

Reviewing Landscape and Visual Impact Assessments (LVIAs) and Landscape and Visual Appraisals (LVAs)

Technical Guidance Note 1/20 (10 Jan 2020)

The purpose of this guidance is to establish a framework for carrying out reviews of LVIAs and LVAs, analysing in a structured and consistent way if the assessment reflects the approach advocated in GLVIA3 and has led to reasoned and transparent judgements. Use of this framework should in due course further raise the standard of assessments

1. Introduction

The third edition of the *Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment* (GLVIA3) was published in April 2013. It has been widely welcomed, accepted and adopted for use in assessing the effects of projects on landscape and visual amenity and since publication been promoted by Landscape Institute (LI) training events.

GLVIA3 sets out that assessment of effects on the landscape and visual resource that may result from a development proposal may be undertaken formally as Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) typically as part of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or less formally as a Landscape and Visual Appraisal (LVA). The LI strongly recommends that GLVIA 3 is followed when undertaking these assessments and that the resulting LVIAs and LVAs should be objective with clear thinking, easy to follow, and demonstrate how they have informed appropriate siting, design, and mitigation.

The main difference between an LVIA and LVA is that in an LVIA the assessor is required to identify 'significant' effects in accordance with the requirements of Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations 2017, as well as type, nature, duration and geographic extent of the effect whilst an LVA does not require determination of 'significance' and may generally hold less detail.

In the case of LVIAs, The Regulations have further implications for landscape professionals:

- Reg. 18 (5) stipulates that the developer must ensure that the ES is prepared by '*competent experts*' and that the developer must include a statement "*outlining the relevant expertise or qualifications of such experts*".
- Reg 4 (5) places obligations on the relevant planning authority or the Secretary of State because they "*...must ensure they have, or have access as necessary to, sufficient expertise to examine the Environmental Statement.*"

Note that the terms 'competent expert' and 'sufficient expertise' are not defined in the EIA Regulations. The Landscape Institute, in the absence of formal certification of specific competence, considers that a 'competent expert' would normally be a Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute who, has substantive experience of undertaking and reviewing LVIAs. This may be evidenced by the assessor's CV, by reference to previous assessments, and by endorsement by other senior professionals.

Following on from GLVIA3, which focusses on how to *undertake* LVIAs/LVAs, this document provides guidance on how to *review* LVIAs or LVAs prepared by others. Such review may be undertaken from within the organisation which produced the LVIA/LVA, e.g. as part of a QA process, or by third parties on receipt of LVIAs and LVAs, such as landscape and or planning professionals in public sector bodies.

This guidance sets out a framework for carrying out such reviews in a structured and consistent way that reflects the approach to assessment advocated in GLVIA3 and use of it should further raise the standard of assessments.

2. Existing advice and guidance

GLVIA3 Chapter 8, under the heading “Review of the landscape and visual effects content of an Environmental Statement”, says:

“8.35 Competent authorities receiving Environmental Statements will often subject the documents to formal review of both the adequacy of the content and of their quality. The review process will usually check that the assessment:

- *meets the requirements of the relevant Regulations;*
- *is in accordance with relevant guidance;*
- *is appropriate and in proportion to the scale and nature of the proposed development;*
- *meets the requirements agreed in discussions with the competent authority and consultation bodies during scoping and subsequent consultations.*

8.36 The summary good practice points in this guidance should assist in review of the landscape and visual effects content of an Environmental Statement. In addition, several existing sources may also help anyone involved in reviewing this topic to decide what to look for:

- *IEMA has developed a series of general criteria for reviewing Environmental Statements and registrants for the EIA Quality Mark¹ must meet the criteria...*
- *The former Countryside Commission published criteria for reviewing the landscape and countryside recreation content of Environmental Statements...*
- *Appendix 1 of Scottish Natural Heritage’s Handbook on EIA² contains useful tests to help judge the landscape and visual effects content of Environmental Statements...”*

In addition, European Commission guidance on ES review³, published in 2001 and, although directed at whole ES review rather than topic specific review, has also provided useful pointers.

This review framework has been developed in this context.

¹ IEMA EIA Quality Mark, IEMA website: <https://www.iema.net/eia-quality-mark> [accessed 200110]

² Scottish Natural Heritage, *A handbook on environmental impact assessment v5*, 2018, SNH website: <https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/2018-05/Publication%202018%20-%20Environmental%20Impact%20Assessment%20Handbook%20V5.pdf> [accessed 200110]

³ European Commission, *Guidance on EIA-EIS Review*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities 2001 ISBN 92-894-1336-0, EC website: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/archives/eia/eia-guidelines/g-review-full-text.pdf> [accessed 200110]

3. Carrying out the review

There are three main components of a review of a LVIA or LVA leading to a report containing the overall conclusion in respect of the completeness, competency and reliability of the LVIA/LVA.

- 1. Checking the methodology used to undertake the assessment, the criteria selected (including balance between), and the process followed;**
- 2. Checking the baseline, content and findings of the assessment;**
- 3. Checking the presentation of the assessment findings.**

As a starting point when undertaking a review, the reviewer will need to define the structure and process to be followed by for example setting out a set of headings or questions against which the LVIA or LVA is examined. Setting out standard or systematic questions will allow consideration being given to each step and each element covered in the assessment. The “good practice” bullet points at the end of each chapter in GLVIA3, noted above, may provide a starting point for such an approach. It is also important to bear in mind the principle of proportionality (cf. EIA Directive). Both the LVIA (or LVA) and the Review should have a defined scope and level of detail which is proportionate and reasonable to allow an informed decision to be reached.

In order to improve consistency and quality of reviews of LVIAs and LVAs the Landscape Institute has produced this framework. Those who undertake reviews should follow this framework and modify or adapt the framework to the Review being carried out and set out the reasons for such modifications.

