



Barriers & facilitators to long-term engagement in the competition pathway for Canoe Slalom and Kayak Cross within the UK.



PADDLE^{UK}

tass[★]



Contents

Introduction	3
Introduction to TASS Insight	3
Intro to Paddle UK Slalom Committee	3
Research Process	4
Data Collection Demographics	5
Executive Summary of Key Findings	5
Highlights of Canoe Slalom Competitions	6
Challenges to Canoe Slalom Competitions	8
In The Competition Structure Fit for Purpose?	13
Opportunities for Competition Improvements	15
What Would Encourage Paddlers to Come Back to the Sport	20
Challenges Specific to Volunteers	21
Perceptions of Kayak Cross	24
Recommendations	27
Conclusion	31

Photographer credits:

Anthony Edmonds, Rob Eton-Jones, Adam Johnstone, Rich Ramsdale, Andy Neave, Neil Fletcher, Craig Douglas



Introduction

The following report was developed from an insight project, conducted on behalf of Paddle UK by TASS Insight, who acted as an independent organisation within the process.

In the sport of Canoe Slalom, it was recognised that participation numbers have dropped within competitions. The main aim of the project was to understand if the current Canoe Slalom competition pathway was fit for purpose, defined as:

“...ensuring that there is a standard of competition suitable for athletes of all degrees of ability.”

As secondary aims of the project, data was also collected on: perceptions of Kayak Cross, experiences and challenges of volunteers, and engagement of clubs with competitions.

Introduction to TASS Insight

The Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) is a Sport England funded partnership between talented athletes, delivery sites and national governing bodies of sport. These parties work together to bring the best out of our country’s most exciting young talent.

As part of their role in supporting national governing bodies, the insight team within TASS have extensive experience in developing and delivering research projects that support strategic decision making within organisations. In this role, the insight team is able to act as an independent body within the research, offering objectivity and credibility to the project.

Intro to Paddle UK Slalom Committee

The Paddle UK Slalom Committee is an entirely volunteer-led committee whose purpose is to interest itself in all matters relating to the management and development of Canoe Slalom in the UK with particular focus on:

- a. Increasing participation through the provision of competition
- b. Administration of rules and regulations
- c. Development of athletes, coaches and officials

The Slalom Committee has UK wide responsibility for those areas outlined within its Purpose and Responsibilities and will work closely with the National Association.

Research Process

After consultations with Paddle UK on the aim and purpose of the project, a four-phase strategy was implemented. This approach enabled a broad range of views to be heard whilst also gaining an in depth understanding from key stakeholders within the sport.

The four phases are outlined:

Competition Attendance

TASS Insight attended two competitions in order to immerse themselves in the sport and have informal conversations with paddlers, volunteers and spectators.

Survey

The Canoe Slalom community were asked to complete a survey which explored engagement with the sport, reasons for drop out (if applicable), participants' general experiences and any additional feedback for the NGB.

Interview

Professional and volunteer stakeholders from clubs, Slalom Committee, World Class Programmes and International Panel were interviewed. They were asked questions on their experience of the sport and the current challenges competitions faced.

Focus Groups

Key participant groups took part in focus groups, including athletes, parents, National Associations coaches and volunteers. The focus groups facilitated discussions around their experience and challenges within competitions.

Following data collection, the analysis was conducted by researchers within TASS. The key findings are summarised and supported with data in the following report. Finally, six key questions relating to the future of the sport have been posed to Paddle UK and its community for consideration.



Data Collection Demographics

In total, **269 people** completed the survey. Of these 269, **81.5% were currently involved in the sport** in some capacity. The remaining 18.5% had dropped out of the sport.

Within the survey, there were a large spread of roles within the sport. This is summarised in the table below.

Competitor	Official/Volunteer	Coach	Parent	Spectator
222	153	102	103	59

Note: some people had more than one role e.g., former paddle /current volunteer

In total, **459 minutes** of interviews and focus groups were conducted, including five expert interviews with professional and volunteer stakeholders (e.g., slalom committee members, international panel members and Paddle UK performance coaches) and four Focus Groups with athletes, parents, National Association coaches and volunteers.

Executive Summary of Key Findings

Based on extensive research within Slalom and Kayak Cross, the following conclusions can be drawn.

- The social and community aspect of the sport is very strong. This aspect was seen as a major highlight and something that should continue to be supported.
- A lack of people entering and volunteering at competitions was a significant concern for all involved in Canoe Slalom. Several reasons for this lack of engagement emerged including: the cost of travel, entry, and equipment; too many competitions becoming a burden to paddlers and their families; and a focus on the elite aspect of the sport.
- While Kayak Cross was seen as an opportunity to bring new people into the sport, considerable safety concerns were raised.

The report then proposes that the sport considers the following questions, which are developed from the findings. Possible solutions to these questions are further outlined in the report.

- 1. Could fewer national races lead to more meaningful and rewarding competition?**
- 2. Can regional competitions support sustainable participation in the sport?**
- 3. How can sociable competitions be facilitated at the regional level?**
- 4. How can competitor retention be enhanced from junior to veteran paddlers?**
- 5. How can volunteers be encouraged, welcomed and valued within the sport?**
- 6. How can Kayak Cross be integrated into the pathway?**

A Social Sport

Continuing from the previous point, the social aspect of the sport and competitions was recognised as a highlight by paddlers, volunteers and parents. This included the opportunity to meet new people but also to spend time with fellow paddlers during a competition weekend. In the survey, **42% of respondents stated that making friendships and socialising with teammates encouraged them to return to competitions.**

“They've [their children] got a whole network of friends almost [all] around the country now. It's kind of a really nice way for them to get to know other people”

Parent

“The environment has encouraged quite a lot of friendship building... you're out in remote locations. You're generally camping and it brings families and groups of people together.”

Parent

Positive Impact on Mental Health

Paddlers at all levels of the sport described the positive impact that spending time in nature and on the water had on their mental health. This was also recognised by volunteers and parents.

“I think it's good for everyone's mental health as well because you're outside. It's fresh air, it's exercise, it's community... you struggle to get that sometimes... So it's such a positive from that side of things.”

Parent

Development As People

Parents and volunteers recognised the impact canoeing as a sport has had on the general development of people, including skills such as resilience, confidence and interpersonal skills.

“I've seen so many people develop through kayak... the confidence and independence.”

