



# **Title of report: Executive Response to the 'Charter for the River Wye' motion**

**Decision maker: Cabinet Member Environment**

**Decision date: 06.03.26**

**Report by: Sustainability and Climate Change Officer**

**Corporate Director – Economy & Environment**

## **Classification**

Open

## **Decision type**

Non-key

Notice has been served in accordance with Part 3, Section 9 (Publicity in Connection with Key Decisions) of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012.

## **Wards affected**

(All Wards);

## **Purpose**

Approve the executive's response to the 'Charter for the River Wye' motion approved at the Meeting of Council held on Friday 5 December 2025.

## **Recommendation(s)**

**That:**

- a) Herefordshire County Council consider the principles of the Charter for the River Wye wherever relevant in decision making processes, reviewing the opportunities for integration alongside policy and strategy updates;**
- b) The Council reflects the intrinsic value of the River Wye and its tributaries within the new Local Plan, currently being drafted, utilizing the Charter for the River Wye as a reference document in framing ambitions regarding Herefordshire's rivers;**

- c) **The Council recognise the priorities relating to freshwater habitats stated in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, including those to safeguard against pollution, restore and reconnect wetland habitats, and restore hydrological functions at a catchment scale, as well as the commitment in the Herefordshire Council Plan 2024 - 2028 to ‘do everything we can to recover the health of our rivers’;**
- d) **The Council support neighbouring authorities in their will to champion the Charter, toward a holistic, cross border and catchment-wide acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of the River Wye and its tributaries, and to publicise the collective response.**

### Alternative options

1. None proposed. It is a Constitutional requirement that all motions by Council are referred to Cabinet

### Key considerations

#### Introduction

2. On Friday 5 December 2025, the motion ‘Charter for the Rights of the River Wye’ was brought to Full Council and was carried by a simple majority. The motion called upon the executive to support the Charter for the Rights of the River Wye and its tributaries, the rights contained within being as follows:
  - a. *The Right to Flow and Perform Natural Functions*  
To maintain its natural course and seasonal rhythms without obstructions or extractions that detrimentally affect ecological function of any part of the river system.
  - b. *The Right to Biodiversity*  
To good biological health through the existence of balanced, diverse, and viable, populations of native species and habitats specific to the Wye and its tributaries.
  - c. *The Right to Be Free from Pollution*  
To exist in a state of ecological health and not be subject to detrimental levels of known and emerging pollutants that adversely affect the life of the river.
  - d. *The Right to be Supported by a Healthy Catchment*  
To flow through environments which support the river as a balanced, sustainable, and resilient aquatic ecosystem.
  - e. *The Right to Regenerate*  
To recover to full ecological function through natural processes and for this to be supported by intervention, where necessary, to halt the decline in biodiversity and abundance and to increase both over time.
  - f. *The Right to Representation*  
To be represented and have these intrinsic rights recognised in the determination of matters that directly affect the river’s health now and in the future.
3. This motion comes after previous motions, supported by full council, have sought to address the notion of rights of Nature and their application to the River Wye. On Friday 3 March 2023, the motion River Wye Byelaws was brought to Full Council and was carried by a simple majority. The following is an extract from the minutes:

*This motion calls upon the executive to consider making an application to the UK government to*

*recognise a byelaw drafted by Herefordshire Council to invest the River Wye and tributaries within the county of Herefordshire with the following rights from the rights of rivers declaration.*

*The right to be free from pollution*

*The right to perform essential functions within its ecosystem*

*The right to flow*

*The right to feed and be fed by sustainable aquifers*

*The right to native biodiversity*

*The right to regeneration and restoration*

*With an additional right to be protected from physical damage.*

4. Following advice, the legal team within Herefordshire Council determined that a byelaw was not an appropriate approach in this instance. Alternative opportunities to respond to the motion were sought, including a recommendation to the Nutrient Management Board to create an additional member to represent the Voice of the River, which was adopted, and a commitment to explore the concept of a River Charter.
5. In September 2025, a working group was formed with members of the Nutrient Management Board and Wye Catchment Partnership, including representatives from Powys County Council, Forest of Dean District Council, and Herefordshire County Council. The working group collaborated to produce the Charter for the Rights of the River Wye as seen in Appendix 1.
6. Having been agreed at full Council in December 2025, the next step is for Herefordshire Council to support the principles reflected in the 2025 Charter, identifying appropriate opportunities to integrate a nature-centred approach to strategic planning and policy development.

## **Background**

7. The River Wye, the 4<sup>th</sup> largest river in the UK, is a cornerstone of Herefordshire's cultural and economic identity. Nationally important for biodiversity, with stretches receiving legal designations as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), the River Wye and its tributaries support community wellbeing, provide ecosystem services and are essential for a diverse range of industries from tourism to agriculture.
8. Despite its significance and legal protections, the features and species that characterise the River Wye and its tributaries are threatened by complex factors including excessive nutrients, pollutants, flow, and non-native invasive species – issues exacerbated by climate change.
9. To recover the condition of the catchment, and provide an environment that supports residents and nature, a holistic and transdisciplinary approach is needed, with collaboration essential across the diverse stakeholders with an influence over the river environment.
10. Herefordshire Council has already been working in a number of other ways toward this aim, including through the construction of a series of integrated wetlands as part of the Phosphate Mitigation Strategy, working with farmers in priority sub catchments on the delivery of a variety of Natural Flood Management (NFM) as part of the Council's NFM project, and on an annual basis since 2022, supporting the Cabinet Member Environment in the delivery of a Rivers

Conference - an event designed to bring together stakeholders from diverse backgrounds to discuss best practice and innovations in land management, toward river betterment.

