

# Exploring the practical application of the River Ouse Charter



Marine Workshops, Newhaven, BN9 0ER

# Executive Summary

On 22nd October 2025, 58 participants from 35 organisations gathered in Newhaven to explore the question: how do we turn the River Ouse Charter from principle into practice?

The River Ouse Charter is the first River rights charter to receive policy level recognition from a local authority in England. It affirms the Ouse's right to flow, to support its native biodiversity, and to have a voice in the decisions that affect it. This report documents what the symposium found.

Three governance challenges were tested across four real-world case studies: when to trigger the river's representation, who should speak for the River, and how those decisions could be enforced. Participants consistently favoured hybrid, participatory models over single solution approaches, and identified parallel tracks for the next phase of work spanning catchment partnership engagement, data linked rights triggers, translocal learning, and a pilot nature inclusive governance mechanism.

OR

Participants consistently favoured hybrid, participatory models over single solution approaches, with an emerging consensus points toward piloting an Ouse Assembly as a pragmatic and imaginative next step—moving deliberately into a pilot phase that tests how imagination, participation and governance can work together to give a lasting voice to the River Ouse.

# Our Participants

58 participants from 35 organisations participated on the day spanning local authorities, water companies, landowners, those with statutory duties, nature NGO's, communities, legal firms, educational institutions and nature rights advocates and experts from across the catchment and further afield.

Adur and Ouse Catchment  
Partnership  
Barcombe Parish Council  
Dark Matter Labs  
Doreen Prior  
Ecoforensics CIC  
Emma Critchley (artist)  
Environment Agency  
Gower St Foundation  
Hamsey Parish Council  
Hogan Lovells  
Iford Estate

J B A Consulting  
Kings College Legal Clinic  
Lewes District Council  
Lewes Rowing Club  
Living Imaginaries  
Mike Deacon  
Ouse and Adur River Trust  
Piddinghoe Parish Council  
Railway Land Wildlife Trust  
Ringmer Parish Council  
Rodmell Parish Council  
Roehampton University  
South Downs National Park

South East Water  
Southern Water  
Southwood Foundation  
Sussex Bay  
Sussex Local Nature  
Partnership  
Sussex Wildlife Trust  
University of Southampton  
University of Sussex  
University of Sussex  
Wealden District Council  
Wilder Ouse  
Wilderlife

# Introduction & Purpose

The Rights of Rivers movement is gaining momentum in the UK and internationally, with communities, local authorities and institutions increasingly exploring how rivers might be recognised not only as resources, but as living entities with intrinsic rights.

Over the last few years, something extraordinary has been happening on the Sussex River Ouse and its catchment. Since 2022, a River Ouse Charter has been developed through extensive local consultation led by Love Our Ouse (LOO), working with Lewes District Council, Sussex Wildlife Trust, the Ouse and Adur Rivers Trust (OART), Environmental Law Foundation, Hogan Lovells LLP, Monica Fiera Tinta and a wide range of community stakeholders. The Charter recognises the River Ouse’s right to flow, the right to its native biodiversity and the right to an influential voice in decision-making that affect its ability to live, thrive and evolve, reframing human–river relationships around mutuality rather than extraction.

In February 2023 Lewes District Council (“the Council”) passed a motion to explore Rights of Rivers and develop a Charter for the Ouse. In March 2025, the Council’s decision to “champion and support” the Charter marked the first time in England that a river rights charter received policy level recognition at a council . This milestone signalled both strong local support and growing appetite for new approaches to river governance. This was soon followed by Wealden District Council, Lewes Town Council and several other Councils in the South East.

The focus has now shifted from vision to practice: exploring how the Charter can be embedded in decision-making, how the river’s voice might be represented, and what mechanisms are needed to uphold it. To support this, Love Our Ouse partnered with Moral Imaginations (MI) and the Environmental Law Foundation (ELF) to explore and design methods and approaches that could be used to translate the river rights charter into practice. They convened a one-day symposium on the Charter’s practical application for local stakeholders and decision makers, to build consensus and test, explore and prototype potential pathways forward.

## Purpose of this Report

This report documents how the symposium was designed and delivered, what was explored on the day, and the emerging answers to the core question that guided the event:

**What is required to pilot and sustain a nature-inclusive governance mechanism that enables the River Ouse to be represented in decision-making and the Charter to be implemented?**

This report is intended to demonstrate delivery against the exploratory phase of the project, while clearly setting out the foundations and requirements for the next steps which include piloting an interspecies council as an advisory mechanism within local authority governance, alignment with catchment partnership, the translation of Charter rights into measurable data triggers, and a translocal learning network to share what is being built here with river communities across the UK.



# Finding shared meaning about these key terms

Throughout this report, certain key terms are used which we have defined here for clarity and shared understanding, especially where they are technical or relating to nature-centric legal and governance mechanisms.

## **Rights of Nature and Rights of Rivers:**

The idea that rivers, forests and ecosystems deserve legal recognition and protection in their own right, not only because they are useful to humans, but because they have inherent value as living systems. This has been recognised in law in over 30 countries: New Zealand's Whanganui River was granted legal personhood in 2017; Ecuador enshrined nature's rights in its constitution in 2008; Colombia recognised the Atrato River as a legal person in 2016. In England, these rights are not yet embedded in law, but the River Ouse Charter represents a significant first step, with Lewes District Council formally supporting the River Ouse Charter.

## **The River Ouse Charter:**

A community developed document, produced through two years of public engagement, that sets out the river's rights: to flow, to support its native biodiversity, and to have an influential voice in decisions that affect it. The Charter does not override existing law, but works alongside it, providing a shared framework that councils, organisations and communities can use to ask better questions and make better decisions on the river's behalf.

