

**Rebuttal of Savills' Statement on Matter 4 6b.
David Young on behalf of GreenWayOxon**

[GreenWay's position is that Oxford's housing need figures are flawed, that the understatement of Oxford's housing capacity compounds housing and transport pressures around Oxford, and that in any event, the Cherwell Local Plan has not properly considered alternatives to releasing Green Belt land - and that, for all these reasons. exceptional circumstances are not proven.

The Council failed to consult the Golf Club at any stage before the end of the consultation period.

Savills have also misrepresented the position of the Club itself as regards the reasons for the Club being willing to sign an agreement, and I have explained what I understand as the Club's position in a letter to the Inspector.]

General

1 Our Statement highlighted the importance of this part of the Green Belt, the Kidlington Gap - and indeed of the physical contribution of the golf course within it, providing a very functional and open use and an important green lung, in an otherwise heavily trafficked and busy area. Please do not lose sight of this. but I have to counter quite a few points about the course.

2 This is a 112 year old historic course, but with up to date facilities and very probably the best view from any clubhouse in Oxfordshire. Because it is very close to the City, it is very much part of the local community - as well as fulfilling important physical and mental health, and wellbeing functions.

3 It is a popular and well regarded course; it has a larger membership than nearby courses (including the Oxford Golf Course – the only other non-proprietary club locally). It is a tough test of golf for single handicappers - and even for Professionals, who are rarely able to beat Par, but who nonetheless appreciate its challenge. Critically because of its location, it is accessible by older golfers; the course having (relatively) gentle slopes and a layout which circles back every so often, close to the clubhouse allowing play for, eg, 7 9 or 14 holes, as well as the normal 18.

4 Now, at a time of chronic pressure on the NHS from 'lifestyle' diseases (eg obesity and diabetes) recent initiatives between the Club and NHS locally are now being followed elsewhere. It is absolutely not a time to contemplate the removal of this course.

CDC Sports Facilities Review

5 This report seems to have been put on the Examination website very recently. It appears at its outset (11.1) to take closure of our golf course as a given. Contrary to the report's assertions, the Club's lease has not expired; it is holding over and has security of tenure under the Landlord and Tenant Act.

6 The Report considered the demand only from the Cherwell District Council Area. (Only about a quarter of our golfers come from there.) It concluded that must mean that most are from Oxford, but (11.47) says that its modelling excludes any consideration of imported demand from elsewhere. Even so, it variously concluded (11.35) and (11.37) that 9 or 18 holes would be necessary in the Kidlington area if NOGC were to close. It also says (11.52) that additional analysis would need to be undertaken in relation to the potential loss of North Oxford Golf Course to confirm whether full replacement was needed. Nearly 90% of respondents (11.20) to an on-line survey felt that there was roughly the right amount or too little golf provision in the District.

Savills Appendices

7 I have to say that I have found it difficult to sift through the volume of related reports appended to Savill's Statement. I show through one or two examples how statistics and conclusions are unfairly drawn to try to justify a conclusion that the course is surplus to requirements under Para 74 NPPF. I reject this conclusion absolutely.

8 Whereas the successive Appendices are presented as independent and objective, all are commissioned directly or indirectly by Savills. I hardly recognise North Oxford golf course as portrayed.

Gaunt/SMS

9 The report states (p 8) that it is not possible to quantify any oversupply because of the need to gain access to confidential information from clubs - then goes on to say that there is evidence of oversupply within a 20 minute drive time catchment of North Oxford!

10 Much of the report centres around figures of driving times to alternative courses from the Club. I have played many times over the last 40 years at most of these courses. I find the driving time figures a significant underestimate at many times of the day; not least because of congestion on the local road network. In particular I would never allow less than 30 minutes (and often a lot more) to reach the Oxford course. This is the only one that I would consider as a comparable course to North Oxford.

11 There are some very curious statistics quoted. For instance, page 9 of the SMS Appendix 3 gives a 2017 figure of c.2.5m for adults who have played at least once in the last 12 months on a full length course *in GB*. Golf England figures for 2018 show 3.7m played on a full length course in *England* over the 12 months before Sep 2018.

