

Future Provision of Municipal Golf Courses

Report of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny  
Committee

September 2019



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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In June 2019, a delegated decision was taken regarding the future provision of Arrowe Park and The Warren golf courses, with approval given to start negotiations with a preferred provider on a lease transfer of the two aforementioned courses. This decision was called in based on the reasons stated below:

- *Brackenwood Golf Course, which must also be affected by the same issues leading to this decision, is excluded from the decision and any proposed benefits to users and taxpayers*
- *Accurate financial information for the running costs (including income, expenditure and capital works) for both facilities has not been provided*
- *The scope of the negotiations has not been defined, in particular, any alternative uses for the land or buildings*
- *The only consultation outlined is the statutory consultation required by the Local Government Act 1972 and that no meaningful consultation has taken place with existing users and clubs on either facility.*

Subsequently, a call-in meeting of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee was held, with Members agreeing the following resolution;

- *'That this Committee requests the Cabinet Member to pause the process for the future provision of golf courses in Wirral while the Members of this Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee carry out a fact-finding visit to all four municipal courses – Hoylake, Arrowe Park, The Warren and Brackenwood. On conclusion of that fact-finding visit, the Environment Committee will meet again at a date to be determined to make a final recommendation to the Cabinet Member.'*

A visit to all four municipal courses was arranged and took place on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2019, with attending Members given the opportunity to view the courses, speak to staff and trade unions and view the frontline offer as part of municipal golf services.

## 2.0 MEMBER WORKSHOP

On 28<sup>th</sup> August 2019, a scrutiny workshop was convened by the Environment Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) Committee – with an invitation to attend extended to all O&S Members. In addition, a number of stakeholders were asked to attend; with representatives from each of the four municipal courses and trade union spokespersons invited to attend to provide a statement to the workshop on key issues or concerns, answer questions and participate in discussion around the future of the courses.

The workshop included a brief opening statement by the Chair of the Environment O&S Committee and Cabinet Member for Community Services. An officer presentation provided background and an overview of consultation results, with statements from stakeholders to highlight their individual observations. The workshop concluded with a closed session for elected members on commercial opportunities and financial information.

## 2.1 Background

Golf is the fifth largest participation sport in the country with around 650,000 members belonging to one of 1,900 affiliated clubs, and a further 2 million people playing golf independently outside of club membership. Golf participation for adults in Merseyside is in line with national figures at around 2.3% of the population.

Although over the last decade trends have indicated that golf is a sport in decline, this has recently shown signs of levelling off - with participation since 2016 remaining static and a small increase in the number of people participating in adventure golf.

There are currently 19 private and public golf facilities, and 5,498 registered club members across Wirral.

Wirral Council own and operate:

- Three full 18-hole courses (Arrowe Park, Brackenwood and Hoylake)
- One 9-hole course (The Warren)
- Two footgolf courses (Arrowe Park, New Brighton)
- Two 'Pitch and Putt' courses (Arrowe Park & Wallasey Beach)

## 2.2 Key Areas of Discussion

### Consultation

One of the key issues highlighted during the 'call in' process was the lack of meaningful consultation that had been undertaken with clubs and users at the municipal courses. Initial consultation with residents on lease transfer proposals took place in December 2018 as a part of an annual budget consultation. Members and course representatives agreed that this consultation had not been comprehensive enough and failed to properly consider the views of regular users and members of golf clubs on Wirral. Although approximately 1200 residents responded to the budget consultation, this did not identify if residents were users of the golf courses.

### User Survey

Following the request of Members that further consultation be undertaken, a user survey took place between 1<sup>st</sup> August and 16<sup>th</sup> August 2019. There were 404 responses in total to this survey, with 75% of these responses received from members of Wirral golf clubs. 73.5% of responses were from users with an active 'Invigor8' membership, with 26.5% of respondents being casual users.

Key feedback collated as a result of this survey highlighted the fact that user priorities were that municipal golf courses on Wirral were affordable, good quality and open and accessible.

- Members and Golf Club representatives alike questioned the validity of the consultation results, given the short timeframe in which it had been carried out and during summer/holiday months, and observed that they did not believe it was promoted adequately. Officers responded that within tight timeframes for user feedback, August was the earliest opportunity to carry out the exercise – but that they did appreciate conditions are never perfect for information gathering exercises. Officers also stated that they believed the response rate to be reasonable and a marked improvement in the

response rate when compared to a similar survey carried out a year ago, were only 200 responses were received from the same user group. In addition, attempts had been made to utilise as many social media channels as possible to promote participation. One Member and club representative stated that they had carried out their own informal surveys within their own ward and club respectively, with the majority of respondents preferring the courses stay under Council management.

- Trade Union representatives clarified their position that initial consultation with them had been based only on the original proposals to transfer the leases at the courses at Arrowe Park and The Warren and stated that they were disappointed that there had been a lack of communication regarding the two other courses. The Chair of the Environment O&S Committee made clear the original call in request and subsequent resolution of the Committee that Brackenwood and Hoylake be included in the review at Members' request, and that the user and staff surveys covered all four courses.