## **Standing mechanism vs. triggered mechanism:**

Two different ways a governance body can operate. A triggered mechanism is activated by a specific event like a pollution incident, a planning application, or a drought. A standing mechanism operates all the time, regardless of crisis, like a board of trustees that meets regularly and sets long term direction.

## **Nature-centric:**

A Nature-centric worldview is a philosophical and ethical perspective that places the natural world at the centre of value systems, rather than human interests. This worldview recognises the intrinsic value of all living things and the importance of biodiversity and ecosystem health.

# Finding shared meaning about these key terms

## **Interspecies Councils:**

A term used to describe the governance mechanism that brings multispecies representation into an assembly format. A structured, participatory process in which people temporarily adopt the perspective of a species or ecosystem element in order to bring non-human concerns into human decision-making. It is a practical deliberation method, utilising roleplay and evidence, used to expand the range of interests considered in governance discussions. It has been used in organisational, community and government settings.

## **Ouse Assembly:**

The name we have given to an Interspecies Council, which may include humans and non-humans, for the River Ouse.

## **River Guardians:**

People who formally take on the responsibility of representing the river's interests within decision making processes.

## **More-than-human:**

A way of describing the world that includes the entire, living world – including plants, animals, and landscapes – which encompasses and exceeds humanity, challenging human exceptionalism. The term was coined by the ecologist and philosopher David Abram, and is commonly used in environmental research and Rights of Nature circles.

## **Right relationship:**

A way of describing a human relationship with a river or with nature that is grounded in care, reciprocity and responsibility, rather than extraction or control. The concept has deep roots in Indigenous traditions and is increasingly used in ecological governance and community practice. In this report, it describes both a goal (building a healthier relationship with the Ouse) and a practice (asking, in every relevant decision, what does a good relationship with this river require?).

# Symposium Aims and Methodology



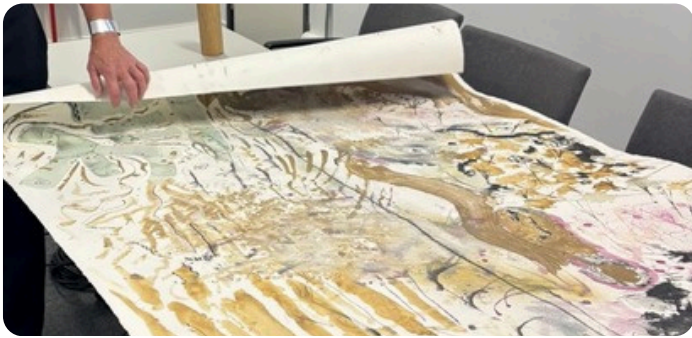
The symposium aimed to move beyond symbolic commitments toward practical implementation, equipping participants with shared language, tested approaches and tools to act in the best interests of the River Ouse and its wider ecosystem. Its objectives were to:

- **Clarify the Charter in practice** by supporting organisations and communities to understand how it applies to their roles and responsibilities.
- **Explore participatory governance** by assessing democratic and deliberative mechanisms, including citizens' assemblies and interspecies councils, to support implementation.
- **Test real-world application** by applying Charter principles to live local scenarios such as planning decisions, water use, and organisational practice.
- **Enable learning and replication** by sharing insights that could inform similar Rights of Rivers initiatives across the UK.



## Methodology

The symposium was designed as a highly participatory, workshop-based day, combining presentations, facilitated dialogue, small-group deliberation, design sessions and practical scenario testing.



### River Ouse Charter Progress

establishing a shared understanding of its origins, intent, current policy status, and the central challenge of implementation. Led by Love Our Ouse.



### The Governance Mechanisms Workshop

mapping potential governance models for the River Ouse, identifying what would be required to **trigger** the river's voice in decision making; how the river's voice could be **represented** (e.g. guardians, assemblies, data, community roles); and how decisions are **implemented** with a clear mandate and accountability mechanism. Led by Moral Imaginations.



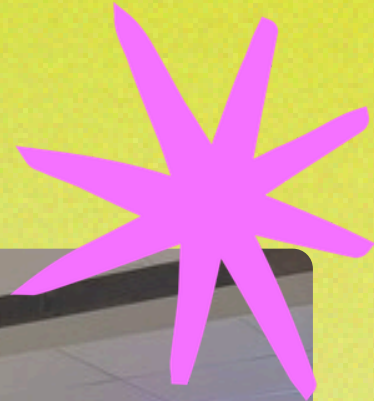
**Ouse Assembly Design Workshop** exploring how deliberative democracy and citizens' assembly models could be adapted to meaningfully represent the River Ouse in decision-making, enabling participants to assess which forms of nature-inclusive governance might best support Lewes District Council and its partners to act in the river's long-term interests. Led by Moral Imaginations.



### Implementation Case Study Workshops

trailing practical implementation of the River Ouse Charter on real-world challenges to identify where existing systems support or constrain implementation, and explore how a future interspecies council could support implementation of the Charter. Led by Environmental Law Foundation & Love Our Ouse.

# Designing practical governance models for implementing the River Ouse Charter



# Designing practical governance models for implementing the River Ouse Charter

In implementing a new governance system for representation of the river, we offered a basic governance framework that participants used to create bespoke mechanisms. It consisted of:

1. **Triggers:** What triggers the river being represented in decision making?
2. **Representation:** How do we represent the river when it is?
3. **Implementation:** How are the outcomes of decisions implemented?

Participants were provided with global and UK case studies of a range of governance mechanisms representing rivers and ecosystems within existing and prefigurative governance systems. They were then guided through a design process to create a bespoke governance model for the River Ouse, identifying opportunities, weaknesses and considerations relevant to the local context.

