Agenda Item	**7.1**
Report No	**PLN/026/22**

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: North Planning Applications Committee

Date: 26 April 2022

Report Title: 20/05067/FUL : REG Strath Tirry Limited

Land 1450M NE Of Dalmichie, Lairg

Report By: Area Planning Manager North

Purpose/Executive Summary

Description: Strath Tirry Wind Farm - Erection and Operation of a Wind Farm for a period of 30 years, comprising of 4 Wind Turbines with a maximum blade tip height of 135m, access tracks, borrow pits, substation, control building, meteorological mast and ancillary infrastructure.

Ward: 01 – North, West and Central Sutherland

Development category: Local

Reason referred to Committee: Application recommended for refusal by officers and referred to committee by two or more local members

All relevant matters have been taken into account when appraising this application. It is considered that the proposal does not accord with the principles and policies contained within the Development Plan and is unacceptable in terms of applicable material considerations.

Recommendation

Members are asked to agree the recommendation to **REFUSE** the application as set out in section 11 of the report

1. PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

1.1 The application is for the erection and operation of a wind farm for a period of 30 years, comprising of 4 wind turbines with a maximum blade tip height of 135m, access tracks, borrow pits, substation, control building, meteorological mast, energy storage and ancillary infrastructure. The proposal has the capacity to generate up to 17MW, with additional storage capacity of up to 3MW of electricity through the proposed battery storage facility.

1.2 The proposal has been submitted under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 on the basis that the applicant has sought to operate the wind farm as a standalone consent which would have an electricity output of less than 20MW.

1.3 Key elements of the development as assessed within the application's Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and Environmental Impact Assessment Report Supplementary Information (EIAR-SI) include:

- Four wind turbines of 135m to blade tip (with a maximum generating capacity of 17MW, a hub height of 77.8m and a rotor diameter of up to 117m);
- Energy storage facility (3MW generating capacity);
- Turbine foundations and crane hard standings;
- Two new site entrances off the A836 (one permanent and one temporary);
- New access tracks (approximately 2,655m within the site boundary, of which 730m will be temporary);
- One watercourse crossing (a crossing at Fèith Osdail will be required by way of a temporary bridge);
- A network of underground cables;
- Switching station and control building;
- Temporary construction compound, storage area and car park;
- Two temporary access compounds;
- Three temporary borrow pit search areas; and
- A permanent 10m meteorological mast.

1.4 The applicant held a series of online consultation events and targeted engagements to seek the views of the local community. The online consultation took place on 29 September 2020 and 1 October 2020, it included a designated website which was fully interactive with a facility to make comments directly to the project team. The applicant engaged with the closest properties to the site directly, this included organising a series of wind farm site visits. A further telephone conference was held on 30 September 2020. The applicant raised awareness of these events by notifying all Community Councils, placing statutory newspaper adverts and a letter drop, which included residential properties in the IV27 postcode district (circa 450 homes in total).

1.5 Access to the proposed development site will be taken directly from the A836, with two site accesses proposed. The proposed access to the south-western of the site will be temporary and only used during construction works. The principal access to the site will be taken from the A836 located to the north-western corner of the site.

1.6 The applicant has requested a micro-siting allowance of 50m for site infrastructure, tracks and turbine locations to accommodate unknown ground conditions, whilst also maintaining environmental buffers (e.g. set back from areas of high bat activity and watercourses). The final design of the turbines (hub and tip heights, rotor diameters, colours, and finish), aviation lighting, substation and control buildings, compounds, ancillary electrical equipment, landscaping and fencing etc, would be expected to be agreed with the Planning Authority at the time of project procurement. For example, it should be noted that the 135m tip height of the turbines is presented as a worst case scenario for the purposes of the assessment. Whilst typical drawings for these elements are set out in the application, turbine manufacturers regularly update designs that are available, thereby necessitating the need for some flexibility on the approved design details (see Planning Statement: December 2020), the final details of which, can be secured by Condition.

1.7 As stated in paragraph 1.1 of this report, the wind farm has an expected operational life of 30 years from the date of final commissioning. The applicant has advised that a decision would then be made as to whether to apply to re-power the site. If, in the event permission is granted for the development, the decision is made to decommission the wind farm, the applicant advises that all turbine components, transformers, substation and associated buildings and infrastructure will be removed. Turbine foundations would remain on site however, although the exposed concrete plinth of the turbine foundations would be removed to a depth of 1m below the surface. Hardstandings will be removed or regraded with soil and planting where appropriate. It is likely that if the site is decommissioned the temporary access to the site would need to be reinstated. The applicant acknowledges that these matters would not be confirmed until the time of the submission of the decommissioning and restoration plan. The applicant anticipates decommissioning works for a period of approximately 6 months.

1.8 The applicant anticipates that the wind farm construction period will last approximately 12 months with a Construction Environment Management Document to be utilised throughout the construction period. This would require to be approved by the Planning Authority, in consultation with the relevant statutory bodies before the commencement of development. The applicant has set out a draft programme of works within their Design and Access Statement.

1.9 The applicant utilised the Highland Council's Pre-Application Advice Service for Major Developments (ref: 20/02680/PREMAJ). The response outlined a number of significant concerns with the proposal. The key issues highlighted from the pre-application process were:

- The potential for significant landscape and visual impacts that may arise as a result of the proposed development individually, as well as cumulatively and sequentially with other built, consented or planned proposals in this area. The area has seen a number of large-scale wind farms which are already consented or under consideration; and
- The potential to impact Carbon Rich Soils, Deep Peat and Priority Peatland habitat.

1.10 The application is supported by an EIAR and EIAR-SI contains chapters on: Site Selection and Design Evolution; EIA Methodology; Energy and Planning Policy; Landscape and Visual Impacts; Ecology; Ornithology; Peat, Hydrology, Hydrogeology and Geology; Noise; Cultural Heritage; Traffic and Transport; Socio-Economics, Tourism and Recreation; Aviation and Radar; Telecommunications; Forestry; and Schedule of Environmental Commitments. The application is also accompanied by a Pre-Application Consultation Report, Planning Statement and Design and Access Statement.

1.11 The applicant originally applied for a wind farm with a generating capacity of 22.8MW (with the battery storage element having a 6MW capacity). The original application constituted a major development and as such pre-application consultation was required, as per the requirements for major planning applications set out within The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (Scotland) Regulations 2013. This requires a formal Proposal of Application Notice to be submitted to the Planning Authority at least 12 weeks prior to any formal planning application being lodged and any subsequent planning application must be accompanied by a Pre-applications Community Consultation report. Whilst the applicant followed parts of the procedure, it failed to submit a formal Proposal of Application Notice prior to submitting the planning application. The Planning Authority did not consider the application to be competent and a recommendation could not be taken. Given, the situation the applicant submitted Supplementary Environmental Information (EIAR - SI) reducing the overall capacity of the scheme to allow the Planning Authority to consider the application as a Local Development.

1.12 In the EIAR-SI the applicant confirms that the only change to the original submission is the reduction in generating capacity. The description of the development as set out in Chapter 3 of the EIAR remains applicable. All other aspects and conclusions of the original submission remain unchanged and should be read in conjunction with the EIAR-SI. With the exception of the updated sections and figures submitted as part of the EIAR-SI, the findings of the EIAR are considered to remain applicable.

1.13 The EIAR-SI is supported by and an updated Ornithological Impact Assessment to address concerns raised by NatureScot and the Royal Society of Birds (RSPB)

2. SITE DESCRIPTION

2.1 The site lies approximately 8km north of Lairg and 4km east of Loch Shin, sitting between the two small settlements of Rhian and Dalchork. It is located within a single land holding at Shinness which is part of the wider Dalchork Wood and covers an area of approximately 79 hectares. The site lies adjacent to the east of the A836, with the western boundary of the site following the road for approximately 1km. The southern site boundary is bordered by a private forestry track which leads into Dalnessie Estate. The nearest residential properties to the site boundary are Dalmichie, located 891m to the south and a row of four houses at Blairbuie, 1.2km to the west of the site boundary. There is an overhead line that runs west to east through the southern portion of the site.

2.2 The site comprises mainly plantation forestry and scrub birch interspersed with areas of open moorland. It is currently used for commercial forestry and deer stalking. There are areas of Ancient Woodland that bound the north and east of the site. One watercourse, Fèith Osdail, flows from north-east to south-west through the southern portion of the site before joining the River Tirry, approximately 150m from the south-west boundary then on to Loch Shin (4km to the south of the site). There is a gentle slope across the site from a south-westerly direction. The site levels across the site range from approximately 150m above ordnance datum (AOD) in the north-eastern of the site to approximately 130m AOD in the south-west of the site. Within the site the landform steepens along the banks of the Fèith Osdail watercourse. The site sites in a plateau at the bottom of a grouping of hills which form a semi-circle to the east of the site. These include, Creag Riabhach na Greighe (459 AOD), Meallan Liath Mor (462 AOD), Meall a' Phiobaire (375 AOD) and Sidhean Achadh nan Eun (317 AOD). Ben Klibreck sites to the north of the site, the highest point is Meall nan Con (962 AOD), this is the second most northern Munro.

2.3 In terms of NatureScot's Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) the west side of the proposed site sits within the Landscape Character Type (LCT) of Strath – Caithness and Sutherland (NatureScot LCT 142) and the east side of the proposed site sits within the Sweeping Moorland and Flows (NatureScot LCT 134).

2.4 There are no areas designated for Natural Heritage within the site. There are however a number of designations within a 20km radius study aera. Those with likely connectivity to the site a listed below and notably includes:

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)

- Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands (5.3km)
- River Naver (11.5km)
- River Oykel (14.5km)

Special Protection Areas

- Lairg and Strath Brora Lochs SPA (1.9km)
- Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors SPA (5.2km)
- Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA and RAMSAR site (5.9km)
- Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet (20.7km)

Site of Specific Scientific Interest

- Lairg and Strath Brora Lochs (1.9km)
- Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors (5.2km)
- Grudie Peatlands (5.7km)
- Cnoc an Alaskie (8km)
- Strath an Loin (9.2km)
- Ben Kilbreck (10.3km)
- Strath Duchally (13.8km)
- Coir an Eoin (14.5km)
- Creag na Croiche (16.4km)
- Kyle of Sutherland Marshes (17.1km)
- Mallart (18.8km)
- Truderscraig (19.1km)

- Altnaharra (19.9km)
- Mound Alderwoods (20.7km)
- Strathfleet (20.7km)

The distances as given above are approximate and are measured from the application site boundary, as such the separation distances from the nearest turbines to the designated area are greater.

2.5 The following Wild Land Areas (WLAs) are within proximity of the application site:

- WLA 33 – Ben Klibreck - Armine Forest (4.9km)
- WLA 34 – Reay - Cassley (5.7km)
- WLA 37 – Foinaven - Ben Hee (8.3km)

The applicant has provided WLA assessments within the Environmental Impact Assessment Report for these WLAs.

2.6 In terms of built and cultural heritage, the EIAR has identified 11 heritage assets within the site boundary (Inner Study Area). This includes, 3 clearance cairns, a shielding hut and 5 quarries which are likely from post-medieval date. Adjacent to the site and included in the baseline assessment is Fèith Osdail Bridge, which is a category C listed building and a former milestone. The former milestone is no longer in situ and its whereabouts are unknown.

2.7 Outwith the site boundary (Outer Study Area) the EIAR has identified 14 Scheduled Monuments, 2 category C listed buildings (including Fèith Osdail Bridge) and a small archaeological landscape. The archaeological landscape lies along the east side of Loch Shin, on a low ridge between the loch and the valley of Strath Tirry to the east is a spread of prehistoric settlement remains, potentially of late Bronze Age date and later, including groups of hut circles, several burnt mounds, spreads of small cairns and a broch. The remains are well preserved within an area of pasture farmland and have archaeological value both as individual monuments and collectively as a group, perhaps representing occupation and farming activity over an extended period in the later prehistoric period.

2.8 The bedrock geology underlying the site comprises mainly Morar Group Psammite (Altnaharra Psammite Formation), which is low grade metamorphic rock (which has minimal permeability). The bedrock has superficial deposits of peat, Alluvial clays, silts and gravels across the site. NatureScot's 2016 Carbon and Peatland Map indicates that the majority of the site is covered by Class 1 Peat, defined as "nationally important carbon-rich soils, deep peat and priority peatland habitat; areas likely to be of high conservation value. Peat probing has been undertaken which identified much of the site was covered with peat depths of less than 1m, however there were some deeper pockets of peat with depths greater than 2m identified within the site.

2.9 Within the development site the dominant habitats are coniferous plantation woodland, blanket bog and wet modified bog. Other sensitive habitats include broadleaved plantation woodland, marshy grassland and running water. Habitat and botanical surveys were undertaken by the applicant, these identify a number of habitats within the site with the potential for Groundwater Dependent Terrestrial

Ecosystems (GWDTE), which are protected under the Water Framework Directive. These included areas of rush pasture habitats, mire habitats and wet heath habitats. The sites geology and pattern of habitat occurrence, means that the habitats are likely to be surface water or rainwater fed. It is not anticipated that there would be a significant amount of groundwater present, even at shallow depths across the site. However, perched groundwater is expected to be present within the superficial geological deposits, but this is considered to be localised and discontinuous.

2.10 The EIAR also reports the results of Protected Species Surveys for Otter, Bats (Pipistrelle (Pipistrellus sp.) and Daubenton's bat (Myotis Daubentonii)), Atlantic Salmon, Brown Trout, European Eel, Freshwater Pearl Mussel, Pine Marten, Butterflies (Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Small Health), Roe Deer, Wildcat, Mountain Hare, Brown Hare, Common Frog (Rana temporaria), Common Toad (Bufo bufo), Newts (Smooth Newt (Lissotriton Vulgaris) and Palmate Newt (L. Heveticus)) and Common Lizard. Small Pearl-Bordered Fritillary and Small Heath are both priority species in the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP). In addition to this there are habitats which are potentially sensitive within the site, which include National Vegetation Classifications (NVC). The most dominated within the site are Molinia caerulea-Potentilla erecta marshy grassland (Erica tetralix sub-community) and Scirpus cespitosus-Eriophorum vaginatum blanket mire (Cladonia sp. sub-community).

2.11 Ornithological Surveys have also been carried out that identify the site and immediate surrounds are frequented by a varied range of birds including but not limited to Pink-footed Goose, Greylag Goose, Whooper Swan, Greenshark, Hen Harrier, Goosander, Eurasian Curlew, Northern Lapwing, Common Snipe, Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, Common Raven and Black-throated Diver.

2.12 The key recreational interests in this area are walking, hillwalking and hiking, cycling, mountain biking, deer stalking, horse riding, fishing, and canoeing. There are no Core Paths or long distance routes within the site, although there are a series of core paths, rights of way, heritage path, hill tracks, cycle and other recreational routes within the study area. These include Heritage Path Strath Tirry to Badanloch; and Scottish Hill Tracks number 341 Lairg to Crask Inn by Loch Choire and National Cycle Route 1. The Heritage Path Strath Tirry to Badanloch and Scottish Hill Tracks number 341 Lairg to Crask Inn by Loch Choire follows the same path along the Dalnessie track to the southern boundary of the site. The A836 which pass the site to the west is a key access route used by touring cyclists and motorists, as is the A838 further to the west, the A839 to the south and the B9176 to the south of the A836, which includes the Struie Viewpoint. These routes are collectively promoted as the Moray Firth Tourist Route by Visit Scotland. National Cycle Route 1 follows the A836 from the south of the Dornoch Firth before joining the B864 on the west side of the River Shin passing the Falls of Shin Visitor Centre. The A837 from Invershin to Ledmore is also popular with tourists, although is not a designated route. In addition, the popular and promoted Inverness to Wick trainline follows roughly the same route as the A839 from the Dornoch Firth northward through Achany Glen before heading east from Lairg though Strath Fleet.

2.13 In terms of landscape sensitivities, there are no international or regional landscape designations on the site however the turbines are within 25km to the following national and local designations:

National Scenic Areas

- Assynt-Coigach (22.2km west)
- Dornoch Firth National Scenic Area (22.6km south and southeast)

Special Landscape Areas

- Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire SLA (8.3km north)
- Loch Fleet, Loch Brora and Glen Loth (21.8km east)
- Bens Griam and Loch nan Clar (23.6kn northeast)
- Fannichs, Beinn Dearg and Glencalvie (25.2km southwest)

2.14 There are a number of turbine developments in proximity of the proposal, which must be taken into account by the assessment for cumulative landscape and visual impacts (LVIA). Windfarms beyond a 20km radius of the application site have been scoped out of the assessment of cumulative effects, so the list below sets out windfarm projects within 25km that are operational, approved or have been submitted but not yet determined.

Built and consented / under construction

Between 3km and 20km

- Braemore (1.8km southwest, 18no turbines, tip height 126m, hub height 81m, rotor diameter 90m).
- Creag Riabhach (13.3km north, 21no turbines tip height 123m hub height 69m, rotor diamenter 112m)
- Lairg (10.5km south, 3no turbines, tip height 100m, hub height 60m, rotor diameter 80m).
- Lairg 2 (11.3km south, 10no turbines, tip heights 150/180/200m, hub heights 83.5/115/125.5m, rotor diameters 133/133/149m).
- Achany (12.6km southwest, 19no turbines, tip height 100m, hub height 59m, rotor diameter 82m).
- Rosehall (12.3km southwest, 19no turbines, tip height 90m, hub height 59m, rotor diameter 62m).
- Kilbraur and Extension (20.1km, 27no total turbines, tip height 115m, hub height 70m, rotor diameter 90m).

Under consideration

- Braelangwell (19.4km southwest, 20no turbines, tip height 180m, hub height 112m, rotor diameter 136m).
- Achany Extension (12km west, 20no turbines, tip height 149.9m). The Highland Council has raised no objection to the application subject to a reduction in scale of the scheme.
- Meall Buidhe (22.4km southwest, 9no turbines, tip height 149.5m).

- Chleansaid (3.3km, northwest 20no turbines, tip height 200m, rotor diameter 75m).
- Strath Oykel (18.3km southwest, 16no turbines, tip height 250m)
- Sallachy (14.1km, northwest 9no turbines, tip height 149.5m)

PLANNING HISTORY

3.1	18.02.2015	14/04614/PREAPP Proposed development of up to 7 wind turbines with a tip height up to 125m, plus associated infrastructure of: sub-station and welfare building and parking, buried electric cables on-site, means of communication, borrow pit(s), access from the highway, tracks and water course crossing, crane hard-standings, and external transformers for an operational life of 25 years, and temporary construction compound. It is possible that the EIA process will identify other works required either as a result of on-site conditions, or as mitigation. The project will involve the felling of elements of a young unmanaged conifer plantation. Major Pre-Application Advice Meeting. Contact Ingrid Frost for further details.	Case Closed
3.2	19.06.2015	15/01353/FUL Temporary siting of a 70m meteorological mast at land to the east of A836 at Strath Tirry	Permission Granted
3.3	29.05.2015	15/01430/SCOP Erection of 5 wind turbines, height to tip 125m (Strath Tirry Wind Farm)	Scoping Decision Issued
3.4	01.03.2018	18/00494/SCOP Construction of Wind Farm (up to 4 turbines) with a tip height up to 135m - Strath Tirry Wind Farm (REG Power)	Scoping Decision Issued
3.4	09.09.2020	20/02680/PREMAJ trath Tirry Wind Farm - Up to four wind turbines with a tip height of up to 135m and an energy storage system with a combined generating capacity in excess of 20MW. The associated infrastructure will include: access tracks (including crossing of the Fèith Osdail burn), crane hardstandings, turbine foundations, underground cabling, on-site control room and switching station, a temporary construction compound, potential excavations/borrow pit workings and a permanent meteorological mast	Case Closed

4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

4.1 Advertised: Unknown NN, Schedule 3 (Bad Neighbour) and EIA Adverts

Date Advertised: 22.1.2021 and 17.09.2021

Representation deadline: 17.10.2021

Timeous representations: 2 (2 No. of Households) objections

Late representations: 2 (2 No. of Households) objections and 1 General Comment

4.2 Material considerations raised are summarised as follows:

a) Contrary to Development Plan;
b) Adverse visual impact (individual impact and cumulative impact);
c) Adverse impact on tourism;
d) Adverse impact on cultural heritage;
e) Adverse impact on ornithology;
f) Adverse transport impacts including on road safety and condition; and
g) Adverse residential and community amenity impacts, including from noise;

4.3 Non-material considerations raised are summarised as follows:

a) Install and provide free electricity to Caask Inn

4.4 All letters of representation are available for inspection via the Council's eplanning portal which can be accessed through the internet www.wam.highland.gov.uk/wam.

5. CONSULTATIONS

5.1 **Lairg Community Council** support the application. It considers that the proposed development will have economic benefits for the local community. It has no concerns over scale or visibility.

5.2 **Rogart Community Council** object to the application on the grounds of adverse cumulative transport impacts.

5.3 **Access Officer** does not object to the application. It notes that any paths or tracks constructed should be available for public recreational access during the operation of the development therefore requests a Recreational Access Management Plan (RAMP). The RAMP should detail how construction will minimise disruption to any existing paths and access. The RAMP should also detail how onsite infrastructure will allow public access through the site and any other plans to improve recreational access across the site including signage and car parking provision.

5.4 **Environmental Health** does not object to the application subject to Conditions to limit operational noise output and to protect private water supplies. It has reviewed the applicant's assessment of likely noise impacts and notes that the baseline monitoring survey has also been carried out and noise levels are well below the maximum permitted levels based on a limit of 5dB above background noise. Noise limits for windfarm developments can vary therefore it is recommended a limit of 2dB above predicted levels is attached to any consent.

5.5 **Forestry Team** do not object to the application subject to Conditions to protect Scotland's woodland resource. It notes that the site extends to 78.53 hectares of plantation forestry, with the loss of 14.42 hectares of permanent woodland. However, the developer is committed to deliver an equal area of compensatory planting.

