

Rapid environmental impact assessment

Research report



A report from APSE,
commissioned by PSNet

Foreword

This new report from the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) provides a valuable, practical toolkit which managers and decision makers in councils throughout the UK can use to assess the impact of their public services on the environment. We commissioned it as part of the legacy of PSNet, to be an important part of the improvement process within public services.

Inside this research project you will find the powers available to councils as well as the varied picture on what measures councils currently have in place to meet the forthcoming environmental challenges. There is already a wealth of good practice within councils which can be adapted and adopted by others and I would encourage councils to use their networks to further progress this.

The report shows that public services are up for the environmental challenge with commitment from both elected members and senior management. However, less than half of authorities currently assess all new policies and activities for their environmental impact. This report will hopefully provide councils with the necessary tools to build on this commitment and ensure that environmental impact is understood and easily measured for a range of projects and services in local authorities.

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Chair of PS Net

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Appendix 1 - Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment Tool

Section 1: Introduction

PSNet commissioned APSE (the Association of Public Service Excellence) to carry out a project aimed at developing a toolkit for use in undertaking Environmental Impact Assessments. Whilst the statutory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) framework applies to major projects, the aim of this research was to produce a Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment Toolkit to help councils and other organisations to assess in a more systematic way, the environmental impact of less significant projects, plans and policies. This is to provide a preliminary assessment and screening of the potential environmental impacts of a project or proposal before a final decision is taken, as well as identifying whether a further assessment or environmental survey need to be carried out.

This research also examines the growing impact of environmental issues on local authority service delivery, identifies how prepared local authorities are to meet the challenges created by this agenda and provides a toolkit so that councils and other organisations can 'rapidly' assess the environmental impact of projects, plans and policies which aren't subject to the statutory EIA framework.

With over 300 local authorities signing up to the 'Nottingham Declaration', pledging their commitment to reducing their impact on climate change along with the new legal requirement for local authorities to reduce their carbon emissions, 'the carbon reduction commitment', the project aims to make a valuable contribution to helping local authorities to deal with some of the challenges posed in this area.

The research undertaken for this project included a major survey of councils throughout the UK to ascertain their approach to environmental management. Almost 300 responses were received from council managers and elected members. Follow-up qualitative interviews were carried out with a number of survey respondents to gain more in-depth knowledge on what authorities were doing in relation to environmental management.

Section 2: The role of councils

Councils play a number of important roles in their local community including community leader, service provider – the local council is often the biggest local employer - and as a major spending organisation and estate manager.

In 2007-08 the estimated expenditure of England's 385 local authorities was approximately £154bn. Comparative figures for Wales¹ are over £7 billion (£6 billion revenue and £1 billion capital) and for Scotland² are over £18 billion (£16.5 billion revenue and £2 billion capital). English councils employed in excess of 1.8m people and delivered approximately seven hundred different services. In the same period English councils had a combined procurement budget of over £50bn, spent £1.4bn on vehicles plant equipment and machinery, and had a capital budget of £19bn of which over £12bn was spent on new construction and conversion³. (Please note, the detailed financial statistics above have been provided for English councils only as this research report is written for PS Net whose membership is predominantly in England.)

Councils play a particularly key role in promoting the health, well-being and environment of their local communities. For example clean, attractive, and well designed public spaces encourage people to walk and cycle, and children to be active and play outdoors. The wider environmental benefits include reduced local traffic and CO2 emissions, as well as improved health and well-being and a safer, more vibrant neighbourhood. There is strong evidence⁴ of the positive contribution of both the natural and build environment to health.

¹ Welsh Local Government Financial Statistics 2009

² Scottish Local Government Financial Statistics 2007-08

³ Local Government Financial Statistics England no 19 2009

⁴Health, Place and Nature: How outdoor environments influence health and well-being: a knowledge base. Sustainable Development Commission
http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/Outdoor_environments_and_health.pdf

The local environment is consistently rated as important by people. Action to create good quality public spaces undoubtedly helps to raise the profile and reputation of the local council. And most people agree that government and businesses should set examples by doing more to tackle climate change.⁵ Polling by the Local Government Association also confirms strong support for councils playing a key role in tackling climate change.⁶

A positive approach to environmental quality and improvement also leads to economic benefits. Research by Keep Britain Tidy the environmental charity shows that good local environmental quality is a significant factor in improving the economic investment and ongoing prosperity of an area⁷.

