



Canoeing Ireland - Bridge The Gap Ambassador Programme

Provide a brief description of the Programme/Initiative/Event

Canoeing Ireland's Bridge the Gap Women in Paddlesports initiative was set up to help increase the number of females participating regularly in paddlesports and taking on leadership roles in the sport. Its multi-strand approach supports all four target areas of the Sport Ireland Policy on Women in Sport (Visibility, Coaching and Officiating, Leadership and Governance, Active Participation). A group of 35 Ambassadors for women's paddling was established across the 11 unique disciplines in paddlesports. The Bridge the Gap Ambassadors represent all areas in paddlesports, including coaches, instructors, athletes, committee members, clubs, providers, inclusion coaches, university students and scouts.

What are the aims of the Programme/Initiative/Event?

The overall aim of the Bridge the Gap Ambassadors programme is to upskill, educate and promote key female role models from varying paddlesport disciplines. These role models help encourage more females to take up paddlesports, to progress in their discipline and to increase female coaches, instructors and judges. All 35 Ambassadors are part of a leadership development programme run by the NGB. It is envisaged that some of the Ambassadors may progress to sub-committees and other governance roles following completion of the programme. As part of the leadership programme, the ambassadors explored necessary developments/improvements for each paddling discipline to make it more inclusive to females. These leaders committed to working together to help implement necessary developments to provide girls and young women a pathway in paddlesports and encourage others to join through innovative participation projects. To support other females, the Ambassadors agreed to mentor two females from their own paddling community. Canoeing Ireland's aim for visibility is to reach a target of 50:50 male/female representation across all social media platforms and media content. From a visibility perspective, extensive promotion of the Ambassadors across social media occurs and each are provided with branded clothing for competitions and training.

Please list the steps involved in implementing the project

The programme was launched in early December 2019. Females were nominated to become a Bridge the Gap Ambassador by committees and through recognition of their achievements by experts in their disciplines. In order to inform Canoeing Ireland members, a dedicated Bridge the Gap Instagram page and webpage was developed.



How did you promote your programme in order to get participants?

Canoeing Ireland circulated a document to all nine technical sub committees and thirteen outdoor education and training centres, which outlined the criteria for nominations of women who have made an impact in their discipline, or in their local communities. The women nominated were contacted and the details of the programme were outlined, along with an invitation to attend an information evening and workshop.

What were the outcomes of the Programme/Initiative/Event?

Initially Canoeing Ireland had a number of expected outcomes from the Bridge the Gap Ambassador Programme.

1. Increase connectivity and grow a network between the women leading the way in the various paddling communities in Ireland.
2. Bring the Ambassadors leadership skills to a higher and more professional level in terms of personal skills as opposed to hard skills training.
3. Have the group of ambassadors more comfortable with taking on leadership challenges such as conflict management, positive persuasion, voicing opinions and being heard, and understanding different personalities and approaches to working with them.

The outcomes which came as a result of the Bridge the Gap Ambassador Programme have far exceeded Canoeing Ireland's expectations. The communication network between the Ambassador group and the wider community has grown massively with female members getting in touch through most disciplines on ways that they want to help and become involved. The level of collaboration between Ambassadors and the projects they want to carry out with their communities has been inspirational.

All members of Canoeing Ireland now have strong, visible female Ambassadors as role models to look to towards who are more than happy to listen to their suggestions on growing women's opportunities within their discipline.

What are the next steps for the Programme/Initiative/Event?

The Bridge the Gap Ambassadors are all working on individual projects which will help to develop the various Women in Sport areas of development (Visibility, Coaching & Officiating, Leadership & Governance, and Active Participation). The next step is to adapt these projects to the restrictions brought about by Covid-19 and carry out as many of them as is possible.



Projects include:

- High Performance Training Camps for junior girls in Sprint/Marathon, Freestyle & Slalom
- Specific Coaching Clinics for female university students
- Casual Mentoring for at least 2 women/girls for each of 35 ambassadors – some encouraged to develop new instructors/coaches
- Training development days for women/girls in various disciplines
- Multi-discipline events which are accessible for all abilities
- Research into why women have stopped paddling
- Workshops on fear management on the water
- Increase the number of women who attend events and competitions
- Providing women's introductory courses
- Developing opportunities for our competitive female juniors to meet and train together by club meet up days.
- Joining club/discipline committees and Joining Board of Directors
- Growing our social media presence for women through various platforms
- Reach record numbers of female attendance at all events.
- Promote all of our female members and their achievements

“I’ve engaged with many outdoor coaching and instructor courses, but felt this programme really enhanced my own personal skills in a way that other programmes didn’t. I feel much more confident to be assertive in leadership scenarios and understanding of the different personalities I will have to work with. The soft-skills I have picked up from the programme compliment my professional skill set brilliantly. I am delighted to be involved”

– Sheelagh Hennessy

“Being chosen to be on the Ambassador programme for Bridge the Gap came at a crucial time for me because I had just given birth. While doing my degree in outdoor education I researched the issues that women and girls face when participating and achieving longevity in adventure sports. So I knew continuing my career and even just participating in kayaking was going to be an uphill battle post birth. Being a part of this programme has motivated me to work at getting my skill level back on track. It has boosted my confidence to build relationships in my paddling community that will not only support my leadership development but will help me to make avenues for women and girls into the sport more accessible, where they were not before”. – Sara Mason