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### **ISSUES BENEATH THE SURFACE!**

**David Carpenter of TrioPlus reports on a profile of the grounds management and maintenance industry, uncovering some trends that should be of concern to the professional organisations and National Governing Bodies of Sport.**

Late in 2006, **TrioPlus** was assisting the Institute of Groundsmanship (IOG) to develop and launch '*Challenging Perceptions*', their first ever National Strategy, and I commented to Chief Executive Geoff Webb that grounds management and maintenance could be called 'the hidden profession'. Statistical data is scant and, apart from the odd national media article criticising a playing surface for some untimely Ashes loss or Euro exit, the industry goes largely unnoticed.

Recently IOG asked **TrioPlus** to take a more detailed look at the sector, and previously anecdotal evidence has been confirmed as a worrying medium term trend both for the sector professionally and for sports participants who routinely expect to turn up and find a quality surface prepared and ready for play.

According to '*Active Places*', industry professionals (employed and voluntary) look after more than 54,500 grass playing surfaces and 1,629 synthetic surfaces for pitch sports in England alone. The English Golf Partnership suggested figures of 1,538 18-hole golf courses, 433 9-hole and 81 Par-3 courses. Add 52 racecourses and specialist facilities for tennis and bowls and you get some perspective of the scale of activity.

Yet grounds management and maintenance in the sport and leisure sector hardly merits a mention as a profession in the various economic impact studies undertaken by Sport England, Skills Active, individual Universities, and industry organisations. With the exception of some work in golf and horse racing, reports typically carry a photograph of a playing surface being prepared and that is about as far as it goes. Not necessarily a criticism, just a fact. Echoes of the status of coaching and talent identification in the 1990s and maybe sports development in the 1980s.

This absence of data, and comparable statistics across the UK, makes it almost impossible to estimate annual revenue spend, but in England alone research confirmed annual expenditure of at least £580million. The real figure is likely to be much higher, probably approaching the £1billion mark, but without considerably more work there are difficulties estimating spend in some areas, notably state schools. Conservatively, there are more than 20,000 full time professionals and a similar number of volunteers. Add capital spending, as well as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and you see a very significant industry. Golf dominates the sector, accounting for almost half of all expenditure.

At the highest level, professionals such as Eddie Seward at the All England Club, Paul Burgess at the Emirates, Keith Kent at Twickenham, Chris Woods at the ECB and Steve Welch at Wembley National Stadium are all 'soil scientists', high quality experts in their field.

Look beneath the surface and the picture is very different.

The industry is struggling to attract younger entrants and many more experienced grounds managers are aged 50 and over. Put simply, there are more people exiting than entering the profession, and those leaving or retiring are taking years of skills with them.

In local government the situation is exacerbated by successive tendering regimes, budget reductions, loss of parks and leisure departments and the non-statutory nature of the function. In some authorities, what had previously been skilled grounds staff are now reclassified as general operatives.

One senior local authority officer summed up the position: "There is a shortage of trained skilled staff to work on fine turf surfaces, some of our expert staff are close to retirement age, and there is nothing in place to fill the void."

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment found similar patterns when they looked at parks and open spaces.

The situation in golf and the independent schools sector is somewhat better but the general trend is the same.

Our research found that low pay and poor conditions, lack of progression and career path, and limited training opportunities were all barriers to entry and personal development. Only 10% of those surveyed had entered the profession by choice, many citing their route as through family or friends or 'by accident'. Yet, of those in post, over 60% claimed high levels of job satisfaction.

40% felt they would benefit from additional training. 40% had not had any training during the past 12 months, a frightening figure when you consider how technology is impacting upon and advancing the industry at present, and health and safety regulations change regularly because of legislation both in the UK and EU. Although most employers cited time and budget to be reasons for lack of training, some were negative or dismissive about training for those viewed as 'low academic achievers' or 'difficult to train'.

Women hardly feature in the industry, less than half of one per cent at present.

The consequences are clear. On the assumption that grass remains a preferred playing surface, insufficient trained professionals will lead over time to a decline in the number and quality of grass surfaces, in some cases to a point where they will become dangerous.

The small energetic IOG professional team is starting to be heard and to sit at some of the right tables but they need more support from the major grass surface sports, and from the professional organisations. The IOG is also aiming

to make the profession more attractive to young people and is restructuring its training programmes accordingly.

Organisations that fund playing surface developments need to work harder to ensure that grounds management and maintenance regimes are adhered to after completion. And how about having a look back at all those surfaces originally funded through the National Lottery and ensuring they are up to speed?

The National Governing Bodies, particularly cricket, are already also doing some commendable work but this issue needs to move higher up the agenda. After all, if the playing surface was not there in the first place, there would be nowhere for the coaches, development officers, talent identifiers and participants to go!

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