



**Cotswolds
National
Landscape**

**Exploring Public Engagement Initiatives
to Improve Public Awareness of Water**

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Exploring Public Engagement Initiatives to Improve Public Awareness of Water

This report explores a range of projects that help people understand and care for their local rivers. It looks at initiatives addressing water quality, biodiversity, flood risk, invasive species and sustainable water use through education, hands-on experiences and community involvement. To make sense of how people engage and how this can lead to lasting action, the report uses a Ladder of Engagement framework, adapted from Arnstein's (1969) *Ladder of Citizen Participation*, which illustrates how people can move from awareness through participation to leadership. By reviewing what works well in different settings, it seeks to highlight practical approaches that could be adapted to local needs and capacity.



Combe Mill

Key Areas Affecting River Health

River health is influenced by a mix of environmental pressures and how people interact with waterways; the themes below highlight the main issues affecting rivers and help focus practical action and engagement where it can make the biggest impact.

- **Water Quality:** Sewage discharge, nutrient runoff, pollution from agriculture, pollution from industry, microplastics, road runoff, PFAS, household chemicals.
- **Biodiversity & Habitat:** native species loss, invasive species, habitat fragmentation, weirs and other obstructions, poor water quality, litter.
- **Flood Risk:** understanding flood management and river restoration, land use, climate change, Natural Flood Management.
- **Water Use & Over-Abstraction:** unsustainable water extraction affecting flow and ecosystems.
- **Community Awareness & Action:** motivating local participation in monitoring and restoration, providing opportunities for communities and individuals to engage in conservation projects, education, restricted access to rivers and waterways, restricted access to the countryside by under-represented groups.



Sam Frith

Types of Public Engagement: A Ladder of Engagement

Public engagement can be understood as a progression, where individuals move from awareness to deeper involvement and leadership. The Ladder of Engagement provides a useful framework for structuring different approaches and understanding how they contribute to long-term behavioural change and engagement.

- **Observer/Passive (Lowest Rung)** – People consume information or encounter messages without direct interaction.
- **Follower/Subscriber** – Individuals show interest by signing up, following or staying informed.
- **Supporter/Engager** – People take low-effort actions such as attending events or sharing content.
- **Contributor/Active** – Individuals participate directly through volunteering or practical activities.
- **Owner/Recurring Advocate** – Ongoing commitment, regular volunteering or helping run initiatives.
- **Leader (Highest Rung)** – Individuals drive activity, organise others or lead campaigns.

The engagement approaches outlined below all contribute to different stages of this ladder. When combined, they create pathways for people to move from awareness to sustained action.



Engagement in Practice: Mapping Initiatives to the Ladder

The following pages map the Ladder of Engagement to real activities, showing how people can progress from simply noticing rivers to taking action and leading initiatives.

Ladder of Engagement & Methods of Engagement

Leader

Individuals drive activity, organise others and lead campaigns

- Campaign organisers
- Community-led projects
- Local champions coordinating volunteers or influencing policy
- Use of toolkits (e.g. River Rescue Toolkit) to lead campaigns

Owner/Recurring Advocate

Ongoing commitment, regular volunteering or helping run initiatives

- Riverfly monitoring
- Citizen Science (schools and community groups)
- River Guardians/Catchment Champions
- Regular volunteers in conservation programmes
- Rights of Nature and River Charter

Contributor/Active

Individuals participate directly through volunteering or practical initiatives

- Water Literacy Programme
- PGCE Trainee Fieldtrips
- Trout in the classroom
- River clean-ups & habitat work
- Knowledge sharing events
- Duke of Edinburgh activities

Supporter/Engager

People take low-effort actions such as attending events or sharing content

- Primary & Secondary school fieldwork
- Guided Walks
- Community film screenings & events
- Wild Waters Festival
- Arts & creative activities
- Postcard campaigns/marches
- Digital & knowledge sharing (webinars, online resources)

Follower/Subscriber

Individuals show interest by signing up, following or staying informed

- Online engagement linked to petitions or campaigns
- Initial contact points from festivals or events leading to sign-ups
- Social Media & monthly newsletter updates

Observer/Passive

People consume information or encounter messages without direct interaction

- Stands at local fairs and festivals
- Rain gardens in public spaces
- Yellow Fish campaign
- TV programmes and documentaries

1. Observer/Passive

These approaches prioritise awareness and visibility, often reaching large audiences with low barriers to entry. They can be vital for initial community outreach reach but require follow-on opportunities to deepen engagement.

