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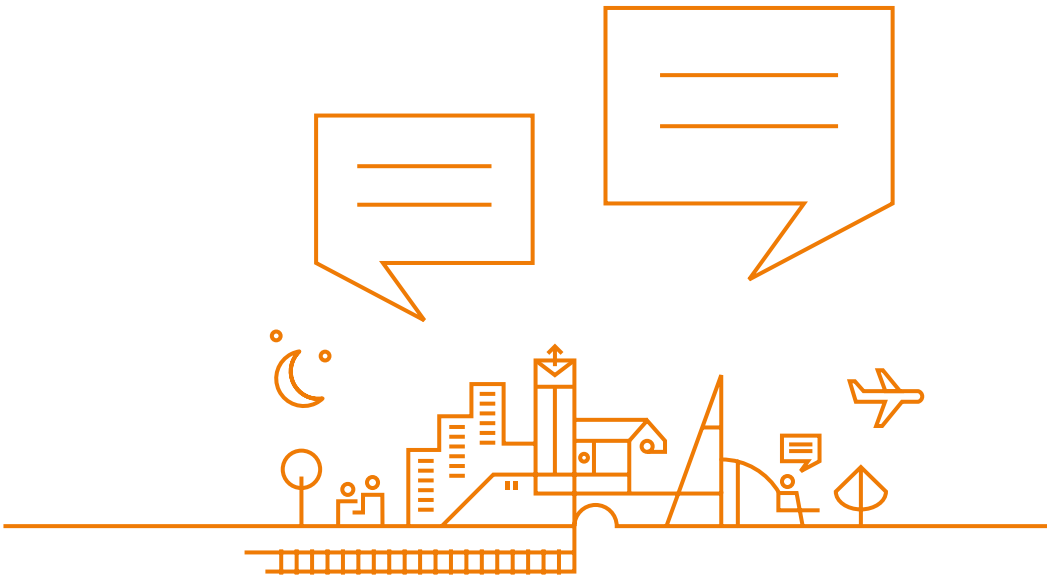
Impact Assessment Outlook Journal
Volume 12: March 2022

Strategic Impact Assessment

Thought pieces from UK practice



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Strategic Impact Assessment

Welcome to Volume 12 of the Outlook Journal, which brings together articles on Strategic Impact Assessment (IA)[1] to inspire practitioners. This Volume provides an outline of present practice and seeks to challenge practitioners to move their approaches forward, embracing opportunities for innovation. As we seek to tackle the climate and nature emergency, the role of Strategic IA should be more important now than ever before. It is critical that sustainability is embedded in policy and programme making, and is used to influence and shape them. We are at a pivotal moment for the planet and for practitioners in this field.

Effective Strategic IA has the potential to shape plans or programmes to be truly sustainable, as well as influence the detail within them for improved environmental outcomes. It gives us the opportunity to look strategically at issues and opportunities, to explore innovation and new ideas, and to look at the systems that underpin impacts on the environment, society and communities. Done well, and allowed to act, it allows us to put sustainability at the heart of decision-making and to consider issues holistically.

Current practice within Strategic IA all too often plays more of a fine-tuning role and is frequently seen as a separate activity to plan or programme development[2]. It is focused on the production of a product, the Strategic IA (often Environmental) Report and this focus leads to inadequate influence on decision-making. The original Government guidance from 2005 - 'A practical Guide to the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive' - remains the key influence on UK practice (outside of Scotland) and over time have become less of advisory and more of fundamental script underlying how Strategic IA is undertaken.

1. Strategic IA is considered to cover a broad range of IA approaches aimed at improving the sustainability performance of policies, plans and programmes, this includes, but is not limited to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) approaches.
2. Smith, S., Richardson, J., McNab, A. (Scott Wilson Ltd), 2010, Towards a more efficient and effective use of Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Appraisal in spatial planning. Final report. Department of Communities and Local Government, London.

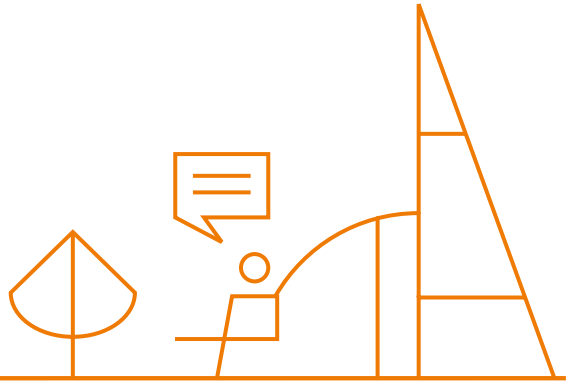
The time is now to rethink Strategic IA practice, to have the confidence to step past entrenched product-oriented practice and to push the boundaries with innovation and a shift in mindset. The world that we live in is changing, the nature and climate emergency is upon us, and awareness of sustainability and climate change in particular has grown across society, including amongst policy, plan and programme makers. The COVID pandemic has brought focus on digital capabilities, on the need for green space and nature, and cemented its importance for health and well-being. It has changed the way that we live and work, and increased our appreciation of the natural environment.

The policy realm is shifting towards outcome-oriented approaches, such as the Welsh Well-being and Future Generations Act of 2015, discussed in both Vicky and Sarah's articles later in this edition. The Environment Act passed in 2021 is another example of this shift, setting England clear statutory targets for the recovery of the natural environment with four priority areas: air, biodiversity, water and waste, and includes targets to reverse species decline by 2030. The Act also sets provisions for a new Office for Environmental Protection, to provide scrutiny of government policy to ensure environment is at the heart of decision-making. With the publishing of the 25 Year Environment Plan in 2018, there is increased focus on environmental net gain and Natural Capital. At the time of writing, the UK Government's Levelling Up White Paper and details on expected planning reforms are anticipated and have the potential to change the focus and approach to Strategic IA.

Practitioners are being asked to consider impacts beyond the 'environment' and bring together assessments on equality, health, Natural Capital, net gain, etc. Plans are changing and adaptive plans are becoming more common to take account of different climate scenarios, and approaches to integrated assessment are developing. There is no doubt that it is an exciting time for Strategic IA practice, and time for change.

This leads us neatly onto the articles we have drawn together for this edition of IA Outlook, which explore how Strategic IA has embedded across the UK, recent developments in practice and consider how it can be further enhanced in the future.

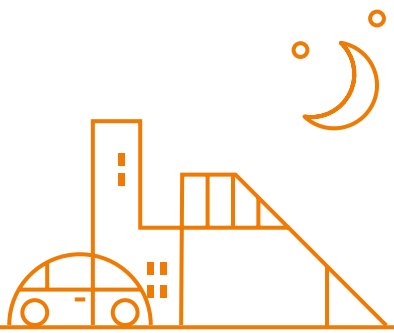
The first group of articles focus on providing perspectives on the effectiveness of Strategic IA practice from across the UK. Professor Thomas Fischer leads us off with a review of how successful Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Sustainability Appraisal (SA) application across the country can be considered across a range of different viewpoints on what makes practice effective. Cara Davidson then provides a perspective on Scotland's expanded application of SEA and how the tool has adapted to meet the changing policy landscape. The third piece focuses on Wales, with Vicky Scholttman providing insight on how Natural Resource Wales ensure that the multiple roles in Strategic IA practice continue to develop to deliver effective outcomes.



The second group of articles consider the issue of the expanding scope of Strategic IA approaches and expectations. We stay in Wales for the first article with Sarah Tooby providing a piece on the application of Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) at the plan level alongside other IA requirements. David Hourd then provides us with perspective on the growing expectations to give direct consideration to Natural Capital, Ecosystem Services and net gain (both biodiversity and environmental) within the busy Strategic IA landscape.

