



NatureScot

Scotland's Nature Agency
Buidheann Nàdair na h-Alba

Commissioning a Landscape Sensitivity Assessment

March 2022

Contents

Introduction.....	2
1. Prior to commissioning	3
2. Commissioning a Landscape Sensitivity Assessment.....	5
3. Managing the Assessment.....	9
Appendix 1 Approaches to development scenarios (aquaculture, housing, wind turbines)	11

Introduction

Landscape Sensitivity Assessments are strategic appraisals of the relative sensitivity of landscapes to development or land use changes. They are an important tool to help guide development to the best locations.

Guidance on how to undertake Landscape Sensitivity Assessments has been produced by NatureScot. This document sits alongside that, and is for planning authorities and other bodies who intend to commission a landscape sensitivity assessment.

The main aims of this commissioning guidance are to:

- To help commission and project manage landscape sensitivity assessments; and
- To provide advice on how to get the most useful outputs from a landscape sensitivity assessment.

This guidance is based on the results of NatureScot research into good practice on [“Landscape Capacity Studies in Scotland”](#) in 2010. The research report was developed into a web-based toolkit on how to commission an assessment. In the past, many “capacity” studies dealt with landscape susceptibility rather than capacity; see the main guidance document for more information on this (paragraph 10). This commissioning guidance and the methodology guidance replace the toolkit.

1. Prior to Commissioning

The purpose and likely scope of the sensitivity assessment needs to be clear. Stage 1 (pages 11 – 14) of the methodology guidance provides information on this. Prior to commissioning an assessment it can be helpful to consider the following:

a. Decide your objectives

Clarifying purpose is an iterative process. It is useful to spend time with colleagues to make yourself familiar not only with your own planning objectives but also with experience gained from elsewhere. Your objectives will relate to the type of development for which the assessment will be commissioned and to your planning needs.

b. Review other assessments

It will probably be helpful to refer to other assessments. As part of this, a structured approach is useful, for example:

- Identify the planning purpose and the specific objectives of the assessment, and what outputs were required. There may be more than one output – mapped recommendations for areas of search, for example, and perhaps also design guidance;
- Look over the recommendations or conclusions and check if the outputs reflect the objective(s) identified;
- Analyse at least one example of the recommendations or conclusions, which may be as maps and text, or guidance. Work backwards to see how the recommendations have been justified in the analysis – can you see how the method has led to the conclusions? - Identify a small number of landscape areas or one bit of the landscape, and follow it through the whole assessment, from analysis to conclusions, or vice versa. This is easier than reading the whole document. Try to pick two or three landscape areas with different characters or conclusions, and see how these work;
- Look at the sensitivity assessment more closely – are there gaps in the train of thought, or concepts that you might find difficult to justify, for example at a Public Local Inquiry? Is the document clearly structured, are the maps at an appropriate scale, and are the illustrations useful?

After you have undertaken a review, it can be very useful to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment with the people who commissioned it or those who use it. Topics for this discussion can include:

Background

- Clarify the purpose of the assessment, the background and need for it
- Involvement of other partnership organisations; was this sought and was it useful?
- Timescale – were there any constraints that affected the scope or objectives?
- Budget

Commissioning a Landscape Sensitivity Assessment

Assessment

- Was the commissioning authority happy with the method?
- Are there any particular strengths or weaknesses in the sensitivity assessment, especially now in retrospect?
- Is the method easy to understand?

Involvement of Steering Group

- Who was on the Steering Group?
- How involved was the Steering Group in managing the project – was the interaction adequate?

Report / Presentation

- Is the output presented in a way that meets the objectives and purpose?
- How useable and accessible has the assessment been?
- Has the assessment been presented to anyone else, such as the Planning Committee?

Use of assessment

Has the assessment been used in any of the following? If so, what has been the experience of the commissioning authority with regards to:

- Development Plan preparation?
- Supplementary Guidance?
- Development management casework?
- Public Local Inquiry?
- In the preparation of landscape frameworks or masterplans?

