

Botley West Solar Farm (Ref: EN010147)

The Examining Authority's

Rule 17 letter dated 17th June 2025 [PD-009]

Joint response from the Host Authorities

1st July 2025



Cherwell

DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE



***Vale
of White Horse***

District Council



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

<p>Rule 17 letter (17/06/25)</p>	<p>Local Authorities</p>	<p>Issue 2: Assessment of Effects</p> <p>It is stated in relevant representations, written representations and Local Impact Reports that the applicant's Landscape and Visual assessment in ES Chapter 8 has 'downplayed' the potential effects of the proposed development. Can the local authorities specifically identify which conclusions of the assessment they disagree with and explain why, with reference to relevant guidance and/or evidence?</p> <p>EN-1 (para. 5.10.13 and 5.10. 14) acknowledges that all proposed energy infrastructure is likely to have visual effects for many receptors around proposed sites and the Secretary of State will have to judge whether the visual effects on sensitive receptors, such as local residents, and other receptors, such as visitors to the local area, outweigh the benefits of the project.</p> <p>Page 144 of the Applicant's Responses to Relevant Representations, the applicant states “ <i>‘For the purposes of the Project, those effects of Moderate adverse or below are considered to be not significant. Taking the proportionality approach to the assessment, it is judged that having Moderate adverse as significant would have resulted in a disproportionate level of significant effects, when considering the circumstances of individual landscape and / or visual receptors.’</i></p> <p>This statement highlights the continued concern about the LVIA work. As covered in Table 8.13 Definitions Significance of Effects Matrix, a moderate effect is where the proposed changes would be noticeably out of scale or at odds with the character of the area. The LVIA should clearly assess the Landscape and Visual effects of the scheme to feed into the Planning Balance. Just because there is a disproportionate level of significant impacts does not mean that the level of significance should be reduced so that these levels are not recorded as significant.</p> <p>The method of the LVIA and its application is unclear in various respects. In addition, the assessment appears to lack sufficient consideration of wider contextual impacts on landscape character and views (from settlements etc), with many viewpoints being positioned overlooking</p>
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		<p>the edge of the development site. As such the majority of the conclusions of the LVIA are considered to be unsupported by reliable evidence.</p> <p>From a significance threshold perspective, only <i>Substantial</i> and <i>Major</i> effects are considered to be significant in the LVIA. It is unclear why the LVIA (Para 5.5.22) considers overall effects of ‘<i>Moderate</i>’ to not be significant, particularly as it is understood that other topics in the ES have done so. This suggests that the ES is inconsistent in its application of the significance threshold.</p> <p>Moderate effects are described (Table 8.13) as:</p> <p><i>“Where proposed changes would be noticeably out of scale or at odds with the character of an area.”</i></p> <p><i>“Where proposed changes to views would be noticeably out of scale or at odds with the existing view.”</i></p> <p>These descriptors sound like effects that should be categorised as significant.</p> <p>[PDB-006], the LVIA methodology Table 8.12 Assessment Matrix (extract below), has one area where the matrix results in a Significance of effect as <i>Moderate</i>, when the Sensitivity is <i>Medium</i> and the Magnitude is <i>Medium</i>. However, when either the Sensitivity or Magnitude is high in association with a Sensitivity or Magnitude that is low, the table assesses the Significance of effects as <i>Minor to Moderate</i> when a Significant of effect of <i>Moderate</i> would be expected. This presentation of the Assessment Matrix also has implications on how the landscape and visual effects of the scheme are assessed.</p>
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Table 8.12: Assessment matrix

Sensitivity of Receptor	Magnitude of Impact			
	Negligible	Low	Medium	High
Negligible	Negligible	Negligible to Minor	Negligible to Minor	Minor
Low	Negligible to Minor	Negligible to Minor	Minor	Minor to Moderate
Medium	Negligible to Minor	Minor	Moderate	Moderate to Major
High	Minor	Minor to Moderate	Moderate to Major	Major
Very High	Minor	Moderate to Major	Major	Substantial

8.5.20 The significance of effect on landscape, views and visual amenity has been described according to the five-point scale shown in the above matrix (Substantial, Major, Medium, Minor, Negligible or Neutral). A description of these terms is provided in **Table 8.13**, below.