Stands at Local Fairs and Festivals

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL)/ Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP).
- **Target Audience:** Families, general public, local communities.
- **Engagement Methods:** Displays, drop-in workshops, science experiments, arts and crafts.
- **Effectiveness:** High – wide reach/high numbers of people engaged; inclusive outreach.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Flexible – can be tailored to types of events.



- **Limitations/Challenges:** Staff/volunteer capacity, accessibility and weather, funding, prioritises quantity over quality engagement.



Yellow Fish Campaign

- **Organisation:** Groundwork & Rivers Trust partners.
- **Target Audience:** Residents, schools and businesses.
- **Engagement Methods:** Painting yellow fish by drains with messaging ("Only rain down the drain") to raise awareness of urban runoff pollution.
- **Effectiveness:** Medium – simple, memorable behavioural prompt.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable and low cost.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Awareness-based; deeper education needed for behaviour change.
- **Link:** [Engaging with communities – Yellow Fish – CaBA](#)

Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust – Rain Gardens in Public Spaces

- **Organisation:** Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust.
- **Target Audience:** Families, local residents, community groups.
- **Engagement Methods:** Creation and interpretation of rain gardens in public spaces; signs highlight freshwater ecology and flood mitigation impact.
- **Effectiveness:** Medium–High – increases visibility of water biodiversity in urban contexts; invites informal learning.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable – can be tailored to parks, high streets, town squares with local partners, volunteers and schools.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Requires coordination with landowners/authorities, funding for installation and maintenance; long-term maintenance needed.
- **Link:** [Rain gardens, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust](#)

Dirty Business – Channel 4 Documentary

- **Organisation:** Channel 4/independent production team/WASP/Surfers Against Sewage.
- **Target Audience:** General public.
- **Engagement Methods:** Docu-drama exposing sewage release into waterways; includes real-life stories, investigative reporting, and expert commentary.
- **Effectiveness:** High – reached a broad audience, raised awareness of river pollution, and sparked discussion across social and traditional media.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Limited – broadcast-level reach, but clips or discussion events could be used locally by partners for education or community sessions.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Passive engagement only; does not directly provide ways for viewers to act or get involved.
- **Link:** [Channel 4 – Dirty Business](#)

2. Follower/Subscriber

Light-touch engagement where people signal interest and remain connected. This stage is often underdeveloped but is critical for converting awareness into ongoing engagement.

Digital & Knowledge Sharing

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL) & partners.
- **Target Audience:** Wider public, volunteers and schools.
- **Engagement Methods:** Webinars, online resources and recordings about river issues.
- **Effectiveness:** Medium – extends reach and on-demand learning, topics can be explored in depth.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Easy replication; low cost.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Digital exclusion; lower engagement than in-person.
- **Link:** [Evenlode Catchment Partnership – YouTube](#)

Social Media & Monthly Newsletter Updates

- **Organisation:** Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP).
- **Target Audience:** Wider public, local communities, volunteers, partners and schools.
- **Engagement Methods:** Regular social media posts (e.g. project updates, river facts, event promotion, calls to action) alongside monthly ECP newsletters sharing highlights, opportunities, case studies and ways to get involved.
- **Effectiveness:** Medium–High – consistent communication helps maintain awareness, reinforce key messages and provide clear routes into further engagement.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable – scalable depending on capacity; can be tailored to local priorities and audiences.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Requires ongoing content creation and coordination; risk of low engagement without active management; digital exclusion for some audiences.
- **Link:** [News – Evenlode Catchment Partnership](#)



3. Supporter/Engager

People begin to actively take part in one-off or low-commitment activities. This is a key transition point where interest becomes personal relevance and motivation.

Primary School Visits

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL)/ Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP).
- **Target Audience:** Primary school pupils.
- **Engagement Methods:** Hands-on outdoor activities near school (pond/river dipping, invertebrate ID, water quality testing), short local walks and linked classroom activities.
- **Effectiveness:** High – positive teacher feedback; curriculum-linked practical skills and nature connection.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable – can be delivered from the school gate using nearby watercourses or green spaces.



