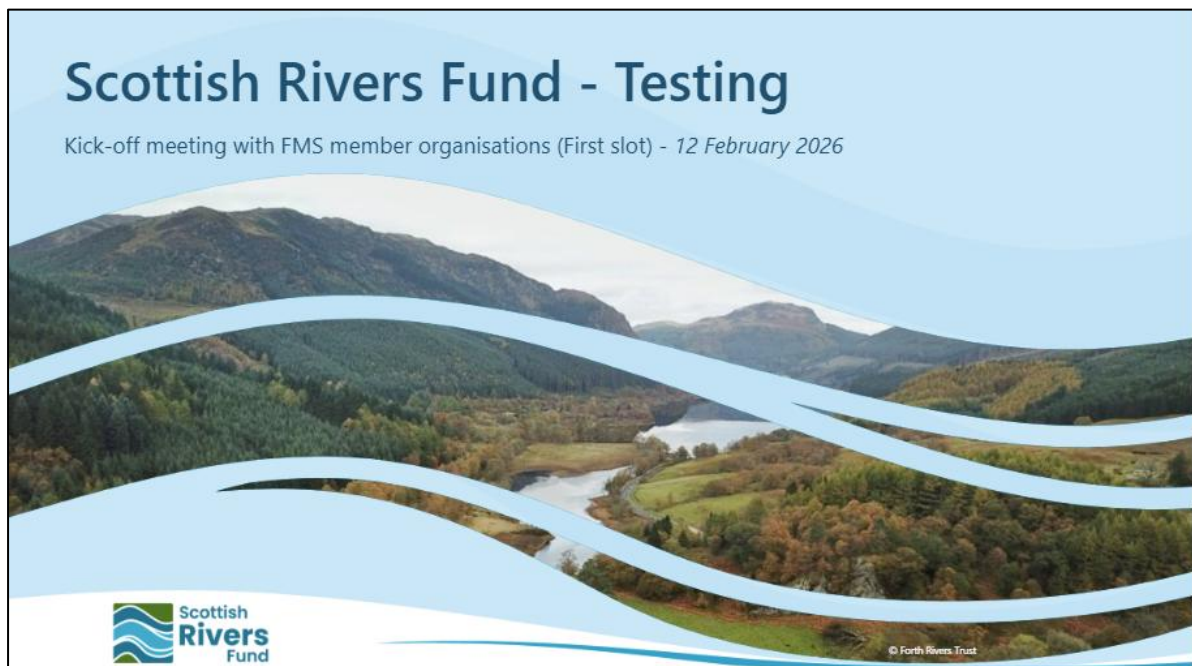




Scottish Rivers Fund – Project Piloting Report

For final reporting to FIRNS

9 April 2026



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1. Introduction

One of the critical workstreams of the FIRNS3 project “Preparing for the launch of a Scottish Rivers Fund” consisted of piloting some projects as part of an end-to-end test of the Fund’s governance structure, processes, and templates and documentation developed during the project delivery period. The report outlines how the activity has been delivered.

2. Piloting activity

2.1 Definition of the scope and objective

At the start of the delivery period, the project team agreed with the FIRNS team to revisit the scope of the activity. The agreed objective was to verify the validity and robustness of some of the core elements of the Fund, and to generate feedback and draw lessons to inform the final development stages before the Fund becomes fully operational. The critical areas to be the subject of the testing included the application process and the associated monitoring requirements. The activity was expected to be undertaken using concrete project examples as a test, to be identified by engaging Fisheries Management Scotland’s member organisations.

The revised scope reflected the stage of development of the Fund at the time of delivery – with the governance structure still being designed and fundraising at an early stage. In

addition, the project team decided to focus the piloting on the areas where it would yield the greatest value, namely the application process and monitoring requirements.

2.2 Process

The activity took place between January and March 2026 and consisted of the following steps:

- An invitation to collaborate and share a concrete project idea circulated to all the member organisations of Fisheries Management Scotland.
- The identification of the organisations to be involved and the disclosure of additional information regarding the activity.
- The delivery of an online inception workshop (held across two time slots to ensure the participation of all the organisations).
- Independent work being undertaken by the organisations involved (reviewing the supporting documents, filling out some forms, and sharing feedback).
- The review of the inputs and feedback submitted by the organisations involved.
- The delivery of an online workshop to share reflections and engage in further discussions.
- The activity was concluded with the processing of payments to the organisations involved and the summary of key takeaways (in this report).

2.3 Supporting documentation

The documents that supported the piloting activity are:

- SRF Funding Criteria (submitted to FIRNS separately)
- SRF Expression of Interest form (submitted to FIRNS separately)
- SRF Full Application form (submitted to FIRNS separately)
- SRF Monitoring Plan Template (submitted to FIRNS separately)
- SRF Monitoring Guide (submitted to FIRNS separately)
- *Ad hoc* feedback form (the feedback gathered is summarised in this report)
- Timesheet (shared with FIRNS as part of the financial reporting)

3. Participation

3.1 FMS members

Initially the activity was expected to focus on three projects. Given the narrower scope of the activity and the benefits of including a diversity of projects and organisations, we decided to

work with all the five organisations who expressed an interest in getting involved in this activity.

3.2 Collaboration arrangements

The organisations who took part in the activity dedicated a substantial amount of their time to take part in meetings, review documents, fill out forms and provide feedback that will help shape the final stages of development of the Scottish Rivers Fund. An arrangement to offer a compensation was agreed with FIRNS. Timesheets and invoices were produced upon completion of the activity.

