



NGB Case Study and Report: Athletics Ireland - Forerunners

What was the programme?

Launched in 2020, Athletics Ireland pilot female leadership programme, Forerunners, was recognised as a key programme to address current gaps and future opportunities for women in sport, and as a result provide a pathway for women aspiring to become leaders in their clubs, regions and on a national level. The Forerunners programme predominantly focused on coaching, club development, communication and connectivity. This was Athletics Ireland's first step in implementing a strategy for identification, recruitment, and development of women in decision-making roles and supporting them through networking and mentoring. The Forerunners content predominantly revolved around Leadership & Culture, Networking & Collaboration, Change Management and Performing under Pressure. All topics aimed to provide the necessary training and expertise to empower the women to thrive in their leadership positions within the sport.

How did you implement it?

The programme was originally due to take place over three Saturdays in 2020, however a total number of 11 sessions took place between February 2020 and February 2021. A number of highly qualified speakers, mentors and contributors delivered the programme and offered support and insights on personal and leadership development. These included Moira Aston (CEO of Canoeing Ireland), Sinead Galvin (Galvin Sports Management), Mark Prendergast (Prendergast Leadership), Jessie Barr (Accredited Sport & Performance Psychologist), Brid Golden (Chairperson of Athletics Ireland's Coaching & Development committee), and Clíodhna O'Connor (Coach educator and athlete developer LGFA).

Participants benefited from the mentor support throughout the course of the programme, which they noted was crucial to furthering their overall development. Mentors became a source of inspiration and support to the participants throughout the course of the programme and helped them become more informed, skilled, self-directed and reflective individuals.

Any additional benefits?

An overriding benefit of the programme was the development of the Forerunners network. The women involved emphasised the benefits of accessing both a coaching and leadership network as it offered greater support to all involved and enabled shared learning amongst participants. It enabled those involved to build and develop positive relationships with other like-minded women, and those who have key experience and expertise in other elements of the sport. Many of the participants link in with one and other to navigate through the various challenges posed throughout the year.

What were your outcomes?

1. Identify and recognize the participants involved and role they undertake in athletics,
2. Identify and agree principles and behaviors throughout the programme,
3. Define roles, responsibilities and support mechanisms for the future of Forerunners,



4. Improve the management and leadership skills of participants,
5. Improve the confidence of participants,
6. Provide mentoring and networking opportunities for all participants.

Did you achieve your outcomes?

Overall, the first pilot programme of Forerunners was very successful and the overall ratings and experiences of the participants were overwhelmingly positive. Athletics Ireland are keen to ensure that the participants are supported throughout and after the programme with ongoing CPD offered.

Programme Results	Percent
Achieved initial goals	100%
More vocal within their roles	73%
Improved confidence to lead	82%
Increase in leadership skills	82%
Increase in communication skills	73%%
Increase working efficiency with their athletes	77%
Increase in softer skills	73%
Increase in network	82%

What would you change if you ran the programme again?

- While online meetings and interaction is beneficial, a programme of this nature thrives with face-to-face contact. Day one of the programme was face to face and the energy generated was apparent. It really provided participants with the opportunity to mix and integrate.
- Try to increase the networking possibilities for the participants in order to enhance their sense of connection to the other women. For example, provide homework / activities that small groups have to do in between sessions. This way, they will get in touch more frequently and the different sessions can also be connected.
- The mentoring element of the programme could remain an online component. This would lessen time and travel commitments of both the mentor and participant.
- Programme certification of some sort.

Any other feedback from the programme?

Leadership programmes are essential for women in sport, not just for the participants involved but the NGBs rolling out the programmes. NGBs heavily rely on volunteers in their sport and if their needs and wants are not reflected, and they do not feel supported accordingly, it will affect the growth and development of the sport. NGB's must be a true reflection of the membership and the people it represents. Leadership and networking opportunities for women in particular is merely the conduit to something much greater!