



Rights of Rivers – Parish Councils Workshop

Agenda

- Introduction - 5:30pm 10 mins
- Rights Primer and the River Ouse Charter - 25 mins
- Council and of All Beings and Feedback - 60 mins
- Break - 20 mins
- What next? - How can you use the Charter? - 40 mins
- Wrap up - 5 mins

An introduction to River Rights Charters in the UK

Context: nature in crisis, governance in silos

- Fragmented governance across regulators, sectors, scales and ecosystems
- Weak accountability for cumulative and diffuse impacts
- A gap between data → decisions → action
- Existing frameworks tend to treat nature as managed assets, rather than living systems
- Investment and regulation poorly aligned with environmental and community outcomes
- Public trust and agency is low: perception is the current system is not delivering for people or for nature.



Photo credit: EPA-EFE/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



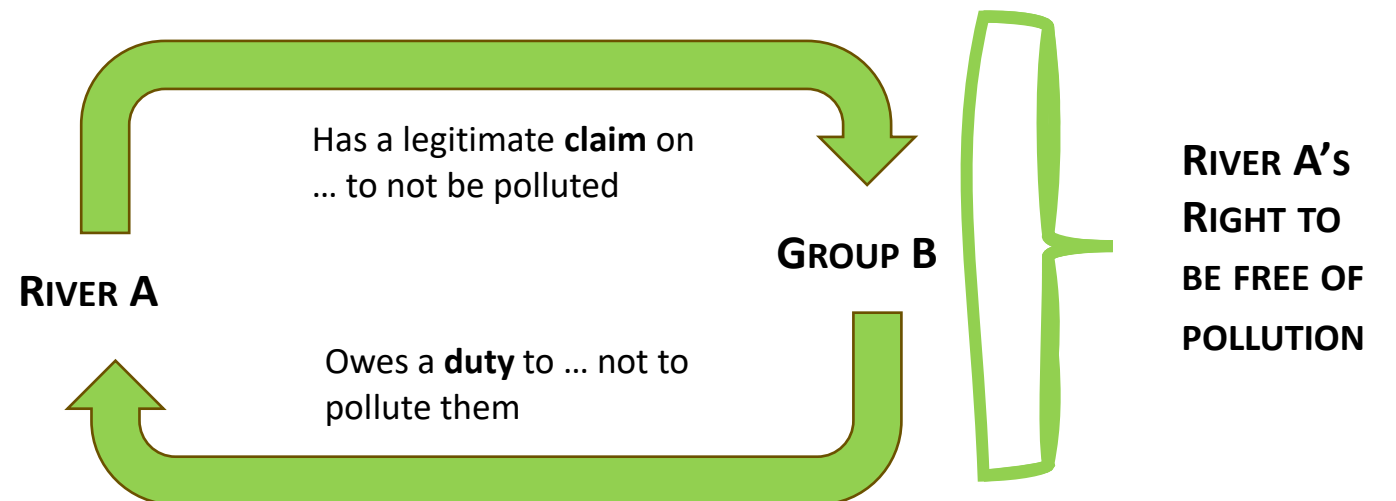
WHAT RIGHTS ARE

RIGHTS PROTECT INTERESTS

- Protect **fundamental interests** of an entity
- RoN must be grounded on the **ecological health**

RIGHTS CREATE DUTIES

- One entity's right **entails** another group's duty
- Duties owed **directly to** the right-bearer – here rivers



A rights of nature approach reframes governance:



- Rights of nature are a **practical governance innovation**, not an abstract concept
- This creates a **unifying logic** across institutions, sectors and scales.
- E.g. Water White Paper reforms the structure of water governance
- River rights can transform the guiding logic of decision-making within that structure and who's represented in it

CASES IN THE UK



March 2025: Ouse Charter
passed:





CASES IN THE UK

Actively explored by:

- National Trust
- Protected Landscape Partnership
- River and Wildlife Trusts

National RoN Initiatives:

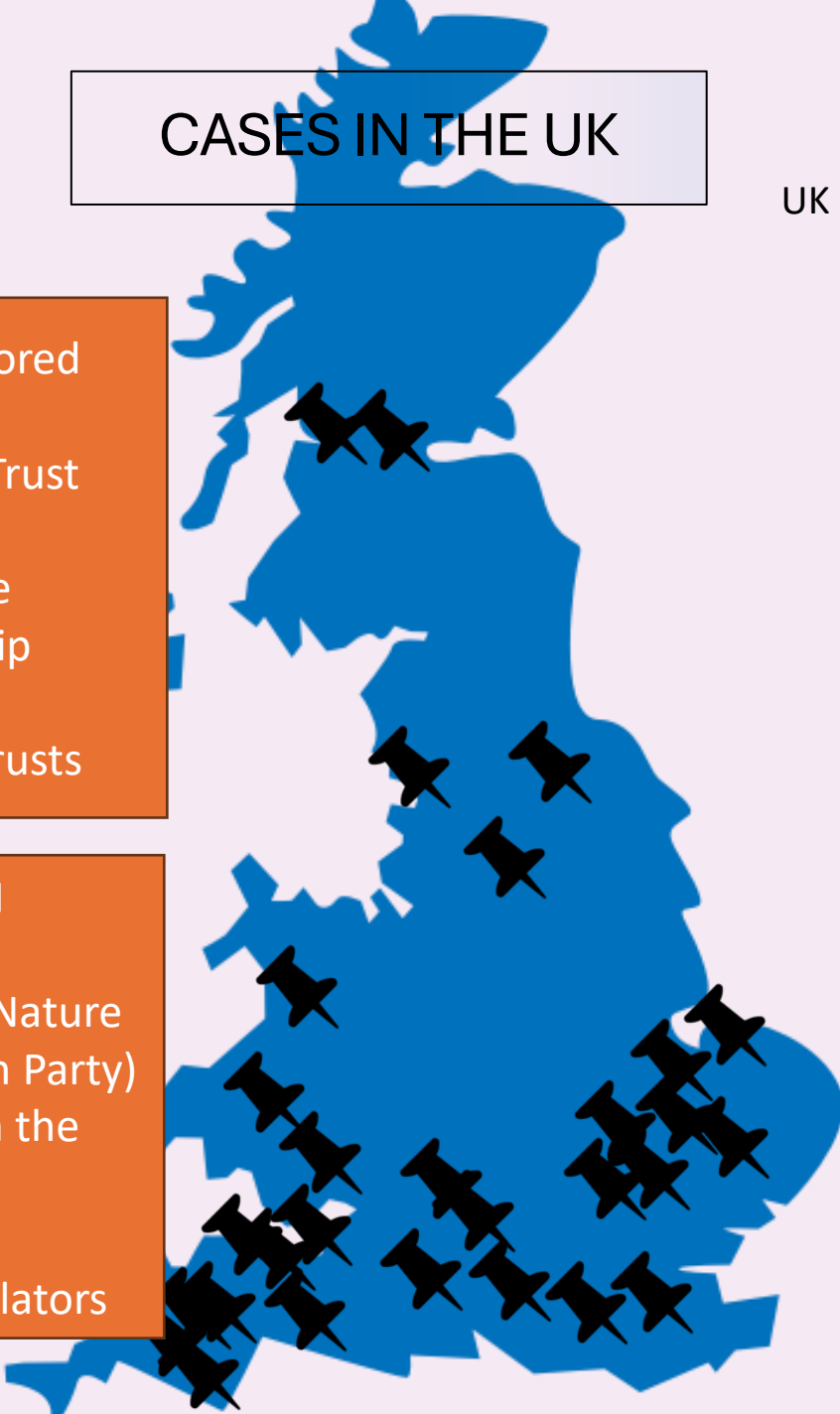
- Rights of Nature Bill (Green Party)
- Nature on the Board
- Networks
- UKG Regulators

UK Rights of Nature initiatives include:

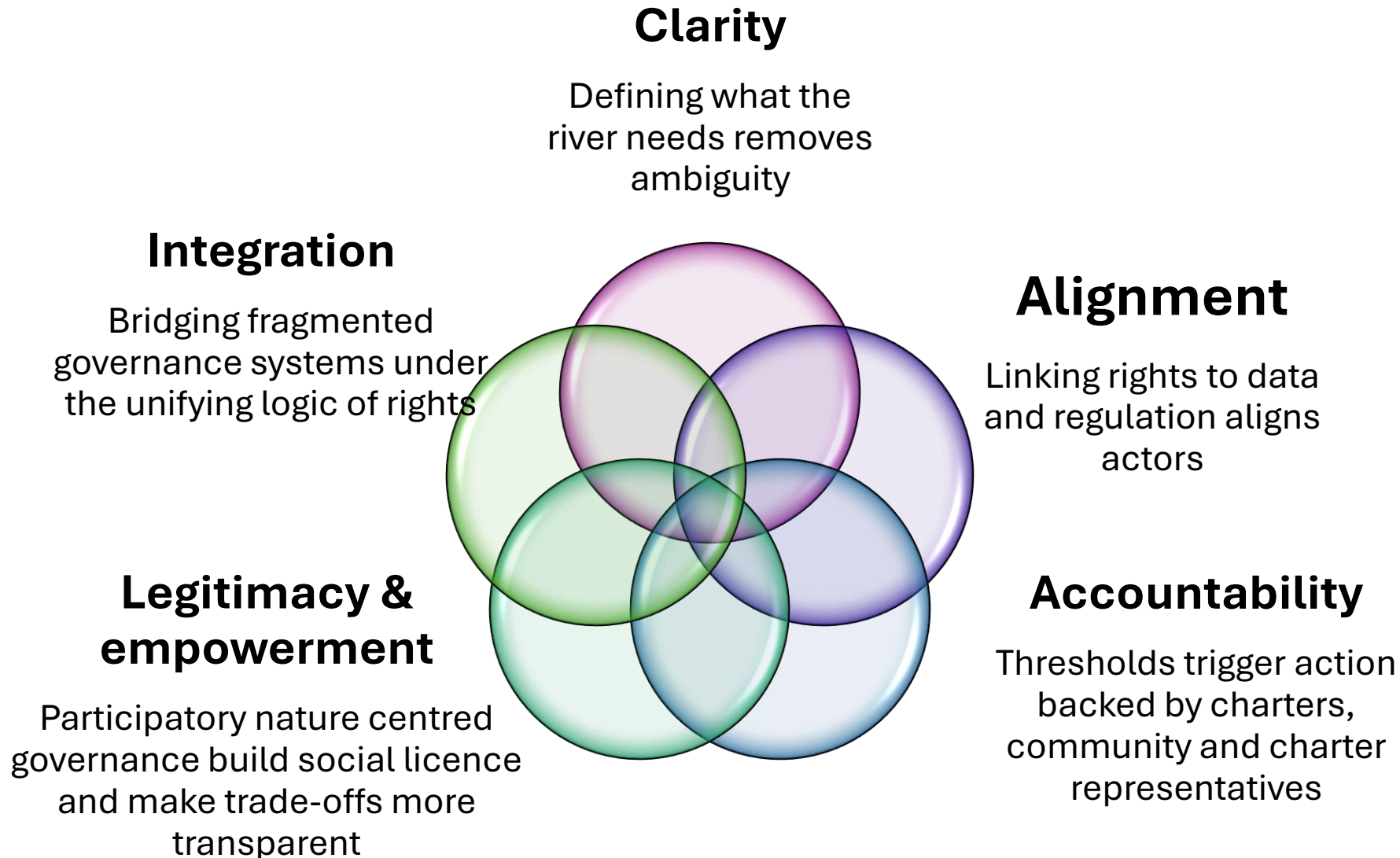
- River Dôn
- River Exe
- River Plym
- Channel Sea
- River Kent
- Gaywood River
- River Char
- River Severn
- River Clyde
- Lough Neagh
- River Avon
- River Deben
- River Frome
- River Wensum
- River Ouse
- River Loddon
- Rivers Itchen and Test
- River Medway
- River Rother
- River Wensum
- River Wye
- River Meon
- River Darent
- Rivers of East Devon
- River Usk
- River Roding
- River Wye
- River Cam
- River Dart

Research projects:

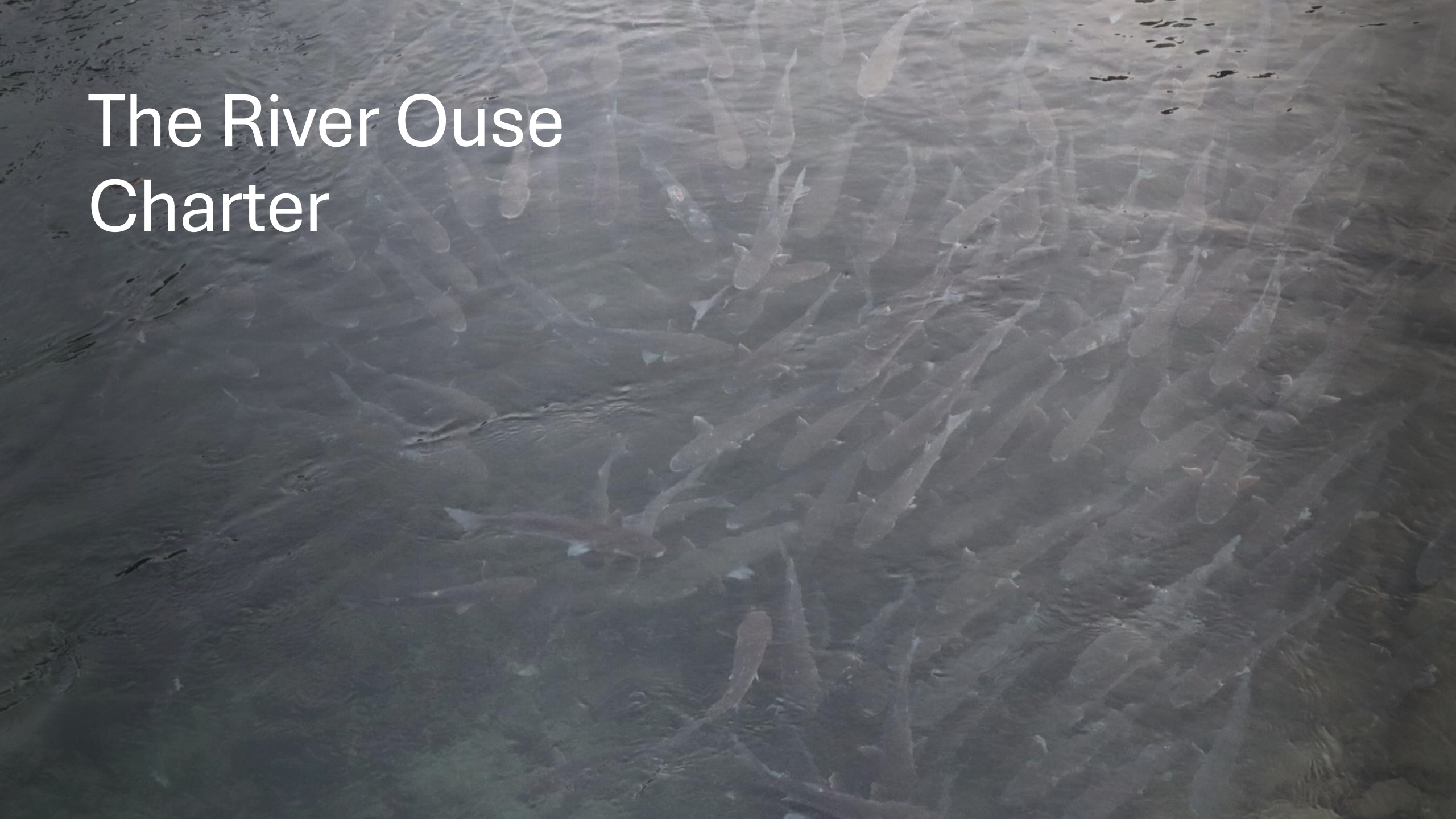
- Southampton
- Reading
- Sussex
- KCL
- Leeds