5.6 **Historic Environment Team (Archaeology)** do not object to the application subject to Conditions. It agrees with the EIAR's assessment on impacts to the historic environment from the proposed development. As mitigation is proposed in general this should be secured through planning condition. This should include embedded mitigation and the watching brief near a shieling site.

5.7 **Historic Environment Team (Conservation)** do not object to the application subject to Conditions. It notes that Fèith Osdail Bridge which is a category C-listed structure has been considered within the EIAR and that for the most part construction traffic will not be using the bridge to access the site. It requests that a formal agreement to not exceed a weight or number will be should planning permission be granted, this should be agreed with the Highland Council (as owner/maintainer of the heritage bridge) prior to commencement of works.

5.8 **Landscape Architect** has raised concerns in relation to the landscape impacts that would result from the proposed development. It is advised that the overall effects on the distinctive sense of place formed by the interaction of landscape character types, which the development would sit at the heart of, would be disproportionate to the development size. The proposed development is unlikely to meet the thresholds most of the criterion as set out in Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance (OWESG).

5.9 **Transport Planning** do not object to the application subject to conditions to secure further detail and agreement on matters related to the development's impact on Council maintained roads, including: access on to and from the public road; general construction traffic; abnormal loads; a Construction Traffic Management Plan; Road Mitigation Schedule of Works; and, a Section 96 Wear and Tear Agreement.

5.10 **Highlands and Islands Airports Limited** do not object to the application. It notes the proposal does not affect the safeguarding area for Inverness Airport.

5.11 **Historic Environment Scotland** do not object to the application. Although the proposed development would significantly affect national historic environment assets it is not of such that would raise national interest. It notes that the EIAR states that no mitigation is required for the operational phase of the proposed development. As there are still some significant effects on the setting of scheduled monuments in the vicinity of the development mitigation should be considered. Good practice in EIA following the mitigation hierarchy is to avoid or reduce significant effects with the option to potentially offset/compensate for any effects to be used only where other mitigation options are not possible.

5.12 **Ministry of Defence (Defence Infrastructure Organisation)** do not object to the application subject to pre-commencement conditions being attached to any permission to secure appropriate aviation lighting and data regarding exact turbine and anemometer siting, construction and operation commencement dates, as well as final structure heights.

5.13 **National Air Traffic Services Safeguarding (NATS)** do not object to the application. It notes that the proposal does not conflict with its safeguarding criteria.

5.14 **NatureScot** do not object subject to application being carried out in accordance with its recommended mitigation. It considers that the proposal is unlikely to have an adverse effect on the integrity of Lairg and Strath Brora Lochs or Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors SPAs given the distance from the proposal, as such an appropriate assessment is not required. It recommends that peatland restoration of should be more than 0.74ha and this commitment is secured through a Habitat Management Plan (HMP). Without the increase in peat restoration agreed through the HMP, it would not be in a position to discharge the condition.

5.15 **Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)** do not object subject to conditions to ensure the development: minimises its impact on peat and carbon loss; protects and enhances, where possible, wetland and peatland habitats, and improves carbon sequestration; protects the water environment by using appropriate watercourse crossings; is constructed in a manner in line with the Schedule of Mitigation; and, is decommissioned in a manner sensitive to the environment by adhering to an agreed finalised Decommissioning and Restoration Plan.

5.16 **Scottish Forestry** does not object to the application subject to condition. It notes that if the 0.53ha of tree felling required for construction work (rather than the proposed development's infrastructure) is to be felled to allow construction operations. If this is that case then a separate felling permission may be required, as per Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Act 2018. It agrees that

5.17 **Scottish Water** do not object to the application.

5.18 **Transport Scotland** do not object subject to conditions to secure information regarding abnormal loads including route and accommodation measures along the trunk road network, and, information regarding construction traffic and traffic management including construction materials, additional signage and temporary control measures in relation to the trunk road network.

6. DEVELOPMENT PLAN POLICY

The following policies are relevant to the assessment of the application

6.1 Highland Wide Local Development Plan 2012

28 - Sustainable Design
29 - Design Quality & Place-making
30 - Physical Constraints
31 - Developer Contributions
51 - Trees and Development

52 - Principle of Development in Woodland
53 - Minerals
54 - Mineral Wastes
55 - Peat and Soils
56 - Travel
57 - Natural, Built and Cultural Heritage
58 - Protected Species
59 - Other important Species
60 - Other Important Habitats
61 - Landscape
63 - Water Environment
64 - Flood Risk
65 - Waste Water Treatment
66 - Surface Water Drainage
67 - Renewable Energy Developments
- Natural, Built and Cultural Heritage
- Other Species and Habitat Interests
- Landscape and Visual Impact
- Amenity at Sensitive Locations
- Safety and Amenity of Individuals and Individual Properties
- The Water Environment
- Safety of Airport, Defence and Emergency Service Operations
- The Operational Efficiency of Other Communications
- The Quantity and Quality of Public Access
- Other Tourism and Recreation Interests
- Traffic and Transport Interests

72 - Pollution
73 - Air Quality
77 - Public Access 43 - Tourism
64 - Flood Risk
65 - Waste Water Treatment
66 - Surface Water Drainage
67 - Renewable Energy Developments
78 - Long Distance Routes

Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan 2018 (CaSPlan)

6.2 There are no site-specific policies covering the application site therefore the application requires to be assessed against the general policies of the Highland-wide Local Development Plan referred to above. It is noted, however, that the CaSPlan does identify Special Landscape Areas (SLA) within the plan area. In this instance, the development has potential to impact Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire SLA.

Highland Council Supplementary Planning Policy Guidance

6.3 The Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance provides additional guidance on the principles set out in Policy 67 of the Highland-wide Local Development Plan for Renewable Energy Developments. The Guidance sets out the Council's agreed position on onshore wind energy matters and reflects current Scottish Planning

Policy. This document is a material consideration in the determination of onshore wind energy planning applications following its adoption as part of the Local Development Plan in November 2016.

6.4 The document includes the Council's Spatial Framework, which, in line with Table 1 of SPP, identifies the areas that are likely to be most appropriate for onshore wind energy development. The current application site lies mainly within a Group 2 Area of Significant Protection. The Group 2 feature present is Carbon Rich Soils, Deep Peat and Priority Peatland Habitat (CPP). CPP is a nationally important mapped environmental asset that indicates where the resource is likely to be found and that detailed peat assessments will be required to guide development away from the most sensitive areas and help inform potential mitigation.

6.5 The document also contains the Loch Ness Landscape Sensitivity Study, the Black Isle, Surrounding Hills and Moray Firth Coast Sensitivity Study, and the Caithness Sensitivity Study. The site does not fall within an area covered by a Landscape Sensitivity Study at this time; however, the west side of the proposed site sits within the Landscape Character Type (LCT) of Strath – Caithness and Sutherland (NatureScot LCT 142) and the east side of the proposed site sits within the Sweeping Moorland and Flows (NatureScot LCT 134) as noted in para 2.3 of this report.

6.6 The following Supplementary Guidance also forms an integral and statutory part of the Local Development Plan and is considered pertinent to the determination of this application:

- Developer Contributions (November 2018)
- Flood Risk & Drainage Impact Assessment (Jan 2013)
- Highland Historic Environment Strategy (Jan 2013)
- Highland's Statutorily Protected Species (March 2013)
- Highland Renewable Energy Strategy & Planning Guidelines (May 2006)
- Managing Waste in New Developments (March 2013)
- Physical Constraints (March 2013)
- Special Landscape Area Citations (June 2011)
- Standards for Archaeological Work (March 2012)
- Sustainable Design Guide (Jan 2013)

7. OTHER MATERIAL POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 The Highland-wide Local Development Plan is currently under review and is at Main Issues Report Stage. It is anticipated the Proposed Plan will be published following publication of secondary legislation and National Planning Framework 4.

7.2 In addition to the above, The Highland Council has further advice on the delivery of major developments in a number of documents, which include the Construction Environmental Management Process for Large Scale Projects; and, The Highland Council Visualisation Standards for Wind Energy Developments.

Scottish Government Planning Policy (SPP) and Guidance

7.3 Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) advances principal policies on Sustainability and Placemaking, and subject policies on A Successful, Sustainable Place; A Low Carbon Place; A Natural, Resilient Place; and A Connected Place, which relate national planning policy to the Scottish Government's National Outcomes.

7.4 SPP sets out continued support for onshore wind energy developments, requiring Planning Authorities to progress, as part of the Development Plan process, a spatial framework that identifies the most appropriate areas for potential onshore wind farms as a guide for developers and communities. SPP also lists considerations in respect of the scale of proposals in relation to area characteristics, to be taken into account in the assessment of wind energy proposals (Para. 169 of SPP).

7.5 Paragraph 170 of SPP sets out that areas identified for windfarms should be suitable for use in perpetuity. This means that even though the consent is time limited the use of the site for a wind farm must be considered as, to all intents and purposes, a permanent one. The implication of this is that operational effects should be considered as permanent, and their magnitude should not be diminished on the basis that the specific proposal will be subject to a time limited consent.

7.6 National Planning Framework 4 will, in due course, supersede Scottish Planning Policy and form part of the Development Plan. Draft National Planning Framework 4 was published in November 2021. It comprises four parts, summarised below:

- Part 1 – sets out an overarching spatial strategy for Scotland in the future. This includes priorities, spatial principles and action areas.
- Part 2 – sets out proposed national developments that support the spatial strategy.
- Part 3 – sets out policies for the development and use of land that are to be applied in the preparation of local development plans; local place plans; masterplans and briefs; and for determining the range of planning consents. It is clear that this part of the document should be taken as a whole, and all relevant policies should be applied to each application.

Part 4 – provides an outline of how Scottish Government will implement the strategy set out in the document.

7.7 The Spatial Strategy sets out that we must embrace and deliver radical change so we can tackle and adapt to climate change, restore biodiversity loss, improve health and wellbeing, build a wellbeing economy and create great places. It makes it clear that new development and infrastructure will be required to meet the net zero targets by 2045. To facilitate this, it sets out that we must rebalance our planning system so that climate change and nature recovery are the primary guiding principles for all our decisions. It sets out that significant weight should be given to the global climate emergency when considering development proposals. The draft sets out that the planning system should support all forms of renewable energy development in principle. Specific to this proposal it states that development proposals to extend and expand existing wind farms should be supported unless the impacts identified (including cumulative effects) are unacceptable. It continues to highlight a range of

considerations for renewable energy applications, similar to the existing provisions of Scottish Planning Policy.

Other Relevant National Guidance and Policy

7.8 A range of other national planning and energy policy and guidance is also relevant, including but not limited to the following:

- National Planning Framework for Scotland 3, NPF3
- Scottish Energy Strategy (Dec 2017)
- Historic Environment Policy for Scotland (HEPS, 2019)
- PAN 1/2011 - Planning and Noise (Mar 2011)
- Circular 1/2017: Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (May 2017)
- PAN 60 – Planning for Natural Heritage (Jan 2008)
- 2020 Routemap for Renewable Energy (Jun 2011)
- Onshore Wind Energy (Statement), Scottish Government (Dec 2017)
- Onshore Wind Energy (Statement) Refresh Consultation Draft, Scottish Government (October 2021)
- Siting and Designing Wind Farms in the Landscape, SNH (Aug 2017)
- Wind Farm Developments on Peat Lands, Scottish Government (Jun 2011)
- Energy Efficient Scotland Route Map, Scottish Government (May 2018)
- Assessing Impacts on Wild Land Areas, Technical Guidance, NatureScot (Sep2020)

8. PLANNING APPRAISAL

8.1 Section 25 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 requires planning applications to be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

Determining Issues

8.2 This means that the application requires to be assessed against all policies of the Development Plan relevant to the application, all national and local policy guidance and all other material considerations relevant to the application.

Planning Considerations

8.3 The key considerations in this case are:

a) Development Plan
b) Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance
c) National Policy
d) Energy and Socio-Economic Benefits, Impact on Tourism
e) Construction
f) Roads, Transport and Access
g) Water, Flood Risk, Drainage and Peat
h) Natural Heritage (including Ornithology)
i) Built and Cultural Heritage
j) Design, Landscape and Visual Impact (including Wild Land Areas)
k) Noise, Vibration and Shadow Flicker
l) Telecommunications

m) Aviation
n) Forestry
0) Other Material Considerations

Development Plan

8.4 The Development Plan comprises the adopted Highland-wide Local Development Plan (HwLDP), Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan and all statutorily adopted supplementary guidance.

Highland-wide Local Development Plan

8.5 With no site-specific allocations or policies within the CaSPlan at the application location, the proposal is principally assessed against HwLDP Policy 67 for Renewable Energy developments Policy 67 sets out that renewable energy development should be well related to the source of the primary renewable resource needed for its operation. Proposals are required to be judged according to their contribution in meeting renewable energy targets and positive/negative effects on the local and national economy as well as against all other relevant policies of the Development Plan and other relevant guidance. In that context the Council will support proposals where it is satisfied, they are located, sited, and designed such as they will not be significantly detrimental overall, either individually or cumulatively with other developments, having regard to the 11 specified criteria (as listed in para. 8.1). Such an approach is consistent with the concept of Sustainable Design (Policy 28) and aim of Scottish Planning Policy to achieve the right development in the right place; it is not to allow development at any cost.

8.6 If the Council is satisfied that the proposal is not significantly detrimental overall, either individually or cumulatively with other developments, then the application will accord with the Development Plan.

Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan

8.7 The Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan does not contain any specific land allocations related to the proposed development. Paragraph 74 of the CaSPlan sets out that the Special Landscape Area boundaries have been revised for the CaSPlan to ensure 'key designated landscape features are not severed and that distinct landscapes are preserved.' The boundaries set out in the CaSPlan are supported by a background paper that includes citations for each of the Special Landscape Areas. Policies 28, 57, 61 and 67 of the HwLDP seek to safeguard these regionally important landscapes. The impact of this development on landscape is primarily assessed in the Design, Landscape and Visual Impact (including Wild Land) section of this report (Paragraphs 8.88 – 8.158).

Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance (OWESG)

8.8 The Council's Supplementary Guidance for Onshore Wind Energy is a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. It should be noted that the guidance does not provide additional tests to assess development proposals against over and above the Development Plan policy. Rather, the guidance compliments the policy by ensuring a consistent and robust methodology is adopted in the assessment of all applicable applications, in particular (although not

exclusively) for consideration of landscape and visual impacts. In that way, the guidance provides a clear indication of the approach the Council takes towards the assessment of proposals.

8.9 To assist with the assessment, the OWESG contains a Spatial Framework for onshore wind energy as required by SPP. The framework applies to individual turbines of ground to tip height of 50m and above, as well as developments of two or more turbines of ground to tip height of 30m and above. The framework sets out the requirement for safeguarding areas in three groupings, 1, 2, and 3. In this instance the site falls within an area designated as Group 2 – 'Area with significant protection'. The Group 2 feature present is Carbon Rich Soil, Deep Peat and Priority Peatland Habitat (CPP). CPP is a nationally important mapped environmental asset that indicates where the resource is likely to be found with a detailed peat assessment being required to guide development away from the most sensitive areas and help inform potential mitigation. The site does not contain any areas designated as Group 3 – 'Area with potential for windfarm development', or Group 1 – 'Areas where windfarms will not be acceptable'. The nearest Group 1 areas are Assynt – Coigach NSA, approximately 22.2km to the west and the Dornoch Firth NSA, approximately 22.7km to the south, which are designated by virtue of being National Scenic Areas.

8.10 The O0WESG also provides strategic considerations that identify sensitivities and potential capacity for windfarm development called the Landscape Sensitivity Appraisals (LSA). The Black Isle, Surrounding Hills and Moray Firth Coast Sensitivity Study, along with the Caithness Sensitivity Study were published in 2017, and now form an integral part of the statutorily adopted OWESG. East and Central Sutherland Study Area, which would cover the area of the site, is one of the six areas still to be examined. The Study has been prepared in draft following the methodology and format of those studies already adopted, however has not yet been published for consultation. Nevertheless, the OWESG approach and methodology to the assessment of windfarm proposals is still applicable to the current application. Specifically, paragraphs 4.16 and 4.17 of the OWESG, which describe the 10 key design criterion that set the 'thresholds' developments should seek to achieve in order to ensure the development is appropriately sited and designed to avoid significant landscape and visual impacts, and comply with the applicable criteria of HwLDP Policy 67. The development's compliance or otherwise with the 10 criteria is discussed in the Design, Landscape and Visual Impact (including Wild Land) section of this report and described in detail in Appendix 3.

National Policy

8.11 As stated, SPP sets out continued support for onshore wind, requiring planning authorities to progress, as part of the Development Plan process, a spatial framework identifying areas that are most likely to be most appropriate for onshore wind farms. This framework, which the OWESG provides, is also intended as a guide for developers and communities alike. National policy also lists likely considerations to be taken into account relative to the scale of the proposal and area characteristics (paragraph 169 of SPP).

8.12 The criteria outlined within SPP include landscape and visual impacts; effects on heritage and historic environment; contribution to renewable energy targets; effect on the local and national economy, tourism and recreational interests; benefits and disbenefits to communities; aviation and telecommunications; development within the peat environment; noise and shadow flicker; and, cumulative impacts. HwLDP Policy 67 for Renewable Energy reflects these criteria. It should be noted that a failure against one of these criteria does not automatically mean that a development fails, as all these criteria must be given due consideration and weighted accordingly relative to the specific proposal.

8.13 Notwithstanding the overarching context of support, SPP recognises that the need for energy and the need to protect and enhance Scotland's natural and historic environments must be regarded as compatible goals. The planning system has a significant role in securing appropriate protection to the natural and historic environment without unreasonably restricting the potential for renewable energy. National policies highlight potential areas of conflict but also advise that detrimental effects can often be mitigated and that effective planning conditions can be used to overcome potential objections to development. A number of criteria are set out in SPP against which proposals for on-shore wind energy development should be assessed (paragraph 169). These criteria are primarily reflected in Policy 67 (Renewable Energy) of the Highland-wide Local Development Plan. A failure against one of these criteria does not necessarily mean that a development fails, all these criteria must be given consideration.

8.14 As a statement of the Government's approach to spatial planning in Scotland, National Planning Framework 3 (NPF3) is a material consideration that should be afforded significant weight in the planning balance. NPF3 considers that onshore wind has a role in meeting the Scottish Government's targets to achieve at least an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, and to meet at least 30% overall energy demand from renewables by 2020, including generating the equivalent of at least 100% of gross electricity consumption from renewables.

8.15 As set out above, National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) was published in draft form in November 2021. This document is still going through the parliamentary process and consultation, therefore the weight to be attached to the document is not the same as the adopted Scottish Planning Policy, National Planning Framework 3 or the Development Plan. However, it can be given weight in the process of determining applications. It will be up to Scottish Ministers to determine the weight to be afforded to it in reaching their determination depending on the status of the document at the time of reaching their determination on this application. It is anticipated that the Planning Authority may wish to make further representation to the application if it is not determined at the time of adoption of NPF4.

8.16 The Draft NPF4 identifies electricity generation from renewable sources of, or exceeding 50MW as national developments, as such this application is not considered to be of national importance. Developments with a generating capacity above 50MW have been identified as national developments due to the need an increase in renewable energy production in order to meet net zero targets. It also highlights that Generation is for consumption domestically as well as for export to the UK and beyond, with new capacity helping to decarbonise heat, transport and

industrial energy demand. It notes that this has the potential to support jobs and business investment, with wider economic benefits.

8.17 For the first time in a planning policy document, confirmation has been provided that when considering all developments significant weight should be given to the Global Climate Emergency. As a development that generates renewable energy this proposal has inherent support from this aspect of NPF4, however the impact on the carbon resource as a result of the development will require further consideration to determine whether the impact of the proposed development is positive or negative in this regard. This aspect is outlined later in this report, the overall carbon payback period is considered to be acceptable.

8.18 Recognising the Ecological Emergency, the draft NPF4 also sets out that proposals should contribute to the enhancement of biodiversity. The proposed development includes provision for peatland restoration and compensatory woodland planting which meet with the provisions of the proposed approach in draft NPF4 for the restoration of degraded habitats and the strengthening of nature networks.

8.19 Considerations for green energy applications have been updated and there is no longer an explicit spatial framework for onshore wind energy developments. Instead, it sets out that proposals for new development, extensions and repowering of existing renewable energy developments should be supported. However, it goes on to set out that such proposals should be supported unless the impacts identified (including cumulative effects), are unacceptable. Draft NPF4 also highlights a number of matters which must be taken into account in reaching a determination on an application for renewable energy. Subject to some minor wording changes, this is largely reflective of the considerations set out in SPP paragraph 169.

8.20 Indeed, the Scottish and UK Governments have published a number of reports in recent years relating to national energy policy and climate change. In short, none indicate a distinct policy change but rather indicate a direction of travel in terms of future policy. Most relevant to this application are as follows:

- Scottish Energy Strategy: The future of energy in Scotland, December 2017;
- Onshore Wind Policy Statement, December 2017;
- Scottish Government, Securing a Green Recovery on a Path to Net Zero: Climate Change Plan 2018–2032 – update, December 2020;
- Committee on Climate Change, The Sixth Carbon Budget, The UK's Path to Net Zero. (including Policy and Methodology) December 2020;
- National Audit Office, Net Zero Report, December 2020;
- HM Government, Energy White Paper, Powering our Net Zero Future, December 2020; and,
- Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy 'Enabling a High Renewable, Net Zero Electricity System: Call for Evidence'

8.21 Furthermore, in late 2019 the Scottish Government's targets for reduction in greenhouse gases were amended by The Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019. This sets targets to reduce Scotland's emissions of all greenhouse gases to net-zero by 2045 at the latest, with interim targets for reductions of at least 56% by 2020, 75% by 2030, 90% by 2040.

