



# EXPERIENCES, BARRIERS & FACILITATORS IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND SAILING WOMEN AND GIRLS' PATHWAY

PROJECT RERPORT &  
RECOMMENDATIONS

Dr Emma Vickers





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# INTRODUCTION

In late 2022, RYA NI began a research project through an independent researcher who has no connection with the organisation, centred on women and girls' experiences, barriers, and facilitators in the Northern Ireland (NI) sailing pathway.

In the sport of sailing in NI, as of May 2023, female membership is currently at about 1/3 of males (3467/9753), which is higher compared to some sports. However, this does not resonate into wider roles in the sport, including commodores (which stand at less than 10% female), and wider aspects of the sport such as governance, and work-based roles.

The overarching aim of this research was to explore women and girls' sailing experiences within NI across all levels of participation (e.g., social level sailors to high performance). Specific focus areas included:

- Understanding the barriers to taking part in sailing and reasons for dropping out
- Understanding women and girls' motivations across different levels of the sport and how better support can be provided to enable women and girls to progress
- Understanding what would enable more women and girls to start or continue their participation, take part more regularly (including in events), and pursue a career in the sport
- Understanding experiences and motivators for women and girls to join workforce and volunteer-based roles

First, a summary of key findings will be presented, followed by how the research was conducted. An overview of key stats and figures from the survey, followed by the focus group and interview findings will then be discussed. Finally, recommendations for RYA NI to consider actioning to optimise women and girls' experiences will be presented.

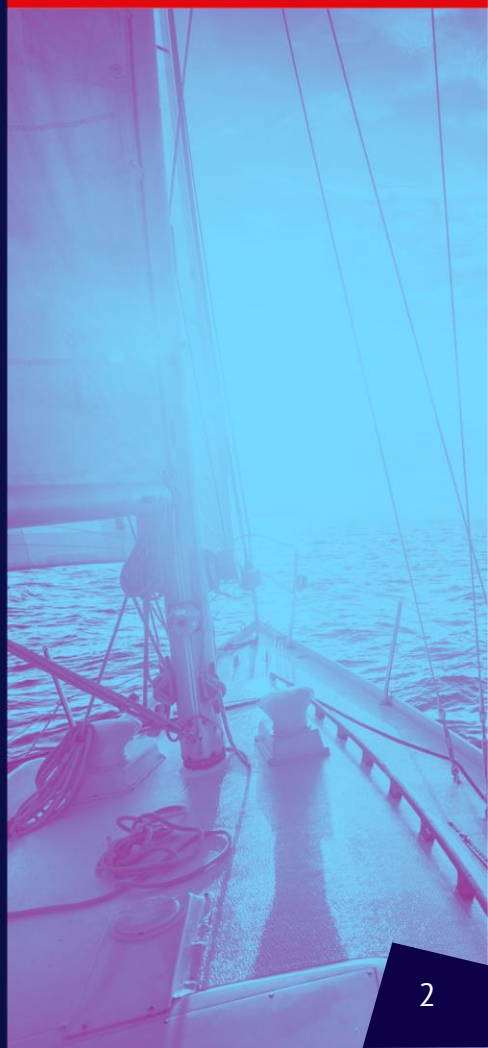
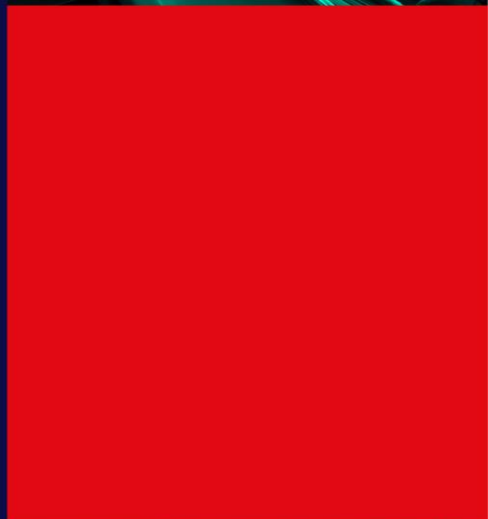




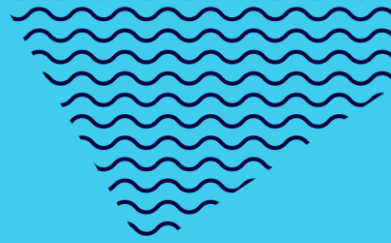
# SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Below is a summary of some of the key findings from this project:

- Routes into the sport for beginner level adult females are difficult, with many engaging for short periods and dropping out quickly (40yrs was the average dropout age from this project)
- Sailing is a family orientated & generational sport, and not as straightforward for females to enter the sport when they have no previous connections
- Motives for females to take part in sailing are primarily intrinsic (e.g., challenging self, social, wellbeing)
- Females want more opportunities to sail socially without the pressure of racing, but access to boats is challenging
- Lack of visibility of females from all corners of sailing is a barrier to participation, and role models need to be age, level, and role specific
- Many females are motivated to get into big boat sailing but lack awareness of how to do so
- Male dominance in the sport is a barrier to females in many ways, both on and off the water, and was the most discussed topic within this project
- Race officiating is an area many female sailors are inspired to pursue but lack awareness of pathways and commitment
- Many females in the pathway squads feel that their opportunities to pursue sailing as a career are limited and feel pushed out of the competitive side of the sport too young
- Females are happy to engage in mixed gender sailing, but prefer to sail with those at the same level/experience as them
- Poor changing facilities can be a major barrier for females engaging in the sport
- The Women on Water (WOW) programme has been successful in inspiring women to get into sailing, but is only a gateway into the sport, with wider considerations needed around sustained involvement
- WOW is not attractive to women who already have experience in the sport and are looking to refresh skills and regain their confidence
- The WOW branding could be used for a series of new programme strands (e.g., WOW social, teenager, compete skills, refresh, and more!)



# RESEARCH OVERVIEW



## STRUCTURE

This research used a two-phased approach, incorporating both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group & interviews) elements.

### PART 1 - SURVEY

Part 1 of the research was to administer a survey that was shared by RYA NI via social media and to its female membership. The survey required participants to answer several demographic questions (e.g., age, level competed at, location), and identify their current status within sailing (i.e., no longer sailing, sail for fun and have never competed before, sail regularly but no longer compete in events, sail regularly and compete in events). Depending on the sailor's current status within the sport, they were asked further questions around what facilitates their engagement, what led to their drop out, experiences across a variety of areas, and feedback they had for RYA NI.

Inclusion criteria for the survey was as follows:

- (a) a female aged 13+
- (b) living in or from Northern Ireland
- (c) have engaged in the sport of sailing at any level (i.e., all the way from sailing socially to elite performance)
- (d) a current sailor OR someone who has stopped sailing

Where appropriate, younger sailors were advised to be supported by their parents to complete the survey.

### PART 2 - FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

Although survey data can give you a general overview of what the important factors around engagement and dropout may be, collecting qualitative data through focus groups and interview provides data that is more in-depth, and helps to better understand participant experience.

5 focus groups and 5 interviews were conducted across March-April 2023.

#### Focus Groups:

- 1 x parents of youth female sailors
- 2 x social level sailors
- 1 x RYA NI staff
- 1 x current/former elite female sailors

#### Interviews:

- 1 x national level sailor
- 1 x parent
- 1 x former international level sailor
- 1 x female coach
- 1 x social level sailor



# PART 1

# SAILOR DEMOGRAPHICS & SURVEY STATS



# FEMALE SAILOR INFORMATION

## DEMOGRAPHICS

100

Female sailors completed the survey

100%

Of sailors were of white ethnicity

42

Was the average female age (ranging from 13 to 81)

18%

Identified as having a physical or mental health conditions or illnesses that have lasted or are expected to last 12 months or more

Example conditions included: ADHD, autism, asthma, fibromyalgia chronic fatigue, rheumatoid arthritis, lower back pain, depression, multiple sclerosis, cancer

59%

Identified as being from Down

(Antrim - 28%, Fermanagh - 3%, Londonderry - 4%, Tyrone - 2%, not currently living in NI - 4%)

Areas that sailors access the water varied, with the three most common being: Ballyhome Yacht Club, East Down Yacht, East Antrim Boat Club

58%

Have never sailed outside of Northern Ireland

Example locations of those that have included: USA, London, Galway, Dublin, Greece, Devon, Australia, Canada, Italy, Scotland, Dubai



# LEVEL & CURRENT STATUS

## LEVEL

Sailors were asked to outline the highest level that they had reached.



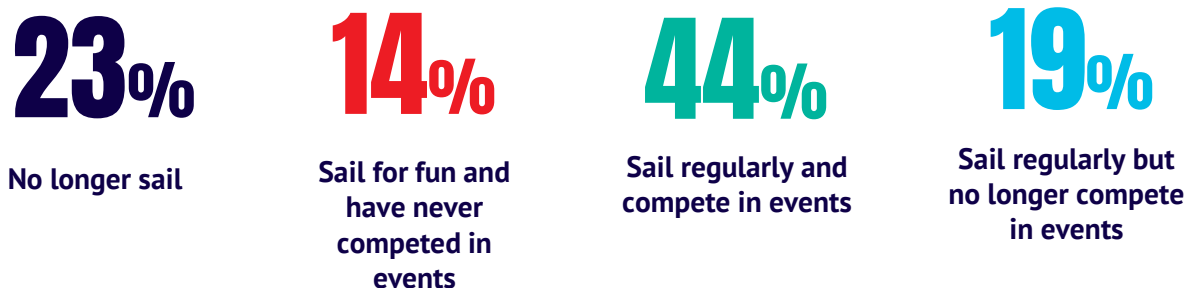
Please note that these are the highest levels achieved by sailors and may **not be their current level**. Many sailors will have moved from an international level to a lower, participatory level.

Only 4 sailors outlined as having progressed from Junior (U16s) to Youth (U19s or U21/23 depending on class) to the senior level.

14 sailors outlined that they had competed at a senior international level.

## STATUS IN THE SPORT

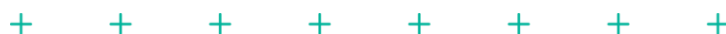
Sailors were asked to identify their current status within sailing so that they could be asked more targeted questions. Many of the females identified as regularly sailing and competing.



### Interesting stats around status:

- The average age of females regularly sailing and competing is **39yrs**
- **93%** of sailors that regularly compete have taken part in club racing
- Females that regularly compete **start sailing earlier** than those that have never competed (on average at age 15 vs.26 yrs), suggesting that earlier entry to the sport supports engagement in racing
- Females that regularly compete are sailing in most cases around 1 to 3 times per week
- The average age of females that regularly compete is less than those that no longer compete (38 vs. 45 yrs)

It is important to note here that the survey targeted females aged 13+, participation is more balanced in the U13 age group.





# STARTING THE SAILING JOURNEY

# 18.8yrs

Is the average age that females started sailing

Entry into the sport ranged from age 1 to 59 years

Entry into sailing varied for sailors at different levels of the sport. As expected, sailors that identified their highest level as being international, start sailing much earlier than social level sailors

International sailors - 8.7 years

Social/recreational sailors - 28 years

## How did females start sailing...

The TOP 4 most popular ways included:

51%

Through a family member

16%

Through friends

12%

Live close to places to sail

9%

Through an RYA initiative

The most popular family member to have supported entry into the sport was a **Father.**

Initiatives included Women on Water (WOW), council dinghy programmes & RYA schemes  
Thoughts and experiences of WOW and its legacy will be discussed later...

From the results, it is clear that sailing is a family orientated & generational sport, and not as straightforward for females to enter the sport when they have no previous connections. Female sailors are **twice as likely to have dropped out** when they entered the sport via another means other than their family link.

**“Loved it! I am still close friends with many of the women who I met on the (WOW) programme. We were all very enthusiastic to keep sailing at the time.”** (Survey)

**“Beautifully supportive and absolutely eye opening.”** (Survey)



# DROP OUT OF SAILING

## WHAT AGE DID FEMALE SAILORS DROP OUT?

23% of female sailors that completed the survey had dropped out of the sport.

