

RIVER WYE CHARTER AND UPDATE

Purpose

To present the Charter for the Rights of the River Wye and advise of the latest activities to help restore the River Wye.

Recommendation

That the JAC endorses the Charter for the Rights of the River Wye and welcomes the other progress in the Wye Catchment.

Key Issues

- Herefordshire Council have adopted a Charter for the Rights of the River Wye and are encouraging other partners to endorse it.
- Haskoning Ltd have been appointed to produce the Wye Catchment Management Plan.
- The Diffuse Water Pollution Plan (DWPP) for England and the Welsh Evidence have been published, contributing to the evidence base for the Catchment Management Plan.
- DEFRA and Welsh Government £1million research programme for the Wye is currently out to tender.
- 'Forest to Sea - A Vision and Strategic Action Plan for water in the Forest of Dean' has completed a public consultation period and is being reviewed by the Severn Vale Catchment Partnership in collaboration with the Wye Valley National Landscape Team.
- The Wyescapes – food, nature, water - Landscape Recovery programme has been submitted to DEFRA by Herefordshire Rural Hub.
- Welsh Government are consulting on a Green Paper 'Shaping the Future of Water Governance in Wales' until 7th April.

Reasons

Declines in water quality in the Wye are affected by climate change and rural land use. Climatic impacts produce more intense winter rainfall and dryer hotter summers, creating potentially greater variations in high and low flows. High rainfall can lead to soil loss and nutrient enrichment of waterways, whereas low flows and hotter weather lead to increased river temperatures impacting fish, particularly salmon, and supporting algal blooms. For a summary of the issues facing the River Wye and its Catchment see

<https://wyeuskfoundation.org/issues/>.

Implications

On 5th December 2025, Cllr Swinglehurst, Herefordshire Council Cabinet Member for the Environment and Chair of the Wye Nutrient Management Board, brought a motion to support a Charter for the River Wye which received majority support at full council. Officers are now drafting the executive response (a Cabinet Member Decision) including recommendations for how Herefordshire Council can practically support the Charter. Other authorities are exploring opportunities to endorse the Charter, including Forest of Dean District Council who have amended and agreed to support their own version, which passed through full council in January. Powys and Monmouthshire County Councils and Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority are also exploring options and have requested updates on progress in Herefordshire. Given that rights can only be legally granted by an Act of Parliament, supporting &/or endorsing the Charter is an intermediary step that does not require legislative reform or enforcement, but still advocates for the Rights of Nature. This is possible through, for example, committing to integrate the principles of the Charter - a nature-centric approach - into policy and decision making, and using the Charter as a reference document in the writing of other plans and strategies as and when these are updated. The full Charter is appended below.

The Diffuse Water Pollution Plan (DWPP) for the River Wye Special Area of Conservation (SAC), was published in November 2025 and presented to the Wye Nutrient Management Board. It was prepared jointly by the Environment Agency (EA) and Natural England (NE). The DWPP outlines the current condition of the River Wye SAC, identifies the sources and impacts of diffuse pollution and sets out the strategic priorities and actions required to achieve favourable condition status. The plan focuses specifically on phosphate and sediment, and integrates technical findings, modelling outputs and stakeholder input to guide effective action. The DWPP recognised that “agricultural land is now the dominant source of nutrient and sediment pollution across the Wye catchment. Most phosphate, and nearly all excess sediment, originates from farmed fields and degraded riverbanks adjacent to agricultural land. Nutrient enrichment in the catchment is a long-standing issue, with applications of fertilisers and manures historically exceeding the total nutrient offtake in crops and livestock products.... The greatest impact from nutrients and sediment is seen in the River Lugg, where phosphate targets are exceeded by a wide margin, mostly due to diffuse pollution from agriculture.” The report notes “Diffuse water pollution is not solely a farming issue. It is a global, systemic challenge embedded in the entire food supply chain. In the Wye catchment, nutrients originate from several sources, including manure application on farmland, the import of animal feed and fertiliser products, the use of crops and organic waste in anaerobic digestion (AD) plants, and population pressures and household consumption patterns that influence food production and waste generation. These sources are influenced by national policies, trade, regulation, and operational decisions across multiple sectors. Diffuse pollution results from the combined and interacting effects of these activities, rather than any single driver.”