River rights works through five reinforcing mechanisms



The River Ouse Charter



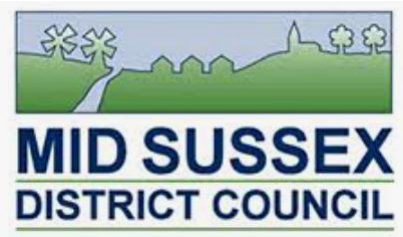
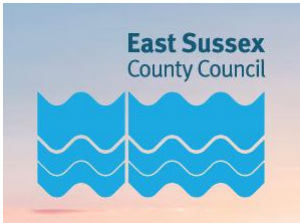
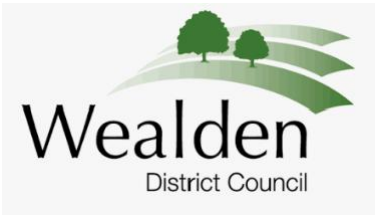
The Sussex Ouse



- 36 miles long from furthest point to sea through 2 counties, 3 districts and a National Park
- Rural, urban and coastal
- Modified – locks and weirs in on the Upper Ouse and canalised on the Lower Ouse
- Freshwater and Tidal
- Rich heritage and central to development of communities



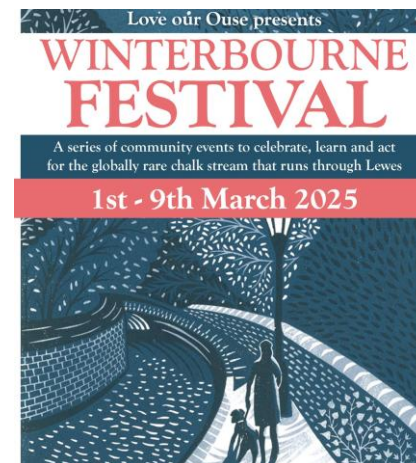
Who looks after the River?





love our Ouse

celebrate learn act



Why a River Rights Charter for the Ouse?



The age of extinction

River Ouse may become first in England to gain legal rights



Developing the Ouse Charter



Exploring the practical application of the River Ouse Charter



Marine Workshops, Newhaven, BN9 0ER



MORAL
IMAGINATIONS





Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs



House of Commons
Library

Research Briefing

31 March 2026

By Nuala Burnett,
Leslie-Anne Duvic-Pooli

Rights of rivers



Summary

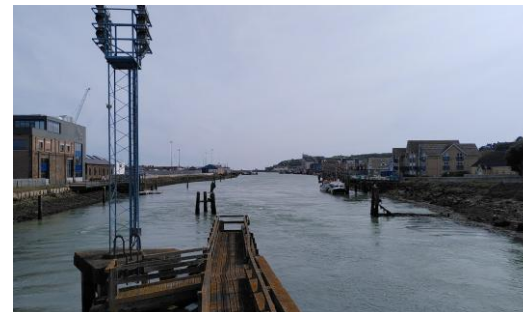
- 1 Can rivers have rights?
- 2 Rights of nature: illustrative cases
- 3 What are the implications of recognising the rights of rivers?
- 4 Recognising the rights of rivers in England

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Parish Councils and the Charter

- Approximately 25 Parish Councils/meetings (maybe more?), (Catchment)
- Closest tier of local government to communities
- Planning consultee
- Landowner and manager
- Links with local, county and national policies
- Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution



The Rights of River Charter for the Ouse

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

- **The right to exist in its natural state:** *Recognising and reflecting that the River Ouse like all rivers is essential for ensuring life, including human life within the Ouse catchment and bioregion whilst recognising the modification of the river where it is necessary to protect existing critical infrastructure and or communities.*
- **The right to flow:** *Flows must follow natural flow patterns and be sufficient in quantity to maintain the ecosystem health of the entire river system.*
- **The right to perform essential natural functions within the river catchment:** *These include maintaining horizontal and longitudinal connectivity, flooding, moving and depositing sediment, recharging groundwater, providing adequate habitat for native flora and fauna, processing nutrients; being water.*
- **The right to feed and be fed from sustainable aquifers:** *ensuring that clean, healthy aquifers provide sustainable ecosystem services in the context of how climate change is affecting these processes.*
- **The right to be free from pollution:** *Taking a holistic view to include diffuse and point sources including but not limited to damaging levels of sewage discharge, industrial waste, litter, antibiotics, agricultural run-off from pesticides, manure and fertilisers; and accelerated soil erosion from human activities, recognising that our changing climate can exacerbate all of these issues.*
- **The right to native biodiversity:** *recognising and responding to the severe decline in native biodiversity over the last fifty years and the threats that invasive non-native species represent for local biodiversity.*
- **The right to regeneration and restoration:** *that a shared vision which identifies and develops best practice river and nature restoration and regeneration across the River Ouse Catchment is progressed in partnership with all relevant stakeholders.*
- **The right to an active and influential voice:** *to have the interests of the River Ouse appropriately and in so far as is possible, impartially represented and considered in the determination of matters that directly affect it. To lobby the Government to create the legal frameworks that can ensure consistent representation for all rivers.*

Opportunities of a Charter



1. Shared moral compass for complex partnerships
2. Shared decision framework
3. Provides operational clarity through measurable triggers
4. A new form of accountability
5. Legal and planning leverage (potentially)
6. Unlocking finance and innovation
7. Civic legitimacy and engagement
8. Tackles root causes of environmental depletion
9. Institutional durability
10. Links community needs and rights with the rivers

What about the Ouse Charter of Rights?



- The Ouse and its catchment is a subject of rights.
- Arguably a material consideration in a planning application
- Informs local policy and informs policy interpretation
- It supports local and national biodiversity duties
- It aligns with national nature recovery goals such as the East Sussex Local Nature Recovery Strategy
- Can match current regulation to rights
- An opportunity to represent the river for its own sake
- An opportunity to give local communities a voice on river issues important to them.





