

# MINUTES of the MEETING of THE RIVER DEVERON DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD,

a Meeting open to the public within the terms of the Aquaculture & Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2013 on Thursday 26th March 2026 at 12 noon at Number 30, Huntly.

This meeting was held in conjunction with that of the TRUSTEES of THE DEVERON, BOGIE & ISLA RIVERS CHARITABLE TRUST. These minutes cover both organisations.

At the outset the Chairman explained that in terms of the 2013 Act, all Meetings require to be open to the public. An invitation to the public was published on the Board's website and all social media accounts along with a copy of the proposed Agenda. Any member who wished to attend was required to inform the Clerk.

**Members of the Public Present: Dave Green, Lucy McKibbin, Calvert McKibbin, Conner Morison, Sarah Cruickshank**

**Present:** Jim Cruickshank (B&T), Andrew Allwood (B&T), Matthew Marsden (B), Gordon Morison (B), Rory Cooper (B & T), Frank Henderson (B&T) (Turriff Angling Association & Turriff Community), Richard Breakell (B), Alfie Cheyne (B)

In attendance-

**Richie Miller** (Director DBI Trust & Board), **Marcus Walters** (River Operations Manager - DBI Trust), **Sarah Roebuck** (Clerk to the Board and Administrator of DBI Trust)

**{B = Board member; T = Trustee or representative}**

**Chairman:** Mr Andrew Allwood

**Apologies for Absence & Welcome** Andrew Higgins (B), Robert Shields (B & T), Robert Copland (B), Steve Mackison (T)

**Minutes of Meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec 2025** A draft of the Minutes of the Meeting had been sent to all Members of the Board and Trust and unanimously approved by those who had attended. The minutes have been published on the Board/Trust's website ([www.deveron.org](http://www.deveron.org)) and signed by the Chairman of the Meeting.

There were no queries nor matters outstanding.

**Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2013** Mr Allwood reported that there were no changes noted to Board Members financial interests since 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2025 meeting as applicable to the Board. No complaints against the Board had been received by the Clerk since the last meeting.

**Update on Financial Matters – Board** The financial update indicated that the board remains in a healthy position overall. While two outstanding assessments are still being pursued, one is expected to be resolved imminently. The other remains more difficult to progress, with challenges in establishing contact. Positive progress has been made in recovering payments from Mr Shaw, with two instalments of £500 already received and further payments scheduled.

**Action updates from previous meeting**

Richie provided a comprehensive update on actions from the previous meeting. One key area of focus has been improving the recording of fish eating bird activity and deterrence measures. This includes exploring the use of mobile applications for those comfortable with digital tools, alongside alternative methods for individuals who prefer not to rely on technology.

Progress has also been made in upgrading the surveillance camera network. Although not all cameras have yet been deployed, six new 4G-enabled units have been acquired through a government grant, significantly enhancing monitoring capability. In addition, a thermal drone—also funded through the same grant—has been purchased. This piece of equipment will support improved monitoring of bird movements as well as aiding in the detection of illegal fishing activity.

Further actions included evaluating equipment used for fish counting in challenging conditions. A specialised 3-degree lens has been secured to allow continued monitoring during periods of extreme low water levels.

Work has also continued on water quality monitoring, and the rivers conservation code has been updated and redesigned, with input from Mr Allwood and others. This revised code has now been distributed.

Efforts have also been made to strengthen communication channels, particularly through social media platforms such as LinkedIn, to ensure members and the wider public are more aware of ongoing work.

**AOCB Response Discussion**

**– Beaver Plan**

A key issue raised was the need for a proactive approach to potential environmental challenges, specifically regarding the possible future presence of beavers. It was emphasised that the board should not simply react to incidents as they arise but should instead develop a structured and pre-agreed response plan. The concern is that when a situation occurs—such as a landowner reporting beaver activity—the board should be in a position to act immediately rather than engaging in delayed discussion. While it was acknowledged that the appropriate response to beaver activity remains somewhat uncertain and subject to ongoing debate, it was noted that work is already underway to determine what actions are feasible.

