

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 29 October 2025
16th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

PE2131: Grant Scottish rivers, including the River Clyde, the legal right to personhood

Introduction

Petitioner Professor Louise Welsh and Jude Barber on behalf of The Empire Café

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to grant the River Clyde, and potentially other rivers in Scotland, the legal right to personhood by:

- adopting the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Rivers
- appointing a Nature Director to act as a guardian of the River Clyde, with the responsibility for upholding its river rights
- considering whether an alternative mechanism should be established to act for the rights of the river, its inhabitants (human and non-human), and society at large.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2131>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 5 March 2025.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Glasgow City Region.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Glasgow City Region and the petitioners, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 20 January 2025.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 695 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
October 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2131: Grant Scottish rivers, including the River Clyde, the legal right to personhood

Petitioner

Professor Louise Welsh and Jude Barber on behalf of The Empire Café

Date Lodged

13 December 2024

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to grant the River Clyde, and potentially other rivers in Scotland, the legal right to personhood by:

- adopting the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Rivers
- appointing a Nature Director to act as a guardian of the River Clyde, with the responsibility for upholding its river rights
- considering whether an alternative mechanism should be established to act for the rights of the river, its inhabitants (human and non-human), and society at large.

Background information

The [Universal Declaration of River Rights \(UDRR, 2020\)](#) was first developed by [Earth Law Center in 2017](#), and provides a framework of six minimum rights that are possessed by rivers.

Our podcast, 'Who owns the Clyde?', centres around the unrealised potential of the Clyde due to fragmented ownership and inconsistent stewardship. Granting the Clyde legal personhood would enable ecological and common human interests to thrive.

International examples of granting legal personhood to rivers as a means of protecting natural habitats and the common good include:

- Whanganui River, New Zealand granted personhood in 2017
- Hundreds of Bangladesh's rivers were legally designated as living people in 2019
- 2021, Canada's Magpie River, called the Mutuhekau Shipu by the Innu First Nation, gained legal personhood.

We held three well-attended events joined by residents, Leader of the Glasgow City Council Susan Aitken, Councillor Graham Campbell, Paul Sweeney MSP, Councillor Holly Bruce, and former MSPs Sandra Whyte and Andy Wightman.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2131 on 5 March 2025

The Convener: We move to petition PE2131, which was lodged by Professor Louise Welsh and Jude Barber on behalf of the Empire Cafe. I wonder whether our remaining guests in the public gallery might, in fact, be them—it seems that they might well be. I am tempted to remind myself where the Empire Cafe is, because I have a feeling that I know. However, I shall not.

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to grant the River Clyde—and, potentially, other rivers in Scotland—the legal right to personhood by adopting the universal declaration on the rights of rivers; appointing a nature director to act as a guardian of the River Clyde, with responsibility for upholding its river rights; and considering whether an alternative mechanism should be established to act for the rights of the river, its inhabitants—both human and non-human—and society at large.

For our consideration of the petition, we are joined by our MSP colleague and former member of the committee, Paul Sweeney. Mr Sweeney joins us remotely, just by way of a change—he must have got fed up coming in for the proceedings on a season-ticket basis. Good morning, Mr Sweeney—it is always a pleasure to have you with us.

10:30

As the SPICe briefing highlights, granting legal personhood to rivers is part of the wider rights-to-nature movement, which is an emerging area of conservation law and practice. Although legal personhood is used for other non-human entities, such as companies, and has been granted to rivers in New Zealand, Bangladesh and Canada, the design of rights-to-nature designation varies markedly.

In its response to the petition, the Scottish Government states that it does not support the proposals of the petition and notes that there would be a need to balance the rights of rivers with the rights of existing natural persons and existing non-natural persons. The Scottish Government considers that there are well-developed policy mechanisms in place that balance the interests of nature, society and the economy, including legislation to protect and improve Scotland's water environment.

The Government's response also draws our attention to the designation of the Clyde mission programme as a national development in the most recent iteration of the national planning framework, NPF4. For those reasons, the Government's view is that granting rivers legal personhood is unnecessary and would have unpredictable results.

We have also received a submission from the petitioners, which welcomes the approach in NPF4 in respect of the Clyde mission. However, the petitioners remain of the view that

“There are insufficient governance and stewardship mechanisms in place to implement and safeguard the River Clyde and its potential”,

and they note that, although the Clyde is central to the broad remit of the Clyde mission,

“the river itself is not represented as an entity.”

Before we consider what further action we might take, I ask Paul Sweeney whether there is anything that he would like to say to the committee.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you, convener. It is a pleasure to join the committee again today. I felt that I had to be close to the Clyde to make this statement, which is why I did not come to Edinburgh today.