The next group of articles recognise the importance of the digital transition and how this is influencing the approach to Strategic IA practice. Steve Isaac provides oversight of how different aspects of this rapidly developing arena of digital IA are being adopted and applied by SEA and SA practitioners. We then move to a piece from Ireland, within which Dr Ainhoa González presents an example of the application of a dedicated digital Strategic IA solution, the *Environmental Sensitivity Mapping Tool*.

The final contributed piece, and our concluding editorial, turns attention to the future of Strategic IA practice. Dr Karl Fuller's article provides a thought-provoking perspective on not only how tools such as SEA and SA need to evolve, but also on how the mindset and approach of practitioners must change to enable more-effective consideration of systemic sustainability challenges. Our closing editorial concludes Volume 12 with a call to arms for members, and all Strategic IA practitioners, to positively respond to adapting our tools and skills to our changing times, as well as calling for engagement in the activities of IEMA's Strategic IA Group.



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SEA in the UK – evidence of effectiveness and areas of challenge

Since 2004, Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), based on European Directive 42/2001/EC (SEA Directive) has been applied in the UK several thousands of times in a range of sectors, including local, transport, waste, minerals and energy planning. There are differences in the way SEA is approached in the four UK nations, with Scotland striving to be a global leader on SEA. Importantly, here SEA is applied not just to plans and programmes, but also to policies. Furthermore, there is some robust institutional support, provided in particular by the SEA Gateway.

With regards to current SEA effectiveness and areas of challenge to SEA, whilst views increasingly differ (in particular on the usefulness of SEA), there are still many similarities between the four UK nations, as practice remains based on SEA Directive requirements. Furthermore, initially the same set of guidelines was used throughout the UK, namely 'A Practical Guide to the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive' from 2005. However, evidence is emerging that SEA quality in Scotland is now starting to be particularly commendable.

An important difference with regards to spatial/local (development) plan-making exists between England and the other three nations. Here, SEA is routinely applied within Sustainability Appraisal, although, more recently, Integrated Appraisal approaches are emerging across practice – as noted across a number of the other articles in the Volume of IA Outlook.

With regards to SEA guidance used in England, there hasn't been much change since the original guidelines were produced. For local plan-making, whilst short online guidance was released in 2015, the original 2005 guidelines for 'SA of Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Documents' remain valid. The Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly also still refer to the initial 2005 set of guidelines on their respective SEA webpages. In Scotland, a number of more-recent SEA guidelines are available, accessible through the Scottish Government webpages.

"There is no doubt, though, that SEA can be effective in supporting more sustainable policy, plan and programme making, if this is what the legislator and decision makers actually want."

Reports produced during SEA processes are of key importancentext and a listing of other policies, plans and programmes that may be relevant. With regards to the assessment of impacts, SEA objectives are established and a matrix-based assessment is routinely used in which plan elements (policies and site-specific allocations) are assessed in the light of those objectives.

Effectiveness of SEA can be expressed through various dimensions, as is subsequently briefly explained. In this context, UK practice is gauged in terms of low, moderate and high effectiveness. To start with, there are two outcome-related effectiveness dimensions, including (1) substantive and (2) normative effectiveness. The former is about whether SEA leads to changes in the plan it is assessing. Whilst there are variations between different applications, and accepting that the role SEA has been given is mainly to fine-tune policies, on average in the UK, SEA's substantive effectiveness can be said to be low to moderate. Normative effectiveness is about an ability to minimise trade-offs being made between different assessment dimensions in a plan. In this context, a recent study into the consideration of health in SEA confirmed what many had suggested before, namely that biophysical aspects tend to be traded-off for economic aspects. On average, normative effectiveness in the UK is therefore low.

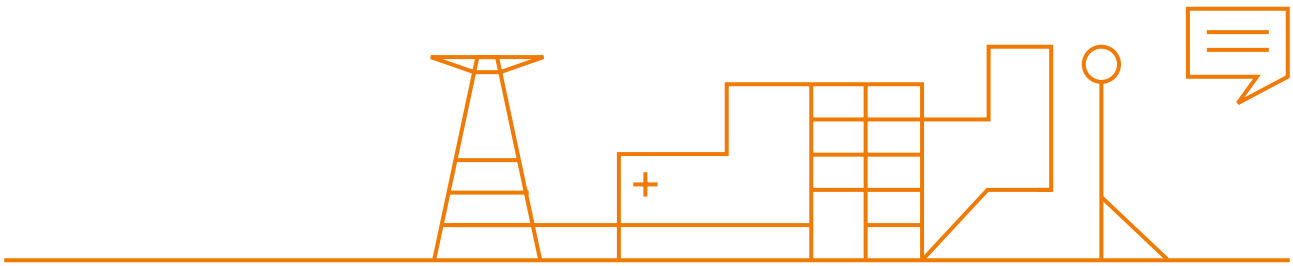
With regards to (3) transactive effectiveness (benefits resulting from SEA outweighing its costs), SEA can be said to be moderately effective. Two dimensions that are also of moderate effectiveness include (4) contextual and (5) procedural effectiveness. The former is about having appropriate legislation and guidance in place as well as authorities with SEA competency. With regards to this dimension, the Scottish SEA system should receive a slightly higher effectiveness score, i.e., moderately to highly effective.

Procedural effectiveness revolves around SEA processes being carried out well, with adequate baseline data being available and appropriate alternatives being considered. On average, in the UK, SEA processes are done well, but there can be gaps in data availability and the consideration and assessment of appropriate alternatives has remained problematic. Associated effectiveness is therefore low to moderate. Two further SEA dimensions of low effectiveness include (6) pluralist and (7) knowledge and learning effectiveness. There isn't currently much evidence that greater public participation is achieved through SEA and that SEA is effectively leading to accommodating competing points of view. With regards to knowledge and learning, there is also only limited evidence that SEA is effective in changing the way those involved in plan-making think.

Finally, a number of recurring areas of challenge have been repeatedly identified in research on UK SEA practice include:

1. Questionable use of baseline information: Whilst usually a substantial amount of baseline information is provided, this is often only (very) partially used in the actual assessment.
2. Poor tiering: SEA reports tend to insufficiently explain how the plan they are assessing sets the framework for other activities, what issues are addressed in other assessments (i.e., at other levels/layers) and what matters are more appropriately assessed elsewhere in the planning system; a problem associated with this is that many of the decisions leading to a particular plan often remain unassessed.
3. Unconvincing options: how reasonable options and environmental/sustainability issues were identified and considered is mostly poorly described; also, the effects of various options are not evaluated satisfactorily.
4. The impact/influence of SEA on plan-making is not well explained in SEA reports.
5. Uncertainties and difficulties are insufficiently explained in SEA reports.
6. Monitoring and follow-up is not well specified.

Whether and how areas of challenge can and will be addressed and effectiveness be improved in the future can only be partly addressed within practice. Much will depend on whether and how SEA and related Strategic IA legislation, policy and guidance will change. Whilst the current government has indicated that it may do away with SA in England altogether, at the time of writing this contribution, its fate remains unclear. There is no doubt, though, that SEA can be effective in supporting more-sustainable policy, plan and programme making, if this is what the legislator and decision-makers actually want.



Cara Davidson
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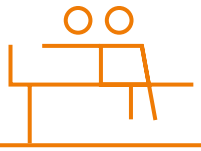
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Scotland's approach to Strategic Environmental Assessment

The introduction of the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act in 2005 brought new responsibilities and opportunities for all public bodies in Scotland. The 2005 Act requires Scottish plans, programmes and strategies that are in the public character and likely to generate significant environmental effects to be environmentally assessed, including proposals for new legislation. This is different to the rest of the UK where the scope of SEA requirements is more limited.

