

Parish Councils: Rights of the River Ouse Workshop



Lewes Town Hall, 21 July 2026

Introduction: River rights and the Ouse Charter

Since February 2025, [nine councils along the Ouse](#) have signed and supported the “Charter of the Rights of the River Ouse”: Lewes District Council, Wealden District Council and eight Parish Councils; Lewes Town Council, Piddinghoe, Ringmer, Rodmell, Hamsey and – most recently – Newhaven Town Council and Glynde and Beddingham Parish Council.

Addressing the poor state of health of rivers in the UK, River Rights Charters provide a clear framework to pre-emptively include rivers’ interests and change conversations, based on ecological knowledge on what a river needs to thrive. Moreover, national momentum for this approach is growing: At least 19 other rivers across the UK currently work on enforcing the River Rights charters they endorsed. By supporting the Ouse Charter, councils recognise the river’s intrinsic value and pledge to work in partnership in upholding and supporting the river’s rights, including the “Right to an active and influential voice”.¹

Bringing together 24 participants from 17 parish councils as well as researchers and residents, the workshop was part of this exploration. The aim of the workshop was to introduce the concept of Rights and Rivers and the Ouse Charter to those Parish Councils, unfamiliar with it and to explore how the Charter can be implemented at a Parish level for those who had signed up to it.



¹ The Charter of Rights of the River Ouse includes the rights of the river

- to exist in its natural state,
- to flow,
- to perform natural essential functions with the river catchment,
- to feed and be fed from sustainable aquifers,
- to be free from pollution,
- to native biodiversity,
- to regeneration and restoration,
- to an active and influential voice.

The evening included an introduction to Rights of Rivers and the Ouse Charter, and a “Council of All Beings”, finishing off with a discussion on how to join forces and implement river rights approaches at Parish level.

Some key aspects:

- An introduction to the concept of Rights of Rivers and its take-up around the world and in the UK set the context,
- It was outlined how a Rights of River approach can be advantageous as a practical governance tool and help to strengthen and enforce current nature legislation.
- The development of the Ouse Charter and the reasons why Rights of Rivers had been chosen as an approach to explore on the Sussex Ouse was set out.
- The number of organisations acting on riverine issues was highlighted and identified as a reason why communities felt confused about responsibilities and representation on the river.
- The impact of the Ouse Charter has extended beyond the Ouse Catchment and inspired other Councils and River Catchments to develop River Charters of their own and explore the implementation of river rights.



Council of All Beings: The North End Stream

The concept of the Council of All Beings was introduced and why it was a useful exercise through which to utilise the Ouse River Charter.



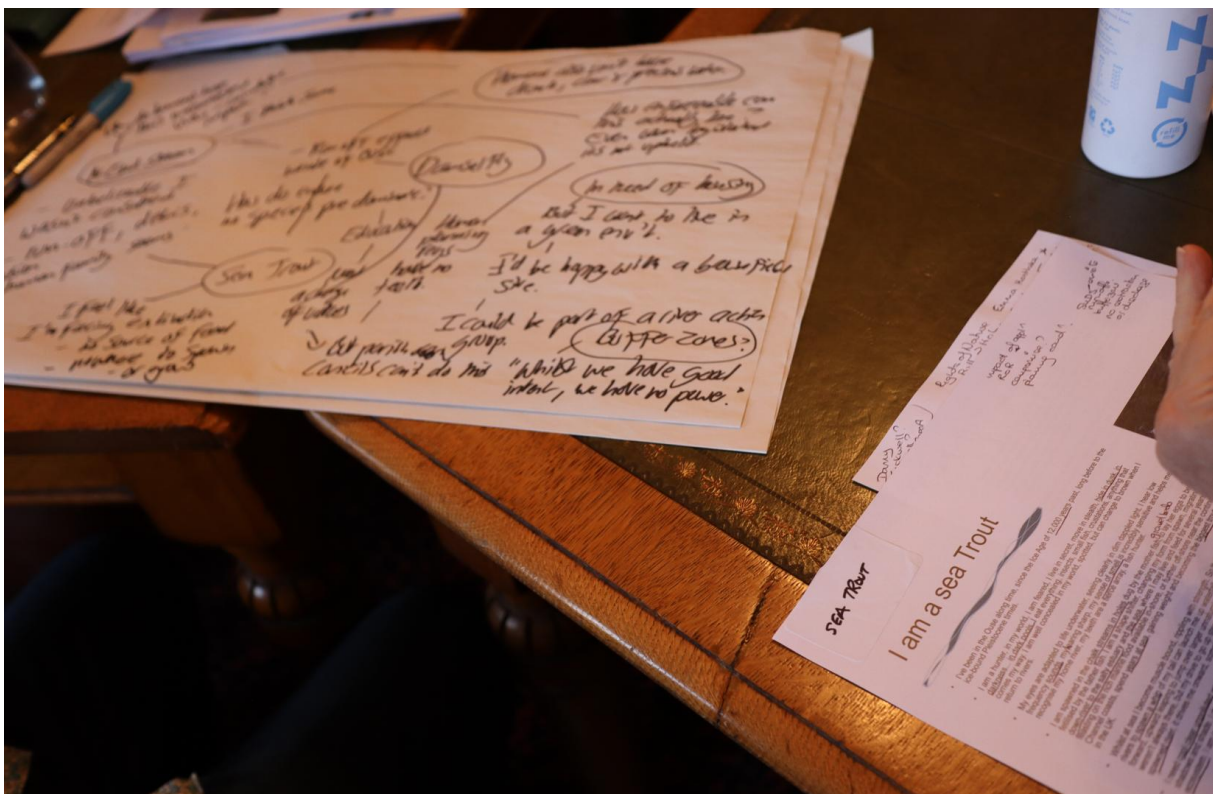
The North End stream is a globally rare chalk stream and the most southern tributary of the Ouse; until now relatively undisturbed, it provides a major spawning ground for sea trout. Close to the stream, at Cooksbridge Road around Hamsey, a development project for 151 residential dwellings (Class C3) is currently under consideration by the local planning committee. Should it go ahead, the project is likely to have severe impacts on the river and adjacent ecosystems.