I was rather disappointed by the Government’s response to the petitioners, because the points that the Government made in rebutting the petitioners’ requests represented the actual position of the petitioners, so I feel that they are in violent agreement. Legal personhood for a river might seem like a bit of an esoteric concept, but I think that it is exactly what is needed. Indeed, that has been a glaring gap in our policy landscape for some time.

The Scottish Government cited the Clyde mission as a vehicle for such work, which might be something to consider, but I agree with the petitioners on the fundamental point that there are

“insufficient governance and stewardship mechanisms in place to implement and safeguard the River Clyde and its potential.”

Although the petitioners

“understand that the River Clyde is central to Clyde Mission’s ... remit and ... sits at the centre of the Clyde corridor,”

they point out that

“the river itself is not represented as an entity”,

nor is there a formal mechanism for all stakeholders to be involved.

I think that an opportunity exists for further development. A myriad of private owners have significant interests in the control of the river and its hinterland, yet there are no formal obligations to engage or consult beyond fairly threadbare planning and statutory obligations. There is a need to improve accountability all round and to address those issues.

Historically, the river had a far greater degree of oversight. The petitioners cite the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park as a potential benchmark for how the current arrangements could be evolved. However, the issue is not purely about the nature aspects of the river; it is about all aspects of the management of the river, including the population, industry and so on.

Glasgow Town Council, which became trustee of the River Clyde in 1770, initially had management responsibilities for dredging and harbour development. The River Improvement Trust of 1809 added ferries to its remit in 1840. In turn, in 1858, that

was replaced by the Clyde Navigation Trust, which had a fairly formal standing. It had nine representatives of ship owners, harbour rate payers were represented, the Corporation of Glasgow had 10 representatives, and the chamber of commerce, the Merchants House, the Trades House, the County of Lanark Council and, indeed, the boroughs of Dumbarton, Clydebank, Renfrew, Govan and Partick were all represented.

That evolved into the Clyde Port Authority in 1966, which was a trust port, and then the Ports Act 1991 opened the door for the Clyde Port Authority to be privatised. It was the subject of a management buy-out, floated on the London Stock Exchange and then acquired by a private group of companies, Peel Group Ltd, in the early part of this century, in 2003. It controls, privately, 450 square miles of land around the river and significant strategic port facilities, but there is no formal mechanism for everyone to be involved in the management of that and to consider its wider impact.

Therefore, although the Clyde mission has been a welcome development in recent years—it has been led by the local authorities in the Glasgow city region and Argyll and Bute Council, and has been resourced with £1.5 million of investment to set up a strategic master plan—there could be further development in that respect.

My fundamental request to the committee is for it to consider how we can bring in the Clyde mission and the relevant local authorities, and to discuss how we can develop the mission's accountability mechanisms. How do we put it on a more formalised footing? Can there be more representation? Can there be more formalised board meetings? Can it have a wider remit? Finally, can we build out from the Clyde mission and try to get back to something like the Clyde Port Authority of old, with a broader management plan for the river that feels visible and accountable?

I think that that is the essence of the petitioners' request. This is not some esoteric concept; it is about going back to what we once had: a broader management structure that was very effective in managing the River Clyde and other rivers in Scotland.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr Sweeney. That was a helpful exposition of some of the issues underpinning the petition.

Having heard from Mr Sweeney, do colleagues have any suggestions as to what we might do?

Foyso Choudhury: In 2019, the High Court of Bangladesh conferred legal personhood on the Turag River and, by extension, all rivers in Bangladesh. In the light of that, and in the light of what Mr Sweeney has said, I think that we should keep the petition open. It would be good to write to the Glasgow city region to seek its views on the actions that are called for in the petition and to get information on the work that is being done to deliver the Clyde mission.

Fergus Ewing: I am very grateful to Mr Sweeney for his most informative introduction and for giving us the interesting background to the history of the Clyde, which has a place in the hearts of many Glaswegians.

I originally hailed from Glasgow, my grandfather won a medal for swimming the Clyde and I used to be the cox to my father's team of four oarsmen, who were called the "Senior Argonauts". They certainly were very senior. As the cox, I managed to steer them into the river bank on many an occasion. We never needed to be rescued by George Parsonage, though, who was the riverman and who for 50 years rescued people from the Clyde. He saved so many lives; indeed, he used to say, "If there were a notch in my oar for every rescue I carried out, there'd be nae oar."

However, irrelevant personal reflections aside, I just wanted to convey that I think that we all have an affection for the River Clyde, and many of the arguments towards the end of Mr Sweeney's remarks about how it can better be cherished, appreciated and protected are, I think, ones that we would all agree with. Therefore, rather than close the petition, we should explore how that could be done.

