

Musselburgh Racecourse – political pressure building on the committee to act



Alison Johnstone and Andy Wightman, the Scottish Green MSPs for Lothian, today added their weight to calls for an independent review of the governance of Musselburgh Racecourse amid a management crisis that is putting 150 local jobs at risk.

The East Lothian venue, which sits on Common Good land and has hosted horse racing since 1816, is set to lose its licence from the British Horseracing Authority over concerns at the way the business is run.

Alison Johnstone MSP said: “The people employed at Musselburgh racecourse are understandably concerned for their future, and the bickering between East Lothian Council and the Lothian Racing Syndicate who jointly run the course is not helping. This is a major local employer and the secretive way it is run has put its future in jeopardy.”

Andy Wightman MSP, Land Reform spokesperson for the Scottish Greens, said: “Musselburgh racecourse uses common good land and should be run transparently in the interests of the community, but instead its management is shrouded in secrecy.

“East Lothian Council’s leadership have stuck their heads in the sand in response to very serious allegations about governance and votes of no confidence in management. The racecourse needs to be opened up to public scrutiny if it is to have a future.”

CURRENT POSITION

The current position is that unless the **Musselburgh Joint Racing Committee (MJRC)** which runs the racecourse commits to the conditions attached to the racing licence issued by the British Horseracing Association, there will be no racing at Musselburgh for the foreseeable future.

There is a race meeting planned for 14 July 2017 but unless the MJRC undertakes to a more open form of governance by tomorrow Thursday at 5pm, then there is no possibility of getting a licence for next Friday's racing.

A meeting of the board has been called by the chairman Councillor Willie Innes for next week, but this will not allow the 14 July fixture to proceed.

COMMENT FROM BHA

The BHA said : "As has already been made clear to the licence holder, MJRC, the BHA is minded to grant a renewal of Musselburgh's racecourse licence subject to the agreement of the MJRC to an independent governance review and implementation of any recommendations by 31 December 2017.

"We have provided a commitment to work with the MJRC and Musselburgh racecourse to address any practical issues with implementation. The matter is entirely in the hands of the MJRC and we look forward to receiving such an undertaking from the MJRC by the end of Thursday 6 July so that the planned fixture on 14 July can continue. The BHA is not in a position to confirm that fixture will go ahead without such a commitment."

The Edinburgh Reporter understands that the BHA is quite unimpressed by the fact that the MJRC does not appear to be complying with its request. It seems that the organisation was not advised direct that a meeting would not be held until next week, and knew nothing of it until they read about it in the Racing Post.

Apparently MJRC had shared their news with the publication but not the licensing body.

TEMPORARY LICENCE

We further believe that if the racecourse does meet the BHA's requirements then a temporary license could be issued to the end of 2017 which would mean that this process would not have to be repeated for each fixture.

There are future meetings planned in July, August, September and October as it stands at the moment.

The position as far as we have been told by Councillor Innes who chairs the MJRC is that he is trying to ensure that any meeting has enough members to be quorate. This is given as an explanation as to why the next committee meeting cannot be held till next week.

COMMENT FROM COUNCILLOR INNES

Councillor Innes told us yesterday : "I am determined to secure the future of racing at Musselburgh. The racecourse is a tremendous asset to the county which, having received significant investment from its owner East Lothian Council over the years, is a highly-regarded and popular facility, which attracts race-goers from far and wide. It also benefits from a committed, hard-working and knowledgeable workforce, who deserve certainty and stability.

"Since the last meeting of the Musselburgh Joint Racing Committee (MJRC), the British Horseracing Authority has proposed a conditional, temporary extension to the racecourse's licence.

"It is only right and proper that the MJRC meets collectively to consider and respond to this proposal – and I cannot make a unilateral decision as Chair.

"I am therefore proposing to convene a meeting of the MJRC

next week, in which all members – including councillors and representatives of the Lothian Racing Syndicate – can consider the proposal.

“Having responded to the BHA timeously and committed to convening this meeting so the issue can be considered quickly and in the proper way, I am now calling on the BHA to put in place the necessary mechanism to allow the upcoming race meetings to go ahead.

“I am very open to views on the future of the racecourse, in terms of ensuring we continue to operate a successful facility and are able to maximise its value to East Lothian.

“The BHA has asked for a commitment to putting review recommendations into place – regardless of what they are. It is vital, however, that there is a full and proper opportunity to consider the recommendations of any review. The racecourse buildings are of course owned by the council – and therefore Elected Members are accountable to the people of East Lothian for these. The MJRC is an associated committee of the council.

“We therefore need to ensure that the outcome is one which enables the continuation of a successful racecourse, harnessing both democratic accountability and horse-racing expertise, in the best interests of local people – who have the biggest stake in the facility.”

There do not seem to be any minutes of previous meetings held by the MJRC on the council website, so it is difficult to know what may have been discussed on previous occasions. The racecourse has 15 full time employees and hundreds depend on the part-time and occasional work that the race meetings bring.