8.22 The statements of continued strong support relating to onshore wind energy contained within these documents are acknowledged. Support for onshore wind is anticipated to meet with the continued aspiration to decarbonise the electricity network, enable communities to benefit more directly in their deployment and to support the renewables industry and wider supply chain.

8.23 However, it is also recognised that such support should only be given where justified. In the context that larger, more optimal turbines are anticipated the Onshore Wind Policy Statement sets out the need for a more strategic approach to new development that acknowledges the capacity that landscapes have to absorb development before landscape and visual impacts become unacceptable. With regard to planning policy, these statements largely reflect the existing position outlined within the National Planning Framework and Scottish Planning Policy, a policy framework that supports development in justified locations where there is an expectation that landscapes already hosting wind energy schemes will continue to do so beyond the lifetime of current consents. In addition, it must be recognised that the greenhouse gas reduction targets and the targets in the Energy Strategy are related not just to production of green energy but also related to de-carbonisation of heat and transport.

8.24 The Scottish Government published Onshore Wind Policy Statement Refresh 2021: Consultative Draft in October 2021. This set out that onshore wind remains vital to Scotland's future energy mix and that we will need additional onshore wind energy toward the target of net zero. However, in doing so it was clear that additional capacity is not at any cost and it needs to be balanced and aligned with protection of natural heritage, native flora and fauna. The document also highlights the challenges and opportunities faced by the deployment of additional onshore wind energy capacity as well as consulting on a target of an additional 8-12GW of onshore wind energy capacity being delivered. Importantly it notes that the matter of landscape and visual impacts of onshore wind development remains an evolving area. As part of this evolution, it considers that while decisive action to tackle climate change will change how Scotland looks Scotland's most cherished landscape are a key part of natural and cultural heritage and must be afforded the necessary protection.

8.25 The Highland Council recognises the Scottish Government's declaration of the climate emergency and related biodiversity crisis and has indeed also declared a climate and ecological emergency, the response to this and manner in which policy will be modified has been indicated through the Bute House Agreement, draft NPF4 and the consultative draft of the Onshore Wind Energy Statement.

Energy and Socio-Economic Benefits, Impact on Tourism

8.26 The Highland Council continues to respond positively to the Government's renewable energy agenda. The government's recent Onshore Wind Energy Statement Consultation Draft states that there is currently 8.4 GW of installed capacity in Scotland, with a further 4.69 GW in the planning/consenting process, 4.64 GW are awaiting construction and 0.43 GW under construction. Highland onshore wind energy projects currently have an installed capacity of 2.5 GW, there is a further 1.18 GW of generation permitted but not yet built and 1.3 GW currently under construction. Onshore wind in Highland therefore accounts for around 29.8% of the

national installed onshore wind energy capacity. There is also a further 1.326GW of onshore wind farm proposals currently in planning pending consideration in Highland, and 1.7GW of off-shore wind when accounting for all installed, under-construction or consented schemes around the coast of Highland.

8.27 While Highland Council has effectively met its own target, as previously set out in the Highland Renewable Energy Strategy, it is acknowledged that such targets are not a cap and may be exceeded. Equally, however, the Council recognises the balance that is called for in both national and local policy and it remains the case that there are areas of Highland capable of absorbing renewable developments without significant effects. Nevertheless, both national and local policy set out the expectation that the Council takes a selective approach to determining which windfarm developments can be supported.

8.28 It is in this context that the Strath Tirry development's indicative maximum capacity of 20MW would not make a significant contribution to Scottish and UK Government policy targets and international commitments for renewable energy and electricity generation. The applicant's Planning Statement projects that the development is anticipated to 'pay back' the carbon emissions associated with its construction, operation, and decommissioning within less than 2 years of operation, saving an estimated 17,629 tons of CO_2 every year compared to fossil fuel mix electricity production.

8.29 In terms of economic benefits, the proposed development anticipates a construction period of 12 months, grid connection, and 30 years of operation prior to several months of decommissioning. Such a project has potential to offer some investment / opportunities to the local, Highland, and Scottish economies including for businesses ranging across construction, haulage, electrical and service sectors through the supply chain, with opportunities in research and development, design, project management, civil engineering, component fabrication / manufacture, installation, and maintenance. The applicant is committed to utilising the local supply chain wherever possible. The largest spending proportion is expected to be on turbine procurement, transport, and installation related contracts, followed by balance of plant, grid connection, and pre-construction.

8.30 Research by RenewablesUK (2015) is cited to predict that up to 13% of planning and development costs for the proposed development could be spent in the Highlands (£2.9 million), and 59% in Scotland (£13.1 million). The research also anticipates that up to 12% of the overall value of construction contracts for the proposed development could be realised in the Highlands (up to £24million), and 36% of the value in Scotland (up to £72 million). The construction phase is predicted to support up to 6.2 jobs for 12 months, translating to up to £409,788 GVA during the construction phase. During the operational period it is estimated that the proposed development would generate around £4.73m GVA and would provide around 3 jobs per year. Given this EIAR concludes that the socio-economic benefits during construction and operation of the proposed development as of minor beneficial and not significance.

Construction

8.31 There are likely to be some adverse impacts caused by construction traffic and disruption, which are most likely to be within the service sector particularly during the construction phase when abnormal loads are being delivered to site, this has been highlighted in the representations. It is anticipated that the construction period for the development would take 12 months. Working hours on site would usually be restricted to be 07.00 – 19.00 Monday to Friday, 08.00 – 13.00 on Saturday with no Sunday of Bank Holiday working. The EIAR confirms that these times would be normal site working hours, however component delivery and turbine erection may take place outwith these hours. Given the location of the development and lack of proximity to properties this is considered acceptable. It is recommended that the applicant continues to keep noise to a minimum on the site and a construction noise assessment will be required as part of the Construction Environment Management Document. Construction updates will be provided on the project website and a newsletter will be distributed to residents within an agreed distance to the site.

8.32 The project anticipates the deployment of a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) in association with the successful contractor engaged. This should include a site specific environmental management procedures which can be finalised and agreed through appropriate planning conditions with the Planning Authority and relevant statutory consultees. Such submissions are expected to be "plan based" highlighting the measures being deployed to safeguard specific local environmental resources and not simply re-state best practice manuals. Due to the scale of the development SEPA will control pollution prevention measures relating to surface water run-off via a Controlled Activities Regulations Construction Site Licence.

8.33 In addition to the requirement for submission and agreement on a CEMP, the Council will require the applicant to enter into legal agreements and provide financial bonds with regard to its use of the local road network (Wear and Tear Agreement) and final site restoration (Restoration Bond). In this manner the site can be best protected from the impacts of construction and for disturbed ground to be effectively restored post construction and operational phases.

8.34 Developers must also comply with reasonable operational practices with regard to construction noise so as not to cause nuisance. Section 60 of the Control of Pollution Act 1974 sets restrictions in terms of hours of operation, plant and equipment used and noise levels, amongst other factors, which is enforceable via Environmental Health. The applicant has submitted a construction noise assessment that indicates predicted construction noise levels will be well below maximum permitted levels. It is also expected that the developer and contractors would employ the best practicable means to reduce the impact of noise from construction activities at all times.

8.35 The applicant has sought a micro-siting allowance of 50m. Micro-siting is acceptable within reason to address unforeseen onsite constraints, anything in excess of 50m may have a significant effect on the composition of a development. Further if matters are identified during the application stage which require movement of infrastructure, it is considered that this is best addressed during the application stage rather than

relying on micro-siting. A micro-siting limit of no more than 50m, should be secured by condition.

8.36 Should the development be granted consent, a Community Liaison Group should be set up to ensure that the community council and other stakeholders are kept up to date and consulted before and during the construction period.

Roads, Transport and Access

8.37 During construction the Proposed Development will be accessed from the A836 via a temporary access junction located in the south-western corner of the site. Following construction this access junction will be restored to the current landscape condition and re-instated, and access during operation will be taken from a junction located in the north-western corner of the site.

8.38 The Port of Entry of the turbines is likely to be Invergordon Harbour, they would then travel from the port of entry via the Council maintained B817 coastal road before turning left into the U4242 unnamed industrial estate distributor road (after Woodside Gardens in Invergordon). From the U4242, the turbines would join the C1063 Academy Road before joining the A9 trunk road at Tomich junction to travel north. From the A9(T), the turbines would join the A839 at The Mound south of Golspie, and proceed to Lairg where loads will turn right on the A836 and approach the site from the south, before accessing one of the site entrances. In order to construct the Proposed Development, bulk materials such as concrete and aggregate will be brought in from local suppliers from the south via the A836. Specialist loads such the turbine components will be transported to site from Invergordon using specialist vehicles via the A9, A839 and A836.

8.39 The EIAR provides an assessment of the development's impact on the surrounding road network during the construction, operation, and decommissioning phases, as well as an Abnormal Indivisible Load (AIL) Route Assessment from the Port of Entry to the site. The Study Area for the Traffic Assessment includes the routes between Invergordon Harbour and the A9(T), the A9(T) from Tomich to The Mound, as well as the A839 from The Mound through Lairg, and onto the site access. The EIAR determines that the likely effect using IEMA guidelines would be minor, non-significant effects along the A836 between the site access junction and Ardgay, relating to the increase in HGV traffic operating on the route.

8.40 Invergordon harbour has successfully accommodated turbine deliveries in the past. Temporary mitigation to the load road network out of this area may be required due to the size of the components being transported. A detailed up-to-date structural assessment of bridges, culverts and any other affected structures along the route would be required, in consultation with the Council's Structures Section, along with an unladen AIL run. Following on, a programme of Road Mitigation Schedule of Works should be agreed and carried out by the developer in consultation with the roads authorities. Full details can be included within the CTMD should the development be granted consent.

8.41 It is anticipated that the following traffic will require access to the site during construction works:

- Staff transport, either cars or staff minibuses;
- Construction equipment and materials, deliveries of machinery and supplies such as crushed rock and concrete; and
- Abnormal loads consisting of the wind turbine sections and also a heavy lift crane, transported to site in sectional loads.

During the 12 month period, it is expected that the peak monthly construction traffic flow associated with the site would be month 5 where activities are anticipated to generate an average of 66 movements per day, of which 20 would be made by light vehicles and 46 by HGV.

8.42 There are no residual effects associated with the operational phase of the Proposed Development. Any effects during construction are reduced by mitigation proposals including a Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP). The Operational and effects were scoped out of the assessment as the likely effects during the operational phase are likely to be less than two vehicles' movements per week and therefore insignificant. It also scoped out decommissioning effects as these can be fully assessed closer to that period, that being said, it is considered that the traffic flows associated with the decommissioning works will be lower than those associated with the construction phase as elements of the proposed development may remain in-situ (such as cable trenches, access tracks, etc).

8.43 Transport Planning in their response have noted that the applicant's assessment relies on improvements to the A836 through the consented Creag Riabhach Wind Farm to remain in place to the benefit of all road users, including construction traffic for the proposed development. However, it will be expected that road mitigation/improvements to the A836 similar to those agreed for Creag Riabhach Wind Farm will be required between the proposed southern and northern site access junctions. Further A836 works will be required between the southern access point and the A838 junction should the Creag Riabhach works not be completed prior to the proposed development commencing.

8.44 Both Trunk Road Authority and the Council Transport Planning Team has confirmed that development traffic can be accommodated on the road network, subject to conditions and a requirement for a legal agreement to address "wear and tear" provisions. These will be consistent with current best practice. These need to highlight potential cumulative impacts arising with other major developments. The conditions are to secure:

- A Construction Traffic Management Plan for approval and implementation as agreed highlighting all mitigation / improvement works required for general construction traffic and abnormal load movements, including the timing of such works and appropriate reinstatement / restoration works.
- An un-laden trial run between the Port of Entry and the site access will be required in liaison with the police and both roads authorities.
- Structural assessment of bridges, culverts and any other affected structures along the route in consultation with the Council's Structures Team.
- Community liaison to ensure the project construction minimises impact on the local community, that construction traffic takes place outwith peak times on the network, including school travel times, and avoids identified community events.
- All traffic management being undertaken by a quality assured contractor.

8.45 The site, like most land in Scotland, is subject to the provisions of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. Although there are no significant recreational access resources within the proposed site boundary, there are a series of core path, rights of way, heritage path, hill tracks, cycle and other recreational routes within the study area. The most significant is the National, cycle Network (NCN) route 1 that runs adjacent to the site and a recorded right of way (CROW Code HS29). The EIAR confirms that there will be no need to close this right of way during construction works as a result of the proposed development. There will be a need to restrict access to the site during construction works at key times. However, where feasible accesses should be made available for a wide variety of users during the construction phase. Access tracks to the proposed development should be accessible to a wide variety of users. All access gates should be "easy open" accesses and be unlocked to responsible access takers. To ensure access is provided throughout the construction period and that enhanced recreational access opportunities are provided during the operational phase, a Recreational Access Management Plan will be required. This will also be required to include details of signage to be included on the site to warn users of the paths within the wind farm of any hazards such as maintenance or potential ice throw during winter. The visual impact of the development from recreational routes is considered in Paragraphs 8.145 – 8.149 of this report.

8.46 During construction works there may be a minor adverse effect to the National Cycle Route 1, due to the increase in road users. It is proposed that this will be managed through the implementation of the Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) for general construction traffic and a Traffic Management Plan (TMP) for abnormal loads (which would form part of the CTMP).

Water, Flood Risk, Drainage and Peat

8.47 The EIAR is clear that a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) will be in place, and as mentioned in paragraph 8.32. The document would ensure that potential sources of pollution on site can be effectively managed throughout construction and in turn during operation; albeit there will be fewer sources of pollution during operation. An outline CEMP is included within the EIAR (Appendix 3.2).

8.48 The CEMP needs to be secured by planning condition to ensure the agreement of construction methodologies with statutory agencies following appointment of the wind farm balance of plant contractor and prior to the start of development or works.

8.49 The application site has identified flood risks from fluvial and pluvial sources. The Fieth Osdail is the only watercourse within the site, flowing westward from the centre of the eastern site boundary, downslope to the south-west corner of the site. The watercourse ranges between 5 – 8m in width and is turbulent and meandering in nature. The EIAR identifies that fluvial flood risks relate to the floodplain directly adjacent to Fèith Osdail watercourse (river). The fluvial flood risk areas are limited to the immediate vicinities of the river, within abandoned channels and meanders. Most of the site infrastructure is not considered at risk of flooding as it will be sited well outwith the fluvial flood plain. However, the proposed temporary (construction phase) site access at the south-west corner of the site, and a short stretch (730m) of proposed temporary access road leading into the site from there, is in close proximity

to Fèith Osdail watercourse and at risk of flooding. This temporary access point is required to the south side of the bridge to allow abnormal loads to be brought to site. The access point is in close proximity to the top of the east bank of the Fèith Osdail watercourse (approximately 7.5m), but is elevated approximately 4 – 5m above the level of the watercourse and is therefore not considered to be at risk of flooding. The Council's Flood Risk Management Team has no specific concerns regarding that constraint.

8.50 Pluvial flood risks are identified as being consistent with the main watercourse channels however the extent of surface water flood risk is localised and does not form large linked flooded areas or flow paths.

8.51 The EIAR notes that there are no known private water supplies within a 1km radius of the proposed site. The applicant undertook a review of the Drinking Water Quality Regulator (DWQR) for Scotland database (DWQR, 2019). The DWQR data was also reviewed against known private water supplies across the Highland region, and a review of OS mapping to identify any wells or springs marked at or near properties in the close vicinity of the site.

8.52 As the development would entail works in connection with the water environment measures have been highlighted by the applicant to mitigate localised flood risks as well as protect the water environment have in the outline CEMP and Outline Drainage Strategy, following pre-application consultation with SEPA. Mitigation measures include:

- the adoption of sustainable drainage principles to control the rate, volume, and quality of run off from the development, in particular in relation to maintaining flow paths to specific habitats sustained by rainfall and surface water runoff;
- 50m development free buffer zones to be maintained around all water bodies;
- access tracks and turbine hard standings will be designed to have adequate cross fall with runoff designed to side cast to a swale which will offer one level of treatment in removing silts and sediment;
- new and replacement watercourse crossings to be constructed to accommodate 1:200 year flood event flows. The EIAR advises that 11 watercourse crossings have been identified; and,
- pollution prevention measures to mitigate against effects of potential chemical contamination, and sediment release.

8.53 SEPA support this approach and conditions are sought to secure further details, including physical markings on the site prior to construction commencing of a 50m buffer to the Fèith Osdail watercourse. Furthermore, the single span crossing of the Fèith Osdail shall be demonstrated to be designed to accommodate without constriction the 1 in 200 year flood event plus an allowance for climate change. All watercourse crossings shall be oversized bottomless arched culverts or traditional style bridges. Works in or in the vicinity of inland surface waters and wetlands, as well management of surface water runoff (including access tracks) will require authorisation under The Water Environment (Controlled Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2011 (CAR).

8.54 The wider site is home to potential Ground Water Dependent Terrestrial Ecosystems (GWDTEs). The EIAR notes that the pattern of occurrence of the GWDTE habitats, which have potential groundwater dependence, is focused close to forestry breaks, roads/tracks, and surface water features. These are areas of preferential surface water flow, where run-off from the surrounding areas will naturally be directed. Based on the low permeability of the underlying geology, and this distribution of habitats, the EIAR considers that it is most likely that most of the observed habitats are in fact fed by surface water/rainwater/localised perched groundwater body.

8.55 To the southern part of the site the EIAR identified potential spring features, suggesting potential for localised emergence of groundwater via fractures. The potential for habitats in localised areas south of Fèith Osdail to be fed by groundwater via localised fracture flow cannot be ruled out. Given these findings although there is unlikely to be GWDTE present in the majority of the site, there is potential to the south-central part of the site, south of Fèith Osdail. As such targeted monitoring and assessment of the groundwater levels and flows beneath the site would be carried out prior to commencing works. This will help to clarify whether identified areas of potential GWDTE in the south of the site are in fact groundwater fed and if any micro-siting or additional protective measures are required to minimise impacts to groundwater quality and flow in these areas.

8.56 Nevertheless, the EIAR has assessed the significance of the effects on the groundwater resource as non-significant given the low productivity aquifer status, minimal groundwater anticipated to be present within bedrock at shallow depth, the absence of private water supplies in the vicinity and localised GWTDEs.

8.57 The majority of the site contains peat, with areas of deep peat of over 1m. A total of 605 peat probes were taken across the application site to identify impacts of the proposed development on the peat resource. The resultant information has been used to inform the site layout taking into account other environmental constraints such as sensitive habitats, ornithology, and the water environment amongst others. The peat probing results found no peat at 58 of the locations surveyed and 363 locations with a depth of less than 0.5m of peat. In 130 locations there was peat depth of 0.5m to 1.0m and in 112 locations there were peat depths equal to or greater than 1m. The areas of peat with a depth greater than 1m are defined as deep peat. These areas were found to be generally between 1m and 2m in depth, but 9 probes identified areas of over 2m in depth and 1 probe identified peat at 3m There areas of deep peat were generally found to the north-east and west/south-west of the site as identified the probing locations and associated peat depths presented in Figure 9.4 of the EIAR.

8.58 Whilst most of the proposed development avoids infrastructure being sited on deep peat (areas with a peat depth of less than 0.5m), Turbine 2 and 3 (including hardstanding) are located on areas of peat with a depth of up to 1m. Similarly, the temporary construction compounds, temporary hardstanding areas and sections of the access tracks are sited on pockets of deep peat. The EIAR does not consider the peat within the site to be priority peatland, this is contended by NatureScot. Whilst it is agreed that the afforested areas within the site would not necessarily be considered priority peatland the entire proposal is located on carbon rich soils. Furthermore, the EIAR states that the laboratory test results indicate that the peat

sample suggests it should be classified as 'peaty/organic soil, rather than peat'. NatureScot are of the opinion that this supports the view that the proposal is located on carbon rich soils. The applicant anticipates a total of 9658.7m^3 of peat will require excavating, but that, the full amount will be available for reinstatement.

8.59 The EIAR SI identifies an area of no less than 0.74 ha for restoration for the peatland habitat permanently lost. NatureScot advise that the applicant has only considered the area of peatland lost through direct impacts and has not account for indirect impacts on peatland habitats from drainage and or fragmentation of peatland habitats within the site. The quality of a restored habitat can take decades to be the equivalent of what it is replacing. As such NatureScot note that up to 2.59 ha of peatland could be lost through the proposed development which is significantly higher than the applicant's calculation of 0.46 ha.

8.60 A revised draft Peat Management Plan and a Peat Landslide Hazard and Risk Assessment are submitted as part of the EIAR SI, which have also helped to inform the design of the proposal. The applicant's risk assessment identifies negligible or low risk of peat instability at all proposed turbine, hardstanding and other infrastructure locations during construction works. More detailed ground investigations will be required and SEPA have requested that a finalised Peat Management Plan, forming a part of the CEMP, is secured by condition prior to works commencing on site. The Peat Management Plan should specify how micrositing and other mitigation measures are deployed to minimise peat disturbance (taking account of other environmental sensitivities), including prioritising the use of pre-disturbed land for cable trenches.

8.61 The submission also includes a draft Habitat Management Plan (HMP) intended to ensure the appropriate and timeous restoration of peatland habitats temporarily removed during construction, at construction compounds and borrow pits for example. NatureScot welcome the increased area of peatland restoration presented in the EIAR SI and the applicant's commitment to investigating further peatland restoration as part of their HMP. However, as noted in para 8.59 above, the HMP should always aim to restore more habitat than the minimum required due to the likelihood of failure and loss of quality habitat. As such NatureScot advise that further peatland restoration should be identified and proposed by the applicant, this should be secured through planning conditions.

8.62 NatureScot raised concerns in relation to the lack of information on the construction of the temporary access track. The information required includes construction details, flood risk modelling and restoration. This would be required to be secured through planning conditions as the applicant argues that should the decision be taken to float the temporary access track then this would result in a reduction in peat extraction and habitat loss area would not change.

