



STRATEGIC REVIEW OF BOWLS IN THE ACT

ACT Government Response

Chief Ministers, Treasury &
Economic Development
Directorate

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INTRODUCTION

Lawn bowls has been played in the ACT since 1926 when the Canberra Bowling Club in Forrest first opened its doors. Since this time, the sport has grown to play an important role in our community, contributing to healthy and active lifestyles.

The provision of lawn bowls facilities in the ACT has historically been linked to the licensed club sector. Over the past 10 years, membership in lawn bowls has continued to decline, resulting in the closure of several lawn bowls facilities (Canberra City Bowling Club - Ainslie, West Deakin Hellenic Bowling Club, Southern Cross Bowling Club – Phillip and South Canberra Bowling Club - Griffith).

Industry feedback suggests the revenue derived from lawn bowling activities does not cover the operational costs associated with maintaining the facilities or providing a mechanism for appropriate sinking funds to undertake future asset upgrades.

Recognising this ongoing issue, the ACT Government (Sport and Recreation) and Bowls ACT (BACT), the local peak body, agreed to engage a consultant (RSM Australia) to undertake a strategic review of the sport, its membership base, and the provision of facilities to identify ways to help secure the future of the sport in the ACT.

The *Strategic Review of Bowls in the ACT* (the Report) was released in June 2021 and includes a number of recommendations aimed at increasing participation rates, better distributing club revenues, and improving the quality of bowling facilities across Canberra. The Report and its findings were supported by BACT and the national body, Bowls Australia.

While many of the issues raised in the Report generally involve the relationship between bowling clubs and Licensed Clubs, there are some opportunities for the ACT Government to assist the industry including:

- Consideration of funding for new programs (not core business) that aim to grow participation in the sport through the Sport and Recreation Grants Program.
- Supporting community club reduce their reliance on electronic gaming machine revenue through initiatives such as the Diversification and Sustainability Support Fund.
- Consideration of support for capital works projects which can demonstrate a long-term positive impact on the provision of bowls facilities in Canberra (i.e. covering greens, conversion to synthetic playing surfaces) on a case-by-case basis.

To support BACT as it looks to implement the recommendations provided in the Report, the ACT Government has provided it with a grant for \$60,000. BACT will engage with affiliated clubs and asset owners as part of this process to ensure the needs of the broader bowls community are considered.

The ACT Government's response to each of the recommendations and identified strategies provided in the Report are listed below.

RESPONSE TO THE REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase membership and participation rates to the national average	
Identified Strategies	ACT Government Response
<p>a. Prioritise the growth of memberships and players to increase the ACT participation rates to the national average benchmark. This represents an increase from 1,067 members or 0.36% of the ACT population to 9,365 members or 3.16% of the population. The current capacity of ACT greens is 65%, meaning that more facilities would be required if this growth could be achieved.</p>	<p>Supported.</p> <p>A strong membership base is critical for the long-term viability of any sport. All sports, including bowls, must continually adapt to meet the changing needs of the ACT community.</p>
<p>b. Clubs must focus on building their membership base to rebuild income streams from more players. Increasing the total number of club members will reduce the pressure on a diminishing membership base to increase fees to fund facility maintenance.</p>	<p>Supported.</p> <p>A strong membership base is critical for the long-term viability of any sport. All sports, including bowls, must continually adapt to meet the changing needs of the ACT community.</p> <p>Bowls clubs may wish to consider opportunities to seek grant funding from the annual Sport and Recreation Grants Program to develop new programs, not core business, that aim to increase participation opportunities to grow the sport in the ACT (Sport and Recreation Grants Program (SRGP) - Sport and Recreation (act.gov.au)).</p>
<p>c. Clubs will need to drive cultural change and adapt to attract and welcome the next generation of players. Clubs need to provide a clear pathway for members to participate in the sport. This involves adapting and evolving the club's ethos to embrace younger generations and actively pursuing marketing strategies that will build membership. Investing time and effort in supporting changes to shorter game formats to attract players with less time available.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting diversity (especially gender and ethnicity) and engagement 	<p>Supported.</p> <p>The ACT Government is committed to supporting bowls to continue to thrive in Canberra and has provided \$60,000 to Bowls ACT to support clubs to begin to implement the recommendations in the report.</p> <p>Opportunities such as using technology to create better member/player engagement, or by offering different game formats to attract a more diverse demographic should be further investigated and implemented where it offers a genuine benefit to the sport.</p>

