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The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all. We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

Front cover: Self-build eco homes at Ashley Vale, Bristol, by Jeff Morgan/Alamy

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for birds
for people
for ever

Strategic Environmental Assessment – learning from practice

Introduction

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

SEA and plan making

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is a tool used internationally to improve the environmental performance of plans[1] so that they can better contribute to sustainable development.

The introduction of the SEA Directive[2] into UK law in 2004 required a major change in approach to the integration of environmental issues into public plan making. SEA predicts and evaluates the environmental impacts of plans and their alternatives at an early stage in their preparation. It identifies improvements to plans through the involvement of environmental experts and the participation of the public. When SEA is carried out effectively and is properly taken into account by decision-makers, the result should be a more robust plan that responds to environmental challenges and improves people's quality of life.

Those affected by the Directive have been on a steep learning curve, trying to understand the implications of the new laws for their activities. In many cases, effective SEA requires changes to the way authorities set about developing plans. In others, some of the actions required to fulfil the SEA Directive already happened previously on a more informal level, but the Directive requires that these are formalised and that stakeholders are specifically consulted on the environmental information.

The cultural change needed to embrace the full benefits of SEA is slowly starting to happen. The RSPB is keen to see that this happens more quickly. In the first two years after the Directive came into effect, some SEAs were carried out under tight time constraints and others managed only a superficial assessment of the potential effects. Many started too late to influence the plan's development.

[1] The term 'plan' is used in this booklet to mean any plan, programme or strategy within the scope of EU SEA legislation, or national legislation where this is different.

[2] Directive 2001/42/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment. European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (2001).

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Grass snake by David Kjaer (rspbimages.com)

Gradually, SEA practice is becoming more pro-active. Some practitioners are starting early, using robust methodologies based on more comprehensive baseline data to identify and evaluate environmental effects. They work closely alongside plan makers to share information when it can best inform the plan. There is still some way to go before this practice becomes the norm. We hope the inspirational case studies presented here will show how SEA can be a beneficial and cost-effective process, which is already helping people to produce more environmentally-sustainable plans.

Why does the RSPB promote SEA?

The RSPB strongly supports SEA because it presents a major opportunity to address the environmental impacts of plans developed for a huge variety of sectors and at levels ranging from UK-wide to individual development sites. Highly complex, cumulative effects such as climate change and habitat loss can be more effectively addressed in strategic plans than in the context of individual projects. For example, SEA can collect baseline data on carbon emissions, and provide a mechanism to help ensure progressive reductions in carbon emissions are achieved through plan implementation, in line with Kyoto Protocol commitments.

In terms of biodiversity, SEA can:

- **help ensure biodiversity objectives are built into plans. For example, opportunities for habitat enhancement that contribute to Biodiversity Action Plan targets can be investigated**
- **identify and evaluate alternatives to proposals that may be better for biodiversity**
- **present recommendations to avoid and reduce identified impacts and safeguard biodiversity.**

Effective public consultation is also an essential component of SEA. The public, including environmental non-governmental organisations such as the RSPB, must be presented with the opportunity to have their say on the draft plan and SEA report near the end of the process. SEA also provides an opportunity for the public to help influence plan making at an earlier stage. By involving people early in the SEA process, practitioners can benefit from people's knowledge of their locality, the environmental problems that affect them, and their ideas about how these problems can be solved. A scoping stage that integrates major public concerns with the key technical issues identified, while flagging up less significant issues for consideration at lower tiers of assessment, can help ensure an efficient and focused SEA.

The RSPB's expertise in SEA

The RSPB has a strong national and international reputation for environmental assessment developed through our continued work in this area over the last 20 years. Through our expertise, we have successfully influenced the development of environmental impact assessment (EIA) and SEA legislation at both EU and UK levels. Guidance produced to encourage high quality impact assessments has included *A step by step guide to environmental appraisal* (1996, with Bedfordshire County Council) and *Biodiversity Impact* (2000 report and leaflet) on the treatment of biodiversity in EIA. Most recently, we were one of several organisations that produced *Strategic Environmental Assessment and Biodiversity: Guidance for Practitioners* (2004, co-funded with the Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature and the Environment Agency).

