

Planning Inspectorate Appeal Ref: APP/Q1825/W/24/3350905

Regarding Planning Application Reference 21/01830/FUL relating to:

Land West of Hither Green Lane Redditch, Worcestershire

Summary Proof of Evidence on Golf Matters from Mark Anthony Smith BA MRICS MBA

3 January 2025

1. My name is Mark Anthony Smith and for the last 33 years I have specialised solely in UK golf property and business matters.
2. I am a chartered surveyor and a RICS registered valuer. I have an MBA from the Henley Business School and a degree in Economics and Statistics from Exeter University.
3. Over the years I have given expert evidence at several planning inquiries on the topics of golf need and economic viability.
4. I am aware of my professional duties as an expert witness. I am to give my true opinions to help the Planning Inspector form views on the relevant issues – and this obligation overrides any duty to those instructing or paying me. I have signed a statement of truth and declaration to this effect in my main proof.
5. Following the Council’s planning refusal, the Appellant asked for my professional opinions on the development proposals from a golf related perspective. I have not had any previous dealings with the Council, the Appellant or The Abbey Hotel.
6. In ‘high level’ terms, the development proposals from a golf related perspective are as follows:
 - existing holes 2 and 3 are lost plus a small part of hole 4
 - the remaining holes are reconfigured to provide an alternative 18-hole course.
7. I have considered the following relevant documents: the planning committee report; the Cornerstone Golf Report which accompanied the planning application; and documents submitted by NoRCA.
8. My analysis covers four main areas:
 1. The main structural trends in the UK golf market over the last 40 years – as the golf course opened for play in 1985.
 2. Comparing The Abbey Hotel in 1985 to its position today from a golfing perspective.
 3. Who plays the course.
 4. Current disabilities of the course.

9. My conclusions are as follows:
1. The current 18-hole layout is too hard for the primary target golfing market of recreational/casual golfers – and particularly those taking golf breaks at the hotel. Slow play is a problem.
 2. Poor drainage (clay subsoil) adversely affects its winter appeal.
 3. The irrigation system will need a substantial and expensive upgrade soon.
 4. The large acreage makes the course expensive to maintain (increased mowing).
 5. If possible, improving the health and safety issues relating to stray shots on holes 1 and 5 would be a good thing.
 6. From a strategic perspective, making the course easier and faster to play would better align it with the primary target golfing market of recreational/casual golfers, many of which would be golf breaks golfers.
10. I have considered the Appellant’s proposed course alterations using the benchmark of ‘benefits’ and ‘harms’ compared to the existing course. I have used the following weightings scale: neutral, moderate, significant, and substantial.
11. I believe that there is a substantial strategic benefit in repositioning the currently ‘challenging’ course, so it becomes shorter and easier to play – but which remains a proper full-length 18-hole course. The current course length is 6,463 yards from the white tees, and it reduces by 6.2% to 6,061 yards.
12. The repositioning will support the hotel’s business positively because it will increase the appeal to a wider playing audience of recreational/casual golfers, and particularly to the hotel’s golf break customers.
13. The latter are fundamentally important for the hotel’s long term business model and the financial viability of the golf course. Currently, the number of rounds played each year at the course are on the low side because of the collective negative effect of its disabilities.
14. The redesigned course will continue to be open for the general public to play. My view is that an easier course will increase the venue’s market appeal rather than decrease it – which I weight as a significant benefit. An easier course will appeal more to beginners, ladies, elderly golfers and

generally all golfers of modest playing abilities – which accounts for the largest section of the UK's golfing market.

15. By contrast, high calibre players only account for a small proportion of golfers and for several reasons they are more likely to choose to play at other courses than the existing 18-hole course.
16. If the appeal was allowed, I anticipate that some funds released from the housing aspect could be used to fund improvements to the course in the areas of land drainage and upgrading the irrigation system. Without such funds, it would be hard to justify such high capital expenditure on the existing course in 'return on capital invested' terms.
17. If course drainage and the irrigation system were substantially improved this would improve course presentation standards and extend the playing season. I would weight this as a significant benefit.
18. Reducing the acreage of grass to be mowed with a shorter course on a more compact site would reduce maintenance costs. I weight this as a moderate benefit.
19. The revised layout improves the safety aspect on the existing hole 5 (an overly long par 5 at 556 yards). It becomes hole 14 and is reduced in length to a 415 yard par 4. The redesign incorporates safety bunding on the left side to give protection to the housing facing the hole.
20. Reducing the length of the current 5th hole should also speed up the pace of play and make the course a little easier. In the wider context, I weight this aspect as a moderate benefit.
21. There is, however, some harm caused by the redesign. With the current layout, golfers have a walk of around 260 metres through the adjacent housing to get from the 1st green to the 2nd tee.
22. With the redesign this walk increases to around 500 metres. This walk is from the new 12th green (the old 1st green) to the new 13th tee. The walk is not ideal but is acceptable for a golf course which appeals primarily to casual/recreational golfers including those on golf breaks. I weight this change as moderate harm.

23. A reduction in the size and length of the course results in better golf provision. It therefore does not surprise me that England Golf, the game's national governing body, has no objection to the development proposals (subject to appropriate playing safeguards during the course alteration works programme).
24. Whilst I acknowledge NoRCA's concerns regarding the proposed course redesign, I do not agree with their main assertions.
25. A particular concern is that the course will lose its 'championship standard' status.
26. According to England Golf, there are around 1900 golf clubs in England. If the existing course really was of 'championship standard', I would expect it to feature near the top of the list of the 'top 100 golf courses in England' on the website 'Top 100 Golf Courses'.¹ It does not appear within this list at all, let alone get close to the top of the list.
27. Furthermore, there are currently 32 affiliated golf clubs in the Worcestershire County Golf Union, yet the existing course does not feature within the top 14 ranked courses in Worcestershire on the website 'Top 100 Golf Courses' (the list ends after 14 entries).
28. I now turn to the UK's top golf resorts which get much of their business from golf breaks. If the existing course was of true 'championship standard' I would expect The Abbey Hotel to feature in listings for the top golf resorts in the UK.
29. The 'Best Golf Resorts in Great Britain and Ireland | Golf World Top 100' was last updated on 10 March 2023.² The Abbey Hotel does not feature within it.
30. Thus, I firmly conclude that whilst the term 'championship standard' may be attributed to the existing course at The Abbey Hotel in colloquial terms and for marketing & promotional purposes, objectively, the course is not of true 'championship standard'.

¹ See www.top100golfcourses.com

² See <https://www.todays-golfer.com/courses/best/golf-resorts-uk-and-ireland/>

31. I do not agree with NoRCA's assertion that the redesigned course will mean that Redditch loses one of its primary leisure resources and attractions. I believe it helps protect the course because it widens its market appeal. It will still be the only 18-hole pay and play course in the town.

32. NoRCA's assertion that it will lose its attraction to all types of golfers is simply not correct. The architectural redesign has been competently undertaken by Jonathan Gaunt, a very experienced and respected member of The European Institute of Golf Course Architects.

33. Overall, I believe that in golf related terms the development proposals deliver several benefits which, when taken collectively, significantly outweigh any harm.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Smith', written in a cursive style.

Mark Smith BA MRICS MBA