Richie has been leading efforts to investigate the legal and practical options available and an update was provided on national developments relating to beaver policy.

Fishery Management Scotland has taken a strong position, particularly regarding the risks posed by beavers. Key concerns include the impact on drainage systems, agricultural land, and local infrastructure. These issues have been raised at a national level, including within forums examining salmon stocks. Beaver impacts are currently being assessed, with findings expected to be presented to NatureScot and associated advisory groups. A final report is anticipated shortly.

At a local level, the board has begun developing a response plan, recognising the importance of being proactive. It is considered likely that beavers could enter the Deveron system via the River Isla. While NatureScot has classified the Deveron as a high-conflict area—making it less likely to be a priority for official reintroduction—experience elsewhere suggests that both legal and illegal releases can occur unexpectedly. As such, preparedness remains essential. It was also noted that beavers are legally protected, meaning any intervention would require appropriate licensing, which can complicate response efforts.

Members expressed concern about the practical realities of managing beaver populations. Questions were raised about whether licensing requirements would be strictly adhered to in practice and whether authorities might take a more permissive approach. Evidence from other areas indicates that beavers can cause significant issues, including blocking drainage systems, damaging farmland, and felling mature trees, some of which may be protected. These impacts can conflict directly with conservation efforts, such as tree planting initiatives aimed at improving river conditions for salmon.

While some areas have experienced relatively limited disruption, others have reported more severe consequences, particularly where agricultural drainage is affected. It was also noted that the suitability of habitats varies, with some regions offering more favourable conditions for beavers than others.

Ultimately, there was broad agreement that the arrival of beavers in the catchment is highly likely at some point, reinforcing the importance of having a clear and effective response strategy in place.

**Poultry Unit Expansion  
– Talk by Mr Dave Green**

Dave Green, Duncan Farms Ltd, kindly came to give us an overview of poultry production and outlined that agriculture in the region is undergoing a major transition, driven by market demand and changing production systems. There is a clear shift away from intensive farming towards more extensive systems, particularly in the poultry sector.

Historically, the area had large-scale pig and poultry production, with major facilities in Banff and Buckie producing up to 200,000 birds per week. Many of these have now closed, leading to a reduction in overall emissions, which are now lower than they were 25 years ago despite growth in some areas.

Traditional livestock sectors such as dairy and beef are declining, mainly due to economic pressures and labour shortages. In contrast, poultry—especially egg production—is growing, but in a different form: instead of large intensive units, production is now more dispersed and increasingly free-range.

This shift is largely driven by supermarkets committing to cage-free eggs by 2025. As a result, existing cage systems are being phased out and replaced with smaller free-range units. Although this increases the number of sites, emissions per unit are significantly lower, with free-range systems producing around 20% of the emissions of previous cage systems.

Overall, Dave emphasised that emissions—particularly ammonia—have declined over time, even in areas like the Deveron catchment where poultry farming is expanding.

Avian influenza has also influenced industry practices. Outbreaks have shown that high-density farming increases disease risk, encouraging producers to spread operations more widely rather than clustering them.

In comparison to areas such as the River Wye in England, where poultry farming is highly intensive, Aberdeenshire remains relatively low intensity, with significantly fewer birds and lower environmental pressure.

The sector is also tightly regulated. As a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone, Aberdeenshire has strict controls on nutrient management, including limits on manure spreading, buffer zones near watercourses, and environmental permits for larger units. Farmers must keep detailed records and meet compliance standards to protect water quality.

Finally, Dave highlighted that poultry manure is a valuable fertiliser when managed correctly. It provides readily available nutrients for crops but must be carefully controlled through soil testing and precision application. This supports a circular farming system, improving soil health and reducing reliance on artificial fertilisers.

