



Reimagining the River Thames

Community visioning for a resilient future along the South Bank

Summary

A Thames that sustains us – reimagining a clean, accessible and climate-resilient river along the South Bank that connects people, nature, and places for generations to come.

On 21st May 2026, South Bank and Waterloo Sustain Us, St Johns, the Environment Agency and Thames Estuary Partnership gathered 70 local stakeholders to think about the future of the Thames along the South Bank. With local river walls needing to be raised by up to one metre by 2090 (and half a metre by 2050) to respond to rising sea levels, we explored how this infrastructure challenge can be an opportunity to think more creatively about our river and riverside. This document acts as a record of the ideas and aspirations shared on the day.

Participants valued the Thames as a source of wellbeing and everyday calm; a living ecological system; a place of history, culture and identity; London's largest open space; and a shared civic asset. Implementation of future flood resilience measures was seen as an opportunity to enhance these characteristics and achieve broader benefits for the area. We heard a shared hope of becoming the centre of a 'river city' with our local river and riverside being climate-smart, ecologically thriving, accessible and engaging.

There was strong interest in community action to help realise these ambitious visions and shape the riverfront's next chapter. Participants identified opportunities for community-led stewardship and education, stronger collaboration and coordination, pursuit of funding opportunities, and influencing strategic planning processes. As our neighbourhood-wide initiative for a fairer, greener future, South Bank and Waterloo Sustain Us will work with local partners to explore how we can realise some of these ambitions and next-steps.



Artwork © Alice Angus



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Contents

- 4 Foreword
- 5 Introduction
- 6 Flood risk management context
 - Thames Estuary 2100 Plan
 - Riverside strategies
- 7 Existing importance and value of the Thames
 - 8 A source of wellbeing and everyday calm
 - A living system
 - 9 A place of history and culture
 - A shared civic asset
- 10 Visions for the river of our future – 2050, 2090 and beyond
 - 12 A clean, ecologically thriving river
 - 13 A climate-smart river
 - 14 An accessible and engaging river
- 15 Next steps – pathways towards this vision
 - 17 Community stewardship & education
 - Collaboration & co-ordination
 - 18 Exploring funding & investment opportunities
 - Informing strategic processes

The Thames along the South Bank



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Foreword

South Bank and Waterloo have been shaped by the Thames. The area is steeped in history with its changes over the centuries telling a story of industry, culture, connection and community. But the transformation of our riverside is not only a story of our past but its future – with continued change required to respond to flood risk. As sea levels rise, there is an urgent need to protect our river, and the neighbourhoods it supports, to ensure that it can keep providing us with a place to work, live, connect with nature and celebrate history.

We know that community is central to successful climate adaptation. The idea for *Reimagining the River* grew from conversations with the Environment Agency about how we reframe our flood resilience challenges in a more creative way – creating space for local imagination, opportunity, and hope.

So that's what we set out to do. It was wonderful to see our community come together to share stories of connection to the river and visions for its future. The event was a chance to learn about our Thames history, hear about resilience work already underway, workshop the future of the Thames locally, and see international examples of regenerated riversides to explore what might be possible.

I am grateful to everyone who helped shape *Reimagining the River*, bringing vision and inspiration to the planning and on the day. This document brings together the ideas and aspirations that emerged. We hope it provides a foundation for future engagement, helping to inform the important decisions ahead. The Thames is central to the identity of South Bank and Waterloo, and by working together we can strengthen both our resilience and our connection to this valued asset for generations to come.

Giles Goddard

CHAIR OF SOUTH BANK AND WATERLOO SUSTAINS US
AND VICAR OF ST JOHN'S WATERLOO

About South Bank and Waterloo Sustains Us



South Bank and Waterloo Sustains us is our neighbourhood-wide partnership for a fairer, greener future for all those who work, live, study and visit the area. It focuses on clean air and energy, more space for nature, local climate resilience and more sustainable ways of living and working. Through this event, our community highlighted just how interconnected these ambitions are when we think about the Thames; with the river embodying the neighbourhood's potential for a fairer, greener future.



Introduction

On 21st May 2026 South Bank and Waterloo Sustains Us, St Johns, the Environment Agency and Thames Estuary Partnership gathered 70 local stakeholders to think about the future of the Thames along the South Bank, in light of the need to raise local flood defences by 2050. Together we explored how this infrastructure challenge can be reframed as an opportunity to think more creatively about the river and southern riverside between Vauxhall Bridge and London Bridge.