The next section synthesises insights from the Governance Mechanisms workshop to show how participants understood the River Ouse Charter, the preferred options for how it can be put into practice, and what is required to pilot a credible nature-inclusive governance mechanism.

# 1. Triggers:

## *When the River's Voice Is Activated*

Participants explored a wide range of potential triggers for activating representation of the river. There was strong agreement that governance must operate on two levels: responsive (able to react to specific triggers and harms) and proactive (ongoing, rolling governance present by default).

Commonly cited triggers included:

- Planning and development applications affecting the river or its catchment
- Pollution incidents, including sewage discharges and agricultural runoff
- Data-based thresholds such as low flows, water quality exceedances, or biodiversity decline already collected by agencies, trusts, and citizen science groups
- Community-reported impacts, including illness linked to wild swimming or visible ecological change

A key tension emerged between event-based triggers reacting to specific harms (**triggered mechanism**) and an always-on approach, where the river's interests are represented on a regular basis regardless of crisis (**standing mechanism**). While **event-based triggers** were valued for their specificity and immediacy, many participants argued that relying solely on crisis response risks reinforcing reactive governance. A standing mechanism was seen as enabling preventative and strategic decision-making, particularly until the river reaches an agreed healthy standard.

Applying the Charter early in planning and design processes, through checklists, guidance or "Charter clinics", where applicants can test designs against the river's rights was suggested. This was seen as a way to shift from reactive challenge to proactive collaboration, aligning regeneration with river health from the outset. Importantly, participants noted that existing policy frameworks are not conceptually incapable of responding to these triggers; rather, failures tend to arise from weak enforcement, poor coordination and insufficient resourcing. Some concluded therefore, that the task includes strengthening, aligning and activating those systems already in place, ensuring they work in the river's interests. As one participant observed, "*We don't need to reinvent the wheel, we need to make the wheel work for the river.*"

Building on this, others stressed the importance of translating rights into clear activation protocols, linking each right to a recognised trigger and an agreed first response. For example:

*Right to flow: trigger = abstraction below X threshold; response = joint meeting between EA, local authorities, and river group within 10 days.*

This approach was seen as a way to turn the Charter into a living instrument rather than a symbolic statement, while complementing (rather than duplicating) existing statutory duties.

## 2. Representation: *Who speaks for the River?*

Representation was the most extensively debated aspect of the workshop. Participants consistently rejected single-solution models in favour of hybrid approaches that respected and included plural forms of knowledge, perspective and accountability.

Proposed forms of representation included:

- **Human guardians or trustees** with ecological, legal and community expertise (professionals and academics, local citizens and river residents, faith groups, lawyers, fishers and ecologists, youth representatives, data collectors and technologists).
- **Community members** living along different sections of the river, reflecting a “river continuum” from source to sea, enabling local knowledge to feed into decision making.
- **Youth or intergenerational councils** to represent long-term ecological interests.
- **A Nature Director** embedded into corporate boards in the catchment.
- **Environmental data and monitoring**, potentially supported by digital tools, used as inputs rather than decision-makers. The Earth Species Project was given as one example, which could allow real-time monitoring, enabling the river to speak using data.
- **A rotating Guardianship Circle**, in which guardians represent different relationships with the river such as floodplain, species, community, local authority and infrastructure – tasked with tracking how the Charter is applied or sidelined, convening periodic “health checks” on the river’s rights, and translating insights into clear recommendations for councils, planners and funders.
- **AI-based voices**, such as “RiverBot” systems or live data dashboards that allow the river to speak based on environmental monitoring.



There was strong agreement that representation must be **informed, inclusive, place-based and accountable**, with caution expressed about professionalisation or capture by powerful interests. Digital and AI-based tools generated interest, particularly for real-time monitoring, but also highlighted the need for transparency and education to build trust, with some skepticism expressed.

The importance of **culture-building** emerged as a recurring theme, particularly the role of empathy-building and perspective-shifting practices. Periodic interspecies or relational exercises were seen as essential for building shared understanding of the Charter's aims and cultivating a collective sense of what good ecological stewardship looks like.

Participants also highlighted that the **Charter applies to the entire catchment**, not just the main stem of the River Ouse, raising questions about how representation might speak for interconnected tributaries, land uses and ownership patterns across the wider system.

A notable debate emerged around where representation should sit. Some participants resisted embedding river representatives within catchment partnerships, arguing that organisations already dedicated to environmental protection should not be overburdened. In contrast, there was stronger support for introducing river representation within profit-driven organisations, particularly businesses whose activities exert the greatest pressure on the river. As one discussion framed it, “those doing the most damage currently have the least accountability to the river.”



### 3. Implementation:

#### ***Who has the mandate and authority to implement the outcomes?***

Participants consistently identified implementation as the most challenging aspect of governance innovation. Key questions focused on how deliberation translates into action, including:

- Who formally receives and responds to recommendations from a river assembly or council?
- How are outcomes integrated into planning, permitting and policy processes?
- Where does accountability sit, and what happens if recommendations are ignored?

A key insight was that implementation should not be understood solely as the creation of new policies or structures, but as an ongoing practice of right relationship with the river. Participants emphasised that the Charter's real power lies in its ability to reshape everyday decision-making, prompting institutions and communities to ask not only what is permitted, but what does right relationship with the river require in this situation? By embedding this question into meeting agendas, project design processes and volunteer training, the Charter can move from a symbolic statement to a living governance culture over time.

