PLANET AQUA CITY AWARDS APPLICATION GUIDE

ABOUT THE PLANET AQUA CITY AWARDS

The Planet Aqua City Awards, developed by C40 Cities and the Future Food Institute, celebrates cities that are leading the transition toward water-resilient, climate-safe, and just futures. The awards are aligned with the C40 Water Safe Cities Accelerator targets, and recognise concrete, scalable actions that address water-related climate risks - flooding, drought, sea-level rise, ecosystem degradation - while strengthening urban resilience, social equity, and regenerative economies.

By honouring projects that integrate science, governance, community engagement, and innovation, the Planet Aqua Award aims to:

- Celebrate & showcase cities that are implementing best-in-class solutions already delivering impact on the ground
- Foster peer learning and collaboration among cities
- Inspire replication, investment and policy alignment at local, national and global levels.

More than a prize, the Planet Aqua Award is a platform for leadership and shared responsibility, positioning water as a unifying force for climate action, regeneration, and the well-being of present and future generations.

The Awards will celebrate action across four categories, with one winner per category:

- Frontline Protection
- Equitable Universal Access
- Flood Protection
- Coastal & Delta Resilience

Prior to the final awards ceremony, C40, in collaboration with the organisers of Venice Climate Week, will announce three finalists for each of the four categories.

Winning cities will receive:

- Physical award presented at Venice Climate Week
- Feature in C40 communications and media outreach
- Speaking opportunity at Venice Climate Week or future C40 events
- Recognition in C40 annual reporting and publications

Please send any questions you may have to jwells@c40.org

THE PARTNERS

C40 Cities is a network of nearly 100 world-leading cities, collaborating to deliver the urgent action needed now to confront the climate crisis. The strategic direction is determined by an elected Steering Committee of mayors, chaired by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan.
The three-term Mayor of New York City, Michael R. Bloomberg, serves as President of the C40 Board of Directors who are responsible for operational oversight.

C40's work is made possible primarily by philanthropic and government funders.
To learn more about the work of C40 and our cities, please visit our website, or follow us on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn.

FUTURE FOOD INSTITUTE

The Future Food Institute (FFI) is an international "think-and-do tank" focused on building more sustainable, regenerative food systems. Led by founder Sara Roversi, FFI bridges the gap between food innovation and climate action through education and global community building.

As a co-organizer and producer of Venice Climate Week, FFI transforms the city into a "living lab. " They lead the Climate Shapers program - empowering young leaders to facilitate high-level dialogues - and spearhead initiatives like Planet Aqua, which focuses on water diplomacy and heritage-based solutions for the ecological transition.

AWARDS CATEGORIES

The Awards recognise cities that are implementing best-in-class solutions already delivering impact on the ground in four categories:

1. Frontline Protection Award. Recognises cities that protect communities at risk from flooding and drought by putting people-centred early warning systems in place and ensuring warnings trigger effective emergency response.

2. Equitable Universal Access Award. Recognises cities delivering equitable, reliable access to clean water - especially for underserved communities - while strengthening long-term water security through demand reduction and/or sustainable supply improvements.

3. Flood Protection Awards. Recognises cities reducing flood risk for people and critical infrastructure by increasing stormwater retention and restoring urban water bodies

4. Coastal and Delta Resilience Award. Recognises cities and territories exposed to sea-level rise, coastal erosion, storm surge, and salinisation, that are pioneering integrated adaptation strategies in deltaic, lagoon, island, and coastal contexts.

SELECTION CRITERIA

All assessments are done using the following criteria (more details can be found in Appendix A):

Required

1. Direct climate risk reduction. The expected climate risk reduction related to water climate hazards eg flooding, droughts, storm surge, sea-level rise and coastal storms

2. Addressing Multi Hazards. Projects with the capacity to reduce more than one hazard.

3. Wider benefits. The positive benefits resulting from the implementation of the project, such as equity, health, economic, and environmental benefits.

Desired

4. Innovation. The extent to which the project takes a new approach to address major environmental issues (noting importance of regional innovation to recognise the scale of challenge overcome)

5. Collaboration. The extent to which the project meaningfully collaborates with other stakeholders to maximise impact (e.g. communities, youth, private sector, workers, unions, civil society).

6. Sharing and scaling. The extent to which the project experience is shared with other cities and regions and the future potential to scale the project within the city.