- **Limitations/Challenges:** Transport, weather, adult supervision needs, access to sites, staff capacity, trained staff/river experts, funding.
- **Link:** [Education and Resources – Cotswolds National Landscape](#)



Secondary School Fieldtrips

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL)/ Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP).
- **Target Audience:** Secondary schools (GCSE & A-Level students).
- **Engagement Methods:** River surveying, water quality testing, catchment tours demonstrating natural flood management.
- **Effectiveness:** High – positive teacher feedback; supports fieldwork skills and Geography curriculum.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** High/Medium adaptability – applicable wherever accessible rivers/ streams exist with suitable features for coursework specification.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Logistics (transport, safety), weather, staff ratios and timetabling, trained staff/river experts, funding.
- **Link:** [Education and Resources – Cotswolds National Landscape](#)

Knowledge Sharing Events

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL)/ Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP).
- **Target Audience:** People with an existing interest in the field.
- **Engagement Methods:** Training for volunteers or community members in specific areas, such as: river surveying, tracks and signs, biodiversity, inclusive access.
- **Effectiveness:** High – tailored to local needs and interests; targeted outreach.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Flexible – can be tailored to local community interests and partnerships.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Staff/volunteer capacity, accessibility and weather, funding, staff/expertise availability.

Guided Walks

- **Organisation:** CNL Wardens.
- **Target Audience:** General public.
- **Engagement Methods:** Riverside walks with live demonstrations of water quality testing.
- **Effectiveness:** High – increases awareness and motivation.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Easily adaptable with local walking groups.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Weather and seasonal access, staff, expertise.



Wild Waters Festival

- **Organisation:** Wild Waters Festival partnership (community & river organisations).
- **Target Audience:** Families and local communities.
- **Engagement Methods:** Celebration of rivers with walks, talks, arts, interactive water activities and community stalls.
- **Effectiveness:** High – broad reach, emotional connection, repeatable annually.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable and scalable.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Planning intensity, weather, funding, staff/volunteer availability, requires community buy-in.
- **Link:** Festival information – <https://wildwatersfestival.com/>

Arts & Creative Approaches

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL) & community artists.
- **Target Audience:** Children, young people and the broader community.
- **Engagement Methods:** Creative storytelling, crafts and photography linked to rivers.
- **Effectiveness:** Medium–High – fosters emotional connection and inclusion.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable with local facilitators.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Effects less directly measurable; requires facilitation skills.



Community Film Screenings & Village Hall Events

- **Organisation:** Local community groups, parish councils, environmental charities.
- **Target Audience:** Residents, families, schools, wider community.
- **Engagement Methods:** Screening documentaries about rivers, water quality and freshwater wildlife in local venues, often followed by Q&A panels, or sign-ups for volunteer projects.
- **Effectiveness:** Medium–High – accessible, low-cost engagement that fosters local awareness, discussion, and potential action.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable – small villages to towns; partnerships with Rivers Trusts or wildlife groups increase reach.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Organiser time, licensing for screenings, venue logistics, technical setup, and follow-up activities needed.
- **Link:** [Beneath the Surface](#)
[Rave on for the Avon](#)

Everyone's Evenlode Postcards Delivered to Policy Makers

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL)/ Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP).
- **Target Audience:** Residents, children and local partners.
- **Engagement Methods:** Postcards by community members expressing river concerns delivered to DEFRA decision-makers.
- **Effectiveness:** Medium – symbolic act amplifying local voices.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable to local campaigns and school activities.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Policy impact indirect, connections with local.
- **Link:** Update on delivery – <https://evenlodecatchment.org.uk/news/government-receives-message-in-a-bottle/>



4. Contributor/Active

Hands-on participation builds skills, confidence and connection to place. Regular participation at this level strongly supports long-term behaviour change.