11. The recommendations outlined reflect the Council's continued commitment to and consideration of the health of the River Wye and the wider catchment, embedding and extending efforts toward river restoration.

### **Community impact**

9. The recommendations set out in this report support the provision of a healthy, safe, and accessible natural environment, recognised as essential for good health and wellbeing for Herefordshire's communities, supporting the priority of 'Healthy and Sustainable Places' as set out in Herefordshire Council's Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2023 – 2033.
10. Herefordshire Council is the responsible authority in the production of the region's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), consultation for which is due to begin early 2026. The priorities currently outlined in the LNRS regarding freshwater habitat are important contributions to the regeneration of the county's waterways. Herefordshire Council have a statutory obligation to regard the LNRS in planning policy and decision making in accordance with the Environment Act 2021.
11. Considering a nature-centred approach in strategic planning and policy aligns with the priority set out in Herefordshire Council Plan 2024 - 2028 to 'protect and enhance our environment' and 'do everything we can to recover the health of our rivers'.

### **Environmental impact**

12. The recommendations set out in this report directly support the aims of the Council's environment policy to 'Prevent and reduce pollution and protect our environment' as well as to 'Conserve the natural and historic environment of Herefordshire' by encouraging a nature-centric approach to decision making.
13. Cross-border collaboration and a shared approach to river restoration is essential for effective environmental management - these recommendations recognise this need and encourage holistic, catchment scale consideration of nature, recognising that nature is not bound by county or country borders.
14. Herefordshire Council provides and purchases a wide range of services for the people of Herefordshire. Together with partner organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors we share a strong commitment to improving our environmental sustainability, achieving carbon neutrality and to protect and enhance Herefordshire's outstanding natural environment.
15. Whilst this is a decision on back office functions and will have minimal environmental impacts, consideration has been made to minimise waste and resource use in line with the Council's Environmental Policy. As such, printing of any associated documents will be avoided unless absolutely necessary to minimise material and energy use and waste generation.

### **Equality duty**

16. The Public Sector Equality Duty requires the Council to consider how it can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that it is paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services.
17. The mandatory equality impact screening checklist has been completed for this activity and it has been found to have low impact for equality.
18. Due to the potential impact of this activity being low, a full Equality Impact Assessment is not required. However the following equality considerations should be taken into account when making a decision about this activity/project:
  - a. Any changes that happen as a result of the recommendations of this report should ensure access to nature and greenspace is equitable. Opportunities to overcome known barriers to access should be actively sought out.
  - b. Communication about this and subsequent decisions should be clear and accessible.
  - c. Environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalised communities – the decision to take a nature-centred approach to strategic planning and decision making actively encourages nature recovery and regeneration, which directly contributes to the health and wellbeing of all humans, in particular those most affected by its decline.

## **Resource implications**

## **Financial implications**

There are no financial implications identified as a result of this decision.

## **Legal implications**

21. In its decision in December 2025, the Council supported the principles of the Charter and have adopted the Charter as a factor to be considered in policy development and decision-making in respect to council functions. This decision if approved, would align this consideration so far as executive functions are concerned.
22. The relevant legal provisions for this decision can be found in the council's constitution, [www.herefordshire.gov.uk/constitution](http://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/constitution).

## **Risk management**

The strategic risks associated with the Council’s response to the “Charter for the River Wye” motion have been reviewed and are being managed in accordance with the Council’s Risk Management Strategy. The identified risks are appropriate and proportionate to the scope of the motion, and ongoing oversight will be maintained through established governance and partnership frameworks to ensure risks are effectively monitored, escalated, and addressed as required.

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
Unification of neighbouring counties under a shared agenda.	Collaborative support of the Charter for the Rights of the River Wye, or adaptations of, presents an opportunity for the local authorities across the Wye catchment to unite under a shared purpose.
Demonstrable commitment to exploring opportunities for river recovery.	The recommendations in this report demonstrate the continued commitment of Herefordshire Council toward the regeneration of the River Wye and its tributaries.

**Consultees**

23. No consultation has taken place.

**Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Charter – Rights of the River Wye

**Background papers**

None identified.

**Glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report**

**Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)** - mandatory, England-wide system of spatial strategies established by the Environment Act 2021 to reverse biodiversity decline, mapping specific locations to create or improve habitats.

**Natural Flood Management (NFM)** – system of balancing and integrating the restoration of natural features and processes with existing land uses.

**Nutrient Management Board** – a forum for stakeholders to come together to influence, advise and challenge those having an impact on the river or delivering improvements across the catchment, though does not have any formal powers or resources.

**Wye Catchment Partnership** – A collection of organisations, individuals, and initiatives working together to understand, conserve, and regenerate the rivers and tributaries of the Wye Catchment.

**Special Area of Conservation (SAC)** - strictly protected sites formally designated under the EU Habitats Directive (and retained UK law) to conserve high-quality, threatened habitats and species.

**Special area of Scientific Interest (SSSI)** – formal conservation designation for sites in England identified for supporting characteristic, rare and endangered species, habitats and natural features, established under the [Wildlife and Countryside Act \(1981\), as amended](#).