

Vast former industrial sites set to be one of UK's largest urban nature reserves

- The Flashes of Wigan and Leigh set to become one of the biggest urban nature reserves with new declaration
- 738-hectare green beacon close to major urban areas will provide access to nature for over 300,000 local people
- Nationally important habitat will help protect rare willow tits, bitterns and water voles

A former industrial wasteland which is now a nationally important site for rare wildlife such as willow tit and bittern is set to become one of England's largest urban nature reserves.

The Flashes of Wigan and Leigh – a 738-hectare area of species-rich wetland, meadows and woodlands – will today (3 October) join England's network of National Nature Reserves.

The designation, which will be the first in the Greater Manchester area, recognises the incredible transformation of the Flashes over the last 100 years. Lakes formed as a result of mining subsidence became home to wildlife like the 'booming bittern' as natural recolonisation and large-scale reclamation works healed the scars of industry.

The former industrial landscape is declared not only for its importance in protecting wildlife and natural capital but for its recreational value to the community. It is hoped the site, which is home to a variety of pursuits from fishing to cycling, nature walks and birdwatching, will provide new opportunities for sustainable tourism and visits from local residents and those further afield.

The new protected reserve will create an oasis for nature, with Wigan also now recognised as one of the greenest urban boroughs in the United Kingdom. The mosaic of shallow open water and wetland habitats (swamp, reedbed, tall herb fen, wet marshy grassland and wet woodland) supports a rich diversity of birds and other species. This includes over 52 pairs of willow tit, accounting for approximately 2% of England's population, as well as the heron-like bittern, water voles and great crested newts.

Natural England Chief Executive, Marian Spain said:

National Nature Reserves help reconnect people with our natural world, providing much needed opportunities to explore our incredible landscape for our health and wellbeing.

A healthy natural environment and economic growth go hand in hand. By working together to build strong partnerships such as those we

see here in the Flashes of Wigan and Leigh, we can provide space for rare species and provide vital greenspace. That will make Wigan and Leigh great places to live and great places to do business in, so helping to attract inward investment.

The unique wetlands in Wigan and Leigh were forged by nature reclaiming former industrial land. Today's designation demonstrates how it is possible to reverse the decline in nature.

Nature underpins the British economy with our natural capital estimated in 2019 to be worth £1.2 trillion. The site will benefit over 300,000 people who live locally to the area, making sure communities and young people have accessible outdoor space for health, recreation, and wellbeing.

Working in partnership with communities has been key to realising this new National Nature Reserve. Declared by Natural England with Wigan Council, Lancashire Wildlife Trust and Forestry England, the NNR brings together a total of 13 sites, including Wigan Flashes, Amberswood, Three Sisters, and Bickershaw Country Park. It also includes Viridor woodland, planted by Forestry England just over 20 years ago.

National Nature Reserves were established to protect some of the most important habitats for vulnerable species, and to provide 'outdoor laboratories' for research. They create vital opportunities for the public, schools, and specialist interest groups to experience wildlife first-hand and to learn more about nature conservation .

This year is the 70th anniversary of the creation of England's first nature reserve – highlighting a long history of restoring nature and helping to bring green space and wildlife to everyone.

There are now 220 National Nature Reserve sites, spanning a total of more than 103,000 hectares. These nature hotspots are key to efforts to restore nature across England, and will play a key role in the nation's nature recovery network in line with the Government's key target to halt the decline in wildlife populations by 2030.

COP President Alok Sharma to attend pre-COP negotiations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo ahead of COP27

- The pre-COP meeting in Kinshasa, hosted by the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Egypt, is the final formal multilateral opportunity for

ministers to shape climate negotiations ahead of COP27 in November

- The COP President will represent the UK at the meeting to lay the foundations for a successful COP27 in Egypt that strengthens global climate commitments and builds on COP26
- He will also highlight the importance of the Congo Basin rainforest as the Earth's most efficient carbon sink, as he calls on countries to honour their COP 26 promises to halt and reverse forest loss, whilst supporting sustainable development

COP President Alok Sharma will travel to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for pre-COP, which runs from 3-5 October. Pre-COP is the annual preparatory meeting ahead of the UN Conference of the Parties (COP). Ahead of COP27 in Egypt, the COP President will continue to work alongside Ministers to build the foundations for successful negotiations at COP27 and progress on adaptation, mitigation, loss and damage and finance.