Over the years, Scotland's approach to SEA has attracted international interest, and we are often asked how SEA operates at national level as part of the national policy-making process. There is a huge variety in the plans, programmes and strategies subject to SEA in Scotland, and innovation and continuous improvement have been key to successful implementation in practice.

"In an increasingly crowded Impact Assessment landscape, the ability to integrate, co-ordinate and flex to meet new demands and priorities will ensure SEA continues to stay fresh and meaningful."



What's different?

Given the broad 'reach' of Scotland's SEA requirements, the SEA Gateway was established to co-ordinate statutory correspondence and ensure timescales are met. Sitting within the Scottish Government's Planning & Architecture Division, the Gateway has helped to support proactive engagement between government and the SEA consultation authorities. This approach also led to the establishment of the SEA Database, which is unique in making Scotland's SEA correspondence fully accessible and searchable online, aiding transparency and putting past SEAs at practitioners' fingertips.

Over a decade ago, the Scottish Government also established an in-house resource offering professional advice on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) within our planning team. Through an innovative funding model, an experienced and enthusiastic Environmental Assessment Team – incorporating the SEA Gateway – was set up to provide a high-quality service to policy-makers across the Scottish Government.

The evolution of SEA in Scotland

Initially, the in-house SEA team took a practical focus and worked hard to deliver SEA for policy makers across the Scottish Government. Over time, this developed and broadened, and the combined experience and expertise of the SEA Gateway and the technical team has helped create a centre of expertise on SEA, moving from a focus on co-ordinating correspondence and project delivery to raising awareness and championing the benefits of SEA, experimenting with new techniques, promoting alternative ways of thinking and finding creative solutions. Working with SEPA, Historic Environment Scotland, and NatureScot, the team has held a number of very successful SEA forum events, which have attracted delegates from across Scotland and beyond, sharing knowledge and expertise and learning from others. This model has also been used to champion and support good practice in related Impact Assessments, such as a Habitats Regulations Appraisal and an Environmental Impact Assessment.

Over the years, successive Scottish Government SEA team members have provided innovative, creative and proportionate environmental assessment services to a very wide range of policy-makers, ensuring that plans, policies and strategies are supported by a robust and proportionate assessment of their environmental effects. Examples of work undertaken include energy, marine, transport, housing, climate change and environmental policies, strategies and legislation, including the recently published Integrated Impact Assessment of Scotland's Draft National Planning Framework 4[3].

This wide range of policy areas has allowed the team to share experience and promote consistency, reduce duplication and stimulate cross-fertilisation of ideas across government. Consistency and continuous improvement have also been achieved where the same team has reviewed multiple iterations of flagship policies such as the Climate Change Plan, National Planning Framework, and Land Use Strategy.

What does the future of SEA look like?

As well as sharing knowledge and ideas, the team has co-ordinated research and pursues a culture of continuous improvement. A focus on climate in light of the global climate emergency recently led the Scottish Government to commission independent research to review how greenhouse gas emissions are considered as part of the Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment processes[4], and this research subsequently informed the team's approach to assessing the Draft National Planning Framework 4. The team is also contributing to wider work to review the Scottish Government's approach to Impact Assessments more generally.

SEA is no longer the 'new assessment on the block' and, whilst there is much to be learned from tried and tested assessment techniques, ensuring continuous innovation and agility to meet new challenges will be key in the years ahead. In an increasingly crowded Impact Assessment landscape, the ability to integrate, co-ordinate and flex to meet new demands and priorities will ensure SEA continues to stay fresh and meaningful for practitioners and plan-makers alike.

3. Integrated Impact Assessment | Transforming Planning.
4. Review of greenhouse gas emissions in SEA and EIA processes (ed.ac.uk).

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The influence of Welsh legislation on SEA practice in Natural Resources Wales

In Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WFGA) and Environment (Wales) Act 2016 provide the framework to guide sustainable development and the sustainable management of natural resources. Both are well aligned with Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) legislation. Natural Resources Wales uses SEA as a tool to embed the objectives and principles of this legislation into our internal plans, and our statutory responses to external plans.

Natural Resources Wales wears two hats when it comes to SEA, we are both plan-makers and statutory consultee. When created, we were very conscious of this dual role, and, as a result of this and European caselaw, our structures were designed to ensure impartiality through functional separation. In the Environmental Assessment Team, we undertake SEA of our plans and aim to influence the plan-making as much as possible through SEA. The Strategic Assessment Team undertake the statutory consultee role and scrutinise the SEA and plan itself to ensure it meets the requirements of the SEA legislation, whilst also looking for opportunities to maximise delivery of our duties under the WFGA and Environment Act.

Both teams worked closely on the development of our suite of SEA guidance. This ensured that, from a practitioner perspective, our approaches are proportionate, flexible and can influence plan development and, from a statutory consultee perspective, the SEA is legally compliant whilst also scrutinising and challenging SEA and plan development. Seeing SEA through both lenses helped us to write guidance that will result in better SEA both for Natural Resources Wales and for other plan-makers in Wales and, most importantly, plans that are sustainable and beneficial for the environment.

"SEA practice is well aligned with the ways of working outlined in the WFGA. It can also be used to scrutinise and influence plan development to maximise contributions to well-being objectives."

In the development of our guidance, we were looking to embed the principles and objectives of the WFGA and the Environment (Wales) Act. Below, I go into a little more detail on how we did this.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act

The WFGA places a duty on Welsh public bodies, requiring them to carry out sustainable development, which includes setting and publishing well-being objectives to maximise their contribution to the seven well-being goals set down by the Act. This provides a shared vision of well-being in Wales for the future that the listed public bodies and partners are all working towards.

The WFGA requires public bodies to carry out their duties in accordance with the sustainable development principle, setting out five ways of working to guide how they must operate.

SEA practice is well aligned with the ways of working outlined in the WFGA. It can also be used to scrutinise and influence plan development to maximise contributions to well-being objectives.

The Environment (Wales) Act

The Environment (Wales) Act gives NRW its purpose, which is to pursue the sustainable management of natural resources (SMNR), and to apply the principles of sustainable management in the exercise of our functions.

The Act establishes a framework of products to aid the delivery of the SMNR objective:

- In the State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR), Natural Resources Wales sets out the national environmental evidence base for organisations across Wales to make use of in their decision-making process.
- The Welsh Government's Natural Resources Policy (NRP) responds to SoNaRR, setting out the national priorities for the SMNR and the key ways in which natural resources contribute across all well-being goals.
- Area Statements, developed by Natural Resources Wales, set out the place-based delivery of the NRP priorities.

The Act also recognises the essential contribution biodiversity makes to SMNR and our well-being, by putting in place the Section 6 biodiversity and ecosystem resilience duty. This duty requires public authorities to seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity in the exercise of their functions in relation to Wales, and in doing so promote the resilience of ecosystems, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions.

How does SEA help us to deliver the SMNR and SD principles and objectives?

The process of undertaking SEA iteratively with plan development is the most crucial element here, with the reports concisely documenting the process. SEA practitioners working closely with plan-makers is fundamental to delivering environmentally sustainable plans.

Like SEA, the SD principles aim to assist better decision-making by ensuring public bodies take account of the long-term effects of a plan, help to prevent problems occurring or getting worse, take an integrated and collaborative approach, and consider and involve people who reflect the diversity of the plan area.