Councils as major spenders can also gain considerable economic benefits, for example through reduced energy costs. Paying more attention to environmental issues can also impact positively on waste management and disposal costs, water bills, transport costs, and expenditure on consumables.

There is a wealth of evidence of councils up and down the country paying more attention than ever to environmental improvement and the contribution they can make in their different roles. The most high profile environmental issue is climate change and the effects this will have. The Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change was launched by a small number of councils in October 2000. By signing the Declaration, councils and their partners pledge to systematically address the causes of climate change and to prepare their community for its impacts. The main focus is on:

- Adaptation by helping their communities to become more resilient to extreme weather
- Mitigation by reducing greenhouse gas emissions from their own operations, services and the community.

⁵ Public attitudes and behaviours towards the environment: Tracker Survey 2009. Defra. September 2009.

⁶ Small Change, Big Difference: are there votes to be had in climate changes? August 2008

⁷ The Link Between Local Environmental Quality and Economic Improvement: EnCams 2005

The Declaration has been signed by over 300 local authorities in England. Local authorities in Scotland and Wales have signed their own versions.

There are many excellent examples of action by local authorities to promote a good quality local environment, and tackle environmental issues and climate change. However there is no room for complacency. The existence of good practice as demonstrated through case studies is not evidence that environmental concerns and actions are embedded in the culture of an organisation or of wider sectoral success in addressing these.

Section 3: The powers and responsibilities of councils

The environment, including climate change is now firmly part of the local government agenda. In recent years Central Government has given councils a wide range of powers and duties that can help them to tackle the key environmental issues. These include the following:

- The power to promote well-being that is set out in Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 for England and Wales (which came into force in 2001 in Wales), and the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 for Scotland. This permits a local authority to do anything that is likely to have the effect of promoting or improving the economic, social or environmental well-being of its area. The well-being powers provide significant scope for environmental initiatives including expenditure, financial assistance, co-operation with others, as well as the provision of staff, goods, services and accommodation.
- The Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' (October 2006) strengthened the leadership role of local authorities in England as 'place shapers'. The Local Government Performance Framework for England, introduced in the White Paper, includes several national indicators (NIs) linked to improving the local environment. An analysis by Defra of the 2008 Local Area Agreement (LAA) priorities⁸ shows some of the main environmental issues that England's local areas are tackling. These include cutting CO₂ emissions, having cleaner streets, improving household waste reuse, recycling and composting, preparing communities to adapt to the inevitable consequence of climate change, tackling fuel poverty, and increasing biodiversity.

The analysis shows that local councils are rising to the challenge of tackling climate change and its impacts with commitments in 98% of local areas. This includes reducing CO₂ emissions in communities in 67% of agreements, putting it among the top five indicators in England, whereas cleaning our streets is a priority for 48% and features among London's top 20.

⁸ 'Local areas will tackle environmental challenges' DEFRA website, 1 July 2008

Eighty-three per cent of areas have pledged improvements on managing municipal waste with 45% of areas committed to increasing the reuse, recycling and composting of household waste. A quarter of areas committed to reducing the amount of waste that is not reused, recycled or composted from households.

These local priorities contained in LAAs have been agreed with central government. This means that local authorities must devote resources, time and effort to achieving the things they believe will make people's lives better. Councils will be awarded extra money based on their performance against these priorities. Progress will be tracked by independent auditors and results published, so any need for improvement can be identified quickly and local authorities and service providers be held to account by local people.

DEFRA analysis of LAAs 2008

- In Wales, the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 expands local authorities' duties to secure improvement (the best value duty) to enhancing sustainability. The Wales Programme for Improvement, which is being reformed to take account of changes contained in the Local Government (Wales) measure 2009, draws on national indicators for Wales which are linked to improving the local environment. Performance data for 2006/2007 highlighted some notable improvements in service delivery for waste management services and energy efficiency.
- Through Scotland's Climate Change Declaration, all of Scotland's local authorities have committed themselves to take action, in partnership with the Scottish Government, on climate change. 21 of the 32 local authorities included ecological and carbon footprinting in their 2008 Single Outcome Agreements. A number of national indicators in Scotland measure environmental improvements. These show that the volume of biodegradable municipal waste sent to landfill has reduced in the last few years, and in 2008-09 was 1.26 million tonnes, compared to 1.47 million tonnes in 2006-07.
- The Sustainable Communities Act 2007 for England provides the opportunity for councils and communities to propose changes at national level (e.g. remove a barrier or specific action) to help deliver projects that will improve quality of life and wellbeing in their local areas. The LGA has been appointed as the national 'selector' body to assess and short-list proposals made by councils under the Act. Sixty-two applications from 32 local authorities (August 2009) propose action to

