Technical Appendix 6.5 Residential Visual Amenity Assessment

Introduction

1. This Residential Visual Amenity Assessment (RVAA) has been in accordance with Landscape Institute Technical Guidance Note (TGN) 2/19: Residential Visual Amenity Assessment (15 March 2019). The TGN states that:

   "The purpose of carrying out a Residential Visual Amenity Assessment (RVAA) is to form a judgement, to assist decision makers, on whether a proposed development is likely to change the visual amenity of a residential property to such an extent that it becomes a matter of 'Residential Amenity'."

2. And further that:

   "Changes in views and visual amenity are considered in the planning process. In respect of private views and visual amenity, it is widely known that, no one has 'a right to a view.' …

   It is not uncommon for significant adverse effects on views and visual amenity to be experienced by people at their place of residence as a result of introducing a new development into the landscape. In itself this does not necessarily cause particular planning concern. However, there are situations where the effect on the outlook / visual amenity of a residential property is so great that it is not generally considered to be in the public interest to permit such conditions to occur where they did not exist before."

3. This assessment considers only what the resident may see from a property. Views or 'visual amenity' are just one component of residential amenity and the two should not be confused. The latter is a planning matter and may also include aspects such as noise, air quality, traffic, etc., in addition to residential visual amenity. This RVAA considers the visual amenity aspects of residential amenity. Where necessary, other aspects are considered in the relevant chapters of the EIA Report and it is for decision makers to weigh all these aspects, and documents/assessments relating to them, in determining the acceptability of a proposal.

4. Overall residential amenity is discussed within the planning statement accompanying the application for the Proposed Development.

5. This assessment, and the process of RVAA, seeks to identify where effects on residential visual amenity are of such a nature or magnitude that they may need to be considered in the overall balance of 'Residential Amenity' or 'Living Conditions'. The point at which this happens is referred to as the Residential Visual Amenity (RVA) Threshold.

Methodology

Study Area

6. There are no standard criteria for defining the RVAA study area and this is determined on a case by case basis. The guidance note identifies that for large structures, such as wind turbines, a preliminary study area of 1.5-2km radius may be appropriate to begin identifying properties for inclusion within RVAA, but for other developments the study area would be much reduced in proportion to their size. Typically for solar farms this extends to 50 or 100m from the above ground development. In this case, consideration has been given to two properties located adjacent to the Application Site as requested by East Lothian Council (as set out in section 6.1.4 in Chapter 6: LVIA). Extending to a 100m study area would not include additional properties for this assessment.

7. Properties are usually assessed individually but may be considered in groups where the outlook or views are essentially the same; for example a row of houses that all share an open outlook towards the site. Where properties are grouped for assessment, this will be clearly identified and reasons for grouping described.

Approach

8. TGN 2/19 advocates a four-step process to RVAA with the first three falling broadly within the scope of LVIA where the magnitude and significance of visual effects is assessed. It follows the same general approach as that

of the LVIA and may draw on its findings, supplemented by other information (ZTVs, visualisations, fieldwork) as required. The first three steps of the process can be summarised as:

- Preliminary review
- Evaluation of baseline visual amenity
- Assessment of the likely change to visual amenity

9. The fourth step involves a further assessment of the change to visual amenity of individual properties identified as *"having the greatest magnitude of change"* (i.e. Large magnitude within this assessment) and identifying whether the RVA threshold is reached. Where a magnitude of change is identified that is less than Large, this final step is not required as the effects would not reach the RVA threshold.

Preliminary Review and Evaluation of Baseline Visual Amenity

10. The first step considers whether a property requires more detailed assessment or if effects are *"judged unlikely to occur or so insignificant that it is not essential to consider them further"* (GLVIA3, para. 3.19), for example, where properties are outside of the ZTV or would experience such limited views that the change to the outlook would be negligible. These properties are identified, and a brief summary is provided but no further consideration is given to these within the assessment. Properties that are financially involved with the Proposed Development are also identified at this stage as, typically, it is understood that those with such a vested interest would be content with any consequential change to their living conditions.

11. Where it is identified that notable effects may arise at a property, the existing baseline visual amenity is described. This is done 'in the round' and considers both views from the dwelling itself, garden areas and driveways and views experienced when arriving or leaving the property. This step is informed by desk study and field surveys from nearby publicly accessible locations.

