

Assessing impacts on Wild Land Areas

Technical Guidance



NatureScot

Scotland's Nature Agency
Buidheann Nàdair na h-Alba

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1. Introduction

1. The NatureScot map of **Wild Land Areas** (WLAs) identifies the most extensive areas in Scotland where wildness is best expressed. The areas identified are recognised by the third National Planning Framework (NPF3) and Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) as nationally important and needing significant protection, but where development may be appropriate in some circumstances.
2. The WLA map is a spatial planning tool and therefore an assessment of impacts of individual proposals on a WLA should be informed by fieldwork and detailed consideration of the specific nature of proposals. This guidance sets out the requirements and methodology for such an assessment.

2. Using this guidance

Scope of this guidance – when and how should it be applied?

3. This guidance sets out a methodology and general principles for assessing the impact of development and other proposals on WLAs, as they are experienced from within the WLA, not from outwith. It supports the Scottish Planning Policy.
4. The method described employs the general approach and principles set out within the *Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (GLVIA)*¹. The assessment of effects of a proposal on a WLA is an exercise distinct from landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA) that can draw on but should not duplicate its information. The assessment should consider effects on the physical attributes and perceptual responses that contribute to the WLA qualities identified in the **WLA descriptions** published by Scottish Natural Heritage (now NatureScot).
5. This guidance should only be applied to proposals whose nature, siting, scale or design are likely to result in a significant effect on the qualities of a WLA. Given this, assessments are more likely for proposals within a WLA, and are less-likely for proposals outwith the WLA.
6. **An assessment will only be required where it has been deemed necessary by the competent authority. You are encouraged to discuss the need for an assessment with the competent authority at an early stage.**
7. A suitably qualified and experienced landscape, planning or other environmental professional(s) should undertake the wild land assessment. The assessment must provide an appropriate level of information to enable the decision maker, and consultees, to understand the significance of effects of the proposal on the WLA.

¹ Landscape institute & IEMA, Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (2013)

Understanding WLAs – qualities and their contributing attributes and responses

8. The WLA map identifies Scotland’s more natural, remote and uninhabited landscapes whose strength and extent of wildness is considered to be of national importance. WLAs have not been identified on scenic grounds and are not a statutory designation.
9. Whilst the WLA map identifies areas where wildness is most strongly expressed, these are not ‘wilderness’, empty of any human activities or influence. They reflect Scotland’s long history of past occupation and current use and management, albeit that evidence of such is often light and limited in extent.
10. Our **wild land Advice to Government** in 2014 recognised that capturing and describing wildness is a subjective matter, reflecting individual experience and expectations, and therefore requires informed judgements. For some, Scotland’s wild landscapes are the setting for their home and workplace; for others, they are places that they visit.
11. However there is a high level of commonality in its appreciation that allows a set of physical attributes that evoke certain perceptual responses to be identified. These can be assessed if presented in a systematic, transparent and consistent way, namely (see Annex 1 for further detail):
 - WLAs have the following **physical attributes**:
 - a high degree of perceived naturalness;
 - a lack of modern human artefacts or structures;
 - little evidence of contemporary land uses;
 - landform which is rugged, or otherwise physically challenging; and
 - remoteness and / or inaccessibility.
 - The **perceptual responses** evoked by these physical attributes include:
 - a sense of sanctuary or solitude;
 - risk or, for some visitors, a sense of awe or anxiety;
 - perceptions that the landscape has arresting or inspiring qualities; and
 - fulfilment from the physical challenge required to penetrate into these places.
12. These physical attributes and perceptual responses come together as wild land qualities – reflecting that it is a combination of factors that contributes to the value and appreciation of wildness. Each of the **WLA descriptions** set out their particular wild land qualities, with the physical attributes and perceptual responses contributing to it identified. These descriptions should form the starting point for an assessment of impacts on a WLA.

3. The assessment process

Wild Land Area impact assessment – key principles

13. Table 1 summarises the assessment approach. This should be:
- concise and proportionate, focused on likely significant effects on the qualities;
 - clear and transparent, so that underlying assumptions and reasoning can be understood by others in conveying the complexity and significance of effects; and
 - focused on qualities, informed by fieldwork and the WLA descriptions.

