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Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)

Blackhillock BESS Project (Scottish Stability)

for Blackhillock Flexpower Ltd.

November 2024

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File name:	2552A2 LVIA Blackhillock BESS 2024 11 18
Status:	FINAL
Date issued:	18th November 2024

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 Liz Lake Associates have been commissioned by Noriker Power Ltd on behalf of Blackhillock Flexpower Ltd (The Client), to prepare a report for ‘‘Blackhillock BESS Project (Scottish Stability)”, to be referred to hereafter as ‘the Site’.

1.1.2 This report has been prepared for 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.

1.1.3 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 (LVIA) has been undertaken to assess the likely effects upon the landscape resource, specific views and visual amenity.

1.1.4 A number of site visits have been undertaken during 2023 and 2024 to appraise the character and condition of the Site and the landscape context, and to identify key visual receptors. The assessment was undertaken by an experienced Chartered Landscape Architect once the scheme was sufficiently developed. The weather was fine and bright with clears spells and a few patches of early mist with good visibility overall.

1.1.5 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 the LI Technical Guidance Note 06/19.

1.1.6 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 3) third 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 more recent 'An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment, Christine Tudor, 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 / townscape, 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)
- Nature Scot – The Landscapes of Scotland, Descriptions 21-30 – Speyside to Deeside and Donside (2020); Area 22: Ladder and Cromdale Hills
- Moray and Nairn (County) Landscape Character Assessment (Review) (1998)
- Moray and Nairn Landscape Evolution and Influences (Landscape Character Assessment) (Nature Scot, 2019)
- Moray (District) Wind Energy Landscape Capacity Study (Carol Anderson Landscape Associates, 2017)
- Keith Green Energy & Infrastructure Framework (November 2023)
- Moray Just Transition: Landscape Sensitivity Study for Blackhillock Substation (LUC, May 2023)

2.1.4 The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment of the proposed development has been based upon the proposals illustrated on drawings prepared by consultants on behalf of the client, including a Landscape Strategy Plan prepared by Liz Lake Associates.

3 EXISTING SITUATION

3.1 Context

3.1.1 The Site is located at Blackhillock, approximately 1.3km south east of the town of Keith in Moray. The A96 cuts across the landscape to the east of the Site via Keith, connecting Inverness with Aberdeen. Meanwhile, the area contains a number of pylons and overhead power lines run (including through the field where the Site is located), converging around Blackhillock Substation, just to the west of the Site on elevated ground, with Cairdshill Quarry located to the south.

3.1.2 The Site, which lies at c.150-160m AOD forms part of the upland farmland landscape, which is an extensive landscape from the rolling foothills bordering the coastal plain to the rising plateau and hills. It is generally a large scale open landscape with broad incised shallow valleys, one of which lies to the east of the Site, where a network of burns feed the River Isla, near Keith.

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.

Nature Scot – The Landscapes of Scotland, Descriptions 21-30 – Speyside to Deeside and Donside (2020)

3.2.2 The Landscapes of Scotland Map and descriptions provides an overarching description of the Scottish Landscape. Keith and its immediate surrounds falls within the northern part of Area 22: Ladder and Cromdale Hills, which is described generally as,

"*This range of moorland hills forms simple skylines when viewed from the intervening glens. They seem large until compared to the Cairngorm Mountains immediately to the south. The uplands are heather-clad and managed for grouse. Now sparsely populated, the remains of shielings are scattered on the hills, demonstrating the importance of transhumance to past communities. The hills are mostly experienced*

from the east-west routes that cross them. The busiest roads and larger settlements, such as Keith, lie to the north of the area. Large distilleries and small whisky towns are located in the valleys, often at the confluence of the Spey with subsidiary burns".

National Landscape Character Assessment

3.2.3 The Site lies in the Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) (now Nature Scot) National Landscape Character Assessment LCT288: Upland Farmland. The Upland Farmland Landscape Character Type in Moray is represented by one area of mid-elevation, coastal uplands, to the north-east of the Spey. The character type is positioned between the Low Forested Hills to the north and Upland Farmed Valleys to the south-west. To the east, it transitions into the Low Hills and Basins and Farmed and Wooded River Valley. To the south, it merges into the Farmed Moorland Edge.[1]

3.2.4 The Upland Farmland profile describes the following as characteristics in the landscape for the area:

"***Landform***: *The landform of the Upland Farmland Landscape Character Type comprises the broad shallow short valleys, lower areas of the low, broad, gently undulating and widely spaced Low Forested Hills, which are the far northern and eastern margins of a large upland landmass descending from the Cairngorms. The bedrock of this land mass is exposed as cliffs at the nearby coastline. The area is probably at the eastern extent of the last glaciation, and the gentle rounded hills and valleys show little obvious sign of glacial activity".*

"Landcover *- The farming area encompasses the broad shallow valleys largely lying to the north of the River Isla, draining to the east via this river. Radiating out from this area, farming extends into the shallow valleys between the forested hills. Improved pasture is mixed with large areas of arable land, often in large scale, recently amalgamated, rectilinear fields. In some areas there is a patchwork of small rectangular and irregular fields of mainly pasture and rough grass, associated with older, smaller farms and small holdings. Relatively small pockets of native woodland exist, usually associated with settlement. On higher slopes, in pockets between forests, are small areas of heather moorland, and peaty soils and bog occur in poorer*

[1] SNH National Landscape Character Assessment LCT 288 Upland Farmland pg.1

drained land. The less intensively used upper slopes retain relicts of late prehistoric, medieval and more recent settlement".

