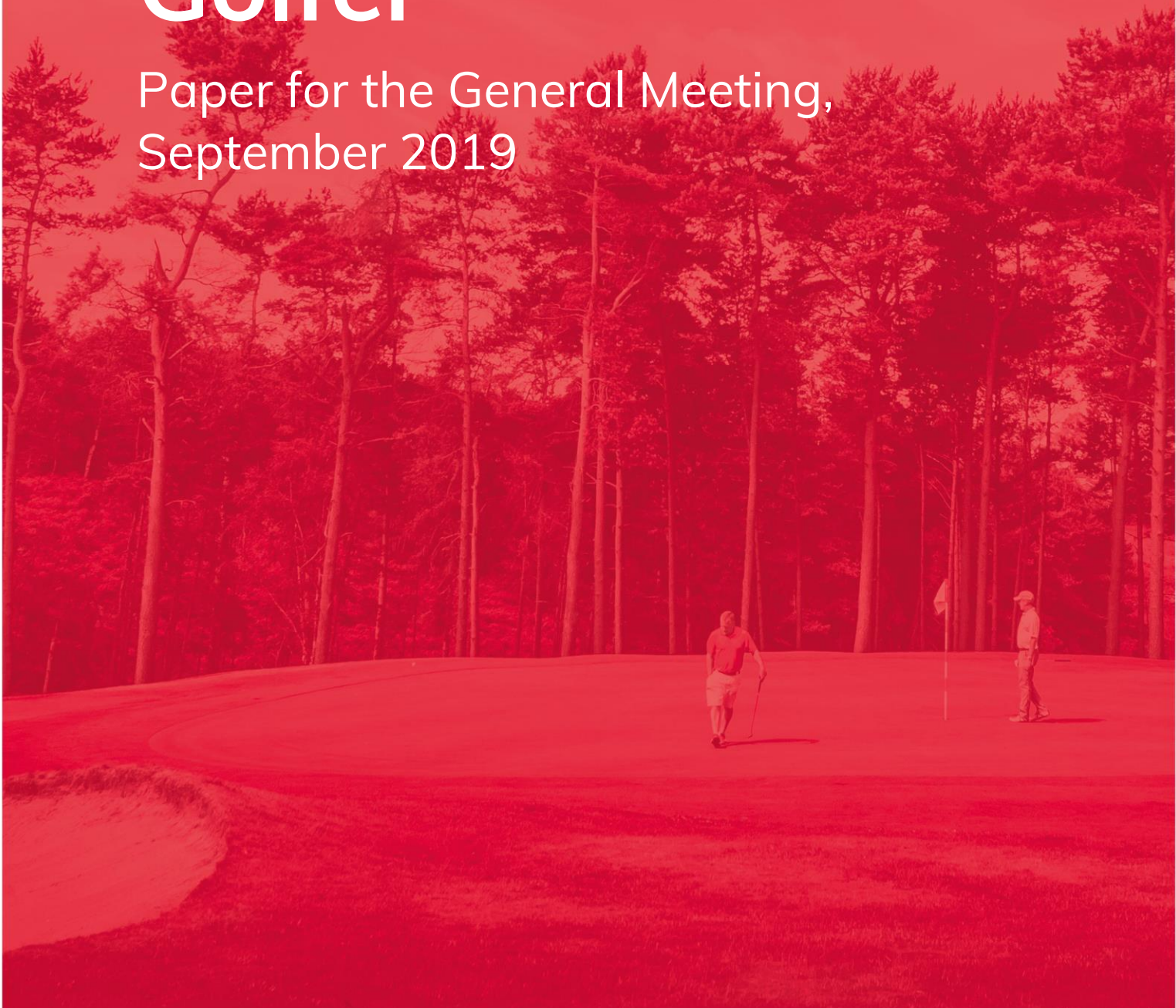




ENGLAND  
GOLF

# The Independent Golfer

Paper for the General Meeting,  
September 2019





# The Independent Golfer

General Meeting, 11 September 2019

## Principles

Following the County Advisory Group (CAG) meeting on Thursday 15 August 2019, it was agreed in principle to pursue developing a proposition for the independent golfer and to continue to consult through the county bodies.

For information, the counties represented on the CAG are: BB&O, Cumbria, Devon, Gloucestershire, Middlesex, Kent, Staffordshire, Surrey, and Yorkshire.

This discussion paper has been developed with the following principles or aims for England Golf in mind:

1. To help stimulate an increase in more frequent golf participation with a group of independent golfers that are already playing the game.
2. To engage and build relationships with all golfers and connect them closer to England Golf; not just the 25% that we have an indirect relationship with through their affiliation as a golf club member.
3. To develop a proposal to respond to the strong view held by Voting Members (County bodies) that we should build a relationship with this group of golfers.
4. To recognise that not all golfers want to be club members, and that modern lifestyles mean that all sports, including golf, are consumed in different ways.
5. To be inclusive and offer services and support to all those who want to play golf, whatever their age or ability.
6. To develop a proposition that benefits golfers and golf clubs and drives revenue from a wider group of golfers back into the game.

## How might this proposition to independent golfers work?

The following outlines the proposition for independent golfers:

1. England Golf would provide an official handicap (WHS index) for independent golfers.
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2. England Golf would run the scheme centrally and virtually and independent golfers would register into the independent golfer scheme via the England Golf website.
3. England Golf would develop a wider series of golfer benefits to include insurance, ticket promotions and a range of other golf-related benefits with leading partners. There is a logic that says all golfers should be insured whilst playing at affiliated golf clubs. Members are now insured through the personal liability scheme offered from 1 July 2019; therefore, independent golfers should also be included.
4. England Golf would charge a fee to the independent golfer and any surplus over costs would be reinvested back into the game.
5. This system could be introduced in 2021 after the introduction of the World Handicap System, which is planned to go live on 1 November 2020.
6. Clubs and counties would retain control over club competitions and there would be no obligation to allow independent golfers entry into these competitions. Independent golfers would not be entitled to enter county or national golf club competitions.
7. Independent golfers would receive golf club promotions to encourage a closer relationship with golf clubs.
8. Golf club members who resign their club membership will not be entitled to join the scheme for the first twelve months after leaving their golf club membership.

