

RIVER WYE UPDATE AND WATER CROWFOOT SPECIES ACTION PLAN

Purpose

To advise of the latest activities to help restore the River Wye including presenting the Water Crowfoot Species Action Plan.

Recommendation

That the JAC

- A. Welcomes the on-going activity across the Wye Catchment to help restore the River Wye, including the expanding adoption of the Charter for the Rights of the River Wye,
- B. Endorses the Water Crowfoot Species Action Plan, as the fifth and final Species Action Plan of the Wye Valley National Landscape.

Key Issues

- The Riverside Code booklet, published in April by the Friends of the River Wye, is designed and illustrated to help people respect, protect and enjoy the River Wye.
- The Charter for the Rights of the River Wye was launched in May during the Hay Festival and has been adopted widely by partners across the Wye Catchment, including a Pledge on behalf of the Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership (appended).
- Haskoning Ltd have been progressing with the first phase of the Wye Catchment Management Plan.
- The Environment Agency have published the River Wye Water Quality 2025 Data Analysis Report (summary appended), which identifies that water temperature in the Wye may have a greater influence on algal blooms than nutrient pollution.
- DEFRA and Welsh Government £1million research programme for the Wye is now underway with a 3-year Living Lab approach led by University of West of England (UWE) supported by the Herefordshire Rural Hub.
- The fifth and final Species Action Plan focusing on a *Ranunculus* Water Crowfoot in the River Wye, is published and appended below.
- The Wye Valley National Landscape Team and Friends of the River Wye are collaborating on a project to investigate the decline of Water Crowfoot, with funding from the Nature Networks Fund in Wales and DEFRA in England.
- Other partners in the Catchment are progressing with projects including the Wye & Usk Foundation Resilient Rivers initiative on the River Monnow and Natural Resources Wales' Upper Wye Catchment Restoration Project.

Reasons

The River Wye is the fourth largest river in England and Wales and supports ecological, economic and recreational diversity. It is a central feature and Special Quality of the Wye Valley National Landscape. The River Wye faces a number of challenges, including how clean its water is and how much water there is flowing - at times too much and at others too little. The river remains a focus for many and it brings people together, whether local people, organisations or businesses. Good water quality is integral to ensuring the health of the river and the local economy. It helps conserve the species which call it home (including us) and maintains the ecosystem services it provides like flood regulation, clean drinking water and recreational activities, for both those who live in or visit the catchment. Communities are increasingly aware of the pressures facing the river and are seeking meaningful ways to contribute to its protection.

Implications

The Riverside Code was launched on 22nd April, collated and published by Friends of the River Wye. It is a 16-page booklet that aims to empower residents of the Wye catchment to be better river guardians. Just as the Countryside Code was designed to help people respect, protect and enjoy our outdoor spaces, the Friends of the River Wye collaborated on the creation of the Riverside Code to help protect our precious rivers and streams.

The Riverside Code explains how to effectively identify and report pollution incidents to the regulators - for example, being able to identify sewage fungus, or to tell the difference between a natural oily sheen and an oil spill. It also clearly communicates the key farming rules, for example around manure spreading and storage, helping people to identify malpractice and how to report it. Additionally, it includes actions people can take in their homes and by the river, raising awareness about the deadly threat of pet flea treatments to river invertebrates and more. Local organisations working to protect the Wye are listed, signposting readers to local volunteering opportunities and further information, such as how to take part in the Big Ranunculus Watch. The booklet contains illustrations from local artist Jessica Watkins, including a stylistic catchment map.

The Code is available at selected bookshops and community spaces throughout the Wye catchment, including Green Ink Booksellers, Hay-on-Wye; Herefordshire Wildlife Trust shops at Queenswood Country Park, near Leominster and Church Street, Hereford; Made in Ross, Old Market House, Ross-on-Wye; Chepstow Books & Gifts. It is also [downloadable here](#).

The Rights of the River Wye Charter was launched at a public ceremony on Sunday 24th May 2026 at The Warren, Hay-on-Wye, marking a significant moment for both the Wye Catchment and the growing Rights of Nature movement across the UK.

