



Love Our Ouse

Strategy 2025-2030

*“A river is more than an amenity,
it is a treasure.”*

JUSTICE OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

Introduction

Launched in 2022, **Love our Ouse (LOO)** is a **community interest company that seeks to strengthen the love, understanding and connection people have with their river** and, through a charter of rights for the river, increase their sense of responsibility towards it.

By providing practical skills and opportunities, we give communities a sense of agency and empowerment to help regenerate the Ouse, its catchment and bioregion to a thriving state from source to sea. We believe the Ouse has the right to support a rich biodiversity and a thriving riverside community and we are tireless in our efforts to achieve this.

In the three short years of its existence, **Love Our Ouse (LOO)** has made an impact far beyond its size: it has conducted over 80 activities with over 5,000 people to inspire communities to learn, care and act for their river. They led the **first successful campaign to see a river in the UK have its rights recognised by a council**. This ground breaking achievement has since inspired a national movement for river rights that puts the needs of rivers and communities at the heart of their governance.

It has done all this despite being run, largely by volunteers and with extremely limited resources. Its recent **nomination for the Kings Award for Voluntary Service** reflects these accomplishments.

However, **these successes have presented new challenges which we will need to rise to**. They have led to increased demand, both locally and nationally, on how communities can be deeply engaged in the regeneration of rivers and how a river's rights can in practice be upheld. This demand is not matched by our current capacity.

This strategy was developed over a six month period in consultation with some of our partner organisations and supporters. It seeks to consolidate and build upon LOO's successes by **strengthening our institutional capacity, build partnerships and scale-up our activities** to support communities to celebrate, learn and act to uphold the rights of the local river they love: the Ouse.

We hope that you will join us and the Ouse on our exciting journey

Love Our Ouse Directors, December 2025



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Our vision: a community connected with and caring for a thriving River Ouse

Our mission: to enable local communities to celebrate, learn and act in order to uphold the rights of the Ouse.

Background and context

Rivers are essential to all life. We all depend on our rivers to provide clean water for drinking and sanitation, fertile soil, and for life 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.

In common with most other rivers in the UK, **the Ouse faces severe pressures** from climate change, unsustainable consumption patterns, diffuse and point source pollution, invasive species, failing and inappropriate infrastructure and unsympathetic development. The River Ouse sustains a diverse array of life forms, including legally protected endangered, declining and vulnerable species. However, climate change and consumption patterns are having significant effects on water availability and flow rates. All of this puts unsustainable pressure on the river's ecosystem, increasing its vulnerability to future change.

We must work together with a common vision, faster, at a landscape scale, in delivering action to address these threats. However, in the face of this complexity and the magnitude of these issues communities often feel disempowered with limited knowledge, skills and opportunities to make a significant contribution to their regeneration. As a result, communities have become disconnected with and have turned their backs upon the river and duty bearers are not being held to account on fulfilling their responsibilities.

The **current ecological state of the River Ouse** is far from good, reflecting broader challenges facing English rivers:

Environment Agency assessments classify parts of the Ouse as having **moderate ecological status**, meaning the river shows noticeable deviation from a healthy, natural state due to human pressures. Independent local studies corroborate this, with water quality data showing:

- Over half of the water bodies in the Ouse catchment fail to reach “good” ecological status under the Water Framework Directive, particularly due to **elevated phosphate levels**
- Specific tributaries such as Glynde Reach are among the **worst-rated** in the catchment, prompting citizen science monitoring for nutrients and dissolved oxygen.

Additional pressures include:

- Increased risks of drought and flooding due to climate change
- **Sewage spills** from ageing infrastructure (over 10,000 hours in 2024), contribute to pollution and ecological stress.
- Physical modification of the river channel, habitat fragmentation and loss of riparian vegetation, reducing natural ecological function.

Current evidence indicates that **significant interventions are required** before the Ouse achieves sustained “good” ecological status comparable to its natural potential.

Our approach

“We are the river, and the river is us” Maori proverb

Our approach is summed up in three words: celebrate, learn, act. By celebrating the inestimable intrinsic value people place upon their river and providing people with opportunities to learn and act on its behalf we help create a culture of love and care for the Ouse.

LOO is rooted in community-led action for the Ouse, so we strive to be inclusive, accessible, and inspirational.

We are also nature-centric in our approach, believing that a community cannot be fully healthy, unless their environment is; that the ability of our rights to be upheld are inextricably linked to the rights of the river. As such, through community and stakeholder engagement, LOO led the development of the first charter of rights for a river to be recognised by a council. This charter includes the right to exist, thrive and have a say in decisions which affect it.

