



**Essential Ground Maintenance
for Gaelic Grounds
During COVID-19 Outbreak**



Natural turf surfaces for Gaelic games – essential maintenance during COVID-19

In line with the GAA's return to action protocol it is recommended that clubs continue to adhere to the current government advice and refrain from organising on-field activity which is likely to remain in place until 20th July at the earliest. Taking this in to consideration the maintenance of our pitches remains important so that they are of the highest standard when required for play. This also represents a potential opportunity to improve the quality of our fields. It is appreciated that many clubs are facing financial challenges but the pitch is the club's biggest asset and should not be neglected as to do so can result in a significant deterioration which would demand greater investment in the future.

During maintenance it is important that both clubs and contractors involved are fully aware of their obligations for the health, safety, and welfare of those involved during the current crisis.

Clubs are therefore encouraged to consult the latest advice from the Health Service Executive (Republic of Ireland) and from the Public Health authority (Northern Ireland).

April has been very dry, mild, and sunny, with rainfall below average across all parts of the country. Whilst air temperatures have been above average, there have been ground frosts recorded at a significant number of weather stations which has impacted upon spring growth. Sheltered, frost free sites will have seen more growth than those exposed to the harsher north to north easterlies that have been a prominent feature of the month. All of this will impact upon maintenance.



1. Grass Cutting

The resumption of natural growth will be site dependant, but all sites should have seen some growth by now. The sward should be kept topped to maintain good density (i.e. not allowed to grow excessively long). When cutting plan to remove no more than one third of the leaf area with each successive cut.

Mowing frequency will vary from site to site and depend upon growth rates, there is some agronomic benefit to reduce the mowing frequency or to allow the grass to grow a little longer than usual when the surface is not being prepared for play, striping for presentation is not a prerequisite when not in use. Longer grass is less susceptible to drought stress and will develop a deeper root system. If allowed to grow too long it will set seed and become thin which will make it more difficult to bring the surface back in to a playable condition.

To return the surface to a playable condition, increase mowing frequency and gradually reduce the height of cut over a couple of weeks or three to four cuts.

Waste facilities may be closed so clipping disposal needs to be considered, if clippings are allowed fly, ensure that they are evenly dispersed, and clumping avoided.

2. Fertiliser

Grass will grow without the application of fertiliser, clay soils have a natural abundance of nutrient, sandy soils, or sand carpet pitches less so. Applications of nutrient will promote more growth which may be unnecessary as fields do not have to recover from wear when not in use. Only consider an application of nutrient when natural growth resumes and in showery conditions to avoid waste. Applied in dry conditions there is a risk of scorch. If rainfall does not occur within 24 hours of application, then it should be watered in.

Consider the amount of nitrogen applied to avoid excessive growth as this will increase the mowing demand.

3. Scarification

The requirement for scarification will be site specific depending upon the amount of organic matter and debris that exists at the turf base. Removing this helps to stimulate growth from the base of the sward and improve surface drainage rates.