Methodological issues aside, the findings in general seem to be lower than would be expected for a development of this scale, with very few significant effects identified.

It is also unclear how the Year 1 effects will reduce to the degree stated by Year 15 (often to *minor* or *negligible*). Viewpoint 20 is an example, where a *minor* adverse effect is said to drop to a *negligible* adverse effect. With the magnitude of impact being described as *negligible* in all cases, and the development being clearly visible across the hills in both views, neither judgement seems correct (see answer to earlier question).

An additional point is that the effect of the mitigation itself (hedgerows etc) should also be considered as part of the judgments, as it is a change that would be brought about by the proposed development – blocking views etc. This will give rise to a permanent change to the landscape character and views.

As a start, if all '*Moderate*' effects reported in the LVIA are also considered to be significant, then the assessment is likely to be fairer, and better in line with other EIA chapters.

		<p>Paragraph 8.14.4 and Table 8.24 summarises the expected effects. ‘<i>Moderate – Major</i>’ effects are listed as being significant in the summary of effects, although it is unclear if these are lower level effects (i.e. with a level sitting between <i>moderate</i> and <i>major</i>), or alternatively if they are sometimes <i>moderate</i> and sometimes <i>major</i>. Clarity could be provided by the applicant.</p> <p>The LVIA predicts no significant effects on landscape character. The Council disagrees with this conclusion, as there will be a large-scale change across extensive areas which will clearly significantly affect the key characteristics of the landscape.</p> <p>The LVIA states that significant visual effects are predicted for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRowS within or immediately adjacent to the project • Viewpoint 5b from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> • Viewpoint 5c from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> • Viewpoint 13 from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> • Viewpoint 17 from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> • Viewpoint 25 from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> • Viewpoint 26 from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> • Viewpoint 32 from a PRow Major • Viewpoint 33 from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> • Viewpoint 38 from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> • Viewpoint 39 from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> • Viewpoint 50 from a PRow Major • Viewpoint 54 from a PRow <i>Moderate-Major</i> <p>These are only considered to be significant at Year 1.</p>
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		<p>As above, it is likely that effects categorised as '<i>Moderate</i>' should also be considered by the decision maker as being significant.</p> <p>The Councils will be undertaking a site visit with their Landscape consultants in mid-July, at which point they can advise more widely in terms of judgements they disagree with and why. The Council has not undertaken a separate LVIA, as this is the role for the developer, and so at present more limited comment is made.</p> <p>RESPONSE:</p> <p>OHA: The OHA in advance of the planned site visit have made the following comments on receptors and magnitude.</p> <p>Receptors</p> <p>Joint LIR [REP1-072] paragraphs 7.3.43 -7.3.45 covers the Councils' concerns with regards to the assessment of visual receptors. There is no clear description of the visual impacts of the scheme, it predominately relates to the spot locations of the LVIA assessment and wider impacts including users of the reservoir, residents, the length and extent of the change of views from the footpath routes are not adequately covered in the LVIA.</p> <p>For the Visual Receptor Groups in VWHDC, the Southern Section of the site, PDB-006 LVIA paragraphs 8.9.127 and 8.9.128 covers the Public Rights of Way in the vicinity of the site. There is limited description of the impact of the scheme on the PROW network, only users of PROW 184/50/20 are mentioned with regards to the Project Substation and the NGET substation.</p> <p>With regards to Views from the Surrounding Road Network, only views from the B4044 are mentioned but no other roads such as Cumnor Road B4017 and Lower Whitley Road. It is noted that Residential/ Settlement Receptors are not covered.</p>
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		<p>Similar concerns have been raised about the Landscape Character Assessment and the level of detail of the assessment, this is covered in the Joint LIR [REP1-072] paragraphs 7.3.64 – 7.3.76.</p> <p>Magnitude of impact</p> <p>One of the VWHDCs main concerns relates to the ‘<i>Magnitude of impact</i>’ assessment. Using the Visual Operational Impacts Assessment as an example (however the points below equally apply to the other assessments in the LVIA such as Construction and Landscape), the Magnitude of impact is predominately assessed as <i>Low</i> for 7 of viewpoints that have views of the site. Referring to the LVIA [PDB-006]. Impact of magnitude criteria, the VWHDC would say that the Magnitude of impact on many of the Viewpoints and therefore views from the associated PRow routes should be <i>Medium</i> rather than <i>low</i>, making the significance of impact <i>Moderate</i> to <i>Major</i> and therefore significant. Table 8.11 definition of <i>Medium</i> Visual Impact is ‘<i>Moderate change in view: which may involve partial obstruction of existing view or partial change in character and composition of baseline, i.e. pre-development view, through the introduction of new elements or removal of existing elements. Change may be prominent but would not substantially alter scale and character of the surroundings and the wider setting. Composition of the views would alter. View character may be partially changed through the introduction of features which, though uncharacteristic, may not necessarily be visually discordant.