Charter
Rights for the River Ouse

Rivers all life. Humans depend on our rivers to provide clean water for drinking and sanitation, fertile soil, and regeneration but rivers also support an extensive diversity of species and ecosystems and play a vital role in the functioning of the Earth's continuous water cycle. Rivers are also one of the largest natural carbon-transport systems on our planet, moving land-based carbon to be stored in the oceans and providing temperature regulation functions.

Rivers and the wetlands they create give many communities a sense of place and identity. Many towns exist in their place because of a river. Communities increasingly demonstrate that they care for their Rivers and act as guardians as the public's concern grows for the poor state of our rivers' ecological health, which increasingly impacts public health.

At a basic level, our rivers face severe pressures from climate change, unsustainable consumption patterns, diffuse and point source pollution, invasive species, failing and inappropriate infrastructure and unsympathetic development. We must work together, faster, at a landscape scale, in delivering action to address these threats.

The River Ouse sustains a diverse array of life forms, including legally protected endangered and vulnerable species. However, climate change and consumption patterns are having significant effects on water availability and flow rates; in-channel structures present major impediments to the movement of fish, in particular, and pollution impacts the rivers natural function and resilience of all species. All of this puts unsustainable pressure on the river's ecosystem, increasing its vulnerability to future change.

This Charter recognises that a wide range of organisations are already having a positive impact on the health of the river, utilising to the best of their abilities the often-limited resources available to them. **However**, there is a need to increase this effort if we are to see improvement which matches the ambition of those at the frontline of positive change especially as the river faces increasing threats across a number of areas. The Charter and its implementation seek to tackle these threats with a partnership framework that recognises the river as its own entity - promoting good practice and identifying where more needs to be done; what action can be taken to restore the Ouse's ecological and chemical health, recognising that we all have responsibilities to fulfil the river's rights. The Charter also seeks to increase political, social and economic benefits for activities that support the river's health.

This Charter establishes that these rights are intended not only to recognise the rights of the River Ouse, but also the health of the river catchment and bioregion of which the Ouse is a part and the health of all ecosystems and natural beings therein, all of which possess, at minimum, the fundamental rights to exist, thrive, and evolve.

Acknowledging the river rights detailed in the Charter is considered a critical component in safeguarding the River Ouse for present and future generations, placing a new emphasis on how we consider nature restoration and filling a gap within existing thought processes and strategies. This step will promote a sustainable river system for the River Ouse, emphasising harmony with nature and benefiting both the river and the public.

Supporters of this Charter of Rights for the River Ouse agree to work together towards the following aspirations.

The River Ouse should possess the following fundamental rights as set forth in this Charter, which arise from its very existence.

- ***The right to exist in its natural state:*** Recognising and reflecting that the River Ouse like all rivers is essential for ensuring life, including human life within the Ouse catchment and bioregion.

- ***The right to flow***: Flows must follow natural flow patterns and be sufficient in quantity to maintain the ecosystem health of the entire river system.

- ***The right to perform essential natural functions within the river catchment***: These include maintaining horizontal and longitudinal connectivity, flooding, moving and depositing sediment, recharging groundwater, providing adequate habitat for native flora and fauna, processing nutrients; being water.

- ***The right to feed and be fed from sustainable aquifers***: ensuring that clean, healthy aquifers provide sustainable ecosystem services in the context of how climate change is affecting these processes.

- ***The right to be free from pollution***: Taking a holistic view to include diffuse and point sources including but not limited to damaging levels of sewage discharge, industrial waste, litter, antibiotics, agricultural run-off from pesticides, manure and fertilisers; and accelerated soil erosion from human activities, recognising that our changing climate can exacerbate all of these issues..

- ***The right to native biodiversity***: recognising and responding to the severe decline in native biodiversity over the last fifty years and the threats that invasive non-native species represent for local biodiversity.

- ***The right to regeneration and restoration***: that a shared vision which identifies and develops best practice river and nature restoration and regeneration across the River Ouse Catchment is progressed in partnership with all relevant stakeholders.

- ***The right to an active and influential voice***: to have the interests of the River Ouse appropriately and in so far as is possible, impartially represented and considered in the determination of matters that directly affect it. To lobby the Government to create the legal frameworks that can ensure consistent representation for all rivers.