From ballet box to river bank - How to get local leaders on board to rescue our rivers

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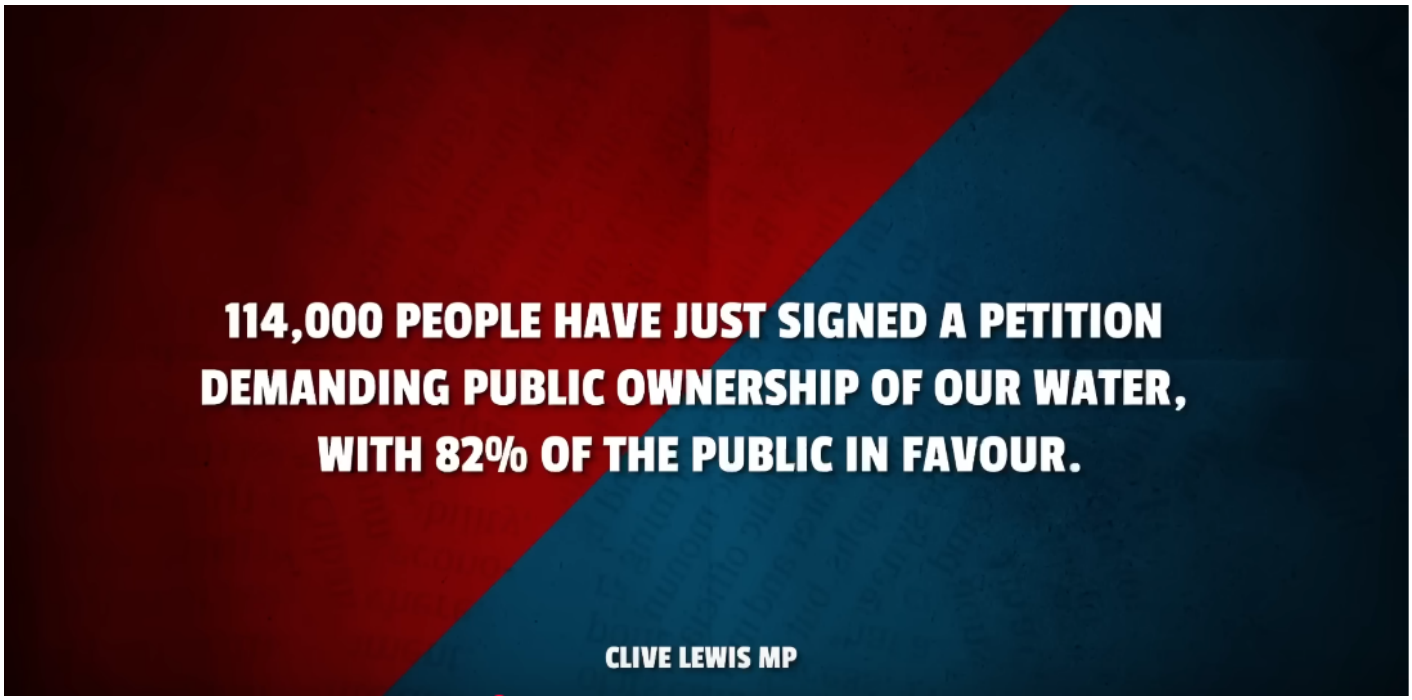
Last week saw **1,641 council seats** across **24 local authorities** up for election, along with six

mayoral elections. I'm not here to talk about results but it's fair to say there are lots of new councillors getting their heads around their new roles. As river campaigners this is an opportunity to start a conversation about what they can do to rescue our rivers.

Listening to 'The rest is politics' podcast with Rory Stewart and Alistair Campbell last week I was interested to hear their take on the local election results that the state of our rivers continues to be a big political issue.



How do we get the message to these new elected officials?

In short there is the direct route, talking to them ourselves and the indirect route, talking to the people they listen to such as local media, constituents or community groups. Both approaches let them know that the public and the media care and want to see action. Using both these approaches creates a surround sound on the state of our rivers and urges action.

What help is available?

The River Rescue Kit from River Action is an online resource designed to empower communities to take action against the growing crisis of river pollution. The section 'Campaign for my River' is packed with advice and resources to help local political campaigning.