# 40yrs

Is the average age that this group of female sailors dropped out of the sport

Length of time spent in the sport before drop out ranged from less than a year to 64 years (average – 18 years)

Exit from sailing varied for female sailors at different levels in the sport. The more elite and experienced a sailor became, the longer they stayed in the sport for. This is in contrast to research from other sports that has suggested that the more elite an athlete is, the earlier they leave the sport and stop competing.

Social/recreational sailor drop out age – **average 37 yrs**

International sailor drop out – **average 54 yrs**

Discussion about barriers to engage in the sport which could lead to drop out are discussed in greater depth in Part 2.

## REASONS FEMALES EXIT SAILING

Reasons identified by sailors for dropout varied significantly, with no clear outstanding reason.

### TOP 5 reasons were:

- Education or work commitments restrict ability to sail
- Childcare responsibilities
- Found a new activity such as a new sport
- Limited opportunities to sail with people in own age group
- Injury or mobility related issues (including disabilities)

**25%** of those that dropped out of sailing had a physical or mental health condition

Only **8.6%** of those that identified as having dropped out have sailed at international level, suggesting that opportunities for beginner/intermediate level sailors may be less accessible.

### When asked to expand on the reasons they stopped sailing, comments included:

- “Being made to feel more welcome as a female new to sailing”
- “Can’t easily get on the boat and then limited ability to move when onboard”
- “Limited support from club for adult beginner sailors. Rescue only available for racing and too nervous to sail without rescue”
- “I needed family buy-in as a parent of a disabled child and water shy teenager”
- “The ability to understand the course, and nowhere to comfortably get changed.”
- “Could not find a club for leisure sailing”



# ARE FEMALES INTERESTED IN RE-ENGAGING WITH SAILING IN THE FUTURE?

What would support female re-engagement...

## TOP 5

Reasons outlined by female sailors...

- **The most popular option by some way was opportunities to sail with other females on a social basis** (average age who stated this was 46yrs)
- More opportunities to be coached (average age who stated this was 41yrs)
- More RYA initiatives for women & girls (further thoughts on this in Part 2)
- Opportunities to hire a boat (discussed further in Part 2)
- A change in the culture of the sport, such as more value and respect for women and girls' engagement (this will be discussed in greater depth in Part 2)

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# 83%

Said YES - they would be interested in starting to sail again

Physical health was the main reason females said they would not re-engage with sailing after dropping out



**FEMALES WANT MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO SAIL SOCIALLY WITHOUT THE PRESSURE OF RACING & OPPORTUNITIES TO SAIL WITH OTHER FEMALES**



# COMPETITIVE EVENTS

## WHAT COMPETITIVE EVENTS HAVE FEMALE SAILORS TAKEN PART IN?

### Sailors had taken part in a range of events:

- RYA events – 47%
- Club events – 81%
- Class Association - 55%
- Events outside of Ireland - 37%

11%

Of female sailors had never taken part in an event before

**Reasons included:** don't feel ready or confident enough, never been presented with the opportunity or no local events, & only want to sail for fun - no interest in competing.

Events outside of Ireland varied, including British, European & World Championships, international regattas & opens, university events, race weeks, and more.

19% of female sailors used to compete, but no longer do.

Reasons for no longer competing varied, including; age, events do not support progression in the sport, family commitments, difficulty due to not owning a boat, travel, health constraints, and limited opportunities to compete in favourite class (due to age). However, the standout reason was simply having **limited time due to work/education commitments**, suggesting that there is still a desire from many in the female sailing community to start competing again...

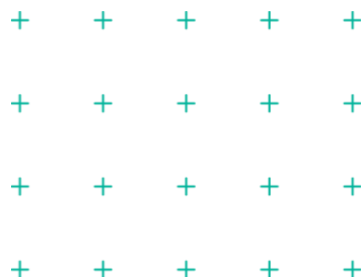
84%

Of female sailors that stopped competing said YES, they would be interested in competing again one day

91%

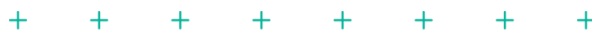
Of sailors that regularly compete own a boat (either on their own or shared ownership)

Competitions are discussed further in Part 2 of the report



# TYPES OF SAILING & BOAT OWNERSHIP

## TYPES OF EVENTS SAILING TAKEN PART IN



The most popular forms of sailing were as follows:

62%

Had sailed a single-handed dinghy

64%

Had sailed a double-handed dinghy

56%

Had taken part in keelboat racing

40%

Had taken part in cruising

The least popular forms of sailing were foiling (no sailors outlined that they took part in this form of sailing), and windsurfing (only 7% had taken part)

### Interesting stats around types of sailing:

- Average age of sailors that have taken part in cruising – 53 years
- Keelboat sailing was the most popular form of sailing for those at the social/recreational & club racing level
- Single handed sailing was the most popular form of sailing for those at the national & international level
- Those that sail a single-handed dinghy are more likely to own a boat on their own

## BOAT OWNERSHIP

55%

Owned their own boat

21%

Owned a boat through shared ownership

24%

Did not own a boat

The top reason for not owning a boat was the **expense**. However, further reasons outlined included; needing full family buy in, too young, don't sail enough or not experienced enough, big responsibility, crewing to gain experience on the water before deciding which type of sailing is preferred, not sure about how to manage a boat.

46%

Would you be interested in boat ownership if RYA NI provided further information about shared ownership options.



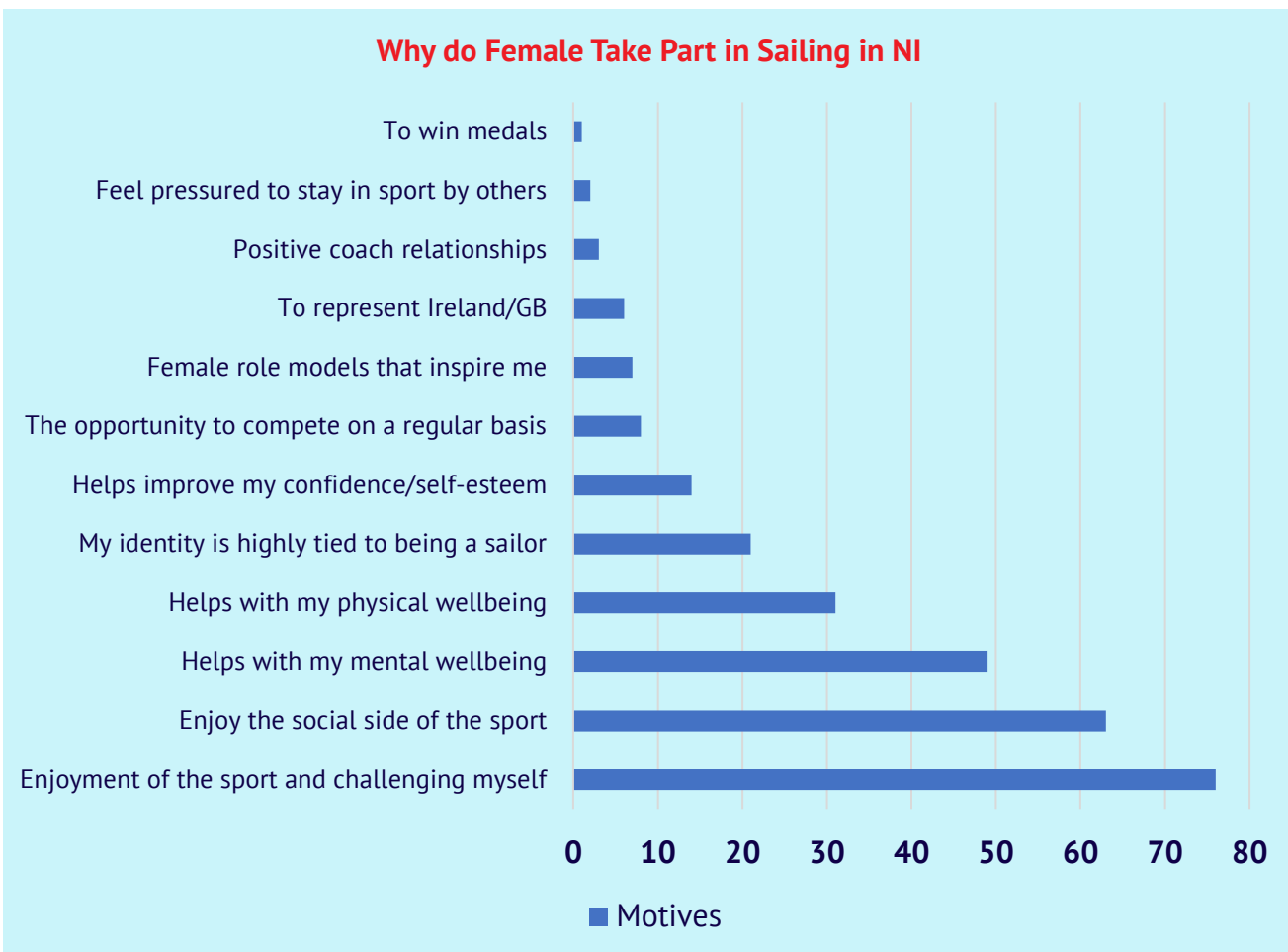
Boat ownership is discussed more in Part 2.

# MOTIVES FOR FEMALE SAILORS

## WHAT MOTIVATES FEMALE SAILORS?

Understanding what motivates female sailors to take part in the sport is key to creating environments that support their engagement in the sport long-term.

Female sailors were asked to rate their top 3 reasons:



The top 4 reasons why female sailors take part in the sport are **intrinsic**. This refers to motives that are driven by internal rewards and are naturally satisfying. Extrinsic motives (externally driven rewards) also feature but are less important to females.



# MOTIVES FOR FEMALE SAILORS

Social aspects of the sport are incredibly important to female sailors, and this will be further discussed within Part 2 when female sailors were interviewed. In addition, the role that sailing plays in endorsing mental and physical wellbeing for sailors should be promoted during campaigns to engage females in the sport.

## DO MOTIVES VARY DEPENDING ON THE LEVEL OF THE SAILOR?

The top motives for female sailors across different levels of the sport (i.e., social/recreational, club racing, county/regional, national & international) are fairly stable, with the top 3 factors all being intrinsic focused. However, the second most important reason that **international level** female sailors take part in the sport is because their **identity is highly tied to being a sailor**. This is unsurprising since undertaking sport at a high level over a prolonged period can lead to a person's identity being highly connected to their sport.

For elite level athletes, a high athletic identity can be a risk factor for increased difficulties if the athlete has to leave their sport, particularly on an involuntary basis (e.g., injury, physical health).



What female sailors love about the sport will be expanded on later, however, further reasons outlined in the survey include...

- Learning about aspects of the sport such as the wind and controlling the boat with speed and direction
- Helping people to sail with disabilities
- The feeling of being at one with the sea and the elements (the scenery, wildlife and wind on my face!)
- Helps sailors switch off and forget about their worries
- Female role models encourage sailors to be the best they can be
- The mental challenge of racing
- Meeting people all over the country and making new friends
- A sense of belonging and feeling of achievement
- In intergenerational aspect – part of my story!
- To represent my country and make a career out of it
- Racing is like a game of chess

**“THERE IS BASICALLY NO OTHER SPORT LIKE IT!”** (Survey)



# SAILING CONNECTED ROLES

We asked female sailors to outline if they had experience of other roles in the sailing environment.

**36%**

Coaching

**29%**

Race officiating

**35%**

Spectating at events

**48%**

Voluntary or paid role in another support capacity

**43%**

Committee

**32%**

As a parent/guardian of a child who sails

**20%**

Of female sailors had no experience of other sailing roles

**50** yrs

Was the average age of a female involved in race officiating

## ONLY 2/23 & 3/23 SAILORS THAT HAD DROPPED OUT OF THE SPORT HAVE COACHED & TAKEN PART IN RACE OFFICIATING

Females involved in other sailing based voluntary and paid roles were more likely to be involved in these roles when **they are actively still sailing** themselves. This suggests that when many females leave the sport, they don't return to engage in such roles. In addition, the average age of those taking part in race officiating is 50, suggesting that it may **not be may attractive role to younger females** in the sport.

