

put greenkeepers' on the line

whether or not the courses are maintained by a private contractor, the standards of grounds maintenance are determined by the Council through its specification and the subsequent management of the contract by the client. The limiting factor is generally financial, and I am left wondering how much a round of golf on Birmingham municipal courses costs and whether a reasonable price increase to pay for an increase in the standard of maintenance is called for.

At Bradley Park Golf Course in Huddersfield the specification for grounds maintenance (contract won by the in-house direct works organisation) is designed to produce high standards of maintenance and has achieved this through the endeavour of the contractor and the co-operative but watchful eye of the Council's client officers. This specification is achieved on a green fee of approximately £8 a round.

However, it will also interest your readers to note that the course has been closed to date (11 December) for some six weeks. The relatively new course, built on a clay sub-soil, has experienced saturated top soil conditions because of the record rainfall in October and November and even those areas of the course with extensive drainage systems have been unplayable. What is remarkable is that two miles down the road a 100 year old course has been open throughout with most areas in good condition: firm underfoot with few areas which could be considered unplayable. The main reason for this amazing contrast is the effect of thatch on the fairways, in this case preventing the downward movement of water to the soil to such an extent that, despite the record rainfall, test holes reveal a bone dry soil underneath the 3" thatch layer. This all bodes ill for the summer when drought conditions will soon be prevalent because of the lack of moisture in

the soil – but what a boon for winter golf!

When extended course closure results in a loss in revenue of many thousands of pounds, I find myself wondering whether the thatch we see as a villain and spend so much time eradicating is in fact a friend of the fairway and not a foe as widely believed. Perhaps a case for thatch management rather than control?

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May I respond to John Turner's letter in the December issue, by saying that many municipal greenkeeping staff strive under very difficult circumstances to achieve the same high standards of presentation and quality as those found on many private courses. The tone of Mr Turner's letter tars all concerned with the same brush, yet there are good and bad courses, both public and private.

CCT, however, seems to be the latest spanner in the public golf works. For many years municipal golf received a bad press due in the main to the lack of interest paid by some local authorities in the game of golf itself. With the realisation that there was valuable income to be gained and a demand to be met, many have attempted to put their house in order.

Situations that have arisen, as appears in Mr Turner's case, are a direct result of the process that many authorities have taken under CCT. The area that Mr Turner is concerned with is the grounds maintenance/course maintenance operation, whether put out to tender as an individual service or undertaken as an entire golf course management operation by a private company. The key to successful operation under this system lies in the course maintenance specification.

In my experience, because the

specification is written without skilled input from experienced greenkeepers and course managers, it is often outdated and inappropriate. Poorly written, it can provide an unscrupulous contractor with many loop-holes by which vital areas of maintenance may be overlooked.

At the other extreme, specifications have been written in such fine and rigid detail that work is often carried out completely unnecessarily, eg. spraying for fusarium patch on a set date, even when none is present! Both extremes threaten the success of the tenderer and the quality of the course by:

- a) The contractor being kicked off the site as the course deteriorates into such a bad state, as he is deliberately allowed to miss jobs out – the 'if I don't say it, he won't do it' syndrome – along with employing unskilled staff, using poor quality materials etc.
- b) Placing a burden of financial pressure on the contractor – even the better, conscientious one – and often placing him in real financial difficulty when he is forced to carry out unnecessary tasks.

As a final point here, the Local Authority invariably make the mistake of opting for the cheapest bid when buying course maintenance as a direct service, or awarding the contract to the highest bidder when the entire management package of a golf site is put out to tender. In this case may I suggest that Mr Turner digs a bit deeper, for there are courses of action he can take. He should be hounding the Local Authority concerned and going through the course maintenance specification with a fine tooth comb. If the contractor is not meeting required standards, the Local Authority should be issuing him with default notices. If a number of these do not suffice, then they should be relieving him of his contract. Perhaps the final twist in this bureaucratic nightmare is that

some Authorities are unwilling to do this, as the cost of re-writing the tender specifications – the documentation and the pure laborious process of it all – is one they are reluctant to undertake a second time, especially so soon after a contract is awarded. In these cases we only hope that come the next round of CCT they get it right!

What is required is rational and expert management communication and understanding of the whole process – from town clerk's pen to assistant greenkeeper's mower – in order that delivery of the high class facilities and courses all golfers deserve may be achieved.

PAUL COPSEY

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Bringing the dangers of Fluorolaster and Veton to the attention of your readers (October, Flying Divots) is to be applauded.

Our company contracts maintenance work all over the UK and on many occasions, especially in the early morning, we have come across stolen burnt-out vehicles that have been abandoned, both on inner city and rural courses.

The temptation to ferret around in such vehicles is considerable, yet without a knowledge of the dangers that lurk therein, anyone without a COSHH assessment is literally playing with fire.

Sanity alone suggests that before approaching such dangerous substances, which when melted turn into highly corrosive Hydrofluoric acid, the handler should at very least wear industrial gloves, for should the product come into contact with bare flesh, amputation is the only solution – too horrible to contemplate.

Congratulations on a very well presented magazine. Continue to keep education to the fore.

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