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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)

Blackford Energy Park

On behalf of Blackford Renewables Ltd

May 2025

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File name:	2875 LVIA Blackford Energy Park.docx
Date Issued:	8th May 2025
Version:	FINAL

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 Liz Lake Associates has been commissioned by Blackford Renewables Ltd to prepare a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) for "Blackford Energy Park", to be referred to hereafter as 'the Site'. The report is in consideration of a planning application for a new battery storage facility with associated infrastructure and landscaping. This report has been prepared on the benefit of the Client and the contents should not be relied upon by others without the express written authority of Liz Lake Associates. If any unauthorised third party makes use of this report they do so at their own risk and Liz Lake Associates owe them no duty of care or skill.

1.1.2 The report considers the existing baseline conditions and seeks to identify the relevant landscape and visual issues applicable to the Site. A Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment has been undertaken to assess the likely effects upon the landscape resource, specific views and visual amenity.

1.1.3 Site visits were undertaken during 2022 and 2023, and then also between March 2024 and April 2025 to appraise the character and condition of the Site and the landscape context, and to identify the key visual receptors. Once the scheme had been sufficiently developed, the assessment was undertaken by an experienced Chartered Landscape Architect. The weather was clear and bright with good visibility for the duration of the visit.

1.1.4 All photographs were taken with a digital camera, a Canon EOS 6D (a Full Frame Sensor camera) with a 50mm Focal Length prime lens in accordance with the guidance contained within LI Technical Guidance Note 06/19.

1.1.5 Liz Lake Associates is a multi-disciplinary environmental and design consultancy with over 30 years' experience of master planning, landscape, ecology, urban design, heritage and environmental impact assessment. The company is a registered practice of the Landscape Institute.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1.1 An LVIA of the Site and the development proposals has been prepared encompassing the 'Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment' (GLVIA), 3rd edition (published by the Landscape Institute and the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment 2013), and 'Landscape Character Assessment: Guidance for England and Scotland' (published by the Countryside Agency and Scottish National Heritage 2002, and the updated 'Approach to Landscape Character Assessment' (published by Natural England, 2014). In summary, the approach combines information and desktop reviews with on-site surveys and appraisal.

2.1.2 The Site based assessment involves the recording of both objective description and subjective impressions of the landscape, as well as details of the existing landscape condition. It includes an assessment of the extent and nature of views to and from the Site and the type of receptors that experience these views.

2.1.3 The following relevant studies and documents have been considered as part of the desk-based review and subsequent assessment:

- Scottish Natural Heritage (National) Landscape Character Assessment (2019)
- Banff and Buchan (County) Landscape Character Assessment (Review) (1997)
- Scottish Natural Heritage (District) Strategic Landscape Capacity Assessment for Wind Energy in Aberdeenshire (2014)

2.1.4 The LVIA of the proposed development has been based upon the proposals illustrated on drawings prepared by consultants and shown on the Landscape Masterplan prepared by Liz Lake Associates.

3 EXISTING SITUATION

3.1 Context

3.1.1 The Site is located approximately 2-2.5km to the west of the village of Rothienorman in the Formartine area, one of six administrative areas in Aberdeenshire. The town of Inverurie lies approximately 18km to the southeast, whilst 45km away is the City of Aberdeen. The A96 lies to the southwest of the local area, running between Inverness and Aberdeen, via Huntly and Elgin. The extent of the Site is shown on **Figure 1: Site Location** in **Appendix A**.

3.1.2 The area (according to the landscape character assessment) forms part of a peripheral edges of a local river valley system associated with the Upper Ythan valley, and a gentle transition with wider rolling agricultural heartlands associated with central and northern Aberdeenshire, in an area which is generally well-settled, wooded farmland at around 150m AOD. At a lower level Black Burn runs to the south of the Site in the valley, and is one of a series of Burns, including Fordoun Burn, tributaries that feed the River Ythan at Fyvie to the east, before the river weaves through Ellon and out towards the North Sea at Forvie and Newburgh.

3.1.3 The wider landscape contains a number of features, including infrastructure elements and energy production. It is noted that a number of new energy schemes have been approved and established within the area. This includes the new electricity substation (Rothienorman Substation) which has been established on open farmland adjacent to the west of the Site as part of the East Coast 400 kV Reinforcement Project, forming a termination point for numerous overhead wires and pylons that cross the landscape. To the west of the substation, there is another battery storage facility currently under construction to the south west of the Site (Overhill Farm BESS, planning ref: 22/2252). There are also long views towards small scale windfarms which are present in the wider landscape and form part of the backdrop in some skyline views.

3.1.4 In addition, a more recent approval for a 50MW BESS has been consented to the east of the substation (planning ref: 23/0718), beside 'The Wood of Middleton'.

3.2 Published Landscape Character Assessments

3.2.1 A brief summary of the published landscape character assessments in the context of the Site is detailed below.

National: Character Area Profile, Scottish Natural Heritage, 2019

3.2.2 The Site lies in the Scottish Natural Heritage National Landscape Character Assessment LCT 32 Farmed and Wooded River Valleys. The Farmed and Wooded River Valleys Landscape Character Type comprises the well settled, wooded and diverse valleys of the Rivers Deveron Bogie and Ythan. They form a significant feature within the extensive agricultural heartlands of Aberdeenshire, flowing out to the sea at Macduff. The landscape is attractive with a high degree of integrity.[1]

3.2.3 The NLCA profile gives the following as a general description for the area:

"Landform - These rivers predominantly meander through relatively shallow valleys bounded by broad rolling hills although the Ythan flows through a narrow gorge, originally cut by glacial meltwater, to the east of Fyvie, and the upper Deveron west of Turriff passes thorough harder schist geology and consequently is also accommodated within a deeper valley.

Landcover - These straths are largely farmed with mixed pastures and arable fields set out on the flat floodplain and gently rolling sides. Farmland is interspersed with mixed woodlands on valley sides, many of these comprising policy woodlands associated with the estates which are a key characteristic of this landscape.

