

An open letter to the Scottish paddlesport community

11 June 2026

To the Scottish paddlesport community,

I am seven weeks in to my role and have spent this time meeting, listening, engaging in conversations on and off the water, and reflecting.

I came into this job aware of the recent Talent Pathway Review and had read it before I started. It is a thoughtful and honest piece of work and I am grateful to everyone who contributed to it so openly. That kind of candour takes courage and it has given me a strong foundation to build from.

What the review reflects, above all, is a community that cares deeply. The passion for paddlesport in Scotland from volunteers, coaches, athletes, parents and clubs comes through on every page. So does the frustration of people who have given a great deal to the sport and have not always felt that reflected back to them. I do not think this is anyone's fault; systems drift, priorities shift, and sometimes the distance between an organisation and its community grows without anyone fully intending it to.

What I took from the review, and from the conversations I have had since, is that the will to do things differently is already there. That is the best possible starting point.

What I have been doing

Since joining, I have been out across Scotland as much as possible - with clubs, at venues, on river banks and on the water, as well as getting to know my new colleagues properly. In my first six weeks, our team have also managed the short deadline for three sportscotland funding pots following the announcement of additional government investment into sport.

I have sat with coaches who have given years of their lives to this sport and who have so much still to offer. I have spoken with parents who want nothing more than a clear, fair system their children can trust and thrive in. I have met athletes at different stages of their journey, some thriving, some working through challenges, some who have stepped back from the sport for a while.

Adam Burns, Paddle Scotland's Club Development Manager, has been doing the same, and our Interim CEO Kevin Pringle has been part of these conversations too. The fact that Development and Performance are now working as one team - genuinely aligned, not just on paper - is critical for what we want to achieve together.

These conversations have shaped everything that follows. This is not a plan I brought with me, it is a plan shaped by what you told us.

What I heard

A few things came through consistently, regardless of discipline or location.

People want Paddle Scotland to show up. Not to take over, but to be present, to work alongside clubs, to be visible and consistent rather than occasional and top-down. The phrase I heard more than once was that coaches and volunteers felt like they were on their own. This has to change.

People want clarity. People want to be included. Not just consulted, but genuinely involved in shaping our direction. Almost everyone, in some form or another, said the same thing: the ingredients are here. The talent is here. Scotland has produced Olympic and Paralympic

medallists. The question is whether we can build a system that makes success the norm rather than the exception and doesn't discard the people around it in the process.

What we are going to do

The headline is simple: more coaching in clubs, more time on the water, clearer expectations and a system that works together rather than in parallel tracks that never quite connect.

To make that real, our team is developing a consistent and clear guide to the pathway - a Paddler Reference Guidance - so that every paddler, parent and coach in Scotland can understand what is expected at each stage, what 'good' looks like and how to progress, should they wish to do so.

We must also be clearer and more ambitious about our commitment to parasport and paracanoe. This is not a separate track to be managed on the side; it is central to who we are. I have heard clearly that our efforts to include paddlers with disabilities have been inconsistent, often relying on the dedication of a few rather than the infrastructure of the whole. We need to create a pathway that is truly inclusive from the ground up, ensuring the barriers are removed and the support is consistent.

Our focus also needs to be broader than just performance and competition. Paddlesport in Scotland encompasses a huge range of activities and motivations. We must ensure that our development work supports and celebrates the full breadth of the sport, recognising that a healthy, thriving community across all paddlesport disciplines is the foundation of everything we achieve.

I want to be honest about how this will be done. What follows is not a finished plan. It is a direction of travel shaped by what we have heard, grounded in the realities of where the sport is right now, and honest about the fact that the Olympic disciplines of Sprint and Slalom are at different stages and will need different approaches. We are going to pilot things, learn from them and be honest about what works and what doesn't. The detailed areas of focus identified in the review and our conversations follow this letter. Again, these are the emerging picture, not the final plan.

What I am asking of you

I know that trust has to be earned. I am not asking you to trust Paddle Scotland on the basis of this letter. I am asking you to give us the space to demonstrate it through our actions and to hold us accountable when we fall short.

But I also want to be honest about something the review made clear: the responsibility for changing the culture of Scottish paddlesport does not sit with Paddle Scotland alone. It sits with all of us.

Some of what has held this community back has come from within it. Individual agendas put ahead of collective good, clubs in competition and a lack of a supportive environment. This has to change and Paddle Scotland cannot change it on its own.

I am asking for something straightforward: show up for each other. Support the volunteers who give their time. Welcome new ideas even when they challenge old habits. If you have concerns, bring them. Constructive challenge is exactly what we need. But let's agree that behaviour which undermines individuals, whether directed at volunteers, coaches, athletes, parents or staff, has no place in the sport we are trying to build.

Finally

I came into this role with a genuine belief that Scottish paddlesport has a strong future. Nearly two months in, that belief has not wavered, it has grown stronger. The passion is real. The talent is real. The willingness to change, which I have felt in almost every conversation, is real.

I look forward to developing this together with you.

Mark Ritchie

Head of Sport, Paddle Scotland

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