Key Recommendations from the DWPP are that improving water quality and river health in the Wye and Lugg require a coordinated, long-term approach that addresses both immediate pressures and legacy issues. The report states, “The following holistic and system-wide actions will help to reduce nutrient and sediment inputs, address other factors that contribute to eutrophication impacts, and support ecological recovery:

- **Prioritise land use change in high-risk areas**, for example by converting intensively

managed arable land on steep slopes, floodplains or adjacent to watercourses into low-input uses like extensively managed grassland, to reduce erosion and nutrient runoff.

- **Target interventions in the upper catchment** to reduce runoff, erosion, and pollutant transport during rainfall events. These may include Natural Flood Management (NFM) measures in headwater areas to slow and store water, as well as land management practices such as cover cropping, buffer strips, and soil improvement in areas where flow pathways increase connectivity between farmland and the river.
- **Enhance riparian zone management** by increasing vegetative cover to stabilise banks, reduce water temperatures, and improve habitat quality. Where livestock access contributes to bank erosion and nutrient input, implement measures to reduce poaching, such as fencing and alternative drinking sources.
- **Ensure that farm-scale nutrient inputs align with crop requirements** and soil capacity. Further reduce P inputs below off-take levels in areas where soils have accumulated legacy P, to actively draw down excess stores in soils and sediments...
- **Carefully manage large-scale sources and movements of organic nutrients**, including manure, slurries, poultry litter, digestate and biosolids.

The DWPP proposes five over-arching strategic priorities:

1. Farm gate nutrient balancing
2. Catchment-scale management of bulk organic nutrients
3. Reducing the impact of high-risk crops on high-risk land
4. Targeted use of Environmental Land Management schemes, advice and funding
5. Supply chain engagement and accountability

The report concludes “Even under optimistic modelled scenarios, the current suite of mitigation measures and mechanisms will not deliver the reductions needed.”

The full DWPP is available here:

<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50131134/Diffuse%20Water%20Pollution%20Plan%20River%20Wye%20Special%20Area%20of%20Conservation%20November%202025.pdf>

The ‘Phosphorus in the River Wye: Evidence Base for Wales and options appraisal’ report was published in December by Ricardo for Herefordshire Council on behalf of the Wye Nutrient Management Board and Wye Catchment Partnership. The Evidence Base and options appraisal draws together the existing evidence related to phosphorus pollution in the Welsh Wye, predominantly in Powys, and outlines a range of mitigation measures that could be implemented across the Welsh Wye catchment to reduce phosphorus concentrations from a range of sources. The mitigation measures presented in the report will be appraised for inclusion in the Wye Nutrient Management Plan to improve compliance with SAC and Water Framework Directive (WFD) targets, the ecological health of the river, safeguard wildlife, support resilient and sustainable agricultural practices, and improve the quality of our water supplies. The report is available here:

<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50131135/Phosphorus%20in%20the%20River%20Wye%20Evidence%20Base%20for%20Wales%20Evidence%20base%20and%20options%20appraisal%20Issue%204%20.pdf>

The contract for the production of the integrated, cross-border 10-year Wye Catchment Management Plan has been awarded to Haskoning Ltd, through Herefordshire Council on behalf of the Wye Catchment Partnership. Haskoning Ltd are independent international consulting engineers specialising in sustainable development and innovation with their

Water Resilience team leading on the contract. Some of the known issues the Wye Catchment Management Plan (Wye CMP26) will address include:-

Flood and droughts -Increasing frequency of extreme high and low flows, and elevated water temperature, compounded by land management issues and abstraction

Water quality -influenced by sediment, nutrients, pesticides, herbicides and acidity

Biodiversity loss -declines in species abundance, distribution, habitat quality and connectivity, and invasive non-native species

Geomorphological limitations - weirs, overgrazed channels, channel straightening of the tributary network and restricted sediment supply.

Elevated water temperatures – both summer and winter.

Work has commenced with an Evidence Review, to be followed by Options Appraisals, drafting of an Action Plan, by late summer, and Stakeholder engagement and consultation on the draft Wye CMP26. Haskoning report to a Task & Finish Group of Wye Catchment Partnership members.

