

**TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ACT 1990
SECTION 78 APPEAL**

APPEAL BY GREAT LAKES UK LTD

REF: APP/C3105/W/20/3259189

**LAND TO THE EAST OF M40 AND SOUTH OF A4095,
CHESTERTON, BICESTER, OXFORDSHIRE OX26 ITE**

**PROOF OF EVIDENCE OF
JOHN ASHWORTH MBA, LLB**

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1. Introduction

Qualifications and Experience

1.1 I am a consultant specialising in the leisure, sport and tourism industries. For seven years to 1994, I was a director of Pannell Kerr Forster Associates, the hotel and leisure consultancy arm of a leading firm of chartered accountants; I became a partner in the firm. Qualified initially as a solicitor, I specialised in corporate planning and management in public administration, before moving to Coopers & Lybrand as a management consultant via an MBA degree at Cranfield Business School. For the past 25 plus years, I have practised as a consultant through my own business, John Ashworth Associates. I also part own and direct a Pilates studio from premises located within a golf club in Hertfordshire.

1.2 I have been particularly involved in the sport of golf. My main experience of, and services for, the golf industry have consisted of:

- promoting the right concept for new golf and resort developments;
- market positioning, market demand and financial feasibility studies;
- dealing with planning applications with independent assessment of need;
- coordinating the project development of new golf businesses including business planning;
- advising on the potential of golf as a tourism generator;
- improving the profitability of golf businesses by market repositioning and operational change;
- independent reviews of current performance and business prospects on behalf of 3rd party lenders, investors and purchasers;
- preparing and implementing marketing and sales strategies for golf memberships and associated real estate;
- providing expert witness services; and
- providing access to funds for new development, expansion and purchase

Scope of Evidence

1.3 Following a refusal by Cherwell District Council ('CDC') to grant planning permission for the development of a Great Wolf Resort on land to the east of the M40 and south of the A4095, Chesterton, Bicester ('the Site'), part of which contains 9 holes of Bicester Golf Club, Great Lakes UK Ltd ('the Appellant') commissioned Golf Business International ('GBI') to consider those reasons for

refusal which directly concern use of the golf course. GBI is an association of professionals with expertise in the business of golf. I am currently chairman of GBI. Swan Golf Designs and Sports Marketing Surveys are members and their reports are appended to this Proof of Evidence. I will refer to and rely upon these reports where appropriate in this proof.

1.4 In my evidence I address relevant parts of CDC's Reason for Refusal no. 1, and in particular:

- I consider CDC's Golf Strategy [CD7-2] and deal with its lack of soundness in light of the analysis which underpins it. CDC's Golf Strategy does not meet the requirements in paragraph 96 of the NPPF of a robust and up-to-date assessment of need on which to base planning policies.
- By reference to the appended report of Howard Swan of Swan Golf Designs, I show that the development proposals for the 9 holes remaining at Bicester Hotel Golf & Spa ('BHGS') will continue to provide a valuable golfing experience, with more relevance to changing trends in the demand for golf than the existing 18 hole private members club.
- By reference to the appended report of Sports Marketing Surveys, I further show that the development proposals both for the golf course remaining at BHGS and the provision of an improved driving range, golf academy and 9 hole short course would also bring significantly more golfers to BHGS than visit it currently.
- I respond to related arguments put forward by Parishes Against Wolf {'PAW'} in their statement of case
- I conclude that the Proposed Development is consistent with paragraph 97 of the National Planning Policy Framework and CDC Local Plan Policy BSC10. In respect of the first exception to paragraph 97, and CDC's claim that the existing 18 hole golf course is not surplus to requirements, I refer to the evidence submitted with the planning application by CBRE, where it was demonstrated that even when adopting the approach to a needs assessment employed by CDC, CBRE concluded that the Cherwell market shows a strong over supply.
- In respect of the further two alternative exceptions in paragraph 97, I show that the Proposed Development will replace the existing golf facility at BHGS with equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality at the same location; and that the Proposed Development is for alternative sports and recreational provision the needs for which clearly outweigh the loss.

2. Context

Reason for Refusal 1

2.1 The first part of the reason for refusal 1 given by CDC in its decision to refuse planning permission for the Proposed Development states:

“The proposed development by reason of its location would result in the loss of an 18-hole golf course when the Local Planning Authority’s evidence indicates the course is not surplus to requirements and there is a need for more provision for golf courses in the Bicester sub-area over the plan period. The evidence and proposals for alternative sports and recreation provision included with the application is not considered sufficient to make the loss of the golf course acceptable.”

2.2 An assessment for the purposes of paragraph 97 of the NPPF concerning the claim by CDC that the BHGS golf course is not surplus to requirements is dealt with in the report provided by CBRE that accompanied the planning application. I reinforce the CBRE report by challenging the analysis used by the Council to reach its conclusions. The Council’s explanation for its Reason for Refusal no.1 set out in its Statement of Case is based on a report published in 2018 – Open Space, Sport and Recreation Assessment and Strategy (Nortoft – October 2018) - (CD7-2). Chapter 11 of that document relates to golf course supply and demand (‘Golf Strategy’). I explain below that the Golf Strategy’s conclusions are based on a flawed analysis of the existing and likely future demand:supply ratio for golf facilities in the district and that any planning policies based upon it are therefore inappropriate.

2.3 The second part of Reason for Refusal 1 states:

“The development is contrary to Policy BSC10 of the Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1 which seeks to protect existing sport and recreation provision and enhance the existing provision. It is also contrary to Government guidance contained within the National Planning Policy Framework.”