Volunteer

Well Run Competitions

On the whole, competitions were described as running smoothly and being well organised. When this occurred, paddlers and spectators were more likely to feel that they had value for their money.

“Generally, competitions are run in an excellent fashion. I have been involved in the sport for years and experienced races from division 4 to prem and selection. There are only 2 competitions I have been to that I regretted going to due to poor organisation.”

Former Paddler and Current Volunteer - Survey Response

Challenges to Canoe Slalom Competition

The following section of the report will focus on the key themes emerging from the research and offer a summary of the perceived challenges.

Lack of Competitors

Despite a strong participation base within Paddle UK, many paddlers do not compete in canoe slalom. Subsequently, a lack of competitors at all levels of events was a topic of discussion for paddlers, volunteers and stakeholders. In particular, the impact on the social atmosphere at competitions was highlighted in relation to events receiving fewer entries.

“One problem that we’ve [The club] had is that people don’t realise it’s a competitive sport and they don’t really understand why they’re being encouraged to go to the races. So, they have all these people come, they love it, they want to come every week, but they never, ever want to race.”

Parent

“You know, we are running an event in fortnight’s time. It regularly and consistently got well over 100 entries, today we’ve had 10.”

Volunteer

Cost to Take Part

Throughout the study, primarily parents but also volunteers, discussed the cost of regularly attending competitions. In an informal discussion during a competition, one parent estimated they spend £14K a year on travel, races, equipment and coaching. This was also supported by focus group discussions.

“So as a parent, it’s the financial commitment which is extortionate, which I wasn’t aware of when we started. And the time factor, having to get [child] to the river on time and stuff like that and like having to work different sort of working patterns and things to work around it is, is a huge restriction.”

Parent



Travel to Competitions

Related to the previous point, travelling to competitions was seen as a challenge by parents and volunteers, particularly for new families. There is a significant cost and time challenge of travelling long distances on a regular basis for slalom competitions, including the challenge of transporting boats.

“Lots of people are scared of having a roof rack because they’ve never had a roof rack. So, the idea of getting a roof rack and then transporting their boat to a venue and all of the logistics sounds too scary”

Parent and club member

“For me the two key challenges to our sport, is that it is very time consuming and it’s very expensive. Cost of travel particularly has become a bigger factor.”

Expert Interview



Too Many Competitions

Parents and volunteers in some divisions (mostly 3 and 4) explained the large volume of competitions that are held in one year (up to 50 competitions). The way the current points system works, parents and paddlers were aiming to attend as many competitions as possible, which increases the time and cost demands on families. This was also seen to impact the competition experience and number of competitors at each event.

“If you’re going out every single weekend to every single race that’s in the calendar, it then becomes a slog and it’s not enjoyable... I think you get caught in a trap that you need to go to the races because you need to [be] progressing [to] go up the divisions.”

Parent

“The quality of races suffer as well because you’ve got so many races to choose from, not everyone goes to every race, so you don’t get the numbers that you might have done if you had less races.”

Club member

The Perceived Effect of Funded Programmes

Some paddlers, parents and volunteers felt that funded programmes over-incentivised progression through the divisional structure and neglected the opportunity to enjoy the sport for sports sake. This could negatively impact a paddler's experience, but also was seen as a barrier to newcomers moving from club participation to competitions.

“They [newcomers] think it's going to be super competitive, and they think their kids aren't ready for that yet. So, they want to wait until they're going to win something. So normally, once you've managed to get someone to one race, then they kind of get it and then they'll do it again. It's just that initial hand holding I think to get people confident enough to just try it.”

Club Member

“We are very good at producing international performances. And actually, I'll probably go a step further and say I think the sport is probably so good at focusing on international performances that it has become the sport. Selection has almost [become] bigger than the sport.”

Expert Interview

“It becomes quite a transactional sport in terms of the whole point in it now is to say: 'right are you going to make it to the top or not' and it's not really a sport in its own right...But that is the challenge, I think of sport to make it sport for sport's sake rather than sport to find the next Olympic champion.”

Parent

Athlete Dropout After Deselection

There was a concern, particularly amongst the club members, that once athletes were deselected from funded programmes, they drop out of the sport all together. This concern was extended by the National Association coaches, who suggested that it also impacts the clubs, because when paddlers are not selected, they might be the only one or two boats left in their club.

“It's a self-destructive squad system. And the ones who make it I'm very happy for and you know, I think that's absolutely brilliant. However, the ones who don't make it, I can't count more than one who has come back and paddled with the club. They leave the squad and they pack in paddling the end.”

Club Member

“I was dropped from the squad and instantly lost interest and felt rejected. Never returned to slalom nor the sport. There is a lot of investment in young people to get them to the podium, but no interest in retaining young people in the sport after the squads.”

Survey Response – Paddler

Seen as a Sport for Younger Paddlers

Some paddlers, coaches and key stakeholders felt that the competition pathway overly focused on younger paddlers and the attraction to the sport for senior athletes was limited. Since the majority of paddlers in competitions were under 18s, senior participants found it difficult to compare themselves to similar paddlers. This creates the big drop in participation post the ages of 18 / 23.

“There is no draw for adults to enter the sport and very little keeping those who have been part of the sport engaged in terms of a peer community.”

Survey Response from a Current Competitor, aged 30-39

“My age group peers, training partners etc are all in different divisions, whereas my competitors are largely all u18 and travel/stay with families. The amateur era of enjoying the sport as an adult with your friends at a reasonable level has completely faded.”

Survey Response - Current competitor

“The real challenge is that the sport is basically a junior sport. And I believe a lot of that’s down to the fact we haven’t got an offer for seniors.”

Expert Interview





Elite Paddlers Within National Competitions

It was perceived by paddlers and coaches at all levels (including the elite), that senior elite paddlers rarely attended national races. This created a division in the sport between the elite system and participation. It also meant that premier division events were not seen as the top of the sport. When talking to parents and paddlers at events, they described wanting more connection with elite paddlers as role models for the younger generation. In contrast, elite paddlers explained the challenges of their timetable and a lack of competition at national events.

“You have less of the top athletes attending than you would have done back in the day... which probably creates the lack of connection to the top end, but also the competitiveness quality of those races probably is a bit less.”

Expert Interview

“If not many of the top guys go, you can sometimes go to a race, and there's basically you... you can end up then basically go in and just being rubbish and still come in first or second. It takes away the emphasis of racing a little bit... It's like a Premier League football team rocking up at a Sunday League. It's so disconnected. Then we get in trouble for not going to them. It doesn't really work that well.”