#### *Staff Survey*

The staff consultation exercise was carried out as a workshop, with officers stating that approximately 80% of staff had attended. According to survey results, staff feedback reflected that of user groups in that affordability, quality and accessibility were most important to them but also that ways of working and course layouts needed to be improved. The survey also sought to capture staff comments on how savings could be made, or income generated – with staff welcoming the idea of the introduction of enhanced golfing activities such as coaching or events and competition days.

#### Ground Condition and Maintenance

Representatives of each of the four municipal golf courses made a statement on behalf of their respective clubs to highlight key issues. Although priorities for each course differ slightly, and there are variations in terms of membership and facilities, ground conditions were broadly declared to be an area requiring improvement.

- Hoylake voiced concerns around the upkeep of its course over the last few years, and the resulting negative impact on numbers of the visiting public. Along with Brackenwood and Arrowe Park, Hoylake also reported that closures have been necessary during periods of bad weather and that drainage issues often mean unplayable conditions. Officers reported that there has been a phased approach to drainage improvement over recent years, but that Hoylake has been heavily affected by an unprecedented level of rainfall and problems with the wider drainage system in surrounding areas and neighbouring farmland.
- At Brackenwood, similar ground conditions have hindered play over a number of years and have had the causal effect of cancelled memberships whilst also discouraging new players. A representative stated that the course simply cannot compete with other courses of a better quality, and that over a 30-year period there has been no major Council investment in Brackenwood – a contributing factor to its deterioration.
- Although Arrowe Park has seen some improvement to the course, notably some drainage work, it was reported that there had been insufficient investment to progress standards at the course. The Warren is the only sandy links course in Wirral and as a result does not suffer to the same extent with drainage issues reported at other locations.

- Members stated that it would be desirable for the Council to carry out a further survey on courses requiring necessary remediation work, in order to gauge a more accurate understanding of the level of capital expenditure required to bring the courses up to the standard of a 'modern municipal course'. Members commented that the grounds staff employed at each course are specialised and experienced and may be best placed to provide further guidance on how improvements can be made. Officers noted that a review of machinery at each course could go some way to improving maintenance methods. Much of the machinery currently used is not fit for purpose and not stored correctly.
- In addition, there was some discussion on the potential for volunteering on the courses. This approach could mean a provision for volunteers to clear ditches and undertake any non-mechanical tasks in order to make small improvements to ground condition without the need for huge investment.

### Invigor8 Membership

The Invigor8 leisure membership provides an option for the inclusion of golf access at Wirral's municipal courses - with 770 of the total 15,000 current Invigor8 members selecting a subscription that is golf inclusive.

- Members requested clarity regarding the re-investment of Invigor8 golf membership fees back into golf facilities in Wirral. Officers confirmed that the £34.00 per month membership fee for 7-day golf is directed back into the golf budget. In addition, assurance was given that if a member signs up at a specific golf course, their fees will be directed to that course – if membership is established anywhere else, the payment is split between all four municipal courses. There was discussion amongst attendees around the difficulties of balancing investment and membership – for example, course representatives and consultation survey results confirmed that many current golf members (55.6% of those surveyed) would be willing to pay more for a better-quality course. However, to improve playing conditions immediately, upfront investment is required which would need to come from the higher fees – a 'Catch 22' situation.
- Discussion took place around the perceived lack of promotion and marketing for golf on Wirral, particularly in comparison to other leisure activities included within the Invigor8 membership. Members questioned whether the Council's own commercial or communications resources could assist each course with improved marketing campaigns. Officers welcomed these comments, however they stated that consideration needs to be given to the fact that current course quality could render increased promotion difficult – if playing conditions are not satisfactory, encouraging new membership could still be very difficult.

### Maximising income at Brackenwood

- A key issue for Members and representatives was the ongoing problem with open access to Brackenwood golf course which means players are able to 'bunk' onto the course to play without payment. Several Members stated their disappointment at having to raise this issue again and again due to the lack of any effective action taken to tackle the problem, and the resulting loss of revenue. Officers responded that, although there is work ongoing to address this issue, admittedly not

enough has been done. Officers had undertaken a trial of additional golf patrols at Brackenwood Golf Course and from this were aware of peak times for 'bunking on' were between 6pm to 9pm. These times could be targeted for additional patrols during the summer. In addition, Members were advised that Wirral Council's Golf Co-Ordinator is looking at potential options and alternative ways of addressing this issue.

- A Member suggested enforcement could be carried out by the community patrol team, who could simultaneously enforce action against littering and dog fouling offences, therefore utilising the Council's own staff to maximise revenue. Officers noted this comment but did advise that the use of Community Patrol Officers could be more expensive than using Golf Advisors.
- Assurance was given to Members that there was no plan to make changes to Brackenwood's current offer as an 18-hole course.