</i>’</p> <p>The following viewpoints highlight the main VWHDC concerns regarding the viewpoints assessment in the LVIA [PDB-006], paragraphs 8.9.235 to 8.9.255 and Table 8.24.</p> <p>Viewpoint 45: View looking southeast from footpath 184/48/10, at the edge of Farmoor Reservoir. Assesses the magnitude of change as <i>low</i> but just covers one viewpoint, and does not look at how the site would be seen from other areas and different users of the reservoir. It also doesn’t mention impacts from the Project and NGET substation.</p> <p>Viewpoint 46: View looking south from footpath 184/15/10 near Eynsham Road</p>
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		<p>Assesses the magnitude of change as <i>low</i>. However, the application will be clearly visible on the rising ground, and views of the proposed solar panels and the Project and NGET substation can be seen. There is no mention that this footpath travels southwards towards the application site and therefore the magnitude of impact will increase.</p> <p>Viewpoint 47: View looking southeast from footpath 184/22/10 (Oxfordshire Greenbelt Way)</p> <p>Assesses the magnitude of change as <i>low</i>. However, the application will be clearly visible on the rising ground. There is no mention that this footpath travels eastwards towards the application site and therefore the magnitude of impact will increase.</p> <p>Viewpoint 48: View looking south from footpath 184/15/30, Oxford Green Belt Way</p> <p>Assesses the magnitude of change as <i>low</i>. However the viewpoint is directly adjacent to the solar panels, and the Photomontage illustrates a complete loss of the view. There are likely views to the west from this location towards the Project and NGET and this is not mentioned in the text. The viewpoint also does not cover that the Greenbelt Way, travels southwards from this point up the slope within the same field as the solar farm, with no existing screen.</p> <p>Viewpoint 49: View looking southwest from footpath 184/22/20</p> <p>Assesses the magnitude of change as <i>medium</i>, but does not cover that there will also be a view further to the west which is likely to include solar panels to the west of Denman's Copse and also the Project and NGET substation. Due to the location of the solar farm on rising ground, it is unlikely the proposed mitigation planting will have an effect on reducing the impact of the scheme.</p> <p>Viewpoint 50: View looking southeast from footpath 184/50/20, Oxford Green Belt Way adjacent Farmoor Reservoir</p>
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		<p>Assesses the magnitude of impact as <i>high</i>, views from the properties to the north at Filchampstead are likely to have a similar view. LVIA paragraph 8.9.246 says</p> <p><i>‘The magnitude of impact would likely reduce slightly to Medium. Resulting in a residual Moderate adverse significance of effect, which is not significant.’</i> However, using Table 8.12 a <i>Medium</i> level of impact with a <i>High</i> sensitivity would give a <i>Moderate to Major</i> impact which would be significant under the LVIA assessment of significance. I also note, the proposed mitigation does little to mitigate the change in view, so it is unclear how the significance level is reduced to <i>Medium</i> at Year 15.</p> <p>Viewpoint 51: View looking northeast from footpath 184/29/10 near Upper Whitley Farm</p> <p>Assesses the magnitude of impact as <i>low</i>. However this footpath passes through the solar array area and adjacent to the substations, so its views are likely to become similar to viewpoint 50. LVIA para 8.9.247 states that there will be views of solar panels and the substation will be visible above the hedgerows therefore the magnitude of impact is likely to be greater than the recorded <i>Low</i>.</p> <p>Viewpoint 53: View looking north from footpath 184/15/30, Oxford Green Belt Way</p> <p>Assesses the magnitude of impact as <i>low</i>. However, the photomontage, clearly illustrates that the solar farm will dominate the middle view and the views of the Substations will be apparent. Similar views or more open views will be achievable as the footpath drops northwards down the slope towards viewpoint 48.</p> <p>Viewpoint 54: View looking north from footpath 184/16/20</p> <p>Assesses the magnitude of impact as <i>Medium</i>. With a recorded <i>Medium to Major</i> significance at year 1, dropping to <i>moderate</i> at year 15. The viewpoint description does not cover the extent</p>
