



# Towards a National Nature Reserve 'The Flashes of Wigan and Leigh'

Report by the partners, led by Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside Wildlife Trust on engagement of local people, March 2021



The University of Manchester

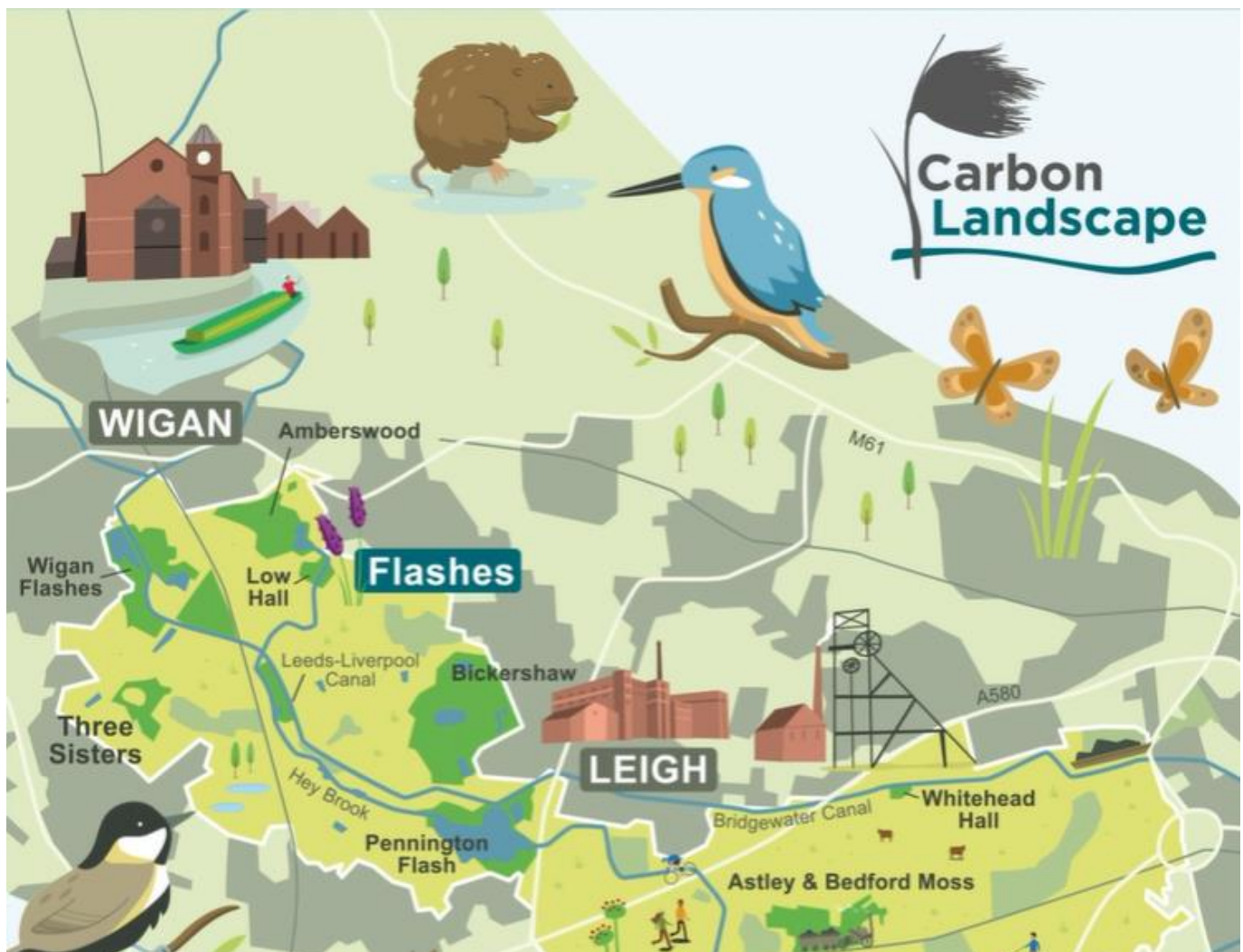


Lancashire,  
Manchester &  
N Merseyside



## 1.. Background

With 2.8 million people on the doorstep, the proposed declaration of a National Nature Reserve (NNR) “Flashes of Wigan and Leigh” offers a potential catalyst for developing a resilient landscape of Great Manchester Wetlands, which sits between Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Regions. This cluster of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Local Nature Reserves (LNR) in the Flashes, offers an opportunity to support a modern approach to delivering the National Nature Reserve (NNR) Strategy at the heart of a Nature Recovery Network (NRN). Importantly, through the exciting opportunities offered for engagement and science, the proposed NNR offers extensive access and recreational infrastructure in a highly urbanised environment.



This cluster of post-industrial ‘Flashes’ and wetland habitats were created through flooding of subsided deep coal mine workings. This historic industrial landscape is the birth place of the Industrial Revolution, which provides a valuable opportunity for NNRs to demonstrate and interpret the value of more recently created and restored habitats, and the changing perception of natural capital assets throughout the ages.

This project is developing these biodiverse urban sites to be designated as a NNR. It is being delivered in Partnership building on the Carbon Landscape Partnership, National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) programme where an interactive map is available [www.carbonlandscape.org.uk/explore](http://www.carbonlandscape.org.uk/explore)

This pilot project had the following objectives, to:

- collate and build the **evidence base** to support a potential declaration for these sites as a new 'urban' National Nature Reserve.
- engage the **local community and wildlife groups in developing the evidence base** for potential declaration of NNR and longer term plans for this super cluster of sites and their environment.