We are often asked to advise bodies on their environmental assessment practice and have organised several major SEA events, including a seminar on implementing the SEA Directive in the UK in 2002. We are regularly invited to give presentations and training at events in the UK and elsewhere.

Consulting the RSPB

The RSPB welcomes the opportunity to get involved early in SEA processes. We can advise on key biodiversity issues and on general good practice. While our resources are limited, please do contact us to discuss whether it is appropriate for us to be involved.

If you are carrying out an SEA that relates to a particular locality or region, please contact the relevant RSPB regional office (addresses on back page) and ask to speak to a Conservation Officer. Policy staff based at the UK Headquarters generally deal with SEAs for plans covering the whole of the UK or England only. Policy staff based at the relevant national headquarters lead on SEAs for plans in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

For more information on SEA and the RSPB, please contact Lisa Palframan at the RSPB UK Headquarters or e-mail lisa.palframan@rspb.org.uk

The case studies

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The following case studies demonstrate, in our view, an aspect of SEA or sustainability appraisal (SA)[2] that has been carried out to a high standard. As long as these aspects form part of a high quality SEA process and decision-makers are willing to accept the SEA findings, this should help to ensure an environmentally-sound plan. Often, the studies show an innovative or unusual approach to an aspect of SEA practice.

The SEA practitioners involved in these case studies often seek to work closely with the plan-makers to find better alternatives to current proposals, and investigate opportunities to avoid and reduce any negative environmental effects that could arise. The clear communication of assessment findings is also vital to their success, to ensure that recommendations to improve the sustainability of the plan are adopted.

Many of the case studies involved a partnership between an authority and a consultancy. As authorities build up expertise in SEA, it is likely that more will lead their own work and many may become self-sufficient. Consultancies will continue to offer direct support, advice and training to organisations with less experience.

At present, very few SEA processes are excellent in every aspect of quality, sometimes for reasons outside the SEA practitioners' control. Given that SEA is a new requirement for many of the plans featured and people are learning from experience, some case studies reflect that situation. Inclusion of a case study does not imply that the RSPB endorses every aspect of the SEA illustrated.

[2] SA is an appraisal of social, economic and environmental issues. It is required for Regional Spatial Strategies and new or revised Development Plan Documents and Supplementary Planning Documents produced in England. People are encouraged to meet the SEA Directive's requirements through carrying out an integrated SEA/SA process and producing a joint report. Further information can be found in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now DCLG) 2005 Sustainability Appraisal of Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Documents and at www.communities.gov.uk

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Comprehensive baseline studies

Use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) in SEA

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Scott Wilson Consultancy

To prepare for the SA/SEA of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea's Local Development Framework, Scott Wilson and the client realised that a comprehensive spatial collection of baseline data was vital. This would add value to the background data in the scoping report, and for the actual assessment. A second volume to the scoping report was developed, presenting a series of maps that reinforced baseline information collected at the earliest stage of the SA/SEA.

It was realised that, while there is plenty of environmental information on websites such as Nature on the Map (www.natureonthemap.org.uk) and Magic (www.magic.gov.uk), there is much less social and economic information available. The strategy integrated environmental information with that used in other studies, using a GIS package. Other data were then gathered, including public transport accessibility levels, indices of deprivation, census data, air pollution models, listed buildings, strategic views, locations of GP surgeries and bus stops. GIS maps show variations between wards and even streets.

This level of detail not only ensured a robust evidence base, but also allowed for the development of an assessment method that produced a replicable, transparent and flexible way of assessing sites. This ensured that sufficient sustainable development information was presented covering all elements of SA (economic, social and environmental). A list of contacts was developed, which will help with baseline information in the future.

Alex White, Scott Wilson
alex.white@scottwilson.com

An example of a GIS map used to provide a detailed baseline for this SEA/SA

Novel and effective communication of results

Sustainability Threshold Assessment approach

SA/SEA of Dartford Borough Council's Local Development Framework (Enfusion)

Enfusion was commissioned to undertake the SA/SEA of the Local Development Framework for Dartford Borough Council in the Thames Gateway, an area facing rapid environmental, social and economic changes. The scale of sustainability issues required a novel approach.

