

BOWLS ENGLAND – 2021 SEASON PLANNING UPDATE

Following last Saturday's meeting and two further consultation sessions with our county colleagues, we wanted to provide an update to our bowls community on plans for the 2021 season.

Our overriding objective remains leading the sport's return to play and helping provide an environment where all bowlers who wish to get on the greens, can do so in a safe manner. Insight from a recent survey informs us that 90% of bowlers want to start playing again as soon as they are able and we believe it is important for the health of our sport for it to get back up and running. We have learnt a lot from 2020, bowls is a naturally socially-distanced, non-contact sport and the Covid-19 roadmap gives us a structure with which to operate and facilitate getting back to bowls.

Bowls clubs and volunteers did a brilliant job last year to reopen safely following the first lockdown. Working with our development arm, the Bowls Development Alliance, we commit to supporting affiliated clubs to navigate through the regulations and overcoming any hurdles. Our hope is that the overwhelming majority of clubs will be open, competitions will be taking place and we will have adapted successfully to the requirements of the government guidance.

Return to Play

On Monday 8th March we will be attending a Sport England briefing on 'Return to Play' with sport-specific guidance expected from the government via DCMS by Monday 29th March, which is the same day as Step 1 of the government roadmap. At Step 1 we expect affiliated clubs to be able to open and play to return based on the 'Rule of 6' and from 12th April Step 2 is likely to allow outdoor catering on site, changing rooms to be open and the easing of travel restrictions. Step 3 from Monday 17th May means larger groups should be able to gather at clubs and inside catering to take place with restrictions and, finally, Step 4 from Monday 21st June should allow the easing of all restrictions.

PLEASE NOTE THIS IS NOT OFFICIAL GUIDANCE. As soon as we are in a position to provide full, DCMS approved guidance for our affiliated clubs we will do. We are conscious there are lots of questions and we are as eager as you for them to be answered. Please be patient and bear with us.

Back to Bowls for Affiliated Clubs

We will be working closely with our development arm, the Bowls Development Alliance (BDA), over the coming weeks to help affiliated clubs to get back to bowls safely, to understand best practice around the country and to give members of affiliated clubs and those wishing to try bowls confidence. This work includes -

- 'Return to Play' guidance for affiliated clubs in order for them to create a safe environment for the sport's return
- Resources and best practice to support the safe running of clubs, including case studies of Covid-friendly activity at clubs in 2020
- Online rink booking and cashless payments to make management of your club as easy as possible
- Promotional material and funding advice to encourage new players and generate more income

Affiliation Process

As clubs will be aware, the affiliation deadline changed this year because of the challenges of Covid-19 and to give clubs more time to get their club open and members signed up. The deadline for payment by county associations to Bowls England is 31st May.

To ensure that we can work effectively with affiliated clubs over the coming weeks, we will be sending an online form to capture some basic information from each club. This will enable us to send information to the right person, engage with you on 'Return to Play' guidance and Back to Bowls support for your club, and also help us embellish our website Club Finder. With 40% of clubs not having their own website or social channels, the Club Finder allows new players to locate clubs and get in touch. With richer information on this page such as facility provision, disabled access and opening times, it will provide a better experience for potential new bowlers.

Please keep your eye out for the registration form for affiliated clubs which will be sent out towards the end of March.

National Competitions and Finals

Last summer, a very small proportion of competition bowlers returned to the sport with the cancellation of the competition programme. Aligned to our core objective, our aim is to get as many competition bowlers playing safely as possible. This will require a bit of imagination, adaptability and a recognition that the season will look different to usual.

The government roadmap gives us a structure and we believe national championships and competitions can take place in their entirety with –

- Matches involving greater numbers of people happening later in the summer when restrictions are lifted
- The national finals starting later and taking place over a shorter time frame in order to free up more time for qualification
- A shorter format in all rounds, including qualification rounds, in order to provide the greatest flexibility for participants, clubs and counties when arranging fixtures

These changes are sympathetic with the findings from our recent player survey and competition focus groups, but at this stage are for 2021 only to navigate through the challenges of Covid-19. We will continue to consult competitions players on their experiences in order to ensure our competitions programme delivers the best possible experience for players and attracts new competition entrants.

The above will therefore mean –

- Changes to the qualification timings for different competitions
- Reduced number of qualifiers to the national finals in Championship events
- Later start date and reduced length of the national finals. The provisional dates are Thursday 19th August to Sunday 5th September.
- Restrictions on numbers at the national finals in order to provide a safe environment for players, officials and spectators.

We appreciate that the summer may feel different and not everyone will feel comfortable about that, but we believe that this is the best approach for the competition programme and that the vast majority will embrace these changes and enjoy getting back to competitive bowls. Unless a competition does not start, we have no plans to return competition fees as we feel that entrants are still receiving good value for their average £3.25 entrance fee and that the vast majority will

recognise the need for adaptability to ensure the competitions programme can take place in these unprecedented times.

Please note that players must be affiliated to Bowls England by 1st May through their submission to their county to participate in any of the national championships and competitions. We will provide a more detailed update on the planned programme by the 24th March with national competition draws revealed early in April.

National Open Weekend – 28th to 31st May

As you will be aware, this is a national initiative offering Bowls England affiliated clubs the opportunity to promote our welcoming and socially-distanced sport and attract new members.

We know that 20% of new bowlers join our sport on the back of open weekends, that our clubs want support to help recruit new players and that there are plenty of people out there who would love to have a go at bowls. We will be waiving 2021 affiliation fees for any brand new bowler joining a club on the back of the National Open Weekend.

Affiliated clubs who sign up will be able to access FREE resources, including bowls-specific workshops to help run a great event and grow your club. In addition, publicity material and creative resources for social media channels, websites and within your local community will be made available. It will be supported by a national marketing campaign to help raise awareness of the events across the country, and some clubs will get a visit from an England Commonwealth Games Squad bowler.

More information and registration details will be coming out very soon.

We hope this helps update you on the current position. The summer will feel a little different, as so much of life has done in recent times, but our overriding feeling is of positivity that our season will be able to start on time, that bowlers at all levels will be playing and that we will see new bowlers on our greens this summer. We thank you in advance for appreciating what we are trying to achieve and we hope we can all work together to make this a memorable season for all the right reasons.

Finally, just to reiterate, please be patient with us and your county in terms of receiving more detailed information. We want to provide this as soon as possible but government approvals have to be sought and work has to be done. Thank-you.