support environmental sustainability. The applications include proposals concerning energy efficiency and renewable energy; excess packaging and plastic bags; waste and recycling; local food production and allotments; and protection against flooding. An Amendment Bill proposes that there should be no limit on the short-list and that the process should be ongoing rather than dependant on invitation from the Secretary of State. This Act does not apply to Scotland or Northern Ireland and in Wales, the Local Government (Wales) Act 2009 provides councils with a duty to make progress towards its strategic objectives (as set out in its community strategy) especially in terms of the environmental well-being of the area.

- The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act deals with many of the problems affecting the quality of the local environment. The Act provides local authorities, parish and community councils and the Environment Agency with more effective powers and tools to tackle poor environmental quality and anti-social behaviour. In particular the Act includes sections on nuisance and abandoned vehicles, litter, graffiti, waste, noise and dogs. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 relates to England and Wales only.
- Planning - councils can influence the local environment through the planning system. The Planning Act 2008 for England and Wales gives local planning authorities a crucial role to play in planning for sustainable development. It adds a duty on councils to take action on climate change in their development plans. Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) documents and their replacements Planning Policy Statements (PPS) provide guidance to local authorities and others on planning policy and the operation of the planning system. Examples are:
 - Planning Policy Statement 9 - Biodiversity and geological conservation which stipulate that planning policies should ensure that biodiversity in green spaces and among developments is enhanced, contributing to a better quality of life and sense of well being and contributing to improving the local environment.
 - Planning Policy Guidance 17 – Sport and recreation which highlights how local planning authorities must take into account a community's need for recreational space. The guidance describes the role of the planning system in assessing the opportunities and needs for sport and recreation. It also describes the need to

assess and safeguard open space which has recreational value, resisting pressures for development.

- Planning Policy Guidance 19 – Outdoor advertisement control which explains how an advertisement control system can help contribute positively to maintaining an attractive environment.
- The second National Planning Framework (NPF2) is Scotland's strategy for the long-term development of Scotland's towns, cities and countryside. The NPF must be taken into account by local authorities in the preparation of statutory strategic and local development plans, thereby promoting climate change adaptation into the land use planning system and investment decisions.
- Transport – controlling traffic in a neighbourhood contributes to the local environment and all councils can find ways of encouraging sustainable travel. Councils also have opportunities to influence regional assemblies to ensure climate change is adequately considered when regional transport strategies are prepared or amended.

Local transport authorities are required to produce a local transport plan (LTP) and implementation of the Plan should take account of national climate change objectives and have regard to the climate change impacts of transport.

The Local Transport Act 2008 in England and Wales contains requirements supporting the government's efforts to tackle congestion and improve public transport. It gives local authorities powers to take action e.g. to develop proposals for local road pricing schemes (i.e. congestion charging) in a way that best meets local needs.

Planning can shape the pattern of development and influence the location, scale, density, design and mix of land uses. Through this it is possible to reduce the need to travel and reduce the length of journeys. It can also make it safer and easier for people to access jobs, shopping, leisure facilities and services by public transport, walking, and cycling.

Consistent application of these planning policies will help reduce some of the need for car journeys and enable people to make sustainable transport choices.

Planning Policy Guidance 13 (Transport) is also relevant. Its objectives are to integrate planning and transport at the national, regional, strategic and local level to:

- Promote more sustainable transport choices for both people and for moving freight
- Promote accessibility to jobs, shopping, leisure facilities and services by public transport, walking and cycling
- Reduce the need to travel, especially by car.
- In Scotland, the principal message of Scottish Planning Policy 17: Planning for Transport is to promote the integration of land use and transport, including creating the right conditions for greater use of sustainable transport modes. The policy states that local plans and local transport strategies should co-ordinate land use and transport planning at a local level.
- The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 for England and Wales introduced a duty for local authorities to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity when exercising all of their functions. In Scotland, the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, gave all public bodies in Scotland a duty to "further the conservation of biodiversity" as they carry out their work.
- The Sale of Electricity by Local Authorities (England and Wales) Regulations 2010 will give local authorities in England and Wales power to sell 'green' electricity produced from renewables such as wind, solar, aerothermal, geothermal, biomass, landfill gas, etc. Similar provisions have been introduced for local authorities in Scotland through the Sale of Electricity (Scotland) Regulations 2010.

