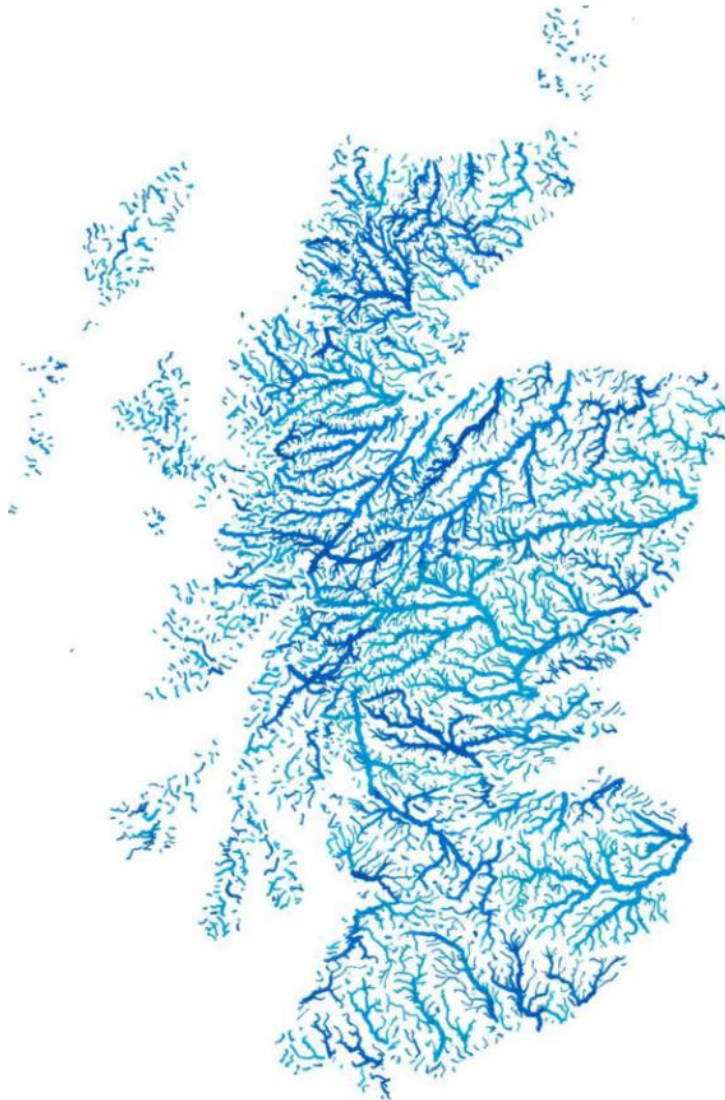


Preparing for the Launch of a Scottish Rivers Fund Final Report and Evaluation

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1. Project outline

The project outline as described in the application is as follows:

This project builds on two earlier FIRNS projects and aims to bring a Scottish Rivers Fund (previously called the River Catchment Restoration Fund) to market. The earlier FIRNS projects laid the way for the Fund's governance mechanism and identified delivery ready river restoration projects as the initial market offer to potential Fund contributors. The Fund will use the example of the Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund (SMEEF) to attract corporate contributions to fund the delivery of place-based projects. This FIRNS project will focus on the strategic and focused marketing to potential corporate contributors with the offer to purchase nature-related and social outcomes delivered through place-based river catchment restoration projects. Fund governance and procedures for application, awards and monitoring will be established and tested with three pilot projects. Fisheries Management Scotland will work closely with NatureScot, SEPA, and Scottish Government to ensure alignment with emergent and ongoing policy. The legacy is to achieve transformative catchment scale restoration action and heightened recognition of the importance of rivers supported by an innovative nature market mechanism.

The project started on the 9th June 2025 and concluded on the 31st of March 2026.

The Project Team comprised two members of Fisheries Management Scotland staff and three members of SMEEF staff. In total this amounted to 2.5 full time equivalents. Fisheries Management Scotland staff were the Director of Finance as Project Manager and a full time Nature finance Manager recruited specifically to the project. The SMEEF staff were contracted to the project by adding additional hours to their part-time SMEEF contracts with NatureScot. They were the SMEEF Partnerships Manager, Grants Manager and Finance Officer. All staff were in place by mid-August.

The project plan is included at Annex 1.

A list of all project deliverables is included at Annex 2. The key deliverables will be available on Fisheries Management Scotland's website¹ in due course.

¹ <https://fms.scot/>

2. Project Activities

The following section provides commentaries on the project's planned activities as described in the project plan with an evaluation of their achievements and learning points. The original project plan is included in Annex 1

2.1 - Steering Group

Establish a Steering Group to support the delivery of the project, strengthen accountability, and ensure feedback mechanism is in place.	
Commentary	A Steering Group was established at the start of the project, comprising the FIRNS project team and representation from the key project partners (Fisheries Management Scotland, NatureScot, SEPA, Crown Estate Scotland, and the Marine Directorate of the Scottish Government). In total, 5 meetings were held, which allowed for project implementation oversight, steering, and support with critical decision making (e.g., Fund hosting decision and core funding). Minutes from each meeting and action points were recorded and circulated in a timely manner among the Steering Group members.
Learning points	The Steering Group helped to create a sense of shared responsibility for the initiative, with all represented stakeholders invested in supporting critical decision making, including in relation to Fund hosting, core funding, and successful delivery of some project activities (e.g., corporate engagement events).
Deliverables	1. FIRNS Steering Group Terms of Reference