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		<p>of the footpath length that would be impacted or that you would be walking through solar arrays either side or illustrate the proposed access track on the photomontage.</p> <p>Cumulative impacts</p> <p>With regards to Cumulative impacts, LVIA paragraph 8.11.74 illustrates VWHDC's concern about the approach to assessment. It refers only to viewpoints 44 and 46 and not the PROW routes that these viewpoints represents. Both schemes will be apparent in views from the south, east, north and west. LVIA paragraph states 8.11.78</p> <p><i>'Both schemes would also be a noticeable addition to the landscape, when viewed from the south. Covering a relatively large area of land, there would be a Medium magnitude of direct cumulative impact upon the landscape character and available views. This would result in a Moderate adverse significance of cumulative effect, which would not be significant.'</i> We are unsure why a relatively large area results in a <i>Medium</i> and not a <i>Major</i> magnitude of impact, at Year 1 and therefore a significant cumulative effect. We also note there is limited information on visual effects either Combined or Sequential. Similar concerns are also present about the ability of mitigation planting being able to reduce the cumulative impact to Minor Adverse at year 15.</p> <p>VWHDC have similar concerns with regards to the NGET paragraph 8.11.85 and 8.11.86 being assessed as</p> <p><i>'Covering a relatively large area of land, there would be a Medium magnitude of direct cumulative impact upon the landscape character and available views. This would result in a Moderate adverse significance of cumulative effect, which would not be significant.'</i> The impact will be similar to the Project Substation, which is assessed as having a <i>High</i> Magnitude of impact. Similar concerns are also present about the ability of mitigation planting being able to reduce the cumulative impact to <i>Minor Adverse</i> at year 15.</p> <p>WODC:</p>
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		<p>The Environmental Statement Non-Technical Summary [APP-037] - (Para 6.3.20) states that there are no significant adverse effects either temporary and permanent effects on the local landscape character arising from construction and operation of the Project.</p> <p>This was the starting point for West Oxfordshire District Council's view that the applicant has downplayed the landscape and visual impacts of the proposed development. It would be expected that a development of this scale would result in significant landscape impacts, particularly as a result in the change to landscape character over a considerable area of the Oxfordshire countryside.</p> <p>The applicant's LVIA identifies a number of significant impacts for viewpoints throughout the project area but for winter Year 1 only, i.e. before mitigation has been established. The applicant concludes that there are no significant effects identified once the mitigation matures, with no residual significant effects identified at summer Year 15.</p> <p>WODC identify a number of examples where they consider the LVIA has 'downplayed' the potential effects of the proposed development as detailed below;</p> <p>Viewpoint 5b - View looking east from footpath 416/5/20 and Viewpoint 5c - View looking west from footpath 416/5/10 – Both viewpoints assessed as Moderate to major adverse during operation at winter year 1, reducing to minor to moderate adverse at summer year 15. These effects are the result of a medium magnitude of impact on a high sensitivity receptor. The proposed development would dominate the landscape in this location even with the addition of the screen planting to be established by year 15. The proposed development would dominate views to the east and west and with the addition of screen planting would substantially alter the view in this location. WODC consider that the magnitude of impact could be increased for this cluster of viewpoints, which would likely result in a higher significance of effect.</p> <p>Viewpoint 23 - View looking northeast from footpath 238/2/20, near Pinsley Wood – Significance of effects assessed as <i>moderate adverse</i> during operation at winter year 1 and</p>
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		<p><i>moderate adverse</i> during operation for summer year 15. This is based on a <i>medium</i> magnitude of impact for a receptor of <i>high</i> sensitivity.</p> <p>This viewpoint looks east from the ancient woodland at Pinsley Wood towards the ancient woodland at Burleigh Wood. The sensitivity of the receptor in this location is assessed as <i>high</i>. WODC agree with the assessment of the sensitivity of the receptor.</p> <p>The proposed development would dominate the landscape with panels, power converter stations and fencing visible in near and long-distance views.</p> <p>The applicant's methodology states that a <i>medium</i> magnitude of impact involves the introduction of elements that may be prominent but not necessarily uncharacteristic with the attributes of the receiving landscape. In terms of visual resources, a <i>medium</i> impact may arise from a change that may be prominent, but would not substantially alter the scale and character of the surroundings and wider setting. The composition of views would alter. View character may be partially changed through the introduction of features which, though uncharacteristic may not be visually discordant.</p> <p>WODC consider that the magnitude of impact has been understated in this example and that it could easily be assessed as <i>high</i>, i.e. introduction of dominant, uncharacteristic elements with the attributes of the receiving landscape with complete or very substantial change in view or complete change in character.</p> <p>The proposed mitigation measures when established at year 15 would completely block the view of the surrounding landscape from this viewpoint. This would also represent a <i>high</i> level of impact due to the complete change of view from the public right of way.</p>
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Viewpoint 23 – Looking east from Pinsley Wood (Winter Year 1)