2.4 I also demonstrate later in this evidence that the Proposed Development does comply with the NPPF and BSC10. The development affecting 9 of the 18 holes of golf at BHGS will be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location. In addition, the development involves the delivery of golf facilities, along with recreational provision of the resort itself, which would clearly outweigh any loss of the affected 9 holes. The Proposed Development will meet the requirement in BSC10 of providing at least equivalent community benefit and will in fact enhance existing sport and recreation provision in CDC’s area. In terms of compliance with Development Plan (Local Plan Policy BSC10) and the NPPF, my evidence should be read alongside the evidence of Chris Goddard who deals with all planning matters (CD12-3) and the CBRE report.

3. The Golf Strategy Document

3.1 The Golf Strategy document to which CDC has referred is based on an approach to modelling the ratio of supply of golf (in terms of golf holes) to demand (in terms of total population). The supply side of this modelling *“includes the golf sites within Cherwell but excludes sites outside of the district”* (paragraph 11.3). The demand side modelling is said to be based on population levels within the Cherwell district (‘the District’) and its sub areas, excluding the population resident outside the District.

3.2 This approach taken in the Golf Strategy is fundamentally flawed. Amongst other things, it assumes that the administrative boundaries of the District represent the extent of demand for the golf courses located within the District and of supply for golfers living within that area which is clearly not the case. It assumes that golf courses located outside the District, in some cases within a few miles of the District’s boundary, do not or cannot meet any demand from residents within the District. There is no basis for this. It is well established and acknowledged within the industry that drive time is the key accessibility factor, not only for golf but for a wide range of sport and leisure facilities. For golf, a drive time catchment area around a golf course of 20 minutes is generally used as a benchmark, representing coverage of at least 60% of members of a private club. Administrative boundaries are irrelevant to such drive times or a person’s ability or willingness to use a golf facility. Indeed, paragraph 11.8 of the Golf Strategy report itself concedes that *“the spread of golf provision means that everyone with access to a car can reach a course within 20 minutes’ drive time”* and Figure 56 illustrates the level of coverage, but the Golf Strategy then fails to reflect this in its modelling.

3.3 Three alternative models are used in the Golf Strategy. The first two adopt a ‘golf holes per head of population’ approach described above, disregarding drive time catchment areas. This approach is flawed for (amongst other things) the reasons set out in paragraph 3.2.

3.4 The third model is also flawed. This model is said to be *“based on the known average club membership figure of 385 for Cherwell, based on the England Golf 2016 information for the 7 membership clubs in the district, giving a total of 2,695 golf members in 2016. With a current Cherwell population of 148,276, this gives an average rate of golf club membership of 18.18 per 1,000 population”*. The model then applies this ratio to estimated population growth in the District through to 2031 to claim an estimated growth in demand for membership by that date of 989 new members. This purported new demand figure is then set against the membership capacity of the 7 membership clubs in order to claim a shortfall in supply – capacity is assumed to

be the difference between the average membership of the existing clubs (385) and national average golf club membership levels (460).

3.5 The **first problem** with this approach can be seen in the Golf Strategy document itself where it is stated: *“As it is not possible to determine what proportion of the golf membership is from people living outside of the district, or conversely how much demand is exported, for example to South Northants, it is assumed that the export and import of golfers is balanced.”* (paragraph 11.40). There is absolutely no justification for such an assumption – in fact it is acknowledged at paragraph 11.32 that it is known to be wrong in the case of the Kidlington district: the Golf Strategy itself states, *“Importantly, none of the three models is able to effectively assess the level of imported demand into the Kidlington sub area, likely to be primarily from Oxford.”*

3.6 The **second problem** is that the Golf Strategy assumes golf club capacity at national average golf club membership levels. This is clearly inappropriate by definition – as many clubs have higher membership numbers as those which have lower, so capacity cannot be defined by the mid-point. Club capacity is a function of several factors including the size and layout of the golf course, the size of and facilities provided in the clubhouse, and the members’ policies on such issues as visitor access, joining fees and subscription levels.

3.7 The **third problem** is that the Golf Strategy is based on figures that very quickly become out of date. I have applied updated figures to Figure 61 in the Golf Strategy, using the following more up-to-date data:

- England Golf’s November 2020 report identifying an average membership per England Members’ Golf Club at 484 not 460 as used in the Golf Strategy Report.
- The England Golf report gives 2018 membership numbers for the 6 golf clubs used in the analysis (not 7 following the closure of Banbury Golf Course) – they total 2183 members, an average of 364 per club, not the 385 used in the analysis.
- The Cherwell Local Plan Review 2040 Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report, July 2020 (at para 4.101) forecasts population growth in Cherwell from 149,200 in 2018 to approximately 170,000 by 2043. This is the most up-to-date information on forecast population growth published by CDC and refers to the most recent ONS population projections.

3.8 These revisions demonstrate the following conclusion on the supply/demand ratio using the analytical approach in the Golf Strategy as follows:

Table: Forecast Golf Membership to 2040							
Number of Golf Clubs in District	Estd total capacity based on national average of 484 members per club	Used Capacity of Clubs based on England Golf data	2018 Spare Capacity	Members per Head of Population 2018 (149,200)	Forecast Population Growth to 2040	Forecast Added members	Balance in Supply and Demand by Membership
6	2904	2183	721	68.35	20000	293	428

3.9 The table, applying the methodology used in the Golf Strategy, shows an excess of supply over forecast demand from members totalling 428 membership places by 2040. Therefore, if one accepts the Golf Strategy methodology as valid and to be used as the Council has done, the application of up to date information significantly changes the outcome from a forecast deficit of 989 membership places by 2031 to a surplus of 428 places by 2040. This further supports the conclusions of the assessment carried out by CBRE.

3.10 I am aware that there are proposals to develop North Oxford Golf Course for housing. Membership numbers at North Oxford are reported by England Golf as 441, which suggests that even if those proposals go ahead, and were to be reflected in the Golf Strategy, the ratio of supply to demand for golf memberships would have been roughly in balance.