Proposed implementation approaches included:

- Establishing an Ouse assembly as an advisory mechanism formally linked to local authority governance
- Using trusteeship or oversight models to safeguard independence and continuity
- Embedding Charter principles into planning guidance, organisational policies and training
- Leveraging public visibility and political accountability where legal enforcement is weak
- Developing a shared understanding of Charter principles, including agreed definitions of 'good ecological status', so that governance mechanisms can be clearly and consistently activated by measurable data or community-recognised signs of ecological change.
- Operationalising citizen science and accessible tools to support public participation in the Charter's principles, alongside shared ecological knowledge particularly around sewage, pollution and system behaviour to enable communities to "*live the river's rights*" through stewardship and relational ways of being that support systemic transformation.
- Building a local-translocal learning network to situate the Ouse Charter within a wider movement of relational river governance maintaining a place-specific approach while sharing transferable learning through exchanges with other UK and international river rights initiatives, and developing adaptable tools (such as methods, templates and evaluation frameworks) that others can use and evolve.

A recurring tension throughout the discussions concerned the **balance between system integration and bottom-up community** action. On one hand, participants acknowledged the importance of working within existing infrastructure and aligning with local policy frameworks to ensure legitimacy and influence. On the other hand, there was clear frustration and distrust toward current systems expressed by participants, particularly the planning process which was widely perceived as overriding local environmental concerns in favour of development.

Some participants argued against ‘reinventing the wheel’, instead advocating for strategic engagement with existing power structures, including **lobbying businesses** to embed river representation within **corporate ESG frameworks**. Others called for community-driven advisory bodies that **prioritise local knowledge and lived experience** as the foundation of ecological decision-making. Despite these differences, there was strong shared support for locally empowered governance models capable of influencing higher policy levels over time, alongside a clear consensus that “*the Charter sits alongside, not beneath, existing law*”, serving as a practical lens through which statutory duties can be met more coherently and consistently in the river’s interests.

Participants also recognised that the current political environment presents significant constraints, reinforcing the need for participatory approaches that can build legitimacy gradually and withstand shifting priorities. Across perspectives, there was consensus that any new governance mechanism must be supported by **adequate resourcing, coordination and institutional commitment**, particularly in light of existing enforcement gaps.



# Applying the charter to real-world case studies

In the afternoon, participants worked in facilitated groups on practical implementation scenarios. These case studies invited participants to test Charter principles against real-world challenges, identify where existing systems support or constrain implementation, and explore how a future Ouse interspecies council could become part of regular local governance.

## Case Study 1:

### Nature Restoration (Landport Brooks & Offham Marshes)

This case study explored how the River Ouse Charter could guide catchment-scale restoration in Lewes District, using Landport Brooks and Offham Marshes as a live example. For these areas, nature restoration involves improving habitats for amphibians, enhancing flood resilience, and providing recreational and educational opportunities for local communities. Participants emphasised the Charter's value not just as a policy tool, but as a catalyst for creative, community-led nature restoration. While the Charter does not simplify complex negotiations, it provides a framework to embed the river's ecological health as a core principle in catchment management, balancing competing interests, articulating trade-offs, and ensuring accountability. By integrating governance, participatory processes, and cultural engagement, it can support projects in Lewes District that deliver mutual benefits for nature and communities, fostering resilient, thriving river ecosystems and a strong sense of place.



## Case Study 2:

### Planning and Development Pressure (Hamsey Housing Application)

This case study tested how the Charter might be applied to a proposed housing development affecting the North End Stream, a sensitive chalk tributary and sea trout spawning ground. Participants noted that while the Charter is not yet a formal material consideration in planning law, it can still strengthen community and council responses by translating river rights into existing policy duties, biodiversity obligations, protected species frameworks, Nature Recovery Strategies, and planning conditions. The Charter was seen as a tool for pre-emptive negotiation rather than adversarial objection, shaping mitigation, monitoring, drainage design, and developer responsibilities through mechanisms such as Section 106 agreements and biodiversity net gain. The case reinforced the need for formally appointed river guardians or advisory bodies to ensure the river's interests are consistently voiced within planning decisions.



## Case Study 3:

### **Water Scarcity, Drought and Responsible Consumption**

This case study examined how the River Ouse Charter could guide responsible and sustainable water consumption in the context of declared drought conditions in East and West Sussex, with Ardingly Reservoir at 27.6% capacity. Participants noted a disconnect between individual perceptions of water abundance and the systemic reality of one of the most water-stressed regions in the world, compounded by privatisation and weak regulation that have prioritised shareholders over ecological health. Key Charter rights, such as the right to flow, to be fed by sustainable aquifers, to be free from pollution, and to an active and influential voice, were identified as directly threatened by over-abstraction and fragmented policy. The Charter was seen as a framework for shifting from reactive crisis management to proactive, relational governance, embedding both behavioural change and institutional accountability. Practical proposals included promoting water reuse and rainwater harvesting, supporting farmers to reduce runoff, introducing guaranteed minimum water rights with escalating charges for excess use, and establishing innovative funding mechanisms such as River Funds, river taxes on companies operating along the catchment, and the redirection of fines and levies into local restoration. Inclusive representation, through river guardians, interspecies councils and stronger community engagement funded in part by water companies, was viewed as essential to rebuilding trust, aligning policy, and ensuring that the river's long-term right to thrive is not subordinated to short-term human demand.



## Case Study 4:

### **Institutionalising the Charter within Organisations (Railway Land Wildlife Trust)**

This case study explored how organisations such as Railway Land Wildlife Trust can embed the River Ouse Charter through coordinated cultural, professional and institutional change. At a personal level, this includes baseline assessments of staff and volunteer attitudes, training to be in “right relationship with nature,” and creative tools such as arts-based engagement, storytelling, gamification and Interspecies Council persona cards (river, fish, bird) to normalise rights-based language. Professionally, participants proposed linking Charter rights directly to ecological data, thresholds and regulatory triggers, revising evaluation frameworks to ask “What would success look like from the river’s perspective?” and tracking interventions as performance metrics. Institutionally, options included appointing a board-level Nature Guardian or Rights Champion, embedding rights language into strategies and management plans, and creating governance mechanisms, such as river guardians or citizen assemblies, to ensure the river’s voice meaningfully shapes funded decisions.



