Landscape / visual assessments for wind turbine applications

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The Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Assessment advise that visuals should be printed at an appropriate scale for comfortable viewing and that they must meet the appropriate standards as described in the Landscape Institute's Advice Note 01/11 – Photography and Photomontage in Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

It refers to and recommends Visual Representations of Windfarms – Good Practice Guidance commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage, a more technically comprehensive document (both documents can be downloaded from the respective websites).

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The guidance recommends that the minimum height of visuals should be 200mm, although heights down to 130mm may be acceptable.

This dimension combined with the viewing distance and the horizontal field of view dictate the dimensions and format of the image, which typically if representing a panoramic view would be much greater than A3 size. (The viewing distance is the distance that one should view the image from so that, theoretically, the image appears at the same scale as when viewed in the field from the recorded viewpoint).

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The reasons the guidance advises that images should be produced at this size is to try and reproduce as accurately as possible the image one would see in the field and to be easily understood and usable by members of the public and those with a non-technical background.

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Although we are used to assessing documents with visual information submitted that has not conformed to the guidelines, we tend to forget that the public also has to access these documents and we should in future be insistent that visual information is produced at an appropriate size and scale.

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Scottish Natural Heritage have currently issued draft revised guidelines (to follow) which will be published before January 2014 and which place even more emphasis on increased image size to provide a better representation of the proposal and to compensate for the fact that the printed image cannot represent the contrast and depth that the human eye can see in reality.

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The public are entitled to ask for larger scale and clearer visuals in compliance with the current guidelines or even with the draft guidelines as the purpose of the planning process is to provide clarity for effective decision making. It is true that little research has been done to compare the visual impact post development of wind farms with the visualisations submitted for a planning decision. However this is a deficiency recognised by the latest best practice guidance (GLVIA April 2013).

More research in this area particularly in terms of representing cumulative and sequential visual impacts as well as the visual effect of moving rotor blades should lead to more clarity as to the nature and extent of visual impacts and to better planning decisions in the future.

Visual Representation of Wind Farms

Summary for members of the public and decision makers

October 2013