

Agenda Item	6.4
Report No	PLN/086/23

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: North Planning Applications Committee
Date: 6 December 2023
Report Title: 23/02320/S36: ITP Energised
Land 1500M SW Of Melvich

Report By: Area Planning Manager - North

Purpose/Executive Summary

Description: Melvich Wind Energy Hub
Ward: 01 - North, West and Central Sutherland
Development category: Section 36
Reason referred to Committee: Section 36 Application

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 **RAISE OBJECTION** to the application as set out in section 11 of the report.

1. PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

- 1.1 The Highland Council has been consulted by the Scottish Government's Energy Consents Unit (ECU) on an application made under Section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 (as amended) for the construction and operation of the Melvich Wind Energy Hub and associated infrastructure. The application is for 12 wind turbines to be operated for 40 years, with all turbines having a maximum blade tip height of 149.9m. The proposal has capacity to generate up to 57.6 MW, based on the power rating of the proposed turbines, alongside up to 42 MW of battery storage capacity.
- 1.2 Key elements of the development as described and assessed within the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and Additional Information include:
- 12 wind turbines of 149.9m height to blade tip with internal transformers;
 - Turbine foundations and hard standing areas measuring approximately 30 m x 45 m, with an additional laydown area approximately 75 m x 16 m;
 - 2 borrow pit search areas;
 - 4.7 km of new on-site access tracks, plus 3.4 km of upgraded existing tracks;
 - 4 new watercourse crossings;
 - A new substation and battery energy storage facility, measuring approximately 85 m x 100 m;
 - Underground cabling; and
 - A 'wind farm walk' public access footpath.
- 1.3 The main site access would be from an existing track connecting to the A836 public road, with a potential section of new track connecting to a second junction to allow for abnormal loads access to the site. The preferred access route would be from the port of entry at Scrabster Harbour, via the A9 and A836.
- 1.4 A micro-siting allowance of 50 m has been assumed by the applicant for the turbine locations, hard standings and access tracks to accommodate unknown ground conditions. The micro-siting will be used to avoid any areas of deeper peat, higher elevations of ground, watercourse buffers, Ground Water Dependent Terrestrial Ecosystems and cultural heritage assets. The final design of the turbine, colour and finish, aviation infrared lighting, ancillary electrical equipment, landscaping and fencing etc. are also expected to be agreed with the Planning Authority, by condition, at the time of procurement. Turbine manufacturers regularly update designs that are available, thereby necessitating the need for some flexibility on the approved design details.
- 1.5 Permission is sought to operate the windfarm for a 40 year period. A further application would be necessary to determine any future re-powering proposal. If the decision is made to decommission the wind turbines, all components, and above ground infrastructure would be removed. Any such track or infrastructure

foundation retention would however need to be agreed via a decommissioning method statement and would require a planning application at the time of decommissioning the remainder of the site. Any application for retention of such infrastructure will be determined in line with the development plan in place at that time.

- 1.6 The applicant anticipates that the construction period will last approximately 18 months, guided by a Construction and Environmental Management Plan (CEMP).
- 1.7 Whilst public consultation for Section 36 applications is not mandatory, the applicant held two rounds of public exhibition meetings to seek the views of the local community. In person events were held in Strathy and Halladale Villages in June and November 2022 that offered attendees the opportunity to leave feedback on the proposals. An additional event was held in November 2022 with the local common grazings committee. The project website also offered a public exhibition and the ability to leave feedback on the proposals.
- 1.8 Pre-Application Consultation: The applicant utilised the Council's Pre-Application Advice Service for Major Developments under reference (ref 22/03514/PREMAJ), on 2 December 2022. At the time of advice being sought, the scheme comprised 15 wind turbines up to 149.9 m to blade tip height and ancillary infrastructure. The main issues raised related to the landscape and visual impacts of the proposal. The majority of the site is located within the Caithness study, specifically the study 'LCA' referenced CT4 Central Caithness. The appraisal for CT4 concludes that significant constraints to development include the wild landscape of the Flow Country, which contributes to the visual setting of Lone Mountains LCT to the south and west, and the areas of transition to the adjacent character types. The appraisal also concludes for CT4 that there is limited scope for larger scale turbines. The key routes likely to be affected by the development are the A836 (part of the NC500) and the A897, sequential route analysis which addresses the composition of the development as well as its presence or absence of visibility, and the interrelationship of the development on these routes with cumulative developments will be essential to understanding the emerging development picture around this part of the north coast. NatureScot highlighted that there is potential for significant effects on the scenic value of Scotland's North Coast. This is a regionally distinctive landscape that makes a contribution to the identify of Scotland's landscapes which are of national interest. Effects on the qualities of the East Halladale Flows Wild Land Area (WLA) would be significant.
- 1.9 The application is supported by an Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) containing chapters on: the proposed development and site selection, planning and renewable energy policy, landscape and visual impacts, ecology and nature conservation, ornithology, hydrology, geology, hydrogeology, and peat, archaeology and cultural heritage, traffic transport and access, noise, socio economics and other issues, including telecoms, aviation and shadow flicker. The Report contains a Schedule of Mitigation. The application is also accompanied by a Planning Statement, Design and Access Statement and Pre-Application Consultation Report.
- 1.10 Since the Planning Authority were initially consulted on the application, the applicant submitted Additional Information (AI) detailing changes to the scheme in

response to consultation responses received and concerns raised by the Planning Authority. This comprised a completed proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS) Impact Assessment Screening Toolkit.

2. SITE DESCRIPTION

- 2.1 The 458 hectare site is located on the north coast of Sutherland, at the western edge of the dispersed settlement of Melvich. The site forms part of an open coastal moorland landscape. It is crossed by several small watercourses, including the Alltan Domhaich, Allt na Clèite and the Achridigill Burn. The topography where the proposed turbines are to be located varies across the site, with those in the northern part close to the 110 m above ordnance datum (AOD) contour with the southernmost turbine location being close to 160 m AOD.
- 2.2 The site has a rural character with the land being primarily undeveloped moor with some rough grazing. The site is located directly adjacent the A836 public road, which forms part of the NC500 tourist route.

Environmental Designations and Habitats

- 2.3 The site does not form part of any statutory or non-statutory designated sites for nature conservation. There are several statutorily designated sites within 5km. These include;
- The Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands (also designated as a Ramsar site) Special Protection Area (SPA), on the southern site boundary.
 - The North Caithness Cliffs SPA approximately 1.5 km northeast.
 - The Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC) on the southern site boundary and the Strathy Point SAC, approximately 3 km northwest.
 - The West Halladale Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) on the southern site boundary, the Strathy Coast SSSI approximately 1.5 km northeast and the Lochan Buidhe Mires SSSI approximately 5.2 km southwest.
- 2.4 In early 2023, a nomination for World Heritage Site (WHS) status for Scotland's Flow Country was submitted to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) by the Flow Country Partnership, via the UK Government. The Flow Country Partnership anticipates a decision on whether to award WHS status in Summer 2024. The Flow Country has been nominated for WHS status in part for its blanket bog habitats and associated biodiversity. The application site is wholly within the boundary of the proposed WHS.
- 2.5 The habitats across the site have limited identified potential to support protected species. The dominant habitat types identified within the site are various types of dry dwarf shrub heath alongside modified bog.
- 2.6 There are a number of watercourses that run across or near to the site. The

Alltan Domhaich, Allt na Clèite flow broadly north to south across the site and the Achridigill Burn flows from southwest to northeast across part of the southern area of the site. The Baligill Burn is located approximately 200 m to the west flowing south to north.

- 2.7 The bedrock beneath is overlain with peat with hummocky glacial deposits in the northeast. The maximum depth of peat deposits on site is up to 6 m although the proposed turbines and other infrastructure are mainly proposed to be located on areas of peat depth between 0 m and 0.5 m.

Landscape Designations, Wild Land and Landscape Character

- 2.8 The site does not form part of any national landscape designation, with the closest being the Kyle of Tounge National Scenic Area (NSA) located 15 km to the west. A small portion of the northern extent of the site is however located within the Farr Bay, Strathy and Portskerra Special Landscape Area (SLA). Landscape designations and areas of wild land which have been scoped into detailed assessment within the EIA include:

- Wild Land Area (WLA39) East Halladale Flows located 3.4 km to the southeast;
- Farr Bay, Strathy and Portskerra Special Landscape Area (SLA) within and adjacent to the northern site boundary;
- Bens Griam and Loch nan Clar Special Landscape Area (SLA) located 20 km south;
- Eriboll East and Whiten Head Special Landscape Area (SLA) located 28 km, west;
- Dunnet Head Special Landscape Area (SLA) located 31.6 km north east;
- Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire Special Landscape Area (SLA) located 35 km southwest.

- 2.9 The site is situated within the Sweeping Moorland and Flows Landscape Character Type (LCT) 134. This is an extensive landscape character type comprised of gently sloping or undulating landforms with occasional isolated hills, lochs and mature meandering rivers. The sensitivity to change of this landscape character type has been assessed by the applicant as medium / low.

Built Heritage

- 2.10 There are no designated heritage assets within the site itself. There are 9 Scheduled Monuments, 4 Category A listed buildings, 5 Category B listed buildings and 6 Category C listed buildings within 10km of the site.
- 2.11 The presence of peat across the site indicates the potential for historic environmental evidence to be contained on site.

Cumulative Developments

- 2.12 The nearest operational wind farm to the application site is Strathy North, some 4.4 km to the southwest. However, Kirkton Energy Park application 22/05533/S36 is currently pending consideration and borders the southern application site boundary. Armadale Wind Farm, application (ref 22/01972/S36), is some 5.4 km to the west is also currently pending consideration.
- 2.13 The list below sets out the operational / under construction, consented and in planning wind farm projects that the applicant took into consideration in their cumulative assessment. This was based on a 20 km study area with turbines of a tip height above 50 m. The following list provides details of these developments, including the number of turbines and approximate blade tip height and distance to their site boundaries from that of the proposed development.

Site Name	No. of Turbines	Tip Height (m)	Distance from the Proposed Development
Operational Sites			
Strathy North	33	111	5.5 km, SW
Bettyhill	2	120	12.3 km, W
Baillie	21	115	14.6 km, E
Forss 1	2	78	15.8 km, E
Forss 2	4	125	15.6 km, E
Consented / Sites Under Construction			
Strathy Wood	13	180	6.5 km, SSW
Limekiln Resubmission	21	126-139	9.7 km, E
Limekiln Extension	5	149.9	12 km, E
Strathy South	35	200	10.8 km, SSW
Dounreay Tri Offshore	2	201	12.6 km, NNE
Hill of Lybster	1	99.5	16.3 km, E
Pentland Offshore	7	300	10.8 km, NNE
Application / Appeal Sites			

Kirkton	11	149.9	2 km, SE
Armadale	9	149.9	5.8 km, W
Bettyhill Extension	11	149.9	11.8 km, W
Cairnmore Hill	5	138.5	18.7 km, E
West of Orkney Offshore	125	360	14.4 km, N

3. PLANNING HISTORY

- 3.1 12.09.2022 22/02994/SCOP, Melvich Wind Farm - Erection and Operation of a Wind Farm comprising of 15 Wind Turbines with a maximum blade tip height 149.9m, battery energy storage system, access tracks, borrow pits, substation, control building, met mast and ancillary infrastructure Scoping Opinion Issued

4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

4.1 Advertised: Section 36 Application

Date Advertised:

- The Northern Times: 07.04.21 and 14.04.23
- The Scotsman: 07.04.23
- The Edinburgh Gazette 11.04.23

Representation Deadline: 4 August 2023

Representations Received by the Highland Council: 3 (3 objections, 0 in support)

Representations Received by the Energy Consents Unit: 3 (3 objections, 0 in support)

4.2 Material considerations raised are summarised as follows:

- Landcape and visual impact of the development, including cumulative impact along with other windfarms;
- Noise impacts;
- Impacts on ornithology;
- Impacts on local business, particularly those related to tourism;
- Impacts on local fisheries;
- Impacts of traffic and condition of the local road network;
- Pollution, use of resources, and carbon emissions during construction;
- Issues with the accuracy of the EIAR documents;

- Incompatibility with the proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site;
- Lack of socio economic benefits; and
- Does not accord with the Development Plan.

4.3 Non-material considerations raised are summarised as follows:

- Grid connection works should be included as part of the application;
- Grid capacity constraints; and
- Limitations on actual generation capacity over that quoted in application.

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. Those representations received by the Scottish Government's Energy Consents Unit can be accessed via www.energyconsents.scot It should be noted that some representations have been submitted to both The Highland Council and Energy Consents Unit.

5. CONSULTATIONS

5.1 **The Access Officer** does not object to the application. Welcomes the new proposed walking route and suggests conditions to secure an Access Management Plan for during construction and operation of the proposed development.

5.2 **The Ecology Officer objects** to the application. This is on the principle that the proposal is located in the candidate Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS) where it is not possible to offset any impacts upon the WHS. This is outlined in more detail in the planning appraisal section of this report.

5.3 **Environmental Health** do not object to the application. This is subject to a condition being attached to control operational noise.

5.4 **The Historic Environment Team (Conservation) object** to the application. This is due to the proposal's impact on the outlook and setting of the Bighouse group of listed buildings, particularly the A Listed walled garden and pavilion from which ten of the proposed turbines will be visible on the horizon.

5.5 **The Transport Planning Team** do not object to the application. It recommended condition to secure a Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) and Section 96 Agreement for wear and tear on the road network.

Consultations Undertaken by the Energy Consents Unit

5.6 **Aberdeen Airport** do not object to the application. It consider that the proposals do not fall within their safeguarding limits.

5.7 **British Telecom** do not object to the application. It considers the proposal should not cause interference to BT's current and presently planned radio network.

5.8 **Crown Estate Scotland** do not object to the application. It confirms that the

assets of Crown Estate Scotland are not affected by the proposal.