Enfusion used a Sustainability Threshold Assessment (STA) approach. It uses a colour scheme to determine the effect of an option or policy on each SA objective. A red policy poses absolute constraints, orange considerable constraints, yellow indicates room for improvement/ mitigation and light green is positive. Dark green shows a policy that would resolve an existing sustainability problem. Where an impact is uncertain or neutral, it is coloured blue. A median sustainability rating for each policy is then determined based on the prevalence of colours.

The approach has proved particularly useful in assessing options, as the overall sustainability effect is immediately visible. Summary tables can be produced providing a visual indication of how well a policy has performed, without the need to score results numerically. Absolute environmental constraints are instantly recognisable too.

The approach has been used on the SA/SEA of the Core Strategy, Site Specific Allocations and Area Action Plans, working equally well for all types of Local Development Documents. The approach has helped to focus the Council on the main sustainability issues and cumulative impacts arising from their local development framework; in particular, how best to meet challenging growth targets in the most resource-efficient and sustainable manner, and how to benefit existing communities in the face of rapid change.

Toney Hallahan, Enfusion
toney.hallahan@enfusion.co.uk

'Sustainability Appraisals are often full of tables using unintelligible symbols. Enfusion has focused on a user-friendly assessment method. Their traffic light approach allows easy comparison of policies and options. It highlights where policies should be amended to make them more sustainable.'

Adrian Gowan, Head of Policy, Dartford Borough Council

enfusion

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

Water vole by David Kjaer (rspb-images.com)

Effective tiering of SEA and EIA

Improving regeneration through Sustainability Appraisal

Brent Council

Sustainability Appraisal (incorporating SEA) of the South Kilburn Supplementary Planning Document (London Borough of Brent/Collingwood Environmental Planning)

The South Kilburn regeneration area occupies 48 hectares in the south-eastern corner of the London Borough of Brent. The objective of the South Kilburn Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) is to ensure long-term physical, social and environmental regeneration by establishing the principles and parameters to guide future development and enable the overall vision for South Kilburn to be realised. The SPD follows on from a Masterplan for the area prepared by Brent Council and South Kilburn *New Deal for Communities* in 2004.

As part of preparing the draft SPD, a Sustainability Appraisal (SA) incorporating SEA was undertaken between October 2004 and January 2005, in advance of the formal consultation on the draft SPD and its SA Report. The timescale for undertaking the SA was very tight, driven partly by the introduction of the new planning regime and the need to secure a mechanism for delivering the regeneration.

As it was a strategic appraisal, the SA did not consider each development site in detail, but focused on appraising the principles set out in the SPD, such as land use and design and development principles. It proposed mitigation measures and recommendations on how the principles could be improved and conditions added to the planning requirements and implementation of any planning permissions. The appraisal of the principles was an iterative process and the proposed mitigation measures and recommendations were incorporated, where considered appropriate, in revisions of the draft SPD.

The SA made specific recommendations relating to the need for, and scope of, more detailed assessments, including an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), to be undertaken at the subsequent outline planning application stage for the Masterplan and individual site-specific applications. This provides an important 'bridge' between the SA and subsequent EIA(s).

In addition to the tight timescale, an important limitation on the SA was the need to retrospectively consider alternatives because the Masterplan was developed over several years prior to the introduction of the SA/SEA requirements. This meant that a range of options had been considered, assessed and debated with the local community and other stakeholders prior to the preparation of the draft SPD, which consequently seeks to implement the preferred option as presented in the Masterplan. The SA therefore could only appraise the options retrospectively, rather than as they were developed.

'The comprehensive Sustainability Appraisal resulted in real changes and clear improvements to the SPD.'

Dave Carroll, Head of Policy and Projects, Brent Council

South Kilburn does, however, illustrate the potential for effective tiering between SA/SEA and EIA, even where both assessments relate to the same physical area. The SA also helped secure key enhancement and mitigation measures within the SPD.

