
Spey
Catchment
Initiative
Annual Review
2025
www.speycatchment.org

Caring for the rivers, landscapes, wildlife and communities of the Spey catchment.

Cover Photo: T*he River Truim near Dalwhinnie. The Truim is an important spawning tributary for the River Spey's spring salmon. The area is also important habitat for wetland and wading birds. The SCI, with generous sponsorship from Diageo, planted 9,000 trees over 5 hectares of ground here in the spring of 2025. In time, these trees will provide shade to cool the river, as well as providing important habitat for other biodiversity.*

(Photo: Paul Hughes, Communications & Project Officer, SCI).

Spey Catchment Initiative

Annual Review 2025

Spey Catchment Initiative (SCIO)

The Town House

The Square

Grantown on Spey

PH26 3HF

Registered Company number

CS006049 (Scotland)

Registered Charity number

SC052191

September 2025

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SCI Sponsors

The SCI is grateful to the organisations which sponsor its work:

Spey Catchment Initiative

Trustees

Chairman: *Martin Gilbert, Vice-Chairman, Standard Life Aberdeen*

Trustees: *Michael Alexander, Global Head of Sustainability, Diageo*

Andy Ford, Director of Nature & Climate Change, Cairngorms National Park Authority

Alison Baker, Director of Restoration, Atlantic Salmon Trust

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Spey Catchment Initiative Partners

Cairngorms National Park Authority	Spey Fishery Board	Scottish Land & Estates
The Moray Council	Forestry & Land Scotland	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
The Highland Council	Scottish Forestry	National Farmers Union Scotland
NatureScot	Diageo	SAC Consulting
Sottish Environment Protection Agency	Jahama Highland Estates	Cairngorms Crofters & Farmers Community
Badenoch Heritage	Savills	Buglife
Scottish Water	Woodland Trust Scotland	

A Word from the Chair

I have great pleasure in presenting the 2025 Annual Review of the Spey Catchment Initiative (SCI). Throughout the year, the effects of the climate crisis – and the accompanying biodiversity emergency – have become all too apparent, with the driest spring for over sixty years, followed by an equally dry summer. The climate projections are for summers like this to happen every other year by 2050 unless we act now to do something about it.

I am therefore heartened to see the work of the SCI, which has continued its ambitious journey of environmental restoration in the Spey Catchment, as it endeavours to address the climate and biodiversity crises confronting us all.

This year has seen the Initiative continue to make substantial progress on a landscape-scale project on the Conglass Water above Tomintoul, with plans to plant 112 hectares of native trees, and continue to explore potential solutions to the long-standing problems with the River Gynack above Kingussie. We have also worked with the Cairngorms National Park Authority and local partners to restore montane trees – an ecosystem almost lost to Scotland - near Cairn Gorm Mountain.

The SCI has continued to work closely with our distilling partners – Diageo and Chivas Brothers Ltd – to expand riparian tree planting in the outer reaches of the catchment. We have also been supported by the Scotch Whisky Association, to help prepare for putting water back down two upper Spey tributaries, the flows from which have been diverted into the Tay since the Second World War to generate hydroelectricity. As a passionate salmon angler, I shall be delighted to see our iconic Atlantic salmon return to these rivers once they have been restored, having been denied access to them for over eighty years.

During the year we have also expanded our governance capabilities, with our now established Board of Trustees enhanced by Alison Baker from the Atlantic Salmon Trust and Susie Swift, consultant chartered accountant with Saffrey. We said au revoir to our long-standing Principal Project Officer, Penny Lawson, and are delighted that she has agreed to continue some of our volunteer engagement. We also warmly welcomed Ffion Robb to our Team, and we look forward to working with her as part of the Riverwoods Blueprint Project over the coming years.

All of this work has been a continuation of our strategy of creating resilient ecosystems through targeted restoration projects. As we look to the future, we remain committed to our mission of environmental restoration and sustainability. We are grateful for the support of our trustees, our members, partners, and the wider community, and we look forward to continuing our work to protect and enhance the Spey catchment for generations to come.

Martin Gilbert

Chair - SCI Board of Trustees

1. Spey Catchment Management Plan

This Annual Review only covers the SCI's work in 2024/2025, but the Spey Catchment Management Plan was first published in 2003. It was forward-thinking for its time, involving a broad range of stakeholders engaged in land and water management throughout the 3,000 Km ^{2} of the River Spey catchment and considered partnership working to achieve shared objectives. It was revised in 2016 and then revised again in 2022. In early 2023, the SCI went out to public consultation on the revised Plan, which was subsequently published in time for the launch of the Spey Catchment Initiative as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation in May 2023.

The revised Spey Catchment Management Plan sets out a broad strategic framework for the wise and sustainable use of the water resource between 2023 and 2030, as well as the protection and enhancement of the water quality and natural heritage throughout the whole River Spey catchment. It summarises in one document all the current key issues, pressures and opportunities that exist as they relate to the local environment and provides a wealth of information on flood management, water quality, fisheries management, economic development, as well as the protection of species, habitat, fisheries, forestry and woodland. You can find the complete Plan here:

https://speycatchment.org/spey-catchment-management-plan/

2. SCI Strategy

Since its inception in 2010, the SCI has become a highly successful public/private partnership, delivering a range of multiple-benefit projects. These have included river restoration and bankside improvement works, in-river habitat enhancements and obstacle removal, as well as riverside amenity works to improve access and enjoyment of the River Spey for local communities.

The SCI held a Strategy Day in April 2022, which resulted in a consensus to expand the SCI's remit to adopt an even more holistic approach to the management of the catchment, by including consideration of peatland restoration, carbon sequestration and potentially deer management, in order to make the Spey catchment sustainable and more resilient to the climate and biodiversity emergencies confronting us all.

The Strategy Day also agreed by consensus to progress the SCI to become a legally recognised entity. Following consideration of all the options for this, it was agreed by consensus that the SCI should apply to become a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (or SCIO) and on 14th December 2022, the Initiative was successfully incorporated.

There had also been consensus that the Spey Catchment Initiative should become a two-tier SCIO, with a Board of Trustee Directors sitting above the Steering Group (now the Advisory Group) in order to provide strategic guidance and oversee governance issues.

We reported last year that the SCI Steering Group (re-named the Advisory Group in 2025) had considered that changes to potential funding for the SCI, particularly since the announcements of reductions in public spending, made it appropriate to reconsider the organisation's Strategy in order to achieve the SCI's objectives. This was developed during the last quarter of 2024 and the SCI's new strategy was approved by the Board of Trustees in February 2025. This strategy is outlined on page 10.

Strategy for the Spey Catchment Initiative

Vision: Our vision is of a thriving, climate resilient Spey ecosystem, where natural processes have been restored and the biodiversity of our rivers and habitats is flourishing, in harmony with our local communities.

Mission: To create a sustainable, climate resilient and thriving natural environment for wildlife and communities throughout the Spey catchment.

