

Thank you for allowing me to speak at this meeting

This meeting and the previous Scrutiny Commission Meeting that I attended in October, represent the closest thing to a meaningful discussion regarding the future of the course that I have been allowed to enter into. I feel I have some valuable information and some valid arguments that I hope will cause the Council to delay the final decision to close of the course and to take more time to review the situation.

During the previous meeting it was obvious that the course was being viewed as a lost cause and that keeping it open would only lead the Council to further subsidise a dwindling number of individuals doing an expensive leisure activity that could be carried out elsewhere.

Since the meeting in October I have contacted a number of ex members, club officials, Council members and the former course manager and club professional in order to understand what has led the course to be in its current situation.

All have spoken of a course that is much better than it is given credit for. The course was renowned as one of the best municipal courses in the UK and used to take around 60 thousand green fees a year. Bi monthly meetings were held that were attended by representatives of the Council, the professional golf staff, ground staff and the club committee to resolve any issues regarding the day to day running and maintenance of the course. The course was so successful that Humberstone Heights was opened, to allow the Council to further tap into this healthy market and both courses helped to fund the running of the parks and other leisure facilities.

For whatever reason, the golf courses dropped down the pecking order at the council. There has been a notable decline in the popularity of golf. That has already been pointed out in the consultation documentation. However, this decline does not justify the complete lack of support or investment received by the course over the last 10-15 years.

The club officials I have spoken to, have painted a picture of a management structure that has become more and more distant with red tape preventing any meaningful repair or maintenance from taking place. It's has taken the current committee more than a year to arrange the latest UCC meeting to discuss the running of the course. One former Club Secretary even refused to pay the rent until the Council fixed the CCTV system. Eventually of course he was forced to pay but the CCTV still does work to this day.

At least two years ago the management at the council were advised that the prices to play the course were too high. Due to the current financial climate private courses have reduced their rates in order to attract more clientele. The failure to react to this has had an extremely detrimental effect on the number casual "pay and play" golfers that visit the course. This in turn has reduced the amount of people that the club can convert into permanent paying members.

The situation with the golf courses is similar to that of the Council owned gyms. 4- 5 years ago the Council had the problem that gyms such as Aylestone Leisure Centre were not making enough money. Less people were using them as the equipment was old and out of date and the prices were too high compared with new private gyms. Luckily, the people who hold the purse strings were made to see sense and the gyms got new equipment to allow them to compete.

The problem is, if the council closed the public gyms eventually the private gyms would have enough members and could raise their prices meaning the public would no longer have access to affordable facilities. This is what will happen if the council close facilities such as Western Park.

Western Park was opened by Leicester City Council in 1910 to provide affordable golf for the people of Leicester.

Role of the club in the community

The Club has a proud history of introducing great young golfers to the sport and has served as a feeder club for the private courses. Golfers who started at Western Park include Jason Palmer (European Tour), David Gibson (County Champion) and Coby Cartwright (current LRGU Junior Champion). These golfers along with many others may not have had the chance to take up golf, if it wasn't for affordable access to facilities such as Western Park.

As Dave Gibson has stated “without Western Park, the only way kids will have access to the sport is if they have a parent who is a member of a private club”

Golf Professionals such as Lee Skidmore, Pete Livie and Ian Bailey have given thousands of lessons at Western park to children from the surrounding area, many of whom come from deprived backgrounds. These lessons still continue but just because the kids are not currently signed up as members doesn't mean their loss will be any less important. Golf is a sport that requires a great deal of commitment. Introducing kids to the sport is a great way of keeping them off the street.

I have spoken to the chief operating officer of the PGA who emphasised the role a golf club plays in the community. There are very few environments where young and old people can mix in a safe social environment where respect, care and mutual support are provided. The Golf club provides this.

It also provides a much needed social hub for its elderly members who live alone and the golf course is their main point of contact with friends. Western Park has a large senior section. Many of whom have stated they will give up golf if the course is closed.

Environmental

Leicester has recently been in the news regarding its poor air pollution rating. High levels of nitrogen dioxide caused by traffic is recognised by the government as the second biggest health risk after smoking. Western Park Golf Course consists of a 148 acres of mature parkland situated next to a large housing estate and soon to be expanded industrial estate.

The Mayor has already admitted that some of the golf course land will be built on. The only way to protect this vital area of green belt is for it to remain as a golf course.

This leads me to my main objections to the decision:

First,

The Consultation Process

The Mayor has decided to close the course despite the results of two public consultations showing the majority of the public support it staying open.

The two consultations carried out by the City Council were very one-sided and the accompanying reports were heavily biased towards the closure of Western Park but despite this 90% of responses to first consultation supported the continued subsidy of both courses and 62% of responses to the second did not support the closure of Western Park.

How can the Council and the Mayor possibly justify ignoring the opinion of the public that voted for them?

The report that accompanied the second consultation stated that Humberstone Heights would become self-sufficient if Western Park were to close and 50% of its members transferred to Humberstone Heights. This is a massive assumption. In all the members I have spoken to, I know of 3 that are prepared to transfer to Humberstone. Most will transfer to local private courses or give up the sport completely.