The River Ythan between Turrif and Fyvie has a more open character where the valley is broad and shallow, and fenced floodplain pastures dominate. The river is narrow and straightened in this area with occasional fringing wetlands either side of the

[1] Nature Scot (formally SNH) National Landscape Character Assessment LCT 32 Farmed and Wooded River Valleys pg.1

channel, river terraces and small areas of scrubby vegetation providing some limited diversity.

The Bogie strath forms a wide saddle of fields between the high moorland ridges which lie to the east and west. Both the Bogie and the upper Deveron west of Huntly are more strongly contained by adjacent hills and are less intensively farmed.

The wooded policies and areas of parkland of the Hatton and Fyvie Castle estates are distinctive features in the valley south of Turrif.

The narrow and deeply incised upper Ythan east of Fyvie is different in character with the meandering water course strongly contained by steep slopes, its intimate scale accentuated by dense woodland, some of this comprising botanically rich semi-natural woodland, along the Braes of Gight.

The River Deveron, which extends from the Moray hills to Banff, is aligned through a relatively broad valley and is strongly contained by rolling hills for much of its length. Like the Ythan, this valley accommodates extensive estate policies including those of Duff House, Forglen and Netherdale.

There is little marginal or wetland vegetation on the floodplains of both rivers, with farmland largely abutting them, although semi-natural woodland comes down to the river banks in more inaccessible, steep-sided areas such as the narrowly constricted sections of the Deveron south of Banff.

Mixed woodlands contribute to the rich diversity of these valleys with the policies of designed landscapes extending onto rolling hill tops. Within the Deveron valley, well-managed woodland and belts of beech often cover steeper river scarps and are planted on natural terraces on lower valley terraces. Woodland is more mixed on higher slopes and on hill tops comprising spruce, pine and larch. Knolly river deposits are often planted with Scots pine and beech.

Settlement - Roads run alongside the rivers and small towns such as Fyvie, Turriff and Huntly are concentrated at confluences and key bridging points. Farms are evenly dispersed along these straths, usually sited on lower slopes and terraces raised above flat floodplains. Quiet roads and footpaths, particularly those along the Deveron valley, can provide a sense of seclusion and allow an appreciation of the rich

scenic diversity of these valleys. In contrast, between Fyvie and Turiff the busy A947 Aberdeen to Banff arterial route is tightly aligned to the Burn of Turriff, a tributary of the Deveron. Farmland on valley sides within the Deveron valley comprises mainly arable fields divided by beech and thorn hedges and fences. Fenced pastures are also present on the flat haughlands either side of the river.

Hill slopes overlooking these valleys are well settled with relatively large farms. The shelter afforded by the valleys has resulted in settlements including villages such as Fyvie which lines a bank above the Ythan and the large market town of Turriff, which occupies a bluff above the bend of the River Deveron. Castles and mansion houses and historic built features such as follies, bridges, gate houses and boundary walls contribute to the architectural interest of these valleys.

The area itself has attracted a small amount of wind turbine development, due to its small scale, valley landform and high landscape quality. Wind farms in neighbouring Landscape Character Types along the edges of the valleys are visible from this landscape."[2]

3.2.4 The key characteristics of the area profile are:

- *"The Ythan has an open character between Turrif and Fyvie, in a broad shallow valley with fenced pasture floodplain. The river is narrow and straightened in this area. East of Fyvie, it is narrow, deeply incised and meandering, contained by steep slopes.*
- *The River Deveron, aligned through a relatively broad valley strongly contained by rolling hills.*
- *Wooded policies and small parklands in places.*
- *Little marginal or wetland vegetation on the floodplains, with farmland abutting both rivers except where semi-natural woodland comes down to the river banks in more inaccessible, steep-sided areas.*

[2] Nature Scot (formally SNH) National Landscape Character Assessment LCT 32 Farmed and Wooded River Valleys pg.1, 2 & 3

- *Mixed woodland with policies of designed landscapes extending onto the rolling hills.*
- *Well settled hill slopes overlooking the valleys with relatively large farms.*
- *Villages and large market towns.*
- *Castles, mansion houses and historic built features.*
- *Quiet roads and paths giving a sense of seclusion, contrasting with the busy A947 Aberdeen to Banff arterial route*".[3]

3.2.5 This is a national scale assessment and provides a useful overview of landscape character on a broad scale, although it is recognised that district scale landscape character assessment will assist further in relation to LVIA for development proposals at a more local scale.

County: Banff and Buchan County Landscape Character Assessment, 1997

3.2.6 An older document forming part of a Nature Scot (formally SNH) review of the landscape of the County of Banff and Buchan 37 (1997), shows that in broad (Regional) landscape terms, the Site lies in Landscape Character Area 12: Deveron and Upper Ythan Valley. In general terms the area is,

"*Incised through the plain of Banff & Buchan, the Deveron and upper Ythan rivers and their adjoining major tributaries meander through predominantly shallow valleys, bounded by broad and rolling hill ridges to either side. Occasionally these valley sides become steeper as the River Deveron flows northwards to the sea.*

The river valley slopes are well vegetated. The layout of the mixed deciduous and coniferous trees is generally responsive to the landform and provides a major contribution to the character of these valleys. Fences, and hedges of beech and thorn, divide the agricultural land which almost invariably leads up to the river's edge.

[3] Nature Scot (formally SNH) National Landscape Character Assessment LCT 32 Farmed and Wooded River Valleys pg.1

There are few significant areas of marginal vegetation along the water courses, although woodland approaches the riverbanks in more inaccessible areas, such as at the Bridge of Alvah, and at Fyvie and Gight.

