

Coul Links: golf course plans still driving a wedge between rival groups

By John Ross

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A view from the 18th hole on the planned golf course at Coul Links

Plans to build a championship golf course at Coul Links in Sutherland continue to divide opinion seven years after the idea was first mooted.

With new proposals on the table, after a previous attempt was turned down, the issue is not going away.

So, what happened to the original plans and what has happened since?

Who was behind the original course plan?

American entrepreneur Todd Warnock revealed in November 2015 he was leading proposals for a 'world class' course.

Mr Warnock, owner of the Links House Hotel in Dornoch and the town's courthouse building, said he was working with renowned course developer Mike Kaiser.

The first plans were made available for consultation in August 2016.

Within days, the [Not Coul](#) group was set up to fight the proposals, highlighting the area's vulnerability as a site of special scientific interest (SSSI).

More than 1,100 people objected to the application when it was lodged, and more than 90,000 signed an online petition.



Todd

Warnock, who originally planned to build the golf course. Picture by Sandy McCook.

Conservationists called for surveys for the Fonseca's seed fly. They say it is only found in the dune system on a stretch of the coastline.

Mr Keiser and his team maintained that, rather than destroying habitats, they would be preserving them.

The developers and supporters of the golf course said it would bring much-needed investment to the area.

In September 2017, after two years refining the £8-10 million project, plans were submitted for approval.

The Coul Links team hoped work would start the following year and be completed by March 2021.

Claims of millions of pounds and hundreds of jobs

An economic study estimated the golf course would create 250 indirect jobs and add £60 million to the East Sutherland economy alone – 450 jobs and £85 million for the Highlands – in its first 10 years.

Mr Warnock also revealed the development would be part-owned by The Embo Trust. This, he said, was to “guarantee a local income stream for generations”.

In November 2017, the Green MSP John Finnie submitted a parliamentary motion opposing the course, claiming it would be “catastrophic” for the environment.

Conservation organisations, including RSBP Scotland and the Scottish Wildlife Trust, also lodged an objection warning it would damage an internationally important wildlife site.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency withdrew its objection in March 2018.



The Coul

Links public inquiry began in February 2019. Picture by Sandy McCook.

But the following month it was revealed more than 1,170 objections had been lodged with Highland Council’s planning department.

[Highland Council’s north planning applications committee backed the plans in June 2018.](#)

Councillors went against the recommendation of officials who said the development would have a detrimental impact on the SSSI.

[The Scottish Government called in the application in August 2018](#) and a public inquiry opened in February 2019, lasting four weeks.

Coul plans refused

The saga seemed to end in [February 2020 when the government refused the plans](#).

Planning minister Kevin Stewart said [Reporters concluded the harmful impacts of the development to protected habitats and species would outweigh the potential socio-economic benefits](#).

However, in January 2021 a new group, [Communities for Coul \(C4C\)](#) revived the idea, saying it felt their area had been “dealt a grave disservice”.

[The landowner, Edward Abel Smith later announced plans for a £20 million eco hotel at the site if the golf course gets approved](#).

[In June last year a community ballot was held and attracted a 44.4% turnout](#).

To the question ‘Do you support a community planning application for an environmentally-sensitive, world-class golf course to be built at Coul Links near Embo? 69.2% said Yes.



Coul Links.

Picture by Alasdair Dickson.

[C4C lodged a pre-Planning Application Notice \(PAN\) for the development with Highland Council in June 2022](#).

[It says it has worked to review the concerns raised by Scottish Ministers in the previous application](#).

[A full planning application is expected in the autumn](#).

[But the division continues. In July an alliance of seven environmental organisations raised concerns over the new plans for a golf course](#).

[In return, C4C challenged the group to say how they would protect the habitat it says is threatened by the course plans](#).

[A public exhibition of the plans was held at Embo Community Centre on July 27](#).

Coul Links: revived golf course plans go on display to the public in Sutherland

By John Ross

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Gordon Sutherland, director of Communities for Coul. Picture Sandy McCook

Plans for a world class golf course at Coul Links in Sutherland have gone on display to the public.