Natural Heritage (including Ornithology)

8.63 The EIAR has identified and assessed the development's likely impacts on designated sites, ornithology, protected species, and ecology. The development is not situated within any sites designated for ecological interests but is close to, and has potential connectivity with, a number of sites that are designated at national and international level. As there is potential for the proposal to impact connected sites

designated at a European level (Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors SPA and Lairg and Strath Brora Lochs SPAs), the requirements of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 as amended (the "Habitats Regulations") apply or, for reserved matters, The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017. Consequently, the Scottish Government as the competent Authority is required to consider the impact of the proposal on Natura2000 sites through Habitats Regulations Appraisals (Appropriate Assessment). NatureScot has provided advice in relation to each of the Natura2000 sites including the likelihood of significant effects and subsequent mitigations that may be required, which is summarised below.

8.64 NatureScot advise that the qualifying interests (black-throated diver) of Lairg and Strath Brora Lochs SPA, are not expected to be significantly affected by the proposed development. During 2013/14 and 2020 survey work no black-throated divers were recorded over the proposal, therefore there is no collision risk anticipated. Furthermore, the proposed site is approximately 1.7km from the SPA and will not affect the supporting habitats or species for black-throated divers. Given the distance from the proposal to the SPA it is not considered that it will result in significant disturbance to black-throated divers and an appropriate assessment is not required for this SPA.

8.65 The qualifying interests of Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors SPA that has the potential to be affected is Hen Harrier. However, NatureScot do not consider the integrity of the site to be adversely affected by the proposal. During the 2013/14 and 2020 survey works no hen harrier flights were recorded during the breeding season over the site, therefore no collision risk is anticipated. The proposal is approximately 5km from the SPA and will not affect the supporting habitats or species for hen harriers within the SPA. Furthermore, given the distance from the proposal and the SPA it is not considered that it will result in significant disturbance to or displacement of hen harriers. NatureScot advise that an appropriate assessment is therefore not required for this SPA.

8.66 In relation to wider countryside birds (i.e. those not connected to a protected area), NatureScot is generally content with the level of survey work. The 2020 winter survey noted several hen harrier flights close to the proposed site. All flights were below turbine collision height which is indicative of hunting behaviour. The final HMP will include measures to prevent greenshank, wood sandpiper and hen harrier from breeding within the proposed development site. Further bird monitoring will be undertaken as part of the final HMP prior to commencement of development, and again once the development was operational. These would involve species specific surveys for greenshank, wood sandpiper, hen harrier and black grouse. NatureScot welcomes the revised HMP which includes measures to deter breeding within the key turbine key holes and the continued species monitoring, reporting any collision mortalities.

8.67 Survey work from October 2020 noted that a black grouse lek had been heard near the site but the location had not been identified. As per NatureScot guidance the applicant was asked to identify the location of any black grouse lek within 1.5km of the site. The applicant presented the findings of other recent survey works that had been undertaken for the Creag Riabhach grid connection in summer 2018, as well as Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and Land Scotland (FLS) records

from the surrounding area since 2000. In 2009, a male black grouse lek was recorded displaying approximately 1.1km east of the proposed development and approximately 1.4km south of the proposed development. Additionally, in summer 2018 the closest lek was recorded approximately 1km east of the proposed development, with three displaying males and a female in attendance. Another lek, approximately 1.5km east of the proposed development, was recorded with on displaying male. As no black grouse leks were identified within 750m of the proposed development site it is not considered that there is potential for disturbance.

8.68 In addition to the above, the RSPB have submitted a detailed response expressing concerns in relation to black-throated diver (in connection with Lairg and Strath Brora Lochs SPA). It notes that the SPA supports six pairs of black-throated diver, representing 3% of the British population and can not conclude from the information presented within the EIAR that there would not be a significant effect on black-throated diver. RSPB acknowledges that the EAIR SI presents sufficient justification as to why there are no significant effects anticipated on the Lairg and Strath Brora Lochs SPA black-throated diver population. However, RSPB recommends that further mitigation and habitat enhancements are provided through the final HMP.

8.69 RSBP are confident that through black grouse and raptor surveys undertaken in 2021 there is no evidence of confirmed breeding within 2km of the proposed site. It advises that further survey work should be included in the pre-construction surveys, due to historic presence and continued suitability of habitat. Surveys show a lot of buzzard flight activity which could indicate a breeding attempts on or near the proposed site, therefore RSPB suggests that felling should be avoided in the breeding season. This could be secured through planning condition.

8.70 The EIAR includes an assessment of the impact on protected species. The Phase 1 Habitat Survey identified several otter spraints along the Fèith Osdail, two away from the watercourse and a potential couch was recorded to the north of the proposed temporary access track. However, no otter holts were recorded. The surveys also reported evidence of pine marten scats and dens within the site.

8.71 Whilst bat Surveys recorded four species of bats, common pipistrelle (Pipistrellus pipistrellus), soprano pipistrelle (P.pygmaeus), brown long-eared bat and Daubenton's bat the EIAR states that overall bat activity in the area is low. The common pipistrelle recorded the most (487 total passes across the bat activity season), followed by soprano pipistrelle (with 188 total passes). Three passes were recoded for brown long-eared bat and Daubenton's bat across the activity season. Common and soprano pipistrelle are at high risk, and brown long-eared bat and Daubenton's bat are at low risk of effects from wind farms at a population level. Any micrositing allowance agreed still maintains a minimum 50m separation from watercourses and other features suitable for commuting bats. Any impacts on Bats may still require a Protected Species License from NatureScot, which would be subject to the development passing the three licensing tests for protected species in the event the application is approved.

8.72 Freshwater invertebrate (excluding Freshwater Pearl Mussel) were recorded at locations within the Fèith Osdail. The Fèith Osdail was determined to have very good to excellent water quality and is therefore capable of supporting a diverse range of species. The electric fishing survey found that juvenile Atlantic salmon and Brown

trout were present at all four sampling sites along the Fèith Osdail. Minnows and three-spined stickleback (Gasterosteus aculeatus) were present at most survey sites.

8.73 A survey was carried out using camera trapping across the site for wildcats, with no sightings recorded. NatureScot do not fully agree with some of the information presented within the EIAR and have advised that further survey work should be undertaken prior to any construction commencing and consider that camera trapping should continue to ensure the site is adequately covered. The field study area was found to contain a resident population of sika deer (Cervus nippon), with low numbers of seasonally occurring red deer (C. elaphus) and occasional roe deer. As such a Deer Management Plan would be required.

8.74 Final Species Protection Plans (SPP) will be required which outlies further preconstruction Protected Species Surveys would be required, along with an Ecological Clerk of Works (ECoW), as part of a CEMD condition. Surveys for legally protected species should be carried out at an appropriate time of year for the species and as close to the commencement of construction as possible, but no greater than 8 months preceding commencement of construction. A watching brief should then be implemented by the ECoW during construction. The ECoW's remit would include the authority to stop works where impacts on Protected Species are identified, as well as to oversee that works are undertaken in accordance with the CEMD and Schedule of Mitigation. Given the above, the development is not expected to have a detrimental impact on ecology.

8.75 In terms of forestry, woodland, and tree impacts, are likely to occur as a result of tree removal to allow for the proposed development site. There will be further impacts, although these would be limited, mainly resulting from the requirement to minimise the risk of subsequent windthrow to the newly created forestry edges by the additional felling of trees to create more windfarm edges. The site comprises of 51.11 hectares of forest, subdivided into 43.7 hectares of conifer planting and 7.41 of broadleaf (approximately 15 years old). The EIAR sets out a total loss of 14.42 hectares of permanent woodland. However, the applicant is committed to delivering an equal area of off-site compensatory planting. It is the Council's preference that this is delivered as close to the site of woodland removal as possible. The Highland Council's Forestry Team welcomes the applicant's commitment to provide compensatory planting subject to the submission of a Compensatory Planting Plan approved by the Planning Authority prior to works commencing on site, and all compensatory planting to be delivered prior to the windfarm becoming operational under the supervision of a suitably qualified forestry consultant which should be conditioned. It should be noted that the future baseline of the proposed site would be unlikely to change significantly in the absence of the proposed development. The coniferous plantation is likely to be harvested by clear fell methods before the trees reach maturity at 40-70 years. Without the Proposed Development, it is unlikely that the forest would be felled any earlier.

8.76 The future baseline of the proposed development site is unlikely to change significantly in the absence of the Proposed Development. The coniferous plantation is likely to be harvested by clear fell methods before the trees reach maturity at 40-70 years. Without the Proposed Development, it is unlikely that the forest would be felled any earlier.

8.77 Overall, the peatland habitats are considered unlikely to change significantly in the absence of the Proposed Development as the open habitats would continue to be impacted and shaped by afforestation and grazing. The majority of habitats are already modified by the surrounding coniferous plantation and grazing by deer, which are expected to continue. Therefore, the distribution of species present within the field study area is unlikely to change significantly in the future. However, climate change may have an effect on future species distribution. Temporary to long term displacement of forest species is likely as coniferous plantations are clear felled and replanted and species recolonise the previously displaced area.

8.78 Whilst it is recognised that there will be impacts on natural heritage as a result of the proposed development both through the construction and operations phases of the development. There is, as with other successfully accommodated wind farm development in Highland, workable and practical mitigation that can be put in place to minimise these effects.

Built and Cultural Heritage

8.79 Scottish Planning Policy (paragraph 145) states, that 'where there is potential for a proposed development to have an adverse effect on a scheduled monument or on the integrity of its setting, permission should only be granted where there are exceptional circumstances.' Further to this Historic Environment Scotland (HES) published the Historic Environment Policy for Scotland (HEPS) in 2019. This includes a series of policies which are supported by the Managing Change guidance series. Of particular relevance for this application is Policy HEP2 which states: "'decisions affecting the historic environment should ensure that its understanding and enjoyment as well as its benefits are secured for present and future generations." And HEP4 that states "changes to specific assets and their context should be managed in a way that protects the historic environment. Opportunities for enhancement should be identified where appropriate. If detrimental impact on the historic environment is unavoidable, it should be minimised. Steps should be taken to demonstrate that alternatives have been explored, and mitigation measures should be put in place."

8.80 The EIAR has identified 11 heritage assets with heritage assets within, and adjacent to, the site boundary (the Inner Study Area). The majority of these assets relate to the post-medieval farming activities and include a possible sheiling hut and the Category C Listed Fèith Osdail bridge, the site of a former possible cairnfield, destroyed by forestry, the site of former milestone, five quarries and two recorded features have been identified as being natural features. There are no Scheduled Monuments within the inner study area. The EIAR concludes that there is low to moderate potential for the site to contain unidentified buried archaeological remains, including prehistoric remains and post-medieval, particularly in areas free from commercial forestry. The Council's Archaeology Officer agrees with the findings of

the EIAR and that the proposed mitigation to reduce any impacts on Cultural Heritage assets should be secured by condition.

8.81 In relation to the impacts on the Category C Listed Fèith Osdail bridge, the Highland Council's Conservation Officer had concerns in relation to the potential adverse impact on the structure due to the bridge being utilised by heavy traffic. Most of the traffic will be not be using the bridge, however as there may be construction traffic crossing the bridge a formal agreement to not exceed a weight or number should be agreed with the Planning Authority in consultation with the Roads Authority prior to works commencing. This can be secured through planning conditions.

8.82 Outwith the site boundaries (the Outer Study Area) the EIAR identifies 14 Scheduled Monuments within 5km of the application site, including 2 further Scheduled Monuments, outwith the Outer Study Area, which have been identified within the EIAR that have settings (prehistoric landscape along the east of Loch Shin) considered to be important to understanding the monuments. The assessment also includes designated heritage assets from which there would be theoretical view of the turbines. There are also two Category C Listed Buildings from which there is predicted theoretical visibility of the Proposed Development.

8.83 The Scheduled Monuments within the Dalchork Wood commercial forestry plantation include remains of prehistoric settlement (hut circles and field systems and a broch) and funerary remains (one burial cairn), and the remains of post-medieval farming activities (farmsteads and shielings). These are all preserved within open clearings within the forestry plantations but share broadly similar characteristics with many of the archaeological remains in this part of Sutherland.

8.84 The two listed buildings, a road bridge (LB 8018) and a memorial monument (LB 8027), are minor 19th century structures. One, the road bridge is a functional feature carrying the A836 over the Fèith Osdail watercourse, the other is a simple obelisk memorial commemorating the life and service of a local man. Along the east side of Loch Shin, on a low ridge between the loch and the valley of Strath Tirry to the east is a spread of prehistoric settlement remains, potentially of late Bronze Age date and later, including groups of hut circles, several burnt mounds, spreads of small cairns and a broch. The remains are well preserved within an area of pasture farmland and have archaeological value both as individual monuments and collectively as a group, perhaps representing occupation and farming activity over an extended period in the later prehistoric period.

8.85 Historic Environment Scotland (HES) considers the proposal has potential for significant adverse impacts on three Scheduled Monuments in particular: Cnoc a' Bhreac-leathaid, shielings and cairnfield 700m NNE of (SM 5300), Loch Beag na Fuaralachd, cairn and shielings 1175m ESE of SW end (SM 5081) and Sallachy, broch 425m NNE of Fruchan Cottage (SM 1883). The Cnoc a' Bhreac-leathaid, shielings and cairnfield and Loch Beag na Fuaralachd, cairn and shielings monuments are focused on the shallow glen carrying the Fèith Osdail. The location of these monuments above the Fèith Osdail and their relationship to it is a key factor in their setting. The assets can be viewed as part of a series of relict settlements scattered throughout Strath Tirry and around Loch Shin. A number of these settlements are likely to have been contemporaneous with these monuments and may have been visible from them. HES note that although the proposed development

would introduce modern infrastructure into the setting of these monuments, which would be prominent on the skyline to the west of the monuments, significantly affect the setting of both, the ability to understand, experience and appreciate their relationship with the surrounding landscape would not be so significant as to affect the integrity of their settings. HES agrees with the EIAR that the effect on the setting of these scheduled monuments would be moderate and significant but would not raise issues of national interest.

8.86 Sallachy, broch 425m NNE of Fruchan Cottage (SM 1883) located approximately 6kn to the south west of the proposed development, comprising of the remains of a broch with surrounding ditch and bank defences. HSE consider that the broch is located in a prominent position on a low rocky knoll on the east-facing slope overlooking Loch Shin with open views along the loch in both directions and across the loch. The broch would have been a highly visible structure when first built and likely to have been visible from relatively long distances. The broch's visibility and monumental architecture would have expressed the occupants' power and status to people living in the surrounding area, as well as visiting allies or potential enemies. HES therefore consider that the monument's setting extends into the surrounding area and long views both to and from it are important to an understanding of key aspects of its cultural significance. The visualisations provided at Figure 11.9b and LVIA VP11 demonstrate that the turbines would be clearly visible against the backdrop of the hills behind. The development would introduce a new element of modern infrastructure into the setting of the monument and form a distracting element in the important views out from the broch. HES advise that the development is likely to have an adverse effect on the setting of the monument and whilst it considers the EIAR to underestimate the effects it does not consider that the effects would affect the integrity of the setting of the monument.

8.87 HES and the Council's Historic are largely content with the assessments provided in the EIAR and as such the proposal is likely to meet the threshold of Criterion 3 of the OSWESG, which requires development to not diminish the prominence of landmarks or disrupt their relationship to their setting in terms of cultural heritage.

Design, Landscape and Visual Impact (including Wild Land Areas)

8.88 The applicant has presented a number of submissions to illustrate the landscape and visual impact of the development both singularly and cumulatively with existing and consented windfarm developments. To this end, the EIAR includes a description of the design process, along with assessments against Landscape Character Areas, National Scenic Areas, Special Landscape Areas, and Areas of Wild Land. A total of 20 viewpoints across a study area of 40km have also been assessed, however all viewpoints are within 30km of the development. These viewpoints are representative of a range of receptors including communities, recreational users of the outdoors, and road users. The expected bare earth visibility of the development can be appreciated from the ZTV to Blade Tip with Viewpoint Locations in the EIAR (Figures 6.7A and 6.7B). The viewpoints have been selected to represent visibility from landscape character types, landscape designations and principal visual receptors. These include points of specific importance such as recognised viewpoints, designated landscapes, settlements and routes.

8.89 The methodology for the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) is sufficiently clear, being generally in accordance with the Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Third Edition (GLVIA3), with the assessment's methodology being provided at EIAR Appendix 6.1. As set out in para 3.32 of GLVIA 3 the "LVIA should always clearly distinguish between what are considered to be significant and non-significant effects." The applicant judges significant effects following the combination of judgements based on the Sensitivity of the Receptor as defined by the receptor's susceptibility against the importance of the view / landscape, which it distinguishes between national, regional, and local, against the Magnitude of Change. According to the definitions provided in the EIAR at Table 6.2 (Chapter 6) in the submitted EIAR, impacts of High / Medium-High and Medium correspond to significant effects. Where Medium – Low effects are predicted, the EIAR advises that professional judgement has been applied to ensure that the potential for significant effects arising has been 'thoroughly' considered with a reasoned justification provided. It should be noted that the maximum sensitivity as set out at Table 6.2 is 'Medium – High' within Appendix 6.1, however within EIAR Chapter 6, Table 6.2 includes a maximum sensitivity of 'High'. Those effects classified as Medium, Medium – Low, Low or Negligible are considered to be Not Significant. The Council is of the view that based on the methodology presented within the EIAR Medium – Low and Low effects can be significant but this needs to be considered on a viewpoint by viewpoint basis using professional judgement.

8.90 In the assessment of each viewpoint, the applicant has come to a judgement as to whether the effect is significant or not. In assessing visual impacts in particular, it is important to consider that the viewpoint is representative of particular receptors i.e. people who would be at that point and experiencing that view of the landscape not just in that single view but in taking in their entire surroundings.

8.91 A key consideration in the effects on receptors of wind energy development is the sequential effect when travelling through an area on the local road network both by individuals who live and work in the area and tourists. Those travelling scenic routes, whether designated as such or not, have a higher sensitivity to views. While a driver of a vehicle is likely to be concentrated on the view immediately in front, passengers have a greater scope for looking at their surroundings. As such it is considered that road users are usually medium, medium-high or high sensitivity receptors. There is a small inconsistency in approach by the applicant when considering sensitivity of road based receptors but it has not altered the overall conclusion of significance.

8.92 THC's final visual assessment for each viewpoint (alongside a reasoned guess of the applicant's viewpoint analysis) is provided in Appendix 2 of this report below.

Siting and Design

8.93 Chapter 2 of the EIAR sets out the reasons for the site selection, as well as the design evolution from the initial iteration through the Scoping stage in 2018, through the pre-planning application request for a development of up to 4 turbines in 2020 to the current submission. While matters such as landscape and visual impact have been taken into consideration, it is clear from this Chapter that the site has been chosen following an approach from the landowner to the developer with a desire to

generate wind energy rather than through a wider site selection process which involved alternative sites.

8.94 The applicant was advised at the pre-application stage that the key considerations for the design process would be to mitigate the development's impacts on Natural, Built, and Cultural Heritage resources, peat, residential and visual amenity. Significant concerns were raised in relation to the anticipated effects on Ben Klibreck in the north, the mountains of Assynt – Coigach NSA in the west and Ben Hee in the north west. The site was selected after taking into consideration a number of issues such as the cumulative developments, grid connection, access, environmental designations, landscape designations, wind speed and visual receptors. This process resulted in the site being selected as having potential for wind development with minimal environmental constraints.

8.95 Although there are no protected areas designated for nature conservation, landscape quality, or cultural heritage within the site, there is in proximity. These designated areas lie within the study area and have been considered as they may be affected due to potential visibility of the proposed development. The nearest residential receptors are located approximately 891m to the south of the site. The site is also located relatively close to the existing road network and would be visible from a range of angles from this network. The applicant has also secured a grid connection, where the wind farm would connect into the existing network infrastructure at the Lairg Grid Supply Point, located in Lairg Muir, Approximately 1km north-east from the centre of Lairg. This is likely to be an overhead line, albeit that this connection does not form part of the planning application.

8.96 The site is a fairly modest area of land for the scale of proposal. It is fairly flat, rising gradually from 130 AOD in the south-west corner to 155m AOD in the centre of the site. To the west and north of the site the topography is similarly flat and low lying. Two relatively small hills lie adjacent to the site, to the south is Cnoc' a' Bjreac-Leathaid and to the east is Cnoc a Fuarlachd which respectively summit at 216 and 230m AOD. Further north and east are much larger hills as noted in para 2.2. The landscape is principally forested which will be removed prior to commencement of development. The removal of forestry will in itself bring about a landscape and visual change but this is not unusual in the Highland landscape. The site itself is relatively small for a scheme of this scale and constrained by land availability / ownership. It is considered that the proposal has been designed to fit a wind farm onto the site rather than the wind farm being designed to fit the site's location.

8.97 The EIAR bases the design principles on an environmental assessment process, taking into account potential environmental, landscape and visual impacts and their effects, physical constraints, and health and safety considerations while maximising the generating capacity. The four turbine layout has, where possible, been designed to avoid habitats of highest ecological importance and with the highest sensitivity to impacts. The application includes the erection of a 10m metrological mast, it is proposed that the mast would be a 'tilt mast' which when lowered it will measure approximately 2.4m in height, reducing the visual impact.

8.98 The site is located within an 'Area of significant protection' as defined by The Highland Council OWESG. Across the immediate landscape of the study area there are several distinctive groups of wind turbines/wind farms with heights ranging from Achancy and Lairg I with 100m to tip and Lairg II Redesign with tips of up to 200m.