Ric Eales, Collingwood Environmental Planning
r.eales@cep.co.uk

Chris Knights (rspb-images.com)

Humber Flood Risk Management Strategy

The scoping stage in SEA is an opportunity to identify key environmental issues, so they can be assessed in detail during the following stages. SEA objectives should reflect both technical issues and wider concerns. Scoping sometimes results in a long list of potential SEA objectives, some of which may not be immediately relevant to the plan. Yet, if they are ignored, the SEA may be criticised for missing out important issues.

The Environment Agency used a novel method of tackling this issue for the SEA of the Humber Estuary Flood Defence Strategy. SEA played an important role in the overall decision framework, which helped identify the most sustainable solution.

The Environment Agency set two types of SEA objectives. There were 'appraisal' objectives, produced using the results of earlier assessment work, consultation with stakeholders and professional judgement. A set of 'aspirational' objectives was also compiled, reflecting the Agency's goals, policies and objectives, and those of other parties.

Not all of the aspirational objectives were significant at the strategic level. However, they will guide the Agency's work in the Humber and during implementation of the strategy when a more detailed EIA will be needed for each of the capital scheme projects. They were also used as an additional test of the overall performance of the strategy and its contribution to the Agency's vision.

This approach helped focus the assessment on the most significant issues, actively recognising other important issues and demonstrating where these would be more appropriately addressed at other levels of assessment.

Jo Murphy, Environment Agency
Joanne.Murphy@environment-agency.gov.uk

A comparison of the two types of objectives

Appraisal

Key issue addressed by the SEA at strategy level.

- **Protection of people, property and infrastructure.**
- **Protection and enhancement of a European site.**
- **Port and navigation activities (geomorphology).**

Aspirational

Issues identified as 'non-strategic' but still important.

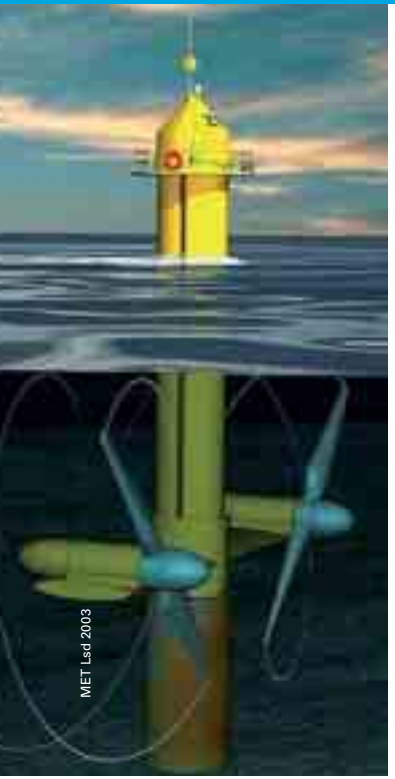
- **Risks of unknown archaeology and contamination.**
- **Detail of protected species.**
- **Local landowner concerns and aspirations.**

Environment Agency

Malcolm Hunt (rspb-images.com)

Effective consultation

Using a suite of methods to seek stakeholder input



Scottish Marine Renewables SEA (Scottish Executive, Faber Maunsell and Metoc)

The Scottish Executive commissioned this SEA to assess the environmental effects of harnessing up to 10% of Scotland's electricity generation needs from marine renewable energy sources by 2020. It will also help develop renewables policy and provide information to help developers with individual projects.

The potential for energy generation within the study area (west coast of Scotland, the Pentland Firth, Orkney and Shetland) is considerable. New technologies are being developed to convert waves and tides into energy. Some devices float, while others lie on the sea floor or are completely or partially submerged. Individual and cumulative environmental impacts are being assessed. Relevant environmental issues, ranging from marine mammals to diving birds, fisheries, archaeology and the coastal landscape, are covered by the SEA.

An SEA steering group was established, consisting of a range of interest groups including the RSPB. The group has provided valuable advice on all aspects of the SEA, including its scope, assessment methods and the need for additional studies, such as the potential collision risk to birds. Workshops have been held and a website (www.seaenergyscotland.co.uk) has been established. The consultation proposed for the environmental report, published in March 2007, will seek a wide range of opinions by targeting environmental organisations, developers and the public. An exhibition will travel throughout the study area to seek the opinions of the communities who may be most affected.