The Environment (Wales) Act sets out SMNR principles, which cover the WFGA principles above, but also include use of relevant evidence, seek to build ecosystem resilience, consider effects at an appropriate scale and seek to deliver multiple benefits, all of which an SEA will do. The final principle is adaptive management. In undertaking SEA of plans we aim to predict effects, and at a strategic scale this can sometimes be a judgement. The need to monitor, and, where plans are cyclical, review is crucial to ensure we can adapt our plans and ways of working.

The products of the Environment (Wales) Act are crucial evidence bases for both SEA and the plans themselves. The SEA scoping baseline should draw on the wealth of evidence and trends that are published in SoNaRR every five years, and the plan objectives should, as far as is appropriate, seek to contribute to the delivery of the NRP and the organisational well-being objectives. For more regional plans, the Area Statements are also a vital source of information.

Summary and Forward Look

In my view, the Welsh legislation strengthens and complements SEA practice in NRW, linking the value of natural resources to the well-being of future generations. We are working with colleagues to look at how we might integrate other Impact Assessments (e.g., Health Impact Assessment, Equality Impact Assessment, etc.) in the future. We have also recently restarted the UK SEA Forum where we can discuss and learn from practice in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. So, there is lots of opportunity to learn and adaptively manage!

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Equality Impact Assessment as part of an Integrated Impact Assessment in strategic plan-making: ensuring efficiency whilst improving rigour: a thought piece

What is an EqIA?

Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) puts people at the heart of the planning process. An RTPI Policy Paper[5] on 'Poverty, place and inequality', sets out that *'...The environment can shape people's behaviour and limit or enhance their well-being and life chances... Increasing equality and opportunity should be a core part of local, city and sub-regional plans and strategies.'*

> *"One of the clear benefits of integrating the assessments is that it enables equalities considerations to be fully considered in all aspects of plan making and across all topic areas as the plan is written, including environmental and economic considerations."*

EqIA is a way of assessing a plan or proposal, to evaluate its potential effects on people with protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act 2010, although the EqIA itself is not a compulsory exercise. The Equality Act 2010 sets out nine characteristics that are protected, namely: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage or civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. It also brought into force a public sector Equality Duty, requiring that public bodies have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people. An assessment of equality impacts has always been a part of SEA and SA, including through the requirements under the SEA Regulations for 'population' and 'human health'. The Equality Act 2010, however, ensures that increased rigour can be incorporated in terms of how the specific effects on protected characteristics are set out, as well as enabling an increased focus on community engagement.

What is Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)?

Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA), or Integrated Sustainability Appraisal (ISA), is a process of appraising the contents of a development plan, against a series of sustainability objectives, seeking to provide iterative feedback of recommendations to improve the relative sustainable development performance of local authority development plans. An IIA can include a range of

5. Report (rtpi.org.uk).

statutory or non-statutory required assessments and will meet the legal requirements of the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Regulations. The IIA is high-level and considers both positive and negative effects of the development plan, to help ensure that future communities are sustainable (considering a full definition of sustainability which encompasses economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being).

IIA provides an opportunity for ensuring greater efficiency as the common elements of the range of assessment types are not repeated. Various types of assessment can be successfully integrated in this way, including those that have commonalities such as Equality Impact Assessment and Health Impact Assessment, Children's Rights Impact Assessment and, in Wales, the integration of Welsh language assessments, all of which have elements of equality assessment within them. Within this, legal requirements of various assessment types can also be met, such as for the SEA Regulations and, in Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015.

EqIA as a standalone process

As with any type of assessment, there are examples of where EqIAs are done more, or less, successfully in practice. Some critics have stated that EqIA can turn into a 'tick box' exercise, despite that not being the original intention. EqIA can be seen as merely assessing the 'impact' of a plan or policy, which can be a passive process, often completed after the plan or policy has been written and decided upon, as an explanatory process only. Further, the similarities between certain assessments, such as EqIA and HIA, when written separately, can lead to repetition and an unnecessary number of documents for the public or stakeholders to consider during consultation. By way of judicial consideration[6], the case of Bracking v Secretary of State [2013] EWCA Civ 1345 [7] sets out the relevant principles, including that, *inter alia, EqIA 'must be "exercised in substance, with rigour, and with an open mind" (it is not a question of 'ticking boxes)'.*

Benefits of integration

The integration of EqIA into IIA ensures that a collaborative approach is undertaken on different issues, sharing knowledge and recognising links between topics in a consistent and transparent manner across planning and appraisal teams. It ensures that equality is assessed in a rigorous way, as the full spectrum of interrelationships between topics can be assessed. The EqIA, as part of an integrated process with SA and other assessment types, will also generate an iterative assessment, allowing feedback and recommendations, either to improve effects or to mitigate potential negative effects, throughout the development of the plan. Further, public consultation can be undertaken more effectively, so that a greater range of topics can be consulted upon in one process, reducing the potential for 'consultation fatigue' as well as improving transparency in decision-making and increasing trust between stakeholders.

Potential criticisms and response

Some critics of this approach suggest that the integration of the process can lead to the 'watering down' of the EqIA, including its findings and recommendations. For example, the effects on specific protected characteristics may get lost within what can be an extensive document.

However, the benefits of integration, when this is done thoroughly and by experienced professionals, can easily overcome this type of issue. Findings can be set out in the IIA document, with regards to specific effects on those with protected characteristics, which could be extracted/found easily if required for a specific use. One of the clear benefits of integrating the assessments is that it enables equalities considerations to be fully considered in all aspects of plan-making and across all topic areas as the plan is written, including environmental and economic considerations.

6. Planning and Equalities Impact Assessments (localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk).

Case Study: ISA of Future Wales: the national plan 2040

The ISA of Future Wales included the integration of EqIA. The screening work for the ISA confirmed that Future Wales would have a potential impact on equalities and human rights. The ISA Framework and associated decision aiding questions ensured that the duties within the Equalities Act would be addressed as Future Wales was assessed, recognising the direct and indirect effects the planning system can have on protected characteristics. This included advancing and promoting equality of opportunity and good relations as well as wider community cohesion, seeking to create the conditions which assist in eliminating unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation through land use planning initiatives. The ISA Framework was informed by evidence from academic journals, toolkits and reports. It was also informed by an extensive engagement and consultation process. After six iterations, Future Wales was recorded as being likely to result in highly positive effects on objectives relating to education, health, employment, economy, connectivity, social cohesion, housing and culture. For many of these the identified effects are likely to become significantly positive over the medium and long term. By integrating EqIA into the ISA, a more comprehensive assessment of potential effects was undertaken, with a more meaningful and informed result.

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Director
Temple

Strategic Impact Assessments – Exploring the scope for integration of Natural Capital, Ecosystems Services and Environmental Net Gain

Introduction

Natural Capital is our stock of natural resources including e.g. geology, soils, air, water and all living things. Many of these provide us with additional benefits called Ecosystem Services. By understanding the stock of Natural Capital in a plan area and its associated Ecosystem Services we can make a more holistic and informed appraisal of a plan as it develops and help to steer it towards achieving genuine net gains for biodiversity and the wider environment, the latter being a concept also referred to as Environmental Net Gain (ENG).

Such a goal is encouraged by the Environment Act 2021 and the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan. We are approaching a crossroads for Impact Assessment and eagerly await the Government's planned consultation on its future. There is an opportunity to help steer the development of Strategic Impact Assessment away from simply minimising harm to focusing on a strategic delivery of benefits. This article explores how adopting an integrated Natural Capital approach, allied with digital spatial data analysis and appropriate metrics can help achieve this.

