



CEA in policies and plans: UK case studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how cumulative effects assessment (CEA) has been considered in Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) of regional and local plans in a number of case studies in the UK. Initially, the paper presents the legislative and regulatory requirements for assessing cumulative effects in plans and programmes in the UK. The two approaches for assessing plans in the UK, Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and SEA are discussed and in most cases, a combined SA and SEA process is undertaken by Regional and Local Planning Authorities. The strengths and weaknesses of this approach are explored, as well as their usefulness in decision making. There are problems relating to baseline, establishing trends and predicting cumulative effects at the strategic level. The issues in assessing cumulative effects within this SA/SEA framework are discussed and recommendations for improvements are made.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores how cumulative effects are considered in spatial planning at regional and local development plan levels. To meet the European Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive (2001/42/EC), planning authorities must assess the cumulative environmental effects of plans and programmes. In the UK, spatial plans are assessed through a Sustainability Appraisal (SA) process that incorporates the requirements of the SEA Directive.

This paper outlines government guidance on SA and SEA and examines current practice through case studies. Issues in assessing cumulative impacts using a combined SA and SEA approach are discussed and ways for improving the assessment of cumulative effects are suggested.

2. Requirements for Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment

The assessment of cumulative effects of plans and programmes are required under the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Regulations (2004) (the 2004 Regulations), which transposed the SEA Directive to English law. The SEA Directive requires that the information to be provided in the Environmental Report should include the following:

“...the likely significant effects on the environment... These effects should include secondary, cumulative, synergistic, short, medium and long term permanent and temporary, positive and negative effects”. (Annex 1 (f) and footnote)

Under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004) (the 2004 Act), SA is mandatory for Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) revisions

and for new or revised Development Plan Documents (DPDs) and Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs).¹ The Act also stipulates that the SA must meet the requirements of the SEA Directive.

RSSs² are development plans prepared by the regional planning authority, which sets out the vision for the future development of the region. A region would cover a number of local planning authority areas. The RSS provides the context for local authority development plans and the local authorities need to consider the RSS in preparing their plans. Statutory plans at the local authority level set out strategic land-use aims and the framework for development consents.

The statutory plans of local planning authorities consist of a suite of documents (DPDs and SPDs) within a Local Development Framework (LDF). When adopted, development control decisions must be made in accordance with the DPDs, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. DPDs comprise of the Core Strategy, Site Specific Allocations and Area Action Plans. The Core Strategy sets out the spatial vision, spatial objectives and strategic policies for the development of the local authority area. SPDs provide guidance on specific issues, such as air quality, housing or design.

3. Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment

SA and SEA are distinct processes. SEA focuses primarily on environmental issues while SA places emphasis upon economic and

¹ However, under the Planning Act 2008, which amended sections of the 2004 Act, local planning authorities were no longer required to prepare a SA or SEA for their SPDs. The Town and Country Planning (Local Development) (England) Regulations 2009 SI 2009 No. 401 amended the 2004 Regulations.

² Since this paper was prepared, Regional Spatial Strategies outside London have been revoked by the Secretary of State on the 6th July 2010. RSSs will legally be abolished via the 'Localism Bill' in the autumn of 2010.

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social issues as well as the environment. SEA is a process for evaluating the environmental effects of proposed policies, plans or programmes on an existing evidence baseline and serves to ensure that environmental issues are integrated into plan-making. SA examines environmental, economic and social considerations from an objectives-led perspective. To fulfil the requirements of the SEA Directive, the SA should include the collection of baseline information to identify key issues and problems for the SA to address. The Government's approach is to incorporate the requirements of the SEA Directive into a wider SA process that considers economic and social as well as environmental effects.

3.1. Sustainability Appraisal Process and Guidance

The Government has produced guidance on SEA and SA. In 2005, the Government issued guidance on SEA (ODPM, 2005a). The Government also issued guidance on undertaking SAs of RSSs and LDFs which incorporates the requirements of the SEA Directive (ODPM, 2005b). This has now been updated by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Guidance for the preparation of Local Development Documents (DCLG, 2009). The SEA guidance focuses on environmental issues while the SA guidance considers social and economic issues as well as environmental ones. However, both guidance and the more recent DCLG (2009) guidance on SA recommend the same approach as discussed below.

The SA/SEA process considers the principles of sustainable development throughout the plan preparation by examining planning policies, allocations and proposals for their broad compliance and contribution to sustainable development.