The SEA will help ensure that future planning for marine renewables takes account of all environmental information, as well as the views of the public and other stakeholders.

Iain Bell, Faber Maunsell
iain.bell@fabermaunsell.com

'The aim is to integrate environmental issues into the formulation of marine renewable energy policy. The SEA provides a starting point for the future planning of marine renewable energy projects in Scotland and the involvement of the Steering Group and wider consultations are a key part of this process.'
Scottish Executive

Working together

Using SEA to facilitate interdisciplinary working

Buckinghamshire County Council

SEA of Buckinghamshire County Council Local Transport Plan 2006–2011 (Buckinghamshire County Council/Centre for Sustainability (C4S) at TRL)

The Buckinghamshire County Council Local Transport Plan (LTP) 2006–2011 sets out the Council's strategy, vision and implementation programme for all forms of transport. It includes proposals for 15 major transport schemes, including public transport and road link improvements.

After the production of the scoping report, C4S were commissioned to work at the Council offices alongside the transport planning team, co-ordinating the assessment activities and producing the Environmental Report. The environmental performance of the plan was enhanced by others in the Council, including the County Archaeologist, and the biodiversity and landscape teams.

With the LTP proposing a lot of major schemes, the GIS facility, which had originally been used to provide the environmental context to the SEA, was used to identify conflicts and synergies. A variety of biodiversity, landscape, heritage and social datasets were used. Some potential adverse impacts relating to heritage and landscape resources were identified using the GIS, as were positive effects relating to improved access for deprived neighbourhoods.

Several features of this SEA contributed to a thorough understanding of the potential sustainability impacts of the LTP, in particular the detailed discussions with other departments and the GIS assessment. The SEA team presented mitigation and enhancement measures in the environmental report. Many of these have been adopted, and therefore the SEA process has helped to greatly improve the sustainability of the LTP.

Rob Gardner, C4S
rgardner@trl.co.uk

'The SEA objectives are being recognised by our Actions Audit for the life of LTP2 and will be incorporated into our Scheme Assessment Matrix, which will help to prioritise proposed transport schemes that adhere to the SEA objectives and also help to identify and then improve proposed transport schemes which do not.'

Buckinghamshire County Council

Buckinghamshire County Council

David Levenson (rspb-images.com)

SA/SEA of the Yorkshire and Humber draft Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) (Yorkshire and Humber Regional Assembly/Levett-Therivel Consultants)

Key sustainability issues that the RSS tries to deal with are social inequalities, the social and environmental impacts of changing lifestyle and transport patterns, the region's relatively low economic prosperity compared with other English regions, climate change, declining population, water demand versus supply, waste production, an ageing population and changes to the landscape.

Most of the SA/SEA work was carried out by consultants Levett-Therivel and Halcrow/EDAW, with considerable input from Yorkshire Futures, and invaluable feedback and advice from a steering group.

The SA/SEA involved three formal assessment rounds: of a strategic vision and two drafts of the RSS. In addition, several informal, rapid bullet-point type assessment rounds (one to two days) were carried out to inform planners about the impacts of draft policies in virtually real time.

The SA/SEA report documents how it helped to influence the RSS:

- **The SA/SEA's comparison of three alternative RSS visions influenced the decision to place more emphasis in the RSS on social and environmental factors.**
- **It led to a more consistent approach and greater priority throughout the RSS on reducing the need to travel, projects of regional significance, and protection of green belts.**
- **It led to clearer support in policies for peripheral areas of the region for small-scale and innovative diversification of the economy.**
- **It influenced individual sections of the RSS. For example, in Leeds, it led to greater emphasis on regeneration of existing built-up areas rather than peripheral spread, the development of ideas about complementary roles for major settlements, and better consideration of how economic growth can be more sustainable.**
- **It was a factor leading to more work being commissioned on the relationship between housing and economic success in the region.**
- **The SEA/SA will be used by the Region's Sustainable Development Board to review the impact of the RSS as it is implemented.**

Planning timescales were an ongoing problem: the planners were under pressure to get the RSS out quickly, and the SA/SEA struggled to keep up. This may be an issue for many RSSs and LDDs, but can be managed by effective communication between the planning and SEA teams.