Emerging policy landscape

In recent times we have been grappling with the concept of ENG: what it really means, how it relates to things such as Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services and how it can go further than biodiversity net gain (BNG).

> *"Adopting and integrating an ENG approach into strategic impact assessment is as much about a change in mindset as it is the development of a tool or procedure".*

If you search online for 'ENG', you'll get a lot of hits and you'll commonly see this definition of ENG as *'ensuring that developers leave the environment in a measurably better state compared to the pre-development baseline'*. (National Infrastructure Commission)

This is a concept that is encouraged in the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan. Similar themes are backed up in the 2021 Dasgupta Review (which argued that the value of nature needs to be at the heart of economic decision-making) and now also in the Environment Act, which requires a 10% BNG for new developments.

To understand what ENG is, we first need to recognise the two-way relationship between infrastructure and the environment. It can clearly have both positive and negative effects on our Natural Capital and associated

Ecosystem Services. For example, a development could result in the loss of a valuable habitat or make local air quality worse. However, it could also directly create new habitats or connectivity. It could introduce SuDS features to reduce flood risk or it could include compensatory or offsite measures such as habitat restoration or deliver peat bog restoration, which will benefit CO2 sequestration.

It is also important to recognise how Natural Capital or ENG approaches can reduce the need for hard infrastructure, such as river re-profiling and catchment management to provide flood protection instead of hard flood defences – this then results in societal benefits, economic benefits and can improve biodiversity. This is really ENG in a nutshell – understanding the interconnectivity of benefits and illustrating the complete interdependence of nature, society and the economy as common goals to pull together rather than against each other.

Temple has produced an infographic to help visualise the link between Natural Capital, Ecosystem Services and Biodiversity, which can be accessed here: https://www.templegroup.co.uk/service/natural-capital-biodiversity/

How have processes such as SEA and SA traditionally dealt with Natural Capital and net gains?

For many of us, the most commonly used Strategic Impact Assessment techniques in terms of planning are Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) or Sustainability Appraisal (SA). When undertaken for Local Plans in England, the latter also follows the requirements of the SEA Regulations and consequently its established methodology.

These techniques involve the establishment of an environmental (and for SA, social and economic) baseline for the plan or programme area, which includes a range of Natural Capital topics, as prompted by the Regulations:

'(a) biodiversity; (b) population; (c) human health; (d) fauna; (e) flora; (f) soil; (g) water; (h) air; (i) climatic factors; (j) material assets; (k) cultural heritage, including architectural and archaeological heritage; (l) landscape; and (m) the inter-relationship between the issues referred to in sub-paragraphs (a) to (l)' (The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004, Schedule 2).

They also then involve the appraisal of effects, often in a qualitative fashion commensurate with the high-level nature of the plan or programme, against a series of criteria or objectives. The identified effects will be either positive, negative or neutral, often with different magnitudes applied, and opportunities will arise for recommending mitigation or enhancement as part of the appraisal process.

So, some of the bones of a Natural Capital or Ecosystem Services assessment exist in the established SEA/SA process. Indeed, Paragraph 6 (m) of Schedule 2 of the SEA Regulations listed above specifically refers to covering the *'inter-relationship between the issues referred to in sub-paragraphs (a) to (l)'*. Schedule 1 of the Regulations also requires consideration of the cumulative, synergistic, secondary, positive and negative effects and, importantly, **the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected**. Yet, the majority of SEA/SAs fall short of taking the truly Natural Capital or Ecosystem Services approach that is needed to establish ENG.

There are many potential reasons cited for this including budgetary, programmatic and/or perceptions that SEA/SA can be ineffective. So, is it time for the SEA/SA approach to be challenged and reviewed to embrace a wider Natural Capital/Ecosystem Services approach which it has so often lacked?

Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services Tools

While rising to prominence in the UK more recently than SEA/SA, it is important to note that Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services approaches are not new. Scores of methodologies exist worldwide, some of these use conversions to financial evaluation of environmental effects, others do not. There is, however, no single standard approach or metrics currently agreed for use in determining ENG, unlike its cousin, BNG.

Some examples of existing methodologies in this area include:

- TESSA
- NEVO (Natural Environment Valuation Online tool)
- GI Valuation Toolkit (GINW)
- ARIES
- CIRIA's BEST tool
- ORVal (Outdoor Recreation Valuation Tool)
- DEFRA's ENCA guidance
- Co$ting Nature
- Natural England's Environmental Benefits of Nature Tool

In fact, there are so many to choose from, the Ecosystems Knowledge Network (https://ecosystemsknowledge.net/) has a Natural Capital 'tool assessor' to help you decide what is best for your needs. Not all of these will translate directly to the strategic scale, although some have specific guidance and approaches for application at a range of granularity.

How can Strategic Impact Assessment be improved by integrated Natural Capital approaches?

There is sufficient experience and expertise in existence to be able to develop a robust and repeatable Strategic Impact Assessment technique which draws upon the best and most applicable components of established SEA/SA and Natural Capital/Ecosystem Services techniques. Indeed, this has been attempted by some organisations already.

The following are some suggested considerations for development:

- **Ecosystem Services/Natural Capital Mapping:** Strategic Impact Assessment typically relies on spatial data which becomes a fundamental part of assessing the impacts of proposed development against the baseline. Various approaches exist to mapping Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services, although again this is not standardised and its coverage across the UK is incomplete. Being able to draw upon a standard approach and mapping of Natural Capital/Ecosystem Services across a plan area will be central to the development of a consistent approach to incorporating this into Strategic Impact Assessments.
- **Establishing Appropriate Metrics:** Closely related to the spatial data point above is the establishment of an appropriate set of metrics for use in assessments. As identified above, this is well developed for BNG (at least at the project-level, albeit less so at the strategic level) but currently not for ENG. The development of an agreed set of ENG metrics (to be refined for a particular plan area) will be central to achieving a standardised approach and will be necessary to be able to measure the ultimate net gains provided. The Government's 25 Year Environment Plan includes some indicators that could be adapted for use in this.
- The above two bullets point towards the benefit of a digital/spatial data-based approach. Whether this be through the measurement of gains/losses of features in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), the linking of that directly to metrics in calculation tools or the ability to calculate more complex ecosystems service benefits, it is clear that digital data analysis and management will be key to developing an efficient and repeatable approach at the strategic level. The ideal solution would be a system that can calculate the relative benefits in real-time for different strategic options and be able to present the findings clearly to decision-makers.
- Many Natural Capital tools use monetary valuation to help compare effects. Whilst there is value to this and many of the available tools are based on this approach, this shouldn't need to be essential, especially at a strategic scale where there will be greater levels of uncertainty involved and more margin for flexibility is required.

- As with all strategic assessments, it is essential to consider potential effects that fall outside the boundaries of where the intervention is occurring. This is particularly true with Ecosystem Services where the benefits or impacts may occur outside of the immediate study area.

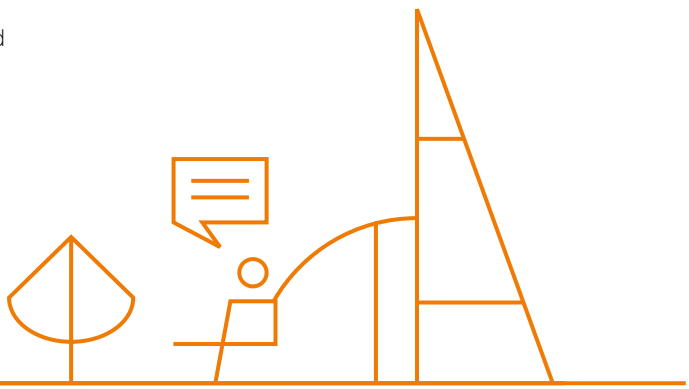
- Many strategic options assessments involve the identification of options with fewest impacts. A change of mindset towards selecting the options with the most benefits in terms of environmental net gains would be more positive and would best harness the ENG ethos. The use of Ecosystem Services to identify potential interconnected indirect benefits to society is valuable in this.