Our Values: Collaborative Pragmatic Ambitious

Strategic Objectives

1. **River Restoration**
    - **Action** : Deliver habitat restoration projects focussed on riverbanks, floodplains, and aquatic ecosystems.
    - **Outcomes**: Improved water quality and restored hydrology , healthy aquatic ecosystems, increased biodiversity, natural flood management and enhanced climate change resilience.
2. **Woodland Creation**
    - **Action** : Deliver or support riparian native woodland creation and restoration projects.
    - **Outcomes**: Shading, water temperature mitigation, healthy aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and enhanced biodiversity and climate change resilience.
3. **Riparian Habitats & Nature Networks**
    - Deliver strategic projects to improve and reconnect riparian habitats at landscape scale.
    - **Outcomes:** Restored nature networks with increased biodiversity and connectivity .

We will support these objectives by:

4. **Supporting & Advising Farmers and Land Managers**
    - **Action** : Support land managers to design and deliver riparian and nature restoration projects that develop and sustain their enterprises.
    - **Outcomes**: Sustainable rural enterprises that deliver biodiversity gains.
5. **Community Engagement**
    - **Action:** Connecting people and communities with our work, linking businesses to sustainable ecosystems.
    - **Outcomes:** Community support for habitat restoration and nature enhancement.
6. **Organisational Sustainability**
    - **Action:** Develop a sustainable organisation with capacity to effectively deliver our objectives.
    - **Outcomes:** A financially stable organisation with adequate resources for effective operational delivery.

3. SCI Projects

3.1 A Strategic Approach to Project Selection

The SCI took a step-change in 2019 to its approach to projects, when it undertook the River Calder Restoration Project. This marked a move to addressing whole tributaries as sub-catchments of the River Spey, rather than small sections of rivers and burns, as had previously been undertaken. IN so doing, we aim to work towards landscape-scale changes that will help secure the sustainability and resilience of Speyside to the climate and biodiversity emergencies confronting us all.

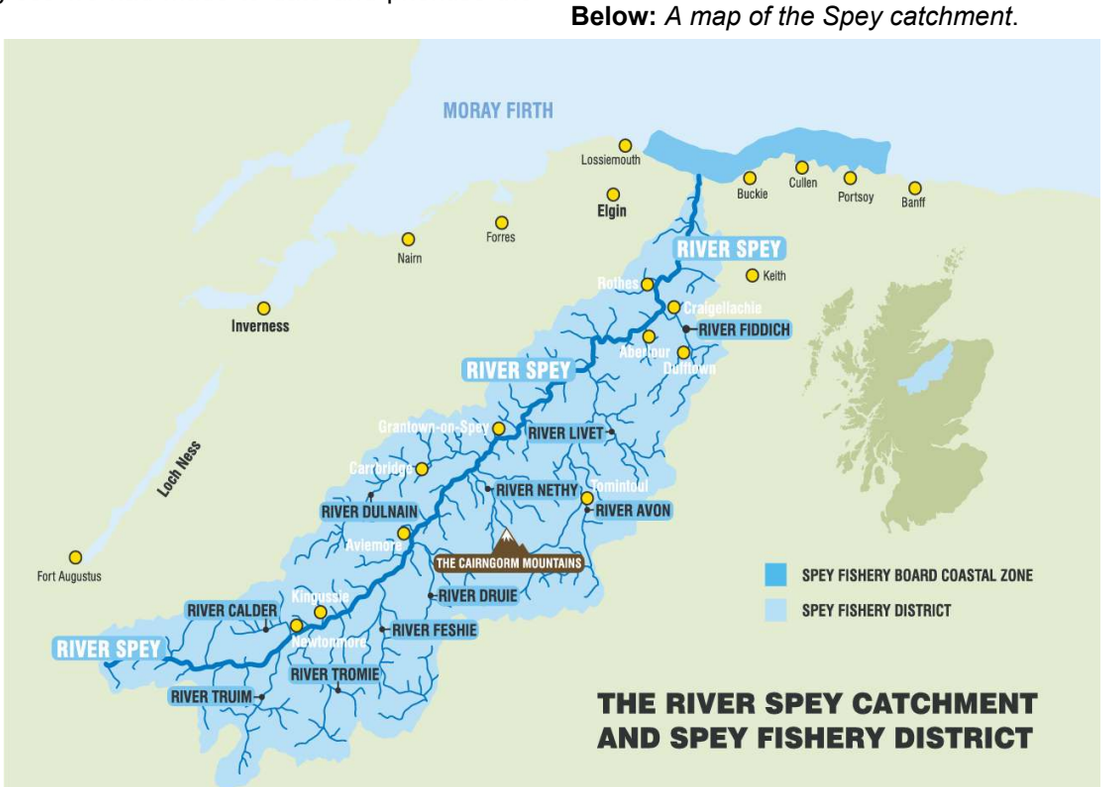
The SCI team met over two days in early 2024 to evaluate its priorities for future projects and consider its strategy for scoping and planning them. The combined knowledge of our team is extensive, built upon many years of working throughout the Spey catchment and our understanding of the many differing, and sometimes competing, objectives for land and sporting uses.

These meetings enabled the team to evaluate the progress we had made to date and prioritise the sub-catchments we should focus on moving forwards, also considering the requirements of legislation, such as the Water Framework Directive, Scottish and UK Government strategies and objectives and potential funding that may support the development and implementation of our projects.

This process has enabled us to compile a list of projects throughout the catchment, and to prioritise them for development, for recommendation to the Executive Committee of the SCI's Advisory Group and, in turn, Board of Trustees. The SCI's project selection strategy will be reviewed by the Executive Committee in early October 2025.

It is important to emphasise the significant time it takes to develop these landscape-scale projects, with many taking at least two years to scope and plan, ensuring that the interests of all relevant stakeholders can be considered and, as far as possible, accommodated.

Below: *A map of the Spey catchment.*



3.2 Allt Mor Erosion Scar Investigation

Over the last three years, the SCI has worked to develop ideas for the Allt Mor, the upstream section of the River Gynack, above Kingussie. This river has, over recent years, created significant erosion scars within its valley. Some of the largest scars are highly unstable, thought to be exacerbated by the lack of vegetation which is limited by herbivore browsing pressure in the area. These hillside scars are illustrated in the pictures on the following page. Substantial volumes of sediment from them fall into the river, degrading habitat, and causing major flooding issues for Kingussie down below as they are swept downstream when the river goes into spate. Indeed, it is estimated that 60-70% of the sediment that collates under the bridges in Kingussie comes from these hillside scars. The excessive sediment also increases the maintenance needed by the estate to protect flood diversion and hydro generation infrastructure on the river.

In 2023 consultants CBEC eco-engineering were commissioned to survey the erosion scars, sediment regime and the wider sub-catchment and to produce high level options for reducing sediment mobilisation and stabilising the worst erosion scars. A potential solution suggested ground works to reduce the angle of the scars and measures to stabilise the slopes with geotextiles and planting of shrubby vegetation to encourage regeneration. Small areas of the flood plain could also be planted with low-growing trees and shrubs. This type of restoration project has not been done before on this scale and is not without risks. It's also arguably a departure to some extent, from our normal approach to working with natural processes and avoiding engineering wherever possible. Further exploratory work was needed, as well as full consultation with the local community and stakeholders over the whole subject. Considerable investment would be required if most options were to be implemented.