So we encourage communities both within the Ouse and throughout the UK to recognise and uphold those rights through **creating a culture of care for the river** and fulfilling their duties to their river. We do this through **celebrating the river** and what we all love about it, enabling people to **learn more about the river**: its ecology, culture, heritage and issues affecting it and to **act to protect its rights** and regenerate the river.

We engage in **strong partnership with key stakeholders** such as local authorities, environmental organisations and regulators. We hope to benefit existing organisation’s positive work by increasing engagement and support as well as create increased accountability for those with statutory duties.

We draw upon our collective ingenuity, energy and ability to nurture and adapt, be disruptive and challenging to bring about positive change that can be sustained. **We seek to be the community thread that links and upscales disparate, fragmented, and under resourced community-action for the Ouse and its catchment.**

Our three strategic objectives for 2025-30 reflect our desire to strengthen and scale-up this approach of ‘celebrate, learn and act’ in order to create a community deeply connected with, and caring for, a thriving River Ouse. By 2030 we will:

- Increase community care, love, knowledge responsibility, appreciation of, and action for, the Ouse
- Ensure the Charter for the River Ouse is being implemented and upheld by all communities and key stakeholders within the catchment.
- Strengthen the institutional capacity of Love Our Ouse to regenerate the river Ouse.

“Really interesting and inspiring - have learned so much. Has made me... want to do something”



Learning about the Ouse: River Ecology 101 Training

In 2024 we delivered **4 free and oversubscribed training courses** for 85 community members along the Ouse Valley learning about the rivers ecology basics, the threats and challenges it faces and skills needed to complete a river assessment survey of their local stretch of the river.

Celebrating: River Festival, River People Tour, & Winterbourne Festival



“This was a fantastic event and well done to all those involved in the organising of it. To have attracted over 30 organisations and 1600+ people to something like this is a huge achievement and not something I suspect could have been achieved by many others, so brilliant job”

Peter King, Director - Ouse and Adur Rivers Trust

On 25th September 2022 Love our Ouse partnered with the Railway Land Wildlife Trust to launch a one day, free and inclusive River Festival - a grand taster of what we are about and wish to develop in the future.



◀ The River People Tour travelled downstream visiting community venues between October 2023 – May 2024 and attracted around 1000 visitors.

“ I came knowing very little about the subject. Left here knowing lots! ”



▶ 1000 people across 9 events joined us to celebrate, learn and act for the rare Winterbourne chalk stream that runs through Lewes

Objective 1:

By 2030 increase community care, love, knowledge responsibility, appreciation of, and action for, the Ouse

“Many people who had never taken part in river based activities before have been supported to take meaningful action through their warm, creative, and accessible events. They have helped bring together groups and organisations who had never spoken.”

Mike Deacon, Life-long Ouse Angler

There is a **greater public awareness and demand for the regeneration of rivers**, but **communities often lack the knowledge, skills and resources to be able to feel empowered to make a difference**. Since 2022, LOO has conducted over 80 activities with over 5,000 people fuelled by 3456 voluntary hours to help strengthen a culture of care for the Ouse through celebration, learning and practical action. Nonetheless, the Ouse catchment is far from being regenerated to a fully thriving state and its rights are regularly ignored or abused by communities and other stakeholders.

At the same time, the way in which the Ouse is currently managed does not fully recognise and consider the immense intrinsic value communities place upon it and the importance of communities views being represented in its governance. Many organisations responsible for regenerating the Ouse often lack the knowledge, skills and sometimes even willingness to meaningfully engage communities in decision-making and action for the Ouse. **A key role for LOO is therefore advocating for wider and deeper community engagement and building the capacity of relevant organisations to be able to engage communities.**

Creating this culture of care for the river and **empowering communities with the knowledge and resources to take positive action is at the heart of LOO's work**. This objective seeks to deepen and broaden this work.

Activities and outcomes:

1.1 Outcome: *By 2030 we will have increased community awareness of the ecology, culture and heritage of Ouse and issues affecting it*

Activities: we will offer increased opportunities for communities and schools to connect with and learn about the history, culture and ecology of the Ouse and learn practical actions they can do to protect it such as River Ecology 101 training and heritage walks.

