

ABN 68 452 663 560

FAIRBAIRN
GOLF CLUB



35 Laverton Ave Majura ACT 2609
www.fairbairngolfclub.com.au

☎ 02 6257 9000

✉ manager@fairbairngolfclub.com.au

10 April 2026

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF DEFENCE ESTATE ASSETS

Dear Senators

Fairbairn Golf Club (the Club) operates on land identified as subject to divestiture. The Club commenced in 1953 as the RAAF Fairbairn Golf Club built by Defence volunteers and over the years was developed by the Defence membership into the 18-hole course it is today. This was transitioned to a not-for-profit Incorporated Association in 2004 in anticipation of RAAF Base Fairbairn officially closing. The Club licenced the land from Defence when it ceased to be part of RAAF Base Fairbairn in 2007. The current licence, which began on 1 July 2025, is for five years with the option of a five-year extension to 30 June 2035.

While we understand that Defence estate management must balance operational, financial and strategic requirements, the land in question provides functions and benefits that extend well beyond recreational use.

The proposed sale warrants the Committee's consideration of a number of issues, including the impact on veteran wellbeing and their connection to sites of military service; Defence community support; heritage values; whether public use or private use should be prioritised; broader social and community impacts; and remediation costs.

Veteran wellbeing and connection to sites of military service

The Club serves a unique role within the veteran and Defence community in Canberra and the surrounding region. With participation from approximately 300 veterans, current serving members, and Defence families, the Club operates as more than a sporting facility: it represents an informal but important extension of Defence community and veteran support. Numerous studies on Defence and veteran wellbeing have highlighted the importance of ongoing social connection, structured activity, and a sense of belonging after transition from service.

Activities such as community sport - particularly when organised around Defence networks - support mental health, reduce social isolation, and maintain esprit de corps and purposeful routine that all veterans value. While these social benefits are not the primary mission of Defence estate, they intersect with national veteran wellbeing priorities and Defence's long-standing commitment to supporting its people.

Additionally, Defence organisations often rely on community partnerships and informal networks to maintain member welfare, especially for retired personnel who no longer have regular contact with Defence workplaces. The Club functions as a stable, self-managed venue where current and former Defence members can gather, and provides an environment that encourages peer support, mentorship, and inter-generational connection among those who have served. For example, Club events include:

- An ANZAC Day dawn service with a commemorative address provided by an ex serving club member. Many veterans wearing their medals attend this event followed by breakfast and a social round of golf.
- The Services Golf Association – a group of ex-service personnel who play golf regularly to enhance their social connectivity.
- Various social events and veterans can participate in working bees offering a sense of purpose and achievement.

Losing access to the land will diminish these opportunities for veterans and families, requiring alternative forms of support or new facilities that may not be able to achieve similar outcomes.

The 2024 Report from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran’s Suicide highlighted the importance of ongoing connections to Defence, other veterans and serving members and how it contributes to good mental health, wellbeing and suicide prevention. While it can be argued that it is possible for veterans to join other courses, most in Canberra are overfull. At best it would result in the dilution of the veteran cohort who would be lost within the new clubs, and it is likely that those clubs would not cater for veterans as well as Fairbairn, leaving them disenfranchised. In addition, veterans and defence personnel may not be able to afford the other golf clubs.

The table below provides a comparison of Fairbairn’s fees with other courses, illustrating the affordability of Fairbairn compared to other local 18-hole golf clubs.

COST TO JOIN AN 18 HOLE GOLF CLUB IN CANBERRA

Course	Rate applicable to period	Annual fee (full 7 day membership)	Joining fee (if membership available)	Cost to join (if available)	Percentage above Fairbairn
Fairbairn	FY27	\$1,255	\$0	\$1,255	
Burns	FY27	\$1,620	\$0	\$1,620	29%
Gungahlin Lakes	FY26	\$1,883	\$670	\$2,553	103%
Queanbeyan	FY26	\$1,950	\$1,000	\$2,950	135%
Gold Creek	FY26	\$2,399	\$600	\$2,999	139%
Yowani	FY27	\$2,810	\$1,200	\$4,010	220%
Murrumbidgee	FY26	\$2,399	\$2,000	\$4,399	251%
Federal	FY26	\$3,700	\$2,000	\$5,700	354%
Royal Canberra	FY26	\$6,810	\$15,000	\$21,810	1638%

Note: Some clubs are yet to publish their FY27 rates. Increases of 10-15% can be expected on the FY26 rates listed above.