Assessment of the Likely Change to Visual Amenity

12. The change views and visual amenity as a result of the proposed development is described for each property and a judgement on the magnitude of change and level of effect[1] likely to be experienced is provided. This involves consideration of the following factors:

- Distance between the property and proposed development and their relative locations (e.g. up/down hill);
- Nature of available views (e.g. panoramic, enclosed) and the effect of daily or seasonal variations;
- Direction of view or aspect of property affected;
- Extent to which the proposed development may be visible from various parts of the property (e.g. dwelling, rooms, access, garden);
- Scale of change to views, including the proportion of view occupied by the proposed development;
- Compositional changes (e.g. loss/addition of landscape features such as woodland);
- Contrast or integration of new features with the existing views;
- Any uncertainties inherent to the design of the proposed development (e.g. micrositing allowances); and
- Duration and nature of changes (e.g. temporary/permanent, intermittent/continuous).

13. This stage may be supported by a range of visual aids as required including maps, ZTV studies, photography and visualisations. The choice of visual aids is determined on a case by case basis and may be informed by consultation. In line with best practice guidance[2] the type of visualisation should be proportionate to the nature of the proposed development and assessment stage.

RVAA Judgement

[1] Note that in considering the level of effect, all residential receptors are treated as being of High sensitivity (high susceptibility and high value) as directed by TGN 02/19 para. 4.23

[2] Landscape Institute Technical Guidance Note 06/19: Visual Representation of Development Proposals

14. This final stage is concerned with identifying *"whether the predicted effects on visual amenity and views at the property are such that it has reached the Residential Visual Amenity Threshold, therefore potentially becoming a matter of Residential Amenity"*. This is the key concern of RVAA and judgements on the RVA threshold are set out clearly and unambiguously for those properties where detailed assessment has identified the property or group of properties as likely to experience the greatest magnitude of change (Large) 'such that the Residential Visual Amenity Threshold may be engaged'[3].

Cumulative Developments

15. The RVAA is undertaken against the baseline as set out within the LVIA and includes consideration of any pertinent consented developments unless there is clear reason to believe that they would not be built. Future, unconsented, cumulative development is generally not a RVAA consideration and is not included within this assessment.

Distances/Directions

16. Where distances and directions are given within the assessment, these are distances between the nearest part of the main property (including garden) and the nearest solar panels (or other above ground infrastructure), unless explicitly stated otherwise. Distances given are rounded to the nearest 10m to account for the level of accuracy available in techniques used to measure (usually based on aerial photography within a GIS).

Assessment

17. The assessment is provided in the table overpage and is supported by further detailed illustrations and photos in Annex A. This is a separate assessment from the LVIA provided in chapter 6, and specifically considers effects on each private property whereas the LVIA considers effects on people in the public domain. As such the magnitude of effects may differ from nearby locations considered within the LVIA.

[3] TGN 02/19 – *Figure 1 RVAA Process*

Ref	Property	Distance to nearest solar panels	Magnitude of Change	Level of Effect	Assessment
P1	Oldhamstocks Mains Farmhouse	c. 60m (main house/ garden) c. 25m (cabin)	Medium	Major/ moderate	This detached, two storey house sits within extensive grounds and amongst a series of outbuildings that wrap around the northern and western sides of the house; a large polytunnel (not shown on aerial photography in Annex 1) is also situated on the northeastern boundary of the property and is understood to be part of a commercial venture. The main driveway and parking area is located to the southwest of the house, also running around the northern side of the house to provide access to outbuildings. The main garden area is located southeast of the house and there are further open areas to the northeast and southwest of the central collection of buildings. The wider property encompasses a woodland belt along a valley to its southeastern side, bounded by the local road beyond. A number of static caravans and a small cabin are set within the wooded area. Address data does not identify these as residential dwellings however the cabin at the southwestern end is noted as being for residential use. The nearest solar panels would be situated to the south and southeast, beyond the woodland belt on this side of the property, around 60m from the main house and garden area. In winter, the solar panels here would be seen filtered through the tree belt (see Photo 1 in Annex 1) from the garden area and windows on the southeastern elevation of the house although at other times of year, leaf cover would reduce the degree of visibility. Similar views through this tree belt would be possible from the open area northeast of the buildings and, to a lesser extent, from the driveway and parking area. Closer proximity views would also be possible in winter from the cabin to the southwest, again filtered through trees within the property and roadside hedgerow beyond (see Photo 2 in Annex 1), where the nearest solar panels would be located around 25m away on slightly elevated ground; these views are likely to be substantially screened when trees are in leaf. The existing hedge on the boundary of the Application Site to the southeast of the property would be managed to an increased height which would provide some further screening of the closest solar panels, but more distant panels on the rising ground beyond would remain partly seen. Looking from the northeast boundary of the property, beyond the polytunnel, more open views across the fields that drop away towards the coast are possible through gaps in the existing hedgerow to the north and northeast although it is noted that the property owners have recently planted up gaps in the existing hedgerow and a new stretch of hedgerow with trees to the east of the polytunnel (see Photo 3 in Annex 1). The solar panels would be set back a minimum of 50m from the property boundary here and at slightly lower elevation as the ground drops away. Considering that existing woodland forms the immediate context of views towards the closest part of the Proposed Development, that this would remain the case, and the filtered nature of the views, Medium scale changes to views would occur from an Intermediate extent of the property and would give rise to a Medium magnitude of impact during all stages of the Proposed Development. **As the magnitude of effects is below Large, there is no potential for the RVA threshold to be exceeded at this property.**

