

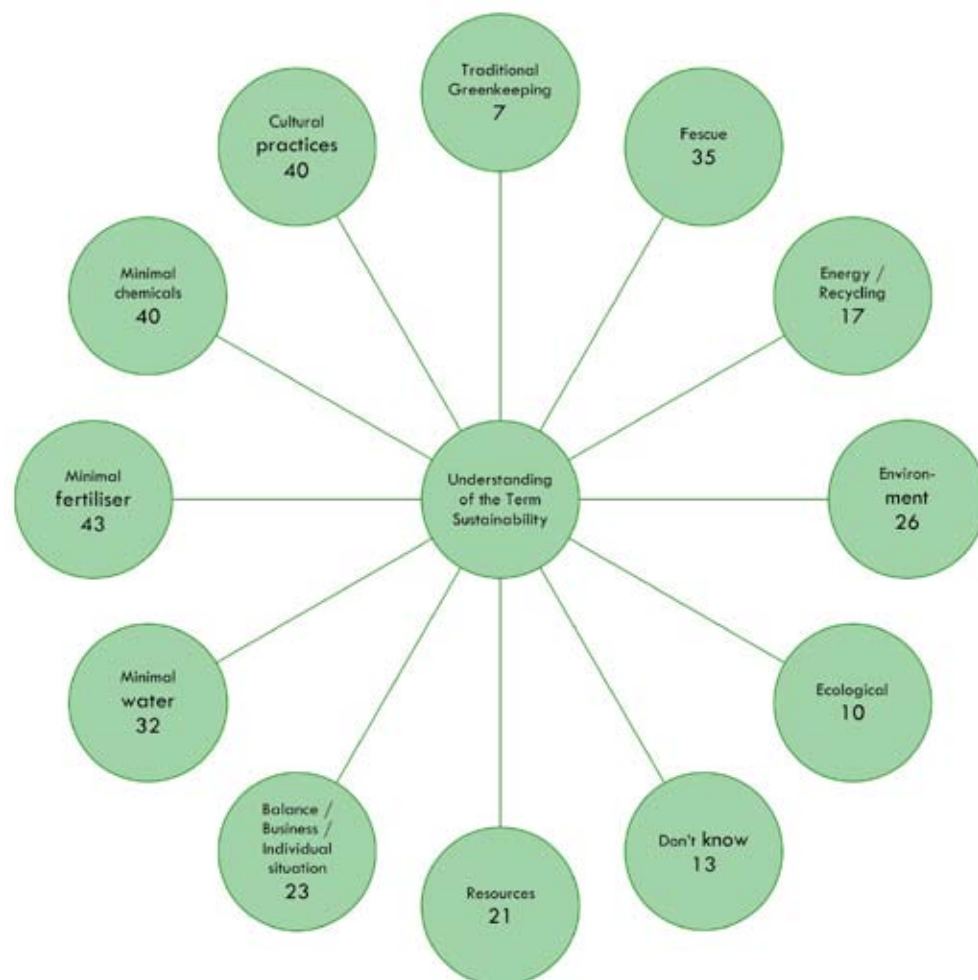
Understanding Sustainability...

Katie Walls and Dr Andy Owen, of Myerscough College, reveal the results of their recent survey examining what is meant by the “S” word

Sustainability is a frequently used ‘buzz word’ nowadays and is applied to a wide range of everyday processes and activities. Its definition will vary depending on the situation you wish to apply it to.

Broadly, sustainability covers three dimensions; economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and social sustainability. This is illustrated within the R&A’s definition of sustainable golf course management – “optimising the playing quality of the golf course in harmony with the conservation of its natural environment under economically sound and socially responsible management” (R&A, 2007). In the greenkeeping industry issues surrounding sustainability have been the focus of many seminars, articles and message board discussion but do we all really understand what it means when applied to our own individual situations?

Myerscough College, as part of a wider study examining sustainability, recently undertook a survey of Head Greenkeepers and Course Managers to ascertain their understanding of the term “sustainability” and interviewed key personnel from the greenkeeping and golf club industries. The responses that were received from the survey were analysed and it was felt that the easiest way to compare these written answers was to group common themes / words together. The results were then displayed indicating the percentage of responses relating to each theme. A total of 12 key issues were identified from the completed questionnaires (figure 1).



From these responses there were five that were mentioned more than any other. Over 30% of Course Managers / Head Greenkeepers stated that ‘minimal fertiliser’ (43%), ‘minimal chemicals’ (40%), ‘fescue grasses’ (35%), and ‘minimal water’ (32%) were important/relevant in their understanding of sustainability.

One of the key factors and initial steps in managing a golf course sustainably is the creation of a sustainable environment. This is achieved by improving drainage, air movement and light penetration, and reducing, and subsequently controlling, thatch levels by a suitable aeration programme. The importance of creating this environ-

Figure 1: Greenkeepers understanding of the term sustainability (numbers indicate the % of respondents using that term).

ment and the correct use of cultural factors is clearly being recognised by Course Managers/Head Greenkeepers within the industry.

The level of inputs (water, fertiliser and chemicals) will play a major role in determining the success of a sustainable management programme. Once the ideal environment has been created through the use of necessary cultural practices then input levels can start to be monitored and reduced. Reduced water, chemical and fertiliser inputs could be an outcome of any sustainable management.

