



# COVID-19 SECURE GOLF IN THE UNITED KINGDOM 2021

This report is informed independently by epidemiologist and Principal Advisor on Physical Activity for Health to the four United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers, Professor Charlie Foster; and Chief Medical Officer to the European Tour, Consultant in Sport and Exercise Medicine at the University of Edinburgh, Dr Andrew Murray. We trust our counsel is helpful to you and your team working with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Golf and the industry organisations it represents.

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## OVERVIEW

Overall, golf has the same health benefits as walking, cycling and running and, if anything, with the uncrowded nature of courses and strict protocols provided, risk of transmission during golf is lower than these other health enhancing physical activities.

If scientific evidence is to be applied logically and consistently, golf should be permitted to return during the current phase of national lockdown (commencing 4 January 2021), incorporating enhanced protocols appropriate for the new variant described in this paper.

## INTRODUCTION

The immune health, mental health, physical health and longevity benefits of physical activity<sup>1,2</sup> have been advocated by the World Health Organisation and many national governments including the UK Government and Prime Minister The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP<sup>3,4</sup>. At the 2018 International Congress on Golf and Health hosted at the UK parliament, Professor Fiona Bull (Head of Physical Activity, World Health Organisation), Professor Charlie Foster (Principal Advisor to the Home Nations Chief Medical Officers) and Steve Brine MP (Public Health Minister) and all participants were agreed that golf can provide very valuable and health enhancing physical activity for those aged from 4 to 104<sup>5</sup>.

While the benefits are considerable, golf has worked collaboratively with public health authorities and government, in the face of COVID-19, to ensure risks are minimised, noting it is a sport that naturally lends itself to social distancing. Many governments across Europe, North America and Asia have supported the continuation of golf even in lockdown conditions, indicating that the considerable benefits likely outweigh risks, and very limited if any transmission is associated with the outdoor elements of golf. We recognise that balancing science and policy decisions are complex and challenging but we wish to highlight the overwhelming scientific case for golf to be played safely today.

Golf has established COVID-19 secure practices, mitigation measures and outdoor characteristics that meet the Hands, Face, Space directive, and this paper outlines adaptations that will be widely implemented by the golf industry in response to new, more transmissible variants that account for the majority of cases of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom.

The sport will function in total compliance with Tiered COVID-19 Alert Levels and it delivers important physical activity and mental wellbeing benefits.<sup>6</sup>

The sport provides on course green exercise for an average of 96 players, spread over 18-holes, in an open space of typically 60 hectares. This extensive field of play and limited number of players creates safe space for all participants when enhanced hygiene and social distancing measures are observed. Objectively, it should afford greater social distancing opportunity than the transportation activities of walking, running and cycling in urban environments.

During the period of 'stay at home' direction golf courses remained closed but through strict adherence to government guidance on essential work, the playability of courses was maintained to a minimum standard to enable a swift return to play once restrictions were eased. At lower COVID-19 alert levels, June through September 2019, the sporting and green exercise needs of players were met safely in an estimated 20m 18-hole rounds.

Test and Trace data are not published on positive contacts derived from playing golf but academic opinion canvassed from advisors to the UK Government's Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE), and Health Protection Teams indicate that any level of community transmission attributed to playing golf is likely to be extremely low and significantly lower than indoor space, or more populated outdoor areas.

Operational experience strongly suggests that golf can be played safely on course during this national lockdown, to risk assessed enhanced hygiene and social distancing measures. In lockdown conditions golf can be played within a household group, or with two adults from different households. At lower COVID-19 alert levels (Tier 1-4) golf can be played safely within the Rule of Six (fourball). Clubhouse, retail, and hospitality facilities, as predominantly indoor offerings are, and should be subject to additional restrictions at this point in the pandemic.