### Further roles outlined included:

- Regional sail measurer + + + +
- Teaching in outdoor centres + + + +
- Yacht master shore-based instructor + + + +
- Event organiser + + + +
- Maritime journalist + + + +

Discussions about experiences in these roles and possible barriers to engaging in them will be discussed in Part 2.





# PART 2

## FOCUS GROUP, INTERVIEWS & WIDER SURVEY FINDINGS



# BARRIERS FOR FEMALES TO ENGAGE IN SAILING

The following section will discuss some of the barriers that females face within sailing, that can lead them to drop out of the sport. It is important to recognise that the barriers outlined are **not** the experience of all female sailors, as every sailor's experience will differ depending on the environments that they are in. Many outlined how they dropped out of sailing after accumulating a number of bad experiences and didn't have a sole reason for why they dropped out. This suggests **that small improvements could make a big difference to female participation.**



**“I was sailing just as much as I possibly could, but I just had too many bad experiences now and it's just got to the point where I'm just like right, enough is enough...there were just a lot of small things that happened over the years that I just finally decided no, I'm going to stop this.”** (Social/club racing sailor)

# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## NOT BEING 'FROM' THE SPORT

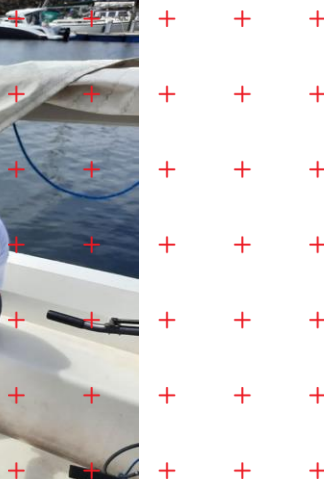


One of the discussion points that regularly emerged in conversation with sailors at a social level was that they often felt undervalued or not as welcome when they didn't 'come from a sailing background'. Many of the females that participated in the focus groups and interviews discussed how they grew up in the sport and that made it easy to dip in and out of different forms of sailing throughout their lives. However, for those that come into the sport as an adult beginner, they often feel like they are thrown into the deep end and not given enough time and respect to learn at the pace they need to go. The need for an increased focus on adult beginners and more extensive learning opportunities will be discussed further on the next page.

**"I didn't grow up sailing, so I was still trying to learn, and I find it very difficult on the big boats during a race trying to learn stuff because you don't have the opportunity [outside of racing]. It's like, move I'll do this, you're not going fast enough, you just don't have time to take anything in."** (Social/club racing sailor)

Difficulties entering the sport as a beginner level female adult were suggested to be **enhanced when that female was single** (or didn't have a partner with them any level of sailing experience), since partners may support them with aspects such as rigging. Being assigned a 'club buddy' to support the initiation period could be particularly impactful for solo female adult beginners.

**"I think it wasn't very welcoming as a single girl and I didn't know why that was an issue. A lot of my friends that I started sailing with maybe had partners who sailed, and they could help them rig and stuff at the beginning which was quite daunting."** (Social/club racing sailor)



**"Undervalued as a women and as an adult learner. If you didn't grow up as a sailor you are pretty unimportant and to that end you are almost considered a hindrance by 85% of long-time sailors."** (Survey)

# LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADULT FEMALES TO DEVELOP CONFIDENCE AND LEARN NEW SKILLS

Linking to the previous page, females felt that the opportunities for adult female beginners were far less than sailors with more advanced skills and children. Unlike sailors that have grown up in sport, and have sailed with parents as children, adult beginners need more time to develop their confidence on the water. Female sailors wanted:

- More intensive training opportunities – with sailing being such a complex sport, sailors need more time to practise skills on the water in a safe, friendly, no pressure environment, and the current courses often do not cater for this
- More adult only courses to get into sailing (not just females, but more of a focus on beginners)

**“I think mostly the opportunities that we have at the minute are for young people, for children. Most of the training and courses are set up for them, and there isn’t much for young adults and older people, men or women to get into the sport. At that stage they are piggy backing on someone who owns a boat and getting out to crew to learn that kind of stuff you know.”** (Social level sailor)

**“Create more courses to inspire women without them feeling patronised.”** (Survey)





# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## THE ABILITY TO HIRE A BOAT

Reasons for not owning a boat were discussed earlier on, however, it became apparent during discussions with female sailors that not being able to access a boat easily significantly impacts involvement in the sport. **Looking at the 24% of female sailors that do not own their own boat (21% shared a boat), many of these had also dropped out of the sport.** The following points were raised regarding boat ownership being a barrier:

- If you are new to sailing and don't know someone with a boat, it's a non-starter
- Boats available at clubs are often not suitable to adult female beginners
- Knowing how to hire a boat is not common knowledge
- Women have been told that boats are needed for the kids at the club
- Not able to try enough boats to know what is suitable to buy
- No justification to buy a boat if it's not going to be a family activity
- Shared ownership can lead to accountability issues
- You most likely need to be a member of a club to hire a boat
- Boats available for hire are often not competitive racing boats (but training boats) which can be a barrier to racing.

**“If you don't buy a boat and don't know someone with a boat, you don't really have an opportunity... so if you're new to a club, and you want to pick up sailing, your kind of at a loss.”**

(Social/club racing sailor)

Some sailors spoke about boat rental schemes they had heard of and said that such schemes would be very helpful to set up at their own clubs.

## FINDING A CREW

Female sailors spoke about the difficulties they faced in:

- Finding a boat to crew on
- Finding crew for their own boat

Many of the sailors spoke about the difficulties in finding a boat to crew on, and despite some ad hoc websites, such opportunities were not widely advertised. This could be an area that RYA NI look to champion further, particularly crews looking for female sailors with limited experiences that will be given training opportunities.

**I'm always hearing racing boats complain they don't have enough crew, then in other circles sailors who don't have a boat to sail on. There are a few ad hoc websites of boats looking for crew, but they don't seem well advertised and are rarely updated. It might be something the RYA NI could champion.”** (Club racing sailor)





# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## ASSUMPTION THAT EVERYONE WANTS TO RACE

Entry initiatives should not be seen as a 'steppingstone'

A popular discussion point that emerged was that many females felt there was a pressure to engage in racing, particularly after taking part in initiatives such as WOW. Social level sailors that were fairly new to the sport felt that there could be more opportunities to:

- Sail socially for fun with no pressure to race
- Enjoy social sailing (no racing) with rescue support
- Receive more support to identify clubs where social sailing took place and there was less emphasis on performance sailing (as this can be a major deterrent for beginner level females)
- Receive more support to bridge social sailing and club racing – often felt that the step into club racing was too quick and they hadn't had enough time to develop the skills required to race
- Receive more support to connect social sailing introductory courses (e.g., WOW), with wider sailing related career/development opportunities

**“Most of the women I met through WOW had no interest in racing, loved sailing recreationally and no longer sail as there is no opportunity to sail just for fun but with the support of rescue.”**

(Survey)

**“Women on water is super and got me interested enough to start sailing again and to complete courses. I would love more opportunity to sail with others for fun and with a little coaching to build confidence. I'm not ready for racing!”**

(Survey)



As a softer, first step into racing, below is a best practice example of how this could be achieved:

“At my club, I've started up a ladies match racing group so it's a team racing type one on one setup, but it's just designed to be fun, it's not designed to give people a real competitive aggressive scary experience, come long, and we are going to go for a sail, do some races, and learn something, there's not going to be winners and losers at the end of it, so just a softer way to get back into it. For me, I'd be happy doing that and I know that there are other females in my club that have been away from the sport for a number of years and have been doing dingy sailing or keelboats or nothing at all.” (elite)

# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## FEMALE HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS



One of the core topics discussed by females as a possible barrier, particularly by parents of sailors in the pathway, youth sailors, and former elite level sailors was female health, and how it isn't talked about enough within the sailing community. This included:

- The need for female pathway sailor education on managing their menstrual cycle when sailing, in particular, at major events when they are out on the water all day
- The need for champions in NI to be an advocate for female health on the water, and for coaches to be educated on this topic and make it less of a taboo subject
- More encouragement to use committee and motherships for female health reasons
- More opportunities for females to stop during long days on the water to have a toilet break so they aren't put in uncomfortable situations where they need to pee in front of males off the side of a boat
- Advice for pregnant females that are sailing and how certain activities may need to be adapted

Although it was acknowledged that this area has taken a **huge leap forward in recent years**, with the introduction of time limits/breaks at events, it's clear that this is a topic that needs further education and understanding of, and voices that champion it.



**“One of my daughters got her period and was very hesitant and concerned about getting in the water.”** (Social sailor)

**“Whilst pregnant I couldn't see any information online from the RYA regards information and advice for expectant mothers regards health and sailing adaptation advice.”** (Survey)

**“Being in a boat for like 8 hours a day, it's not a pleasant experience... The boat I was on, there's no toilet on it.”** (Elite sailor)

**“Particularly for junior girls, information on how to manage their menstrual cycle while sailing...whether that's support to come ashore halfway through a session, or even just feeling comfortable to talk to a coach about any pain or difficulty they're having in a session because of it. If coaches could make the sailors aware of their understanding, this would help...instead of young girls feeling as though they have to keep quiet and just deal with it.”** (Survey)

# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## LACK OF VISIBILITY OF FEMALES FROM ALL PARTS OF SAILING

A huge topic of discussion with female sailors was the major role that promoting female role models could do for the sport across all levels, types of sailing, and different roles in the sport. Role models can show other women and girls what is possible and inspire, motivate, and accelerate their involvement in a sport. Points of discussion included:

- The need for the promotion of women across various roles on the water, including on rescue, as officials, and more, since many of these wider roles in the sport can be male dominated.
- The need to share and promote the stories of women across ages (there was discussion that there are few female coach role models that are slightly older)
- The need for clarity within clubs around how females take specific pathways (e.g., race officer)
- The need for more features in local press and media
- The need for females to go into schools and show young girls all the different roles that are possible in the sport
- The need to highlight the challenges and barriers many females have overcome within sailing, and provide examples of how they have overcome these
- The need to promote more role models that have a disability within sailing
- The positive impact that older females in club environments had on younger sailors just getting into the sport, with many parents saying they felt secure knowing their child had a 'motherly figure' on the water

In addition, more elite level females felt they didn't have any female roles in NI that they looked towards, and it was felt by parents that more could be done to connect current pathway athletes with the former generations of elite Irish sailors that have been trailblazers in the sport. Since there have been no NI female Olympic sailors, connecting pathway athletes with other successful women in the sport across the world could be impactful. Names mentioned included Laura Decker, Jeanne Socrates, and Tracy Edwards.

**“If you can't see it... you can't be it...”** (RYA NI Staff)

**“There was never really anyone before me that I would have known about or looked to.”**  
(Elite sailor)



**“It's also important that they see other females out on the water, on rescue, officials, and in all those other capacities, you know it can be very male dominated, they all want to be driving the rescue boats and all of that. Encouraging girls into that side of it is important, just seeing females on the water is important.”** (Parent)

# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## SAILING WITHOUT RESCUE

An interesting point raised by a number of sailors was that a woman's fears in the sailing environment are often different to men, this includes many not feeling safe to sail without rescue support, which is often only available for racing. Female sailors described being put off by sailing knowing that rescue was not available.



**“I don't feel safe to go out in a boat without rescue there and the only time rescue was available, and it was very clear, that it was only for racers...so that kind of put me off.”**

(Social sailor)

+ + + + + + + + +

**“Rescue is only available for racing and I'm too nervous to sail without rescue.”**

(Survey)

## EXPERIENCE OF & ENTRY INTO BIG BOAT SAILING

Throughout discussions there seemed to be a consistent theme emerging around the challenges that female sailors face (a) getting into bigger boat activity (e.g., yachts), and (b) the environments on big boats. Many suggested that unlike any other type of boat, females felt more out of place, were not valued in their expertise, experienced more aggression and shouting, and physicality appeared as a barrier. Others described how they wanted to get into big boating but the pathways in weren't clear, and its typically something you fall into after trying many other boats. In addition, accessing a toilet and having to get changed in a small space was described as often being an awkward experience for many.