The River Charter was endorsed by the JAC at the previous meeting. The Charter recognises the River Wye as a living ecosystem with intrinsic rights including the right to flow, biodiversity, regeneration and freedom from pollution. It is believed to be the first full catchment River Charter in the UK and the first Rights of River framework for a Welsh river. It has been developed collaboratively across the catchment and endorsed by councils and institutions including Herefordshire Council, Powys and Monmouthshire County Council, the

Forest of Dean District Council and Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority. Each signatory made a Pledge at the signing and the Wye Valley National Landscape Pledge is:-

The River Wye and its tributaries are a Special Quality of the Wye Valley National Landscape, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, that covers one third of the lower reaches of the River Wye, but only 8% of the Wye Catchment. The Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership pledges to work with all partners to restore the River Wye - improving water quality, reducing excess nutrients, and supporting collaborative action across the catchment to conserve and enhance its outstanding natural beauty.

The illustrated Wye Charter and the Wye Valley National Landscape Pledge are appended.

The Charter forms part of a growing international Rights of Nature movement that is reshaping how ecosystems are recognised and protected in law and governance. The rights expressed in the Charter do not constitute any new legal status but reflect protections already recognised across existing environmental legislation and regulation.

Wye Living Labs is the new research programme, funded by DEFRA and supported by the Welsh Government, led by researchers at University of West of England (UWE), Bristol and the Herefordshire Rural Hub. It is a major 3 year project that brings farmers and stakeholders together to test practical solutions for soil health, nutrient management and water quality in the Wye catchment.

It recognises that farmers in the Wye catchment hold knowledge that no published report contains. The Living Labs programme is designed to identify that knowledge, test it, and turn it into solutions that policy can act on. Research by the Herefordshire Rural Hub has identified that 55% of Wye fields contain more nutrients in the soil than crops need and inputs have exceeded outputs for years. Thus the existing nutrient store in many soils could meet crop needs without new inputs. Nearly fifteen years of voluntary action has left the river struggling. The data indicates that voluntary measures alone have not been sufficient to reverse the decline in water quality. The Wye Living Labs programme is not intended to allocate blame for that decline, but to understand what is actually happening in the Wye catchment, in order to design solutions that works. It seems that for many farms, reducing nutrient inputs is not an environmental sacrifice, as the nutrients are already in the soil. Thus buying in fertiliser and feed is paying for something the land does not need, and the surplus has to go somewhere. Drawing soil nutrient levels down to the agronomic optimum may not cause loss of yield, and for many farms it might reduce input costs immediately. Some of the main questions for the Living Labs are:

- Can nutrient drawdown be operationalised on working farms in the Wye?
- What does the transition look like?
- Does any improvement in river condition become detectable within a Living Labs timeframe?

These are not answered in any existing report.

Farmers, landowners, and anyone with an interest in the Wye Catchment and its rivers have been invited to join co-design workshops, at Garway Village Hall on 29th June, Weobley Village Hall on 27th July and 10th August at the Royal Welsh Showground. These informal workshops will help decide which interventions to trial and where. There is a strong emphasis on Farmer engagement, Cross-border inclusion (England & Wales) and Evidence-led decision making. Evidence gap analysis to date has identified 13 priority gaps: Highest – agricultural / technical (soil phosphorus, manure, farm practices); High - governance &

behaviour; Medium – monitoring & data. Over the next 3 years, the Living Labs programme will explore practical solutions that support both water quality & sustainable farming.

The 2025 River Wye Data Analysis Report has been published by the Environment Agency (EA) [River Wye Water Quality | Engage Environment Agency](#). The first report was published in 2022 with the Data Analysis Report released annually. The report captures the EA's monitoring data in the Wye Management Catchment, helping to improve understanding of the causes of changing conditions in the Wye. The Report Summary is appended, and notes:

“Conditions in 2025 were closer to those present in 2022 (another hot and dry summer). However, mean and maximum temperatures recorded in July 2025 slightly exceeded those recorded in 2022. Despite elevated temperatures, prolonged blooms of planktonic algae did not occur in 2025, this is potentially due to reduced runoff of nutrients in spring, and no summer storms occurring. Ongoing work suggests that water temperature has a greater influence upon algal communities and blooms in the River Wye than nutrient pollution.”

