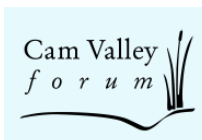


CVF explainer: The Rights of Rivers



This brief article explains the Rights of Rivers, an approach that is being increasingly discussed nationally and in Cambridge (viz the recent motion passed by the City Council). As an organisation, Cam Valley Forum does not promote a particular view on this, but welcomes the new thinking that it brings to the urgent need to protect and sustainably manage the Cam and its chalk streams.

The [Rights of Nature](#) is a legal and philosophical movement that gives ecosystems and natural entities - like rivers, forests, and mountains - inherent right to exist, thrive, and regenerate, rather than treating them merely as human property or resources. The Rights of Nature are now widely recognised in many cultures and help people to understand the intrinsic value of nature, and that nature should be granted the same kind of legal rights that human rights give to people.

The Rights of the Cam have been promoted by Friends of the Cam since 2021 and are based on the [Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers](#), published in 2017. Rights of Rivers have been declared in many countries since then (e.g. USA, Canada, Ecuador, Brazil, and increasingly the UK) and governments in several countries are using the Declaration as a template for drafting legislation.

Academic and legal research on the rights of nature suggests that there are two ways by which rivers might be afforded rights:

- the 'direct legal personhood' model, which grants a river legal personhood in its own right; and
- the 'indirect legal personhood' model, which creates a separate legal person, such as a statutory body, to represent a river's interests without changing the status of the river itself.

Proponents of recognising the rights of rivers think that doing so can raise the profile of river health, translate nature-centred values into legal processes, and, in some contexts, strengthen protection where traditional regulation has proved inadequate. Certainly, the recent initiatives both locally and in the UK have greatly increased publicity and interest in protecting rivers and streams.

Challenges in implementing rights for rivers include extending the concept of personhood to new entities, deciding who represents a river and how they are held to account, and operationalising a river's rights. As ethicists point out, there is never a 'right' without a responsibility. They are twinned. [Lawyers point out](#) that any law will need to ensure that rivers have no liabilities, just rights. If rivers have liabilities, then this may result in a system where rivers are held liable for flooding (for example) leading to them (and/or their guardians) being locked in expensive continuous litigation. In the examples of 'animal rights,' or 'children's rights', the responsibility for them is clearly ours as 'persons', and not theirs. Even where courts recognise new rights, enforcement can mirror the limitations of existing environmental law particularly if institutions have limited capacity or where there are persistent pressures such as diffuse pollution or illegal extraction. Charles Rangely-Wilson discusses this in his blog [River Rights and Wrongs](#).

A March 2026 House of Commons Library Research Briefing on [Rights of Rivers](#) gives a useful overview of the concept and how this is being applied in the UK. The British Ecological Society provided a helpful and positive summary of [Rights of Nature – a growing movement in the UK?](#) from a scientist's perspective, in August 2025. As examples, Lewes

District Council in Sussex approved the [Rights for the River Ouse Charter](#) in 2025, and others are following suit, including [Cambridge City Council](#) in July 2026. Also in 2026, the [Rights of the River Wye](#) were recognised throughout much of its catchment as a result of endorsement by councils and institutions in Herefordshire, Powys and the Forest of Dean.

In Greater Cambridge, a new campaigning organisation, ReAnglia, is leading an initiative to seek a permanent voting seat for the [Voice of the River on the board of the Greater Cambridge Development Corporation](#), in part a follow-up to the motion passed by the City Council in July 2026. ReAnglia has written to the government requesting such an appointment. The Voice of the River would differ from that of the environmental specialist, currently planned as an appointee to the [Board](#). The idea is modelled on how judicial courts represent parties that cannot represent themselves: the Voice of the River would have the standing to flag matters, would require published reasons for any decisions, and would report independently. A similar approach has been used for the [River Wye Nutrient Catchment Board](#) which has appointed an ecologist to represent the Voice of the River Wye.

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