***"Settlement**: The area is accessible and reasonably well settled, with small scale, frequent farms scattered in the central area and valleys, often partially enclosed by woodland pockets. Mills and distilleries provide an occasional reminder of the rural economy of the area in the later 19th Century. A network of local and major roads is concentrated around Keith, the only town, and roads typically radiate outwards in all direction to passes between hill tops. Keith retains its historic, intimate, planned core, distilleries and bonded warehouses. New development on the edge of the town is relatively prominent in this open landscape. Similar to the road network, pylon lines are concentrated within this area, focussing centrally on Blackhillock substation (currently expanding) the number of which can be regular features in views. Wind turbines, modern farm structures and houses are occasional but prominent features".*

*"**Perception:** There are expansive views across open farmland. The eye is drawn to the large scale, undulating form of the skyline to the north, with its occasional conical summits, conifer-clad hill tops, and valley passes, and landmark hills in adjoining landscapes, including the Bin of Cullen, Knock Hill and Meikle Balloch, seen from settlement and roads. On the elevated western periphery of this area, there are far-reaching views from passes to the coastal plain to the east, as well as views to moorland edge and mountains to the south from higher areas."*[2]

3.2.5 The key characteristics of the LCT Upland Farmland are:

- *"Broad shallow valleys.*
- *Large scale, open landscape with a simple vegetation pattern.*
- *Predominance of farming in valleys and the central basin.*

[2] SNH National Landscape Character Assessment LCT 288 Upland Farmland pg.1 & 2

- *Backdrop to farmland provided by the Low Forested Hills, with steeper north and western sides and shallow southern and eastern slopes, covered with extensive conifer forests, and simple, undulating skyline.*
- *Broad, sweeping, rectilinear fields of the central farmland, interspersed with patches of smaller fields, peaty soils, marginal pastures and small plantations.*
- *Relatively well settled farmland area, with an even distribution of farms accessed by a network of rural roads.*
- *Small farmsteads often partially enclosed by isolated woodland pockets.*
- *Views from top areas to Cairngorms and higher moorland edges to south, and to east across Buchan plain.*
- *Limited visual diversity*".[3]

3.2.6 This is a national scale assessment and provides a useful overview of landscape character at a broad scale, and it is recognised that district and county landscape character assessments will also assist further in relation to LVIA for development proposals at a local level.

Regional/ County Landscape Character Assessment

3.2.7 An older document forming part of a Nature Scot (formally SNH) review of the landscape of the County of Moray and Nairn: NatureScot Review 101 – Moray and Nairn LCA (1998, Turnbull Jeffrey Partnership), shows that in broad (Regional) landscape terms, the Site lies in Landscape Character Area 8: Uplands Farmland.

3.2.8 In general terms the Upland Farmlands are a place where,

"This extensive Landscape Character Type includes a wide range of Landscape Character Areas, from the rolling 'foothills' bordering the Coastal Plain, rising to plateaux and hills around 600m in height. The Uplands form a backdrop which is often views as a whole from the Coastal Plain and the Moray Firth." [4]

"The landform of the Landscape Character Area comprises broad, gently undulating slopes rising in close proximity to the coast, cut by gently graded valleys to the higher

[3] SNH National Landscape Character Assessment LCT 288 Upland Farmland pg.1

[4] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 44

lands of the Open Uplands, and punctuated by distinctive conical hills such as the Bin of Cullen and Knock Hill." [5]

"Although woodlands exist, these cover a smaller proportion of land than the Rolling Farmland and Forest Character Area, and are less integrated within the farmland, forming large scale coniferous plantations of uniform colour and height to the western edge of the Character Area, on the fringes of the Spey Valley. Smaller scale geometrically shaped young coniferous plantations are prominent on higher hill slopes, forming an abrupt edge to semi improved pastures and moorland. The few areas of native woodland that exist tend to be small isolated pockets associated with individual farmsteads." [6]

"Pasture interspersed with some arable land is the dominant land use within the broad valleys and this is where the dispersed settlement pattern of small farms is concentrated." [7]

3.2.9 The assessment identifies some relevant landscape issues as being,

- *"Rural development*
- *Future felling / restocking of forests*
- *Agricultural change*
- *Telecommunications*
- *Windfarm development".* [8]

3.2.10 The sensitivity of the landscape to change is noted as:

"This is a large scale landscape with a simple vegetation pattern and mainly rural population. It is a landscape where visual diversity is somewhat limited and some forms of landscape change could offer opportunities for enhancement, although it would be important to conserve the positive features of the landscape such as the

[5] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 92
[6] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 92
[7] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 92
[8] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 94

extensive views and general open character and landform of distinctive hills such as the Bin of Cullen and Knock Hill."[9]

3.2.11 **Management and Planning Guidelines** are outlined below and provide the basis for an overall aim of the Moray and Nairn Landscape, which is to,

"*Conserve the special character of the area, through the protection of distinctive features such as the coastline, native woodlands, policy landscapes and the built heritage, and to build on these features in order to achieve landscape enhancement. The strategy should also aim to consistently evaluate appropriate change and consider the visual balance and interrelationship of the different elements which make a contribution to the landscape character, in addition to considering the relationship between different Landscape Character Areas"*[10].

3.2.12 In terms of **Rural development,**

"The landscape has a dispersed pattern of settlement of small farms with few clustered settlements. The dispersed nature of existing settlement is reduced as newer buildings are often placed in close proximity along the roadside. The size and shape of recent housing is often quite different to the older traditional buildings, as is the use of modern materials in their construction, which contrasts with the naturally weathered stone".

"New housing development in the countryside should be sensitively located away from prominent ridges and hills and where it is placed to the roadside, it should be in close proximity to existing trees and woodland, which would help tie the building into the landscape. Where derelict or abandoned buildings can be reused, this should be encouraged through design guidance, as outlines in the Moray Local Plan – Housing in the Countryside (1993) and through the targeting of financial incentives".

3.2.13 In relation to **Agricultural change,**

[9] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 94

[10] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 109

"Changes to agricultural policy and market forces may encourage farmers in this area

to consider diversification in the future. This may well include the establishment of woodlands, as land values in this area are generally less than in other more favourable agricultural areas in Moray. The establishment of sensitively designed new mixed species woodlands would provide opportunities for enhancing the landscape by introducing visual diversity and creating a strong enclosure pattern to visually contain and shelter farmland. A potential inhibiting factor may however be associated with the tenure and size of land holdings and in view of this it may be necessary to consider the targeting of incentives towards new planting within a more detailed strategy, as previously described".

"The scale of new woodlands needs to be carefully considered in relationship to their proposed locations, particularly in view of the size of land holdings, as does the overall desired balance of open space to planting. It will be important to consider the conservation of heather moorland on upper hill slopes and tops which presently adds much visual interest to the landscape. The archaeological potential of the upland areas, which have been less modified by agricultural and forestry in the past, needs to be addressed as an integral part of the planning, design and establishment of new woodlands. Publications such as Forests and Archaeology (1995) and expert archaeological advice will be important in this respect".