### Proposed Options for the Courses

In addition to the original proposals for lease transfer, a number of potential opportunities for commercial development at each course were presented to Members, based on user, staff and officer suggestions and research. Golf provision would remain at the heart of any new model, but Members were apprised of the possibility of introducing additional activities, upgrading existing buildings to allow for function hire and allowing diversification of Wirral's current golf offer.

In addition, user survey results stated that customers would be happy with an improved 'secondary spend' option such as coaching or better café / bar facilities.

- Discussion took place around the level of investment necessary at each course in order to bring them to the required quality standard. Broad cost estimates had been provided to Members, and subsequently challenged, but officers stated that despite conversations around the level of investment needed, one thing was clear – substantial investment is required.  
In order for municipal courses to be developed enough to attain a good standard, capital expenditure would be essential not just for ground improvements and maintenance, but for course furniture, IT infrastructure and marketing.
- Trade Union spokespersons highlighted their concerns around potential profitability of municipal courses – notably the question that if they were an attractive prospect to private enterprise, then surely any lease transfer is a lost income opportunity for the Council. In addition, club representatives voiced fears that courses are being managed as a leisure service and not as a golf course.
- Club representatives also expressed their concerns that a lease transfer for the course may result in a new provider disbanding established clubs, some of which have been running for many years, and creating a 'pay and play only' environment. General consensus was that most members were less concerned with who it was that was managing the course, whether Council or external provider, as long as courses were properly maintained, of a good quality and honoured current club arrangements. Officers advised that, in the event that negotiations with any preferred provider were to commence, discussion around guarantees to current clubs could be included.

- A representative from The Warren emphasised their feeling that the course is not just a hub for golf clubs but a community association. Municipal courses have always historically been an access point for golf, a feature that they are passionate about retaining. They believe that with additional resources, membership across all four courses can be improved – whilst maintaining the current good relationships with staff.

### 3.0 SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

As a result of the Member workshop, a number of crucial findings were gathered. In discussing the future provision for municipal golf in Wirral, there was agreement that the following key areas required improvement or consideration as part of any future proposal:

- i) Improved communication with golf courses and club representatives is required. There could be scope for this engagement to be delivered through the implementation of a quarterly user group for Councillors, officers, staff and other stakeholders so that issues may be highlighted, and courses and clubs can be kept apprised of upcoming plans.
- ii) Additional consideration needs to be given to possible marketing solutions and promotion of municipal courses locally in order to increase membership and therefore maximise revenue which can be reinvested into maintenance of the courses.
- iii) Further review of ground conditions is needed at each course, with additional exploration of alternative ways of working. A full appraisal of current machinery and associated supplies is also necessary in order to ascertain a more accurate level of the capital expenditure required at each course.
- iv) Members broadly welcome commercial opportunities put forward to maximise the long-term future of these sites, taking into account the current golf market and the future demand of the sport.
- v) Potential use of self-policing or increased patrols is necessary to tackle issues of non-payment for play, particularly at the Brackenwood course.

### 3.1 Recommendations

The Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee are requested to;

- Approve the findings of this workshop report and consider them as part of any final recommendation(s) made regarding the future provision of municipal golf courses in Wirral.



## Appendix 1

### Attendees

#### **Elected Members**

Councillor Tom Anderson (Chair)  
Councillor Christina Muspratt  
Councillor Allan Brame  
Councillor Steve Hayes  
Councillor Ian Lewis  
Councillor Helen Cameron  
Councillor Michael Collins  
Councillor Mary Jordan  
Councillor Jenny Johnson  
Councillor Alison Wright  
Councillor Geoffrey Watt  
Councillor Brian Kenny  
Councillor Tony Cottier  
Councillor George Davies  
Councillor Jerry Williams  
Councillor Tony Norbury  
Councillor Sarah Spoor  
Councillor Karl Greaney  
Councillor Jean Robinson  
Councillor Moira McLaughlin  
Councillor Julie McManus

#### **Officers**

Colin Clayton – Assistant Director, Community Services  
Matthew Humble – Programme Manager  
Damien Walsh – Senior Manager, Leisure Services  
Simon Bellamy – Leisure Operations Manager  
Neil Price – Golf Co-ordinator  
Darran Marquiss – Parks Area Manager, Wallasey  
Martin Grayshon – Parks Area Manager, South Wirral  
Anthony Bestwick – Parks Area Manager, West Wirral  
Mark Goulding – Principal Accountant  
Anne Quirk – Senior Solicitor  
Julie Horman – Project Officer  
Alexandra Davidson – Scrutiny Officer

#### **Golf Club Representatives**

John Lawrence - Hoylake  
Keith Marsh – Brackenwood  
Keith Lewis – The Warren  
Pat Hickey – Arrowe Park

#### **Trade Union Representatives**

Allan Small - Unite  
Steve Bennett - Unison