

Policy Brief: The State of River Rights in the UK



UK Rights of Rivers Snapshot:

- 10 councils have passed local river rights motions
- 40 more councils are considering river rights provisions
- 35 rivers and river groups have joined the **River Rights Network**
- River management boards on the Usk, Wye, and Roding have appointed **nature representatives** to speak on behalf of rivers
- Alongside pilgrimages, campaigning, and experimental multi-species parliaments

Map of UK River Rights (Dec 2025):



Major threats to UK Rivers:

The river rights movement in the UK has arisen in part due to increased awareness of the state of UK rivers. These threats include:

- Pollution, caused by sewage, wastewater, agricultural runoff, and other causes
- Over-abstraction of water from rivers, as well as associated aquifers and wetlands
- Alteration to rivers and floodplains through canalisation and damming.
- Reduction in biodiversity through habitat loss and a reduction in water quality

In England, 85% of rivers fall below ecological standards. In the UK, 62% of river stretches failed to reach good overall health due to agricultural pollution, and 54% due to release of untreated sewage.

Issues with the current legal system

Whilst rivers in the UK have some level of legal protection, these face the following problems:

- Fragmented and patchwork legislation, without a common framework of interpretation – some national, some inherited from EU, some international
- Lack of effective regulation – through a lack of funding and cuts to staffing
- Privatisation of water, which incentivises profit-seeking for shareholders rather than prioritising effective river management.
- Little to no legal avenues for citizens to challenge ineffective management of rivers in their area
- Special protections – through SSSIs, SACs, and SPAs – are highly site-specific and not suitable for the protection of rivers.

How River Rights Fix these Problems:

River rights approaches will solve the problems of UKs rivers by:

- Placing **river health** at the heart of all decision-making, and recognising rivers' intrinsic value, independent of our uses.
- **Empowering** local communities to speak for the interests of their rivers, as guardians, stewards, or nature representatives.
- Providing a clear **interpretative framework** for interpreting existing laws and policy, and passing new legislation and policy.

River Rights recognises that the health and empowerment of the local community, and the health of the local river, are inextricably linked. Ecological and social justice must be met together.

Major Currents of UK River Rights:

1. *Motions and charters passed in councils*
 - Lewes City Council – first declared rights of river Ouse in **2023**
 - Local river rights charter developed by community, led by Love Our Ouse, and supported by council in **2025**
 - In 2025, **nine** other councils across the UK declared river rights motions
2. *Community guardianship and activism*
 - Local clean-ups, campaigning, and citizen science initiatives
 - Collect data to hold water management bodies to account
 - Practically maintain, monitor, and campaign for river health
 - Increasingly organised and motivated around **rights of rivers**
3. *Artistic and Spiritual Practice*
 - Non-legal interpretations of river rights – moral and spiritual
 - Aim to improve relationships with rivers
 - Include pilgrimages, ceremonies, artistic and ritual practices.

Further information www.riverrights.org

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