3.2.14 Regarding **Telecommunications,**

"The growth in telecommunications forecasts and increase in the number of mast installations and supporting infrastructure, usually on high ground. The masts tend to be places on hills within close proximity to the settlements and the roads which they are servicing in order to get there best possible reception. The prominent rocky hill summits surrounding the Moray Firth are unsuitable for forestry and, as such, there presence as focal points are emphasised when seen in contrast to the surrounding even, dark, forest texture. If telecommunications' constructions are sited on these prominent summits, the visual importance of, and significance attached to, the

natural landform would be affected. Access roads for these installations can appear as hard, linear features, superimposed on the underlying natural form".
"Masts and supporting infrastructure may be placed within this Landscape Character Area in locations where the landform would help to absorb the man-made features, rather than draw attention to them. The nature of the generally convex rounded slopes means that masts could be placed in an open position, but one where the upland backdrop reduces the vertical emphasis. This would give the necessary height whilst avoiding the need to be placed on important hill summits. Where the existing forest roads are unsuitable for servicing the telecommunication building, the flow of the landform contours may be used as a guide when placing new roads to achieve the sense of unity. However, new access road development could be avoided is helicopter access where feasible option".

3.2.15 In relation to **Windfarm development,**

"In visual terms there is scope for accommodating a limited amount of windfarm development in this area due to the simple character of the landscape elements such as landform, vegetation patterns and settlement, which would help reduce any feeling of 'clutter'.....". [11]

Moray Local Landscape Designation Review 2018

3.2.16 More recently, the Council undertook a review of Landscape Designations within the district, and whilst the Site is not covered by a landscape designation, the report itself provides some useful background as to some of the landscape qualities and considerations typically associated with the district's character areas (through an evaluation of landscape criteria). The following attributes were considered in relation to LCT 8: Uplands Farmland[12],

[11] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 94-97
[12] Moray Local Landscape Designation Review 2018, p.98

3.2.17 Landscape Character Unit Reference: LCT 8

Scored Landscape Criteria (Total Score 9)		
Criteria	**Rating (and score)**	**Description**
Rarity/typicality	Low (1)	Extensive area of open farmland not rare in Moray
Scenic Qualities	Low (1)	Open elevated farmland with limited diversity. Strongly influenced by large wind turbines in places
Enjoyment	Medium-low (2)	Some Core Paths but intensive farmland generally limits widespread recreation
Cultural qualities	Medium (3)	Not notably rich in historic built features and few cultural associations
Naturalness	Medium-low (2)	Very small areas of SSSI designated but generally intensively managed farmland limits naturalness

Other considerations		
Connectivity	Some	Some visual connectivity with the Broad Forested Hills within Upland Farmland limits naturalness
Variation in quality	No	

3.2.18 The LCT as a whole was one of the lower scoring LCTs (a total of 9 points out of possible 25), and was not taken forward for further assessment on account of its rating towards the lower of the scale for value, quality and key attributes relating to landscape character.

Moray and Nairn Landscape Evolution and Influences (Landscape Character Assessment), 2019

3.2.19 Evolution of the land, through land use and management changes as well as its key components are both recognised,

"Humans have transformed the natural vegetation through settlement, farming, native forest clearance and tree planting, along with other activities. Recent land use and management changes provide a highly dynamic landscape which continues to evolve in character".

"Several key components of the landscape make a strong contribution to the distinctiveness of Moray and Nairn as a whole. When viewed together, they provide striking visual features, for example the forests and woodlands of the area, the varied coastline which can be seen along its length from the higher ground, and the extensive heather moorland covering the uplands. Buildings are also important components of the landscape and this applies not only to the grand estate houses and lodges, particularly prominent in the west and often associated with designed landscapes and policies; but also the small traditional farmsteads and cottages which dot the landscape, and the distinctive planned settlements of the area"[13].

"Since the early 20th Century, new large-scale land-use changes such as military air bases, extensive afforestation, out-of-town business parks, wind farms, expansion of towns and sporadic housing development in rural areas have begun to change the rural character of the area. Since the 1970s, the ongoing closure and redevelopment of smaller farms has resulted in large new houses or groups of houses starting to change the character of areas that were once the preserve of traditional farmsteads"[14].

3.2.20 The assessment in relation to **Energy generation and utilities** confirms,

"Like much of Scotland, renewable energy projects have become more prevalent in the last couple of decades and this seems likely to continue".

[13] Landscape Evolution and Influence – Moray and Nairn, p.4
[14] Landscape Evolution and Influence – Moray and Nairn, p.16

"A demonstration offshore site is operational in the Moray Firth and two offshore wind farms adjacent to this are likely to be built in the next few years. Linked to this there will probably be substations and overhead wires, and pylons linked to a submarine connection between Caithness and Moray, focussing on Keith".

"There are already more than 25 wind farms within this area. These include large developments at Dava Moor and a considerable number of single or small groups of small- to medium-sized turbines, especially in the foothills inland, for instance near Rothes".

"There is also a biomass-fired combined heat and power (CHP) plant built at Rothes which uses a combination of whisky distillery by-products and wood chips, generating enough energy to supply around 9000 homes as well as heat. There has been recent interest in solar farming in the area and permission has been granted for 20MW solar farm near Urquhart to take advantage of the good sunlight level in the area".

3.2.21 In relation to **Mineral Extraction – coastal and inland stone**,

"Hopeman Sandstone has been extracted in areas such as Quarrelwood for centuries to be used in building, and this continues in a limited level to this day. Clashach sandstone has some recognition in the building trade and is used in restoration and new-build projects, across Scotland and internationally. There is also some sand, aggregates, cobbles and limestone extraction".

"In recent years mineral extraction has increased in Moray, averaging approximately 330,000 tonnes per year. This is projected to continue over the next decade with three new quarries approved and another under consideration. The demand for minerals is resulting from major infrastructure projects, such as the A96 dualling and settlement expansion".

3.2.22 In relation to **Planned settlements** of which Keith is one of the principle towns,

"A number of these are planned settlements. The main towns such as Elgin, Nairn, Keith and Forres developed into market towns and flourished with the expansion of the railway system, improvements in agriculture and the growth of tourism. The towns of the area have expanded significantly in recent years, often accommodating substantial areas of new housing and, more recently, industry on their fringes".