Table 1: Overview of Wild Land Area impact assessment

Step	Summary
Step 1 - Define the study area and the scope of the assessment	Identify a study area appropriate to the scale of the proposal and extent of likely significant effects on the WLA. Output: Brief justification and map or description of the area that will be assessed.
Step 2 – Verify the WLA baseline	Confirm the wild land qualities (set out in the WLA description) relevant to the study area, describing any major changes that have occurred since the description was prepared and the nature of their contribution to the WLA. Output: Identification of relevant qualities and explanation of how any changes since preparation of the WLA Description have affected them.
Step 3 – Assess the sensitivity of the qualities	Through detailed field assessment within the study area, assess the sensitivity of the wild land qualities scoped in (including their physical attributes and perceptual responses), to the type and scale of change proposed. Output: A clear and concise narrative explaining the susceptibility of individual qualities and / or combinations of qualities where there is some commonality between their contributing attributes and responses, and their overall sensitivity.
Step 4 – Assess the magnitude of the effects	Assess the effects on individual and / or combinations of qualities, drawing out which physical attributes and perceptual responses will be affected, how and to what degree. This should reflect the size or scale of change, its extent and duration. Output: A clear and concise narrative explaining the effects of the various elements of the proposal on individual qualities and / or combinations of qualities.
Step 5 – Judge the significance of the effects	Conclude on the overall significance (taking into account any mitigation), in terms of the study area and where relevant the wider WLA. Output: A clear narrative explaining the overall significance of residual effects identified on the individual qualities and / or combination of qualities.

14. The assessment may comprise a brief statement or a more detailed report depending on the significance and complexity of effects, and may include annotated photographs and a table summarising impacts and their effects. Examples of assessments produced can be viewed on the **NatureScot website**, which will be updated as and when further examples illustrating good practice become available.

Step 1 - Define the study area and the scope of the assessment

15. The study area should reflect the extent of likely significant effects on the WLA(s), rather than necessarily seeking to cover the entire WLA, taking in to account that:
 - impacts on qualities that affect only a geographically limited part of the WLA are still capable of resulting in significant effects;
 - where cumulative effects with other developments or management changes require to be considered the study area may be considerably larger, encompassing the entire WLA or possibly multiple WLAs; and
 - effects of the proposal on the study area must be considered in addition to the contribution that the study area makes to the wider WLA, which will be informed by its description.
16. The rationale for the selection of the study area and scope of the assessment should be clearly stated and consider the following.
 - The extent of visibility and recognised routes / movement through the WLA. The scale of the proposal may not equate to the extent of effects (for example, a large proposal where visibility is limited to part of the WLA, a more focused study area may be appropriate).
 - The wild land qualities likely to be significantly affected. The focus of the assessment should be on the qualities likely to be affected rather than where the proposal is located.
 - The potential for cumulative effects. Other proposals (either of the same or different type) which are likely to contribute to significant cumulative effects should be identified in discussion with the decision maker. The principles within our guidance document **Assessing the cumulative impact of onshore wind energy developments** specific to onshore wind energy development can be applied to other development and should aid this assessment.
17. Early discussion (at the pre-scoping stage) with the decision maker is strongly encouraged, to ensure a focussed and well informed assessment. Tools such as Zones of Theoretical Visibility mapping (ZTV), assessment points and visualisations may be necessary to inform the assessment depending on the nature of the proposal (refer to our **Visual representation of wind farms guidance** for details²).

Step 2 - Verify the WLA baseline

18. This step describes the baseline as it is at the time of the assessment. The WLA descriptions (prepared during 2013 – 2015) are important for understanding the baseline condition of the WLAs, along with the results of our **desk-based mapping work**.
19. When examining the baseline, the strength of attributes and responses and their contribution to the identified wild land qualities of the area should be verified against the

² Scottish Natural Heritage, Visual representation of wind farms (2017)

WLA descriptions. The baseline should take into account any relevant and substantial changes that have occurred within or outwith the WLA since the descriptions were produced. Changes should only be referenced if individually or collectively they materially affect the wild land qualities.