2.2 - Corporate engagement and marketing

Carry out systematic company approaches to test the value proposition, provide feedback to the Fund structure and criteria, gauge interest, and secure preliminary financial commitments.	
Commentary	Over the course of the project, we have approached 65 businesses directly and had meaningful engagement with 85 business representatives from 42 businesses. Engagement with the most promising businesses is ongoing. The records are maintained in various internal working documents including • engagement tracker • company profiles • meeting notes

	We have identified pockets of interest from the renewables sector and secured a commitment from an offshore wind developer for up to £20,000. A full account of the business engagement activities including the in-person and online events, one-to-one face-to-face and online meetings are included in the deliverable reports listed below.
Learning points	Marketing is a specialist area, and we have found it challenging to secure solid commitments. We are keen to enlist external specialist help to refine our approach. Our marketing activity has been conducted in parallel to the other activities of this FIRNS project and has arguably been somewhat diluted as a result. We are still trying to identify the vital "hook" into a business sector that compels business/es in that sector to invest.
Deliverables	1. Marketing and Business Engagement Report 2. Events and workshops summary report

2.3 - Hosting

Relevant hosting arrangements for the Fund are defined, including an assessment of the hosting implications in terms of resources, policies, and processes to inform the other project activities, and a resultant hosting decision.	
Commentary	An assessment of various hosting scenarios and decision making in this respect was prioritised during the first phase of the project, with a critical role played by NatureScot's SMEEF team in facilitating the process. A decision was reached in November 2025 – future hosting within NatureScot was collectively agreed as the desirable scenario. The decision was supported by FMS Board and formally endorsed by NatureScot's Senior Leadership team and submitted for information to NatureScot's Board. This decision was critical to unlock other project activities.
Learning points	The hosting decision process proved more resource intensive than initially anticipated, and the time taken to reach a conclusion had a knock-on effect on activities dependent on it – particularly the development of the Fund's policies, templates, and processes, and the external communications strategy. In hindsight, earlier groundwork in previous FIRNS phases (with clearer parameters around decision-making requirements) would have reduced the burden on the project team and helped avoid delays downstream.
Deliverables	1. Partnership Agreement (DRAFT unsigned)

2.4 - Governance

Building on the SMEEF experience, design and establish the governance structure of the Fund (key roles in governance). Ensure inclusion of FMS and other organisations as relevant (NatureScot, SEPA, Marine Directorate, Environmental / Community NGO).	
Commentary	The project team jointly agreed that the Scottish Rivers Fund should mirror the governance structure and policies of SMEEF, which was considered a robust and relevant reference model for the Fund. The governance structure comprises three bodies, each performing distinct functions. The Steering Group provides strategic oversight of the Fund, with representation from FMS, NatureScot, Crown Estate Scotland, SEPA, and the Marine Directorate of the Scottish Government. The Ethical Contributions Board is responsible for conducting due diligence on potential contributors, and the Grants Panel for assessing grant applications. The governance structure was designed but not yet established. The decision was taken to defer establishment until the Fund becomes operational – specifically, until a dedicated Scottish Rivers Fund team is in place and the underlying processes and documentation needed to support its functioning have been finalised.
Learning points	Embedding the SMEEF team within the project team was essential to understanding how the 'sister initiative' operates in practice, and to designing a governance structure that draws on the SMEEF model while being adapted to the specific context of freshwater and rivers funding. Although the governance structure was not established during the project period, the groundwork is complete and it is ready to be put in place. The recommendation is to initiate establishment once a Scottish Rivers Fund team is in post within NatureScot and confirmation of core funding has been secured to ensure continuity in the short term.
Deliverables	1. SRF Steering Group Terms of Reference 2. SRF Risk Management Policy

2.5 - Operating model (incl. processes and documentation)

Building on SMEEF, design the operating model of the Fund, including preparatory costs, cost recovery, multi-year funding, staged payments that support the type of projects and organisations that are likely to apply, due diligence and ethical contribution process, funding contracts covering risks, liabilities, and commitments, finance acceptability criteria in relation to river catchment and freshwater environment.	
Commentary	The project team's work on the Fund's operating model centred on its two key functions: fundraising and grant giving – the latter is discussed in the following table. In relation to fundraising, all relevant procedures, templates, and policies have been developed drawing on the SMEEF model, with adaptation to reflect the distinct mission of the Fund. These will provide the foundation for the Steering Group and Ethical Contributions Board to exercise their functions effectively once established.
Learning points	As noted above, embedding the SMEEF team within the project team was essential to understanding how the sister initiative operates in practice, and to developing processes and documentation that draw on the SMEEF model while being tailored to the specific context of freshwater and rivers funding.
Deliverables	1. SRF Ethical Contributions Board Terms of Reference 2. SRF Contribution Acceptance Policy 3. SRF Contribution acceptance procedure 4. SRF Due diligence checklist 5. SRF Contributors handbook and agreement 6. SRF Contributors handbook (only contributor's undertaking) 7. SRF Contribution agreement template

