

Embracing Equality

In this edition of **SCOTTISH PADDLER** we discuss taking positive action on equality and diversity ...

In the April 2020 edition of **SCOTTISH PADDLER**, SCA announced the establishment of the new Equality Group, with the aim of improving inclusivity in paddlesport in Scotland. One of the roles of the Equality Group is to gather information from clubs and members who are engaged in diversity,

equality and inclusion (EQI) activities and learn from those.

Here, Mags Elliot provides a personal reflection on the events that led to the creation of the Equality and Diversity Champion and the role description that may be of use to other club committees currently considering this path. If you want

to find out more about the information within this article you can contact EKC at info@edinburghkayak.com. If you have suggestions for future articles, would like to share experiences or would like support on any aspects of EQI you can contact SCA Equality Group at equality@canoescotland.org.

Gary Entrican, Equality Group Member

Mags Elliot explains the motivation for Edinburgh Kayak Club (EKC) to create an Equality and Diversity Champion...

Embracing equality within EKC

Equality has always been enshrined in the EKC Constitution, which was formalised in 2014 within an Equality Policy. The process of drawing up our first club development plan in 2014 highlighted the desire of the EKC committee and the wider membership to introduce a greater variety of individuals to paddlesports and to increase the diversity of the club membership.

The initial motivation for creating a club development plan was to support funding applications towards a new boat shed. However, the committee quickly realised that the development plan was an excellent tool for reflecting the needs and aspirations of the membership, producing a clear picture of the objectives of the club and a detailed list of the actions that needed to be taken to achieve those objectives.

In relation to our objective: 'To encourage under-represented groups to

the club and create a safe and stimulating environment for these groups', the following actions were identified:

1. Reach out to support groups and voluntary organisations in Edinburgh and offer taster sessions in cooperation with the club, to encourage new groups of people into the club.
2. Have a plan of support, safety and sharing of information for paddlers with additional needs.
3. Organise events to try and increase the diversity of the club by targeting under-represented groups.

In relation to actions 1 and 3, it was decided to focus initially on offering a paddlesport experience to individuals from the LGBT community. This target group was suggested by me as I believed this group to be under-represented in the club, although there were no actual statistics. I was aware of the perceived, and sometimes real, barriers for people from the LGBT community participating in mainstream sports clubs. Also, being lesbian myself, I felt that I was in a good position to take the lead in trying to introduce individuals from this particular group to paddlesports and our club.

Our hope was that through a positive experience of paddling with EKC, LGBT individuals would feel that our club was a safe, comfortable and enjoyable environment for them to pursue an interest in paddlesports and that at least some of them would go on to become members of the club. In addition, it was hoped that they would share their experience with others in the



LGBT community and EKC would become more widely known as an inclusive club and attract more LGBT members.

I took on the main role in the organisation of two LGBT(I) events in 2015 and 2016. For both events I first requested support from club coaches, leaders and volunteer assistants, set dates and venues for the sessions and ensured that there was going to be sufficient equipment, and help with transporting equipment and participants. The response from club coaches, leaders and volunteer assistants was very positive and, on both occasions, it was quickly clear that there would be enough support from the club to run these events.

The event in 2015 consisted of two half-day sessions at Musselburgh Lagoon and a day trip on the River Tweed. I advertised the event via EKC, the SCA, the Edinburgh based LGBT Health and Wellbeing Centre (which acts as an umbrella organisation for many LGBTQI groups and has an extensive mailing list) and the Lilidots (a lesbian walking group which I am a member of).

I decided on a maximum of 20 participants for the lagoon sessions and 15 for the river trip, and that everyone would be encouraged to try both kayaking and canoeing. These decisions



were primarily based on the availability of coaches, leaders, volunteer assistants and equipment. A small charge was asked from participants for equipment hire.

Just the right number of participants responded and all the spaces were quickly filled but no one needed to be turned away. The great majority of participants were female. This was partly because some of them were recruited from a lesbian-only group, but I also wondered if there is more of a perceived/actual barrier for gay/bisexual men to come along to a mainstream sports club than there is for lesbians and bisexual women.

My reflection on the event, and the feedback that I got from both participants and club volunteers, was that it had been a very positive and enjoyable experience. The aim that participants would continue paddling and become members of the club was not fulfilled to the extent I had hoped for, but two great follow-up outcomes were that two members of the committee attended an LGBTI Awareness and Equality Training for Sports Organisations, run by LEAP Sports Scotland, and EKC became listed on the LEAP Sports Scotland website as an LGBTI inclusive sports club.