20. The strength to which the wild land qualities are expressed will vary in different parts of the WLA. In general, the wild land qualities strengthen progressively as a person moves into a WLA, recognising that peripheral areas are nonetheless important contributors to the WLA. The WLA description and fieldwork should be used to understand the different characteristics of the baseline environment, providing the basis for the assessment of effects on qualities.

Step 3 - Assess the sensitivity of the WLA qualities

21. Sensitivity is a combination of the nationally important value attached to WLAs and susceptibility to the type of change proposed. Susceptibility should take into account any evidence of past or current use and how they enhance or detract from the qualities.
22. The identification of the qualities which are likely to be affected, and the degree to which they are susceptible to the type and scale of change proposed, should be clearly explained to understand the level of sensitivity assigned. Due to the inherent difficulty in assigning a standard susceptibility rating criteria to wild land qualities, this step of the assessment may require a more detailed narrative, drawing out where susceptibility of the qualities may vary across the study area.
23. The following factors are some of the considerations influencing sensitivity.
 - The strength of the qualities expressed within the area likely to be affected by the proposal, together with the influence of existing detractors on the individual qualities.
 - Where there may be overlap between individual qualities and their contributing attributes or responses, explanatory text should clearly state how the WLA description has been interpreted and which qualities, and associated attributes and responses, are considered in the assessment.
 - Whilst the qualities experienced from well visited destinations and routes within the WLA will be particularly sensitive, the assessment should recognise that WLAs even if not highly visited are sensitive.

Step 4 - Assess the magnitude of effects

24. Assessment of the magnitude of effects on the wild land qualities should be set out in terms of the size or scale of change, geographical extent of the area influenced, and their duration and reversibility.
25. Distance of the proposal from the WLA (if located outwith it) will often be an important consideration but should not be used as a proxy for the magnitude of effect (it is the effect on wild land qualities that is important). Similarly the extent of effects is not simply about

the percentage or absolute area of the WLA affected, but should describe where the effects occur (within the WLA) and how these affected areas contribute to the wider WLA.

26. The likely change to wild land qualities may be considered in relation to the following factors.
 - Effects on the seeming expansiveness of the WLA and potentially its visual connectivity with other less developed landscapes (including other WLAs).
 - Reduction in the sense of solitude as a result of visibility, noise and / or movement of the proposal.
 - Impacts that vary over time, for example drawdown margins associated with a loch storage hydro scheme affecting the sense of naturalness, or artificial lighting affecting the sense of sanctuary or risk.
 - Attrition of qualities through cumulative effects, for example a series of run of river hydro schemes affecting water courses and reducing perceived naturalness.
27. A succinct narrative approach to this step of the assessment is encouraged. Judgements should be clearly informed by an understanding of the proposal and qualities of the WLA, and draw on the fieldwork undertaken.

Step 5 - Judge the significance of the effects

28. Judgments on the significance of effects require underlying assumptions to be transparent so that reasoning can be easily understood by others. The assessment should clearly separate out: the identification of any significant effects; any mitigating measures to reduce significant effects; and identification of any residual significant effects on the wild land qualities.
29. The significance of effects should be considered in terms of the WLA(s) qualities, reflecting the combination of sensitivity and magnitude. The emphasis should be on a narrative explanation that provides clarity on the specific nature, extent and duration of effects, and ultimately which effects are considered to be significant. Where effects are identified that result in a material change in the experience of any of the wild land qualities, this is considered to be significant.
30. This narrative should draw out the key issues, any scope for reducing adverse impacts and include a final statement on the significance of effects, reflecting the qualities as they are expressed across the wider WLA and any adjacent ones. This reflects the need for an evidence based approach combined with professional and reasonable judgment.
31. Having identified potential effects (through Steps 1 to 4), measures to reduce any anticipated adverse effects should be considered. Whilst it is recognised that there will be limited scope for successful mitigation of large scale developments within or partly within WLAs, some examples of approaches to mitigation measures that could be applied to other developments are included in Box 1. Once these measures have been considered, the residual significant effects should be clearly identified.