Athlete

For some coaches and athletes, the competition structure did not currently achieve the aim of creating a standard of competition for all abilities because, the level of competition did not fulfil the needs of elite athletes who were more accustomed to international competition.

“The quality of the events internationally are obviously higher in the sort of formats and the kind of rounds you have to go through, and that kind of thing is not replicated in domestic competition.”

Expert Interview

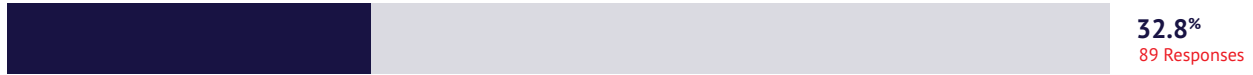
“I guess we're talking now, the quality of judging, and stuff like that isn't what you'd be used to when you're racing internationally. It's going from what we spend most of our time doing, it's a big step down. There's no video and all that stuff that you're used to having.”

Athlete

Is the Competition fit for purpose?

Survey participants were asked if the current competition structure was fit for purpose (and they were given the defined purpose: to ensure that there is a standard of competition suitable for all abilities). Only 6.6% of respondents felt competitions did not achieve this at all. However, the majority felt that it only partially achieved this.

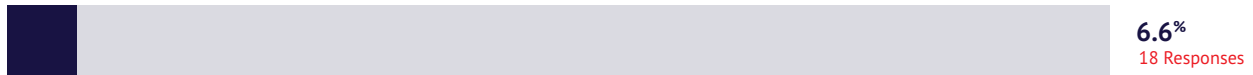
It fully achieves this



It partly achieves this



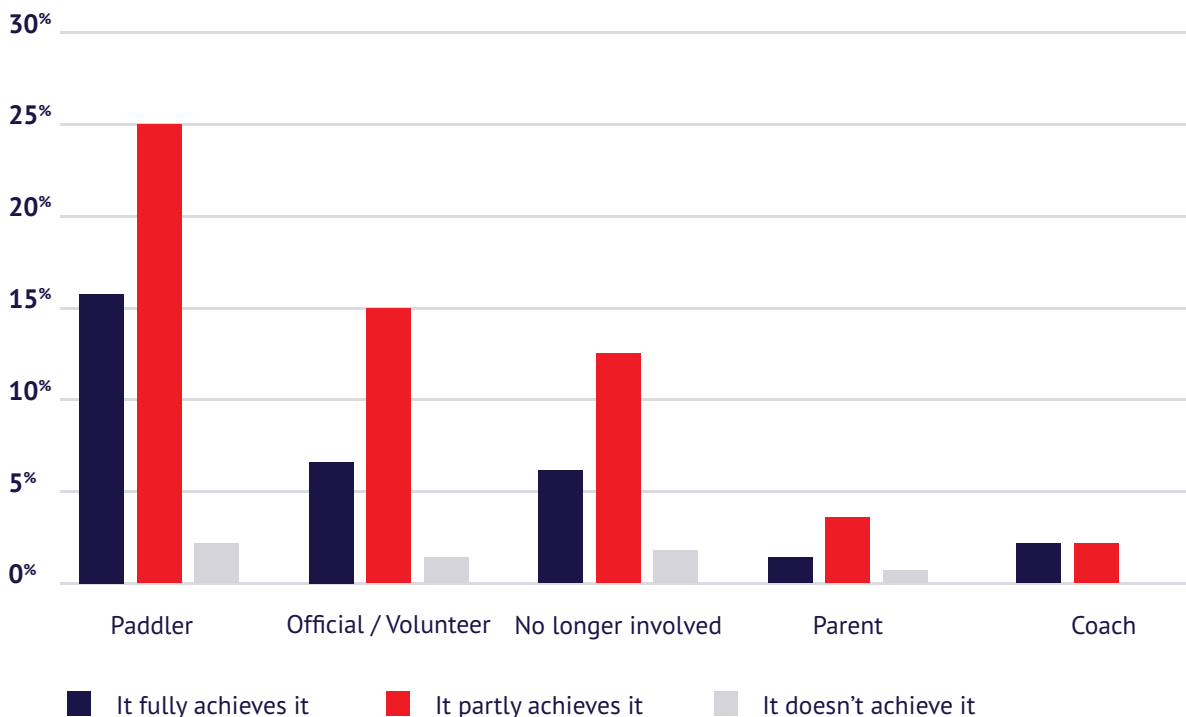
It doesn't achieve this at all



Do Different Groups think differently?

To further understand how the competition structure is perceived, answers to this question were broken down by participant groups:

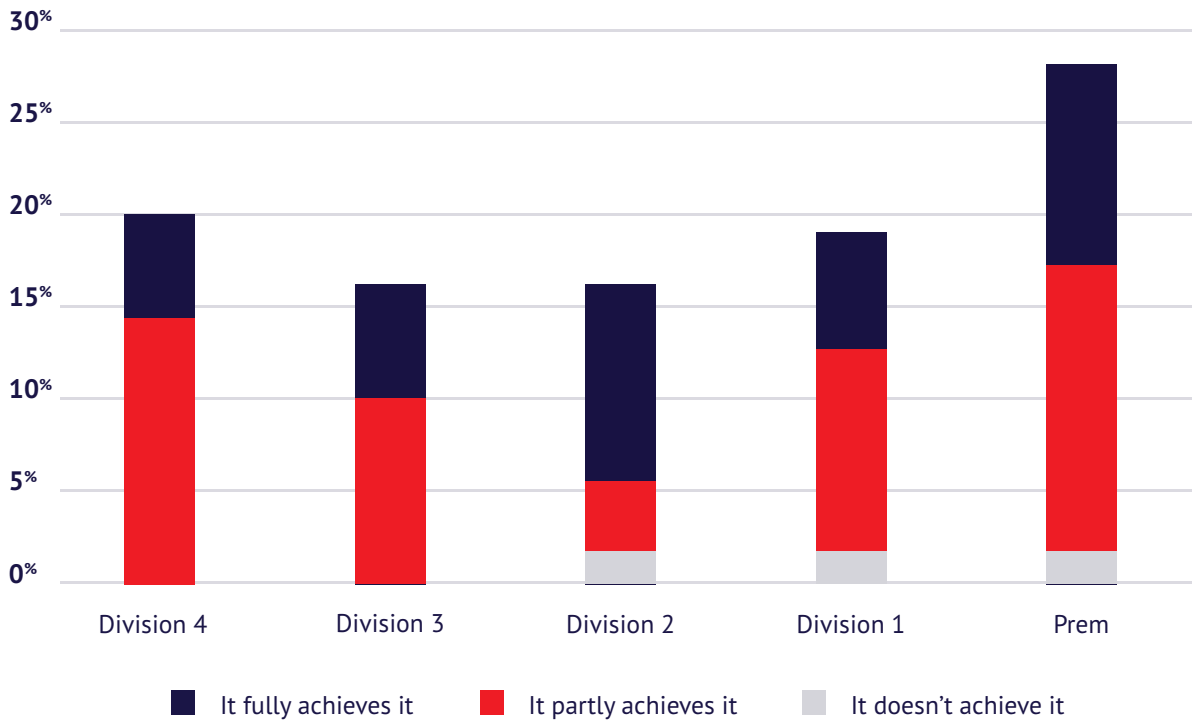
Does the Competition Pathway Achieve its Aim?