- 5.9 **Edinburgh Airport** do not object to the application. It considers that the proposals do not fall within their safeguarding limits.
- 5.10 **Glasgow Airport** do not object to the application. It considers that the proposals do not fall within their safeguarding limits.
- 5.11 **Highlands and Islands Airport Authority (HIAL)** initially objected to the proposals related to the safeguarding criteria and operation of Wick Airport. This objection has since been withdrawn, provided that no part of the development exceeds 309m AOD in height.
- 5.12 **Historic Environment Scotland (HES)** do not object to the application. It considers that the effects on the setting of the heritage assets located in the vicinity would not have a significant adverse impact on the integrity of the settings and would not raise issues of national interest.
- 5.13 **Joint Radio Company** do not object to the application. It does not foresee any potential problems based on known interference scenarios.
- 5.14 **Marine Scotland Science** do not object to the application. It provides comments on the submitted fish survey. It advises that appropriate site specific mitigation measures including an integrated water quality and fish population monitoring programme (WQFMP) should be established.
- 5.15 **Ministry of Defence, Defence Infrastructure Organisation** do not object to the application. It requests a condition requiring the submission of an aviation lighting scheme and that notification is sent to it at least 14 days prior to the commencement of the development.
- 5.16 **Mobile Broadband Network Ltd** do not object to the application.
- 5.17 **National Air Traffic Services Safeguarding (NATS)** do not object to the application. It notes that the proposal does not conflict with its safeguarding criteria.
- 5.18 **NatureScot** object to the application. This is on the basis that there would be significant adverse effects on Scotland's North Coast which is a regionally distinctive landscape that makes a contribution to the identity of Scotland's landscapes. It considers possible impacts of the proposals on nearby natural heritage designations and protected species more widely. Advice was provided to the Scottish Government's Energy Consents Unit who will be required, as the competent authority, to carry out an appropriate assessment in terms of the habitats regulations, on the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Special Protection Area (SPA) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The comments received are considered in further detail in the planning appraisal section of this report.
- 5.19 **The Northern District Salmon Fishery Board** does not object to the application. It considers that there is no direct interest in relation to the Boards' Statutory

responsibilities due to the inaccessibility of the site to migratory fish.

- 5.20 **RSPB Scotland object** to the application. This is due to a lack of information to allow a conclusion of no adverse impacts on the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA.
- 5.21 **Scottish Forestry** do not object to the application.
- 5.22 **SEPA** do not object to the application. It welcomes the proposed peatland restoration plans.
- 5.23 **Transport Scotland** do not object to the application. This is subject to conditions to secure an abnormal loads assessment on the trunk road and details of special traffic control methods for abnormal load deliveries.
- 5.24 **Vodafone** do not object to the application. It raises concerns regarding the impact of the proposals on their network infrastructure.

6. DEVELOPMENT PLAN POLICY

- 6.1 The following policies are relevant to the assessment of the application

National Planning Framework (NPF) 4 (2023)

- 6.2 National Development 3 (NAD3) - Strategic Renewable Electricity Generation and Transmission Infrastructure
 - 1 – Tackling the climate and nature crisis
 - 2 – Climate mitigation and adaptation
 - 3 – Biodiversity
 - 4 – Natural places
 - 5 – Soils
 - 7 – Historic assets and places
 - 11 – Energy
 - 13 – Sustainable transport
 - 22 – Flood risk and water management
 - 23 – Health and safety
 - 25 – Community wealth benefits
 - 33 – Minerals

Highland Wide Local Development Plan (HwLDP) (2012)

- 6.3
 - 28 - Sustainable Design
 - 29 - Design Quality and Place-making
 - 30 - Physical Constraints
 - 31 - Developer Contributions
 - 53 - Minerals
 - 55 - Peat and Soils
 - 56 - Travel
 - 57 - Natural, Built and Cultural Heritage
 - 58 - Protected Species
 - 59 - Other important Species
 - 60 - Other Importance Habitats

- 61 - Landscape
- 62 - Geodiversity
- 63 - Water Environment
- 64 - Flood Risk
- 66 - Surface Water Drainage
- 67 - Renewable Energy Developments
- 68 - Community Renewable Energy Developments
- 69 - Electricity Transmission Infrastructure
- 72 - Pollution
- 73 - Air Quality
- 74 - Green Networks
- 77 - Public Access
- 78 - Long Distance Routes

Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan) (2018)

- 6.4 No policies or allocations relevant to the proposals are included. It does, however, confirm the boundaries of Special Landscape Areas within the plan's boundary.

Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance (OWESG) (2016)

- 6.5 The Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance (OWESG) provides additional guidance on the principles set out in HwLDP Policy 67 for renewable energy developments. The guidance sets out the Council's agreed position on onshore wind energy matters, and, although reflective of Scottish Planning Policy at the time of its adoption prior to the adoption of NPF4, the document remains an extant part of the Development Plan and is therefore a material consideration in the determination of onshore wind energy planning applications. Nevertheless, the Spatial Framework included in the document is no longer relevant to the assessment of applications as in effect, the policies of NPF4 (specifically Policy 11 - Energy) removes Group 2 Areas of significant protection from consideration by effectively making all land in Scotland either Group 1 Areas where wind farms will not be acceptable, or Group 3, Areas with potential for wind farm development.
- 6.6 The OWESG 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 falls within the Caithness Sensitivity Study area.

Other Highland Council Supplementary Guidance

- 6.7 Developer Contributions (Mar 2018)
- Flood Risk and Drainage Impact Assessment (Jan 2013)
- Green Networks (Jan 2013)
- Highland Historic Environment Strategy (Jan 2013)
- Highland's Statutorily Protected Species (Mar 2013)
- Highland Renewable Energy Strategy and Planning Guidelines (May 2006)
- Physical Constraints (Mar 2013)
- Roads and Transport Guidelines for New Developments (May 2013)
- Special Landscape Area Citations (Jun 2011)

Sustainable Design Guide (Jan 2013)

7. OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Emerging Highland Council Development Plan Documents and Planning Guidance

- 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 post National Planning Framework 4.
- 7.2 The Highland Council also 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.

Other National Guidance

- 7.3 Onshore Wind Energy Policy Statement (2022)
Onshore Wind Sector Deal for Scotland (2023)
Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan (2023)
Scottish Energy Strategy (2017)
2020 Routemap for Renewable Energy (2011)
Energy Efficient Scotland Route Map, Scottish Government (2018)
Siting and Designing Wind Farms in the Landscape, SNH (2017)
Assessing Impacts on Wild Land Areas, Technical Guidance, NatureScot (2020)
Wind Farm Developments on Peat Lands, Scottish Government (2011)
Historic Environment Policy for Scotland, HES (2019)
PAN 1/2011 - Planning and Noise (2011)
PAN 60 – Planning for Natural Heritage (2008)
Circular 1/2017: Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (2017)

8. PLANNING APPRAISAL

- 8.1 This application has been submitted to the Scottish Government under Section 36 (S36) of the Electricity Act 1989 (as amended). Should Ministers approve the development, it will receive deemed planning permission under Section 57(2) of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 (as amended). While not a planning application, the Council processes S36 applications in the same way as a planning application as a consent under the Electricity Act will carry with it deemed planning permission.
- 8.2 Schedule 9 of The Electricity Act 1989 contains considerations in relation to the impact of proposals on amenity and fisheries. These considerations mean the developer should:
- have regard to the desirability of preserving natural beauty, of conserving flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features of special interest and of protecting sites, buildings and objects of architectural, historic or archaeological interest; and
 - reasonably mitigate any effect which the proposals would have on the

natural beauty of the countryside or on any such flora, fauna, features, sites, buildings or objects.

8.3 It should be noted that for applications under the Electricity Act 1989 that the Development Plan is just one of a number of considerations, and therefore Section 25 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 which requires planning applications to be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise, is not engaged. That said, the application still 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.

8.4 The key considerations in this case are:

- a) Compliance with the Development Plan / Other Planning Policy
- b) Energy and Economic Benefits
- c) Construction
- d) Roads, Transport and Access
- e) Water, Flood Risk, Drainage and Peat
- f) Natural Heritage (including ornithology)
- g) Built and Cultural Heritage
- h) Design, Landscape and Visual Impacts (including on Wild Land Areas)
- i) Noise and Shadow Flicker
- j) Telecommunications
- k) Aviation
- l) Other Material Considerations

Development Plan / Other Planning Policy

8.5 The Development Plan comprises National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), the adopted Highland-wide Local Development Plan (HwLDP), the adopted Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan) and all statutorily adopted supplementary guidance.

National Policy

8.6 National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) forms part of the Development Plan and was adopted in February 2023. It comprises three parts:

- Part 1 – sets out an overarching spatial strategy for Scotland in the future and includes six spatial principles (just transition / conserving and recycling assets / local living / compact urban growth / rebalanced development / rural revitalisation. Part 1 sets out that there are eighteen national developments to support the spatial strategy and regional spatial priorities, which includes single large scale projects and networks of smaller proposals that are collectively nationally significant.
- Part 2 – 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. This part of the document should be taken as a whole in that all relevant policies should be applied to each application.

- Part 3 – provides a series of annexes that provide the rationale for the strategies and policies of NPF4. The annexes outline how the document should be used, and set out how the Scottish Government will implement the strategies and policies contained in the document.

- 8.7 The Spatial Strategy sets out that we are facing unprecedented challenges and that we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to future impacts of climate change. It sets out that that Scotland’s environment is a national asset which supports our economy, identity, health and wellbeing. It sets out that choices need to be made about how we can make sustainable use of our natural assets in a way which benefits communities. The spatial strategy reflects legislation in setting out that decisions require to reflect the long term public interest. However, in doing so it is clear that we will need to make the right choices about where development should be located ensuring clarity is provided over the types of infrastructure that needs to be provided and the assets that should be protected to ensure they continue to benefit future generations. The Spatial Priorities support the planning and delivery of sustainable places, where we reduce emissions, restore and better connect biodiversity; liveable places, where we can all live better, healthier lives; and productive places, where we have a greener, fairer and more inclusive wellbeing economy.
- 8.8 The proposed development is of national importance for the delivery of the national Spatial Strategy, whereby in principle support for the development is established. As the proposed development would be capable of generating over 50 MW, it is of a type and scale that constitutes NPF4 National Development 3 - Strategic Renewable Electricity Generation and Transmission Infrastructure.
- 8.9 At the high level, NPF4 considers that Strategic Renewable Electricity Generation and Transmission Infrastructure will assist in the delivery of the Spatial Strategy and Spatial Priorities for the north of Scotland, and that Highland can continue to make a strong contribution toward meeting Scotland’s ambition for net zero. Alongside these ambitions, the strategy for Highland aims to protect environmental assets as well as to stimulate investment in natural and engineered solutions to address climate change. This aim is not new and will clearly require a balancing exercise to be undertaken, which is reflected throughout the document.
- 8.10 NPF4 Policies 1, 2, and 3 now apply to all development proposals Scotland-wide, which means that significant weight must be given to the global climate and nature crises when considering all development proposals, as required by NPF4 Policy 1. To that end, development proposals must be sited and designed to minimise lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions as far as is practicably possible in accordance with NPF4 Policy 2, while contributing to the enhancement of biodiversity, as required by NPF4 Policy 3.
- 8.11 Specific to this proposal, as well as the support in Policy 1 (significant weight will be given to the global climate and nature crisis when considering development), Policy 11 of NPF4 supports all forms of proposals for renewable, low-carbon and zero emission technologies including wind farms. However, any project identified

as a national development requires to be considered at a project level to ensure all statutory tests are met, as set out in Annex 1 of the NPF4. This includes consideration against the provisions of the Development Plan, of which NPF4 is a part.

- 8.12 Complementing those policies is NPF4 Policy 4 Natural Places, which sets out that development proposals by virtue of type, location, or scale that have an unacceptable impact on the natural environment will not be supported. The policy goes on to clarify what that means for different designations. It sets out that proposals with likely significant effects on European sites (SACs or SPAs) require appropriate assessment, and that development proposals that will affect a National Park, NSA or SSSI will only be supported where: i) the objectives of designation and the overall integrity of the areas will not be compromised; or ii) any significant adverse effects on the qualities for which the area has been designated are clearly outweighed by social, environmental or economic benefits of national importance. This is an important consideration given the proximity of the development in relation to the West Halladale, East Halladale Lochan Buidhe Mires, Strathy Coast and Red Point Coast Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's), the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands (also designated as a Ramsar site) and North Caithness Cliffs Special Protection Areas (SPA's) and the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands and Strathy Point Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).
- 8.13 Similarly, sites designated in Development Plans for local nature conservation or Special Landscape Areas (SLAs) are protected in NPF4 Policy 4 unless the development will not result in significantly adverse effects on its qualities or its integrity, or, these effects are clearly outweighed by social, environmental, or economic benefits of at least local importance. Nearby SLAs scoped in for assessment include Farr Bay, Strathy and Portskerra, the Bens Griam and Loch nan Clar, Eriboll East and Whiten Head, Dunnet Head and Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire.
- 8.14 The most significant policy change for Natural Places brought about by NPF Policy 4 is with regard Wild Land Areas, which states that renewable energy developments that support national targets will be supported in Wild Land Areas (WLA) and that buffer zones around WLAs will not be applied, so that effects of development outwith WLAs will not be a significant consideration. The site itself is not with Wild Land, however the development can be seen from WLA 39 - East Halladale Flows to the southeast.
- 8.15 Specific for energy developments, NPF4 Policy 11 states that the principle of all forms of renewable, low-carbon, and zero emission technologies is supported with the exception of wind farm proposals located in National Parks or National Scenic Areas. Policy 11 Part c) qualifies this position by stating that wind farms should only be supported where they maximise net economic impact, including local and community socio-economic benefits such as employment, associated business, and supply chain opportunities. The policy goes on to state that while significant weight will be placed on the contribution of the proposal to renewable energy generation targets and on reduction of greenhouse gas emissions targets, the development's impacts, including cumulative impacts, must be suitably addressed and mitigated against. In this regard, the Highland Council has consistently given

significant weight to a development's contribution to environmental targets prior to and post the adoption of NPF4.