Step 1. Checking methodology, criteria and process

In this phase, the reviewer will check the methodology, scope and process used in the assessment and how these relate to GLVIA 3. This involves reviewing the following:

- a) Does the scope of the assessment meet the requirements set out in the Scoping Opinion and/or as defined in the LVIA or LVA and if substantively different, are the reasons clearly set out and explained?
- b) What consultations have been carried out and have responses been acted upon?
- c) Has the scope and methodology of the assessment been formally agreed with the determining authority? If not, why not?
- d) As part of the methodology, has the terminology been clearly defined, have the criteria to form judgements including thresholds been clearly defined and have any deviations from good practice guidance (such as GLVIA3) been clearly explained?
- e) Does the assessment demonstrate a clear understanding and provide a separate consideration of landscape and visual effects?
- f) Does the assessment demonstrate comprehensive identification of receptors and of all likely effects? and
- g) Does the assessment display clarity and transparency in its reasoning, the basis for its findings and conclusions?

Step 2. Check the baseline, content, and findings of the assessment

As part of this stage in the review process the reviewer will consider the description of the baseline, both in narrative as well as in illustrations by plans, photographs and drawings etc. This may also include publicly available aerial photography, books, online resources, local plans and management plans.

The reviewer may also consider that a site visit may be necessary either to complement or to verify baseline information. The site visit and potential visits to viewpoints are also useful to check actual findings of the assessment.

This stage of the review typically includes further tests:

- a) What is the reviewer's opinion of the scope, content and appropriateness (detail, geographic extent) of both the landscape and the visual baseline studies which form the basis for the assessment of effects (supported by appropriate graphic such as ZTVs etc as appropriate)?
- b) Has the value of landscape and visual resources been appropriately addressed (including but not necessarily limited to) considerations of: local, regional and national designations; rarity, tranquillity, wild-land and valued landscape?
- c) Have the criteria to inform levels of sensitivity (both landscape and visual) and magnitude of change have been clearly and objectively defined, avoiding scales which may distort reported results?
- d) How well is the cross-over with other topics, such as heritage or ecology, addressed?
- e) Is there evidence of an iterative assessment-design process?
- f) Is it clear how the methodology was applied in the assessment, e.g.: consistent process, use of terms, clarity in reaching judgements and transparency of decision-making?
- g) How appropriate are the viewpoints that have been used?
- h) How appropriate is the proposed mitigation, both measures incorporated into the scheme design and those identified to mitigate further the effects of the scheme, and mechanisms for delivering the mitigation?
- i) What is the reviewer's opinion of the consistency and objectivity in application of the criteria and thresholds set out in the methodology for assessing the sensitivity of receptors, the magnitude of changes arising from the project, the degree/nature of effects, and the approach to judging the significance of the effects identified, in the case of EIA projects?
- j) What is the opinion on the volume, relevance and completeness of the information provided about the development or project including, where relevant, detail about various development stages such as construction, operation, decommissioning, restoration, etc.?
- k) Does the document clearly identify landscape and visual effects which need to be considered in the assessment? and
- l) Have levels of effect have been clearly defined and, in the case of LVIA, have thresholds for significance been clearly defined and have cumulative landscape and visual effects been addressed?

Step 3. Critique of the presentation of the findings of the assessment

This phase is perhaps the most straightforward. It involves examining the ‘presentation’ of the assessment including report text, figures/ illustrations, visualisations, and other graphic material forming the LVIA or LVA, and answering the following:

- a) Does the LVIA/ LVA display transparency, objectivity and clarity of thinking, appropriate and proportionate communication of all aspects of the assessment of landscape and visual effects, including cumulative effects.
- b) Have the findings of the assessment been clearly set out and are they readily understood?
- c) Has there been clear and comprehensive communication of the assessment, in text, tables and illustrations?
- d) Are the graphics and/or visualisations effective in communicating the characteristics of the receiving landscape and visual effects of the proposals at agreed representative viewpoints?
- e) Are the graphics and/or visualisations fit for purpose and compliant with other relevant guidance and standards? and
- f) Is there a clear and concise summation of the effects of the proposals?

Overall Conclusion: Report the review

The final step of the review process is to use the reviewer’s findings to draft a short report which would include (but need not be limited to):

1. Confirmation of the brief issued to the reviewer setting out the scope of the review;
2. A summary of how the review was undertaken);
3. A summary of findings of the review of the assessment methodology;
4. A summary of findings of the review of the scope of the assessment;
5. A summary of findings of the review of the actual assessment of effects;
6. A summary of findings of the presentation of the assessment;
7. A summary statement by the reviewer in respect of appropriateness, quality, comprehensiveness, compliance and conformity with relevant guidance and regulations;
8. Recommendations for further information to be sought (if necessary); and
9. Overall conclusions on the adequacy of the assessment and whether it is sufficient to support making an informed planning decision.

The report can also include further information not covered here but relevant to reporting on the compliance (or otherwise) of the LVIA or LVA with GLVIA3 or matters of competence or expertise. This guidance provides a summary framework for reviewing and reporting only; the Landscape Institute continues to regard GLVIA3 as the primary source of guidance for undertaking LVIA's and LVAs.

4. Further information

For further information or to provide feedback on the guidance in use, please refer to the Landscape Institute's website, using the search terms GLVIA. At the time of publication, material is likely to be found in the following section: <https://www.landscapeinstitute.org/technical/glvia3-panel/>

Authored by Mary O'Connor FLI on behalf of the GLVIA Panel and approved by LI Technical Committee
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Landscape Institute
85 Tottenham Court Road
London
W1T 4TQ

www.landscapeinstitute.org

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