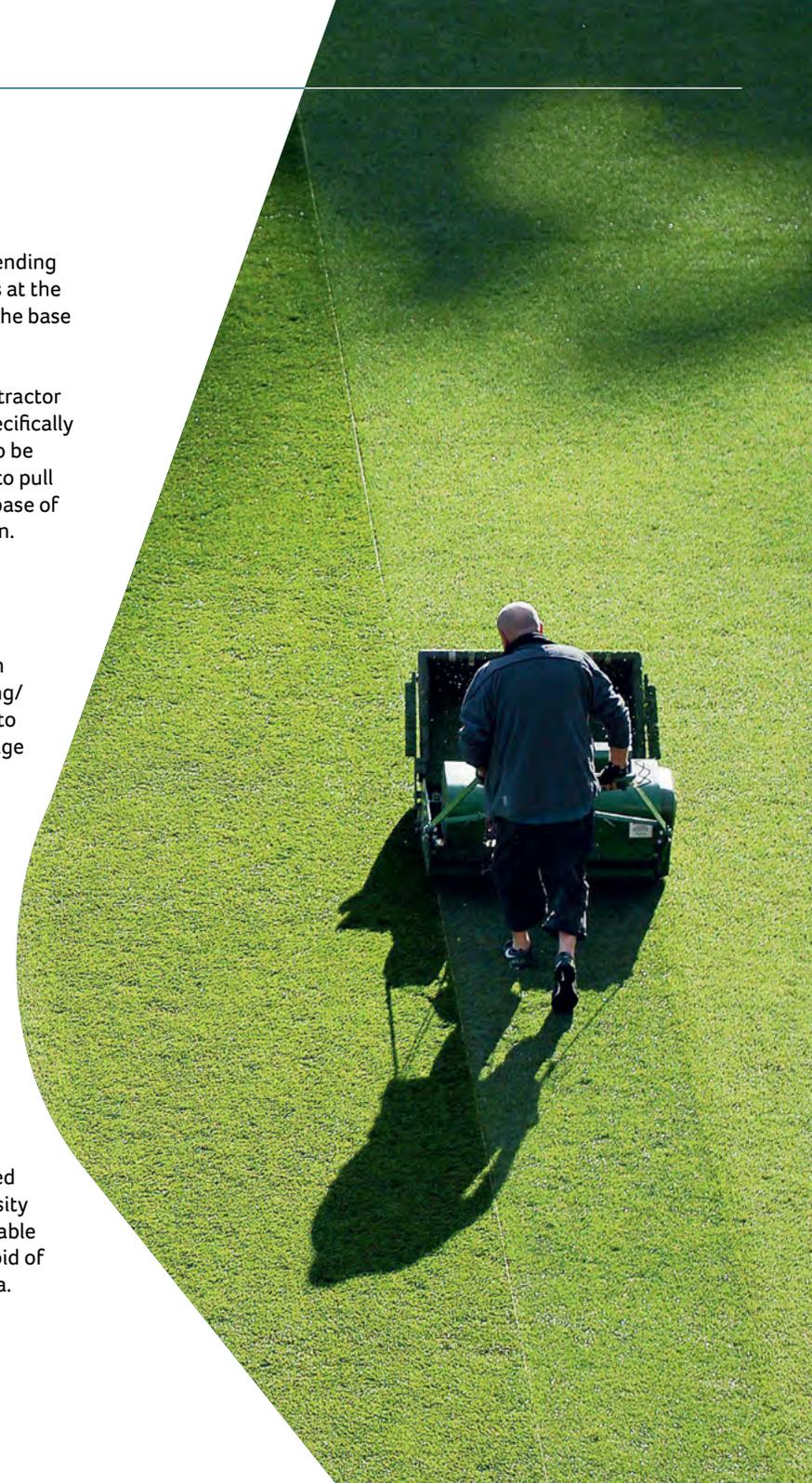
Whilst many sportsground contractors have appropriate tractor mounted scarifiers, sweepers and collectors designed specifically for this task, spring tine rakes and a chain harrow can also be used to good effect on a limited budget. The objective is to pull out as much of the debris or weakly rooted plants at the base of the sward as possible and to stimulate sward regeneration.

4. Repairs

If there are thin or weak areas, they could be repaired with seed or turf. If seeding, form a seedbed by lightly loosening/ raking the surface. Seed can be broadcast and worked in to the surface by forking. Keep the surface damp to encourage germination and establishment. There will be enough nutrient within the seed for initial germination but thereafter some nutrient may be applied, taking care to avoid scorching the seedlings.

Turf may or may not be available from local suppliers and may have to be sourced on site. Any turfed areas will require regular (daily) irrigation/rainfall until the turf develops a decent root system.

A more general overseeding should be considered given the timeframe currently available, this presents a great opportunity to improve the density of the existing sward and its botanical composition. Use a seed mixture of two or three cultivars of perennial ryegrass only. The cultivars chosen should be highly rated in Table S1 of Turfgrass Seed 2020. Seeding rates will be dependent upon existing density but apply at a minimum of 200-250 kg/ha through a suitable mechanical seeder in two directions. If the ground is devoid of grass then the rate should be increased to 350-400 kg/ha.



5. Top Dressing

With the resumption of growth top dressing is useful particularly following scarification to improve surface levels and surface drainage. Often undertaken as part of a renovation programme, a lighter application of a sand dressing in the spring/early summer can be extremely valuable and should be made if finances allow.

A quality SportsTurf sand should be used, as a guide the following table provides some guidance on the depth of sand that would be expected to be achieved given the rate of application.

Rate of application	Approximate depth (mm)
10 tonnes/ha	0.6 mm
50 tonnes/ha	3.0 mm
100 tonnes/ha	6.0 mm

6. Aeration

The purpose of aeration is to relieve compaction that accrues due to usage. Compaction has a negative impact on pitch performance, it adversely affects the pitch's ability to drain effectively by inhibiting the movement of water as well as having a negative impact on the grass plants ability to function properly by hampering the movement of grass roots through the soil.

Localised hand forking to areas of high wear could be undertaken to help sward recovery from damage due to pitch activity or wear.

Overall deep aeration in the form of Verti-Draining is one of the most effective aeration techniques and more soil loosening may be possible when the field is out of play for a prolonged period. If soil conditions permit, then deep aeration should be completed.