- 8.16 NPF4 Policy 11 Part e) sets out the additional project design and mitigation requirements for energy proposals. This includes a broad range of matters akin to those to be assessed under HwLDP Policy 67. This includes consideration of the landscape and visual impacts and advises that where impacts are localised and / or appropriate design mitigation has been applied such effects will generally be considered acceptable. Members will be aware that the concept of wind energy developments that have only localised impacts as being more likely to be acceptable is not new and is also reflected in previous Highland Council planning decisions. However, the landscape and visual impacts of a proposal of 12 turbines at 149.9m in height remains challenging to be entirely contained, as reflected in the significant adverse impacts identified within the EIA and through the consultation process. While the adopted NPF4 reflects a stronger presumption in favour of all national scale energy developments, judgment still requires to be applied at the project level to ensure proposals do not have unacceptable landscape and visual impacts even if the contribution to national renewable energy targets is considerable.
- 8.17 On that point it is noted that both legislation and planning law indicate that where there may be incompatibility between NPF4 and the Local Development Plan (LDP) (HwLDP, CaSPlan, and Highland Council Supplementary Guidance) published prior to NPF4, then the more recent document shall prevail. Notwithstanding however, in instances of incompatibility, this requirement may not eliminate the provisions of the LDP in their entirety whilst these documents remain an extant part of the adopted Development Plan. That means that the Council may wish to give more weight to the provisions of its LDP over national policies where there is strong justification for doing so, such as where it feels that LDP policy is better equipped to respond to local conditions for example. However, this matter is yet to be tested through the planning system.

Highland-wide Local Development Plan

- 8.18 The principal HwLDP policy on which the application needs to be determined is Policy 67 - Renewable Energy. HwLDP Policy 67 sets out that renewable energy development should be well related to the source of the primary renewable resource needed for operation, the contribution of the proposed development in meeting renewable energy targets and positive/negative effects on the local and national economy as well as 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, individually or cumulatively with other developments having regard to 11 specified criteria (as listed in HwLDP Policy 67). Such an approach is consistent with the concept of Sustainable Design (HwLDP Policy 28) and the concept of supporting the right development in the right place at the right time.
- 8.19 Although HwLDP Policy 67, the OWESG and NPG4 Policy 11 are compatible, NPF4 expresses greater support for renewable energy projects outwith National Parks and NSAs, and requires greater weight to be attributed to the twin climate

and biodiversity crises in the decision making process, whilst still recognising that a balancing exercise must still be carried out.

Area Local Development Plans

- 8.20 The Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan) does not contain land allocations related to the proposed development. It confirms the boundaries of Special Landscape Areas within these plan areas. NPF4 Policy 4 and HwLDP Policies 28, 57, 61 and 67 seek to safeguard these regionally important landscapes. The impact of this development on landscape is primarily assessed in the Design, Landscape and Visual Impact section of this report.

Onshore Wind Energy Supplementary Guidance (OWESG)

- 8.21 The Council's OWESG forms part of the Development Plan and remains a critical document in the determination of applications. The supplementary guidance does not provide additional tests in respect of the consideration of development proposals against Development Plan policy. However, it provides a clear indication of the approach the Council towards the assessment of proposals, and thereby aid consideration of applications for onshore wind energy proposals.
- 8.22 The OWESG approach and methodology to the assessment of proposals is applicable and is set out in the OWESG Para 4.16 - 4.17. It provides a methodology for a judgement to be made on the likely impact of a development on assessed "thresholds" in order to assist the application of HwLDP Policy 67. The 10 criteria are particularly useful in considering visual impacts, including cumulative impacts. An appraisal of how the proposal relates to the thresholds set out in the criteria, is included in Appendix 3 of this report.
- 8.23 The Landscape Sensitivity Appraisal for Caithness was published in 2017 and forms part of the statutorily adopted OWESG. The turbine envelope for this application falls within area CT4 Central Caithness, a landscape area described as flat to gently undulating where the guidance advises "there is some limited potential for further commercial scale development in this LCT, to concentrate and consolidate with existing development".

Onshore Wind Energy Policy Statement (2022), Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan (2023) and Onshore Wind Sector Deal for Scotland (2023)

- 8.24 The Onshore Wind Energy Policy Statement supersedes the previously adopted Onshore Wind Energy Policy Statement which was published in 2017. The document sets out a clear ambition for onshore wind in Scotland and for the first time sets a national target for a minimum level of installed capacity for onshore wind energy, being 20 GW. This is set against a currently installed capacity of 9.4 GW (June 2023). Therefore, a further 10.6 GW of onshore wind requires to be installed to meet the target. It is however acknowledged that targets are not caps. In delivering such a target Scotland would play a significant role in meeting the requirement of 25-30 GW of installed capacity across the UK identified by the Climate Change Committee.

- 8.25 Like the previous iteration of the Onshore Wind Energy Policy Statement, the document recognises that balance is required and that no one technology can allow Scotland to reach its net zero targets. The document is clear that in achieving a balance, environmental and economic benefits to Scotland must be maximised. In taking this approach, this echoes Scotland's Third Land Use Strategy.
- 8.26 The document recognises that there may be a need to develop onshore wind energy development on peat. While peatland is present on the site, it is considered that appropriate mitigation has been applied by design and peat management plan can be secured by condition.
- 8.27 Benefits to rural areas, such as provision of jobs and opportunities to restore and protect natural habitats, are also highlighted in the document. The proposed development does lead to such benefits being delivered; however, the scale of the benefits are not demonstrably greater than those one would expect on any such wind farm development of commensurate size prior to the adoption of NPF4.
- 8.28 Additionally, the document acknowledges that in order for Scotland to achieve its climate targets and the ambition for the minimum installed capacity of 20 GW by 2030, the landscape will change. However, the OWEPS also sets out that the right development should happen in the right place. Echoing NPF4, the document sets out that significant landscape and visual impacts are to be expected and that where the impacts are localised and / or appropriate mitigation has been applied the effects will be considered acceptable.
- 8.29 The role of Landscape Sensitivity Appraisals in considering wind energy proposals is promoted through the document. This highlights the importance of applying those contained within the Council's OWESG when assessing applications.
- 8.30 Finally, the document considers some of the wider benefits and challenges faced by in delivery of ambition and vision for onshore wind energy in Scotland. These include shared ownership, community benefit, supply chain benefits, skills development and financial mechanisms for delivery. Technical considerations are also highlighted, those relevant to this application have been considered and mitigation, where required has been secured by condition.
- 8.31 The Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan has been published for consultation. Ministers will likely give consideration to this document in their decision on the application, however, limited weight can be applied to the document given its draft status. Unsurprisingly, the material on onshore wind in the document reflects in large part that contained in NPF4 and the Onshore Wind Energy Policy Statement 2022. A fundamental part of the Strategy is expanding the energy generation sector. Overall, the draft Energy Strategy forms part of the new policy approach alongside the OWEPS and NPF4 and confirms the Scottish Government's policy objectives and related targets reaffirming the crucial role that onshore wind and enabling transmission infrastructure will play in response to the climate crisis which is at the heart of all these policies.

8.32 To deliver the ambition for onshore wind, the Onshore Wind Sector Deal for Scotland was introduced in September 2023. The document focuses on necessary high level actions by Government and the Sector to support onshore wind delivery. Jointly, Government and the Sector are committed to working together to ensure a balance is struck between onshore wind and the impacts on land use and the environment. The document looks to expediate decision making and consent implementation to achieve 20 GW of installation by 2030, meaning we should be seeing faster decisions on applications that are already in the system, with more consents being build out.

Energy and Economic Benefit

8.33 The Council continues to respond positively to the Government's renewable energy agenda. Installed onshore wind energy developments in Highland account for around 30% of the national installed onshore wind energy capacity, with a substantial number of onshore wind farm applications pending consideration at present.

8.34 While The Highland Council has effectively met its own target, as previously set out in the Highland Renewable Energy Strategy, it remains the case that there are areas of Highland capable of absorbing renewable developments without significant effects.

8.35 Notwithstanding any impacts that this proposal may have upon the landscape resource, amenity and heritage of the area, the development could be seen to be compatible with Scottish Government policy and guidance and increase its overall contribution to the Government, UK and European energy targets, with the development anticipated to generate up to 57.6 MW of electricity (turbine model dependent). Based on a typical capacity factor, the development is likely to generate approximately 212,931 MW hours per year, the equivalent of powering approximately 64, 622 homes.

8.36 There will be carbon losses as a result of the development, including those related to turbine manufacture and impact on peat. These losses would equate to a total of approximately 124,534 tonnes of carbon. As a result, the anticipated that the estimated carbon payback period for the development would be approximately 0.9 years, based on a grid mix (including both renewables and fossil fuels), with the proposal reported by the applicant to have an overall beneficial effect on climate change mitigation. This is considered a relatively short payback period.

8.37 The applicant anticipates the construction period to last 18 months with the wind farm having an operational period of 40 years. Such projects can offer investment / opportunities to the local, Highland, and Scottish economy, including businesses ranging across the construction, haulage, electrical and service sectors.

8.38 There are likely to be some adverse effects caused by construction traffic and disruption, as well as some adverse economic impact that turbines may have on tourism. These adverse impacts are most likely to be within the service sector particularly during the construction phase when abnormal loads are being delivered to site.

- 8.39 The assessment of socio-economic impact offered by the applicant suggests a minor beneficial economic impact resulting from the development. It has identified that the capital cost of the development was estimated to be £67.3 million. Based on research undertaken by BiGGAR Economics on behalf of RenewableUK in 2015 the applicant anticipates 28% of total capital construction costs could be secured through Highland contracts. It anticipates around £19 million will be spent in Highland during the development and construction phase of the wind farm with 140 Full Time Equivalent job years created during construction in Highland.
- 8.40 For each operational year of the wind farm, it is concluded that the proposed development would generate approximately £0.8 million a GVA and 5 jobs within the Highlands. In addition to the payment of annual non-domestic rates, the applicant also notes that there will be economic benefits to the local community and economy arising from the community ownership arrangement proposed. In this respect, the applicant states that they have committed to offering £5,000 per installed MW per year in index-linked community benefits for the local area, in addition to an electricity discount scheme for local residents and an offer to secure equity in the proposals. The applicants also state that they would fund improvements to the local tourist infrastructure and encourage local business in the procurement process for constructing the proposals. In line with Council policy and practice, community benefit considerations are undertaken as a separate exercise and generally parallel to the planning process, albeit that in this regard the proposals receive a degree of support under the NPF4 Policy 11 and 25 which relates to maximising economic benefit and Community Wealth Building.
- 8.41 In EIA terms, the overall effect of the project, including consideration of community benefits, is reported to be moderately beneficial and significant in EIA terms, albeit for the local area.

Construction

- 8.42 It is anticipated that the construction period for the development would take approximately 18 months. Construction will be scheduled from Monday to Friday 07:00 to 19:00 and Saturday 08:00 to 13:00. No working activities would be planned on Sundays. In the event of work being required out with these hours, the Planning Authority would be notified, wherever possible.
- 8.43 The nature of the project anticipates the need for a Construction Environmental Management Document / Plan (CEMP), in association with the successful contractor engaged. A draft CEMP has been provided with the EIAR and this may be secured via condition and should include site-specific environmental management procedures which can be finalised and agreed through appropriate planning conditions. 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.
- 8.44 In addition to the requirement for submission and agreement on a CEMP, the

Council will require the applicant to provide a financial bond regarding final site restoration (restoration bond) in the event of non-wind turbine operation and to provide a Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) for the use of the local road network.

- 8.45 Developers must 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 etc. and is enforceable via Environmental Health and not Planning.
- 8.46 The applicant has anticipated a micro-siting allowance of 50 m. Micro-siting is acceptable, within reason, to address unforeseen onsite constraints. Anything in excess of 50 m 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 50 m can be conditioned, with micro siting to avoiding any areas of deeper peat, higher elevations of ground, watercourse buffers, Ground Water Dependent Terrestrial Ecosystems and any encountered cultural heritage assets.
- 8.47 Should the development be granted consent, a Community Liaison Group (CLG) 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

- 8.48 The applicant has highlighted the expected impact of this development, particularly through the construction phase, with the Port of Entry for turbine components to be Scrabster Harbour with these being routed to the site across the A9 and A836. Bulk loads will be delivered westward to the site via the A836.
- 8.49 The EIAR reports that the proposed development would lead to a temporary increase in traffic volumes on the road network during the construction phase. Traffic volumes would decrease considerably outside the peak period of construction. The peak construction period (month 4 of the construction programme) would see an increase of 70 HGV journeys to the site per day (35 inbound and 35 outbound) above baseline use. The overall traffic volumes not anticipated to increase by more than 10% at any point except for the A836 near the site access junction. The anticipated total traffic volumes are projected to be within the capacity of the roads in question and the environmental effect is considered not to be significant, providing that a comprehensive CTMP is established.
- 8.50 The EIAR includes a cumulative transport assessment. Due to the projected commencement time of the surrounding determined and permitted wind farms, no crossover in construction traffic is predicted. The applicant has accounted for the operation of the now permitted Sutherland Spaceport (ref 20/00616/FUL). The results indicate that when considering the cumulative traffic impacts, the total amount of traffic does not increase at any of the measuring points by more than 12%.

- 8.51 The Council Transport Planning Team, and Transport Scotland, have confirmed that development traffic can be accommodated on the road network, subject to conditions as well as the requirement for a legal agreement to address “wear and tear” provisions. These will be consistent with current best practice and 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.
 - 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.
- 8.52 No core paths are present directly through the application site. The site, like most land in Scotland, is subject to the provisions of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. Where and when feasible existing tracks should be made available for public use during the construction phase. The applicant also proposes a waymarked walking route through the site.
- 8.53 To ensure access is provided throughout the construction period and that enhanced recreational access opportunities are provided during the operational phase, an Access Management Plan would be required by planning condition. This is 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.

Water, Flood Risk, Drainage and Peat

- 8.54 The EIAR specifies that a Construction Environmental Management Document / Plan (CEMP) will be in place to 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. The CEMP can be secured by planning condition. This will 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.
- 8.55 In order to protect the water environment a number of measures have been highlighted by the applicant for inclusion in the CEMP including the adoption of sustainable drainage principles, and measures to mitigate against effects of potential chemical contamination and sediment release. This includes setbacks from water courses, employment of an Ecological Clerk of Works (ECoW) and undertaking a programme of baseline water quality and quantity monitoring surveys prior to construction, and thereafter during construction.