Viewpoint 23 – Looking east from Pinsley Wood (Summer year 15)

Viewpoint 24 - View looking east from footpath 238/5/20 near Church Hanborough

Assessed as having a *moderate adverse* impact during the operational phase at winter year 1 reducing to a *minor adverse* impact at summer year 15. This is based on a *low to medium* magnitude of impact on a receptor of *high* sensitivity. Although views of the landscape are filtered by vegetation along the eastern side of the public right of way, where views are available they span a considerable distance over the rolling countryside across the Evenlode Valley and to Bladon Heath in the distance. The LVIA determines that there would be views in the immediate foreground and on rising ground across the Evenlode Valley of solar panels across majority of the view. At winter Year 1, although without leaf, existing layered vegetation would have limited screening effect due to the position of the view. Solar panels closest to the PRow would screen views to parts of the wider Project Site. Although the solar farm itself would screen views to the wider project and although it is difficult to determine without the aid of photomontages, WODC consider that the magnitude of impact could be considered to be high in this location due to the very substantial change in view, which would impact the assessment of significance.



Viewpoint 24 – looking east from footpath 238/5/20 (Existing summer view)

Viewpoint 25 - View looking south from footpath 238/5/20 -

Assessed as having a moderate to major adverse effect during the operational phase at winter year 1 which reduces to a *moderate adverse* effect at summer year 15. This is based on a

medium level of impact for a receptor of *high* sensitivity. This viewpoint is in an elevated position and offers panoramic, long-distance view of the surrounding countryside. It could be argued that the magnitude of impact from this location should be assessed as *high* due to the dominance of the proposed development in the landscape and the substantial change in view. The proposed mitigation planting would also result in a change to view by screening the panoramic views of the surrounding countryside, although the proposed development would still be visible in near and long-distance views. WODC consider that even with proposed mitigation the residual impact in this location is more likely to be *moderate to major*, which is significant.



