

VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF WIND FARMS – Version 2 (SNH, July 2014): BRIEFING NOTE

New guidance for the production of wind farm visualisations published by SNH

July 2014 saw the publication of the long awaited second edition of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) guidance entitled 'Visual Representation of Wind Farms'. This now replaces the previous good practice guidance originally published in 2006.

SNH has stipulated that '*All applications requiring a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment as part of an Environmental Impact Assessment should conform with the requirements set out in this document.*'

The new guidance is more prescriptive than the former guidance and varies considerably from it. Certain aspects of the new guidance are fairly controversial and several leading landscape practitioners have raised concerns about the direction and specific requirements of the new guidance. Nevertheless, the Scottish Government which tasked SNH with updating the guidance has approved the publication and, for projects in Scotland at least, the new guidance will provide the blueprint for wind farm visualisations for the foreseeable future. A quick reference guide to the main headline changes is provided overleaf.

Notably, the new guidance is now in conflict with Landscape Institute Advice Note 01/11 '*Photography and Photomontage in LVIA*' which specifically endorsed the former guidance. Pegasus understands that the Landscape Institute advice note is likely to be amended in due course but it is not yet clear as to whether or not it will fully endorse the new guidance for use in other parts of the UK.

PEGASUS GROUP

Pegasus Group employs over 40 landscape architects many of whom are leading experts in the renewable energy sector. We have a vast amount of experience in Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) for wind farms of all scales and sizes both in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. Our senior directors and associates have provided evidence on all landscape and visual related matters at numerous planning inquiries.

We have considerable experience in preparing visualisations for wind farms in Scotland and other parts of the UK both in accordance with the former guidance and also the additional requirements of certain other local authorities (eg Highland Council).

Pegasus Group participated fully in the consultation process undertaken by SNH on the draft version of the guidance. Members of staff attended workshops hosted by SNH and subsequently a comprehensive formal consultation response was submitted by Pegasus to SNH.

We would be more than happy to discuss any queries that developers have regarding the new guidance and its implications for their existing and future submissions. Fundamentally however we strongly believe that visualisations are simply one tool to assist the landscape practitioner in his or her assessment of the landscape and visual effects of any given development. There is far too often a fixation on visualisations. One must be careful not to place too much emphasis on visual aids at the expense of a robust written assessment which fully articulates the findings of the LVIA.

Pegasus Group

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HEADLINES



PHOTOGRAPHY

- The guidance requires that all photography is now taken using a 50mm fixed focus lens on a digital camera with a full size sensor. Whilst this has been standard practice within Pegasus for a number of years it has remained common practice by many practitioners until now to use less expensive camera equipment without a full size sensor. Developers will need to satisfy themselves that photography used in their future submissions (particularly when this was taken some time ago) has been taken in accordance with the new guidance.

VIEWPOINT PACK

- In addition to the traditional submission of visualisations in an Environmental Statement, developers will now be required to submit an A3 sized 'Viewpoint Pack' comprising single frame images which in theory are to be used only in the field at the viewpoints.

DIGITAL VIEWER

- Furthermore, developers will need to submit digital visualisations (produced to a slightly different specification to those submitted as printed copies) for upload to a new 'Digital Viewer' (apparently scheduled to be up and running by January 2015).

VIEWING DISTANCE

- Whereas the former guidance previously recommended a viewing distance of 500mm for all visualisations the new guidance instead specifies a printed image size and advises against presentation of images to a '*principle*' (ie geometrically correct) viewing distance. Notably the '*principle*' viewing distance for the specified images is now approximately 812.5mm - beyond the distance which a human can hold an image from their own eye. The new guidance dismisses this issue suggesting that the new presentational standards compensate for human perception but openly recognises that '*some technical users of the visualisations may still wish to know the principle distance of the image*'. Pegasus believes that when making professional judgements about the landscape and visual effects of a development with reference to a visualisation it is still essential to know the correct viewing distance.

FIELD OF VIEW

- A consequence of the larger printed image size is that unfortunately the horizontal and vertical field of view is now much reduced. Until now typical wind farm visualisations have illustrated between 75 and 90 degree in the horizontal field and approximately 30 degrees in the vertical field enabling a good understanding of the landscape context within which the wind farm is proposed. The new photomontage requirement enables only 53.5 degree to be illustrated in the horizontal field whilst the Viewpoint Pack images only permit for 27 degrees in the horizontal field of view. The vertical field in both cases is only 18 degrees. Therefore the context shown in the view is very much reduced. Pegasus believe it may be in developers' interests to present an additional photomontage showing 90 degrees to ensure that decisions are taken in the context and full appreciation of the receiving baseline landscape and not simply as a reaction to a very narrow focussed view of the proposed scheme.

IMAGE PROJECTION

- The guidance now requires photography which is to be used for printed visualisations to be stitched in 'planar projection' rather than the previously advocated 'cylindrical projection' but also requires the production of cylindrical projection baseline panoramas to show wider context. The visualisation for submission on the Digital Viewer also needs to be produced using cylindrical projection. In effect this therefore requires the production of two separate photomontages for each illustrated viewpoint. Unfortunately this inevitably requires duplication of effort with additional cost to the developer.

GRACE PERIOD

- In recognition that baseline photography is often captured well in advance of the submission of an Environmental Statement, SNH has agreed a grace period of 6 months from the publication of the new guidance in which visualisations produced under the old guidance can still be submitted. After January 2015 SNH expect all visualisations to comply with the new standards. Pegasus would advise that any visualisations being finalised now should be undertaken in accordance with the new guidance.