



Environmental Impact Assessment Report

Swarclett Wind Farm

Technical Appendix 5-4: Assessment of the Proposed Development Against the Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance

Swarclett Wind Energy Limited

wind2

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Introduction

The Highland-wide Local Development Plan, 2012, sets out the overarching vision statement, spatial strategy and general planning policies for the whole Council area, excluding the area covered by the Cairngorms National Park (CNP) Local Plan. The Onshore Wind Energy: Supplementary Guidance (OSWESG) forms part of the Development Plan for The Highland Council (THC).

The OSWESG sets out how THC manages onshore wind energy development proposals. It provides a spatial framework to guide the location of large wind farms, development guidelines for all locations, and additional guidance.

The layout design process for Swarclett Wind Farm, as described in Chapter 3 Description of Development (EIAR Volume 2), was cognisant of the advice given in OSWESG, whereby: *“All proposals should seek to avoid significant adverse landscape and visual effects individually and cumulatively, taking into account other built and permitted proposals as well as valid planning applications not yet determined (the weight apportioned to each will reflect their position in the planning process).”*

The scope of the LVIA was agreed with THC in accordance with paragraph 4.12 of OSWESG.

The iterative approach to the design of Swarclett Wind Farm considered the following mitigation measures to “overcome or minimise impacts” as listed in paragraph 4.14 of OSWESG.

- *“Careful siting of turbines to seek to reduce overall impact of the scheme;*
- *Amending turbine configurations, including hub height, rotor diameter, and blade rotation speed;*
- *Adjusting the number of turbines;*
- *Considering turbine colour, including any variation from the typical off-white/ pale grey colours;*
- *Design and arrangement of any lighting required to minimise its impact;*
- *Undergrounding of any power lines connecting individual turbines to any on-site sub-station;*
- *Undergrounding or sensitive treatment of those power lines connecting any wind farm sub- station to the electricity distribution system;*
- *Arrangements for any transformers for individual turbines (the Council expects these to be accommodated and enclosed within the turbine mast in order to reduce the landscape and visual impact of the development);*
- *Length, route, visibility and methods and materials used in the construction of access tracks.”*

The methodology used for the preparation of figures supporting the LVIA have been prepared according to the requirements set out in OSWESG, including both:

- The Highland Council, July 2016. Visualisation Standards for Wind Energy Developments. Available from:
https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/12880/visualisation_standards_for_wind_energy_developments

- NatureScot, 2017. Visual Representation of Windfarms: Guidance, Version 2.2. Available from: <https://www.nature.scot/doc/visual-representation-wind-farms-guidance>

The tables below set out an assessment of the proposal against the criteria set out in THC's OWESG at paragraphs 4.16 – 17, as follows:

- “The following criteria set out key landscape and visual aspects that the Council will use as a framework and focus for assessing proposals, including discussions with applicants. Applicants are strongly encouraged to seek 'Pre-application Advice' to help identify what criteria are relevant to their proposal.”
- “The criteria do not set absolute requirements but seek to ensure that developers are aware of key constraints to development. It is the Council's expectation that applicants will site and design schemes to avoid significant adverse impacts in order that they reflect the criteria below. The assessment will be based on the characteristics of the proposal and its surrounding area (e.g. existing turbine scale, density, landscape character etc.)”

Table 5-5-1: Criterion 1

Criterion 1	
Location and Setting	
<i>Relationship between Settlements /Key locations and wider landscape respected.</i>	<i>The extent to which the proposal contributes to perception of settlements or key locations being encircled by wind energy development.</i>
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>Turbines are not visually prominent in the majority of views within or from settlements/Key Locations or from the majority of its access routes.</i>
Response	
<p>Within the core study area, in the Farmed Lowland Plain LCT, settlement is characterised by a very dispersed pattern, with widely separated farmsteads and loose clusters of residential properties arranged along the angular rural roads. Locally to the site there are concentrations of houses at Bowertower, with the loosely defined settlement set out along the plateau ridgeline between the Mains of Bowertower, Bowertower and Lower Bowertower. To the west of the Proposed Development a loose cluster of farms is seen across the valley of the Burn of Durran at Durran.</p> <p>The Proposed Development lies beyond c.1.5km from the main clusters of residential properties. The Proposed Development is positioned across the western extent of the low plateau ridgeline to the west of Bowertower, within the local area of moorland, and away from the smaller field patterns which are seen closer to the areas of settlement.</p> <p>The Proposed Development is set back from the main area of settlement and whilst prominent in local views, the majority of view directions from the settlement are not affected by visibility of the Proposed Development. There is no potential for the perception of encirclement.</p>	