Box 1: Examples of potential mitigation of effects

- **Rationalise the spatial extent or scale of proposal or parts of the proposal:** removing or reducing the scale of components in more sensitive locations; identifying lighting options that minimise impacts; combining tracks and associated elements within a single working corridor; and revising construction access routes to avoid sensitive areas.
- **Sensitive siting of components:** re-siting components where woodland can provide (or will provide in the future) some screening; and micro siting components to use land form to reduce their visual envelope.
- **A high standard of design:** burying components; and selecting sympathetic materials to improve landscape fit.
- **A high standard of restoration:** tracks can be removed or their running width reduced, following construction.

32. In addition to the mitigation of new effects, in some cases it may be appropriate to consider the scope for removing and / or enhancing existing features that detract from wildness. For example by re-routing existing poorly sited tracks to ensure a better landscape fit; restoring redundant access tracks; or removing redundant fence lines. Early consultation with the decision maker at the pre-scoping stage can help to identify appropriate mitigation.
33. In judging significance, the following factors should be considered.
- The sensitivity and magnitude of change on the qualities of the WLA.
 - The contribution of areas affected to the wider WLA.
 - The nature and extent of any likely cumulative effects.
 - Whether the impacts are adverse or beneficial, and their longevity.

Judgements will be informed by the national importance of WLAs as set out in SPP2 and NPF3, the wild land descriptions and an understanding of the WLA through field assessment.

Annex 1: Explanation of physical attributes and perceptual responses

Physical attributes	Explanation
A high degree of perceived naturalness	Within WLAs vegetation cover is primarily composed of natural or semi-natural habitats (which may not be, ecologically, in the best condition). Catchment systems and other geomorphological processes are largely unmodified. The term ‘perceived naturalness’ reflects that some may consider the vegetation cover to be more ‘natural and unmanaged’ than they are in fact (for example, managed heather moorland).
A lack of modern human artefacts or structures	There is no or very limited evidence of contemporary buildings, structures or engineering works within WLAs although their presence outwith may be discerned. Older artefacts (for example, shielings and cleared settlements) and small scale features (for example, fences and stalkers paths) may be evident.
Little evidence of contemporary land uses	Within WLAs no or very limited evidence of more intensive land use, but their presence outwith may be discerned. Extensive grazing and management for field sports may be evident (for example, muirburn, grazing pressure and use of ATVs).
Landform which is rugged, or otherwise physically challenging	Within WLAs, land that has extensive rough terrain or extensive boglands, which is difficult to traverse.
Remoteness and / or inaccessibility	Within WLAs, land that is distant from public motorised access (the nearest public road, ferry landing or railway station), taking account of the distance, barriers to travel (for example, lochs, rivers and cliffs), and ease of travel on foot / bicycle.
Perceptual responses	Explanation
A sense of sanctuary or solitude	The perception of separation from the ‘modern world’, isolation or distance from disturbance, that engenders feelings of respite or tranquillity, that enables a focus on the natural / semi-natural setting.
Risk or, for some visitors, a sense of awe or anxiety	The perception of hazard that arises from being self-reliant in remote settings of large scale, whose rugged natural character and isolation from assistance (if required) engenders respect.
Perceptions that the landscape has arresting or inspiring qualities	An aesthetic reaction to the natural / semi-natural setting, often associated with the ‘classic’ high, steep and jagged mountains juxtaposed with deep lochs or seas, but can also be prompted by other superlative compositions such as the large scale simplicity of rounded massif, or the seemingly infinite expanse of open peatland or seas.
Fulfilment from the physical challenge required to penetrate into these places	The satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that arises from the physical effort required to traverse these settings, tackling their scale, topography, ground and weather conditions.

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NatureScot
Great Glen House
Leachkin Road
Inverness IV3 8NW

NatureScot was formerly known as Scottish Natural Heritage.

www.nature.scot

