SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION ON LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL ASSESSMENT OF WINDFARMS

Introduction

During oral evidence to the committee on 21st March 2012 it was agreed that SNH would provide some further information to the committee on the process of landscape and visual assessment for windfarms. This supplementary evidence briefly describes the process and sets out our role in providing advice to the decision maker. It refers to many other pieces of information and guidance and we have provided hyperlinks to further sources if required.

What is landscape character assessment?

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is the standard system for identifying, describing, classifying and mapping the variety of our landscapes in a systematic way. It helps explain what makes landscapes distinctive and different from each other. It takes account of cultural aspects and other associations as well as physical features. LCA can also be used to guide landscape change by providing a baseline against which to assess the change predicted to arise from a development proposal, such as a windfarm.

The LCA provides the starting point for the assessment of a windfarm application. The whole of Scotland has been mapped and described, and the full set of LCAs is available here. Further information on how LCA works is also available here.

Landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA)

The technique of landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA) is used to identify, describe and assess the effects of proposed change on the landscape, such as a new road or windfarm. It uses the LCA as a baseline to assess this change. The LVIA process is used to help design the proposed change, so that negative effects are reduced and is commonly used in Environmental Impact Assessment.

LVIA uses a standard, consistent, professionally adopted methodology, set out in the “Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (2nd edition)” (GLVIA) published by the Landscape Institute. The two aspects of the assessment - landscape and visual effects - are independent but related. Landscape impacts affect individual elements of the landscape, such as physical features, or qualities or associations, (such as cultural aspects or wildness), or the overall character. Visual impacts are the changes in the appearance of the landscape and how people see these.

It is an objective and transparent process. It involves a detailed assessment of the effects of the proposed development on the landscape character and the visual effects on a selection of carefully chosen viewpoints. The assessment of windfarms in this process is objective. Personal opinions about windfarms are set aside and the assessment focuses on an assessment of the sensitivity of the landscape, the magnitude of change to the landscape and the significance of the resulting impacts. More detail on this can be found in the GLVIA.
The visual effects of windfarm proposals are generally represented through the production of wireframes and photomontages which depict the likely effect of the development. We published guidance on the Visual Representation of windfarms in 2006 setting out detailed advice on how this should be done in a consistent manner. We are currently reviewing this guidance to ensure that the information provided by developers provides as accurate a representation of the proposed development as is required, based on our experience over the last 5 years.

**Assessing the cumulative impacts on landscape**

In some parts of Scotland there are many windfarm applications installed or within the planning system. The purpose of a Cumulative Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (CLVIA) is to describe, represent and assess the additional impacts which a proposed wind farm would have in relation to other existing, consented or proposed windfarms. The main requirement is an assessment which is proportionate to the impacts, and identifies the significant cumulative effects arising from the proposed windfarm.

All CLVIA should accord with the methodology outlined in the GLVIA and other relevant guidance. These have been developed to ensure a consistent approach is used. The judgement about the limits of acceptable change to the landscape is made once the assessment process has completed.

We have recently published revised guidance on **Assessing the cumulative impacts of windfarms**. It must be emphasised that this guidance only sets out a process to assess cumulative effects. It does not help you decide whether cumulative effects are acceptable or not. This is a judgement that requires detailed consideration on a case by case basis against a set of clear principles.

**Siting and Designing windfarms in the landscape**

When undertaking an LVIA we assess the application against the principles set out in **Siting and Designing windfarms in the landscape** – published in 2009. These are broadly accepted as the basis for locating and designing windfarms, and we are currently reviewing this guidance. The guidance also sets out key principles for multiple windfarm develop and offers advice on spatial planning for windfarms.

**Spatial planning for windfarms**

Planning Authorities have been tasked by Scottish Planning Policy to set out spatial plans for onshore windfarms of greater than 20 MW. We have been working with Planning Authorities to help deliver these, but, as set out in our written evidence, progress has been mixed. We strongly support a plan led approach to windfarm development and we published our own Strategic Locational Guidance in 2002. As stated in our oral evidence, we are revising this guidance and would be pleased to work with Scottish Government and others to develop a clearer national steer on windfarm development which takes in to account the growing cumulative
effects. Ultimately, however, we believe that detailed spatial plans at the local level are required against which individual applications can be assessed.

Our role

Our role in this process is to provide independent and objective advice on the impacts of each proposal. We do so using the processes set out above and seek to offer clear and transparent advice on the likely effects of the proposal. We will also offer advice on the consistency of the proposal with the relevant landscape capacity study and / or spatial plan for windfarms where these exist. Ultimately, however, we offer advice to the decision maker (either the Planning Authority or Scottish Ministers) who must then weigh up the benefits of the proposal with the effects on our landscapes and reach a view on the application.

Scottish Natural Heritage
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