Table 5-5-2: Criterion 2

Criterion 2	
Gateways	
<i>Key Gateway locations and routes are respected</i>	<i>The extent to which the proposal reduces or detracts from the transitional experience of key Gateway Locations and routes.</i>

Criterion 2	
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>Wind Turbines or other infrastructure do not overwhelm or otherwise detract from landscape characteristics which contribute the distinctive transitional experience found at key gateway locations and routes.</i>
Response	
<p>The Proposed Development is set well into the interior of the extensively settled and modified Lowland Agricultural Plain LCT. It is set well back from the network of trunk roads which lead through Caithness. The Proposed Development is also set back from the connecting main thoroughfares through the rural landscape.</p> <p>The landscape is expansive, with gently flowing low ridgelines, and a large-scale arable field pattern. This landscape has the capacity to absorb the scale of development proposed without overwhelming the simple character of the underlying landscape.</p>	

Table 5-5-3: Criterion 3

Criterion 3	
Landmarks	
<i>Valued natural and cultural landmarks are respected.</i>	<i>The extent to which the proposal affects the fabric and setting of valued natural and cultural landmarks.</i>
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>The development does not, by its presence, diminish the prominence of the landmark or disrupt its relationship to its setting.</i>
Response	
<p>The Proposed Development, through its sensitive positioning in the landscape will be set well back from distinctive landscape features, cultural landmarks and local visitor attractions.</p> <p>Locally to the site the Lud Stone, scheduled monument, is positioned at the summit of the low ridge at Bowertower, Viewpoint 2, Figure 5.2.2. Whilst the Proposed Development is prominent in views to the north east, it is set well back, and does not diminish the subtle character of the monuments setting.</p> <p>The Proposed Development is set well back from the local recreational resources of Loch Watten, Viewpoint 9, Figure 5.2.9, and Loch Scarmclate, Viewpoint 15, Figure 5.2.15. The Proposed Development is positioned within the interior of the Lowland Agricultural Plain and does not exert a strong influence on the dramatic coastal scenery to the north.</p> <p>Similarly, the Proposed Development does significantly affect the visual relationships between vantage points such as Dunnet Head, Viewpoint 12, Figure 5.2.12, and Ben Dorrery, Viewpoint 14, Figure 5.2.14, and views to the south towards the landscape of Rounded Hills at the leading edge of the Highlands or the distinctive landscapes of the Flow Country to the south west.</p> <p>There are a few instances for travellers on the A836 where the Proposed Development will occasionally be seen as a distant element in expansive views to the wider landscape for transitory receptors.</p>	

Table 5-5-4: Criterion 4

Criterion 4	
Recreational Routes	
<i>The amenity of key recreational routes and ways is respected.</i>	<i>The extent to which the proposal affects the amenity of key recreational routes and ways (e.g. Core Paths, Munros and Corbetts, Long Distance Routes etc.)</i>
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>Wind Turbines or other infrastructure do not overwhelm or otherwise significantly detract from the visual appeal of key routes and ways.</i>
Response	
<p>The Proposed Development , through its sensitive positioning in the landscape, will be set well back from distinctive landscape features, cultural landmarks and local visitor attractions. There are a few instances for travellers on the NCR1 and the North Coast 500 tourist route where the Proposed Development will occasionally be seen as a distant element in expansive views to the wider landscape for transitory receptors, Viewpoint 16, Figure 5.2.16.</p>	

Table 5-5-5: Criterion 5

Criterion 5	
Transport Routes	
<i>The amenity of transport routes is respected.</i>	<i>The extent to which the proposal affects the amenity of transport routes (tourist routes as well as rail, ferry routes and local road access).</i>
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>Wind Turbines or other infrastructure do not overwhelm or otherwise significantly detract from the visual appeal of transport routes.</i>
Response	
<p>The A836 route corridor connecting the communities of the north coast, and the route of the National Cycle Route 1 , forms part of the North Coast 500 tourist route. The Proposed Development which will be set well back from these routes will have a limited influence on the experience of these route corridors.</p> <p>There will be occasional views to parts of the Proposed Development from the Far North Railway Line which will be of a short duration and will be seen away from the main direction of views from the route. The Proposed Development will not overwhelm the experience of journeys along parallel route of the A882 or detract from the visual appeal for travellers.</p> <p>The A9 which passes through the western extent of the study area is largely in visual shadow and the route will experience some very limited visibility towards the Proposed Development, which will be seen as a new element in partial views to the northeast.</p>	