We decided to organise another event in 2016 and I suggested that this time we should focus on the recruitment of gay/bisexual men. A member of EKC that I had got chatting with on a club trip had told me that he volunteered as a leader with Unscene Edinburgh (a social group for gay and bisexual men) and he thought he could get together a group of men to participate in the event.

The event this time was condensed into one weekend as I felt this would make it more manageable for both volunteers and participants, and the number of participants was reduced to 12. The weekend consisted of one afternoon session at Musselburgh Lagoon and a day trip on the River Tweed and, as in 2015, everyone got to try both kayaking and canoeing. The event was held earlier in the summer with the idea that this would make it more likely that participants would go on to attend mainstream club lagoon sessions and river trips over the rest of the summer. Additionally, club membership for the rest of the membership year was included with the equipment hire charge in the hope that participants would take advantage of this by attending mainstream club events.

All 12 participants were enrolled from Unscene Edinburgh and the feedback from all involved was very positive, however, as in the previous year, there was very limited further involvement in

the club by attendees. I did try to get feedback from participants from both years as to why they didn't carry on paddling with the club and there were a variety of reasons given. One main factor was that people who are already actively involved in groups and interested in outdoor activities are less likely to have the time to take up a further activity/join another club.

It did appear that most of the attendees viewed the EKC events as a one-off fun weekend spent with people they knew already and/or expected to feel accepted by and comfortable with and did not see the event as a pathway to taking up a new activity or becoming a member of a new club, especially a mainstream one. There are a great number of LGBTIQ specific groups, including several sports and outdoor activity groups, and it's very possible that the individuals recruited for the EKC events have a preference for being in an LGBTIQ-only environment when they have the choice.

I was certainly asked if EKC were planning more of these LGBT(I) events and there seemed to be an interest and demand for this in preference to attending the mainstream club events. Perhaps offering a longer-term introduction to paddling and the club rather than just a couple of LGBT(I) days would lead to a different and more successful outcome. A paddling skills course rather than a one-off event may be more likely to attract LGBTIQ people who want to take up paddling as a longer term activity/sport and a course would give participants more time to build up their paddling skills and confidence before moving to a social environment that might be, or be perceived to be, more demanding.

In retrospect, I wish I had gathered feedback from the events in 2015 and 2016 in a more systematic way as this would have assisted in evaluating and learning more from them. I believe, despite the limited success of these LGBT(I) events in directly increasing the diversity of the club, having these events has still impacted in a positive way on the culture of the club. As a result, I feel that now, as well as being advertised as an 'inclusive club', anyone from the LGBTIQ community coming along to a club session/joining EKC will really experience this inclusivity in practice.

I feel there is scope to run further events for other groups that are under-represented in our club and there is a lot more work that can and needs to be done in relation to our objective of increasing the diversity of the club.



As I have described, since 2014 there have been some actions carried out by the club in relation to our objective to ensure equality and increase diversity, however the main focus of the club was our new shed project. This project is now complete and the shed with its additional storage space and increased security has allowed us to purchase a much wider variety of craft to suit people with differing needs. This has made a great difference to the range of paddling opportunities that we can now offer and has extended our ability to be more inclusive as a club.

Undertaking the planning and organisation necessary to address the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda does require vision and drive and needs the commitment of the whole club. The EKC committee agreed that having someone to take a lead on this and enlist the support of others in the club would be a very positive move and this has led to the introduction of a new role on the committee of Equality and Diversity Champion. I agreed to take on this role and I have drawn up an initial role description which has been added to the EKC website: edinburghkayak.com/club-committee-roles

Equality and Diversity Champion

The role of the Equality and Diversity Champion is to:

- Aim to ensure that everyone has an equally positive experience of the club as per the EKC Equality Policy: edinburghkayak.com/single-post/equality-policy
- Work towards increasing the diversity of the club membership with particular reference to groups that are currently under-represented in the club.

I see the equality and diversity role as being 'reactive' by ensuring that we have a plan as a club of how we respond to and meet, as far as possible, the different needs of each person approaching/joining the club and through this enable everyone to have an equally positive experience of the club, and 'proactive' by attracting a diverse range of new members to the club through targeted advertising and focussed introductory activities.