Understanding a landscape’s sensitivity to change is an important aspect of Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) in EIA. Together with consideration of a proposal’s magnitude of effects, evaluating the sensitivity of landscape receptors is critical to supporting professional judgements about the significance of landscape effects as part of the LVIA process.

The third edition of the *Guidelines for Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment* (GLVIA3), published in 2013 by the Landscape Institute/Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment, recognises that ‘landscape sensitivity’ is effectively a shorthand way of describing the wider array of factors that underlie the nature of the receptor likely to be affected. However, as acknowledged in *The State of EIA Practice in the UK* (IEMA, 2011), this shorthand terminology may not promote transparency and understanding by stakeholders about the range of factors that has been considered in assessing the significance of effects. GLVIA3 encourages landscape professionals to assess the nature of a landscape receptor’s sensitivity by combining judgements about its susceptibility to the type of change arising from the specific proposal with judgements about the value attached to the receptor.

In the author’s experience, both as a former landscape planning officer for a local planning authority and as a landscape planning consultant, the term landscape sensitivity is typically widely defined by different stakeholders. This experience also highlights that the approach and criteria used to assess sensitivity of landscape receptors may not always be explicitly stated in LVIA.

This was readily apparent at a workshop for landscape professionals attended by the author in late 2015, which explored current best practice for informing Natural England’s review and update of landscape sensitivity assessment guidance dating from 2002. The workshop revealed how the definition of landscape sensitivity can vary considerably in practice, having different meanings to both landscape professionals and stakeholders. It also demonstrated that there is a risk of assessment methodologies and criteria becoming over-complex, and only capable of being understood by landscape professionals and not by decision-makers and other stakeholders in the planning process.

The author’s experience also shows that under-estimation of landscape sensitivity can sometimes be an issue in LVIA. This is often the case where baseline assessment studies have failed to adequately consider the nature and value of landscape receptors within the study area potentially affected by a proposed development. For example, a sound understanding of the unique pattern and condition of landscape features that combine to give an area its unique and distinctive character (such as field boundaries, historic farmsteads or ancient woodland) is critical to making judgements about the susceptibility of a landscape to the type of change arising from the nature of the specific proposal. Different places have different patterns and features that combine to create the unique, locally distinctive character of the landscape, with surviving historical patterns typically giving some places a particularly strong distinctive character. A thorough understanding of the historic character or ‘time depth’ of a site’s landscape and setting provides a starting point for informing mitigation of landscape impacts through appropriate site layout and project design. Altering these historic patterns or removing features altogether can have adverse impacts on landscape character, and this needs to be fully reflected in the assessment of sensitivity as part of the LVIA process.
Rather than being focused on definitions and potentially overly-complex methods provided by guidance, it is probably more important for landscape professionals and stakeholders to recognise that landscape sensitivity is fundamentally determined by the specific nature of the site and its context. A bespoke approach to assessing the sensitivity of landscape receptors is therefore most helpful in drawing out specific issues or subtleties. Key to this is the application of professional judgement based on proportionate methodologies, clearly defined assessment criteria and consistent use of terminology, so that the underlying assumptions and reasoning can be understood by all stakeholders.

Keeping the approach to landscape sensitivity assessment as simple and transparent as possible will go a long way to improving best practice, and help address what can often be perceived by stakeholders as a complex and subjective process in EIA.

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