- engage the **wider local communities especially young people (16 – 25 year)** in part of the planning for potential declaration, but also to develop these as a Nature Recovery Area as part of the wider wetland Nature Recovery Network.
- deliver through a **demonstration site** for the community engagement a series of reedbed restoration and enhancement work.
- Develop and evaluate **innovative community engagement** (both in the context of the pandemic and beyond), as part of the national Nature Recovery Network development.

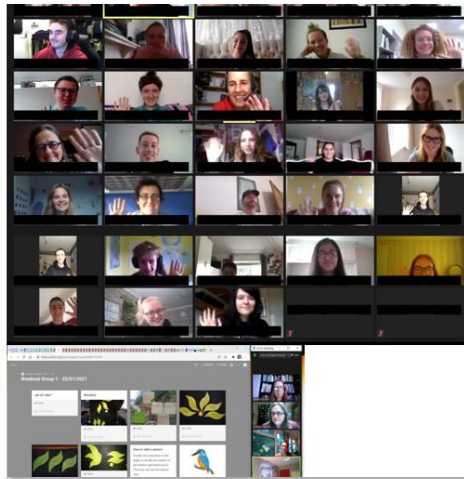
The project is linking to, and developing further, elements of The Carbon Landscape Programme, a NLHF funded Landscape Partnership Scheme running to 2022. This will provide ongoing legacy and support to this Wigan and Leigh NNR project. The desired outcome is an engaged local community supporting the evidence to underpin an application for the proposed NNR. It will reflect their wider interests and support for the landscape restoration and cluster of sites that make up the Wigan and Leigh Flashes and to evaluate the approach to engaging in this participatory process.

## 2.. The approach - offering beneficiaries a six session “core programme”

Natural England staff worked with the following partners:

- **Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside Wildlife Trust** for the physical restoration of Pearsons Flash (in conjunction with **Wigan Council**) and to extend the engagement to a wider group of young people specifically.
- **Carbon Landscape delivery partner The University of Manchester and Ketso** for strategic visioning, designing and delivering community engagement workshops, and data analysis to create a ‘story map’.
- **Greater Manchester Ecology Unit** to coordinate the citizen science, skills development in surveying and develop the evidence base for a proposed National Nature Reserve

The programme was delivered between November 2020 to March 2021. The beneficiaries were split into three groups whereby they were offered a six session programme comprising of Thursday evenings and Saturdays so delivery was quite intensive.



