## Case study

**TITLE Community and stakeholder engagement through Catchment Management Advice**


*Clean River Kent Volunteer Open Evening, Our River Kent Exhibition, Kendal Museum, Thursday 16 April 2026*

### When and where

This case study reports on community and stakeholder engagement made possible by the Catchment Management Advisor role. Existing conservation advice delivered by Natural England in the River Kent catchment focuses on 3 areas: 1) advice on accessing agri-environment schemes; 2) protected sites consents and advice; and 3) catchment sensitive farming advice. Through the R4ever Kent project Catchment Management Advisors were able to reach community groups and stakeholders that do not fall under the remit of existing work groups within the natural England Cumbria Area team. Catchment-wide recovery requires engagement beyond agriculture, including community groups and local residents, cultural institutions, campaign organisations, and industrial and non-farming land managers.

To address this, the Catchment Management Advisors developed a programme of community-facing engagement and partnership working, complementing technical farm advice and building a shared understanding of river recovery.

### What we did

The project worked closely with Natural Kendal and the Clean River Kent Campaign to co-deliver engagement activities 2024–2026. This included collaboration on the 2024 and 2025 ‘Natural Kendal’ nature recovery festivals, and the ‘Our River Kent’ museum exhibition at Kendal Museum in 2026. Together, these initiatives combined scientific communication, cultural interpretation and public engagement, significantly increasing awareness of the River Kent SSSI/SAC and its designated features.

The ‘Our River Kent’ Exhibition ran through March and April in 2026, raising awareness of the designated species of the River Kent SSSI/SAC. The exhibition was co-curated by catchment

management advisors and community groups, to bring together natural history, community stories and conservation science. All four of the designated species (Freshwater pearl mussel, White-clawed crayfish, Bullhead and River water crowfoot) were presented in museum displays, with local, place-based interpretation and context, allowing visitors to gain a clearer understanding of why the river is protected, what 'favourable' ecological condition means in practice, and how species depend on water quality and habitat condition.

Specimens from the natural history collection at Kendal Museum (river Kent Freshwater Pearl Mussel shells and water crowfoot herbarium specimens) were used to tell the story of social and ecological change in the catchment, displayed alongside contemporary survey results and photographs. The exhibition effectively used the freshwater pearl mussel to communicate the need for wider river health, helping the public understand the broader implications of environmental degradation and connection to destructive flooding events. Through maps, industrial history and oral accounts, the exhibition showed how drainage and floodplain modification, industrial use (mills, mining, forges) and agricultural pressures have shaped river habitats and contributed to species decline and community vulnerability on the context of warming average temperatures.

A strength of the exhibition was its collaborative and inclusive approach, involving Natural Kendal, Clean River Kent Campaign, local artists, schools and historians. The exhibition included interactive elements, where museum visitors were encouraged to contribute their own experiences to a co-produced 'map' of the river fostering a sense of shared ownership. Kendal Museum reported good visitor attendance at the museum during the exhibition, and recovered much positive feedback about the exhibition. The exhibition was also reported on in the local press (Westmorland Gazette 2026).

Catchment Management advisors were also able to develop relationships with industrial and non-farming land managers near to Freshwater Pearl Mussel reintroduction sites, including 'Hollingsworth and Vose' filter factory and HP Plantation (see Appendix 2, walkovers 17 and 18) in Kentmere. This work focused on identifying pollution risks from infrastructure, drainage and yard runoff, providing tailored advice on reducing point-source and diffuse pollution, and integrating industrial land into catchment-wide water quality improvements. This further widened the project's reach and reinforced the message that river health depends on all sectors, not just farming.

Catchment Management Advisors engagement consistently emphasised the role that healthy rivers play in supporting biodiversity, farming resilience and a sense of belonging. By emphasizing the collective responsibility for river health and the role that everyone—from farmers to residents to industry—has to play in supporting in nature recovery, Catchment Management Advisors were able to develop positive relationships with different stakeholders, despite the increasingly contentious and high-profile nature of water pollution.

## Outcomes

Catchment Management Advisors engagement activity raised the profile and public awareness of the River Kent SAC and its protected species in the local area, reflected in the high visitor engagement and positive feedback at the Our River Kent exhibition at Kendal Museum. The work contributed to the project's wider target of engaging tens of thousands of people across the

catchment. The role through the LIFE project was able to have a far greater adaptive and flexible approach to engagement with different stakeholder groups than the usual Natural England statutory roles are able to, providing an excellent demonstration of added value provided by the partnership.

### Learning

Collaborating with local conservation groups significantly increased the reach of engagement activity. Linking ecology to local history and lived experience helped audiences understand complex environmental issues. Other river restoration projects such consider working with local heritage institutions, particularly where authentic specimens can help enhance understanding of habitats and species.

### Contact us

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