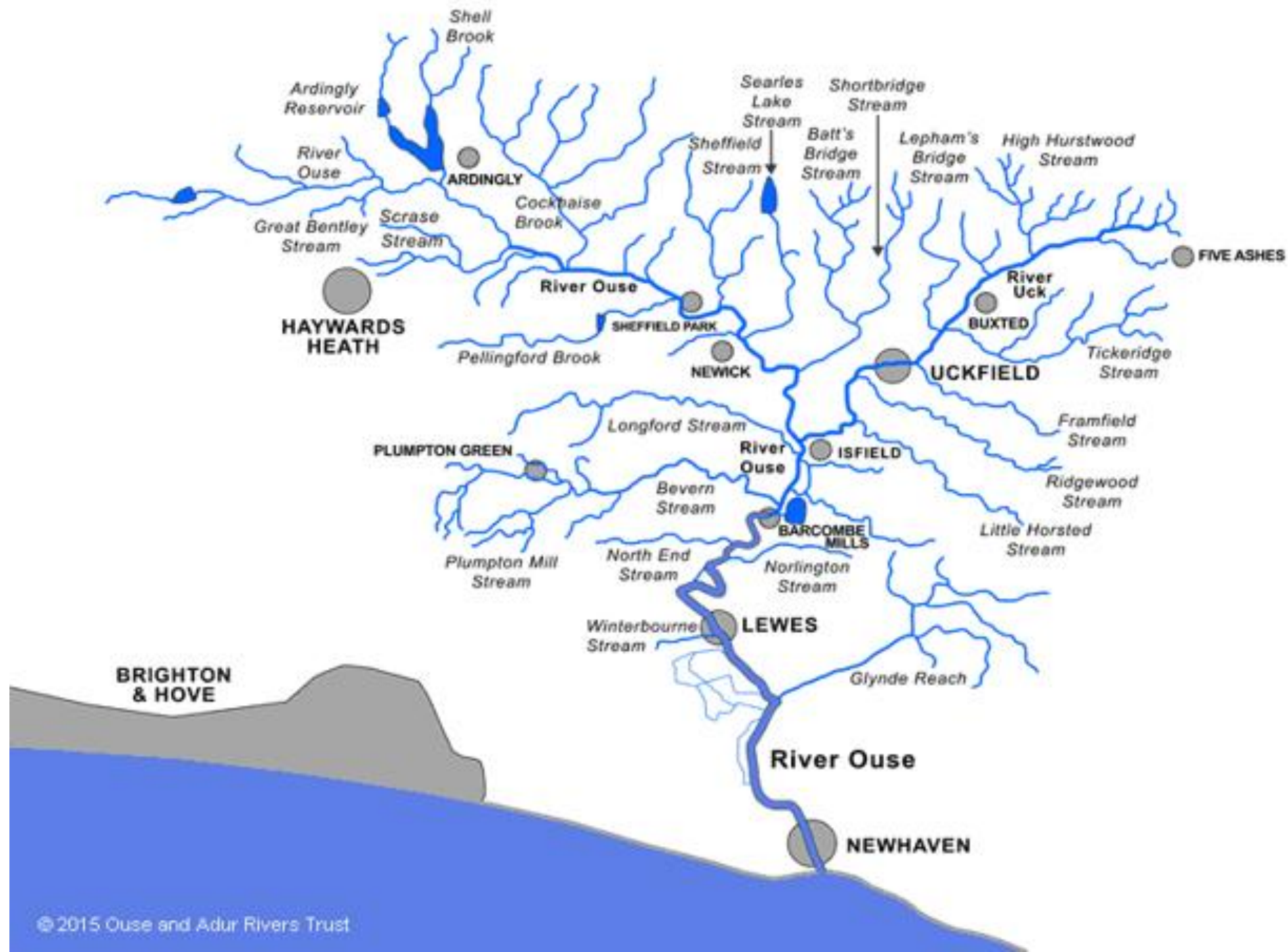
COUNCIL OF ALL BEINGS

Council of All Beings



- There are decisions being taken all the time by local and national governments that effect the environment in which we live. These decisions are taken by humans. Animals and nature are not consulted about the decisions that affect them too. But what if they were consulted?
- There is a new form of nature governance that is emerging where animals and habitats are represented by humans and given a voice. This is called a Council of All Beings. Today some of you will represent aspects of nature giving them a voice in the planning application that we will consider. You are here to represent their interests. We have also included future generations.





Today



- At your table you will represent the role assigned to you, whether, human or non-human. Your facilitator will guide you through the issues for consideration.
- There are 7 species per table, including humans, and other members of the local wild community.
- The table will feed back to the group through the facilitator.
- This exercise is meant to create an empathetic perspective for the participants, and to attempt to reach a decision that balances nature and human needs.



The Decision to be considered by the Council of All Beings



- The provision of 151 residential dwellings (Class C3) including 40% affordable housing and commercial floorspace provision (Class E), with public open space, soft and hard landscaping, play space, community orchard, vehicular access, car and cycle parking provision and associated infrastructure including SUDS provision Location:
- Land At Cooksbridge Road Cooksbridge East Sussex

Why the decision is controversial – North End Stream

- **“The Low Weald is a landscape of low vale, gentle ridges that breaks the singularity of the horizontal and enriches and enlivens the lacework of streams and rivers that form the backbone of the landscape.” – Dave Bangs – author and naturalist**
- North End Stream curves along and around the northern edge of the development site, two agricultural fields on a downward slope. This northern boundary also contains Cooksbridge Southern Water sewage works which discharges into Northend Stream, and is already overwhelmed.
- The North End Stream is a chalk fed stream that runs eastwards through Hamsey, near Lewes. A tributary of the River Ouse, the stream’s source and much of its course is within the South Downs National Park. Currently the North End Stream scores well against other similar watercourses in the catchment and those assessed nationally for habitat quality and surrounding land use. (Source Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust OART).



North End Stream



Why the decision is controversial – Pt 2. Sea Trout

- The stream is an important spawning ground of the sea trout. The sea trout is an iconic species of the River Ouse, is considered to be the largest sea trout in the country and is an indicator species for river health. It is likely the sea trout that return to NES to spawn are endemic to the Lower Weald streams.
- Sea trout come to North End Stream to spawn, it is the first viable stream that they encounter when returning from the sea. Instream, they create 'redds', small depressions which the females dig in the gravel with their tails. The tiny 'parr' which hatch take refuge amongst the gravel beds. They may stay here for up to two years before they become smolts and take to the sea. They need clear water to thrive and the adults need cover for protection. Longitudinal studies of the sea trout in the North End Stream dating back several decades have shown that the adult fish return to their spawning ground year on year to reproduce.
- There is grave concern that if the development goes ahead, there will be a local extinction of the sea trout such will be the impacts on North End Stream.



Framing questions to consider during the Council of All Beings



- What is your opinion of the planning application as your species?
- How do the Rights in the Ouse Charter impact on your species?
- What impacts would it have on you if granted and how could your species compromise or maybe your species cannot compromise, i.e. if your life depends on it?
- How can we draft a planning condition which recognises all the species?