General

On reflection, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment, and how might it be improved? Has it achieved its objectives and met the client's expectations? What advice would the commissioning authority offer others who were going to commission a piece of work like this?

c. Determine the project resources

During scoping it is important to consider the budget available for the assessment, if the project is not being undertaken in-house by Local Authority landscape staff. The assessment may extend over one or more financial years, so it is important to secure appropriate finance. You should also ensure that there is adequate staff time available for project management, participating in Steering Group meetings, reviewing report drafts and for site visits.

2. Commissioning a Landscape Sensitivity Assessment

a. Set up a Project Steering Group

A Steering Group of relevant staff and organisations will be essential to guide the project. It should consist of those who represent the views and interests of sectors most likely to be affected by and use the findings of the final report. The Steering Group should include at least one landscape architect to ensure the technical aspects are dealt with. Consider if external advice is needed, as this may be a requirement of external funding. NatureScot landscape or area staff could be asked to join the Steering Group as this can help with experience from elsewhere.

If more than one planning authority is involved, staff from both / all councils will be needed on the Steering Group. Representatives should be able to give adequate time to the project, as the assessment is unlikely to be of equal priority across all authorities, especially if development plans are not all at the same stage.

The role of this group will be to:

- help refine and further develop the scope and purpose of the assessment,
- inform the project brief,
- approve the procurement of a consultant to undertake the work,
- steer the project through its various stages to conclusion, including commenting on drafts and agreeing findings during the process, and
- approve release of funding at specified times in the project.

It needs to be agreed at the outset - and clear in the contract - who is able to sign-off the final report. It can be beneficial, but more time-consuming, if this is the whole Steering Group. It is important that the Steering Group is a manageable size, where all members are able to comfortably express their views and consensus on decisions can be reasonably reached. If large organisations, or a number of them are involved it may be worth considering whether a wider review group is required to resolve technical issues and to review report drafts.

b. Establish realistic timescales

Landscape sensitivity assessments are frequently commissioned to input to other planning work, and timescales may be fixed. Careful thought should be given to programming – it is a common complaint from consultants that timescales for this type of assessment are invariably tight.

When preparing a timetable for the project, the following should be taken into account:

- **Preparation and setting up.** Allow time to clarify planning aims, agree objectives and prepare the brief with the help of colleagues, and NatureScot if required. Include the time it takes to gain approval for the project budget and staff time.
- **The procurement process.** This may include a pre-qualification questionnaire, a main tender and an interview (which all together could take up to three months), as well as the time required to meet relevant in-house procedures.

Commissioning a Landscape Sensitivity Assessment

- **The size of the study area.** It might be decided to exclude areas unlikely to undergo the envisaged landscape change due to policy (e.g. National Scenic Areas) or lack of development pressure (e.g., for settlement expansion, areas distant from existing housing).
- **Field work relative to the size of the study area.** Both the size of the area and its accessibility will affect the amount of time allocated to field work. It is useful, even at this stage, to factor-in time for the less accessible areas which you may expect the surveyors to visit – are there hills, islands, views from the sea?
- **Time of year.** Seasonal aspects can affect projects. For example, fieldwork can be restricted in winter months by shorter daylight hours and poor weather; and in summer the consultants, consultees and Steering Group members may have holiday commitments.
- **Piloting of the method and possible revisions of method.** The Steering Group will need time to consider the method, perhaps through fieldwork with the consultants or the use of a pilot study. The purpose of an assessment tends to become clearer as it progresses and there may be a need to alter the emphasis to respond to initial findings.
- **Time to review and edit.** Draft reports often include terminology, text, concepts and assumptions with which the contractor and the steering group have become almost over-familiar. If you can, build in time for a period of review, or editing, by someone unfamiliar with the assessment but who will need to use it, to ensure it is fit for purpose.
- **Mapping and data requirements.** Allow time for supplying the consultants with the necessary digital mapping layers and any other datasets of information required. This may involve licencing or other requirements.
- **Final mapping onto GIS** does not usually take place until the final report is approved, so time may need to be allocated for this to take place along with final editing.
- **Availability of funds.** For some bodies, including the planning authorities and NatureScot, funds are only available for a limited period of time. The project timescale may be limited by the availability of these resources.
- **The need for, and timing of, stakeholder engagement including public consultation.** It is usual to allow four to six weeks for any external consultation. If this is to be focussed on certain people or organisations it is a good idea to warn them in advance of the forthcoming consultation – this often leads to better levels of participation.
- **The opportunity to align the timescale with the Local Development Plan process.**
- **Availability of the Steering Group.** The project manager and Steering Group will have other commitments and these should be taken into account as far as possible. Plan adequate time for reading, reflection and commenting on drafts – at least two weeks for each draft. Make sure that there is also time for the consultants to respond to feedback and incorporate agreed comments.
- **The availability of potential consultants, and any potential conflicts of interest.** If local authority staff with relevant experience are to be involved, then their availability needs to be confirmed.
- **Quality assurance at the end of the process.** Where required, e.g. to ensure that the project outputs are clearly presented in the agreed format and are easily understood, this is usually carried out by a separate individual, i.e. outwith the Steering Group.