3.11 The **fourth problem** is that CDC’s approach deals only with members of golf clubs, whereas many people play golf on a ‘nomadic’ basis and choose not to pay a subscription for golf club membership. As the England Golf Facility Planning Report dated November 2020 [Attached at Appendix 3 and CD16B-1] states: *“Golf is the fifth largest participation sport in the Country, with around 630,000 members belonging to one of 1850 affiliated clubs and a further 2 million people playing golf independently outside of club membership”*.

3.12 The **fifth problem** is that CDC’s Golf Strategy simply fails to reflect any of the very clear and important changes in the nature of interest in golf which I deal with later in this proof.

3.13 The Golf Strategy is therefore based upon a flawed methodology and, notwithstanding its inaccurate approach, is already out of date.

3.14 The Golf Strategy suggests *“There are no robust mechanisms for assessing the supply / demand balance for golf as the usage information for the individual golf courses is commercially sensitive”* This is incorrect. The Facility Planning Report published by England Golf in December 2020 referred to in paragraph 3.5 contains member numbers for each of the golf clubs in Cherwell. The Golf Strategy also states *“The England Golf modelling is based on a drive time catchment of 20 minutes,*

which for the Kidlington area, encompasses almost all of Oxford, parts of the Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire, each of which have golf courses. For Banbury and Bicester, the 20 minutes' drive time catchments also cover areas within the adjacent authorities, and there are golf courses there within easy reach of the towns." Given that is the case, it is surprising that the approach to modelling the demand/supply ratio used by England Golf, that is one based on golf facility catchment areas, is not used as the basis for the Golf Strategy as it is far more appropriate than the approach used in the Golf Strategy document.

3.15 Based on its approach as described in the Facility Planning Report, England Golf reaches a very different conclusion to that contained in the Golf Strategy. England Golf concludes: *"Within the identified region [based on Cherwell DC] there is a relatively low demand for golf when compared to the average for the South East region.... There is a high level of golf provision within the area in comparison to the demand with a good number of traditional 18-hole courses. There is only one standalone 9-hole course"* – see page 8 Facility Planning Report. This further demonstrates the mistaken approach in the Golf Strategy.

3.16 In addition, the needs of prospective golfers and the objectives of England Golf to drive up participation are ignored in CDC's approach. There are in fact much needed initiatives to diversify the product offer – more short courses, entertainment through technology on driving ranges and attractions for families and younger players. These are needs to which the Development Proposal will enable BHGS to respond (which I address further below).

4. Assessment

Paragraph 97 National Planning Policy Framework

4.1 CDC claims that the Proposed Development would lead to the loss of an existing 18 hole golf course, leaving 9 holes, and this does not meet the three tests in paragraph 97 of the NPPF which states that existing open space, sports and recreation buildings and land should not be built on unless one (or more) of three tests are met. These are:

(a) an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements, or

(b) the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location, or

(c) the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision the needs for which clearly outweigh the loss.

4.2 An assessment for the purposes of (a) has been provided by CBRE. As to (b) and (c) I show below that the Proposed Development will replace the existing golf facility at BHGS with equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality at the same location; and (having regard to Mr Goddard's evidence) I also show that the Proposed Development is for alternative sports and recreational provision the needs for which clearly outweigh any loss.

Description of Planned Improvements to Bicester Golf Course

4.3 CDC's Statement of Case claims that *"The assertion by the Appellant (at Para.5.4 of its Statement of Case) that the Council's first reason for refusal is "misconceived" and could be appropriately addressed through a re-provision of 18 holes on a suggested redesign of the retained 9-hole course (as referenced at Para.9.5 of its Statement of Case) will be contested by the Council as unfeasible and impractical and therefore cannot be relied upon"*.

4.4 I refer to the report of Howard Swan (at Appendix 1 to this evidence), an established, vastly experienced and well-respected golf course architect, to show that an alternative layout is both feasible and practical. His report contains proposals (section 5) for a redesigned and reconfigured nine-hole golf course which will have two sets of teeing areas on each hole thereby providing an 18

hole playing experience. It is envisaged that play to 9 holes will continue throughout the construction period (section 6) with interim layouts being provided to ensure continuity. Mr Swan summarises (section 8) that a reconfigured and repurposed nine holes is more than an adequate replacement for the existing 18 hole golf course and, together with the proposed upgraded facilities would significantly enhance the present offer. He comments that the management objective would be to develop a close liaison with local schools and youth groups and others to provide golfing and educational opportunities with special financial arrangements and that it would be eligible for adoption by the Golf Foundation, the national golfing body for schools, as a Golf Roots Centre. The Appellant reserves the right to call Howard Swan as an expert witness in the event that CDC (or PAW) introduce detailed evidence relating to golf course design.

Changing Demand Characteristics for Golf

4.5 CDC maintains that the Proposed Development will result in reduced opportunities for improved health and wellbeing and result in a loss of active engagement in sport; and that the substantial harm caused by the development proposals would not be outweighed by any benefits accruing from the recreational activities proposed. I consider that the opposite is the case – that the Proposed Development itself will broaden the attraction of the golf facility at Bicester Golf Club leading to the potential for higher visitor numbers from a wider cross section of the community than is currently attracted to the 18-hole private members golf club.