This document acts as a record of the views shared by our local community during table-based discussions, drawings and brainstorming activities on the day. In doing so, it seeks to capture the ideas and aspirations of individuals and organisations at the event rather than outlining a single vision that has been collectively agreed by all.



Flood risk management context

THAMES ESTUARY 2100 PLAN

Climate change is making average sea levels rise with high tides becoming higher and storm tides bigger and more frequent. This increases the risk of water going over the Thames estuary's tidal flood defences. To adapt the estuary to these changes the Environment Agency has developed the Thames Estuary 2100 plan (TE2100).

TE2100 is an adaptive flood risk management strategy that sets out adaptation pathways to respond to possible climate futures. It has a series of flood defence options, decision points and recommended interventions to protect the estuary.

London already has a network of flood defences including walls, embankments, gates and the Thames Barrier. While the Thames Barrier protects against large storm tides, the walls along our local section of the Thames protect the area against daily high tides.

These walls will need to be raised by up to a metre by 2090 (and half a metre by 2050) from current levels to respond to rising seas. These walls are not just flood defences but are also multifunctional; providing walkways, beach access, wharves, green space and even forming parts of the foundations of buildings. To plan for this change TE2100 sets out actions for Lead Local Flood Authorities to develop local riverside strategies.



RIVERSIDE STRATEGIES

Under TE2100, Lead Local Flood Authorities (in our case Southwark and Lambeth

Council) have agreed to create riverside strategies by 2030. These will integrate defence raising and flood protection into placemaking and growth strategies to maximise potential environmental, social, cultural and economic benefits. Riverside strategies can take the form of a standalone strategy or a combination of local plan policies, planning documents, masterplans and other strategies. To support this work, the Thames Estuary Partnership is developing a Joint Thames Strategy through research and community engagement. The strategy will identify the distinct character of riverside communities across the Thames catchment, including in central London, to help inform future riverside strategies.




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Existing importance and value of the Thames

Understanding existing priorities and values can give a clear indication of what we want to protect and enhance as we look to the future. The first workshop question saw attendees sharing **'why is the Thames important to you or your organisation?'**

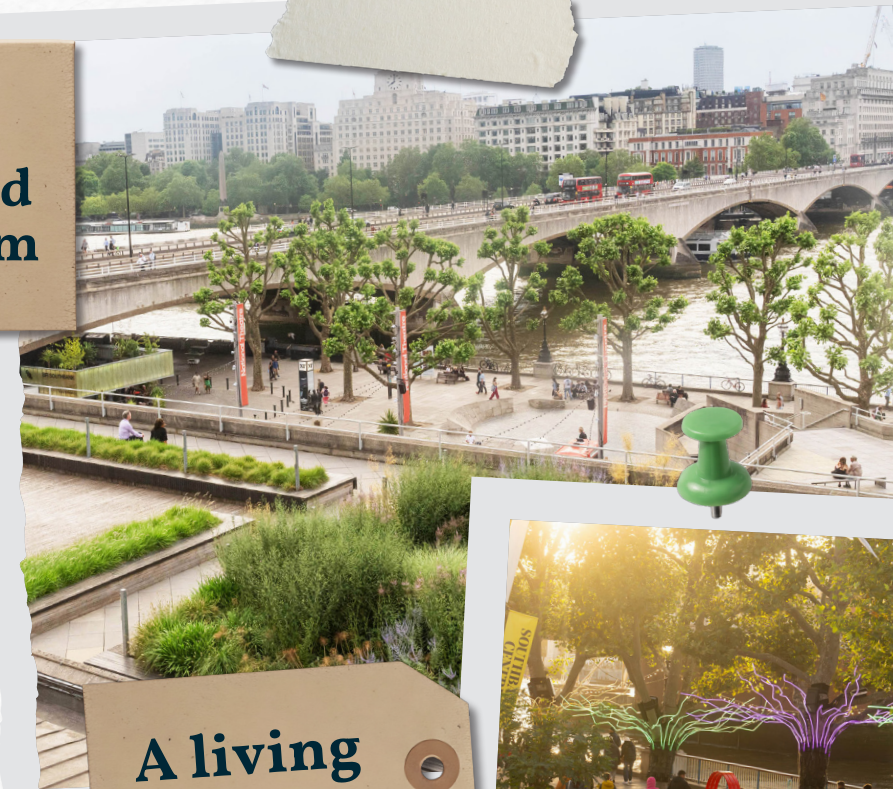
The responses showed how the River Thames is central to everyday life along the South Bank with participants emphasising how the river defines London socially, spatially and visually. Many referred to it as London's largest open space and valued its role as a place for connection – connecting people with neighbours, with nature and with other locations upstream/downstream.