2.6 - Grant making and management

Design a fit for purpose process for grant making, including: establishing funding criteria and eligibility, all forms and templates, roles of assessors and approval panel to evaluate project applications, grant set up process, claims & payments process.	
Commentary	The project team's work on the Fund's operating model centred on its two key functions: fundraising and grant giving – the former is discussed in the table above. In relation to grant giving, all relevant processes, procedures, and templates have been developed to support this function, including a two-stage application process and associated forms, funding criteria, a grant offer letter, reporting templates, applicant due diligence process and forms. These will provide the foundation for the Steering Group and Grants Panel to exercise their functions effectively once established. It should be noted that when the Fund is ready to launch its first funding round, applications are expected to be received through NatureScot's new grant management system. The application forms, currently in Word format, will therefore need to be migrated to that system at that stage.
Learning points	As noted above, embedding the SMEEF team within the project team was essential to understanding how the sister initiative operates in practice, and to developing processes and documentation that draw on the SMEEF model while being tailored to the specific context of freshwater and rivers funding.
Deliverables	1. SRF Expression of Interest Form 2. SRF Full Application Form 3. SRF Project Budget Template 4. SRF Grant Offer Template 5. SRF Project Monitoring Report 6. SRF End of Project Report 7. SRF Assessment Form 8. SRF Applicant Due Diligence - Policy & Procedures 9. SRF Applicant Due Diligence - Review Form 10. SRF Grants Panel Terms of Reference

2.7 - Project dashboard

Explore the integration of the FMS / Esri developed project pipeline portfolio within or alongside NatureScot in possible combination with the NatureScot landscape scale dataset visualisation, or other Fund hosting system, incorporating Esri support.	
Commentary	We looked carefully at how we might integrate the Esri-based portfolio developed under the previous FIRNS project with NatureScot's Grants Management System (Flexigrant) and have concluded there is not a good fit between the two systems. When we first considered the possibility of integrating the two systems in this way, we were not sure whether NatureScot would be the hosting organisation and so had our options open for integrating the Esri system with the grant management process. The grant management documentation we have prepared that includes various application templates etc. are fully transposable into a format for integrating with Flexigrant. Additionally, the Scottish Rivers Fund is now featured in NatureScot's Online Nature Investment Prospectus. Fisheries Management Scotland will continue to maintain and update the project portfolio as a useful resource for identifying potential projects across Scotland's River catchments that will have potential applications for both the Nature Investment Prospectus and the Scottish Rivers Fund. A dedicated Scottish Rivers Fund website supported by a distinctive brand identity is now live. This has been developed in conjunction with NatureScot's web team to ensure compliance with access and security requirements. The website will be an ideal platform to convey project progress and report aggregated impacts against the Fund's high level outcome indicators.
Learning points	It is important to think through the benefit of creating a digital solution before committing. In this case, pursuing this option with NatureScot could easily have replicated the intended benefit being provided by the Nature Investment prospectus. However, if the fund was being hosted by FMS, this option might have been well worth taking on board.
Deliverables	none

2.8 - Monitoring and reporting

Develop fit for purpose monitoring and reporting process and templates, building on monitoring framework developed by FMS (FIRNS2), with feedback from NatureScot and SEPA freshwater teams, ensuring that monitoring requirements are integrated into projects application and funding. Learn from the marketing and corporate engagement activities to refine reporting system.	
Commentary	Building on work undertaken during the FIRNS2 project, the project team produced an externally facing monitoring guide for project applicants and a monitoring plan template to complement the grant application documentation. Internal and external discussions were also held (including with the Nature Restoration Fund team) on how to ensure robust and consistent monitoring across the future project portfolio, particularly during the post-project delivery period. As reflected in the monitoring guide (see deliverables below), the current design of the Fund envisages that a proportion of capital raised is earmarked for a dedicated monitoring pot, to fund either in-house or externally supported post-project monitoring. This is considered essential to maintaining high quality monitoring and reporting standards, although this arrangement should be further discussed and verified as the corporate engagement and fundraising advances. Further recommendations relating to monitoring were gathered through the project piloting activity, described below.
Learning points	The monitoring framework developed during FIRNS2 proved instrumental in shaping the monitoring function of the Fund. Some additional refinement to the monitoring guide, template and process is anticipated in the coming months, once the governance structure has been established, to ensure that recommendations gathered through the piloting activity are properly taken into consideration. This includes further work to develop monitoring of long-term social outcomes, which have so far received less emphasis than ecological outcomes.
Deliverables	1. SRF Monitoring plan template 2. SRF Project monitoring guide

2.9 - Workshops

Deliver some workshops (up to four) with the purpose of gauging interest from corporates, testing the value proposition, seeking feedback on certain dimensions of the Fund structure/operation, and to support the piloting of the projects.	
Commentary	The project team delivered two corporate engagement events: an in-person workshop in December 2025 and a webinar in March 2026. The two events were distinct in their objectives and target audiences. The in-person event was aimed at businesses already familiar with the Fund (primarily from the energy sector) with the dual purpose of reinforcing relationships and gathering feedback to inform the final stages of the Fund's development. The insights gathered are reflected in the report (see the list of deliverables), along with recommendations for future consideration. The webinar targeted the whisky and food and drink sectors, focusing in particular on companies that had not previously been engaged. It therefore served primarily as an awareness-raising exercise and an opportunity to identify contacts for further engagement. The webinar was not open to the public; its promotion was supported by the Scotch Whisky Association and the Food & Drink Federation. Both events were organised with the close involvement of key Fund partners (particularly FMS, some of its members, and NatureScot) and helped reinforce the relationship with the SMEEF team, presenting the two funds as part of a joined-up 'source to sea' approach to private investment in nature restoration.
Learning points	Both events proved valuable in deepening relationships, gathering feedback, and generating additional business leads – they proved an effective means of engaging prospective contributors. Due to their resource-intensive nature, the experience suggests that in-person events are best reserved for situations where there is already sufficient traction and a degree of established interest. A webinar or lighter-touch engagement may be more appropriate at earlier stages. The relationship with trade bodies evolved significantly over the course of the project. Initially considered as a potential source of funding, they came to be recognised instead as critical gatekeepers and valued partners whose role in facilitating access to their sector-specific membership bases is central to the Fund's corporate engagement strategy. A further learning relates to the value of a targeted, sector-specific approach to events, rather than a broad, all-encompassing one. Focusing on distinct sectors allows messaging and conversations to be tailored accordingly. The approach is replicable across other sectors.
Deliverables	2. Events and workshops summary report