4.6 To fully appreciate the opportunities to be created by the development proposals in terms of golf requires an understanding of the changing demand characteristics for golf. The introduction to England Golf's Club Membership Questionnaire 2018, a biennial survey designed to provide a snapshot of the national golfing landscape complete with current trends, reads: *"Over the last decade the golfing landscape has changed considerably. Club membership has steadily declined and only recently shown signs of stabilisation, while the number of independent golfers and leisure golfers has continued to grow. Golf as a sport has also diversified in this time and there are numerous opportunities to play, outside the traditional 18-hole format, including adventure golf, entertainment ranges, virtual golf and competitive socialising experiences. Some affiliated golf clubs have started to respond to the evolving market with flexible memberships, academies, fun golf formats and by improving the off-course experience. Given the competition for our leisure time, clubs need to continue to develop and trade on their differences. It's true that some clubs have closed during the last 24 months, but new facilities are being built and other clubs are investing in redevelopment projects to diversify their business and generate additional income streams."*

4.7 England Golf's publication 'Customer Focused Facility Guidance: England Golf 2018' is aimed at advising golf facilities on new approaches to best respond to latest trends. Extracts from the publication are as follows:

Playing a traditional 18 holes of golf can be time consuming and in order to appeal to wider audiences, variations of the game have been introduced in recent years. These can help make the sport:

- > Less intimidating and more enjoyable for beginners
- > Extend the playing career of older players
- > Improve accessibility for disabled people
- > Create shorter options for people with limited time
- > Provide a wider mix of facilities that will increase user appeal
- > Offer a friendlier and inviting public image
- > Offer alternative ways to play golf that appeal to the whole family

To attract a wider customer base consider:

- > indoor space for virtual golf experiences
- > entertainment activities on the driving range including music, F&B service, targets, Cosmic golf
- > adventure golf
- > fun putting area

To benefit existing and new players consider:

- > driving range with tailored bays for teaching
- > ball tracking technology
- > computer-based game technology within the bays
- > practice holes or small loop of holes for new players
- > short game area
- > putting area

4.8 The change away from the existing 18 hole arrangement at BHGS in consequence of the Proposed Development will directly respond both to national trends in golf participation and to the characteristics of golf demand and supply in the local area. The aim is to appeal to a wider demographic than that historically associated with golf but at the same time to retain an attraction for the committed golfer. It is intended also to provide a pathway into golf for people who have participated on, say, a driving range but not regularly on a golf course.

4.9 Even if no changes were made to the remaining facilities at BHGS, the offer of 9 holes to the local area, coupled with its use by users of the Proposed Development, would represent a facility that is in tune with current trends. However, changes to the remaining facilities would further increase this attractiveness. For example the proposal for an academy with a driving range, par 3 short course and short game practise area would offer lessons to beginners and improvers and the 9-hole course could be maintained to high standards reflecting conditions on the best private courses. Local residents and families as well as school visits represent target audiences alongside tourist visitors to the BHGS and to the Great Wolf Resort. The loss of the existing 9 holes would be compensated by the redesign and upgrade of the remaining 9 holes of the golf course, with the addition of an extra nine teeing positions together with new greens, bunkering and water features, as described in the attached report from Howard Swan. This will be combined with improvements to the driving range to provide 12 bays with the potential to be equipped with Toptracer or equivalent technology, with the provision of an Academy teaching and practice area, and with the provision of a 9 hole Family and Beginners’ course – see section 5 of the Howard Swan report.

4.10 To test this further, I have examined the value of the 18-hole course and the golf business it supports and compared it with the value and business that result from the Proposed Development.

The Business at BHGS

4.11 I have been supplied with information on the volume of the existing golf business at BHGS by the hotel management team. I set out the key elements below.

4.12 Membership numbers have been falling consistently over the past few years and are well below the average membership level (484) of golf clubs in England reported earlier.

<u>2017</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>
270	250	230	220

4.13 In 2020, 41% of members are seniors on 5-day membership; 16% are 7-day members and 16% are joint golf and health club members; only 3% are junior members; 24% fall into other membership categories.

4.14 Records are available for the number of rounds played by visitors but not those by members. An estimated 7,000 green fee rounds were played on the golf course in 2019 split by category as follows: 3,870 casual visitors; 1,225 golf society rounds; 1,860 hotel resident rounds. Experience

elsewhere suggests that a typical golf club member will play about 40 rounds per year on his home course. Applying that average to Bicester GC, member rounds can be estimated at 9,000 rounds per year. When added to visitor rounds, the total volume of rounds on the course can be estimated at 16,000 rounds. This is well below the capacity of an 18-hole members' course where the number of rounds played is typically around 25,000 rounds per year.

4.15 The hotel management team estimate that there are 570 visits to the driving range per year; and 182 lessons per year given by the golf professional.

4.16 Annual golf revenues are shown in the Table below:

Table: Revenues from Golf at BHGS					
2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
£443,423	£424,058	£360,895	£359,928	£372,442	£315,792

Broken down in the latest year as follows:

Table: Annual Golf Revenues at Bicester Golf Club	
Membership subscriptions	£150,000
Green fees	£129,000
Range balls	£3,000
Teaching	£5,500
Buggy/trolley hire	£27,500
Total	£315,000

4.17 I am advised by the hotel management that annual operating costs for the golf business in 2019/20 comprised direct costs of £243,000 to which should be added overheads of £77,000 demonstrating that the golf business was operating at a marginal loss. Some added value lies in the contribution golf makes to the hotel's performance - the Golf Club generated 1,359 golf related room nights in the hotel in 2019 from visiting golfers with consequential spend by golfers on food and beverage in the hotel.

Impact of Development Plans on Business Volumes, Customer Demographics and Finances

4.18 In the following paragraphs, I comment on the potential consequences of the development proposal element by element, including the change to a 9-hole golf course first, followed by potential changes through improved driving range, golf academy teaching and short par 3 course. For each element, I show potential market penetration and potential business volumes. To do so, I have relied on The Golf Actives Study 2015 commissioned by the European Tour and carried out by Sports Marketing Surveys which attempted to identify all UK participants (at least twice in the previous 12

months) in at least some form of golf. The findings relevant to my evidence are included in the SMS Report ('SMS Report') at Appendix 2a (page 22) and Golf Actives Study at Appendix 2b and are summarised as follows:

- Participation in golf on 9-hole golf courses: 5% of the adult population and 3% of 6-17 year olds.
- Participation on a driving range: 6.5% of the adult population and 3.8% of 6-17 year olds.
- Participation on a Par 3/short course: 2.3% of adults and 2.5% of 6-17 year olds.