- Consider these issues and goals much earlier in the plan-making process.

- Ensure these strategic assessments are legible and accessible to the public and wider consultation.

- Should we consider ENG more like BNG in terms of our developments and strategic plans by having a mandatory ENG requirement?

Overall, adopting and integrating an ENG approach into Strategic Impact Assessment is as much about a change in mindset as it is the development of a tool or procedure. It is about holistic thinking and identifying linkages between our assessments to help identify opportunities for community and ecosystem enhancement that might otherwise have been missed. Initiating this at the strategic level opens far more wide-reaching opportunities than leaving it to the project-level only. Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services techniques can certainly help but there is no need to start from scratch. Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services are established and there are logical and well-established aspects of the SEA methodological structure which can be adapted and evolved.



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Digital SEA in practice

While IA practice has now accepted the benefits of Digital Impact Assessment (DIA), its application in Strategic Impact Assessments, such as SEA, is still in its infancy. The Access to Argyll and Bute (A83) SEA provided a good opportunity for SEA practitioners at Jacobs to realise many of these benefits and put them into practice. The principal benefits from the use of digital techniques for this project were in the use of interactive mapping for assessment purposes and the production of a digital Non-Technical Summary for public consultation.

Interactive Digital Mapping

Using Jacobs' ProjectMapper tool from the outset to display project datasets allowed the SEA practitioners to quickly and efficiently identify all key environmental constraints within 11 potential route corridors across Argyll and Bute at the SEA scoping stage. These datasets included designated and non-designated environmental features shown within and surrounding the potential route corridors.

> *"...extensive use of 3D modelling and detailed project information layers helping to differentiate the alignment options..."*

This rapid and comprehensive appraisal of constraints was particularly important for a project with a rapid turnaround, and enabled effective identification of a preferred route corridor in the Glen Croe valley, along the route of the existing A83.

At the Environmental Report stage, these same datasets allowed a more detailed analysis of the environmental constraints in the Glen Croe valley, with extensive use of 3D modelling and detailed project information layers helping to differentiate the alignment options within the valley. 3D visualisations were subsequently added to the Environmental Report, to provide the reader with a more complete picture of the terrain, proposed structures and tunnels and their associated constraints and opportunities.

Digital mapping was ground-truthed with a number of surveys undertaken in 2021, including aerial surveys. The mapping allowed ecologists, hydrologists and hydrogeologists to target the most appropriate areas to survey, thus saving time and survey effort. In turn, the digitisation of survey results supplemented the digital mapping for use in environmental assessment.

The use of digital mapping proved essential during the COVID-19 pandemic as it allowed easy analysis for SEA practitioners working remotely. It also allowed the practitioners to collaborate effectively, for example sharing screens to discuss all of the constraints and opportunities with an Environmental Steering Group, comprised of Transport Scotland, the SEA statutory consultation authorities, local councils, the National Park Authority and other key stakeholders.

SEA Non-Technical Summary Smart Report (StoryMap)

The digital StoryMap provided a great opportunity for the general public and key stakeholders to understand all of the key aspects of the project in a more intuitive package. The integration of aerial photographs allowed the reader to better interpret the nature of the terrain in relation to the engineering challenges and the potential environmental constraints and opportunities. Interactive mapping in the StoryMap clearly presents the significant environmental constraints associated with the 11 route corridors in Argyll and Bute, and also the constraints associated with five possible route options within the retained Glen Croe Corridor. The reader has the ability to zoom in or out and select the environmental constraints they wish to view according to each SEA topic. This allows the reader to quickly focus on the issues that matter to them. This proved to be more user-friendly than long and often cumbersome Environmental Reports. The digital StoryMap therefore provides an excellent 'snapshot' of the project and its SEA, with multiple hyperlinks to other data sources if required, including a general project StoryMap and PDF copies of the SEA and its appendices.

The future of Digital Impact Assessments in Jacobs

Jacobs, in partnership with AECOM, recently published the Impact Assessment Non-Technical Summary for Transport Scotland's second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2), covering SEA and various Social and Equality Impact Assessments. Jacobs also continues to use Digital Impact Assessments for many EIAs, including the recent M60/M62/M66 Simister Island Interchange. It is expected that most SEAs produced by Jacobs will also continue to use digital techniques, including StoryMaps, because of their clear benefits in efficiency and associated cost savings and their obvious benefits for engagement with key stakeholders and the general public. Jacobs' Smart Reports will also be used for other forms of assessment that are often less map-based, such as Equality Impact Assessments. For all of these IAs, there are multiple opportunities to improve report presentation, for example through the use of interactive infographics, tables and figures. This is expected to improve project and IA understanding and synthesise the key findings. As with digital IAs produced to date, this is likely to continue providing time and resource efficiency savings for practitioners and clients. Ultimately, it will also continue to yield better consultation feedback and improve the social and environmental outcomes of each project.

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Environmental Sensitivity Mapping: Supporting evidence-based Strategic Environmental Assessment and spatial planning

In the context of the global climate and biodiversity emergencies, there is a significant impetus on planning departments and governmental agencies to ensure that environmental awareness is at the heart of decision-making. Yet, access to environmental information remains disjointed. Moreover, even when available, assessors, planners and decision-makers often lack the technical skills required to interrogate and apply environmental datasets. This is particularly an issue in the context of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). In Ireland, for example, we have seen a rapid growth in the availability and accessibility of spatial datasets pertaining to the environment – mainly fostered by the implementation of the European INSPIRE Directive, but also as a result of considered governmental initiatives to tackle knowledge and data gaps. These datasets have been created by disparate sources and made available through an array of websites, including the Irish Government's Data Repository (data.gov.ie) and the National Spatial Data Hub (geohive.ie). Yet, the effective use of these data often requires specialised Geographic Information Systems (GIS) skills and technical competencies to understand and interpret any mapped outputs.

"The ESM webtool has created substantial opportunities to improve SEA, AA and EIA practice and to support the work of consultants and planning departments."

To overcome most of the technical and accessibility barriers to the effective use of environmental information in Ireland, we have developed an Environmental Sensitivity Mapping (ESM) webtool (Figure 1). The ESM has made it possible to readily visualise, interrogate and use over 130 data sources at once in a structured and purposeful manner to inform SEA, AA, EIA and, ultimately, plan-making. Before the webtool was published, ESM required not only GIS skills and expertise, but also weeks of time and effort by dedicated teams, to gather and analyse data from a wide range of sources. This made it difficult for planners, stakeholders and the general public to scrutinise the information. The webtool overcomes these obstacles by making relevant data readily available in one location, and producing sensitivity maps in a matter of minutes. As the Technical Director of Environment of RPS Group (Ireland) notes:

'It is very accessible for a wider audience including planners, engineers, environmental specialists and stakeholders making it a practical tool that can be used widely to support decision-making. We have used it to support SEA on a number of plans since its launch, including the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, and we regularly recommend it to clients and colleagues as a tool to assist their decision-making.'