- 8.56 SEPA does not object to the proposed development. The site infrastructure is not considered to be at risk of flooding. The watercourse crossings within the development will be regulated under SEPA's Controlled Activities Regulations (CAR) regime and will be designed to allow continuous flow. A detailed drainage strategy will be developed, details of which may be secured by condition to allow final assessment by SEPA and the Council's Flood Risk Management Team.
- 8.57 The proposed development site was assessed for its potential for Groundwater Dependent Terrestrial Ecosystems (GWDTE's). The identified communities were however, assessed as having low groundwater dependency, with the majority being disconnected from underlying groundwater or dependent on surface water.
- 8.58 Deep peat, generally ranging from 0.5 m to 1.5m, is present across the site, with there being localised areas in excess of 2 m in depth. Overall, a total of 49,936m³ of peat is expected to be extracted, with the majority of peat impacts relating to access tracks and borrow pit requirements, with peat to be used for the reinstatement of onsite access track verges and borrow pits. Peat management and reinstatement during and following construction has been detailed in the outline CEMP and Peat Management Plan, the finalisation of which can be conditioned.
- 8.59 A Peat Landslide Hazard and Risk Assessment has been submitted as part of the EIAR and have helped to inform the proposals. The applicant's risk assessment identifies that providing the assessment's mitigation is followed, the site is of low to very low risk to peat instability. The adherence to this document can be secured through condition.
- 8.60 There are 2 registered Private Water Supplies (PWS) within a 2km radius of the proposed development. The assessment concludes that one of the identified PWS within the study area is hydro-geologically connected to the site. The applicant proposes that a water quality monitoring and management plan be developed to address the potential impacts on this supply, should the development proceed. This may be secured via condition on any deemed planning permission, should consent be forthcoming.
- 8.61 Given the watercourses across the site, and PWS within the vicinity, water quality will require to be managed through the construction, operation and decommissioning phases of the development. This can be secured by condition, with the final scheme being developed in consultation with Council, SEPA, and relevant fishery boards.

Natural Heritage (including Ornithology)

- 8.62 The site is located within the proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS). The proposed windfarm does not however, directly overlap any confirmed natural heritage conservation designations. However, it is in the proximity of several areas designated as important for natural heritage at the local, national or international level. The Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC) is located directly to the south of the site and is designated for its standing waters and blanket bogs. The Strathy Point SAC lies 3.2 km to the northwest of the site and is designated for its sea cliffs and associated maritime

plant communities. Additionally, the site is located in proximity to five Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). West Halladale (adjacent to the south) East Halladale (3.1 km south east) and Lochan Buidhe Mires (4.6 km south west) are designated for their blanket bogs. Strathy Coast (0.4 km north) and Red Point Coast (2.9 km north east) are designated for their coastland features. All designated sites were scoped out of the EIAR based on a lack of significant impact pathways and in consideration of the embedded design mitigation. However, one designated site, Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SAC, was subject to a (shadow) Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA), screening stage and Appropriate Assessment; the latter concluded no likely significant effects on the SAC as a result of the proposed development.

- 8.63 In terms of habitat loss, the application site mainly comprises blanket bog, wet modified bog, dry modified bog, dry dwarf shrub heath and dry heath/dry modified bog mosaic. In total, it is expected that the development will impact on 27.21 hectares of these habitat types. Due to the area of these habitats that will be lost relative to the total amount of the habitat types at the regional and national level and considering the existing degradation of some of the habitat on site, the degree of habitat loss is considered as minor adverse and not significant in terms of the EIAR. The applicant has suggested a Habitat Management Plan (HMP) to ensure the restoration of 220 hectares of blanket bog and 60 hectares of peatland on and off site.
- 8.64 Despite these measures, the Ecology Officer has noted that although the proposed WHS has been considered within the EIAR, crucially it is not possible to offset any impacts upon the WHS in terms of the qualities of its Outstanding Universal Values (OUV), which include the peatland and its ecosystem processes. The direct and indirect loss of some 0.15ha of blanket bog habitat, as predicted in the applicant's Habitat Management Plan, and its hydrology due to the development, would adversely impact the extent and quality of the blanket bog habitat within the WHS, therefore negatively impacting the OUV and as such, the Ecology Officer cannot support the proposals.
- 8.65 The site has also been subject of an ecological survey, including a protected mammal survey. The surveys revealed the onsite presence of bats, otter and water vole. It is considered that the potential of the site for bat roosting is low. Otter are likely to use the site on an infrequent basis, although no places of shelter or resting sites, including natal dens, were identified. Fish surveys were also undertaken on the watercourses on site and revealed the presence of Brown Trout in the Achridigill Burn.
- 8.66 In terms of the potential for disturbance to water vole, all proposed new infrastructure on site is buffered from watercourses by a minimum of 50 m where appropriate and so highly unlikely to result in disturbances at this distance. The nearest water crossings, re-surfacing or widening works to existing tracks lie 440 m from the nearest known water vole burrows, and so at this distance any impacts to water voles are highly unlikely. Pre-construction surveys would be undertaken to ensure no significant effects may occur to water vole, in case new areas have been inhabited.

- 8.67 The applicant has conducted a suite of ornithological surveys, including vantage point, breeding bird, focal diver lochan surveys. Six raptor species and owl species of high conservation value and three common raptor species were registered in the site during the Vantage Point and walkover surveys, of which merlin and barn owl were also assessed as breeding within the site or within the 2 km survey area. Seven species of wildfowl and divers were recorded during the surveys, none were confirmed breeding within the site, however red-throated diver were confirmed as breeding within the 2 km survey buffer. Three species of gull were recorded, two recorded occasionally during flight activity surveys with one recorded as breeding within the 500 m survey buffer. Seven species of waders were recorded, all were recorded as breeding in the site or 500 m survey buffer.
- 8.68 In accordance with guidelines, the impact assessment assumed the application of standard mitigation measures toward the ornithological impacts of the proposed wind farm. With these in place, predicted effects were not considered significant for all important ornithological features.
- 8.69 NatureScot do not specifically object to the proposals on natural heritage and ornithology grounds. However, it advises that the proposal is likely to have a significant adverse effect on red and black throated diver, greenshank, hen harrier and merlin associated with the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA. The Scottish Government, as the competent authority will be required to carry out an appropriate assessment in regard of these impacts. NatureScot consider it unlikely, based on the EIAR information, that the Scottish Government will be able to conclude no adverse effects on the integrity of the site. RSPB Scotland have also objected to the proposals based on a lack of information to allow a conclusion of no adverse impacts on the integrity of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA. RSPB raise concerns that the proposals could create an obstacle across the commuting routes of red throated diver between their reeding Lochans and forage areas at sea. It has requested a population viability analysis is undertaken on red throated diver in the area.

Built and Cultural Heritage

- 8.70 Potential indirect effects on the settings of designated heritage assets in the wider area have been considered in detail as part of the applicant's assessment. All potential effects have been deemed to be neutral, negligible or minor and therefore not significant in EIA terms. The Council's Historic Environment Team have however objected to the proposals based on the impacts upon the setting of nearby listed buildings in the Bighouse Group, particularly the Category A-listed walled garden and pavilion. The Listed Buildings at Bighouse consist of the Category A Listed Walled Garden and pavilion, 3 Category B Listed Buildings Bighouse House, Barracks and an Ice House and the Category C Listed Bighouse Farm Steading, located approximately 1.6km north east of the site. As noted in the applicant's assessment and visualisations within the EIAR, up to 10 turbines would be visible to blade tip height from the pavilion. Historic Environment Scotland do not object to the proposals on this basis, but nevertheless, consider that they will result in a detrimental impact, albeit not one that would raise issues of national importance. In both cases, the consultation responses note that the

pavilion building is aligned with the walled garden gatepiers and entrance on a south west – north east axis. The view back from the pavilion includes the walled garden in the foreground, with the house beyond and backdropped by the hills beyond Melvich. This view would have been part of the original design of the complex and allows an appreciation of the pavilion and garden's relationships with the wider array of buildings and borrowed views from the landscape beyond. The proposed turbines would be visible in this view rising above the horizon formed by hills to the west of Melvich. The turbines would introduce a distraction into this important view, particularly Turbine 5 which would be seen behind the entrance and gate piers. The movement of the blades, being close to the horizon, would add to this distraction. Both Historic Environment Scotland and the Council Historic Environment Team consider that the impact on the setting has been underestimated in the EIA report, which predicts that the proposal would result in a minor significance of effect on the setting of this heritage asset. It is Council officers position that the proposals cannot be accommodated without a significant adverse impact on the built heritage, albeit at the regional level, and thus the proposed development is contrary to NPF 4 Policy 7 Historic Assets Part c), and Places and Policy 11 Energy Part e) (vii), as the development adversely effects the setting of a listed building and does not adequately preserve its character, and its special architectural or historic interest.

- 8.71 The Council's Archaeologist is satisfied that no further monitoring is required during construction, with the protection of know assets being secured through compliance with the proposed CEMP condition.

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

- 8.72 A total of 20 viewpoints (VP), and one additional wireframe location, across a 45 km study area, focussed on areas of significant visual impact within 20 km of the proposed development site, have been assessed with regard to landscape and visual impact. These viewpoints are representative of a range of receptors, including recreational users of the outdoors and road users. The expected bare earth visibility of the development can be appreciated from the figures with photomontages and wirelines contained within Volume 3 of the EIAR.
- 8.73 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 within EIAR. This methodology has been used to appraise the assessment provided and to come to a view on what combination of effects on the sensitivity of receptor and magnitude of change are leading to a significant effect.
- 8.74 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.
- 8.75 A key consideration in the effects on receptors of wind energy development is the sequential effect when travelling through and 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. In addition, the wider area is regularly frequented by cyclists. As such it is considered that road users are usually high sensitivity receptors.

Siting and Design

- 8.76 A small portion of the northern extent of the site is located within the Farr Bay, Strathy and Portskerra SLA but otherwise the site does not fall directly within any area designated for landscape quality or cultural heritage. The proposed turbine locations maintain a setback distance of over 1 km from any nearby residential properties. The site is located relatively close to the existing public road network. The applicant has identified that a local grid connection will be required, albeit that this connection does not form part of the planning application and would require its own assessment. That assessment must consider the cumulative effect of the grid connection with the wind farm development.
- 8.77 The applicant considers that the site is suitable for development due to having a strong wind resource. The applicant's stated design principles focus on maximising energy generation while respecting technical and environmental constraints, minimising impacts on the amenity of residential properties around the site, and avoiding deep peat, watercourses and ecologically sensitive areas within the site.
- 8.78 From elevated positions to the east, south and west, within the wider landscape the development would be viewed as a single distinct cluster of turbines.
- 8.79 Wider views of the windfarm will be mainly encountered by road users and recreational users of the outdoors. There would be significant visual impacts on residents of both the settlements of Melvich and Portskerra.
- 8.80 The design of the development and its relationship with the surrounding landscape and features is best demonstrated by the visuals from:
- North - VP9 (Totegan Strathy Point Road) which represents the view from the track to the Strathy Point lighthouse at a point with a defined gap in the containing raised landform, permitting views toward the application site to the southeast across Strathy Bay. As is discussed in more detail below, the development would be seen on the skyline above the cliffs of Strathy Bay, from views looking outward across the Farr Bay, Strathy and Portskerra Special Landscape Area (SLA). The proposed turbines would become very prominent features, particularly given the framing by landform and water, forming a significant visual distraction within views of the characteristic bay and cliffs in the wider area to the east.
 - South – VP12 (A897 near Substation) represents views across floodplain of the Halladale River valley which transitions into the rising landform of the adjacent area of moorland looking towards the application site to the northwest. The proposal would be seen above the valley sides which form the skyline to the northwest. They would draw the eye as a notable change

to the views which currently do not include features beyond the containment of the valley sides.

- East - VP6 (A897 Golval) which represents a view westward across the floodplain and valley of the Halladale River. The valley bottom largely comprises improved pasture, occasionally up the sides, giving way to occasional tree and woodland cover and some commercial forestry. Several quarries can be seen on the valley sides or bottom. The development would introduce a prominent new skyline feature within this relatively small-scale and enclosed part of the valley although it is accepted that effects on character are moderated by the existing human influences in the area, notably by the evidence of quarrying.
- West – VP8 (Steven Terrace, Strathy) represents the view looking across part of the Strathy Valley toward the development site to the southeast and is an important viewpoint considering the experience for road users travelling east on the A836. The A836 is intermittently visible to the southeast, as is sporadic housing development on the valley sides. This is also crossed by various transmission lines on wooden poles. The proposals would introduce large-scale skyline features into the valley landscape, however it is accepted that this impact would be somewhat offset by the existing level of human influence here.

- 8.81 The design process has progressed through several different iterations of site size and turbine numbers and detailed site layout. The preliminary design studies resulted in an initial layout of 25 turbines of up to 149.9 m to tip height. Based on information gained from further surveys of the site and design consideration, a second 18 turbine layout was developed, and the site boundary changed. Further review of environmental findings prompted a third iteration of the proposal design, with 15 turbines. This Layout C was presented for public consultation and was the reference for the project at the EIA scoping stage. A fourth iteration, Layout D, with no change in turbine numbers, was developed following from the community consultation process. Layout D was taken forward to the Council for the major pre application enquiry stage in 2022. Following feedback from this process, the applicant removed the three south eastern most proposed turbines, resulting in the current Layout E, with 12 turbines.
- 8.82 The proposal also incorporates a substation building and switchgear compound alongside a battery storage compound. While the detailed design of these elements is indicative at this stage, the compound will measure approximately 85 m x 100 m, with buildings a maximum of 9 m in height.
- 8.83 Strathy North is the only operational wind farm within a 10 km radius of the site, consisting of 33 turbines up to 111 m tip height. The proposals would therefore introduce a group of fewer turbines, but at a larger scale, than that currently operational in the vicinity. The proposed development would most closely associate with a cluster of operational wind energy sites with Bettyhill to the west and Strathy North to the southwest.
- 8.84 The pattern of consented windfarm development in the area is of turbines that are predominantly set back from the coast and the bases of straths and at least partially screened from settlements and main transport routes by intervening

higher ground. The more recently consented developments in the area range from 180 m to blade tip height (Strathy Wood) to up to 200 m to blade tip height (Strathy South). The existing turbines at Strathy North are of a smaller scale, but in greater numbers and laid out in more widely spaced groups. Due to the siting of the proposals, it would read as a standalone wind farm, and only as an extension of existing, operational wind farm developments, when viewed from longer distance viewpoints.