Moray Wind Energy Capacity Study (2017)

3.2.23 In this study Moray Council also refer[15] to district level character which associates the Site as falling within the Uplands Farmland (8), and considers sensitivity issues (albeit being considered in relation to large scale wind turbine capacity purposes), which states,

"*The Upland Farmland landscape character type encompasses the broad shallow valleys largely lying to the north of the River Isla. This landscape has a simple land cover of open farmland with large fields of pasture predominantly enclosed by post and wire fences. There is an even distribution of farms across this extensive area, accessed by a close network of minor roads. This landscape is edged by the densely forested broad upland plateaux and more pronounced hill tops of the Broad Forested Hills within the Upland Farmland (8a) which forms a low dark backdrop to more settled and open farmland. Bin of Cullen, Meikle Balloch and Knock Hill form distinctive 'landmark' features from the Upland Farmland. While some key characteristics of this landscape could relate to larger development typologies, the presence of an even dispersal of small farms and houses and the potential for cumulative effects with large turbines sited both in this landscape and adjoining landscapes increases sensitivity*".

3.2.24 In addition, the document recognises the presence of farm buildings and industrial buildings in the LCA as well as opportunities for energy related infrastructure, and in particular the suitability of the landscape to accommodate turbines,

"*The simple, gently undulating landform and overall medium scale of this landscape which could best relate to the size of smaller typologies".*

"Freestanding turbines up to 12m high relate well to the size of existing buildings in the landscape, including farm buildings. These turbines are just over twice the height of a single storey house, while a two storey house is about 9m high to roof pitch. This height of turbine is also similar to small telephone masts and tall telegraph poles".

[15] Moray Wind Energy Capacity Study, 2017 (Carol Anderson Landscape Associates), p.58

"Freestanding turbines between 12m and around 20m in height to blade tip can be, at its highest, over twice the height of a two storey house. This size of turbine is therefore likely to be prominent and may appear above buildings. However, a well grown, mature forest, broadleaved or conifer tree is also about 15-20m in height. Turbines are likely to be similar in height to these trees, even more so in fertile lowland landscapes where trees often achieve good growth. Other structures of a similar height include taller communications masts and small pylons".

Keith Green Energy & Infrastructure Framework, November 2023 (A Just Transition Strategy for Moray)

3.2.25 In this study led by Collective Architecture, the intention was to further the Sottish Government's Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan to significantly upscale renewable energy production and provide,

"*…a strategic framework for Blackhillock and Keith North East (NE) in order to clearly guide development proposals for grid infrastructure and energy systems/ storage associated with renewable energy to the most appropriate locations in an around Keith*."

3.2.26 The study incorporates a Landscape Sensitivity Study carried out by LUC which focusses on the area immediately surrounding the existing Blackhillock Substation, using scenarios to reflect different types and scales of development that might be proposed in the area.

"Type 2 - Battery Energy Storage Systems / solar farms, representing industrial style development of more modest scale, in the form of 'shipping container' size buildings and / or solar arrays and associated road infrastructure. Development will potentially occupy a smaller footprint than Type 1 (unless it relates to a larger scale solar farm)".

3.2.27 Using a series of carefully defined criteria (physical character, including topography and scale; natural character; historic landscape character; form, density, identity setting of existing settlement/development; views and visual character including skylines; access and recreation; perceptual and experiential qualities), the study

identified a series of Local Landscape Character Areas (LLCAs) and identified the Site as falling with LLCA7: Gibston Farmed Valley Sides[16].

[note: there appears to be a typo on the report's Figure 15 – Blackhillock LCAs, which incorrectly indicates LLCA8; however, all other pages and documents refer to LLCA7]

3.2.28 The characteristics of the LLCA7 Gibston Farmed Valley Sides are,

- *"North-east facing lower slopes of Cairds Hill, following a shallow valley of a tributary of the Den Burn;*
- *Large, open and rectilinear fields occupied by mixed farmland and enclosed by post and wire fencing;*
- *Some broadleaved woodland along the tributary burn;*
- *Large farmsteads are visible on upper slopes;*
- *Strongly influenced by adjacent industrial development, as well as overhead lines which cross the LLCA;*
- *Elevation affords distant views north across Keith and Strathisla to rolling forested hills including Knock Hill and Lurg Hill, and east to Meikle Balloch Hill; and*
- *LLCA is visible from the A96 which follows its north-eastern boundary"*[17].

3.2.29 The assessment also identifies type of landscape and visual mitigation and landscape enhancement that would be potentially appropriate in this location.

- "*Reprofiling of platforms where possible to provide a more naturalistic landform across Cairds Hill (LLCA 1).*
- *Mixed woodland planting along A96 to screen views towards Blackhillock substation, the quarries and potential development sites (LLCAs 3, 7, 8).*
- *Enhanced planting around Blackhillock Substation and Beatrice HVDC Converter station to screen in views from the west, north and east (LLCA 1).*
- *Rationalisation/ potential undergrounding of overhead lines in the vicinity of the substation, to help reduce the prominence of larger scale vertical electricity infrastructure in the area (LLCAs 1, 3, 7, 8).*

[16] Keith Green Energy & Infrastructure Framework, p. 41

[17] Moray Just Transition: Landscape Sensitivity Study Study, May 2023, p. 24

- *Consider colour palette of buildings in substation sites, using colours which help structures recede into views (LLCA 1).*
- *Recessive colours which are likely to be suitable for the Moray landscape include greys, greens and browns. Native hedgerow planting along field boundaries to enhance landscape character and strengthen the habitat network / enhance biodiversity (LLCAs 2,3,7, 8).*
- *Native riparian woodland along tributary burns to enhance landscape character, strengthen habitat networks / enhance biodiversity and filter views towards the Beatrice Converter Station, Blackhillock Substation or quarries (LLCAs 2,3,7,8).*
- *Expansion and diversification of woodland on Cairds Hill to soften the linear forestry edge, strengthen the habitat network / enhance biodiversity and filter / screen views towards existing development and potential development site from the northwest (LLCA 10)"*[18]*.*

3.2.30 Section 7.1 of the study, including Figure 42[19], refers to Landscape and Habitat requirements of a proposed development, stating,

- *"The landscape character of both study areas is primarily rolling farmland and woodland, punctuated at intervals by road and energy infrastructure.*
- *Any proposed development must take cognisance of the landscape character and be sensitively sited and designed to minimise its visual impact.*
- *Any proposed landscape mitigation must enhance the local biodiversity. Any new development at Blackhillock must be located to the south of the ridgeline identified. At Keith Northeast any new development should generally keep to the north of the ridge line or avoid new infrastructure seen on the horizon in views from the settlement.*
- *Any new planting & woodland must connect with existing habitat networks & using native planting local to the area. (Refer to Appendix, Landscape Sensitivity Study).*
- *There are 2 key water courses in the locale with no identified flood risk"*

[18] Keith Green Energy & Infrastructure Framework, p. 44

[19] Keith Green Energy & Infrastructure Framework, p. 94-95

3.2.31 As well as the LLCAs, the study is underpinned by a Landscape Sensitivity Study, prepared by LUC, see below.

Moray Just Transition: Landscape Sensitivity Study for Blackhillock Substation (LUC May 2023)

3.2.32 The LLCA 7: Gibston Farmed Valley Sides are given a Sensitivity Rating of Low – Moderate for this type of development (Type 2), which is the joint lowest score of the study area. The detailed LUC assessment below shows that the land (including the Site) contains no Medium-High or High Sensitive attributes or characteristics.