Prevailing Nation's and Regions safe play guidance which is regularly updated can be sourced from National Governing Bodies, England Golf, Wales Golf, Scottish Golf and Golf Ireland online at:

[www.englandgolf.org/playsafe](http://www.englandgolf.org/playsafe)

[www.walesgolf.org/covid-19](http://www.walesgolf.org/covid-19)

[www.scottishgolf.com/coronavirus-covid-19-updates](http://www.scottishgolf.com/coronavirus-covid-19-updates)

[www.golfireland.ie](http://www.golfireland.ie)

## **GOLF AND HEALTH BENEFITS**

'Sporting Future - A New Strategy for an Active Nation'<sup>7</sup> has redefined what success in UK sport means, with a focus on five key outcomes, physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development and economic development.

A scoping review of scientific literature published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine in 2016<sup>8</sup> found positive relationships between golf and health. The best available medical evidence suggests that playing golf may contribute to reduced mortality and increased life expectancy. When a Swedish study compared over 300,000 golfers with non-golfers, they found a 40% lower mortality rate<sup>9</sup>. The authors speculate that this corresponds to a 5-year increase in life expectancy regardless of gender, age or socioeconomic status.

The scoping study also found evidence of beneficial effects for golfers in cardiovascular, respiratory, metabolic and musculoskeletal health. UK-based research has identified the 'golf specific effects' that improve strength and balance that may contribute to fall reduction, a leading cause of disability and health costs in older age and in both sexes.

The practice of any type of regular, moderate to vigorous physical activity appears to be associated with enhanced immunosurveillance and mucosal immune responses. A recent article in the Lancet concluding "This is likely to explain the significant risk reduction of community acquired infectious diseases and infectious disease mortality, as well as an increase in the potency of vaccination"<sup>10</sup>.

Leaders in public health, public policy and sport from across the globe recognise that golf helps in the race to tackle physical inactivity and contributes to the prevention of a range of non-communicable disease including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer of the breast and colon. There is also a growing body of evidence linking playing golf and wellness.

The sport is recognised as making an important contribution to helping people cope with wide ranging disability and dysfunction including dementia. Studies show that psychological benefits from playing golf include improved self-esteem, improved confidence, and reduced anxiety. Golf also provides an excellent opportunity for developing interpersonal skills, emotional control and enhancing social connections.

## **GOLF AND THE ECONOMY**

Golf was the first sport in the UK to provide Government with an industrywide measure of the value of the sport to the UK economy <sup>11</sup>.

This independent report found that UK golfers spent £4.3 billion on their sport in 2014, accounting for 14% of all consumer spending on sport with £990 million paid in Government taxes. Golf's Gross Value Added (GVA), the wages and profits measure of economic activity, was calculated at £2 billion or 7% of GVA attributed to all sport in the United Kingdom.

The report also highlighted that the golf industry in the UK employs 74,480 people with a third employed directly by golf facilities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. After accounting for indirect and induced economic impact effects, the turnover of the UK golf industry was estimated at £10.3 billion for 2014.

A noteworthy feature of this study is that a single sport moves the dial on national measures of economic activity. In 2020, the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University was commissioned by The R&A to update the Satellite Account findings and determine the economic impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the value of the UK golf industry. The study findings were presented in evidence to the DCMS Select Committee.

## CURRENT GUIDANCE SOUTH AND NORTH OF THE BORDER

	SCOTLAND	ENGLAND
<b>Meeting Outdoors</b>	A maximum of two people from up to two households can meet outdoors for sport, exercise or social interaction, excluding under-12s who can play together outside	It is against the law to meet socially with family or friends unless they are part of your household or support bubble. You can only leave your home to exercise (see below)
<b>Exercise Outdoors</b>	A maximum of 2 people from 2 separate households can meet outdoors for sport or exercise. Children under the age of 12 from these households do not count towards this number	Limited to once per day, alone or with your household/support bubble/childcare bubble or, when on your own, one person from another household
<b>Outdoor sports venues</b>	Outdoor non-contact sports such as golf and tennis are permitted for all age groups provided this is within a single household group, or the group contains no more than 2 people from 2 different households, excluding under-12s. Outdoor gyms can also remain open	Outdoor sports venues, including tennis courts, golf courses and swimming pools, must close
<b>Organised sport for children</b>	Organised sport and exercise for under-12s can continue in line with workplace and socialising guidance	Not permitted – however organised outdoor sport for disabled people is allowed to continue
<b>Outdoor playgrounds</b>	Open	Open

## GOLF AND RULES – SAFE PLAY AND RESPONSIBLE MANGEMENT

The UK Golf Industry has come together to design and maintain practices and procedures for the safe management of golfing facilities during COVID-19 restrictions- and this has been enhanced to reflect the new variant and national lockdown.