Working with the community and the estate, we're trying to take a holistic approach to the issues. Erosion scar stabilisation is one element, along with peatland restoration underway in the upland area of the sub-catchment being undertaken by the landowner through Peatland Action, and the flood alleviation measures down-river around Kingussie, coordinated by The Highland Council. Taken in unison, these measures could exemplify a multi-partner, holistic approach.

We reported last year that the SCI had submitted an application for development phase funding in January 2024 to NatureScot's Nature Restoration Fund (NRF), in order to undertake more detailed survey and planning work during the spring/summer of 2024. This application was unfortunately unsuccessful, but following further discussion with NatureScot, a further revised application was submitted in August 2024 and was successful.

Pictured on page 13: *The Allt Mor above Kingussie, and the unstable erosion scars which are the source of significant volumes of sediment transported down the river, causing flooding in Kingussie. The SCI project here aims to explore stabilising these scars to reduce flood risk and improve habitat and biodiversity. It aims to complement the peatland restoration being undertaken on the land above theses scars, and flood alleviation measures in and around Kingussie down below. This approach ensures landscape-scale change to develop sustainability and resilience to the climate and biodiversity emergencies.*

(Photo: Paul Hughes, SCI Communications & Project Officer)

Following a successful Single Tender Justification application to NRF, the main survey and design consultancy contract for the scar stabilisation work was awarded to CBECeco-engineering.

The contract started on 29th April 2025, and the final report is expected to be received in October. A second contract for the Herbivore Impact Assessment was awarded to Adoxa Ecology. Their field work was completed on 28th April, and their report will inform plans for small areas of scrub woodland creation. That report indicates a moderate herbivore impact on heathland and high/very high impact on tree growth. Development of other ecological monitoring has also been progressed.
On the evening of 24th September, the SCI held a public consultation in Kingussie to outline some of the issues, explain the exploratory studies undertaken so far and hear from the community their thoughts and learn from their knowledge. We'll now be building that information into both the CBEC report and also, our own thinking about what we might eventually recommend. SCI will hold another public consultation before the development investigation concludes.

We have until March 2026 to complete the development investigation. This is a complex process. We are sure that the investigation will have made a significant contribution to the understanding of the issues and helped progress greater integration of solutions, but whether scar stabilisation becomes part of solutions for implementation is not yet clear.

3.3 River Truim Riparian Planting Project

The SCI has been working with Ralia Estate, Cuaich Estate and a tenant farmer to develop native riparian woodland creation on the River Truim for some time. The Truim runs past Dalwhinnie and towards Kingussie, close to the A9 and is illustrated on the front cover of this Review. It is an area with very little remaining bankside tree cover. This is a challenging and exposed site, suffering in the past from grazing pressure, seasonal flooding and a sparse local seed source for tree regeneration. The importance of the area for wading birds has been another constraint to creating new woodland cover here and we are grateful for the positive engagement by RSPB.

Mounding ground preparation was completed in February 2025 and was followed by fencing and the planting of circa 9,000 native trees over 5ha of ground in the spring of 2025. Our Spey Tributaries Project Officer, Ffion Robb, is now monitoring the project over the winter of 2025 and throughout 2026, after which we aspire to implement further enhancements to the work already undertaken.

We are grateful to Diageo for their financial support for this project.

Above: The Truim Riparian Planting Project in progress, with (inset) SCI Nature Restoration Officer Phil Whitfield engaged in some of the tree planting. This project is also illustrated on the front cover of this Annual Review.

(Photos: Paul Hughes, SCI Communications & Project Officer)

3.4 The River Within

A Partnership with Chivas Brothers Limited

We reported last year that the SCI entered into a partnership agreement with Chivas Brother Ltd, which was launched on World Water Day on 22nd March 2024. Duplicate partnership agreements were also established with our neighbours, the Findhorn Watershed Initiative and the Deveron, Bogie & Isla Rivers Trust.

The partnership, called 'The River Within', is a collaboration between Chivas Brothers and the three catchment organisations, including the SCI. It will help protect and restore waterways within the Trusts' combined catchment areas in North-East Scotland – a total of 5,566 km^2, some of which flows through Chivas Brothers-owned land – by focusing on enhancing biodiversity, limiting rises to water temperature from climate change and strengthening the longer-term resilience of the rivers.

This partnership is important not just for Scotland's natural landscapes, but also its heritage industries. Currently 34% of Scotland's rivers are in compromised ecological health, meaning by the end of this century and as a result of climate change, they could face three times as many droughts and up to 40% more flooding, threatening the diversity of life in and around the waterways. Chivas recognise that waterways are a vital source of life for Scotland's rich wildlife, as well as a key component and ingredient of whisky making, which depends on the health of the nation's rivers, banks, burns and springs.

A range of specific waterway projects are currently being developed in close partnership with the three catchment organisations. These are focusing on direct activity along riverbanks and waterways designed to help increase biodiversity and the overall health of the river ecosystem. This in turn will help limit the rise of water temperatures, restore floodplain resilience and increase river security. Chivas have embraced the principle that simple, practical interventions, such as planting new trees along rivers, can provide additional shade that helps limit river temperature rises and strengthen riverbanks, as well as helping biodiversity to develop and thrive.

The SCI has been scoping and developing potential projects in Glenlivet since 2024, some of which (see 4.51 and 4.5.2 below) have been implemented in 2025 or are scheduled for 2026. Glenlivet is also adjacent to the Conglass Water and the significant project we are planning to implement there. Taken together, it will help to make landscape-scale change that will improve the sustainability and resilience of these upland areas to the climate and biodiversity emergencies. The SCI is grateful to Chivas Brothers for their partnership and support and looks forward to developing this work throughout 2026 and beyond.

Chivas Brothers
Pernod Ricard

Spey Catchment Initiative

3.4.1 The Conglass Water Restoration Project

In continuation of the SCI's policy of addressing tributaries as sub-catchments of the River Spey, we have been working since 2023 on the development of a significant project on the Conglass Water, which is a tributary of the upper River Avon. The Conglass starts above an historic tin mine near the Lecht Ski Centre and runs close to the village of Tomintoul.

Some work on the River Conglass had been undertaken by the SCI in 2017, which addressed some river restoration issues at Mains of Auchriachan as part of the Tomintoul & Glenlivet Landscape Partnership Project. Back then, the SCI advised on the establishment of over 100 metres of willow spiling and the creation of an artificial log jam, both of which became demonstration projects for such works.

