

The British Lichen Society
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British Lichen Society

Head of Planning and Building Standards
The Highland Council
Glenurquhart Road
Inverness
IV3 5NX

6th April 2023

Dear Sir/Madam,

23/00580/FUL | Construction of an 18-hole golf course, practice area, access, parking, ancillary infrastructure and the change of use of existing buildings to form clubhouse, pro shop, maintenance shed and ancillary facilities | Land 1700M NW Of Embo Community Centre School Street Embo

With reference to the planning application above, the British Lichen Society OBJECTS to this proposal.

The British Lichen Society is the national charity working to promote the teaching and study of lichens, the conservation of lichens and their habitats and highlight their beauty and importance.

Our objection is due to the likely adverse impacts of the development on nationally and internationally important and legally protected habitats and species, specifically the sand dune feature of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the likely adverse impact on the nationally and internationally important lichen assemblage.

The proposed development site is subject to multiple legal designations designed to afford its protection including SSSI, SPA and Ramsar status. These designations were a key factor in the decision by Scottish Ministers to refuse planning permission for the very similar previous development proposal submitted in 2017 and subject to a public local inquiry in 2019 at which the British Lichen Society provided expert witness representation.

Despite some changes from the original application, we do not consider this new proposal to be sufficiently improved as to permit the granting of planning permission for an 18-hole golf course and associated infrastructure on this site. We consider the impacts in detail in the Appendix below but in summary these are:

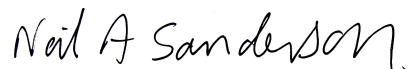
- The proposal will impact negatively on the legally protected sand dune feature (SSSI).
- The developer has failed to carry out adequate species surveys as recommended by the NatureScot (then Scottish Natural Heritage) Bryophytes, Lichens and Fungi Adviser in 2017 'further survey should be carried out of lichen rich heath, both within the development footprint and in other areas of potential habitat. Only then will it be possible to determine the relative impact on the important lichens that occur on the site' (SNH, 2017).
- The proposal will impact negatively on the nationally and internationally important lichen population.

The society is a Charitable Incorporated Organization (number 1194213)

- Climate change adaptation: the proposal is not consistent with the eight climate change adaptation principles published by NatureScot¹.

Coul Links is protected for nature at national and international levels. The Scottish Government recognises the twin climate and biodiversity crises and the part that Scotland must play in addressing these. Highland Council has also declared a climate and ecological emergency and is a signatory to the Edinburgh Declaration on post-2020 global biodiversity framework. Given this, it is imperative that this application is refused.

Yours sincerely, Neil A Sanderson



President, British Lichen Society

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¹ <https://www.nature.scot/climate-change/helping-nature-adapt#:~:text=Acting%20on%20Adaptation%20Principles&text=Reduce%20other%20pressures%20on%20ecosystems,soil%20processes%2C%20and%20species%20interactions>

Appendix: Supporting Information

1. Impact on sand dune SSSI features

The application states that 1.5 hectares of dune heath will be affected by this proposal. The proposed mowing/modification of habitat within the SSSI will be also be a direct impact and it is misleading to state that only 1.5 hectares of habitat will be affected.

The 1.5 hectares of dune heath constitutes a significant area of habitat, the loss of which is unacceptable given the site's SSSI status and the fact that dune heath is a legal protected feature within the SSSI citation. Sand dunes are also listed on the Scottish Biodiversity List as a priority habitat.

The application presents as positive the fact that the area of dune heath to be affected by this proposal is smaller than that which would have been affected by the previous proposal. This comparison is immaterial – this application must be judged on the basis of its proposed impacts, not on the basis of a comparison of this proposal with previous plans for the site.

We do not consider that the proposed compensation for the loss of this habitat is sufficient to justify its loss.

