



# EMPOWER Rivers

Community Grant 2026



# EMPOWER Rivers Community Grant

Thames21 recognises the fantastic work being done by volunteers and community groups to improve the health of London's rivers. To support this work, Thames21 will be awarding grants of up to £20,000 for volunteer-led river restoration works and monitoring initiatives. In this round of the grant there is £80,000 to be awarded. One final round of this grant will be available in 2027.

This grant scheme is awarded as part of EMPOWER Rivers, a Thames21 project funded by the Lund Trust.

## What does this grant fund?

### 1. River Restoration Projects

London's waterways are highly modified; they have been shaped by urbanisation and human interventions that have compromised their ecological integrity and reduced the benefits they can provide for people and wildlife. Thames21 is supporting community groups to help return London's rivers to a more dynamic and ecologically diverse state that will boost biodiversity and increase resilience to climate change.

This grant is intended for small-scale river restoration projects led by voluntary community groups and small charities (annual income of less than £1 million). The [EMPOWER Rivers Large Grant](#) is intended for larger river restoration schemes led by landowners, local authorities and larger charities.

As part of the EMPOWER Rivers programme Thames21 has developed a course called An Introduction to River Restoration that enables volunteers to recognise issues that are impacting rivers, consider solutions and understand constraints. Check out our [What's On](#) page to find upcoming courses.

#### **Examples of river restoration activities that Thames21 would like to support with the EMPOWER Rivers Community Grant:**

- creating berms
- adding large wood habitat
- toe-board removal
- small-scale concrete and stone channel reinforcement removal
- small-scale weir removal and fish passage
- small-scale channel reprofiling
- backwater creation and restoration
- leaky dams
- installation of reedbeds including floating reedbeds
- planting (as part of wider improvements)
- invasive species control and removal (Himalayan balsam, floating pennywort, Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed)

Thames21 will support successful applicants to refine their river restoration proposals. All river restoration activities will require landowner approval; some will require permits such as a Flood Risk Activity Permit. Thames21 will support successful applicants to obtain the necessary permissions and permits.

All river restoration activities should be planned in collaboration with the relevant catchment partnership<sup>1</sup>. Thames21 can help make the necessary connections between your project and the local catchment partnership.

## 2. Monitoring Projects

Gathering reliable data on river health is crucial for effective decision making. Monitoring could focus on water quality, species or habitats. Data can be used to identify sources of pollution; to monitor general river health or to monitor the impact of river restoration projects.

Some monitoring is carried out by professionals from organisations like the Environment Agency (EA), Thames Water, Thames21, and other rivers trusts. However, resources are limited, and the role of dedicated volunteer citizen scientists is becoming increasingly important.

Robust citizen science data can be used to influence change. There have been many cases across the UK where monitoring by trained citizen scientists has allowed early detection of pollution incidents that otherwise would have been missed, leading to vital intervention by the Environment Agency. In other cases, monitoring by citizen scientists has identified sewage pollution, leading to water companies, including Thames Water, addressing issues with sewage infrastructure. Citizen science data has also been used to inform decisions about where to create nature-based solutions such as wetlands, which improve water quality and create valuable freshwater habitats.

This grant will support volunteers to gather crucial data that will be used to inform action on river health.

### Training and Monitoring Strategies:

The EMPOWER Rivers Community Grant strongly prefers applications in which monitoring activities are conducted as part of a coordinated monitoring strategy planned in collaboration with the relevant catchment partnership. This is to ensure that data collected are aligned with catchment-level objectives and can be used to influence action.

Please note that the main way EMPOWER Rivers is supplying individual citizen scientists with water quality monitoring equipment is via our Become an AquaTracker and Urban Riverfly training courses. This is so that citizen scientists can be trained in the different survey techniques before receiving equipment, and we can work with them on a strategic catchment-wide monitoring strategy.

Please contact [citizenscience@thames21.org.uk](mailto:citizenscience@thames21.org.uk) to find out if Thames21 has an active or upcoming citizen science monitoring strategy in your area.

We welcome applications for any London-based citizen science projects that include a coordinated monitoring strategy with specific aims and a plan for how to analyse and use data. For example, this might look like a programme of road runoff monitoring or bacterial sampling in areas identified within a targeted monitoring strategy, with the community grant covering lab costs.

### Suggested monitoring methods:

- Monthly [Urban Riverfly](#) Monitoring Initiative surveys
- Regular monitoring of chemicals (like ammonia and dissolved phosphate) and physical parameters (like temperature, conductivity, and turbidity) at particular sites, for instance

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<sup>1</sup> You can find your local catchment partnership at <https://catchmentbasedapproach.org/get-involved/?postcode>

upstream and downstream of known polluting outfalls, at an RMI site, or upstream and downstream of wetlands or other nature-based solutions.