Together, these four case studies show that the Charter’s future rests not on symbolic recognition, but on practical governance capable of representing the river under real-world pressures. They demonstrate how river rights can be translated into concrete triggers, benchmarks and decisions across restoration, planning, drought response and organisational strategy. At the same time, they expose a persistent gap: the river is affected in every arena, yet rarely has a consistent advocate within decision-making systems. A pilot Ouse Assembly would therefore act as connective tissue, providing a standing, legitimacy-building forum that links policy, culture and accountability, and embeds the river’s voice within everyday governance.

# Designing a River Ouse Assembly

Building on the governance discussion, participants were introduced to deliberative democracy and citizens' assembly methodologies, including emerging models of nature-inclusive and interspecies assemblies called 'Interspecies Councils'. Three potential assembly formats were explored:

- A **fully more-than-human Interspecies Council**, where all participants adopt the perspectives of river species or nature elements
- A **hybrid** model combining human citizens and more-than-human representatives in an Interspecies Council approach
- A **human citizens' assembly** supported by designated River Guardians

Participants worked in small groups to consider how each model might function for the River Ouse, what it would require in practice, and what it could offer Lewes District Council and partners as an advisory governance mechanism. They were asked to express which of the three approaches they believed would best suit their needs and aims.



## A Hybrid Interspecies Council Approach

Participants felt that a hybrid model offered the most credible balance between innovation and institutional legitimacy. This approach was seen as capable of maintaining the empathic and moral imagination benefits of speaking for the river, while being accessible and actionable within existing governance systems. Participants also noted the strain on limited decision-making resources, suggesting that connecting into established structures such as citizens' assemblies could balance human and ecological needs while making effective use of existing institutional capacity.

One group suggested a “river continuum” model, in which representation reflects different stretches and characteristics of the river from source to sea, informed by ecological knowledge, lived experience and community connection.

The Interspecies Council could function as a standing, advisory mechanism, supporting Lewes District Council and partners to navigate complex decisions affecting the river, while also building shared responsibility, public legitimacy, democratic accountability for the river and long-term stewardship.

Overall, participants viewed Interspecies Councils of all forms as a way to reconnect communities, councils and ecosystems, while providing a credible forum for navigating trade-offs between human activity and ecological limits.



# Key Learnings and Next Steps

## Developing “right relationship” with the River

Participants consistently described the River Ouse Charter as both symbol and instrument: a way to give voice to the river, mobilise community agency, and test a new paradigm of ecological rights in the UK context. Importantly, the Charter also offers a positive framing through which communities can engage with the river, at a time when public attention has increasingly been drawn to it through the lens of sewage and ecological failure. Beyond its practical use, the Charter was recognised as enabling a cultural and governance shift away from human-centred decision-making towards a model grounded in care, reciprocity and mutual flourishing. In other words, a shift from “ego to eco”.

A central learning was that the Charter’s greatest impact lies in how it “reshapes governance culture” over time by embedding reflection and responsibility into everyday practice, rather than relying solely on formal authority. Participants framed this as a shift from entitlement to responsibility, and from compliance to kinship with the river. Participants described how building right relationship with nature could bring the following benefits:

- Recasts people as duty-bearers rather than passive consultees
- Reframes the river as an actor with rights instead of a resource to be managed and used
- Encourages shared responsibility and stewardship of a commons
- Creates space for hope, imagination and collective action in the face of ecological crisis

Cultural practices such as exercising moral imagination emerged as a practical governance capacity: enabling perspective-taking, empathy, expanding the moral circle of concern beyond the human, and supporting experimentation with new ways of acting with the river. By cultivating shared imagination, the process opens space for empathy, collective care and empowerment — enabling everyone engaged with the river to take action not just in policy, but to become active in everyday stewardship and community engagement. This emphasis on relational engagement, moral imagination and expanded participation is central to the promise of an interspecies council as a catalyst for systemic change rooted in responsibility, reciprocity and ecological flourishing.

## Key challenges observed

- **Structural and political constraints:** Efforts to establish new governance mechanisms for river rights will face many of the same constraints as existing systems, including limited funding and capacity, weak enforcement, and a challenging political environment for advancing nature-led governance at both local and national levels.
- **Unclear mandate, enforcement and accountability:** There remains uncertainty over who would ultimately enforce decisions made on behalf of the river: local councils, existing regulators such as the Environment Agency, or a new body. Also how the outputs of an interspecies council would be integrated into existing decision making structures. How to translate rights-based language into planning and operational processes also remains a present question, in particular where the Charter is not a legal instrument, but an instrument of moral and political force.
- **Urgency versus bureaucratic pace:** Tension between the speed of ecological degradation and the slow, complex nature of institutional decision-making. Overly layered governance risks paralysis at moments of crisis, underscoring the need for simplified procedures, clear responsibilities and decision pathways that allow an interspecies council to act quickly and decisively when triggers arise, while still supporting informed and accountable deliberation.
- **Systemic power imbalance:** Discussions highlighted persistent power imbalances between communities and centralised institutions, compounded by a legal vacuum for enforcing nature's rights in the UK.
- **Anthropocentrism:** Debates surfaced around anthropocentrism and whether human representation risks oversimplifying ecological complexity, and whether complementing with scientific evidence, data and technological representation could help.
- **Tension between technological skepticism and opportunity:** The use of AI-driven ecological data to identify triggers and give the river a voice generated both interest and skepticism. Whilst some expressed distrust, others highlighted the potential of citizen science and data-driven tools to enable faster and more responsive action when river health is threatened.



