

What price municipal green fee golf?

MANY of us are fully aware of the Government's intentions regarding compulsory competitive tendering for golf courses, but a lot of the public course clubs do not realise they have to protect themselves and their members.

This they can do by insisting with their local authority that they have the right to see and to read the specification that has been drawn up by the local authority, who have to list "how things are to be done and when they are done" the club's must use their right to insist that their rights are protected by ensuring the local authority put into their spec's i.e. clubs booking arrangements, captains days, charity days and any tee times that have been allocated to them, failure to see that the points mentioned are in spec could mean that whoever has



Panshanger Golf Club - winning the fight to be competitive.

"We are trying to get a message over before we witness the downfall of municipal clubs as we know them."

the right to take over the course does not have to honour any of these arrangements as they will only work to the spec; laid down at the time of the tender, whereas if the club get these included they have some protection.

In this feature Greenkeeping Management is attempting to get this message over before we have to witness the downfall of municipal clubs as we know them.

Demands are already being made on the clubs that have failed to find out these facts and are now tied down with red tape. The National Association of Public Golf Courses is at the forefront of the fight and it is with their help that Greenkeeping Management is presenting this feature.

Mike McClennan
Editor

WITH the explosion of interest in golf in this country in the past five years – due mainly to the media exposure and success by British players in international events such as the Ryder Cup and American Masters – one has to question what the future is for municipal golf courses.

I have to say the future of municipal golf looks fairly bleak, as the new capital and financial controls on local government spending will make it extremely difficult for authorities to finance new leisure projects, in particular municipal golf courses, in the future.

In addition recent legislation introduced by the government, such as compulsory competitive tendering, and even the effects of the poll tax, will have, I believe, a detrimental effect on courses in this country.

It is already widely recognised that we require up to 700 new courses in this country by the year 2000, to cope with the present demand from new players, and one only has to go to your local municipal course at any time of day to see what demand there is.

At Panshanger Golf Complex, which is run by Welwyn Hatfield Council, we get players leaving the public house, which is situated in the middle of the Golf Course, at 11.00 p.m. on a Saturday night and waiting in their cars until the shop opens at 6.00 a.m. the following day, to try and secure a round for that day.

This surely cannot be tolerated as in any other sport it would be unthinkable.

Some Municipals, especially in the South, are reporting over 70,000 rounds per year which by any Greenkeepers standard is 20,000 rounds too many, as the wear and tear on the course becomes very difficult to control.

In fact the STRI recommend that 45,000 rounds per year is the most economical level to maintain a Golf Course. However, in saying this there is a need to improve a lot of the existing Municipal Courses in this country, and to bring them up to the standards that the public expect as media exposure is showing courses at the highest quality, and the golfer expects this to be the standard on his own course.

Having travelled round the country and visited many

Municipal Courses there is a considerable variance in standard, and it is apparent to me that some Local Authorities do not see the benefit, whether it be financial or prestige, in providing a Course of the highest quality. We at Welwyn Hatfield believe in providing quality and the investment in Panshanger has paid off, with many members of the public unaware that it is a Local Government provision.

At Panshanger, which is situated in the green belt on 110 acres we provide a thriving 18 hole Golf Course, Public House, Function Suite, 3 Glass Backed Squash Courts, Pro Shop and other associated areas, and I would suggest to many people that our model is one that can easily be developed should the Local Authority be prepared to invest. The Course, and all the associated facilities, now cover its costs including all its debt charges, and still is able to make a contribution back into the Rates or what is now called the Poll Tax Fund.

I believe that Local Authorities should have the courage to invest more into

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their courses, for it they do not then the Private Sector will take these over in due course with the result of Compulsory Competitive Tendering.

At the moment under the new legislation it is compulsory for all Local Authorities to expose leisure management, bars and catering and grounds maintenance to tender, and the dangers here are the

Private Sector will possibly take control of the grounds maintenance of some courses. I hear some Authorities saying that they welcome this but, as we all know, the maintenance of a Golf Course is not only a job but a hobby as well to dedicated Greenkeepers, and when Golf Course maintenance becomes a commercial issue then there is the danger that the specification

could suffer and investments which have been made in the Course over the past years could go overnight.

Having said this, there are a lot of Municipal Courses which will benefit from CCT especially those where maintenance in the past has been sadly lacking and it is these courses, I believe, that the Private Sector will be trying to win.