CATEGORY:	SELECTION CRITERIA
FRONTLINE PROTECTION AWARDS	Required Cities must demonstrate that early warning systems are established in high-risk areas where communities are exposed to flooding and/or drought, with evidence that warnings reach communities at risk in accessible formats and languages. Applicants must show that warnings trigger a structured emergency response, including clearly defined protocols, designated responsibilities across city departments, and tested activation mechanisms. The project must demonstrate an inclusive, people-centred approach - including participatory design or co-development of warning systems with affected communities, particularly women, elderly, disabled, and, if applicable, informal settlement residents.

FRONTLINE PROTECTION AWARDS

Desired

Applications should provide evidence of integration with urban planning and land use systems, such as linking early warning data to flood risk mapping, zoning decisions, or infrastructure investment priorities.

Applicants must demonstrate how the system can be scaled city-wide or replicated in other urban contexts, including evidence of interoperability with national or regional disaster risk reduction frameworks.

Projects that go beyond warning systems to also address underlying vulnerability - through nature-based solutions, community capacity building, or shelter provision - will be prioritised.

EQUITABLE UNIVERSAL ACCESS AWARDS

Required

Cities must demonstrate the project is aiming to achieve a reduction in water demand or non-revenue water/water losses, with clear evidence, baseline data, and results or projected results achieved within 10 years or less.

Applicants must show the project is aiming to achieve an increase of water supply - whether through increased volume, number of connections, or diversification of supply sources - with priority given to projects serving previously unconnected or underserved communities.

The project should demonstrate a strong equity focus, specifically showing how access to safe, reliable drinking water has been improved for low-income, marginalised, or climate-vulnerable groups.

Desired

Applications should provide evidence of integration with nature-based solutions or land use planning, such as watershed protection, managed aquifer recharge, or green infrastructure for water supply security.

Applicants should show how the project addresses long-term climate resilience of water supply, including supply diversification (e.g. rainwater harvesting, water recycling, desalination) to reduce dependence on climate-sensitive sources.

Projects that demonstrate a scalable or replicable model - including evidence of policy adoption, regulatory change, or financing mechanisms that could enable citywide or regional expansion - will be prioritised.

FLOOD PROTECTION AWARDS

Required

The project must demonstrate a measurable increase in stormwater retention or/and infiltration. Applicants should show how the initiative achieves an increase in stormwater retention or infiltration relative to the project site's baseline, utilizing permeable surfaces and nature-based solutions to mitigate runoff and reduce
peak flow during extreme weather events.

Priority will be given to projects that actively restore the natural function of the city's blue infrastructure. This includes the reclamation and rehabilitation of rivers, creeks, or wetlands to reduce flood risk and improve water quality.

The project must demonstrate an inclusive and equitable approach, specifically targeting protection for vulnerable groups. Criteria include the use of participatory design methods that build community capacity, ensuring that flood protection also serves as a catalyst for social equity, especially for the most marginalised communities.

Desired

Applications must provide evidence of a highly integrated governance model. This involves collaboration between city departments (e.g., Water Utilities, Urban Planning, Parks, and Finance) to ensure the project is embedded in the city's long-term plan.

Applicants must demonstrate how the project's methodology can be scaled city-wide or replicated in other urban contexts facing similar climate-driven flood risks.

Beyond flood protection, applications that also contribute to address urban heat, enhance urban biodiversity, or contribute to water security through groundwater recharge or rainwater harvesting for non-potable use will be prioritised.

Projects demonstrate measurable improvements to water quality, reducing public contamination risks and advancing the goal of swimmable urban water bodies.

COASTAL AND DELTA RESILIENCE AWARDS

Required

Projects should address at least one of the following: sea-level rise, coastal erosion and salinisation through a combination of protective, accommodative and, when applicable, nature-based solutions.

They should protect vulnerable coastal communities and critical infrastructure from storm surges, flooding and saltwater intrusion.

The project should demonstrate what has been improved for low-income, marginalised, or climate-vulnerable groups.

COASTAL AND DELTA RESILIENCE AWARDS

Desired

Evidence of collaborative governance approaches involving stakeholders such as coastal zone management, urban planning, water utilities and community stakeholders, as part of whole of catchment approaches to integrated water management.

Projects uses ecosystem-based adaptation such as mangrove restoration, dune rehabilitation or living shorelines that enhance natural coastal defences.

Projects demonstrating integration into general urban planning and multifunctional solutions.

Can demonstrate monitoring systems that track coastal changes, water quality and effectiveness of adaptation measures over time

Projects demonstrate scalability and transferability of approaches to other coastal and delta cities facing similar water issues.