- Water sample testing by an accredited lab to investigate the concentration of priority pollutants (for example bacteria, nitrate, or road runoff pollutants like heavy metals)
- eDNA surveys
- Bioacoustic surveys
- Modular River Physical (MoRPh) surveys
- Other survey techniques will be considered if applicants can show that the data collected will be robust and useful

If applicants wish to discontinue monitoring activities, Thames21 may ask you to return your equipment, so it can be used by others.

## Eligible Costs

**The following costs can be supported using the EMPOWER Rivers Community Grant (more detailed information can be found in the Community Grant Budget Template Excel spreadsheet):**

Equipment, tools and materials for river restoration projects:

- PPE such as gloves, hard hats, high vis, life jackets, steel toe cap wellies and waders
- First aid kits, throw ropes, wading poles
- Tools including but not limited to: spades, mattocks, wheelbarrows, mallets, digging bars, litter pickers
- Materials such as: hazel bundles, coir rolls, stakes
- Plants and small trees
- Storage boxes for equipment
- Equipment hire
- Equipment for events such as gazebos, tables, hot water flasks, etc...

We recognise that some river restoration activities will require help from contractors. We will also consider funding the following contractor activities:

- Invasive species removal (Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed)
- Vegetation management specialists
- Small-scale concrete bank reinforcement removal
- Weir removal
- Channel re-profiling
- Backwater creation and restoration
- Surveys

Monitoring equipment:

- Riverfly Partnership-approved RMI monitoring kits from NHBS (includes net, bucket and trays)
- Handheld water quality monitoring devices and reagent (such as medium-range ammonia and low-range phosphate Hanna Checkers)
- Conductivity and temperature probes
- Secchi tubes for measuring turbidity (cloudiness)
- Lab analysis costs



- PPE and health and safety equipment such as safety goggles, gloves, reagent disposal bottles, waders, wellies, throw ropes, wading poles and first aid kits

Thames21 will consider funding equipment not listed above if applicants can show that data collected will be robust and useful.

**The following costs cannot be supported using the EMPOWER Rivers Community Grant:**

- Staff costs
- Organisational overheads

## Who can apply?

This grant scheme is intended for projects that are instigated, led and largely delivered by volunteers and community groups. We will also accept applications from smaller charities (annual income of less than £1 million).

Applications from projects that involve physical river improvements must be submitted by recognised community groups such as River Action Groups or Friends groups, or by registered charities. Find out more about how to set up a River Action Group [here](#).

Applications for monitoring projects must be part of a coordinated monitoring strategy.

Projects must take place in Greater London, defined for the purposes of this grant as within the boundary of one of the London Boroughs.

**Applications will not be accepted from:**

- Local authorities
- Businesses
- Larger charities (annual income of more than £1 million)

However, Thames21 will consider applications from organisations of the types listed above if made jointly with voluntary community groups or small charities.

## Selection Criteria

Applications will be scored according to the following criteria with equal weighting given to each.

**Environmental impact** – how will the project improve habitats, biodiversity, water quality or climate change resilience, either directly or by providing evidence and data that will be used to make better decisions?

**Social impact** – how will people benefit from the project, either by being directly involved or because they will have access to improved public space?

**Deliverability** – is the project feasible? Does your group/organisation have the skills and capacity to deliver it? If not, can you collaborate with other organisations that do? (This can include Thames21.)

**Community action** – is the project led or co-led by local communities?

## How will grants be paid?

In most cases grants will be paid in arrears on receipt of an invoice and proof of expenditure. In some circumstances it may be possible to pay grants in advance.

Successful applicants will be required to sign a grant agreement which will define the terms of the grant, including payment terms and reporting requirements.

## Key dates

- Open for applications from 9<sup>th</sup> January 2026
- Application deadline – 9am 20<sup>th</sup> March 2026
- Applicants will be made aware of outcome by 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2026
- Projects must be completed by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2028

## How to apply?

Email [empowerrivers@thames21.org.uk](mailto:empowerrivers@thames21.org.uk) to request an application form and budget spreadsheet or visit the [EMPOWER Rivers Community Grant webpage](#) to download the documents.

Contact [empowerrivers@thames21.org.uk](mailto:empowerrivers@thames21.org.uk) if you need help completing an application.

Please complete and return applications to [empowerrivers@thames21.org.uk](mailto:empowerrivers@thames21.org.uk) along with any supporting documents or photos.