However, depend on your current situation i.e. soil type, local climate, health and condition of the turf.

A total of 35% of the respondents identified 'fescue grass' within their understanding of sustainability. There can, however, be confusion surrounding the desire to achieve fescue-dominated swards. The likelihood is that this will not be achievable in some areas, but what is achievable is movement towards

estly and realistically, determining the environmental conditions of that course and what it is possible to achieve there. Within this the importance of the business balance was also noted.

This is a crucial part of sustainable management. If you remember, sustainability encompasses three aspects; environmental, economic and social. Economic sustainability i.e. the business balance must be achieved for sustainability as a whole to be successful.

'Resources', including 'budget', was identified as a key response by 21% of course managers / head greenkeepers. Resources can be linked to minimal inputs; fertilisers and chemicals are becoming increasingly more expensive and quality water sources are a finite resource.

Judicious use of resources could have a positive impact on the budget, which might be beneficial in the current economic climate. Reducing the use of natural resources,

sustainable golf course management. So the question has to be asked; is the information available appropriate and in the right context? Perhaps it is not reaching as much of the targeted greenkeeper audience as intended? Or maybe there are those out there who don't buy into the philosophy and therefore don't want to understand?

The interviews with key personnel from the greenkeeping and golfing industries highlighted some interesting information.

The issue of improving education and informing greenkeepers what is involved in the process of sustainable management was a view echoed by a number of the interviewees.

From these interviews it also became very apparent that although the key organisations within the greenkeeping industry (R&A, BIGGA & STRI) had a very good understanding of sustainable golf course management those from the golfing industry (professional and secretary) had limited knowledge. To ensure more success and understanding of sustainability on the golf course all those involved need to be educated.

So in conclusion, these results show that a considerable proportion of Course Managers/Head Greenkeepers fully understand the concept of sustainable golf course management and are aspiring to incorporate aspects of sustainability into their management philosophy.

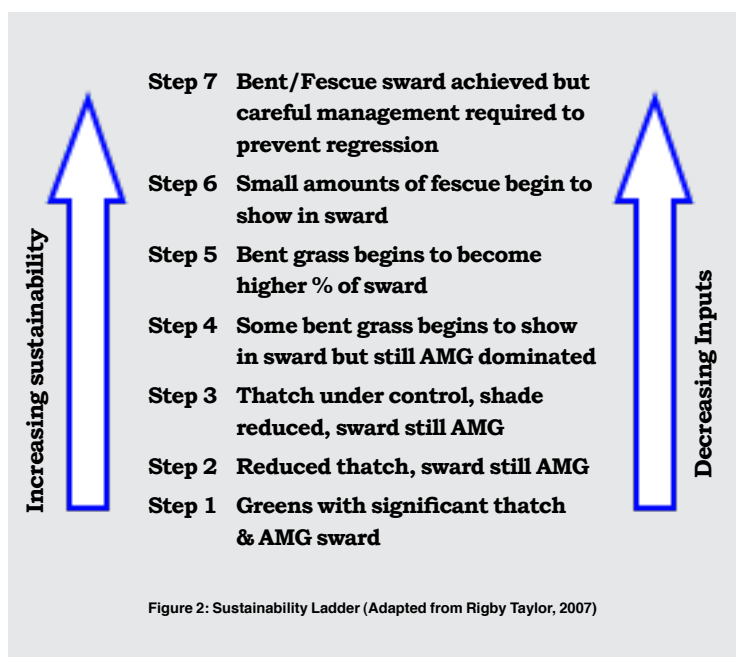
There is still a lack of education and understanding, however, and a refusal by some to accept the need and benefits of this type of management. Is more education the answer to this?

Golf courses are often perceived as polluters of the environment, which use and destroy valuable habitats. Many in the industry will know this isn't necessarily the case but an undesirable reputation that the industry has developed.

Careful use or management of the environment will therefore help to reduce this negative perception and create valuable habitats for wildlife whilst reducing environmental impact.

From the questionnaire there were also a small number of courses that provided generous detail of their successful progress towards sustainable management.

These 'real-life' examples illustrate that sustainable golf course management is possible, but that small steps need to be taken to allow maximum benefit with minimal disruption.



managing in a more sustainable way. This can be demonstrated by the following sustainability ladder.

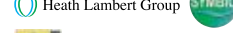
Progression up the ladder, even if only one or two steps, shows increasing sustainable management. Reaching step 7 is desirable but not always achievable and that's why the balance and business of the 'individual situation' must be taken into account. The importance of this was identified by 23% of the course managers / head greenkeepers.

The R&A prescribes that the first step in sustainable golf course management is to assess the course's current sustainability status, hon-

including energy is a major part of the sustainability concept, with energy / recycling being recognised by 17% of the respondents.

A final response to mention was that of the 13% who admitted to not really knowing what sustainability meant. Without a level of understanding of the principles and the process it is difficult for the course to be managed in a more sustainable manner. This particular response raises the issue of education and informing greenkeepers what is involved.

As mentioned in the introduction to the piece there have been numerous talks and articles relating to



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