Meanwhile, DEFRA are tendering for the potential £1million 'Water Quality Research and Catchment Planning in the River Wye' contract. The Aims and Objectives of this research programme, with a maximum duration of 3 years until 2029, will be to build on existing evidence and work alongside stakeholders to:

- Investigate the sources of the pollution and pressures affecting the river, in particular focussing on agricultural pollution
- Study the impacts of changing farming practices and land management in the catchment
- Develop and test new ways to improve land management to improve water quality, which are suitable for the Wye catchment and will also be transferable to other catchments, using a 'living-labs' approach to test solutions by engaging and incorporating diverse stakeholder groups from the catchment throughout the process and testing approaches in the field.
- Examine what's driving wildlife decline and water flow – the movement and quantity of water which is crucial for habitats and species
- Understand best practice for undertaking research involving a complex stakeholder group.

It is intending that this research will identify and quantify new innovative methods to reduce agricultural diffuse pollution to river environments and explore the costs and benefits as well as barriers to uptake of these measures. The research will also gather evidence that can be integrated into new and existing models to estimate the impact of agriculture on the water environment and contribute to reducing agricultural diffuse pollution. The project will also act as a case study to apply learnings on sustainable governance and stakeholder engagement for future research programmes in other river catchments with similar or differing challenges.

The Wyescapes Landscape Recovery Project Development Phase Proposal has been submitted to DEFRA. It is anticipated that ongoing review by DEFRA will take until the autumn before a confirmed outcome. A newsletter will be issued shortly by Herefordshire Rural Hub to confirm submission and to share ongoing news. The Wyescapes Landscape Recovery programme incorporates 49 land holdings across 5,125ha between Leominster and Goodrich. For further information see <https://herefordshireruralhub.co.uk/wyescapes/> .

The Wye Catchment Partnership (WCP) met on 25th February at Dingestow Village Hall, with the support of Monmouth Rotary, followed by an afternoon site visit to Ty Mawr Farm on the Old Lands Estate. Haskoning Water Resilience team made a presentation on their process and timetable for the Wye Catchment Management Plan (Wye CMP26). Herefordshire Council, as secretariat for the WCP also published the first Wye Catchment Partnership newsletter.

The latest Wye Nutrient Management Board (NMB) meeting was held on 21st January. The NMB agreed to endorse the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP25) Commitment 26: to reduce in total Nitrogen, Phosphorous and sediment pollution (tonnes) from agriculture by at least 18% by December 2030 from 2018 baseline (Environment Act 2021 interim target). The NMB also debated the DWPP and the Welsh Evidence Base. Details of the meeting and the recording are available here: [Agenda for Wye Catchment Nutrient Management Board on Wednesday 21 January 2026, 2.00 pm - Herefordshire Council](#)
The next scheduled NMB meeting is on Wednesday 22nd April 2026.

Welsh Government have published a Green Paper setting out proposals for fundamental reform of the water system in Wales 'Shaping the Future of Water Governance in Wales'. It responds to the Independent Water Commission, established jointly by the Welsh Government and UK Government published in July 2025. Proposals in the Green Paper include creating a new, dedicated Welsh economic regulator for water, supported by new legislation and a modern regulatory framework designed to encourage investment, protect the environment and deliver a water system that works for Wales, leading to cleaner rivers, stronger regulation and better accountability. Consultation on the Shaping the Future of Water Governance in Wales Green Paper is open until 7th April 2026. For further details see: [Green Paper: Shaping the Future of Water Governance in Wales | GOV.WALES](#)

'Forest to Sea - A Vision and Strategic Action Plan for water in the Forest of Dean' has been through a public consultation managed by Severn Vale Catchment Partnership in collaboration with the Wye Valley National Landscape Team and other partners. The document sets out the environmental priorities and ambitious, specific objectives to be delivered by 2035 and includes the tributaries of the Wye within the Forest of Dean District. The Strategic Action Plan is now being finalised for adoption by the Severn Vale Catchment Partnership.

The River Restoration Centre Annual Conference is 29th & 30th April 2026, at the ICC Wales, Newport. For more information see <https://www.therrc.co.uk/rrc-conference-2026>

Background

The Wye Valley National Landscape covers about one third of the River Wye in length, the lower reaches, and only about 8% of the Wye Catchment. The River Wye and its tributaries are a Special Quality as identified in the statutory Wye Valley AONB Management Plan. Most of the nutrients and contributing conditions for the algal blooms originate outside and upstream of the National Landscape.