*“I went to Hawkley Hall High School. We used to go cross country running at Scotmans Flash and I had no idea.”*

The visioning workshops (delivered by Dr. Joanne Tippett and Fraser How as part of the Carbon Landscape Project) provided an ideal opportunity to reach new audiences in the Carbon Landscape. In the context of the pandemic and lockdowns, reaching community members and groups for physical workshops had become impractical. This Proposed NNR project created a focus around which strategic outreach could occur, bringing together three distinct groups of beneficiaries (detailed below). This created a powerful synergy, in which the Carbon Landscape community engagement workshops (via the ‘RoundView’ project) were brought to new audiences in the community, while simultaneously gathering data, insight and perspective to inform the Potential NNR declaration around the Flashes. In this way, the Potential NNR project provided valuable support to the Carbon Landscape engagement process, and the workshops themselves facilitated the core information gathering and engagement within the Potential NNR project.

### **The core programme of six sessions was:**

1. **Visioning and bigger picture** – This interactive session, with Dr Joanne Tippett and Fraser How, explored opportunities for the area and introduced key issues to do with nature recovery and heritage posing the questions “how can we best work together for nature recovery (and people's wellbeing) in Wigan and Leigh?”, “how we can best get more people involved in this in future”, “what matters to you in the landscape and what is working well!”. The session introduced the pandemic-inspired tool for engagement and learning, Ketso Connect to develop creative ideas.
2. **Virtual tour of Pearson’s Flash** - Pearson’s Flash enabled a real-life reedbed improvement managed by Dr Mark Champion to run alongside learning. Since this was

lockdown, this ended up being virtual as opposed to a site visit. Mark discussed the hydrology, drainage and getting those little fish to move through the reedbed to give bitterns more feeding opportunities. This in turn supported learning for the AQA Management Plans.

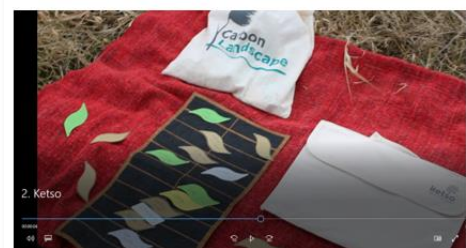
3. **Visioning and bigger picture – opportunities and creative ideas.** This session, with Dr Joanne Tippett and Fraser How, went deeper into creative visioning for the future of the area, developing ideas for nature recovery and sustainability in the wider area, and helping towards the aspiration of achieving National Nature Reserve Status. This workshop introduced the RoundView way of thinking about sustainability as a spark for new ideas.
4. **Bow saws and loppers outdoor volunteering** – this involved Covid-safe family-friendly volunteering helping clear scrub off the wetlands and creating a dead hedge with Community Engagement Officer Lizzie Hill from Lancashire Wildlife Trust and Support Officer Steve Ormerod from the Carbon Landscape Partnership.
5. **Surveying and ID skills** with Stephen Atkins of Greater Manchester Ecology Unit which again ended up on zoom. This was a taster of the skills involved. It became a really successful recruitment ground for a follow on six week course around surveying which had had 40+ people every week, which is a great achievement. It needed to be recorded and put onto youtube for people who felt they could not attend every session. It in turn supported the evidence base of “recruiting” more people to do the citizen science willow tit squares.
6. **Planning for the Future - Ways Forward** - This final session with Dr Joanne Tippett and Fraser How offered an opportunity to see and develop emerging ideas from the overall visioning process, prioritise next steps for action and think how best to get more people involved in this in future.

We believe the “deep dive” into strategic visioning with community members to create a ‘**story** map’ of ideas for the future is unique. Each participant was sent a physical pack to support their engagement and so they were not constantly looking at the screen during the workshops. This included a Ketso Connect kit for creative engagement and a series of paper maps created by The University of Manchester team, showing changes in the landscape from 1830s to 1880s to the present day in land and water forms. These were very popular and seemed to create a real fascination. These sessions have generated over a thousand ideas that will be distilled into a story map.