Despite this, many females outlined their desire to get into big boating and develop their helming skills.

**“One of the biggest things was just being shouted at all the time, like on the big boats I had just never come across the sexism that I came across in sailing.”** (Former elite sailor)

**“I moved into big boats... we needed some practice so we asked could we come out on a boat in order to practice and when they realised that I was a girl coming onto the boat, they actually refused to allow me to be on the boat, so the perception of women is quite low, it's like a boys club.”** (Former elite sailor)



# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## LIMITED ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOLS

Although the clear limitations around offering sailing to large groups of children were recognised (voluntary staff, limited time, and resources), it was felt by many that sailing pathways and opportunities could be better promoted in schools across NI. RYA NI could play a crucial role in championing sailing in schools and lobbying for outdoor centres to be established and more accessible. It was suggested that:

- All schools in NI should be made aware of sailing pathways and clubs could be directed to ways that they can open up sailing to local schools
- Basic programmes that promote not just sailing but also water safety in schools are essential
- Schools' programmes are a great way to open up the sport to new populations, including those that are not brought up in sailing environments
- Taster sessions through local universities and colleges could also be impactful
- Sailing or water-based activities could enrich the lives of school children from a wellbeing point of view, particularly those with special needs

**“Send some of the members to ALL schools in NI to open up sailing to EVERYONE.”** (Survey)

**“Within the Special School environment, specifically, opportunities for our children to socialise are greatly limited and the structure, routine, discipline and enjoyment that they could gain, with their peers, would be the best environment for them to achieve their best outcomes. Again, the damage of the Pandemic as well as the current strike action by teaching staff, has altered all schools' abilities to undertake the wider extra-curricular activities that may have occurred in the past. It would be timely to promote RYA activities within this arena.”** (Social sailor)



**“Get sailing into schools, schools need to be aware that these programmes are running. From a wellbeing point of view, any activity can enrich relationships and experiences is key.”** (Social sailor)

# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## LACK OF APPROPRIATE CHANGING FACILITIES

An area raised multiple times was improper changing facilities at club and wider sailing environments as a barrier to females returning to the sport. Lack of or low-quality changing facilities mean many females feel uncomfortable and can be particularly challenging when there is a requirement to change into a wetsuit. Further points included:

- Single sex facilities are important to ensure privacy and dignity
- Lack of suitable facilities can be a major challenge for families with children that have specific needs, including people with sensory disorders, such as autism.



**“We deserve to have access to single sex changing facilities for our safety, privacy and dignity.”** (Survey)

**“There were little things that impeded how we could progress, one of them was a lack of changing room, so we were getting changed into wetsuits. They have autism, and it is an incredibly sensory condition. The process of buying a wetsuit and then putting it on was just beyond traumatic, sometimes it was in the back of year, sometimes a container, sometimes a public toilet. Specific changing facilities are really essential.”** (Social sailor)

## SAILING CLOTHING IS OFTEN UNFLATTERING AND NOT COMFORTABLE

A few women suggested that having better fitted sailing clothing for women would help them to be more comfortable and feel less self-conscious when sailing. Although perhaps not a major barrier to female drop out, the image of the sport is important to help attract new females of all ages into it.

**“Having female specific fitting sailing clothing would help make sailing more comfortable.”** (Survey)

**One of the things that has been raised is around body image and that a lot sailing clothing is not flattering for women, perhaps for women who have had babies and are a little more self-conscious about their body...it’s not a great place to start.”** (RYA NI staff)

# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## EXPERIENCES OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION

There is no easy way to approach the topic of gender discrimination or sexism and it can often seem like males are frequently being blamed for barriers to female participation in sport. However, this topic simply cannot go unnoticed based on the high number of comments that have been made by females across every single level of the sport (recreational to elite) regarding the attitudes, comments, and behaviours of some males in the sport (not all!). It is clear that some male sailors can hinder and create barriers to female participation often without noticing the impact they are having. It was the **number one** topic raised when discussing barriers and negative experiences in the sport for women, and one of the most common points raised when females were asked if there was anything RYA NI could do to improve sailing experiences for women.

# 51%

Of females that completed the survey outlined that they had experienced some form of gender discrimination within the sailing environment.



Since it would be impossible to include all of the key comments and points raised within quotes, a summary of areas raised are listed below to ensure that women's voices have been heard:

- Males shouting and being aggressive
- Being spoken down to and receiving verbal abuse
- Most activities in the sport are male dominated
- Attitudes towards females in the sailing environment
- Males assumed to be the owner of a boat and the more experienced sailor
- Being pushed out the way and not given the opportunity to learn and complete tasks without being interrupted
- Being patronised in committee roles and views not heard
- Sexism is the 'prevailing culture'
- Sexist comments made by males as part of panel events
- Males being chosen first for various events and crews despite being less experienced
- Feeling intimidated
- Being blocked from progressing into race official and committee-based roles
- Being told to speak up and stop being quiet, and this will help solve issues around female engagement

**It must be made clear that not all males act in this way**, and many may do so without realising. It is also recognised that the nature of sailing being a very physical sport means males have an upper hand in many ways. Later, the valuable role of male allies and the positive role they can have in changing what is described as a 'prevailing culture' are discussed.

Quotes centred on female experiences of gender discrimination in the sport are shown on the next page.







**“I felt the men on the boat took over and did the more physical jobs. I didn't feel encouraged to get involved.. more like I was a hindrance.”** (Survey)

**“Men often surprised that I am the owner/helm & that I expect to be fully involved & informed at all times.”** (Survey)

**“As a female owner have always been ignored in favour of whatever man was on or near the boat at the time, who its assumed will be the owner whilst I would know nothing!”** (Survey)

**“I'm surprised and shocked to hear of outright sexism with other females as they looked to become race officials.”** (Survey)

**“Clubs are wrought with sexism as culture...RYA could lead on changing culture.”** (Survey)

**“I have experienced sexism and been targeted for verbal abuse on the water and other incidents on the shore because of my gender.”** (Survey)

**“One of the others that I sat alongside [at an event] was so unbelievably sexist, saying you just need to speak up, women are just too quiet.”** (National level sailor)

**“It's very much a shouting pushing your way through, who can be the most intimidating, that is the way they have been taught and that is the way it seems to work.”** (Parent)



# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## THE CLUB ENVIRONMENT

Another area that many thought could improve from a female perspective is the club environment. The need for better female changing facilities has already been discussed, however, additional areas raised included:

- The need for a greater emphasis on club social events that include men, women, and children.
- Some clubs do not allow children in the bar area, and therefore can become a social space for males only, making them more intimidating environments for women
- Imagery on the walls across clubs could improve, however, it was recognised that some clubs have addressed this, and have good representation of female images.

**“The imagery throughout the club in terms of the photos on the wall, some clubs are actually very good, but others, maybe 80% of the pictures on the wall are male.”** (RYA staff)

## SAILING MAY NOT MEET THE NEEDS OF SPECIFIC POPULATIONS

One of the key reasons that women described dropping out was due to mobility issues or physical disabilities, or sailing experiences hadn't met their needs. A specific example raised in the focus groups was that of a family with two female children who had neurodiverse learning needs, including ADHD & autism. This family is currently not engaged in sailing, after feeling that the course they were on was slightly too fast paced, and included elements that the children did not enjoy (e.g., forced capsizes). Although it was recognised in the discussions that accessing courses through 'sailability' may be better suited, support and training for coaches to learn how to adapt sessions for people with neurodiverse conditions may be beneficial.

In addition, the positive impact that sailing can have on people with a disability was discussed. It was highlighted that the opportunity to engage in organised activities is limited, yet sailing could offer so much in terms of fitness, confidence building, therapy, respite and inclusion, as well as building a life-long interest.

**“The idea of doing the forced capsizes was quite traumatic for them, by this point we had lost the daughter with ADHD and Autism, she was still on the boat, but she wouldn't put herself forward to do that.”** (Social sailor)

**“It would be a fantastic asset to have more structured access to programmes running year-long, with appropriate support facilities available at the venues - changing, catering, social spaces - to allow for the experience to be properly serviced.”** (Social sailor)

# BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN SAILING

## PHYSICALITY - AN EVER-PRESENT DISADVANTAGE

A topic that came up over and over again was that females are typically at a physical disadvantage within the sport of sailing. Points of discussion included:

- Female sailors have experience of being second choice despite significant experience to males who are physically stronger
- Moving trailers, getting boats off racks, and the general logistics of moving equipment can make sailing particularly challenging for females to take part in
- Some females described how when they moved into the laser radial, because of their size, it put a lot of pressure on their back and knees
- Females need to pick a boat that suits them physically should they want to successfully progress in the sport



**“Some boys who maybe weren’t as competitive would go on to get spots on both because they were strong enough and big enough to crew on big boats, as a female, no matter how much knowledge you had, you were always going to be second in line if someone has big muscles.”** (Parent)

**“I was quite small, moving trailers and getting boats off top racks, like just the general logistics sometimes. Is it a barrier? It is a massive barrier, it’s all equipment, logistics, moving stuff around.”** (Former elite level sailor)

# FACILITATORS FOR FEMALE SAILORS THAT SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT

It is important to understand what prevents female sailors from taking part in sailing, however it is equally as important to understand what supports females to thrive in the sport, and what motivates them to keep coming back. Understanding these factors can help ensure that initiatives and programmes are promoting and including the right elements.



**“It is definitely a form of therapy!”** (Social sailor)



# FACILITATORS THAT SUPPORT SAILING

## A SPORT FOR LIFE...AND INTER-GENERATIONAL!

A term that was consistently raised throughout this project was that sailing is a sport for life. It is clearly a sport that can form deep connections within people, their families, and communities, with many explaining how there is a 'role for everyone' in the sport. Many sailors also explained that the inter-generational aspect of sailing should be celebrated more, considering a child could be competing on the same course as someone much older (male or female), something that is rare across many other sports.

**“Sailing is definitely a sport for life. It’s one of those sports that you can dip in and out of. It will always be there for you to come back to in some capacity.”** (Elite sailor)



**“You literally can do it until your hobbling about, you can move from boat to boat, it doesn’t take much exertion. You can be involved as a volunteer or an official. You don’t have to be able to run.”** (Elite sailor)

## SAILING AS A DE-STRESSOR (THERAPEUTIC POWERS!)

When asked what they love about sailing, one of the most popular discussion points was the therapeutic benefits, aligning to the survey findings, where **mental wellbeing** was one of the most common answers. Being out on the ocean helps sailors to switch off from other responsibilities, and the benefits of this form of ocean therapy should be actively promoted when recruiting new females into the sport.

