

Golf Ireland geared for the good of the game

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What is good for the game of golf in Ireland?

In their quest for answers to that question, the Golfing Union of Ireland and the Irish Ladies Golf Union developed a dream for what a new national governing body for golf could be. Following extensive consultation with clubs and other key stakeholders, Golf Ireland is now being proposed as one body for all golfers on the island of Ireland and clubs will vote on this proposal on January 19th.

As clubs have been all too painfully aware, membership has been in decline for some time while the average age of participants continues to rise. There is a substantial risk to the popularity of the sport and it has become clear that golf as a game is not meeting the needs of modern Ireland.

Bringing Ireland's two golf Unions together was identified as an essential first step to meet the challenges facing the sport. In practical terms, future funding from both Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland will be contingent upon golf having a mixed gender governance structure. Golf Ireland will fulfil the requirements of the Governance Code for Community and Voluntary Organisations, as recommended by Sport Ireland. The principles of this code are not currently being met by the GUI or the ILGU by virtue of their single gender governance structures.

For clubs, a vote for Golf Ireland will mean an increase in support from the governing body. The range of services currently provided by the Confederation of Golf in Ireland (CGI) will be delivered under the Participation and Club Support Department of Golf Ireland. These services will be enhanced and expanded, giving clubs greater resources available to help with the things that really matter: membership, governance and competition.

Clubs across the island of Ireland are now being asked for their approval so that Golf Ireland can become a reality. On 19 January 2019, each Union will ask their member clubs to vote on the Golf Ireland proposal. Naturally, clubs are wondering what a future with Golf Ireland will look like.

KEY QUESTIONS

1. What are the benefits that Golf Ireland will bring? The game of golf in Ireland will have an all-inclusive governing body for the first time, which is good for promotion; which is good for attracting capital funding; which is good for attracting commercial partners; which is good for the image of the game. Golf Ireland is good for the game.
2. Will Golf Ireland interfere with the running of our club? Clubs are the bedrock of golf in Ireland. Golf Ireland will support clubs and advise on best practice models to help clubs progress towards improved governance and management practices. Golf Ireland will not interfere with the day-to-day running of its affiliate clubs.
3. What changes will we see in our club? Clubs will only have to deal with one body in future when it comes to handicapping, inter-club events, club supports and game development. There will be no requirement for separate men's and women's clubs and each club will be free to decide whether to move to a single structure. Clubs will also be free to retain their existing structure.

As Ryder Cup winning Captain Paul McGinley noted in his letter to golf clubs supporting the creation of Golf Ireland: "This is golf's way of responding to the needs of golfers in modern society."

As per the end of 2017, there are 395 GUI fee-paying clubs and 374 ILGU fee-paying clubs. All clubs currently affiliated to the two Unions will automatically be affiliated to Golf Ireland on its establishment date.

Golf has suffered a substantial drop in playing numbers from its peak in the mid-2000s. Although golf remains one of the most popular sport and exercise activities in Ireland, it is clear that the game must adapt. Dr Pete Lunn - author of a 2017 ESRI report entitled 'Golf in Ireland: A Statistical Analysis' - stated that:

"Golf is unusual among sporting activities in its appeal to older people and link to lifelong health benefits. But participation is declining and the challenge for those who promote the game is to find ways to engage the modern generation of younger adults and their families."

The founders of the GUI and ILGU were sporting pioneers, putting in place structures that would be imitated the world over. Both Unions remain as ambitious as they were at the beginning and Golf Ireland, which has been many years in the making, is the result of a careful and courageous mission to meet the needs of golf and golfers in this modern age.