Use of Viewpoint Analysis as a tool in Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)

**Whilst there has been much debate over recent years governing what might be described as the ‘rules of preparation and presentation for photomontages’** there has been little debate about how this information is reported and used in LVIA.

Visualisations of a proposed development are very important and the images they present often have a strong influence on planning decisions for development in those cases where aesthetics may be a key component to the determination. A single viewpoint image may for example, unduly influence the public and could disproportionately affect a decision.

The way in which LVIA are use viewpoint material is variable and no specific guidance is provided in GLVIA 3\(^2\). The three most common methods, currently used are listed as follows:

1. **Use of viewpoints as a proxy to visual assessment**
2. **Use of viewpoints to assess landscape effects and / or guide other EIA assessments**; and
3. **Use of viewpoint analysis to guide the assessment within the LVIA**.

The advantages and disadvantages of each method are briefly discussed as follows:

**Method 1: Use of viewpoints as a proxy to visual assessment**

In some cases, the visual assessment, undertaken as part of an LVIA, is restricted to the reporting of effects from the viewpoints alone. Whist this approach is simple and concise, the viewpoint and its accompanying visualisation become paramount and it is seldom the case that a single viewpoint can be truly representative of all the relevant visual receptors in that area.

**Method 2: Use of viewpoints to assess landscape and visual effects**

In some cases, viewpoints and visualisations will be used to assist the landscape assessment, although this is not explicit within GLVIA 3 guidance. When correctly used the baseline photography and visualisations can add to an assessment, helping to define the nature of landscape change and its geographical spread. Disadvantages arise when the landscape component of the viewpoint analysis is too brief, or becomes a ‘box ticking’ exercise. In those instances, views illustrating a significant visual effect can be misinterpreted into a much wider and significant landscape character effect, particularly if the viewpoint in question is ‘specific’ or ‘illustrative’ rather than ‘representative’ as defined by GLVIA 3\(^2\).

**Method 3: Use of viewpoint analysis to guide the LVIA**

Viewpoint analysis provides a more in depth assessment and of all the methods, most recognises the importance of the images and their potential influence on planning decisions. The analysis of the viewpoints is commensurate with rigour employed in viewpoint selection, photography and visualisation for example. The approach may be summarised as follows:

- Each viewpoint is assessed and in accordance with GLVIA 3, assessment text is provided explaining the rational for the assessment;
- A summary table of the viewpoint analysis is provided in order of distance; and
• An analysis of the results is provided helping to define the direction, elevation, geographical spread and nature of the potential visual effects in addition to the information initially presented via Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV) mapping.

A disadvantage of this approach is that it can result in the preparation of an ‘Appendix of Viewpoint Analysis’ in addition to the visual assessment text within the main chapter. However, the advantages are that this approach can assist in limiting more precisely the scope of an assessment by identifying the areas where significant effects are likely to occur. It can also greatly assist in discussions relating to ‘Statements of Common Ground’, which can involve disagreement between professionals on the visual effects of a proposed development. Finally, this approach can assist in providing clarity as to why a particular visual effect is significant and what weight it should be given in the decision process.

To conclude, it is advised that where a proposed development may be ‘visually sensitive’, then Method 3 should be employed, ensuring that a high level of assessment is paid to the viewpoint analysis, commensurate with the importance of visualisations in the overall planning process.


3 GLVIA 3, page 109.