Section 4: Carbon Reduction Commitment

The Climate Change Act 2008 made the UK the first country to have a legally binding long-term framework to cut carbon emissions.

The carbon reduction commitment (CRC) is the UK's first mandatory carbon trading scheme and covers both public and private sector organisations, including local authorities. It is designed to encourage large non-energy intensive organisations in the UK to reduce their CO₂ emissions. The aim of the carbon reduction commitment is to reduce the level of carbon emissions by approximately 1.2 million tonnes of CO₂ per year by 2020. As a Climate Change Act commitment the scheme is aiming to achieve an 80% reduction in CO₂ emissions by 2050.

Participation in the scheme is mandatory for those councils that meet the qualification criteria. During the introductory phase which runs from 1 April 2010, qualifying local authorities will have to buy carbon allowances to cover their energy related emissions. These will cost £12 per tonne CO₂ and there is no limit on what you can buy.

From April 2013 carbon allowances will be auctioned and the government will put a cap on the total CO₂ emissions. The price will be set by the market with councils and other big organisations able to buy and sell at the market price. If a council can implement a project that will reduce its CO₂ emissions it can sell its surplus allowance on the market. The aim is to use carbon trading to incentivise organisations to reduce their CO₂ emissions.

Data on each councils emissions and its general performance will be published and included in league tables.

Section 5: Sustainability and procurement and the role of local authorities

With an estimated combined procurement budget of over £50bn and a capital budget of £19bn in England alone, councils are in a strong position to influence the local environment through their approach to procurement.

Sustainable Procurement is a process whereby organisations meet their needs for goods, services, works and utilities in a way that achieves value for money on a whole life basis in terms of generating benefits not only to the organisation, but also to society and the economy, whilst minimising damage to the environment.

A sustainable procurement policy should consider the environmental consequences of a range of factors including design; non-renewable material use; manufacture and production methods; logistics; service delivery; use; operation; maintenance; reuse; recycling options; disposal; and suppliers' capabilities to address these consequences throughout the supply chain.

Section 6: APSE environmental survey

In November 2009 APSE carried a major survey of councils throughout the UK to ascertain their approach to environmental management. Almost 300 responses were received from council managers and elected members. Just over half (54.8%) were from unitary councils, with 37.6% from district councils and the remaining 7.6% from county councils.

Respondents were asked to assess the level of priority their authority gave to environmental issues. Over half (51.8%) said their council gave a high or very high priority to environmental issues, with a further 4 in 10 (37.7%) giving it a medium priority and just 7.4% saying it was low.

Respondents were then asked to answer a more specific set of questions on the council's overall approach to improving the environment. The replies indicate strong elected member (78.3%) and senior management (86.6%) support and commitment. Almost 85% of respondents said staff were encouraged to think about how they could make a positive impact on the environment through their actions at work, and almost 7 in 10 perceived strong public support for improving the local environment and tackling environmental issues. The full results are as follows:

In general how would you describe your Council's attitude to improving the local environment and tackling environmental issues?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
There is strong elected member support and commitment	25.2%	53.1%	11.9%	1.4%	8.4%
There is strong senior management support and commitment	24.6%	62%	10.6%	0.7%	2.1%
We have a good environmental policy statement which is regularly monitored and progress reported	25.5%	50%	18.8%	3.5%	6.3%

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
There is strong public support from the community for improving the local environment and tackling environmental issues	19%	50.7%	15.5%	0.7%	14.1%
Tackling environmental issues is seen by the Council as a way of making financial savings	4.9%	42%	39.9%	3.5%	9.8%
Complying with the legal minimum environmental standards and requirements is the Council's most important consideration	5.6%	40.1%	36.6%	7.7%	9.9%
Staff are encouraged to think about how they can make a positive impact on the environment through their actions at work	18.9%	65%	12.6%	1.4%	2.1%

Section 7: Environmental Management Systems (EMS)

Many local authorities have introduced an Environmental Management System (EMS) to help them to manage and reduce their environmental impact, manage their environmental risks, and ensure they comply with relevant legislation. The various EMS in use do not state specific environmental performance criteria but are part of an organisations management system. Their principal aim is to ensure that an organisation's overall environmental objectives are set out in its environmental policy and implemented throughout the organisation. The policy should be subjected to regular measurement, monitoring, and audit in order to assess its effectiveness and to achieve continual improvement.