The direct approach: engaging Councillors one-to-one

A letter (or email) to new and existing local councillors can be a powerful opening action to start an ongoing relationship. We have produced guidance on writing a powerful letter within the River Rescue Kit which you can use and adapt as you see fit. As an opening gambit, its a good idea to keep positive and passionate, reminding them of any commitments they've made on rivers and making sure the letter feels personal both to you (and your organisation/group if you are part of one). Set out the nature of the issue in your area, which could be sewage pollution caused by water companies, over abstraction in chalk stream areas, or agricultural pollution caused by intensive animal farms.

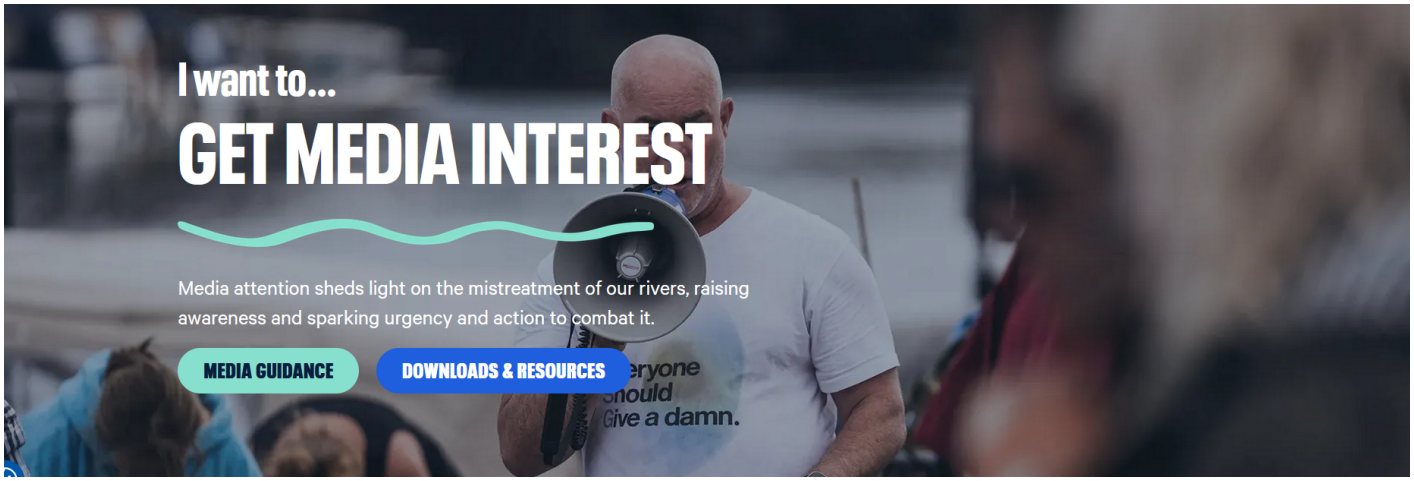
Having worked across a large range of environmental issues in my career, one thing that I find particularly powerful about working on rivers is that they are so tangible and so precious to local communities. You could invite local counsellors on a riverside walk so that you can introduce your group and talk about the issues and the solutions next to the river in question as you watch wildlife and river users enjoying the space. It never hurts to give an opportunity for a good picture for their website and social media as well!

The indirect approach: build public pressure and amplify voices

There are lots of different ways to work to help amplify local voices so they are heard by our elected officials. Campaigns draw attention from the media or elected officials by representing large numbers of people with a shared message, – see the River Rescue Kits guide for launching a petition or organising a demonstration. You might even want to organise an event. Local groups have held funerals for the river, ceremonies to bless the river, and 'paddle outs' with swimmers, kayakers and paddle boarders taking to the water together with placards so think outside the box. We also have a 'I want to get media interest' section you might find useful.

If you want to see who else is campaigning in your local area have a look on the River Rescue Kit Community map, and add yourself so others can find you. Working together can share the work and create a louder voice.

The elections may be over, but no matter what the results were in your local area, the real work for both new and returning Councillors starts now. Our rivers need champions in town halls and council chambers today. By reaching out to new councillors, building public momentum, and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with others who care, we can turn this political moment into a river rescue mission. Because when local voices rise together, even the most powerful tides of neglect can be turned. Let's make sure our rivers have a future as alive and thriving as they deserve.


I want to...
GET MEDIA INTEREST
Media attention sheds light on the mistreatment of our rivers, raising awareness and sparking urgency and action to combat it.
MEDIA GUIDANCE
DOWNLOADS & RESOURCES
Give a damn.