Work on this latest project has been led by Phil Whitfield, who joined the SCI as our Nature Restoration Officer in December 2023, with a background of over thirty years in forestry, in both the public and private sectors. Phil has worked hard to design a significant project which proposes to plant trees across ground owned by Crown Estates Scotland and their tenant farmers, in particular Andy and Debbie Duffus at Mains of Auchriachan, as well as additional tree planting on other land owned by Glenavon Estate.

The Conglass Restoration Project has proved to be one of the most complex projects the SCI has attempted so far; there are multiple stakeholders, a plethora of designations (Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, RAMSAR sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest) and various, sometimes conflicting, land management and sporting interests.

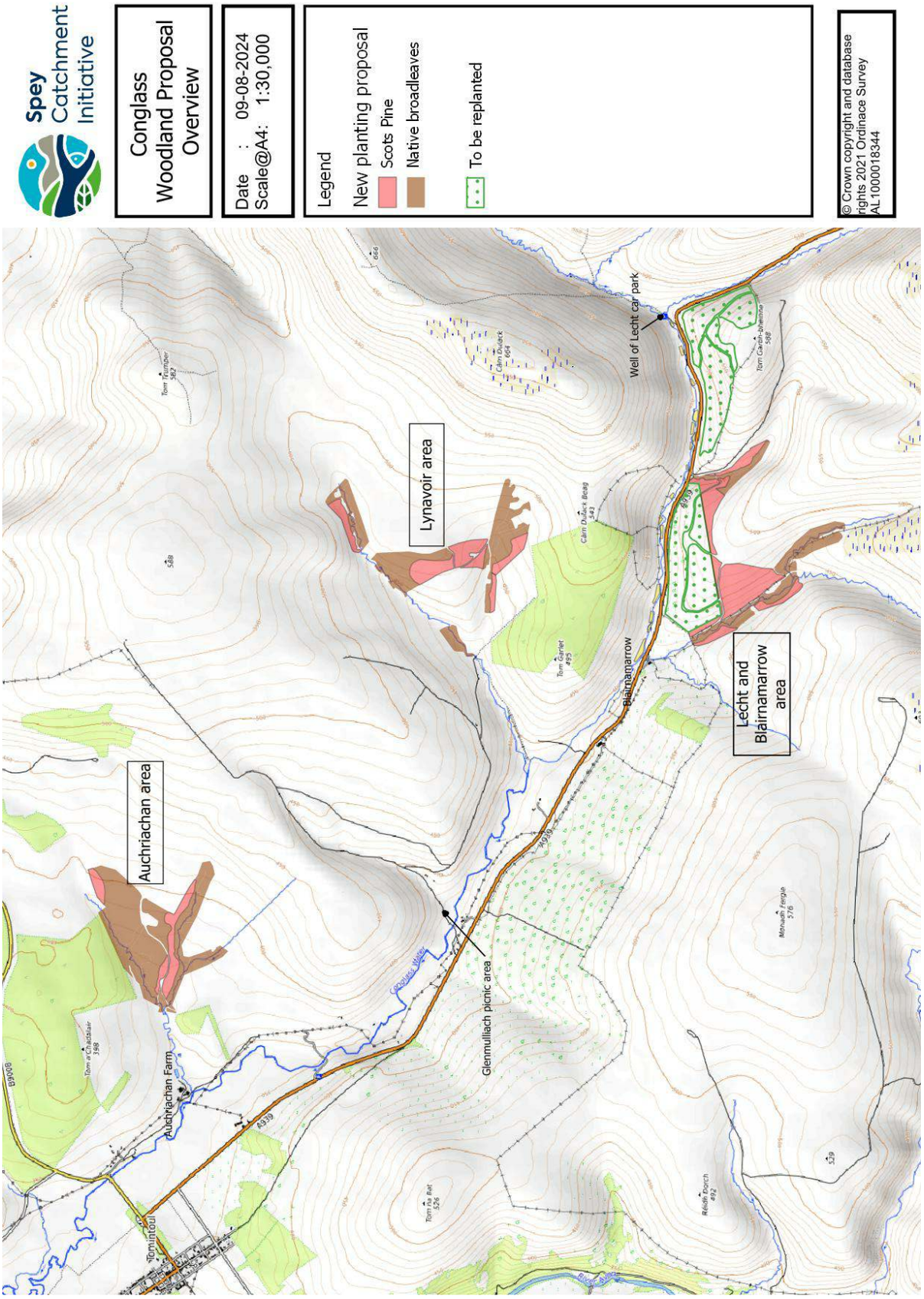
Phil Whitfield has engaged with all of the stakeholders in the area to ensure that the SCI's proposals considered and met all of the land management and sporting concerns, and has been working closely with NatureScot and the CNPA to overcome some of the designation issues. The SCI is also particularly grateful to Crown Estates Scotland for their cooperation with and support for this project.

Phil's extensive knowledge of forestry has enabled the project to be professionally scoped and costed, resulting in plans for forestry covering a total of 112 hectares. The scheme will create new native woodland that delivers a range of environmental benefits, including protecting and shading of watercourses that flow into the Conglass.

A significant challenge has required Crown Estates Scotland (CES) and Strutt & Parker (their managing agents) and Andy Duffus, the tenant farmer to devise a fair approach to sharing woodland carbon benefits, costs and responsibilities, between landlord and the tenant farmer. We all hope that this first agreement will help to facilitate further schemes with CES tenants in the Glenlivet Estate. We believe that legals for this agreement are now being finalised between the parties and hope that Forestry Grant Scheme contracts can then be issued, allowing fencing to be undertaken by the spring of 2026, with tree planting thereafter.

Ultimately, this project will help to make landscape-scale change to build sustainability and resilience for the benefit of the River Conglass, the upper River Avon area and the River Spey catchment as a whole. We look forward to reporting on progress on this significant project in the future.

We are grateful to Chivas Brothers Ltd for assisting with the financing of the scoping for this project through The Rivers Within Project.



Above: Map showing an overview of the woodland planting proposals for the Conglass Restoration Project.

3.4.2 The Auchnascraw Water Margins Project

The Crombie Burn flows through the Braes of Glenlivet from the hills above Scallan, through the main farming community there, past the distillery and joins the Livet near Tomnavoulin. It is a degraded watercourse – particularly in its upper reaches - being devoid of tree cover. As part of The Rivers Within, the SCI has been scoping potential projects in the Braes of Glenlivet and within this, a small riparian woodland scheme was agreed at Auchnascraw on the Crombie Burn, in the upper reaches of Glenlivet.

RSPB partnered with us here on wader conservation and were keen to deliver some enhancements for waders adjacent to the planting, whilst working with the same farmer. New woodland in areas important for wading birds is often controversial , so establishing a partnership approach and finding solutions that work for riparian ecology as well as waders has been key, particularly if we are going to be able to develop further riparian woodland along the Crombie Burn and the Livet in future.

This provided us with an opportunity to undertake a riparian planting in the spring of 2025, with the assistance of local school children from Tomintoul. We hope that this will demonstrate to local farmers our commitment to the area and our ability to deliver, which we hope in turn will act as a catalyst for further projects in this area.