Viewpoint 25 - View looking south from footpath 238/5/20 (Winter year 1)



Viewpoint 25 - View looking south from footpath 238/5/20 (Summer year 15)

Viewpoint 26 – View looking north from footpath 238/5/20 Moderate to major adverse during operation at winter year 1. Reduces to minor to moderate at summer year 15, based on a medium magnitude of impact for a receptor of high sensitivity. The proposed development would occupy the entire view from this location to the top of the hill (at viewpoint 25) and in views to the east extending down towards Lower Road. The significance of effect is judged to be moderate to major adverse at winter year 1, which is significant. It is not clear how the significance of effect will be reduced by summer year 15 as proposed mitigation would also likely have an adverse impact on views from this location.



Viewpoint 26 – View looking north from footpath 238/5/20 (Existing) (No photomontage available)

Viewpoint 27 – **View looking north from footpath 238/5/20, near City Farm**

Magnitude of impact is assessed as low from this location, but the proposed development would be clearly visible on rising ground, framing the view of the grade 1 Listed church at Church Hanborough. WODC consider that the magnitude of impact in this location would more likely be medium which would have an impact on the assessment of significance.



Viewpoint 27 – View looking north from footpath 238/5/20, near City Farm (Summer year 15)

Viewpoint 32 - **View looking northwest from footpath 124/5/10, near Begbroke**

Major adverse during operation at winter year 1. Reduces to minor to moderate at summer year 15. WODC consider that the residual effect at year 15 would remain as a moderate to major adverse impact due to the very substantial change in view. This would represent a high magnitude of impact on a receptor of high sensitivity,



Viewpoint 38 View looking west from footpath 152/6/10 near Purwell Farm -

Assessed as having a *moderate to major adverse* impact during the operational phase at winter year 1 which reduces to a *moderate adverse* impact at summer year 15

This is based on a *medium* level of impact for a *high* sensitivity of receptor. The applicant's photomontages indicate that the level of impact at winter year 1 would more accurately be assessed as a *high* level of impact due to the scale of change and the dominance of the proposed development in the landscape. The established mitigation measures at summer year

15 would also result in a *high* level of impact as the result would be a very substantial blocking of the existing view. A high level of impact for receptors of *high* sensitivity would result in a *major adverse* effect which is significant.



 Representative Viewpoint 28: View looking west from footpath 1528/16, near Purwell Farm	Bodley Wood Farm 000000000000	Date of Photo: 08/03/2023 View Date: 08/03/2023	Location in site plan: 000000000000	Distance to site: 100m Viewpoint range: 100-150m	Distance to site: 100m Viewpoint range: 100-150m	Horizontal field of view: 90° Field of view: 100-150m	Existing and Development Scenario: View 28 (Representative Viewpoint 28)
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 Representative Viewpoint 29: View looking west from footpath 1528/16, near Purwell Farm	Bodley Wood Farm 000000000000	Date of Photo: 08/03/2023 View Date: 08/03/2023	Location in site plan: 000000000000	Distance to site: 100m Viewpoint range: 100-150m	Distance to site: 100m Viewpoint range: 100-150m	Horizontal field of view: 90° Field of view: 100-150m	Existing and Development Scenario: View 29 (Representative Viewpoint 29)
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Viewpoint 40 - **View looking north west from footpath 152/6/10, near Cassington** –
Assessed as having a *low* magnitude of impact for a receptor of *high* sensitivity. The proposed development would be clearly visible on the rising slopes to the north and so WODC consider that the magnitude of impact should be increased to a *medium* due to the partial change in the landscape





Viewpoint 41 - View looking west from Yarnton Road, Cassington

Significance of effect assessed as *moderate adverse* at winter year 1 and *moderate adverse* at summer year 15. This is based on a *medium* magnitude of impact for a receptor of low to medium sensitivity. Although receptors in this location are likely to be predominantly road users, the proposed development would be highly visible due to its proximity to the highway and the impact that it would have on the openness of the landscape in this Green Belt location. WODC consider that the magnitude of impact could be increased for this viewpoint which would impact on the assessment of significance.