Water Literacy Programme

- **Organisation:** Waterwise & partners.
- **Target Audience:** Adults, community groups, professionals.
- **Engagement Methods:** Online and in-person learning modules to build understanding of water systems, sustainable use, and environmental impact.
- **Effectiveness:** High – equips participants with knowledge and practical skills to make informed decisions and take action.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Moderate – materials can be adapted by local groups for community education.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Requires time commitment; may attract those already motivated.
- **Link:** [Water Literacy Learner Resources](#)

PGCE Trainee Fieldtrips

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL)/ Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP).
- **Target Audience:** Geography PGCE trainees.
- **Engagement Methods:** Demonstrations of river surveying, health and safety, catchment exploration and planning safe fieldwork.
- **Effectiveness:** High – positive feedback; builds confidence and legacy through future teacher practice – many trainees go on to teach at local schools, funding.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable – local partnerships to teacher training providers.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Academic timetables, weather and coordination with institutions, staffing restrictions, trained staff/river experts, funding.
- **Link:** [Education and Resources – Cotswolds National Landscape](#)



Trout in the Classroom

- **Organisation:** Chilterns Chalk Streams Project.
- **Target Audience:** Children & young people/Schools.
- **Engagement Methods:** Classroom trout egg rearing; pupil monitoring of growth and water quality; release of fry into nearby rivers; linked ecology lessons.
- **Effectiveness:** High – memorable, hands-on science; fosters stewardship.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Moderate–High – requires tank setup, egg sourcing and suitable river habitat.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Equipment and maintenance, teacher time, welfare/biosecurity and seasonal timing, trained staff/experts, funding.
- **Link:** [Learning | Chilterns Chalk Stream Project](#)



Youth Conservation Volunteer Opportunities/ Duke of Edinburgh Awards

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL) & Wychwood Forest Trust.
- **Target Audience:** 14–24 year olds.
- **Engagement Methods:** Conservation tasks including hedge-laying, pond clearing, bird box building and willow weaving.
- **Effectiveness:** High – builds skills, confidence and long-term volunteering.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Applicable across green spaces with suitable supervision.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Weather dependent, physically demanding and requires trained supervisors and safeguarding procedures, access to suitable habitats, tools and equipment.
- **Link:** [Education and Resources – Cotswolds National Landscape](#)

5. Owner/Recurring Advocate

Sustained involvement and growing responsibility. These individuals form the backbone of local delivery and continuity.

Citizen Science Schools

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL)/ Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP).
- **Target Audience:** School pupils & Eco-committees.
- **Engagement Methods:** Teacher/pupil training for water quality testing; whole-school assemblies about river health.
- **Effectiveness:** High – ongoing engagement; supports Eco-Schools Green Flag.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable where local watercourses are accessible.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Requires committed staff to oversee tests; weather and timetable constraints, funding.
- **Link:** Education and Resources – Cotswolds National Landscape



Citizen Science Opportunities

- **Organisation:** Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL) & Earthwatch UK.
- **Target Audience:** Community members, school groups.
- **Engagement Methods:** Water quality monitoring with FreshWater Watch; national “Water Blitz” events.
- **Effectiveness:** High – long-term engagement with usable data.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Medium – works best with organised groups.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Ongoing coordination/training; volunteer retention and some costs.
- **Link:** Earthwatch UK – <https://earthwatch.org.uk/program/freshwater-watch-in-the-uk/>

Riverfly Monitoring

- **Organisation:** Anglers' Riverfly Partnership.
- **Target Audience:** Volunteers, anglers, community groups.
- **Engagement Methods:** Training volunteers to survey aquatic invertebrates as pollution indicators.
- **Effectiveness:** High – valuable long-term data and stewardship.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable with low equipment needs.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Requires ongoing coordination and data management, training, volunteer time.
- **Link:** Riverfly Partnership – <https://www.riverflies.org/>

River Guardians/Catchment Champions

- **Organisation:** Local Rivers Trusts and community partners.
- **Target Audience:** Local volunteers and champions.
- **Engagement Methods:** Trained guardians reporting issues, promoting river care and supporting events.
- **Effectiveness:** High – sustained local ownership and trusted community presence.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable; can grow networks across catchments.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Requires ongoing support and coordination.
- **Link:** [About The River Guardians](#) | [Friends Of The Thames](#)



