

# Discussion Paper

## How River Rights Charters Help Address Key Critiques of Catchment Based Partnerships



Catchment Based Partnerships (CaBPs) are widely recognised as a **positive step** in UK river governance, but after more than a decade of operation they are also subject to **well-established criticisms** from practitioners, academics, NGOs, regulators and communities. Below is an **overview** of the main critiques and **how River Rights Charters can help** address some of these.

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### Key Criticisms of Catchment Based Partnerships

#### 1. Lack of Power and Accountability

##### Most common criticism

- CaBPs are **non-statutory** and have no formal decision-making authority
- They rely on goodwill rather than enforceable duties
- When problems persist, it is unclear **who is responsible for acting**

**Result:** Partnerships can become talking shops rather than delivery mechanisms.

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#### 2. Fragmented Responsibility

- Multiple organisations (EA, councils, water companies, NGOs, landowners) share partial responsibility
- No single body is accountable for overall river health
- Partners can defer action by pointing to others

**Result:** Slow responses to crises and diluted responsibility.

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#### 3. Insufficient and Insecure Funding

- Core funding is often short-term and minimal
- Heavy reliance on project-based grants
- Limited capacity for long-term planning, monitoring or coordination

**Result:** Partnerships struggle to move from strategy to sustained delivery.

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#### **4. Dominance of Powerful Stakeholders**

- Larger institutions often shape agendas (e.g. regulators, water companies)
- Smaller NGOs and community voices may be marginalised
- Power imbalances are rarely addressed explicitly

**Result:** Community trust can be undermined, and innovation constrained.

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#### **5. Weak Community Legitimacy**

- Public awareness of CaBPs is generally low
- Engagement can be technical and inaccessible
- Local values, cultural relationships and lived experience of rivers are often under-represented

**Result:** Decisions may lack social legitimacy and public buy-in.

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#### **6. Over-Technical Framing**

- Focus on compliance metrics and technical plans
- Little attention to how people value rivers (e.g. swimming, heritage, wellbeing)
- Moral and cultural dimensions are sidelined

**Result:** Disconnect between governance processes and public concern.

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#### **7. Limited Influence on Planning and Development**

- CaBPs often struggle to influence:

- Local planning decisions
- Infrastructure development
- Abstraction and discharge permitting

**Result:** Catchment strategies are overridden by sectoral decisions.

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## 8. Poor Integration Across Policy Silos

- CaBPs sit alongside multiple parallel processes:
  - Water Framework Directive objectives
  - Flood risk management
  - Local Nature Recovery Strategies
  - Water company business planning

**Result:** Duplication, confusion and missed opportunities for alignment.

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## 9. Lack of Clear Success Measures

- Outcomes are often vaguely defined
- Success measured by meetings held or projects delivered, not river health
- Few mechanisms to adapt based on failure

**Result:** Limited learning and weak accountability for results.

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## 10. Voluntary Nature Limits Ambition

- Partners can opt in or out
- No obligation to prioritise catchment outcomes over institutional goals
- Environmental ambition can be constrained by lowest-common-denominator agreement

**Result:** Incremental change rather than transformation.

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## The Deeper Structural Critique

Many critics argue CaBPs reflect a **governance gap** rather than a solution:

“They manage collaboration, not responsibility.”

They coordinate actors who **already hold power**, but rarely challenge:

- Extractive economic models
- Regulatory failures
- The assumption that rivers are resources to be managed rather than living systems to be cared for

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## Why This Matters Now

These criticisms have become sharper due to:

- Public anger over river pollution
- Climate-driven water stress
- Loss of trust in institutions
- Failure to meet Water Framework Directive standards

As a result, there is growing interest in **complementary approaches** (such as river rights charters) that:

- Clarify duties
- Centre the river itself
- Create clearer accountability
- Strengthen moral and civic legitimacy

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## How River Rights Charters Address Key Critiques of Catchment Based Partnerships

Critique of Catchment Based Partnerships	Why This Is a Problem	How River Rights Charters Help Address It
<b>1. Lack of power and accountability</b>	No clear responsibility for river health; limited follow-through	Charters establish explicit duties to uphold the river’s rights, clarifying who is expected to act when those rights are threatened or breached.
<b>2. Fragmented responsibility</b>	Multiple actors hold partial roles with no unifying principle	River rights provide a single, shared reference point: the needs of the

Critique of Catchment Based Partnerships	Why This Is a Problem	How River Rights Charters Help Address It
<b>3. Insecure, short-term funding</b>	Limits capacity and long-term planning	river itself, aligning diverse actors around common outcomes. Rights-based outcomes create a compelling narrative for blended finance and long-term investment tied to river health, not projects.
<b>4. Dominance of powerful stakeholders</b>	Marginalisation of community and NGO voices	Charters are typically co-created, embedding community values and giving moral weight to local voices in governance discussions.
<b>5. Weak community legitimacy</b>	Low public awareness and trust	The language of rights resonates with the public, reframing rivers as living systems people care about, not technical units to be managed.
<b>6. Over-technical framing</b>	Disconnect between governance and public concern	Rights translate technical data into plain-language outcomes (e.g. "safe to swim"), making governance intelligible and relatable.
<b>7. Limited influence on planning and development</b>	Catchment plans overridden by sectoral decisions	Rights-based framing strengthens arguments in planning, LNRS and policy decisions by establishing a moral and policy baseline.
<b>8. Poor integration across silos</b>	Duplication and misalignment of efforts	Charters act as a governance anchor that links regulation, planning, restoration and community action around agreed river outcomes.
<b>9. Weak success measures</b>	Focus on process, not outcomes	Rights-based approaches encourage the use of clear indicators and thresholds linked to each right, supporting adaptive management.
<b>10. Voluntary nature limits ambition</b>	Lowest-common-denominator action	While still voluntary, rights frameworks raise ambition by creating shared moral commitments that are publicly visible and reputationally meaningful.

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## What River Rights *Do Not* Replace

River rights charters are **not a substitute** for:

- Regulation or enforcement
- Catchment partnerships
- Statutory planning frameworks

Instead, they act as a **complementary layer** that strengthens these mechanisms by providing:

- Moral clarity
  - Outcome focus
  - Public legitimacy
  - Better alignment across actors
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## Strategic Insight

Catchment partnerships manage **collaboration**.  
River rights charters strengthen **responsibility**.

Together, they offer a more complete governance model—one that is both technically competent and socially legitimate.

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## Why This Matters for the UK Now

As public trust declines and river health continues to deteriorate, governance systems that rely solely on voluntary coordination are no longer sufficient. River rights charters offer a practical way to:

- Retain the strengths of CaBPs
- Address their structural weaknesses
- Move from process to impact

Catchment Based Partnerships remain **valuable and necessary**, but widely seen as:

- **Necessary but insufficient**
- Strong on collaboration, weak on accountability
- Technically competent, socially fragile

River rights governance approaches such as charters can help CaBP's address these shortcomings and move from collaboration to responsibility by providing:

- Moral clarity
- Outcome focus
- Public legitimacy
- Better alignment across actors

**Understanding these critiques and river rights charters is essential to improving—not abandoning—the catchment-based approach.**

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