8.99 Where the Proposed Development occurs in areas of peat, the locations have been selected to avoid areas of deep peat. Where peat depth is greater than 1 m, track construction will generally be of a floating design in order to minimise the disturbance to peat. Measures already taken into account during design include track micro-siting to avoid most areas of deep peat and, where required, features will be incorporated into the track, such as hydrological culverts to minimise the potential effects on the hydrological characteristics of mire and wet heath habitats.

8.100 It has become increasingly important to consider the context in which wind farm development is seen and subsequent cumulative effects. Of particular importance is how developments relate to each other in design and relationship to their surroundings; their frequency when moving through the landscape; and their visual separation to allow experience of the character of the landscape in between. Care and attention are therefore required regarding design, siting and location to avoid detrimental visual impacts. NatureScot's Siting and Designing Wind Farms in the Landscape Guidance notes that it can be particularly challenging to accommodate multiple wind farms in an area, and so advances windfarm design objectives of limiting visual confusion and reinforcing the appropriateness of each development for its location. In this instance the proposed site is in an area which is attracting several development proposals, with some of the largest turbines in Highland, as such this can lead to extensive visual impacts.

8.101 This approach is consistent with NatureScot's (then SNH) guidance, Siting and Designing Wind Farms in the Landscape which sets out (paragraph 4.2) that relating further development to a complex patter of development will be challenging but the focus should be on improving the overall pattern and character of development rather than exacerbating existing conflicts between design. The applicant has highlighted that they designed the scheme based on the four key locations to provide views towards the proposed development from different directions. Therefore, it is assumed that the applicant considers that the design of the scheme would be best demonstrated from VP3 (A836 south of Dalmichy); VP5 (A836 north of Rhian Bridge); VP7 (Blarbuie) and VP9 (Saval).

8.102 The current application site is within the Landscape Character Area (LCA) Strath – Caithness and Sutherland and Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCA. However, the context of the landscape context should consider the Strath LCA as a unit within the Sweeping Moorland and Flows. The area does have its own character, but with such subtle topographic definition from the Sweeping Moorland and Flows. The Highland Council's Landscape Architect advises that it is more useful to consider the two Landscape Character Types (LCT) as one lower lying landscape character area which is bounded by higher ground in the form of the Rounded Hills and Lone Mountain LCAs which directly abut them and the Rugged Massif to which the Rounded Hills form foothills in the north west around 25km from the site. In many viewpoint locations the turbines will be seen in-front of the Rounded Hills and Lone Mountains LCTs.

8.103 It is accepted that the design of the wind farm has had to balance landscape character and visual amenity; environmental constraints; topography and ground conditions; and technological and operational requirements. The applicant has explained for each viewpoint how the design has sought to address the receptor(s) at the viewpoint. However, it is not considered that the development has been appropriately designed to address the constraints of the area as a result of the complex surrounding landscape and existing development.

8.104 In terms of design of the other infrastructure on the site (control building, substation and tracks), these appear to be sited to principally avoid deep peat. The substation and met mast are both located to the southern boundary and will likely be visible to northbound travellers on the A836. Although the met mast does tilt down when not in use to limit the visual impact, it is not clear what periods the met mast would be tilted down for. The turbines have been sited back from the road, however given the constrained land holding the closest turbine is approximately 255m from the A836. The elements that are contained within the centre of the site would be afforded some screeding from the residual forestry. However, the design of these requires to be progressed from the standard uninspiring designs as shown indicatively in the EIAR and EIAR-SI. This could be secured by condition. The applicant has confirmed that the transformers will be contained within the turbine nacelle.

8.105 The relationship with other wind energy schemes in the area, can be seen from most viewpoints in the distance. It is considered that, the location and design of the scheme has would affect the separation from other wind energy development which would be uncharacteristic for development within the area. The proposed development often appears to compromise the design of the existing wind energy developments, in terms of scale and distance, often dominating the existing wind energy development. Furthermore, existing wind energy developments within the area generally occupy sites in elevation positions within the Rounded Hills LCT. The location of the proposed development within the open lower ground is a significant contrast to this and will tend to increase the perception of the area being dominated by wind energy development.

8.106 The views from the south, around the settlement of Lairg, and to the west on high ground are where the turbines will have the most significant impact.

8.107 The relationship between settlements/key locations and the wider landscape is considered against Landscape and Visual Assessment Criteria contained within Section 4 of the OWESG, Criterion 1. The nearest settlement identified within the Local Development Plan is Lairg, located approximately 8km to the south. Due to the site location and topography, the proposed turbines are screened within Lairg. However, there is some theoretical visibility on the edges of Lairg and on higher ground as demonstrated at VP9 (Saval), VP10 (Rhian Breck, Lairg) and VP20 (The Ord). Furthermore, the proposed development would be visible from a number of key locations when approaching Lairg which would intensify the experience. Views from the dispersed communities which are common in this area, will be most substantial around Tirryside (VP8) and Blarbuie (VP7), Rhian (VP5) and Dalchork (VP2). The proposed development is considered to not meet the threshold of Criterion 1 as set out in Appendix 3 of this report.

Landscape Impact

8.108 Whilst the EIAR predicts that in the most part the proposed development will not have a significant impact on the landscape resource within the study area, it does identify some localised effects on the areas that are closer in proximity to the site, and mostly contained to 6.5km from the proposed development. As such, the EIAR identifies the potential for these significant effects to arise on the landscape character of the site and some parts of its surroundings.

8.109 There are several aspects to consider in determining whether this development represents an acceptable degree of impact on landscape character, including:

- impacts on the local landscape composition closer to the development;
- impacts on the Landscape Character Area (LCA) as a whole and on neighbouring LCAs; and,
- compliance with THC Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance as it relates to Landscape Sensitivity.

8.110 The assessment undertaken by the applicant has identified the addition following LCTs within a 25km study area:

- 134 Sweeping Moorland and Flows;
- 135 Rounded Hills;
- 138 Lone Mountains;
- 142 Strath – Caithness and Sutherland; and
- 145 Farmed and Forested Slopes within Crofting

All other LCTs were not assessed due to the limited theoretical visibility of the proposed development.

8.111 The proposed development would largely sit within a small area of Strath – Caithness and Sutherland Landscape Character Type (LCT142), with a small part of the east of the site sitting within an area of Sweeping Moorland and Flows (LCT134) according to NatureScot National Mapping. The site is also considered to be close to Rounded Hills – Caithness and Sutherland (LCT135). Turbines 2 and 3 are siting within Strath – Caithness and Sutherland LCT and turbines 1 and 4 site within Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCT. The EIAR does not consider the site area to display the remoteness, naturalness, expansiveness, exposure and long, open views of sweeping moorland and flows, or the enclosure, cultivation and strong watercourse focus of strath. Viewpoint 4 (A836 north of Dalnessie entrance) lies within this receptor, while Viewpoints 1 (A836 Dalchork bird hide layby), 2 (A836 at Allt Chaiseagail Bridge), 3 (A836 south of Dalmichy) and 5 (A836 north of Rhian Bridge) are just outwith its boundary and provide a useful outlook across the LCT.

8.112 Strath LCAs are generally known for creating linear spaces, with open floors typically containing a river or loch. This LCT ranges from fairly straight deeply incised troughs to more winding valleys with a number of minor side glens. The degree of enclosure of the strath is dependent on the height and steepness of containing hill slopes with many straths strongly contained by steep-sided Rounded Hills – Caithness & Sutherland, although a few are more open where they border the lower and more gently undulating Sweeping Moorland and Flows or are associated with larger loch basins. In this case Strath Tirry is broader and more open because of the relatively

low and gently sloping Rounded Hills LCT and Caithness & Sutherland and Sweeping Moorland and Flows which contain them. Although the Strath LCA lies outwith any designated landscapes, it appears to be part of a shallow bowl of landscape with Ben Klibreck in the north, the mountains of Assynt-Coigach NSA in the west and Ben Hee in the north west. While the landform of the LCA is not pronounced, the transition from settled to unsettled land which is found at its edges promotes a sense of arrival at a wilder place. Therefore, any development in this LCA would have potential to dilute that sense of transition and arrival.

8.113 This area of strath is something of an anomaly as it has a relatively broad, short shape, with the River Tirry running up the eastern side of the LCT and a broad expanse of the LCT extending westwards to Loch Shin, a maximum of 3.5km to the west of the River Tirry. This results in the Strath, which covers the western part of the site to be less prevalent in the study area, generally found in a tight, linear or winding form along a river or loch. Viewpoints 1 (A836 Dalchork bird hide layby), 2 (A836 at Allt Chaiseagail Bridge), 3 (A836 south of Dalmichy), 7 (Blarbuie) and 8 (Tirryside) lie within this LCT. It is considered that areas with a high visibility of the proposed development (principally within 4km of the proposed development) would be significant, particularly when viewed in front of the distant Lone Mountains to the north of the proposed development and rounded hills to the north / northeast. The development would tend to disrupt the relationship of the lower foreground landscapes with Ben Klibreck, and its flanking Ben Armine massif within Rounded Hills LCT. This relationship is a Key Characteristic of the Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire SLA and the citation's Sensitivity to Change includes the fact that the 'area is very sensitive to development that could interrupt the relationship between the open moorland and the isolated mountains.'

8.114 Sweeping moorland and flows and strath are very distinctive LCAs, often covering open moorland and the other covering valleys and glens. All four turbines have theoretical visibility of up to approximately 5.3km from the proposed site within the Strath and Sweeping Moorland LCAs. Sweeping moorland and flows LCT is described as a flat, gently undulating and generally smooth landscape and is an extensive LCT across the eastern part of the 20km study area and covers the eastern part of the site. In this case the transition between Strath and Sweeping Moorland is masked to the east of the A826 by the presence of coniferous plantation. The planting also limits intervisibility between the two LCAs of structures lower in height than the trees. In the wider landscape the development would be seen to sit on the boundary between the two LCTs. The Sweeping Moorland and Flows and Strath LCAs are both limited in extent in this area, the boundaries with the Rounded Hills being around 4.5km to the east of the proposed site and around 3.5km to the west of Farmed and Forested Slopes with Crofting around 3.5km to the south and Lone Mountains 10km to the north. This creates a complex interplay of landscape character types, which gives rise to a distinctive local character composition.

8.115 South of the Crask Inn, Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCA clearly reads as part of the Strath of the River Tirry, and is experienced to the north and west as a sweeping, shallow bowl, bounded by the rising ground of other landscape character areas beyond its limits. Loch Shinn is lost on the folds of landscape and the Sweeping Moorland seems to merge with the rolling hills beyond. To the east the LCA is experienced primarily as a slightly convex slopes with commercial plantation which

generally obscure perception of landscapes beyond. From the A838 the LCA is experienced primarily as moorland and forested slopes rising from the shores of Loch Shin, creating a sense of containment with the loch's strath. From both spaces, Lone Mountains are exposed and obscured as the road rises and falls through the undulating landscape and conifer plantations and small buildings are limited to small, tight groups with shelter trees, adding to a sense of remoteness and isolation. Any development in this LCA would have potential to dilute that sense of transition to remoteness.

8.116 It is considered that the proposed development would reduce the sense of remoteness on the Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCA. The proposed development would introduce new highly dominate large structures into the LCA. The EIAR predicts that the proposed development is likely to affect the following key characteristic of strath/sweeping moorland and flows; 'Long, low and largely uninterrupted skylines offering extensive views across this landscape and result in a feeling of huge space' and have a significant effect between 1km and 4km from the proposed development. The Proposed Development will be seen in relation to the skyline in views from some parts of the LCT. The proposed development would result in the perception of the landscape scale and distance being confused by the introduction of turbines in a location where they are seen against the backdropping hills where the perception of the scale of hills and distance to them will tend to be reduced, and from elevated positions where its relationship to the Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCT will tend to highlight the relatively compact and contained nature of this landscape area seeming to dominate the LCA rather than be absorbed within it.

8.117 Further east is Rounded Hills – Caithness and Sutherland (LCT135) which forms higher and more defined rounded hills adjacent to the lower and more gently undulating and lower-lying Sweeping Moorland and Flows. The LCT forms a broad crescent of hills and includes Meallan Liath Mor which has a summit of 462 AOD. The landform further northeast from the proposed development within this LCT rises to 713 AOD. This group of moderately high hills encloses the sweeping moorland and flows LCT that lies to the east and west, and also provides a band of peripheral 'foothills' around the higher ground of rounded hills that lies to the east and north-east, including Ben Armine and Creag Mhor. While much of the grouping is upland, with the hills generally reducing in height towards the south, the River Brora cuts a broad swathe of lower ground across the southern part of the LCT.

8.118 As such the LCT provides enclosure of the lower ground and is therefore considered to be a distinctive area of landform. These hills have a remoteness around them due to the lack of visible manmade features. VP14 (Creag Mhor) looks towards the proposed development and across this LCT, giving a useful overview of its appearance. The EIAR finds that the effect between 4.6km and 6.5km from the proposed development would be significant, however beyond this it finds the effects to be not significant due to a combination of the factors considered in the medium-high sensitivity of the receptor and the maximum low magnitude of change upon it. As the proposed development will have a defining effect on landscape character due to the proposed development viewed in front of hills which are considered to be integral components of the diverse scenic landscape.

8.119 The Lone Mountains (LCT138) lie to the north east of the site and comprise of Ben Klibreck with a summit of 962 AOD. This is a distinctive mountain which is visible far beyond the edge of the LCT and is seen on the horizon from many key views, with particularly dramatic views from the A836. The development would tend to disrupt the relationship of the lower foreground landscapes with Ben Klibreck, and its flanking Ben Armine massif within Rounded Hills LCT.

8.120 The closest settlement is Lairg with the landscape character in and around Lairg itself, Farmed and Forested Slopes with Crofting LCT. This forms an enclosed bowl surrounded by elevated hill and upland moorland landform. This LCT represents a key area in terms of landscape transition as routes from the south and east emerge from Strath landscapes and converge into northwards routes which disgorge from the Farmed and Forested Slopes with Crofting to the more expansive moorland and rounded hills and lochs landscapes to the north and west. Although there is no theoretical visibility from within Lairg, there is visibility of the proposed development from almost all the upper slopes of the surrounding hills (VP9 Saval, 10 Rhian Breck, Lairg and 20 The Ord). This LCT is considered to be a key location which provided a gateway to the other LCTs, best demonstrated from VP9 (Saval), VP20 (The Ord) and VP10 (Rhian Breck, Lairg). Although the proposed development will not have a significant effect on this LCT, it will impact the relationship between LCTS. As such the settlement of Lairg and its immediate hinterland are impacted from the proposed development and therefore do not meet the threshold of Criteria 1 and 2 of the OWESG.

8.121 Another key gateway effect is also experienced near the entrance to the Dalchork Hide on the A836, where views north to Ben Klibreck open up abruptly. This creates a sense of leaving behind the settlement and transport hub of Lairg to a wilder landscape.

8.122 In terms of Criterion 10 of the OWESG the proposed development impacts a number of the LCTs and how they interplay, although this is mostly limited up to 6.5km. The development's landscape context results in the experienced from within the Sweeping Moorland and Flows, and to some extent the Strath landscape, as an extensive shallow bowl of a landscape edged with rising hills. Furthermore, the frequent changes of landscape character within this area makes the landscape particularly sensitive to issues in relation to perception of scale and distance in the landscape. This is further exacerbated with the complex set of landscape interactions, as the development is seen from more developed areas against a wilder backdrop. This interplay of different LCAs which come together to from the local composite landscape character would be undermined by the interruption to the relationship between them.

8.123 When the proposed development is seen against a back drop of the Lone Mountains and the Rounded Hills within the Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire Special Landscape Area, the development will tend to disrupt the landscape function of 'providing a simple foreground to views of distant Lone Mountains and Rugged Mountain Massif – Caithness & Sutherland, complementing the distinctive form of these mountains and accentuating their height and prominence' which the Nature.Scot Landscape Character description attributes to the Sweeping Moorland and Flows. It is this combined landscape setting which creates a sense of landscape place, and which is

most compromised by the effect of the proposed development on the interaction between landscape types and on the appreciation on the scape and composition of the landscape.

8.124 As well as assessing the effect of the Proposed Development itself, the LVIA assesses the cumulative effect that may arise when the Proposed Development is added to various scenarios of operational, under-construction, consented and application-stage wind farms. The cumulative assessment concludes that when the proposed development is added to operational and under-construction wind energy developments, there will be some significant cumulative effects that will arise.

8.125 Most significant cumulative effects occur when the proposed development is viewed with other wind energy development. It is considered that the existing pattern of development of wind energy generally occupies sites in elevated positions within the Rounded Hills LCT. The location of the proposed development within the open lower ground is a significant contrast to this and would tend to increase the perception of the area being dominated by wind energy development. Furthermore, the proposed development would affect the separation between developments and / or clusters by its occupation of a site which is uncharacteristic for development within the area.

Wild Land

8.126 No element of the proposed development is within a Wild Land Area; however it is in relative proximity to Wild Land Areas WLA34 – Reay – Cassley (VP11: Sallachy, VP13: Track to Loch Sgeireach and VP19: Moavally are all located within WLA34), WLA35 – Ben Klibreck – Armine Forest (VP14: Creag Mhor and VP15: Ben Klibreck are located within WLA35), and, WLA37 – Foinaven – Ben Hee (VP17: Cnoc an Alaskie and VP18: Ben Hee are within WLA37).

8.127 Reay - Cassley WLA 34 is located approximately 6.3km to the west of the proposed development site. The WLA consists of an area of land that extends across the north west Sutherland from Scourie in the north to Rosehall in the south. The area comprises moorland to the north, a high and irregular mountain range within the central section, and simpler peatland slopes in the south. The ZTV (Figure 6.11) show localised and intermittent theoretical visibility from the WLA, gained largely from the south-eastern ‘leg’ of the WLA, which forms a ridge between Glencassley and Loch Shin. Viewpoints 11 and 19 are located at the southern and northern ends of this ‘leg’, VP13 is representative of the eastern ‘leg’ and VP16 represents view from close to the submit of Ben More Assynt 998 AOD. Theoretical visibility is gained from a minimum of 5.7km (from the western side of Loch Shin, near Beinn Sgeireach 476 AOD) up to a maximum of around 40km away, at Meall an Fheur Loch 613 AOD.

8.128 The EIAR has scoped out three of the four Wild Land Qualities (WLQ) for WLA 34, NatureScot is content with the applicant’s reasoning in relation to the WLQ 1 – 3. However, NatureScot predicts that there may be some significant effects on responses which underpin WLQ4: Extensive, elevated peatland slopes whose simplicity and openness contribute to a perception of awe, whilst highlighting the qualities of adjacent mountains. The corresponding viewpoints provides context of the development as experienced from within this WLA.

8.129 In terms of WLQ4, Strath Tirry would impact the influence the openness on the Rounded Hills to the north / north east of Lairg as demonstrated from VP11. The turbines will interrupt the views towards the east from the WLA, which may effectively create a new focus in the landscape, in particular from long distance views when looking out of the WLA where the turbines are seen in front of the distant hills, increases the proposed developments prominence. Visibility of Strath Tirry from this WLA is limited to its eastern sections, the eastern slopes and close to the summit of Ben More Assynt. From Ben More Assynt (VP16) the proposal would appear to visually introduces larger turbines in front of existing wind farm development, in particular Gordonbush / Kilbraur cluster. The proposal may disrupt the special quality of the WLA particularly when viewed on its own from the WLA. However, it is unlikely that the effect would be such that it would affect the integrity of the site and raise landscape issues of national importance. NatureScot advise that the proposal would affect the arresting nature of the extensive views from elevated locations on the east facing slopes of the WLA as the turbines would be one of the few obvious mand made features.

8.130 When Strath Tirry is viewed from the south eastern part of the WLA the turbines influence on the experience of some aspects of this quality would be greater as the turbines would be visible in the direct and peripheral views from extensive areas where no existing wind farms are currently visible. However, given that other wind farms are viewed from a large portion of the south eastern 'leg' the overall effect of reducing the strength of WLQ4 is reduced, and therefore would not affect the integrity of this key characteristic.

8.131 The **Ben Klibreck – Armine Forest (WLA 35)** is located approximately 5.2km to the north and northeast of the development site. The WLA consists of an area of land that extends across central Sutherland between the settlements of Lairg, Altnaharra and Kinbrace. It comprises of a series of round-topped hills and plateaus as well as an extensive area of undulating peatland and lochans that reflect the effects of glaciation. The Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire SPA is located within the WLA recognising its scenic value. The WLA is represented by Viewpoints 14 and 15 in the EIAR, taken from Creag Mhor and Ben Klibreck (Meall Nan Con). There are 5 WLQ:

- An awe-inspiring simplicity of landform and landcover and a perception of 'emptiness', so that the extent of the peatland often seems greater than it is.
- Arresting, isolated mountains rise up in stark contrast to surrounding peatland and glens, amplifying the awe-inspiring qualities of each.
- A remote interior where access involves long distances and lengthy time via penetrating glens or crossing over and around rugged landforms and waterbodies.
- An extensive area of peatland with a prevailing strong sense of naturalness.
- A secluded, elevated and remote interior plateau shielded by an outer rim of hills, in which there is a strong sense of solitude, sanctuary and risk.

There are a number of wind farms visible from this WLA (built, consented and under construction), resulting in some of the qualities being substantially reduced in strength. Strath Tirry would introduce very small pockets of new visibility of turbines into the WLA. Where visible, often on elevated ground, the turbines would appear as obvious human artefacts seen in clear weather conditions in the setting of managed forestry. It is likely that this would have some adverse effect on the appreciation of

WLQ5, however not significant as the 'interior' of this WLA remains largely unaffected by this proposal.

8.132 The **Foinaven – Bee Hee (WLA 37)** is located approximately 8.5km to the northwest of the development site. The WLA consists of an area of land that extends across north west Sutherland, extending from the peatlands of Crask in the southeast to the mountain of Foinaven in the north west. The WLA scenic qualities are recognised by its inclusion in part within the North-West Sutherland NSA. The applicant has scoped out 5 of the 6 WLQ for this WLA and NatureScot is in agreement with the applicant's reasoning. Viewpoints 17 and 18 provide some context of the effect on WLQ6:

- Extensive peatland slopes that appear awe-inspiring in their simplicity and contrast to neighbouring mountains and allow wide open views of the surrounding area.