The hill ridges overlooking the valley bottoms are well settled by frequent farmsteads. Settlements include villages such as Fyvie, which lines a bank above the Ythan, and the large and prosperous market town of Turriff. Built of red sandstone, it occupies a bluff enclosed by the bums of Putachie, Knockie and Turriff, above the Deveron river. Castles and mansion houses, such as Delgatie, Fyvie, Forglen and Duff House, contribute to the architectural diversity of this area."[4]

3.2.7 The assessment identifies some relevant landscape issues as being,

"The changing character of the agricultural landscape. *The visual impacts of set aside land and, to date, the inhibiting effect of the policy on positive schemes aimed at improving landscape diversity are important issues in Banff & Buchan, where uptake is relatively high. Future agricultural policy changes will be vital in determining the appearance of the countryside in the long term.*

Continued threats to semi-natural habitats throughout the District. *It has been shown that characteristic landscape features such as hedgerows, heather moorland and lowland mosses have been dramatically reduced in the past. Threats continue to be posed to the remaining mosses, areas of sand dunes, rivers and some areas of semi-natural woodland, as a result of pressures for peat extraction, coastal recreation, continuing trends towards agricultural intensification, and over-maturity and/or lack of management of policy woodlands.*

A lack of landscape diversity and distinctiveness within intensively farmed land in many parts of the District. *As farm units have increased in size, and agriculture has become more intensive, hedgerows, woodland and semi-natural vegetation have diminished, leaving much of the Banff & Buchan landscape uniform in appearance.*

[4] No 37 Banff and Buchan Landscape Character Assessment, 1997, p. 14 & 15

A gradual deterioration and erosion of existing distinctive features. *Features which make a great contribution to landscape character in some parts of Banff & Buchan include stone walls, beech avenues and hedges, and mixed species roundels. Many of these are under threat of decline due to a lack of management, or removal for development. Distinctive architectural details, for example traditional colour finishes and indigenous building materials, are not generally used in new buildings, which reduces landscape distinctiveness in some areas.*

The impacts of present and potential new housing development on the fringes of existing settlement and within the countryside. *Poorly sited and designed housing detracts from and diminishes landscape distinctiveness. The demand for new housing in rural locations throughout Banff & Buchan is likely to continue and there is a need for any further development to reflect more closely local traditions in settlement layout and built form.*

The potential pressure for new rural development. *There is likely to be future pressure for the development of windfarms and large-scale forestry. The potential for increasing mineral extraction has also been identified in the Structure and Local plans, but this is likely to be on a relatively small scale, given the distance from major markets."*[5]

3.2.8 Guidelines for Landscape Conservation and Enhancement are outlined as being:

- *"The protection and revitalisation of distinctive landscape features in the District;*
- *The encouragement of appropriately sited and well-designed new woodlands and forestry planting, particularly in areas where there are opportunities to reinforce or enhance existing landscape character;*
- *The encouragement of farm conservation schemes on a larger scale;*

[5] No 37 Banff and Buchan Landscape Character Assessment, 1997, p. 37 & 38

- *The promotion of good design practice in the siting and detail of new development within rural settlements and in the countryside;*
- *The direction of large-scale rural development, such as windfarms, to the less visually sensitive areas of the District".*[6]

3.2.9 The Mechanisms for Change are outlined as being:

- *"Maintain and enhance the traditional farm, estate and village landscapes, whose origins lie mainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth century settlement of the District;*
- *conserve the special natural character of the coastal area and traditional settlement patterns of the District by directing new development to build on existing visual and architectural character;*
- *sensitively site any new large-scale development so as to minimise impact on landscape character;*
- *encourage landscape enhancement through the expansion of natural habitats on farmland and through the creation of a more wooded landscape, particularly in the agricultural heartland".*[7]

3.2.10 The main issues associated with trends for landscape change are outlined as being:

- *"The gradual erosion and decline of some landscape features, for example hedgerows, policy plantings, stone dykes, mosses;*
- *The need to accommodate significant new forestry plantings;*
- *The lack of landscape diversity and distinctiveness within the intensively farmed lands in many parts of the District;*

[6] No 37 Banff and Buchan Landscape Character Assessment, 1997, p. 38
[7] No 37 Banff and Buchan Landscape Character Assessment, 1997, p. 43

- *The changing character of the agricultural landscape brought about by national policies such as set aside;*
- *The existing and potential visual impacts of poorly sited and badly designed housing and other built development".*[8]

3.2.11 **Landscape Guidelines** are outlined below and provide the basis for an overall aim which is to '*protect and build upon local distinctiveness*'[9].

- *an emphasis on local distinctiveness through, for example, the reinstatement of lost features and the encouragement of this aspect in the design in new buildings;*
- *the conservation of special features which make a valuable contribution to local landscape character through revitalisation and better management;*
- *the protection of positive landscape character through the sensitive location and design of new development;*

3.2.12 *the enhancement of less visually diverse landscapes through woodland planting and the creation of new habitats on a more permanent basis".*[10]

District: Scottish Natural Heritage Strategic Landscape Capacity Assessment for Wind Energy in Aberdeenshire, 2014

3.2.13 Aberdeenshire Council's most recent document refers[11] to district level character identifying the Site within the Deveron and Upper Ythan Valleys (24(i)). The summary of sensitivity (albeit for wind turbine capacity purposes) states,

"*In Banff and Buchan is the Deveron and Upper Ythan Valley, which is a shallow valley that flows out to the sea at Macduff. Its sides are clothed with a mix of broadleaved and conifer woodlands and its floor has farmland running to the river's*

[8] No 37 Banff and Buchan Landscape Character Assessment, 1997, p. 46
[9] No 37 Banff and Buchan Landscape Character Assessment, 1997, p. 46
[10] No 37 Banff and Buchan Landscape Character Assessment, 1997, p. 46
[11] Strategic Landscape Capacity Assessment for Wind Energy, 2014 (Ironside Farrar), p.44

edge. Its shelter has resulted in settlements such as Turriff, Fyvie and large estates resulting in five HGDLs. It is an attractive river valley with a high degree of integrity".

"This area is unsuitable for turbines due to its medium scale, valley landform, quality, pattern, high value and visual sensitivity. These areas would be unsuitable for wind turbine development beyond a domestic scale, less than 15m associated with farm buildings or tourist facilities and at the base of slopes".

3.2.14 In addition, the document outlines the following in terms of scale and location (in relation to small scale turbines),

"*…… the smallest turbines below 15m have a similar scale to built structures and trees found commonly throughout the landscape and do not have the same eye-catching prominence and extensive visibility of larger turbines. They do not therefore have the same issues of wide scale cumulative effects across extensive landscape areas".*

"The issues relating to design and siting of small turbines concern mainly their localised effects on the area in which they are sited rather than wider cumulative effects on landscape character. Small wind turbines should be judged on their own merits, assessed against the criteria that apply to most other domestic or farm scale built structures".