Projects demonstrate measurable improvements to water quality, reducing pollution and public contamination risks, increasing public recreational access as well as advancing the goal of swimmable coastal and delta water bodies.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The Planet Aqua Cities Awards are open to cities around the world, regardless of size, if the two eligibility criteria below are met. Any relevant department within the city's administration can submit applications for the Awards - endorsement from the Mayor will be a bonus; submissions by external parties will not be accepted.

- Projects must have begun implementation in 2016 or later;

*NOTE: If the submitted project is part of a larger, long-term project, then the application must ONLY focus on and discuss results of the stage that has begun since 2016.

- The city can be an active C40 city or a non-C40 city

Submissions are preferred in English but are accepted in local languages.

APPLICATION PROCESS SUMMARY

STEP 1

Ensure you meet all Eligibility Criteria.

Applications must be submitted by the relevant department within the city's administration.

STEP 2

Prepare your application online by filling out the application form. You can save and come back to the form later (so long as your email is included).*

Try to include as much data as possible to show results or projected results.

Make sure you have all the necessary documents before submitting your application online.

All questions are mandatory in order to submit your application, unless stated otherwise.

STEP 3

Review and finalise your application submission

STEP 4

Once you have submitted your application, you will receive a confirmation email.

If information is missing from your application, you will be contacted and asked to provide further details.

IMPORTANT DEADLINES

18 MARCH 2026	Application submission opens
30 APRIL 2026	Application submission closes at 6 pm CET
11 MAY 2026	Selection and announcement of finalists
7 JUNE 2026	Awards Ceremony

SELECTION PROCESS

Applications will be selected based on the Selection Criteria detailed above and below.

Experts from C40 and Venice Climate Week, accompanied by expert partners relevant to each category, will conduct a detailed assessment to identify three finalists per category. After the finalists have been announced in May, an external expert jury will be convened to select one winner per category. The winners will be announced at the awards ceremony in June at Venice Climate Week.

APPENDIX A: DETAILED ASSESSMENT CRITERIA SCORING SYSTEM

1. Frontline Protection Award

Summary: This award recognises cities that protect communities at risk from flooding and drought by putting people-centred early warning systems in place and ensuring warnings trigger effective emergency response.

This will be evaluated on the basis of:

SCORE	DESCRIPTION
HIGH	Application demonstrates relatively major quantifiable climate change risk reductions through comprehensive early warning systems covering all high-risk, low-income areas, communities at risk. Application demonstrates a strong focus on groups/communities at risk with robust emergency response plans ensuring safety, accessible shelters, and provision of basic needs during flooding and drought events Evidence of operational early warning systems that have successfully reduced fatalities, displacement, and economic losses during extreme weather events Clear demonstration of community engagement in system design and testing, with culturally appropriate communication channels Integration with city-wide disaster risk reduction frameworks and climate adaptation plans Clear demonstration of how the system can be scaled city-wide or replicated in other urban contexts, including evidence of interoperability with national or regional disaster risk reduction frameworks.
MEDIUM	Application demonstrates relatively major qualitative or minor quantifiable climate change risk reductions through early warning systems in most high-risk areas Application demonstrates a relatively major focus on vulnerable groups/communities with developing emergency response plans Application demonstrates a relatively high degree of integration with nature-based solutions and/or urban planning Evidence of early warning system implementation in progress, with some documented effectiveness in reducing impacts Community engagement mechanisms established but not yet fully tested across all vulnerable populations Emerging connections to broader city resilience frameworks

LOW	Application demonstrates relatively minor qualitative climate change risk reductions through early warning systems in limited high-risk areas Application demonstrates a relatively minor focus on vulnerable groups/communities with basic emergency response plans Application demonstrates a relatively minor degree of integration with nature-based solutions and/or urban planning Early warning system in early stages of development or implementation Limited community engagement or effectiveness data available Minimal integration with broader city planning and resilience strategies

2. Equitable Universal Access Award

Summary: This award recognizes excellence in universal equitable access by bridging the gap between infrastructure climate resilience and urban growth. We honor initiatives that strengthen water system efficiency and security, through non-revenue water reduction, recycling, and the diversification of water sources, alongside robust demand management and conservation strategies. The award integrates technical improvements that secure water supply with inclusive policies that ensure access to safe drinking water to all while managing unsustainable consumption, ensuring water resources and population that depend on those are protected against climate change.

