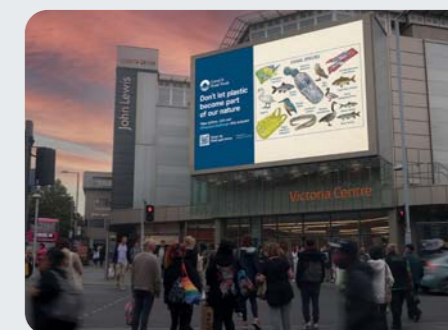
270,000 people have engaged with us on social media and digital channels.

5,200 people have actively signed up to our pledge tool.

In 2024, we plan to undertake a further study and update our findings.

“ We felt that this charity was on the doorstep for so many people and our teams were both familiar with the Trust and could see and experience the impact directly. This helped the Trust stand out from other charities in this 'environmental' category whose impact, whilst admirable but was geographically far removed. ”

The judging team from Ocean Outdoor Media for their 'Drops in the Ocean' advertising fund



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“I enjoy exercising with my daughter, Jaime. It’s a great way to reconnect with each other and take some time without the day-to-day distractions of work and school. Running along the canal together is a great way to get away from it all. It gives us an opportunity to escape from the roads and the noise of the traffic. I didn’t realise that collecting litter while you’re running is called ‘plogging’ until recently. It makes sense to do it when we’re out running together. It gives us a focus and helps distract from the distance we’re running.”

Jacqui

“Plastic litter is a huge issue, and it’s something that I think everyone can get involved in. Please join the Plastics Challenge to help make your local canal a place all of us can enjoy.”

Bill Bailey



Four-year-old Ayesha decided to collect litter along the Paddington Arm of the Grand Union Canal near her home in London to help protect the wildlife that lives there and she made a film for us to encourage others.



Watch the film here:
<https://youtu.be/sO4W197AKSg>

Case study: Green Flag Award® Scheme

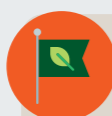
The Green Flag Award® scheme recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world.

The Award is managed under license from the UK Government Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities by Keep Britain Tidy who also administers the scheme in England. Keeps Wales Tidy administers the scheme in Wales.

In recent years, we sought to obtain Green Flag status for many sections of our network.

Over 700 miles of our canals, other waterways and waterspaces, representing a third of our network, now hold Green Flag Awards®, including urban and rural stretches in Sheffield, Birmingham, Garstang, Wigan, Saddleworth, Stoke and Wolverhampton. This significant milestone has been achieved thanks to the support of our volunteers and local partners who do so much to make their local canals, waterways and waterspaces attractive places for people to spend time.

According to Green Flag, the benefits for canals, other waterways and waterspaces include gaining national recognition, encouraging increased usage, preserving historic importance and helping to attract third party funding and support.



According to its website, the Green Flag Award® aims to:

- ✓ Ensure that everybody has access to quality green and other open spaces, irrespective of where they live.
- ✓ Establish standards of good management.
- ✓ Ensure that these spaces are appropriately managed and meet the needs of the communities that they serve.
- ✓ Promote and share good practice amongst the green space sector.
- ✓ Recognise and reward the hard work of managers, staff and volunteers.

Place-based & co-creation in building community connections

Our research

We commissioned our academic partners at the Sustainable Places Research Institute (PLACE) at Cardiff University to undertake a participatory research project in Leicester that explored the barriers to local communities using the Grand Union Canal (Leicester Line) and the River Soar Navigation.

We sought to identify the factors that could motivate wider and future participation with specific waterside communities and shed light on whether (and how) access to our canal and river navigation contribute to enhancing community wellbeing in the Belgrave district of Leicester. It also enabled us to test the community wellbeing model of People, Place and Power, developed by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing which describes some of the potential pathways to an intervention working.

We found that by engaging with our canal and river navigation, older people were combatting isolation or loneliness and those with mental health problems were finding people in the community to talk to as an informal support system.

In relation to those not currently using the local canal or river navigation, Belgrave residents reported that being part of groups representing ethnically diverse communities and religious gatherings were important. Also, an active presence of self-initiated activities including yoga and walking groups provided further focus and direction for how we developed our community activity programmes.

The People-Place-Power framework has been found to be a valuable lens through which to view and evaluate our community engagement and participatory programmes and for

building a better understanding of the role of waterways in enhancing community wellbeing.

