Thank you for your request of 19 September 2017 for views on Petition 1655 (Scotland’s National Scenic Areas). This petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the process for designation of National Scenic Areas (NSAs) and consider increasing the number of NSAs to protect Scotland’s natural landscape and support the tourism sector. The Committee asked in particular whether the Scottish Government’s policy on wind farms, including environmental impact assessments, contributes to its position on not reviewing the NSAs process, and requested a view on the suggestion of the provision of regular updates to the Scottish Parliament on cumulative impact.

The process for the designation of NSAs is provided by section 50 of the Planning etc. (Scotland) Act 2006 and we have no plans at present to review the process or the extent of NSAs in Scotland.

Onshore wind development is essential to Scotland’s transformation to a fully decarbonised energy system by 2050. Development in the right areas brings opportunities which underpin our vision to grow a low carbon economy and build a fairer society. Our current policy is to support the deployment of onshore wind while:

- protecting the environment (landscape and visual, ecological and other environmental impacts);
- protecting residential amenity; and
- maximising local benefits, including through promoting shared ownership and community benefits.

The consideration of potential cumulative impacts is recognised as an important part of the planning process. However, it is not something which we consider could be readily or meaningfully quantified as a national impact for reporting purposes. Understanding the cumulative effect of wind farms on NSAs would require more than a map or list of the locations of wind farms. Impacts would require consideration of the specific circumstances of individual proposals, such as how developments relate to each other in design and in relationship to their surroundings; their frequency as one moves through the landscape; and their visual separation to allow experience of the character of the landscape in-between. A map or dataset of the location of individual wind farms can provide an indication of likely cumulative impacts, but would not tell you what the cumulative effects are, or their degree. It would also be limited in time to the last time the map was updated, after which the impacts may change as over time wind farm sites are re-powered or decommissioned. In our view, cumulative impacts are best assessed through the consenting process for individual developments, and through the Strategic Environmental Assessment (‘SEA’) by planning authorities of local development plans.