Nene River Chronicles

Oct 2026



A Riverfly Network for the Nene

The team at Nene Rivers Trust have secured funding from the Postcode Lottery and the Wildlife Trust to develop a Riverfly monitoring network across the catchment.

The health of a river is about much more than what obviously jumps out at us when we look at it. Beneath the riffles, the plant matter and the riverbed lives a biodiverse bouquet of species that can tell us about the condition of our waterways, chemically and physically. Through training on identification and counting them, local people/landowners can play a huge role in data collection which in turn helps protect our rivers within the Nene catchment.

That is the idea behind establishing a Riverfly monitoring network across the Nene and it's tributaries: bringing together volunteers, local communities and environmental organisations to create a clearer picture of river health, from the smallest headwaters to the main river itself.

By establishing regular monitoring sites across the Nene's tributaries, we envisage to build a stronger ability across the catchment to identify concerning changes and give communities a practical way to contribute to river protection.

But what is Riverfly monitoring?

The Riverfly Monitoring Initiative is a citizen-science

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approach that uses aquatic invertebrates, the small insects that live in our waterways, as indicators of water quality and overall waterbody health.

The Riverfly monitoring focuses on 8 species that are found in most waterbodies across Britain. Different invertebrates have different tolerances to pollution and environmental stress, so changes in their abundance can provide useful information about the condition of a watercourse.

Trained volunteers follow a standardised sampling method, identify key groups and record their findings at regular intervals, usually monthly. The results establish a baseline against which future observations can be compared.

A sudden decline in certain invertebrate groups can prompt further investigation, helping environmental organisations respond more quickly to a possible pollution incident. It's indicative but it is not absolute, it provides a longer-term picture than chemical testing which is instant but references that specific point in time only.

The strength of this approach lies in its simplicity: local people can gather meaningful, repeatable evidence about the streams they care about while engaging with their local waterways and getting out into nature.

Building a network across the tributaries: a Step-by-Step Process

The trusts ambition is to create a connected network of monitoring sites, each site would provide a small piece of the puzzle; combined, they will reveal patterns across the catchment.

Map the volunteer groups and identify gaps!

Our first step is to understand the geography of the network and what we have in place that we can tap into. We are working with local river groups, parish councils, climate action groups, just to name a few of the sort of groups we talk to. Once we know who is engaged and onboard with the process, we can then map these groups and identify where the gaps are and where we need to target on group discovery/creation.

We are not going with a prioritised approach; we don't want any group feeling lower priority than another. This is about getting as many people to the table as we can and as many communities re-engaged with nature.

Safety, access, habitat suitability and the ability to return to the same location regularly all influence site selection, a process which we will be leaning on the local knowledge of these groups to accomplish.

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Training us and local volunteers

Training and monitoring will follow the recognised Riverfly methodology, with volunteers being given instruction and guidance on how to collect samples consistently, identify the relevant invertebrate groups, record results and recognise when a reading needs to be reported.

Training is also needed for NRT members as we are looking to become trainers ourselves to give out the training personally within the catchment. This keeps trainers within the catchment and able to bolster more groups beyond this funding period.

Establishing the monitoring routine

The network will run a system for recording sampling dates, results, observations and any unusual conditions, which paints a more of a picture than the invertebrate data alone. These are helpful bits of information but will not replace the formal sampling procedure.

Over time, the invertebrate records will help build a picture of normal conditions at each location. That baseline is particularly important when trying to distinguish a genuine ecological change from the natural variation that occurs in streams.

The Vision

This project is simple: to build a network of people who care about the Nene and its tributaries, and who want to get firsthand involvement in protecting them. By bringing in local communities, parish councils, volunteers and existing river groups, we can start to build a clearer picture of what's happening across the catchment's aquatic environment and spot changes that might otherwise go unnoticed.

It doesn't need to happen overnight, starting small, getting people trained and building a network that works for the long term is what matters. Every new monitoring site adds more context to our data, helping us understand the health of waterbodies across the catchment.

Ultimately, this is about giving people the knowledge and confidence to take an interest in their local rivers. We are building a network that shares information, raises concerns when needed and brings people together around a shared goal.

One catchment, lots of tributaries, and a whole network of communities coming together to take care of them.

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