Second,

We have never been allowed to enter into a meaningful discussion regarding the future of the golf club. Any arguments we have made to buy the course time have fallen on deaf ears.

All the information I have provided today, has been sent to the Mayor. This can be vouched for by Councillor Sue Bardon, Wayne Naylor and Nigel Porter as I have bombarded them with the same emails.

The Mayor's response was that someone would meet with me so that my arguments could be added to consultation process. The meeting was arranged for two days after the announcement of the decision to close the course.

The Mayor has stated that the Council simply can't afford to continue to subsidise two golf courses in the city.

He has asked a handful of amateur golfers at the club with no experience of running a business of this size to produce a business plan for the future of the course. It is not surprising that what they produced was not acceptable.

I am not a professional golfer or business owner but with a small amount of research I have been able to find evidence to support that Western Park could easily become a viable business again. I have contacted many people in the industry and not one has agreed that the course is not viable.

Third,

We have recently requested a breakdown of the finances of Western Park Golf Course to ascertain where the reported loss of 123 thousand comes from.

The actual total cost to run Western Park Golf Course is 328K. 260k for ground maintenance alone! The income of the course is 209K, Making a loss of 128K

I have also been given the finances of a local manicured private course (that shall remain nameless). The total annual cost to this course is 251k. The course has 5 ground staff and a full time head green keeper. Compared to Western Park which I believe has 3 full time ground staff, one that is part time and a manager that only attends site once or twice a year.

The rates for the private course are double that of Western Park, the Gas, Electric and Water Bills are higher. The Building, Maintenance and Service Costs are higher but despite this it's running costs are 25% lower. How is this possible?

The ground maintenance makes up nearly 80% of the costs to run the course. Surely, the council is in a position to use its equipment more efficiently than anyone else. As its equipment can be used on the surrounding parks therefore you are not paying for equipment laying dormant.

Either the figure of 260K includes the maintenance costs for all the parks in the area (in which case the golf course losses are incorrect) or the management of the golf course has to be questioned.

To make a fair comparison I have contacted two more private courses in Leicestershire and their figures are also around 250K. The PGA have confirmed that the average cost to run a private course is twice that of a municipal. Something is clearly wrong.

With the 90 odd additional members we were going to get before the consultation started, we would have an income of around 259K. This would've halved the deficit but it would also appear to be enough to run any other golf course. I have a breakdown of both sets of figures but I cannot give out the information about the private course without permission.

In conclusion

I can only conclude that from start to finish, during the whole process of the consultations and decision making process there was no intention of allowing an argument to keep Western Park open to be considered.

I have started a petition on [change.org](https://www.change.org) and it would appear from the comments on the petition and in the Leicester Mercury that most people share the opinion that the whole process has been fabricated to allow the land to be sold.

It is the duty of the Council to maintain and keep the assets of Leicester for future generations not run them into ground by not reinvesting profits or selling them for building land or road development as soon as there is a plausible excuse.

The people of Leicester do not want this closure. However, it would seem we have little chance of affecting the outcome once the mayor has made up his mind.

I understand that large cuts in governing funding mean the Council has to review previously funded activities. In fact, a review of the way the two golf courses are managed is long overdue. The Council has to accept its responsibility for the decline of a golf course that until recent times has always made a profit.

Golf England have stated that a recent survey found that the latent demand for golf is huge and it's only the perceived barriers to entering the sport that deters these people from playing. Why not use the fact that the course is in the public eye to promote the course and help break down these barriers. There are over 10 thousand people in walking distance of Western Park, we don't need many of them to turn the club around. Golf is still the 5th most popular sport in the UK. It may have taken a hit due to 7 years of poor economy and 4 years of the worst summers in history.

Are the Council suggesting that the recession is to continue for the foreseeable future? Because that's not what the papers say.

Rumour has it that the decision to close the course will be rubber stamped today no matter what is said. I'm sure the Mayor will say that he's heard all this before and that it is too late. However, there is a viable argument to keep this course open, there are serious questions over the finances presented, the robust management I've been told is in charge and a consultation process that only states one side of the argument.

My hope is that this committee can use this "call-in" from its own concerned Councillors, to allow time for a proper assessment of the course finances and to produce a business plan that is acceptable. I can provide written statements of all I have stated and I am confident that I can provide enough evidence and possibly a panel of industry experts to convince the Council that this is the wrong decision.

With a review of the pricing for pay and play golfers in line with the current financial climate and current condition of the course and by the Council, green staff and club committee working together, I'm confident that we can turn the club's fortunes around so that it can become a source of income for the Council as it has been for the past 30 years.

The Club is held in high regard by many of its ex members. Many of these will return if they believe the council is willing to support the club.

The Council needs to remove some of the red tape surrounding the course. Half the members at the course are Builders and Decorators that would be more than willing to excavate ditches, dig out bunkers and decorate the club house if they were allowed to do so.

We cannot let this valuable asset be wasted without at least trying to make it work first. Unless there is an ulterior motive behind the closure, I cannot see the benefit of finalising the decision to close the course until all avenues have been explored and both parties are satisfied.

Thank you for listening.