- 8.85 The applicant's decision to maintain turbines not exceeding 150 m in height avoids the need for visible aviation lighting, as is the decision to have internal turbine transformers, resulting in less visual clutter within the site. These design matters can be secured by condition.

Landscape Impact

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

- impacts on the Landscape Character Type (LCT) as a whole and on neighbouring LCTs;
- direct impacts on landscape designations; and
- impacts on surrounding landscape designations.

- 8.87 The application site lies within the Sweeping Moorland and Flows Landscape Character Type (LCT) 134. This is an extensive type covering much of the land to the south of the proposed development site and consisting of gently sloping or undulating landforms that generally lie below 350 metres with occasional isolated hills of limited height forming landmark features. The LCT is punctuated by lochs and mature, meandering rivers and is noted for its distinct flora, dominated by sphagnum mosses. The sensitivity of this LCT to change is medium to low as there are already several large operational or consented windfarms in the LCT, located to the east and southwest of the proposals. The applicant has set out in its assessment of impact on the LCT that the relationship between the proposed development and existing development in the area as well as the surrounding topography, reduces the extent to which the development influences the wider LCT. As a result, the applicant has identified that there will be a significant effect on the LCT extending to 4 km from the development. However, beyond such distances, there would be limited impacts. The applicant has not identified significant effects on any other surrounding LCT. That said, as also noted by NatureScot in their consultation response, the proximity of LCT 134 to the coastline results in the development being experienced from within and of influence to the character of the adjacent LCT's, particularly the High Cliffs and Sheltered Bays (LCT 141), Sandy Beaches and Dunes (LCT 140) and the Coastal Crofts and Small Farms (LCT 144). The proposals are, unlike other consented wind energy development within the area, not set back from the coastline and main travel routes. As such, it is considered the applicant's assessment has underplayed the extent of the landscape impacts in this regard.

- 8.88 NatureScot object to the proposals on the basis that the applicant's LVIA has underplayed the overall significance of effect on the regionally distinctive

character of Scotland's North Coast. The proposal is located in a prominent position within the North Coast landscape, in a transitional area between the larger-scale open moorland to the interior and the smaller-scale indented coast. The proximity of the proposal to the intricate coastline would result in it appearing to dominate the smaller-scale features, while also drawing attention away from the interplay between the open moorland and indented coast, when viewed along the coast. The effects of the proposal would be experienced over 10 km between Strathy and Melvich, where the distinctive characteristics of this landscape are best expressed. These effects would be compounded by in-combination effects with the proposed Armadale Wind Farm, application 22/0172/S36. As such, the impacts on the character of the surrounding landscape are considered as severe as to warrant objection to the scheme, a viewpoint which is shared by the Council Officers.

- 8.89 A portion of the northern area of the site extends into the Farr Bay, Strathy and Portskerra Special Landscape Area (SLA). Parts of the SLA are highly sensitive to change, most notably the mosaic formed of the moorland and crofting settlements and the sense of 'big skies' and extensive open views within the area. The applicant has concluded that there would be significant impacts on parts of the SLA closest to the development. While the Council Officers acknowledge these impacts, it is not considered that the overall integrity of the SLA will be impacted. Nevertheless, in terms of views out across the SLA, the proposals will be significantly detrimental to one of its Special Qualities, the 'Dramatically Intricate Coastline and Forceful Sea.' The area comprises a distinctive rocky coastline, typically viewed from the cliff tops. The complex assemblage of headlands and cliffs form unique features along the coastal edge. As is particularly evident from VP9 (Totegan Strathy Point), the proposed turbines would form a highly prominent feature on the skyline above the cliffs of Strathy Bay, particularly given the framing by landform and water. The presence of the turbines would diminish the perceived scale of the coast cliffs. Whilst set back from the cliff edge, the turbines would distract from views of the characteristic bay and cliffs in the wider area to the east, and would significantly alter the character of Strathy Point overall. The effects on other SLA's within the LVIA study area are not considered significant. The applicant's ZTV indicates portions within both the Eriboll East and Whitten Head and Dunnet Head SLA's where theoretical visibility of 9-12 turbines may be possible, however it is recognised that the landscape effects will be limited by the distance of some 30km between the proposals site and these designations.

Wild Land

- 8.90 In relation to Wild Land Areas, NatureScot has advised that they are generally in agreement with the applicant's assessment of the impacts of the proposals on Wild Land Area (WLA) 39: East Halladale Flows.
- 8.91 The proposal would be visible as an engineered feature outwith the WLA from the west facing extents and northern summit of Beinn Ràtha and would introduce an engineered feature of height into views west out over the surrounding extensive moorland landscape. The location of the proposal within the low lying sweeping moorland flows means that it would be clearly visible from the western extents of the WLA with no screening afforded given the expansiveness and scale of the

flowing landscape westward. The operational Strathy North Wind Farm has diminished the perception of the expansiveness and scale of the landscape westward, and NatureScot considers that the location of the proposal would extend this effect north-westward when experienced from Cnon Bad Mhairtein and Beinn Ràtha. As such, although the proposed development would have some effects on views out to the northwest from the WLA, NatureScot consider the physical attributes and perceptual responses of the relevant wild land qualities would not be significantly affected by the proposal, nor would the perceived extent of the WLA. This is agreed by the Council Officers.

Visual Impact

- 8.92 The Council considers visual impact using the criterion set out in Section 4 of the OWESG, with assessment against the criterion and view as to whether the threshold set out in the guidance is met or not, is contained in Appendix 3 to this report. Unsurprisingly, as visual impact assessment combines objective and subjective aspects through the application of professional judgement, there are differences between the applicant's assessment and the appraisal undertaken.
- 8.93 The applicant's assessment draws upon the supportive elements of how the proposal could be viewed within the landscape. The ZTV demonstrates that the scheme will be extensively visible in most directions out to a distance of around 10 km. Beyond this distance there will be more intermittent visibility.
- 8.94 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 effects does not automatically translate to unacceptable effects. Following a review of the applicant's Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA), there are areas of difference between Council officers and the applicant.
- 8.95 Consideration of each viewpoint based on the applicant's methodology is contained within Appendix 2 of this report, as is a summary of the applicant's assessment and the Council officer's appraisal of the assessment, which highlights the differences and any concerns with regard to visual impact. The EIAR includes a visual impact assessment from each of the 20 viewpoints.
- 8.96 Most viewpoints are considered to be used by receptors of high sensitivity and susceptibility to wind energy development, although it is acknowledged that not all receptors experiencing the development from all viewpoints would have a high sensitivity to the development. What follows is a summation of the visual impacts grouped by receptors.

Impact on Road Users

- 8.97 The primary impact on road users on through routes would be incurred on the A836, which runs east to west along the coast north of Melvich, although it is accepted that views of the proposal would vary due to the undulating setting of the road. The impact on road users on the A836 will be pronounced travelling east, especially between VPs 11 (A836, Crasbackie Hill) and 3 (A836 Melvich). From a point to the west of Strathy, near Lochan Ealach, to the locus of VP 1

(A836 Portskerra Junction) there would be open and uninterrupted views of the proposed development, albeit seen at an oblique angle to the direction of travel and not impinging upon views out to sea. The proposed development would as such, be a new focal point in views south for an approximately 7 km long section of the route, as indicated by the applicant's sequential wirelines.

- 8.98 For road users travelling west on the A836, the proposal would become a noticeable new feature on the skyline for a distance of approximately 4.5km between a point north of Drum Holliston, to adjacent VP3 (A836 Melvich). As the course of the A836 descends into the Halladale River Valley, on the approach into Melvich, the proposal would be a significant visual feature, albeit, viewed at an oblique angle. The development will also form a prominent feature in isolation, to hub height and at the centre of views, for receptors travelling westward on the A836 between a point to the west of Forss and east of Reay, a distance of approximately 6.5 km, although views will be more distant between these points. The development will also be visible westbound to the east of Bridge of Forss, albeit existing wind energy development will be much more prominent in views at this point, as indicated by the applicant's sequential wirelines.
- 8.99 As such, it is considered that the applicant's summary of the visual impacts on the A836, while acknowledging the significance of visual impacts on receptors on the A836 route travelling both east and westward, underplays the distances over which these effects would be experienced by the road users.
- 8.100 The impacts on users of the A897, which runs south from Melvich along Strath Halladale, have been assessed as not significant overall, with the visual impacts considered as localised and reducing in significance beyond 4 km from the proposed development due to views being restricted by valley sides. However, the applicant's sequential wirelines indicate that varying numbers of turbines will be visible to hub height from a point east of Woodcock Hill to just south of Achiemore, over a distance of some 10 km and a further 4 km stretch from the locus of VP 12 (A897 Near Substation) to VP4 (Halladale Bridge), travelling north. The proposed turbines would be a prominent new feature on the Strath for receptors travelling north on the A897, especially given the relatively small scale and enclosed nature of Strath Halladale close to its northern end, where the proposals would have the effect of drawing the receptors' view beyond the western ridgeline, disrupting the sense of containment. As such, it is considered that the applicants overall assessment underplays the significance of the visual effects, both at the northern end of the Strath and in terms of the distance that views of the proposals would be experienced in the southern section of the A897.

Residential Receptors

- 8.101 The settlements of Melvich, Strathy and Portskerra are the nearest to the proposed development. The applicant has prepared a dedicated Residential Visual Amenity Assessment featuring a 2 km study area around the proposed development site within which, 134 residential properties are located. The assessment concludes that while the visual impacts on the outlook of seven of these properties may be of a high magnitude, in no case would the effects be so severe as to affect living conditions at the property to the point where it becomes

an unattractive place to live.

- 8.102 While the visual impacts will be significant to residences in Melvich and Portskerra, it is acknowledged that these will mainly be limited to the outlook from properties, or their access routes, inland to the south or west, with the outlook in other directions, including north and eastward toward the coast, unaffected.

Impact on Recreational Users of the Outdoors

- 8.103 The applicant considers that significant visual impacts will be incurred to recreational users of the landscape into two areas. These included Melvich Dunes and Core Path SU19.05 that heads east from Melvich to Bighouse and the visitor attraction at Strathy Point including Core Path SU19.06.
- 8.104 The proposals would not be directly visible from Melvich Beach however, they would be visible from the dunes above the beach and would be noticeable beyond the coastal hills that enclose Melvich to the south. The scale of change would be significant across a localised area due to the small number of existing artificial structures in view as well as the extent of visibility from the Dunes looking south.
- 8.105 Strathy Point is considered a place of interest for tourism, with a clifftop walking route extending to the lighthouse on the point. It is reached via a minor road that passes through the dispersed Strathy settlement. An intervening landform results that visibility of the proposed development would be intermittent along the route to Strathy Point. Where visible however, the development would be seen above the cliffs at the east side of Strathy Bay and the towers of all 12 of the proposed turbines would be visible. Both the applicant and Council officers agree that significant visual impacts would be incurred on the visual amenity of this location, as represented by VP9 (Totegan Strathy Point Road).

Cumulative Visual Impact

- 8.106 When considering visual impact, it is important to consider the cumulative impact with other consented and proposed (application stage) developments. For the most part there will not be an inter-relationship between the proposed development and operational and consented schemes within the LVIA study area. With the exception of the Kirkton Energy Park proposal, application 22/05533/S36, the outcome of other schemes currently at the planning stage is not considered by the applicant materially change the individual visual impact appraisal above.
- 8.107 The applicant considers that in the case of this scheme being approved and brought forward, the individual or 'solus' visual impacts of the current proposals would be slightly reduced, for receptors on the A836 and A897, due to the influence of the Kirkton proposal, should this proceed. The Council officers would also suggest that this effect would be realised at VP14 (A897 Trantlebeg), with the addition of the Kirkton turbines forming an alternative focal point to the Melvich proposals alone. The applicant also considers that the visual impacts of the proposals would be slightly reduced from Core Path SU04.06, near VP10 (Armadale) should the Armadale Wind Farm, application (ref 22/01972/S36), proceed. This is not contested. It is also likely that should the Armadale proposals

proceed, they would form a significant alternative focal point from the Melvich proposals for receptors travelling east along the A836 to the west of the Armadale Settlement.

- 8.108 Consideration of cumulative visual impacts also involves questions over the 'in combination' effects. In this respect, it is considered that the applicant's assessment underplays the in combination effects of the Melvich and Kirkton proposals, should these both proceed, on receptors travelling west on the A836 and North on the A897, a key issue being the contrast between the linear spaced array of the Kirkton proposals and the more dispersed array at the Melvich, in addition to the location of the latter in the transition area between views to the uplands and out to sea.

Noise and Shadow Flicker

- 8.109 Predicted operational noise levels are expected to meet the derived noise limits. The Planning Authority would expect that a condition restricting operational noise levels to no more than 2dB above the predicted levels in the EIAR should the proposals otherwise be permitted.
- 8.110 In terms of shadow flicker, it is not anticipated that this will be an issue for this development either individually or cumulatively given the location of the development in relation to properties. The applicant has conducted an assessment that has shown that the modelled occurrence of shadow flicker within a realistic scenario (taking account of average meteorological conditions from the nearest Met Office station) is within the accepted limits for realistic shadow flicker of less than 8 hours per year, for all receptors.

Telecommunications

- 8.111 Subject to satisfying the concerns raised by Vodafone in their consultation response, it is considered that potential interference with radio / television networks in the locality can be addressed. A condition should be sought to secure a scheme of mitigation should consent be granted.

Aviation

- 8.112 The proposal attracted an initial objection from Highlands and Islands Airports (HIAL) based on the safeguarding criteria and operation of Wick Airport. This was later withdrawn provided no part of any turbine exceed 309 m in height AOD. Should the proposals otherwise be permitted, this could be taken forward via a planning condition. A further condition could be applied to secure suitable mitigation in terms of infrared aviation lighting only for the proposed turbines, in line with the consultation response received from the Ministry of Defence and notification to the appropriate bodies of the final turbine positions. As the proposed turbines are not over 150 m in height, visible aviation lighting is not required.