From this, we can see the same general pattern between the groups (i.e., no one group thinks the structure works better or worse than another group).

To further investigate this, we looked specifically at the paddler group and separated the findings by divisions. Here, the graph shows that Divisions 2, 1, and Premier were the only groups including anyone who stated that the competition pathway “doesn’t achieve” its purpose.

Paddlers perspectives on the competition aim



Opportunities for Competition Improvements

The following section of the report will focus on the key opportunities that the sport might consider in any potential evolution.

“We need better attended events, and that requires a radical re-think of how the discipline is organised”

Survey Response

Increasing Paddle time in Competitions

During most competitions, paddlers get one practice run and two race runs which amounts to around eight minutes of ‘racing’ on the water. This does not include warm up time or free practice at the lower division races. It was felt by paddlers that this wasn’t a lot of time when accounting for the cost of travel and accommodation. Furthermore, **54% of respondents** stated that ‘more time on the water’ would enhance their competition experience.

“[it’s a] significant cost of fuel and accommodation and everything else that goes with it, just for maybe 10 minutes of paddling”

Expert Interview

“A big thing at the minute in the younger division, is people start, [drive] to a field in North Wales, do two runs.. and they get bored out of their minds [waiting the rest of the time].”

Athlete

One Day Events

The time commitment for paddlers was also considered an area for improvement. In the focus groups, a suggestion of offering one or even half day events were put forward to encourage more people to be involved. Examples of one day events (e.g., mini slaloms) and running categories back-to-back (i.e., all C1s in the morning, all K1s in the afternoon) were given as suggestions.

“You know, you could run certain categories back-to-back, you know, kayaks in the morning, canoes in the afternoon. If people are just wanting to turn up, do two runs and go, then I think that kind of thing is more realistic, more achievable.”

Expert Interview

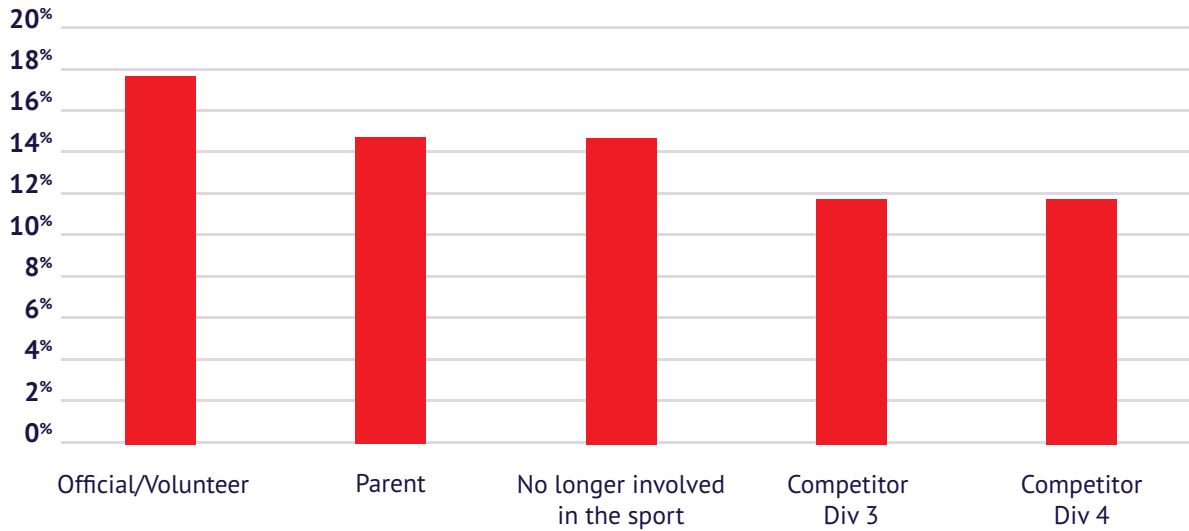
“[Talking about mini-slalom event] They’re basically a one-day event. They’re open to everybody.... Entry fees were cheap. You didn’t have accommodation... but those events still get you know, up to 150 people turn up and just compete, turn up, do it for the day and go home.”

Club Member

Survey participants were also asked for suggestions of how to improve the competition structure. Respondents selected both single day events and multi-day events.