The **Water crowfoot Species Action Plan**, the last of the 5 Species Action Plans for the Wye Valley National Landscape, has been produced and is appended below. Water crowfoot is an indicator of both river water quality and quantity. It is recognised as an important indicator species of good ecological status under the Water Framework Directive. Its presence in a river system often reflects high water quality, suitable flow conditions and relatively low nutrient pollution, making it a useful species for environmental monitoring and conservation. In recent years, the abundance of Water crowfoot in the River Wye has declined dramatically, as well as on the neighbouring River Usk and other rivers in the region. The exact causes of this decline remain uncertain, but several contributing factors are believed to be at play including the well document water quality issues and the major flooding events between 2018-2020 which physically scoured the riverbed, removing large stands of the plant. In the seasons that followed, hot and dry conditions hindered re-growth, while grazing birds may have further inhibited recovery. While the Wye has a Public Right of Navigation, other rivers with no access rights have also lost Water crowfoot, which suggests that recreational activity may not be significant driver of loss. However evidence from drone surveys, the [Big Ranunculus Watch](#) and anecdotal observations by canoeists and anglers suggest that Water Crowfoot has made modest recoveries in the last 18 months.

The Wye Valley National Landscape Team are supporting the Friends of the River Wye on a project to investigate the decline of Water Crowfoot. Friends of the River Wye have secured a grant of £175,600 from the Nature Networks Fund, from the Heritage Fund on behalf of the Welsh Government, for the project on both the Wye and the Usk. The Wye Valley National Landscape Team are providing match funding from their DEFRA allocation to enable investigations on the English stretch of the Wye as well. Citizen scientists will be trained to survey the presence of water crowfoot in the rivers over the next three summers, starting this year. The project will commission drone surveys as well as using ground observations, building on last year's pioneering work by Dr Fleur Visser of the University of Worcester, the Wye Valley National Landscape Team and Friends of the River Wye. Natural Resources Wales and Environment Agency will also be advising and collaborating on the project. Information will be shared publicly through an open-access archive. The project intends to research the conditions necessary for Water Crowfoot to thrive and investigate what could have caused its catastrophic decline.

The Wye Catchment Management Plan (CMP) is being produced by Haskoning Ltd on behalf of the Wye Catchment Partnership. Work has commenced with an Evidence Review, to be followed by Options Appraisals and drafting of an Action Plan, by late summer, and Stakeholder engagement and consultation on the draft Wye CMP later in the year. Haskoning are contracted through Herefordshire Council and report to a Task & Finish Group of Wye Catchment Partnership members. For further updates from the Wye Catchment Partnership see <https://wyecatchmentpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Wye-Catchment-Partnership-Newsletter-June-2026.pdf>

The latest **Wye Nutrient Management Board (NMB)** meeting is on Monday 6 July at 2pm. Details of the meeting and the recording are available here: <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1161&MIId=10044&Ver=4> Item 9. Contains an update from the Environment Agency on Project TARA (Testing Approaches to Regulating Agriculture) focusing on Poultry Manure Regulation (see <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50134603/Environment%20Agency%20Updates%20-%20Project%20TARA.pdf>)

The next NMB meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 7th October 2026, 2.00 pm.

The **Wyescares 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. The Wyescares Landscape Recovery programme incorporates 49 land holdings across 5,125ha between Leominster and Goodrich. For further information see <https://herefordshireruralhub.co.uk/wyescares/> .