## Background

Research shows there are currently two million independent golfers in England playing up to twice a month. Of these, we know that 600,000 play regularly at a golf club, are on average 45 years of age, have unofficial handicaps and play in societies, corporate days and social competition<sup>1</sup>. This equates to 6 non-members playing at any golf club in England per week.

Golf club membership has been steadily declining over the last 15 years and more and more golfers, and society in general, are moving away from costly membership models and are looking for alternative value for money opportunities for themselves and their family<sup>2</sup>.

The main reasons for the decline in club membership and the reluctance of independent golfers to join a golf club are time and cost pressures. As a result, there is clearly a strong

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<sup>1</sup> SMS research 2019; Sport MR monthly tracker; Active Lives 2018; Jigsaw segmentation; Golf Actives research 2016 and 2019

<sup>2</sup> SMS research 2019; Sport MR monthly tracker; Active Lives 2018; Jigsaw segmentation; Golf Actives research 2016 and 2019



rationale for creating a route for regular pay and play and independent golfers to have a more flexible playing relationship with a golf club or group of golf clubs.

The issues and opportunities around the independent golfer have been discussed and debated at Board meetings, General Meetings and in a number of regional forums over the last 12 to 18 months and are seen as an important strategic issue for England Golf by our golf clubs and county bodies.

Most of these golf clubs do not collect the data of independent golfers and therefore cannot build relationships with them, market to them, or offer them products or services which may connect them into a form of membership. With the right proposition, we can tailor a package of support to really benefit both independent golfers and golf clubs.

At the recent March Regional Meetings, and at the April Annual General Meeting and the General Meeting, two opportunities to connect with independent golfers were identified: insurance and handicap. This is presented in the England Golf Business Plan in the section looking at “2021 and Beyond”.

## Research and Insight

At the April 2019 General Meeting the SMS (Sports Marketing Surveys) research commissioned by England Golf and Wales Golf in February 2019 had been completed. The research included feedback from over 10,000 golfers, the majority being golf club members, as well as over 200 golf club managers.

The following points were statements of feedback from that research:

1. Only 15% of non-members currently have insurance, but those playing regularly do see a need for insurance and would see it as a valuable benefit.
  2. The majority of current members who responded to the SMS survey believe non-members should be able to obtain a handicap and those members also believe that this is then likely to encourage those non-members to become members in the future.
  3. More than 70% of non-members who are currently playing at golf clubs say they would be interested in obtaining a handicap if it was made available.
  4. Non-members feel that they cannot justify the full cost of golf club membership, but would be willing to pay for an affiliation to England Golf, if it included a handicap.
  5. Non-members, and especially lapsed members, are showing a willingness to have a relationship/affiliation with England Golf.
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6. Club managers did indicate a slight concern about offering a handicap outside of club membership but, felt that if well managed and competition access was restricted to club members only, could see how it would encourage participation and grow revenue for clubs.
7. The ability to build better relationships with non-members and ultimately sell membership in the future are seen as real benefits by club managers.
8. Club managers definitely see the value of insurance – to both members and non-members.

### **The proposition to independent golfers**

The Board recognises this is an important issue for Voting Members and this is a matter which has been discussed over the last 12 to 18 months.

The research and insight suggest that there is interest from a proportion of independent golfers in receiving a handicap linked to England Golf, with various benefits added in to form a wider proposition.

The Board considered that lessons could be taken from the New Zealand model. New Zealand Golf have been through various trials and their flexi-club model is working well for them. They had commented that whilst it had not been popular with clubs at first, after 6 months all but one golf club (of about 400) were now committed to the scheme. Independent golfers are being charged the equivalent of £60 per annum with no existing golf club member allowed to join the scheme for a period of one year after leaving club membership.

Scotland's plans remain on track to allow independent golfers to join a virtual club with a handicap.

The Board also considered whether any handicap offered to independent golfers should be club-validated or should be unrelated to a club (non-club validated) as with other various commercial models.

Any scheme would be subject to the controls inherent in the WHS system, and the integrity of the handicap would therefore be protected.

### **What is the handicap on offer?**

At the moment the only way to obtain an official handicap is by being a member of a golf club. As a result, the benefits of having a handicap and of being a golf club member are seen by many as one and the same thing. This is one of the challenges when introducing

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any new system, and there are some who are concerned that offering a handicap outside of golf club membership would lead to a loss in golf club members.

The main reason people join a golf club are the social, playing and competitive opportunities, and these remain the main reasons why people stay as members.

The independent golfer will have access to the WHS Index, and this will be calculated on the same basis as for an affiliated golf club member. Restrictions will be in place to ensure the integrity of the handicap is maintained and it will also be important that any other benefits that are offered to the independent golfer are also available to club members, indeed club members should receive enhanced benefits.

For those independent golfers who go on to play more regularly and play multiple golf courses it is a means in which they can track their progress and ability through the handicap. For those that ultimately show interest in obtaining a golf club membership, the golf club will be able to use the golfer's independent handicap as a means to determining where they are in their development in the game.

### **What are the next steps?**

Voting Members are asked to consider this paper and contribute to the discussion on the 11 September 2019 at the General Meeting. If the general consensus at the September General Meeting is to move forward with a formal proposal, this will be presented to the Board at the end of November and then put forward to the Voting Members at the General Meeting in December 2019.

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