Concerns were raised regarding water quality, particularly the impact of agricultural runoff. While modern regulations have improved practices, there remains a legacy of historical nutrient buildup, particularly phosphorus, which can continue to affect rivers for decades. Extreme weather events, such as heavy rainfall, can exacerbate these issues by increasing runoff. Changes in farming practices, including reduced grassland and increased arable production, may also contribute to soil erosion and nutrient loss.

**AOCB – Banff Bridge and Fish passage update**

An update was given on Phase Two of the Banff Bridge works, which began in mid-2025 and involved major structural improvements, including scour protection and reinforcement. The project is large and significant for the catchment.

Fish rescues were carried out to enable construction, and efforts were made to maintain the natural riverbed profile, although later structural changes altered some of this. Concerns about stability—particularly at the edges of the scour protection—have been addressed, with confirmation that large boulders have been installed beneath the surface. The works are expected to conclude early May.

From a fisheries perspective, there is no clear evidence that fish passage has been affected, although flow patterns may have changed slightly. Observations suggest fish are still able to pass through the bridge unimpeded during their normal run timings, and overall, the project is considered to have been well managed, despite some uncertainty about long-term impacts. The Trust Team has raised concerns with the contractor Story regarding loose mesh material and some metal pins that need to be rectified before leaving the site.

**AOCB – Poaching**

Poaching activity appears to have increased over the past year, possibly more than has been directly observed. In response, enforcement has been strengthened through the use of thermal drones, upgraded cameras, and

additional trained personnel, alongside improved coordination with Police Scotland, particularly during high-risk times such as evenings and weekends.

Although penalties have increased, securing prosecutions remains challenging due to difficulties in obtaining sufficient evidence and considerations around public interest. Despite this, it is hoped that greater enforcement presence and new technologies will act as an effective deterrent.

#### **AOCB – River Opening**

The board briefly reflected on the recent opening ceremony held in February, which was described as a successful and well-organised event. Most members had attended and agreed that it had been a positive occasion. Thanks were extended to those involved in organising the event, as well as to guest speakers Scott McKenzie and Anne McAlpine, who were commended for their contributions.

#### ***The meeting then focused on Trust Business.***

#### **Update on Financial Matters – Trust**

The trust, initially expected to run a deficit, is now projected to achieve a small surplus due to increased income from contract work and project funding. Income has risen by around £35,000, with costs well managed, leaving the trust in a strong financial position with no immediate concerns.

Improvements have also been made to financial management, including setting up an online deposit account to better utilise surplus funds, despite earlier banking challenges. Overall, the trust is well placed to continue and expand its work, although future funding remains dependent on securing ongoing grants and projects.

The current valuation of the Trust's investment with McInroy and Wood stands at **£177.817.06**.

#### **Report by Mr Miller & Mr Walters on DBI Trust work**

Mr Miller, Director and Mr Walters, River Operations Manager, had prepared a written report on the work of the Trust since the last Board Meeting and this was e-mailed to all members (**Detailed report available on request from the Clerk**).

General discussions were had on the topics below:

- Communications
- Scottish Invasive Species Initiative (SISI).
- Fishery Protection
- Water Scarcity & Water Temperature
- Bird Counts and license
- Health and Safety
- Windfarms

- Seal Licence
- Glenkeith Weir Fish Passage
- Project Deveron – Phase 1
- Project Deveron – Phase 2
- Deveron Agri – Environment Liaison
- Water Quality – River Bogie Pollution Incident
- Just transition Fund Bid – Moray Council
- Working with Rivers – Intern
- Beauly to Blackhillock to New Deer to Peterhead 400k OHL
- Banff Bridge Scour Protection
- Fish Disease
- Trust 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations

An update was provided on communications and outreach efforts, highlighting the importance of engaging with the wider public and increasing awareness of the trust's work. Various communication channels are now being used more actively, including social media platforms.

A particular success was noted in relation to a short film produced about the King Edward Dam project. The film, which is available online, has attracted over 40,000 views, significantly increasing visibility for the trust's work. The inclusion of local schools, such as Banff Academy, in outreach activities was also highlighted as a positive development. Students involved in the "Is a River Alive?" project participated in recent events, contributing poetry and reflections on the river, which added a valuable educational and community dimension.