4. Key takeaways

The following tables summarise the feedback we received from the organisations involved in the piloting activity with regard to their experience simulating an application for funding to the Scottish Rivers Fund based on the identified project. Key takeaways are translated into recommended actions that can inform the latest stages of development of the Fund – these are intended for consideration by the governance structure of the Fund (to be established) prior to the Fund becoming operational.

4.1 Funding criteria

Area	What we heard	Recommendations
Development activities	It is very important to have this category of activities eligible for funding alongside funding project delivery.	- Explore further appetite for financing development activities with prospective contributors. - Consider establishing a dedicated funding pot or earmarking a small share of capital for each funding round to support development activities. - Assess whether a dedicated (more streamlined) application process would be desirable for these applications.
Communication and promotion	Project-specific communication and promotional activities are not mentioned among the eligible costs, despite their	- Consider adding a reference to these activities among eligible cost.

	importance. It is unclear if and how these will be supported by the Fund.	- When establishing the Fund's communications function, consider the possibility of engaging future grantees for joint comms pieces.
Eligibility	There could be greater clarity regarding the organisations eligible, including examples.	- Consider revisiting the eligibility criteria prior to first funding round, including examples of organisations eligible.

4.2 Application process

Area	What we heard	Recommendations
Two-phase approach with two forms	The two-phase approach is clear, well designed, and calibrated. Overall, the two forms are considered appropriate in terms of questions included, length, and granularity. The expected timeline for the entire process should be clarified. Depending on the timeframe, the scope of some projects may change between EoI and full application.	- Oversee transfer of the current forms to NatureScot's new grant management system. - Ensure a clear timeline is set out upon the launch of each funding round. - Allow project applicants to indicate if there has been any change to the project scope since the start of the application process.
Project location	Unclear if site maps and pictures accompanying the project descriptions are required for the application process.	- Consider adding to the application forms (for both phases) a dedicated field to identify the project site.
Designated sites	The application form could request information about designated site status, given specific requirements a project would have to satisfy.	- Consider adding a dedicated field to the application form.
Project planning stage	The application process could include a question that allows for explaining (and assessing) how advanced a project is in terms of planning (e.g., landowner approvals, licences, public bodies engagement).	- Consider adding a field or a pre-defined checklist allowing project applicants to specify the steps undertaken to make the project 'delivery ready'. - Consider developing a template and/or dedicated guidance on

	Regarding the landowner agreement, a standard form or clear guidance on requirements could be provided by the Fund.	expectations regarding landowner engagement (link to monitoring and reporting). - Explore further the processes and templates adopted for other funding mechanisms (including SMEEF and the Nature Restoration Fund).
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4.3 Monitoring requirements

Area	What we heard	Recommendations
Usability of the template	While the importance of rigorous monitoring was acknowledged, some participants reported that the usability of the monitoring plan template could be improved – for instance by including additional explanations or by having worked examples as a reference. Some advised that a more prescriptive approach might be beneficial (e.g., “SRF as leader on monitoring”).	- Prior to the launch of the first funding round, consider revisiting the monitoring plan template to improve the user experience. - Prepare some worked examples (building on the work undertaken under the FIRNS2-funded project).
Baseline assessment	One of the difficulties is that not all the projects will have the same level of information at application stage – this includes a baseline assessment that may not be available for all projects.	- Consider including a baseline assessment among the eligible costs and allowing for the re-submission of the monitoring plan at the start of the project, after a baseline assessment has been undertaken. - Consider as an alternative approach supporting projects where baselines are available and offering support through development funding for other projects.
Post delivery monitoring	Overall, positive to have responsibility for post-delivery monitoring lying within the Fund. However, some grantees may	- Further discuss and fine-tune the monitoring arrangement, responsibilities, and costing,

	want to retain responsibility over some monitoring activities (e.g., electrofishing). Independent of who carries out post-delivery monitoring, it is important to ensure flows of information.	particularly for the post project delivery phase.
Support for applicants	While the guidance note was considered overall helpful, some applicants may benefit from additional, hands-on support. It is also important to verify that the monitoring approach is feasible and proportionate to each project.	- Prior to the first funding round, consider developing and rolling out a training programme, workshops, or 1:1 sessions for applicants (those invited to submit a full application).

4.4 Other

Area	What we heard	Recommendations
Long-term project management	Long-term project management responsibilities, beyond the project delivery period, would benefit from further clarity.	- Explore the requirements and arrangements adopted by other funding mechanisms (including SMEEF and the Nature Restoration Fund). - Clarify responsibilities for long-term project management in the Funding Criteria and other relevant document.
Risk assessment	The ability of the forms and templates to gather information to assess the risks to the delivery of the project could be improved.	- Consider requesting applicants to identify key risks and to identify suitable mitigation measures. - Consider requesting in the application form a breakdown of the project by activity with information about the management approach. - In the monitoring plan, consider adding information about monitoring skills, experience, and qualifications.

Long-term community benefits	There is strong guidance on ecological measures in the supporting documents. On the contrary, social/community benefits are hard to quantify, and further guidance on expectations regarding suitable metrics and approaches would be helpful.	- Explore further how the Fund could offer further guidance on the social component of the outcomes it intends to deliver. - Consider revisiting the Community Benefit and Engagement Strategy developed with support from FIRNS during the second funding round.
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5. Next steps

The recommendations reflected above will form part of the final stages of development to allow the Fund to become fully operational and ready to launch the first funding round. As soon as the governance structure of the Fund has been established, these recommendations will be discussed further with the experts involved in the governance bodies – notably the Grants Panel and Steering Group. Further discussions with the organisations who have been involved in the process will be considered.