The research project has been extended to explore an additional two Outcomes Focus Areas, Sefton and Brent, as case study areas. This second stage of the research project will focus on further exploration of the issues covered in the first stage, extending the approach to additional demographic groups within the new locations. The aim is to foster deeper understanding of people's engagement with waterways, and how the Trust can enable more people to enhance community wellbeing through engagement with our canals, other waterways and waterspaces. Research will continue to explore barriers to participation, how waterways access can enhance community wellbeing, and what could motivate wider participation.



<p>PEOPLE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social support • Neighbours • Organisations 	<p>PLACE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belonging • Natural & Cultural assets • Services • Opportunities 	<p>POWER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation • Inclusion
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Community Roots in Action

Working with SEGRO, our Community Roots project in Brent, London used World Bee Day as a focus to encourage the local community to visit, find out about and help look after their local canal. Over 100 people learned about the biodiversity of the canal, took part in litter picks and built insect habitats.

“Really good to get an insight into the wildlife around the area – this is often missed when walking or driving around the busy and built up industrial area. It was also a great opportunity for us as a company to feel like we were doing something positive, understanding more about the environment near our offices and how to take more ownership for the sustainability of the waterways.”

SEGRO staff member



“We want regular users to see the space is cared for so hopefully they will respect it.”

Lorraine

In Smethwick, we are working with Eco-Sikh UK to deliver environmental improvements and community events along the canal. On Eco Community Day we planted trees and during Diwali Festival, Galton Bridge was lit up in celebration.



Case study: Our place-based and co-creation in action

Since 2019, our Community Roots programme, funded by players of People's Postcode Lottery, has been working with communities living within 1km of our canals, river navigations, docks and reservoirs in our Ten Outcome Focus Areas where there are lower levels of wellbeing and access to green spaces is limited.

By engaging with people who don't currently use our canals, other waterways and waterspaces, and changing perceptions of them so they are seen as valuable local assets, we are connecting communities, making them stronger and more resilient.

Each Community Roots project is unique, focusing on community co-creation, promoting physical and mental wellbeing, making environmental improvements, and reconnecting people with nature. By building community capacity we are ensuring the positive impact continues beyond the initial funding period.

From January 2022 to December 2023

54,961 people

including **12,197** children and young people, took part in Community Roots activities.

We delivered **2,337** Community Roots events and activities.

49 Community Roots canal adoptions.



Ten Outcome Focus Areas



Sheffield



Blackburn and Burnley



Black Country



Birmingham



Leicester



Tottenham Hale



Torfaen



Brent



Sefton



Coventry



By improving local peoples' awareness of the green and blue space available on their doorstep and increasing accessibility and engagement, the programme is delivering multiple benefits for individuals, communities and the environment. The physical waterway environment is also improved, which in turn further enriches the lives of those who use this space due to the benefits that engaging with nature brings.

Local insights are key to our Community Roots approach and between 2020 and 2022 we carried out research with 2,472 people across the ten locations to understand the project's impact to date and help shape future plans and priorities.

Overall, 15% of residents are aware of the Community Roots programme. Brent (37%) and Tottenham (34%) have the highest levels of awareness, whereas awareness is lowest in Leicester (7%), Burnley & Blackburn (5%) and Sandwell & Walsall (5%).

Those who have heard of the Community Roots programme are far more likely to have attended some form of event or activity at their local waterway in the past 12 months. Attendance is particularly strong in Brent.

Around a quarter of residents visit their local canal, waterway or waterspace at least once a week (26%).

Those who are aware that they live within 1km of their local canal, waterway or waterspace are more positive about the impact it has on their local area.

Evaluation to date shows that our Community Roots programme is:

- ✓ **Changing** negative perceptions of waterways – canals are seen as valued resources that need looking after.
- ✓ **Encouraging and improving** accessibility to canals, other waterways and waterspaces – giving people access to the green and blue spaces on their doorstep.
- ✓ **Having** important benefits for participants' physical and mental wellbeing.
- ✓ **Giving** people the chance to try something new, learn new skills and meet new people.
- ✓ **Helping** people to reconnect with nature and enjoy their local environment.