c. Agree the content of the Statement of Requirements or brief

The brief for the project should be agreed with the Steering Group. Particularly important aspects to specify in relation to landscape sensitivity assessments are:

- **Agree development or land use types.** A landscape sensitivity assessment works best if it is targeted at a specific type of development. Some have more than one type of development, which are assessed individually – for example housing and employment land.
- **Consider if design guidance is required.** Assessments can provide indicative guidance on the siting and design of the development scenarios (see Appendix 1). If this is not needed, be clear about this in the Statement of Requirements.
- **Define the type and format of outputs,** e.g. design guidance, interactive mapping, etc.
- **Ensure software compatibility.** Make sure that the outputs are compatible with the relevant in-house GIS system and any other software programmes that are available. Be specific about what is needed.

Other information for tenderers

- **List the other relevant resources available, such as mapping or background information.** This includes provision of digital mapping and data. It can include previous assessments, designations, ecosystem services, natural capital, historic aspects, etc. Information on development and land use patterns and pressures will also be relevant.
- **Steering Group.** Be clear about the expected extent of Steering Group involvement, e.g. will it approve drafts or just comment on them? What is the likely membership of the Steering Group?
- **Meetings.** Indicate the number and location of meetings that the consultant will be required to attend. This includes any joint site visits with the Steering Group and presentations to Council staff.

d. Procurement and tender review

The procurement process should be an opportunity not only to secure the best tender, but also to instil confidence in the assessment and what it can achieve.

Tendering requirements for sensitivity assessments should:

- **Require details of how much of each task or stage will be allocated to which project team member.** This enables those assessing the tender to see if an appropriate emphasis has been put on the relevant parts of the project, and also how much senior staff time is allocated to each task.
- **Outline the expected balance between desk study and fieldwork.** Fieldwork is an essential part of Landscape Sensitivity Assessment, and tenderers should be asked to provide details on how much time has been allocated to this, including any joint site visits with Steering Group members.
- **State how tenders will be assessed.** This helps to ensure tenderers have addressed all of the aspects likely to be of importance.

Appointing a suitable consultant

- Tenders should be assessed primarily by the client, with support from the Steering Group, to ensure that members are content with the appointment.
- The consultancy team should include at least one Chartered Landscape Architect, to ensure that the technical nature of the subject is addressed. Familiarity with the type of development or land change is needed. Some knowledge of the landscapes of the study area is beneficial, as it enables the project to progress more quickly in the early stages.
- It is important to assess tenders for value for money, not simply cost. This allows for potential 'added value' aspects, such as having more than one chartered Landscape Architect on the team or proposals to engage the Steering Group in some field work, to be considered in the procurement process.

3. Managing the Assessment

a. Project management

As with all projects, landscape sensitivity assessments benefit from good management. This includes adopting and imposing realistic timescales, ensuring that there are opportunities to learn from the outcomes as the project progresses, and maintaining a good record of agreed changes to method and output.