1.2 Outcome: *By 2030 we will have increased capacity of other key stakeholders to engage with communities*

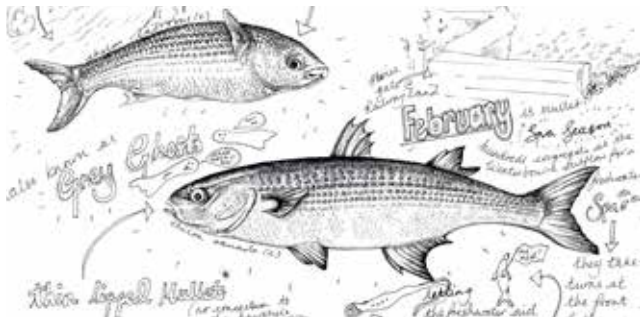
Activities: we will offer technical and practical support to catchment partnership members in effective community engagement approaches.

1.3 Outcome: *by 2030 we will have increased number of people engaging in practical action for the wellbeing of the Ouse*

Activities: We will offer increased opportunities for communities to take practical action to improve the cultural, heritage and ecological state of the Ouse, for example through citizen science projects.

How will we *prove* we are making an impact?

- Number of people taking part in LOO community awareness activities regarding the cultural, heritage and ecological issues regarding the Ouse
- Number of partner organisations that state they have increased capacity in community engagement
- Number of practical action activities implemented that help uphold the rights of the Ouse
- Number of published articles, media and external reports citing the work of Love Our Ouse



Community River Mapping

Across seven events, over 650 people have taken part in [our community mapping](#). It is a participatory process through which people can express their local knowledge, understanding, beliefs, hopes, fears and views about a place that seeks to strengthen community awareness and relational responsibility for local environments.



Objective 2:

By 2030, the [Charter for the River Ouse](#) is being implemented and upheld by all communities and key stakeholders within the catchment.

“ Their vision and action have captured the attention of people both locally and nationally, sparking a movement that is now resulting in similar groups across the country advocating for the rights of rivers ”

Caroline Croft, Head of Development and Operations, The Southwood Foundation

In February 2025, the River [Ouse catchment became the first in the UK to have its rights to exist and thrive formally recognised](#) by a Council. LOO led this two-year process of developing this charter of rights coordinating with local stakeholders, extensive public consultation and drafting with expert advice with 2393 voluntary hours committed. This received [widespread UK and global media attention](#). It represents a fundamental shift in the way we relate to and manage rivers: from being simply a resource to be exploited, to something of inestimable value and worth which we owe duties to.

Since then, three other Councils along the Ouse have passed motions, [seven other councils have emulated this approach](#) for their own rivers and there are currently over thirty rivers in the UK pursuing charters of rights. As a result, **LOO has been inundated with requests for technical support, media requests and research interest** by academic institutions. Being a volunteer-led organisation, our desire to respond to all of these requests is high, but our capacity low.

Furthermore, passing a charter is one thing. **The challenge now is implementing the charter and**

proving that it can make a tangible beneficial difference to the wellbeing of the river. This means raising greater awareness of the charter amongst the public and key stakeholders and strengthening the capacity of statutory authorities and other organisations to implement and uphold the charter. It also means **developing appropriate governance mechanisms** by which the voice of the river Ouse can be actively and influentially heard in decisions which affect it.

Additionally it means **drawing out lessons which can be shared with the wider UK and global rights of nature movement** so adoption of this approach becomes more widespread and ultimately, for rights of rivers to be recognised in UK law.

Therefore this strategy outlines how **we hope to ensure that the Ouse charter of rights is implemented and upheld** and how **LOO will support the wider rights of nature movement** in the UK and beyond.



Geese flying at Barcombe

Activities and outcomes:

2.1 Outcome: *Communities and stakeholders are supporting, upholding and celebrating the charter*

Activities: promote greater awareness of, support for and celebration of the charter. For example activities to promote people and organisations signing the charter and the provision of practical advice on how they can uphold it.

2.2 Outcome: *more stakeholders have the capacity to implement the charter and using it to strengthen positive outcomes for the Ouse.*

Activities: capacity building activities to support stakeholders to implement the charter; for example support to parish and district councils, the catchment partnership, schools, regulators, landowners and businesses to mainstream the charter into their own planning and activities.

2.3 Outcome: *The Charter is regularly being upheld by key stakeholders*

Activities: to uphold the Charter. For example: the development of governance mechanisms to ensure the charter is upheld such as a guardian council and/or citizen assemblies and the inclusion of the river in

relevant decision making forums.