This year's pre-COP is being held in Kinshasa, the first time in six years that the event has been held in Africa. The DRC is home to the largest proportion of the Congo Basin forest, which is the world's second largest tropical rainforest region and part of the solution to climate change.

At COP26 in Glasgow, former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, US President Joe Biden, President Felix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and President Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon announced a donor pledge from 12 donors of \$1.5 billion for the Congo Basin forests over 2021-25. Whilst in Kinshasa, the COP President will give an update on the progress of the pledge, ahead of its formal reporting on the Pledge at COP27.

This pledge will protect and maintain the Congo Basin forests, peatlands and other critical global carbon stores whilst meeting local sustainable economic development needs.

The COP26 Presidency recently invited world leaders to come together at COP27 to establish the Forests & Climate Leaders Partnership. This new Partnership will accelerate implementation of the unprecedented commitment made at COP26 by more than 140 countries to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation, while delivering sustainable development and promoting an inclusive rural transformation.

Pre-COP will be the last time that ministers collectively gather ahead of COP27.

COP President Alok Sharma said:

"With just over a month to go until COP27, discussions here in the DRC take on an ever greater urgency.

"As the impacts of climate change become more extreme, the focus must remain

on implementation and action – driving progress on what was collectively agreed in Glasgow. And we should be clear: the Glasgow Climate Pact and Paris Agreement must be the baseline of our ambition.

“Our hosts the DRC are the primary stewards of the second largest forest in the world. Forests are the lungs of our planet, absorbing one third of the CO2 which fossil fuel burning releases every year.

“COP26 laid the groundwork for more ambitious action, with more than 140 leaders committing to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030. COP27 must be a moment for delivering on these commitments made to protect and restore forests.”

-ENDS-

Notes to editors

- The UK committed £1.5bn over five years to support the forests pledge, including £350m for tropical forests in Indonesia, and £200m for the LEAF Coalition.
 - The UK will also contribute £200m, alongside 11 other donors, as part of a new £1.1 billion (\$1.5bn) fund to protect the Congo Basin. The area is home to the second-largest tropical rainforest in the world which is threatened by industrial logging, mining and agriculture.
 - Last year’s landmark forest pledge at COP26 to end deforestation was the biggest step forward in a generation to protect the world’s forests. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-100-leaders-make-landmark-pledge-to-end-deforestation-at-cop26>)
 - [The Glasgow Climate Pact](#) (GCP) kept alive the goal of limiting global temperatures from rising more than 1.5C degrees, while also cementing progress on finance for climate action, adaptation and loss and damage. The GCP sets out a clear framework for progress ahead of COP27 including:
 - Calling on countries to phase-down unabated coal power and phase-out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies.
 - Requesting that countries revisit and strengthen their 2030 emissions reduction targets as necessary to align with the Paris temperature goal by the end of this year.
 - Urging developed countries to scale-up climate finance, including delivery of the collective \$100bn joint mobilisation goal as soon as possible and through to 2025, and to double finance for adaptation by 2025 on 2019 levels.
 - Underlining the central importance of adaptation, the dangers of loss and damage, and the need to scale-up action and support for both.
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Red tape cut for thousands of growing businesses

- More businesses to be categorised as small businesses, meaning less red tape
- Move will potentially exempt tens of thousands of the UK's growing businesses from relevant future regulations, saving them thousands of pounds
- Start of a sweeping package of reforms to cut red tape for business and stimulate growth

Thousands of the UK's fastest-growing businesses will be released from reporting requirements and other regulations in the future, as part of plans aimed at boosting productivity and supercharging growth, Prime Minister Liz Truss announced earlier today.

Currently, small businesses are presumed to be exempt from certain regulations. However, many medium sized businesses – those with between 50 and 249 employees – still report that they are spending over 22 staff days per month on average dealing with regulation, and over half of all businesses consider regulation to be a burden to their operation [[source](#)].