“When I first moved here, it was difficult because in my accommodation, there's truly little green space. I was introduced to the canal side, which is like literally in the Midlands anyway, it is everybody's local nature reserve.”
Participant



Case study: Engaging new audiences through Culture & Arts

Through our partnership with Arts Council England and Arts Council Wales, the Trust is using arts and culture to bring canals, other waterways and waterspaces to life in new and exciting ways, reaching new audiences and encouraging people from different backgrounds and communities to visit their local canal, river navigation or docks, often for the first time.

This partnership is based on a shared belief that arts, culture, and our country's vibrant canals, other waterways and waterspaces have an inspirational and transformational effect on communities and can boost wellbeing. It puts local people at the heart of delivering diverse engagement projects. It provides an opportunity to pilot place-based arts initiatives with the communities who are traditionally least likely to engage with the arts or canals.

Since January 2021, the number of people participating in the Trust's Art Programme have included:

161,227 Trust-led activities

227,039 Partner-led activities

270,000 Digital / online activities

Total **658,266**



“Our partnership with the Canal & River Trust is helping the Arts Council bring culture to more people in more places, with investment in organisations 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. We look forward to continuing to work with the Trust to amplify the impact of our funding, and bring the benefits of creativity and culture to even more people across the country.”

Dr Darren Henley, CBE
Chief Executive, Arts Council England

Our national street art trail

Our national street art trail aims to transform spaces alongside our canals with the help of local artists and community groups. The art tells the stories of different communities who live along the canal and encourages local people to visit. Thanks to support from players of People's Postcode Lottery, we have developed street arts trails in Sheffield, Coventry, Oxford, London, Leicester and Birmingham, adding colour and life to the canals and other waterways.



Soar Lane by Joe & Rich. One of the five large scale canalside murals in Leicester. The artwork is reflective of the wildlife found in the local area.

Artist Joe Miles

Mariam's story: Co-creation with the Somali community in partnership with Women's Inclusive Team

Since 2022, we have been working with the Women's Inclusive Team, an organisation advocating for equality and inclusion for Somali women, girls and their families in Tower Hamlets. The girls in the group had never been to the canal before and didn't see it as a space for them. Through a series of consultation and co-creation sessions, we worked with the girls and their group leaders to understand the barriers they were facing and co-designed a programme of activities that would enable them to experience and enjoy the Regent's Canal, including nature walks, kayaking and a boat trip.

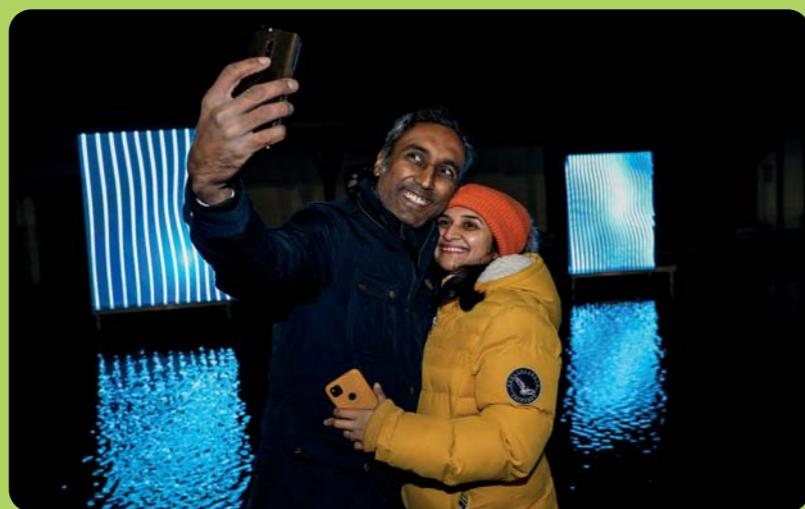


Mariam, a member of the London Girls' Group, said: "I feel happy when at the canal. I've been involved in the London Girls' Group by helping trips, canal walks, and waterways arts and crafts. My main motivation in being involved is to spend time by water with friends and feel safe and comfortable in doing so. I've enjoyed exploring new activities and

knowing that the canal is not just for white people. I've also benefited by learning how canals are maintained and looked after, so I can play a part in keeping them nice for others. The canal is important for me as it's local, and I love the atmosphere by water. I find water calming, and that being close to it has improved my mental wellbeing."

"Thanks to this project, the young ladies of the London Girls' Group have had exciting adventures along the canal."