LUC Table 4.7: Landscape Sensitivity Assessment for LLCA7: Gibston Farmed Valley Sides (P.24[20])

Criteria	Description	Rating
Physical character (including topography and scale)	Gently sloping landform; Fields are typically large in scale and regular in shape; and Large scale infrastructure influences the LLCA in proximity to Blackhillock Substation	L-M
Natural character	Mixed farmland with some limited broadleaved woodland along the tributary burn; and No ecologically designated areas.	L-M
Historic landscape character	No designated heritage assets; and Field patterns in surrounding area date from 18th century to present	L-M
Form, density, identity and setting of existing development	Adjacent development at Blackhillock Substation and Blackhillock Quarry has a strong influence, creating hard edges to the west and south of the LLCA; and The LLCA provides a backdrop to the valley of the Den Burn as seen from the A96	M
Views and visual character including skylines	A relatively open landscape with limited vegetation cover; and Visible from the valley of the Den Burn including the A96	M
Access and recreation	There are no core paths or recreational facilities	L
Perceptual and experiential qualities	Rural in character, but with modern influences including overhead lines and highly visible industrial development in the neighbouring LLCA; and A96 locally reduces tranquillity.	L-M

[20] Moray Just Transition: Landscape Sensitivity Study Study, May 2023, p. 24

3.2.33 As such the summary for the Type 2 development scenario is,

"*The LLCA is of low-moderate sensitivity to the Type 2 development scenario. Lower height buildings and structures may result in fewer significant landscape and visual effects and could be more easily screened in views from the A96*".

3.2.34 Suggested planting and mitigation measures include,

- *"Mixed woodland planting along A96 to screen views towards Blackhillock Substation and potential development sites in the LLCA.*
- *Native hedgerow planting along field boundaries to enhance landscape character and strengthen the habitat network / enhance biodiversity.*
- *Rationalisation/ potential undergrounding of overhead lines on the approach to Blackhillock Substation, to the west, to help reduce the prominence of larger scale vertical electricity infrastructure in the area".*

3.2.35 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 and non-statutory Designations

3.3.1 **Scheduled Monuments:** There are no Scheduled Monuments on the Site or within the 2km study area of the Site. (Refer to **Figure 2: Landscape and Heritage Designations with Public Rights of Way**).

3.3.2 **Listed Buildings**: There are no Listed Buildings on the Site, although there are a number of Listed Buildings within 2km of the Site within Keith; the nearest being Category C *42 Land Street, former steading at rear and garden wall* (LB35635), approximately 1.6km to the north west. (Refer to **Figure 2: Landscape and Heritage Designations with Public Rights of Way**).

3.3.3 **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.

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

3.3.5 **Countryside Around Towns (CAT):** Whilst the Site does not fall within the Keith CAT, the local landscape designation south of the town extends towards a property called Denhead, approximately 350m from the Site. The designation serves to "Protect the area around the town from development"[21]. (Refer to **Figure 2: Landscape and Heritage Designations with Public Rights of Way**).

3.3.6 **Conservation Areas**: There are no Conservation Areas on the Site, however Keith Mid Street and Keith Fife Keith Conservation Areas lie approximately 1.6km and 2.2km north west of the Site. (Refer to **Figure 2: Landscape and Heritage Designations with Public Rights of Way**).

3.3.7 **Public Rights of Way (PRoW):** There are no Public Rights of Way across the site itself; however, there are PRoW and Core Paths within 2km of the Site. The closest of which is Core Path KT06 to the north of the Site, connecting the nearby town of Keith with Dunnyduff Wood. Further Core Paths are located in the wider area shown on **Figure 2: Landscape and Heritage Designations with Public Rights of Way**. It should be noted that other paths, track and access routes are not marked on plans, but can be subject to public access.

3.3.8 **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 3: Environmental Designations**).

3.4 Landscape Resource

3.4.1 The Site forms part of the upland farmland landscape, which is an extensive landscape from the rolling foothills bordering the coastal plain, to rising plateaus and wooded hills. It is a large scale open landscape with broad shallow valleys, typified by the well wooded valley to the east of the Site through which the Burn of Drum fed by various tributaries (and sections of the A96) runs into the River Isla east of Keith.

[21] MLDP 2020 Vol 2: Settlement Statements, p257 and p254.

3.4.2 Whilst the Site lies at c. 150m AOD, it faces broadly east, with the surrounding landform extending up to almost 300m AOD in the west (at Cairds Wood), whilst to the east of the river valley the rolling agricultural land gives way to more prominent wooded hills, such as Dunnydruff Wood and Balloch Wood, whose wooded peak rises to c.365m AOD over 3km in the distance.

3.4.3 The patchwork of enlarged fields are generally bounded by a combination of post and wire fencing with small pockets of trees (including a small block of young trees on the northeastern boundary of the Site), resulting in pastoral fields that are open in character. High voltage overhead powerlines and pylons crosses the Site along the towards Blackhillock Substation (c.0.03km west), recently enlarged. There are a number of other developments which include a further substation (Beatrice Onshire substation), mineral extraction at Tarmac Cairdshill Quarry, site compounds and other commercial/industrial activity focussed around Blackhillock.

3.4.4 The land surrounding the Site also contains a presence of isolated farmsteads in an open landscape adjacent to Gibston House and Little Gibston to the north and south, with further farmsteads scattered (for example Denhead, Rosehall Farm, Blackhillock Croft etc.) on the slopes either side of the valley. The farmsteads are often composed of a farmhouse cluster (finished in stone, grey concrete aggregate or whitewashed brick and render with grey roof tiles), 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 steel cladding.

