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9. What is Strategic Environmental Assessment?

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a key component of sustainable development, establishing important new methods for protecting the environment and extending opportunities for participation in public policy decision making.

The Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005 covers “Scottish public plan, programme or strategy” (PPS). Those PPS that geographically cover more than Scotland have to be considered under the Environmental Assessment of plans and programme Regulations 2004 (UK Regulations).

SEA is a means to measure the likely environmental impacts (both positive and negative) of a PPS, to determine whether those effects are likely to be significant. This can often mean repeating the assessment, with various reasonable alternative approaches, in order to identify meaningful opportunities to avoid or reduce the likely environmental effects.

SEA process can ensure that those preparing a PPS and those being consulted are completely aware of the significant environmental impacts that may occur prior to implementation.

What is the purpose of SEA?

One of the key purposes of SEA is to ensure the environment is carefully considered when PPS are being prepared and opportunities to avoid or reduce negative effects as far as possible, or enhance positive ones, are fully explored. When undertaken early, the statutory consultation provides a meaningful opportunity for the public to have their views taken into account before the PPS is adopted or approved.

The goal of SEA is to ensure that the PPS reflects the best environmental option open to decision-makers in light of other important considerations. It ensures that any decisions taken on environmental matters are open and transparent. SEA also places an onus on those preparing public plans to monitor the environmental impacts, for unforeseen effects, of their PPS once approved or adopted.

What PPS are subject to SEA?

Public PPS that are prepared and/or have to be adopted by a public organisation (e.g. your local Council or National Park Authority, the Scottish Government, Scottish Water, Scottish

Environmental Protection Agency, Scottish Natural Heritage) are required to undergo an SEA, if they are likely to have significant environmental impacts.

The Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005 details the types of PPS automatically requiring SEA. It also details the procedure for PPS that do not automatically require an SEA but may have significant environmental impacts, if implemented. The Act also outlines the types of PPS which are exempt from SEA.

So far the following types of PPS, related to planning, have been subject to SEA (please note this list is not exhaustive):

- Strategic Development Plans
- Local Development Plans
- Supplementary Planning Guidance
- Core Path Plans
- Masterplans
- Tourism Strategies

How important is SEA?

SEA is an important statutory process. It ensures that decision-makers are fully aware of the environmental consequences of the PPS that they are preparing and that environmental considerations are taken at least on par with social and economic considerations.

This aims to ensure that the likely environmental effects of their preferred option and any reasonable alternative approaches are understood and communicated to those with an interest in the PPS. It is a transparent process which allows the public to see how the PPS has taken into account the likely environmental impacts and their views before it is approved or adopted.

Why should I respond to consultation requests on SEA?

Some PPS could affect you directly, e.g. development plans or masterplans; therefore the views of the public on environmental impacts are worthwhile and potentially crucial. They can also persuade those preparing the PPS to review their proposals in environmental terms to avoid or reduce as far as possible the likelihood of a significant adverse environmental impact.

SEA allows the views of the public to be taken on board before the plan, programme or strategy is adopted. The public organisation responsible for the PPS is legislatively required to give due consideration to your views and inform you of how they have been taken into account when the SEA process is concluded and the PPS is adopted.

How is an SEA undertaken? How can I give my views?

There are six main stages in the SEA process. However not all PPS will have to go through all six stages. The stages are:

- Pre-screening/Screening
- Scoping
- Environmental Report
- Consultation
- Post-Adoption Statement
- Monitoring

Some PPS which automatically require an SEA, given the likelihood of significant environmental effects, can move straight to the scoping stage.

The public organisation preparing a PPS would generally seek the views of the public at the environmental report stage. However, some public organisations may seek the views of the public at scoping stage or before formally submitting the environmental report.

How will I know about the consultation on an SEA?

Responsible authorities are required to publicly advertise that the SEA and the PPS to which it relates are out for consultation in a local newspaper, detailing the consultation period and where the documents can be accessed. The consultation period should also be highlighted on the public organisation's website.

What is Scoping?

Scoping is an important stage in the SEA process where the public organisation sets out, among other things, the issues that are to be considered in the SEA.

What is an Environmental Report?

The Environmental Report provides a written commentary on the findings of the environmental assessment process, any mitigation and the monitoring measures to be used.

How does SEA relate to the reformed Planning System?

Scottish [Government Circular 1/2009: Development Planning](#) details where and when SEA is required to be undertaken in order to comply with the Development Planning (Scotland) Regulations 2008 and the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005. The information below outlines the SEA process under the new planning system:

- Scoping Report has to be prepared and submitted to the Consultation Authorities in advance of the consultation on the Main Issues Report;
- The Environmental Report must accompany the Main Issues Report and be publicly consulted upon;
- The Environmental Report would also accompany the Proposed Plan and be publicly consulted upon.

Where do I get access to the SEA documents?

The public organisation has a legislative requirement to provide copies of the relevant documents (i.e. the plan and the Environmental Report) at their main office and on their website. Copies of the documents may also be available on CD or in paper copies but a charge may be incurred. Contact your planning authority (your local Council or National Park Authority) for details.

What happens if the Environmental Report for a Development Plan is too complicated to understand?

There is some onus on public organisations who prepare these documents to write them in a format and manner which is easily accessible and understandable to a member of the public. The Environmental Report will contain a “non-technical summary” of the full report and this should aid comprehension of the assessment.

If you cannot understand the document or find what you are looking for, then contact the public organisation that produced the environmental report.

What happens after Adoption?

After the PPS is adopted the public organisation has a statutory duty to monitor the environmental impacts for any unforeseen adverse effects. Where unanticipated environmental impacts have been identified through monitoring, the public organisation has to be prepared to put mitigation measures in place. They are also required to produce a “post-adoption statement”.

What is a Post-Adoption Statement?

A post-adoption statement provides detailed information on how the SEA process was taken into account when making the final decision. The statement is required to demonstrate how the responses received e.g. through public consultation were taken on board.

Where can I obtain more information and advice?

- Contact your **local planning authority** in relation to Development Plans and SEA

Your planning authority should be your first stop for SEA information on Development Plans etc. and for help and guidance on any SEA documents that are prepared. Some

local authorities have dedicated SEA officers who will be happy to answer any queries and give advice on SEA related issues.

- **Scottish Government**

The Scottish Government's [SEA website](#) contains a wealth of information and guidance on SEA. This includes:

- A basic introduction to Strategic Environmental Assessment
- [The SEA Tool kit](#)
- [SEA Glossary](#)

The Scottish Government is also preparing a Planning Advice Note on SEA and Development Plans. This will contain guidance and advice for planning authorities.

How can Planning Aid for Scotland help?

If you are still unsure or need independent advice, then Planning Aid for Scotland may be able to help. Contact our **Advice Service**, which is **free of charge** to individuals and community groups, on **0845 603 7602**, or refer to our information leaflet which is available on our website at www.planningaidscotland.org.uk