**“It takes your mind off all your other things that are going on in your life. You are thinking about where the wind is coming from, have you got your sails set, looking at the dolphins playing around I mean it’s just stuff occupying your mind taking your thoughts away from your everyday worries.”** (Social sailor)

**“Being on the water gave her a lot of peace, calmness, and quietness.”** (Social sailor)



# FACILITATORS THAT SUPPORT SAILING

## THE VITAL ROLE OF MALE ALLIES

Although almost every female spoken to in the focus groups and interviews had some level of experience feeling undervalued or discriminated against as a female in the sport, many discussed their positive experiences with males that pushed and supported them. Key discussion points included:

- It should be recognised that many males in the sport have an extremely positive influence when they are able to call out others for unacceptable behaviours and comments
- Parents outlined the key support many males within clubs had given their young daughters when they were new to the sport, including support with equipment
- Male ally prizes/awards were considered a positive

**“It is really important to recognise that not all men behave like this, and I know from my own experience that many are brilliant allies, there have been lots of times when my male sailing friends have stood up for me and have encouraged me to get back into my sailing, including giving up their time to help me. This makes a massive difference. I think there should be an award for males who support female sailors/sailing.”** (Survey)

**“I really like the idea of male ally prizes and that sort of thing because there are a lot of good guys out there.”** (Parent)



## FEMALE PRIZES CAN INCREASE MOTIVATION

Many discussed the positive role of female prizes within the sport of sailing. Key points included:

- Female prizes are encouraging and acknowledge the strength and stamina differences that females must often overcome
- Competing for an annual best female sailor of the year would be encouraging
- Some females had heard comments from males suggesting that the female prizes were unfair

**“Please keep female prizes as I think this is really encouraging....our tactics and technical knowledge have to be very sharp when there is strength difference.”**

(Survey)

# FACILITATORS THAT SUPPORT SAILING

## A TRANSFERABLE SKILLSET... AND A WINDOW TO MANY CAREERS!

One of the key areas discussed (particularly with parents and younger sailors) was the skills that female sailors can develop that transfer to wider life settings. Key points included:

- Sailing gives you a sense of competency because it is so multifactorial – there are physical requirements, key decisions that must be made quickly, and adaptations to various weather conditions, that is unlike any other sport
- It is one of the few sports where females can compete alongside males, that can give young girls a huge confidence boost
- Sailing develops personal decision making, as you are required to learn quickly from mistakes. Parents recognised that this skill transferred into other settings for their children, such as school.
- Female sailors can learn body confidence through sailing

**“The girls I know who sail, I think it give you a sense of competency, it’s very physical, you’re on the water, it’s a survivalist sport, it’s you the water and the wind, the conditions aren’t always nice, and that’s part of the challenge of it. It can give girls an underlying confidence that they can do things for themselves.”** (Parent)



Sailors also discussed how the skills they have learnt through sailing can be transferred into various careers. Unlike many sports, sailing is a conduit to many different careers, for example, boat management, the maritime industry, sports science, kit design, and many more. Sailors felt that RYA NI could do more to push this aspect to females both entering the sport for the first time, or pathway sailors who may be exiting the competitive side.

**“The skills of organisation and thought processes, because they are looking at what they’re doing next and looking at the wind and the tide, it helps her and transfers to her schoolwork.”** (Parent)

**“Sailing as an activity can be a conduit to many different careers, from media to sports science to working with special needs athletes or perhaps designing/developing new kit or boat parts.”** (Survey)

# FACILITATORS THAT SUPPORT SAILING

## PURPOSEFUL INITIATIVES SUCH AS 'WOW'

Many females detailed their experiences of either taking part in or supporting a Women on Water (WOW) event, and there was **overwhelmingly positive feedback**. Although only a small number of the females that completed the survey said they had entered the sport through an RYA initiative such as WOW, because these programmes are relatively new, the long-term impact on female engagement is unknown. Females described:

- Meeting friends for life through the WOW programme
- WOW gave them the initial confidence to get into sailing
- WOW as a very supportive and eye-opening programme
- The fantastic job that RYA NI are doing in promoting the programme

Female targeted initiatives such as WOW are clearly an excellent way to drum up initial interest in the sport and help increase confidence to get out on the water. However, there were a lot of comments about the need for a WOW phase 2, looking at the next stage of skill development, and how WOW could also play a valuable role as a refresher programme for sailors with pre-existing experience on the water. Many outlined how they and others who completed the programme were no longer sailing, and therefore considerations around programme legacy need to be addressed. These will be discussed in the recommendations.

**“I met so many women on that course, some of them are still my best friends and meet up with them all the time. Unfortunately, none of us are sailing anymore, I was the last. There was about 40 of us that were sailing that summer from May to the end of September.”** (Social sailor)

**“Beautifully supportive and absolutely eye opening.”** (Survey)



**Part of my journey was women in water that gave me the confidence to start. I think this is a great way to get women involved** (Survey)



# FACILITATORS THAT SUPPORT SAILING

## SESSIONS THAT ARE SPLIT BY LEVEL/EXPERIENCE, NOT GENDER

Sailors were asked about their preference to undertake sessions that are mixed or female only, with a very small number suggesting they prefer female only....

**49%**

Prefer mixed sailing

**4%**

Female only sailing

**47%**

Have no preference

**“I would rather be with beginners, not about whether they are male or female, it’s just that we are at the same level and that we want the same things from it.”** (Social sailor)

When asked to expand, female sailors typically said that they didn’t mind whether they were in female only sessions or not, the biggest factor was that they preferred to be with others who were of the same level or had the same experience in sailing as them.

**Generally, for me it’s not really about the sex it’s about what they are looking for and making sure you’re all at the same level. I think what I found really difficult was being surrounded by people who have sailed all their lives or have sailed a lot more than me.”** (Social sailor)

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## THE SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

+ + + + + + + +

In the survey, the social side of the sport was voted as the second most important motive for females in the sport, and this was evident during discussions with sailors across all ages and levels. Discussion points included:

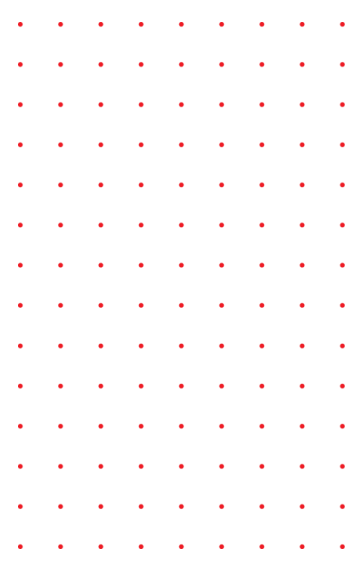
- Younger females often find safety in numbers and progress through the sport in groups
- Youth sailors make friends all over NI and it’s often what drives them to keep wanting to compete
- Many don’t do the sport to compete or race and enjoy the social side after racing in the bar/clubhouse

**“She developed a love for sailing through Covid, but it was also because she met another girl, and they are good friends, and the friendship has been a huge part of it for her, and just then having somebody to go out with.”** (Parent)

**“I was never really into the competitive part of it, that never interested me. But being out with a group and then going for drinks afterwards and just the whole experience was really fun.”** (Social level sailor)



**PATHWAY CONSIDERATIONS**  
**COMPETITION**  
**ASPIRATIONS OF SAILORS**  
**EXPERIENCE IN WIDER ROLES**  
**SKILL DEVELOPMENT**



# PATHWAY CONSIDERATIONS

We asked RYA NI staff, former and current elite level female sailors, and the parents of female sailors in the pathway their thoughts around the barriers and challenges that female sailors face when progressing in the sport.

It was recognised by RYA NI staff that the performance end of the sport is relatively equal at junior level (U16), with a 50/50 split of males and females, but sees a drop off at youth level (U19-U21/23) with around a 70/30 split of males and females. With a 50/50 split in Olympic classes between males and females, many of these spots are not being filled by NI female athletes. With all the past NI Olympic sailors being male, a key driver for RYA NI is to produce the next female NI Olympian. An overview of areas discussed by the female sailing community are presented surrounding the more elite end of the sport are discussed on the following pages.

## LEAVING NI - PURSUE SAILING OR NOT?

Females on the more elite end of the sport spoke about their experiences of leaving NI to study, some had specifically chosen their university so that they could continue to pursue their sailing, however, for others, sailing was not part of their university plan.

Since sailing is a late specialisation sport, it is possible to study and then return to the sport at an elite level post university, this is contrary to many other sports.

RYA NI staff spoke about the challenges they face when top female pathway sailors leave NI to pursue their studies and sailing, since this leaves a gap in training opportunities for other female sailors and means that female elite youth sailors are not visible to the next generation. However, for sailors looking to push for an Olympic campaign, leaving NI was essential.



Parents spoke about their lack of awareness around where their children could go to university to pursue sailing.

**“Sailing wasn’t part of my plan when I went to university. If I was do choose my university again, I’d definitely want to take into consideration how I was going to sail at university, but I didn’t plan it.”** (Former elite sailor)



# PATHWAY CONSIDERATIONS

## FEELING 'PUSHED' OUT OF CLASSES WITH NO WHERE TO GO

By far, one of the most topical discussions during this project were related to the issue that affects many more females than males within sailing, and that is the issue around physicality, and the limits this puts on sailors being able to progress in a specific class.

Almost all of the female sailors in the survey between the ages of 14-18 recognised this as the main issue they had faced. Points raised included:

- Capping the ages on specific classes is deemed unfair and inappropriate given that girls will naturally develop less muscle and strength than males, and almost always be disadvantaged
- The transition from the laser 4.7 to the Ilca 6 is incredibly challenging and can create a huge dropout for females
- Female youth sailors are put off staying in the sport competitively when they are told they are required to put on significant amounts of weight to be able to progress
- Female described being 'forced out' of Topper squads at 15 and not knowing how they can stay involved in the sport
- Sailors lost interest at around 15 years old when they couldn't see a boat option for them moving forwards
- Sailors described trying out for RYA squads but being turned away for being too old despite outperforming younger sailors
- There are limited event options for those in the laser 4.7
- There is a desire for females to be allowed to continue competing in specific classes beyond the age cap (e.g., 16-18), such as the RS Feva, to prolong their competitive options

Parents also outlined they were concerned about their daughters next steps in the pathway since their options appeared to be limited because of their age and weight.

**“The fact that girls are forced out of the RYA Topper Squad at 15 is quite ridiculous given that most girls are not heavy enough for Lasers. Even if they do get through Laser 4.7, there is often nowhere to go after that. RYA ought to recognise that girls and boys grow at different paces and adjust its criteria accordingly.” (Youth female sailor)**

**“I am quite small and concerned I might age out of a topper before I will be able to sail in a laser and would like to see the age boundaries changed.” (Youth female sailor)**

**“For girls it is much more difficult, and most wouldn't want to gain an extensive amount of weight as girls don't usually want to look heavier/the same weight as males.” (Survey)**

**“I moved on to the RS Feva but was not allowed to compete due to age restrictions. Think it would be great if sailors aged 16-18 were able to compete at a higher level in boats such as the Feva as it would encourage more people like me and my crew to maintain sailing competitively.” (Survey)**

# PATHWAY CONSIDERATIONS

## A BIGGER EMPHASIS ON SUPPORTING TRANSITION PERIODS

Leading on from the discussion on the previous page, female pathway sailors felt that more support could be directed at sailors making the transition between classes, and that there should be greater emphasis on understanding transition within coach education.

Sailors suggested that instead of a focus on putting on weight and muscle, they could be taught better techniques around how to effectively use their height and weight to their advantage. In addition, sailors discussed how earlier preparation for key boat transitions was essential.



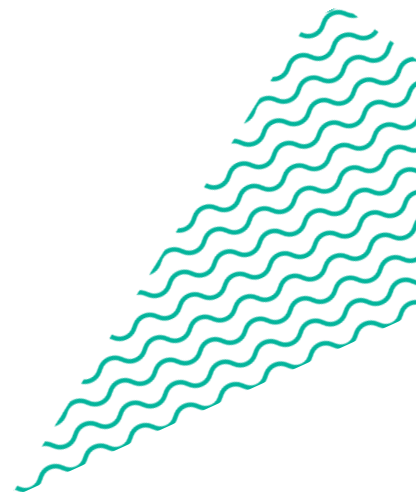
**“If girls can also be shown the best and most effective ways to use their strength and height with specific coaching, I think there would be a higher number of girls still participating in the racing side of the sport in the youth classes.”** (Youth female sailor)

## MINDSET THAT OLYMPICS IS NOT ATTAINABLE

Interestingly, many parents and female sailors stated that they think there is a lack of belief amongst sailors in NI that achieving a world class level is unattainable, particularly for women. This may be due to the lack of females that have made it to do the Olympics from NI. Some felt that RYA NI has shut themselves off from the wider world sailing community, with many sailors being complacent to be successful in NI.

**“One of the things I’d like to see RYA NI do would be to look to the world and to Europe to see what’s happening and not look in so much try to look at the trend before it gets here and jump on that, otherwise we will be left behind.”** (Parent)

**“I think something has been lost, there hasn’t been an intention, but I think that NI has closed themselves off to the wider sailing community in the world and there’s a tendency to say let’s be champions here rather than let’s go and find the best people we can race against and beat them.”** (Parent)



# PATHWAY CONSIDERATIONS

## SUPPORTING FEMALE PATHWAY SAILORS TO TRIAL NEW BOAT OPTIONS (AND A GREATER VALUE PLACED ON DOUBLE HANDERS)

A central topic of discussion around the female pathway with both sailors and RYA NI staff was the need for a greater focus on trialling new boats, and in particular exploring double handers as an option earlier in a sailor's journey.