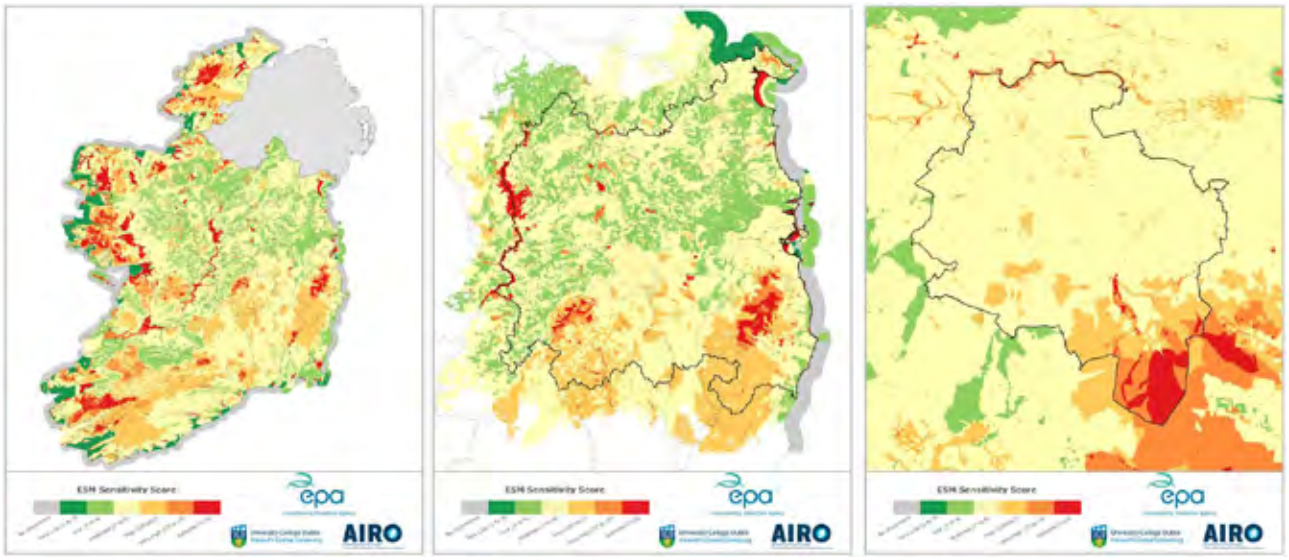
The ESM webtool has created substantial opportunities to improve SEA, AA and EIA practice and to support the work of consultants and planning departments. By highlighting the location of natural assets, their overlap and vulnerability, the tool provides immediate and objective information to guide development to suitable areas for environmental protection. In doing so, it places the environment at the centre of decision-making and prevents land with significant natural value from being zoned for development. The Planning Regulator & Chief Executive at the Office of the Planning Regulator in Ireland observes that:

'The development of the ESM tool has provided an effective, straightforward to use mechanism whereby professional planners have the capacity and the confidence to gather and interrogate data directly and place the insights derived at the heart of the planning process.'

The novelty of the ESM webtool – and its added value when compared to common data browsers – lies in the creation of plan-specific environmental sensitivity maps at national, regional and local levels (Figure 2). The webtool contains a multi-criteria analysis widget, where multiple user-selected environmental considerations are brought together to capture their overlap and thus measure the overall sensitivity of the various lands/areas to change. Users can adjust the weighting related to each environmental dataset incorporated into the analysis so that stakeholders' concerns can feed into the analysis. The output maps can help planners anticipate potential land use conflicts, thus informing the identification of suitable development locations while protecting the environment.

Figure 1. *Screenshot of the Environmental Sensitivity Mapping (ESM) webtool interface illustrating datasets and data query functions, as well as the ESM widget that enables undertaking plan-specific environmental sensitivity analysis – a sensitivity map output is presented in the screenshot.*

Figure 2. *Environmental Sensitivity Mapping at different planning levels: from national (left) to local (right).*



A Senior Executive Planner of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (Ireland) highlighted the contribution of the ESM webtool to the SEA and plan-making processes:

'The outputs of the ESM tool added weight to environmental considerations as it could be clearly seen where the environmental sensitivities were located, facilitating a fuller understanding of the environmental issues that are present within the region.'

The ESM webtool is now routinely used in Ireland, fostering evidence-based decisions and sustainable development. Its significant contribution to environmental governance has also been acknowledged at European level. As part of the Interreg Europe PROGRESS project, the ESM webtool was ranked first out of a series of European good practice case studies on improved landscape governance for economic and environmental sustainability. In recognition of its potential as an example of good practice which can be emulated in other European regions, the webtool has been included on the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform. For more detail, see: https://www.interregeurope.eu/policylearning/good-practices/item/5876/environmental-sensitivity-mapping-esm-webtool/

The ESM webtool is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Office of the Public Regulator (OPR), and it is hosted by Ordnance Survey Ireland (OSi) on GeoHive – the National Geospatial Data Hub. It has been developed and is maintained by researchers at University College Dublin's School of Geography and the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) at Maynooth University. You can find out more about the ESM webtool at: www.enviromap.ie For any technical queries or further information, you can also contact the author of this article and the ESM webtool project lead at: ainhoa.gonzalez@ucd.ie

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Time for an SEA shake-up

> *"Adapting SEA... requires a change in the mindset of SEA practitioners."*

"Did it make a difference?" – A phrase that has stuck with me from one of the first Impact Assessment conferences I attended. The true test of whether an Impact Assessment has been successful.

While it's difficult to discern what has happened in the background to the production of an SEA Report, there are few examples of SEA resulting in a significant change of direction or improvement in environmental performance for a plan or programme. This is not a new problem. In 2010, a UK Government report noted that SEA tended to operate as a parallel process to plan-making and had more of a 'fine-tuning' than a 'plan-shaping' role[7]. Sadly, there were no reforms to SEA as a result. Many SEAs appear locked in to following a template that was set over 15 years ago – proficient at producing the SEA Report, but limited in terms of positive environmental outcomes.

SEA, as currently practised, is not fit for today's challenges of a world that is exceeding planetary limits in greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity decline, the prevalence of chemicals in the environment and other factors. We are, I think, at a pivotal moment where SEA must change or be considered outdated and ineffective.

Reforming SEA

What would be the hallmarks of a reformed SEA approach? I would argue that an effective, fit for the 2020s SEA process would:

- value influencing the plan or programme over producing a product
- be an agent for regenerative systems rather than minimising adverse effects
- challenge the assumptions and systems that underpin the impacts on the environment, rather than sticking rigidly to the rails of the topics listed in the Regulations.

For the practitioner, this creates a more uncertain world. While following a template process is relatively easy, stepping into an SEA where you don't know how the SEA is going to be undertaken, what the outcomes are going to be or what the report is going to look like is a step into the unknown. Nobody said this was going to be easy and this isn't the time to retract to our default position, we already know that isn't up to the job. Here are some initial thoughts as to how we might step into this brave new world.

1. Identify the leverage points

The task is to influence the plan. This is best achieved by being involved as early as possible in the plan-making process. Questions that the practitioner might ask are:

- How are the problems defined that the plan is trying to address? Are there alternative perspectives?

7. Smith S, Richardson J, McNab A (Scott Wilson Ltd), 2010, Towards a more efficient and effective use of Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Appraisal in spatial planning. Final report. Department of Communities and Local Government, London.

- How and by who are initial concepts developed?
- Where are decisions made in the process?
- Who is making decisions?

Introducing systems thinking to this process might also help. Perhaps the proposed plan is only propping up an already degenerative system and there are other more sustainable approaches?

These are all opportunities to influence the direction and the content of the plan, ideally before pen is put to paper. Some opportunities will have passed by and others will be difficult to infiltrate. Nevertheless, the key question is, where are the leverage points to effectively influence the plan?