12 We know that golf participation has risen recently, partly as a result of the 2016 Olympics and that Golf England figures show that average English club membership has gone up to 460 from 484. (2018 figures were available to Savills and their several consultants to have used)

13 The SMS Appendix 3 does admit (p12) ‘The course is challenging enough to be interesting even for category one players and being reasonably flat, is attractive for seniors and ladies’ and that the catchment profile (86% ABC1) is a fit for a members’ club. It also acknowledges that ‘We have not found any evidence to suggest that the club is under immediate financial pressure nor currently could be considered not to be viable.’ Also, the club ‘are becoming more commercial in their outlook and proactively looking to grow membership via catering for a slightly different audience. This is evident in the management practices, marketing activity and online presence and an increasing emphasis on teaching’

14 Other parts however are misleading. For instance (p20) it absurd to suggest that this 112 year old course should be dismissed as holes routed ‘back and forth.’ (I don’t know where that would leave St Andrews.) The margins (p20) do not cause problems; there has been no recorded issue with ball escape in my nearly 40 years at the club. (Royal Lytham and Carnoustie for instance have holes running beside railway lines, and Frilford and the Belfry, roads close to their boundaries.)

15 The (very challengeable) conclusion that ‘NOGC is not obviously better’ than others locally, seems to be a half hearted compromise to please a client. The only really comparable club is Oxford, which is a good course but difficult to access at most times of the day, with inclines too steep for many of our golfers.

16 Oxford rarely takes fewer than 30 mins to reach. 5 of the other 7 alternative courses (27/8) suggested to take ‘homeless’ golfers from North Oxford are not within the stated travel times at most parts of the day. Hinksey Hill is built on waste, is in very poor condition and can be regarded as no more than a starter course. Waterstock is similar. Neither has a proper clubhouse. Kirtlington is a modern but relatively immature course that appeals to a different cohort. Bicester is increasingly an hotel orientated course. Studley Wood is probably the most comparable course in this batch, but doesn’t offer the ease of play for older people and gets very full at weekends. The other 2 are further away. Magnolia is hopelessly long requiring buggies and over 5 hours. Frilford Heath is a much bigger course. All are proprietary clubs.

17 Indeed most courses in Oxon are proprietary. Ours and Southfield are members’ clubs. (There are through some of the reports, vague assertions about members clubs. In my view NOGC combines the best of both forms, with a supportive member ethos and genuine community outreach.)

18 I stand by my estimate of what our members would do if NOGC was forced to close (over half would play less or not at all) – not least because my colleagues think the loss of members to golf would be greater.

Simpson

19 I find it difficult to read this Appendix (written by a Director of Savills, but which he says is an ‘objective’ review) and come to any conclusion but that it is not objective.

For instance,

- 3 pt 2 denies that golf participation decline is levelling off but (higher) 2018 figures are not referred to – see above.
- 3 pt 6 Seeks to rubbish the Cherwell Report by pointing out that it ignores provision elsewhere (when the real issue – see above) is that it takes account of neither provision nor catchment population outside Cherwell (and this latter is more significant anyway).
- 5.0 A 30 minute drive time is not really relevant (Cherwell's Adopted Local Plan Policy has 15 minute for comparison).
- 6.2 22,000 - 25,000 rounds would be at the upper end of annual rounds for most individual courses in Oxfordshire.
- 6.3 Practice facilities are not confined to 'just 1 fairway'. Driving practice can take place away from the clubhouse on 19 and 18. There are 2 teaching Professionals, a fully stocked Professional shop, 3 driving bays (1 indoors with simulator) a practice putting green, practice bunker and pitching area.
- 6.3 Whether Oxford is superior to NOGC is a matter of judgement – and it certainly depends on what for. For North Oxford's cohort our course is certainly more suitable. That may be why it generally has higher levels of membership.
- 6.4 Green fees at North Oxford are competitive and the Club has a range of green fee (and indeed membership) offers not recorded here. That it is well used and regarded and in much better financial health than most clubs would seem to justify its pricing structure in any event.

WYG Assessment

20 This report too, beneath a welter of often irrelevant data contains misleading and inaccurate statements. For instance

- The Table on p 21 does not have the correct figure for N. Oxford membership which is 467 (not 385) for 2018.
- The extensive analysis includes the availability of Par 3 and 9 hole courses and driving ranges. These are largely irrelevant to the issue.
- I contest absolutely that there is (22) 'nothing significant' about the North Oxford Course.

However, it does recognise (24) that there are factors which will increase demand for golf in the future.