We worked with Arts Council England as part of the Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 celebrations, hosting a range of events, performances and installations at Coventry Canal Basin. This included Studio Morison's Small Bells Ring narrowboat housing a floating library of short stories and school visits aboard our Learning by Water boat, Tucana.



Windrush generation on the water, Black History Month Celebrations 2023 in Nottingham

We teamed up with Binks Yard to celebrate Nottingham's heritage, hosting a Black History Month event by the city's canal. The event gave people the opportunity to see the city from a new perspective and explore its heritage.



Getting our waterways Games ready

As one of the leading members of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games programme 'United By Birmingham 2022', our Community Roots volunteers dedicated over 900 hours to make our canals look amazing, cleaning up over 22 miles of canals as part of our #plasticschallenge.



Over the 11 days of the games:

- 5 million** visitors to the region
- 152%** increase in footfall Perry Barr along Tame Valley
- 65%** increase in Birmingham City Centre
- 924 hours** of volunteering given by Trust volunteers
- 22 miles** of canal cleared of plastic through our Plastics Challenge
- 680 people** took a boat trip along Coventry Canal
- 2000+ people** engaged on 'Journeys' (floating museum)



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Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games Gen22 Programme

Canal & River Trust was one of the flagship delivery partners for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games Gen22 programme. As partner, we provided opportunities for young people aged 16-24 living in the West Midlands region to gain skills for life and work, by leading 100-hour volunteering projects and taking part in a series of employability workshops.



Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games



Community involvement & 'ownership' – volunteering, social action and rehabilitation

At the Trust, volunteers play an active, valuable and valued role at all levels and their time, commitment, energy and skills contribute so much to our charity.

The impact they are making every day is helping to ensure our canals, river navigations, docks and reservoirs are maintained, safe and welcoming spaces for us all to enjoy. Volunteers are helping us to make our canals, other waterways and waterspaces better places to visit – helping to

deliver great customer service and visitor experience, supporting our community participation programmes and events, undertaking repairs, restoration and environmental improvements, carrying out research as well as providing strategic direction and office-based support.

The annual wage replacement value to our volunteers is estimated at **£9.2 million.**



Last year 4,306 regular volunteers spent over **677,000 hours** helping us.



48% of our volunteers want to give back to their community.



Over **five million** hours of time has been given by our volunteers since the Trust was created in 2012.

The wellbeing value for our volunteers and affiliated partners is estimated at **£5.2 billion** per year.

31% want to meet new people and make new friends.



30% said mental wellbeing was a key reason for volunteering.



Since 2021, our 1,885 registered volunteer lock keepers recorded over **647,000 hours** of lock keeping.



“It’s all about people, boats, fresh air and outdoor activity. I’m into my ninth season as a volunteer lock keeper here at Diglis in the heart of the city of Worcester and I’m loving it more all the time. Each year I learn new things and meet new people. I’m getting great exercise in the fresh air, I absolutely love the history of the waterways and I get to meet some fascinating people.”

Gill, volunteer Lock Keeper, Worcester & Birmingham Canal



“My ever-growing relationship with the Trust is genuinely one to cherish. In the first 20 years of my life, I had never been to a canal. Today, I volunteer on the Trust’s Council, Regional Board for London and am the Chair of the Youth Advisory Group, actively seeking and creating ways to guide young people and communities towards the waterways. I am driven to help people appreciate the Trust’s network of canals and navigable rivers. My involvement has contributed to my own personal and professional development and helped to progress the businesses I run.”

Louis Howell, Trust volunteer



“We are working with corporate volunteers to deliver practical improvements. Our partnership has seen MACE volunteers and Trust colleagues work together to improve Beauty and Nature on the Doorstep, protecting habitats for wildlife and creating attractive places for people to access nature.”

Case study: Community rehabilitation on our network

Across England and Wales there is a growing issue with prison overcrowding and current population numbers greatly exceed capacity. There is a need for a long-term strategy to address this at all levels and one strand of the solution is alternatives to custodial sentences for low-level offenders.

Probation and community sentences are increasingly viewed as a good alternative to short-term prison sentences – as well as reducing the prison population they have generally shown to be associated with lower offending rates.