".....Small wind turbines are often fully or partially backclothed against landforms and/or trees, giving a closer relationship to the ground than the larger structures".

3.2.15 The documents outlined above, together with the Site appraisal, have been utilised to establish the baseline conditions for the Site and its surroundings in order to help inform this assessment.

3.3 Statutory Designations

3.3.1 **Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI):** The Site is not covered by any SSSI's. There are also no SSSI's within the 2km study area of the Site.

3.3.2 **Conservation Areas**: There are no Conservation Areas on the Site or within the 2km study area of the Site.

3.3.3 **Scheduled Monuments:** There are no Scheduled Monuments on the Site or within the 2km study area of the Site. The closest Scheduled Monument is some 4.0km to the north west: *Ythan Wells, Roman camps 1000m WSW of Logie Newton Farm* (SM2415) (Refer to **Figure 2: Environmental and Cultural Context with Public Rights of Way**).

3.3.4 **Listed Buildings**: There are no Listed Buildings on the Site, although there is one listed building with 2km of the Site, *Home Farm of Blackford Dovecot* (LC3027) approximately 1.0km to the east of the Site. (Refer to **Figure 2: Environmental and Cultural Context with Public Rights of Way**).

3.3.5 **Gardens and Designed Landscapes**: There are no Historic Gardens and Designed Landscapes on the Site or within 2km of the Site.

3.3.6 **Public Rights of Way (PRoW):** There are no Public Rights of Way across the site itself or within 2km of the Site.

3.3.7 **Environmental Designations**: Environmental designations in the local context of the Site are limited to regularly or recently cultivated agricultural, horticultural and domestic habitats, grasslands and woodlands. (Refer **Figure 2: Environmental and Cultural Context with Public Rights of Way**).

3.4 Landscape Resource and Contribution of the Site to Landscape Character

3.4.1 The Site forms part of the peripheral edge of a local river valley system associated with the Upper Ythan valley, and a gentle transition with wider rolling agricultural heartlands associated with central and northern Aberdeenshire, in an area which is generally well-settled, farmland with some woodland at around 160m to 140m AOD. The wider landform undulates up to approximately 195m AOD on surrounding crests, rising to over 200m to the south and north west, restricting many wider views. The undulations are incised by attractive small tributaries, including the Black Burn which runs to the south of the Site and around to the west towards Fisherford, as well as a further tributaries to the east at Blackford. Black Burn and Red Burn converge just south of Rothienorman and continue as Fordoun Burn to the River Ythan at Fyvie.

3.4.2 The patchwork of rolling agricultural fields in the wider landscape are generally bounded by a combination of post and wire fencing and well maintained low level hedgerows (some fragmented, together with some stone walls in the area) resulting in a largely open character. Although there are generally infrequent tree blocks on higher ground in this landscape, the 'Wood of Middleton' lies to the south of the Site, whilst the western edge of the field comprises a strong belt of trees following the field boundary.

3.4.3 High voltage overhead powerlines cross the landscape close to the Site, and it is noted that a new electricity substation (Rothienorman Substation) has been established on open farmland adjacent to the west of the Site forming a large conspicuous industrial feature across parts of the local area in a number of directions (partly as the young planting is yet to establish), and in addition a new battery storage scheme is under construction to the south of the Site (Overhill Farm BESS, planning ref: 22/2252).

3.4.4 The Site itself lies in a slightly more elevated position adjoining another recently consented battery storage system for 50MW (planning ref: 23/0718) adjacent to the 'Wood of Middleton', and extends outwards further across the open agricultural slopes north and east down towards small field drains forming a shallow valley near Blackford.

3.4.5 The land surrounding the Site also contains a presence of isolated farmsteads in an open landscape with occasional clusters of trees, isolated woodland pockets and tree belts (for example Westfield, Baikiehill, Maryfield, Home Farm, Middleton of Blackford, Smithy Croft, Overhill, West Redhill, East Redhill etc.). The farmsteads are sometimes composed of a farmhouse cluster (finished in grey concrete aggregate and stone with grey roof tiles, and sometimes set around a courtyard), together with a series of outbuildings which vary in size and scale, but include a range of finishes, including grey steel, or brick and concrete plinth with coloured steel cladding present too.

3.4.6 Overall, the field parcel is considered to contribute positively to the local landscape character, since the land exhibits attributes or characteristics that are representative of the local landscape, including the agricultural use and landscape with marginal

vegetation; meanwhile, the recent completion of the substation, coupled with the current work ongoing at the Overhill Farm and the recent approval of (50MW) battery storage adjacent to the Site, has already introduced a number of recognisable new industrial features on adjacent land (as well as the presence of overhead wires and pylons) which influences the character of the local area. In contrast, the elements that form the surrounding farmsteads are of variable style, but they nevertheless contribute to the rural integrity and character of farm groups within the landscape pattern, in combination with hedges and wooded features where occurring; overall, these elements are recognisable features in the landscape and only occasionally integrated by the structural planting and use of varied colours, in an otherwise open landscape.

3.4.7 The Site does not form part of a designated landscape, it is not part of National Scenic Area (NSA) as defined by Nature Scot in national terms, and nor is it designated locally through a local landscape designation (Special Landscape Area). However, the Site itself is recognised as having some landscape value overall, which is considered to be medium when taking into account the value attributes of the Site, its features and the overall local landscape and its context.

3.5 Visual Resource

3.5.1 The visual amenity experience by people (visual receptors) in the locality of the Site differs according to many factors. Visual receptors of higher sensitivity with a greater susceptibility to change include residents at home (private viewpoints), people engaged in outdoor recreation (including the use of PRoWs), visitors to heritage assets and other attractions, travellers on recognised scenic routes (public viewpoints) and people at their workplace where views are an important contributor to the setting and quality of their working life. Travellers on road, rail or other transport routes are considered less sensitive to changes in visual amenity.