The Prime Minister has announced plans to widen these exemptions to businesses with fewer than 500 employees for future and reviewed regulations, meaning an additional 40,000 businesses will be freed from future bureaucracy and the accompanying paperwork that is expensive and burdensome for all but the largest firms.

The exemption will be applied in a proportionate way to ensure workers' rights and other standards will be protected, while at the same time reducing the burden for growing businesses.

Regulatory exemptions are often granted for SMEs, which the EU defines at below 250 employees. However, we are free to take our own approach and exempt more businesses to those with under 500 employees. We will also be able to apply this to retained EU law currently under review, which we would not have been able to do without our exit from the EU.

The changed threshold will apply from tomorrow (Monday 3 October) to all new

regulations under development as well as those under current and future review, including retained EU laws. The Government will also look at plans to consult in the future on potentially extending the threshold to businesses with 1000 employees, once the impact on the current extension is known.

This is the first step in a package of reforms to ensure UK business regulation works for the UK economy. The reforms will harness the freedoms the UK has since leaving the EU to remove bureaucratic and burdensome regulations on businesses, while streamlining and making it easier for them to comply with existing rules, ultimately saving them valuable time and money.

Notes to editors

- Currently, government's starting assumption when developing policy is that businesses with less than 50 employees should be exempt from certain regulations. We are now amending this assumption to businesses with less than 500 employees.
- These are not blanket exemptions, and they can be overridden in appropriate cases as a result of the policy development process including any consultations that may be undertaken if there is a justifiable reason for doing so.
- The changed threshold will apply from Monday 3 October.
- 'Staff days' refers to the total number of days worked by individual members of staff during one month.

Areas urged to 'go for growth' as Investment Zone applications open

- Pushing ahead with its mission to level up, the government is encouraging councils to take full advantage of its offer to lower taxes and streamline planning rules
- The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is inviting expressions of interest for Investment Zones from all local areas in England from today
- Investment Zones will boost growth, deliver homes, spread opportunity and create jobs across the country.

Local areas wanting to turbocharge economic growth can apply to host a new Investment Zone from today (Saturday 1st October).

The government is encouraging councils to take full advantage of its offer of lower taxes and streamlined planning rules for specific sites to boost investment and development – both commercial and residential.

These offers will, as part of the government's wider levelling up measures, drive serious economic growth that will be transformational for towns and cities across the country. They will create jobs, deliver new homes and spread opportunity.

Investment Zones could benefit from a range of tax incentives over the next 10 years, such as reliefs on business rates, stamp duty land tax and employer national insurance contributions.

Through Investment Zones, the government will also empower local places to deliver planning that is right for their area, while maintaining high environmental outcomes and keeping national green belt protections in place. To ensure this, local areas must agree in the EOI process to require mitigation of any adverse environmental impacts of the proposed development.

The government has been working with local areas to identify bureaucratic requirements, processes and red tape that needlessly slow down development or make it more complex than it should be – with Investment Zones set to benefit from simplified planning rules. This includes reviewing ineffective EU requirements, lengthy consultations with statutory bodies and onerous national and local policy rules.

The government has had encouraging discussions with 38 councils, from Cornwall to Cumbria, about proposals for specific, defined areas within the local authority that could become an Investment Zone. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is now inviting expressions of interest from those initial places and all other Mayoral Combined Authorities or Upper Tier Local Authorities and Freeports in England by Friday 14 October.

To ensure Zones have the infrastructure and skilled workforce that they need, the government will give greater control over local growth funding to local leaders.

Local authorities are being asked to keep growth at the front and centre of their plans by setting out the potential economic opportunities of an Investment Zone in their area, how they fit into the area's wider economic strategy and how they will support long-term UK economic growth.

Investment Zones will be open to all but the government will set a high bar for establishing them, honing in on areas where they will have the greatest impact on growth and housing supply.

Bids will also be considered on the pace at which development can be delivered and should set out any live or potential, public, private or foreign direct investment that is likely to come forward.

Freeport governing bodies will be able to convert their existing tax sites to Investment Zones, should they wish to.

The UK government wants the offer of Investment Zones to be extended across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and is working with the devolved administrations on the best way to do this.

The deadline for expressions of interests is noon on Friday 14 October, and successful areas will be announced within weeks.