We are grateful to the Macgilvray family at Auchnascraw for their help and support and Chivas Brothers Ltd for financing this project as part of The Rivers Within Project.

Below: The Auchnascraw Water Margins in the Braes of Glenlivet and (inset) SCI's Nature Restoration Officer Phil Whitfield teaching local school children how to plant trees.

(Photos: Paul Hughes, SCI Comms & Project Officer)

3.5 Coire na Ciste Montane Woodland Project

Montane Woodland —made up of hardy, slow-growing trees and shrubs— is one of Scotland's rarest and most fragmented of habitats. Once found high up on many of Scotland's hills and mountains, today it survives only in scattered fragments.

Coire na Ciste is a sheltered mountain Coire on the north-east side of Cairn Gorm. Its gullies and slopes offer better growing conditions for trees than the exposed ridges above. These are the kinds of places where natural treelines extend upwards into the mountains— and where we're most likely to see change in the years ahead as a result of climate shifts.

This location offered a rare opportunity to restore a lost habitat, support biodiversity, and strengthen ecological connections across the Cairngorms. The site is also strategically important; planting here can help link the forests of Glenmore with wider montane woodland efforts, such as those underway in the Loch Avon basin. This is a key opportunity to strengthen ecological connectivity in line with the Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan. Restoring native woodland here builds on decades of reduced grazing pressure and complements natural regeneration already visible in parts of the Coire. While Scots pine and rowan are returning naturally, other important species — including dwarf birch and montane willows — are still largely absent.

Below: Planting montane trees in the upper reaches of Coire na Ciste.

(Photo: Paul Hughes, SCI Comms & Project

The Coire na Ciste Montane Woodland Project has been an exciting partnership effort – involving the SCI, Cairngorm Mountain Ltd, Highlands & Islands Enterprise and the Cairngorms National Park Authority - to help bring this lost habitat back to a small area of Cairngorm Mountain (*Cairn Gorm*).

The project scoping began in 2024. Wide stakeholder consultation was undertaken, Environmental Impact Assessment screening with Scottish Forestry was completed and the project approved, with funding of £43,000 provided by the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

A press release and social media coverage launched the project in early April 2025, which generated considerable interest. The press release was published widely, and SCI staff undertook a short interview on Radio Scotland's Lunchtime Life programme. The majority of feedback has positive, and we received several offers of volunteer help. Since then, we consolidated the logistics for delivery and temporary storage of trees in late summer and a baseline bird survey, using acoustic recorders, has been implemented by Adam Fraser from CNPA. In August, 30,000 trees of carefully selected montane species of appropriate provenance were planted, including dwarf birch, downy birch, eared and downy willow and other minor montane willow species. The project was completed in early September 2025.

This habitat will take a long time to establish, but progress will be carefully monitored through annual walkovers and a more detailed survey five years after the trees have been planted.

Above: Views of the landscape of Coire na Ciste, where the SCI ran a project during 2025 to plant 30,000 montane trees.

(Photos: Paul Hughes, SCI Comms & Project Officer)

3.6 Riverwoods Blueprint Project

The Spey Catchment Initiative was chosen last year as one of the three Demonstration Areas for the Riverwoods Blueprint Project, coordinated by the Scottish Wildlife Trust and also involving the Tweed Forum and the Kyle of Sutherland Rivers Trust.

The Riverwoods Blueprint Project now lies at the core of the Riverwoods partnership. In 2024 the Blueprint Project, led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), was awarded £1.8 million in funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to support the delivery of a four-year £3.5 million programme to create a practical blueprint for river woodland restoration across Scotland.

The project was proceeded by a development phase, during which SWT worked with Riverwoods partners to conduct research and devise a strategic plan for river woodland creation and restoration at scale.

One of the requirements of the project was that each of the delivery partners was required to recruit a dedicated project officer to deliver it, with the National Lottery reimbursing SCI for 50% of all that project officer's costs. This enabled us to welcome Ffion Robb to the SCI team in April 2025 as our Spey Tributaries Project Officer.

Now in the delivery phase, the Blueprint Project is delivering:

TREES IN THE GROUND:
Demonstrating how to achieve meaningful restoration in collaboration with local communities across different catchments.

FUNDING FOR A PIPELINE OF NEW PROJECTS:
The Riverwoods Development Grant addresses an essential first step in enhancing local river health and will kickstart a pipeline of new restoration projects across Scotland.

WHOLE COMMUNITY TO THE WHOLE CATCHMENT:
Targeted and strategic methods and resources to engage members of the community on a journey towards practical riparian restoration and conservation.

HEIGHTENED COLLABORATION:
The Digital Centre of Excellence will provide a space for knowledge and data sharing, best practice guidance, and centralised resources.

STANDARDISED MEASURING AND MONITORING:
A measuring and monitoring framework and protocols to support project evaluation.

Since joining the SCI, Ffion was quick to engage with local farmers in the Laggan, Newtonmore and Kingussie areas to look at potential riparian tree planting and woodland creation opportunities. Some of these are still in the scoping stage of development, but one riparian project will be implemented near Kingussie in late 2025, with grateful thanks to Chivas Brothers Ltd for their financial support, and others are being progressed for implementation in 2026.

You can find more information about Riverwoods at:
URL: https://www.riverwoods.org.uk/

The Riverwoods Blueprint Project is made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to National Lottery Players.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund is the largest funder for the UK's heritage. Using money raised by National Lottery players we support projects that connect people and communities to heritage.

Our vision is for heritage to be valued, cared for and sustained for everyone, now and in the future. From historic buildings, our industrial legacy and the natural environment, to collections, traditions, stories and more. Heritage can be anything from the past that people value and want to pass on to future generations.

3.7 Scotch Whisky Association

The SCI's CEO, Roger Knight, has been working closely with the Scotch Whisky Association (SWA) to encourage their support for and sponsorship of projects within the Spey catchment, on behalf of their members. The SWA have become interested in supporting a project on Fresh Water Pearl Mussels (FWPM), which are one of the four designated species that make up the Spey's Special Area of Conservation status and are currently a species under threat from climate change. The Cairngorms National Park Authority are developing a potential FWPM translocation project, to move some FWPM from areas in the lower Spey, where they are abundant, to other suitable areas in the catchment where they have become absent. This is still under development.

In May 2025, Roger Knight presented a scoping project to the SWA's Water & Effluent Committee to scope a riparian tree planting project along an upper Spey tributary identified as a suitable site for FWPM translocation. This would enable us to ensure that that burn has the optimum habitat to ensure FWPM survival. This project was accepted by the SWA and is currently being implemented, for completion by December 2025.

Roger Knight subsequently met with the SWA to discuss water temperature monitoring within the Spey catchment, potentially linked to the Scottish River Temperature Monitoring Network run by the Scottish Government's Marine Directorate, and the engagement of Matthew Waterkeyn to help scope the restoration of the Allt Bhran and Cuaich. Following meetings with the Marine Directorate, it was agreed that Speyside already had sufficient coverage of water temperature monitors and that further deployment would not add significantly to the Scottish Government's knowledge. The SWA were, however, keen to support the SCI with the engagement of a specialist water engineer to advise on the Allt Bhran and Cuaich river restorations (see section 4.8 below). The SCI is grateful to the SWA for their generous assistance with these exciting projects.