2.10 - Piloting

Select three projects to be piloted through the development, application and approval process, as well as the compliance with the monitoring framework (baselining and monitoring protocol). Gather insights and identify corrective actions for the fund governance and operating model. Ensure adequate incentive mechanism for the organisations responsible for the pilot project.	
Commentary	Between January and March 2026, the project team conducted a piloting activity using concrete project examples to test the validity and robustness of the Fund's application process and associated monitoring requirements – core elements of the Fund's operating model. Project examples were identified by engaging FMS members. Five organisations volunteered to participate: Ayrshire Rivers Trust, Clyde River Foundation, Esk Rivers & Fisheries Trust, Galloway Fisheries Trust, and River Dee Trust. The collaboration took the form of an initial invitation, an introductory online workshop, independent work completed by each organisation, and a closing online workshop for discussion and knowledge sharing. To support the activity, the project team developed a suite of supporting documents (drawing on outputs from previously described workstreams) as well as a structured feedback form. Two incentive mechanisms were put in place to encourage participation. First, organisations were offered the opportunity to directly influence the Fund's configuration and operating model at a critical stage of its development. Second, volunteering time was reimbursed at an agreed rate of £20 per hour, recognising the real resource commitment involved in contributing to this activity. The piloting exercise generated valuable insights and lessons to inform the final development stages before the Fund becomes operational, as reflected in the associated deliverable. The resulting recommendations and next steps are expected to be considered by the Fund's governance structure once established.
Learning points	There was strong interest among participating FMS members in the Fund, which was consistently seen as a critical additional source of funding for the freshwater environment. The team encountered a genuine willingness to collaborate and share constructive feedback across many areas – reflected in the level of engagement that allowed five rather than three organisations to be involved. The monitoring approach was identified as the area requiring the most refinement before the first funding round can be launched.
Deliverables	1. Project piloting summary report

2.11 - Communications

Development and delivery of a communications plan (pre- and post-launch) to raise the profile of the Fund. Also to incorporate branding and development of promotional/marketing materials and website content/design as needed.	
Commentary	This activity was added during the project as an agreed essential component, recognising that a credible, professional brand and web presence would be necessary to support corporate engagement and prepare the Fund for its public launch. The activity centred on developing a brand and web identity for the Fund, delivered with the support of two companies identified through competitive tender (JONO Design and Farsight Digital Solutions). In parallel, a set of branded materials was developed to support the corporate engagement workstream, including an investment prospectus and a PowerPoint pitch deck, both designed to be adapted and tailored to specific audiences. This work has laid the foundation for the communications and marketing function that will be built into the Scottish Rivers Fund team, and ensures the Fund can present itself consistently and professionally from the outset.
Learning points	Establishing a brand identity as part of this project has been beneficial, as it has allowed us to already conduct part of the corporate engagement using the Fund's own identity, conveying professionalism and confidence, rather than relying on interim materials. The process also highlighted the importance of aligning the Fund's visual identity and messaging with those of SMEEF and broader partners' branding – both to affirm the 'source to sea' narrative and to situate the Fund credibly within an established institutional landscape. Looking ahead, a detailed communications plan for the post-launch phase remains to be developed, building on recommendations from this activity as captured in the report referenced below. This should be an early priority for the incoming Scottish Rivers Fund team, alongside ongoing stakeholder engagement and fundraising.
Deliverables	1. SRF event slide deck 2. SRF webinar presentation 3. Brand and online presence summary report 4. SRF Brand guide 5. SRF logos 6. SRF Investment Prospectus 7. SRF General slide deck for pitching 8. Website: www.riversfund.scot

3. Assessment of achievement FIRNS standard outcomes

Our broad assessment of the project against each of FIRNS standard outcomes is presented in tabular form as follows:

Outcome assessment; scoring 1=fully, 2=partially, 3=marginally		
Outcomes	Score	Commentary
<i>Create reliable ways to invest in Scotland's nature and biodiversity, preferably using ideas from Scotland's Natural Capital Market Framework and Biodiversity Strategy and Delivery Plan.</i>	1	The Fund and its underlying processes have been designed as a vehicle that bridges companies' interest in nature-positive investment with Scotland's strategic policy priorities, as reflected in the Natural Capital Market Framework, the Biodiversity Strategy and Delivery Plan, and other relevant strategies. This alignment has been reflected consistently across our communication and marketing materials, for instance the Fund's prospectus, pitch deck, and website.
<i>Engage meaningfully with communities in project design and delivery, fostering inclusion, and develop effective mechanisms to share benefits where appropriate, thereby supporting a just transition.</i>	2	Engagement with community organisations through projects delivered through the Fund will follow the "Community Engagement and Benefits Realisation Strategy" delivered in FIRNS 2 as a prerequisite for project funding. The level of engagement undertaken and realisation of any benefits will depend on the scale and type of projects supported. Community engagement is one of the high-level impact indicators, and has been captured in critical templates (including the application forms and monitoring plan). Some of the projects identified in the portfolio include a focus specifically on awareness raising and education including scope for the use of volunteers and citizen science.
<i>Capture and share learning and best practice to enhance and scale high-integrity natural capital markets.</i>	1	Lessons learned are included in section 2 of this report. We have also shared widely including through the FIRNS Community of Practice events facilitated by Social Investment Scotland. The governance and operational elements of the Fund have been developed using lessons learned from others and have been woven into the operational and governance structure.