3.5.2 A number of specific, representative and illustrative photographs selected for inclusion in the report and to illustrate the visual effects of the proposed scheme range from receptors including, local roads, public rights of way and representative private views are shown on **Figure 6: Photo Location Plan** and photographs are

shown at **Figure 7: Photographic Sheets**. The visual receptors are considered to illustrate a fair representation of receptor groups with varying sensitivity/susceptibility to change in their visual amenity.

3.5.3 Initial consideration of the study area, via desk research, covered a broad sphere of 2-3km; however, this has been refined through field survey to review an appraise the extent of visibility of the Site in the landscape as follows;

- Views from farmsteads and dwellings in the vicinity of the Site
- Views from south of the Site
- Views from B992 north of the Site
- Views from the B992 west and south west of the Site
- Views from Cadgers Road and unnamed lane west of Site
- Views from the unnamed lane south of Site
- Views from unnamed lane west of Blackford
- Views from B9001 north of Rothienorman

4 THE PROPOSALS

4.1 General Principles

4.1.1 This section of the report considers the results of the initial baseline work in the context of future development of the Site.

4.1.2 The design of the proposed development should be well-integrated into the fabric of the rolling landscape at the edge of the transition between the valley side and the wider agricultural heartland. To assist the design process, the following general landscape opportunities could be applied to the emerging landscape scheme based upon site investigations, landscape character assessment and visual effects considerations.

4.1.3 The Banff and Buchan Landscape Character Assessment provides Guidelines for landscape typology Deveron and Upper Ythan Valley (12). Those relevant to the Site are:

- *"An emphasis on local distinctiveness through the reinstatement of lost features and the encouragement of this aspect in design.*
- *The conservation of special features which make a valuable contribution to local landscape character through revitalisation and better management.*
- *the protection of positive landscape character through the sensitive location and design of new development.*
- *The enhancement of less visually diverse landscape through woodland planting and the creation of new habitats on a more permanent basis."*[12]

[12] No 37 Banff and Buchan Landscape Character Assessment, 1997, p. 46

4.1.4 By taking on board and implementing these points as part of the emerging layout and strategy for the Site, it would provide beneficial opportunities for the land and integration into the wider area, having the potential to deliver benefits for landscape enhancement and green infrastructure in keeping with local landscape character for the area.

4.2 Proposals and Approach to Mitigation

4.2.1 The proposed development scheme, which is shown on the drawings and plans of the consultant team, includes the following elements:

- Development comprising of a series of battery containers, inverter/transformer skids (circa 2-3m high), ancillary equipment including supergrid transformers and 400kV switchgear, and an access track with gravel finish. It is noted that the slightly taller elements (up to 13m high) are located closer to the existing Rothienorman Substation and beside the recently consented substation for the 50MW scheme, (planning reference APP/2023/0718), where they will be seen within the context of the existing infrastructure alongside the backdrop of 'Wood of Middleton', with new planting to help minimise any impact.
- New solar panel arrays will also be included within the scheme on the inner edges of the slopes and in the western corner of the Site.
- Where possible visible elements will be powder coated/ finished in an appropriate RAL colour (for example mid grey, green tone or black to be agreed) to recede.
- The proposals will be fenced with a 2.4m high security perimeter fence and access will utilise the existing access track serving the adjacent, recently consented scheme (for 50MW), which is also included identically in this scheme in case the recently consented 50MW scheme is not built.
- The proposals will be framed by a series of inner and outer berms (extending to 8m in height on the northern and eastern edges), which include planting that shall help contribute to the containment of infrastructure and softening of various elements.

- The proposed planting will provide connectivity and linkage between existing green infrastructure features, including the Wood of Middleton, the emerging planting associated with the recently consented (or completed) infrastructure schemes, as well as strengthening and connecting linear belts of trees and native planting along the boundaries of the Site and crests in the landform.
- Provision of new native hedgerow and structural vegetation, including new trees and wooded features along boundaries of the Site, including gapping up where appropriate, will reflect the character of the area and contribute to biodiversity.
- An attenuation basin will also be provided in the north eastern corner of the Site as part of the drainage proposals for the scheme.

4.2.2 In consideration of the landscape and visual issues relevant to the Site, an approach to the mitigation of the proposed scheme has been considered, incorporating the principles outlined above and as reflected on the Landscape Strategy Plan prepared by Liz Lake Associates. The landscape strategy will be developed in further detail as part of the planning conditions and would successfully ensure that the identified landscape and visual effects are minimised.

4.2.3 Recommendations have been incorporated into the proposals which successfully mitigate potential adverse landscape and visual effects and help to integrate the proposed scheme into this location.

5 ASSESSMENT OF LANDSCAPE EFFECTS

5.1 Identifying the Landscape Effects

5.1.1 This section of the report considers the results of the initial baseline work in the context of future potential development at the Site. The landscape effects are the changes to the Site, quantitative or qualitative, compared with a scenario without the Proposals. Effects can be adverse or beneficial, direct, indirect, or cumulative. The following assessment of landscape effect should be read in conjunction with the approach to mitigation (refer Chapter 4).

5.1.2 The effect of the proposed changes to the Site, specifically on the identified landscape receptors (attributes) have been reviewed, including consideration of changes to the existing landscape resource, the introduction of new elements within the landscape, and changes to local perceptions of the Site.

5.2 Sensitivity and Susceptibility

5.2.1 An important element in identifying the effects of a proposal is to assess the ability (the susceptibility) of the existing landscape to accommodate the specific proposed changes with regard to the consequences on the local landscape character.

5.2.2 The Site (landscape resource) has been deemed to be of Medium to High Susceptibility to accommodate the proposed development, since it is a landscape where well considered changes of an appropriate nature could be absorbed without the undue loss of key characteristics, individual elements or features and specific aesthetic or perceptual aspects or, overall landscape character.

5.2.3 Accordingly, the sensitivity of the Site is considered to be Medium to High when value (Medium) and susceptibility (Medium to High) are combined.