I am the North End Stream

- I am ancient, I have flowed for thousands of years, all year with rainwater from the hills round the South Downs, percolating through the chalk and coming out as a spring to a trickle to a stream. I am called locally North End Stream, I am a tributary of the Ouse, I become the Ouse as many of my fellow chalk streams do, cutting through the chalk to meet my mother river. I am one of about 220 chalk streams in the world, rare and precious. Many are here in the South East but people have forgotten our nature, have forgotten how to be aware of our rare beauty and intrinsic value to all my species. Three quarters of my fellow chalk streams are in poor condition.
- I love to flow my clear chalk waters through the fields around Hamsey. I meander and flow gently, my banks deep cut through, steep banks. I am gravel, small stones make up my bed, a place of shelter and home to many species, invertebrate babies hide in my stones. My most beloved sea trout, moving my gravel around, flushing debris to move on, a gravel grinder, slit mover, shape shifter. In return for the hunter's service, I make fish spawn, fish take refuge redds, safe spaces. I am drunk, clear and precious.



I am a sea Trout



- I've been in the Ouse along time, since the Ice Age of 12,000 years past, long before to the ice-bound Pleistocene times.
- I am a hunter, in my world, I am feared, I live in secret, move in stealth, hide in dusk, in darkness... in dark pools. I eat everything, insects, small fish, crustations, anything that comes my way. I am well concealed in my world, spotted, but can change to brown when I return to rivers.
- My eyes are adapted to life underwater, seeing clearly in dim dappled light. I hear low frequency sounds, my earing sharp, my sense of smell is incredibly sensitive and helps me recognise my home river, my teeth are a fierce array, a fish hunter.
- I am spawned in the chalk streams in holes dug by the mother fish, to lay her eggs to be fertilised by the father fish. I am a shape shifter, changing my form from spawn, migrating down-river to the salty estuary and the sea, where I may live and feed for several years, feasting on the rich marine food available in-shore, or further off-shore near the continental Channel coasts, spend years at sea, gaining weight and becoming the biggest trout species in the UK.
- Whilst at sea I become muscle bound, rippling with strength. So that when I return to the rivers to spawn a whip of my tail can launch me up waterfalls and rapids, send me thrusting forward, upward leaping to jump over larger unnatural obstructions in my home river, they weren't always there, but my drive to go up steam to return to where I began, I can smell my spawned river, it drives me onward, sometimes to death. To return to my home river.
- I need cool clear unpolluted water to thrive, tree roots to hide in that hold the river banks, shadows and shade. I do good for the waters I inhabit, my presence indicates a healthy ecosystem. I am important, not just for the health of the river but for my own intrinsic worth.



I am a Local resident

- I am a single mother, of two small children, 7 and 7. I have been living in temporary accommodation for 5 years, during which time I have been on the housing list for Lewes District Council and am now high on their list of priority. I work part time as a teaching assistant in a local school. I grew up in Lewes but cannot afford to buy here. I want my children to have access to green space that I had.
- I love nature and love living in the National Park but am also desperate for housing, for my children and this application promises 40% affordable housing. I have been promised a house if this development is built.



I am a Nightingale

- I am nightingale, I come from afar, thousands of miles I fly, every year I come if I can, as my kind have come for thousands of years, crossing the seas, steering by the stars and magnetic pulses you can only dream of, to return to the place of my forebears. For the summers in softer climates, I come for the abundance of insects promised. I eat a lot of insects, on the wing, agile to catch their small bodies. Less now. I come here to find a mate, to nest, to fledge the next generation.
- I love the scrub, where I can hide my small brown body, the bushes of hawthorn and blackthorn, most beloved, thorns of protection, woody and tight against those that would eat me. I am hard to see. I have lost a lot of this habitat I love due to land use changes such as agriculture and development.
- I love to sing for my presence here, I am famous for it, poets have written of my song, musicians come to play with me, to match my song. I am song. I sing varied, a mimic. I sing to let them all know I am here, arrived and this is my patch. I sing to attract lady nightingale as she passes through. If I sing she will hear me if she comes this way.
- My numbers have declined by over 90% since the 1970s.



I am Parish Councillor

- I have lived in the area all my life, moving here to this Parish 20 years ago. It is where I raised my family. When my children left home, I felt I wanted to give something back to the community and so stood for election as an independent and was elected.
- I feel passionately that if this development is given permission, the heart of the village will be lost, we will no longer be a village. I am also a nature lover and live near North End Stream and whilst I am no expert, know how special it is. I hear cuckoos and nightingales. What a treasure in this time of nature loss.
- I was elected to represent my community, but I am limited in the statutory powers at my disposal.



I am a Damselfly



- I am a hunter of the air, catching other flying insects
- I grew from a nymph which needs freshwater, pooled areas and a slow flowing water.
- When I meet a partner, we join together in a heart shape and once fertilised, eggs hatch after 5-6 days into nymphs that live in water for up to two years.
- Conditions for our survival are threatened by river pollution, eutrophication, over grazing and climate change.
- There are 17 species of damselfly in the UK and the majority of the species in Sussex, including the beautiful demoiselle can be found along the Ouse and its streams.