2. Impacts on Lichen Population

Coul Links, as a constituent part of Loch Fleet SSSI, is the richest site in Britain, if not NW Europe, for lichen species of sand dune systems (Coppins 2019). Both Ferry Links and Coul Links support this assemblage with both Links complementing each other and contributing equally to the integrity of the site as a whole. The lack of recognition of this nationally significant interest as part of the notified SSSI features is a huge oversight. We have no confidence that the mitigation measures can in any way be guaranteed to protect this significant interest.

Our response to the previous 2017 planning application requested a full lichen survey be carried out, which we note has still not been done. NatureScot's scoping opinion advised the applicant to ensure they have the most up-to-date information available from e.g., the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh (RBGE) and from ourselves as holders of a national database of lichens. We are therefore surprised that the EIA relies heavily on a 1992 report (Fryday, 1992), and does not make use of publicly available evidence which demonstrates in fact that Coul Links is of national and international importance for its lichen assemblage. Dr Coppins' 2019 report, prepared for and submitted as part of Not Coul's submission to the public inquiry, demonstrates this national and international importance, and the fact that Coul Links far exceeds the threshold for SSSI designation for its lichen interest based on 2018 JNCC guidelines for the selection of SSSIs concerning lichens (Sanderson *et al.* 2018). The EIA therefore significantly underplays the importance of lichen populations on the site, and we have no confidence that the mitigation measures can in any way be guaranteed to protect this interest.

We note that the EIA includes a proposal to mow fairways, with the assertion that *'this will create a diverse landscape mosaic for lichens grasses and mosses to thrive.'* The accompanying environmental management plan states that: *"The objectives of fairway management are to provide an acceptable surface giving a firm relatively level stance from which a clean contact with the ball can be made through 12 months of the year, barring exceptional weather conditions. The sward should be uniform, closely mown and free from significant blemishes (to reward well placed balls)."* Given this, and the fact that standard industry

practice is to mow fairways between two and four times per week, we do not consider that this management regime will in any way facilitate the creation of a 'diverse landscape mosaic' let alone one in which lichens will thrive, and certainly not those for which the site is important. We note that although they are mentioned in the EIA, there is no mention of lichens in the environmental management plan, despite the report by Dr Coppins being made available during the earlier rejected planning application. We find this omission concerning, given the assertion that important species will be protected.

In addition to the above, the EIA proposes to mitigate the 'significantly adverse' impact to lichens by 'avoiding the most sensitive areas'. Given that no formal lichen survey has been carried out, and the applicant therefore has been unable to demonstrate an understanding of where the most sensitive areas are, we have no confidence that important lichen populations will be protected.

3. Climate change adaptation

The proposed development is not consistent with the eight climate change adaptation principles published by NatureScot (NatureScot 2023), the most relevant to this planning application being:

1. **Reduce other pressures** on ecosystems, habitats and species – e.g. pollution, unsustainable use, grazing, habitat fragmentation and invasive non-native species.
2. **Make space for natural processes** including geomorphological, water and soil processes, and species interactions.
3. **Enhance opportunities for species to disperse** by reducing fragmentation and increasing the amount of habitat available.
4. **Improve habitat management** where activities such as grazing, burning or drainage cause declines in diversity or size of species populations, or where modifying management or increasing habitat diversity could improve resilience to climate change.

The proposed development will result in an increase in habitat fragmentation, decrease in habitat area and disruption to natural geomorphological processes and as such is not consistent with these climate change adaptation principles, which should be exemplified across Scotland's protected areas. There may be opportunities to improve habitat management, e.g. through scrub management and grassland grazing measures, however such management should be implemented on the site irrespective of the development.

References

NatureScot. 2023. <https://www.nature.scot/climate-change/helping-nature-adapt#:~:text=Acting%20on%20Adaptation%20Principles&text=Reduce%20other%20pressures%20on%20ecosystems,soil%20processes%2C%20and%20species%20interactions>

Scottish Natural Heritage, 2017. Ref CDM 147883 Coul Links, Dornoch – proposed golf course development. Comments on the Environmental Statement by David Genney, SNH Bryophytes, Lichens and Fungi.