The Club’s Constitution also prioritises Defence personnel for memberships, exempting them from wait lists. This priority caters for current serving members being posted in from outside the area which is another important consideration.

Community relationships also form part of Defence's broader social licence. The Fairbairn Precinct includes several Defence-adjacent organisations and has a long history tied to military aviation and operations. The Club's location and heritage contribute to the identity of the area and hold symbolic meaning for many who served at RAAF Base Fairbairn or the Canberra Defence Establishment. Decisions that significantly alter these community features can generate reputational impacts or perceptions of disconnect from Defence's past and present members.

The proposed land sale not only negatively impacts the wellbeing of veterans and their families, but also the broader social and historical role the site plays for Defence personnel and veterans. It seems incongruous with Royal Commission recommendations to sell off the land as it threatens the existence of a club that is so valuable and a successful model for veteran community support.

Maintenance and ongoing costs

One of the reasons stated for divesting parts of the Defence Estate is to save the cost of maintaining facilities that it is not using. That is not the case for the Fairbairn Golf Club. The Club pays Defence an annual fee plus a percentage of its turnover as rent under its licence. In addition, the Club has spent about \$1.6 million over the last 5 years making improvements to the property. So, the land does not cost Defence anything and actually makes it money.

Remediation costs

Remediation costs are likely to be significant. PFAS contamination is present across the course and while the highest concentration is adjacent to the airport fire training ground, it is present throughout the licenced area. PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) are synthetic 'forever chemicals' which do not break down over time. Long serving members who helped maintain the course when it was part of the RAAF Base have advised that PFAS was used as a fertiliser on the course.

The presence of PFAS across the former RAAF Base has been noted elsewhere. For example, the presence of PFAS contaminated soil was acknowledged in Capital Airport Group's Major Development Application for 19-21 Scherger Drive (a proposed new office building in the Fairbairn Precinct) dated March 2025 (see section 5.2.3).

Extensive testing and management of PFAS may be required before the land could be used for other purposes or may lower the expected sale price.

Public v private use

The Club provides a community facility with over 40,000 rounds of golf being played in the last 12 months. This facility has been supported by the ACT Government providing a grant to improve our driving range upgrade which was completed in December 2024. In 2025 the Club was selected as the Country Golf Club of the year by Golf NSW in recognition of the investments being made, the range of golfing options being offered and the club's long term development plans.

As noted above, it provides the most cost-effective option for membership of an 18-hole golf club in the ACT and adjacent areas, as well as the course being available to social golfers. Our Vision and Mission Statement enshrine the objective of providing the best value golfing facility in Canberra.

The Club is available to the public, subject only to the terms of the Licence between the Commonwealth and the Club. This makes the Club qualify as "an alternative public use" warranting priority over private development.

The golf club is a valuable local community asset accessible by local social clubs, charity days, and corporate events. Additionally, the club hosts women's beginners golf programs, mums and bubs social events and PGA Legends events as well as a number of annual events open to golfers from around the district. The club is also a signatory to the Women in Golf Charter. Ceasing to operate Fairbairn as a golf club will see 850 plus members looking for new clubs to play and the ACT does not have the capacity for these players to be absorbed into other clubs. This loss of access will impact people's fitness, mental health and remove community engagement opportunities.

The land sits within the ANEF20 and ANEF25 contours of Canberra Airport. It is also adjacent to a live fire range used by Defence and navigation aids run by Airservices Australia. These limit the permitted uses of the land and its value to prospective buyers.

As mentioned above, Defence granted the Club a 5-year licence starting 1 July 2025 and with a 5-year option to extend it out until 30 June 2035. This term was granted on the basis of the Master Plans we submitted for development of the course over 10 years and the investments we have been making and wish to continue to make.

That one part of Defence sees the Club as providing a valuable community facility with plans to improve it further and extended our licence to 2035 - while another part of Defence was planning to terminate our licence - is very disappointing.

Conclusion

In summary, the land on which the Club operates does not directly cost Defence to manage or run and provides a range of benefits to veterans, Defence personnel and the wider local community. Alternate uses of the land are limited by its location and the remediation of PFAS, which is likely to be expensive. Continuing its current public usage should be prioritised over a sale to private developers.

Yours sincerely

Brian Depree
President
Fairbairn Golf Club