2.4 Outcome: *increased number of nature-centric laws, policies, charters and other governance mechanisms for rivers in the UK*

Activities: contribute to ongoing debates, campaigns and research around rights-base approaches to river governance and advocate for more eco-centric laws, policies and governance models in the UK.

How will we prove we are making an impact?

- Number of instances in which the charter has been publicly celebrated (festivals, events etc.)
- Number of charter awareness activities in communities and key stakeholders
- Number of Councils local councils, parishes, organisations and individuals that have publicly endorsed the Ouse charter.
- Number of instances in which the Ouse charter has been publicly cited in decision-making that has made a positive difference to the Ouse
- Positive changes in making laws, policies and governance more eco-centric.
- Number of other rivers that have had charters of rights endorsed or have nature represented on their catchment partnership and have referenced Love Our Ouse



The Ouse at Lewes



River Summit

Rights of Rivers Summit on the 24th of November 2023 brought together 70 practitioners from more than 42 organisations locally and from across the UK to help develop the UK's first river rights charter to be supported by a Council.

“ It was a wonderful day - a seamless and enlightening blend of global issues (rivers worldwide) and the local (Ouse). I learned that intelligent community organising is really possible. ”

Objective 3:

By 2030, strengthen the institutional capacity of Love Our Ouse to regenerate the river Ouse

LOO was only established in September 2022, but in those three short years we have made an impact beyond our small size, limited funding and our, primarily local, scope.

We have forged strong relationships with river trusts and water companies, environmental organisations, local government, academic institutions and even the [Tate gallery](#). We play a lead role in the UK River Rights Network and the [Confluence of European Water Bodies](#). We sit on the **Ouse and Adur Catchment Partnership**. **We have nurtured 455 newsletter subscribers, 1780 followers across our social platforms.**

To date, **we have managed to do all of this largely on a voluntary basis**, totalling 2975 internal management hours, with limited and unpredictable financial resources and rudimentary organisational structures. This has placed immense strain on our volunteer staff and directors at a time when both the need and demand for our skills and ground breaking approaches has never been greater.

In this strategy we acknowledge that **if we are to widen and deepen our impact and respond to this growing demand, we need to strengthen our institutional capacity**. This will include developing the

appropriate organisational structure and systems and mobilising the adequate resources to implement this strategy. It includes evolving from a purely voluntary organisation to one in which there is at least one paid member of staff who is able to adequately respond to the increasing demands placed upon the organisation.

Activities and outcomes:

3.1 Outcome: *LOO is implementing activities according to a strategy, theory of change and annual plan*

Activities: Development of a clear strategy, theory of change and annual activity plans

3.2 Outcome: *LOO has the appropriate organisational structure, human resources, financial, IT, monitoring and evaluation systems to implement its strategy*

Activities: Development of an appropriate organisational structure, systems and human resources to support the effective and efficient implementation of our strategy.

3.3 Outcome: *LOO has secured sufficient core and project funding and resources to implement our strategy and annual plans*

“ Love Our Ouse deliver with remarkable dedication and professionalism.”

James Herbert, Lewes Town Councillor

Activities: Development and implementation of a resource mobilisation strategy to meet all of LOO's core and operational needs including the recruitment and retention of at least one full-time member of staff.

3.4 Outcome: *Regular, timely and effective communications to stakeholders*

Activities: Development and implementation of an effective communications strategy for our beneficiaries and key stakeholders.

How will we prove we are making an impact?

- Demonstrable progress is being made against our strategy and annual plans
- Recruitment of one full-time paid member of staff.
- Increased core, project and reserve funding adequate to maintain the implementation of the strategy
- Role descriptions for all directors, staff and volunteers; IT systems being used for planning and implementation, annual operational and financial plans
- Increased number of people reading the LOO newsletter and number followers on our social media platforms

Objective 1

By 2030 increase community care, love, knowledge responsibility, appreciation of, and action for, the Ouse

1.1 Outcome: increased community awareness of the ecology, culture and heritage of the Ouse and issues affecting it

Activities: increased opportunities for communities and schools to learn about the history, culture and ecology of the Ouse and practical actions to protect it, such as River Ecology 101 training and heritage walks.

1.2 Outcome: increased capacity to engage with communities

Activities: technical and practical support to partnership members in effective community engagement approaches.

1.3 Outcome: increased number of people engaging in practical action for the wellbeing of the Ouse

Activities: increased opportunities for communities to take practical action to improve the cultural, heritage and ecological state of the Ouse, e.g. citizen science projects.

