

How to make a River Charter

The River Dart 2021-22



Bioregional Learning Centre (BLC) is working in South Devon to help build ecological and economic resilience to long-term climate change. One area we focus on is fresh water, because it is such an essential resource for life. To address the challenges of flood, drought and future scarcity BLC decided to explore what a contract between local people and their river would look like. It is going to take all of us working together, not just government or our water company, to make the changes that are needed to protect river biodiversity and human health in the future.

The River Charter that we made for the River Dart around the Dartington Estate was a prototype. We involved over 1,200 people in its making in a real community effort. It was unveiled at the Water Resilience Summit that took place in Totnes Civic Hall in September 2019 in front of water experts and citizens from across the South West. It has the backing of the South Devon Catchments Partnership and the Environment Agency and aims to create a culture of care for water.

We know reaching agreement on how to care for our rivers and streams is not easy! The root of the word 'rivalry' comes from the Latin *riva* for river bank. Rivers seem to generate a good deal of argument. Our charter seeks to by-pass that by giving rights to running water rather than people. These are not legal but moral rights. We respect and work with all the many ways in which individuals and organisations care for their rivers. At the same time the River Charter gives citizens and their communities a new role as stewards whose voices are heard.

Each River Charter has a simple shared format but differs when it comes to the 'assets' that the community wants to protect. This document is a guide to how to make a River Charter. Making a charter is not difficult or time-consuming, the challenges lie in engaging your community and bringing as many people from as broad a background as possible into the process. Our ambition is to create a River Charter for the whole of the River Dart together with the communities of Dartmeet; Spitchwick; Buckfast; Staverton; Dartington; Totnes; Ashprington and Cornworthy; Stoke Gabriel, Dittisham; Kingswear; and Dartmouth. It will be the first whole-river charter in the UK and part of a world-wide movement of people stepping forward to steward their rivers.

Step One

Identify the need that your community has for a River Charter by canvassing local people and finding out what the local water issues are. Take these concerns to a local community forum along with the information about the River Charter. This could be a meeting of a climate activist group, a Community Land Trust, a Church group, a Parish Council or an Neighbourhood Plan task group..... or a different group. See if you can gather a group of people together to take the next step of planning together. In Dartington we asked people to score what they treasured:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy water | <input type="checkbox"/> Biodiversity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Respectful access | <input type="checkbox"/> Tranquility |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trees along the banks | <input type="checkbox"/> Beauty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wildlife corridor | <input type="checkbox"/> Swimming, fishing, canoeing (circle one) or |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The river's own rights/agency | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unique and special place | <input type="checkbox"/> The source of life, part of the hydrological cycle |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drinking water | |

Step Two

Plan a community conversation about your part of the river that invites local people to talk about the past, present and future of the water, the landscape it is in and the water wildlife. If you need any help with this planning contact the Bioregional Learning Centre (see contact details below). Set a date for the meeting, write an invitation and invite as many other groups and individuals as possible. You may want to show a film about water or invite a local expert to give a talk. Again, Bioregional Learning Centre can help you with this.

Step Three

Hold the meeting and expect some tension as people name their concerns. There will be issues that people care deeply about, feel frustrated that they have not been addressed or not have enough reliable information to come to a conclusion on. It is important to listen and capture what is being said. Concerns, turned around, become 'assets': the things you care about and want to protect. However, you are not planning a protest and once concerns have been aired you will look to turn them into positive statements. In order to do this, in the second part of the meeting break into small groups to decide which 'assets' like a river wildlife corridor or healthy water the community wants to name in the Charter. (See the River Dart Charter at Dartington)

Step Four

Email us at the Bioregional Learning Centre via the contact form on our website, www.bioregion.org.uk, with a summary of the words you want in your local River Charter (look at the Dartington version on our website for reference). Tell us the name of your community and the assets you want to list. We will produce a first version of your River Charter that can be shared with your community and get their assent. You will also want to establish which group (Community Land Trust, a Church group, a Parish Council or an Neighbourhood Plan task group..... or a different group) will 'hold' the River Charter on behalf of the community, and be named as doing so in the charter. And identify two people who are willing to step forward as 'river stewards' and be trained in Citizen Science on the River Dart by Westcountry Rivers Trust.

Step Five

Email the Bioregional Learning Centre with any additions and changes you need to make (including contact information for the stewards). We will send you a final PDF that you can have printed out and display. We will then connect you up with the other River Charter groups on the Dart and with the South Devon Catchments Partnership that has the overview of rivers in South Devon. Your charter will be added to the river-long whole-river charter for the Dart.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Contact:

Isabel Carlisle
Bioregional Learning Centre
www.bioregion.org.uk