This will be evaluated on the basis of:

SCORE	DESCRIPTION
HIGH	Application demonstrates major drought risk reductions; supply diversification or increase in volume or number of connections; protection of major water supply source; or Application demonstrates reduction of water demand or of non-revenue water/water losses Application demonstrates a strong focus on providing access to safe drinking water for vulnerable groups/communities including underserved areas, informal settlements, and marginalised populations Application demonstrates a high degree of integration with nature, and/or urban planning through the use of nature based solutions or land use planning that enhances water security Evidence of water recycling and reuse systems that contribute to supply diversification and resilience Integration with climate adaptation strategies addressing future water availability scenarios

HIGH	Application demonstrates innovation in its solution to increase water security. Innovation may be centered on governance, finance, technology, or infrastructure. Clear pathway for scaling project methodology city-wide or replicating in other urban contexts facing similar climate-driven drought risks, with documentation supporting transferability
MEDIUM	Application demonstrates relatively major drought risk reductions; supply diversification or increase in volume or number of connections; protection of major water supply source; or Application demonstrate relative reduction of water demand or of non-revenue water/water losses Application demonstrates a relatively strong focus on providing access to safe drinking water for vulnerable groups/communities Application demonstrates a relatively high degree of integration with nature, and/or urban planning through the use of nature based solutions or land use planning Water efficiency improvements documented with measurable results Some connection to climate resilience planning
LOW	Application demonstrates relatively minor drought risk reductions; supply diversification or increase in volume or number of connections; protection of major water supply source; Application demonstrates low reduction of water demand or of non-revenue water/water losses. Application demonstrates a relatively minor focus on providing access to safe drinking water for vulnerable groups/communities Application demonstrates a relatively minor degree of integration with nature, and/or urban planning through the use of nature based solutions or land use planning Basic equity considerations with limited implementation Minimal integration with broader climate resilience strategies

3. Flood Protection Award

Summary: This award recognises cities reducing flood risk for people and critical infrastructure by increasing stormwater retention, restoring urban water bodies, and implementing nature-based solutions that protect communities while delivering multiple co-benefits including biodiversity enhancement, urban cooling, and water security.

This will be evaluated on the basis of:

SCORE	DESCRIPTION
HIGH	Application demonstrates achievement of significant increase in stormwater retention or infiltration relative to project site baseline, utilising permeable surfaces, green infrastructure, and nature-based solutions Project actively restores natural function of city's blue infrastructure through reclamation and rehabilitation of rivers, creeks, wetlands, or other water bodies, with measurable improvements in flood risk reduction and water quality Evidence of highly integrated governance model with strong collaboration between Water Utilities, Urban Planning, Parks, Finance, and other relevant city departments, with projects embedded in long-term city planning frameworks Demonstrates inclusive approach specifically targeting protection for vulnerable groups, using participatory design methods that build community capacity and ensure flood protection serves as catalyst for social equity Clear pathway for scaling project methodology city-wide or replicating in other urban contexts facing similar climate-driven flood risks, with documentation supporting transferability Project delivers significant co-benefits addressing urban heat, enhancing urban biodiversity, and contributing to water security through groundwater recharge or rainwater harvesting for non-potable use Monitoring and evaluation systems in place demonstrating effectiveness during extreme weather events
MEDIUM	Application demonstrates achievement of relative increase in stormwater retention or infiltration, with nature-based solutions integrated into project design Project includes some restoration of natural water body function with documented improvements Evidence of integrated governance with collaboration between multiple city departments, though integration may not be fully embedded in long-term planning Demonstrates inclusive approach with community engagement, though participatory methods may be developing Potential for scaling identified with some supporting documentation Project delivers some co-benefits related to heat mitigation, biodiversity, or water security Basic monitoring systems in place with some effectiveness data

LOW	Application demonstrates low increase in stormwater retention or infiltration Limited restoration of natural water body function Evidence of some inter-departmental coordination but limited governance integration Basic community engagement with limited focus on vulnerable groups Minimal documentation of scalability or replicability Few or no additional co-benefits beyond flood protection Limited monitoring or effectiveness data available

4. Coastal and Delta Resilience Award

Summary: This award recognises cities and territories exposed to sea-level rise, coastal erosion, storm surge and salinisation that are pioneering integrated adaptation strategies in deltaic, lagoon, island, and coastal contexts. It celebrates comprehensive approaches combining protective infrastructure, ecosystem-based adaptation, and community resilience that address the unique vulnerabilities of coastal urban environments.