5.3 Significance of Landscape Effects

5.3.1 Effects can be adverse or beneficial. Where the Proposals are judged to cause deterioration to the landscape resource / local landscape character this is described

as an adverse effect. Where the Proposals are judged to increase the value of the Site to the landscape resource / local landscape character this is described as a beneficial effect.

5.3.2 The proposed scheme will result in some noticeable effects during the construction period, which include the presence of (for example) construction vehicles, materials, stockpiles, offices and parking/ welfare facilities and associated safety fencing, which are acknowledged to be short term temporary effects during the construction phase(s).

5.3.3 There will be direct change to the resource of the land in the proposed changes across the Site to one of infrastructure resource until the land is restored to agriculture at the end of the scheme's life. It is acknowledged that the proposed development brings new built elements and features into an area of the Site that is undeveloped and open. There will be an inevitable change to the open character of the agricultural land, the use of the land (for agriculture) and the change in the landform itself (through the introduction of terracing and the creation of large earth mounds along the outer edges of the Site), although existing (boundary) features such as trees and woodland will retain their structural integrity and composition as part of the wider landscape framework. Furthermore, it is recognised that the proposals to accommodate the new battery energy storage units, solar and associated infrastructure elements will be placed in an existing context of energy and utility infrastructure on adjacent land. The development of the Site will represent a noticeable degree of change on part of the LCA locally.

5.3.4 Overall, the scale and degree of change on the Deveron and Upper Ythan Valleys as a whole would be apparent, as the change occurs on part of the valley's upper side, which is framed by a distinct but intervening block of woodland (Wood of Middleton). Accordingly, the overall significance of the landscape effect with regard to the proposed scheme is considered to represent a **Substantial to Moderate Adverse Effect** (Yr1), although these effects would be relatively localised in extent and limited to an area of landscape within an arc of 1km to the north and east of the Site; given the containment in landscape terms, these effects would diminish quickly beyond the local area and not extend to the wider landscape beyond 1km.

5.3.5 The landscape resource of the Site itself will be improved and enhanced through planting of new features, including new trees (including linear wooded belts), hedgerows and species rich grassland and scrub. These new elements will provide a positive contribution to character and have a beneficial effect on the resource of the Site itself.

5.3.6 Once an appropriate landscape management scheme has established, the significance of the landscape effects in the long term will change and is considered to represent a **Moderate Adverse Effect** (Yr15) on landscape character, as the proposed development will be assimilating into its setting in the longer term.

5.3.7 It is also noted that the effects of the scheme are likely to be reversible, as at the time the Site ceases to operate, the land could potentially be returned to agriculture; however, this will occur beyond 15 years (being the time for the effects of the established scheme to be assessed) given the maximum length of 40-year lease being sought. That being the case, the operational equipment from the Site could subsequently be removed along with the earth bunds leaving the majority of the structural Green Infrastructure elements as maturing landscape features in the location.

6 ASSESSMENT OF VISUAL EFFECTS

6.1 Identifying the Visual Effects

6.1.1 The visual effects are the changes to the Site, quantitative or qualitative, compared with a scenario without the Proposals. Effects can be adverse or beneficial, direct, indirect or cumulative. The assessment involves a systematic identification and description of the visual effects, accompanied by plans and photographs. The following assessment of visual effects should be read in conjunction with the approach to mitigation (refer to Chapter 4).

6.1.2 The likely value placed upon views by people, or the visual amenity of the locality, is evaluated to help assess the effects of the proposed development.

6.1.3 The assessment has been carried out to make informed judgements applicable to visual amenity throughout the year, including the winter months as it is recognised that deciduous planting may increase the degree of visibility in some locations.

6.1.4 An important element in identifying the visual effects of a Proposal is to assess the existing visual receptors (people who see the view) and their susceptibility to changes in views and visual amenity. The susceptibility of different visual receptors to changes in views and visual amenity is mainly a function of:

- "*The occupation of activity of people experiencing the view at particular locations;* and
- *The extent to which their attention or interest may therefore be focused on the views and the visual amenity they experience at particular locations.*"[13]

6.2 Significance of Visual Effects

[13] Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, 3rd Edition, Para 6.32 (2013)

6.2.1 Assessment of the significance of visual effects relating to the proposed development is considered with regard to the sensitivity of the visual receptor, the value attached to the views or visual amenity and the magnitude of change in view. The magnitude of change in view is considered in light of:

- The sensitivity of the visual receptor (the viewer);
- The value attached to the views or visual amenity;
- The size and scale of the development;
- The geographical extent of the area influenced;
- Duration; and
- Reversibility.

6.2.2 For the identified viewpoints the degree of change which the Proposals will engender is described and assessed. The following section identifies the primary viewpoints and people or visual receptors within the area that are likely to be affected by the change in views and visual amenity resulting from the proposed scheme. The significance of the visual effect has been assessed upon completion of the scheme and once established (i.e. 15 years plus), although it is acknowledged that new woodland and tree planting will continue growing to maturity over a longer period of time beyond the establishment period.

6.3 Identification of Visual Effects

6.3.1 The following section identifies a range of typical receptors within the area which are likely to be affected by the change in views and visual amenity resulting from the proposed development.

6.3.2 It should be noted that for some views the effects are considered to be short lived, largely because they occur on transient routes – e.g. local roads– in these locations, views are often short lived or periodic glimpses whilst moving along a route.

Private Viewpoints

Views from farmsteads local to the Site (private view no photo) (High Sensitivity)

6.3.3 Some residents are likely to experience views of the new proposals from their properties and/ or land in the vicinity of the Site, in particular where properties are set on the edges of the valley (e.g. Westfield, Baikiehill, East Redhill and West Redhill). Views of the proposed earth bunds (and new fencing) that wrap around the Site are likely to shield some of the new infrastructure; however where visible, batteries, solar panels and associated elements scheme may be seen in context of the existing infrastructure, including the Rothienorman substation, the neighbouring 50MW BESS (yet to be constructed). The Wood of Middleton and a strong line of trees on the crest of the landform will form a backdrop and context for the proposed scheme. New linear planting belts around the perimeter of the scheme will help soften the proposals over time.