The key component of EMSs is the process of identifying and evaluating the organisations impacts (positive or negative) on the environment, and its activities, products and services that cause them. Part of the process is the assessment of impact and the identification of operational control measures, and the setting of objectives and targets for environmental management and improvement.

When establishing an environmental management system (EMS) organisations often undertake an environmental review to:

- determine the impacts the organisation has on the environment, and which of them are significant;
- understand which of its activities, products and services cause the significant impacts;
- know which of its activities, products and services are covered by environmental legislation and regulations, whether it is complying with them and whether this can be sustained on an ongoing basis;
- know the extent to which it is controlling its significant environmental aspects and whether effective controls are already in place; and
- be in a position to develop objectives and targets for environmental improvement and implement additional operational controls where they are necessary.

Examples of environmental aspects are set out in more detail later but usually include:

- emissions to air;
- releases to water;
- disposal of waste and contamination of land;
- use of energy, raw materials and natural resources;
- land use and habitat loss;
- disposal of the organisation's products by customers; and
- environmental performance of contractors and suppliers

Once identified the significance of any impact is then evaluated.

In April 2008 Defra produced a position statement which sets out the Government's policy on EMS and explains why the Government **encourages** wider take up of EMSs. The statement has six main recommendations as follows:

1. Organisations should put in place an EMS that is appropriate for improving their environmental and financial performance, and which is best suited to their operations taking into account the size, complexity, nature and risks of their activities.
2. Organisations implementing an EMS should consider the value of adopting a national or international standard or scheme, such as the international standard ISO 14001, the EU Eco Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) or the British Standard BS 8555.
3. Organisations should aim to achieve certification of their EMS that provides independent recognition of performance by using auditors accredited by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS).
4. Organisations should aim to integrate their EMS into all their business activities, secure senior management commitment and leadership and involve all levels of staff in the implementation and delivery of an EMS.
5. An EMS should be used to demonstrate compliance with legislation and performance against industry benchmarks and performance indicators. This information should be disclosed and communicated internally and externally in an open and publicly available format.

6. An EMS should be used by organisations to help drive performance through the supply chain and support and encourage suppliers to attain more transparent and higher levels of financial, environmental and sustainable performance.

There are a number of different EMSs in use by councils. Although an EMS can be locally designed and self-certified, some council's prefer to follow a formal EMS standard such as ISO 14001 and EMAS⁹ as this is more likely to be recognised and valued by stakeholders. Others follow BS 8555¹⁰ using for example the Acorn¹¹. Other methods, such as Green Dragon in Wales, have different levels, with each step contributing towards achievement of the International and European environmental standards ISO 14001 and EMAS.

According to the APSE survey¹² almost four in ten (38.2%) councils have implemented an EMS, and just over 1 in 4 (27.3%) were planning to. Almost a quarter of the councils surveyed had not implemented an EMS and had no plans to do so.

Of those that had implemented an EMS or were planning to do so, over 4 in 10 (42.5%) were aiming to achieve the ISO 14001 standard and around 1 in 5 (21.9%) were using EMAS. Some council's had adopted an authority wide EMS and others had a departmental system. Whilst a more detailed analysis was not possible, 57% of the respondents said that environmental management was carried out at corporate level and 37% at departmental level.

⁹ EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme

¹⁰ British Standard BS 8555:2003 – 'Guidance to the phased implementation of an environmental management system including the use of environmental performance indicators'.

