

A year in turfcare: the GMA annual report

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The GMA has made significant achievements over the past year, including strengthening the Pitch Advisory Service, tackling inequality and continuing to provide learning opportunities

In last year's report, we explained how the GMA executive team and Board were navigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this had impacted on our strategic plans. Since then, the GMA has been taking the necessary steps to create the foundations for renewed investment and growth by investing in staff members who will help to increase our capacity and provide improved services and opportunities for our members.

Like every other business and leisure sector, the turfcare industry is not immune to the prevailing global conditions that are creating new challenges, such as climate change, rising inflation and the impacts of Brexit. This is in addition to the slow emergence of countries that still have restrictive lockdowns in place and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which are causing supply issues in goods and services. Furthermore, the sector is also facing pressure to change working practices with restrictions on the use of red diesel and chemicals.

TIME BOMB

In 2019, the GMA published Groundsmanship – Sport's Vital Profession. This report highlighted the "ticking time bomb" relating to the ageing profile of the workforce and the lack of new entrants from a diverse demographic. Our latest workforce survey snapshot indicates that in the next three years alone, around 3,220 people are expected to retire from the turfcare sector.

This brings into focus the need to continue our work in elevating the profession's profile and that's why 'Industry Workforce Development' is one of the six strategic pillars sitting at the heart of the GMA's new strategy. There is a great deal of disparity when it comes to recognition and rewards for people who work within our industry, particularly across different sports and employment environments. The continued challenge is to ensure that groundspeople are valued and remunerated fairly across all types of organisations.

MEMBERSHIP PERKS

It is imperative that the GMA continues to provide relevant membership benefits and, in what has been a challenging period for all membership organisations, we continue to engage and react to our members' needs through our communications, products and services.

Of the membership benefits, Grounds Management magazine continues to be the most popular, while the discounts on GMA events, training and education, clothing and legal assistance – together with exclusive access to the industry's National Salary Framework – present a strong value proposition for our members.

We have seen encouraging membership growth in the corporate, grassroots and local authority sectors, as well as independent schools and professional organisations. GMA member benefits are reviewed annually and our new strategy, which encompasses key pillars to help tackle social and economic challenges, will continue to ensure members are well served by the GMA.

LEARNING LEAPS FORWARD

Throughout 2021 and 2022, more than 1,200 individuals (volunteers and professionals) have engaged in GMA training or education. While we are once again delivering in-person training, we are also ensuring that online course development continues – offering nine courses with a further two in development – to complement the 20-plus face-to-face training courses. GMA qualifications also continue to provide expansive turfcare knowledge for continuous lifelong learning.

The GMA has also reviewed and updated its highly valuable, non-site-specific Risk Assessment and Safe Systems of Work documents, and has carried out more than 80 turfcare consultancy audits in the past year. The Technical and Learning department is also working closely with national governing bodies of sport (NGBs) to ensure that the GMA's learning provision fits with all multi-sport needs.

This department has also been re-accredited by the Matrix Standard – the Department for Education's standard for ensuring the GMA's delivery of high-quality learning, impartial advice and guidance.

PITCH ADVISORY SERVICE

The Pitch Advisory Service (PAS) transitioned from the Grounds and Natural Turf Improvement Programme (GaNTIP) on 1 April 2021 for a third phase of the programme, which will run until 31 March 2024.

This programme has increased in size from two to four key account managers and eight to 11 regional pitch advisors, and works with four sports: cricket, football, rugby league and rugby union.

One of the significant achievements this year is the key account managers' assistance in the continued development and implementation of the Football Foundation PitchPower app with integration of data collected from cricket, rugby league and rugby union. This will allow the PAS team to continue to provide a consistent, tailored approach, gain better data and provide NGBs with a greater scope of pitch care assistance at grassroots level.

More than 8,500 unique pitches have been assessed with high levels (94 per cent) of user satisfaction by using the PitchPower app. Across this sample size, 55 per cent of pitches are rated poor or basic and 45 per cent good or higher. This is higher than the expected national average of a third of pitches being good or higher within NGB Playing Pitch Strategies, and this is due to most pitches assessed to date being maintained by the club and voluntary sector where maintenance standards are higher.

