



Cabinet

Tuesday, 9 March 2021

Edwalton Golf Course Strategic Review

Report of the Executive Manager – Finance and Corporate Services

**Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Strategic and Borough Wide Leadership,
Councillor S J Robinson**

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. This report provides an update from the Communities Scrutiny Group on Edwalton Golf Course (EGC) and recommends a way forward for what is a significant asset for the Council.
- 1.2. In January 2020, Cabinet resolved to review ongoing provision of golf at Edwalton. Despite considerable effort, Lex Leisure has struggled to ensure that the golf course retains any viability, given the challenging operational environment (previously reported in financial reporting to both the Corporate Overview Group and Cabinet). Cabinet requested that a report be commissioned to consider whether there is a golfing need for Edwalton Golf Course, and an alternative options appraisal, if a need is not established, for consideration by the Communities Scrutiny Group.
- 1.3. In January 2021, at the Communities Scrutiny Group meeting Knight, Kavanagh and Page (KKP) (which provides specialist services in sport, leisure, culture, regeneration and green spaces) presented the report on the finding of a two-stage study in respect Edwalton Golf Course:

Stage 1: A Golf Needs Assessment.

Stage 2: Edwalton Golf Courses Options Appraisal (Feasibility Study).

- 1.4 This report covers the findings of the Communities Scrutiny Group and proposes next steps for determining the future of the asset to maximise its value to the community and Rushcliffe.

2. Recommendation

It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:

- (a) acknowledges the feedback from the Communities Scrutiny Group which includes the endorsement of a golfing need at Edwalton Golf Course; and

- (b) allocates the utilisation of £0.05m of 2020/21 projected in-year budget efficiencies to undertake a further detailed technical risk assessment of the site and thereafter a further £0.25m for further master planning work, assuming the risks identified are not prohibitive so that a realistic and deliverable masterplan can be achieved for the site.

3. Reasons for Recommendation

To ensure that the Council's Edwalton Golf Course asset continues to deliver maximum value for money for taxpayers across the Borough, whilst providing appropriate community infrastructure and the right level of leisure provision. More work is needed on refining future options for the site which includes further technical assessments of the site.

4. Background

The Council has been pro-active in trying to ensure Edwalton Golf Course maintained financial viability with investment by both the Council and Lex Leisure as reported previously. Lex has been running at a significant loss (around £44k on average over the last three years). This is despite many initiatives including improvements to the clubhouse facilities, enhanced marketing and events, signage and investment in a golf simulator.

5. KKP Findings

5.1. The KKP Stage 1 Golf Needs Assessment recommended (as reported to the Communities Scrutiny Group):

- Keeping the 9-hole standard course (even if at the expense of the par 3). If this is not possible in terms of space, a 6-hole standard course alternative should be considered as part of the Stage 2 options appraisal.
- Developing the driving range bays by increasing the number, covering more bays and providing floodlighting to enhance income generating potential. If this is not possible, the provision does not require retention in its current form given how restricted the provision currently is in terms of how much demand can be accommodated. Investment in the virtual, indoor offer could be sought instead.
- Improving the clubhouse. This should be geared to members, pay and play users and particularly wider community use as well as daytime and evening commercial activity.
- Reconfiguring the course to best enable site master planning that may enable some potential housing development, provided that this ensures that golf facilities of the requisite quality are developed. This would almost certainly enable the Council to further reduce the revenue subsidy needed as well as driving increases in participation, providing a site for further housing development and a capital receipt that can be utilised to support the Capital Programme (where resources are reducing, and future borrowing is anticipated).

- 5.2. Based on the Stage 1 Golf Needs Assessment findings and recommendations, the Stage 2 Edwalton Golf Courses Options Appraisal's key lines of enquiry were amended to reflect that whilst evidence suggests that the facility should not be lost in full, it is also clear that it cannot continue to operate in its current guise given the financial losses being accrued. Therefore, the Stage 2 report looked to identify how Edwalton Golf Courses can be more commercially viable.
- 5.3. The Stage 2 Feasibility Study concluded that no evidence was found to suggest that a 6-hole golf course will be preferable to the current 9-hole offer and should be discounted. The 9-hole standard course should be retained, accompanied by an improved range of additional amenities. The golf offer feasibility of Edwalton Golf Courses only makes financial sense if the current site has capacity to host a driving range and that the residual elements of the par 3 could be made available for housing development.

6. Community Scrutiny Group comments

- 6.1. It should be noted, and was discussed by the Scrutiny Group, that other leisure uses for the course were considered by KKP in the context of both financial viability and the likely outcome of a planning objection by Sport England, if there was a change in leisure use.
- 6.2. It was agreed that the significant asset Edwalton Golf Course should not continue in its current form, given its low usage and the current cost to the taxpayer. Scrutiny members supported a proposal that master planning work be undertaken for the site including a business case with a report to Cabinet in 2021 to tie in with the Local Plan process – i.e. consideration of whether the current designation of “safeguarded” land is appropriate.
- 6.3. The Scrutiny Group was divided as to whether some of the site (current par 3 course) should be considered for development for housing as part of the masterplan work – in any event this can only be determined following further technical work.
- 6.4. The Scrutiny Group recommended ‘that golf and/or other sporting and community use should be retained on the site. This could be achieved by developing and investing in the main golf course, a driving range and community facility and if viable other sporting activities, as part of the masterplan work’.