In a “Council of All Beings”, participants on four tables took up the roles of human and other species involved: the stream, sea trout, damselflies, nightingales, parish councillors, local residents in need of housing, and future generations. Discussing individual impacts such as increased sewage discharges, abstraction, pollution and footfall, participants surfaced the consequences future human communities and local species might face—from disturbance to local extinction.



As participants discussed, upholding the river's rights clearly meant either objecting to the development project or calling for strict conditions. Including human *and* other species, the method made participants experience a different kind of conversation and shift in perspective, which many appreciated greatly.

It was noticeable how this approach enabled what was a fairly complex development proposal (albeit with many details missing) to be considered in a very short space of time from a number of differing viewpoints.



Using the River Ouse Charter enabled the consideration of these issues to be framed in a consistent and clear way.



Some responses from the table discussions;

- Why do humans have this unconnected view?
- Another voice is needed, independent ecological advocate
- Mitigations can be promised but they might not be carried through.
- No thought to impact on place and identity, will tear the heart out of the village.
- Nature already threatened by pollution and climate change, this will be a pressure too far.
- We are a statutory consultee, and no one listens and puts a different lens on a decision.
- What is the compromise? New home versus loss of nature.
- Make Charter key to conditions/objections – bring rights into application process and make it pre-emptive and conditional.
- How many flushes will the development bring to an already creaking water infrastructure.

Outcomes: Upholding the rivers' and communities' rights

A number of key themes came through in discussion around the practical implementation of rights and the Ouse Charter at a Parish Council I

Parish and town councils are the closest tier of local government to local communities and their environments and will continue to make their voices heard after local government reorganisation and devolution. They can thus take on a leading role in implementing the Charter in the future.

Even though participants emphasised they have no veto right on planning decisions, discussions revealed they do have a certain degree of influence on decision-making along the river: by drafting neighbourhood plans, as statutory planning consultees and (at times) landowners, as well as through engagement with local communities.



1. Planning: the Charter as material consideration

With the Ouse Charter endorsed by Lewes District Council and Wealden District Council, Parish Councils notably have the possibility to refer to it as a material consideration in responses to planning applications, thus making theirs and local communities' voices heard. There was some mention that River Rights might be integrated into the SDNPA local plan in some way following the Regulation 19 consultation, but this has yet to be corroborated.

2. Rights depend upon remedies: working jointly and building groundswell

Beyond that, Parishes can uphold the Charter in any ongoing process relevant to the river and its catchment (planning, reviews, neighbourhood plans). By using the same language, they can create consensus and make river rights inform local policy. This process has important precedents, such as the Falkirk Community Charter² and climate emergency declarations, emerging and being referred to across the country.

Participants proposed building a Parish council Rights of Nature network to collectively uphold the Charter and make (human and other species) communities' voices heard. Moreover, with Lewes District Council currently reviewing its statement of community involvement, Parishes can collectively make a point and emphasise the Charter as the voice of communities in related consultations.

² The Falkirk Charter was successfully cited as material consideration to ban fracking. Viewed as the "voice of the community", it notably led to a national campaign in Scotland to ban all fracking.

3. Increasing accountability: rights and ecological data

With a lack of accountability and resources to enforce planning conditions, pre-assessments are often not (independently) verified, while post-surveys and checks on BNG compensation seem not to be taking place at all. Developers might dissolve after completion and long-term liability, and maintenance and accountability for developments post-development is not a given.

The Ouse Charter can provide a framework with which to collect environmental data: By funding environment committees, officers or citizen scientist projects to collate and update ecological data in the Parish landscape, Parishes could build a collective ecological database link to the individual rights. Making themselves experts, Parishes would then have independent expertise and arguments at their fingertips when it comes to applications and other processes, thus turning ecological data into political force.

'Shifting Baseline Syndrome' is the phenomenon where each new generation accepts the current degraded environment as the new 'normal' baseline thereby lowering our expectations of what a health environment over time. With "minor deleterious effects" in environmental assessments accumulating over time, the ongoing degradation of local ecosystems is also largely out of view: The Charter and related database could be used to address these 'shifting baselines', clearly already at play.

4. Education and awareness-raising

Parish councils can raise awareness about the Charter and common environmental goods amongst their communities: Proposals involved funding citizen science or other kinds of data collection and informing Parish residents about the nature they have at their doorsteps.

5. Working in partnership

In all these actions, Parishes can work in partnership with existing organisations across the Ouse catchment to streamline their work and build large-scale consensus for the river's rights. Some of those mentioned were:

- Parish Council Rights of Nature Forum: collaborating and bringing people together, taking inspiration and applying for grants. Could be suggested to ESALC and others.
- "LEAF" (Local Environmental Action Forum) was mentioned by a representative from Barcombe Parish Council, tapping into local communities' knowledge, reporting, campaigning to encourage residents to put things on the record
- Link with Love Our Ouse and Ouse and Adur Rivers Trust, especially on citizen science projects
- Make use of the Biodiversity Records Centre managed by the Sussex Wildlife Trust
- Link with the Catchment Partnership developing a regional data hub.

If you are interested in supporting the Ouse Charter and wish to progress this at your Parish Council (or through another grouping) please find our template motion at [Rights of Rivers – Love Our Ouse](#)



"We are the river and the river is us."
Maori Iwi on the Whanganui River



Thank You! Email: info@loveourouse.org
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