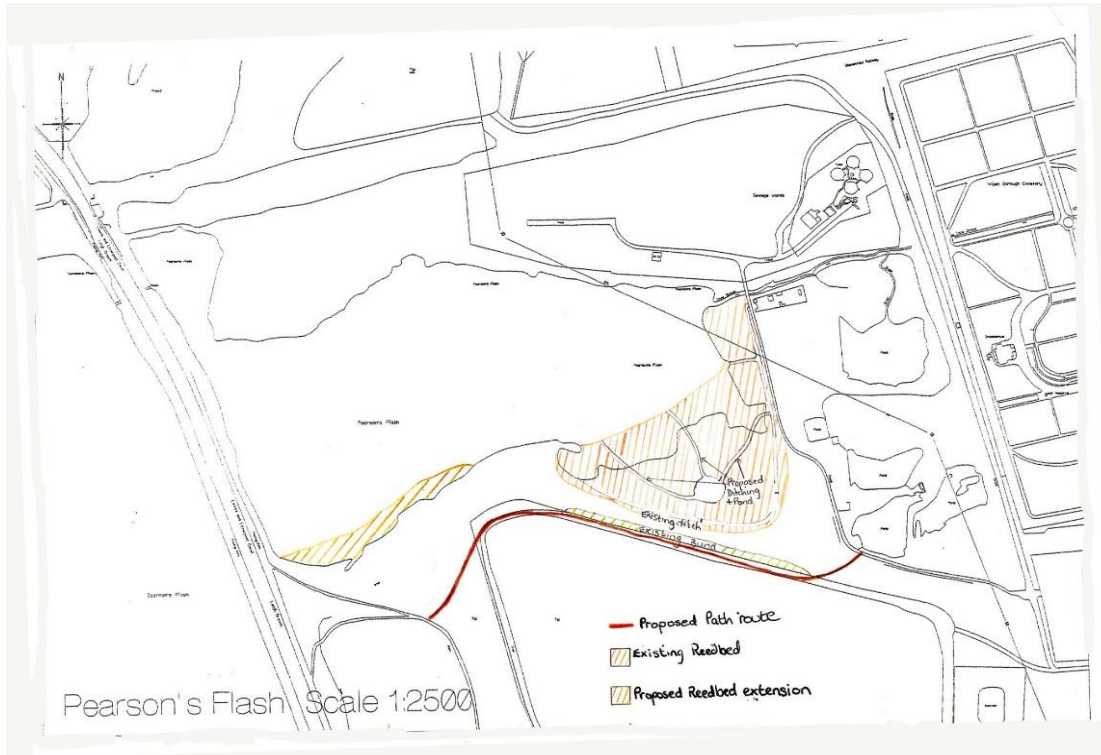
Similarly, the idea of **physical restoration work being a source of learning** for the local community is novel, especially forming the basis of an AQA Management Plans for Environmental Conservation which has enabled 8 learners to go onto get certificates.

The reedbed improvement works have created 3.5 ha of bed lowered reedbed and 0.5 km of new ditching. This, with other improvements, will make an existing bund water tight. It will also refurbish a water control feature to bring a total of 6 hectares into a new improved state. The reedbed is an integral part of the reedbed network found within the proposed NNR (where approximately 0.75% of the UK’s fresh water reedbed is located). During these important works water rail, Cetti’s warbler and bittern were all heard. The opportunity was taken to use the project to inform and engage with the community via zoom and social media UK Government as COVID-19 restrictions preventing the planned face to face engagement.

Visioning participant  
*“I join around 10 webinars per week and yours was sincerely the best. The most engaging, inclusive, organised and fun!”*



Now the excavator works are complete rotational reed cutting in late summer, with the support of volunteers, will maintain a range of structures and reed densities within the reedbed, making areas suitable for feeding, roosting and hopefully nesting bitterns and other reedbed birds. Some underwater cutting to cause drowning of reeds and therefore the opening up of clearings, will be necessary as the site matures after the land lowering.