The SA process consists of the following stages:

- Stage A – Setting the context, establishing the baseline and deciding the scope;
- Stage B – Developing and refining plan options and assessing the plan's effects;
- Stage C – Preparing the SA Report;
- Stage D – Consulting on the plan and SA Report;
- Stage E – Monitoring the significant sustainability effects of the plan.

Government guidance on SA/SEA sets out the key points in the assessment of secondary, cumulative and synergistic effects during the SA process. This is shown in Table 1. In Stage A, the focus is on identifying key receptors and establishing their condition. In Stage B, the assessment focuses on testing the options and their likely cumulative effects. The guidance suggests that the assessment should predict the effects of the plan on key receptors and to consider the cumulative effects of other plans and projects with or without the plan on those receptors.

The Guidance recognises that there are issues and uncertainties in predicting effects, which may be due to the variation in natural systems and interactions, the lack of information, knowledge and scientific agreement regarding cause–effect relationships, or the inability of predictive models to accurately represent complex relationships.

The SA/SEA Guidance also lists some techniques for assessing secondary, cumulative and synergistic effects: questionnaires, interviews and panels; checklists; matrices; causal chain/network/systems analysis; modelling; trends analysis; overlay mapping and GIS; expert opinion; carrying capacity and threshold analysis.

4. Sustainability Appraisal/SEA of spatial plans in practice

In practice, a combined SA/SEA process is undertaken in assessing the effects of plans. SA/SEAs usually follow the procedure outlined in the SA/SEA Guidance. The appraisal consists of three stages: compatibility appraisal between plan objectives and SA objectives,

options appraisal and detailed appraisal of policy and proposals. A matrix-based approach is commonly used to assess options or policies against Sustainability/SEA objectives. The next section explores how the cumulative effects of plans, policies and proposals are appraised in regional and local plans.

4.1. Regional Spatial Strategies Sustainability Appraisal/SEAs

A review of the eight SA/SEAs of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) produced for England between 2005 and 2008 examined if and how cumulative effects were addressed. There are eight English regions and a list of the RSSs reviewed is included in Appendix A. The review showed that six (75%) included an analysis of cumulative impacts. Although the sample is quite small, nevertheless, it indicated how cumulative effects were considered. The cumulative impacts analysis was included in the section which discussed the likely significant social, economic and environmental effects of policies and cumulative significant impacts were identified within appraisal matrices of policies.

Three SAs/SEAs in the sample included a separate appendix on the analysis of potential cumulative impacts. These are the SA/SEAs for the North East RSS, South East RSS and the Yorkshire and Humber RSS. These examples provided more detail regarding potential cumulative effects: sustainability issue the cumulative effect relates to; causes; affected receptors; limits, thresholds; relevant plans and programmes; influence of RSS and potential mitigation.

For example, the SA/SEA for Yorkshire and Humber appraised the cumulative impacts of all the RSS policies on each SA/SEA component or resource. This provided an overall view of the RSS's impact on the resource. The detailed matrices identified causes of impact (which included other plans, strategies, etc.) and mitigation measures that the RSS and others could implement to address cumulative impacts. Identifying measures that can be addressed within the RSS and those that could be addressed by others is quite useful, particularly when a number of organisations are involved in implementing measures. The cumulative impact/receptor column identified trends and their impacts but was not so clear as to who the receptors are. An extract from the matrix is shown in Appendix B-1.

In other examples, the affected receptor is clearly identified. The matrices for the analysis of potential cumulative impacts for the SA/SEAs prepared for the North East RSS and South East RSS were organised according to a key sustainability issue. Under each issue, cumulative effects were identified, including the following: causes; affected receptors; limits and thresholds; relevant plans and programmes; influence of the RSS and potential mitigation. This provided a clear indication of which plans, programmes or actions (in CEA literature referred to as current and Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions (RFFAs)) have been considered and which together with the RSS have the potential for cumulative impacts on a receptor. However, the ways in which these plans and the RSS contribute to cumulative effects were not discussed. An extract of the matrix used in the North East RSS SA is included in Appendix B-2.

In general, the analysis in the SA/SEAs reviewed focussed on the cumulative impacts of the RSS policies and there was less attention to the cumulative impacts of alternatives or options. In terms of the overall approach, all the SA/SEAs followed the ODPM guidance, where baseline analysis identified key issues. However, a more detailed analysis of the cumulative effects of other plans, programmes or actions and the RSS on receptors could have been provided.

4.2. Local Development Framework Sustainability Appraisal/SEA

To further explore how cumulative effects are considered in spatial planning, examples of SA/SEAs for local development plans were examined. The regional SA/SEA review provided an overall view of

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