3.4.5 Overall, the field parcel which contains the Site is considered to make a positive contribution to the local landscape character, since the land exhibits attributes or characteristics that are representative of the local landscape, including the agricultural use and rather open, sloping landform providing a landscape with a simple vegetation pattern together with a number of scattered farms and properties (for example Gibston House, Little Gibston, Denhead, Rosehall Cottage, Rosehall Farm, Tarnash), which is located alongside wider patches of woodland extending out of the valley floor, and pronounced wooded hills providing a strong backdrop to the local environment. However, there are a number of elements (overhead wires and pylons crossing the valley, substation to the west, a works compound directly south and a quarry to the south) which temper and cause a degree of dilution of the local

character, especially given their proximity to the Site, including some features positioned on higher ground to the west edge of the field.

3.4.6 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; 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 contains no features or attributes of rarity and there appear to be no associations connecting the Site with notable people, historical events or the arts. The Site has a limited degree of remoteness or tranquillity due to its proximity to the local energy infrastructure, including the existing substation, pylons and overhead wires.

3.4.8 Although, the Site does not form part of a valued landscape for the purposes of the NPPF, taking into account the few value attributes of the Site features on the open land, the Site itself is recognised as having some value overall, considered to be medium-low.

3.5 Visual Resource

3.5.1 The visual amenity experienced by people (visual receptors) in the locality of the Site differs according to many factors. Visual receptors of higher sensitivity with limited susceptibility to change include residents at home (private viewpoints), people engaged in outdoor recreation (including 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 and people engaged in outdoor sport or recreation are considered less sensitive to changes in visual amenity.

3.5.2 Consideration of the study area, via desk research and field survey, has identified a number of locations from which the Site (proposed scheme) will potentially be visible.

However, this has been refined through ZTV and field survey to review an appraise the extent of visibility of the Site in the landscape.

3.5.3 The following specific, representative and illustrative views have been selected for inclusion in the report to illustrate the visual effects of the proposed scheme, from a range of receptors including private views, local roads and footpaths:

- A96, including to the south of the Site
- Unnamed rural lane approaching Blackhillock Substation and Gibston House
- Unnamed rural lanes around Rosehall Farm/ Cottage and Cairdshill Quarry
- Drum Rd and Core Paths, including KT07, east of Keith
- Southern edge of Keith, nr Edindiach Rd
- Seafield Park and Land Street, including Core Paths KT13 and KT06
- Public tracks at Balloch Wood, including Core Path KT03
- Path west of Birkenburn, nr the Old Military Rd
- Core Path KT04 at Edindiach Rd, south of Keith
- Core Path KT04 on lane near Mains of Auchoynainie
- Farmsteads and dwellings (eg Rosehall, Denhead, Tarnash Fm etc,)
- Miekle Balloch and Core Path KT27

3.5.4 These are shown on Figure 8: Viewpoint Location Plan and photographs are shown at Figure 9: 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.

3.5.5 The presence of the large-scale infrastructure/ raised structures associated with the existing Blackhillock Substation and other infrastructure influences views in the landscape to the extent that taller elements such as pylons and masts can be identified in some views above the woodland.

- The majority of closer views of the Site from the north are limited to a degree by intervening woodland/ vegetation and the folds in the undulating landform which roll down into the well wooded valley floor. Beyond the valley, only a few long distance glimpses are likely from rising open ground, as far as Drum Road; although the vertical presence of taller pylons and to a degree substations are appreciated in most views.

- Views from the west are largely contained by the existing substations (Blackhillock and Beatrice Onshore), which are elevated dominant features on a pronounced landform, and in part (to the south west) set in front of the wooded backdrop (Cairds Wood).
- Despite the landform falling away towards the wooded valley (which only limits some views), views from the east are otherwise generally open and extend across the A96 to Balloch Wood, and include a number of properties, roads and paths close to the Site. Filtered views between the coniferous woodland extend to the woodland routes, together with long elevated views from a section of open ground not far from the summit (Meikle Balloch).
- Localised topographical changes in the landform around the eastern (open) edge of Cairds Hill and small pockets of vegetation result in limited visibility towards the Site from the south, as the land falls towards the Burn of Nethertown and the A96.

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 as well-integrated into the landscape as possible and seeks to maintain the qualities of the transition between the wooded backdrop and the wooded river valley. The treatment of the Site boundaries and the structural spaces will be key to maintaining and enhancing the quality of that transition.

4.1.3 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.

4.1.4 The Moray and Nairn Landscape Planning and Guidance states the aim should be to,

"Conserve the special character of the area, through the protection of distinctive features such as the coastline, native woodlands, policy landscapes and the built heritage, and to build on these features in order to achieve landscape enhancement. The strategy should also aim to consistently evaluate appropriate change and consider the visual balance and interrelationship of the different elements which make a contribution to the landscape character, in addition to considering the relationship between different Landscape Character Areas"[22].

4.1.5 The Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment provides Guidelines for landscape typology Uplands Farmland (8). Those relevant to the Site are:

- *"Establishment of new woodlands comprised of native species, balanced created between woodland cover and open space.*

[22] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 109

- *Revitalisation and long term management of woodlands, designed landscape and distinctive hedgerows."*[23]

4.1.6 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 Noriker Power drawings, includes the following elements:

- Development comprising a series of individual containerised battery stores and inverter/transformer skids (circa 2-3m high), DNO substation including primary transformers and inverters (circa 9m-11.5m high), along with ancillary equipment including switch rooms, backup generator, storage containers and an access track with gravel finish.
- Where possible visible elements will be powder coated/ finished in an appropriate RAL colour (for example green tone to be agreed) to recede.
- The proposals will be fenced with a 2.4m high security perimeter fence and accessed from the edge of the existing field along the unnamed road via a new track, running below the existing pylon network.
- The proposals include a series of pre-planted ivy screens sited on earth bunds of varying height, with further native planting (trees and structure planting) to help assimilate a series of terraces into the sloping landform, replicating the effect of some trees emerging out of the wooded valley.
- New planting in the form of native trees and structure planting will provide structure and some height over time.

[23] No 101 Moray and Nairn Landscape Character Assessment, 1998, p. 110

- An attenuation basin and also a dry attenuation feature will also be provided to the north east of the battery storage as part of the drainage proposals for the scheme.

