Being a member of a golf club and maintaining a handicap is rarely without its challenges. Justifying the cost is one thing, but trying to remember half-a-dozen logins so you can book tee times, enter competitions and submit scores can make you wonder why you even bother.

As an official licensee of the new World Handicap System (WHS), Scottish Golf have spent the last three years working on a simpler and better solution. Now, they think they’ve found it with a Venue Management System (VMS) which brings together handicapping, digital scoring, tee-time bookings and membership management under one, centralised system.

The software has been configured to enable clubs and golfers north of the border to access a player’s newly-updated handicap index, which will be calculated and published by Scottish Golf through a new central database of handicaps (CDH) from November 2. This will all be made available through a new free app, which is set to go live later this month. It means that every golfer in Scotland will soon be able to view their world handicap for the first time, more than six months ahead of schedule. It is one of many

At a time when the world of golf has come to a standstill, Scottish Golf are putting the finishing touches to a new app which might just safeguard the future of their golf courses and increase participation. So why do some clubs think it’s too good to be true? Michael Catling went to Scotland to investigate...
I CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHY CLUBS ARE NOT FALLING OVER THEMSELVES TO GET INVOLVED. THE APP IS AMAZING. IT'S FREE AND REALLY STRAIGHT FORWARD TO USE, EVEN FOR US OLDER CHAPS'

Benefits which, Scottish Golf believe, will help educate golfers about the WHS and make it easier to submit general play and competition scores.

“A lot of the worry is what a golfer’s handicap is going to be when they play anywhere other than their home course and how they calculate it,” explains Iain Forsyth, Chief Commercial Officer. “The app will give you that breakdown and because it knows who you are and where you are, it will tell you what your playing index is and how many strokes you’re apart from your handicap. It will help them to understand and integrate with the World Handicap System, which has been made available at no extra cost. But the beauty of the VMS is that it knits everything together so golfers can access their handicap and everything else in one place. It is one integrated system, with one login and password that can be used on the Scottish Golf website and iPad. “One of the issues clubs have is marketing their own opens. Until now, you normally had to visit their website. But a club can now use the app to advertise regional and national competitions, which can then be entered and paid for by a golfer using the same app.”

For any club that wants it, Scottish Golf is offering a fully-customised website and iPad to operate the app at no extra cost. While this form part of the recent increase in member affiliation fees, the VMS comes with the promise that clubs will no longer need to run multiple software packages, thus saving them time and money.

But despite being hailed as a “game changer” that could potentially bring in millions” by Andrew McKinlay, Chief Executive of Scottish Golf, there remains a concern over whether clubs would benefit from it. “While this forms part of the recent closures due to low usage,” says Forsyth, “more axed in 2017. Many others are now at a loss for words.”

“Worrying statistics from the KPMG Golf Participation Report last year show that 13,671 golf club members in Scotland were lost between 2017-18 – a drop of nearly 80,000 since 2005. The knock-on effect saw 19 courses lost in 2016 and 18 more axed in 2017. Many others are now at risk, including free of charge council-owned municipal golf courses and five in South Ayrshire which have been earmarked for closure due to low usage.”

“We think there are just over 180,000 members of Scottish Golf and three times that number of players who play for them,” says Forsyth. “One of the biggest issues affecting clubs right now is the prices being charged by third-party providers. When a membership costs £800 and one green free is only £20, simple maths will tell you that it will work...”
WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO IS ATTRACT THE NON-MEMBERS.
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Really, we want to attract non-members, not members. We have listened to the concerns of some clubs and put provisions in place so a golfer cannot leave a golf club and join our virtual club for a minimum period of time. “We know there are people – like students or those with young families – who play infrequently and cannot afford to spend a grand a year on membership. This is a way for them to stay in the game until they are in a position to purchase a membership again.”

With the country now in lockdown, Scottish Golf are running weekly video seminars for clubs to demonstrate how the system works and more importantly, how it can save them money. They hope to have “at least a third of their affiliated clubs” using the VMS before the WHS comes into effect. It’s an ambitious goal but when you’ve got a platform this good, it may not be long before they convince the majority of clubs and golfers in Scotland to embrace what they are offering. They’ve already convinced us.

WHAT ARE ENGLAND GOLF DOING?

Unlike Scottish Golf, who are going with one software provider to cover all bases, the governing bodies in England, Wales and Ireland are looking to engage with the current ISVs to provide continuity for clubs who use them for myriad things other than handicapping. We understand England Golf are producing an easy-to-use handicap app, developed by DotGolf, which will allow golfers to access their handicap index and input scores. This will likely go live after the launch of the WHS, when every governing body becomes the central authority for handicapping in their territory.

WHAT THEY SAY...

“It’s more than just an app which allows you to input your scores and calculate your handicap index. The system knows who you are and allows us to value membership at other clubs so we can offer a better rate. For independent golfers, we can offer them the chance to play the course at a higher rate, but with the added incentive of being able to enter an open competition when it’s quiet. That does two things: It gets the visitor revenue up, but also gives people the exposure to a club which will hopefully convert to a membership. If you add up all the green fees you need to pay as an independent golfer, on top of the £60-a-year ‘virtual golf club’ subscription, you don’t need to play too much until you enter a membership category.”

Derek Watters, head pro at Gourock Golf Club

A 21ST CENTURY GOLF CLUB

Gourock are running all competitions 100 per cent digitally, which is now possible through the use of the Scottish Golf VMS. This means users can pay and book online, check in through the app without having to go inside the club, and then submit their scores digitally. Should social distancing return, Gourock have also made it possible for golfers to sign as both the marker and player on the app to avoid sharing phones and any physical contact.

out cheaper if you pay to play less than 40 times a year. That needs to change a little…”

To help flip this, Scottish Golf have introduced a virtual golf club for independent golfers to coincide with the launch of the WHS on November 2. For a £5 monthly fee, pay-per-play golfers will be able to obtain and maintain an official handicap by playing in open competitions and submitting general play scores. Any booking or green fee will then go directly to the individual club, rather than any third-party organisation like Tee Times which have been known to take a 20 per cent cut.

“The idea is to encourage clubs to get more green fees and to embrace the independent golfer in a positive way,” says Forsyth. “We are giving golf clubs the power to choose whether they want to make their tee times available to the independent golfer. But because they can identify them through their login and CDH number, they can charge the usual green fee and entry fees and keep 100 per cent of the revenue.

A similar scheme called Flexicub is currently being used in New Zealand, where independent golfers pay £15 a month or £120 for the year to become an official member of New Zealand Golf. They then gain access to tee sheets and affiliated green fee rates, plus they get to keep an official handicap. England Golf have also been debating launching a virtual golf club with counties and clubs for some time. In a statement, they told us: “In January, we sent a survey to all our affiliated clubs to get their feedback on key questions. The results are now being collated. The best way to sum it up is that the discussions remain ongoing. There is a broad consensus from all parties to engage with independent golfers, but how this is done is still being discussed.”