



SPÓRT ÉIREANN
SPORT IRELAND

Women in Sport

Leadership Programme 2026



In the line with the Sport Ireland Policy on Women in Sport (WIS Policy), Sport Ireland are pleased to announce the return of our Women in Sport (WIS) Leadership Programme for 2026.

Leadership and governance continue as priorities for Sport Ireland and the Government, and we are committed to increasing the number of women in leadership and governance roles. (Objective 2, Sport Ireland WIS Policy). The development of quality leadership courses, tools, and resources is a key action under this objective.

The WIS Leadership Programme will commence on Saturday 7th March 2026 and will conclude Thursday 12th November 2026 (or upon completion of a final individual mentoring session). The programme offers a blended learning experience with in-person and online sessions. It will be delivered in collaboration with Jo Hopkins Consulting (JHC), a global team of experts in sport and business, who have been enabling individuals and teams to consistently perform to the very best of their ability, for over 20 years.

This programme is designed for:

Participants who identify as female, working or volunteering in sport, who don't have access to suitable/similar development opportunities, specifically:

- Women employed at any level in a Sport Ireland funded body with the potential/desire to progress to a leadership or more senior leadership role.
- Women volunteering within a Sport Ireland funded body with the potential/desire to progress to a leadership or more senior leadership role, e.g. to Board level.
- Female Board Members of Sport Ireland funded bodies.

Key features of the programme

The Women in Sport Leadership Programme 2026 is a comprehensive one-year development experience. The programme blends in-person, virtual, and self-directed learning to strengthen leadership capability, collaboration, and performance in dynamic environments.

The programme aims to equip participants with practical skills to:

- Develop an authentic leadership identity grounded in strengths and values.
- Influence and negotiate confidently in challenging environments.
- Network strategically, blending relational and transactional approaches.
- Coach and support peers to build collective leadership capacity.
- Navigate sporting organisations and drive positive cultural change.
- Develop and maintain confidence to pursue new roles and responsibilities.
- Develop stronger strategic networks across the Irish sports system.
- Develop executive coaching skills to support and lead people through uncertain times.

In Person Introduction & On Boarding - Authentic Leadership

An introductory in person workshop will act as a programme launch and onboarding session for participants. The focus of the day will be on understanding yourself as a leader, authentic leadership, understanding the importance of personal values and how they can influence behaviour, leadership styles and decision making under pressure.

One Smart World 4D-i & Personal Development Plan

Participants will be issued with the One Smart World 4D-i profiling tool and will receive a 75 minute debrief/mentoring session which will help them to understand their preferred operating styles, how these may influence how they work with others and how they adjust when under pressure. On the back of this session, a Personal Development Plan will be created for participants to outline goals they have set, areas for further growth and development and an action plan to achieve these.

4 x 120 min Leadership Seminars (Online)

Over eight months participants will attend four online live seminars. These sessions open with a keynote on a focused topic from a guest contributor and opportunities for Q & A.

Guest speakers and topics:

- 1) Authentic Leadership & Allyship - Leadership journey & how to develop allies and support within your organisation with Angela Platt.
 - 2) The Principles of Good Governance and Strategic Leadership with John Steele.
 - 3) Creating the Right Culture & Developing High Performing Teams with Karen Brown.
 - 4) The Importance of Good Governance and the Value of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion with Anne-Marie Hughes.
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4 x Facilitated Action Learning Sets (Online)

Over eight months participants will attend four online facilitated Action Learning Sets. The sessions will include peer group discussion in their designated learning pods led by their cohort facilitator and personal JHC coach on key points that arose from the keynote speaker and the leadership topic they covered.

4 x Peer Coaching Sessions

Participants will receive four additional peer coaching sessions within their learning pods throughout the programme, with a view to working through their own personal development plans, the next steps on their leadership journey and developing key mentoring skills. The coaching sessions will be provided by experienced performance coaches who understand the specific challenges women can face in their transition to leadership roles within sport and who will aim to help participants build insight, knowledge, and understanding of self.

Individual Mentoring Support

Participants will have the option to be paired with a mentor from the Irish sports system who has graduated directly from the Women in Sport Leadership Programme & Mentor Development Programme 2025. They will have four mentor sessions throughout the programme.

JHC High Performing People Platform & Webinars

Participants will be given access to the JHC High Performing People learning platform providing on demand access to the JHC collection of online courses. This will include topics such as Leadership, Mentoring, Team Development and other exclusive content from JHC's network of contributors.