When managing a landscape sensitivity assessment it is also useful if the Steering Group:

- Tests the transparency and accessibility of the proposed method or possible methods of assessing landscape sensitivity through a pilot study;
- Undertakes at least one field visit with the consultants so that everyone can see the process of assessing landscape sensitivity in action;
- Reviews the criteria selected for undertaking the assessment of landscape sensitivity to check that they are understandable, unambiguous, clearly explained and systematically assessed. They should also be relevant to the landscape of the study area, and make sense in the field.
- Scrutinises the assessment of landscape sensitivity to make sure that it responds to the brief and addresses its requirements;
- Takes time to make sure that it is easy to explain the ‘trail of reasoning’ or rationale behind the recommendations to someone else;
- Ensures, if the report is to be Supplementary Guidance that it is presented in a form which is likely to be adopted by the Council.

b. Record keeping

Good record-keeping throughout the project is essential to aid reporting. It also enables the client to understand how decisions were made, which in turn increases confidence in the findings. See paragraph 3.6 of the methodology guidance.

c. Report Format

- The report format should reflect the aims of the brief and any technical requirements. These will include the specifications associated with electronic formats and GIS. In addition, the consultants may have valuable experience about presenting the findings of this type of assessment.
- Findings can be presented in a variety of ways, such as tables, matrices, lists of bullet points, maps; and as combinations such as narrative with map, tables with maps, bullet point lists with maps, and descriptions with matrix.
- Engagement with the Steering Group in establishing a useful and clear format is essential as they and their colleagues are most likely to be implementing the findings. See section 4 of the methodology guidance.

d. Follow up

The use of the final report can be enhanced through additional, follow-up actions. These may include:

Commissioning a Landscape Sensitivity Assessment

- Workshops and site visits demonstrating its use to colleagues who were not on the Steering Group. This allows users of the assessment to have a deeper understanding of the process, become familiar with the findings and to ask the consultant questions;
- Presentation(s) to Councillors. Similarly, this allows the councillors to understand the process and have confidence in the findings;
- The adoption of the report, or part of it, as Supplementary Guidance. This gives added weight to the conclusions.
- Securing the consultant to represent the Council at Public Local Inquiries (PLI). If the findings robustly withstand scrutiny at a PLI then this gives added credibility to the assessment as a whole.

All of these activities consolidate understanding of the assessment findings and foster confidence in the report.

Appendix 1

Approaches to development scenarios

The following are examples of approaches to some of the most common development type scenarios in landscape sensitivity assessments in Scotland.

Aquaculture

Ways to approach aquaculture scenarios can include, for example:

- describing different scenarios by specifying the type of aquaculture development, such as off-shore fin-fish farms and their associated shore bases, shellfish lines which may also have some type of shore base, oyster racks and trestles (which are located on the shoreline and are visible when the tide is out) or other line or buoy-based shellfish industries.
- describing different typologies by type of aquaculture development and size. However, it should be borne in mind that oyster racks, for example, are very different in the potential effects on the coastal landscape to fin-fish farms and it may not be possible to carry out the same landscape sensitivity assessment for both types of development. In addition, the industry measures size as volume output, but for a landscape assessment the surface of the water covered by cages, or lengths of shellfish lines, are likely to be more important.

Settlement expansion and housing studies

Ways to approach settlement expansion or housing scenarios can include, for example: -

- describing different scenarios by specifying the type of development and indicating a housing allocation.
- describing different scenarios by making the limits of the study very clear, e.g. Domestic scale housing of three houses or more.

It may also be that the purpose of the study is to assess the landscape sensitivities associated with development bids proposed by developers. The scenarios then relate to that which are proposed by the developer.

Wind turbine development

Ways to approach wind farm scenarios can include, for example:

- describing different typologies by the size of the group of turbines and amount of power likely to be generated.
- describing different typologies largely by the height and number of turbines.
- combining these and have typologies which tackle variable layouts associated with numbers and height combined.