

Briefing for UK Councils: Rights of Rivers



What Are Rights of Rivers?

Rights of Rivers frameworks recognise rivers as living systems with inherent rights. Commonly recognised rights include: the right to flow, to be free from pollution, and to regeneration and restoration. Over 50 countries - including New Zealand, Spain, and Canada - have granted water bodies rights. In the UK, local councils are beginning to act.

Recent UK Developments (2025)

- Lewes District Council (River Ouse) – First UK council to adopt a Rights of River Charter.
- Followed by 10 other councils in declaring river rights in 2025 – including Basingstoke and Deane; Southampton City; Test Valley Borough; Medway; Rother; Hereford; Norwich, and others.
- Council declarations often support development of community-led river charters.

Why It Matters

Environmental Health: Over 60% of English rivers fail ecological standards, with sewage spills and nutrient pollution as major threats.

Value. Rights charters recognize that rivers have a value that goes beyond the instrumental benefits they provide to human beings, and ought to also be preserved for their own sake.

Governance: Rights charters give councils tools to act faster, align with the Environment Act 2021, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), and public health goals.

Community Empowerment: People are frustrated with top-down and ineffective river management. Guardianship allows citizens and trusts to advocate for the interests of rivers.

Future-proofing: Businesses benefit by aligning with TNFD and biodiversity reporting requirements.

Council Action Checklist

Adopt a Charter – Co-develop with local communities and catchment partnerships, keep it clear (6–8 rights).

Appoint Guardians – One community, one technical, reporting quarterly on river health.

Integrate with Planning – Use rights to inform planning approvals and enforce 10% Biodiversity Net Gain.

Leverage Monitoring – Tie rights to continuous water-quality monitoring data and set action triggers.

Embed in Procurement – Require contractors/utilities to publish open data and adopt pollution-reduction plans.

Support Citizen Science – Fund and validate community monitoring so it influences enforcement.

Engage Business – Invite water-intensive sectors to publish TNFD-aligned transition plans.

Takeaway: Rights of Rivers are not symbolic—they are practical governance tools. Councils that act now can improve compliance with environmental law, protect communities, unlock funding, and lead the UK's transition to a rights-based relationship.

Further information: www.riverrights.org Email riverrightsnetwork@gmail.com