

Belfast Kayak Club

Chairperson's Report for Year Ending 31st Dec 2023

Activities and Developments during 2023

The membership by the end of 2023 was a total of 183 members comprising 114 existing members and 69 new members. Some of these new members were already experienced paddlers but a large majority had come through our sets of Introductory Skills Sessions. I think that this high proportion of inexperienced new members brings the club its greatest challenge as we must try to provide opportunities for them to develop their paddling skills on an on-going basis in a welcoming environment.

Olly is the first point of contact for this group and he does fantastic work in communicating with them about the Introductory Skill Sessions.

We are indebted to Rory O'C for constructing a questionnaire to help the Committee, and club in general, understand the paddling backgrounds, aspirations and assessment of the club from as many members as possible. Rory put together excellent graphics to summarise the responses from the 62 respondents. I'm just going to pick out some of the findings that seemed most pertinent to me.

What folk most sought from the club were opportunities for exercise, formal training and skill development opportunities, followed by opportunities to make new friends, About thirty per cent of respondents found it difficult to attend paddles posted at short notice. Sixty three per cent of respondents gave an 8, 9 or 10 out of ten when rating how welcome they felt in the club. Ninety seven per cent rated the welcome at 7 or above out of 10.

Sharon McC in her role as a Committee member proposed that we should have an informal Welcoming Group. This group is now up and running and comprises Sharon McC, Joy T, Rory O'C, Sinead McM, Declan C and Sean D. The group is actively trying to maintain contact with folk after they do their set of Introductory Skill Sessions to try and make them feel embedded within the club and also to learn what they would like to receive from the club.

The club ran multiple sets of four weekly introductory skill sessions in the the three disciplines, Whitewater Kayaking, Open Boating and Sea Kayaking, many paddles during the year. Our Training Officer, Malcolm will present wonderful data that gives a unique insight into all our activities.

From my perspective as a sea kayaker I'm aware that there is some concern that the number of paddles suitable for the folk who came through our introductory skill sessions was on the low side. This is especially true for the folk on the autumn series. As I was putting together this report I wondered if we should omit the autumn set of Introductory Skill Sessions to free up four days when we might post easy paddles or offer further training for the folk attending the two sets of Skill Sessions offered in May/June.

The survey and responses given recently to Sharon indicate that folk would like a structured path through the tier of BC Awards, starting with the Discover Award. There is also a real need to give time for the Development of our Coaches and Leaders. These questions are for the Committee to decide of course. To my mind we can only to our best to meet these aspirations and needs as we are a group of volunteers with multiple claims on our time.

Pool Sessions

We are indebted to Sharon McC for giving so much time to organise the sets of four weekly sessions in the Ormiston Pool. This a relatively large pool and is an ideal facility for all kinds of paddling skills.

Grants

We received 50% grant support from Ards and North Down Borough Council for four new sea boats, an HV and an LV Scorpio, another Perception Essence 16 and a Wavesport Hydra HV. We also received a 50% grant for a Venture Prospector 155 open boat and a SUP board, the latter two items will help in the delivery of the Paddlesport Safety and Rescue Course (FSRT).

Achievement of British Canoeing/BC Awards

Congratulations to the following members for achieving the following BC awards- Darren G, Nigel C, Gavin McPh and Roisin W achieved the Sea Kayak Award, Scott Templeton achieved the Paddlesport Leader Award
Simon E has become a Paddlesport Safety and Rescue Course Provider- the old FSRT and completed the Advanced Whitewater Safety and Rescue Course
Joe R achieved the Sea Kayak Coach Award
Greg has just been signed off as a Provider of the Sea Kayak Safety and Rescue Course

Three members achieved the Sea Kayak Award Leader- Alex McC, Pete C and Mark L. Willie S achieved The Advanced Sea Kayak Leader Award.

The above group of sea paddlers took every opportunity to prepare for assessment on Intermediate/Advanced club paddles, which were most often posted by Peter K and Willie S. Other less experienced paddlers also signed up on these Intermediate paddles and were able to develop their paddling skills in more challenging conditions.

Killyleagh as an additional focus for club paddling

BKC pays monthly rental for a space in the new boat park in Killyleagh which is currently securely fenced and contains several large craft. We have always felt that club kayaks and canoes should be stored inside a container in the facility but the application for grant aid for containers for ourselves and our partner in the grant application process has proved to be very problematic. If this continues to be the case we will have to look at spending the very significant cost of buying a container without grant aid.

Change in club Officers

I would like to say a very big thank-you to Carl as he retires from the role of Club Treasurer after six years- the maximum allowed in one stretch as per our Constitution. Carl is also stepping down from Committee to give someone else the opportunity to join it. Besides the exacting and relentless work of Treasurer most of us know that Carl contributes so much more to the club. He has helped and advised many new members when they are considering buying their first boat, ordered all our new equipment, kept a watchful eye on all existing club equipment, posted some of the most heavily subscribed beginners' paddles and encouraged others to post beginners' paddles.

We are very fortunate and grateful that committee member Deborah B has very kindly agreed to take on the role/ work load of Club Treasurer.

I would also like to thank John Cunningham for his tenure as one of the two Club Safeguarding Officers and report that Greg has been appointed to take John's place.

Looking Forward

It has now been confirmed that, our governing body, will phase out the recognition of EPs/Experienced paddlers approved by individual club Committees by 2026. This change means that there will be an increased need for Whitewater and Sea Kayak Leaders to meet the BC ratios, particularly on those paddles with a fairly big number attending. This in turn leads to an increased need to encourage and help existing EPs to develop their leadership and paddling skills to achieve the Paddlesport Touring Leader, Whitewater Kayak Leader or Sea Kayak Leader Award. BC Awarding Body's descriptions of the environments which these awards match are in the Document Section of our Resources section on the website.

There will be a significant cost of the above to the club as the Committee will aim to continue to support written applications for the cost of 50% of the training and 100% of the assessment of those BC awards which benefit club members- essentially the coaching and leadership awards. The individuals must have a track record in supporting club paddles and applicants must undertake in writing to develop/continue their support in line with their BC award.

We will continue to cover the cost of the two day First Aid Courses which are required by all our EPs, unfortunately almost all of these are due for renewal in May or June of this year. In line with our belief that members who give their time to coach and lead within the club should not be out of pocket the difference between the cost of Affiliate membership and the Full Governing Body membership required by all our EPs will be met by the club.

Water Safety Days

We will continue to support the Water Safety Days held in a number of the North Down ports.

MND Ireland

There is a special event pencilled in for the 20th April when the hope/plan is that multiple small teams of paddlers will circumnavigate all of Ireland on the one day. Many of us know that a very highly regarded Donegal paddler is suffering from this grim disease. BKC members have been asked to lead a total of five legs on the north east coast of Ireland.

We hope that you will want to support this very deserving charity. We hope to run our own MND Ireland paddle on another date in which more folk can paddle and raise funds.

The 'Bangor Bay' Race in aid of RNLI

The committee explored the possibility of re-instating this race but found it wasn't financially viable as a fund raiser. However, we hope to run a similar race in Strangford Lough in conjunction with the East Down Yacht Club. This is the 200th anniversary of RNLI and so we hope that members will support the event.

I hope that this report is an accurate overview of the activities and ethos of BKC in 2022-23.

Patricia Scovell
Chairperson