

The Links Trust made a record profit of £11.5 million in 2023 and recorded the highest number of annual rounds ever played at 283,000 nearly 30,000 more than the previous record of 254,000 in 2022. There were 152,000 rounds played by visitors which is an increase of 52% when compared to 2007 where 99,820 visitor rounds were played. With no additional capacity it is no surprise that getting a tee time is so difficult. The 2024 trajectory for rounds played is the same as 2023 and the Links plan to continue generating surpluses of the 2023 magnitude to fund an £80 million capital investment program over coming years despite 64% of surveyed links ticketholders expressing dissatisfaction with access to the courses. Why undertake a survey if you do not reflect and act on the results? A plan to increase revenue from off course activities, presumably sponsorship and branding, was mooted, which will, in the view of some, increase the commercialised image of the Links and potentially debase the traditional portrayal of St Andrews Golf. The Trust Strategy of investing £80 million without a coherent plan to limit visitor numbers is one of a charity operating on publicly owned property, surely this should be subject to public scrutiny and debate.

Note of the Meeting

Approximately 70 people including trustees and directors attended this meeting on the eve of the publication of the 2023 annual trust report. The evening was extremely well managed, and an excellent presentation was given by the chief executive, Neil Coulson. The presentation included data from the 2023 annual report and results from the recent Links ticket holders survey.

The total number of rounds played on the courses has increased to 283k with the majority being played by visitors (151k) compared to Links ticket holders (131k). However, no differentiation was made between resident ticket holders and other categories. 1,500 extra tee times for Links ticket holders have been provided in 2024 and 10,000 will be added in 2025 on all courses barring the Old. There was no mention of how these extra times for Links ticket holders would be applied throughout the year although they are likely to be very early times which are the most unappealing to golfers. (Applying simple division this equates to 5.5 times daily on the five courses (excluding the Balgove).

A new booking system will be in operation in November of this year and a 'Home of Golf' app will also be made available.

Pressures on the Links courses, academy and hospitality services comes from increasing visitor and ticketholder demand and further pressure will come from the western expansion of St Andrews and increasing student numbers. There is not yet a final decision on the entitlement of the population in the St. Andrews western expansion to resident Links tickets.

Revenue in 2023 was £43.9 million with a surplus of £11.5 million. This represents an increase from 2019; £29.2m and £3.3m respectively. Continuing to generate such surplus is required to fund capital investment of £80 million over the next several years (number unspecified). A new irrigation system for the courses will cost £10 million; other investments are required for the Eden and Links clubhouses, preparation of the Castle course for play throughout the year and the trust will invest in coastal protection which is the principal reason for purchase of the land beyond the end of the Eden and Strathtyrum courses. It is hoped to increase income from business diversification through an 'off course programme' (i.e. monies not generated via the sale of tee times, hospitality or merchandise). How this will be achieved was not clear but will probably involve selling the St Andrews brand.

The Links ticket holder survey found that of 1243 responses 87% found course access a sticking point and 64% were dissatisfied with access to at least one course and there was also dissatisfaction with availability at the academy.

There was a short question and answer session following the presentation; an important criticism was that the programme outlined for the trust was excellent for a commercial organisation but was ignoring the principles of being a charitable trust. Neil Coulson responded by reiterating the preface to his presentation; that the guiding principles of the trust were the 1974 Act and its charitable charter. An important view raised was that losing the confidence of the local population is not in the long term interest of the trust.

Reacquaintance with the works of C Northcote Parkinson* can be amusing and informative, some of his observations being “The number of workers within public administration bureaucracy or officialdom tends to grow, regardless of the amount of work to be done. Expenses will always increase in proportion to income growth.”

*PARKINSON'S LAW: Or The Pursuit of Progress Penguin 1986