



Hogan
Lovells

Nature governance and its role in water regulation

**Summary of workshop
notes and outputs**

Purpose of workshop

In partnership with colleagues from Rights of Rivers Network, Love our Ouse, Environmental Law Foundation and Hogan Lovell, Ofwat hosted a workshop with fellow regulators to discuss Nature Centred Governance and its role in regulation.

The purpose of the workshop was to understand and engage with how the Rights of Rivers and Nature Based Governance could operate within our regulatory landscape. Using the example of the River Ouse Charter we assessed the opportunities and challenges of implementing a river rights approach in practice for different stakeholders and participatory decision-making.



Agenda

Presentations from representatives across the river rights movement

Discussion session - How river rights approaches can help regulators strengthen the water sector

Group sessions

- What are the challenges and opportunities of a river rights charter
- If charters existed for all UK rivers, what would be the challenges and opportunities associated with: Regional Planning, Water quality and supply and Engagement?
- Next steps

We led the day by inviting attendees to share their favourite river memory

"Going for a run and seeing 3 kingfishers flaying about, another woman also stopped her run to watch with me"

"The River Aire burst it's banks in late winter flooding the valley. The floods froze, and we played ice hockey across the fields, jumping over dry stone walls and careering around sunken trees"

"River festivals on the River Medway and floating up and down on our boat"

"White water rafting on the Zambezi"

"Sitting by rivers on summer evenings with friends"

"Swimming in a river in Devon next to a tanning factory"

"Sea trout leaping up the weir, or realising a mass migration of fish was happening in the Ouse, seeing the river"

"Swimming during summer holidays in the River Miño in Spain"

"Paddleboarding and swimming with my kids during Covid in Barcombe Mills"

"Tracking the River Stiffkey down to the sea as a child and harvesting Samphire from the banks"

"Walking along the River Avon through St Nicks Park during Covid, Nature = Sanity"



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The workshop opened with a series of presentations from individuals working in at local and national level to better understand and implement nature centred governance across the water landscape. All the presentations heeded the idea of giving rivers (and nature more broadly) a more direct voice in decision making.

Each speaker talked about their role and experience with the Rights of rivers movement:

Dr Andrew Staines, Head of Environmental Partnerships working, **Ofwat** - set out the challenge and direction for regulation

Dr Neil Williams, Lecturer of Philosophy, **University of Southampton** – provided an overview of the River Rights concept

Matthew Bird, Director, **Love our Ouse** – Communities demonstrating River Rights in practice

Cllr Emily O'Brien Cabinet Member for Nature, Climate & Food Systems, **Lewes District Council** – How it can be adopted at local government

Emma Montlake, Co Director and Head of Casework, **Environmental Law Foundation** – Legal/policy inputs and how it fits existing frameworks

Josh Levene, Coordinator, **River Rights Network** – translated it into regulatory practice followed by group discussion.

Session 1 – How can river rights approaches help regulators do their job better?”.

Opportunities

- **Building trust and legitimacy:** Rivers can be a shared, unifying focus that can rebuild public trust, support stronger narratives about environmental outcomes, and improve engagement.
- **Long-term, place-based regulation:** River Rights could enable a shift away from short-term, reactive regulation towards long-term stewardship, resilience and prevention, supporting catchment partnerships and holistic regional planning.
- **Better use of data and evidence:** Citizen science and local knowledge could complement existing regulatory datasets, improving sensitivity, relevance and legitimacy while making better use of existing tools such as WFD frameworks rather than creating new systems.
- **Improved valuation of nature and resilience:** River Rights could offer a framework to better value natural systems, resilience and wider benefits that are currently under-represented in economic and regulatory decisions.
- **Cultural and organisational benefits:** A River Rights or Nature Centred Governance framing could provide guiding principles for regulators during organisational change, culture change, improve staff morale and strengthen connections with customers and place, outside of water company and political boundaries.

Challenges

- **Governance and accountability:** There is a lack of clarity around who initiates, facilitates and sustains River Rights approaches. Ensuring rivers are actively, influentially and independently represented (eg through guardian at catchment scale or guardian council at regional scale) is a right cited in many charters that councils have passed.
- **Existing frameworks and politics:** more clarity is needed about how River Rights fits alongside or improves on existing systems such as the Water Framework Directive, and how it operates in a policy environment dominated by growth priorities and short political cycles.
- **Language and framing:** The concept and terminology of “rights” may help or hinder engagement depending on audience, and careful communication is needed to maintain trust where ecological change is slow or not immediately visible.
- **Delivery and behaviour change:** Coordinating large numbers of stakeholders is complex, behaviour change across government, organisations and consumers is difficult, and initial ambition may require significant upfront resources before long-term benefits are realised.



Regional planning

River Rights could help create a clear, shared basis for regional decisions, aligning planning, environment and growth at a catchment level and supporting longer-term thinking. But there are real risks around misaligned boundaries, unclear accountability, and conflict with growth priorities, especially without a strong national steer.

Water quality and supply

The approach could set a clearer example for what good looks like, driving more preventative action and better use of local data, while encouraging efficiency and resilience. The main challenges are cost, affordability, and tensions with existing incentives and frameworks, alongside difficulty in valuing environmental outcomes in a meaningful way.

Engagement

There is strong potential to reconnect people with rivers, improve trust, and support behaviour change, particularly through catchment partnerships and citizen science. However, engagement is resource-intensive, the language of “rights” can be difficult, and it remains hard to reach beyond already engaged groups or demonstrate impact quickly.

In this session, groups were invited to think more granularly about the river charters, by again listing challenges and opportunities for 3 key regulatory policy areas: Regional Planning, Water quality and supply and Engagement

Next steps

- **Expand engagement and communications** with EA, NRW and Defra to promote stronger cross-regulator strategy around River Rights / Nature-centred governance.
- **Agree and clarify a regulatory position on nature-centred governance.**
- Explore how River Rights concepts fit with the culture and operating model of the new regulator. **Consider opportunities for pilot/sandbox scenario.**
- **Act as a convener for water sector stakeholders** to support collaboration and shared learning.
- **Map national stakeholders, funds, experts and examples of good regulatory practice** related to River Rights and catchment governance.
- Consider **Rights of Rivers representation in WINEP and A-WINEP/Welsh Environment programmes**
- **Greater internal engagement** to raise awareness of Rights of Rivers campaigns and Nature Centred Governance thinking
- Engage with Water Companies to understand their interest and existing activities