PAGE 8

A source of wellbeing and everyday calm

Many participants described the Thames as a place of calm and respite. People come to the river for 'a breath of fresh air' with local residents seeing the foreshore, including Ernie's Beach by the OXO Tower, as their sanctuary and a place of exploration and play across generations. The presence of water, open sky, and fresh air provides a rare sense of space within the urban environment. It offers relief from the busyness of the surrounding high-rises through wide views and expansive sightlines. Participants saw walking along the Queen's Walk, spending time on the foreshore, and simply experiencing the river's changing tides as restorative activities. This accessibility – being able to see, reach and engage with the water – was considered 'priceless.'



A living system

The river is not static but appreciated as 'a living system' that continues to shape and sustain the city. Participants highlighted the Thames' role supporting biodiversity, particularly birds and aquatic life, and bringing nature more broadly into central London. This access to blue and green space within the city was seen as essential.




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A place of history and culture

The Thames was described as a space of heritage and culture, a legacy reflected in this year's 75th anniversary of the Festival of Britain, for which the South Bank served as the centrepiece. At the same time the area is seen as a place of constant change. Attendees spoke of its 'history and grandeur,' its role in shaping London's past, and its ongoing contribution to the city's identity with mudlarking continuing to uncover more of its hidden history. Its position as a cultural corridor is reinforced by major institutions like the Southbank Centre, National Theatre, and British Film Institute, hosted along its banks. This 'iconic' status is recognised worldwide and contributes to a sense of pride and belonging among local communities.



A shared civic asset

Functionally, the Thames remains a 'working river' and a key transport artery, supporting millions of passenger journeys and significant freight movement each year. It connects people across the city and provides alternative routes for travel and exploring. Participants also highlighted its role as a continuous pathway linking neighbourhoods and communities.

