



IRISH FA

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

PROGRAMME



KEY FEATURES OF THE PROGRAMME

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 Northern Irish sports system
- Develop executive coaching skills to support and lead people through uncertain times

In-person Introduction to Leading & Onboarding Session

The programme will launch with a full day, in-person onboarding workshop.

The session will focus on:

- Understanding self as a leader
- Authentic leadership and values-based decision making
- How personal values influence behaviour, leadership style and decision making under pressure

One Smart World 4D-i Profiling & Personal Development Plan

Participants will complete the One Smart World 4D-i profiling tool and receive 60-minute individual debrief and coaching session. This session will support the participants to:

- Understand preferred operating styles
- Recognise how these styles influence working relationships
- Identify behavioural shifts under pressure

Each participant will co-create a Personal Development Plan aligned to their role and aspirations.

JHC High Performing People Learning Platform

Participants will receive full access to the JHC High Performing People Learning Platform, providing on demand access to the Brilliant Basic collection covering:

- Leadership
- Mentoring
- Coaching
- Team Development

Leadership Seminars x 2 (Online)

Guest speakers and topics include:

- Creating the right culture and developing high performing teams – Karen Brown, Gold medal winning Olympic Hockey Coach
- Leadership, influence and identity – Charlotte Healey, Head Coach, Bristol City

KEY FEATURES OF THE PROGRAMME

Skills Development Workshop & Peer Coaching x 5

Participants will attend five live 90-minute online workshops. These sessions will focus on leadership skill development, application of learning to individual PDPs and navigating next steps on participants' leadership journeys.

In-person mid-programme connection day - Theme: Coaching & Mentoring Skills Development

This in-person session will provide a structured opportunity to:

- Reflect on progress and learning to date
- Deepen trust and connections across the cohort
- Develop executive coaching and mentoring skills

Individual Personal Development Mentor

Participants will have the opportunity to be supported by a mentor. Our mentors include:

Louise Thompson - Irish FA Women's Pathway Referee Officer

Clare Carson - Irish FA Coach Developer

Rachel Stoops - Irish FA Digital Communications Officer

Clare-Anne Mills - Chair of Ballymena United FC Women/Head of Vice Chancellor's Office at Ulster University

In-person finale & Graduation- 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.



WEEK	ACTIVITY	DATE	TIME	LOCATION
Session 1	Introduction to Leadership	Sat 20 June 2026	9:30am–3:30pm	National Stadium
Session 2	Skills Development Workshop & Peer Coaching 1	Wed 19 August 2026	12:00–1:30pm	Online
Session 3	Skills Development Workshop & Peer Coaching 2	Wed 7 October 2026	12:00–1:30pm	Online
Session 4	Leadership Seminar 1	Tues 10 November 2026	6:30–8:00pm	Online
Session 5	Role Model Day	Sun 6 December 2026	TBD	National Stadium
Session 6	In-Person Mid Programme Connection	Sat 30 January 2027	9:30am–3:30pm	National Stadium
Session 7	Skills Development Workshop & Peer Coaching 3	Wed 24 February 2027	12:00–1:30pm	Online
Session 8	Referee development day Grassroots Development Online call on PR/Marketing Online call on governance	March 2027	TBD	Online
Session 9	Leadership Seminar 2	Tues 13 April 2027	6:30–8:00pm	Online
Session 10	Applied Experience Project (Project planning) Role models	May	Flexible	Clubs /
Session 11	Skills Development Workshop & Peer Coaching 4	Wed 2 June 2027	12:00–1:30pm	Online
Session 12	Skills Development Workshop & Peer Coaching 5	Wed 8 September 2027	12:00–1:30pm	Online



Our Approach

The programme is built on the understanding that women develop most effectively in environments that are inclusive, participative, and psychologically safe. Trust and respect form the foundation. It focuses on creating learning spaces where participants can build confidence and expand their networks. This approach is recognised as a key factor in enabling long-term progression into leadership roles. The design blends individual learning, peer support, mentoring, and strategic practice to help women strengthen their confidence and navigate leadership roles within football and the wider sporting system.

Jo Hopkins - Lead Facilitator

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 the 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.





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Eliza Downey - Co-Facilitator

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.



Esme Matthew - Co-Facilitator

Esme holds an MSc in Exercise Physiology and has been the Co-Head of Physiology at the English Institute/UK Sports Institute for seven 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.

Irish FA Mentors

Louise Thompson - Women's Referee Pathway Officer

Louise Thompson has been an active referee since 2017, following 14 seasons playing in local leagues within the NIWFA, including the women's premiership. After transitioning from playing to officiating Louise quickly progressed through the ranks, refereeing across both men's and women's leagues locally. Her dedication and performance led her to gaining her FIFA international badge in 2020. Since then, Louise has gained extensive experience at both domestic and international level. Her appointments have included Women's Nations League fixtures, FIFA Women's World Cup qualifiers and UEFA Champions League matches. Alongside her on-field career, Louise currently works in the Irish FA as the Women's Referee Pathway Officer. In this role she focuses on recruiting, retaining and developing referees, helping to strengthen and grow the women's officiating pathway across Northern Ireland. At local level she continues to officiate in the top tiers of both men's and women's football in Northern Ireland.



Clare Carson - Irish FA Coach Developer

Clare has worked in the Irish Football Association for over 12 years and volunteered within the association for around 10 years before joining full time. She has worked across the primary schools' section, girls' participation and currently works in the Coach Education department as a Coach Developer.