Visibility of Strath Tirry will be largely limited to the southern end of this WLA. The intermittent, limited, and relatively distant visibility of the proposed development that can be gained from the WLA coupled with its low-lying nature ensures that it will not appear as a prominent external feature. Consequently, it is unlikely to have a significantly adverse impact on this key characteristics / attribute.

National Scenic Areas

8.133 The closest NSAs to the proposed development are the Dornoch Firth and Assynt-Coigach NSAs, which located over 20km away. The Dornoch Firth NSA has no visibility as demonstrated on the ZTV (Figure 6.7a) of the EIAR. Therefore, there would be no predicted effects from the proposed development. The Assynt-Coigach NSA is shown on the ZTV (Figure 6.7a) to have very intermittent visibility, which is mostly blade only. Subsequently, an assessment against the defined special qualities of either NSA is not required. NatureScot have not raised any concerns in respect of NSAs.

Visual Impacts

8.134 The applicant's assessment has indicated that significant visual effects are likely to be contained within approximately 6.5km of the Proposed Development, although they may, in unusual circumstances, arise beyond this.

8.135 The Council considers visual impact using the Criterion set out in Section 4 of the Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance (OWESG), with the Council's assessment against the criterion and view as to whether the threshold set out in the guidance is met or not, contained in Appendix 3 to this report. Unsurprisingly, there is a difference between the applicant's assessment and the appraisal of the Planning Authority, which is to be expected because a visual impact assessment is largely dependent on the application of professional judgement. The information in Appendices 2 and 3 combined with matters as set out below, explain the difference between the outcomes of the assessments.

8.136 The visual receptors for the development have been assessed in the EIAR. The applicant has undertaken a detailed visual impact assessment at each of the 20 viewpoints, focussing on the effect on the receptors at the viewpoint. The EIAR states that receptors at 8 of the 20 viewpoints would have the potential to be significantly

affected by the proposed development. These viewpoints range in their proximity to the site and in most cases a new element is not introduced into the view and the cumulative impact with the consented development is taken into consideration. The views from the remaining viewpoints have not been assessed as significant by the applicant. It is considered that the intervening distance between the viewpoint and the scheme, the more limited magnitude of change. In this case, the baseline of a range of wind energy developments limits the effects as being assessed as significant.

8.137 The Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV) contained in the EIAR indicates that the development would have limited visibility beyond 30km of the study area, with small pockets of visibility limited to the south, southwest, north and northwest of the development between 20 and 30km. The development will be more visible between 10 and 20km, however large areas to the south, west, and east will have no or limited visibility of the development due to distance and topography. Within 10km, the development becomes visible from most areas, with the notable exception of the south eastern part and within the settlement of Lairg. As would be expected, visibility of hub heights generally contracts to higher ground following the pattern as described above (Figure 6.8a), more screening is afforded from the lower viewpoints. Figure 6.14A – 6.14O shows that the development will increase turbine visibility to the west of loch shin and with further pockets of visibility to the south. Visibility is particularly extensive on the higher ground to the west as seen from VP13: Track to loch Sgeireach.

8.138 As stated in Paragraph 8.3, the OWESG sets out the standard against which the Council assesses all wind farm proposals to ensure applications are determined in a consistent manner. Whilst a large scale wind energy scheme would be expected to result in Significant visual impact effects, the Council, through the OWESG, also acknowledges that Significant does not automatically translate to unacceptable in all instances. Following a review of the applicant's assessment the main points of difference, in the Council's view, is in relation to the applicant's assessment on Scale of Change appears to under-represent the change to the baseline view that would be introduced by the development as a single development whereby a larger potential Scale of Change was noted at several viewpoints. Similarly, the same appears to be true for the applicant's assessment of the Scale of Extent for a number of viewpoints, which leads to disagreement on the Magnitude of Change and Significance of Effect experienced by receptors at 7 of the viewpoints. There are some minor disagreements in relation to Sensitivity of Receptor at VP1 (A836 Bird Hide Layby), however the level of significant is agreed. There is further disagreement in terms of the Sensitivity of the Receptor and Magnitude of Change for VP8 (Tirryside A838), where it is considered that the applicant has underestimated the susceptibility and value of the view as well as the scale of change resulting in significant effects. A summary of the applicant's assessment and the Council Officer's appraisal of the assessment which highlights the differences and any concerns with regards to visual impact can be found in Appendix 2 of this report.

8.139 The principal visual impacts are a result of scale and siting of the proposed development individually with the turbines dominating the view. This is particularly the case when viewed from the south of the development, within 10km where it is considered to result in the most significant impacts. Although there is not an adopted

sensitivity appraisal for the study area, generally straths as a location for wind development are unlikely to be suitable for large scale turbines as seen in this case the turbines would protrude incongruously in the landscape when viewed against the backdrop of the enclosing slopes. This effect is best illustrated from Viewpoint 1 (A836 Birde Hide Layby), 2 (A836 at Allt Chaiseagail Bridge), 3 (A836 South of Dalmichy) and 5 (A836 North of Rhian Bridge), all located on the A836. From these viewpoints the development would significantly detract from the visual appeal by its presence, diminishing the prominence of Ben Klibreck and disrupting its relationship to its setting. This would also be the case with VP8 (Tirryside) should the forestry be felled.

8.140 Views from the west of Loch Shin include viewpoints 11 and 13, these views show the relatively settled Loch Shin in the foreground, with the middle view containing the strath / sweeping moorland and flows, and the lone mountains and rounded hills in the backdrop. These are open scenic views of Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire SLA. In this instance it is considered that the applicant has underestimated the Magnitude of Change in relation to VP13 and in that basis the proposed development would result in significant visual effects.

8.141 Similarly, to viewpoints 11 and 13, it is considered that the Magnitude of Change has been underestimated by the applicant for viewpoint 12 (Meall Dola). The view is located on the summit of Meall Dola to the east of Lairg and south east of the proposed development. There is an open view of the strath, open moorland and flows, rounded hills, lone mountains and the rugged mountain massif, creating a complex scenic landscape. From this view the turbine blades would be seen rotating between landforms, drawing the view away from ben Klibreck, the SLA and NSA, distorting the scale of the landscape. It is considered that the level of effects resulting from the proposed development from viewpoint 12 would be significant.

8.142 There is a variance in judgement of visual impact effects in some of the more distant views; VP14 (Creag Mhor); VP15 (Ben Klibreck) and VP17 (Cnoc an Alaskie). Viewpoints 14 and 15 are all located on the summits of hills, with viewpoint 17 located near the trig point on Cnoc an Alaskie. VP14 and 15 benefit from panoramic views across the different landscapes towards the proposed development. From each of these viewpoints there is a sense of remoteness that will be interrupted by the presence of the proposed turbines, particularly from VP14 and 15. These elevated views highlight how the turbines would dominate and interrupted the low-lying view.

8.143 As noted in para 8.91 a key consideration in the effects on receptors of wind energy development is the sequential effect when travelling through the area on the local road networks both by individuals who live and work in the area and tourists. In relation to sequential views along the road network, there is limited theoretical visibility from the south of Lairg, Viewpoints 10 (Rhian Breck, Lairg), and 20 (The Ord) are in within the locale of Lairg. Nevertheless, these viewpoints are located in an important part of the town's rural (and cultural) setting and are representative of the southern approaches to Lairg. VP20 represents views from the A839 as you approach Lairg from the south, whilst VP10 represents local commutes when approaching Lairg from the south-east, as well as fleeting views from the Far North Railway Line (Inverness to Wick) when travelling in both directions. Both these viewpoints are elevated positions, these views are important as they are experienced by receptors as they travel through the area. However, given the limited visibility

when travelling from the south towards Lairg it is not anticipated that there would be a significant effect either on its own or cumulatively. Similarly, the A838 north of Lairg as limited theoretical visibility, with the most significant effects when travelling north from Lairg as demonstrated at VP8 (Tirryside).

8.144 It is considered that the applicant's assessment of the route is a fair representation of the likely effects. It recognises the most significant effects would be experienced from the A836 / National Cycle Route 1 (NCR1) as represented by viewpoints 1 (A836 Bird Hide Layby), 2 (A836 at Allt Chaiseagail Bridge), 3 (A836 South of Dalmichy), 4 (A836 North of Dalnessie Entrance), 5 (A836 North of Rhian Bridge) and 6 (A836 South of Crask). NCR1 follows the route of the B864 and the A836 as it passes through the study area from Edderton in the south to Tongue in the north. The section of this route that is shown on the ZTV to gain theoretical visibility of the proposed development runs from Achany, on the B864, up to North Dalchork, on the A836. Visibility of the Proposed Development from the B864 section is very limited and therefore it is not considered to have a significant effect on the route, viewpoint 20 (The Ord) is the only viewpoint close to the B864 as noted above. The stretch where there is potential for a significant effects to occur is where the route follows the A836 from Lairg travelling northwards and from the Crask Inn travelling northwards. The effect on this stretch of NCR1 is therefore in par with the effects on this part of the A836. It is agreed that the value of the view and susceptibility to change of the views from the A836/NCR1 are high. It is considered that there are significant effects on the route from north of Lairg (south of VP1) and the Crask Inn (north of VP6). This covers approximate distance of 12.5km when travelling south and 6.5km when travelling northwards on the A836. The turbines of the proposed development would be visually prominent when travelling south towards Lairg. Cumulatively, consented and built developments already have prominence on other approaches to the settlement and the proposed development would intensity this experience. The development would detract from landscape characteristics which contribute to the distinctive transitional experience as travellers from the south move away from the settled Farmed and Forested Slopes with Crofting landscape of Lairg and into the more open and wilder landscapes which characterise the route to the north.

8.145 Furthermore, the proposed turbine experience in relation to other schemes when travelling along routes given that the amenity of transport routes is directly linked to the receptors' enjoyment and appreciation of the qualities of the landscape and natural, cultural, and built environments. In reality, such an appreciation requires respite from the experience of turbine development and in locations of high wind energy development pressure and windfarm densities, those sections of the view that provide respite from turbines become increasingly important for the viewer. For example, the proposed development will introduce turbines into a part of many views that is unaffected by wind energy development. The cumulative ZTVs (Figures 6.14a – 6.14o) shows that areas to the west of Loch Shin and to the north east are currently unaffected by wind energy, which would theoretical visibility of the proposed development. The ZTVs also demonstrate that on the A836 there is very little respite from wind energy developments and this proposed development would further exasperate this.

8.146 In relation to other recreational routes the applicant has assessed the visual effect on core paths and eights of way within the study area. It is agreed that the visual effect in relation to core path SU16.02, located within the Gunn's Wood would not have significant effects due to lack of theoretical visibility. It is also agreed that there would be a significant effect on core path SU16.05 at Loch Shin Hide (VP1). This is a short path that leads to the Loch Shin bird hide from the A836, north of Lairg where there will be a clear view of the proposed development.

8.147 It is considered that the applicant has underestimated the Magnitude of Change in relation to core path SU16.03 at Ord Hill (VP20), where there would be significant effects as discussed in para 8.120 this is considered a key location with scenic views. The proposed development would be visible for approximately 1km of this well used core path, although it is appreciated that the proposed development would be most visible from the more elevated parts of this core path network. Many walkers will be there to appreciate the cultural heritage of the area where their experience of the walk may be diminished due to the turbines creating a focal point especially if the forestry is felled.

8.148 It is important to consider the context of the development in combination with other windfarm developments and assess the likely cumulative effects. Of particular importance is how wind energy developments relate to each other in design and relationship to their surroundings; their frequency when moving through the landscape in between. In this instance, cumulative impacts of the proposed development in combination with the existing and consented energy developments at Achany, Beinn Tharsuinn, Braemore, Coire na Cloiche, Creag Riabhach, Gordonbush, Kilbraur, Lairg and Rosehall, which are key elements in the assessment of the proposal. Wind energy developments in the wider area are important as these are experienced by receptors as they travel through the area. Where the development introduces turbines to views from the viewpoint where turbines are not visible, this is not considered a cumulative visual impact irrespective of the magnitude of change. This effect is not applicable to Strath Tirry as each viewpoint has theoretical visibility of other wind energy developments, in the direct view and/or wider view.

8.149 The Council is in disagreement with the applicant's cumulative assessment for receptors at the following viewpoints: VP5 (A836 North of Rhain Bridge), VP10 (Rhian Breck, Lairg), VP14 (Creag Mhor) VP15 (Creag Mhor), and VP17 (Cnoc an Alaskie). It is considered that the applicant has underplayed the magnitude of change resulting in significant cumulative effects. In the case of Viewpoint 5 there appears to be a difference in professional judgement in relation to significant effects.

8.150 It is considered that the development increases the influence of wind energy development at 10 of the viewpoints, these include the views within 10km of the proposed development and also from the more elevated views between 10 – 20km such as VP14 (Creag Mhor), VP15 (Ben Klibreck) and VP17 (Cnoc an Alaskie). Generally, the proposed development is in contrast to the existing and consented wind energy developments as it is located on much lower ground on the cusp of the Strath and Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCTs. When viewed in relation with the existing and consented wind energy developments, Strath Tirry appears in the forefront with the existing and consented wind development in the distance and on

elevated positions within the Rounded Hills LCT which increases the perception of wind energy development in the area. This is the case for the following viewpoints: VP5 (A836 North of Rhain Bridge), VP9 (Saval), VP10 (Rhian Breck, Lairg), VP12 (Meall Dola), VP14 (Creag Mhor) VP15 (Creag Mhor) and VP17 (Cnoc an Alaskie).

8.151 In terms of visual impact, the applicant appears to rely heavily on landcover (trees and woodland) to reduce the Magnitude of Change. Whilst the council accepts that in some cases the assumption that tree and woodland cover would remain as extant there would nevertheless be significant visual impacts.

8.152 The council finds that the proposed development would result in further significant effects that have not been identified by the applicant individually and cumulatively. These effects are as a result of scale and design of the proposed development individually and as it relates to the existing wind energy development in the area. This is particularly the case where the turbines are viewed with Ben Klibreck and the rounded hills in the backdrop which diminished the prominence of Ben Klibreck, leading to extensive visual impacts. Furthermore, the proposed turbines would create issues in relation to perception of scale and distance in relation to Ben Klibreck.

8.153 In terms of residential amenity, and in line with Reporters' findings for similar schemes, such as the consented Limekiln Wind Farm for example, the development is not considered to have an overbearing effect at residential properties located outwith 2km distance from the proposed development.

8.154 There are 5 properties within the 2km limit, the closest Dalmichy at approximately 1.36km to the closest turbine. As such, further consideration of whether the turbines would appear overbearing and to overwhelm visual amenity required, as these properties would experience the greatest overall visual effects not just when residents are in their homes but also when going about their daily lives. To that end, the applicant has undertaken a Residential Visual Amenity Assessment (RVAA). The RVVA includes an assessment on all 5 properties which concludes that while there are likely to be significant effects on the residential visual amenity of all the properties, these, effects do not have the potential to reach the Residential Visual Amenity Threshold. To that end the applicant does not consider that the proposed development would result in having an 'overbearing' or 'overwhelming' effect to render the properties as unattractive places to live.

8.155 The methodology used in the RVAA has been to assess the visual impact from 5 specific properties where the expected impact would be virtually indistinguishable due to proximity and aspect. The applicant sets out the assessed magnitude of change and significance of effect. It assesses the field of view, the direction of view, the layout of the turbines and the distance to make a judgement on whether the Residential Visual Amenity Threshold is reached or not.

8.156 The applicant's findings have been disputed by third parties and given that the RVVA does not include photomontage visualisations of the development from all of the properties, particularly from the closest property (Dalmichy), relying instead on wirelines the difference in views could be upheld. The wirelines do not provide detail of the physical context the turbines would be experienced from each property. The physical context is important to determine the degree to which the development

changes the views from properties and therefore the magnitude of the development's impact, and because physical markers in the landscape (field boundaries, farmsteads, overhead lines etc.) are used in the perception of scale and distance in the landscape.

8.157 Despite the RVAA's limitation, the properties in the study area are laid out in a manner typical of rural houses in Sutherland, that is with garden grounds set to lawn with small trees and low post and wire fencing or stone wall boundaries. These properties connected to farming and the rural economy generally host additional outbuildings, which may influence the development's effect on their visual amenity as the properties' relationship to the turbines is complicated through alternating screening and framing effects. With that in mind, THC accepts that the turbines would for the most part be experienced, externally at least, in the context of an open vista as shown on the wirelines. What is clear, is that the turbines would be a stark new dominate feature in the landscape, occupying a maximum of 27% of the field of view from the closest property (Dalmichy). As this property benefits from a conservatory (projecting north-west) with the principal views towards the development. As the property would experience views of the proposed development both externally and internally the applicant's assessment may be disputed. The turbines would be viewed from the conservatory, a principal room, occupying the main view with the turbines flicking across the residual forestry. As such, the proposed development may have an overwhelming change in the visual amenity from Dalmichy.

8.158 It should also be noted that residential amenity is impacted by other factors such as noise and shadow flicker, which are also assessed within this report.

Noise, Vibration and Shadow Flicker

8.159 The applicant has carried out a noise assessment which did not find any significant effects in relation to construction activities, construction traffic, operation of wind turbines and operation of other non-turbine fixed plant. The EIAR found that the predicted wind turbine noise levels associated with the operation of the proposed development would meet derived noise limits as identified at noise sensitive receptors (NSR), namely Blarbuie (NSR1), Dalmichy (NSR2) and Rhian Bridge (NSR3). Figure 10.1 of the EIAR demonstrates the noise contours from where 35dB LA90 is met. NSR2 is just within these limits (as set out in the EIAR: Chapter 10 Table 10.13) and may require further monitoring should the proposed development become operational. However, as the noise limits are met the EIAR does not predict any significant residual noise effects during the operation of the proposed development. The applicant has confirmed following first operation of the proposed development a noise compliance test will be commissioned to determine compliance with the consented noise limits. Should there be any exceedances of noise limits attributable to the proposed development identified then an operational noise management plan would be implemented to ensure noise limits are met. The Highland Council's Environmental Health officer does not raise any concerns in relation to the applicant's noise assessment but does recommend that a noise limit of 2dB above predicted levels is attached to any consent.

8.160 The EIAR scopes out shadow flicker as the applicant assessed there would be no impact on any properties within the shadow flicker study area. The study area in respect of the shadow flicker analysis was applied equating to 11 x rotor diameter,

which adheres to guidance set out in the OSWEG to take account of the northerly latitudes. Appendix 4.6: Figure 1 shows that all of the properties surveyed would not be impacted.

8.161 As the applicant does not anticipate any vibration effects, they were therefore scoped out and not assessed within the EIAR.

Telecommunications

8.162 There are no unresolved objections with regard to aviation interests, with no outstanding concerns being raised by the Civil Aviation Authority, Highlands and Islands Airports Limited, Ministry of Defence or National Air Traffic Services. Should the proposal be granted permission, a condition can be applied to secure suitable mitigation in terms of aviation lighting and notification to the appropriate bodies of the final turbine positions.

Aviation

8.163 There are no unresolved objections with regard to aviation interests, with no outstanding concerns being raised by the Civil Aviation Authority, Highlands and Islands Airports Limited, Ministry of Defence or National Air Traffic Services. Should the proposal be granted permission, a condition can be applied to secure suitable mitigation in terms of aviation lighting and notification to the appropriate bodies of the final turbine positions.

Other Material Considerations

8.164 Given the complexity of wind farm developments, and to assist in the discharge of conditions, the Planning Authority seek that the developer employs a Planning Monitoring Officer (PMO). The role of the PMO, amongst other things, will include the monitoring of, and enforcement of compliance with, all conditions, agreements and obligations related to this permission (or any superseding or related permissions) and shall include the provision of a bi-monthly compliance report to the Planning Authority.

8.165 The applicant has advised that at the end of their operational life, if the decision is made to decommission the wind farm, all turbine components, transformers, substation and associated buildings and infrastructure will be removed from the site. The Planning Authority also requires that any foundations remaining on site; the exposed concrete plinths would also be removed to a depth of 1m below the surface, graded with soil and replanted. Cables also require to be cut away below ground level and sealed. Whilst the applicant has indicated a preference to retain the new site tracks for landowner use, this is yet to be agreed as the Planning Authority expects all new tracks areas constructed during development of the wind farm to be reinstated to the approximate pre-wind farm condition, unless otherwise agreed with the landowner and/or Highland Council. The material used to construct the tracks to be taken up, removed to areas identified in a site restoration scheme, backfilled with suitable material and covered with topsoil/reseeded. Backfilling of access tracks would be carefully planned in advance to avoid having to move plant machinery and equipment on freshly reinstated land.

8.166 These matters will not be confirmed until the time of the submission of the Decommissioning and Restoration Plan (DRP). The DRP would be submitted to and approved in writing by the Planning Authority in consultation with NatureScot and SEPA no later than 12 months prior to the final decommissioning of the wind farm. The detailed DRP would be implemented within 18 months of the final decommissioning of the development unless otherwise agreed in writing with the Planning Authority.

8.167 The requirements to decommission and restore a wind farm site at its end of life is relatively standard and straight forward, with any request for re-powering to be considered with the submission of a relevant future application. It is important to ensure that any approval of this project secures by condition a requirement to deliver a draft decommissioning and restoration plan for approval prior to the commencement of any development and ensure an appropriate financial bond is put in place to secure these works.

8.168 In line with SPP, Highland Council policy and practice, community benefit considerations are undertaken as a separate exercise and generally parallel to the planning process. For this application it would include the financial contribution and the in-kind contribution to upgrade of broadband infrastructure.