4.19 Frequency of participation was also included in the research (although not reproduced in the SMS Report). The average number of attendances per year for each format was as follows:

- 9-hole golf course: adults 8.1 times; juniors (6-17 year olds) 6.7 times
- Driving range: adults 8.3 times; juniors (6-17 year olds) 6.5 times
- Par 3/short course: adults 5.1 times; juniors 4.5 times

Change to 9 Holes: the effect on the golf business

4.20 The demand for the 9 hole golf course at BHGS resulting from the Proposed Development will come from three market segments: club members from the local catchment area; casual visitors and golf society visitors; and tourists staying in the hotel at BHGS and at the Great Wolf Resort next door.

4.21 By applying the findings of the SMS Report on participation and frequency of activity to the population characteristics of the catchment area around BHGS, I have derived estimates of potential activity levels for the golfing facilities that will be provided by the development proposals. Estimated population numbers by age range in the 20-minute drive time catchment area around BHGS are shown in the following table.

Age:	0-5 yrs	6-17 yrs	18+ yrs	Total
	12,800	30,700	136,000	179,500

Source: ArcGIS and JAA

4.22 The market potential for 9-hole course visits from the 20-minute drive time population can be estimated at 55,000 by adults (136,000 x 5% x 8.1 times) and 6,100 by juniors (30,700 x 3% x 6.7 times).

That potential will be shared by 9-hole courses located within a reasonable drive time. There is only one other 9-hole course within 20 minutes' drive of Bicester Golf Club – at Kirtlington Golf Club – and only two more within 30 minutes' drive – at Stowe and Radley – both of which are located on school sites; in total, there will be four 9-hole courses. It is not unreasonable to assume that 9-holes at BHGS will take at least an equal share of the market and has the potential to attract an estimated 15,000 rounds from the local catchment area. Some of those rounds will be played by remaining and new members of the Golf Club and some by casual visitors. I have assumed for these purposes that visits by golf societies (which tend to prefer visits to 18-hole courses) would not be likely.

4.23 Tourists and guests at the BHGS hotel and at GWR will represent another demand segment. The SMS report attached at appendix 2 gives support [see page 10, Bicester Resort Evaluation, November 2020] to the following conclusions about the impact on the tourist market:

- The change to the golf facilities at BHGS will diversify and broaden the appeal of the venue.

- Considering the geographical situation of Bicester, the range of other tourist attractions available in the area and the proportion of golfers who already take family resort holidays, the siting of the Great Wolf Lodge in this area and next to Bicester Golf Club should provide a significant draw to golfers from further afield.

- Many Great Wolf Lodge holidaymakers will be economically active but time-poor, with reduced opportunity to play golf regularly due to their other work and family commitments. Providing an opportunity for this group to combine their holiday with golf will undoubtedly be appealing, and will also allow golfing parents to introduce and encourage their children to try the sport as a holiday activity, especially if 'starter' facilities are developed at the Golf Club.

- The current golf facilities at Bicester Hotel, Golf & Spa (18 holes and very basic practice facilities) serve a relatively low number of members and existing golfers visiting the course.

- The proposed changes to BHGS in conjunction with the development of the Great Wolf Lodge, are likely to attract people:
 - From further afield in the UK
 - Who are under the age of 45 and have young families with them
 - Who would benefit from and be drawn to a range of enhanced facilities at the site.

4.24 The SMS Report’s conclusions evidence a positive impact on the golf business at BHGS from the golf tourist market. In addition to the local demand from the 20 minute catchment area, the 9 hole course at BHGS will benefit from the high volume of visitors to the Great Wolf Resort, many of whom can be expected to participate in the golfing experiences available on the adjoining site.

4.25 As the popularity of shorter forms of golf grows, with the backing of England Golf’s campaign to promote 9-hole golf and shorter formats to busy people and to show ‘it’s all the game in half the time’, I expect demand to continue to increase. The SMS report at Appendix 2 page 23 showed that 20% of golfers had played golf only on a 9-hole course, and a further 25% had played some of their golf over 9 holes. At BHGS, an estimated 16,000 rounds were played on the existing 18-hole course in 2019 – see paragraph 4.14 earlier – I estimate that once the Great Wolf Resort is built, the number of total rounds that will be played on the golf course will increase to an estimated 20,000 as shown in the Table below.

Table: Estimated Future Rounds: 9 Hole Course		
Rounds by:	2019 Existing	Mature Operation 9 Holes
Members	8,800	7,500
Local casual visitors	3,870	3,000
Societies	1,225	140
BHGS residents	1,860	1,860
GWR guests	0	5,500
New locals	0	2,000
Total	16,000	20,000

4.26 My estimate assumes:

- 150 members play 7.500 9-hole rounds
- The existing body of casual visitors will reduce (reflecting the change from 18 holes to 9 holes)
- Minimal visits from golf societies
- Based on the findings of the SMS survey, there will be no change to rounds played by BHGS residents
- Of the average number of overnight guests at the Great Wolf Resort, 15 will play golf per day
- Local visitors to the driving range and Golf Academy and Academy Course facilities will generate a further 2,000 rounds on the nine-hole golf course.

4.27 In total, my estimates suggest that 12,500 rounds will be generated by the local population and 7,500 by tourist visitors to the area.

Impact of Improvement of Driving Range with Par 3 Academy Short Course

4.28 I then turn to consider the position if the remaining facilities at BHGS are improved by enhancing the driving range, its equipment and outfield as described in the attached report by Howard Swan. The outfield would be transformed to create a short course with the greens doubling up as targets for users of the range. Scheduling of the opening times for the two facilities would be managed to respond to local patterns of demand with the likelihood that the range will be open during weekday evenings and at weekends and the Academy course open on some weekdays during the daytime and at agreed periods at weekends. More intensive use of the Academy course would be programmed during school holidays.

