

Water of Leith Management Plan – 2025 Update and Report

By Helen Brown, Chief Executive September 2025

Introduction

The Water of Leith is one of Edinburgh’s most important natural and cultural assets. Since the launch of the Management Plan in 2020, partners including the City of Edinburgh Council, SEPA, Scottish Water, the Water of Leith Conservation Trust, Forth Ports, NatureScot and many community groups have worked together to deliver a wide range of projects. This five-year update highlights achievements to date, ongoing challenges, and future priorities across water management, biodiversity, access, education, heritage, landscape, and climate resilience.



Water Actions: Managing Flood Risk, Water Quality & River Health

Flood protection remains a central priority. A new catchment-wide flood risk model has been completed, providing an updated foundation for decision-making. Regular maintenance of flood defences, reservoirs, and dock water levels helps protect local communities, while online resources now give residents clear guidance on emergency flood response.

Water quality has been strengthened through SEPA’s chemical and biological monitoring, Scottish Water’s significant programme of sewer overflow upgrades, and new research into diffuse pollution. A live online map now tracks sewer overflow activity, providing greater transparency.

Ecological health is supported by management of flows, water scarcity planning, and work to restore natural riverbanks. While large-scale removal of barriers to fish passage is unlikely in the near future due to high costs, opportunities for smaller habitat and morphological improvements continue to be explored.

River clean-up remain a key management action with over 2400 hours spent annually on removal of litter including 12 boat based clean-ups in Leith



Habitats & Species: Boosting Biodiversity

Biodiversity is at the heart of the Management Plan. Over the past five years:

- **New habitats have been created**, with 11 “Biodiversity Boost” sites established, ranging from large meadows to pocket habitats, plus the river has seen the installation of two biomatrix platforms in Leith
- **Invasive species management** remains a challenge, but volunteer action has delivered extensive control of Giant Hogweed, Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan balsam, including herbicide-free trials.

- **Citizen science has flourished**, with dozens of annual surveys monitoring meadows, river flies, fungi, breeding sites, bats and pollinator transects. Plus over 250 annual patrols recording walkway use, issues and river wildlife.
- **Nature based solutions** have sprung up along the river including willow spiling and bank stabilisation project, planting and brush fences to slow runoff and tree planting contributing to Edinburgh’s Million Tree City initiative, with further woodland creation under development.

Looking ahead, plans include wetland and peatland restoration in the Pentlands, designed to enhance biodiversity while storing carbon and supporting climate resilience.



Access & Recreation: Improving the Walkway

The Water of Leith Walkway is one of Edinburgh’s most valued green corridors, and maintaining it is a core focus. Regular volunteer-led maintenance keeps the paths safe and welcoming, supported by upgrades such as resurfacing from Balerno to Slateford and improvements at St Marks Park. During the life of this plan the Coalie Park Improvement Project has completed the transformation of a neglected and overlooked part of the river, creating a vibrant and accessible space.

The challenges of maintaining 13 miles of walkway has seen significant investment in repairs and renewals, including major structural repairs after landslides, installation of two new bridges and many maintenance projects, with further work planned at key sites. Path surfaces, railings, and lighting are being improved where appropriate, balancing accessibility with protection of the river’s rural character.

Connectivity projects continue to expand links between neighbourhoods and the wider active travel network. Signage and wayfinding have been upgraded in several areas, with further work planned to unify interpretation across the route. Heritage signs are being restored, and creative placemaking projects, including murals and mosaics, are enhancing the walkway’s cultural identity, including the outstanding Colinton Tunnel.

Inclusive access is a growing priority, with scoping underway for a wheelchair-accessible route between Balerno and Murrayfield. Walkway use is monitored through counters and patrols, while events, guided walks, and cultural projects encourage people of all ages to enjoy the river.



Education & Engagement: Inspiring Stewardship

Community involvement is essential to the river’s future. The Water of Leith Conservation Trust supports an active network of local groups, business and volunteers, from Balerno to Leith, who help care for habitats and public spaces. Volunteers contribute more than 7,000 hours each year through clean-ups, habitat work, and maintenance.

Education programmes have also grown significantly. In 2024 alone, more than 170 school sessions, guided walks, and community events were delivered, bringing the river's ecology and heritage to life for thousands of people. The Visitor Centre continues to act as a hub for outreach, with new interpretation and digital resources expanding its reach.

Public interpretation has been enhanced with updated trails, apps, and digital media, telling the story of the river's wildlife, history, and culture. Initiatives such as the Colinton Tunnel artwork and Antony Gormley's "6 Times" sculptures showcase the river's role as both a natural and cultural landmark.



Heritage: Protecting Cultural Assets

The Water of Leith is not only a natural treasure but also a rich cultural landscape. An audit of heritage features would help to catalogue historic structures, weirs, and archaeological features, mapping locations and identifying features at risk. Victoria and Rennie's Island bridges in Leith have been renovated and repairs have been carried out to quayside walls at Coalie Park (Leith) and Craiglockhart Grotto. However further investment in preservation is required.

Heritage is increasingly integrated into planning frameworks, ensuring new development respects and enhances the river corridor. Recent work has contributed to the updated World Heritage Site Management Plan and to conservation efforts in Leith and Dean Valley.

Work in the Dean Valley continues to focus on vegetation management, with major structural repairs and placemaking taking place at Lindsays Mill, with funding being sought for further improvements. Public engagement remains central. Interpretation boards, printed material, open days at historic buildings, and heritage-themed events bring the story of the river to life for residents and visitors alike.

Landscape & Geodiversity: Celebrating Character

The landscape and geological features of the Water of Leith are an important part of its identity. The adoption of City Plan 2030 has strengthened protection for these assets, although further work is needed to assess undesignated areas and monitor pressures on the river's setting.

Historic landscapes, such as designed gardens and cemeteries, are being surveyed to understand their contribution to the river's character, while Local Geodiversity Sites are monitored for issues such as erosion and access.

Public engagement is supported through Edinburgh Geological Society leaflets, guided walks, and interpretation materials, helping to share the story of the river's geology alongside its natural and cultural heritage.



Planning & Climate Resilience: Preparing for the Future

The river corridor is a vital part of Edinburgh’s response to climate change. The Management Plan has influenced citywide planning policies, strengthening requirements for green infrastructure, biodiversity, and ecological connectivity. Local stakeholder groups are helping shape development in sensitive areas such as the Dean Valley and Leith Waterfront.

Nature-based solutions are at the heart of climate resilience efforts. These include floodplain habitat creation, woodland expansion, and peatland restoration, which together enhance biodiversity, improve water storage, and capture carbon.

The Water of Leith Conservation Trust has also adopted its own Net Zero and Zero Waste strategy, supporting the city’s wider climate goals. Work is underway to establish a monitoring programme for climate change impacts, ensuring the river continues to be managed as a resilient, living system.

Conclusion

Five years into the Water of Leith Management Plan, real progress has been made in strengthening flood protection, improving water quality, enhancing biodiversity, upgrading access, and celebrating the river’s heritage. These achievements are the result of close collaboration between public bodies, community groups, and residents.

Challenges remain—particularly around invasive species, climate change resilience and funding for major restoration projects. But with strong partnerships, active community involvement, and a clear strategic framework, the Water of Leith is better placed than ever to meet the challenges of climate change and urban growth while continuing to enrich the lives of the people and wildlife of Edinburgh.