<p>with specific demographics e.g., Families</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve club capability to organise the game using online tools to facilitate access for members 	<p>Bowls may wish to consider opportunities to seek grant funding from the annual Sport and Recreation Grants Program to develop new programs or initiatives to address this recommendation (Sport and Recreation Grants Program (SRGP) - Sport and Recreation (act.gov.au)).</p>
<p>d. Evolve the bowls club culture to genuinely welcome, include, and coach new players.</p>	<p>Supported.</p> <p>The ACT Government is committed to supporting bowls to continue to thrive in Canberra and has provided \$60,000 to Bowls ACT to support clubs to begin to implement the recommendations in the report.</p> <p>Bowls may wish to consider opportunities to seek grant funding from the annual Sport and Recreation Grants Program to develop new programs or initiatives to address this recommendation (Sport and Recreation Grants Program (SRGP) - Sport and Recreation (act.gov.au)).</p>
<p>e. Build on the Bowls Australia consumer marketing campaign by seeking opportunities to support clubs to modernise by leading and coordinating shared services such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop membership “CRM” (customer relationship management) resources e.g., “membership drive” pack to encourage improvement in membership acquisition practices and processes, collection, and retention of shared data resources. • Invest in systems and technology development to facilitate player engagement with the game and competitions so that the organising of the game can be modernised. A membership platform that can be adopted across all clubs will facilitate up-take and support the organising of the game. • Modernise game formats to attract the next generation of players. Add a third stream to existing Pennant and Championships competitions organised by Bowls ACT – Implement “Jack Attack” to establish and embed shorter game formats in clubs. 	<p>Supported.</p> <p>Opportunities such as using technology to create better member/player engagement, or by offering different game formats to attract a more diverse demographic should be further investigated and implemented where it offers a genuine benefit to the sport.</p> <p>The ACT Government is committed to supporting bowls to continue to thrive in Canberra and has provided \$60,000 to Bowls ACT to support clubs to begin to implement the recommendations in the report.</p> <p>Bowls may wish to consider opportunities to seek grant funding from the annual Sport and Recreation Grants Program to develop new programs or initiatives to address this recommendation (Sport and Recreation Grants Program (SRGP) - Sport and Recreation (act.gov.au)).</p>

2. Restructure and diversify club business models away from traditional club revenues

Identified Strategies	ACT Government Response
<p>a. Clubs should redefine and adopt new business models that do not rely on Electronic Gaming Machine (EGM) revenues and the Community Contributions Scheme to fund facilities maintenance. Facilities owners will need to refocus effort on making the bowling facility more self-sustaining. At the same time, increasing bowling participation amongst all club members will improve the perception and value of these facilities to the broader club membership. Host clubs and affiliated bowls clubs can redefine their relationships so that revenues and costs can be shared between both entities. Smaller standalone clubs can reduce their reliance on EGM revenue.</p>	<p>Agreed.</p> <p>The government is supporting community clubs (licensed clubs) to reduce their reliance on EGM revenue through initiatives such as the Diversification and Sustainability Support Fund.</p> <p>Where applicable, a healthy and mutually beneficial relationship between bowls clubs and licensed clubs that directly own bowling greens is crucial to the long-term viability of bowls in the ACT.</p>
<p>b. Clubs should prioritise facilities maintenance in the disbursement of fees. Fees for all forms of the game should contribute to greens maintenance. Where bowls clubs are affiliated with larger community clubs, an appropriate portion of fees for greens maintenance should be disbursed to the facility owner. All asset owners should be maintaining sinking funds for reinvestment into facilities maintenance and renewal. Clubs should also implement consistent processes to apply fee increases consistent with economic inflation such as applying annual CPI amount to membership fees and wage price index to greens fees.</p>	<p>Supported.</p> <p>As noted in the Report, the current disbursement of revenue generated by bowls does not prioritise facility maintenance. As a result, the licensed clubs (facility owners) are currently heavily subsidising these bowls clubs. While in the past, costs associated with maintaining bowls facilities have been absorbed by the Community Contributions Scheme, this should not be continued to be relied on moving forward.</p>
<p>c. Clubs should restructure fees to build more stable revenue, while facilitating payment terms that support new and ongoing members. The average player pays across membership, greens fees, and competitions fees in excess of \$1,500 per annum to play, excluding travel expenses. Changing the fee structure to a golf fee model – claiming the majority of these expenses through membership fees, with fortnightly small direct debit payments, and correspondingly reducing greens fees to minimal levels would mean that revenue could be better managed and deployed to fund greens maintenance.</p>	<p>Supported.</p> <p>As licensed clubs look for opportunities to diversify income streams and become less reliant on EGM revenue, it is important that bowls adopts a business model which prioritises facility maintenance and ensures appropriate funding is provided to the facility owner to cover costs associated with the delivery of the sport.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fees for all forms of the game should contribute to greens maintenance. A tiered structure would continue to provide low fee options for pensioners, and may provide limited use options e.g., “barefoot” bowl style membership for social players. • Where bowls clubs are affiliated with larger community clubs, an appropriate portion of fees for greens maintenance should be disbursed to the facility owner. 	
<p>d. All asset owners should be maintaining sinking funds for reinvestment into facilities maintenance and renewal.</p>	<p>Supported.</p> <p>Setting aside adequate funds to support a sinking fund to meet future asset repair and replacement is essential for any facilities owner/operator. All bowls participants (both members and casual users) should financially contribute to the ongoing maintenance and upgrade of bowls facilities.</p>
<p>e. The ACT Government provide equipment maintenance funding support to enable Greenkeepers to establish an equipment rental service across all clubs, where key machinery and equipment is purchased by a central body, and then rented to all clubs. This would assist with reducing maintenance costs across all clubs.</p>	<p>Not Agreed.</p> <p>The provision of equipment maintenance funding to establish an equipment rental service is not being considered by the ACT Government at this time. The purchase and upkeep of maintenance equipment is a business expense and should be considered as part of the broader budgeting processes.</p>