8.169 The applicant has shown the potential for a battery storage facility within the development. This is welcomed as it facilitates the management of the grid in times of high land low demand. The details of any battery storage facility, likely to comprise of battery storage containers, cooling systems and switchgear, can be secured by condition.

8.170 There are no other relevant material factors highlighted within representations for consideration of this application.

Matters to be secured by Legal Agreement / Upfront Payment

8.171 An assessment of the condition of the roads, pre and post construction will be required. This will inform the production of a roads wear and tear agreement under Section 96 of the Roads (Scotland) Act. This type of agreement can be secured by condition.

Non-material considerations

8.172 The issues of constraint payments, impact on electricity prices of renewable energy development and community benefit are not material planning considerations.

9. CONCLUSION

9.1 The Scottish Government gives considerable commitment to renewable energy and encourages planning authorities to support the development of wind farms where they can operate successfully and situated in appropriate locations. The project has the potential to contribute to combating the climate emergency through an additional 49.9MW of renewable energy capacity towards Scottish Government targets and through peatland restoration.

9.2 However, as with all applications, the benefits of the proposal must be weighed against potential drawbacks and then considered in the round, taking account of the relevant policies of the Development Plan. The proposal has been designed to the available land holding and driven by the desire to generate wind energy on this particular site rather than looking at the wider area and significant effects which would arise as a result of the proposed development. As noted in this report, the proposed development raises considerable concerns in terms of significantly detrimental landscape and visual effects. It is considered that there is capacity in the general area around Loch Shin for further wind energy development. However, it is not suitable for just any commercial scale wind farm and due consideration, and weight, needs to be given to the matters of landscape and visual impact. As noted in the report, the location and scale of the proposed development has a number of significant adverse effects, as recognised by the applicant themselves in their assessment of the scheme, as a result of the design of the wind farm which sits in an area with complex composition. As noted in this report, the proposed development raises considerable concerns in terms of significantly detrimental landscape and visual effects. The assessment has considered the proposal against the Criterion cited in the OWESG designed to ensure developments are suitably located and sensitively sited and designed to avoid unacceptable impacts on the development's wider context. Although the proposal has had to respond to the landscape, visual, environmental, and cultural constraints of its location, the development is not considered to achieve the threshold for several of these criteria due to the proposal's design and layout, its large-scale and elevation. The proposal shows two distinct pairs of turbines that affect the setting of Ben Klibreck, and the associated Rounded Hills which lie within the Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire SLA. The proposed development will disrupt the landscape function of providing a simple foreground to views of distant Lone Mountains. Furthermore, the combined landscape setting of multiple LCAs that come together, creating a sense of landscape place, and which is most compromised by the effect of the proposed development on the interaction between these landscape types and the appreciation on the scale and composition of the landscape would be compromised. When viewed with other wind energy development, the setting, scale and separations are inconsistent resulting in further adverse effects. These factors contribute to a prominent development that would undermine the integrity of distinctive key landscape characteristics and character areas; with detrimental landscape impacts on its hosting Landscape Character Areas, its Landscape Character Types as a whole, as well as on the complex of nearby Landscape Character Areas that characterise the setting of Lairg, all of which it would overwhelm. The turbines would detract from the visual appeal of key locations such as The Ord Hill and Ben Klibreck as well as key transport and recreational routes and their destinations. As such there would be a significantly detrimental change in the visual and qualitative appreciation of the surrounding landscape and sense of place that would be experienced on a daily basis by residents who live not just in close proximity to the proposal site, but also those who live in the wider communities around Lairg and beyond. These concerns are echoed in the representations that have been received to the application.

9.3 The Highland Council has determined its response to this application against the policies set out in the Development Plan, principally Policy 67 of the Highland-wide Local Development Plan with its eleven tests, which are expanded upon with the Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance. This policy also reflects policy tests

of other policies in the plan, for example Policies 28 and 57. These policies also draw in the range of subject specific policies as also contained within the HwLDP as listed in section 6.1 above. Given the above analysis, the application would not accord with Policies 67, 28, 29, or 57 of the Development Plan.

9.4 Scottish Planning Policy aims to achieve the right development in the right place. It is considered that the adverse landscape, visual, and residential amenity impacts outweigh the benefits as they relate to production of renewable energy and economic benefits.

9.5 All relevant matters have been taken into account when appraising this application. It is considered that the proposal does not accord with the principles and policies contained within the Development Plan and is unacceptable in terms of applicable material considerations.

10. IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Resource: Not applicable

10.2 Legal: Not applicable

10.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural): Not applicable

10.4 Climate Change/Carbon Clever: If approved the proposed development has the potential to produce renewable energy and make a meaningful contribution to a net zero electricity network.

10.5 Risk: Not applicable

10.6 Gaelic: Not applicable

11. RECOMMENDATION

Action required before decision issued Y Circulation to local members

Subject to the above actions, it is recommended to

REFUSE the application for the following reasons

1. The application is contrary to Policies 67 (Renewable Energy), 28 (Sustainable Design), 29 (Design Quality and Placemaking), and 61 (Landscape) of the Highland wide Local Development Plan, and Scottish Planning Policy as the development would have a significantly detrimental impact on landscape qualities and sense of place that they imbue. The location and vertical scale of the proposed development would not relate well to the existing landscape setting, would undermine the distinction between the Lone Mountains, Rounded Hills, Strath, Sweeping Moorland and Flows, and, Farmed and Forested Slopes with Crofting landscape character types, and, would disrupt the integrity and variety of Landscape Character Areas.

2. The application is contrary to Policies 67 (Renewable Energy) and 28 (Sustainable Design) of the Highland wide Local Development Plan, the

Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance and Scottish Planning Policy as the development would have a significantly detrimental visual impact and when viewed by residents, travellers, including tourists and recreational users of the outdoors in the wider vicinity of the site, from the north, east, south and west of the proposed development as a result of the location, scale and elevation of the proposed development.

Designation:	Acting Head of Development Management – Highland
Author:	Claire Farmer
Background Papers:	Documents referred to in report and in case file.
Relevant Plans:	Plan 1 - Location Plan
	Plan 2 - Site Layout Plan

Appendix 2 – Viewpoint Assessment Appraisal – Visual Impact

Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Significance (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Cumulative (Consented and Operational) Magnitude of Change (Scale of change / Extent / Duration)	Cumulative Significance (Consented and Operational) Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor	THC Notes
VP1 – A836 Bird Hide Layby	APP	**Medium – High** Walkers / Cyclists	**Medium**	**Significant**	Low	Not Significant	The VP is located in a layby beside the A836. The layby provides parking for the Loch Shin bird watching hide, which is accessed from this point via core path SU16.05. The view will be gained by northbound travellers on the A836, including cyclists following NCR1. The VP is also illustrative of sequential views when travelling north along the A836. It is located within the strath – Strath Tirry LCT. The view towards the proposed development is open and there are long, open views. The rounded hills are visible in skyline landform with Ben Klibreck (VP15) also visible. The foreground of the views includes some characteristics of the strath LCT, where dispersed houses, small woodlands, field boundaries and varied land uses are seen in this part of the view. The applicant has allocated a medium - high sensitivity of receptor as this VP as it is not a marked or formal viewpoint but is located at the start of a signposted core path. It should be noted that there is a tourist board sign directing users to the layby to access the bird watching hide. Therefore, it is considered that the sensitivity is high. Nevertheless, users of the bird hide are more likely to value the view to the west over Loch Shin. The
	THC	**High** (road users / regional tourist route / NCR1 / recreational users / bird watchers)	**Medium - High**	**Significant**	Low	Not Significant	

							turbines will appear as large moving structures in the forefront of the distant hills. Although the proposed development affects a limited proportion of the view, it does cover a large portion of the distant hills in terms of horizontal spread as well as vertically. In agreement with the applicant's assessment of **significant** effect. In agreement with the applicant's assessment of cumulative impacts, due to the distance between the VP and Creag Riabhach wind farm there would not be significant cumulative effects.
VP2 – A836 at Chaiseagail Bridge	APP	**Medium – High** Cyclists / recreational users	**Medium - High**	**Significant**	Negligible	Not Significant	This viewpoint, the second in the series of viewpoints on the northbound A836, at the bridge over the Allt Chaiseagail burn. The VP is illustrative of sequential views when travelling north along the A836. The landform of Ben Klibreck (VP15) rises from this low-lying landscape as a focal point to the north of the viewpoint. Similarly, to VP1, the view will be gained by northbound travellers on the A836, including cyclists following NCR1. The VP is illustrative of sequential views when travelling north along the A836. This is a scenic view with Ben Klibreck the main focal point when travelling north. Agree with the applicant's assessment resulting in **significant** effects. The operational and consented wind farms at Achany and Braemore are theoretically visible to the south-west of the Proposed Development, at a minimum of approximately 8 km and 9.6 km away respectively. All of the turbines at Braemore and the majority of turbines at Achany are screened by woodland and have very limited visibility from the viewpoint. The consented wind farm at Creag Riabhach is also theoretically visible to the north of the viewpoint, a minimum of 17 km away. Given the limited visibility for northbound travellers it is agreed that the cumulative effect would not be significant.
	THC	**Medium – High** Cyclists / recreational users / tourists / road users	**Medium - High**	**Significant**	Negligible	Not Significant	
	APP	**Medium – High**	**High**	**Significant**	Negligible - Low	Not Significant	This viewpoint is the third in the series of viewpoints on the northbound A836, it is located at a bend in the road

VP3 – A836 South of Dalmichy		Cyclists / outdoor recreational users					approximately 1.8 km to the north of VP2. This view will be gained by northbound travellers on the A836, including cyclists following NCR1. The VP is illustrative of sequential views when travelling north along the A836. This is the closest northwards VP and is considered a close range view as the closest turbine is approximately 1.8km north. The lone mountains LCT of Ben Klibreck (VP15) is a focal point on the skyline, and other enclosing sections of rounded hills can also be seen. The property at Dalmichy, set in its associated woodland, can be seen just under 500 m to the north of the viewpoint. The proposed development would introduce large moving structures to the forefront of the lone mountains and rounded hills. The turbines appear to dominate the view and have an overbearing impact on the view. Turbines would increase the influence of wind energy development and interfere with the view in the sense of the loss of scale of the scenic landscape. It is agreed that the effects would be **Significant.** The operational wind farms at Achany, Lairg and Rosehall are theoretically visible from this VP, all over 9 km away. They all lie to the south-east and south-west of the viewpoint, therefore not viewed with the proposed development. It is considered that cumulatively the proposed development would not have a significant effect given these turbines would be the main focal point.
	THC	**Medium – High** Cyclists / recreational users / tourists / road users	**High**	**Significant**	Low	Not Significant	
VP4 – A836 North of Dalnessie Entrance	APP	**Medium - High** Road users including cyclists	**High**	**Significant**	Northbound travellers - Negligible Southbound Travelers Medium	Not Significant for north bound travellers **Significant** for south bound travellers	The viewpoint is located towards the northern end of the site, and is mainly representative of the view associated with southbound travellers. The wider view includes views of operational wind farms at Achany, Lairg and Rosehall are visible on the skyline to the south and south-west as you travel south towards Lairg. There is also theoretical visibility of the consented wind farms – Braemore and Lairg II. The viewpoint lies within the

	THC	**Medium - High** Cyclists / recreational users / tourists / road users	**High**	**Significant**	Medium / Medium - Low	**Significant** for south bound travellers	strath LCT, looking over the sweeping moorland and flows LCT. This is a close-range view, with the turbines located close to the A836 (approximately 440m away). The view is partly obscured by woodland and forestry where the blades of turbine 1 would be seen flicking across the view. Whilst the existing screening would reduce the overall visibility and vertical impact of the proposed development, it will result in the permanent loss of nearly 30% of the tree covering. Therefore, it is likely that visibility of the turbines and the wider landscape will increase, leading to a **significant** effect. Furthermore, this is a section of view which is currently unaffected by wind farm development. Within the wider view the proposed development would lead to an increase in the frequency of turbines when travelling from the south, particularly from A836 / National Cycle Route 1 leading to a **significant** effect both individually and cumulatively.
VP5 – A836 North of Rhian Bridge	APP	**Medium - High** Road users, including cyclists	**Medium - High**	**Significant**	Medium – Low	Not Significant	The viewpoint is located on the A836, just over 1.5km to the north of Rhian Bridge. The viewpoint is located on the eastern side of Strath Tirry, located within the sweeping moorland and flows LCT which runs between Loch Shin and Ben Kilbreck. This view similar to VP4, would be gained by southbound travellers. The operational windfarms of Achany, Lairg, and Rosehall are theoretically visible on the skyline. Achany and Rosehall are currently screed by forestry. There is also theoretical visibility of Beinn Tharsuinn and Coire na Cloiche (15.7km – 16.1km away). The turbines will be viewed in the foreground view when travelling from north to south with the rounded hills in the backdrop. The turbines will appear as large moving structures in the forefront of the distant hills. Although the proposed development affects a limited proportion of the view, it is a forward-facing view which covers a large portion of the distant hills in terms of horizontal spread as well as vertically. In agreement with the applicant's assessment of **significant** effect. In terms
	THC	**Medium – High** Cyclists/ recreational users/ tourists/ road users	**Medium - High**	**Significant**	Medium – Low	**Significant**	

							of the cumulative impact, Lairg is visible to the right of the view, however Beinn Tharsuinn and Coire na Cloiche wind farms are currently screeded by woodland should this be felled in the future then there would be some visibility which would increase the presence of wind farms development given rise to some **significant** cumulative effects.
VP6 – A836 South of Crask	APP	**Medium - High** Road users, including cyclists	Medium – Low	Not Significant	Medium – Low	Not Significant	The viewpoint is located on the A836, approximately 2 km south of the Crask Inn. Again this view will be gained by southbound travellers on the A836 / NCR1. From this viewpoint a significant amount of wind energy is visible, including the Lairg, Beinn Tharsiunn, Coire na Cloiche and Achany wind farm developments, all located to the right of the view. However, the Strath Tirry turbines would be closer to the viewpoint and introduce large moving structures into this part of the view. The turbines appear larger than the other wind farm development and although they are contained within the sweeping moorland, the turbines are in front of the rounded hills to the south and south east of Lairg. The turbines do not form a balanced view with turbines 1 and 4 afforded more screening than turbines 2 and 3 from the topography. There are som conerning in realtion to to the contrast of the scale of the turbines with the surrounding landform, but the turbines are contained within layers of landscape. Whilst there will be some adverse effects they are not considered to be so substantial that the effect would be significant either on its own or cumulatively
	THC	**Medium – High** Cyclists/ recreational users/ tourists/ road users	Medium – Low	Not Significant	Medium - Low	Not Significant	
VP7 - Blarbuie	APP	**High** Residents	**Medium - High**	**Significant**	Low (operational) Medium – Low (consented)	Not Significant	The viewpoint is located at a small group of properties that lies west-south-west of the site. The view is representative of the residents and is located within the strath LCT. The view looks across the strath LCT to the sweeping moorlands and flows then the rounded hills LCTs. The rounded hills form much of the skyline around

	THC	**High** Local residents	**Medium - High**	**Significant**	Medium - Low	Not Significant	the view, however the lone mountains LCT of Ben Klibreck (VP15) is also visible and forms a focal point on the skyline to the north. Achany, Craig Riabhach, Rosehall and Lairg wind farms have theoretical visibility in the wider view. There is some screening afforded through the trees around the properties. The view looks north-east which is presently not affected by turbines and has a sense of wildness with very little man made infrastructure visible. Although the turbines appear as a balanced cluster, they would become the main focal point, dominating the view and drawing the view away from Ben Klibreck. Furthermore, the effect would reduce the perception of scale and distance associated with the different landscape characteristics, creating a visual dissonance resulting in a **significant** effect. In terms of cumulative effect, the proposed development would introduce further turbines, which will lead to some adverse effects, however given the distance from the other wind farm development and that the proposed development would not to create a windfarm landscape it is not considered there would not be a significant cumulative effect.
VP8 – Tirryside A838	APP	Medium Road users	Medium - Low	Not Significant	Negligible	Not Significant	This viewpoint is located on the minor road that provides access to Tirryside from the A838. Pondside Camping and Accommodation is located approximately 630m north of the viewpoint. The viewpoint is representative of residential properties in Tirryside, road users, tourists and outdoor recreation users. The view would be seen by users of the south / south-eastern side of Loch Shin. Some screening is afforded due to woodland, forestry and buildings. The viewpoint lies within the strath LCT, with houses, overhead line and elements of other human activity visible. The proposed development would be partially screened with the blades flicking behind forestry. The view looks to the Loch Choire SLA and Ben Klibreck (VP15) is a focal point to the north. There is other wind farm development with theoretical visibility within the
	THC	**Medium - High** Road users/ local residents/ tourists/ outdoor recreational users	**Medium – High**	**Significant**	Low	Not Significant	

							wider view, but this would be limited due to distance, topography and screening from vegetation. This is a close-range view, which will introduce large moving structures into the view, dominating the rounded hill LTC which backdrops the turbines should the forestry be felled. The applicant has underplayed the sensitivity of the receptor and the magnitude of change. The view has a scenic value and road users can also have a higher sensitivity. The magnitude of change is considered to be higher if the forestry was felled. However, due to the blades flicking in front of Loch Choire SLA, distracting the view from Ben Klibreck the magnitude of change is considered to be Medium – High leading to **significant** effects. It is not considered that there would be significant cumulative effects, due to the limited visibility of other wind energy developments.
VP9 - Saval	APP	**High** Road users	Medium	**Significant**	Medium	**Significant**	The viewpoint in located on a minor dead-end road that provides access to Saval, north of Lairg. Creag Riabhach is visible in the distance. Ben Klibreck (VP15) is visible behind the proposed development. The turbines are viewed as two distinct pairs in the foreground of the rounded hills and lone mountains. The viewpoint represents forward views of the transitional landscape from the more settled farmland and slopes to sweeping moorland, rounded hills and lone mountain LCTs. The strath LCT can also be seen to the north / north-west. Ben Klibreck forms the focal point on the skyline. The rugged mountain massif of Ben Hee is also visible in the wider view to the north-west. The perception of landscape scale and distance is confused by the introduction of turbines in this location where they are seen against the backdropping hills where the perception of the scale of hills and distance to them appears to be reduced, dominating the view. Agree
	THC	**High** Road users / local residents	Medium	**Significant**	Medium	**Significant**	

							with applicant's assessment that the proposed development on this view would have **significant** effects. In terms of cumulative effects, Creag Rhibhach can be seen to the left of the view. Strath Tirry turbines will appear to dominate Creag Rhibhach turbines where there will be confusion over scale and perception. Other wind development is also visible in the wider view or in nearby locations. However, the relationship between Strath Tirry and Creag Rhibhach appears to emphasise the difference in scale between the proposed and consented developments in the view. Given this it is considered that cumulative effects would also be **significant.**
VP10 – Rhian Breck, Lairg	APP	**High** Road users / local residents	Medium – Low	Not Significant	Medium – Low	Not Significant	The viewpoint is located on the border of farm and forested slopes with crofting and rounded hills LCTs. The view looks north towards the development over the settlement of Lairg. This is an elevated viewpoint with the lone mountains of Ben Klibreck in the skyline, and main focal point from this viewpoint. The rugged mountain massif of Ben Hee is also visible to the north-west and Meall Dola (VP12) rises to the north-east. It is likely that this viewpoint would be representative of views from the Far North Railway Line (Inverness to Wick) in both directions. The development appears as two distinct pairs of turbines, contained within the layers of landscape from this viewpoint. The scale of change to the view is considered to be Medium – Low due to the screening afforded by the topography, vegetation and housing. The turbines do appear inferior to the lone mountains of Ben Klibreck from this viewpoint. However, using professional judgement it is considered that the effects would be **Significant.** The proposed development will introduce further wind energy into the view with these turbines dominating the turbines at Creag Rhibhach. It is therefore considered that the applicant may have slightly
	THC	**High** Road users / local residents	Medium – Low	**Significant**	Medium	**Significant**	

							underestimated the magnitude of change when applying professional judgement. From this viewpoint the cumulative development would result in a substantial variation between the proposed development and the other wind energy developments in terms of scale, spacing, layout and settings with the Strath Tirry turbines dominating. It is therefore considered that the proposed developed would result in some cumulative **significant** effects.
VP 11 - Sallachy	APP	**Medium - High** Walkers	Medium	**Significant**	Medium – Low	Not Significant	This viewpoint is located on the west side of Loch Shin, north of Sallachy Lodge. The viewpoint is representative of outdoor recreational users. The view shows the relatively settled Loch Shin in the foreground, with the middle view containing the strath / sweeping moorland and flows LCT and the lone mountains and rounded hills in the backdrop. This is an open view with scenic value. When the turbines are seen against a backdrop of the Lone Mountains and the Rounded Hills within the Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire Special Landscape Area, the development disrupts the landscape function of 'providing a simple foreground to views of distant Lone Mountains and possibly to the Rugged Mountain Massif – Caithness & Sutherland from the higher ground at Sallachy. Furthermore, from this viewpoint the perception of landscape scale and distance is confused by the introduction of the turbines against the backdropping hills, reducing the scale of the backdropping landscape. It is therefore considered that the proposed development would lead to **significant** effects. In terms of cumulative effects there is theoretical visibility of other wind energy developments, however due to the distance, topography and screening from vegetation it is unlikely that there would be visibility of the developments at Kilbraur and Creag Riabhach developments. Lairg I and II would have higher visibility, they would be seen on the skyline to the south-east of the viewpoint. It is not
	THC	**Medium - High** Hill walkers / outdoor recreational users	Medium	**Significant**	Medium - Low	Not Significant	