The new and improved release of PitchPower 2.0 will play a significant part in the development of multi-sport data collection and provide detailed requirements for each sport, which will be underpinned by the GMA's Grounds Management Framework (GMF). PitchPower 2.0 will be launched in the summer of 2022.

GROUNDS SURVEY

The GMA and the PAS have collaborated with Myriad and Doran Consultancy to carry out the annual Workforce Development Survey, which will offer invaluable data on recruitment, retention, diversity demographics, current pay scales and how work-life balance is impacting on mental health.

Using the survey results, we are devising a 'Workforce Development Plan' – aligned to the PAS, GMA and NGBs' overarching workforce development strategies, including the Football Foundation Groundskeeper Volunteer Plan – to meet the needs of each sport and help to tackle inequalities within the grounds industry. This commenced on 1 March 2022 and is due to be completed on 1 August 2022.

LOCAL AUTHORITY ENGAGEMENT

Local authorities' interaction, for all sports within the Workforce Development Plan and GMF, is important and necessary to ensure that the relevant resources are provided if targets are to be met. The Football Foundation has recruited two staff members to work on this remit and the current local authority pilot, being run by the Foundation, will help identify the further resource needed.

For example, to date, 2,418 pitches have been assessed across the 86 local authorities and unsurprisingly the pitch quality standard is significantly lower than that of the club network: 28 per cent of pitches are good and 72 per cent of pitches are poor or basic.

MEETING CHALLENGES

The PAS has achieved set targets in year one and is benchmarking set targets for years two and three. It carried out a major grounds survey during March 2022, with results published in July. The GMA plans to repeat this survey each year with comparisons made from the data received to aid workforce development as part of the phase three proposal.

The GMA's GMF continues to be developed and is an integral part of the PitchPower app. This will continue to enable individuals, clubs and organisations to identify areas of improvement and education required to provide solutions. Further, with continued promotion by NGBs, in conjunction with the GMA, it will be a key factor in improving the playing surfaces within sport, and will provide a clear pathway for future grounds professionals and volunteers.

We have continued to work with the local authority Risk Register to record current and historical maintenance practices for each sport and how that could affect the ability of grassroots sports to continue to be played, now and in the future.

Technology, data collection and analysis are central to all PAS thinking. Collating the relevant data for each sport will be essential in creating the plan for future phases of the programme and to ensure that GMA products and services continue to be updated and created, aligning with the programme needs to provide consistent and desirable training and membership benefits.

Areas for development will include implementation of recommendations from the results of the Workforce Development Survey and Grounds Survey to provide a clear GMF pathway. A health and safety section will also be added to the GMA Toolkit. Environmental sustainability and innovation are essential within the volunteer sector and any future support programmes will focus on this.

The GMA has reviewed and reset its strategy to better service the issues facing our members today. Although the executive and Board's ambitions have faced financial restrictions – which impacted on the ability to build and invest in resources, to campaign and to advocate best practice – we have navigated our way through a testing time and will continue to meet the challenges and to represent our members' interests with our strategic aims.

SALTEX IS BACK ON TRACK

After the pandemic's impact on SALTEX in 2020, the event re-established itself as the foremost trade exhibition for the sports, amenity and landscaping sectors in 2021, due to a very positive response by both exhibitors and visitors. No one can underestimate the pressure on the GMA to deliver an exhibition of this size and scope against such a backdrop of uncertainty following lockdowns and public-health-led priorities.

Everyone's personal safety and wellbeing was at the forefront of our event delivery, and while affected by limited visits from international engagement, we witnessed an eagerness for person-to-person contact with a very positive level of attendance, which has led to an encouraging number of exhibitors that have already signed up for the 2022 event.

** Please visit the members area of thegma.org.uk website for a reminder of GMA member benefits and how you can access them.*