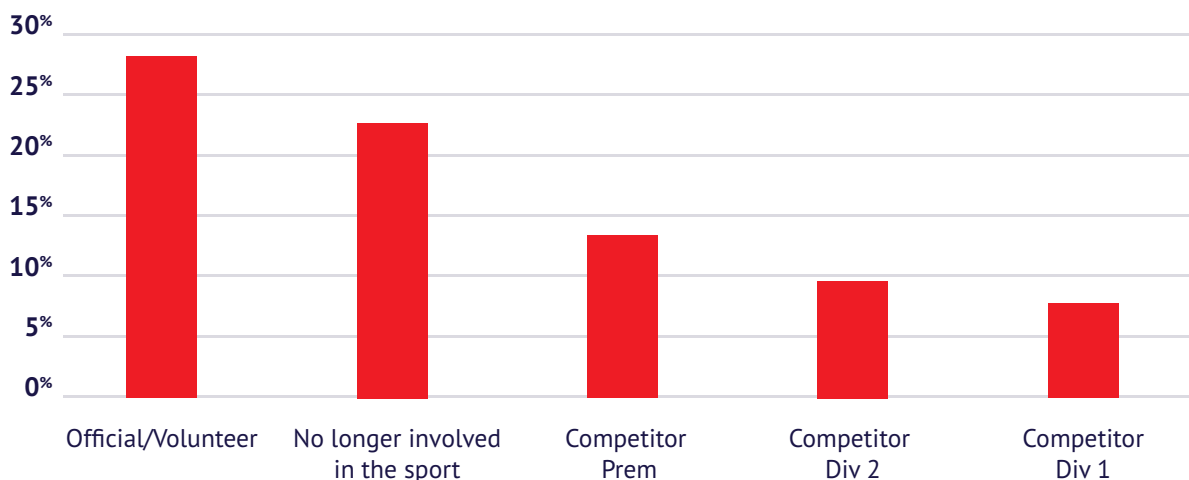
Interestingly, more respondents selected multi-day events (21.5%) than single day events (12.8%). However, when this was broken down into categories it becomes clearer that parents and Divisions 3-4 would see single day events as an improvement.

Interested in Single Day Events



Whereas Premier division paddlers would be more interested in multi-day events. Interestingly volunteers appeared in both preferences, as did those who are not currently involved in the sport. This could be because they cover all divisions (i.e., some volunteers could be division 4 and some could be Division 1).

Interested in Multi Day Events



In conclusion, single day events might be considered easier to attend at the entry level of the sport, but multi-day events could enable a format similar to international competitions.

National Competitions

Some participants in the survey and focus groups discussed hosting larger national events that focused on creating a fun atmosphere. There are several reasons why a national series of events could benefit competition numbers, including better aligning national competitions with international ones, and aligning with national programs so elite paddlers can attend.

In the survey, when asked for suggestions on improving competitions, responses included evening social events (26.4%), equipment and retailer stalls (22.3%), commentary (21.9%) and food and drink stations (15.2%). Big screens and scoreboards were also suggested by survey respondents.

“What we probably need to do though is source a microphone and one half-decent speaker. Because people will just stand and listen in that area and that creates more of an environment.”

Athlete

“We need to review what national events there are and how they're delivered, and really making them be special and worthwhile for people going to.”

Expert Interview

More regional competitions

In the survey, **51.7% of respondents** stated that more regional competitions would enhance the competition experience. This was a particular discussion point within the parents' focus groups as a more regional focus was expected to reduce the time and cost demands of attending competitions.

“Fewer national ranking races, to boost attendance at each one. Consequently, that would free up the calendar for more regional events, i.e., competition with less travel expense; many of which could be single day events, or a training/practice/coaching day preceding a competition day.”

Survey Response, Current Competitor

“Essence of the sport should be more local ... it's the sort of thing you could do in a day. You could travel to a day's competition... probably 50 miles from where you live. And yeah, you don't have to spend all weekend doing it, and it's probably not going to cost you quite as much either.”

Parent

“The way you know the sport needs to go is more locally. Running more local events. For all abilities.”

Expert Interview



Team Events and Inter-club Competitions

Both team events and inter-club competitions were discussed by participants in the research as a way to enhance the social aspect and sense of belonging to the sport.

The addition of team events was selected by **48% of survey respondents** as a way of improving competitions. Whereas, inter-club competitions and supporting younger paddlers to compete as part of their club were discussed in the focus groups and interviews by paddlers, parents and key stakeholders.

“We sort of sold it that we're a racing team and all the kids had a racing T-shirt. So, when we went to the venue, everyone knew that we were all part of the one team.”

Club Member

“Inter clubs... I think that's a good one in terms of encouraging clubs and... You kind of need to have a spectrum of people across your club in order to do well at the inter clubs. As well as just the community.”

Expert Interview

Training Opportunities

Opportunities for training and coaching was considered as a way of improving competitions by **43.5% of survey respondents**. This was further explained by a parent in the focus group:

“[daughter] started C1 last year and within six months she was in Division Two because the weightings were very generous... But actually now we're having to be really strategic about which races we go to, because she's terrified of half of the division two venues... so, the trouble is the kids will get to division two, they have a bad experience. Then the girls drop out. Because they're not ready for the water. So just sort of, you know weekends where they can go and just train on harder water without having to go along to the races necessarily and just give them that confidence and help to build them up a bit.”

Club Member

Whilst there is currently no explicit requirement for competitions to provide 'training' opportunities in their structures, it is worth considering how training opportunities could be better promoted and facilitated by all involved.

Social Events Through the Weekend

Since the social aspect of the sport was a highlight for paddlers, parents, coaches and key stakeholders, enhancing this at competitions could improve the experience for attendees. Some suggestions included: Welcome evenings on the Friday night and BBQs on the Saturday evening.

“A kind of a welcoming evening on the Friday night so people could arrive and come into the clubhouse, meet a few people, get a bit more comfortable with the people that they're going to race against, and the organisation. They can ask questions if they've got questions and do it all around a can of beer or something. And I think that would be quite a good introduction to the way the event was going to run really,”

Club Committee Member

“Create events that cater for an enjoyable social experience for adult competitors who are not trying to be high performance athletes.”

Survey Response

Age-Group and Vets Competitions

Older paddlers typically discussed the desire to compete against paddlers their own age. Age group competitions within or alongside open competitions could provide this whilst enhancing the competition experience and encourage paddlers to stay involved in the sport past the age of 25.

“More age bands to recognise and encourage through-life 'serious' participation as per many other sports, e.g. triathlon. The sport is orientated around Juniors and Seniors (given the drop-out rates, Seniors = elite athletes only), Masters (everyone from 35-100), and Veterans (anyone who so declares). There need to be age range categories to create races within a race - e.g. 35-39, 40-44. Let people compete against their peers, as well as the elites.”