During National Lockdown, or Tiers higher than 4:

- Persons from one household should be permitted to play together
- Two adults from different households may play, while children under 12 from these households should be permitted
- 2 metres + (aiming for 3 metres) should be adhered to for members of different households
- 4 markings should be placed adjacent to the tees 3 metres apart, highlighting appropriate social distancing
- Travel to venue must be local (in keeping with wider guidance re exercise)

The measures above are for during national lockdown, and are in addition to the published Tier 4 guidance. Further detailed industry guidelines have been issued for the benefit of all staff, including greenkeepers, club professionals and golf facility managers, administrators and, of course, all golfers.

There are many different types of golf clubs and golf facilities, requiring 'safe golf' to be implemented locally. However, the fundamentals are the same throughout the sport, which has a good record on compliance with rules and procedures.

These procedures include all aspects of the golfing experience, from arrival in the car park prior to play through prompt departure on completion of the round. Golfers are required to comply with the rules on enhanced hygiene and social distancing throughout. Temporary provisions in relation to the Rules of Golf have also been put in place to ensure safe play.

The sport has acted as one to design and activate COVID-19 secure measures and has temporary provisions on the Rules in place to ensure the health, wellbeing and safety of all participants. The sport's governing body, the national associations in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland and bodies representing club managers, club professionals, facility owners and greenkeepers are fully engaged and meet regularly as an industry group working in partnership the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Golf.

## **COVID-19 SECURE GOLFING FACILITIES**

Operational guidance is set out below for golf facility owners, professional and administrative staffs engaged in the management of golf courses, clubs and driving ranges when COVID-19 restrictions are in force in the Nations and Regions of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

It is essential that golfing facilities operate safely, meeting the sporting, physical activity and mental wellbeing needs of patrons, while abiding, at all times, by prevailing government public health restrictions.

Prevailing government public health direction and advice can be sourced online at:

UK Government - [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)

Scottish Government - [www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot)

Welsh Government - [www.gov.wales](http://www.gov.wales)

Northern Ireland Executive - [www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)

Irish Government - [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)

Key stakeholders in the golf industry have come together to ensure the safety and wellbeing of golfers and members of staff alike. Practical advice and guidance are available to help golf courses and driving ranges remain open, under professional staff supervision, and in conditions that promote COVID-19 security.

The guidance in this document includes:

Golf course preparation

Permitted play

PGA Professional services

Clubhouse management

Full-service resumption

## **GOLF COURSE PREPARATION**

Golf clubs have been permitted to carry out essential course maintenance during lockdown periods and to enhanced standards at lower COVID-19 alert levels. At all times staff safety is paramount.

Measures relating to staff should include but not be limited to:

- Ensuring suitable disinfectant and hand sanitiser is provided in all communal areas.
- Staggering working hours and break times.
- Prohibiting use of communal areas.
- Ensuring there is a robust lone working policy.
- Encouraging staff to bring their own food and drink for breaks that should be stored safely and separately.
- Appointing a senior member of staff to be responsible for COVID-19 protocols and disinfecting / sanitising all surfaces that are touched, for example door handles and fuel pumps. The same member of staff should be responsible for opening and closing doors to the maintenance facility.
- Ensuring team meetings, if they are necessary, are held outdoors.
- Utilising modern communication methods, for example online systems or mobile phones for team communications rather than indoor briefings and job sheets.
- Ensuring there is a high focus on hygiene and physical distancing.
- Ensuring staff members work separately, not in pairs / groups where possible.
- Allocating individual machinery to one staff member only.
- Fully sanitising all machinery after use, focusing on all areas that the staff member has come into contact with.

N.B. Where this document refers to ‘sanitisers’ and ‘sanitising wipes’, please follow prevailing government recommendations.