4.2.2 A landscape scheme will be implemented to minimise the effects of change to the character of the Site and its wider views and also seek to secure biodiversity enhancements. The proposed landscape scheme will include:

- Carefully widen the irregular patchwork mosaic profile of native scrub and tree planting along the southern and eastern boundary, in keeping with the character of the tree planting and vegetation adding height and which is associated with the small watercourse which feeds Den Burn.
- Provide pockets of trees where practical outside the utility easement to help provide depth and height relative to the terraces, as a means to soften the scheme and provide a layering effect where possible. Tree clusters will connect to existing features and help soften the scheme (it is accepted little can be done to alleviate the existing taller pylons).
- The new access track and fencing will be softened by planting a new native hedge, to help reinforce the strong linear field pattern visible in the area on the open slopes, where hedges have previously been removed. The area below the overhead wires and around pylon bases will be enhanced with a mosaic of native scrub and species rich grassland, extending the patchwork of low level planting into the centre of the Site.
- New planting will seek to add some height and structure where appropriate, to provide new groupings and clusters of trees, in an area where a careful balance of woodland and open spaces are required.

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). The landscape strategy would be developed in further detail as part of the planning conditions and would successfully ensure that the identified landscape and visual effects are minimised.

5 ASSESSMENT OF LANDSCAPE EFFECTS

5.1 Identifying the Landscape Effects

5.1.1 The effect of the proposed changes to the Site, specifically on the identified landscape receptors (attributes) has 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.

5.1.2 This section of the report considers the results of the initial baseline work in the context of future potential development of 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 effects should be read in conjunction with the approach to mitigation (refer to Chapter 4).

5.2 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 regards 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 an established location where well considered change of an appropriate nature could be absorbed without loss of key characteristics, individual elements or features and specific aesthetic or perceptual aspects of overall landscape character. Indeed, it is recognised that this is in the context of a landscape with the presence of energy related development and infrastructure.

5.2.3 Accordingly, the sensitivity of the Site is considered to be medium-low when value (medium-low) and susceptibility (medium-low) 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 temporary effects during the construction phase.

5.3.3 The proposals would result in a direct change to the Site itself from one of agriculture to one of infrastructure resource, which would be apparent locally and 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 field itself. However, it is considered that the proposals to accommodate the new battery energy storage units and associated infrastructure elements will be present in the existing context of energy and utility infrastructure on adjacent land. The development of the Site will represent a noticeable change to the Site itself on a relatively small part of the LCA, which is already influenced by infrastructure development. The proposed scheme includes for new planting (as well as combinations of bunds and ivy screens) to help provide softening of the battery energy storage facility and help integrate it into the landscape.

5.3.4 Overall, the scale and degree of change on part of the Uplands Farmland local landscape would be recognised, but alongside some existing features that have already influenced the landscape in this location, including the nearby electrical substations and overhead power lines, and mineral extraction. Accordingly, the overall significance of the landscape effect with regard to the proposed scheme is considered to represent a Substantial to Moderate Adverse effect locally, with limited harm to the wider character of the area.

5.3.5 Once an appropriate landscape management scheme has established the significance of the landscape effects in the longer term will change and is considered to represent a Moderate to Slight Adverse Effect to the landscape resource and landscape character.

5.3.6 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 be restored to its current condition; however, this will occur beyond 15 years (being the time for the effects of the established scheme to be assessed) given the 25-year lease being sought. That being the case, the operational equipment from the Site could subsequently be removed, leaving only the Green Infrastructure elements as maturing landscape features in the location, together with a mosaic of enhanced grassland, scrub and meadow.

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.

6.1.2 The following assessment of visual effects should be read in conjunction with the approach to mitigation (refer to Chapter 4).

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

6.1.4 Whilst Site visits have been undertaken in winter months when deciduous vegetation has no leaf cover, the assessment has endeavoured to make informed judgements applicable to visual amenity throughout the year and the consideration of seasonal views during summer months.

6.1.5 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 or 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.*[24]

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

6.2 Significance of Visual Effects

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*
- *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 development. The significance of the visual effect has been assessed upon completion of the scheme and once established (i.e. 15 years plus), being either a Negligible, Minor, Moderate or Substantial Effect overall.

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 local farmsteads/ dwellings in the vicinity of the Site, (refer example photo views 12, 5, 6, 20, 18) (High Sensitivity)

6.3.3 Residents with an outlook across open fields are likely to experience views of the new BESS storage development from land surrounding the Site, due to the orientation and layout of the scattered farmsteads and the nature of the undulating landform (e.g. Gibston House, properties at/adjacent to Tarnash Farm, Denhead, Mains of Auchoynainie, Rosehall); however, where visible the new proposals would be seen in an agricultural context (although a few with an industrial influence) and new planting will help soften the scheme further to a degree, however the influence of industrial development will remain.

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

Views from the southern edge of Keith, nr Seafield Park/ Lands Street north of the Site, (refer example photo views 21 and 22) (High Sensitivity)

6.3.4 Residents with facing windows at the edge of the settlement are unlikely to experience clear views of the proposed scheme from land surrounding the Site, due to the presence of the localised landform and extensive vegetation within and to the edges of the cutting within which the well concealed A96 and Den Burn lie. Seafield Park and connecting Core Paths which lie at the edge of the settlement provide some southern views across the undulating valleys beyond the town, but will be unlikely to be affected by the proposed scheme (although existing pylons and substations will still be glimpsed)

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

Public Viewpoints

Views from public tracks at Balloch Wood/ Meikle Balloch (Core Paths KT27, KT03) , (refer example photo views 14, 9 and 25) (High Sensitivity)

Users of the Core Paths and associated tracks and trails in Balloch Wood and leading to Meikle Balloch Hill will experience a mixture of long views of the proposed scheme through gaps in the coniferous woodland cover; however, where visible the new structures would be seen with a backdrop of contrasting industrial influences to the views, which are apparent and in close proximity to the Site. It is noted that the hilltop is more open above the woodland canopy; however, by contrast the limited effects will be felt at a much greater distance approaching 3km and in a much wider panorama, which includes other infrastructure.

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

Views from Core Path KT04 at Edindiach Rd, east of Keith
(refer example photo view 6) (High Sensitivity)

6.3.5 Users of the Core Path from the town accessing the associated tracks and trails for recreation in the surrounding area are unlikely to experience views of the proposals due to a combination of the localised nature of the rolling landform profile above the edge of Den Burn, where the steeper side slopes also contain a significant amount of vegetation cover limiting views south towards the Site.

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

Views from track west of Birkenburn, Old Military Rd
(refer example photo views 15) (High Sensitivity)

6.3.6 Users on a short section of path/ track west of Birkenburn are likely to experience some glimpsed views of the BESS scheme across the Burn of Tarnash in gaps between sections of woodland within the valley; however, where visible it will be glimpsed in a context with isolated farms and outbuildings already visible, as well as

a backdrop of contrasting industrial influences to the views, which are apparent near to the Site.