This will be evaluated on the basis of:

SCORE	DESCRIPTION
HIGH	Application addresses sea-level rise, coastal erosion, storm events or salinization by integrating different strategies/approaches like protective, accommodative, and, when applicable, nature-based solutions. The project significantly reduces the risk of vulnerable coastal populations and critical infrastructure from storm surges, and saltwater intrusion. Clear evidence of collaborative governance that actively involves coastal managers, urban planners, water utilities, and local community stakeholders. Projects prioritizes ecosystem-based adaptation, such as mangrove restoration, dune rehabilitation, or the creation of living shorelines. Evaluate the inclusion of monitoring systems designed to track coastal morphology, water quality, and the long-term performance of adaptation measures. The project demonstrates potential for replication or scaling in other coastal or delta cities facing similar environmental challenges. The project has clear plans for ongoing operations and maintenance, including defined governance, financing and capacity building measures. Measure the project'sco-benefits, such as improving water quality, reducing contamination risks, and advancing the goal of swimmable coastal water bodies.

MEDIUM	The application partially addresses sea-level rise, coastal erosion, or salinization by integrating protective, accommodative, and nature-based strategies, though its impact is limited to a specific segment of the city's coastline The project reduces partially the risk of vulnerable coastal populations and critical infrastructure from storm surges, and saltwater intrusion. Limited evidence of collaborative governance that actively involves coastal managers, urban planners, water utilities, and local community stakeholders.
LOW	Application addresses only one impact from sea-level rise, coastal erosion, or salinization. The project has limited reduction of the risk of vulnerable coastal populations and critical infrastructure from storm surges, and saltwater intrusion. No clear evidence of collaborative governance that actively involves coastal managers, urban planners, water utilities, and local community stakeholders. Projects don't prioritise ecosystem-based adaptation, such as mangrove restoration, dune rehabilitation, or the creation of living shorelines. The project doesn't have any monitoring systems designed to track coastal morphology, water quality, and the long-term performance of adaptation measures. The approach is not modular and scalable for application in other coastal or delta cities facing similar environmental challenges. The project has limited impact on improving water quality, reducing contamination risks, and advancing the goal of swimmable coastal water bodies.

SCORING AND WEIGHTING

The initial shortlisting undertaken prior to consideration by the jury will be as follows:

Each of the above criteria will have an equal weight.

The criteria will be scored as follows:
o High 3 points
o Medium 2 points
o Low 1 point

Each project's overall score will be composed of the sum of scores across each of the six evaluation criteria.

The submitted information in each application will be vetted by experts from C40 supported by Future Food Institute as well as specific award partners, which may alter scores.

In deciding the eventual winner of each category, the jury panel will utilise the above scoring system, but will also take into consideration other aspects relevant to each category. Each decision will be clearly justified by the panel.

APPENDIX B: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

GENERAL QUESTIONS

How many applications can be submitted by one city?
Cities can submit to all criteria but may only submit one application per criteria.

Can a project be submitted in multiple categories?
It is possible to add a secondary category when submitting a project. This will allow the project to be taken into consideration for both award categories. While reviewing the application, the reviewing team might also suggest that you nominate your project in another category, if they think it is relevant.

What does 'project' refer to in the application form?
Project is a catch-all term reflecting the actions cities take, and could be in reference to projects, initiatives, programmes, policies and plans, all of which can be submitted for consideration in the relevant categories. This guide and the application form simply refer to all these as 'projects'.

Can applications be submitted from partnerships of two or more cities, city and regional governments, or other combinations of government entities?
Yes, partnerships demonstrating knowledge sharing and cooperation between cities and also between cities and other bodies, e.g. regional governments, are accepted and encouraged.

Will finalists be invited to the Awards ceremony?
Yes, finalists will be invited to the Awards ceremony.

QUESTIONS ABOUT FILLING OUT THE APPLICATION FORM

What if I do not know the answers to some of the questions in the application form?
All questions are mandatory unless stated otherwise. If you are unsure how a specific question applies to your project, do your best to answer the question anyway. Please note that a project can still win even if it does not 100% cover all criteria. Try to include as much data as possible to show results or projected results.

Can I submit additional documents with my application?
The online application form allows you to upload additional attachments in order to supply supporting material, such as communications material relating to the project or other relevant documents (e.g. project plan, press release, video, etc).

Do any fees apply?
No, applying to the Planet Aqua Cities Awards is free of charge.

Could the same project be submitted into more than one category?
No, but you can indicate which is the primary and secondary category for your application.

What if I have a question about applying or filling out the application itself?
If you don't find the answer in the FAQ, you can email questions to jwells@c40.org

When will I be notified regarding the status of my application?
All applicants will be informed in May 2026.

What are the legal terms and conditions that must be agreed to when submitting an application?
The complete terms and conditions are available for download here. Applicants need to agree to these terms in order to provide the organisers with permission to use submitted information as non-confidential data and to evaluate and share them with third parties supporting the evaluation process.