4.29 Both the range and the Academy course would be used in association with the golf academy teaching programme. To ensure efficient programming and smooth running, the head golf professional could be given the responsibility of managing the booking, scheduling and general management of all three facilities.

4.30 To estimate likely usage of the improved driving range and Par 3 academy short course, I have used the same approach as that applied to the 9-hole golf course, that is one based on the market potential in accordance with the findings of the SMS Report.

The research indicates that 6.5% of UK adults and 3.8% of juniors are likely users of driving ranges, with adults averaging 8.3 visits and juniors averaging 6.5 visits per year. When applied to the population living within the 20-minute drive time of BHGS, that suggests a total of 73,400 driving range visits by adults and 7,500 by juniors.

4.31 That potential demand will be shared by all the facilities in the catchment. Competitor driving range facilities exist at 5 locations within 20 minutes of BHGS as shown in the Table below

Table: Driving Ranges within 20 minute drive time catchment

Venue	Drive Time (mins)	Driving Range	Toptracer / equivalent
Kirtlington Golf Club	8	8 covered bays (not floodlit)	no
Waterstock Golf Club ¹	17	22 covered floodlit bays	no
Oxford Golf Centre	17	18 covered floodlit bays	no
Buckingham Golf Club	18	10 covered bays (not floodlit)	no
Studley Wood Golf Club	20	15 covered bays (not floodlit)	no

¹ Note that there are recent media reports that the owners are planning to develop the land at Waterstock Golf Club to change the use to a warehouse distribution centre. If that comes to pass, competitive supply will be reduced

4.32 It is not uncommon for members' golf clubs to provide a practice area for their members and visitors, but this is not usually perceived as a destination for practice by the general public, even if it is in some cases actually available. Any such facilities are not shown in the Table.

4.33 The improved range at BHGS could have 12 bays. I have assumed no floodlighting for present purposes. When these have been provided, the area will have a total of 85 bays serving a potential demand of 81,000 visits. All things being equal, that suggests a potential demand of around 950 visits per bay per year. For the 12 bays at BHGS, it would be reasonable to set a target of over 11,000 visits although I have assumed a more conservative estimate below.

4.34 Currently, none of the ranges in the area is equipped with Toptracer technology or its equivalent. The introduction of ball tracking and gaming technology, developing the concept originated by Topgolf, has extended the appeal of the driving range to new markets seeking entertainment alongside golf. The proposals envisage BHGS introducing TopTracer or similar technology onto the redesigned range, which will elevate it above its competitors in the local market. Ranges across the country claim a 20% uplift in visitor volumes when this form of new technology is installed and when a food and beverage service is supplied to range users. A food and beverage service is already established in the performance gymnasium centre at BHGS close by the driving range and could be made available as a service also to all users of the three golf practice facilities.

4.35 The par-3 academy course would occupy the range outfield and a putting and chipping area would be provided alongside the range building. The SMS Report indicates that 2.3% of UK adults and 2.5% of juniors are likely users of par 3 short courses, with adults averaging 5.1 visits and juniors averaging 4.5 visits per year. When applied to the population living within the 20-minute drive time of BHGS, that suggests the potential for 16,000 visits by adults and 3,375 by juniors.

4.36 There are no 9-hole short par 3 courses in the local area. Typically, these short/par-3 courses are aimed at beginner golfers and the recreational or family golfer but they can represent a step on the pathway to play on a full length 9 or 18-holes especially when combined with teaching facilities. They also provide a short game practice facility for the accomplished golfer, particularly those of more mature years. The Oxford Golf Centre provides the nearest competitor facility – the range is freestanding with no golf course alongside but it does offer an extensive short game practice area and golf academy.

4.37 The planned facilities at BHGS will be built to a high standard and assuming they are well promoted and managed, should prove attractive to the local market as well as to guests at GWR and BHGS. In addition to the local market I would expect a level of visitation from the Great Wolf Lodge

adjacent to the facility, which will target families with children up to 12 years old. On average estimates suggest that there will be around 1400 guests on site at the resort every day. Although the resort will provide a range of on-site facilities to entertain families and children, only a small indoor mini golf course is planned. If only 1% of guests at GWR also visit the golf facilities at BHGS, that represents an additional 5000 visits per year. Residential guests at the Great Wolf Lodge will have access on foot to the adjoining golf facilities at BHGS and BHGS would offer a club hire service.

Estimated Visitor Volumes and Revenues

4.38 Based on this market analysis, I have made what I consider to be conservative estimates of likely visitor numbers to the Proposed Development at BHGS once the business has matured to a steady operating state. To enable a comparison with the level of revenue currently generated by the golf facilities at BHGS as reported earlier, I have made reasonable assumptions on pricing (net of vat). My estimates are as follows:

- 150 members pay an annual subscription averaging £500 and play 7,500 rounds of golf per year on the nine-hole golf course
- 12,500 casual visitor rounds are played on the nine-hole golf course at an average of £15 per round
- 5,000 range visitors buy 5000 buckets of 100 balls at £6 per bucket
- 5,000 rounds are played on the Academy course at £5 per round
- 100 members join a Golf Academy at an average fee of £50 per year

4.39 In summary, the Table below shows my estimate of future annual revenues. I have not included any value to BHGS of additional room nights and spend on food and beverage by golfers staying overnight in the hotel. All estimates are in real terms at today's prices and are net of VAT where relevant.

Table: Summary of Estimated Annual Revenues	
<u>Revenues</u>	
Golf revenues	£322,500
Food & Beverage net revenues	£15,000
Other: buggy rentals	£30,000
Total revenues	£367,500

4.40 I have assumed an average net spend per head of £4 on food and beverage by 50% of the 30,000 visitors to the site each year. With combined Cost of Sales and direct catering staff costs of 75%, the food and beverage net profit will be an estimated £15,000 pa.