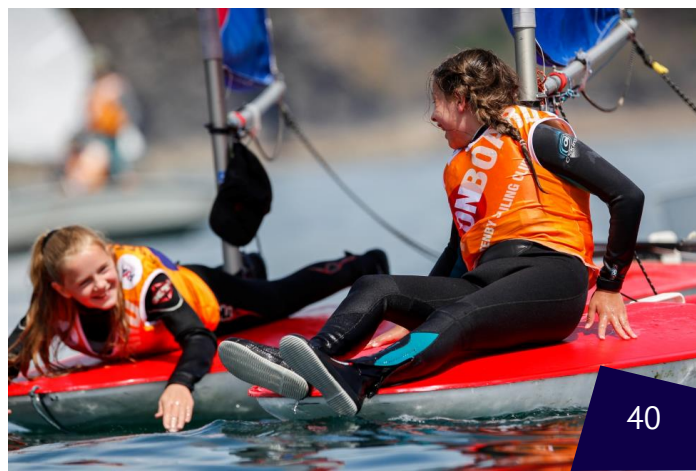
When looking at the types of sailing that females under the age of 19 have experience of, **100% stated they had experience of single-handed sailing**, but only **57% had ever tried double handed sailing**, suggesting many are not exposed to this form of sailing during their development. Sailors and parents suggested:

- There should be days when girls on the squad train together and try new boats, which can double up as a team bonding activity, supporting the development of a female community
- Trying to find another girl to sail a double hander with can be challenging, particularly if there are not many youth female sailors at your club, and therefore pairing clubs up to do 'double hander trial events' could be beneficial
- Single handed sailing can be lonely, and the social aspect of double handed sailing should be sold more (as highlighted, the social side of sailing is one of the biggest drivers for participation)

Whilst it was recognised that going double handed can be a challenge since you must coordinate training schedules with one another, it could be a great pathway for female sailors that are not the right size to progress into a new single-handed class.

**“Having days where just the girls on squads, train together, try new boats together, come together onshore for team building, some events where girls and boys are split but not separating us from the boys completely as I think it is good to be pushed mentally and physically. I think this will make it less intimidating and create a female community within sailing.”** (Youth female sailor)

**“If your in a club and there's not a lot of young people, trying to find somebody to pair up with is another issue. Could they pair clubs up with their teenagers, try a 29er day and come and meet other likeminded people that would like to try a double hander.”** (Parent)





# PATHWAY CONSIDERATIONS

## AWARENESS OF PATHWAY OPTIONS & TRANSPARENCY OF INFORMATION



Some of the parents that took part in this project explained that they weren't clear on pathway progression options. They explained that:

- Progression options for their child's level/physicality weren't entirely clear
- Getting hold of information and guidance was difficult
- Knowledge of pathways was particularly challenging when you have no background in the sport

In addition, sailors explained they often felt that others were hiding information, and not wanting to give away tips, and that this theme seemed to run throughout the sailing community. Parents who had experience of other sports said that lack of transparency of information was particularly noticeable.

**“Part of me is not thinking about it but we probably should. In terms of progression, I'm not entirely clear, she could probably go down laser, she could go down double hander, but in my head, these are the only two routes, maybe there are other options, but I would have to say I'm a bit fuzzy on those.”** (Parent)

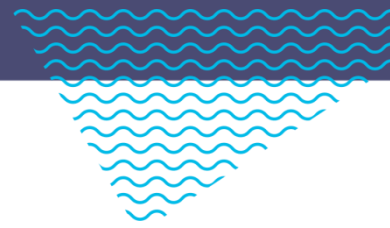
**“Sailing does seem to be very much, I don't think people want to give away their secrets, other sports people would have been giving you tips on how to improve.”** (Parent)

**“This whole concept of people having certain information that others can't access, whatever it is, coaching information, tools, and resources, it should be open.”** (Former elite sailor)



**“in every other sport we had been in it had been coaches and clinics and all that and you can ask someone, and they would have pointed you in the right direction but with sailing we definitely found that there was a major lack of it.”** (Parent)

# PATHWAY CONSIDERATIONS



## CLUB PATHWAYS ARE NOT ALWAYS SUPPORTIVE OF PERFORMANCE

Some of the more elite level sailors highlighted the challenges they often faced trying to find the appropriate level of training within clubs with limited groups of pathway/elite level sailors in the same boat situated together. This often means elite level sailors have to travel further to train, which could eventually impact on their motivation to remain at a high level.

It appears that from conversations with RYA NI, many clubs do not reflect Olympic style sailing, as the boats and styles of racing are not conducive to Olympic pathways. This means that when sailors leave the NI club scene, they are exposed to Olympic pathway sailing for this first time. It could be argued that exposure needs to happen at a much earlier age to support sailors to thrive in the pathway.

**“The sport here in NI doesn’t really reflect at all what’s in the Olympics and its only when girls break out of the NI club scene and go to the Olympic path, think oh this is amazing, finally I can sail, so it’s a bit the wrong way round.”** (RYA staff)

**“Club level sailing is not that of the Olympics, and the boats that they use are conducive to females until you get to the Olympic pathways.”** (RYA staff)



**“There’s so many small clubs, it makes it really hard to find groups of the same boat and level to train with, so I’d end up driving maybe 2 hours every Sunday, a 4 hour round trip to get racing, well fair play to my parents for driving me, but that was one if the main issues. For me, it’s the distance, in terms of being able to train and race with other people.”** (Elite level sailor)





# PATHWAY CONSIDERATIONS

## A BRIDGE FROM PATHWAY TO PERFORMANCE

Although this is resource dependent, many youth sailors suggested there needs to be a wider talent pool within the pathway, and an increased focus on providing opportunities for young sailors on the periphery of entering the performance pathway to gain exposure to training with a higher level. Sailors suggested that it is hard to break into the pathway without such opportunities. Creating opportunities for exposure between sailors lower down the pathway and performance squads will not only create a bigger depth of female sailors in NI but support younger sailors to stay motivated.

**“People are selected and stay in the squad for their time, and it is hard for new people to break through. It means that young people are not good enough for a future. and I do not know anyone other than myself who continued sailing without ever being on a performance pathway squad.”** (Survey)

**“There needs to be a bridge between non-performance pathway people and pathways people so that they continue.”** (Survey)

**I was continually told there would be a training option for people not on the squad, but it never happened. There should be options for people who are not selected. RYANI is limiting themselves to only 20ish people in the toppers.”** (Youth female sailor)





# COMPETITION

As outlined previously, not all females are keen to race or enter events, however, many do enjoy racing and challenging themselves, and many are keen to get back into racing after a break! Different aspects of competing is discussed regularly throughout this report, including:

- The role of female prizes
- 'Softer' entry into racing (female match racing example)
- Female health considerations during events
- Feeling undervalued as a female in a mixed fleet during racing
- Mixed fleet racing can be quite aggressive and not enjoyable
- Not owning a boat can limit racing options

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Wider considerations include:

## MIXED EVENTS SUPPORT YOUTH FEMALE DEVELOPMENT

Elite youth sailors suggested that bringing in mixed categories has been incredibly helpful for development, particularly for females that are too small to crew. Mixed sailing has facilitated their transition into the double handed class.

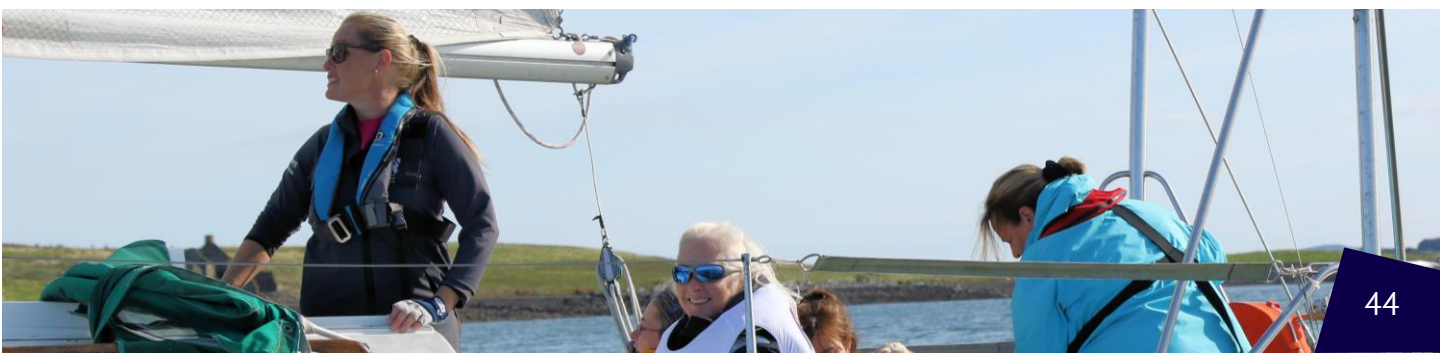
**I sailed with my brother, I don't think there was a mixed category for a while but bringing that in has helped a lot of people, especially girls who are too small at the minute to crew... This has helped a lot of girls who are too small for a laser move into a double handed class, and still be able to sail and compete to a high level."**

(Elite youth sailor)

## FEMALE LEAGUES WITH A SOCIAL ELEMENT

Although many suggested they enjoy mixed sailing at a youth level, some did suggest that female-based leagues that support re-entry into racing for those that have had a number of years out, could be of benefit. This may also encourage female sailors to stay in the sport when they are of post-youth age. This could fall under the WOW branding and have a strong social element. This will be discussed in the recommendations.

**"Some Female 'leagues' to promote female competition for other age categories other than junior. Make it fun and competitive!"** (Survey)



# COMPETITION

## THE RED DIAMOND SHOULD BE OPTIONAL

Interestingly, a number of female sailors expressed their dislike for the red diamond requirement in events that are designed to mark out females within a mixed fleet. They suggested that it actually may give females a technical and tactical disadvantage and should be optional.

**“Please get rid of those ridiculous diamonds the RYA require on dinghy sails to mark out the girls. It’s really unhelpful and sexist.”** (Survey)

**“Regarding the red diamond, please leave this optional, never impose something like this. I personally don’t agree with marking females out in mixed fleets as I believe it gives them technical and tactical disadvantages. However, some girls don’t seem to be aware of this...if they want to put their diamond on their sail then that is up to them. Please don’t make this mandatory....why anyone would want to make it easier for other competitors in a series to find them in a fleet to tack on top of them is beyond me.”** (Survey)



# ASPIRATIONS OF FEMALE SAILORS

Female sailors were asked about their future aspirations in the sport. A summary of these are categorised below by level of sailor (highest level the sailor self-categorised at).

## Social, Recreational, and Club Level Sailors

- Own a boat and sail for pleasure
- Gain knowledge and become a more competent sailor
- Take a break and hope to rediscover enthusiasm
- Sail the Pacific solo/sail the world!
- Gain more confidence on the water
- Get back on a boat after major surgery
- Continue sailing for fun, social reasons
- Support own children to sail
- Start cruising and complete day cruiser practical
- Sail for recreation and not be put under pressure to race
- Sail single handed boat
- Continue providing rescue support
- Compete in more race series
- Do the next qualification level
- Be a more able crew member and build confidence

## International Level Sailors

- Teach own female children how to sail
- Enjoy club racing and cruising, and go on sailing holidays
- Pursue a career within sailing
- Improve position within racing fleet
- Olympics is the main goal
- Top 15 in the Worlds/win a World title
- Begin coaching/pass dingy instructor
- Move up to silver class
- Keep sailing for as long as possible!
- Keep competing at the highest level
- Represent country

Many of the youth sailors' (19 and under) goals and aspirations were much more focused on performance

outcomes, sailing internationally, being selected for squads, winning medals, and representing their country, compared to older age groups.