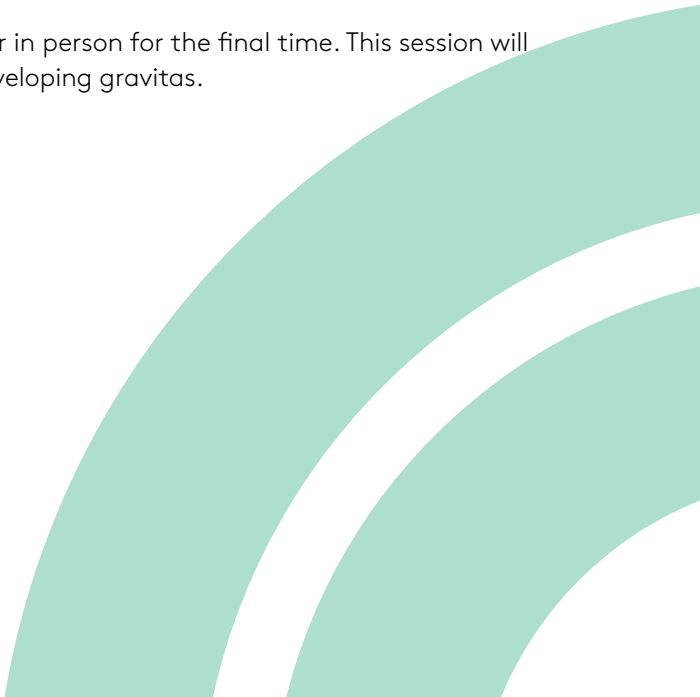
Participants will also have access to live quarterly webinars with industry leading guest speakers. Attendance is optional and not required as part of the leadership programme, areas of focus will include:

- Leading Change in a Performance Environment: Managing transitions and driving success
- Understanding Networking: Building and leveraging professional relationships
- Performing under Pressure
- Lessons in Leadership – Panel discussion with leaders within the Irish, UK, Australian & Canadian Sport System

** Please note that webinar dates are still to be confirmed*

In Person Finale – Finding Your Voice

The programme finale will see the participants come together in person for the final time. This session will focus on developing influencing and negotiating skills and developing gravitas.



Programme Schedule

Activity	Date	Time	Location
Week 1: Introduction to Leadership In Person Workshop	Sat 7 March	09.30-15.30	Clayton Hotel, Dublin Airport Central
Week 2: Leadership Seminar 1 & Action Learning Set 1	Wed 18 March	18:30-20:30	Online Zoom
One Smart World Debrief & Professional Development Plan	March/April	TBD	Online Zoom
Week 4: Peer Coaching Session 1	Wed 22 April	12:00-13:30	Online Zoom
Week 5: Leadership Seminar 2 & Action Learning Set 2	Thurs 14 May	18:30-20:30	Online Zoom
Week 6: Peer Coaching Session 2	Thurs 11 June	12:00-13:30	Online Zoom
Week 7: Leadership Seminar 3 & Action Learning Set 3	Wed 26 August	18:30-20:30	Online Zoom
Week 8: Peer Coaching Session 3	Wed 2 Sept	12:00-13:30	Online Zoom
Week 9: Leadership Seminar 4 & Action Learning Set 4	Wed 30 Sept	18:30-20:30	Online Zoom
Week 10: Finding Your Voice In Person Workshop 2	Tues 13 Oct	09.30-15.30	Clayton Hotel, Dublin Airport Central
Week 11: Peer Coaching Session 4	Thurs 12 Nov	12:00-13:30	Online Zoom



Facilitators, Mentors and Contributors



Jo Hopkins – Lead Facilitator and Project Manager

Jo is the founder of Jo Hopkins Consulting (JHC) and a Global Master Trainer for One Smart World Inc. A former international athlete and coach, a trained counsellor, teacher, consultant and adjunct of Hult Ashridge Executive Education.

Jo's roles, (including her tenure as Performance Mentor for Team GB Performance Services Team, Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020), have honed her skills and processes working with senior leadership teams who are required to deliver under extreme pressure. With over 20 years of experience developing people, in sport, business, public and voluntary sector, Jo has a trademark for a challenging yet supportive approach which encourages and empowers individuals to take control of your environment and responsibility for your own performance.

Jo established JHC in 2014 with a singular desire to help people succeed. Working only with the very best she ensures that every organisation is assured a tailor-made delivery.

Eliza Downey – Co-Facilitator on the Programme and Mentor

Over the past 16 years, Eliza has worked in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Gaining expertise in the fields of sports development, team development, event management, programme design and delivery and performance coaching and mentoring. Eliza is a former Irish International Rugby and All Ireland winning County Gaelic Football player and has been immersed in the world of sport her entire life.

In her current role and with her experience in freelance leadership, performance mentoring/coaching and team development consultancy, Eliza has frequently worked with National Governing Bodies within Ireland and the UK, coaching and developing high performance female athletes, teams and coaches. Eliza supports many in their leadership journey, enabling them to create effective relationships that benefit them and their team in all types of environments. Eliza is currently completing the ILM Level 7 Executive Coaching and Mentoring Certificate.

Karen Brown - Online Workshop Contributor and Mentor

Karen is an Olympic Gold Medal winning coach, a former international hockey player and performance mentor working across eight Olympic Sports. She also is a performance consultant for organisations such as Arsenal FC, Watford FC, the Premier League and UK Sport.