4.41 In summary:

- The remaining 9 holes can readily be improved in accordance with the plans shown by Swan Golf Designs and thereby be more attractive to all golfers; with two teeing flights per hole, an eighteen-hole round will continue to be offered to those who prefer it over 9 holes
- It is reasonable to assume that a significant number of guests at the adjacent Great Wolf Resort will play golf on the course and make use of the additional golf facilities
- The improved driving range and the addition of a short game academy course, attractive to families, beginners and improving golfers will significantly increase the volume and mix of visitors to the site
- The result will be a more valuable golf facility potentially attracting a wider cross section of visitors from the local community and offering an introduction to golf for newcomers to the game as well as an attractive practice and playing facility for the established golfer
- My estimates indicate 30,000 visits to the site each year once the business has become established compared with an estimated 16,750 visits currently
- Estimated annual revenues will total £367,500 compared with current revenues of £315,000.

4.42 My analysis demonstrates a potential for a significant increase in the number of visits to the site from the local catchment and from tourists to the Great Wolf Resort and BHGS. The demographic characteristics of visitors are likely to be more broadly based than those of the private members and tourists who currently visit. In addition, the Proposed Development will improve the financial viability of the golf business. The investment cost of the development will be provided by the Appellant as part of the development agreement.

4.43 In my view, for these reasons, the Proposed Development meets the requirements of NPPF paragraph 97(b) and (c) – exception (a) having been demonstrated in the report by CBRE - in that:

(1) “the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location”.

The outcome will be a golf facility which provides an equivalent experience in terms of quantity because of the ability to play golf over 18 holes and with the quality improved because the condition and layout of the course will be significantly enhanced. Overall, it will be better provision for golf in terms of quantity and quality because the retained 9 hole golf course will also be enhanced by

improvements to the driving range and by the addition of a golf academy and a par 3 short hole course which will attract a more diverse and higher volume customer base.

(2) “the development is for alternative sport and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss”.

Not only will the golf facility be enhanced, but in addition, the Great Wolf Lodge will provide a range of recreational opportunities including the waterpark, adventure games, mini golf, arcade games, landscaped open space and nature trails (as dealt with by Mr Goddard). Overall, the Proposed Development will be a significant enhancement of the site in terms of recreation use which would outweigh the loss of the existing 9 holes.

4.44 Refusal Reason 1 also suggests that the development is contrary to Policy BSC10 of the Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1 which seeks to protect and enhance existing sport and recreation provision: *The Council will encourage partnership working to ensure that sufficient quantity and quality of, and convenient access to open space, sport and recreation provision is secured through the following measures: Protecting existing sites; Addressing existing deficiencies in provision through qualitative enhancement of existing provision, improving access to existing facilities or securing new provision; and Ensuring that proposals for new development contribute to open space, sport and recreation provision commensurate to the need generated by the proposals.*

4.45 The notes to Policy BSC10 indicate that “Development proposals that would result in the loss of sites will be assessed in accordance with guidance in the NPPF and NPPG” – as I have pointed out, the assessment by the Council of the loss of part of the golf course, based on the analysis in its Golf Strategy, does not comply with guidance in the NPPF.

4.46 The notes to BSC10 go on to say that development proposals “will not be permitted unless the proposal would not result in the loss of an open space of importance to the character or amenity of the surrounding area, an assessment has been undertaken which demonstrates that the site is surplus to requirements including consideration of all functions that open space can perform, or the Council is satisfied that a suitable alternative site of at least equivalent community benefit in terms of quantity and quality is to be provided within an agreed time period.” In terms of golf alone, the result of the Proposed Development will mean that the retained 9 holes of the golf course at BHGS with the ability to play from 18 tees will retain a traditional golf facility in this location, to which will be added

the other benefits of an improved driving range, a golf academy and a short 9-hole course. In addition, the Great Wolf Lodge will provide the wide range of recreational opportunities described above.

4.47 The Proposed Development will clearly contribute to open space, sport and recreation provision commensurate to the need generated by the proposals and will support the Council's policy to ensure that sufficient quantity and quality of sport and recreation provision is secured.

4.48 For these reasons, my view is that the Proposed Development at BHGS will comply with policy BSC10.

Response to Parishes Against Wolf's (PAW) Statement of Case and Golf Report.

4.49 I have considered PAW's objections to the Proposed Development in so far as they relate to the golf facilities. PAW argues that CDC's view that the Proposed Development is not in compliance with the NPPF paragraph 97 and Policy BSC10 in the Local Plan is correct. I fundamentally disagree for the reasons already set out above, and further addressed below in my concluding comments.

4.50 PAW makes reference to a Green Space Strategy, 2008 as the basis for the case that Cherwell needs 1 additional 18 hole golf course to meet demand in the Chesterton area. It also quotes the Golf Strategy 2018 in support of an argument for more golf provision in Cherwell. I have already shown why the Golf Strategy and the CDC policies which are based upon it are flawed. There is no demonstrable need for an additional 18 hole golf course in the District, as has been demonstrated by my analysis above of the Golf Strategy and confirmed by the England Golf report. The 2008 Green Space Strategy is even further out of date in relation to golf demand and supply.

4.51 Annex C to PAW's Statement of Case refers to a response to the planning application from Cherwell's Recreation and Leisure Department. The Department refer to the Golf Strategy report in favour of additional golf course provision (which I have already addressed above), but in fact then state: "To compensate for the loss of 9-holes of golf course provision, we would be seeking mitigation based on a positive approach to an increase in usage of the remaining 9 holes. This should be presented in the form of a development plan, showing how usage and accessibility will be increased, especially from the local community". The proposals that I have outlined for redesign of the 9 hole course (as illustrated by SGD) and the enhancement of the driving range and academy course and practice area do show more than just compensation for the loss of nine holes. They represent a positive approach which will result in increased usage of the golf facility. The impact of the

development proposals as described in my evidence demonstrates how usage and accessibility will be increased from the local community and visitors.

