

Orkney Inclusive Paddlesport Project

Roger Holmes headed north to Orkney to deliver an inclusive paddlesport project, he tells us about it here...

Back in 2019, following the success of the Inclusive Paddlesport Project we had run that summer with Fife CAG, Aberdeen Kayak Club, and Forth Canoe Club in partnership with Scottish Disability Sport (SDS) and the MS Society we seemed to be building some real momentum. People had seen the film and the Facebook posts and we began to get further enquiries through the MS Society in Inverness and even Orkney asking if we could support a similar initiative in their area.

Having already worked with Inverness Canoe Club and following some phone calls and a meeting in Inverness it resulted in members of the MS Society joining the pool sessions in Inverness in early January 2020.

Orkney offered a different challenge, for a start it's not just a quick 'nip up the road' and I only really knew one member of Kirkwall Kayak Club. That was Nick Blowfield whom I had emailed and spoken to about an article he had written for **SCOTTISH PADDLER**, on how he and the club had supported young adults to take part in paddlesport through Scottish Autism.

So I contacted Nick who was really enthusiastic from the start and after some initial discussions with the club, SDS, MS Society and Orkney Islands

Council we began planning some inclusive paddlesport sessions for the summer of 2020.

Not to be deterred by lockdown and hoping things would settle down, we all stayed in contact; Nick from Kirkwall Kayak Club, Heather Lowden and Kirsty Ewen from SDS, George Hannah and Allan Jamieson from the MS Society and Joanne Cairns from Orkney Islands Council and myself.

The plan began to evolve in the hope we could make it happen in the summer of 2021. The idea was that we would run pool sessions at the start of the week for confidence and when people had had time to recover, run some sea sessions and include some Paddle Ability training somewhere in between.

The next thing was how we were going to pay for it? This was when Nick again arrived with the solution. In most clubs' constitutions it states that should that club fold, any remaining funds should be donated to a like-minded club or organisation and this is what the former committee of Orkney Sea Kayaking Association chose to do when they heard of this project.

This injection of cash enabled me to travel, stay in Orkney for a week to support the club and take along a selection of adaptive equipment. I was

also able to hire the swimming pool at The Pickaquoy Centre and a room at the St Magnus Centre for Paddle Ability training at no cost to the participants. It is hoped that this will also help fund some adaptive equipment for the club to be able to use in the future which is a great legacy.

Finally, Jo and I along with Jasper our dog set off in a fully loaded car and two boats up the A9 for an overnight stay at the inlaws near Inverness, before catching the lunchtime ferry from Gills Bay to St Margarets Hope in Orkney. It was amazing when we finally arrived in Orkney, after so much planning, waiting and uncertainty as to whether this would ever be able to happen!

We started with pool sessions on the Saturday and Sunday. As with all these things, everything relies on the drive and enthusiasm of the volunteers to make it a success - and that is just what they did! From moving boats into the pool, to helping participants get on the water and then supporting those first paddle strokes. It was an afternoon with plenty of smiles and laughs with some participants catching on so quickly that coaches were literally running up and down the length of the pool to keep up. There was a great team vibe from all the coaches and participants including Joanne and Kirsty who were on the side supporting and taking pictures.





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On the Tuesday evening we got a chance for all the coaches to get together at the St Magnus Centre to take part in some Paddle Ability training with lots of great discussions and sharing of experiences and ideas.

On Wednesday afternoon it was the first chance to get people out on the sea at Scapa beach. A wide selection of craft (on two trailers) had been delivered the night before by Peter, and the volunteers, many of whom had spent the morning at work, all rushed to the beach to get set up for folks arriving at 1pm.

Scapa beach was an ideal location with its wide, sandy beach that shelves gently so the sea is shallow for quite a way. This allowed the coaches to walk alongside participants in the shallows while they launched and gained confidence. For these sessions family members of all ages were able to join in. From a couple, Janet and her husband Richard, whom I paddled with in a rafted canoe they had me in stitches the whole time, to a family managing to take part in an outdoor activity together.

As we headed back to the mainland on the ferry on Saturday morning it had been an amazing week. Everyone had been so friendly and helpful especially all the club coaches and volunteers: Jenni Kakkonen, Stuart Little, Peter Woodward, Bob Moar, Dennis Bichan and Kristian Cooper. An extra special thank you goes to Nick Blowfield, Beki Russell and Coilla Drake who made every session, Coilla even camped all week so she could be there as she lives on another island. A big thank you to everyone involved.

What did the participants think?

"My husband has struggled with MS for many years. His symptoms include pain, fatigue and difficulty with balance. He used to enjoy the outdoors so much and loved hill walking.

"When George got in touch and suggested a day out for our family with specialist kayakers we were delighted and signed up straight away! The day out was wonderful. It is a rare occasion that we all do outdoor activities

together now. My husband really enjoyed it and our children too. They loved seeing their dad joining in and having fun with them."

"The kayaking gave both me and my nine-year-old niece a chance to try the activity in a fully accessible session together. It was a really enjoyable experience and in fact so super that my niece is now intending to take up the sport after having

such a good speedy lesson from the session leaders."

"It was fantastic seeing folks from the MS community in Orkney getting a chance to do something they probably wouldn't get to do otherwise. To see folks out there enjoying themselves having fun and in some cases with family, it was just priceless".
George Hannah - MS Society