4. Assessment of achievement of FIRNS Milestones

Our broad assessment of the project against each of FIRNS standard Milestones is presented in tabular form as follows;

Outcome assessment; scoring 1=fully, 2=partially, 3=marginally		
Milestones	Score	Commentary
Number of hectares identified for potential restoration through private investment	2	The project portfolio developed under the previous FIRNS project identified 1,200 hectares from among the 40 projects listed. We would anticipate that when the fund is open for applications and a wider cohort of project developers are able to apply to the Fund, that the aggregate area would be very much higher than that.
Type of ecosystem services identified for development and estimated revenue or cost savings generated (£)	3	The Scottish Rivers Fund is not geared to delivering costed benefits from ecosystem service provision, but rather to delivering measurable improvements to river biodiversity and function.
Type of codes/standards used or developed	3	The Scottish Rivers Fund has a flexible approach to metrics included in the monitoring framework that encourages the use of whichever good and recognised monitoring practice is most appropriate for the intervention that is being delivered by a project. This means that there is no standard metric or code being used. However, the intention is that as national codes such as the Ecosystem Restoration Code and Scottish Biodiversity metric are developed, the Fund will consider adopting these as a common recognised standard.
Volume of potential finance to be mobilised (£)	1	Our initial "target" for supporting projects in the first year of opening is for 10 projects ranging in value from £25,000 -£250,000. The project portfolio developed in the earlier FIRNS project comprised projects totalling £10.5 Million.
Estimated cost to deliver identified natural capital interventions (£)	3	As the Fund is designed to offer opportunity to deliver across all of Scotland's river catchments, and we know that the extent of enhancements that would improve the ecological health of our rivers is almost limitless, the cost is too.

Outcome assessment; scoring 1=fully, 2=partially, 3=marginally		
Milestones	Score	Commentary
Development of a viable business model	2	The business model is similar to the tried and tested model of SMEEF, although the Scottish Rivers Fund has still to find the vital "hook" to confidently attract business.
Evidence that a suitable governance/legal structure has been developed which will deliver future nature restoration	1	As adopted from SMEEF and benefitting from SMEEF's track record that has so far worked well to date.
Number of buyers or investors engaged with	1	Over the course of this project, we have approached 65 businesses directly and had meaningful engagement with 85 business representatives from 42 businesses. Engagement with the most promising businesses is ongoing.
Number of agreements signed or being explored with buyers or investors	3	No agreements with businesses have been signed during the project period. However, discussions with some businesses are on-going. As of the end of the project, a company expressed interest in a seed funding contribution.
Replicability or potential to scale	1	The nation-wide scale of the fund is built in from the start offering opportunity to all Scotland's river catchments.
Bundling and/or stacking capability	3	The possibility for bundling and/or stacking has not been specifically built into the Fund. We have not ruled out a project developer wanting to use the Fund in that way by combining funding/investment sources to making a proposition deliverable.
Aggregation capability	1	A key aim of the Fund is to support delivery of a wide range of projects at scale across Scotland. This will create efficiency for the contributors and multiply the effectiveness of their contributions when aggregated. Equally, the aggregated outcomes from all projects will produce a much greater effect than a number of small individual projects reported on separately.

Outcome assessment; scoring 1=fully, 2=partially, 3=marginally		
Milestones	Score	Commentary
Types of community benefits proposed	2	The Fund does not engage directly with the projects delivered by the Fund. Community engagement is a prerequisite of project funding and follows the "Community Engagement and Benefit Realisation Strategy" developed in the earlier FIRNS project. Overall project impact reports include community engagement and benefits to people. See the Strategy ² - examples are provided in the strategy.
Community engagement with and representation on the project governance	3	The full constitution of the Fund's Steering Group has not been determined and will be finalised once we have confirmed NatureScot staff in post. We intend to include community representation on the Fund's Steering Group but not yet identified.
Types of mechanisms used to engage with local communities	2	Examples are listed in the Community Engagement and Benefit Realisation Strategy
Number of community organisations engaged with	3	None so far as this will happen once the Fund starts supporting projects. Community engagement is a prescribed component of project development and delivery proportionate to the nature of each project.
Which communities were engaged in project design and implementation	2	In the early days of setting up the Fund, members of Fisheries Management Scotland (Rivers and Fisheries Trusts) were the main community focus. They also participated in the pilot testing activity.
Number of new jobs created or identified by projects	3	All projects supported by the Fund will require to report on people benefits. We have not made a prior assessment. Jobs created is a metric used in the community benefit high-level outcome impact reporting. With regards to the project itself, its delivery supported the creation of one full-time post within FMS and the extension of part-time contracts for three members of the SMEEF team.

² <https://fms.scot/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/250425-DLVRBL-Cmnty-Engmnt-and-Bnfts-Rlstrn-Strat-FINAL1.pdf>

Outcome assessment; scoring 1=fully, 2=partially, 3=marginally		
Milestones	Score	Commentary
Number of potential jobs identified for future nature restoration	3	All projects supported by the Fund will require to report on people benefits. We have not made a prior assessment.