Ref	Property	Distance to nearest solar panels	Magnitude of Change	Level of Effect	Assessment
P2	Oldhamstocks Mains Cottages	c. 60m (main house/ garden)	Medium	Major/ moderate	This detached 1.5 storey property is located at a junction between two local roads, around 200m southwest of Oldhamstocks Mains Farmhouse. The house faces directly onto the road to the north with a parking area and garage to the east and the main garden area wrapping around the south and western sides of the house. The south, east and west garden boundaries are well vegetated with trees, hedgerows and shrubs and, beyond this, there is a shallow, vegetated valley and burn that lies between the southern edge of the garden and the Application Site. To the east of the garage, separated from the main garden area by a tall hedgerow, there is a polytunnel and further narrow strip of grassed land that extends alongside the road for c. 150m that also belongs to the property. During early operation, before mitigation planting matures (up to 10 years post construction), the Proposed Development would be seen to the southeast and east from the main garden area, partly screened and filtered through existing garden vegetation and scrubby trees along the burn beyond (see Photo 4/5 in Annex 1); when trees are in leaf the closest solar panels would be substantively screened. The closest part of the Application Site, which sits slightly elevated relative to the garden, would not have any development within it and a small area of woodland is proposed here – set back from the property boundary to limit the sense of enclosure. The rear, southward elevation of the house is not oriented directly towards the solar panels and downstairs views from inside the house would be limited to the small sunroom that projects out at the rear, looking across the garden. Upstairs, oblique views may be possible from windows on the southern elevation. There are no windows in the gable end of the house that faces towards the Application Site. Views are more open from the separate grassed area beyond the polytunnel (see Photo 6 in Annex 1), where solar panels would be seen in relatively open view in the field beyond the burn. Considering the filtered views from the main garden area and restricted visibility from the house, Medium scale changes to views would occur over a Localised extent of the property and would give rise to a Medium magnitude of impact. Once proposed woodland beyond the burn begins to mature it would largely screen views of the solar panels from the garden and sunroom, although would further enclose the views to the southeast which itself would result in a similar scale of change to the view as during early operation. Views from upstairs windows would likely remain until the proposed woodland achieves substantial growth. **As the magnitude of effects is below Large, there is no potential for the RVA threshold to be exceeded at this property.**

Summary and Conclusions

18. The aim of the RVAA seeks to identify where effects on residential visual amenity are of such a nature or magnitude that *"the effect on the outlook / visual amenity of a residential property is so great that it is not generally considered to be in the public interest to permit such conditions to occur where they did not exist before."*

19. Two residential properties have been considered within the RVAA. Neither would have open views of the Proposed Development from the main house or garden areas, with the closest solar panels seen partly screened or filtered through existing vegetation within gardens and on the perimeter of the Application Site. These would be most notable in winter but when trees are in leaf, views would be much more restricted. Proposed woodland close to Oldhamstocks Mains Cottages would largely screen views of the solar panels from downstairs windows and the main garden area as it matures but would create a greater degree of visual enclosure around the property which would be a change from the more open aspect at present. Existing hedgerows managed to an increased height would slightly increase the screening of the closest solar panels seen from Oldhamstocks Mains Farmhouse when their design height is achieved although would not result in any notable reduction in impacts.

20. During all stages of the Proposed development,, neither of these properties would experience the highest magnitude impacts and there would be no potential for the RVA threshold to be exceeded.

Annex 1 Plans and Images

Overview

P1 Oldhamstocks Mains Farmhouse

Photo 1 - View southeast from main garden

Photo 2 - View south from cabin entrance

Photo 3 - View northeast from polytunnel entrance

P2 Oldhamstocks Mains Cottages

Photo 4 - View east from main garden

Photo 5 - View south from main garden

Photo 6 - View southeast across separate grassed area