Riki Therivel, Levett-Therivel
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Levett-Therivel
sustainability consultants

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Cirl bunting by Mike Lane (rspb-images.com)

South Hams District Council SA/SEA of LDF (including Sherford New Community Area Action Plan)

Enfusion is undertaking the SA/SEA work on the South Hams LDF, including the Area Action Plan (AAP) for the Sherford New Community. The project illustrates how the SA/SEA process can assist in the implementation of cutting edge sustainable design and construction.

Sherford is a new mixed-use community proposed for the edge of Plymouth, which will have 5,500 homes by 2026. From an early stage, the South Hams District Council set a very clear vision for the project and in particular the achievement of an exemplar approach to social, economic and environmental sustainability. The SA/SEA was seen as a key tool to ensure the delivery of the vision and its recommendations were given a high priority by the Council. The involvement of the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment in facilitating Enquiry by Design events also helped stakeholders to achieve a holistic approach to the planning and design of the new community.

The SA/SEA has significantly strengthened the Area Action Plan, particularly with regard to setting best practice sustainability targets and ensuring a sound approach to sustainability issues. Of particular note, the following SA/SEA recommendations were adopted in the AAP:

- **quantitative targets for energy conservation and CO_2 reductions in buildings**
- **commitment to a target of 50% of the development's energy requirements being provided by on-site renewable energy generation, including the promotion of a wind power proposal within the Community Park**
- **the inclusion of requirements for water conservation measures within the development**
- **waste recycling measures**
- **policy requirements for development densities**
- **principles for 'designing out' crime**
- **ensuring a strategy for biodiversity is required for the development.**

Other sustainability measures include policies that promote a modal shift to more sustainable transportation and require high quality compact design, with neighbourhood centres providing for daily needs. Phasing will ensure retailing, employment, community facilities and infrastructure are provided in advance of residents' needs to engender sustainable patterns of travel and to promote community development and identity. Further policies require 50% affordable housing and the early delivery of employment opportunities and design requirements to respond to climate change.

The master planning and design for the Community is currently underway, with cutting edge sustainable construction and design practices being adopted by developers in order to comply with the targets contained in the emerging AAP. At the time of writing, the AAP has reached the submission stage, with its Examination due in January 2007.

Barbara Carroll, Enfusion
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South Hams
District Council

enfusion

Barn owl by Mark Hamblin (rspb-images.com)

SEA of the Army Super Garrison Proposals (Defence Estates/Army Infrastructure Organisation/Entec UK)

Defence Estates, using Entec guidance, determined that SEA should be undertaken on the 'Army Super Garrison' proposal. This proposal would concentrate the British Army into fewer, larger communities throughout the UK.

For the SEA to be effective, the methodology devised needed to be both robust and comprehensive. In particular, it would need to fully engage the customers throughout the process in order to respond to the unique set of circumstances in which the SEA was being undertaken.

Challenges arose, owing to:

- **commencing the SEA early in the development of the Army Super Garrison proposal, when it was broadly conceptual and strategic**
- **the SEA being the first undertaken by Defence Estates on behalf of the Army within the Ministry of Defence**
- **the proposals being UK-wide and involving statutory consultees from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.**

Consultation on the Stage A scoping report closed in November 2006 and the assessment of effects has begun. The approach taken by Defence Estates and Entec emphasises collaborative working, which helps ensure that the SEA is integrated effectively throughout development of the proposals. This approach will also develop the customer's capacity to manage further assessments for themselves in the future.

The proposal has benefited from early engagement with a wide range of military and external consultees, who have provided valuable input. This will help ensure that remaining stages of the SEA will progress with buy-in from these key groups.

Phill Minas, Entec UK
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'Undertaking the SEA at this early stage has allowed us to incorporate sustainable development considerations into the Super Garrison proposal from the start, helping to ensure that subsequent developments deliver the MOD's sustainable development targets.'