Table 5-5-6: Criterion 6

Criterion 6	
Transport Routes	
<i>The existing pattern of Wind Energy Development is respected.</i>	<i>The degree to which the proposal fits with the existing pattern of nearby wind energy development, considerations include:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turbine height and proportions, • density and spacing of turbines within developments, • density and spacing of developments, • typical relationship of development to the landscape. • previously instituted mitigation measures • Planning Authority stated aims for development of area
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>The proposal contributes positively to existing pattern or objectives for development in the area.</i>
Response	
<p>The Proposed Development is appropriate to the large scale of the Lowland Agricultural Plain. The turbines are proposed in logical position within this landscape, set across slightly elevated ground on an area of moorland, set back from the main clusters of settlement. The landscape has an existing pattern of farm scale renewables development associated with the farming settlement and also accommodates two larger wind turbine developments at Taig na Muir to the north east and Weydale Farm to the west. Other large vertical structures are present in the expansive agricultural landscape including communications masts and transmission line infrastructure.</p> <p>The Proposed Development will fit into this large-scale landscape, which has the capacity for the scale of development proposed, creating a local focus to views. The Proposed Development will fit with the scale of the underlying landform.</p> <p>The Proposed Development is set well back from the very large clusters of development to the south and east.</p>	

Table 5-5-7: Criterion 7

Criterion 7	
Separation between wind farms	
<i>The need for separation between developments and/ or clusters is respected.</i>	<i>The extent to which the proposal maintains or affects the spaces between existing developments and/ or clusters.</i>
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>The proposal maintains appropriate and effective separation between developments and/ or clusters.</i>
Response	
<p>The Proposed Development will be seen within the underlying large-scale landscape as a separate development, set back from the broad pattern of established energy development. However, the Proposed Development will not introduce wind farm development to a new area currently not influenced by wind energy development. The positioning of the Proposed Development maintains appropriate and effective separation between developments and/ or clusters.</p>	

Table 5-5-8: Criterion 8

Criterion 8	
Perception of Landscape Scale	
<i>The perception of landscape scale and distance is respected.</i>	<i>The extent to which the proposal maintains or affects receptors' existing perception of landscape scale and distance.</i>
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>The proposal maintains the apparent landscape scale and/or distance in the receptors' perception.</i>
Response	
<p>The host landscape is robust and large scale, with a pattern of land uses which are suited to accommodating development of the scale proposed without undue effects on the perception of scale and distance. The Proposed Development and the sensitive siting will respect the prevailing landscape features and will not overwhelm or dominate features of the wider landscape setting. Whilst the Proposed Development will appear locally prominent, the turbines will be assimilated within the wider landscape over relatively short distances, appearing subservient in scale to the key features in the wider setting.</p>	

Table 5-5-9: Criterion 9

Criterion 9	
Cumulative Effects	
<i>Landscape setting of nearby wind energy developments is respected.</i>	<i>The extent to which the landscape setting of nearby wind energy developments is affected by the proposal.</i>
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>Proposal relates well to the existing landscape setting and does not increase the perceived visual prominence of surrounding wind turbines.</i>
Response	
<p>The Proposed Development has been carefully planned to relate to the existing site features and fit with the underlying features of the landscape. It is set well back from existing development clusters and is proposed as a free-standing development in the large scale landscape of the lowland agricultural plain.</p>	

Table 5-5-10: Criterion 10

Criterion 10	
Landscape Character	
<i>Distinctiveness of Landscape character is respected.</i>	<i>The extent to which a proposal affects the distinction between neighbouring landscape character types, in areas where the variety of character is important to the appreciation of the landscape.</i>
<i>Development should seek to achieve a threshold where:</i>	<i>Integrity and variety of Landscape Character Areas are maintained.</i>
Response	
<p>The Proposed Development will be positioned wholly within the Lowland Agricultural Plain Landscape Character Type (LCT). The Proposed Development will fit with large scale features of this landscape type including the broad low ridgelines, the large-scale field pattern, and regular forestry plantation blocks and shelter belts. The LCT extends across a large area and as the Proposed Development is set well into the core of the LCT the extent to which it influences the transitions to other landscape types is limited by distance.</p>	

Summary

The Proposed Development fits with the framework for development proposals as set out in the OSWESG. The design has incorporated general good-practice embedded mitigation measures in relation to the design of turbines. Site-specific mitigation has been achieved through careful siting of the array in response to the prevailing landscape setting.

Any new wind turbine development may result in potentially significant effects upon landscape and visual amenity. In the case of the Proposed Development, significant effects on landscape and visual receptors will be limited whilst the design strategy performs well against OSWESG's ten criteria.

References

The Highland Council, 2012. Highland-Wide Local Development Plan (LDP) 2012. Available from: https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/178/local_and_statutory_development_plans/199/highland-wide_local_development_plan

The Highland council, 2016. Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance, November 2016. Available from: https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/18793/onshore_wind_energy_supplementary_guidance_november_2016