Survey Respondent, Current Competitor



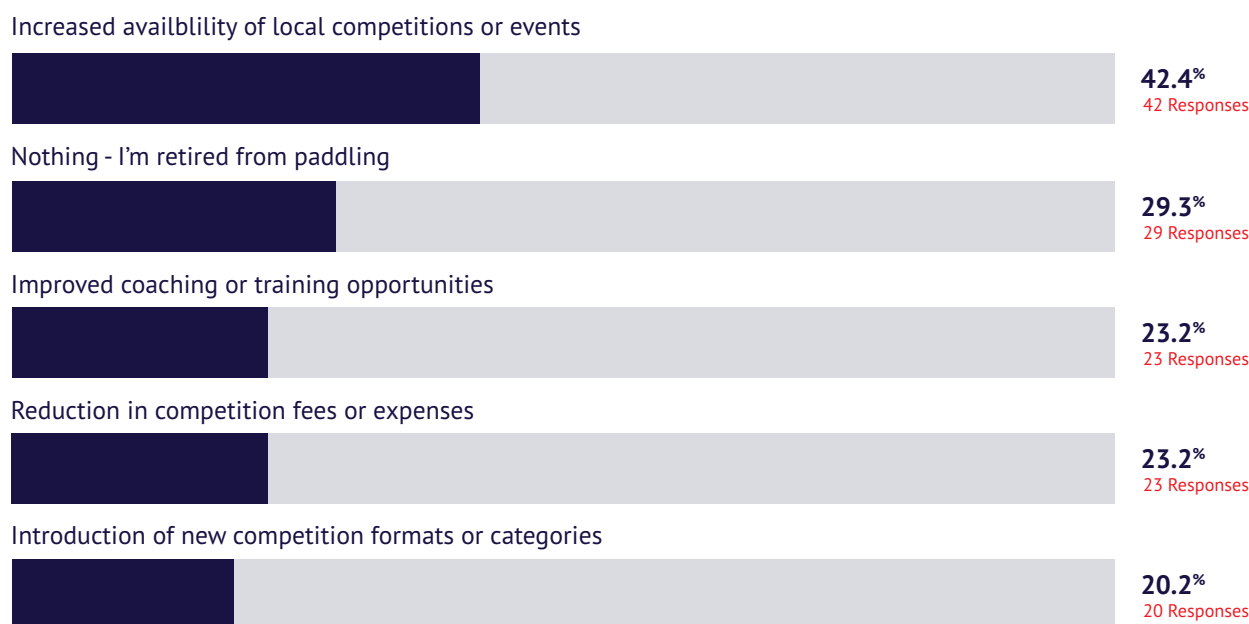
What Would Encourage Paddlers to Come Back to The Sport?

The survey asked former participants to identify the “main reasons they no longer engaged in slalom competitions”. The costs to attend competitions and a lack of training opportunities with paddlers of a similar age group were two of the top reasons. Respondeees were able to select more than one answer.



In addition to these reasons, **46% of respondents** selected “other”, comments included: injury, travelling long distances, and young paddlers attending university.

These participants were then asked to identify what would encourage them to start competing again. New competition structures or more local competitions were included in the top five reasons a person might return to the sport.



This is consistent with the previous findings regarding local competition as well as coaching and training opportunities.

Challenges Specific to Volunteers

In the focus group, many volunteers shared their positive experiences of volunteering in the sport, including the feeling of giving back, meeting new people and supporting family members. However, it was clear that there was a dwindling number of people offering their time to volunteer and officiate races. Additionally, there was a recognition that due to long days, volunteering wasn't currently an appealing offer.

“There's just not enough people volunteering. It's always the same. It's always the same people at the same events that are volunteering.”

Volunteer

“We're in a catch 22 at the moment, aren't we? Because we're short on volunteers, the volunteers are doing very long hard days, which means other people go: “oh, I'm not doing that. That's hard work”

Volunteer

Time and Cost Commitments

Time constraints due to other commitments (e.g., work and family) was the biggest barrier to volunteering, identified by 53.2% of all survey residents. In the focus groups, there was also the discussion of cost commitments for volunteers, since they were often not paid or reimbursed for travel or accommodation.

“It can be very expensive to volunteer. I mean you go to some races where you're not paddling and all it is, is outlay for no actual gain you know as in time on the water, potential points on your card for promotion or so on.”

Volunteer

Lack of Incentive to Volunteer

Many of the volunteers discussed a lack of incentive for people to offer their time. In particular, the Paddle Up scheme was largely seen as removing any previous incentive to judge at races. Paddlers are now able to pay to paddle in a higher division, rather than volunteer as a judge and be offered a run.

“The judges run side of it has been a little bit eliminated with the paddle up [scheme]. I think we'd lose lots of volunteer judges who might or their parents might so the child could have a paddle. But because they can now pay and paddle up, they don't need to judge.”

Volunteer

Lack of Recognition

In the survey, **27.5% of all respondents** identified a lack of recognition or appreciation for volunteers as a barrier to people offering their time. This was the second highest identified barrier after personal time commitments. This was expanded upon in the focus groups, where volunteers often felt they weren't thanked for their time at the end of a competition weekend.

“At the end of [competition], which was a very long weekend, two people said thank you. I don't do it for people to say thank you to me. But it does make a big difference at the end of a long weekend when you're knackered. When you're giving up your own time and money to be there.”

Volunteer

Some Negative Experiences

The majority of people discussed the good friends they had made through volunteering and the positive support they'd received in learning the role. However, it was also mentioned in the volunteer focus group - and also by key stakeholders - that a small number of other volunteers had not been welcoming to newcomers.

“[other volunteers] They're unpleasant. They're not very friendly. And you want to become one and you think I'm actually not even going to waste my time. They're not a welcoming group. Not all of them, I hasten to add.”

Judge

“There's a bit of a them and us about almost like, 'Well, they're only a part time volunteer'. You know 'that person, they only come to volunteer when it's at Lee Valley”

Expert Interview

In a similar vein, the survey identified some people who had experienced criticism from paddlers about decision-making when judging when asked what the barriers to volunteering are.

“Verbal abuse and derogatory comments”

Survey Response, Volunteer





Parents Not Wanting to Judge

Parents were often identified as a group to target to volunteer, since they were already at competitions with their children. However, many parents explained that they would be reluctant to offer their time to judge competitions for two main reasons: Firstly, they were not willing to judge their own children's runs. Secondly, they also needed to support their children on the day (e.g., with getting to start times and preparing boats). This meant that the need to give a full day to judge was seen as not possible. Whereas, giving up an hour of their time was seen as more realistic.

“I don't want to be judging my own kids to be honest with you. Ideally, I don't even want to judge my own group that I'm with, so I wouldn't want to judge any of my own club members. So, you know, sometimes it's parents that just go and help out doing teas and coffees and cakes and then they get relieved whilst their child is on the water.”

