

Carving Connections



CONCEPT & AIM:

Carving Connections addressed the overlapping challenges of social isolation, cultural exclusion, and lack of access to green space and public creative activity among South Asian women in Accrington. Many members of Accrington's Station Adoption group, Stations of Welcome experienced barriers—both cultural and practical—that limited their participation in public life, outdoor environments, and creative expression. They were often underrepresented in craft-based learning, rural engagement, and public art.

The project was part funded by Community Rail Network through the DfT Community Rail Development Fund (CRDF), aimed to increase confidence, wellbeing, and social connection through hands-on greenwood craft workshops, co-creation of sculptural public benches, and shared rail-connected journeys into the Arnside and Silverdale National Landscape. These experiences supported agency, skill-building, and emotional connection to place and community amongst this community.

WHAT HAPPENED

In collaboration with The Coppice Co-op participants worked with traditional tools and sustainable, locally sourced timber over four weekly sessions, developing environmental awareness alongside creative skills. Sessions also invited personal and cultural reflection—encouraging participants to consider their own relationship with landscape, nature, and belonging.

The group of 12 women learned how to use a variety of tools to carve designs into the back rest of the bench. They had to work to a time limit at each session so had to manage their time efficiently.



The final benches were installed as permanent artworks in the rural public space, creating a visible legacy of inclusion, collaboration, and creativity. They acted as both practical seating and symbolic markers of identity and shared ownership of the space.

The project also fostered connection between groups: the Silverdale Station Adoption group was invited to visit the Accrington-based participants—creating a rare and valuable opportunity to start building connections and relationships across communities connected by the railway.

The bench designs reflect the women who created them. The names of all the participants are carved into the bench in English and Urdu as well as a railway track, a mosque, an acorn that represents Accrington and a Bitten that represents Silverdale.

There were 6 train trips altogether from Accrington to Silverdale, with a change at Preston. On one occasion I couldn't accompany the group due to another commitment, so two members of Stations of Welcome lead the group to Silverdale and back. This was a huge leap in terms of confidence as they were not only taking the trip without the usual support of a CRL member of staff but were taking responsibility for the rest of the group.

There were many conversations about different ways of life and discussions about opportunities for women in the South Asian heritage communities as well as a great appreciation for the opportunity to experience a part of the country that is considered the whitest county in England.

They would meet a gentleman at the station every week who would ask them about the progress of their work. He was usually travelling to Lancaster and would sit with the group and ask them about what they do etc. He actually came to the celebration at the Coppice Co-op.

There is a bench in the Silverdale and Arnside National Landscape that has the names of women on it that from a Pakistani heritage because they helped to design and create it. This is a huge achievement for the group but also as an example of true community cohesion. People from all over the country will visit the area and see what has been done by these women for years to come. It has inspired the group to share their achievement with the wider community and their families.

The bench in Accrington will stay there for years to come when the grandchildren of the women will be able to see what their grandmother did. For many of the women this is more than they ever thought they might be remembered for.



OUTCOMES

The whole project was a joy, and the collaboration with The Coppice Co-op was a triumph. It was a proud moment to see the final product and the role the women played in making the bench. They designed and carved it themselves, adding to the design each week after reflecting on their work. They took the project seriously and enjoyed each session. Conversations after each session on the train home about completed work and plans for the following week showed the project's importance in their lives. All participants attended every session, organising their home lives around it—a change in mindset that was a positive outcome. Many learned to prioritise themselves and their commitment, which made them feel valued.

Many families attended the celebration event, showing the immense pride the women had in their achievement. Some members of the local mosque in Accrington also attended the unveiling and were proud to see a symbol of the mosque carved onto the bench.

Conversations on the train to Silverdale often focused on feeling uplifted by being outdoors, doing something they hadn't thought possible, and how sitting around the open fire reminded them of childhoods.

There is potential for a project with Community Rail Cumbria linking the mosque in Accrington to the new prayer centre in Dalton, Cumbria—an opportunity to connect two different counties and communities by rail.

This project is special. The women started just after the COVID-19 pandemic as a support group due to lack of confidence, and four years on they are participating in community activities that benefit both them and their community. Stations of Welcome's tagline, Our Faith, Our Town, Our Station, is reflected in their work, showcasing important aspects of their faith. The project shows how community rail positively impacts lives, proving that hijab-wearing Muslim women are seen, heard, and play a positive community role.

The benches they created will remain in the Arnside and Silverdale National Landscape and at Accrington Station for many years, leaving a legacy as the first Muslim women's Station Adoption group.