As a former international player and having played in Northern Ireland for over 20 years, Clare brings a wealth of knowledge around the female game on domestic, European and international level, as well as in a coaching capacity, having coached in women's Champions League, underage Northern Ireland girls' teams and at club level for the past five years since retiring.

Clare is currently completing her UEFA Pro Licence badge and has been actively supporting the development of female coaches in Northern Ireland for the past eight years. Her expertise will help give an insight in to the different dynamics of coaching, developing players and people, and challenging how we look to improve the female environment.

Rachel Stoops - Sports Marketing & Content Specialist

With over seven years' experience across football and international sporting events, Rachel specialises in integrated brand campaigns, digital content strategy and fan engagement. She has worked across national governing bodies, professional football club and international event organisations, delivering impactful campaigns that connect with audiences both on and off the pitch.

In her current role with the Irish Football Association, Rachel leads content strategy for the Foundation and Girls' and Women's Football, driving brand consistency and sustained audience growth across digital platforms. Rachel brings a hands-on approach that bridges both strategic planning and execution, combining creativity with data-driven insight to deliver meaningful results for brands, stakeholders and fans alike.

Clare-Anne Mills - Head of the Vice-Chancellor's Office at Ulster University

Claire-Anne is the Head of the Vice-Chancellor's Office at Ulster University, where she is responsible for providing strategic, operational, political and governance leadership across the Vice-Chancellor's portfolio.

She directly supports the Vice-Chancellor and Senior Leadership Team with stakeholder engagement, co-ordinates high level initiatives and oversees the planning and delivery of significant institutional events, such as graduation ceremonies.

She is responsible for managing the governance arrangements for the Senior Leadership Team, ensuring that SLT and the Vice-Chancellor's Office operate efficiently, and supports effective decision making and institutional reputation.

Claire-Anne has been involved with local football for more than 12 years. She is the Chair of Ballymena United F.C. Women, a Member of the Co. Antrim and District Football Association Council and the Chair of the Co. Antrim FA's Women's Committee. She also founded Ballymena United F.C. Learning Disability in 2022 and serves as Chair of the club too.



Findings

Low Female Participation Across Roles

- Only 3% of coaches are female
- 13 active female referees
- Limited number of women in football governance and administration roles
- Lack of visibility and role models in the female game
- Limited media coverage and storytelling around grassroots and domestic game

Registration process

Who Should Apply

The Irish FA Female Leadership Programme is open to women who are passionate about football and motivated to develop their leadership potential within the game. We are seeking applicants who are ready to grow, challenge themselves and play an active role in shaping the future of football in Northern Ireland. **Please see 'Participant Eligibility & Selection Criteria' on the following page.**

This programme is designed for women who are currently involved in football – or aspiring to be – across a wide range of roles, including **Coaching, Refereeing, Governance, and Marketing/PR**. You may be at an early stage of your leadership journey, taking your first steps beyond grassroots involvement, or already operating in a leadership or decision-making role and looking to further develop your skills, confidence, and influence.

We particularly welcome applications from women who:

- Demonstrate a clear interest in progressing into leadership roles within football
- Are committed to personal development and learning
- Want to build confidence, strategic networks, and leadership capability
- Are keen to contribute positively to the women's and girls' game
- Aspire to act as role models, mentors, or advocates for others

Applicants do not need to hold a formal leadership title to apply. The programme recognises leadership in many forms, and values potential, ambition and commitment to the game as much as experience.

Places on the programme are limited and selection will be made to ensure a diverse, engaged, and supportive cohort that reflects the breadth of roles and experiences across football. Participants must be able to commit fully to the programme schedule, actively engage in sessions and contribute to peer learning and collaboration.

If you are motivated to develop as a leader, ready to invest in your own growth, keen to help create a more inclusive and representative leadership landscape within football, we encourage you to apply for the Irish FA Women's Leadership Programme.

[Irish FA Women's Leadership Programme - Participant Registration questions – Fill out form](#)



Participant Eligibility & Selection Criteria

Overview

This programme is designed for women who are committed to progressing as leaders within football and who will actively apply their learning to create positive change in their club, programme, or community.

1. Current Involvement in Football

Applicants must be actively involved in football in Northern Ireland in one or more of the following roles:

- Club committee member or volunteer
- Coach, manager, or assistant coach
- Club or programme administrator
- Development officer, co-ordinator or organiser

Applicants should have direct influence or clear potential to influence their club, programme, or football environment.

2. Motivation & Readiness to Develop as a Leader

Applicants should demonstrate a clear personal reason for wanting to take part in a leadership programme and show willingness to step outside their comfort zone, reflect on themselves and be open to learning, feedback and growth. Applicants should also have ambitions to progress and influence change within football.

3. Commitment to Full Engagement

Applicants must be able to commit to all online and in-person sessions, actively participate in discussions and group work, and engage respectfully with fellow participants, facilitators and peer-learning opportunities. The programme relies heavily on interaction, reflection and shared learning.

4. Commitment to Women's & Girls' Football

Applicants should demonstrate a genuine interest in supporting, developing and advocating for women and girls in football. This includes creating inclusive environments, encouraging other women into leadership roles and aligning with values of empowerment and collaboration.

5. Commitment to Applying Learning Post-Programme

Successful applicants will be expected to apply learning practically within their club or role and support the wider impact of the programme by sharing good practice, acting as positive role models and engaging with the wider female football leadership network.

6. Selection Priorities

Where applications exceed available places, priority may be given to applicants who clearly articulate the impact the programme will have on their club or football setting, demonstrate readiness for change, represent a wide range of roles and locations, and have not previously accessed similar leadership development opportunities.