Parent



Perceptions of Kayak Cross

At the time of the survey, **only half (53.5%) of people** had engaged in Kayak Cross as a paddler, volunteer or spectator. When discussing this topic, responses were polarised. On the one hand, people were excited to explore a new direction for the sport. On the other hand, there were concerns it would draw attention away from slalom. The following summarises some of the opportunities and concerns.

The positives

Head-to-Head Format

When asked what part of the sport people enjoyed, **64.6% of people** stated: the head-to-head format. This was seen as a novel and exciting aspect of the sport.

It's Fun to Watch

A key benefit of the Kayak Cross format was that it was interesting and exciting for spectators.

"I think as a spectator sport for someone who's not into slalom, it's quite a lot more exciting than watching people technique in their way around the gates."

Parent

Potential to Bring People into The Sport

Since the sport was new and interesting to watch it was considered to be a good opportunity to bring new people into the sport.

"I think you could be really creative with it and use it to bring people into the sport."

Expert Interview

Could Be Easier Access for Beginners

Kayak Cross use plastic boats, rather than more expensive, specialist carbon-fibre boats that are used in Slalom. These are often readily available to borrow or hire from clubs.

"The average canoe club will have lots of plastic boats that would be suitable to do kayak cross in. The accessibility of the equipment is much better. You almost wonder whether it's an opportunity to reinvent the entry level of the sport."

Expert Interview



Areas of concern

Paddler Safety

Safety and the contact aspect of the sport was a major concern, particularly for parents. It felt that proper protection has not yet been put in place and that injury was common within the sport.

“I feel the safety of the paddlers has not been addressed properly and someone is going to experience a significant facial injury which is not worth the price of entertaining the audience. I therefore feel strongly that I do not want my children participating.”

Survey Response, Parent

Equipment Costs

There were concerns of the cost and the logistics of transporting two different boats to competitions. One for slalom and one for kayak cross. Some people were also unsure what equipment they would need, e.g., new paddles.

“I guess I view it from a pragmatic point of view. It's like, well, does it mean we're buying other boats, other equipment, that sort of stuff, an extra bit of cost in there and stuff like that.”

Parent

Awareness

In general, it seemed that people were interested in the sport but had not had chance to experience it. On this basis, it was expected that the Olympics would increase interest in the sport of Kayak Cross.

“I suppose that there's limited experience in it, there's not been many opportunities to do any of it for the kids at the moment and things like that”

Parent

Additional Demands Placed on Organisers

Some organisers were concerned that they already felt that organising slalom competitions was challenging. They, therefore, preferred not to have the additional demands of organising Kayak Cross.

“The few events that I have tried to run have been tagged on to the back of slalom events. It makes a massive schedule on those days, which for the organisers becomes a pain in the ** and they're not over-keen on doing it. But I guess they step up because they recognise that there's a feeling that we should invest in it.”**

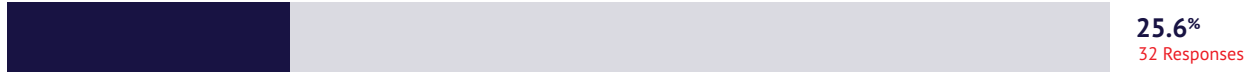
Expert Interview



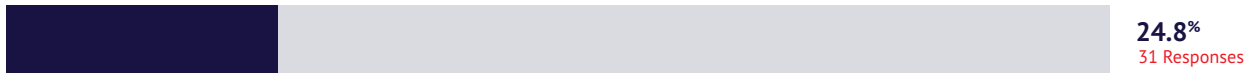
What would encourage people to be involved with it?

When asked what would encourage people to participate in Kayak Cross, the top three responses related to exposure to the sport, including training opportunities.

Access to races



More on-water training opportunities



Access/opportunity to partake within the sport



Recommendations

“Big thinking is desperately needed, preferably with paddlers and volunteers at the heart of it”

Retired GB Paddler

Based on the key findings, TASS have created some key questions for Paddle UK and the Canoe Slalom community to consider. These questions include possible solutions, but of course there may be other solutions available too.

1. Could fewer national races lead to more meaningful and rewarding competition?

Many paddlers and volunteers discussed the large number of competitions throughout the year. This increases the time and travel commitment if paddlers are wanting to attend all of them (and attending more was how many paddlers accrued the points to get promoted). However, it also meant that participant numbers are more spread out.

Based on the findings, fewer competitions could make them more meaningful and rewarding. Furthermore, these competitions could be designed to create more of an atmosphere by integrating other suggestions from the community (e.g., commentators, retailer stalls, social events).

Possible Solutions:

- Move towards one national series of 5-6 events per year. These events could be supported by the Paddle UK Slalom Committee, which could lead to more consistent races and enable better scheduling for elite paddlers to attend events.
- Creating an atmosphere at competitions, including commentary, international standard delivery (e.g., video judge), timing screens and retailer stalls.
- Practice, qualifying and final format for racing to enhance competition feeling and jeopardy. This would also more closely align to international competitions (by ranking in each event through qualifying, this could also support elite paddlers to attend).

“Fewer [competitions] but bigger events at that level would be better. The more around it that feels like a higher level event... Just so [athletes] are able to build the skills [of racing under pressure].”

Expert Interview

“Identifying maybe four or five key events in a year, which are national and probably run under international rules. You don't have to fully mirror [international competitions], but you know, have a bit more jeopardy, in terms of, you have to have so many people go through to the semi final, then final...”

Expert Interview

2. Can regional competitions support sustainable participation in the sport?

Through the research, it became clear that different divisions of paddlers might hold different preferences for competitions. For example, paddlers and their families in divisions 3 and 4 typically described the travel and cost of competitions as a perceived barrier. Therefore, can a more regionalised competition support these divisions in particular?

Possible Solutions:

- Regional level competitions, run by clubs, that support access and enjoyment of the sport in the lower divisions
- A good spread of competitions for divisions 3 and 4 so that paddlers have access to events within a 90 minute travel window.
- Mini-slalom formats, one or half day events to reduce the time commitment
- Age and stage appropriate racing (e.g., reducing course lengths to aim for 90 seconds of paddling).
- Highlighting the ability to paddle, or even hire, different boats to make competitions more accessible to those without expensive equipment.

“Getting around the country is probably a challenge for people... but [having a] structure that doesn't demand that necessarily you have to go all the way around the country... certainly in the lower levels maybe making it more regionalised or localised that you can access more regular competition.”