7. Weed Control

This would only be contemplated when the sward is actively growing, normally during the period of May to September and when the grass is not subject to drought. Avoid herbicide applications when there are young seedlings within the sward as these will be more susceptible to damage from the herbicide. Occasional weeds can be tolerated or removed by hand, otherwise spot treatment or an overall application of herbicide might have to be planned for.

8. Machinery and Equipment Maintenance

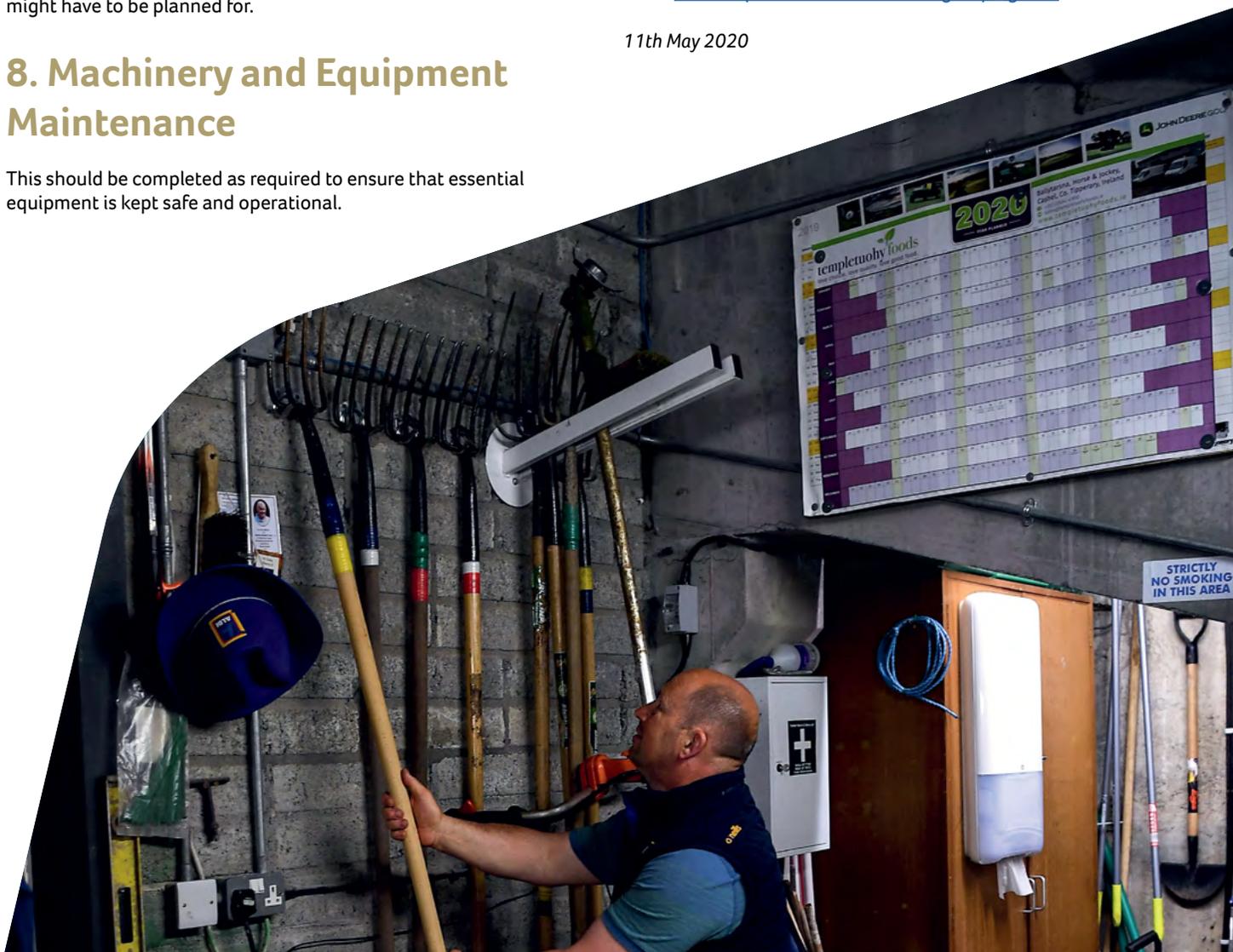
This should be completed as required to ensure that essential equipment is kept safe and operational.

Given the ever-changing situation there may be a requirement to review, update and reissue this guidance. This guidance is of a general nature but should any club wish to discuss their requirements and site-specific approach in more detail then please contact the National Pitch Maintenance Workgroup.

Version 2.
National Pitch Maintenance Workgroup –

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