							considered that the introduction of Strath Tirry turbines would have a significant cumulative effect.
VP12 – Meall Dola	APP	**Medium - High** Hill Walkers	Medium – Low	Not Significant	**Medium**	**Significant**	The viewpoint is located on the summit of Meall Dola (323m AOD) to the east of Lairg and provides elevated views towards the proposed development. There is a mapped path to the summit. There is an open view of the strath, open moorland and flows, rounded hills, lone mountains and the rugged mountain massif, creating a complex landscape. There are also a number of forestry plantations visible. The turbines would appear as two uneven pairs, with Creag Riabhach in the distance. It is considered that the applicant has underplayed the magnitude of change. The turbine blades would be seen rotating between the landform and drawing the view away from Ben Klibreck, the SLA and NSA, distorting the scale of the landscape. It is considered that a **significant** effect would result from the proposed development. A number of wind farm developments have theoretical visibility and most notably include Achany, Braemore, Beinn Tharsuinn, Coire na Cloiche, Gordonbush, Kilbraur, Lairg, Rosehall and Creag Riabhach developments. The proposed development does not form a relationship with the existing pattern of wind energy, in terms of scale and separation when viewed with Creag Riabhach in particular, therefore resulting in a **significant** cumulative effect.
	THC	**Medium - High** Hill Walkers	**Medium**	**Significant**	**Medium**	**Significant**	
VP13 – Track to Loch Sgeireach	APP	**Medium - High** Walkers / Outdoor recreational users	Medium – Low	Not Significant	Low/Medium - Low	Not Significant	The viewpoint is located within WLA34 (Reay – Cassley) and the rounded hills LCT. It is located on the lower slopes of the ridge of land that encloses the southern side of Loch Shin, to the south-west of the proposed development. The view looks across Loch Shinn towards the development on the cusp of the Strath and Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCT. The rounded hills are seen in the skyline along with Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire Special Landscape Area. The proposed development would introduce large moving structures in the forefront
	THC	**Medium - High** Walkers / Outdoor	**Medium**	**Significant**	Medium	Not Significant	

		recreational users					of the rounded hills. The turbines would appear as two uneven pairs, which would be visibly prominent in an area that is considered to be wild / remote hill landscape. It is considered that the applicant has slightly underestimated the magnitude of change and that the proposed development is judged to result in **significant** effects. Operational wind farms Gordonbush, Kilbraur. Lairg and Achany wind energy developments all have theoretical visibility. The proposed developed would introduce further wind development into a view, they would dominate the view in relation to the other wind farm energy on the north side of Loch Shin. The other wind development on the north side of Loch Shin is much further away, this proposal brings the turbines closer to Loch Shin and does not reflect the pattern of the existing wind energy development in this area. However, given the distance of the other wind energy there would be limited visibility and although there are some adverse effects these are not considered to result in significant cumulative effect.
VP14 – Creag Mhor	APP	**High** Hill walkers	Low / Medium - Low	Not Significant	Medium - Low	Not Significant	The viewpoint is located at the summit of Creag Mhor (Meall nan Con), 713m AOD. The viewpoint is within WLA35 (Ben Klibreck – Armine Forest) and Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire SLA. The viewpoint provides a panoramic view across the different landscapes towards the proposed development. The view includes Ben Klibreck, Ben Armine, Ben Loyal, Ben Hope, Ben More Assynt, Ben Griam Mor and Griam Beg. The viewpoint is located to the eastern edge of the rounded hills LCT. It is considered that the applicant has underplayed the magnitude of change. The magnitude of change would be higher given that the proposed turbines would appear as large structures which distort the scale of Ben Klibreck (VP15) and the rounded hills that form
	THC	**High** Hill walkers / Outdoor recreational users	Medium	**Significant**	Medium	**Significant**	

							the backdrop. It is judged that the effects would be **significant**. Achany, and Rosehall have theoretical visibility and appear as one development in terms of scale and design. It is considered that the applicant has underplayed the magnitude of change, as it would be higher given that the proposed turbines would appear larger and disjointed from the existing wind energy with Strath Tirry located closer to the viewpoint. It is considered that the proposed development would also have a **significant** cumulative effect.
VP15 – Ben Klibreck	APP	**High** Hill walkers / Outdoor recreational users	Low / Medium - Low	Not Significant	Medium - Low	Not Significant	This viewpoint is located at the summit of Ben Klibreck (Meall nan Con), 929 AOD. A panoramic view overlooking the north-west of Scotland. It is located in the lone mountains LCT, WLA35 (Ben Klibreck – Armine Forest) and Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire SLA. The viewpoint shows the proposed development contained in a lower area of ground that appears to be remote with very little human activity visible. The turbines are seen as two sets of pairs. Similarly, to VP14, the magnitude of change would be higher given that the proposed turbines would appear as large structures within the low-lying middle view. It is judged that the effects would be **significant**. In terms of cumulative impacts, a number of wind energy developments are visible, including Braemore, Lairg, Coire na Cloiche, Achany, Rosehall, Beinn Tharsuinn developments are all visible in the distance behind Strath Tirry. As such the proposed development does not considered that it respects the existing pattern of wind energy development, resulting in **significant** cumulative effects.
	THC	**High** Hill walkers / Outdoor recreational users	**Medium**	**Significant**	**Medium**	**Significant**	
VP16 – Ben More Assynt	APP	**High** Hill walkers / Outdoor	Low / Negligible	Not Significant	Low	Not Significant	This viewpoint is located at the summit of Ben More Assynt, 998m AOD. The view has a high value and is a well-known hillwalking location due to its Munro status. It

		recreational users					is located within WLA34 (Reay – Cassley) and Assynt – Coigach NSA and known for its extraordinary landscape. The viewpoint is located at the southern end of an extensive area of rugged mountain massif LCT. The viewpoint has a panoramic view across north-western Scotland, including Assynt mountains pf Canisp, Cul Mor, Quinag and Suilven. The view looks over Loch Shin within the middle view, towards the proposed development. It is not considered that the proposed development would dominate the view and will only affect a small portion of the view as such unlikely to detract the view towards the proposed development. It is considered that there would not be significant effects resulting from the proposed development. In terms of cumulative impact there is other wind energy developments with theoretical visibility in the distance. It is judged that due to the limited visibility due and the distance to them it would not give rise to significant cumulative effects.
	THC	**High** Hill walkers / Outdoor recreational users	Low	Not Significant	Low	Not Significant	
VP17 - Cnoc an Alaskie	APP	**Medium – High** Hill walkers	Low	Not Significant	Medium – Low	Not Significant	This viewpoint is located near the trig point on Cnoc an Alaskie, 312m AOD, located within WLA37 (Foinaven-Ben Hee). There is a sense of remoteness from this viewpoint where you can view the interior of the sweeping moorland and flows that covers the vast, open and low-lying area between Loch Shin and Strath Tirry, surrounded by rounded hills that emphasis the vast low-lying area. The turbines would interrupt the remoteness of the view, leading to **significant** effects. Other wind energy development has theoretical visibility in the distance, lying beyond the proposed development, these are located in much higher ground. The scale difference and difference in the pattern of development between the different schemes would be discernible and have an adverse effect on the scale of the landscape. It is anticipated that there would be cumulative **significant** effects.
	THC	**Medium – High** Hill walkers / Outdoor recreational users	Medium - Low	**Significant**	Medium	**Significant**	

VP18 – Ben Hee	APP	**High** Hill walkers / Outdoor recreational users	Low	Not Significant	Low	Not Significant	The viewpoint is located on the summit of Ben Hee, 873m AOD, from where a panoramic view is gained across extensive areas of north-western Scotland, including Ben More Assynt, Ben Klibreck, Ben Hope and Ben Loyal. It is located on the eastern edge of the rugged mountain massif LCT. It is some 24km from the proposed development, has a limited proportion of the panoramic view. Furthermore, the proposed development would only be visible on clear days. It is therefore considered that the proposed development would not have a significant effect. There are a number of wind energy development with theoretical visibility, including Gordonbush, Creag Riachack, Kilbraur, Lairg, Achany, Beinn Tharsuinn, Rosehall and Coire na Cloiche. It is not considered that the proposed development would engulf the existing wind energy development and as such the proposed development would not have a significant cumulative effect.
	THC	**High** Hill walkers / Outdoor recreational users	Low	Not Significant	Low	Not Significant	
VP19 – Moavally	APP	Medium – High Hill walkers	Low	Not Significant	Low	Not Significant	The viewpoint is at the summit of Maovally (511m AOD), which lies on the western side of Loch Shin at its northern end. The viewpoint is located within WLA34 (Reay – Cassley). Maovally is accessed to within 400m of the summit by a tarmac hydro road. The views are dramatic across the rocky rugged mountain massif and Loch Shin. The view demonstrates the complexities of the different landscapes drawing the eye to turbines as such there may be some adverse effects, but they are not considered to be significant. There are a number of wind energy development with theoretical visibility, including Gordonbush, Kilbraur, Lairg and Achany. The proposed development does lie in the forefront, however it is not considered that it would dominate the other wind energy developments and therefore would not lead to significant cumulative effects.
	THC	Medium – High Hill walkers / Outdoor recreational users	Medium - Low	Not Significant	Low	Not Significant	

VP20 – The Ord	APP	**High**	Medium - Low	Not Significant	Medium - Low	Not Significant	This is a recognised viewpoint, located at The Ord (159m AOD), to the west of Lairg. The Ord Hill is considered a landmark feature at the southern edge of Loch Shin and Northern extent of Achany Glen. Located to the chambered cairn on the top of a small hill with 360° panorama within the broad valley basin at the foot of Loch Shin. It is accessed via a network of paths, including core paths, and is part of a popular archaeological trail. It hosts several SAMs, whereby the view is paramount to the appreciation of the nationally designated view. It incorporates lots of man-made features including fields, houses, roads and forestry. Despite this the viewpoint is considered a key location that has scenic value due to its elevation in relation to the low-lying sweeping moorland and flows and the diversity of the surrounding complex landscape patterns. Of particular note are the views along Loch Shin, to the north-west, and the distinctive focal point landform of Ben Klibreck to the north, Benn Hee is visible on the skyline to the north and Loch Choire SLA. The turbines would be seen on the lower ground in the forefront of the slopes of Ben Klibreck, however It is likely that only 3 of the turbines blade tips would be visible, providing the forestry that currently provides screening remains in situ. Given that the forestry may be felled then the magnitude of change is considered to be higher than that assessed by the applicant. It is therefore considered that the proposed development would result in a **significant** effect. There is also theoretical visibility of consented wind farms at Creag Riabhach (22 km to the north) and Lairg II (3.8 km to the south-east) as well as Achany, Beinn Tharsuinn and Coire Na Cloiche in the wider view. The scale difference and difference in the pattern of development between the different schemes would be noticeable, leading to some adverse effects. However, given the view towards the proposed development
	THC	**High** Tourists/ Outdoor recreational users	**Medium**	**Significant**	Medium - Low	Not Significant	

							(northwards) only has theoretical visibility of Creag Riabhach which would be limited due to the distance it is unlikely that the effects would result in significant cumulative effects.

Appendix 3 - Assessment against Landscape and Visual Assessment Criteria contained within Section 4 of the Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance

Criteria	Response to EIAR Review of Design against Criteria in THC Onshore Wind Energy SG 2016	
1	Relationship between Settlements/Key locations and wider landscape respected.	Turbines are not visually prominent in the majority of views within or from settlements/Key Locations or from the majority of its access routes. ---------- The development doesn't significantly add to visibility of turbines within the settlement of Lairg, but would contribute significantly to prominence of turbines on the main approaches to the settlement. The proposed development would be visually prominent in the majority of approaches to Lairg from the north. Cumulatively, consented and built developments already have prominence on other approaches to the settlement and the proposed development would intensify this experience. It is considered that the proposal does not meet the threshold
2	Key Gateway locations and routes are respected	Wind Turbines or other infrastructure do not overwhelm or otherwise detract from landscape characteristics which contribute the distinctive transitional experience found at key gateway locations and routes. ---------- The development would detract from landscape characteristics which contribute the distinctive transitional experience are travellers from the south move away from the settles Farmed and Forested Slopes with Crofting landscape of Lairg and into the more open and wilder landscapes which characterise the routes to the north and west. EIAR response does not consider the transitional landscape experience where the A836 passes from Farmed and Forested Slopes with Crofting to Strath/Sweeping Moorland and Flows, over Rounded Hills when travelling northwards from Lairg and vice versa when travelling southwards towards Lairg. This is an area which, in succession, gives a great variety of landscape character within a short travel time, with views into the Lone Mountains and Rounded Hills, particularly to the east. This presence of the turbines in the west is likely to contribute to an impression of the Rounded Hills at this narrow neck being dominated by wind energy development. The proposal does not meet the threshold.
3	Valued natural and cultural landmarks are respected	The development does not, by its presence, diminish the prominence of the landmark or disrupt its relationship to its setting. ------ The development would, by its presence, diminish the prominence of Ben Klibreck and disrupt its relationship to its setting. The threshold is not met.
4	The amenity of key recreational routes and ways is respected.	Wind Turbines or other infrastructure do not overwhelm or otherwise significantly detract from the visual appeal of key routes and ways. ---- It is that the proposed development would impact the visual appeal of key recreational routes and ways. For this scheme this would include the

		A836, NCR1, the core paths at The Ord and the Bird Hide. As such it considered that the threshold is not met.
5	The amenity of transport routes is respected	Wind Turbines or other infrastructure do not overwhelm or otherwise significantly detract from the visual appeal of transport routes on local network. -------- Regard impacts on A836, for example, when travelling northbound a significant part of the experience of that road is as they travel through the transitional landscape characters is experienced. As such the development would significantly detract from the visual appeal of transport routes, disrupting the relationship of the Rounded Hills and Lone Mountain Landscapes. The threshold is not met.
6	The existing pattern of Wind Energy Development is respected.	The degree to which the proposal fits with the existing pattern of nearby wind energy development, considerations include: • Turbine height and proportions, • density and spacing of turbines within developments, • density and spacing of developments, • typical relationship of development to the landscape, • previously instituted mitigation measures • Planning Authority stated aims for development of area ---------- The relationship to the landscape is not consistent, not least because the scale of the development when viewed with other wind energy developments. Furthermore, the proposed development is set in much lower ground, whereas existing wind energy developments within the area generally occupy sites in elevated positions within the Rounded Hills LCT. The location of the proposed development within the lower ground is a significant contrast to this and will tend to increase the perception of the area being dominated by wind energy development. The threshold is not met
7	The proposal contributes positively to existing pattern or objectives for development in the area.	The proposal maintains appropriate and effective separation between developments and/ or clusters ---------- The proposal would affect the separation between developments and/ or clusters by its occupation of a site which is uncharacteristic for development within this area. The difference in turbine scale being pronounced and their relationship to the landform being so different. From many viewpoints the turbines would become the dominant feature, moving the visual and landscape emphasis substantially to an area that is currently unaffected by wind energy. The threshold is not met.
8	The perception of landscape scale and distance is respected	The perception of landscape scale and distance is respected --- While it is true that the turbines would be located in a very large landscape area, the degree to which separation from other landscapes would mitigate effects on scale and distance is overstated. The development

		would lie within a Strath and Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCT situated within a narrow neck close to the Rounded Hills. The perception of landscape scale and distance is confused by the introduction of turbines in a location where they are seen against the backdropping hills where the perception of the scale of hills and distance to them will tend to be reduced, and from elevated positions where its relationship to the Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCT will tend to highlight the relatively compact and contained nature of this landscape area seeming to dominate the LCA rather than be absorbed within it. The threshold is not met.
9	Landscape setting of nearby wind energy developments is respected	Proposal relates well to the existing landscape setting and does not increase the perceived visual prominence of surrounding wind turbines. --- The proposal would affect the separation between developments and/ or clusters by its occupation of a site which is uncharacteristic for development within this area. The difference in turbine scale being pronounced and their relationship to the landform being so different. From many viewpoints the turbines would become the dominant feature, moving the visual and landscape emphasis substantially to an area that is currently unaffected by wind energy. The threshold is not met
10	Distinctiveness of Landscape character is respected	Integrity and variety of Landscape Character Areas are maintained. ---------- Integrity and variety of the Landscape Character Areas which come together to form the local composite landscape character would be undermined by the interruption to the relationship between them due to the proposed turbines. The proposed scheme would increase the domination of the visible parts of the Lone Mountains and Rolling Hills LCTs as perceived from the more complex local landscape which would affect the perception of landscape. The threshold is not met

N

Cattle Grid

134

Quarry (disused)

MS

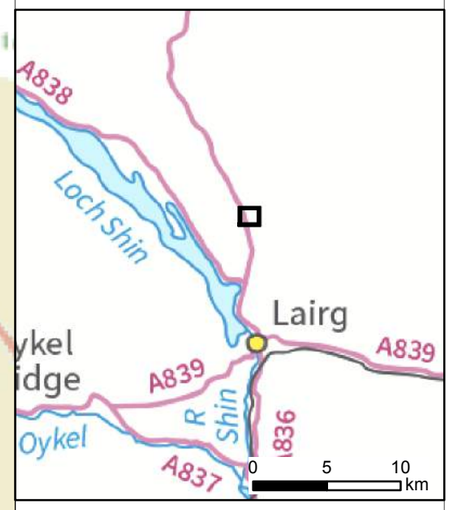
140

Sheepfold

A

KEY

Site Boundary



0 100 200 m

Scale 1:4,000 @ A3

REG POWER MANAGEMENT

Falck Renewables SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

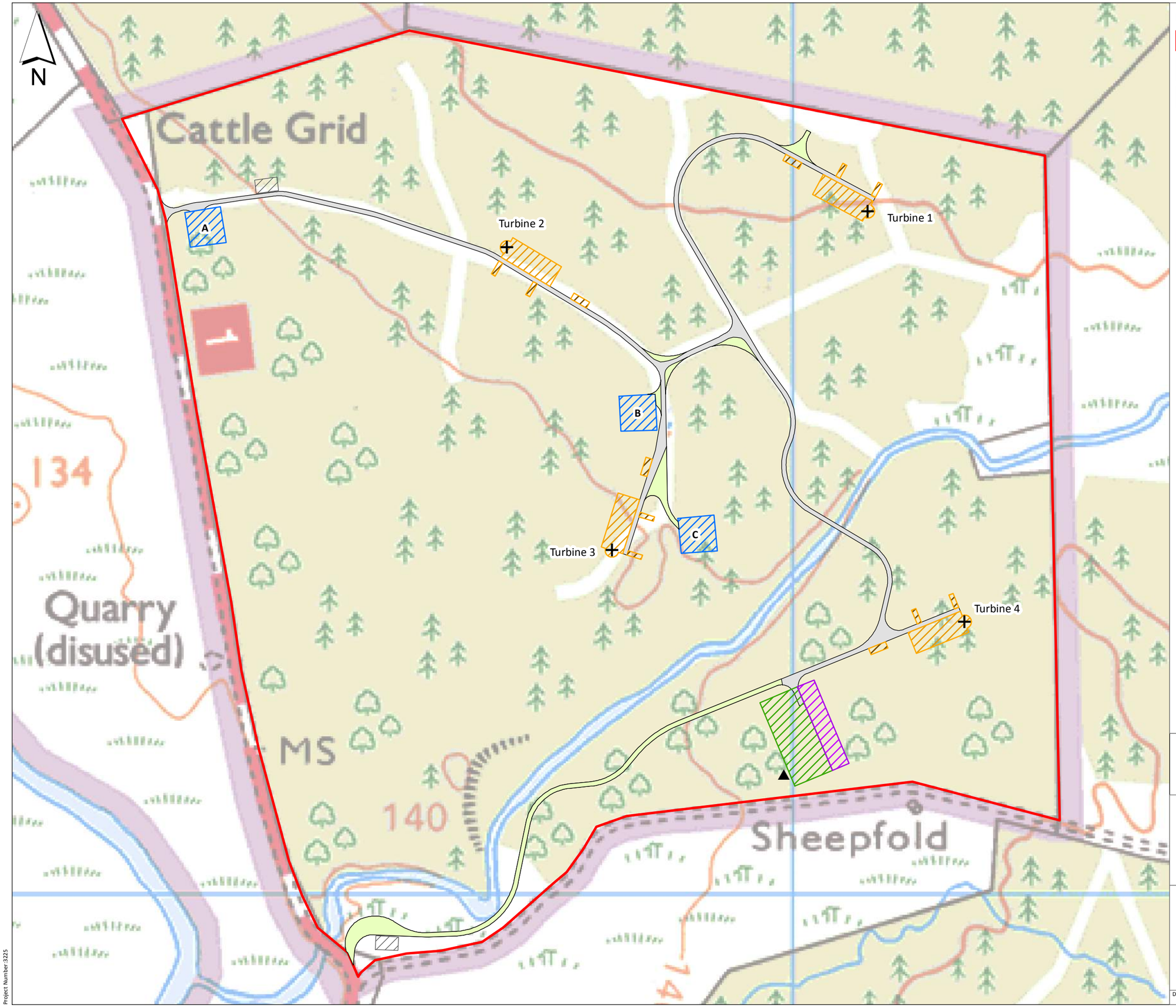
Strath Tirry Wind Farm
EIA Report

Figure 1.1

Site Location Plan

Date:	Drawn by:	Checked by:	Version:
03/12/2020	JB	RT	V5

Project Number 3225



KEY

- Site Boundary
- Turbine Location
- Meteorological Mast Location
- Turbine Hardstanding
- Temporary Hardstanding
- Access Track
- Temporary Access Track
- Energy Storage System, Switching Station & Control Room
- Temporary Borrow Pit Search Area (Areas A-C)
- Temporary Entrance & Exit Compound
- Temporary Construction Compound

Note - all infrastructure identified as temporary will be re-instated post-construction.

0 100 200 m

Scale 1:4,000 @ A3

REG POWER MANAGEMENT

Falck Renewables SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Strath Tirry Wind Farm
EIA Report

Figure 1.2

Site Layout Plan

Date:	Drawn by:	Checked by:	Version:
28/10/2020	JB	RT	V3

Project Number 3225