Expert Interview

“Single days are probably better than weekends in terms of what people can afford... Might be a way of making it more attractive and less of a commitment for taking up your weekend.”

Expert Interview

“Do we not use plastic boats? Can we not? You know, our entry level of the sport? It doesn't really matter what boat you're using when you're entering, you're trying to put people in really, aren't you? If they enjoy it, they'll then probably naturally decide to specialize,”

Expert Interview



3. How can sociable competitions be facilitated at the regional level?

Again, focusing on the divisions 3 and 4, paddler and volunteers discussed the desire to enhance the social aspects of a competition weekend. The community and social side were often cited by participants as the most enjoyable aspect of the sport.



Possible Solutions:

- Competitions with a focus on enjoyment of the sport and community.
- Availability of camping to create a festival feeling to the weekend and to potentially reduce costs of accommodation.
- Additional, family friendly activities throughout the weekend.

“Keeping it fun for the kids so they want to keep competing and stay in the sport.”

Survey Response

4. How can competitor retention be enhanced from junior to veteran paddlers?

Many paddlers, volunteers, and coaches recognised a large dropout rate in the sport after the junior age. Some also related this to being released from the talent/elite system. This has an impact on the participation numbers for competitions but also people available to judge and volunteer.

Some reasons for this drop out included: a large focus on elite and Olympic success and less focus on taking part for the enjoyment of the sport, and older age groups’ preference against competing with under 23s.

It is therefore important to consider how the competition pathway can support participation throughout a paddler’s life. But also, how funded programmes interact with the competition pathway and how non-supported or deselected paddlers are encouraged to continue engaging in competitions.

Possible Solutions:

- Age group competitions, including 5-10 year age brackets could support more like-for-like competitions and encourage competition in adulthood.
- For youth development programmes to become less dependent on the ranking system when considering inclusion criteria.

“[Vets paddlers], they’re still looking to be competitive with each other, but they’re not on this elite pathway, and there’s a real market for that for a start in growing the numbers because at the moment it’s kind of the vet division and they’re quite, into it. But you could probably grow that bit. [older paddlers] still want competition, but it’s just in a different way. They’re probably gonna bring their kids, you know, former paddlers that have families and kids and whatnot.”

Expert Interview

5. How can volunteers be encouraged, welcomed and valued within the sport?

The lack of volunteers was a recognised problem within the sport. Currently volunteering isn't seen as a particularly attractive offer, since you are required to give up full days or weekends, often travel large distances, and attend multiple competitions in a year. Many volunteers did not seek payment for their time but did explain that feeling valued and appreciated by paddlers and the organisations did go a long way.

In addition, when considering how to bring new people into volunteering, the survey showed that 22% of people were unclear about how to get involved with volunteering.

Possible Solutions:

- Incentives and recognition for volunteers from clubs, paddlers and Paddle UK.
- Encouraging a positive culture that shows gratitude to all volunteers, from paddlers, coaches and fellow volunteers.
- Introducing roles that can be completed by people who have an hour or half a day to volunteer.
- Increasing participation numbers or seeking sponsorship could support payment or cover travel costs for judges and volunteers.
- Decreasing the number of competitions would also reduce the demand placed on volunteers.

6. How Can Kayak Cross be Integrated into the Pathway?

While views on Kayak Cross were polarised, many people admitted that they did not have a good understanding or had limited exposure to the sport to offer an opinion. It was also recognised that the sport required quite different demands to slalom. Therefore, it is likely that some people will never be involved in Kayak Cross. However, many people were interested in finding out more and recognised the discipline's potential to bring new people into paddle sports.

The biggest concern, particularly from parents, was for the safety of the paddlers. Therefore, a focus from the Paddle UK Slalom Committee to enhance understanding and exposure to Kayak Cross could support further involvement, whilst continuing to guard the safety of paddlers.

Possible Solutions:

- Increase opportunities for people to give Kayak Cross a go, including outside of slalom.
- Consider how beginners can get involved with the sport, e.g., running two paddlers head-to-head, or removing certain skills that may be too advanced.
- Support developing competition schedules that can include kayak cross and slalom.
- Consider additional safety precautions: gloves, gum shields, and face guards / full face helmets.

“I think we have to be open-minded about it as a whole sport : “We’ve been involved in canoe slalom for a long time and I’ve heard plenty of people who don’t see the point of it.” And I think that’s a real shame because I think there’s a real opportunity for attracting other boaters into it.”

Expert Interview

“Certainly when I first saw it, I felt well, anyone can win here. It's got nothing really to do with skill. It's to do with just kind of what luck you have paddling down the course. But I have to say that my opinion of that is changing. I think the skills are improving”

Parent



Conclusion

The findings of this study highlights both the strengths and challenges of the Canoe Slalom and Kayak Cross competition pathway in the UK. The social and community aspects of the sport, which are greatly valued by paddlers, volunteers, and parents, emerged as key strengths that should be nurtured. These aspects contribute significantly to the enjoyment and mental well-being of participants.

However, the study also identified several challenges that need to be addressed to maintain and increase engagement. The primary issues include the high cost and time commitment associated with competing, the extensive travel required for events, and the large number of competitions that can lead to participant burnout and lower competition quality. Additionally, the lack of volunteers and clear pathways for new volunteers to get involved poses a significant threat to the sustainability of the sport.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. While this report presents several recommendations, the way forward lies with the paddling community. Recommendations include reducing the number of national competitions to make each event more meaningful and rewarding, enhancing the atmosphere and professional standards at competitions, and improving volunteer recruitment and retention through incentives and clearer engagement pathways. Integrating Kayak Cross more effectively into the competition pathway with increased safety measures and beginner-friendly opportunities can also attract new participants.

By focusing on these areas, the Canoe Slalom and Kayak Cross community can hope to create a more sustainable and enjoyable competitive environment that continues to develop athletes and foster a strong community spirit.

Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS)
College House
Northumbria University
Newcastle upon Tyne
Tyne & Wear
NE1 8ST

 info@tass.gov.uk

 [@talentedathlete](https://twitter.com/talentedathlete)

 [@talentedathlete](https://facebook.com/talentedathlete)

 [@talentedathleteuk](https://instagram.com/talentedathleteuk)

 [TASS](https://youtube.com/TASS)

 [TASS \(Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme\)](https://linkedin.com/company/TASS)

www.tass.gov.uk