The Land Ethic--Ahead of its time

- the need to foster an environmental ethic that protects and preserves wilderness for current and future generations of humans, nonhuman animals and ecological communities alike.



I am Future
Generations

- “Surely we have a responsibility to leave for future generations a planet that is healthy, inhabitable for all species.”
- Sir David Attenborough

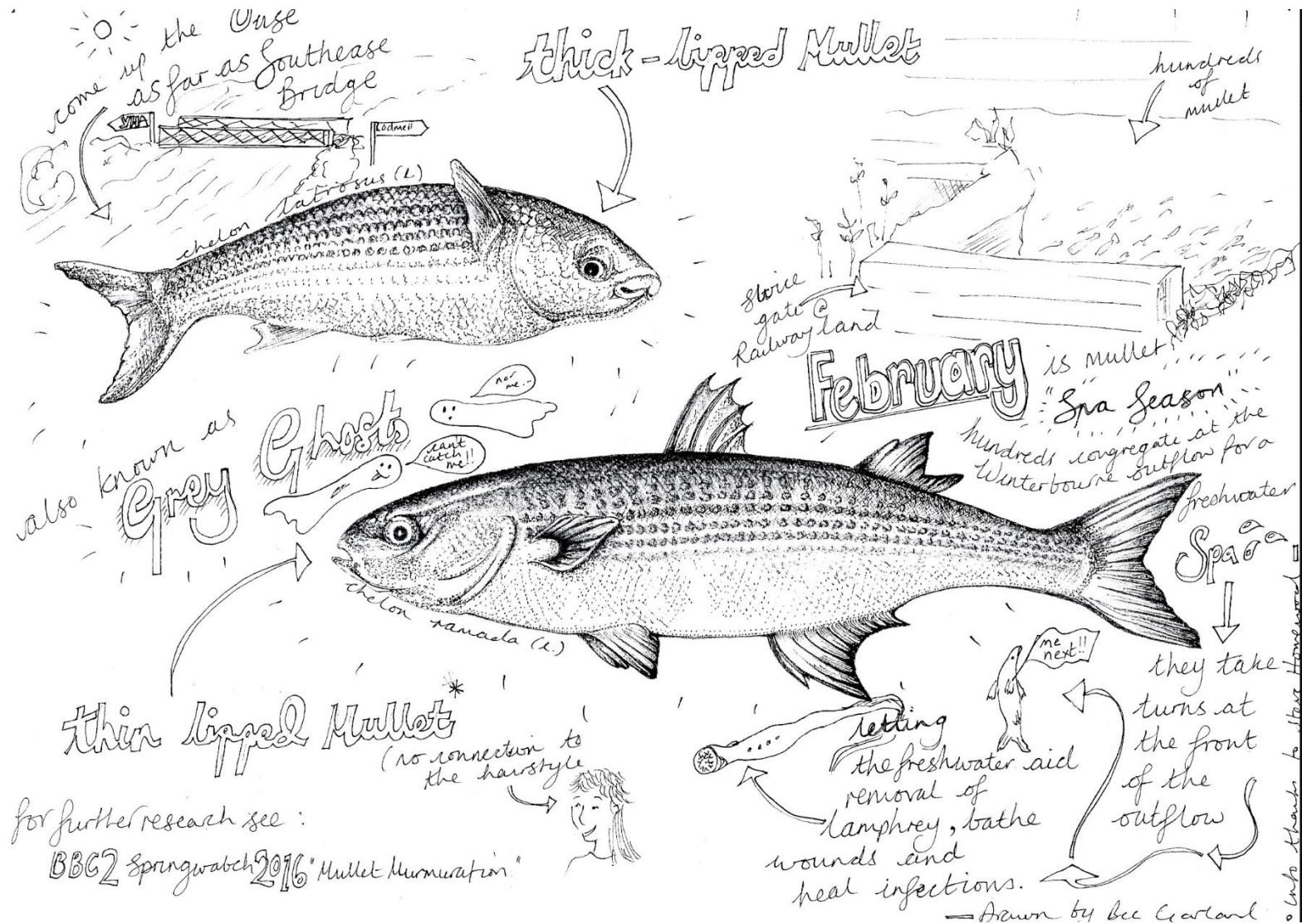
Feedback from the Council of All Beings

- From each group led by facilitator
- Were you able to reach a consensus amongst your different species?
- Was the process positive/negative for you?
- How might you use this or elements of this at a Parish Council level?

BREAK 20 Minutes

Using the Charter.

- Intro
- Questions?
- Temperature check?
- What do you need?
- Opportunities or concerns?
- Ideas going forward –
info network, specific advice, joint work?
- Sign up and template motion
- Report



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