Without wanting to sound any discordant note, I should also say that it was in Glasgow 48 years ago that I studied the law of persons, and I have to point out that the river cannot be a person in law. Therefore, we can have sympathy with the petitioners' aims, but the means by which they seek to give effect to them would not, I think, really fit with Scots law—and, in saying that, I pay all my respects to other countries that have taken a different view on that matter. There could be some new form of body—after all, the Glasgow Humane Society had a role, the Clyde mission has a role and other bodies have been mentioned. A new charity could be established if that was felt necessary. That would be a more orthodox manner of pursuing aims that we might all agree are worthy ones.

The Convener: I think that those remarks were very nicely rounded and put. I am not sure that the petition's specific aim is something that we can deliver, but we could pursue the underlying issues that it raises in the way that has been suggested this morning. Are colleagues content to proceed on that basis?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I thank Mr Sweeney for assisting us in coming to that determination. We will keep the petition open—the petitioners in the gallery can be assured of that—and we will seek the information that has been requested, as suggested.

Annexe C: Written submissions

Glasgow City Region written submission, 4 April 2025

PE2131/C: Grant Scottish rivers, including the River Clyde, the legal right to personhood

The Committee agreed to write to Glasgow City Region (GCR) seeking its views on the action called for in the petition to preserve and protect the Clyde, as well as further information on the work being undertaken to deliver Clyde Mission. The Committee has also requested views on action that could be undertaken to formalise and improve accountability in the management of the River Clyde.

GCR is comprised of the local authorities of East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire. Following the signing of a City Deal between the authorities and the Scottish and UK Governments, the Glasgow and Clyde Valley Cabinet was established in 2015 as a Joint Committee constituted under Section 57 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. The Cabinet is specifically responsible through a Minute of Agreement for decision making in relation to the City Deal, strategic economic development priorities as well as any other activities agreed by the authorities. The action called for is outside of that remit, so GCR is not able to provide a view on that element.

We are able to provide the following information on the Clyde Mission initiative. Clyde Mission was launched by the Scottish Government in 2020 with the intention of: *“making the Clyde an engine of sustainable and inclusive growth for the city, the region, and for Scotland”*. It has been described as the greatest development opportunity in western Europe.

The fourth National Planning Framework highlights Clyde Mission as a ‘national development’, stating it will:

“...revitalise a major waterfront asset which is currently under-utilised. This will support the delivery of our spatial strategy by attracting investment and reuse of brownfield land in west central Scotland where there is a particular need to improve quality of place, generate employment and support disadvantaged communities. It will also support adaptation to climate risks.”

Annex C includes further information about the national spatial strategy and its implementation at a regional and local scale. In respect of Clyde Mission, it states:

“The Clyde Mission will stimulate investment in sites along the Clyde to build a wellbeing economy and achieve a step-change in the quality of the environment for communities.”

The Clyde Mission footprint covers a large and diverse area that includes a mix of urban and rural places, three Innovation Districts and two World Heritage Sites at New Lanark and the Antonine Wall. The evolution of the river over centuries as a source of energy, food and water, a crossing point and a means of transport

(amongst many other functions) has spawned many places of cultural and historic significance, and left an indelible imprint on collective memory and identity.

Today, over 100,000 people live within 500 metres of the 80 mile long river corridor. That same footprint supports over 160,000 jobs across 6,600 businesses including Barclays, JP Morgan and Thales, as well as a resurgent maritime sector encompassing BAE Systems, Clydeport, Malin Group and HMNB Clyde near Helensburgh. The corridor is a hub for the country's creative and cultural sector including the SEC, the Citizen's, Tron and Denny Civic theatres, Beacon Arts Centre, SWG3, Riverside Museum, BBC and STV.

Extensive City Deal funding is transforming the riverside with projects to remediate land, deliver new homes and commercial development, improve public realm and connectivity along and across the river, including three new bridges which will reconnect communities and create new corridors of job opportunities.

In August 2023 the Scottish Government transferred lead responsibility for Clyde Mission to GCR and Argyll and Bute Council, with £25 million capital funding for a Heat Decarbonisation Fund and £1.5 million revenue funding for a dedicated team and to develop a Strategic Masterplan.

The Strategic Masterplan will explore and develop how best to deliver this mission across strategic themes, signature locations and priority actions. The draft aims of preparing a Strategic Masterplan are to:

- Engage and activate stakeholders to ensure Clyde Mission is responsive and secures long term commitment to its delivery.
- Ensure Clyde Mission is coherent and impactful by reviewing its themes and priorities and setting out a clear and compelling place-based strategy that resonates.
- Develop a phased programme for delivery that is tangible, ambitious, viable and primed to secure investment from multiple sources.