Above: A Speyside burn which has been exposed to warming water temperatures through lack of tree cover. This is the sort of burn we are scoping, with sponsorship from the Scotch Whisky Association, for tree planting to improve the habitat for the potential translocation of Freshwater Pearl Mussels.

(Photo: Roger Knight, SCI Chief Executive Officer)

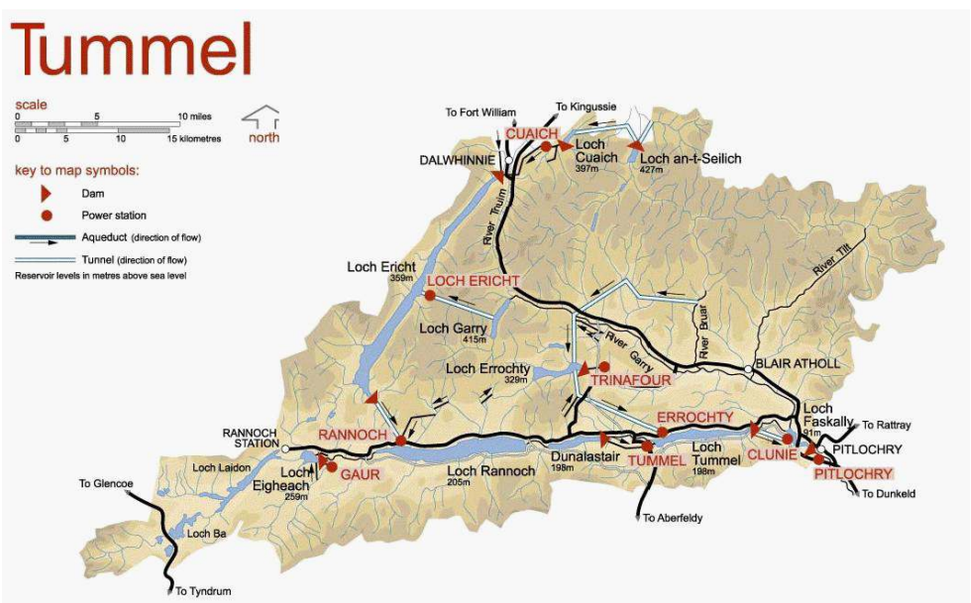
3.7.1 Allt Bhran and Cuaich River Restorations

The Allt Bhran (a tributary of the River Tromie) and the River Cuaich (a tributary of the River Truim) are both impounded (dammed) and their flows are diverted into the Tay catchment by Scottish & Southern Energy (SSE) to generate hydro-electricity, as part of the Tummel Hydro-Electric Scheme (see map below). Both of these rivers have had their flows diverted out of the Spey catchment and into the Tay since circa 1940 and SSE have agreed with SEPA that they will re-water these upper Spey tributaries as part of the third River Basin Management Plan to implement the legally binding Water Framework Directive (WFD).

The SCI and the Spey Fishery Board (SFB) have been working closely with SEPA's Hydro Review Team, which confirmed to us in mid-December 2024 that these two tributaries would have water flows reinstated as part of the WFD. These provide us with significant river restoration opportunities, which will need to be put in place before December 2027 (the deadline for completion of the WFD). It also provides us with an opportunity to enable Atlantic salmon to return to these upper Spey tributaries and to spawn in areas they have not been able to access for over 80 years. Atlantic salmon are one of the four designated species that make up the River Spey's Special Area of Conservation and are now officially an Endangered Species in Great Britain.

The SCI and SFB met with SSE on 16th May 2025 to discuss their proposals and the opportunities and challenges involved in re-watering these two upper Spey tributaries. With generous financial support from the SWA (see section 4.7 above), the SCI has been fortunate to engage Matthew Waterkeyn to work on and scope these projects. Mathew is a chartered civil engineer and water engineer, who has worked internationally and was part of the team which re-engineered the river at the Cornish village of Boscastle, using Nature-based Solutions, after it was flooded in 2004.

Work has progressed quickly, with both rivers surveyed, options for restoration analysed and subsequent presentation of our ideas to a Multi-Stakeholder meeting convened by the SCI on 9th July, involving SSE, SEPA, the Spey Fishery Board and the estates concerned. The group subsequently met again on 3rd September, and a positive, cooperative relationship has been established across the group. The Allt Bhran is proving to be more complex than the Cuaich, principally due to sediment management issues, but we are hopeful that engineering on the Cuaich will begin in 2026.



Left: A map of the Tummel Hydroelectric Scheme, which has been in place since the late 1930's and diverts water from the upper tributaries of the Spey into the Tay catchment to generate hydroelectricity.

(Image courtesy of Scottish & Southern Energy)

Above: The Allt Bhran is at the top of the Tummel Hydro Scheme. This river, pictured right, has its entire flow diverted through a tunnel, with most going into the Tay to generate hydro-electricity, leaving a largely dry riverbed below, pictured left. Working closely with Scottish & Southern Energy, SEPA and Wildland Estates, we have an exciting opportunity to re-water this upper tributary under the Water Framework Directive.

(Photos: Roger Knight, SCI Chief Executive Officer)

Left & Below: The River Cuaich is also impounded and its flow diverted into the Tay to generate hydroelectricity. The SCI is working closely with Scottish & Southern Energy, SEPA and Phoines & Cuaich Estates so that this river will also have a water flow released down it under the Water Framework Directive. We are hopeful that engineering works may commence here in 2026.

3.8 The Esmee Fairbairn Foundation

In late 2023, the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation generously offered the SCI a grant of £200,000 over three years towards core costs of a sustainable, climate resilient and thriving natural environment for wildlife and communities throughout the Spey Catchment. The SCI is grateful to the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation for this ongoing support towards its core costs. As part of this offer, the SCI agreed three key outcomes for delivery:

1. **Outcome:** Corporate organisations fulfil their ESG responsibilities by using the SCI to implement projects.
   Indicator: Five major corporate organisations identify ESG goals and develop nature-based solutions to fulfil them. At least three major corporations support SCI mission through multi-year partnership agreements.
   Progress: SCI has developed multi-year partnerships with two major corporations (Diageo and Chivas Brothers Ltd.), with additional multi-year support from the Cairngorms National Pak Authority and NatureScot. Additional support has been received from the Scotch Whisky Association to scope and develop Nature-based Solution projects on behalf of their members. SCI is continuing work to develop further support from additional corporations.

2. **Outcome:** Public/private/community partnership with SCI demonstrates landscape-scale restoration to improve biodiversity and build climate change resilience.
   Indicator: River Calder Restoration Project delivers restoration to provide natural flood management, climate sustainability and enhanced biodiversity. New landscape-scale catchment restoration projects established on the River Gynack and the River Avon.
   Progress: This Annual Review reports on the project progress on the Allt Mor (River Gynack) and Conglass (River Avon), with the completed River Calder Restoration Project subject to ongoing monitoring.

