

## Attracting youngsters into the industry

Some on-trend and hot topics came out of the first Turf Business Question Time event, held at the FA facility at St. George's Park in Staffordshire, reports Emma Otusajo.



Among the audience were a mix of turf care professionals from across the industry, whilst panel members gave great insights into current issues and how the industry can work together to resolve them.

A big thank you goes to Scott Brooks, who hosted the event and took part in the panel. There's appreciation to the morning panel members, who were: Geoff Webb, of The IOG, Jim Croxton, of BIGGA, Alison Robinson, of Myerscough College; Paul Ashcroft, of Arsenal FC and James Bledge, of Cinque Ports Golf Club.

Thanks also goes to the afternoon panel, who shared talks around sustainability and media. Panel members were: Adrian Kay, York Racecourse; Lee Strutt, of Royal Automobile Club Golf Course; Charles Henderson, of PSD Labo Sport as well as Scott Brooks.

### Boosting young people into the industry

In recent years, the numbers of people entering the industry as beginners or completing an apprenticeship has declined. Roy Rigby, of Manchester City, highlighted an example when his team had 66 applications for an

apprenticeship and shortlisted six. The person offered the job at the end then declined it.

Reasons for a lack of young people opting to train in turf care were thought to be perceptions of low wages, a lack of perceived career progression and little clarity about the areas to work within the sector. The panel agreed that these factors can often prevent young people from seeing the industry as an attractive career path.

"We've got to repackage what we're offering... promoting it as a STEM subject to start to attract the very best students out of schools by raising that scientific element of it and bringing in people from more diverse backgrounds," said Alison.

Geoff Webb noted the confusion about the educational pathways leading into turf care. Other panellists agreed that there is a plethora of qualifications available and, often, young people aren't sure about the differences between them and which direction to go. More so, rewards should follow with the successful completion of qualifications.

For young people to progress in a career, the panel considered the importance of the need for clubs and

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organisations to develop a strong training culture, which would support progression and the development of their staff and boost morale.

### So how can training providers attract more young people into the turf care industry?

Alison Myers said that she organises taster daytime activities and promotes these to students. She also invites in headteachers to show them what the turf care industry can offer and how students can achieve the same status as turf care role models, such as Paul Burgess of Real Madrid, amongst others. One suggestion was to partner with a local golf club to invite school students on a course tour, immersing students into understanding what goes into turf care.

### Improving education and career pathways

The panel felt there is some confusion between different qualifications and which are most important for staff to progress in their careers. There is also the perception that entry requirements to the industry are very low and what sort of message this sends to students and their parents.

Geoff Webb explained that the sector has an indefinable system, as nobody's tried to classify a standard of turf and how this relates to people starting out in the industry, to those who are more experienced.

The panel questioned if qualifications could be made clearer, coupled with some strong case studies and role models to show what can be achieved in the industry.

Geoff said: "We're at the point where we need to re-evaluate our strategy for encouraging people to enter the industry. We've got to make sure we're attracting people to come in at all levels of the industry."

As well as the technical and scientific training included in courses, more training in commercial and managements spheres would be useful. This includes teaching students how to put together a proposal and deliver it at board meetings. Alison singled out the importance of including English and maths as a vital part of the training, too - particularly if people want to progress into managerial roles. The panel agreed overall the gaps in

knowledge missing from some courses, need to be addressed, resulting in "...more broadly-rounded qualified people", said Jim Croxton.

### Boosting paycales across the industry

Perceived low pay, lack of progression and increased spending for employers on their clubs are affecting industry payrates. It was pointed out that club owners are expecting the same turf quality on a lower budget, with some recruiting volunteers to complete the work.

"You wouldn't expect Tesco to hire volunteers to work in its stores, so why would you expect groundkeepers to

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volunteer to maintain the turf?" Geoff commented.

For a 16-year-old, a £10,000 salary is good, but for somebody over 18, they're more likely to have outgoing and would expect more, Alison highlighted.

Geoff pointed out that progression is an issue, too, as employees can be earning the same five years down the line as when they came in, which isn't attractive to parents when looking at career options. The question of paycales as a standardisation was raised, which Alison clarified doesn't currently exist. Also, with the increasing amounts that venues spend on entertainment and running costs, they can be limited as to how much they can pay groundkeepers.

The panel talked about the need for the industry a clear progression pathway that shows where somebody can go and the salary they can eventually earn. James Bledge told the panel about a pay scale calculator his team has developed for the industry, which may be able to standardise pay or set a benchmark.

"Staff want to know that one day they can have the type of salary that will afford them a house or a holiday and that they're on a par with their friends and family," commented Lee Strutt.

### Chemicals and recycling

The audience asked about alternative chemicals to use on turf with the declination of fungicides.

It's increasingly tough to suggest alternatives, as there are few," said Adrian Kay. He highlighted grass turf breeding and planning a preventative programme of action, by picking out key focus periods where the high intensity is and to focus on those. Charles Henderson explained that his team use their own waste compression system for one of its club's grass clippings. During this process, the liquid from the grass can also be recycled back through the system, which other clubs can adopt as best practice.

### Media and expertise

The panel felt that not enough is being done to promote the skills and expertise in the turf care sector through the media. Considering the UK sports turf care sector is worth £1 billion, according to Geoff Webb, few people are aware of this and it was believed that there should be more joined-up working between the media and turf care professionals, through sports and social media. Whereas media often reports negatively about the industry, this needs to be balanced with the positive aspects.

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