

Where the grass is greener



As austerity bites, maintaining the correct skills base is vital to delivering quality turf-care provision, a leading training body is urging.

Sport and amenity areas offer a vital outlet for taxpayers, yet 'short-termism' over skills development could put the quality of green space and sports pitches alike in peril, cautions David Golding, Greenkeepers Training Committee (GTC) education director and European Greenkeeping Education Unit standards director.

'Councils should be striving to achieve good standards on municipal golf courses and sports facilities,' he insists. 'Whether courses are maintained by in-house staff or external contractors, it always comes back to the importance of trained greenkeepers and them being given the tools and equipment to meet the required standards.'

The GTC are an advisory organisation, which, through its representation on government accredited bodies, ensures the specialist sector has a range of

formal qualifications from the work-based apprenticeship and vocational qualifications to a degree in sports turf surfaces.

At a time when golf is tackling troubled times as a surfeit of courses seeks to attract what is a static participation base, Golding believes a strong cohort of apprentice greenkeepers and groundsmen is crucial in developing the skills base which will keep the game's rolling acres in prime condition.

Golding started his career as an apprentice greenkeeper at Buxton & High Peak Golf Club and swiftly climbed the career ladder, managing Trafford BC's two golf courses as part of the Contract Division until 1989.

He believes much of the fundamental fabric of good greenkeeping is in danger of being lost as councils' focus shifts from discretionary services such as leisure provision.

'I had responsibility for two public courses in the borough back then but the problem then, as now, is if you're not seen out on course, people assume you're not on the case. Many of my efforts

The British model of golf turfcare skills training is envied abroad but councils need to ensure the system isn't driven into the long grass. Tom James reports.

at Trafford in the late 1980s were spent struggling to keep the work in-house rather than allowing it to be contracted out as we had a loyal team of greenkeepers on both courses.

'Also, at that time there were very few, if any, contractors with the level of expertise within their staff to maintain fine turf areas to the required standards.'

Arguably the biggest issue in the industry is the de-skilling of council ground care staff, Golding says, due in part to outsourcing work or the reduction of in-house staffing, meaning high standards are harder to maintain.

'Letting maintenance out to contractors is fine in practice but the quality of turfcare cannot be allowed to slip,' insists Golding, who is a fierce advocate of the need to reinvigorate the municipal golf market.

'In golf, even on municipal courses, certain tasks just have to be done, regardless of the time and manpower required. At Trafford for example, we endeavoured to carry out essential daily maintenance before golfers commenced play. This meant



Jack became suspicious when Bernie kept hitting balls into the high grass.

very early starts, which was the norm in the private sector.'

He adds: 'Contractors now show an appetite and willingness to retain the vital skills needed to maintain golf courses. Some, for example MyTimeGolf, who manage and maintain 19 public courses in Birmingham and the South East, show that commitment. The GTC are working with their course managers to ensure their teams have the necessary skills to maintain the course to a very good standard.'

The explosion of golf in the 1980s spelt the demise in the local authority-run sector, Golding says, and 'courses were once chocked full from morning to night in the heyday.' Proprietary courses popped up all over Britain, helped by the set-aside scheme which allowed farmers to change their land use, so many invested in developing golf courses.

Key to maintenance quality is the golf course manager, who understands the running of the course and the time and manpower needed to deliver the goods. 'We're in danger of losing these skills,' says Golding.

If councils dilute roles by giving parks department or

leisure department managers such a wide remit, there will be too few specialist staff and standards will drop,' he says.

'During my time at Trafford, the whole leisure department encouraged in-house, on the job training, albeit informally,' he explains.

'For golf, training was excellent and it worked – equipping greenkeepers with the breadth of skills needed to work in the local authority sector.'

The model is as robust today as then, Golding maintains. 'The proof of how admired it is, rests in the fact that developing golfing nations are looking at the Britain as the training model to follow. Our apprentice schemes, which focus on multi-skilling staff, are very different to the US system where there's often one or two highly educated and skilled professionals and many - for want of a better word – labourers.

'Even in the greenkeeping level two qualification, students still have to identify grasses, weeds, diseases, trees and learn all the required skills to maintain the sports area,' he explains.

'It's not just about preparing a golf course or football pitch. After all, we're not dealing with a mono crop but a multi-



faceted provision.'

Golding welcomes the link-up between the GTC and Bernhard and Company Ltd grinders, which recently became a GTC Quality Assured Training Provider.

'Big companies such as Toro and Bernhard have good knowledgeable staff and trainers who are willing to help and support the sector,' Golding continues. 'But councils should be considering running more of their own apprenticeship schemes if they are keeping maintenance in-house.'

'There's government funding support for many horticulture and landscaping programmes, so I don't know why more isn't being done and why the message is not getting out there to people who want to train in this industry.'

Some local authorities may fear – like all companies which offer apprenticeships – that staff will be trained up, only to move on. Golding stresses this will always happen but the key is to look after your employees.

'Staff have to feel that they can forge a career in the council sector, that there are prospects to move up and improve their skills. There has to be direction and a route for career progression. If staff recognise this, they will remain loyal – it's simple really,' he adds.

Golding turns once more to the value of golf, and proposals to progress the shorter game, which focuses on three, five, six and nine-hole courses, where the emphasis is on introducing new players to the game and having fun.

'Golf course architects such as Howard Swan, from Swan Golf Designs are really pushing the idea and at local authority level it could be highly successful in bringing numbers back up to where they were,' he explains.

'We need to plant the seed of the good municipal course, and you only have to look at STERF's Maria Strandberg's presentations on multi-functional courses to see the potential golf has to become a genuine community hub.'