Savills statement

21 The main report (1.17) **incorrectly quotes NPPF 74** by stating that ‘where a course or similar facility is proposed for development its release should be supported where an assessment.....’ Paragraph 74 actually says ‘should not be built on unless’ There is a lot of difference.

22 I understand the leases (1.12) to be ‘held over.’

23 Of the 12 exceptional circumstances listed (1.14), as I have said elsewhere, 2 are robustly challenged, 1 not justified and 9 merely development opportunities.

24 It find it a simply outrageous claim (1.18) that whatever sports and recreation provision is likely/possible to be provided in 6 a and 6b, could in any way outweigh the loss of a golf club facilities and course. Golf is the 5th largest participation sport in England.

25 The implication that this members’ club (1.18) is not open to the public is wholly wrong. I have covered this point at length in my submissions, and its increasing role in the local community is very much welcomed by visiting golfers, societies and the thousands of visitors to the club and course.

26 The Suggestion throughout that displaced members can simply do their own thing and apply to join other clubs is not the same as providing a suitable alternative in terms of quality and quantity as 74 states.

27 I have suggested a revised policy for PR 6c. We would want the Inspector to take a view in the Local Plan – anything less than the words suggested would put the future of this Club in jeopardy.

Conclusions

28 We believe Savills have deliberately slanted the figures to seek to demonstrate that there are easy alternatives if NOGC were to close. It would be difficult to find any impartial golfer in Oxfordshire who would suggest that on golfing grounds they would be happy to lose the N Oxford course.

29 Savills seek to remove a flourishing, locally appreciated course which serves as an example of what the Green Belt should be all about. Seeking to show that displaced members can simply apply to join other clubs is not the same as providing a suitable alternative in line with NPPF in terms of quantity and quality. It is not provision, but simply stating that homeless members have to do their own thing.

30 Interestingly, having toyed with the idea of developing Oxford Golf Club, Oxford City Council came to the conclusion that it should be retained. There is little difference between that club and North Oxford. Indeed on membership figures North Oxford appears to perform better. I have said elsewhere that the City Council for years have been seeking overspill into the Green Belt, that their figures of need are

severely flawed and that they have prioritised employment over housing within the City with knock on effects on the surrounding area and transport.

31 It is ironic in turn that somehow Cherwell have uncritically accepted the housing need figures, taken no account of their adopted Local Plan policies on Green Belt (or recreation facilities), ignored the NPPF in their site selection process and dumped housing somewhat at random and almost entirely on Approved Green Belt land .

32 Losing the North Oxford course makes no sense in this context. The quality of lives of its members, visiting golfers and the thousands of local people that make use of the clubhouse facilities depend on the course and its facilities.

33 Account must be taken of the growing community engagement and the developing need for a well-being focussed facility. The recent research on health is particularly relevant to the particular cohort at the course; most would be lost to golf or frequent golf – with undoubted physical, social and well being burdens placed on local and community health. There has been a lot of (overdue) publicity about the health benefits of golf. As recently as 26th January, the Daily Telegraph reported that that golf is now being prescribed by the NHS as pilot studies found that it boosts happiness fitness and strength. It quotes Professor Sir Muir Gray ‘ Golf on referral is an excellent high-value health service because we now have strong evidence that physical activity can not only prevent disease but that it can also prevent disability, dementia and frailty in people who are already affected by disease’.

34 Muir Gray is one of England’s most senior medical figures and is the author of the ‘Sod 60/70/80’ range of books. He wrote to us as follows, ‘Golf is a great antidote to ageing. It is important that society increases, rather than reduces, recreational opportunities for all ages. I am very disappointed that the local Council seems to be contemplating the demise of the long established and flourishing North Oxford Golf Club. This is particularly so in that, being relatively compact, it has obvious attractions for the older golfer. I hope that the Council rethinks its proposals in the interests of health and well-being.’

35 As a Planner starting out around the Beeching period, I wondered why we had lost so many railway lines to short-sighted expediency; we could certainly do with them now. Loss of facilities such as our course would in the very near future to be deeply regretted by the NHS and Health professionals.

36 Finally, again, after this golfing interlude, do not forget that this is a key piece of Green Belt. NPPF 81 states that LPA’s ‘should plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of the Green Belt, such as looking for opportunities to provide access, to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation, to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity...’ Our golf course does just that.

6/2/19