7. Planning Implications

- 7.1. In the current adopted Local Plan, the Edwalton Golf Courses site is “safeguarded” – not allocated for housing but could become available in the future if it was required to meet Rushcliffe’s housing allocation.
- 7.2. The Council believes it has sufficient housing land supply to meet requirements to 2028, providing the major housing allocations in particular are delivered (e.g. Fairham and Gamston). The Borough’s housing requirement is, however, currently being reviewed as part of preparing a new Local Plan to cover the

period up to 2038. This includes considering whether new sites need to be identified for housing development. It is proposed that as part of the Local Plan review process there is further consideration of whether there is justification to remove the 'safeguarded' designation from all or part of the site, and for it to be identified instead as suitable for other uses including potentially housing. It is proposed that this process is supported by undertaking a master planning exercise for the site.

- 7.3. It is proposed the initial stages of master planning the site should be commissioned to ensure there are no prohibitive risks in relation to, for example, flooding and highways that limit the options available for the future of the site. It is proposed that £0.05m is required to commence the work. By identifying potential risks as early as possible this will ensure resources are not unnecessarily used – a full master planning exercise is likely to require a further £0.25m.

8. Alternative options considered and reasons for rejection

- 8.1. The Council could choose to reject the KKP report findings in whole or in part, but this will not address the financial losses currently being experienced by the asset in its current operation.
- 8.2. The Council could decide to close the facility and maintain it as open space; however, this would incur an estimated cost of £88k per annum and would mean the demand for the facility by "pay and play users" and existing members would not be met. It would be difficult to demonstrate this offers best value for money for the Rushcliffe taxpayer. This would mean the site is both lost for "organised sport" which would be contrary to Sport England policy, and also lost for any future development opportunities.
- 8.3. The other extreme is that the whole site could be developed for housing, but this would mean the demand for golf by "pay and play" users and existing members not being met. Bodies such as Sport England could object if it is perceived there is detriment to the leisure provision. Any development of the site would have to be sensitive to alternative leisure provision such as walking and cycling.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

- 9.1. The proposed next stage of a detailed technical assessment of the site, master planning exercise and business case will include further work on risks.
- 9.2. Edwalton Golf Course has been consistently considered within the strategic housing assessments as potential development land. It is identified within the Local Development Plan as safeguarded land, which means, whilst it is marked for future development, the land is not currently required to fulfil the Local Plan housing numbers. For it to be identified as suitable for development would require its allocation through a review of the Local Plan.

- 9.3. The contract arrangements ensure that further subsidy is payable to the contractor if usage worsens; or if usage improves then profit would be paid to the Council. Based on recent years' performance Edwalton Golf Course is likely to incur financial losses.

10. Implications

10.1. Financial Implications

- 10.1.1. Edwalton Golf Courses has made a loss year on year with its current activity (on average around £44k per annum, 2017-2019).
- 10.1.2. It is proposed to allocate £0.05m of 2020/21 projected in-year budget efficiencies to undertake a further detailed technical Risk Assessment of the site and thereafter a further £0.25m for further master planning work, assuming the risks identified are not prohibitive so that a realistic and deliverable masterplan can be achieved for the site
- 10.1.3. Financial implications will be considered further once there is a more detailed business case supported by a masterplan.

10.2. Legal Implications

There are no immediate legal implications arising from a review of a Council asset. Changes of use for the site/development will be subject to planning approval.

10.3. Equalities Implications

No known equalities implications at this stage but any review would consider the equality and diversity requirements of the residents of the Borough.

10.4. Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Implications

There are no immediate Section 17 implications at this stage.

11. Link to Corporate Priorities

Quality of Life	EGC is an underutilised asset and changes to its use is likely to improve the quality of life.
Efficient Services	Currently EGC is a loss-making entity and is effectively subsidised by the existing leisure contract and is an inefficient use of Council resources. Future plans for the site should look to address this.
Sustainable Growth	Potential alternative use of EGC should be considered in the context of the growing size of population of the borough and its leisure needs
The Environment	It is accepted that EGC is a large green space and a 'lung' within Rushcliffe. Any alternative use of the asset will have to sensibly take into account environmental issues.

12. Recommendations

It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:

- (a) acknowledges the feedback from the Communities Scrutiny Group which includes the endorsement of a golfing need at Edwalton Golf Course; and
- (b) allocates the utilisation of £0.05m of 2020/21 projected in-year budget efficiencies to undertake a further detailed technical risk assessment of the site and thereafter a further £0.25m for further master planning work, assuming the risks identified are not prohibitive so that a realistic and deliverable masterplan can be achieved for the site.

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Background papers available for Inspection:	Communities Scrutiny Group Report 28 January 2021 Edwalton golf course Strategic Review and minutes of meeting Cabinet Report 14 January 2020 Edwalton golf course Update Cabinet Report 13 June 2017 – Concluding Report of the Edwalton golf course Strategic Asset Review Member Group
List of appendices:	None