## Key considerations for designing governance

- There is strong appetite for establishing a **formal, recurring participatory mechanism** to represent the River Ouse in an advisory capacity.
- **Hybrid and layered governance models** were consistently favoured over single-solution approaches
- Moral imagination and **perspective-shifting practices** were seen as critical enablers of meaningful representation for ecological democracy
- Measure success with **relational indicators** (e.g strength of cross-sector partnerships and instances of ecological and cultural repair) and introduce a “ripples tracker” to document the imaginative impact and show the cultural and narrative influence of the Charter as a form of governance change
- **Link governance activities to local authority** decision-making while **retaining deliberative independence**
- Use the Charter pre-emptively in planning and as a **living framework**, translating symbolic rights into routine indicators, questions and actions
- Embed **plural knowledge and inclusive participation**. Governance design should intentionally bring together diverse forms of knowledge and lived experience, ensuring representation spans disciplines, sectors, ages and communities. Balancing scientific and policy expertise with local, cultural and intergenerational perspectives was seen as essential to building legitimacy, inclusivity and shared stewardship.

These insights provide a robust, participant-led foundation for moving from exploration to experimentation of a pilot Ouse assembly in the form of a Hybrid Interspecies Council with human and more-than-human representatives.

## Next Steps

The symposium clarified both the appetite and the foundational requirements for piloting a nature-inclusive governance mechanism for the River Ouse. Key next steps identified include:

- Designing and piloting an interspecies council in partnership with Lewes District Council and stakeholders
- Clarifying mandate, scope and integration with local council decision-making processes
- Securing resources to support facilitation, documentation and learning
- Continuing community and stakeholder engagement to ensure legitimacy, accountability and inclusivity

## Concluding remarks

This symposium demonstrated both a strong appetite and a clear foundation for moving from principle to practice in implementing the River Ouse Charter. Participants consistently affirmed that meaningful representation of the river requires more than symbolic recognition: it calls for a standing, nature- inclusive governance mechanism that can operate within existing decision-making structures while expanding them to include more-than-human perspectives. The emerging consensus points toward piloting an Interspecies Assembly as a pragmatic and imaginative next step—moving deliberately into a pilot phase that tests how imagination, participation and governance can work together to give a lasting voice to the River Ouse. Throughout the day, participants demonstrated remarkable engagement and enthusiasm, with lively debate, collaborative problem-solving, and a shared commitment to translating vision into practice.



## Further pathways forward

The symposium produced a set of recommendations for next steps. What follows is a map of five interconnected pathways that together could constitute a programme for embedding the River Ouse Charter in real governance.

### 1. Pre-emptive Charter integration into planning processes

Many of the decisions that most affect the River Ouse like water abstraction, land management, flood risk, nutrient management, are made by the bodies that sit around catchment partnership tables: the Environment Agency, Southern Water, South East Water, landowners, and others. The Charter's reach must extend to these actors and these decisions.

This pathway focuses on working with the Adur and Ouse Catchment Partnership and its members to explore how Charter principles can be embedded in shared governance, including data sharing, joint trigger protocols and clearer accountability mechanisms, so that the river's rights are considered as a matter of routine, not as an afterthought when crisis arrives.

### 2. A standing Hybrid Interspecies Assembly as connective tissue

Participants were clear that river representation cannot rely solely on crisis response. The most supported model was a permanent, advisory Hybrid Interspecies Assembly – combining human citizens with more-than-human representatives – operating on an ongoing basis rather than being activated only when harm occurs. This body would function as connective tissue between policy, culture and accountability, providing the River Ouse with a consistent and credible voice within local governance. The hybrid model was favoured precisely because it holds together imaginative legitimacy and institutional practicality, remaining both innovative and actionable within existing governance frameworks.

This pathway involves designing and piloting that mechanism in partnership with Lewes District Council and wider catchment partners, clarifying its mandate, its relationship to existing decision making structures, and how its outputs will be received and acted upon. The pilot would be rigorously documented and independently evaluated, with learning made openly available to other river communities across the UK.

### 3. Rebuilding power through plural, locally-rooted representation

A strong undercurrent was distrust of both professionalisation and capture by powerful interests. Participants consistently pushed for representation that includes river residents, youth, faith groups, fishers and citizen scientists – not just experts. The "river continuum" model (source to sea) was a creative expression of this: representation that mirrors the river's own geography and ecology.

## Pathways forward

### 4. Trans-local learning – the Ouse as a demonstration site

The River Ouse Charter is not an isolated experiment. Since Lewes District Council's decision in February 2025, the River Test and River Itchen have received similar recognition from local authorities in Hampshire. The Rights of Rivers movement is gaining ground across the UK and internationally.

This track involves building connections with other UK river rights initiatives and relevant international examples, sharing tools, templates and evaluation frameworks, and developing the shared knowledge base that will allow communities elsewhere to adopt and adapt what is being learned here. It also involves communicating that learning publicly in ways that build the broader political and cultural case for relational river governance.

### 5. Translating rights into measurable triggers

A right that cannot be measured cannot be acted on. A critical next step is the practical work of linking each of the Charter's rights to specific, agreed indicators: flow thresholds, water quality readings, biodiversity benchmarks. This would allow the Charter to function as a living instrument, automatically activating a response when the river's health drops below an agreed level, rather than remaining a statement of intent.

