

NGCAA swings the spotlight on disability

GOLF club secretaries from all over the UK descended upon the Belfry in Warwickshire to take part in an interactive seminar organised by the National Golf Clubs Advisory Association (NGCAA).

It was the last chance for golf clubs to get practical advice on how to meet the requirements of the new Disability Discrimination Act that came into force on 2 December 2005.

Anxious

Many of the club secretaries present were anxious about the implications of the Act and how to comply with the law without it costing the earth. Clubs and associations from all over the land were well represented. The delegate list included Association of Golf Club Secretaries, the PGA, Scottish Ladies Golf Association and the English Blind Golf Association as well as over fifty individual clubs.

Over 200 people listened to expert speakers including Michael Shaw of the NGCAA, David Driver of Configure, Howard Hall of Citation and Ray Lee of the Handigolf Foundation.

Michael Shaw, national secretary of the NGCAA, opened up proceedings for the packed audience and hammered home the key message of the day which was: “act now or face dire consequences.” He said: “The law is rigid and has teeth. Failure to make reasonable efforts to comply could result in huge fines, court appearances and negative publicity.” However, he also allayed the fears of many clubs by going on to explain how they can protect themselves with some proactive tips and sensible legal advice.

David Driver of Configure, a leading disability access consultancy, stepped up to explain the main principles of the Act and advise how clubs can make practical changes to their environment to meet the law.

Essentially, golf clubs must not treat disabled people less favourably than other customers and they must make adjustments to all aspects of the club to ensure it is accessible to disabled people.

Not just wheelchairs

It was interesting to note the wide scope of people that fall under the definition of 'disabled'. It is not just, as many people think, only those people in a wheelchair that need to be catered for.

As Driver explained: "8 million people are affected by diseases related to arthritis and over 8 million people have some degree of hearing loss. There are nearly 1 million blind or partially sighted people. It is not just those people who are wheelchair bound that golf clubs need to consider. It is anyone with a mental or physical impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day duties."

Private member clubs are now affected by the law and this duty of care for disabled people not only affects club members - but guests who wander into the club, people who buy from the club shop, hire out a function room or even book a table in the restaurant.

As well as physical areas of the club that need to be adjusted to meet the law other provisions such as communications and even club websites need to comply. It was alarming for members to discover that the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) recently investigated one thousand websites for their ability to be accessed by disabled people.

So, what is 'reasonable'?

Definitions of 'reasonable adjustments' were spelled out to clubs worried about the costs of meeting the new law. Clubs were informed that financial considerations *are* a factor in

deciding whether the club should make adjustments or not.

Michael Shaw of the NGCAA explained: “The resources of the club, rather than the size of its membership are the relevant point here. A club with a large number of members may have few resources, as it charges lower fees may find the adjustment of barriers to be deemed unreasonable. However, a club with higher fees but fewer members may have more resources and therefore adjustments here may be classed as reasonable.

“There are plenty of ways that clubs can defend accusations of falling foul of the law, even if they have seemingly, at first glance not complied with the DDA. Each case is different and its important to get good advice,” added Shaw.

It was explained that there are four key ways of adjusting features: removing the feature (steps to a clubhouse for example), altering the feature, avoiding the feature or making an alternative feature available. Each one of these options should be considered and clubs can make a choice based on the finances they have available.

Audits are essential

All the experts agreed that golf clubs must undertake an independent audit of their premises that identifies the issues, agrees a plan of action and then publishing the plan to inform people.

Practical points

Clubs learned that a minimum of *six per cent* of their parking spaces should be allocated as disabled bays. Guidelines were also issued on the issue of allowing ‘transfer space’ for people in wheelchairs to get out of the car park and enter the club safely. Issues from handrails, ramps, spring doors, signage, buggies and toilet facilities were all examined to see how they affect the access available for disabled people. Examples of good and bad practice were highlighted.

Viva la difference?

Howard Hall of Citation, the health and safety specialists, explained the health and safety considerations of the Act and the importance of carrying out risk assessments.

Finally, Ray Lee, the secretary of Handigolf, the charity for physically disabled people who have to be seated to play all golf shots, concluded the seminar by outlining that clubs must realise how little in time and money it costs to make changes to the golf club environment which will aid disabled golfers and visitors to clubs. A lively session on lip reading and a closer look at the importance of buggies and wheelchairs gave the audience a unique insight into the challenges faced by disabled golfers.

Overall it was an important day for the future of golf clubs and the feedback was positive. Clubs are now equipped with the knowledge to put their learning into practice.

*Summaries and information packs from the seminar are available in limited numbers.
Call the NGCAA on 01684 311 353.*