Having given my broad

views on the future of Municipal Golf, and to the future, I would welcome any comments from readers as to their views as I have only touched on some of the nerve ends which need debating and would welcome greater debate through this magazine.

PETER KIRKHAM
Assistant Director of
Recreation, Welwyn
Hatfield Council

THERE are three areas of legislation which may affect Municipal Golf Clubs. Managing sports and leisure activities, grounds maintenance and catering.

The local authority has discretion over letting these functions as a separate contract or including them all in the sports and leisure contract.

Some authorities will consider letting the management of golf courses (including any combination of the three functions) as a separate contract or including it in a much larger contract covering other activities e.g. sports centres, swimming pools etc.

Different authorities will take different approaches.

The Contract Process

Local authorities may only carry out work contained within the Act if the following conditions have been met.

(a) The authority must publish a notice, before carrying out any of the work contained within the Act, in at least one local newspaper and one trade journal containing a brief description of the work, details for inspecting or purchasing the specification and a statement that the authority intends to make an invitation to carry out the work.

(b) The periods, place, time and charge specified in the notice are reasonable and the authority has made a detailed specification of work available before carrying the work and that the specification includes a statement of the contract period.

(c) There must be at least three bids invited from the private sector if sufficient interest is shown.

(d) If the local authority wishes to carry out the work itself, a written tender must also be submitted.

(e) The authority must not act in a manner which is anti-competitive.

(f) In carrying out the work, the authority must comply with the specification of work it has produced.

Legislation areas to be watched

The Specification

The specification is a very detailed document giving information and setting standards on every aspect of the service provided. If the specification is perfect and the contractor adheres to it, the customer using the service should not be able to detect any difference in the service, whoever is carrying out the work.

The specification for managing sports and leisure facilities might cover the following areas:

Description of area, description of service, changes in policy, improvements/expansion of the service, pricing, monitoring of performance, financial records, management information, sponsorship, purchasing, stationery, management, staffing levels, staffing qualifications/validity and experience, standards of dress/uniform, training, opening hours, programming, booking system, marketing, advertising, security, upkeep of facilities.

Action for Clubs

This note is not necessarily exhaustive, but is intended to act as a reminder, or checklist, of issues which clubs based on municipal golf courses should discuss with their local authority. Remember, if anything is not included in the specification, the person or company who wins the contract is under no obligation to provide it.

Because of the financial objectives which have to be met, anything outside of the specification will be the subject of a variation order which could be expensive.

(a) Seek an early meeting with officers of your council's Leisure Services or Recreation Department to discuss the club's position in relation to competitive tendering and, in particular, the specification.

(b) Find out how the local authority intends to package the contracts and what the timescale for going out to tender will be.

(c) It is likely that the local authority will be taking the opportunity to review its policy and operation. Find out if this is the case, what is under review, how it will affect the club and how you can help in that process.

(d) Is the local authority view on charging likely to remain the same? What about season tickets? Any price concessions for club members? What about other charges – lockers, hire of equipment etc? Are juniors protected?

(e) Has the club any arrangement to book the first tee for competitions? If so, are the arrangements included in the specification? Is there a difference between regular arrangements (e.g. twice a month for competitions) and special occasions (e.g. Cap-

tain's Day)? Are they also protected?

(f) What are the booking arrangements? Will they remain the same? How much notice will be given for regular bookings and special occasions?

(g) Is there a formal route for consultation between the club and the local authority. If not, use this opportunity to establish one. Don't appear to be in the position of always asking for something. Your expertise may help the local authority in preparing a specification or monitoring the contractor's performance.

(h) Are there rules about priority on the first tee? More than one starting point? Competitions having priority etc? Often these rules are not written down, but in future they may need to be.

(i) What arrangements does the club have for visiting players or teams in competitions (concessions, priority bookings etc.)? Make sure that they are protected in the specification.

(j) Have NAPGC competitions been considered? If there are existing arrangements, are they included in the specification? What about future possibilities – hosting the NAPGC Open?

(k) Does the club have any arrangements for catering (for visiting teams, for example)? Are the arrangements protected?

(l) Does the club have any arrangement for use of any part of the clubhouse either permanently or for special occasions? Office space, storage space or use for social events are examples. Make sure that your use is protected in the specification.

In this article we examine the myriad of ways in which Government legislation could affect the running of municipal golf courses. Thanks for the information goes to the National Association of Public Golf Courses.

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