This pathway involves working with ecologists, data scientists, citizen science groups and regulatory bodies to define what good looks like for the Ouse, and to build the monitoring infrastructure, including digital tools and community reporting mechanisms, needed to detect when those standards are not being met. The government's new commitment to ending operator self-monitoring and investing in independent data systems makes this a particularly timely opportunity.

### Engaging the national water reform agenda

The government's Water White Paper, published in January 2026, represents a significant reform of England's water system. It commits to doubled funding for catchment partnerships, more joined-up regional water planning, and greater involvement of local communities and civil society in river governance. The River Ouse Charter, already the first of its kind to receive policy level recognition from a local authority in England, is the kind of community led, catchment scale model that this reform agenda is reaching for.

#### **These five pathways are not independent of one another.**

The assembly requires data triggers to carry institutional weight; the planning integration depends on the cultural shift that the assembly cultivates over time; and the translocal network is what transforms a local experiment into replicable learning. Together, they offer a coherent and participant-grounded foundation for the next phase of work: moving from exploration to pilot, and from pilot to practice.

# Partners and Supporters

With thanks to all participants, facilitators, student supporters and partner organisations who contributed their time, expertise and care for the River Ouse. This symposium represents a collective step towards ecological democracy: embedding the rights and voice of the river within local governance and decision-making.



## **Love Our Ouse (LOO):**

Love Our Ouse is a community interest company formed to link people to celebrate, learn about and upscale positive action for the Sussex Ouse from source to sea. We believe the Ouse has the right to support a rich biodiversity and a thriving riverside community. To date Love our Ouse has led the development of the Ouse Charter of Rights in consultation with and supported by local stakeholders and expertise further afield.

## **MORAL IMAGINATIONS**

## **Moral Imaginations (MI):**

Moral Imaginations is a leading research, practice and design lab dedicated to catalysing just, regenerative futures through igniting humankind's moral imagination. They have three focus areas: building the field, infiltrating institutions, and igniting public moral imagination. They share thought leadership, lead programmes and work with organisations through their award winning approach, adopted by over 75 public and private organisations.



## **Environmental Law Foundation (ELF):**

Environmental Law Foundation helps the voice of ordinary people and communities to be heard on matters affecting the environment in which they live by providing free information and guidance in-house on environmental issues for individuals and communities, also through our university based law clinics, and via our network of specialist environmental lawyers and technical experts.

The event was supported by student researchers and facilitators from partner universities, and generously funded by:



With generous student support from:



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# Supporting Resources

River Ouse Charter documentation

Symposium presentation materials

Case study references

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# Appendix: Case Study Notes from the Symposium

*The following case studies were developed by facilitated groups on the day of the symposium. Each group worked on a live, real-world scenario, testing how the River Ouse Charter might be applied in practice. These notes are lightly edited from the original group outputs to support readability, while preserving the distinct perspectives and working style of each group.*

## Case Study 1: **Nature Restoration - Landport Brooks and Offham Marshes**

This case study focused on nature restoration in the Lewes District, using Landport Brooks and Offham Marshes as a live example. Restoration goals for these sites include improving habitats for amphibians, enhancing flood resilience, and creating recreational and educational opportunities for local communities.

Participants explored the Charter as a practical governance tool for restoration work, one that could reframe conversations and establish ecological benchmarks, such as the river's right to flow, to a natural state, and to biodiversity, as the basis for project objectives, design and monitoring. Rather than treating ecological health as a consideration to be balanced against human interests, the Charter places it at the centre. Human interests, including public access, recreation and wellbeing, are then considered within that frame rather than in competition with it.

The group identified specific practical applications. Catchment partnerships could use Charter rights to co-produce shared restoration visions, while planning authorities could use them to guide priorities and link restoration to funding and stakeholder engagement. Triggers for action, such as pollution thresholds, habitat loss measurements, or community-reported concerns including anglers' observations, could prompt timely interventions when rights are threatened. Integrating scientific monitoring with citizen data, and making that data publicly accessible, was seen as a way to build a fuller picture of river health and keep governance grounded in evidence.

*Participants placed particular value on community engagement and arts-based approaches, including working with schools and local organisations to build awareness and foster stewardship. Establishing wildlife and ecological integrity as non-negotiable fundamentals, rather than soft add-ons to be traded away in negotiations, was seen as a key contribution the Charter could make to the culture of catchment management.*

*Challenges acknowledged by the group included fragmented responsibilities among regulators and partners, the instability of national policy frameworks, and the risk that rights language gets diluted into harm-reduction thinking rather than genuine restoration. The benchmark, participants felt, should be whether a project moves the Ouse towards its full rights, not merely whether it causes less damage than the alternative.*

*The Charter does not simplify complex negotiations, but it provides a framework to embed ecological health as a core principle, articulate trade-offs clearly, and hold all parties to account. Used well, it can support projects that deliver genuine benefit for both the river and the communities that depend on it.*

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## **Case Study 2:**

### ***Planning and Development***

#### ***- The Hamsey Housing Application***

This case study examined how the Charter might be applied to a proposed development of 160 dwellings in Hamsey. The North End Stream, a chalk tributary of the Ouse running along the northern boundary of the proposed site, is a well-documented spawning ground for sea trout, a species whose numbers in the Ouse have declined significantly over the past two decades. The group worked through three questions: which Charter rights are implicated; what legal and policy mechanisms are relevant; and how the Charter might be used before reaching the point of formal objection.