5. Challenges encountered and measures taken

5.1 - Fund hosting

It took much longer than anticipated to agree where the Fund should be hosted and to clarify the hosting terms. We were considering three options: NatureScot, Fisheries Management Scotland and a third-party host like Foundation Scotland or Inspiring Scotland. From early on our preference had been for NatureScot to host given the track record already established with SMEEF and the perceived benefit to business of trust and alignment with government policy. The bulk of the project's activities on governance, management, operations, branding and marketing depended on knowing what organisation would be hosting the Fund.

Measures we took to expedite a decision were:

- Holding a series of meetings with NatureScot, Foundation Scotland and Inspiring Scotland to understand the respective pros and cons of each option.
- Conducting an appraisal with Fisheries Management Scotland Board of the hosting options using a SWOT approach
- Assisting NatureScot with the preparation of a paper for NatureScot's Senior Leadership Team to consider
- Preparing a partnership agreement with NatureScot
- Involving senior members of NatureScot in promotional business-facing events

5.2 - Securing contributions

As reported elsewhere it has been challenging to secure corporate contributions. This has been the most crucial aspect to succeed in this project. We have learnt much about how to go about engaging with business. We have undertaken some initial training, adopted recommended approaches and methods for records keeping and had follow up training and sharing sessions. As mentioned earlier, our capacity to sustain the necessary focus on follow-up and get to the financial decision-making function in business has been diluted by having to deliver a wide range of project actions.

Measures we have taken are to:

- Approach the project partners to provide a share towards supporting the core function required within NatureScot to maintain the marketing effort and provide a NatureScot "front" representing the Scottish Rivers Fund.
- Develop a capacity building plan of work to support productive engagement with business through a further submission for FIRNS funding.
- Approach our business contacts to consider providing core funding to maintain the minimum cohort of staff needed to drive the Fund forwards beyond the end of this project. We have secured a commitment of up to £20,000.

5.3 - Dispersed part-time project team

We recruited three SMEEF staff into the project team – by adding days to their part-time contracts with NatureScot. Two staff members provide two days each and one, one day. FMS had two staff, one full time and one part-time. Staff were geographically dispersed across Scotland – though three were based in Edinburgh. The project activities were split across the team and with dependencies between the activities it was important to maintain good coordination especially as staff had assigned certain days to the Project set apart from their other work. This presented a potential challenge to working smoothly and effectively to deliver a time-bound ambitious project.

To ensure good coordination and communication we therefore implemented the following measures:

- Face to face kick off and interim review meetings
- Regular weekly online meetings on a set day and time each week
- Agreed activity plan with agreed leads and support for each activity – maintained online for review and updating as required.
- Online shared folders and a dedicated Teams channel

6. Additional and unintended benefits

The delivery of the project has been collaborative and outward-looking by design, thanks to the close involvement of the SMEEF team, the regular engagement with the Steering Group, and the many opportunities to engage with businesses, practitioners, and academics working on nature finance, nature markets, and mechanisms similar or adjacent to the Fund.

This social capital has not only been beneficial for the Fund's development, providing solid foundations for future work, but has also laid the groundwork for exploring other ideas and opportunities. For instance, building on the work undertaken through this project, FMS has formed a partnership with the Forth Rivers Trust and the University of Edinburgh and is collaborating with the Scottish Government, SEPA, Scottish Enterprise, and Scottish Water, among other stakeholders, on a separate yet related initiative focused on nature markets for water outcomes. In the future, we expect synergies and cross-learning between these two initiatives.

7. External events

We have attended a number of key external events to inform and engage in wider aspects of nature markets development and gain useful intelligence. Key events we have attended and/or presented at are:

- Presented to the CIEEM "Source to Sea" conference.
- Attended the UK Ecosystems Knowledge Network Nature Finance conference.
- Attended "Investing in Scotland's Infrastructure, delivering for people, nature and communities" about the investment in biodiversity coming forwards from Openspace, Scottish Power, SSE and Scottish Water by 2030.
- Presented on the Scottish Rivers Fund at the Scottish Forum on Natural Capital conference "Natural Capital Finance into Action".
- Attended the Edie-26 conference in London over two days that showcased national and international corporate approaches to ESG investments and reporting.

We have also participated in a number of FIRNS Community of Practice events led by Social Investment Scotland that have been in support of developing business contacts and investment: "Connecting Nature Programmes, Investors & Supporters" and "making the deal". Late in the project we had a one-day marketing strategy workshop with a private marketing consultant (Volo consultancy) provided by Social Investment Scotland. These have all been useful and we intend to follow up with Volo with a further workshop beyond this FIRNS project period.

8. Further work planned and next steps

We are hopeful that our bid submitted for a further FIRNS bid to progress the Fund to a full launch in 2026 is successful.

The focus of that bid covers the transitional arrangements to NatureScot maintaining the momentum built by Fisheries Management Scotland to support the development of necessary capacity within NatureScot to finalise internal governance and operational processes and consolidate new and emergent corporate relationships. A key element of the transition is to continue the ongoing corporate engagement work led by Fisheries Management Scotland to attract sustained corporate contributions to the Fund leading to a full launch of the Fund during 2026. The project would be supported by a marketing consultant over a six-month period, and the setting up of an advisory grouping of accounting, finance and legal experts.

