

EXCLUSIVE Locals 'wildly in favour' Forbes backs plans to build controversial new golf course

By Andrew Learmonth

KATE Forbes has backed calls for a controversial new 18-hole golf course on Coul Links, near Dornoch.

The former finance secretary said it was a "necessity" and that the Highlands did not have the "luxury of ignoring major economic opportunities".

She also suggested most people opposed to development did not live locally, but were "pontificating on the future" of the Highlands from the central belt. It is the first time the MSP has spoken out in favour of the new course.

While she represents the neighbouring constituency, she said she had real concerns about the prospect of depopulation across the region. "And that's all the more reason to look at initiatives that might reverse that trend.

And if you look right across the Highlands' history, particularly since the 1960s, what's made the biggest difference has been key economic interventions.

"So opportunities to create jobs, industries taking off and, let's be frank, tourism, and all that comes with tourism done the right way, is one of those key economic drivers."

Last month, the Scottish Government called in Highland Council's decision to grant planning for the course.

Much of the land was designated as part of the Loch Fleet site of special scientific interest (SSSI) in 1984.

However, Communities for Coul, the group behind the proposed golf, said the area has become "so degraded that it needs the very best in 21st century conservation to restore and protect it". The group added that having the course on "about

0.1%" of the SSSI would generate enough cash to restore and protect the whole area.

That claim has been rejected by Not Coul, the campaign group opposed to the development. It says the course would "seriously damage" the habitats and wildlife of a triple-protected site.

There has also been opposition from the Conservation Coalition of wildlife charities, which includes the National Trust for Scotland, RSPB Scotland, and Scottish Wildlife Trust.

Two petitions calling for planning permission to be refused have now received over 125,000 signatures between them. Scottish ministers called in and rejected a previous planning proposal for a golf course on the same site in 2020.

Ms Forbes said: "My understanding is that a lot of the earlier concerns have now been mitigated. And when you've got renowned economists telling you that this could turbocharge the Highland economy, when you've got environmentalists telling you that concerns can be addressed and this may actually be good for the environment, I am left wondering why not?"

When asked about the opposition and the huge numbers of people who signed petitions against the development, she said: "Well, the first question I would ask is where the petitioners are predominantly located? And I'm open to being corrected, but it wouldn't be the first time that there are many people that feel very exercised about something in an area where they don't live.

"Ultimately, the young people of the east Highlands are the ones that we have to retain with jobs and housing. 'It's all very well from the

luxury of an Edinburgh flat pontificating on the future of the more fragile areas of the Highlands, it's quite another thing when you're trying to make ends meet, and you're feeling that challenge of being unable to get on the housing ladder and not earning a decent wage.

"So I, ultimately, as a Highlander, would always prioritise the views of those in the Highlands. I just don't think in the Highlands we've got the luxury of ignoring major economic opportunities," she added. "Other places may have that luxury. In the Highlands, it's a necessity."



Coul Links, near Dornoch
Picture: Vince Lowe

Dr Tom Dargie, an ecologist who is the lead for the Not Coul campaign opposed to the development rejected claims there was depopulation in the area. "Instead, it is expansion with lots of young families. The 2022 Census figures to be issued in May will show that.

"This depopulation assertion is a myth bandied by people who should know better. They will be claiming next that local communities are an endangered species. The 400 jobs claim is another myth. There is no demand for more seasonal hospitality jobs in Dornoch and SE Sutherland."

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: "The Scottish Government received a notification following the Highland Council's decision to approve the application for a golf course at Coul Links.

"After giving full and proper consideration to the proposal, Scottish ministers decided to call in the application for their own determination.

"A reporter has been appointed to examine these proposals and prepare a report and recommendation for Scottish ministers who will make the final decision on this planning application."



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