### **3.. The beneficiaries**

For the purpose of delivering the core sessions the beneficiaries were split into three groups.

**Group A were local residents and Friends Groups** in Wigan and Leigh. We hosted a public meeting which was a complete sell out at 100 tickets and there clearly was an appetite for the proposed NNR declaration that felt like a groundswell of support. This group was then referred onto core sessions in November to December 2020 and the majority are still engaged by being offered a formal “opt in” process from the point of GDPR.

**Group B were young people (16 to 25)** We took a slightly different approach as we wanted to ask what they would like. They too had core sessions between January and February 2021 but they also liked the idea of co-creating digital content (using padlet) and creating a week of events in the February half term. The key feedback from local young people was they just didn't know about the history or wildlife of the landscape.

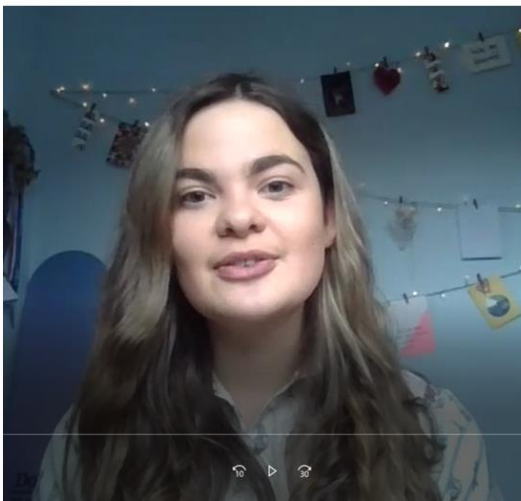
**Group C Pilot around Bickershaw Country Park.** This group ran February to March 2021. Bickershaw is not as far along in its journey towards nature recovery as coal mining only stopped in 1992. This is a more traditional capacity building group with the view to setting up a Friends Group after the core sessions. One participant, who has attended many of the sessions across the project, has also started to get the Heritage Resources together for a booklet. All this work is supported by the engagement officer Lizzie Hill.



*“I used to volunteer on Bickershaw Country Park and when the job became available I saw it as a great opportunity to start my career in conservation.”*

#### **4.. Our approach to driving engagement with the community and lessons learned**

The recruitment Techniques for Group A and C formed around social media. We created public **Eventbrite events with links to facebook**. A particularly important way for getting noticed is doing the social media shares on a Sunday morning on the big facebook nature groups like “Wigan Nature and Wildlife”. This was a good way to find likeminded people and also to get them chatting and sharing. We also **sent personal email invites to all the Friends groups**, environmental and heritage groups to distribute to their members. The other places were Carbon Landscape volunteer database, Bickershaw volunteer database and GMEU Citizen Science database. Also the **power of the engagement officer Lizzie chatting to people** at Bickershaw Country Park about the project should not be underestimated.



Emma

*“With the Youth Council we have had the chance to help with the running of Lancashire Wildlife Trust especially the campaigns like the peat free campaign.”*

The recruitment for the young people was slightly different. What we believe is quite unique about this project is involvement of young people fundamentally in the fabric of the work.

We started by **writing to local sixth forms and colleges with a tangible offer of mutual interest** and we managed to

engage Winstanley, St John Rigby, Deanery, Myerscough College, Wigan and Leigh College this way. Not everyone wants to be involved in planning, surveying or site management and so using arts projects, such as how to run a media campaign or script writing for an augmented reality trail with British Cycling have been important. Due to Covid restrictions it was difficult to capture some existing groups like the Wigan Youth Zone and other interest groups. Also it may have been felt “too high brow” a project for under 16s and so they were signposted to other Carbon Landscape arts and culture programmes which focused on supporting getting young people out into the landscape.