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Substantial to Moderate Adverse Effect
- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Moderate Adverse Effect.

Public Viewpoints

Views from south of Site (refer example photo location 8) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.4 Although there are no identified Core Paths or clearly marked public routes, informal access tracks in the vicinity of three hills south of the Site (towards Hill of Blackford, Kinbroon and Rothmaise are likely to experience glimpsed views across the narrow valley of Black Burn towards the Site. Portions of the access road and planting associated with the already consented 50MW scheme (ref: 23/0718) will be establishing on the slopes and the hill crest. Despite the presence of a woodland block (Wood of Middleton) and other structures associated with infrastructure, portions of the proposed scheme are likely to become visible from behind the crest in the landform. However, some of the new planting around the southern portions of the Site will establish over time, helping to increase the depth and quantity of tree canopy cover in the local area.

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Moderate to Slight Adverse Effect

- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Slight Adverse Effect.

Transport Routes

Views from B992 north of Site, (refer example photo locations 13, 14, 15, 28 & 29) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.5 Vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians will experience some views of the scheme from the undulating, elevated plateau, where sections of open road afford occasional views towards the Site across the folds in the landform; however, where visible, the new scheme will be seen alongside the adjacent substation, with the Wood of Middleton forming a backdrop against the site. New planting will help soften the scheme further in the longer term.

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Moderate to Slight Adverse Effect.
- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Slight Adverse Effect.

Views from the B992 and Unnamed Road west/south west of Site, (refer example photo locations 19 & 22) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.6 Vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians will be unlikely to experience any clear views from these sections of road at distance on lower ground between the A920 and the edge of Fisherford; although, nearer to Black Burn the presence of intervening structures associated with the large substation to the southwest of the Site are visible and will sit in front of the new scheme from the lower ground, with the Wood of Middleton and a strong tree line on the crest of the landform forming distinct features in long views.

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Negligible Effect.
- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Negligible Effect.

Views from Cadgers Road and unnamed lane west of Site, (refer example photo locations 16, 18, 20, 21 & 25) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.7 Vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians are unlikely to experience clear views from the undulating but elevated sections of road at distance west and southwest of Fisherford across the valley side; the large structures associated with the existing substation immediately west of the Site will largely mask the new proposals, together with the Wood of Middleton and strong tree lines on the crest of the landform forming distinct features in these longer views. The effects will be mirrored for the residential properties along these roads (for example Newseat, Tillymorgan Cottage, Goukswell, Mains of Tillymorgan, South Mains, West Cairnhill).

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Negligible Effect.
- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Negligible Effect.

Views from the unnamed lane south of Site (refer example photo locations 1 & 2) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.8 Vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians are unlikely to experience any clear views from these low lying sections of road running close to the course of Black Burn, where the presence of intervening structures associated with the large substation and the new Overhill Farm BESS immediately to the south west of the Site, are positioned higher on the landform and, together with the Wood of Middleton, form distinctive features in the foreground of these local views. New and recent planting will continue to establish further over time increasing the treed context in the local area, with the proposed scheme located largely beyond the crest of the hill behind this infrastructure. These changes will be mirrored for views from the residential properties (e.g. Keltswelis, Overhill, Smithy Croft, Middleton of Blackford).

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Negligible Effect
- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Negligible Effect

Views from unnamed lane north west of Blackford heading towards B992, (refer example photo locations 11, 12, 24 & 27) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.9 Vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians will experience clear, open views of the new scheme from the elevated sections of road to the east of the Site towards B992 as the lane rises out of the valley. Views of the proposed scheme will be dominated by the engineered appearance of the earth bunds (and new fencing) that wrap around the Site, which are likely to shield much of the new infrastructure and also some parts of the 'Wood of Middleton'. New linear tree planting belts around the perimeter of the scheme will help soften the proposals over time, although gaps will remain. However, the change in landform with earth bunding around the perimeter is likely to remain visible as an uncharacteristic landscape feature on the valley side.

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Substantial to Moderate Adverse Effect
- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Moderate Adverse Effect.

Views from unnamed lane south west of Blackford House, (refer example photo locations 9 & 10) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.10 Vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians may experience limited glimpsed views of the new scheme from the lower sections of road to the east of the Site at Blackford; portions of the access road and planting associated with the already consented 50MW scheme (ref: 23/0718) will be establishing on the slopes and the hill crest (photo 10). Despite the presence of a woodland block (Wood of Middleton) and other structures associated with infrastructure, portions of the proposed scheme are likely to become visible from behind the (unvegetated) crest in the landform. However, some of the new planting around the southern portions of the Site will establish over time, helping to increase the depth and quantity of tree canopy cover in the local area.

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Slight Adverse to Negligible Effect
- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Negligible Effect

Views from B9001 north of Rothienorman, (refer example photo location 23) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.11 Vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians using the B992 are unlikely to experience views of the proposed scheme from the open sections of the elevated road to the east of the Site as it rises out of the valley (near to Gallows Hill); although the landscape is open, views of the proposed development will be screened by the intervening undulating landform (Hill of Wells and Hill of Wells Wood), and occasional patches of woodland (associated with the valley beyond).

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Negligible Effect
- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Negligible Effect.

Views from Blackford Road (west of Rothienorman), (refer example photo locations 30 & 31) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.12 Vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians travelling west from Rothienorman village towards Blackford are unlikely to see any views of the proposed scheme. The presence of woodland in and around the edges of the shallow valley of Black Burn at Blackford, and the extensive tree cover enveloping Blackford House and Home Farm, limit views west towards the Site, from elevated land close to Rothienorman or lower down alongside the burn.

- Scheme completion (year 1 winter): Negligible Effect
- Established scheme (+15 years summer): Negligible Effect

7 CONCLUSION

7.1.1 The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment has reviewed the existing landscape and visual resource of the land at Blackford Energy Park (the Site) in consideration of the proposed scheme for a new battery energy storage facility and associated infrastructure.