Dr Sue Jordan, Defence Estates

Defence Estates

Embedding SEA into organisations

Creating tools to support widespread practice

Ernie Janes (rspb-images.com)

SEA toolkit: Thurrock Council and Scott Wilson

Thurrock Council wanted to apply SEA techniques to plans that did not necessarily require SEA. Scott Wilson created an SEA toolkit for Thurrock Council to facilitate this approach.

The toolkit was designed to be easily understandable. It is split into three sections:

1. **the requirements of the SEA Directive and legal provisions with regard to content and consultation**
2. **'topic papers' for each topic that is included in the SEA Directive (Annex I (f)). These covered the scoping stage for each of the topics for Thurrock, giving not only a comprehensive background to the baseline and a policy context, but also SEA Objectives based on those adopted for the SA of Thurrock's LDF**
3. **instructions on how to carry out assessments of the plans, with assessment matrix templates and advice provided.**

This toolkit approach has been welcomed across the Council, being approved for use by various corporate sectors. It will provide value across the Council's operations and raise awareness of the SEA Directive and the sustainability agenda, embedding it into everyday activities and plan making. Internal staff carrying out SEAs will build capacity and institutional knowledge with regard to sustainability. The distribution of technical information to Council staff will ensure comprehensiveness and will enable data to be updated regularly. Finally, the adoption of the toolkit for use on non-statutory plans and programmes will ensure that Thurrock Council provides an example of best practice with regard to sustainable development.

Alex White, Scott Wilson
Alex.white@scottwilson.com

Thurrock Council

Management of SEA

Sharing best practice through training and networking

Genevieve Leaper (rspb-images.com)

Aberdeenshire Council, Aberdeen City Council and Scottish Enterprise Grampian

Aberdeenshire Council, Aberdeen City Council and Scottish Enterprise Grampian have developed a partnership strategy for sharing the expertise, cost and resources needed to undertake SEA. They have set up a project which aims to develop an innovative approach to funding, disseminating best practice, promoting consistency and controlling quality in the SEA process. It also seeks to develop in-house expertise; develop a culture of integrating SEA as part of the plan making processes; effectively manage the SEA processes; promote good practice and make long-term cost savings.

To achieve these aims, a co-ordinator was employed by all three bodies, to:

- **champion SEA**
- **advise, train, and support officers**
- **develop user-friendly guidance and resources**
- **identify strategic actions requiring SEA and ensure the need for SEA is met.**

The first year of the project focused on awareness raising, basic training and development of resources. The second year is focusing on the development of professional knowledge in SEA through expert training and support. So far, over 100 officers have received training, eight guidance documents are in use, 76 generic plans/programmes/ strategies have been identified for SEA and the SEA officer is currently supporting about 10 others in carrying out SEA. Senior management in all three authorities have been very supportive of the work undertaken. The partners, through an SEA steering group, monitor the delivery of the project. A user group made up of officers involved in SEA and chaired by the SEA officer will monitor quality.

The project highlights what partnerships can achieve in a short time. Modest investment in the project has led to big returns in quality, capacity, understanding and how things complement each other. Closer ties continue to be developed between partners. Finally, the development of in-house expertise is expected to save the partners an estimated £1.5 million in consultancy fees over three years.

Joe Somevi, Aberdeen City Council/ Aberdeenshire Council/ Scottish Enterprise Grampian
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West of Scotland SEA group

SEA practitioners and planners working in one region of Scotland have found an effective way of supporting each other and sharing experiences. They set up the West of Scotland SEA group. The group has been running for more than a year and has around 15 regular members from the region's local authorities, who meet informally for half a day every three months. Initially the group consisted of SEA practitioners and planners, but now others involved in SEA, such as biodiversity officers, attend.

Each meeting involves discussion and debate (for example on possible approaches to SEA) and external speakers are often invited. The attendance of representatives from the Consultation Authorities and SEA Gateway (the Scottish Executive's central administrative body for SEA) provides a useful link between these groups and the responsible authorities. E-mail contact is continued between meetings.