## County, Regional & National Level Sailors

- Compete internationally
- Become part of a crew on a yacht
- Get into cruising and start exploring
- Transition to a new class (due to age) and build greater strength and gain weight to be heavy enough
- Try to maintain sailing whilst at university
- Improve racing skills in double handers
- Get more involved in keelboats
- Experience sailing outside of NI
- Encourage the next generation
- Gain confidence to go to other countries and race officiate
- Take part in national events
- Sail around an island but lacking a boat!
- Gain greater confidence in skills
- Continue racing regularly





# EXPERIENCE IN WIDER SAILING ROLES

Female sailors were asked about their experience in other roles that are connected to sailing, including committees, coaching, being a race officer, volunteering and more.

## BEING ON A COMMITTEE



In the survey, **43% said they were or had been part of a committee**, which by all accounts is a relatively high figure. Experiences and opportunities varied; however, it was promising to hear that for those that had experience of being in high governance positions at RYA NI, speak positively about the gender balance and positive male allies in these roles. Although many spoke positively about their roles on committees, on a more local local level, some of the comments included:

- Women are often being lumbered with aspects believed to designated female role, including entertainments, kitchen, social, environmental etc.
- Many women explained feeling out of place and undervalued in these roles, with their comments and thoughts sometimes being ‘brushed under the carpet’ and shut out quickly
- Women are often the voice of reason and can play powerful roles on committees
- Younger females should be encouraged to have a voice within clubs at an earlier age
- The positive impact of gender equity on club development needs to be widely articulated

Further discussion included how RYA NI could play a big role in filtering governance by supporting club committees to actively set gender equity targets. However, recent improvements in gender equity in committee roles were also referenced.

**“I think sometimes women in committees can be the voice of reason as well, and that is a very powerful role to play in a committee.”** (Social sailor)

**“Sometimes you have to be careful if you are on a committee that women can get lumbered with the things that are the entertainments, the house, the cooking.”** (Social sailor)

**“Improving inclusivity with recommended Committee balance i.e., at least 30% each gender to encourage female participation in governance to highest levels.”**

(Survey)

**“Women sometimes feel that their suggestions are brushed under the carpet.”** (RYA NI staff)





# EXPERIENCE IN WIDER SAILING ROLES

## RACE OFFICIATING

When asked to outline their future aspirations within the sport, a high number of females expressed an interest in the race officer pathway, however, many outlined they weren't clear on how to get into race officiating or how much commitment is involved.

Those females that were involved in race officiating had predominantly positive experiences of the role, outlining how they had been supported by males to put themselves forward for opportunities. Many outlined how it had become an integral part of their lives and offered opportunities to travel and meet new people both in NI and abroad. Some highlighted that they weren't aware of many female race officers, particularly on a national level, and felt that promotion of women in these roles is key. Sailors that did know other female race officers could not praise them highly enough!

Although experiences in this role were predominantly positive, one sailor did highlight that she had heard of other female sailors being 'blocked' from becoming race officers, from males in the club who were unsupportive of them progressing into this role. In addition, as previously highlighted, those that identified as having race officer experience were on average 50 years old, suggesting it may not be seen as an established path for younger females.

**“All the national race officers I know are men, I'm sure there are women out there, I just don't know about them, and I certainly don't know anyone whose gone beyond that, it seems to be the peak because I don't know anyone who has done it. There is a real lack of visibility here in terms of women.”** (National level sailor)

**“You can volunteer and go to bigger events, just being a volunteer. I've retired now so I can go spend a week at an event, and it ended up being so lovely, such nice people, and to see the young people at the youth championships, and just being a part of something so positive is why people volunteer, it's just so enjoyable.”** (Social sailor)

**“I do know others who have said that their club would not support her, and actually blocked her from doing it, personally I was stunned.”** (Social sailor)



# EXPERIENCE IN WIDER SAILING ROLES

## COACHING - BENEFITS FOR SELF AND OTHERS

Although not many female coaches engaged in the interview process, many of the sailors had some connection or experience within coaching, and **36%** of the survey cohort had coaching experience. One female coach outlined how many coaches had stopped following Covid, and RYA NI had pushed an initiative trying to build a database of coach contacts to rebuild the coaching network. However, many other sailors spoke of the difficulties accessing coaching (particularly for those at club racing level and those on the peripheries of the talent pathway), and therefore it appears that more can be done to advertise coaching opportunities.

Females spoke positively about their coaching experiences, with several suggesting they turned to coaching to be able to give back to the sport they loved, and support others to have a life-long passion for the sport. In addition, others spoke about the positive impact that coaching has had on their own sailing development as it can support you to better analyse your performance.

Other key points raised included:

- Sailors want to see and hear from more female coaches to understand the various issues they face and how they have overcome them (this could perhaps be delivered as online workshops)
- RYA NI recognised the challenges they face to bring females through the coaching pathway, with many undertaking their dingy instructor course, but not progressing to become a senior instructor
- The tutor workforce is predominantly male
- A supportive club committee with female representation can improve female club coach experiences



**“I coach because I enjoy seeing kids develop, I have always liked being able to see the progression of someone that you have helped...someone took a chance on me and being able to do that for someone else and encourage them on their sailing journey, as it is a sport for life.”** (Female coach)

**“It’s a good skill and I think people should multi-task and balance a bit of coaching with their sailing so that they can have that as a back-up or use it to fund and support their own racing.”** (Former elite sailor)

# SKILL DEVELOPMENT

## WHAT SKILLS ARE FEMALE SAILORS INTERESTED IN DEVELOPING FURTHER?

Female sailors were asked to outline if they were interested in developing any new skills. **The resounding answer was yes.** Many sailors were incredibly eager to enhance their skills and knowledge, not just beginners in the sport, but those at a more advanced level too. There was a particular interest in learning skills that enable the sailor to better read the environment (such as understanding the weather). An overview of the skills discussed is included below:

### Sailor skills

- Boat maintenance (and engine maintenance)
- Support with starting electric engines & diesel engines
- Navigation skills
- Dealing with different conditions
- Heavy weather techniques
- Rigging
- Helming
- What it means to be part of a crew
- Slowing down so you don't go over the starting line
- Recovering from a turtle
- Dry capsizing
- Meteorology
- Celestial navigation
- Mooring and berthing skills
- Hoisting sails
- Knots
- Reading the wind
- Handling, mooring, and anchoring a cruising boat
- Sailing 'language'
- Depowering a boat

### New types of boating & water sport

- Paddle boarding
- Speed boating
- Dingy course
- Double handers
- Sailing solo
- Yacht cruising
- Wing foiling
- Keelboating
- Windsurfing

### Events & Racing

- Learn more about types of events
- The principles of performance racing
- Racing rules
- Race tactics

### Wider role skills

- Race management and jury opportunities
- Judging protest committees
- Race officer (progression from shore based to committee boat)
- Day skipper & coaching
- Race organisation
- Yachtmaster
- Powerboat instructor
- Club governance (and managing a club)

**There is a need for a course that teaches you what everything is on a Keelboat.”**

(Club racing sailor)



**“If there was a one day course on anything I would have done it, if there was any one specific thing I would have paid any money to do anything, be it launching a boat, or rigging a boat or knots or anything. I would have done any workshops if they had been available.”** (Social/club racing sailor)





# PART 3

## RECOMMENDATIONS

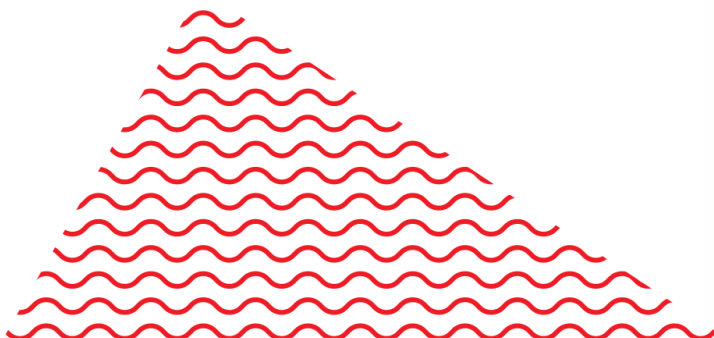
# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the outcomes of the research within Parts 1 & 2, a series of recommendations for RYA NI have been put forward to consider.

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## QUESTIONS TO ENCOURAGE REFLECTION

The recommendations have been posed as questions to help RYA NI reflect on their current practice. Many of the suggestions will include specific financial and people resource, and therefore the organisation should consider what their core priorities are before actioning.



## PART 3

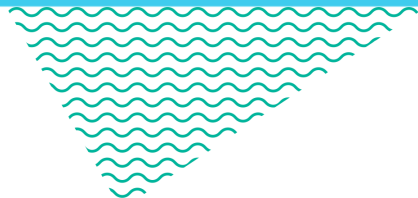


# 11

Top recommendations to consider

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## WOMEN ON WATER - ONLY OPENS THE GATE...



### 1. Could WOW have a phase 2 element?

The feedback on WOW was that it is an excellent, insightful, and inspiring programme. However, the one topic that kept emerging was that WOW is often too short, has limited legacy, and only a short introduction to sailing. Understandably this is the aim, however, many of the women spoke about how they needed longer to develop confidence in their sailing abilities.

WOW was described as 'opening the gate to sailing'. Considerations may include:

- Extending the introductory element of the WOW programme
- Lengthen the WOW programme to a 6–12-month commitment, with 'clusters' of delivery
- Every WOW participant to develop their post-WOW sailing plan
- Consider reduced boat hire fees for those who undertake WOW to continue sailing long-term (or further RYA NI/club perks that will support their long-term engagement)

Understandably, the WOW Alumni programme has started to build on this recommendation. Following the WOW introductory course, there could be further delivery strands of WOW as the next step (discussed on the next page).

**“Where do we expand beyond? The WOW for me is just the opening gate, its where we take it from there that is the challenge and needs a bit of vision really.”** (Club racing sailor)

**“The women in water thing is great but it is only a step into it.”** (Social sailor)

**“My experience has been, women on water and initiatives like this, run once a year, they are not enough.”** (Former elite sailor)



**“When I started it was supposed to be only a 4-week course, but they let us do it every 4 weeks, and by the end of the summer the numbers had just built up and up and it was such a fantastic programme, but at the end of that summer it was a case of buy a boat. No body was ready to buy a boat.”** (Social sailor)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## NEW STRANDS OF THE WOMEN ON WATER PROGRAMME

### 2. Could the WOW programme be categorised into new delivery strands?

WOW is clearly a good brand that has been successful in introducing sailing to females. However, many women who already have significant experience within sailing suggested that they wanted to get back into sailing after a break but did not feel that that WOW was an appropriate route to do this.

On reflection, the WOW programme may benefit from more targeted delivery that suits the needs of specific populations. Below are some ideas:

- **WOW Refresh** – a refresher course designed for women who are not new to sailing, but have not sailed for a long time, and want some support to get back on the water to rebuild their confidence. Women who have competed at the elite end of the sport suggested this is something that they would engage in.
- **WOW Support** – a programme designed to introduce females to supportive roles on the water and provide a clear pathway into doing them on a permanent basis. This includes rescue and committee boat roles, race officiating, coaching, committees, and more.
- **WOW Compete** – a programme specifically designed to support women to get into racing and learn very specific skills required during racing. This could culminate in friendly no pressure race opportunities across clubs.
- **WOW Teenager** – many young females want to do activities with those of a similar age, and value social interaction with others of a similar age to them. Therefore, a programme targeted at a younger female demographic could support groups of teenagers to enter the sport and create lifelong friends. Higher level sailors could be brought in to support and become role models for the young participants.
- **WOW Pathway** – this strand could be focused on supporting a wider group of females who are on the peripheries of entering the pathway or provide opportunities for females in the pathway to come together and explore new boat options (e.g., double handers). It could also include bringing in former successful female sailors to advise and support sailors' journeys.
- **WOW Social** – since many females stated that they have no interest in racing and were put off with WOW being assumed as a 'steppingstone' to racing, a version of WOW that is a more casual social sailing programme could be a good option.
- **WOW Skills** – short courses based on developing some of the many areas listed within the skill development section. These could be 1 day/half a day events ran by clubs. It seems that there is an appetite amongst the female sailing community to pay for this.