Other Material Considerations

- 8.113 The applicant has sought permission to operate the windfarm for 40 years. Should

consent be granted, the Planning Authority would request that any forthcoming permission includes a clear description of development which specifies the precise number of turbines to be developed, the maximum blade tip height, the rotor diameter and includes details of all associated ancillary infrastructure with such matters not be left to planning conditions, which could lead to scope for further redesign or re-powering without requiring a full fresh consent.

- 8.114 Council policy and practice is for community benefit considerations to be undertaken as a separate exercise and generally parallel to the planning process.

Non-Material Considerations

- 8.115 The matter of insufficient grid capacity is not a material consideration in the determination of this application. NPF4 Policy 11 Energy, Part b) sets out that grid capacity should not constrain renewable energy development. Should the proposals otherwise be permitted, a separate application under Section 37 of the Electricity Act may be required should an overhead grid connection be proposed.

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 be situated in appropriate locations to operate successfully. The project has the potential to contribute some 57.6 MW of renewable energy alongside up to 42 MW of battery storage capacity towards Scottish Government targets and play a role in the route to a net zero Scotland. In addition, the development has potential to bring economic benefits to the area and to create new jobs.
- 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, and all other material considerations.
- 9.3 In this respect, the proposal is considered to significantly weaken the interaction between the coastal and more inland landscape types that characterises the coast between Bettyhill and Portskerra, covering a distance of some 10 km. This interaction is not repeated in this form anywhere else on the north coast. As such, the proposed development cannot be accommodated without significantly detracting from the sense of place in this wider landscape.
- 9.4 Furthermore, the proposed development will lead to direct and indirect loss of blanket bog habitat and its hydrology. As such, the development would adversely impact the extent and quality of the blanket bog habitat within the proposed Flow Country World heritage Site (WHS), negatively impacting one of the site's Outstanding Unique Values (OUV's). Owing to the direct impact on the proposed WHS, this impact cannot be mitigated or compensated for through alternative habitat enhancement provision.
- 9.5 The Council's Historic Environment Team have also objected to the proposals based on the impacts upon the setting of nearby listed buildings in the

Bighouse Group, particularly the Category A-listed walled garden and pavilion. As the designed outlook and setting of the listed building would be affected, the proposals cannot be accommodated without an unacceptable adverse impact on the historic environment.

- 9.6 NatureScot advises that the proposals are likely to have a significant adverse effect on red and black throated diver, greenshank, hen harrier and merlin associated with the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA and consider it unlikely, based on the EIAR information, that the Scottish Government will be able to conclude no adverse effects on the integrity of the site. RSPB Scotland have also objected to the proposals based on a lack of information to allow a conclusion of no adverse impacts on the integrity of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA in terms of the foraging routes of red throated diver.
- 9.7 Officers have assessed this application principally against the policies set out in NPF4 and the Development Plan, including Policy 67 Renewable Energy of the Highland wide Local Development Plan with its eleven tests which are expanded upon within the OWESG. This policy also reflects policy tests of other policies in the HwLDP, for example Policy 28 Sustainable Design. The proposal can be considered to benefit from in principle support as a National Development prescribed by NPF4, owing to the contribution the development would make toward tackling climate change. In this case, such a contribution would however come at a considerable cost. Owing to the poor siting and design of the proposal, the extent of resultant landscape and visual effects, as well as the natural habitat and built heritage impacts, which are deemed unacceptable.
- 9.8 Schedule 9 of the Electricity Act sets out what an applicant shall do in relation of the preservation of amenity. It is considered that the proposal has had insufficient regard to the desirability of preserving natural beauty or protecting the setting of historic interests, and has not done what is reasonable to mitigated the effects on the natural beauty of the countryside or on built heritage. This is by virtue of the location, setting and design of the wind farm, resulting in landscape and visual impacts which cannot be accommodated, as well as the direct loss of blanket bog within the proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site. Officers are also not satisfied that environmental effects of this development can be addressed by way of mitigation.
- 9.9 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 no other material considerations outweigh this position.

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: The proposal has the ability to make a meaningful contribution toward the production of renewable energy, however would have a direct impact on blanket bog habitat within the proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site.
- 10.5 Risk: Not applicable
- 10.6 Gaelic: Not applicable

11. RECOMMENDATION

Action required before decision issued

Notification to Scottish Ministers - Y

Conclusion of Section 75 Obligation - N

Revocation of previous permission - N

Subject to the above, it is recommended that the Council **Raises an Objection** to the granting of this planning for the following reasons:

1. The application is contrary to NPF4 Policy 11 part (e) (ii) and Highland-wide Local Development Plan Policy 67 (Renewable Energy). The proposals weaken and detract from the sense of place and landscape qualities of the interaction between the Coastal Crofts and Small Farms, Sweeping Moorland and Flows and Rocky Hills and Moorland Landscape Character Types (LCT's) in the wider area, by virtue of the scale and location of the development. The proposals would also result in significant impact on the perception of one of the special qualities of the Farr Bay, Strathy and Portskerra Special Landscape Area (SLA): its intricate, rocky coastline. Consequently, it is concluded that the type, location, and scale of the development will have an unacceptable landscape impact.
2. The application is contrary to NPF4 Policy 11 part (e) (ii) and Highland-wide Local Development Plan Policy 67 (Renewable Energy). The proposals incur significant visual impacts, beyond a local scale, on users of the A836 and A897 roads, as particularly evident through Viewpoints 5 and 8 as well as visitors to Strathy Point, Viewpoint 9, by virtue of the scale and location of the development.
3. The application is contrary to NPF4 Policy 4 part (a), NPF4 Policy 7 part (l), Highland-wide Local Development Plan Policies 67 (Renewable Energy), and 57 (Natural Built and Cultural Heritage) in that it will lead to significant loss of peatland and bog habitat, as well as potential hydrological disturbance and ornithological impacts within the candidate Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS). It is not possible to offset any impacts upon the WHS in terms of the qualities of its Outstanding Universal Values (OUV), which include the peatland and its ecosystem processes. Consequently, it is concluded that the type, location, and scale of the development will have an unacceptable impact on the receiving environment.
4. The application is contrary to NPF4 Policy 4 parts (a) and (b), Highland-wide Local Development Plan Policies 67 (Renewable Energy), and 57 (Natural Built

and Cultural Heritage) in that it may adversely effect the integrity of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Special Protection Area (SPA), in respect of the potential impacts on SPA bird species.

5. The application is contrary to NPF4 Policy 7 Part (c), Policy 11 part (e) (vii), and Highland-wide Local Development Plan Policy 57 (Natural Built and Cultural Heritage) in that it adversely effects the outlook and setting of the Bighouse Group, incorporating a Category A-listed walled garden and pavilion.

Designation: Area Planning Manager - North

Author: Michael Kordas

Background Papers: Documents referred to in report and in case file.

Relevant Plans:

Document Type	Document No.	Version No.	Date Received
Site Location Plan	Figure 1.1		16 May 2023
Site Layout Plan	Figure 1.2		16 May 2023
Typical Turbine Elevation	Figure 4.2		16 May 2023

Appendix 2 – Visual Assessment Appraisal

Scenario 1 - the effects of the proposed development compared to the present baseline, i.e., operational developments and those under construction, as described in the applicants Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

Scenario 2A - the proposed development with operational and consented developments and the proposed Armadale Windfarm.

Scenario 2K - the proposed development with operational and consented developments and the proposed Kirkton Windfarm.

Scenario 2P - the proposed development with operational and consented developments and the proposed Pentland Offshore Windfarm.

Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
			Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
1. A836 Portskerra Junction (1.4 km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major	Significant	Moderate	Major	Significant
<p>This viewpoint is located on the A36 within the linear settlement of Melvich, looking southwest over the local community garden. Views to the south are contained by buildings and the rising landform, largely comprising rough grassland divided by post and wire fences.</p> <p>7 of the proposed turbines will be visible to hub height, with the remainder of the 12 visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposal would be seen along the open skyline between the buildings to the south. The rotating blades of the turbine rotors would appear over the intervening landform with the majority of the turbine towers, and six turbine hubs, screened beyond. They would be a notable new feature with blade movement drawing the eye.</p> <p>While the turbine towers would largely be screened by intervening higher ground, the hubs and blades would nevertheless, represent a very dominating feature from closer locations within the settlement and a significant and adverse effect. The scale of the turbines combined with their proximity to receptors both within Melvich and users of the A836, leads to a level of effect which is disproportionate to the relatively limited scale of the scheme, with 12 turbines up to 150m to blade tip height. The Council Officers therefore do not fully agree with the applicant's assessment of the impact on receptor's visual amenity, although both concede that the visual effects will be significant overall.</p> <p>Cumulatively, in scenarios including Pentland Offshore and/or West of Orkney there would be a greater concentration of turbines visible offshore. It is considered that their presence would not directly alter the effects arising from the current proposals, as they would lie in the opposite direction from them.</p>								
2. Top of	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant

			Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
Melvich Dunes (2.18km to nearest turbine)	THC	High	Moderate	Major	Significant	Major	Major	Significant
<p>This viewpoint is taken at the top of the sand dunes. The linear settlement pattern at Melvich is apparent in views to the south-west, located between the undulating pastoral land which runs from the beach to the A836 and the lower slopes of the uplands which form the backdrop. 3 of the proposed turbines will be visible to hub height, with a further 8 visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposal would be seen above and beyond the coastal hills that contain the bay and settlement at Melvich with views primarily experienced by people walking from the beach back towards the village. The towers and hubs of most turbines would be screened by the intervening landform although blades would be clearly visible turning above the skyline, with houses at Melvich and the mast on Cnoc a' Choir Bhig providing ready scale comparators. As such, the Council Officers do not fully agree with the applicant's assessment of the impact on receptor's visual amenity although both concede that the visual effects will be significant overall.</p> <p>Cumulatively, in scenarios including Pentland Offshore and/or West of Orkney there would be a greater concentration of turbines visible offshore, which would provide a separate focal point of wind energy development.</p>								
3. A836 Melvich (1.6km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
<p>This viewpoint is located to the south-east of Melvich and looks west towards an access track which is marked out by a rising line of electrical transmission poles. The track ultimately leads up to the telecommunications mast at the top of Cnoc a' Choire Bhig. The hillside cover consist of a mix of rough grassland, bracken and gorse. 1 of the proposed turbines will be visible to hub height with a further 3 visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposal would be seen just to the left of the mast on Cnoc a' Choire Bhig and would be visible to varying degrees on the skyline. The rotor of one turbine would be in relatively open view with a further few turbine blades seen to varying degrees turning over the skyline. They would be a prominent new feature, with the house and mast providing nearby scale comparators, although would be seen in the context of the transmission line, mast and roadside signage. The majority of the turbines would be screened by the intervening landform and as such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.</p> <p>The proposal would add to the existing presence of smaller scale infrastructure (transmission line, mast) on this section of the skyline. Effects on character would be relatively limited given the existing presence of these and the main road at this location presenting clear human influences. Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in the planning or scoping phases would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.</p>								
4. Halladale	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant

			Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
Bridge (2km to nearest turbine)						Scenario 2K: Minor		
	THC	High	Moderate	Major	Significant	Major	Major	Significant
<p>This viewpoint is situated adjacent to the bridge crossing the Halladale River. The view west looks across the bridge and surrounding foreground vegetation to the open hills rising beyond. Below these the A836 is seen sweeping round to the right, disappearing into a cutting, with the mast on Cnoc a' Choire Bhig seen on the skyline above. 2 of the proposed turbines would be visible to hub height, with a further 7 visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposal would be seen above and beyond the open hilltops rising beyond the A836. The towers and hubs of most turbines would be screened by the intervening landform although blades would be clearly visible turning above the skyline, with two turbine hubs also seen just above the skyline. The turbines would be a notable new skyline feature, seen in the context of the nearby quarry and the mast on Cnoc a' Choire Bhig, primarily experienced by westbound road users.</p> <p>The proposal would introduce a new skyline feature seen in the context of the main road and the mast on Cnoc a' Choire Bhig. Blade movement would be a new feature drawing the eye but effects on the overall character of views from this location would be moderated by the existing human influences. Nevertheless, the scale of the turbines combined with their proximity to receptors both within Melvich and users of the A836, leads to a level of effect which is disproportionate to the relatively limited scale of the scheme, with 12 turbines up to 150m to blade tip height. The Council Officers therefore do not fully agree with the applicant's assessment of the impact on receptor's visual amenity although both concede that the visual effects will be significant overall.</p> <p>Cumulatively, in scenarios including Kirkton, the Kirkton turbines would be the main focus in the view, albeit seen briefly and perpendicular to the direction of travel. The effect on the impact on visual amenity arising from the current proposals, accounting for a baseline including Kirkton would therefore, be slightly reduced.</p>								
5. A836 Bighouse Road Junction (2.8km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate Scenario 2K: Moderate / Minor	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major	Significant	Major	Major	Significant
<p>This viewpoint offers an open and expansive view to the west, looking across areas of upland comprising open moorland with occasional blocks of commercial forestry. To the left of view, pasture in the bottom of the Halladale River valley is seen in the middle distance while to the right of view the undulating terrain in the foreground screens views across the lower valley and Melvich Bay. 11 of the proposed turbines will be visible to hub height with the remaining 1 visible to blade tip height.</p>								

Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
			Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
	<p>The proposals would be seen just beyond the skyline in the moorland covered hills seen across the Halladale River valley. Nearly all the turbine rotors would be largely visible with the lower parts of some turbines screened behind the intervening landform. Turbines on the right hand side of the array may be partially screened or filtered through the small group of trees in the foreground. The proposal would be a prominent new feature on a relatively empty skyline. Although the intervening landform provides a clear sense of separation the proposals would introduce a prominent new skyline feature. As such, the scale of the turbines combined with their proximity to receptors both within Melvich and users of the A836, leads to a level of effect which is disproportionate to the relatively limited scale of the scheme, with 12 turbines up to 150m to blade tip height. The Council Officers therefore do not fully agree with the applicant's assessment of the impact on receptor's visual amenity although both concede that the visual effects will be significant overall.</p> <p>Cumulatively, in scenarios including Kirkton, the Kirkton turbines would be a prominent existing skyline feature, seen directly ahead for westbound users of the A836. The effect of adding the proposals to a baseline including Kirkton would therefore, as was the case at Viewpoint 4, be slightly reduced.</p>							
6. A897 Golval (2.6km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Moderate	Not significant	Moderate Scenario 2K: Moderate / Minor e	Moderate	Not significant
	THC	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Major / Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	<p>This view looks across the low-lying floodplain of the Halladale River valley which is contained by low hills rising beyond. The valley bottom largely comprises improved pasture, occasionally extending slightly up the valley sides. This gives way to occasional tree and woodland cover on the lower valley sides with moorland and some commercial forestry defining the hills beyond. Looking to the north-west, a number of quarries can be seen on the valley sides or bottom along with the southern edge of Melvich and mast on Cnoc a' Choire Bhig seen in the distance. 9 of the proposed turbines may be visible to hub height while a further 3 may be visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposal would be seen appearing over the skyline across the valley, above and just to the right of one of the quarries. Around half of the turbines would have their hubs visible above the skyline while only the blade tips of more distant turbines would be visible. The turbines would be a prominent new feature on the valley skyline, within this relatively small-scale and enclosed part of the valley, close to its northern end. As such, the Council Officers do not agree with the applicant's assessment of this viewpoint and it is considered that significant visual impacts will be incurred.</p> <p>Cumulatively, in scenarios including Kirkton, the Kirkton turbines would be a prominent existing skyline feature, seen extending across a relatively wide arc of view along the far side of the valley. The effect of adding the proposals to a baseline including Kirkton would be notably reduced, given the proposed Kirkton turbines would become an additional and very prominent feature of views across the valley.</p>							
7. Strathy West Road	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Major / Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant

			Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
(2.3km to nearest turbine)	<p>This viewpoint is located on a minor road with sparse linear settlement alongside and rising landform containing views to the east, towards the site. 4 of the proposed turbines may be visible to hub height with a further 6 visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposals would be seen on the skyline over the rising ground to the east. The hubs and towers of most of the turbines would be screened by the intervening landform with blades seen turning above. It would be a new skyline feature but not in a part of the view that tends to draw the eye. The proposals would increase the influence of wind energy development in this location. Although not a new feature, given the presence of existing and consented turbines to the south, it would be closer and have a more notable influence. As such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning/scoping would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.</p>							
8. Strathy A836 / Steven Terrace Junction	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Major / Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
(3.1km to nearest turbine)	<p>This view looks across the lower Strathy valley and undulating coastal landform around the settlement. The A836 is intermittently visible to the south-east, weaving across the fields in the valley bottom. This is also crossed by various transmission lines on wooden poles and low hills rise beyond to contain the valley. 7 of the proposed turbines may be visible to hub height with a further five visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposals would be seen as a notable skyline feature in views across the valley. Most of the turbine hubs and rotors would be visible with a small number screened by the landform. Turbines would appear relatively large with houses in the valley acting as scale comparators. The proposal would introduce large-scale skyline features into the relatively small-scale landscape of the valley, their influence on character would be somewhat offset by the existing level of human influence here. As such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning/scoping would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.</p>							
9. Totegan Strathy Point Road	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major	Significant	Major / Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
(6.2km to nearest turbine)	<p>This viewpoint is located on a local road on Strathy Point. Views are contained by rising and undulating landform associated with the coastal cliffs. The line of low voltage transmission poles and overhead lines create an incongruous foreground feature. A gap in the containing landform allows a view across Strathy Bay towards the headland to the south-east. All 12 of the proposed turbines will be visible to hub height.</p> <p>The proposal would be seen on the skyline above the cliffs above Strathy Bay. The turbines would be prominent features, particularly given the framing by landform and water. The proposal would be set back from the cliff edge and would alter the perceived character and distract from views of the characteristic</p>							

			Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
	<p>bay and cliffs in the wider area to the east, which adds to the character of Strathy Point overall. The Council Officers therefore do not fully agree with the applicant's assessment of the impact on receptor's visual amenity although both concede that the visual effects will be significant overall.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the applicant considers that other wind farms in planning/scoping would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal. There Council Officers conclude that there would be some stacking with the proposed Kirkton turbines, should this development proceed. However, as only blade tips would be visible, the effect of this is not considered to alter the significance of the impacts on visual amenity from the current proposals in combination.</p>							
10. Armadale (7.6km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Slight	Moderate	Not significant	Slight	Moderate	Not significant
	THC	High	Slight	Moderate	Not significant	Slight	Moderate	Not significant
	<p>This viewpoint looks to the west, to the coastal landform on the opposite side of Armadale Bay, although the body of water itself is not visible from this location. The foreground view is influenced by settlement and land use associated with Armadale. 6 of the proposed turbines may be visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposals would be seen as blade tips above moorland to the east and would be well screened by the intervening landform. It is acknowledged that the proposals would have limited influence on landscape character at this location, due to the limited visibility and as such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning/scoping would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.</p>							
11. A836, Crasbackie Hill (8.6km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	<p>This viewpoint looks west toward the application along a short section of the A836 road and over areas of undulating open moorland. Wooden poles and cables briefly run alongside the road before traversing east across the moorland. 1 of the proposed turbines may be visible to hub height, with a further 7 visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposal would be seen mostly as blade tips above the nearby skyline, with two of the turbines more openly visible, especially Turbine 1 at the southernmost extent of the array visible from this location. The proposal would be seen as a new feature on a distant skyline, albeit within in a landscape already influenced by existing wind turbines and foreground energy transmission infrastructure. As such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on</p>							

			Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
	receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.							
	Cumulatively, the proposed Armadale Windfarm, if it proceeds, would form a major new focal point from this viewpoint.							
12. A897 Near Substation (4.5km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Moderate	Not significant	Moderate Scenario 2K: Minor	Moderate	Not significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Major / Moderate	Major / Moderate	Not significant
	<p>This viewpoint looks across the low-lying floodplain within the Halladale River valley which transitions into the rising landform of the adjacent area of moorland. The river is visible in the foreground with the floodplain pasture immediately beyond. Low voltage transmission poles, both single pole and twin, are seen nearby. 8 of the proposed turbines will be visible to hub height with a further 3 visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>The proposals would be seen above the valley sides which form the skyline to the north-west. They would draw the eye as a notable change to the views which currently do not include features beyond the containment of the valley sides. The proposals would affect the contained character of the valley and perceptions of scale by introducing features which stand above the skyline. As such, the Council Officers do not agree with the applicant's assessment of this viewpoint and it is considered that significant visual impacts will be incurred.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms would not alter the limited effects arising from the proposals, with the exception Kirkton, which would be more prominently seen alongside the proposal, potentially reducing the impacts of the current proposals on visual amenity.</p>							
13. A836 Dounreay (12.8km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	<p>This viewpoint is located on the A836, near the entrance to the Dounreay Facility. The view west towards the site is influenced by the A836 as well as the buildings and infrastructure within Dounreay to the north-west. The A836 draws the eye to the hills to the southwest. All 12 of the proposed turbines may be visible to hub height.</p> <p>The proposals would be seen on the moorland skyline beyond the nearby farmland and between the nearby A836 and Dounreay buildings. It would be a very limited change in the context of the existing infrastructure and wind farms. The proposals would be a minor feature on the skyline.</p>							

Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
			Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
<p>The applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.</p>								
14. A897 Trantlebeg (10.7km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Moderate	Not Significant	Moderate Scenario 2K: Minor	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
<p>This view looks north across the low-lying floodplain within the Halladale River valley. Roadside vegetation and rising ground along the road corridor obscure views of the river and residential properties and outbuildings located in Trantlemore, on the opposite bank of the river, are visible on the higher ground on the western edge of the river valley. 7 of the proposed turbines may be visible to blade tip height.</p> <p>Valley sides would screen the majority of the proposal, with blades and tips visible to varying degrees on the skyline. The change to views from this location as a result of the proposals would be noticeable for northbound road users. The proposal would be a very minor feature on the skyline. As such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning would not alter the limited effects arising from the Proposed Development, with the exception of Kirkton, which would be more prominently seen directly in front the current proposals, potentially reducing the impacts on visual amenity from it.</p>								
15. Cnoc Craggie (27.2km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Slight	Slight	Not significant	Slight	Slight	Not significant
	THC	High	Slight	Slight	Not significant	Slight	Slight	Not significant
<p>This location provides a panoramic and long-range view to the north-east from an elevated location on the top of Cnoc Craggie. The lower-lying area of moorland, pockmarked with waterbodies, gives way to extensive areas of forestry in the middle ground. The entire proposed windfarm of 12 turbines may be visible to hub height.</p> <p>The proposals would be seen as a very distant feature on the skyline between the operational and consented wind farms which are more prominent within the view. The proposals would be a minor feature on a distant skyline already influenced by existing wind turbines and as such, would have no influence on landscape character. As such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.</p>								
16. Forsinard	App	Medium / High	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant

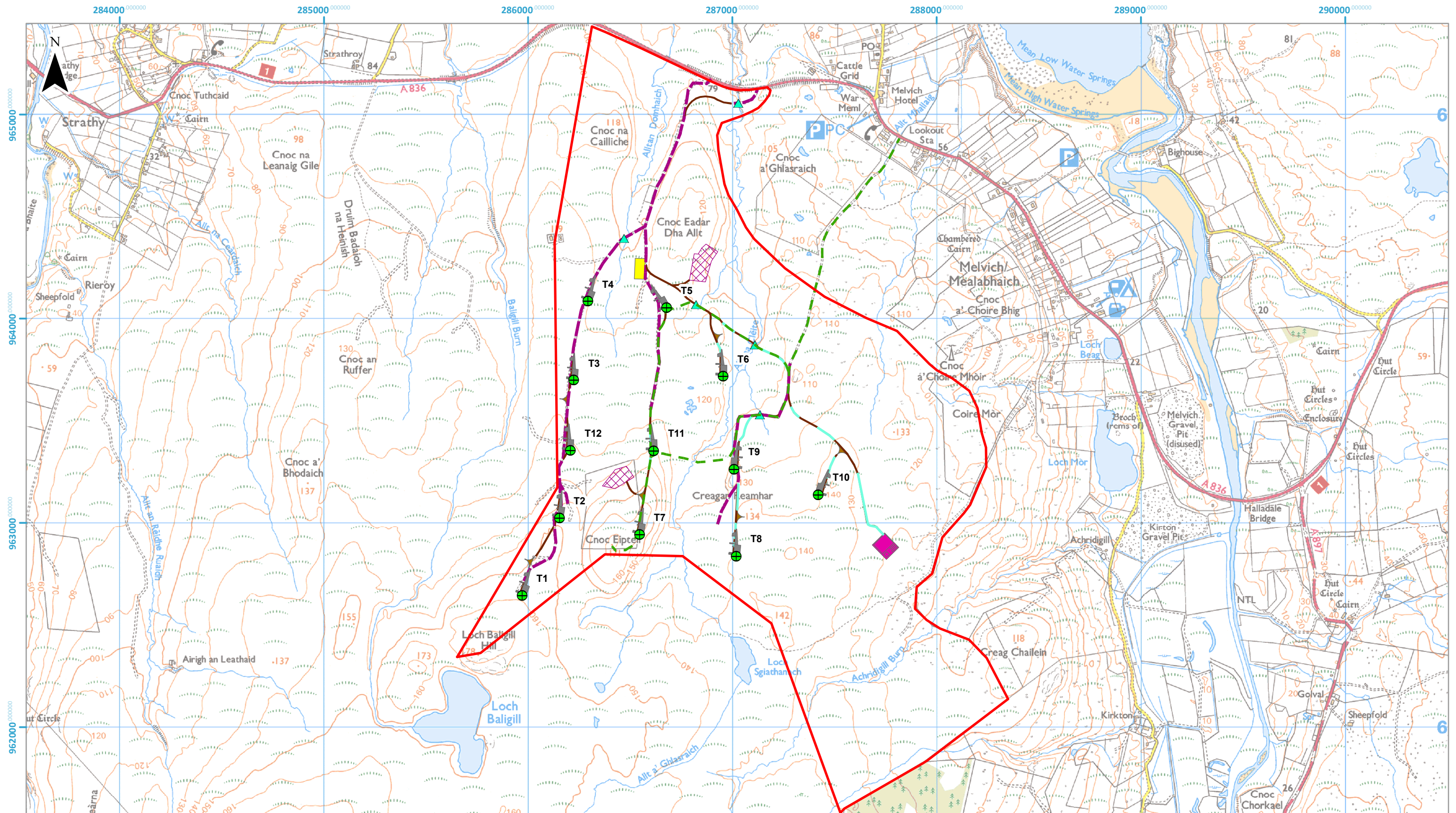
			Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
(20.7km to nearest turbine)	THC	High	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant
<p>This viewpoint looks north from the Forsinard Flows across an area of moorland patterned with an intricate network of water courses and pool systems. Extensive areas of plantation woodland are present in parts of the view.</p> <p>The Proposed Development would be screened by the intervening plantation woodland on Woodcock Hill and would not be visible from this location. Were the woodland to be removed, the entire windfarm would be visible, however, considering the distance to the development from this location, it is not considered that the additional effects would be significant. As such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning/scoping would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.</p>								
17. A836 West of Thurso (19.1km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
	THC	High	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant	Moderate	Major / Moderate	Significant
<p>This viewpoint is located on a verge on the A836. Looking west towards the site along the road, Baillie wind farm is seen beyond the nearby farmland, as are the nearby turbines at Forss, further to the right of the view. The entire 12 turbine proposed array will be visible to hub height.</p> <p>The proposals would be seen in the distance and would not noticeably alter the existing view, in the context of the more nearby wind farms. As such, there would be no additional change to landscape character from this location. The applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.</p> <p>Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning/scoping would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.</p>								
18. Beinn Ratha (WLA 39) (8.2km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant
	THC	High	Negligible	Minor	Not significant	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant
<p>This viewpoint is located near the summit of the Beinn. Looking north-west towards the site, settlement at both Melvich and Portskerra is visible on the lower-lying land around the Halladale River valley and the coastal edge. A line of pylons traverses the view set within the lower-lying ground seen in this direction, drawing the eye towards Strathy North Windfarm. The entire 12 turbine proposed array may be visible to hub height.</p> <p>The proposals would be seen beyond the powerline and set between Strathy North and the coastal settlement, partly backdropped by low hills beyond, forming a noticeable change to that part of the view. The proposals would introduce an additional infrastructure feature on the hills; however it would be experienced in the context of both existing turbines and existing transmission infrastructure and would have only a limited characterising influence here. As</p>								