A bid by a previous group to develop a golf course at Coul Links [was first revealed in 2015](#), but was rejected by Scottish Ministers in 2020.

Communities for Coul (C4C) revived the plans in 2021 and lodged a pre-Planning Application Notice (PAN) with Highland Council in June this year.

The group hopes to submit a full planning application by the early autumn.

Exhibition picketed by opposition group

C4C opened the exhibition of plans in Embo Community Centre but an opposition group Not Coul picketed the event and handed out leaflets to people as they went in.

C4C says it has responded to concerns raised previously in developing the new plans.

This includes a comprehensive proposal to restore and protect the Coul Links Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) on the shores of the Dornoch Firth.

It says the amount of land used for tees, greens, fairways and walkways in the SSSI has been reduced by over 40%.



Tom Dargie from Not Coul which leafleted people as they entered the exhibition. Picture by Sandy McCook

This, it argues, will perpetually protect the coastal environment and help transform the area economically and create 175-250 jobs

Nicola Drummond, a planning consultant for C4C, said the exhibition is part of the planning process which requires community consultation.

She said invasive plants are taking over the SSSI: “We see this as symbiotic relationship in terms of the development, bringing forward a quality golf course but also enabling the SSSI to benefit from long-term appropriate management.

“By reducing the footprint of the golf course....we feel we have gone a long way to addressing the concerns Scottish Ministers raised.”

One of those handing out leaflets was Tom Dargie, ecologist for Not Coul.

Opponents say they will fight the plans

He said: “I had a careful look at the exhibition and its much as I expected. But we are pretty sure on three grounds we will be fighting hard against this development.”

Mr Dargie said he doesn't accept the economic case with the workforce not available. He said last month there were 30 vacancies in hospitality businesses and the care sector in Dornoch.

Not Coul also has doubts over the quality of the planned golf course and concerns about environmental damage.

Lynn Redfern, who runs a local caravan site in Dornoch with husband Darren, said: “I am completely against it and haven't seen anything that has changed my mind.

“Are they are saying the jobs will be good enough to encourage people into the area?

“Even if they do come to the area, they can’t afford housing now. If you create a golf course that’s going to become more popular for second homes and put the prices up again.

“We are in that cycle already and its going to get worse.



The exhibition was held at Embo Community Centre. Picture by Sandy McCook.

“And this whole thing about managing the area. That’s been there well before we have and it’s taking care of itself. People should leave it alone.”

Retired banker Brian Munro from Dornoch is in favour: “I was very disappointed when it was turned down. The council approved it, the community council was supportive and the community was supportive.

“It then got called in and coincidentally the week it was turned down was the week they were trying to get their budget through with the Green Party, it stinks.

‘I think it would be good for the area’

“To me it’s a natural area for a golf course. The people who are shouting about protecting the plants are not doing a thing to protect them at the moment.”

James McGillivray, from Dornoch, said: “I am in favour of the course. I think it would be good for the area. The site is run down and needs to be done up.”

Another visitor, who gave his name only as John, said he is “ambivalent” to the plans.

“I can see both sides of the argument. You can see the job opportunities but you can also see the environmentalists’ concerns as well.

“But the biggest problem will be getting planning permission.”

Earlier this month an alliance of seven environmental organisations raised concerns over the new plans for the golf course.

The Conservation Coalition's fears remain that a development of the type and scale planned would impact on national and international protected areas.



Brian Munro is in favour of the golf course. Picture by Sandy McCook.

The group, that includes [the Scottish Wildlife Trust](#) and RSPB Scotland, encouraged “anyone concerned about saving nature” to contact their local MSP.

C4C hit back [challenging the coalition to explain how they would protect the natural habitat they say is threatened by the golf development.](#)

Esme Clelland, from RSPB Scotland, who attended the exhibition, said it is hoped to have meaningful discussions with the applicants and consultants on the plans

“We still have concerns about the fact it still overlaps the designated site but it’s been good to chat to people and we will take that away and have a think about it.”