

Rights of Rivers in the UK: Why It Matters – and How It Helps



1. The context: rivers in crisis, governance in silos

Over half of monitored English water bodies still fail to meet “Good Ecological Status.” Despite billions spent on regulation, investment and restoration, river governance remains fragmented: the Environment Agency, Ofwat, councils, developers and catchment partnerships each hold partial responsibility. The result is **diffused accountability** and **slow response** when water quality or flows degrade. A *rights-based approach* offers a unifying principle – placing the **river itself as a subject of care, not just an object of management**.

2. What “Rights of Rivers” means

“Rights of Rivers” recognises that rivers possess inherent rights – to flow, to be free from pollution, to support native life and to fulfil their ecological functions. These charters or declarations (already used for 12 rivers in the UK) are locally led, non-statutory frameworks that express **shared duties** among people, councils and businesses. They do **not** require full legal personhood, but they:

- Establish a **moral and policy baseline** that transcends political cycles;
 - Provide a **governance anchor** for planning, enforcement and community action.
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3. Seven advantages of a Rights of Rivers approach

1. A shared moral compass for complex partnerships

- Provides a clear, emotionally resonant yardstick for decisions.
- Helps align regulators, landowners, developers and communities around measurable outcomes (e.g. healthy flow, low phosphate, restored biodiversity).

2. Operational clarity through measurable triggers

- Converts monitoring data into action: thresholds (DO, nutrients, flow) linked to pre-agreed responses.
- Complements Environment Act monitoring duties and the Storm Overflows Reduction Plan.

3. A new form of accountability

- Makes it explicit who acts when rights are breached – replacing finger-pointing with structured guardianship.
- Publicly visible “Rights Dashboards” make progress transparent and trust-building.

4. Legal and planning leverage

- Rights framing strengthens arguments in planning responses, Local Nature Recovery Strategies and biodiversity net gain negotiations.
- It supports demands for on-catchment, hydrologically sound mitigation measures.

5. Unlocking finance and innovation

- Rights-based metrics make outcomes fundable (align with TNFD, green bonds, natural capital accounting).
- Provides a narrative that appeals to both corporate ESG and community grant funders.

6. Civic legitimacy and engagement

- Language of rights speaks to residents, schools, and civic groups in plain moral terms.
- Strengthens community science, volunteer monitoring and political will.

7. Institutional durability

- Rights charters embed stewardship that outlasts elections and corporate cycles.

- Guardians act as continuity holders, ensuring that river health remains a standing obligation.

4. How catchment partnerships can apply it

Action Area	Practical Step	Outcome
Governance	Adopt a short Rights Charter co-authored by partners & community	Shared accountability framework
Monitoring	Map each right to 2–3 measurable indicators	Real-time data triggers action
Guardianship	Appoint “River Guardians” with transparent terms	Ongoing stewardship role
Planning	Embed rights checks into planning & BNG responses	Harder to approve harmful schemes
Community	Use rights language in campaigns & schools	Broader, lasting engagement

5. Real-world examples and momentum

- **River Ouse Charter (Sussex):** Community-authored rights statement driving local dialogue and first to be supported by a local council in the UK.
- **International precedents:** Whanganui (NZ), Atrato (Colombia), Mar Menor (Spain) — show rights frameworks accelerate restoration investment and civic pride.

Momentum is building: rights language is entering council motions, catchment strategies and NGO communications across the UK with over twenty rivers currently pursuing river rights.

6. Potential next steps for the UK

A rights-of-rivers approach will **not replace regulation**, but it can fill the cultural and governance gap between policy ambition and lived ecological health.

For councils and partnerships:

1. Draft a concise Rights Charter (6-8 rights).
2. Link each right to a small set of indicators and thresholds.
3. Appoint local guardians.
4. Publish an annual “Rights of the River Scorecard.”

For government:

- Provide a national template or guidance linking rights charters to the Environment Act framework.
 - Support local pilots through Natural England, EA and DEFRA partnership funds.
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In summary

Recognising the **Rights of Rivers** is not a radical legal leap — it’s an *evolution* of stewardship. It gives existing partnerships, councils and regulators a coherent, values-driven framework for action that can:

- Improve environmental outcomes,
- Strengthen democratic legitimacy, and
- Restore trust in how we care for our shared waters.

When we give rivers a voice, we hear more clearly what our communities and ecosystems need.

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