Objective 2

By 2030, the Charter for the River Ouse is being implemented and upheld by all communities and key stakeholders

2.1 Outcome: Communities and stakeholders are supporting, upholding and celebrating the charter

Activities: promote greater awareness of, support for and celebration of the charter. For example people and organisations signing the charter with practical advice on how to uphold it.

2.2 Outcome: more stakeholders have the capacity to implement the charter and using it to strengthen positive outcomes for the Ouse.

Activities: capacity building to implement the charter; e.g. support parish and district councils, the catchment partnership, schools, regulators, landowners and businesses to mainstream the charter into their own planning and activities.

2.3 Outcome: The Charter is regularly being upheld by key stakeholders

Activities to uphold the Charter, e.g. development of governance mechanisms such as a guardian council and/or citizen assemblies, inclusion of the river in relevant decision making forums.

2.4 Outcome: increased number of nature-centric laws, policies, charters and other governance mechanisms for rivers in the UK

Activities: debates, campaigns and research on rights-based approaches to river governance, eco-centric laws, policies and governance models.

Objective 3

By 2030, strengthen the institutional capacity of Love Our Ouse to regenerate the river Ouse

3.1 Outcome: LOO is implementing activities according to a strategy, theory of change and annual plan

Activities: Development of a clear strategy, theory of change and annual activity plans

3.2 Outcome: LOO has the appropriate organisational structure, human resources, financial, IT, monitoring and evaluation systems to implement its strategy

Activities: Development of an appropriate organisational structure, systems and human resources to support the effective and efficient implementation of our strategy.

3.3 Outcome: LOO has secured sufficient core and project funding and resources to implement our strategy and annual plans

Activities: Development and implementation of a resource mobilisation strategy to meet all of LOO's core and operational needs including the recruitment and retention of at least one full-time member of staff.

3.4 Outcome: Regular, timely and effective communications to stakeholders

Activities: Development and implementation of an effective communications strategy for our beneficiaries and key stakeholders.

Ouse heritage and culture

Drawing upon our rich history through cultural and arts activities we explore our evolving relationship with the river, deepen our connections and find exciting ways to engage with a variety of people.



Voice of the River workshop May 31st © Tate (Oliver Cowling), 2025



You gather the rains
hold below until - release
pure clear chalk water
through concrete culverts that bruise
yet you give us dreams and hope.

By Patrick Crawford, Winterbourne Poems



Winterbourne Poems print by Michelle Hockey



Voices of Water, Tate Modern September 2025

2022



22nd April 2022
Incorporated as CIC

25th September 2022
River Festival including
River Rights workshop



2023

February 2023
River Rights Motion
agreed at Lewes
District Council

24th November 2023
River Summit



2024

14th April - 28th
September 2024
4 x River Ecology
Training Courses

21st October 2023
- 25th May 2024

4 x River People Tour
events in Balcombe,
Barcombe, Lewes
& Newhaven



2025

24th February 2025
Lewes District Council
formally support Ouse
River Charter

1st - 9th March 2025
Winterbourne Festival

25th - 28th April 2025
Ouse Waterblitz
testing event



31st May 2025
Tate Modern Voices of
the River workshop

15th June 2025
Ouse Water
Quality Event

16th July 2025
Wealden District Council
support River Rights



6th September 2025
Tate Modern Voices of
Water Roundtable

27th September 2025
Glynde Reach community
water
testing programme
starts (1 year)

2nd October 2025
River Ouse Charter
Symposium



The Charter of Rights for the River Ouse

The River possesses the following fundamental rights as set forth in this Charter, which arise from its very existence:



- 1 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 whilst recognising the modification of the river where it is necessary to protect existing critical infrastructure and or communities.



- 2 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.



- 3 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.



- 4 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.



- 5 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, pharmaceuticals, 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.



- 6 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.



- 7 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.



- 8 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.

Love Our Ouse directors

Matthew Bird Project strategy and delivery lead. Chartered Environmentalist, Climate and Sustainability professional with a background at local authorities. He's also a Lewes Town Councillor.

Emma Montlake Grass roots legal support lead. Also works as Director of Casework at Environmental Law Foundation.

Josh Levene Advisor on river rights. With over 25 years of experience working with river-based communities in Africa, South Asia, and the UK he's also a coordinator of the UK River Rights Network.

Natasha Padbury Community engagement lead and general manager. She also works as Sustainability Manager at Depot and 15 years experience coordinating community cultural projects.

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