We've developed a national partnership with the Ministry of Justice and His Majesty's Prison & Probation Service to contribute to the delivery of the Government's rehabilitation agenda and increase our operational capacity to improve our network.

Through our community rehabilitation partnership, we aim to provide up to 300,000 hours community payback activity by 2025/26.

People on probation are helping deliver a range of improvements

along our canals, other waterways and waterspaces including vegetation management; lock gate painting; towpath works; graffiti and rubbish removal; and installing signs and benches.

Across the Trust we have probation teams working in 16 areas, across all 6 regions, contributing c50,000 hours a year. The Trust is now the largest partner of the new West Midlands Probation service and has eight teams a week working in partnership with the Trust's regional colleagues in Birmingham, Sandwell, Wolverhampton, Walsall, Nuneaton and Telford. Due to the success of this partnership, we are exploring opportunities in Worcester, Coventry and Stoke-on-Trent.

Our partnership is delivering benefits for the Trust, the Ministry of Justice, the participants involved and wider communities. Teams help deliver our Beauty and Wellbeing on the Doorstep programmes, increase regional capacity to maintain the canals, river navigations, docks and network of reservoirs and improve the physical environment for wildlife as well as visitors and local communities.



Our partnership is delivering...

Over **1,000** People on Probation engaged so far at 16 sites.



Over **50,000** hours of improvement activity in 2022/23.



Set to increase to **65,000** hours at 25 sites in 2023/24.



Our research also shows there are myriad benefits for participants carrying out the works. We worked with State of Life to evidence the benefits of community rehabilitation on the waterways for those taking part as well as the associated social value. It found that participants doing unpaid work on canals have considerably higher average scores in wellbeing, health, trust, individual development outcomes and nature friendly attitudes compared to their counterparts placed elsewhere.

- **There's an estimated social benefit of £9,550 for every person on probation and total yearly social value of £1.6 million in the Staffordshire region.**

The aim now is to expand the evaluation into a longitudinal study to other regions to inform a national study with the Ministry of Justice. These outcomes reinforce the case for the Trust to continue to be a key partner of choice for delivering Government's rehabilitation agenda with waterside communities benefiting from the improvements and the individuals benefiting from the experience.

“ This year is Community Payback's 50th anniversary and we've built on our ongoing relationship with people on probation working on numerous waterway projects and canal cleanups across the country. These projects are great ways for people on probation to repay their communities while improving our environment and learning skills, including construction, to boost their confidence and employability. ”

Caroline Morrison, the Ministry of Justice Head of Unpaid Work Policy, Projects and People



Case study: Citizen Science Programme

Since 2021, we have been growing our network of citizen scientists who are helping us to gather data and better understand the value of canals for communities.

Working with a variety of charity partners and academic institutions, our projects range from canal-based opportunities such as Otter Spotters, Towpath Surveys, 'Spot that Habitat' and 'Bio-Blitz' to home-based and remote opportunities such as 'Sense in Nature' and 'Rate this Scene'.

Citizen Science projects provide a fantastic 'gateway' opportunity to the Trust as well as being a great way for our supporters, visitors and volunteers to deepen their relationship with us, build skills, confidence and capabilities in new areas and take on additional responsibilities as project advocates, ambassadors and leaders.

Sense in Nature:
1,700 citizen scientists completed nature surveys.



1,624,294 votes cast through 'Rate this Scene'.



The data gathered by our Citizen Scientists is helping to inform our work planning at a local, regional and national level as well as feeding into national counts where it plays a role in shaping policy and practice across the sector.