The board received updates on a range of environmental monitoring and restoration initiatives. These include ongoing work to control invasive species such as Japanese knotweed and American mink, as well as broader habitat restoration efforts.

Tree planting projects are underway in several areas, with the aim of improving river conditions by providing shade and reducing water temperatures for fish. Additional measures include the installation of alternative livestock watering systems to reduce bank erosion and the expansion of buffer strips along watercourses.

Water quality monitoring remains a key priority. A recent incident involving a sewage leak was discussed, highlighting the importance of vigilance and rapid response. The issue was ultimately resolved, but only after persistent investigation and coordination with regulatory authorities.

Efforts are also underway to improve monitoring capacity, including the deployment of temperature loggers throughout the catchment and the use of environmental DNA (eDNA) analysis to assess biodiversity. These tools provide valuable data to inform future management decisions.

**Presentation by Mr Walters:** Marcus provided a detailed update on fish monitoring efforts, including developments in sonar technology and the use of artificial intelligence to analyse fish counts. Historically, fish counting has been a highly labour-intensive process, requiring manual annotation of thousands of observations. The introduction of AI has significantly improved efficiency, allowing large datasets to be processed more quickly while maintaining a high level of accuracy.

Initial results suggest that fish numbers for 2025 may be higher than previously assumed based on catch data alone. This highlights an important distinction between fish presence and fish catchability, with environmental conditions playing a significant role in determining angling success. For example, during periods of low water, fish may be present in the river but less likely to be caught.

The data also provides insights into smolt survival rates, with estimates suggesting that approximately 50–60% of smolts successfully reach the middle river. While there is still some uncertainty in these estimates, the results are broadly consistent with previous studies and provide a valuable baseline for future monitoring.

Looking ahead, the trust aims to strengthen collaboration with agricultural stakeholders and other organisations working within the catchment. A recent workshop involving farmers and environmental groups was described as a positive step towards building these relationships. The goal is to develop a more integrated approach to land and water management, addressing issues such as soil health, runoff, and habitat restoration.

Funding remains a key focus, with several applications submitted to support ongoing and future projects. While not all bids have been successful, there is confidence that continued effort will yield results. The trust is also exploring new funding opportunities, including partnerships with industry and government bodies.

**Trust 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations:** The trust will mark its 25th anniversary in 2026, celebrating 25 years since its establishment in 2001. A commemorative charitable dinner auction is planned for 4th September 2026, alongside initiatives such as a special edition anniversary Deveron Gin and short feature film.

## Health and Safety

It was noted that the introduction of new equipment—most notably the recently acquired drone—brings additional regulatory and operational requirements. Due to its weight and capabilities, the drone falls within a category that requires formal certification and training for operators. Appropriate training has been arranged and is scheduled to take place in the coming months to ensure compliance with aviation regulations and safe deployment in operational settings.

**Meeting closed at** Mr Allwood thanked everyone for attending  
**2:45pm** Next meeting – Thurs 25<sup>th</sup> June 2026 at 12pm.

## **Action Table:**

<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible</b>	<b>Details</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Develop Beaver Response Plan	Richie	Finalise a proactive response plan for potential beaver presence, including legal and operational steps.	December
Complete Drone Training & Certification	Richie / Team	Undertake required training for safe and compliant operation of new drone equipment.	Scheduled (May)
Deploy Surveillance Equipment	Richie / Marcus	Install and utilise new 4G cameras and thermal drone for monitoring and enforcement.	Ongoing
Expand Fish Monitoring Coverage	Marcus	Explore adding additional receivers further downstream to improve data accuracy.	Pending funding decision
Implement AI Fish Counting System	Marcus	Continue refining and validating AI system for fish counting and analysis.	Ongoing
Plan 25th Anniversary Event	Trust	Organise and deliver anniversary dinner and related activities.	September 2026