

Bowls Interim Works and Fit for Play Wednesday 1st April 2020

Grassroots playing facilities will currently have many questions about the current and potential restrictions the Government may impose to reduce the transmission of Coronavirus with regards to bowls playing surfaces, their ongoing maintenance and what works may be carried out to provide a fit for play surface when sport resumes.

This document sets out what may happen to bowls playing surfaces and the soils beneath should they be left alone for lengthy periods, what can currently be done to maintain them and also what works can be carried out should play resume.

Please ensure you always follow government guidelines (www.gov.uk/coronavirus) should you be permitted to work outdoors either as lone workers or as part of a team.

Grassroots playing surfaces may be maintained by the following category of people:

Professional managers and staff are advised to continue to actively consult and discuss working practices with their employers, who should ensure all employees are informed of and are following Government guidelines. Subject to Government policy, your employer should determine with you whether your continued work is necessary, essential and/or safe.

Self-employed grounds staff or contractors are advised to follow the latest Government guidelines, formulate an agreed plan that includes your safe working procedure, and clearly communicate with clients in advance and agree safe working procedures. We advise regular review as Government guidelines develop. Ultimately it is your decision to suspend operations or, to continue to work. The emphasis though is to ensure safe working practices, as communicated by Government. Make plans now for the future and reschedule appointments where you can and keep reassessing this in order that when restrictions are lifted you are able then to return to projects that may have been suspended.

Volunteers should follow latest Government guidelines and not put themselves or others at risk. We advise that the volunteer network monitors the timings of any announcements of the various sports re opening for play, however realistically this will be dependent on how we are able to slow the virus down and return to normality.

The main question you may have is about mowing. Here are some suggestions for you to follow.

Mowing heights of cut (HoC) during non-play

Bowls	Suggested HoC	How much to remove	Frequency (where possible)	Comments
	8 – 12mm <i>(a typical winter height will be fine for the current situation)</i>	Max 1/3 rd	X2 weekly, where possible	This would possibly allow for grass height before cut of 12mm – 18mm at this time of year

Why am I leaving the grass longer than usual? When preparing for play you are usually cutting the grass at a shorter height. With reduced wear and tear on the grass and no need to provide a player experience then the higher the better, within reason. The grass will be under a lot less stress by being longer, will be slightly more of an open sward which will reduce disease pressures (less humidity amongst the leaves) and will encourage greater root growth as more leaf means more food produced by photosynthesis. A longer grass plant also produces deeper roots which improve soil structure, in turn improving drainage as well as improving surface stability.

What may happen if I do not cut the grass at all? The grass will grow very tall, the surface will become very thin, it will try to set seed, and this will result in an even thinner surface. It will be hard to get the surface back into a suitable playing surface when we can start playing sport again.

Other tasks you may be able to carry out:

1: Control or removal of thatch

Why should I do this if play is not taking place? Grass leaves and sheaths do die off on a regular basis and these will build-up at the base of the plant. To keep it healthy you will need to keep the base of the plant clean on a periodic basis. Carry out light scarifying on a monthly basis. If you have a verticutting unit then do this on a fortnightly basis. The natural response in soil is to form a deeper organic layer at the surface which will create a soft surface, a slower rink and which may also hold water if a deep layer forms.

If I am cutting the grass longer will this have an effect on thatch levels? There may be a build-up of excess organic matter – this will depend on soil biology and how actively the dead vegetation is broken down by the soil organisms. However, this shouldn't be a major problem over a short period of time with reduced watering and fertiliser applications and no usage taking place.

If I am scarifying how 'deep' should I go? This will depend on the current condition of the sward, but typically a light or medium depth setting, up to say 5mm depth, as part of routine maintenance should only be considered. Always ensure that the surface is not being damaged with the setting used and be prepared to reduce the depth setting if required.

Where scarification is concerned be cautious of doing this when the weather is hot and dry.