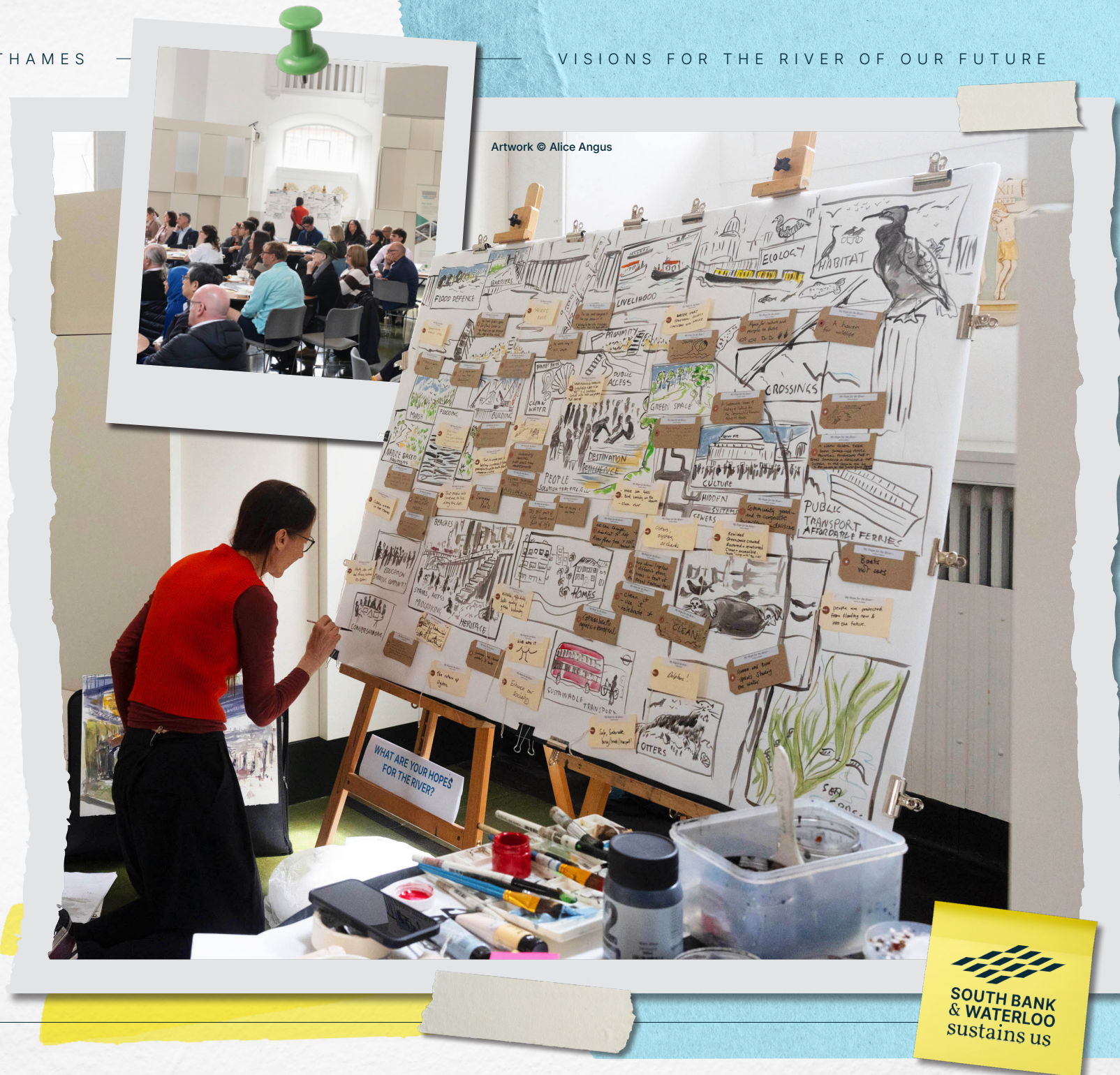



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**Visions for the river
of our future –
2050, 2090 and beyond**

Building on their reflections about the Thames' current importance and values, participants then explored future aspirations through the question **'what do you want our river and riverside to be like in the future – 2050, 2090 and beyond?'** Ultimately, participants' responses envisaged a river that sustains us. They commented on the broader benefits that should be achieved through flood resilience works, rather than simply seeing it as raising a wall. We heard a shared hope for a future-proofed, cleaner, greener, and healthier river that is accessible for all to enjoy. Some framed this as London becoming a 'river city' with this area acting as the living green lung for residents while others spoke of the water acting as the city's arteries, veins and nerve endings.

To support this brainstorming, Alice Angus, artist in residence at local Topolski Studio, led a collective drawing capturing the event's presentations and participants' written and drawn responses to 'what are your hopes for the river?'. This forms part of Alice's wider programme exploring common wealths like clean air, water, ecosystems and healthy communities on the 75th anniversary of the Festival of Britain.



A clean, ecologically thriving river

A significantly cleaner river was central to participants' aspirations. Participants expressed a strong desire for effective sewage treatment, the elimination of plastic pollution, and water purification measures. The future Thames is envisioned as a river where people can safely swim, fish and interact directly with the water.

The river is imagined as a place where human and ecological systems coexist more harmoniously, reinforcing a renewed 'kinship with nature.' As part of this there were suggestions for more green-blue links from the neighbourhood to the river highlighting the 'lost rivers' of the past like the River Neckinger.

This cleaner Thames would support abundant biodiversity, including fish, seals, birds and aquatic plants. Acknowledging the challenges of the built-up urban riverside, there were calls to explore 'sponge parks' within our iconic riverside green spaces such as Bernie Spain Gardens, and other nature-based solutions where feasible. There were also suggestions to introduce a broader mix of tree species and low-level planting to complement the South Bank's London Plane trees.

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My Hope for the River:-
(write or draw)

Rewilded
Green space created
Restored + renatured
Clean + accessible.
People "living with" the river

My Hope for the River:-
(write or draw)

CLEAN

Artwork © Alice Angus



Artwork © Alice Angus

A climate-smart river

The river was seen as having a central role in our transition to a more sustainable and resilient future - not just responding to river flood risk but also broader climate adaptation and mitigation actions. There were suggestions that any changes to the riverside should also provide shade, shelter, significant greening, and prioritise retrofit to address rising temperature and extreme weather.

There is strong support for expanding river-based transport, including affordable passenger services, smaller electric or battery-powered boats, and increased ferry provision. The river could also further support freight movement, reducing reliance on lorries and contributing to cleaner urban logistics. Improved pedestrian infrastructure with wider paths and better connections would also enable greater movement along and across the river. In terms of reducing emissions there were also suggestions for introducing aquatic grasses for carbon capture.