3. Assess feasibility to establish two indoor facilities (one north and one south) to support market consolidation or growth

Identified Strategies	ACT Government Response
<p>a. A new bowling club and facility in Gungahlin is unlikely to be viable or sustainable until Club memberships and capacity increases significantly in nearby regions.</p>	<p>Agreed.</p> <p>The ACT Government notes the Report details a bowls facility in Gungahlin is unlikely to be required in the short to medium term. Noting the information provided in the Report, the potential provision of a bowls facility in the Casey Group Centre (Gungahlin) will no longer be pursued.</p>
<p>b. Bowls ACT, Bowling Clubs, and Members review the feasibility to establish two covered indoor/outdoor facilities (one North and one South) that would increase participation through enabling night play, winter play and reducing the impact of adverse weather. Feasibility should be considered under two scenarios – market growth and market consolidation. Under market growth, additional facilities would be required to meet the capacity requirements of new players. Under a market consolidation, these facilities would enable multiple clubs to flourish and share facilities. They would be funded under merger plans to allow multiple clubs to be hosted and play at the facilities, while maintaining close ties and community relationships with their respective, local affiliated community clubs in Canberra.</p>	<p>Supported.</p> <p>Bowls clubs may wish to consider opportunities to seek grant funding from the annual Sport and Recreation Grants Program in response to this recommendation (Sport and Recreation Grants Program (SRGP) - Sport and Recreation (act.gov.au)).</p>

4. Independent and smaller clubs require financial and material support to develop assets and facilities	
Identified Strategies	ACT Government Response
a. Smaller, independent, licensed bowls clubs should leverage existing grant opportunities, such as the Diversification and Sustainability Support Fund or capital grants, to build executive and organisational capability to strategically steer and fund diversification and re-development opportunities.	Supported. There are several ACT Government programs available to bowls clubs and licensed clubs to support organisational capability development and diversification opportunities.
b. The focus should be on building long term, sustainable, commercial club revenue streams, rather than divesting parcels of land for capital raising initiatives. The ACT Government should encourage innovation in the diversification and re-development of bowls facilities and investment in the development of multi-use and multi-purpose sporting and recreational precincts, with consideration for balancing commercial viability and community purpose.	Supported. The ACT Government is supporting community clubs to reduce their reliance on EGM revenue through initiatives such as the Diversification and Sustainability Support Fund. Subject to any necessary legislative, policy or planning requirements and budget availability, the ACT Government may be willing to consider approaches from bowls clubs regarding the potential diversification or redevelopment of facilities which can demonstrate a long-term positive impact on the provision of bowls facilities.
5. Independent and smaller clubs require financial and material support to develop assets and facilities	
Identified Strategies	ACT Government Response
a. Bowls ACT must develop, grow, and diversify its revenue base. Revenue is based on club memberships, and with a declining number of members, the underlying foundations and capability of Bowls ACT to provide peak body services to clubs will continue to erode.	Supported. A strong and financially secure peak body is important for the long-term viability of any sport.
b. Opportunities include incentivising club membership growth, diversified competitions, cross sector partnerships. Industry level sponsorships may provide limited incremental revenue. Clubs must actively embrace and support Bowls ACT in these initiatives, investing club resources and effort to achieve collective success.	Supported. The development of an agreed revenue structure which enables Bowls ACT to properly service its members will offer significant benefits for the sport.



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