			Amended Proposed Development			Combined Development		
Viewpoint	App / THC	Sensitivity of the Receptor (Susceptibility / value of the view)	Magnitude of change (Scale of Change / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance (Major & Major / Moderate are Significant. Moderate may be significant)	Magnitude of Change (Scale / Extent / Duration)	Level of Effect (Magnitude of Change / Sensitivity of Receptor)	Significance
			such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.					
			Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.					
19. Cnoc Bad Mhairtein (10.2km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant
	THC	High	Negligible	Minor	Not significant	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant
			This viewpoint is located near the summit of the Cnoc. The view looks north-west across an expansive and panoramic area of sweeping moorlands containing both waterbodies and occasional plantation woodland blocks. Settlement at Melvich and Portskerra is visible towards the coastal edge. The entire 12 turbine proposed array may be visible to hub height.					
			The proposals would be seen on the skyline between Strathy North and the sea. Whilst not an atypical feature given the existing and consented wind farms, it would be a noticeable change to the view. Although the wider character is already influenced by existing wind farms, the proposal would create a new feature that would further influence the character as experienced at this location. As such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.					
			Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.					
20. A838 A' Mhoine (34.2km to nearest turbine)	App	Medium / High	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant
	THC	High	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant	Negligible	Minor / Negligible	Not significant
			This distant view looks along the coastline east towards the site across part of the Kyle of Tongue NSA (National Scenic Area). The two operational Bettyhill turbines are seen approximately 21km to the east. The entire 12 turbine proposed array may be visible to hub height.					
			The proposal would be located on the distant open moorland to the east and would be discernible on the skyline in clear weather conditions. The proposals would be a minor feature on a distant skyline already influenced by existing wind turbines and would have no significant influence on landscape character. As such, the applicant's assessment of the impacts on receptor's visual amenity is considered accurate.					
			Cumulatively, the consideration of other wind farms in planning would not materially alter the effects arising from the proposal.					

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

1	Relationship between Settlements/Key locations and wider landscape respected.	<p>Turbines are not visually prominent in the majority of views within or from settlements/Key Locations or from the majority of its access routes.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>The proposals weaken and detract from the sense of place and landscape qualities of the interaction between the Coastal Crofts and Small Farms, Sweeping Moorland and Flows and Rocky Hills and Moorland Landscape Character Types (LCT's) in the wider area. It is therefore, considered that this threshold is not met.</p>
2	Key Gateway locations and routes are respected	<p>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.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>The proposals would incur significant and non-localised on both the A836 and A897 routes as noted above in more detail. It is considered that the threshold is not met.</p>
3	Valued natural and cultural landmarks are respected	<p>The development does not, by its presence, diminish the prominence of the landmark or disrupt its relationship to its setting.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>It is considered that the threshold is met, with the exception of the impacts incurred on the setting of the Bighouse group of listed buildings, particularly the A Listed walled garden and pavilion and on Strathy Point.</p>
4	The amenity of key recreational routes and ways is respected.	<p>Wind Turbines or other infrastructure do not overwhelm or otherwise significantly detract from the visual appeal of key routes and ways.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>It is considered that the threshold is met with the exception of parts of the footpath network around Melvich and Strathy Point</p>
5	The amenity of transport routes is respected	<p>Wind Turbines or other infrastructure do not overwhelm or otherwise significantly detract from the visual appeal of transport routes</p> <p>-----.</p> <p>The proposals would incur significant and non-localised on both the A836 and A897 routes as noted above in more detail.</p>

		It is considered that the threshold is not met.
6	The existing pattern of Wind Energy Development is respected.	<p>The degree to which the proposal fits with the existing pattern of nearby wind energy development, considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 <p>-----</p> <p>On the basis of the landscape impacts noted above, it is not considered that the threshold is met.</p>
7	The proposal contributes positively to existing pattern or objectives for development in the area.	<p>The proposal maintains appropriate and effective separation between developments and/ or clusters</p> <p>-----</p> <p>It is considered that the threshold is not met, taking into account the pattern of existing consented wind energy development, that is generally set back from the coastline and key transport routes.</p>
8	The perception of landscape scale and distance is respected	<p>The perception of landscape scale and distance is respected</p> <p>---</p> <p>On the basis of the landscape impacts noted above, it is not considered that the threshold is met.</p>
9	Landscape setting of nearby wind energy developments is respected	<p>Proposal relates well to the existing landscape setting and does not increase the perceived visual prominence of surrounding wind turbines.</p> <p>---</p> <p>It is considered that the threshold is broadly met, considering the assessment of the cumulative landscape and visual impacts of the development undertaken by the Council Officers and other statutory consultees.</p>
10	Distinctiveness of Landscape character is respected	<p>Integrity and variety of Landscape Character Areas are maintained.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>On the basis of the landscape impacts noted above, it is not considered that the threshold is met.</p>

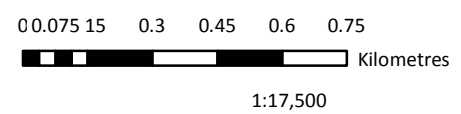


- KEY**
- Site Boundary
 - Turning Heads
 - Turbine Locations
 - Substation and Energy Storage
 - Wind Farm Walk
 - Temporary Construction Compound
 - Crane Hardstandings
 - Borrow Pit Search Areas
 - Watercourse Crossings
 - Floating Road
 - New Tracks
 - Existing Tracks



Coordinate System: British National Grid
 Projection: Transverse Mercator

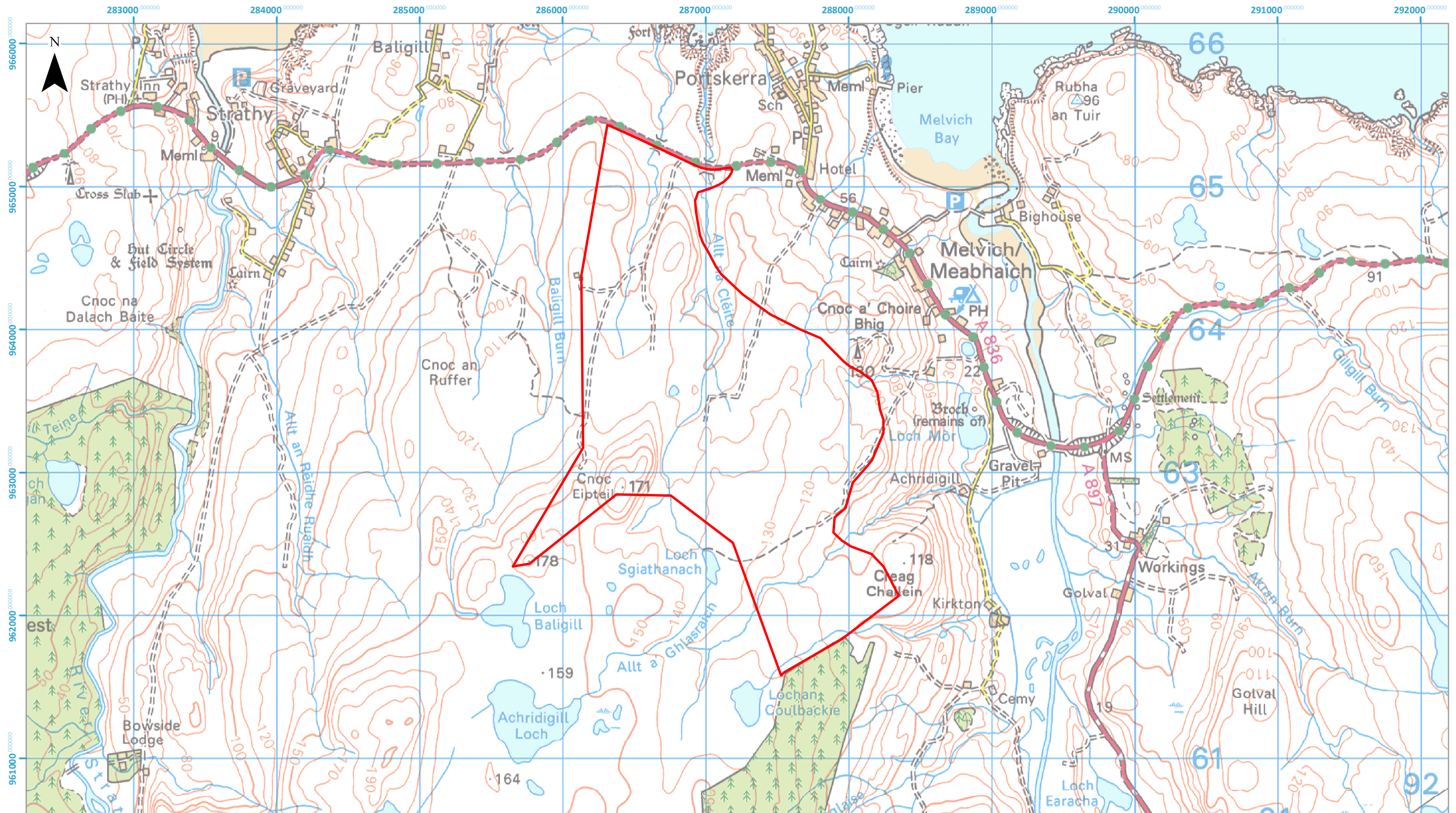
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Melvich Wind Energy Hub
 EIA Report

Figure 1.2
Site Layout Plan

Date: 03/03/2023	Lead: JH	Review: JH	Version: 1.0
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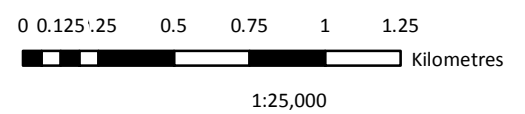


KEY
 Site Boundary



Coordinate System: British National Grid
 Projection: Transverse Mercator

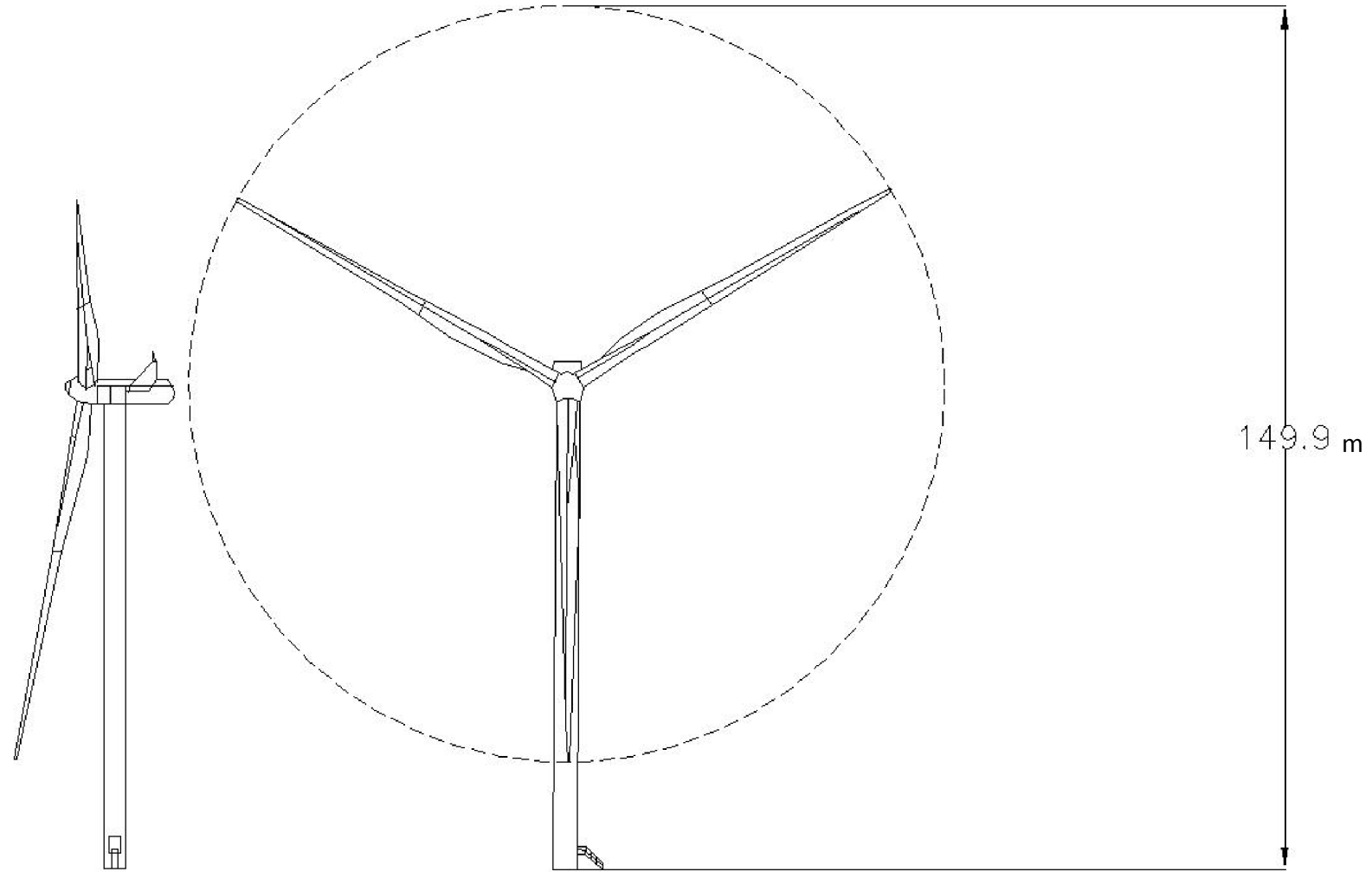
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Figure 1.1
 Site Location Plan

Date: 06/12/2022	Lead: JH	Review: JH	Version: 1.0
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Not to Scale

Proportions are indicative however 149.9m is the maximum height to blade tip.



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Figure 4.2
Indicative Turbine Elevation