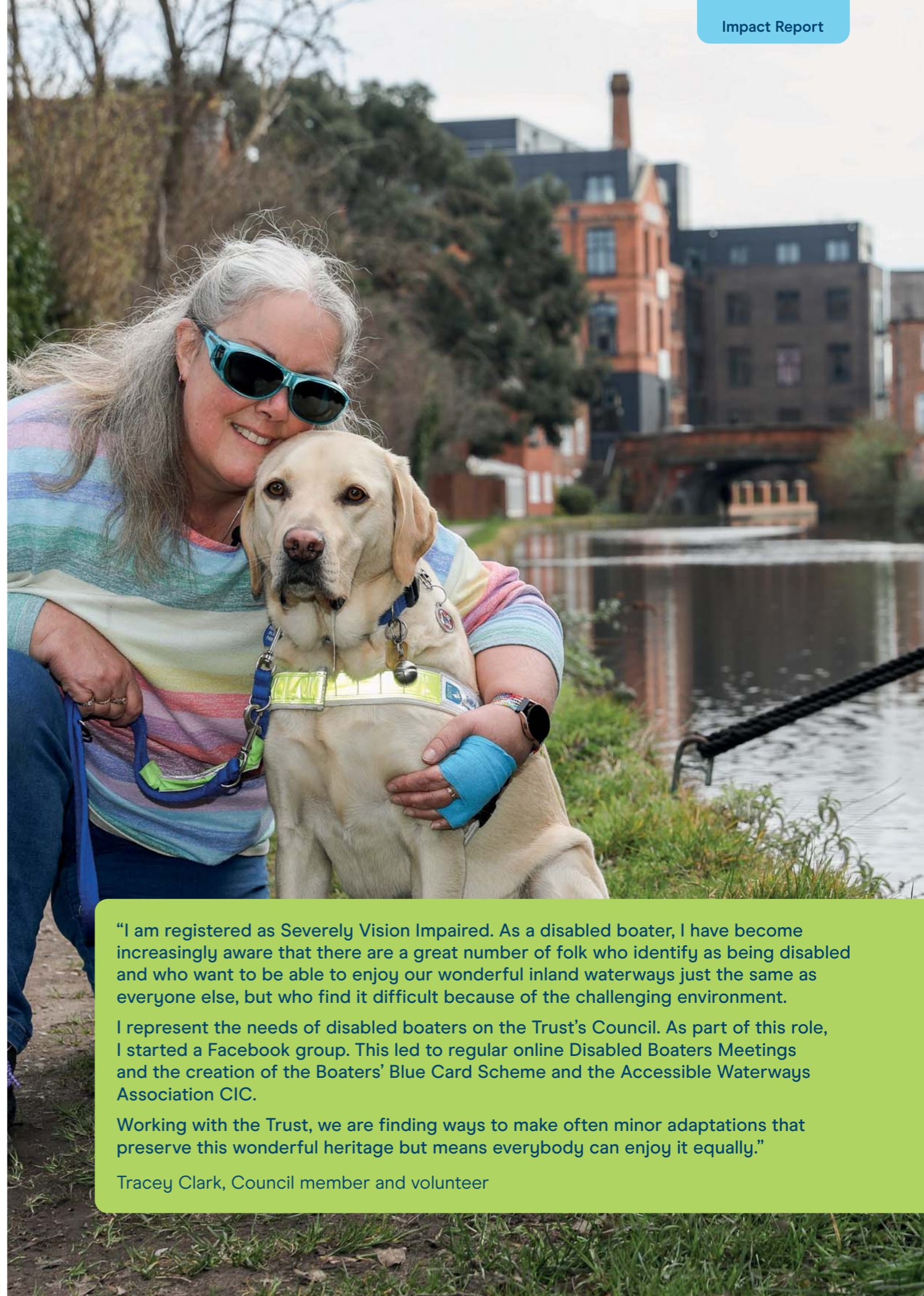
79,000 Tap that Habitat votes by **3,782** citizen scientists.



Malcolm Gray, Towpath Characterisation Citizen Scientist, volunteers for a project aiming to collect data on the condition and character of our towpath network, and provide a picture of where towpath improvements are required and ensure visitor experience is of a good quality.

"Over the last six months I have completed 500 survey locations. The survey itself involves a photograph of the towpath, several measurements of width and condition and a description of the locality and how it feels to you.

It is quite a pleasant task to complete a survey, meeting walkers and boaters and locals wondering what you are doing, especially on a crisp sunny morning."



"I am registered as Severely Vision Impaired. As a disabled boater, I have become increasingly aware that there are a great number of folk who identify as being disabled and who want to be able to enjoy our wonderful inland waterways just the same as everyone else, but who find it difficult because of the challenging environment.

I represent the needs of disabled boaters on the Trust's Council. As part of this role, I started a Facebook group. This led to regular online Disabled Boaters Meetings and the creation of the Boaters' Blue Card Scheme and the Accessible Waterways Association CIC.

Working with the Trust, we are finding ways to make often minor adaptations that preserve this wonderful heritage but means everybody can enjoy it equally."

Tracey Clark, Council member and volunteer