At the same time, the Thames is reimagined as a key energy source, with participants highlighting potential for harnessing tidal power alongside heating, cooling and broader energy generation.



An accessible and engaging river

The riverside is envisioned as a destination in itself: a place to stop, rest, and gather with a vibrant day and nighttime economy. The riverside should be fully walkable, with improved connections from surrounding neighbourhoods and transport hubs, including clearer signage, open views of the river and green corridors leading people to the water.

The Thames Path is imagined not just as a route, but as a series of welcoming spaces that support a wide range of activities. Swimming, boating, water recreation, and riverside leisure were all raised. Retaining and improving access to the foreshore is seen as particularly important, with aspirations for safe, clean, and fully accessible areas for play, exploration, and education.

Participants also expressed a desire for more amenities that allow people to enjoy views of the river. In particular, elevated platforms and walkways were proposed as they could retain views across the river while also creating additional space underneath for greening, public realm improvements and other uses. Participants suggested seating, shade, music, markets, and cultural activities along the riverside and even greening our bridges. There were also ideas raised for activities on top of the river itself like modular 'amphibian' housing and floating bandstands on piers.

Local residents highlighted the importance of balancing this lively and attractive riverside environment with preserving the river's role as a place for calm and connection with nature. As at its heart, this place is their home.

Future development should respect the scale and character of the river. The Thames should remain visible, inviting and integrated into the city rather than hidden behind walls or overshadowed by dense development. Maintaining this balance between development and open space, while keeping the river visible and accessible, was seen as essential.

Artwork © Alice Angus





Next steps – pathways
towards this vision

There was strong interest in the community actively shaping the riverfront's next chapter. During the brainstorming session, attendees were asked **'as a community how can we move forward some of these ideas?'**

Progressing the ambitious visions shared at the workshop was recognised as a collective challenge and opportunity. Participants highlighted the need for early action to avoid reactive responses, calling for long-term thinking and 'future proofing' that ensures decisions made today support a resilient and adaptable river environment beyond 2050. This included ideas for potential community-led next steps to progress this vision under the themes on the following pages.



Community stewardship & education

Participants stressed the importance of meaningful and ongoing community involvement. This includes regular engagement, listening to local knowledge, and ideas for formal mechanisms like citizens' panels potentially through South Bank and Waterloo Neighbours (neighbourhood forum), citizens' parliament for the Thames, or citizens' assemblies to ensure community voices influence decisions.

Testing practical initiatives like walking groups, beach cleans, tours, and river-focused activities, were seen as ways the community could help strengthen people's connection to the Thames and encourage shared stewardship. They highlighted that protecting and celebrating access to the river's foreshore and activating the riverside through art, greening, and activities is central to deepening the public's relationship with the river.

Education and raising awareness of the river's challenges and opportunities would also promote this stewardship. Ideas included school and community programmes, improved wayfinding to- and along- the river (with example of wayfinding from Waterloo Station), and visible markers communicating environmental risks, tide times, and opportunities.



Collaboration & co-ordination

While this event was targeted at the area from Vauxhall Bridge to London Bridge to bring a community-level focus, participants highlighted the importance of linking local projects with wider catchment-scale efforts, working across boundaries to unlock progress. A river-wide community masterplan or 'blueprint' was suggested as a way to align action along the Thames.

Realising these shared visions will require consensus building, understanding of raising requirements, and buy-in across sectors, disciplines, landowners, local authorities and regional bodies. Participants suggested establishing a local coordinator to support collaboration across this network, helping to share data, progress initiatives, and connect activity within the area to wider work taking place across the catchment.

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Exploring funding & investment opportunities

While the event took an aspirational approach to reimagining the river, the cost of implementing these ideas was always understood as a key barrier. As such, participants saw securing funding as an essential next step. At a community level, ideas included attempting to influence government priorities, exploring dedicated funding mechanisms, and making better use of existing local resources. It was also suggested we could investigate ways to reinvest the economic value of access to the Thames back into river improvements through local partnerships or planning contributions.



Informing strategic processes

At the workshop, participants shared how it is essential to embed community priorities for the river in key planning policies and strategies. To support this, our Reimagining the River summary will be shared with stakeholders across the Thames management ecosystem, from the Environment Agency and Local Authorities to the Thames Estuary Partnership, Port of London Authority, Greater London Authority and more.

South Bank and Waterloo Sustain Us will continue to champion a fairer, greener future for the Thames with these stakeholders and promote ways our local communities can engage in the development of planning policies and strategies.



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