



INSTITUTE of ECOLOGY and ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

Position Statement – Strategic Environmental Assessment

What is Strategic Environmental Assessment?

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a process for the identification and assessment of the potential environmental impacts of plans and programmes. The objective is to provide for a high level of protection of the environment, and contribute to sustainable development through integrating environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes.

The requirement for EU Member States to implement SEA was introduced by Directive 2001/42/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment – commonly referred to as the ‘SEA Directive’. The Directive requires Member States to undertake environmental assessment when preparing certain plans and programmes, and it sets out which type of plans and programmes are likely to require SEA.

The requirements of the SEA Directive were transposed into UK law by the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004. This has been followed by further legislation in the devolved administrations – for example, the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes (Wales) Regulations 2004 and the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005.

What is the SEA process?

In the SEA process, the body preparing a plan or programme – or on whose behalf it is being prepared – is the Responsible Authority. Consultation Authorities are public bodies identified for their environmental expertise, and whom the Responsible Authority must consult at key stages in the process.

The Responsible Authority is required to consider whether a plan or programme is likely to have significant environmental effects, and whether an SEA is required. If one is required, the Responsible Authority prepares an environmental report, consults on it and then reports on how the findings have been taken into account in finalising the plan or programme.

The stages in the SEA process are:

- screening – the Responsible Authority establishes the likely impact;
- baseline data collection – where information is gathered about the environment to be affected;
- scoping – setting out in more detail the likely impacts, including consultation with CAs;
- consultation – on the draft plan or programme, and the environmental report;
- post-adoption – an explanation of the outcome of the consultation; and
- monitoring – the effects of the implementation of the plan or programme.

While the Responsible Authority must consult with the Consultation Authorities, it can also liaise with a range of other stakeholders to obtain data and help with considering the potential environmental interactions. In addition, where the SEA highlights potential significant impacts on a Natura 2000 site, an ‘appropriate assessment’ is required.

Why is SEA important?

The SEA Directive and the process put in place by Member States should help ensure that strategic decisions are made in a transparent way, and that a range of stakeholders are involved in the process. In addition, the Directive encourages public bodies to consider their plans and programmes at a more strategic level – rather than just as individual projects and policies – and thus help highlight potential cumulative and synergistic effects on the environment. If implemented effectively, SEA can ensure that:

- environmental factors are included in decision making, thus supporting a sustainable development approach;
- environmentally-responsible alternatives are considered at an early stage, and adopted in plans and programmes;
- where necessary, mitigation measures are adopted to ensure no net environmental loss; and
- the effects of the implementation of the plan or programme are closely monitored.

Issues, Opportunities and Concerns

IEEM expects SEA to have a key role in protecting and enhancing the environment, but in order for this to be realised some key issues need to be taken on board:

- Environmental issues must be considered from the start of the process of developing a plan or programme.
- People responsible for undertaking SEAs need to have a good understanding of the environmental issues likely to be involved – both how to recognise and how to address the potential impacts.
- The environmental report and comments from consultation authorities must be fully taken into account when selecting and refining the final options for a plan or programme.

IEEM sees particular opportunities within the SEA process to secure environmental protection and enhancement:

- Early and extensive consultation with stakeholders will lead to the best use of the range of data available, and tap into knowledge on protection and mitigation options.
- The potential large-scale and cumulative impacts on the environment are more likely to be anticipated and avoided by assessing broad plans and programmes, including links with other policies.
- By highlighting how the SEA process (especially the environmental report, and comments from consultation authorities) has informed the shape of the final plan or programme, valuable lessons can be learned by those undertaking future SEAs.

However, IEEM is concerned that the process may not be implemented to deliver the best outcomes for the environment:

- Sensible alternatives within plans or programmes should not be ruled out purely on economic grounds.
- The short timescale for the process may lead to consultation authorities being unable to provide enough input if early discussions do not take place.
- The scope of consideration of some environmental components may be restricted to the bare minimum that must be looked at, rather than taking a more holistic approach – for example, biodiversity considerations may not be wide enough to include the impact on habitat networks and ecosystems.
- In some situations, there may not be much baseline data on which to base an assessment – and in such situations, a precautionary approach should be taken until adequate data can be obtained.
- Once a plan or programme is approved and implemented, there may be a temptation to undertake only a bare minimum of monitoring of both the impacts of the programme and the success of any mitigation put in place.

Ways forward – to Good Practice

In summary, IEEM advocates a best-practice approach to Strategic Environmental Assessment which includes:

- early liaison with consultation authorities and other stakeholders;
- using staff with a high levels of both environmental expertise and SEA understanding;
- making use of the full range of environmental data available;
- considering fully all sensible options for plans and programmes;
- ensuring that at the scoping stage each aspect of the environment is broadly defined;
- taking fully into account the issues highlighted in the environmental report and by consultation authorities, and modifying plans and programmes accordingly;
- ensuring that plans and programmes contribute to sustainable development by providing positive environmental outcomes; and
- undertaking adequate monitoring programmes and, if necessary, acting on the findings.

IEEM – Who We Are and What We Do

IEEM is the Institute supporting professionals in the fields of ecology and environmental management. The Institute was established in 1991 and currently has around 3,000 members drawn from local authorities, Government agencies, industry, environmental consultancy, teaching/research, and voluntary environmental organisations.

The objectives of the Institute are:

- to advance the science, practice and understanding of ecology and environmental management for the public benefit in the United Kingdom and internationally;
- to further the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological processes and life support systems essential to a fully functional biosphere;
- to further environmentally sustainable management and development;
- to promote and encourage education, training, study and research in the science and practice of ecology, environmental management and sustainable development; and
- to establish, uphold and advance the standards of education, qualification, competence and conduct of those who practise ecology and environmental management as a profession and for the benefit of the public.

IEEM is a member of the Society for the Environment, the European Federation of Associations of Environmental Professionals and IUCN – The World Conservation Union. IEEM is also a signatory of the Countdown 2010 agreement.

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