7.1.2 The wider landscape contains a number of features, including infrastructure elements and energy production. It is noted that a number of new energy schemes have been approved and established within the area. This includes the new electricity substation (Rothienorman Substation) which has been established on open farmland adjacent to the west of the Site as part of the East Coast 400 kV Reinforcement Project, forming a termination point for numerous overhead wires and pylons that cross the landscape. To the west of the substation, there is another battery storage facility currently under construction to the south west of the Site (Overhill Farm BESS, planning ref: 22/2252). There are also long views towards small scale windfarms which are present in the wider landscape and form part of the backdrop in some skyline views. In addition, a more recent approval for a 50MW BESS has been consented to the east of the substation (planning ref: 23/0718), beside 'The Wood of Middleton'.

7.1.3 The Site forms part of the peripheral edge of a local river valley system associated with the Upper Ythan valley, and a gentle transition with wider rolling agricultural heartlands associated with central and northern Aberdeenshire, in an area which is generally well-settled, farmland with some woodland at around 160m to 140m AOD. The wider landform undulates up to approximately 195m AOD on surrounding crests, rising to over 200m to the south and north west, restricting many wider views. The undulations are incised by attractive small tributaries, including the Black Burn which runs to the south of the Site and around to the west towards Fisherford, as well as a further tributaries to the east at Blackford. Black Burn and Red Burn converge just south of Rothienorman and continue as Fordoun Burn to the River Ythan at Fyvie.

7.1.4 The patchwork of rolling agricultural fields in the wider landscape are generally bounded by a combination of post and wire fencing and well maintained low level hedgerows (some fragmented, together with some stone walls in the area) resulting in a largely open character. Although there are generally infrequent tree blocks on higher ground in this landscape, the 'Wood of Middleton' lies to the south of the Site, whilst the western edge of the field comprises a strong belt of trees following the field boundary.

7.1.5 Overall, the field parcel is considered to contribute positively to the local landscape character, since the land exhibits attributes or characteristics that are representative of the local landscape, including the agricultural use and landscape with marginal vegetation; meanwhile, the recent completion of the substation, coupled with the current work ongoing at the Overhill Farm and the recent approval of (50MW) battery storage adjacent to the Site, has already introduced a number of recognisable new industrial features on adjacent land (as well as the presence of overhead wires and pylons) which influences the character of the local area. In contrast, the elements that form the surrounding farmsteads are of variable style, but they nevertheless contribute to the rural integrity and character of farm groups within the landscape pattern, in combination with hedges and wooded features where occurring; overall, these elements are recognisable features in the landscape and only occasionally integrated by the structural planting and use of varied colours, in an otherwise open landscape.

7.1.6 There will be direct changes to the resource of the land in the proposed changes across the Site to one of infrastructure resource until the land is restored to agricultural at the end of the scheme's life. It is acknowledged that the proposed development brings new built elements and features into an area of the Site that is undeveloped and open. There will be an inevitable change to the open character of the agricultural land, the use of the land (for agriculture) and the change in the landform itself (through the introduction of terracing and the creation of large earth mounds along the outer edges of the Site), although existing (boundary) features such as trees and woodland will retain their structural integrity and composition as part of the wider landscape framework. Furthermore, it is recognised that the

proposals to accommodate the new battery energy storage units, solar and associated infrastructure elements will be placed in an existing context of energy and utility infrastructure on adjacent land. The development of the Site will represent a noticeable degree of change on part of the LCA locally.

7.1.7 Overall, the scale and degree of change on the Deveron and Upper Ythan Valleys as a whole would be apparent, as the change occurs on part of the valley's upper side, which is framed by a distinct but intervening block of woodland (Wood of Middleton). Accordingly, the overall significance of the landscape effect with regard to the proposed scheme is considered to represent a **Substantial to Moderate Adverse Effect** (Yr1). Once an appropriate landscape management scheme has established, the significance of the landscape effects in the long term will change and is considered to represent a **Moderate Adverse Effect** (Yr15) on landscape character, as the proposed development will be assimilating into its setting in the longer term.

7.1.8 Overall, the visual effects range from between generally **Substantial to Moderate Adverse** to **Negligible Effe**cts (Yr1), reducing to between **Moderate Adverse to Negligible Effects** (by Yr15), and it has been identified that users of a short section of the roadside (unnamed road from Blackford heading towards the B992 east of the Site) and a number of local farmsteads will experience the most apparent effect on views and visual amenity both during construction and following implementation; however, the effects (where experienced) are recognised as diminishing quickly with distance in an area with a concentration of similar infrastructure.

7.1.9 It should be noted that for some views the effects are considered to be short lived, largely because they occur on transient routes – e.g. roads – in these locations the views are often periodic views experienced whilst moving along a route in an undulating landform, where the presence of overhead wires and pylons and occasional long view toward wind turbines are characteristic of the local landscape of the lowlands in this location. As such, the change experienced is not always the focus of the view.

7.1.10 It is also noted that the effects of the scheme are likely to be reversible, as at the time the Site ceases to operate, the land could potentially be returned to agriculture;

however, this will occur beyond 15 years (being the time for the effects of the established scheme to be assessed) given the maximum length of 40-year lease being sought. That being the case, the operational equipment from the Site could subsequently be removed along with the earth bunds leaving the majority of the structural Green Infrastructure elements as maturing landscape features in the location.

APPENDIX A.1

Figures 1 - 5

Figure 1: Site Location

Figure 2: Environmental and Cultural Context with Public Rights of Way

Figure 3: Published Landscape Character Assessments

Figure 4: Historic Maps

Figure 5: ZTV

APPENDIX A.2

Figures 6 - 7

Figure 6: Photo Location Plan

Figure 7: Photographic Sheets

APPENDIX B

Published Landscape Character Assessments (Extracts)

Scottish Natural Heritage (National) Landscape Character Assessment (2019)

Banff and Buchan (County) Landscape Character Assessment (Review) (1997)

Scottish Natural Heritage (District) Strategic Landscape Capacity Assessment for Wind Energy in Aberdeenshire (2014)

APPENDIX C

Visualisations Pack

Verified Photomontages Sheets 1-45

APPENDIX D

LVIA Methodology

Landscape And Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) Methodology

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