## **PERMITTED PLAY**

With government and public health consent, play as ‘green exercise’ is actively encouraged with strong hygiene and social distancing measures in place. Facilities should implement a range of procedures to allow safe play to take place, including but not limited to:

- Play should be managed by the professional staff / starter and they should remind golfers of the guidance on social distancing and safe play.
- Updated guidance and advice for golfers should be posted on websites and on tee times booking pages.
- Tee time booking should be done online if at all possible.
- Consider increasing the time between tee times to allow for easier social distancing.
- Consider restricting the number of players in a group.
- Consider playing a reduced number of holes (e.g. 9 holes).
- Any payment should be taken online or by contactless methods.
- Clubhouses may have to remain shut at certain COVID-19 alert levels, so ask people to arrive shortly before their tee time (e.g., 10-15 minutes) and change their shoes in the car park.
- Consider the layout of the car park for easier social distancing.

- Consider access toilets that may require to be closed in lockdown conditions.
- Place visual reminders for social distancing at 1<sup>st</sup> tee and refresh messaging in round. Line marking 3m distanced trolley and bag spots at selected tee boxes.
- It may be necessary to employ marshals on the golf course to ensure that the social distancing directive is maintained between players.
- Require golfers to leave the flag in at all times and use a hole liner system that means that the ball doesn't drop and can be retrieved without touching the cup.
- Remove the bunker rakes and cover or close ball washers
- Golfers should be asked to leave the venue as soon as their game is completed.

Responding to prevailing COVID-19 alert levels, staff will need to regulate 'safe play' procedures and communicate these to the golfers. Plans should be put in place to ensure that any practices required of golfers before, during and after the round, including communications of temporary provisions relating to the playing of the game, can be accessed in advance and reinforced when golfers arrive to play.

It may be appropriate to send these guidelines to golfers, place them on the online booking areas of a website and also place signage on the first tee as a reminder.

Driving range use:

The safe use of a driving range or practice area must also be considered. It should be noted that driving ranges might not necessarily be allowed to open at the same time as golf courses. Only outdoor ranges can be considered for opening in National Lockdown.

Safe use procedures include but are not limited to:

- Should bays not be separated by partitions or walls, close every other bay to allow for social distancing.
- Make sure the ball washer has soap in the machine.
- Provide sanitising wipes for people to use as required.
- Clean the ball dispenser surfaces frequently.
- Coach on the side of the range that fewest people have to walk past.
- Ask people to use their own equipment.

Driving range users should be advised of prevailing 'safe use' procedures. It should be noted that pending research from Liverpool John Moore's University (Brown et al) highlights that transfer of virus from a golf ball to a person is extremely unlikely given how rapidly detectable virus decreased when placed on a golf ball.

## **PGA PROFESSIONAL SERVICES**

PGA Professional shop and retail facilities can not open during National Lockdown, except where a staff member is working and the public can not access the inside of the building. When under lesser restrictions the PGA Professional's shop is open guidelines will need to be kept under constant review as government and public health advice may change at short notice. The safe use of the Professional's shop will require the adoption of a range of procedures including but not limited to:

- There should be clear external signage to inform golfers a maximum of 2 golfers will be allowed in the shop at any one time (this may need to be 1 golfer at a time for small shops).
- For larger shops, agreed numbers of customers may be permitted to enter but this must be in line with social distancing recommendations. Larger shops may also wish to suggest a route to be taken around the shop by use of arrows on the floor
- Staff shift patterns should be amended to take account of government advice, ideally one person working at a time - this may result in a lower staffing level in the shop than normal and a more basic service may be offered on initial opening.
- Staff in the shop must conform to government advice on social distancing - ideally one person at a time working in the shop, but if this is not possible, then a 2 metre distance should be kept.
- Shop staff should wash hands regularly and wear a face mask as required.
- Ventilation should be maximised
- Ideally one member of staff would use the till during a particular shift - if multiple people are operating the same till then hands should be washed / sanitised after each transaction.
- There should be a clearly defined queuing area outside the shop where golfers must adhere to social distancing of a minimum of at least 2 metres.
- Hand sanitiser should be positioned at the entrance to the shop and all customers should be asked to sanitise before entering.
- The shop door should remain open to avoid contact with handles by golfers and to easily view number of customers in the shop.
- In store signage should direct customers to the till area and then back out of the shop.
- Transactions should be by customer account or card only.
- Sanitiser wipes should be provided for use before and after each transaction.
- Rental trolleys will not be available unless handles are able to be removed and sanitised between each use.
- Buggy use should be on basis of one person only hire, with strict sanitisation between hires.
- Where possible, a clear screen should be employed to protect shop staff.
- Ideally, the shop should be merchandised with essential items positioned close to the till area, especially given possible lower levels of staffing.
- Other transactions requiring advice will be located in an area where shop staff can offer advice whilst also observing safe social distancing of 2 metres.