**The golden rules of community engagement are build on what has gone before and look for where there is willingness.** The

young people Group worked because of this approach especially through a Youth Summit organised by the Carbon Landscape and Myplace Team in Summer 2020. This was aimed at 16-25

year olds, many of whom are leaders in their communities. Also Wigan Council Youth Cabinet support staff have also supported in a practical way for example distributing ketso packs and supporting young people to attend sessions.



Layan

*“knowing all the locations are near my house.. I just wanted to visit every place especially to see some ducks. I wanted to take my mum.”*

*About the Bickershaw virtual tour –  
“Really informative. Has made me realise how much more I’m missing on my walks.”*



Lockdown prevented actual “in person” surveying and bespoke on site visits to Pearson’s Flash e.g. site visits by Myerscough College and the local sixth form, the Deanery, had to be cancelled. However, using Zoom was a good way to engage and quite a few people said they wouldn’t have been able to attend actual site visits. However, it prevents actual “bonding”, little chats between participant which means everything is facilitated by the person leading the group. People are often “shy” on zoom chat and certainly we found with young people they did not like to switch on their cameras.

However, for Group C, the Bickershaw participants, said the virtual tour enabled them to see the country park in a different way and provided a unique experience.

## **5.. Beyond the core sessions**

Carbon Landscape team has been overseeing the running of 40 workshops (including the six sessions core programme) which were not always specific to the proposed NNR but supported the wider understanding of the this landscape and its biodiversity.

Zoom sessions included trying to appeal to a broad audience base.

- Launch of a short film with a walk of the area and networking event
- Willow tit surveying course
- Six week wildlife surveying course - led by GMEU ecologists and supporting the Citizen Science work of evidence and surveys for Carbon Landscape and this proposal for a NNR.
- Script writing about wildlife for the augmented reality trail



- Art Ideas in Nature
- How to run an iNaturalist safari
- Media training – get your message out there
- Futurist planning with Dr Jess Symons
- Weekend AQA Management Plans for Conservation
- Apple pruning
- AQA Wetlands
- AQA Grasslands
- Youth summit to discuss how they would like to approach the project
- Safeguarding whilst volunteering – working with children and adults at risk
- AQA Wetlands
- Tree ID
- Public meeting for the Proposed NNR



*“I really enjoyed the weekend management plans AQA course as I liked understanding more about what goes into the management of a site and how to create a management plan, skills which I will be able to take forward and use in the future for my career.”*

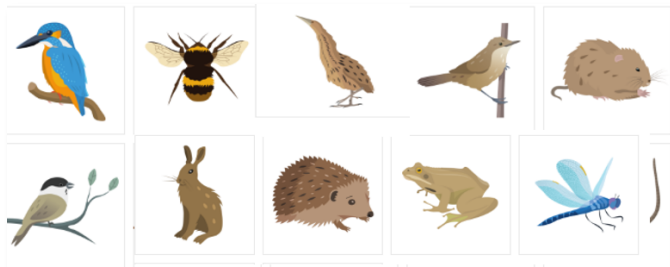
**General public zoom sessions are a significant administration commitment especially dealing with hundreds of email queries.** Zoom invites need sending a couple of days before and then a reminder a couple of hours before. We pushed through new territory by delivering a full weekend course with Dave Winnard on an AQA of Management Plans. From this 10 participants went on to write their own management plans that have been assessed. As part of this some of the Group A participants used and assessed the data from the Manchester University zooms so real life data is informing learning.

It was noted that's Public zoom sessions held during weekday daytime were poorly attended. **The 6pm Monday to Thursday or Saturday workshops are the sweet spot for engagement.**

Also, there has to be a varying programme of activity to appeal to different audiences from the highly skilled bird watchers, who want surveying complex information, to young people with additional needs.

We found running sessions over 1.5 hours is optimum in terms of engagement and participation.

## 6.. Next steps and legacy



*“The Future has to be the National Nature Reserve and something everyone one in Leigh Ornithological Society will be enthusiastically supporting.” Paul Richardson.*

n  
scape

Group A (locals) and C (Locals for Bickershaw Pilot) are to follow on **into surveying, Carbon Landscape volunteering and supporting with the NNR declaration.**

There is a proposal to consider this suite of sites across this landscape for declaration as a National Nature Reserve. The Project Team will work with Natural England to support the evidence and application for consideration and will engage the wider participants in that development as it progresses in 2021.