Thames 21 – Citizen Science and River Clean-Ups

- **Organisation:** Thames21.
- **Target Audience:** Community volunteers, schools, youth groups.
- **Engagement Methods:** River clean-ups, biodiversity surveys, water quality monitoring; youth clubs, training, habitat days and public education on urban water pollution.
- **Effectiveness:** High – sustained volunteer network; raised awareness of river issues.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable – wide range of placements from school groups to corporate volunteers.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Volunteer coordination; permissions for activities in urban spaces; variable site conditions.
- **Link:** <https://www.thames21.org.uk/>

River Charter/Rights of Nature – River Ouse

- **Organisation:** Love Our Ouse with Lewes District Council and partners.
- **Target Audience:** Local communities, volunteers, schools, landowners and policymakers.
- **Engagement Methods:** Community consultations, workshops and public events to co-develop a Rights of River Charter for the River Ouse; endorsement by local councils to prioritise the river's rights in decisions affecting its health.
- **Effectiveness:** Medium–High – helps reframe how people think about rivers, builds community ownership and raises river health up the local agenda.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** High – other catchments can use a charter approach to engage communities and partners around shared values and responsibilities for river health.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Requires sustained collaboration with local authorities and stakeholders, and charters don't yet carry legal enforcement under current UK law.
- **Link:** <https://loveourouse.org/rights-of-rivers/>

6. Leader

Individuals or groups driving initiatives, advocacy or wider change. Leadership is often an outcome of sustained engagement across multiple earlier stages.

River Rescue Toolkit

- **Organisation:** River Action UK.
- **Target Audience:** Community advocates and campaigners.
- **Engagement Methods:** Online guides and templates for evidence-gathering, campaigning, reporting and local action.
- **Effectiveness:** Medium–High – builds capability and confidence for local advocacy.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Highly adaptable to any catchment.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Relies on motivated volunteers; outcomes tied to regulator responsiveness.
- **Link:** River Rescue Toolkit – <https://kit.riveractionuk.com/>

Ernest Cook Trust – Blue Mentors/Blue Influencers Scheme

- **Organisation:** The Ernest Cook Trust.
- **Target Audience:** Young people aged 10–14, particularly those in underserved coastal, riverside, estuary and lake communities.
- **Engagement Methods:** Funded host organisations employ Blue Mentors who support groups of young people (Blue Influencers) to design and lead youth-led environmental social-action projects improving local “blue spaces”. Activities include habitat enhancement, campaigning, community events, and practical conservation.
- **Effectiveness:** National programme engaging thousands of young people; builds confidence, leadership and sustained environmental action.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Adaptable through schools, wildlife trusts, river trusts and community charities.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Requires funded mentor posts and organisational capacity.
- **Links:** <https://ernestcooktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/influencers-scheme/>

March for Clean Water

- **Organisation:** River Action UK & partner organisations.
- **Target Audience:** General public and environmental groups.
- **Engagement Methods:** Public marches and coalition events to raise water quality issues.
- **Effectiveness:** High – strong visibility and collective voice, media coverage potential.
- **Potential for Local Adaptation:** Local marches and “days of action” possible.
- **Limitations/Challenges:** Resource-intensive; outcomes can be slow and indirect.
- **Link:** Campaign page – <https://riveractionuk.com/campaign/march-for-clean-water/>



Conclusion

There are many excellent projects that help people connect with their local rivers, from school visits and community events to volunteering and campaigning. Each plays a different role – some raise awareness, others get people involved, and some encourage action. What works best is when these approaches are combined. Education, community engagement, volunteering, and campaigning all support each other, offering people multiple ways to take part and stay involved over time. This joined-up approach helps create stronger, more lasting engagement.

The main barrier isn't a lack of ideas or interest, but capacity. Time, staffing, and funding often limit how much can be delivered and sustained. People don't always have a clear next step, so initial interest doesn't always turn into ongoing involvement. By connecting these activities more clearly and making it easier for people to move between them, there's a real opportunity to build long-term relationships between communities and their rivers.



Earthwatch



Author

This report was written by Rowan Wynne-Jones, who works for Cotswolds National Landscape on outdoor learning and rivers-based community engagement as part of the Evenlode Catchment Partnership.

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The Cotswolds National Landscape is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), managed and looked after by the Cotswolds National Landscape Board (The legal name is the Cotswolds Conservation Board)