#### Club fitting sessions:

Club fitting sessions are not permitted during National Lockdown, but when this service returns, it should be carried out both indoors and outdoors, should adhere to the following guidance to ensure safety of both customers and professional staff:

- This service should only be offered by prior booking.
- Hand sanitiser should be positioned at the entrance to the club fitting area and all customers and fitters will be required to sanitise before entering.
- Customer advice signage should be placed prominently when entering the fitting room or zone to notify the measures and procedures in place.
- A strict 2 metre social distance must be adhered to between the fitter and the customer.
- All golf fitting components must be sanitised after every use with a conforming alcohol sanitising wipes before being returned to its storage location.

- Particular attention must be given to the sanitising of the club grip and the passing of component clubs between fitter and customer.
- Golf balls used in the club fitting must also be kept clean to avoid cross-infection between customer and fitter.

#### Golf coaching:

Golf coaching is not permitted during National Lockdown but when permitted under lower Tiers, should adhere to the following guidance to ensure safety of both customers and professional staff:

- Promote coaching and playing lessons that take place outdoors and ideally on the course although social distancing must still be observed.
- If at all possible, don't coach in an indoor studio, but if doing this, social distancing guidance must be followed.
- If using a practice ground or similar, create a 2 metre exclusion zone around the lesson tee/golfer that no one enters.
- If you have to move a player into position, use an alignment stick, which is easy to wipe down with a sanitising wipe before and after the lesson.
- Wash hands with soap and water before and after the session.
- Provide sanitising wipes for you and your golfers.
- Offer short game coaching sessions that allow the golfers to use their own golf balls, that way they are not sharing equipment that other people have touched.
- Take flags out of the holes on practice areas.

#### **CLUBHOUSE MANAGEMENT**

Clubhouse facilities should be closed to non-staff members under national lockdown. Under lower tiers, these guidelines will need to be kept under constant review as government and public health advice may change at short notice. It may be necessary to agree a periodic / weekly review meeting with club staff.

- The management and administration of the club will in many ways remain focused on its core objectives. However, certain procedures and policies will need to be introduced or amended to ensure the welfare of the staff, golfers and those outside personnel who will visit the club in their normal working day i.e., delivery, maintenance and even emergency services personnel.
- Whilst the clubhouse may remain closed at certain COVID-19 alert levels, there will be a need for the management of the club to be maintained. At this time offices and administration areas should not be available for golfers or visitors to frequent or visit. All members and visitors will need to be made aware of the alternative communication channels that are available to them.
- Those responsible for overseeing the running of the club, owners, directors and committee members, need to agree and adhere to a cohesive policy and set of procedures that are delivered on a consistent basis.
- The club administration areas and offices will need to be sufficiently arranged to ensure that either lone working (split shifts) or adequate social distancing is adhered to. Should there be need to provide a reception facility, then adequate protective screening will need to be deployed.

- Hand sanitisers and only disposable hand towels should be used for staff toilet facilities - regular cleaning procedures will be required for these areas.
- In the instance of maintenance personnel being involved in clubhouse activities, they should be suitably attired with protective clothing and report in and out of the facility.
- Administer the arrangements for playing golf as outlined above.
- In the event of Clubs offering a take-away coffee / tea service enforce social distancing rules and ensure staff wear face coverings. All drinks or snacks are served in either plastic or paper containers.
- Should the decision be made to open the locker rooms and toilets, then there is a need to ensure they are cleaned and sanitised at regular intervals.
- Ensure all safety measures are shared with all employees and that their health and wellbeing is the number one priority, encourage them to share any concerns and empower them to request that golfers adhere to social distancing measures and report any issues to managers.