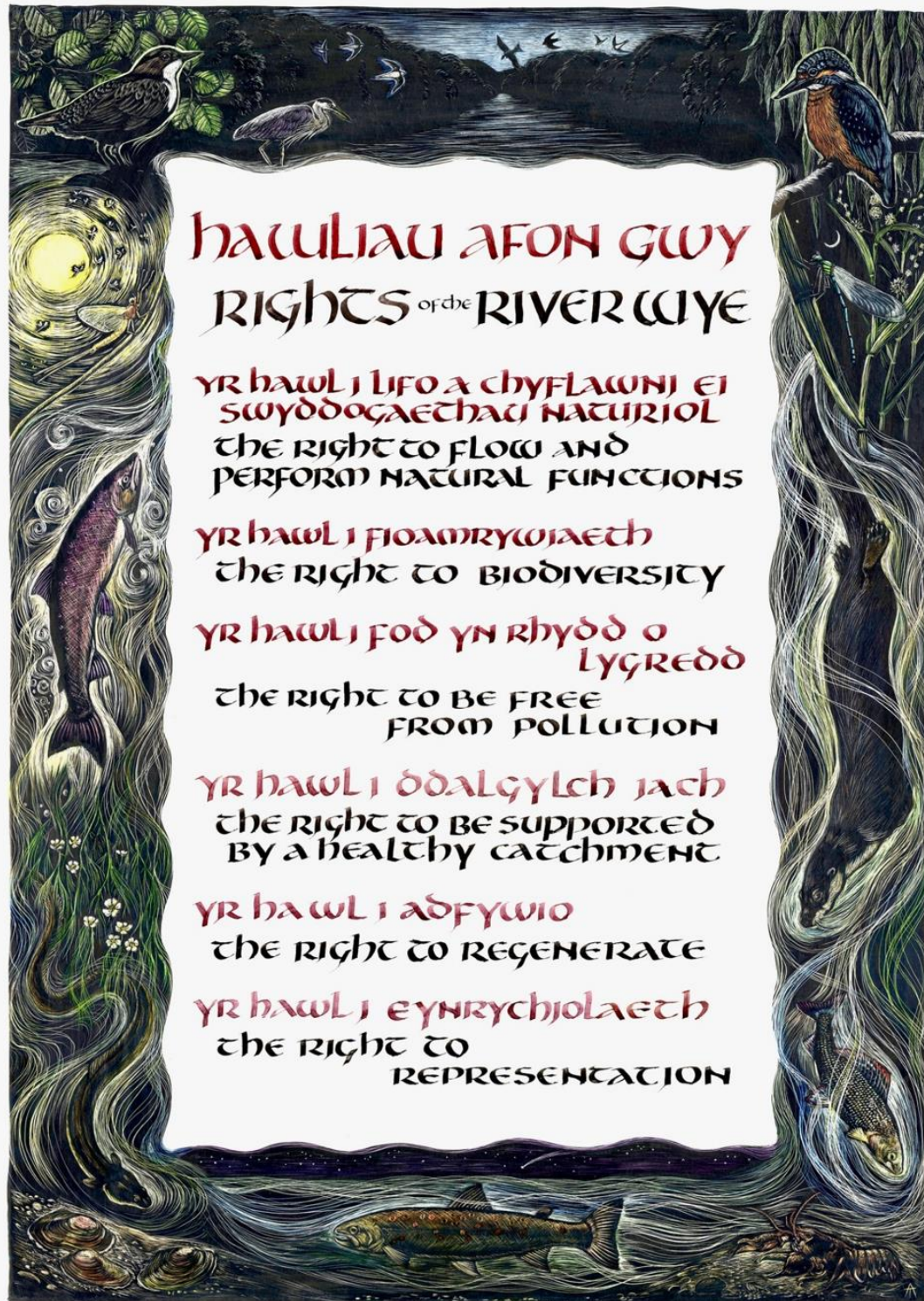
The Wye & Usk Foundation are developing the **Monnow Resilient Rivers** programme, working together with nature to safeguard water. It is a landscape-scale project partnering with businesses, the public sector and farming communities to reduce flood risk, protect water supplies, benefit nature and restore rivers. For more information see <https://resilientrivers.co.uk/> .

For the latest news on activity at the other end of the Wye, Natural Resources Wales has published the most recent newsletter on the **Upper Wye Catchment Restoration Project**, see <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKNRW/bulletins/41eb03c>

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.

The Charter for the River Wye



For further details see:

<https://friendsoftheriverwye.org.uk/wye-river-charter>

<https://savethewye.org/charter-launch-of-the-rights-of-the-river-wye/>

<https://wyecatchmentpartnership.org/the-charter-for-the-river-wye/>

For adoption by partners see:

[Herefordshire Council](#)

[Monmouthshire County Council](#)

[Forest of Dean District Council](#)

[CPRE Herefordshire](#)