Irrespective of whether the bid is successful, we would seek funding to support carrying through with the actions described in the bid, building on the momentum already achieved over the past two and half years' work.

9. Maintenance plans

The work undertaken through this project is not being discontinued. Subject to a successful application, delivery of the Scottish Rivers Fund will continue with FIRNS support for a further financial year, as described in Section 8.

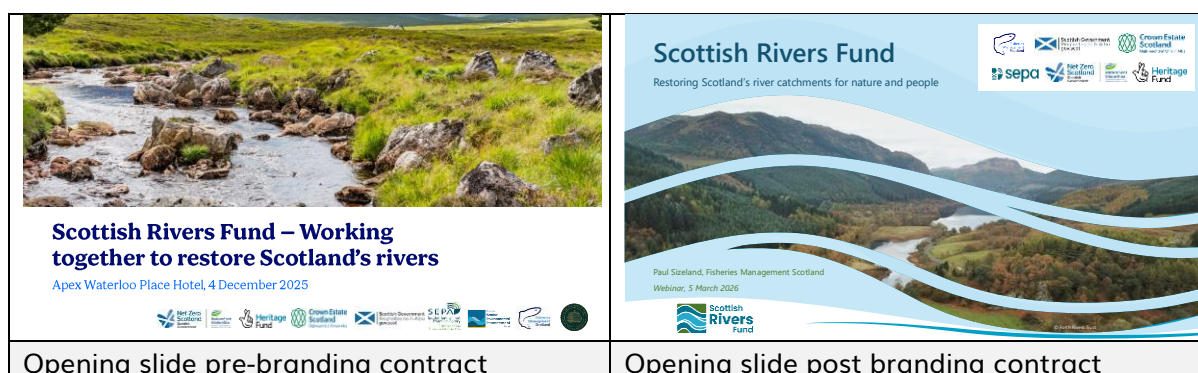
Going forward, the focus will be on the element most critical to the Fund's long-term sustainability and self-sufficiency: marketing and corporate engagement. Building on the marketing and corporate engagement strategy developed through this project, efforts will concentrate on strengthening and establishing new relationships with businesses and converting interest into confirmed contributions that will allow the Fund to operate.

FMS is aware of the five-year post-project compliance period for monitoring and reporting on outcomes and follow-on activities, and will ensure this is adhered to. Should FIRNS funding be approved, FMS will continue to provide regular progress updates on the Scottish Rivers Fund through a new, yet closely related project.

10. Acknowledgements of FIRNS funding

All documentation produced by the project includes use of the standard set of FIRNS logos and acknowledgement text. This has included in the presentations that we have given across a range of forums. This has included direct contact with the First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary, government ministers and Scottish Government and agency colleagues as well as a wide range of local, national and international stakeholders. Examples of promotional and published materials include;

- Scottish Rivers Fund Prospectus
- Slide Deck
- Banner
- Website
- Presentations prepared for individual events (examples below)



11. Key Reports and deliverables

The Key reports and deliverables delivered by the project are:

1. **Marketing and Business Engagement Report** – Available to the public with some modifications (download from FMS's website).
2. **Events and workshops summary report** – Available to the public with some modifications (download from FMS's website).
3. **Project piloting summary report** – Available to the public with some modifications (download from FMS's website).
4. **Scottish Rivers Fund prospectus** – Available to the public (download from FMS's website and the Fund's website).
5. **Scottish Rivers Fund slide deck** – Not publicly available; can be requested from FMS.
6. **Suite of Fund governance documents (procedures, guidance and templates)** – Not publicly available due to their internal nature; can be requested from FMS.
7. **Logo and brand guide** – These are not available to the public due to their internal nature.
8. **Website** (www.riversfund.scot) – Publicly accessible (screenshot below).



A full list of all project deliverables is included at Annex 2

Annex 1 Project Plan

Main project activities	Description	Responsibilities		Timeline										
		Lead Role	Support Role	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	
1 - Steering Group	Establish a Steering Group to support the delivery of the project, strengthen accountability, and ensure feedback mechanism is in place.	FMS (Paul/Federica)	SMEEF (Sarah, All)											
2 - Corporate engagement and marketing	Carry out systematic company approaches to test the value proposition, provide feedback to the Fund structure and criteria, gauge interest, and secure preliminary financial commitments.	FMS (Paul/Federica)	SMEEF (Sarah)											
3 - Hosting	Relevant hosting arrangements for the Fund are defined, including an assessment of the hosting implications in terms of resources, policies, and processes to inform the other project activities, and a resultant hosting decision.	FMS (Paul/Federica)	SMEEF (Sarah/David)											
4 - Governance	Building on the SMEEF experience, design and establish the governance structure of the Fund (key roles in governance). Ensure inclusion of FMS and other organisations as relevant (NatureScot, SEPA, Marine Directorate, Environmental / Community NGO).	SMEEF (Sarah/Chris)	FMS (Paul/Federica)											
5 - Operating model (incl. processes and documentation)	Building on SMEEF, design the operating model of the Fund, including preparatory costs, cost recovery, multi-year funding, staged payments that support the type of projects and organisations that are likely to apply, due diligence and ethical contribution process, funding contracts covering risks, liabilities, and commitments, finance acceptability criteria in relation to river catchment and freshwater environment.	SMEEF (Chris/Sarah)	FMS (Paul/Federica)											
6 - Grant making and management	Design a fit for purpose process for grant making, including: establishing funding criteria and eligibility, all forms and templates, roles of assessors and approval panel to evaluate project applications, grant set up process, claims & payments process.	SMEEF (David)	FMS (Paul/Federica)											
7 - Project dashboard	Explore the integration of the FMS / Esri developed project pipeline portfolio within or alongside NatureScot in possible combination with the NatureScot landscape scale dataset visualisation, or other Fund hosting system, incorporating Esri support.	FMS (Paul/Sean)	TBC											
8 - Monitoring and reporting	Develop fit for purpose monitoring and reporting process and templates, building on monitoring framework developed by FMS (FIRNS2), with feedback from NatureScot and SEPA freshwater teams, ensuring that monitoring requirements are integrated into projects application and funding. Learn from the marketing and corporate engagement activities to refine reporting system.	FMS (Paul/Sean)	SMEEF (David)											
9 - Workshops	Deliver some workshops (up to four) with the purpose of gauging interest from corporates, testing the value proposition, seeking feedback on certain dimensions of the Fund structure/operation, and to support the piloting of the projects.	FMS (Paul/Federica)	SMEEF (Sarah)											
10 - Piloting	Select three projects to be piloted through the development, application and approval process, as well as the compliance with the monitoring framework (baselining and monitoring protocol). Gather insights and identify corrective actions for the fund governance and operating model. Ensure adequate incentive mechanism for the organisations responsible for the pilot project.	FMS (Paul/Federica)	SMEEF (David)											
11 - Communications	Development and delivery of a communications plan (pre- and post-launch) to raise the profile of the Fund. Also to incorporate branding and development of promotional/marketing materials and website content/design as needed.	FMS (Paul/Federica)	SMEEF (Sarah)											

