The Landscape Institute has recently published its latest Technical Guidance Note on residential visual amenity assessment (RVAA), providing a non-prescriptive methodology for the assessment of a development’s effects on views experienced in and around private residential properties.

Residential visual amenity is just one aspect of residential amenity, a broader matter for decision makers which considers the environmental effects of a new development (including noise, vibration, dust, etc.) on private residents.

That is to say, it is not uncommon for residents to experience significant adverse visual effects and in these instances such effects will not necessarily render an application unacceptable in planning terms. Indeed, so follows the commonly held premise that no-one has a ‘right to a view.’ Inspector Jill Kingaby (Burnthouse Farm Windfarm appeal decision, July 2011, APP/D0515/A/10/2123739) stated in her report that despite this ‘There comes a point when, by virtue of the proximity, size and scale of a given development, a residential property would be rendered so unattractive a place to live that planning permission should be refused.’ When the existing living conditions are this severe, then the wider matter of residential amenity would be a material consideration for decision makers and in such cases, it would potentially not be in the public interest to create or allow such conditions where they did not exist before.

RVAA is grounded in the principles and methodologies outlined in the Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (GLVIA) 3rd edition and should be solely carried out by chartered landscape practitioners. RVAA is, though, quite distinct to landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA). LVIA considers impacts on visual amenity experienced from the public realm (or in some instances the impact on heritage assets, where access to public viewpoints is absent), while RVAA is concerned only with the visual amenity experienced from a private curtilage and is therefore an assessment carried out at a much finer grain, often considering only those residences in immediate proximity to large scale or overbearing developments.

The Landscape Institute’s Technical Guidance Note provides a framework for assessing whether the magnitude of a visual effect is so large that it would negatively affect the living conditions at a property, an objective measure referred to as the residential visual amenity threshold. If the threshold is reached then it becomes a matter of residential amenity and therefore a material consideration in the planning process.

Historically, RVAAs have been a common tool in the appeal process for on-shore windfarms where the key determining issue was not the identification of significant effects on views, but whether the proposed turbines would have an overbearing effect and the local area regarded, objectively, as an unattractive (as opposed to a less attractive) place in which to live.
As developments are now becoming gradually denser and taller, RVAAs are becoming an increasingly common tool in the application process. Residential amenity can be a factor which counters the planning balance, rendering applications unacceptable and so emphasises the need to consider residential visual amenity early in the feasibility and design process. Determining whether an effect on the living conditions at a property will reach the residential visual amenity threshold could ultimately shape the development and so this new guidance note is a welcome tool both for developers and decision makers.

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