2: Aeration

Should I do this at all if no play is taking place? With no play taking place and with typical dry weather coming along there shouldn't be a need to do much or any aeration work, especially if the green was in a good condition to start with. If the green needed improving, then the use of a spiked roller for shallow aeration or solid tines for deeper aeration might be considered if the weather is mild with occasional rainfall.

If I can do this, how will it help the soil? It will improve structure, nutrient cycling and soil gas transfer. It will increase infiltration rates and encourage water to move into the rootzone rather than be lost by evaporation. Roots will be able to explore more of the soil profile and this will help produce a surface which can better withstand wear and tear when play starts up again.

When should I decide to not aerate? The soil at your aeration depth needs to be dry enough to crumble easily in your hand. If it smears or you can roll it into a ball it is too wet – wait until it dries further. You may need to spike at a shallower depth initially and then deeper as the soil dries. Don't aerate if it is coming into a dry spell, or if it is already too dry, or too wet.

3: Fertilising

Should I do this if no play is taking place? The soil biology will cycle nutrients naturally which will keep grass ticking over (keeping the grass plant alive) so fertilisation can be reduced. Reduced fertilisation may encourage grasses like Fescue. Therefore, in many cases there will not be a need to apply a fertiliser as the grass will grow naturally and it won't need to recover from wear and tear. We don't want it to get too dense or grow too fast as this can increase disease attack, alongside mowing and scarification requirements.

4: Weeds

At the grassroots level we must readily accept that weeds are part of everyday life on the playing surface.

What could be the potential outcome if I do the minimum work and how can I overcome this? The soil contains many viable weed and grass seeds, and some will germinate. Normally they need space to do this in so if you can minimise bare patches and brush off worm casts quickly weed invasion will be slowed down.

Scarification and verti-cutting can help to physically weaken and reduce the spread of some weeds, especially creeping weeds like clover on bowling greens, so do carry out these tasks where possible. If any broader leaved weeds, such as daisy, are noticed then these should be carefully teased out by hand.

5: Local repairs to playing surfaces

Where and when possible, and where resources permit take time to repair those areas that have always caused issues. This would typically be light renovations by hand forking (or machine if a large area), a light raking or scarification, a light fertiliser application, over-seeding and light top-dressing of thin areas, followed up with regular watering to aid germination and establishment.

6: Irrigation

Should I do this if no play is taking place? Water plays a major part in ensuring grass growth especially during the establishment phase of development following repairs or renovation. Irrigation should be carried out as and when needed as indicated by weather conditions.

Do not over irrigate. Too much water will affect the turfgrass growth and may also affect the soil conditions to the extent that compaction occurs with subsequent maintenance operations. If your ability to irrigate is limited focus on those areas with the weakest turfgrass growth or newly sown grass.

How can I get my playing surface back to a 'fit for play' condition should a ban on play be lifted? It is important that some form of reduced but regular maintenance work has been carried out during this period, so that a gradual reduction in mowing height over say a 2-week period can be achieved. A gradual increase in the usual maintenance activities, including a fertiliser application to help encourage a thickening of the sward, will help to produce a suitable playing surface quickly.

Double cutting the green on alternate occasions will also help to create a denser sward, but don't reduce the height of cut too quickly. Dropping the height of cut by 1mm every 2-days in a gradual and phased approach is a good plan so that during a 2-week period a height of cut of 5mm can easily be achieved without having stressed the grass plant too much.

The actual length of time needed to become fully playable and to what standard will also depend on the condition of the surface in the first place. However, by carrying out regular but reduced maintenance practices over this difficult time a bowling green can be playable in a relatively short period of time.

Closing statement

Please always ensure you adhere to up to date government guidelines (www.gov.uk/coronavirus) regarding the current situation.

The main message to bowling greenkeepers is to ideally continue with all, or most, of the typical good maintenance practices but at a reduced intensity to meet the needs of your particular green.

An ongoing dialogue with your club and leagues will be necessary to ensure sufficient lead in time to get the surface safe and match ready.