A Strategic Outline (Business) Case will be produced to accompany the Strategic Masterplan to strengthen evidence based decision making and underpin long term investment. Procurement is set to get underway in April and work on the Strategic Masterplan is expected to commence in the summer.

Governance of Clyde Mission has been incorporated into existing regional structures for GCR, i.e. with reports being submitted to the Chief Executives' Group, Regional Economic Partnership and Cabinet as required. Officers from Argyll and Bute will advise and co-ordinate any reporting/approval requirements in relation to Argyll and Bute Council, with support from GCR Place as necessary.

Consistent with the approach for other strategic spatial delivery priorities, emerging thinking is to establish a Clyde Mission Partnership Board in due course. The role, remit and membership of the Board will evolve in parallel with development of the Strategic Masterplan.

I trust the above is of assistance to the Committee.

Petitioners written submission, 15 October 2025

PE2131/D: Grant Scottish rivers, including the River Clyde, the legal right to personhood

We welcome the considered response to our petition from Glasgow City Region (GCR) on the action called for in the petition to preserve and protect the Clyde.

We share GCR and Clyde Mission's overarching ambitions for the Clyde Region and spatial strategy, with their aim to "*stimulate investment in sites along the Clyde to build a wellbeing economy and achieve a step-change in the quality of the environment for communities.*"

We can also see the improvements and proposed plans for the Clyde via City Deal coming into fruition in many ways which include new bridge connections, development opportunities and decarbonisation plans. We are also encouraged to see a Strategic Masterplan moving forward in due course and appreciate the impact this might have.

The response from GCR notes that 'to preserve and protect the Clyde' is not within its remit. Our question in return to the Committee and Parliament is, therefore, whose responsibility is it to preserve and protect the Clyde?

GCR also notes that the Glasgow and Clyde Valley Cabinet (which oversees City Deal) was established in 2015 as a Joint Committee. They are responsible for 'strategic economic development priorities'. Again, our question to the Committee is, why do these priorities not encompass the preservation and protection of the Clyde?

Our research indicates that socio-economic interests and environmental concerns do not have to sit in opposition with one another.

Indeed, harnessing natural capital can drive positive social, economic and environmental change in the interest of citizens and ecosystems. Examples include the work undertaken in the Ruhr Valley in Germany where authorities have leveraged the area's natural capital to transform it from a heavy industrial heartland into a green, sustainable region. This transition of structural change has converted the area into a revitalised network of green spaces, parks, and waterways that provide ecological, social, and economic benefits which have boosted sustainable tourism, new development, the green economy and renaturation projects.

Given the vast amounts of the River Clyde and associated land in the control of private interests and demands, we are not persuaded that there are sufficient mechanisms in place to effectively steward the ecological health, environmental opportunities and heritage of the River Clyde. We therefore ask the Petitions Committee to consider where – and how – the rights and health of the River Clyde might be balanced against other private rights and interests.

GCR note in their response that there are emerging plans to establish a Clyde Mission Partnership Board. They also note that the role, remit and membership of

the Board will evolve in parallel with development of the forthcoming Strategic Masterplan. We perceive there to be an opportunity to embed the interests of the river itself within this and for these to be balanced with wider representation on the Board.

At present we are not convinced that our civic representatives have sufficient powers to persuade major actors and private stakeholders with large areas of control along the Clyde to meet necessary social and ecological requirements. In short, at present, despite the convincing plans and policy in place, our legal and civic representatives lack ‘teeth’ in relation to the stewardship and governance of the Clyde and its health.

To close, the right to legal personhood and the rights of natural assets within governance and the law are not abstract notions. Examples of organisations holding the right of personhood include major corporations such as Peel Holdings, Glasgow City Council, our own employers and the Scottish Government itself. Nature rights and guardianship for rivers also hold robust legal precedent. Examples in other countries include England (River Ouse), Columbia (River Atrato) and Netherlands (River Meuse).

In her 2025 book ‘A Barrister for the Earth’, lawyer Monica Feria-Tinta notes that rivers do have rights. It’s whether we choose to recognise them or not. It is how we appoint representatives to protect natural resources that determines the ongoing health of these vital resources to both humans and wider ecosystems.

River Guardians from Columbia, visiting Glasgow via the University of Glasgow and the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF) in June 2025, on hearing how much of our river is in private control, stated that ‘the River Clyde is in jail’.

With this in mind, we ask the Petitions Committee and the Scottish Parliament to help ensure robust representation of the River Clyde itself on the forthcoming Clyde Mission Partnership Board, or any alternative governance mechanism that might be considered in its place.

Let the Clyde flourish!