3. **Outcome:** SCI recognised as a leader in bringing sectors together to restore our natural environment.
   Indicator: Partnership membership expands with additional cross-sector support and ongoing core funding secured. SCI model replicated in other catchments across Scotland.
   Progress: SCI membership has expanded during this reporting period, with the welcome additions of Badenoch Heritage and Buglife. The SCI is also working with our neighbours on the Findhorn Watershed Initiative and the Deveron Bogie & Isla Rivers Trust as part of The Rivers Within, supported by Chivas Brothers Ltd, with progress reported in this Annual Review. We are also working to help develop the SCI model in other catchments, notably on the Cromarty Firth, through the Northern Catchments Partnership hosted by Fishmongers.

We have made significant progress in securing the core costs to fund our staff and equip them to scope and develop the Nature-based Solutions projects we are planning to deliver at landscape-scale. These will restore natural form and function in modified watercourses and enhance river corridor habitats, benefiting biodiversity and improving the resilience of the Spey catchment to climate change. This in turn helps the SCI with its objective of helping to create a sustainable, climate resilient and thriving natural environment for wildlife and communities throughout the 3,000 Km^2 Spey Catchment.

3.9 Landscape Enterprise Networks (LENs)

There has been considerable discussion over the last three years about the creation of Landscape Enterprise Networks (LENs) on Speyside.

LENs is a mechanism for linking organisations with a need for measures to be implemented to ensure their sustainability (the demand side), with farmers and landowners who have the wherewithal to implement these (the supply side) through a LENS Coordinating Operator (the SCI for Speyside). It is coordinated by a company in England, 3Keel, and has established successful operations in north and east England, Italy, Hungary and Poland.

The Forth Rivers Trust have been instrumental in developing a Scottish LENs around Loch Leven and 3Keel aspire to expand this regional hub into Perthshire and establish new LENs operations in the Scottish Borders (via Tweed Forum) and on Speyside (via SCI). The SCI's CEO, Roger Knight, contributed to a joint funding bid to NatureScot's FIRNS 3 fund in late March 2025 to facilitate this through a development phase. This bid was partially successful, by securing funding for the appointment of a LENs Scotland Manager, enhancing the Leven LENs and developing LENs in the Borders, but was not sufficient to enable development on Speyside.

The SCI's CEO, Roger Knight, has subsequently met regularly with 3Keel's new Scotland Senior Programme Manager, Tom Brown, to develop the promotion of LENs on Speyside, through additional support from NatureScot. The development phase for this will run until March 2026, with the aspiration of securing an initial trade later next year.

3.10 Public Consultation, Laggan

Following a survey and modelling study of the hydrology of the Spey floodplain between Spey Dam and Invertruim by Kaya Consulting in 2023, SCI held a meeting of local farmers and community members at Laggan on 22nd January 2025. The meeting was well-attended (50+ people) and provided us with the opportunity to introduce the SCI, explain our work and enable Kaya Consultants to present their report. This was followed by a comprehensive discussion and Q&A session.

This meeting was particularly challenging for both the SCI and Kaya Consultants. The study had suggested some options, which with hindsight was ill advised. These were popularly perceived to be proposals for development and threatening to the best agricultural land in the area. We worked hard to allay these concerns and explain that nothing could be pursued without farmer and community support, but the outcome was a universal aversion to pursuing any of the restoration options that had been suggested. The SCI team subsequently wrote publicly to the attendees to reassure them that we would not be pursuing the options suggested, which appears to have been well-received by the Laggan community.

SCI has learned important lessons here – particularly how key it is to engage with the community living and working the land of the study area very early, to understand their perspectives and learn from their local knowledge. We hope that in time, the modelling work from this study may yet be helpful to future work with the community.

Following the public meeting, SCI has been actively working with some farms and estates in the area, developing nature restoration ideas of their own.

3.11 Biodiversity Audit Workshop

From 2025 the Scottish Government is phasing in a new requirement for all farms and crofts in receipt of Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) payments to complete a Whole Farm Plan, to help identify ways to make farms and crofts more efficient, sustainable and profitable.

The SCI sees real potential for the Biodiversity Audit element of Whole Farm Plans to be a significantly useful tool to help and support farmers to review their land holding and consider future strategic biodiversity potential and change. Eventually all farms in Scotland will need to have a Biodiversity Audit in place, which is likely to be used to monitor and support improvements to habitat condition.

In early 2025, the SCI worked with the Soil Association, Cairngorm Crofters and Farmers Community and SAC Consulting to champion a truly useful approach to Biodiversity Audits. This resulted in SCI running a successful workshop event at Clachaig Farm, near Nethybridge, on 7th March 2025, run by the SCI's Nature Restoration Officer, Phil Whitfield and Paul Hughes.

Phil has subsequently worked with the owners of Clachaig Farm to develop a small riparian fencing and tree planting project, with additional interest now from the neighbouring farm at Lurg. The SCI will be developing these projects for implementation in 2026 and beyond, and we look forward to reporting on progress in next year's Annual Review.

Above: The SCI's Nature Restoration Officer Phil Whitfield, and Communications & Project Officer Paul Hughes, held a Biodiversity Audit Workshop for local farmers at Clachaig, near Nethybridge on 7th March 2025.

(Photo: Paul Hughes, SCI Communications & Project Officer)

4. Communications and Stakeholder Engagement

Communications and Stakeholder Engagement

The Spey Catchment Initiative's (SCI's) communications, stakeholder outreach, and media engagement have continued to grow in reach and impact over the past year. Through targeted storytelling, strategic partnerships, and open dialogue, we have strengthened SCI's visibility, reputation, and trust among communities, partner organisations, and decision-makers across the Spey catchment.

Social Media and Digital Reach

Over the past 12 months, our social media channels generated **116,000 impressions** and **8,600 engagements**, while our follower base grew by **20%** to nearly **3,000**. Project updates, volunteer features, and visual stories of SCI in action have been particularly effective at connecting with our audience and reinforcing our identity as a transparent, results-driven organisation.

Our website also continues to perform strongly as a hub for project news and catchment information, recording **7,548 sessions** and **5,230 new users** this year. The launch of the **River Spey Water Levels** page—showing real-time data from SEPA gauging stations—has quickly made it one of our most visited resources, providing valuable information for land managers, anglers, and local communities alike.

Media, Campaigns, and Visibility

SCI's communications have helped position the organisation at the forefront of public discussion around river restoration and catchment management. The **Coire na Ciste Montane Woodland Project** received national media attention, featuring across *BBC News*, *STV*, and *The Scotsman*, highlighting SCI's leadership and collaboration in large-scale nature recovery. Similarly, our **Allt Mor Erosion Scar Investigation** project was covered in the *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald*, recognising SCI's role in working with the local community to address sediment and flooding challenges.