Annex 2 Full list of project deliverables

SRF = Scottish Rivers Fund

Project Activity	Outputs	Evidence
Recruit FMS Nature Finance Manager	1 FTE created for 9 months	1. Job Description, Payroll payments as provided with claims
Establish Project Steering Group	Steering Group membership and TORs	1. FIRNS Steering Group Terms of Reference
Explore and confirm host organisation for the Scottish Rivers Fund (SRF)	Partnership agreement with Fund host	1. Partnership Agreement (never signed) NatureScot internal communication with SLT confirmed hosting commitment. Covered off with NatureScot funding Manager during meeting on 16 October.
Develop and agree eligibility and approval criteria and key parameters for the SRF	Document outlining Fund criteria and key parameters	1. Funding criteria 2. Funding process
Deliver the marketing strategy (developed previously by FMS) to carry out systematic company approaches to understand responses to the offer, provide feedback to the Fund structure and criteria, and secure contribution commitments. Marketing strategy to include key sectors and individual companies to target (~100), sector and company specific ESG funding interests, marketing messages, compatibility with SRF outcomes, and negotiation guidelines	Contributor engagement plan (and materials as required)	1. Corporate Partnerships Masterclass slide deck Various internal working documents including engagement tracker company profiles meeting notes Materials include (REFERENCED BELOW): early (pre-branding) presentation slides post branding presentation slides prospectus 2. Fisheries Management Scotland Commercial Growth Strategy Support (Volo Consultancy)
	Report on marketing activities (including feedback on what corporate contributors are looking for to meet regulatory reporting requirements)	1. Marketing and Business Engagement Report Additional report below Events and workshops summary report
Establish Fund Governing Panel	Governing Panel	1. SRF Steering Group ToR 2. SRF Risk Management Policy
Develop funding business model, finance acceptability criteria and model funding contracts (inc. review of SMEEF due diligence and ethical contributions processes, and contract templates)	Funding business model, inc. acceptability criteria and due diligence processes	1. SRF Ethical Contributions Board ToR 2. SRF Contribution Acceptance Policy 3. SRF Contribution acceptance procedure 4. SRF Due diligence checklist
	Contributor contract templates	1. SRF Contributors handbook and agreement 2. SRF Contributors handbook (only contributor's undertaking) 3. SRF Contribution agreement template
Conduct workshops for potential contributors to inform the operation of the Fund, and establish a Contributor Forum	Contributor workshops (up to four)	1. Events and workshops summary report 2. Annex 4 - SRF event slide deck 3. Annex 4 - SRF webinar presentation
	Contributor Forum established	
Maintain the online project portfolio and explore integration with Fund host systems and NatureScot landscape scale dataset	Agreed approach to SRF online presence	1. Brand and online presence summary report 2. SRF Brand guide 3. SRF logos
Establish Approvals Panel and application, assessment and award processes	Approvals Panel	1. SRF Grants Panel ToR
	Application, assessment and award processes and documents	1. SRF Expression of Interest Form 2. SRF Full Application Form 3. SRF Project Budget Template 4. SRF Grant Offer Template 5. SRF Project Monitoring Report 6. SRF End of Project Report 7. SRF Assessment Form 8. SRF Applicant Due Diligence - Policy & Procedures 9. SRF Applicant Due Diligence - Review Form
Design the Fund's impact monitoring and reporting process (building on FIRNS R2 monitoring framework)	Impact monitoring and reporting process and templates	1. SRF Monitoring plan template 2. SRF Project monitoring guide
Pilot three projects through the SRF development, application and approval process (including baselining and community engagement requirements)	End-to-end process piloted with three projects and learning incorporated	1. Project piloting summary report
Launch of the Scottish Rivers Fund	Finalised online portfolio and Fund application portal	1. SRF Investment Prospectus 2. SRF General slide deck for pitching
	Ongoing marketing materials	