We are proposing and supporting the Bickershaw group (Group C) to work alongside the community engagement officer Lizzie to form a **Friends group, which will be an amazing legacy.**



Minnie

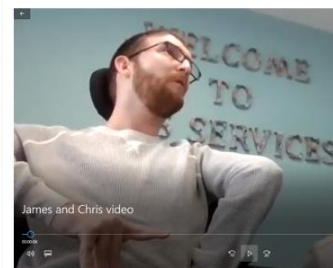
*“I’ve been sent on this one day course to gain my brushcutter licence which is really exciting... we are looking forward to putting our new skills into practice soon.”*

We have also focused on **work-based training especially for the young people** with the opportunity to train up young people in skills that should enable them to get a job in the sector in the future. Examples include brushcutter and outdoor first aid where we also got young people to diarise their day. Tom Burditt who is CEO of Lancashire Wildlife Trust has offered one of the Group B (young people) participants an opportunity to

work shadow some of his more strategic meetings.

Lancashire Wildlife Project Assistant Danielle Rowlands (a young person from Wigan) has been assisting other young people to create a **social media campaign around the hashtag #iflhadanNNR.**

Part of the motivation for this was we wanted to share more of the wonderful footage we captured through a film making process (see below). We also want to maintain momentum until the documentary launches and the Landscape Adventurers programme (which is part of the NLHF Carbon Landscape programme aimed at younger people, 7-17) begins delivering in April 2021 by offering long-term sustainable opportunities to young people.



James –  
*“I felt I had a voice”*

## New Voices in Nature Recovery

Finally, the jewel in the crown of the Proposed NNR project is a **45-minute documentary** (with a 3 minute trailer) which has been presented by Josh Styles, who leads the North West Rare Plants Initiative, with one young person describing him as the “Brian Cox of Botany”. Josh is only 24 so we are excited for a young person to be a figure head of the documentary.

We wanted to capture the new voices in nature recovery so have a broad spectrum of young people engaged in the making and content of the film including a wheelchair user campaigner James. The film is also filmed and edited by a promising young film maker Joe Roper who has been incredibly flexible and supportive especially when we have had to use zoom footage.

*“The establishment of a National Nature Reserve will be important for the amazing wildlife we have here. From booming bitterns to ostentatious orchids.”*



## 7.. Conclusions

Despite the enormous barriers posed by lockdown, we realised we hit a real latent demand for improving the recognition of the unique character of the Flashes from Wigan to Leigh with potential National Nature Reserve status and engaging the local communities in this journey right from the start. The participation by local community members took time and effort but engaging them in a meaningful way so they participate and are not just consulted has led to a much wider appreciation of the landscape, its history and its future.

Zoom meant that we could reach a wider audience quicker and a year of zooming has shown that all sections of society, including older people, are now getting familiar with the technology.

The ongoing engagement through the learning and development programme has provided a real hook to motivate and engage people into these sites and their possible declaration as a National Nature Reserve and longer term future management.

A variety of themes and subjects has allowed interests to be met. The ongoing support throughout the programme by engagement leads for each Group has been a critical way to maintain the Group, its interests, communications between the participants and the organisations involved. These engagement leads have been able to fully develop outreach activity and a deeper engagement into local communities than would occur otherwise.



Proposed National Nature Reserve  
Wigan Flashes to Pennington

# NEW VOICES IN NATURE RECOVERY

4

delivery  
partners

4

supporting  
organisations

40

zoom  
workshops

Over  
1000

ideas captured by  
Manchester University  
/ Ketso team



256

local people  
involved

including  
38

young people

22.5k

social media  
engagements

7

events in  
Nature Recovery  
Action Week



Here are the statistics of the project at a glance.