Given that there may only be one SEA officer in each authority, the opportunity to meet others has been welcomed by all the officers involved. The exchange of ideas and experiences through a group like this helps to raise expectations of what SEA can achieve, gives people who are starting out the opportunity to learn from others and helps more experienced people share best practice. The group intends to continue meeting, potentially less often when SEA practice has become embedded in the work of local authorities and people are familiar with how to effectively carry out SEA.

SEA practitioners and planners all over the UK could successfully apply the West of Scotland SEA group model to their own region, supporting each other as they get to grips with SEA and helping to improve the quality of UK practice.

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RSPB advice for good quality SEA

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Preparation

- In line with the aims of the SEA Directive, ensure the assessment process gives a high level of protection to the environment and contributes to sustainable development. SEA should result in a more environmentally-sustainable plan. Review progress towards this goal at each stage.
- Start SEA at the earliest stage of plan making, to ensure issues are considered from the outset.
- Select a team that collectively has knowledge of SEA techniques, the plan sector and geographical area. While external consultants are advisable in some cases, balance this against the need to build up in-house capacity for future SEAs. A joint approach may be advisable as SEA capacity is being developed.

Undertaking the assessment

- Arrange regular contact between the SEA and plan making teams, to encourage informal exchange of information and emerging ideas.
- Consult with interested parties during the scoping stage of SEA. This helps build consensus on relevant environmental problems. Publish a scoping report.
- Involve professionals with relevant expertise to help ensure issues are properly assessed – for example, talk to ecologists to understand the biodiversity issues. Consider what other assessments may be needed at this stage or later (for example, appropriate assessment under the Habitats Directive).
- Evaluate the proposed alternatives.[1] If no alternatives are presented by the plan makers, several should be developed and evaluated as part of SEA. These should include the 'most environmentally beneficial' alternatives. Ensure the level of detail and the assessment methodologies are appropriate to the nature and scale of the plan.
- Use the 'Positive Planning' approach to safeguard biodiversity and other environmental assets. This means proposing methods to reduce likely adverse impacts at source, then mitigating impacts that cannot be reduced further, and finally compensating for residual impacts.
- Use the results of higher-tier SEA, where available, to inform the assessment, and make clear links with lower-tier SEA and/or EIA for resulting projects, as appropriate.
- If a 'sustainability appraisal' approach is used, aim to achieve sustainable development through integrating environmental, social and economic objectives and achieving a 'win-win-win' result.
- Where conflicts are identified between plan and environmental objectives, state the reasons and recommend how these conflicts can be avoided or resolved.

Using the results to inform the plan

- The environmental report should convey the key information simply and concisely. The longest reports are not necessarily the best! Supporting detail can be published in a separate appendix if necessary.
- Present specific recommendations for improving the plan and indicate how they can be implemented.
- Write the environmental report in an impartial and open style. Produce a separate non-technical summary that can be easily understood by the public.
- Establish that the SEA process and report have been carried out to a good standard. Use the SEA Practical Guide checklist[2], and if possible arrange for an independent quality assurance check. This could be done by someone with SEA knowledge in a related organisation – for example, for spatial plans, arrange to swap SEA reports with someone in a neighbouring local authority. Alternatively, the Institute for Environmental Management and Assessment offers a review service.
- In producing the post-adoption statement accompanying the adopted plan, document and justify in full how environmental issues and consultee opinions were taken into account to finalise the plan. Acknowledge political influences on the adopted plan.

References

The RSPB, English Nature, the Environment Agency and the Countryside Council for Wales have published *Strategic environmental assessment and biodiversity: guidance for practitioners* (July 2004). This is available from **www.rspb.org.uk/policy/planningpolicy**

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[1] See *Dos and don'ts guide to generating and developing alternatives* by CEP, Land Use Consultants, C4S, Levett-Therivel, Scott Wilson and Treweek Environmental Consultants. Available from www.levett-therivel.co.uk under SEA.

[2] The checklist can be found in Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now DCLG), Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and Department of Environment Northern Ireland (2005) *A Practical Guide to the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive*. DCLG, London. Available from www.communities.gov.uk