

Race against time to save July racing at Musselburgh

The news from Musselburgh Racecourse is rather bleak this afternoon.

There has been a long history of difficulties surrounding the East Lothian course, but these do not appear to have been created by the staff who run the course. Rather they are the ongoing legacy of the way that the board which runs the course is set up, and the way that it has operated.

The racecourse is owned by East Lothian Council, leased on a full commercial rent from them, and is managed by the **Musselburgh Joint Racing Committee** (MJRC) made up of four councillors and three members of the Lothian Racing Syndicate (LRS). The MJRC was first set up in 1994 as a partnership between the council and the LRS.



Today East Lothian Council leader Willie Innes is accused of sacrificing the racecourse's next race meeting on **14 July 2017** with the loss of thousands of pounds to the local economy, as well as putting hundreds of jobs in jeopardy.

The racecourse's latest three month temporary licence expired last week after the board which runs the track, **MJRC**, failed to give undertakings to the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) that it would hold a governance review. This is the third time that such a demand has been made, but it appears to be the first time that the licence may actually expire.

The committee has not approved a budget in the last six months meaning that the committee has virtually been unable to govern.

Investors in People who stripped the course of its prestigious award a couple of years ago described the committee then as 'dysfunctional'. IIP accused Cllr Caldwell of having lost the respect of the racecourse team.

A complaint in 2014 to the Public Standards Commission about the actings of Councillors Caldwell, Forrest and McNeil resulted in a decision by the governing body that there had not been any breach of the Councillors' Code of Conduct. The three had been accused of misconduct in their roles as members of the MJRC.

The BHA have since issued a deadline of this Thursday (6 July 2017) for MJRC to meet that condition and to apply for a new licence which would enable Musselburgh to stage its next scheduled fixture on Friday 14 July 2017.

Councillor Innes is one of the four East Lothian Councillors who hold control of MJRC and is Chairman of the racecourse.

The Labour councillor said he would convene a meeting next Tuesday to consider the BHA requirement but this delay will almost certainly result in Musselburgh losing the 14 July race night as the BHA has made clear.

Councillor Innes was appointed chairman in succession to John Caldwell who lost his seat at the May council elections. Councillor Caldwell was twice the subject of no confidence votes by staff, and was openly accused of avoiding usual industrial relations procedures.

The East Lothian course employs 15 full time staff and up to 250 support staff would have been expected to be on duty at the next race meeting.

Local pubs, hotels, restaurants, taxi and coach firms will also lose out from the significant trade the racecourse generates before and after each meeting.

LOTHIANS RACING SYNDICATE

John Prideaux, one of three Lothians Racing Syndicate members on the seven strong MJRC, said: "By delaying this meeting to next week Councillor Innes is as good as saying Musselburgh won't race on 14 July and he fails to grasp that this will cause immense damage to the racecourse. He is playing with people's livelihoods, many who will be out of pocket if this fixture does not go ahead, not to mention damaging a local economy which needs all the help it can get.

"This is an appalling state of affairs brought on solely by the intransigence of Councillor Innes and his colleagues who have refused to engage with the BHA regarding their concerns about how the racecourse is governed.

"The BHA first raised concerns in December and it took MJRC three months to arrange a meeting with the BHA at which one of the councillors didn't even bother to attend. This didn't suddenly flare up last week and this head-in-the-sand approach led to the BHA finally losing patience and not renewing our licence to race.

"Councillor Innes must put the welfare of those employed by Musselburgh Racecourse and local businesses first and resolve this situation immediately. This is not only damaging to Musselburgh Racecourse but it has a wider impact on the reputation of Scottish Racing and the many people employed in horseracing throughout the country."

COMMENT FROM COUNCILLOR INNES

Councillor Willie Innes, Chair of the MJRC, said: "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.”