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

Views from Core Path KT04/Edindiach Rd near Mains of Auchoynainie (refer example photo views 7) (High Sensitivity)

6.3.7 Users on a section of the Core Path (also a local road) between Dunnyduff Wood and the car park at the foot of Balloch Wood will experience views of the proposals across the open valley side; however, where visible the new structures would be seen in context with the existing backdrop of some industrial influences to the views, which are apparent and in close proximity to the Site.

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

Transport Routes

Views from section of unnamed road approaching Blackhillock Substation and Gibston House, Site access (refer example photo views 18, 19 & 20) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.8 Albeit slightly elevated from the Site, vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians will be likely to experience views of the new BESS proposals from the road and new access track; however, the type of change will be similar to that experienced further along the road at Denhead. The upper portion of the new structures would be seen in a similar context towards the end of the track, and with agricultural elements in view (Gibston House adjacent) whilst some of the new planting will help integrate the scheme further. The effects will diminish quickly with distance along the road.

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

Views from A96 (refer example photo views 13 & 24) (Medium Sensitivity)

6.3.9 On the whole, views from the A96 will be limited with no views from the south (eg near Marypark, which is masked by the landform or from the north (alongside Den Burn where there is strong vegetation in the valley). However, from a short open section of road near Rosehall Cottage/Farm, vehicles using the A96 will experience views of the new BESS proposals; however, the new structures would be seen in a similar industrial context with other industrial elements in view, and the substation as a backdrop, whilst some of the new planting will help integrate the agricultural form further. The effects will diminish quickly with distance along the road.

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

Views from section of Drum Rd (also Core Path KT07/ KT08), Keith (refer example photo views 16, 23 & 24) (High Sensitivity)

6.3.10 Albeit slightly elevated above the Burn of Drum, vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians will be unlikely to experience clear views of the new scheme from the road and new access track given the intervening landform and presence of vegetation. Long views from here and the associated connecting Core Paths towards the proposals may be glimpsed, just beyond the town fringes (albeit there is another small substation visible at Keith), with agricultural buildings present and long views of infrastructure and woodland in the rolling landscape, in part associated with the converging Burns in the valleys at Tarnash.

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

7 CONCLUSIONS

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

7.1.2 The Site forms part of the upland farmland landscape, which is an extensive landscape from the rolling foothills bordering the coastal plain, to rising plateaus and hills. It is a large scale open landscape with broad shallow valleys, typified by the well wooded valley to the east of the Site through which the Burn of Drum fed by various tributaries (and sections of the A96) runs into the River Isla east of Keith. Whilst the Site lies at c. 150m AOD, it faces broadly east, with the surrounding landform extending up to almost 300m AOD in the west (at Cairds Wood), whilst to the east of the river valley the rolling agricultural land gives way to more prominent wooded hills, such as Dunnydruff Wood and Balloch Wood, whose wooded peak rises to c.365m AOD over 3km in the distance.

7.1.3 Overall, the field parcel which contains the Site is considered to make a positive contribution to the local landscape character, since the land exhibits attributes or characteristics that are representative of the local landscape, including the agricultural use and rather open, sloping landform providing a landscape with a simple vegetation pattern together with a number of scattered farms and properties (for example Gibston House, Little Gibston, Denhead, Rosehall Cottage, Rosehall Farm, Tarnash), which is located alongside wider patches of woodland extending out of the valley floor, and pronounced wooded hills providing a strong backdrop to the local environment. However, there are a number of elements (overhead wires and pylons crossing the valley, substation to the west, a works compound directly south and a quarry to the south) which temper and cause a degree of dilution of the local character, especially given their proximity to the Site, including some features positioned on higher ground to the west edge of the field.

7.1.4 The proposals would result in a direct change to the Site itself from one of agriculture to one of infrastructure resource, which would be apparent locally. However, it is considered that the proposals to accommodate the new battery energy storage units and associated infrastructure elements can be accommodated successfully in this location, given the existing context of energy and utility infrastructure on adjacent land. The development of the Site will represent a degree of change on a relatively small part of the LCA. The proposed scheme includes for tree planting along the Site boundaries to help provide softening of the battery energy storage facility and help integrate it into the landscape.

7.1.5 The proposals would result in a direct change to the Site itself from one of agriculture to one of infrastructure resource, which would be apparent locally and 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 field itself. However, it is considered that the proposals to accommodate the new battery energy storage units and associated infrastructure elements will be present in the existing context of energy and utility infrastructure on adjacent land. The development of the Site will represent a noticeable change to the Site itself on a relatively small part of the LCA, which is already influenced by infrastructure development. The proposed scheme includes for new planting (as well as combinations of bunds and ivy screens) to help provide softening of the battery energy storage facility and help integrate it into the landscape.

7.1.6 Overall, the scale and degree of change on part of the Uplands Farmland local landscape would be recognised, but alongside some existing features that have already influenced the landscape in this location, including the nearby electrical substations and overhead power lines, and mineral extraction. Accordingly, the overall significance of the landscape effect with regard to the proposed scheme is considered to represent a Substantial to Moderate Adverse effect locally, with limited harm to the wider character of the area.

7.1.7 Once an appropriate landscape management scheme has established the significance of the landscape effects in the longer term will change and is considered

to represent a Moderate Adverse Effect to the landscape resource and landscape character. The significance of the visual effects is relatively localised due to the location within an undulating and incised landform and form a series of localised views seen principally from the local road network or farmsteads within the vicinity of the Site. The proposed scheme will be most apparent from slightly elevated positions looking across or over existing hedges and field boundaries.

7.1.8 Overall, the visual effects range from Substantial to Moderate Adverse to Negligible Effect, although it has been identified that users of a short section of the roadside (to the south of the Site and to the west of the Site) and local farmsteads will experience the most apparent effect on views and visual amenity both during construction and immediately following implementation, when drivers, cyclists and walkers are particularly close to the Site, albeit seen in the local context of an area which has some overhead wires and pylons crossing; however, the effects (where experienced) are recognised as diminishing over time as the mitigation scheme establishes, reducing the effects to range from Moderate Adverse to Negligible generally.

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 energy infrastructure, mineral extraction, overhead wires and pylons are characteristic of the local landscape. As such, the change experienced is not always the focus of the view.