Esme Matthew - Peer Coaching Facilitator

Esme holds an MSc in Exercise Physiology and has been the Co-Head of Physiology at the English Institute/ UK Sports Institute for 7 years – leading and developing the physiology service across the UK sports system. Following two Olympic/Paralympic cycles with the Great Britain Cycling team, Esme moved into a leadership role within the UK Sports Institute, where she has used her experience to support the development of other practitioners through coaching and mentoring. Esme completed the UK Sport Leadership through Mentoring Programme, that was delivered alongside Ashridge Business School, developing her understanding of the challenges of sustainable success in high performance environments. She is a UK Sport endorsed mentor.

Anne Marie Hughes – Online Workshop Contributor

Anne-Marie Hughes joined the IRFU in 2015 as the organisation's Spirit of Rugby Programme Manager, responsible for inclusion, the integrity of the game, safeguarding and developing leadership at all levels of rugby. She was responsible for establishing the IRFU Youth Council and the Spirit of Rugby Programme that aims to ensure the values of the game are embedded across all rugby activities. In 2023, Anne Marie was appointed Head of Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity within the Union.

Debbie Kirkpatrick - Peer Coaching Facilitator

Debbie is a former Irish International Sailor, campaigning for the 2008 Olympic Games and competing at World and European Championships over a 10-year senior international career. Debbie's experience working within performance programmes at the Sports Institute NI has allowed her to gain further experience with high performance directors, coaches, support staff and athletes for up to twenty Irish and British Olympic and Paralympic sports. In her current role at Jo Hopkins Consulting, Debbie creates a welcoming and supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable to share their challenges and experiences openly.

Angela Platt – Online Workshop Contributor

Angela Platt is the Irish Football Association's first ever Director of Women's Football following spells as CEO in both Ulster Hockey and the Northern Cricket Union. Angela is also the founding Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Women's Sports Forum – a position she has held for over 15 years.

A former elite athlete, Angela played for the Ireland Senior International Hockey Team and represented the Senior NI Women's Football Team. She competed in hockey, football, athletics and badminton at youth international level.

John Steele – Online Workshop Contributor

John Steele has a unique blend of experience in creating and leading high performing teams, developed as a professional sports coach and chief executive in the private, public, and not for profit sectors.

He served as an army officer, having been trained at the prestigious Royal Military Academy Sandhurst to lead teams in high pressure environments. On leaving the army he worked in the corporate world before becoming a professional rugby player.

The winning of the bid for the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics saw John take up post as CEO of UK Sport, which he led for a six-year period through Beijing and into London. He has had leadership roles in eleven different games including the record-breaking Rio Olympics and Paralympics, and unprecedented games in Tokyo. John succeeded Steve Cram as Chairman of the English Institute of Sport in 2013 and finished his second term in 2021.

Feedback

A recent evaluation of the 2025 Women in Sport Leadership Programme has resulted in the below positive findings:

- 64% of respondents have reported taking on new leadership opportunities since completing the programme.
- Pre-programme, only 4% of participants rated their leadership ability as very high, rising to 36% of participants post-programme. Those rating it as high, increased from 24% pre programme to 56% post programme.
- 100% of respondents reported that they were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the quality of the programme and 100% would recommend to other female leaders.

Application Process

We welcome applications from females already operating in or wishing to pursue a leadership role within the sport sector. Applicants must be verified and nominated by their National Governing Body, Local Sports Partnership or other funded body of Sport Ireland.

Please only apply if you are committed to attending the full schedule outlined within this brochure, a minimum attendance of 80% is required to successfully complete the programme. To apply, please complete the application form below and email it to odc@sportireland.ie, cc your CEO/Coordinator /most relevant senior leader no later than Thursday February 12th 2026. Applications via post will not be accepted.

All applications will be reviewed by Sport Ireland for eligibility and applicants will be notified of their status in writing no later than Friday 20th February 2026.

Questions

Should you have any questions in relation to the programme and the application process, please contact odc@sportireland.ie.



Women in Sport Leadership Programme

Application Form

SECTION 1: Personal Information

Please complete the following information regarding your application electronically.

Applicant's Name:	
Organisation:	
Role Title:	No of years in role:
Occupation outside of sport if applicable:	
Email Address:	
Phone Number:	
Mobile Number:	
Briefly outline your leadership experience to date, including no. of direct reports if appropriate <i>(This will allow us to ensure you are assigned to an appropriate peer learning group for the programme)</i>	
Experience within sport, professionally and voluntarily:	
Top 3 areas you would like to develop within your leadership:	

SECTION 2: Personal Statement

Please use the space below to complete a personal statement indicating why you believe you should be selected for the Women in Sport Leadership Programme. Please indicate what you hope to achieve from participation on the programme and how it will build management capability within your organisation.
(Between 250 - 500 words)

SECTION 3: Approval

All applications must be supported by the CEO in the participant's organisation.

CEO/Coordinator/Most relevant Senior Leader Name:

CEO/Coordinator/Most relevant Senior Leader Role:

CEO/Coordinator/Most relevant Senior Leader Email:

Please outline in detail the leadership opportunities your organisation will provide this applicant upon completion of the programme:

CEO/Coordinator/Most relevant Senior Leader Signature:



Contact Us

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