



**NOT COUL PRESS RELEASE**  
**13 June 2018**

### **PLANNING CHAIR ASKED TO RE-ASSESS COUL GOLF EVIDENCE**

Following last week's decision by the North Planning Applications Committee to defer a decision on Coul Links, *Not Coul*, the group of local citizens opposing the development, is launching a petition directly to the Chair of the Committee, Cllr Maxine Smith. The petition requests that the Committee gives better and fuller consideration to evidence presented by the Council's own Planning Officer and Scottish Natural Heritage.

An open letter from *Not Coul* to Cllr Smith, which accompanies the launch of the petition, claims that: *"The wider consensus by ecological experts is that this proposal would be one of the UK's most serious and fundamental environmental mistakes."*

Commenting today, *Not Coul* Chair Dr Tom Dargie, said: "This is one of the most unpopular and fundamentally unsound development proposals in the history of Highland Council. The petition to the planning committee will give the thousands of objectors the chance to tell Councillors that they feel incredibly let down by last week's so-called debate. It is not too late to think again in coming to a respected decision, using the evidence and the correct facts."

"Regrettably, several Councillors made statements that were based on astonishing misinterpretations of the evidence that was presented to them by Scottish Natural Heritage."

"Cllr Gale supported on the mistaken understanding that the impacts would be limited to 7% of the site, even though SNH had explained just minutes before that the net impact would be significantly greater than that."

"Cllr Currie based her inclination to support on twin misunderstandings, namely that there are no management options other than the golf development, and that something must be done urgently to deal with "management issues" like improving access through vegetation seen as overgrown and untidy. In fact, SNH made it clear that there are legal mechanisms available to them to ensure the site is properly managed and cared for, long term. And there is no urgent problem. That is a myth created by the applicant. Apart from a little too much gorse, the area remains outstanding. Recent work by world experts on fungi and lichens has shown that. At this moment the dunes are alive with rare insects, carpets of flowers and many breeding birds. Coul is resplendent."

"In addition, members who spoke were mistaken that the mitigation is sufficient to offset severe SSSI damage. The golf footprint in the SSSI is 22 hectares (20 Murrayfield-sized playing fields, 300 Dornoch Cathedrals). The fertiliser effects will go further, maybe another 20 to 40 hectares. The applicant's information on hydrology is seriously deficient and does not allow exact calculations. In fact, golf could destroy or adversely modify most of the interior of the Coul dunes. That may well lead to SSSI denotification."

"The offer of "mitigation" from the applicant, considered acceptable by some councillors, is mainly made up of two things. First there is 10 hectares of ground outside the SSSI, north of Embo. This is offered up as a 'substitute', like for like, for SSSI habitat that will be destroyed. It is not at all like for like. Instead, much is infested with invasive species, garden escapes and good numbers of dog poo bags cast into the rough ground. Much of it is not even dune. Part is old rubbish tips which have just

been made known to the council by Not Coul and which the applicant failed to identify in the application. The main tip is under the green of the proposed 14<sup>th</sup> Hole and has already polluted habitats downslope. All these horrors are outside the SSSI. It is frankly wrong to bring unsuitable ground into an enlarged SSSI.”

“The core SSSI mitigation offered by the developer is a 4.5-hectare scheme to shift heather about, burying other dune habitat where the heather will be dumped. At the same time this will destroy nationally important lichens growing within the heath. Those lichens rely in turn on rabbits which will be wiped out for golf. SNH explained the importance of the lichen and made clear that this scheme (termed “translocation”) simply wouldn’t work. Translocation is not considered as mitigation within an SSSI. That advice, repeated by the Council’s own area planning manager, was ignored by all councillors who spoke about mitigation and offset.”

“We understand that this is a complex development. The members do not realise that the environmental impacts will be extensive, blatant to insidious, much initially unseen. Their effects over a few years will be catastrophic. The mitigation offered is near-worthless, for permission to destroy ground in a triple-designated outstanding dune system. That is precisely why so many people have objected”

*“Such evidence matters.* So far, Councillors have taken the lowest possible numbers of negative damage to this outstanding environment and balanced those against the highest job numbers supplied by the applicant, a fanciful 290. That is the poorest of argument. The ecological integrity of the site – that is the capacity to sustain itself - is at stake, but that fundamental equation has been completely ignored. So, for Councillors to base their arguments on misleading claims made by the developer, rather than on the advice of their own experts, really is inexplicable.”

## NOTES TO EDITORS

- Not Coul is an unincorporated group of Third Party objectors, opposing September 2017 plans for an 18-hole golf course on the site (Highland Council application reference 17/04601/FUL) by a group of developers led by US business people Mike Keiser and Todd Warnock, and including the Coul Links landowner and Embo Trust.

- Coul Links is a stretch of coastline in East Sutherland, north of the village of Embo. Exceptionally, it is protected for its rare dune habitats and wildlife by national (Site of Special Scientific Interest), European (Special Protection Area) and international (Ramsar) designations.

- Coul Links is home to more than 1,200 species including the extremely rare Fonseca's Seed Fly, which is restricted *worldwide* to this stretch of coastline.

- Scottish Natural Heritage and a group of respected organisations, including RSPB Scotland, the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the National Trust for Scotland, have all objected to the proposal on the basis that it runs contrary to all the designations, Scottish Planning Policy (SPP), and the Local Development Plan, by materially compromising the environmental integrity of the site.

- The applicant claims that "less than 2%" of the site will be affected and that mitigation measures will lead to biodiversity net gain. That is completely contradicted, and seen as impossible, given the site’s assets. Coul Links is part of the very large Loch Fleet SSSI which is 80% tidal mud and sand. In fact, the impact on *land* habitat is very large indeed, and analysis by Scottish Natural Heritage shows extensive loss of dune heath, dune grassland and dune wetland would occur. SNH and *Not Coul* also

consider that mitigation measures will be largely ineffective, having stated in November 2017 that "*adverse impacts will still greatly outweigh any benefits for the sand dune habitat*". That advice was repeated at the Committee meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> June. It remains sound.

- A planning decision on the Coul application was deferred on 5<sup>th</sup> June, to allow the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency to consider new evidence submitted by *Not Coul*. That information challenges the content of applicant work on ecology and hydrology, which could be "unfit for purpose". SEPA is also considering comment from the applicant, regarding the *Not Coul* submission. The Not Coul further objection was made on the 21<sup>st</sup> May, before the legal deadline for comments.

Further information:

<http://www.notcoul.com/home.html>

<https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/conserve-coul-links-for-nature-not-golf-1>

[https://highland.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast\\_interactive/354088](https://highland.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/354088)

**Attachments:**

- Not Coul petition letter to planning committee Chair, Councillor Maxine Smith
- Not Coul full letter to planning committee Chair, Councillor Maxine Smith
- Image (no photo credit required)

**Please direct all press enquires and requests for comment to Not Coul:**

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