¹¹ IEMA Acorn Scheme

¹² *ibid*

Section 8: Environmental Impact Assessment

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) can be defined as “a systematic process to identify, predict and evaluate the environmental effects of proposed actions and projects.”¹³ There is a statutory requirement¹⁴ to carry out an EIA prior to major decisions and commitments being made and this is normally integrated into the relevant project design process. The aim is to ensure that those projects that are likely to have a major environmental impact are always subject to EIA and those that are unlikely to are excluded. There are two schedules. Major developments of the type listed in Schedule 1 (e.g. certain waste disposal installations; water treatment plants) always require a EIA and those on the Schedule 2 list (e.g. intensive livestock installations; storage facilities for petroleum and chemical products) will require a EIA if significant environmental impacts are likely.

Around 20% of those projects that require EIA do not require planning permission and are involved in their own decision making processes and have their own EIA regulations. Examples include motorways, trunk roads, overhead power-lines, offshore wind farms, forestry works.

Although significant, less than 0.1% of planning applications are subject to EIA in the UK. A basic EIA Process would look like the following:

¹³ Sadler, B., Fuller, K., et al (2002), *UNEP Environmental Impact Assessment Training Resource Manual*, 2nd Edition, UNEP, Geneva.

¹⁴ Section 71A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the Town and Country Planning Environmental Impact Assessment (England and Wales) Regulations 1999 and in amending regulations

Basic EIA Process

Scoping

Highlights the most important environmental issues



Baseline study

Provide data on the current situation and can use existing studies if they are available



Description and evaluation of baseline studies

Identify critical issues and provide a basis for monitoring



Impact prediction

The estimated impacts of the proposed based on scoping, baseline data and knowledge of previous interventions



Mitigation and monitoring proposals and prescription

Lists the measures needed to enhance environmental benefits and minimise adverse environmental impacts



Environmental Management Plan and monitoring

Mitigation and monitoring proposals may be written up in an environmental management plan.
The monitoring proposal should track the impacts of the project during implementation



Presentation of findings and proposals in the environmental impacts statement

The formal presentation of the EIA process

Source: DFID Environment Guide: A Guide to Environmental Screening June 2003

The role of EIA is to inform the decision maker of the significant environmental impacts that are likely to occur if the development proposal is granted consent. The Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA) Guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment identify a number of immediate and long term objectives of EIA¹⁵.

It describes the immediate objectives of EIA as to:

- improve the environmental design of the proposal;
- check the environmental acceptability of the proposals compared to the capacity of the site and the receiving environment;
- ensure that resources are used appropriately and efficiently;
- identify appropriate measures for mitigating the potential impacts of the proposal; and
- facilitate informed decision making, including setting the environmental terms and conditions for implementing the proposal.

It describes the long term objectives as to:

- avoid irreversible changes and serious damage to the environment
- safeguard valuable resources, natural areas and ecosystem components;
- enhance the social aspects of proposals; and
- protect human health and safety.

The assessment of an environmental impact is a difficult part of environmental management and although there are a range of tools available the professional judgement of those carrying out the assessment should be informed through consultation with stakeholders including where appropriate local communities.

Factors that need to be taken into consideration include:

- size, nature, frequency, likelihood and duration of the environmental impact;
- the sensitivity of the receiving environment and the extent to which the impact is reversible;
- the extent to which the impact (or the activity, product or service which causes it) is covered by environmental laws and regulations, or contractual requirements; and

¹⁵ E Brief IEMA Environmental Impact Assessment

- the importance of the impact to interested parties – e.g. employees, neighbours, regulators.

Source: EIMA Briefing

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA Directive 2001/42/EC)

The SEA Directive was introduced in 2001 and applies to plans adopted after 21 July 2006. It was designed to help us to understand the environmental impacts of a new policy and programmes in much the same way that EIA assesses the impact of specific projects. It requires environmental assessment of certain plans and programmes that are likely to have a significant impact on the environment. Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) and local plans are subject to SEA.

Regional bodies and local councils who prepare these plans have to:

- Prepare an environmental report on the plan or programme's likely significant effects on the environment
- Consult environmental authorities and the public
- Take the environmental report and consultation into account in decisions making
- Monitor implementation of the plan / programme to identify unforeseen effects and enable remedial action to be taken

There are five important stages of the SEA process that always needs to take place:

1. Collecting and presenting information on the environmental baseline and current problems, and their likely future evolution;
2. Predicting significant environmental effects of the plan or programme, including those of strategic alternatives;
3. Addressing adverse environmental effects through mitigation measures;
4. Consulting the public and authorities with environmental responsibilities as part of the assessment process; and
5. Monitoring the environmental effects of the plan or programme during its implementation.