On rights, the group concluded that the development has the potential to affect all of the Charter's rights, with the most acute threats being to the North End Stream's ecological integrity through surface water run-off, diffuse pollution from vehicles, and changes to the hydrology of the site. On legal mechanisms, participants noted that the Charter is not yet a material consideration in planning law, though what counts as material continues to evolve. The more immediate opportunity is in linking Charter rights explicitly to existing policy and legislation: the NERC Act's enhanced biodiversity duty, the Wildlife and Countryside Act, protected species provisions, Nature Recovery Strategies, the South Downs National Park Management Plan, and the government's 25-year environment plan targets. The group also identified potential in Section 106 agreements and biodiversity net gain requirements as mechanisms through which Charter-based mitigation could be secured, for instance requiring the developer to fund protection of the spawning ground as a planning condition.

On the question of pre-emptive use, participants were clear that the Charter's greatest value in planning is as a tool for early negotiation rather than adversarial objection. By engaging with developers from the outset, framing conversations around what the river needs to thrive and what developers can do to support that, the Charter can shift the dynamic from conflict to collaboration. A formally appointed river guardian speaking at planning committee meetings, alongside targeted engagement with local councillors, was identified as a practical and immediately achievable step. Lewes District Council has publicly committed to championing the Charter, and Sussex Wildlife Trust is a supporter. Both organisations have a role in ensuring that commitment is made visible when planning decisions with catchment implications come forward.

## **Case Study 3:**

### ***Water Scarcity, Drought and Sustainable Consumption***

This case study was grounded in an immediate crisis. On 10th October 2025, a drought was declared across parts of East and West Sussex, with Ardingly Reservoir at 27.6% capacity and approximately six weeks of drinking water remaining. The Environment Agency and South East Water had jointly declared the drought and applied to DEFRA to activate Drought Action Plans. South East Water was granted an early variation to its abstraction permit, allowing it to draw from the River Ouse one month ahead of schedule. The South East of England is already one of the most water-stressed regions in the world, with per capita consumption of 148 litres per day. Participants noted a significant gap between how individuals experience water and the systemic reality of its scarcity. Water tends to feel abundant until a hosepipe ban arrives, and even then the connection between personal use and the river's health is rarely made. Privatisation and weak regulation have reinforced this disconnect, prioritising shareholder returns over ecological stewardship. The Charter offers a framework for addressing both the cultural and the institutional dimensions of this problem.

The rights most directly affected by drought and over-abstraction are the right to flow, the right to be fed from sustainable aquifers, the right to be free from pollution, and the right to an active voice in decisions that affect the river. When flows fall, the river's capacity to dilute contaminants is reduced, species are threatened, and the chalk aquifer, already under pressure from climate change and land use change, is further depleted. Each of these impacts is measurable, and each could be linked to a governance trigger.

Practical proposals from the group included promoting water reuse and rainwater harvesting, supporting farmers to reduce run-off and chemical pollution, and establishing a guaranteed minimum water right for all users, with escalating charges for consumption above that level. Participants were clear this was not a punitive proposal but a mechanism to encourage sustainable use and make the real cost of water visible.

On governance, the group recommended that South East Water and other water companies fund community workshops and education programmes as a condition of their operating within the catchment. Inclusive representation, through river guardians, interspecies councils, and catchment-wide citizen engagement, was seen as essential to rebuilding public trust, which has been significantly eroded. Innovative financing mechanisms were also proposed, including River Funds (endowments held in the river's name for restoration), river taxes on companies operating along the catchment, and the redirection of pollution fines into local restoration projects.

The Charter's contribution here is not to replace statutory water management, but to insist that the river has a seat at the table when decisions about its water are made, particularly at moments of crisis when the pressure to prioritise human demand is greatest.

## **Case Study 4:**

### ***Embedding the Charter within Organisations***

#### ***- Railway Land Wildlife Trust***

This case study explored how an organisation already committed to nature conservation can embed the River Ouse Charter in a way that goes beyond policy statements into everyday practice. Railway Land Wildlife Trust (RLWT) served as the working example, though the insights generated apply broadly to any organisation operating within the Ouse catchment.

Participants identified three dimensions of change that need to work together. The first is personal: the attitudes and assumptions that staff, volunteers and trustees bring to their work. Without genuine buy-in, rights-based language risks being applied superficially. Cultural change of this kind takes time and cannot be achieved through policy alone. Participants drew a parallel with the mainstreaming of equality and diversity, noting that lasting change comes through sustained learning, positive framing, and building connection rather than enforcing compliance. Accessible starting points matter, and creative tools such as storytelling, gamification and persona cards representing river species can help people engage with rights-based thinking before they have fully worked through its implications.

The second dimension is professional: translating the Charter into the design, monitoring and evaluation of everyday work. The central question here is whose definition of success counts. Evaluation frameworks built entirely around organisational objectives will not capture whether the river's rights are being advanced or undermined. Participants proposed revising planning and assessment processes to ask what success looks like from the river's perspective, and tracking this as a performance metric. The relevant ecological data largely already exists, collected by catchment partnerships and regulatory bodies, but what is currently missing is a clear and workable chain from rights to data to thresholds to action.

The third dimension is institutional: embedding the Charter in governance structures, strategies and funding decisions. Options explored included appointing a board-level Rights of Nature champion or nature guardian, mainstreaming rights-based language into management plans and corporate strategies, and creating formal mechanisms, such as river guardians and citizen assemblies, to ensure the river's voice shapes decisions rather than simply featuring in communications. Participants noted that the Charter applies not just to the river itself but to the entire Ouse catchment and valley, meaning it can legitimately serve as a decision-making instrument for any organisation whose work touches that landscape.

The group's conclusions converged on a single insight that runs through all four case studies: the Charter's power lies not in creating new legal duties, but in reframing how decisions are made and who they are made for. Play, creativity and positive engagement lower resistance and build shared ecological responsibility. Structural support, including resourcing, leadership commitment and practical tools, is what makes that engagement last.

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