**“WOW is fantastic, but it’s focused on the beginning point, getting women into sailing, which is fantastic, but you’ve got a big group of women like me who have taken a break, women naturally lose confidence if they’re not doing something all the time...you don’t tend to step right back in again without knowing that you can do it, that’s a barrier to getting back on the water. Very few of these events focus on refreshing skills.”** (Former elite sailor)

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## NO PRESSURE RACE OPPORTUNITIES

### 3. Could clubs deliver more no pressure racing opportunities?

Many women that took part in this project suggested they had negative experiences of mixed fleet sailing and weren't always interested in super competitive racing. A good middle ground would be for clubs to run no pressure racing such as the Ladies that Launch initiative that was discussed earlier in the report. This could align to the 'WOW compete' strand discussed on the previous page, and include informal, relaxed, and friendly 'softer' racing opportunities.

This could culminate in a 'Ladies that Launch League' – where multiple clubs running this initiative meet for fun race opportunities, that also include social opportunities after each race.

**“We’ve started a regular ‘ladies who launch’ session at our club to try to encourage women onto the water - some informal racing with a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, to try to build confidence and skills.”** (Survey)

## WOW HIGHLIGHT - FEMALE SPOTLIGHT SERIES

### 4. Could RYA NI do more to promote female role models within the sport?

A popular discussion point was that many females in the sport are not visible, and it's often not clear how they got to the position they did, whether it's an elite level sailor, a club coach, a regional race officer, someone who does rescue support, and more.

RYA NI could look to do a **WOW Highlight** series on social media that highlights the pathways of women across various roles in the sport and help others to understand the barriers and challenges they have overcome to get where they are.

**“There’s the one percent that makes it to the Olympics, that’s absolutely class, I was never going to be that person, but what I would have loved to have been able to see is who are the role models in clubs to provide that pathway so I can see what women are doing, a female race officer, I really admire what she’s doing, and I can see the path around hoe she got there.”** (National level sailor)

**“RYA can establish role models being approachable and accessible. It’s making people aware that anything is truly possible and if there are barriers, how do we break those down.”** (Social level sailor)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## INITIATIVES TO INSPIRE FEMALES INTO SAILING SUPPORT ROLES

### 5. Could an initiative be developed to inspire more women into sailing support roles?

It is clear from discussions with the female sailing community that there is a passion to further explore support roles on the water. These include rescue and committee boats, race officiating, and more. Such a programme could run under the **'WOW support'** branding as previously discussed. Considerations may include:

- **Campaign** - developing a campaign targeted at upskilling females in these roles and creating pathways to start supporting events (similar to the WOW alumni programme)
- **Pathway case studies** - highlight accessible female role models currently in these roles and create 'pathway case studies' that highlight how these women got into the role, and where it has taken them so far.
- **Exit opportunities for youth pathway sailors** – when sailors leave the RYA NI pathway, an option could be for them to receive free or low-cost training to move into wider sailing support roles. Since the survey told us that the average age of a female in the race officer role was 50, this could support younger females to enter into this space. If it does not already exist, considerations could also be given to designing a specific youth race officiating pathway.
- **Wider information about careers in sailing** – in the survey, several females from the youth age group suggested that they wanted to understand more about the sailing careers that could be open to them.

**“It’s also important that they see other females out on the water, on rescue, officials, and in all those other capacities, you know it can be very male dominated, they all want to be driving the rescue boats and all of that. Encouraging girls into that side of it is important, just seeing females on the water is important.”** (Parent)



**“All the national race officers I know are men, I’m sure there are women out there, I just don’t know about them, and I certainly don’t know anyone whose gone beyond that, it seems to be the peak because I don’t know anyone who has done it. There is a real lack of visibility here in terms of women.”** (Former elite sailor)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## BUILDING AN ELITE SAILOR TRAINING BASE AT A UNIVERSITY

### 6. Could RYA NI build an elite training squad round a university in NI?

All of the current and former elite level sailors that took part in this project studied at university, with all of them leaving NI to study. An option could be to build a training base around one of the universities in NI to support educational and training opportunities, that would encourage more females to stay in NI (and allow them to continue providing training and role model opportunities for younger pathway sailors). Understandably, there are challenges with this since there are a limited number of universities in NI and very elite level sailors often progress to British Sailing teams on the south coast of England.

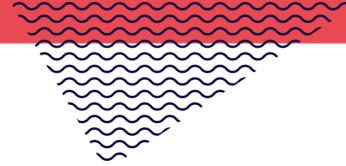
Many parents in this project stated they did not know where their child could go to university and successfully balance their studies with their sailing. The author was involved in a project with British Sailing that explored this topic area and provided detailed overviews of the different ways that sailing and studies/work could be balanced, considerations, challenges, and how to prepare for education-based transitions. Parents and sailors from NI could be directed to some of the resources in this document:

<https://www.tass.gov.uk/resource/rya-sailing-through-a-dual-career-guide/>



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## PROMOTING THE POSITIVE ROLE OF MALE ALLIES



### 7. Could RYA NI promote & voice the need for attitude changes across the sailing community?

From this research, the most popular discussion point was female sailors' experiences of feeling undervalued in the sailing environment, and the attitudes, comments, and actions of males. Although it is important to stress once again that not all males negatively impact female engagement in the sport, and many play a positive role in calling out inappropriate comments and behaviours.

RYA NI could consider a 'call it out campaign', or a 'male ally campaign' that promotes the positive behaviours that males can play to support females in the sport.

**“The biggest driver of change from within is attitude and that’s, in a business corporate culture, everyone is given responsibility to call out when they hear and see bad behaviour and I don’t think that is filtered through to sailing at all. The amount of sexist comments I’ve heard in the last year....When I made it onto the committee, I’m an experienced professional, I had the credibility, but one of the first comments I got was, you’re here because we need a pretty face on the committee, that’s what we need.”** (Former elite level sailor)

**“I sat with men who all thought that was funny, patting themselves on the back, someone should say that’s not acceptable. Men should be able to call each other out in an effective way and say that’s not appropriate. This is how culture change comes about, it isn’t acceptable anymore to have those attitudes.”** (Former elite sailor)



**“It is very intimidating no matter how confident you are.”** (Survey)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FILTERING GOVERNANCE & POWER OF THE FEMALE VOICE

### 8. Could RYA NI play a role supporting clubs to have a female representative across all committees?

RYA NI could play a role in filtering governance to club committees, and ensuring that where possible, females are a valuable part of every committee. Considerations could include:

- **The impact of the female voice** - highlighting the positive impact the female voice can have in a committee/leadership-based role
- **W&G committees** – encourage clubs to develop their own women and girls' committees, so that W&G is always a core agenda topic for every club
- **Support every club to have a female champion** – a designated person (male or female) that always keeps the W&G topic relevant in discussion about club activities and plays a key role in welcoming any new females to the club – ensuring that they know where everything is, how to access equipment, rules, and the unwritten rules!
- **Support more women to undertake committee training** – could RYA NI run training on a national level to support women to better understand the roles and responsibilities of being on a committee and understand key skills and strengths that they can utilise in these roles.

**“Supporting the clubs to understand how important it is to balance the committees and what the advantages of doing this are, how do we attract more female volunteers into these committee. The barrier is the commitment, how can we break it down into more discreet areas, how do we talk about responsibilities. I would have loved to have gone into the committee role with a bit of training. Gender balance is hugely important, and these are the wonderful effects....”** (Former elite sailor)





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## BOAT LOANING SCHEMES

### 9. Could RYA NI consider supporting clubs to develop boat loaning schemes?

Many women suggested that after undertaking the WOW programme, the biggest barrier to continuing sailing was that no one was ready to buy a boat. Could further consideration be given to how boats could be more readily accessed after the WOW programme, and best practice around shared ownership options. In addition, further consideration around how people could enter events without owning a boat, with competitive racing boats being more readily available.

**“A lot of good progress has been made in other nations, where they run leagues where you don’t need to own a boat, you just send a team, there’s a lot more women taking part in those events where the boats can be provided by the race organisers, you just pay a deposit or a fee to join the event.”** (RYA NI staff)

## WOW HEALTH - FEMALE HEALTH CAMPAIGN

### 10. Could RYA NI consider developing a female health campaign?

Issues centred on female health were regularly discussed throughout this project. A campaign that is targeted at breaking taboos may encourage more females to start and remain in sailing. Such an initiative may have already been developed or considered from a wider British Sailing perspective, however, key areas to consider would include:

- Female pathway sailor education on managing their menstrual cycle when sailing, in particular, at major events when they are out on the water all day
- Champions in NI to be an advocate for female health on the water, and for coaches to be educated on this topic and make it less of a taboo subject
- Encouragement to use committee and motherships for female health reasons
- Advice for pregnant females that are sailing and how certain activities may need to be adapted

This may be considered under the WOW branding – **WOW Health!**



**“We need to encourage the young sailors to not be embarrassed to come by a committee boat and ask to use the toilet. We had welfare packs on board, we have to try and make them comfortable.”**

(Race Officer)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## PATHWAY STRATEGY

### 11. Could RYA consider what its key priorities are from a performance pathway perspective?

As highlighted by RYA NI staff, club pathways are often not conducive to Olympic sailing. In addition, many sailors within this project suggested there was a lack of belief that sailors in the pathway could progress to Olympic glory. Therefore, RYA NI should consider how sailors can be exposed to Olympic pathways at an earlier age:

- What role can RYA NI play in influencing clubs to support types of Olympic sailing?
- Should resources be available in the future, could a role supporting pathway development be deployed to build club performance activity and connection to pathway squads?
- Could RYA NI work closely with identified 'performance clubs' that support Olympic level sailing?
- Could RYA NI provide more exposure and training opportunities between those on the periphery of entering the pathway and pathway squads?

Additionally, this may already be operational in some way, but since the transition out of lasers is deemed incredibly challenging for females, formalising a transition squad within the programme, where sailors can choose to trial double handers for a set time period could be of benefit. This may support more girls to stay in the sport longer-term.

**“For people who are competitive and too small, there’s nothing for them, there’s no double handed squads and that is a problem that I found because I wanted to sail 29er and ended up going to double.”** (Elite sailor)

**“More promotion or accessibility for young girls to try double handers.”** (Survey)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Outside of the Top 11 recommendations, wider considerations for RYA NI include:

- Could RYA NI support the development of schools' initiatives that promote basic sailing and water safety, with clear pathways around how to progress from school to club?
- Could RYA NI provide more guidance around which clubs support social sailing opportunities over those that are more competitive driven?
- Could RYA NI look to host female only events and talks to inspire more females into the sport?
- Could RYA NI look to host 'female only' social media pages that allow females from across the sailing community to communicate (e.g., to find a crew/boat), and share best practice?
- Could RYA NI better articulate and share pathways into cruising and other big boat opportunities?
- Could RYA NI further consider its use of the red diamond to mark out female sailors in events?
- Could RYA NI consider grouping its training courses by level (e.g.. beginner, intermediate, advanced) rather than gender?
- Could the RYA NI performance team do more to educate parents on the sailing journey at the start of the pathway, including key challenges and considerations sailors may face along the way?
- Could RYA NI consider training for instructors and coaches on how to adapt sessions for people with neurodiverse conditions?
- Could RYA NI consider exploring facility grants to improve female changing facilities at clubs and other sailing spots?
- Could RYA NI consider lobbying to kit suppliers for more suitable options for female sailors?
- Could RYA further promote intrinsic factors such as physical, social, and mental wellbeing in female targeted campaigns?





## RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY:

### Dr Emma Vickers

Dr Emma Vickers is a researcher from England who has expertise within the field of athlete career development, athlete transitions, and women and girls' experiences in sport. She was previously Head of Insight at the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) and is now Head of Pathway Development at Table Tennis England.

## RESEARCH COMMISSIONED BY:

**RYA NORTHERN IRELAND**

**RYA**  
Northern Ireland