Media interest in these and other initiatives demonstrates growing recognition of SCI as a trusted source of expertise on river restoration, sustainable land management, and collaborative conservation.

Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration

Effective communication is central to SCI's mission of working collaboratively across the catchment. Over the past year, we have hosted public consultation events, farm visits, and stakeholder meetings that have provided opportunities for dialogue, learning, and shared planning. These efforts help ensure our projects reflect local priorities and strengthen relationships between conservation practitioners, land managers, and communities.

Looking Ahead

In the year ahead, SCI will continue to strengthen how we communicate and engage with our audiences. We plan to review and update our website to improve accessibility and impact, and to focus more on video storytelling—producing a small number of high-quality "hero" films that showcase the people and projects behind our work. Our core communications plan will continue to deliver **one social media post each week**, **one blog or project update per month**, and **one video each quarter**, ensuring our outreach remains consistent, purposeful, and engaging.

5. Administration and Staffing

The last years has seen further changes to the Spey Catchment Initiative's staffing.

At the end of April 2025, we said a sad farewell to the Initiative's principal Project Officer, **Penny Lawson.** Penny joined the SCI in 2017 and was the mainstay of the organisation throughout its development into a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation. She has made a huge contribution to the SCI and we are grateful for all she has achieved. Penny has offered to maintain our invertebrate monitoring with the help of Buglife and our volunteers and we shall look forward to continuing to see her in this role. In the meantime, we wish Penny every happiness in her retirement.

The SCI is particularly grateful to the Spey Fishery Board which provides 50% of the time of its Operation Manager, **Duncan Ferguson**, to assist the Initiative. Duncan has been instrumental in implementing the SCI's projects on the ground, once the initial scoping, planning and financial arrangements have been concluded. The Spey Fishery Board also showed considerable support by administering the SCI during the years since its inception in 2010 until its establishment as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation, for which the SCI is also particularly grateful.

Paul Hughes returned full-time to the SCI in December 2024, having previously shared 50% of his time with the Spey Fishery Board, under contract from the SCI. Paul's role has since been expanded to include Project Officer work alongside his communications role, and we are continuing to develop his skill-set in this exciting area of work.

Our partnership with Riverwoods Blueprint provided an opportunity to expand our Project Officer staff and in April 2024 we were delighted to welcome **Ffion Robb** to our team as the Spey Tributaries Project Officer. Ffion graduated from Edinburgh University in 2019 with a First Class Honours degree in Geology and Physical Geography. After working as a Geology Field Tutor and Outdoor Instructor, Ffion spent three years as a River Ranger with River Holme Connections in Yorkshire. As a result, Ffion has hit the ground running and we wish her every success in her new role with the SCI.

6. Extracts From The Constitution of the Spey Catchment Initiative

Type of Organisation

The Spey Catchment Initiative was incorporated as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation on 22nd December 2022 by the Office of the Scottish Charities Regulator (OSCR). Its charity number is SC052191.

Purpose

The organisation has been formed to demonstrate and deliver integrated catchment management by protecting, restoring and enhancing the features and characteristics of the River Spey catchment, with the following purposes:

I. to advance the environmental sustainability and resilience of the whole of the River Spey and its catchment;

Ii. to develop a cohesive and sustainable approach to landscape scale stewardship of the water environment, including the protection, restoration and enhancement of the water quality and natural heritage of the whole of the River Spey catchment;

Iii. to advance environmental improvement and/or protection including, but not limited to, preservation and conservation of the natural environment, conservation and protection of wildlife and natural habitats, promotion of sustainable development including natural flood management, renewable energy generation, and supporting sustainable consumption of energy and other resources;

Iv. to promote education and raise awareness and understanding of the whole River Spey system by engaging stakeholders and communities within and throughout the catchment, including organising or supporting others to organise meetings, lectures, conferences, seminars, broadcasts, training or any other form of educational instruction; and

V. to support the advancement of heritage and culture, including but not limited to restoring and preserving historic sites, traditions, crafts, skills, language, artefacts, exhibits and of their associated background and history;

but such that the organisation shall do so following principles of sustainable development.

Powers

I. The organisation has power to do anything which is calculated to further its purposes or is conducive or incidental to doing so.

Ii. No part of the income or property of the organisation may be paid or transferred (directly or indirectly) to the members - either in the course of the organisation's existence or on dissolution - except where this is done in direct furtherance of the organisation's charitable purposes.

Qualifications for membership

I. MEMBERSHIP shall consist of those individuals who made the application for registration of the organisation and such other individuals aged 16 or over and groups who fully support the aims and activities of the organisation and are admitted to membership under the following clauses.

Ii. Employees of the organisation are not eligible for membership. A person admitted to membership shall automatically cease to be a member if they become an employee of the organisation.

7. Financial Summary

Statement of Financial Activities
for the year ended 31st March 2025

	Notes	Unrestricted funds £	Restricted funds £	Year Ended 31/3/25 Total funds £	Period 14/12/22 to 31/3/24 Total funds £
Income and endowments from					
Donations and legacies	2	**165,331**	**112,302**	**277,633**	376,914
Investment income	3	**154**	**-**	**154**	-
Total		**165,485**	**112,302**	**277,787**	376,914
Expenditure on					
Charitable activities					
Charitable		**218,522**	**49,346**	**267,868**	194,961
NET INCOME/(EXPENDITURE)		**(53,037)**	**62,956**	**9,919**	181,953
Reconciliation of funds					
Total funds brought forward		**181,953**	**-**	**181,953**	-
Total funds carried forward		**128,916**	**62,956**	**191,872**	181,953

Balance Sheet
31st March 2025

	Notes	Unrestricted funds £	Restricted funds £	2025 Total funds £	2024 Total funds £
Fixed assets					
Tangible assets	7	**5,287**	**-**	**5,287**	6,479
Current assets					
Debtors	8	**-**	**-**	**-**	28,721
Cash at bank		**172,009**	**91,125**	**263,134**	183,510
		172,009	**91,125**	**263,134**	212,231
Creditors					
Amounts falling due within one year	9	**(48,380)**	**(28,169)**	**(76,549)**	(36,757)
Net current assets		**123,629**	**62,956**	**186,585**	175,474
Total assets less current liabilities		**128,916**	**62,956**	**191,872**	181,953
NET ASSETS		**128,916**	**62,956**	**191,872**	181,953
Funds	10				
Unrestricted funds				**128,916**	181,953
Restricted funds				**62,956**	-
Total funds				**191,872**	181,953

1. The above figures must be considered as draft until approved by the SCI's Annual General Meeting.
2. These are abbreviated accounts. A copy of the SCI's full Financial Statements, together with explanatory notes, will be published on its website (www.speycatchment.org), once they have been approved at the Annual General Meeting.

Spey Catchment Initiative

Spey Catchment Initiative (SCIO)

The Town House

The Square

Grantown on Spey

PH26 3HF

Registered Charity Number SCO52191