An environmental report should be prepared which identifies, describes and evaluates the likely significant effects on the environment of implementing the plans and set out reasonable alternatives. Measures to avoid, mitigate, and compensate for any serious impact must be included along with a description of the monitoring measures.

SEA also has its own requirements for consultation particularly on the Environmental Report stage. SEA can be a very effective way of assessing the environmental impacts of a new policy and of assessing policy alternatives.

How do local authorities assess environmental impact?

Although the statutory EIA framework is significant, it only applies to major projects. As we have seen many local authorities do not have an EMS in place and have no systematic method for assessing the environmental impact of its decisions and activities.

In the APSE survey respondents were asked to identify those activities that were assessed for their environmental impact by their authority.

Which of the following best describes the activities that are assessed for their environmental impact by your authority?

Only new developments that are covered by the statutory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process	6.3%
Only <u>major</u> new policies, developments, activities, and projects which are likely to have a significant environmental impact	20%
All new policies, developments, activities, and projects	44.4%
It is left to the discretion of the senior responsible officer, or department, or elected member	20%
Don't know	9.4%

According to the survey less than half (44.4%) of authorities assess all new policies and activities for their environmental impact. In 1 in 5 cases the decision as to whether to assess activity for its environmental impact is left to the discretion of the senior officer or elected member. This is unsatisfactory.

Respondents also describe a wide range of methods used by decision takers when assessing environmental impact other than for major projects covered by the statutory EIA regulations.

Other than for developments covered by the statutory EIA process how are environmental factors taken into account in decision making?

A separate report on the environmental impact / issues is produced for the decision taker(s)	5.2%
Use an environmental impact assessment (EIA) procedure which involves an initial environmental screening process, followed where appropriate by an environmental study and report	18.8%
An environmental impact summary / short report is included in the officer recommendation / decision	35.1%
There is no system in place and it is left to the discretion of the senior responsible officer, department, or elected member	27.9%
Don't know	14.9%

A number of respondents to the survey said they would welcome the development of a tool that would enable councils to assess the environmental impact of a proposal as part of the decision making process.

Section 9: Developing a Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment Tool

As we have seen Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is a procedure which must be followed for certain types of project before they can be given 'development consent'. Information about the likely significant environmental effects of the development is collected and assessed in a systematic way.

An Environmental Statement (ES) is the document resulting from the EIA which accompanies the planning application, and the responsibility for producing it resides with the developer. The EIA should be taken into account by both the developer, as part of the project design, and by the relevant planning authority in deciding whether approval should be granted. If the developer undertakes the task properly, this should facilitate the smooth running of the approvals process.

It is a two stage process involving screening and scoping. A screening opinion determines whether an EIA is needed, and is provided by the relevant planning authority. A scoping opinion identifies the range of information which the planning authority considers must be contained within an ES.

SEA introduced in 2001 was designed to help us to understand the environmental impacts of a new policy and programmes in much the same way that EIA assesses the impact of specific projects. It also requires environmental assessment of certain plans and programmes that are likely to have a significant impact on the environment and follows a similar process.

The five important stages of the process can be summarised as follows:

1. Setting the context and establishing the baseline
2. Scope and policy alternatives
3. Effect of the project or plan
4. Consultation on the draft plan / proposal
5. Monitoring implementation

The various EIA regulations are designed to exclude minor projects and those that fall outside sensitive areas that are deemed unlikely to have significant environmental impacts.

It is clear from our research that there is a growing awareness of the importance of the environment and that many authorities would welcome a simple tool that would help them to assess in a more systematic way the environmental impact of less significant projects, plans or policies.

Policies, projects or plans that would be assessed using a local EIA tool could include;

- Opening or closing of a park or play facility
- Redesign of work methods e.g. street scene
- Implementation of revised car user scheme / staff transport policy
- Relocation of services or depot
- Agile working e.g. home working
- Reorganisation of waste collection rounds
- Procurement of new fleet

Appendix 1 contains the Rapid Impact Assessment Tool, which has been developed as part of this research project. This tool can be used as part of the initial screening opinion, helping to ensure that any potential environmental impact is identified by the responsible officer. A judgement will then need to be made about the seriousness of any potential impact and whether a more detailed study needs to be undertaken as part of the decision making process.

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