



## MUNICIPAL GOLF COURSES

Stuart Phipps writes about a seminar that was held on the 25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> October 2004 at the EGU, Woodhall Spa.

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Municipal golf courses represent a small, less than 10 percent, but valuable part of the golfing facilities in Great Britain. They provide inexpensive access to the game for everyone – and hence meet in all respects the criteria laid down by the Government for support from Lottery funds.

Regular users of municipal courses often form clubs which are then operated independently from the council; however, generally, their activity is encouraged. Whilst membership of such clubs is inexpensive, say £100 per annum, when the green fee charged to play each round is added, the overall expenditure is not much less than that at a private members’ or proprietary club.

Use of municipal courses, number of rounds played per year, has been falling steadily over the past 5 years, and many of those attending the seminar came to find a magic formula for improving the situation. The seminar was put on by the Institute for Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) to “examine the public golf scene today in order to identify the features that characterise good public golf provision”.

Day 1 was devoted to a review of the current scene, whilst Day 2 was entirely taken up by a description of the England Golf Partnership – EGU, ELGA, PGA and the Golf Foundation – which has been established as a united interface between golf and Sport England (ie the Government).

### Day 1 -Today’s Golf Market

Stephen Proctor, MD of Sports Marketing Surveys Ltd, gave results of their recent golf surveys:

% of Population playing at least 1 full round per annum				
Age Group	15-24	25-39	40-59	60+
	11%	10%	7%	4%

### British Golf Courses

Private Members’	Proprietary	Municipal
53%	38%	9%

**Survey of golfers playing at least 1 full round pa**

	<b>Private Members'</b>	<b>Proprietary</b>	<b>Municipal</b>
Female	13%	11%	8%
Social grade C1/2	36%	47%	64%
Official Handicap	93%	64%	70%
Under 35	20%	33%	41%
Play 2/week	37%	19%	25%
Less than 5 yrs exp	20%	44%	36%
More than 20 yrs exp	29%	12%	15%
Retired	27%	20%	13%

There was some scepticism about these figures; however since they include infrequent golfers, it was not possible to challenge them.

Questioned on why non-club members did not join a club, the overwhelming factor was COST; other important considerations were the, supposed, exclusivity and the time required to play.

In Stephen Proctor's view, there is an untapped demand for 9-hole courses. (This bodes well for the 6-hole Northwick Park development designed by Peter McEvoy.)

**Justifying Golf Provision**

Peter Howard, Birmingham City Council, is responsible for running the City's 7 golf facilities (five 18-hole, two 9-hole). The average number of rounds played on the 18-hole courses is 48,000 per year.

Municipal golf is subject to shifts in political importance as the elected councillors change; this will cause changes in the financial contribution to the council, and support for the golf operations.

Up until now, municipal golf in Birmingham has broke even, but the decline in numbers of players means that golf is becoming 'a burden on the rates'; maintenance may therefore be skimped, and course presentation will suffer.

**Benchmarking Outputs, Targets and Outcomes**

Trevor Hawkins from the Association of Public Service Excellence

Setting up a golf facility is a political decision, generally based on these factors:

- ⌘ Municipal Symbol (health benefits and attraction to outsiders moving to the area – especially employers)
- ⌘ Social Inclusion (a popular vote-catcher!)

☞ ‘Cash Cow’ (has been the primary reason – but no longer)

The attitude of different local authorities differs considerably, and the quality of the courses reflects this. There is sometimes concern that advertising a good course as ‘municipally-owned’ may put people off. His answer - advertise it as ‘municipal’ only on the way out!

The APSE can provide benchmarks to help local authorities to judge what they may expect, and how they are doing. For instance, it was worth drawing up a profile of population versus usage. He advised golf officers always to set low targets when budgeting!

He suggested that the average municipal course requires a subsidy of 0.34p per round played. This is starkly at variance with the idea the courses have been set up as ‘cash cows’- I was left confused!

The next speaker, Nick Leuty was unable to attend due to a rugby injury - so much for the health benefits of rugby! – so the EGU stepped in.

## **EGU Associate Membership Scheme**

Paul Reitz, EGU, spoke of the advantages the Associate Membership scheme brings to golf. The current membership is 5,000, and 75 percent of those not renewing their membership have joined clubs. The aim is to increase scheme Associate Membership to 10,000.

## **Contracting Out**

Terry Bannister from Master Golfer Ltd listed the advantages his company offered to councils who entered a contract for operation of municipal courses and clubs – especially in marketing - his own speciality. The audience did not warm to him, as he criticised the restrictions imposed on contractors by many councils.

## **The Commercial Sector Ethos**

Neil Simpson of Glendale Golf also stressed the wisdom of councils choosing to lease their golf facilities to Glendale. He recommended long-term arrangements since this allows Glendale to invest properly in the facility – typically £250,000 to £500,000 under a 25-year lease; 5-7 percent of the business turnover would be ploughed back by way of marketing. This all makes it indistinguishable from a proprietary club. Glendale aims to work with a members’ club based on the course, particularly over tee-bookings and competitions, and will, if appropriate, employ a club secretary - despite ‘pay & play’ income growing at the expense of season ticket sales - yet more evidence of the move away from the club golf.

The target age-group for a municipal course run by Glendale would be 29 – 40.

## **Day 2 “A Whole Sport Plan for Golf”**

Roger Moreland, Leisure Partners – consultants, explained the England Golf Partnership structure set up to produce the “Whole Sport Plan” required by Sport England, on which the sum allocated to golf will be based.

Richard Flint from the EGU (now known as England Golf) expanded on the objectives of the EGP, whilst Kirsty Jennings of ELGA (now known as EWGA) talked of the importance of encouraging children, particularly girls, to take up golf. She extolled the merits of the Club Junior Organiser's Handbook, and the Junior Golf Mark, which certifies that the club has in place all the procedures needed for safe, successful coaching of children.

Craig Singleton, PGA, explained the national structure of coaching – applicable to all sports – with 5 Levels of experience and competence. Levels 1 and 2 are expected to be amateurs in all sports, and may be rewarded for their contribution. In golf, however, such volunteers will be subject to the Rules of Golf, and hence liable to lose amateur status if they are paid. Will this develop into a challenge to the Amateur Status Rules?

An entertaining and instructive lecture was then given by Stuart Armstrong of the Golf Foundation with comprehensive coverage of the Tri-Golf system and how it enthuses kids. He appealed to clubs to look to the future – and to take the opportunity to attract parents to try golf. “Golf needs municipal courses” was his message.

*Because information on the England Golf Partnership is already available, the Research (Stephen Proctor) and Benchmark (Trevor Hawkins) presentations were the most interesting for the GCMA. Papers on the commercial arrangements between council and contractor could be interesting, but only if operational matters were revealed – ie how the club is run. This did not happen.*

*Amongst the 10 sports favoured by the Government, golf is the ‘least easy’ sport to take up. However, once involved, players continue to participate far longer than any other – with consequent health benefits (although there is, apparently, no conclusive medical proof of the health benefits: research is needed.)*

*At the end of the Seminar, one point sticks in my mind: if the future of clubs relies on the research presented, clubs would need to reduce their charges and increase their “social inclusion”. Since this is exactly what municipal facilities offer, I would expect their courses to be growing busier. That they are not suggests these are NOT the most important factors in increasing the membership of clubs. They are, however, the easiest answers to give to the question “why don't you join a club?”*

My own opinion is that clubs need to enhance their attraction to outsiders, not drop their prices. In golf, quality counts more than cost.

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