### **FULL-SERVICE RESUMPTION**

At lower COVID-19 alert levels the full services provided by the club and professional staff will be possible. However, it must be noted that there may be certain restrictions in place for some time, such as additional hygiene and social distancing mitigations, that will dictate a phased return to full operation.

### **COVID-19 SECURE TEMPORARY PROVISIONS ON THE RULES OF GOLF**

Until further notice, the following provisions are considered acceptable on a temporary basis by The R&A:

- **Forms of Play and Scoring**
  - It is recommended that non-competition play is used during the initial period of golf being played, and that stroke play competitions involving players in different groups are avoided.
  - When competitive stroke play is possible, a method of scoring needs to be used that does not require any handling or exchanging of scorecards.
  - Committees may choose to allow methods of scoring in stroke play that do not strictly comply with Rule 3.3b, or do not comply with the normal methods used under Rule 3.3b. For example:
    - Players may enter their own hole scores on the scorecard (it is not necessary for a marker to do it).
    - It is not necessary to have a marker physically certify the player's hole scores, but some form of verbal certification should take place.
    - It is not necessary to physically return a scorecard to the Committee provided the Committee can accept the scores in another way.
  - As provided in the Rules of Golf, scorecards can be electronic, which could include emailing or texting scores to the Committee.
- **Bunkers**
  - If golfers take due care when smoothing bunkers, there should be no need to provide a Local Rule for bunkers. But if the Committee feels that the enjoyment of the game is being significantly affected by there being no rakes, it may introduce preferred lies

in bunkers and provide that a player may place a ball in the bunker within as specified distance of the original spot and not nearer to the hole than that spot.

- **Flagstick**

- Golfers are required to leave the flagstick in the hole at all times and not to touch it. It is a matter for the Committee to decide whether it establishes this policy by way of a Code of Conduct or Local Rule, and whether it provides a penalty under the Code of Conduct or for a breach of the Local Rule.
- As a temporary provision, flagsticks can be used for the purpose of player safety which do not meet the specifications in Part 8 of the Equipment Rules.

- **Hole and Holed**

- The hole liner (sometimes referred to as the hole 'cup') is to be set in a way that means that all of the ball cannot be below the surface of the putting green, but the ball is considered holed if any part of it is below the surface of the putting green.

**Note: Consult the relevant handicapping authority on whether scores are acceptable for handicapping purposes.**

## **GOLF'S ROLE IN HEALTH AND ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

Golf plays a key health, social and economic role in the health and wealth of the UK. Golf bodies are all committed to supporting both post COVID recovery pathways for individuals as well as stimulating and maintaining local economies via club membership and tourism. Golf is the perfect offer for the type of recovery exercise recommended for post COVID-19. We can activate our clubs, communities and primary care to offer golf as part of this return to health pathway.

A recalibration of the Satellite Account for Golf in the UK<sup>13</sup> for 2019 reveals that consumer spending on golf was £4.5bn (9.3% of sport), Gross Value Added was £2.1bn (4.5% of sport), 50,668 people were sustained in full-time employment (5.8% of sport) and taxes and business rates paid totalled £1.01bn. The interconnectness of the UK golf industry is a strong precursor for a dynamic sector economic recovery post COVID-19 restriction.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is no doubt that the measures taken by the World Health Organisation, National Governments (and in particular the UK Government) and Public Health Authorities have saved lives. However, the evidence is consistent and growing that regular physical activity is one of the best things you can do for your health<sup>10</sup>.

Golf (and other outdoor sports where physical distancing is possible) provides health enhancing physical activity across the lifespan and offers more control measures than persons walking or cycling on a busy road, street or beach.

Scientifically, the benefits of permitting of golf with the enhanced COVID-19 protocols suggested for National Lockdown in this paper at this time very likely outweigh the disbenefits.

The best available evidence suggests this is the right thing to do at this time.

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