4.52 Annex E to PAW's report contains a Review of Golf by Chesterton Parish Council. The review refers to statements in Bicester Hotel Limited's (the operator of BHGS) accounts as lodged at Companies House with a comment that they give no indication that the golf business is unviable, nor that the needs of golfers are changing and expressing surprise at the proposal to reduce the size of the golf course from 18 to 9 holes. I have shown earlier that golf member numbers at BHGS have been falling consistently for several years and that golf revenues are on a similar downward path. The development proposals have the potential to reverse those trends and add, not detract from, the amenity value of the golf facility.

4.53 PAW refer to the report by CBRE submitted on behalf of the Appellant as part of the planning application. PAW comment that *"Golf has always been and will continue to be played over 18 holes and any club that wishes to provide to a sustainable membership which participates in matches, offers charity and society [golf] must retain the 18-hole format. As CBRE point out there are other formats of golf which have been created to attract a wider audience and therefore greater participation, but to fully provide for every format a club would need to be a course of 18 individual holes"*. BHGS would be able to continue to offer an 18 hole format in the way that has been illustrated. However, the suggestion that a 9-hole course would not add amenity value to the local population when nationwide trends as confirmed by England Golf and SMS suggest otherwise is misconceived. It is also misleading to suggest, as the Parish Council do, that "All courses in the area, including BHGS, currently offer any member of the public the ability to play 9 holes for a reduced fee." It is exceptional for an 18-hole members club to offer a 9-hole membership category, and non-member visitors typically will be excluded at the most popular times when members have priority. Furthermore, only those clubs where the layout of the course returns the 9th hole to near the clubhouse are able to offer 9-hole rounds to the public.

4.54 PAW claim that there are 3 members clubs within 20 minutes' drive of BHGS with spare capacity for 170 full membership spaces and that this is insufficient to accommodate the 185 members likely to leave BHGS if the course is reduced to 9 holes. I disagree with this analysis. I have already noted that 41% of BHGS members are seniors on 5-day membership; and only 16% are full 7-day members – see paragraph 4.12 earlier. Moreover, there are in fact 6 courses within 20 minutes' drive – Kirtlington GC, N Oxford GC, Waterstock GC, Buckingham GC, Hinksey Heights GC and Studley Wood GC. The combined membership numbers in those clubs, according to the England Golf Facility Planning

Report is 2,155, an average of 359 members per club. Golf club membership across the country averages 484. There should be sufficient spare capacity in the local area for 750 membership spaces.

4.55 Section 5 of the PAW statement of case expresses the concern that the post development 9-hole course at BHGS will become unviable, leading to an application for permission for an alternative use of the land. My assessment has shown in paragraph 4.39 that the planned improvements resulting from the Proposed Development will in fact increase revenues from the golf business, not reduce them and the custom from the Proposed Development itself will provide additional financial income and support for BHGS. There is no obvious reason why operating costs, most significantly employee costs, would increase, especially with a reduced site area to maintain. In addition, it should be remembered that the golf business helps drive revenues in the hotel from both room nights and food and beverage sales. The Proposed Development will provide support for the continuation of golf in this location. It is the opposite scenario, namely the current status quo, that is likely to lead to the golf course becoming unviable with the consequential application that PAW appear to suggest.

4.56 PAW concludes its statement with a list of desirable improvements to the golf facilities if the planned development receives permission. The improvements are:

- Creation of another 9 holes course (perhaps a par 3 course) somewhere else on the landowner's land holding – there is sufficient land within the landowner's retained land
- Improved, modern driving range with flood lights and bays
- Improvement plan of the retained 9 holes – improved bunkers, enhanced landscaping including new lake formations
- Improvement of tee off areas
- Improvement of greens
- New and improved buggies for hire
- Improved internal finishing of bar area / '19th' hole
- Improved and better stocked pro shop

4.57 Evidently, most of these improvements are in fact envisaged within the improvement proposals I have outlined.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Paragraph 96 of the NPPF, which introduces paragraph 97 on which the Council bases its reason for refusal of planning permission, states: “Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities (including quantitative or qualitative deficits or surpluses) and opportunities for new provision. Information gained from the assessments should be used to determine what open space, sport and recreational provision is needed, which plans should then seek to accommodate.”

5.2 The assessment on which the Council relies in support of Refusal Reason 1 is contained within the Golf Strategy report, which I have shown to be based on flawed methodology and out of date. Far from being robust, it does not meet the requirement in paragraph 96.

5.3 Consequently, the Council’s evidence for its claim that the golf course is not surplus to requirements and that there is a need for more provision for golf courses in the Bicester sub-area over the plan period is unsound. The conclusion that 1 x 18 hole course or 2 x 9-hole courses plus 7 driving range bays are required to meet future demand in the Bicester sub area is wrong. The planned development of 1 x 9 hole course plus 12 range bays plus a short game academy course will better meet the changing needs for golf facilities in the Bicester area. Moreover, these improvement works are not only positive but they are deliverable in terms of being feasible and practical.

5.4 An assessment was provided by CBRE for the purposes of paragraph 97(a) of the NPPF. My evidence shows that the other two alternative tests in Paragraph 97 of the NPPF will be met by the planned development in that:

“the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location”; and

“the development is for alternative sport and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss”.

5.5 Refusal Reason 1 relies also on the development being contrary to Policy BSC10 of the Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1 which seeks to protect and enhance existing sport and recreation

provision. The result of the Proposed Development will mean that the retained 9 holes of the golf course at BHGS with the ability to play from 18 tees will retain a traditional golf facility in this location, to which will be added the other benefits of an improved driving range, a golf academy and a short 9-hole course. In addition the Great Wolf Lodge will bring with it a range of additional recreational opportunities. I consider the Proposed Development at BHGS will meet the requirements of policy BSC10.