



RTPI

Royal Town Planning Institute

Strategic Environmental Assessment

Improving the effectiveness and efficiency of SEA/SA for land use plans

This practice advice¹ provides advice for planners who are involved in preparing land use plans on how strategic environmental assessment / sustainability appraisal (SEA/SA) can be carried out more effectively and efficiently. It focuses on the particularly influential or problematic stages of SEA/SA, and emphasises that SEA/SA is a positive tool supporting the preparation of local and neighbourhood plans.

Our advice explains the key components of SEA/SA. It assumes that SEA/SA will continue to be required post Brexit. The advice applies to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Key points to remember

- **SEA/SA aims to make a plan more sustainable and more responsive to its environmental effects, by identifying the plan's significant impacts and ways of minimising its negative effects;**
- **It also documents the 'story' of the plan – why the plan is the way it is and not something else. This is for the public, statutory consultees and examiners/inspectors;**
- **SEA/SA can best influence the plan at the alternatives and mitigation stages, so these require particular focus;**
- **SA/SEA should focus on key issues and effects, scope out insignificant effects, and not include unnecessary information.**

¹ Read the full version of the practice advice www.rtpi.org.uk/knowledge/practice/sea/

1. Integration with decision making

The SEA/SA ‘tells the story’ of the plan-making process: it documents how planning decisions have been made, and how they have been informed by environmental and sustainability concerns. This is important for the public, the examination/inquiry, and the post-adoption statement. The SEA/SA report should discuss:

- How the reasonable alternatives were identified and assessed, why the preferred alternatives have been chosen, and why others were rejected;
- What changes to the plan have been made as a result of the SEA/SA;
- What comments the statutory consultees and the public have made on the scoping (and any assessment reports), and what changes have been made in response to these comments.

It may be useful to consider “Where were we, where are we now, where will we be, and how did we get from one to the other?”

2. Scoping

The issues identified as requiring particular attention should inform the plan-making process, including the subsequent SEA/SA assessment stages.

The ‘so what’ test - Many current scoping reports for land use plans are encyclopedic, and contain a great deal of information that is not directly relevant to land use planning decisions, e.g. detailed employment categories, breakdown of educational attainment, waste recycling levels. Instead, the scoping report should focus on key issues for the plan, and that the plan can have a significant effect on. Planners should be able to explain why scoping information is included: ‘so what’.

Spatial information - Many of the key decisions for a local plan will be spatial: Where should housing go? Where are additional services needed? What areas should be protected? The scoping report’s information should be similarly spatial. As a minimum, maps of constraints and opportunities should be prepared.

Going beyond the plan boundary - The SEA/SA should set the plan in its wider context, for instance: Where do residents shop and work? What is the housing market area? Where does drinking water come from? Does the plan area have a strong functional relationship with any nearby conurbations? The SEA/SA should identify beyond-plan area issues in the scoping report, and should later assess the plan’s effects beyond the plan area. Maps may be helpful in describing such effects.

Challenging the policy team to think about what they do and don’t know - Although planners should be aware of most of the issues facing their authority, the scoping stage may reveal issues that are important in plan-making, but

planners were not aware of. For instance, in South-East England the quality of water in chalk streams are major environmental issues which may require the construction of (and planning for) new reservoirs and wastewater treatment facilities.

3. Alternatives

Alternatives is the SEA/SA stage that has been most consistently challenged at examination/inquiry and in the court. Three sets of information are needed for each set of alternatives:

- What reasonable alternatives have been identified and on what basis?
- How they have been assessed and compared?
- What are the preferred alternatives; and why they are preferred over other alternatives?

The SEA/SA alternatives stage should inform the key planning decisions: numbers and location of housing and employment, proportion of affordable housing, any proposed development in the Green Belt etc. Alternatives should also be considered for how to deal with existing problems identified at the scoping stage, e.g. poor air quality, congestion hot spots, areas of deprivation.

4. Affect mitigation and assessment

The SEA Directive sets criteria for determining the likely significance of effects. They are a combination of:

The **magnitude** of the plan's effects, including the degree to which the plan sets a framework for projects, the degree to which it influences other plans, and environmental problems relevant to the plan.

The **sensitivity** of the receiving environment, including the value and vulnerability of the area, exceeded environmental quality standards, and effects on designated areas or landscapes.

Effect characteristics, including probability, duration, frequency, reversibility, cumulative effects, transboundary effects, risks to human health or the environment, and the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects.

Mitigation should be considered in a hierarchy, with avoidance better than reduction, which in turn is better than offsetting.

5. Total, cumulative and synergistic effects

Total effects are all of the plan's effects. They are typically documented by compiling one table of all the sites' and/or plan policies' effects, and by describing them. Some policies' effects may be much greater than other policies: this should be kept in mind when total effects are identified, rather than just adding up all the positive and negative scores.

Cumulative effects are all of the effects on components of sustainability: from the plan plus all other actions including people's behaviour and underlying trends. The 'nibbling' effects of a wide range of actions that cause climate

change and habitat fragmentation are examples. Assessment of cumulative effects therefore requires a change of focus, from the plan to the sustainability components. The effects of other expected plans, projects and underlying trends should already be described in the scoping report as the 'likely future without the plan', so;

cumulative effects = total plan effects + 'likely future without the plan'

Cumulative effects are important because the plan itself may not have a significant effect, but when added to other actions its effects may be significant and require additional mitigation.

6. Monitoring and the post-adoption statement

The aim of SEA/SA monitoring is to check whether the plan is having the significant effects that were predicted, and to deal with any unforeseen problems. Clearly, many changes will be caused by factors outside of the plan's control (e.g. people's behaviour, technical advances), but it is useful to know about any changes and to consider whether the plan needs to be adapted to manage them. Monitoring data also provides a basis for the SEA/SA scoping report of the next round of the plan.

7. Neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood plans in England require SEA if their effects are likely to be significant, or if the plan requires appropriate assessment (rather than just screening) under Habitats Regulations Assessment. If the neighbourhood plan allocates specific large development sites, promotes a large amount of development, is near or in a national or international designated area, or contravenes significant elements of the local plan, then generally it requires SEA. Even if an SEA is not legally required, preparation of an SA (not SEA) report could be useful because it documents how the neighbourhood plan contributes to sustainable development.

For the full version of the practice advice visit

rtpi.org.uk/knowledge/practice/sea

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