2. Ensure accountability sits in the right place

The 'parallel' approach referred to in the 2010 DCLG report, aligned with producing the plan as originally conceived. We need to find ways of ensuring that the plan-makers are accountable for the SEA, for legal compliance and for the predicted environmental outcomes. Easier said than done, of course. Perhaps a start would be to report on the plan-making process and how environmental or sustainability concerns are considered. For the organisation that prefers to keep the SEA at arm's length, then that experience would become part of the report.

For those plans that, despite our best efforts, will increase carbon emissions or sever ecological corridors, those impacts need to be 'owned' by the plan-makers. It means we will need to be clear on the terms of engagement at the outset of an assessment and use more unequivocal language in reports.

3. Use standards of performance consistent with the environmental crises

Basing the conclusions of an assessment on the 'direction of travel' alone is no longer sufficient. How fast we get there matters. To address the climate, biodiversity and other environmental crises plans need to be regenerative, rather than focusing on minimising environmental effects. This requires setting benchmarks of performance that aren't subject to negotiation. For example:

- A reduction in carbon emissions from current levels and beyond those achieved by the 'greening of the grid'
- Providing for biodiversity net gain (BNG)
- Not further depleting water resources where they are already under stress
- Focusing on keeping resources in circulation, rather than on how waste is addressed.

Shaking up the SEA mindset

Adapting SEA isn't just about the practical steps we might take, but it also requires a change in mindset for SEA practitioners.

- We need to develop a generation of practitioners that are defined not by their ability to follow and implement guidance, but by their ability to understand plan-making processes and to develop strategies to influence. Above all they need to be able to *'test hypotheses for change, learn and course correct all of the time'*[8].
- The skillsets of SEA practitioners may need to change. Perhaps all round environmental or sustainability knowledge should become secondary to their skills in facilitation, influencing, engagement or systems thinking.
- We need to redefine success. Moving away from the production of a report or the fulfilment of a contract to *'did we make a difference?'* Does the plan contribute to bringing life back within planetary boundaries?

8. Paraphrased from Uren S (2018), The window to act on climate change is closing fast. We need a new plan, Reuters Events – Sustainable Business.

Summary

Ellie Askham and Josh Fothergill - Guest Editors

From the great papers set out in this edition of IA Outlook Journal it is clear that Strategic Impact Assessment remains a vital tool for improving and advancing plan-making, and that there are many great practitioners working across the UK, Ireland and beyond. It is, however, also clear that plans and the ambitions behind them are changing, often driven by the scale of the sustainability challenges society now faces. As part of this trend, we are seeing more plans that seek to set out a core direction, but retain an adaptive approach to enable them to pivot, if required, by future challenges, or even opportunities that could arise from new technology development for example.

Alongside this there has been a significant growth in the range of Strategic IA tools and approaches since the SEA Directive was adopted at the turn of the millennium. This plethora of tools drives a need for practitioners to become efficient and effective at undertaking integrated assessments, which are appropriately scoped to focus on the key issues and risks related to the plan or programme. It is unfortunate that there is not more interest in the exploration and application of Strategic IA in relation to policy-making, especially outside of Scotland, but this can hopefully act as an inspiration for practice to work harder to show the positive results that can arise from its application to broaden application in the near future.

The advancement of technology and greater innovation in the way practitioners contextualise plan-making, such as the application of systems thinking, is also encouraging, but must also be right for the context of the plan-making process and be effective at engaging its stakeholders. We hope this edition of the IEMA IA Outlook Journal has acted to inspire IEMA members and beyond, and also acts as a call to arms to all Strategic IA practitioners, to positively respond to adapting our tools and skills to our changing times.

Over the page you can find out more about IEMA's Impact Assessment Network and the Strategic IA Group, which we are both members of. Over the next year, the Group will be developing more content for members, as well as seeking to engage with opportunities to further enhance Strategic IA's application, including the English review of the planning system and Scotland's adoption of NPF4 and what this will mean for SEA practice. Strategic IA is adaptable and we look forward to working with IEMA, its members and other practitioners to respond to the challenge and opportunity presented to practice by the climate emergency, development of a circular economy, response to the biodiversity crisis and the need to address inequalities across society.

If you are interested in being involved in the IA Network Strategic IA Working Group, IEMA members can email ia@iema.net to express an interest in joining the group.

Do you make effective use of ALL of IEMA's IA member resources?

IEMA's website contains a treasure trove of IA-related content, as well as information about IEMA's volunteer network groups, blogs, webinars and policy. But not everyone makes the most of this free member content, including:

- Future events and webinars
- Recordings of past webinars, with over 24 hours' worth of IA content
- IA guidance and advice: such as recent EIA guides on climate change, both GHG and adaptation, and soils and land.
- The Proportionate EIA Strategy
- Cover 400 EIA articles and 200 case studies related to EIA, developed by EIA Quality Mark registrants in recent years
- Individual and organisational recognition specific to EIA, through the EIA Register and EIA Quality Mark schemes respectively
- Contact details to engage with the Steering Group members for the:
  - IA Network.
  - GESA Group (Global Environmental & Social Assessment)
  - Geographic/Regional Groups.

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Acknowledgements

IEMA would like to thank our two Guest Editors, Ellie Askham and Josh Fothergill. Ellie is a Principal Environmental Project Manager from the National Environmental Assessment and Sustainability (NEAS) of the Environment Agency. Josh is an IEMA Fellow and the Founder and Director of Fothergill Training and Consulting. Ellie and Josh were supported with publishing and editing by Rufus Howard and Charlotte Lodge at IEMA.

We would like to thank the authors of the articles in this twelfth edition of the Impact Assessment Outlook Journal:

Ainhoa González (University College Dublin)
Cara Davidson (Scottish Government)
David Hourd (Temple)
Karl Fuller (Environment Agency)
Sarah Tooby (Arcadis)
Steve Isaac (Jacobs)
Thomas B Fischer (University of Liverpool)
Vicky Schlottmann (Natural Resources Wales)

IEMA's EIA Quality Mark – a scheme operated by the Institute allowing organisations (both developers and consultancies) that lead the co-ordination of statutory EIAs in the UK to make a commitment to excellence in their EIA activities and have this commitment independently reviewed. The EIA Quality Mark is a voluntary scheme, with organisations free to choose whether they are ready to operate to its seven EIA Commitments: EIA Management; EIA Team Capabilities; EIA Regulatory Compliance; EIA Context & Influence; EIA Content; EIA Presentation; and Improving EIA practice. In April 2021, IEMA celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the EIA Quality Mark.

Celebrating 10 years of the IEMA EIA Quality Mark

10 Year Anniversary

Strategic Impact Assessment

The twelfth edition of the Impact Assessment Outlook Journal provides a series of thought pieces on Strategic Impact Assessment. In this edition, the Guest Editors (Ellie Askham and Josh Fothergill) have selected eight articles produced by IEMA professionals and experts. The result is a useful and illuminating quick read across different aspects of practice within the field of Strategic Impact Assessment.

About the Guest Editors: Ellie Askham BSc (Hons), MSc

Principal Environmental Project Manager, Environment Agency

Ellie has worked in strategic IA and Environmental Impact Assessment for over 16 years within the private and public sector. She is a strong advocate for innovation in the field of strategic IA and seeks to improve and challenge practitioners to move towards approaches that truly influence. She enjoys interpreting SEA legislative requirements and provides bespoke specialist advice to complex plans and programmes. Ellie works closely with customers and partners to turn legislation into operational practice and to increase their understanding of requirements. Ellie is currently providing specialist advice to strategic water resource and flood risk management planning.

Josh Fothergill BSc (Hons), MSc, CEnv, FIEMA

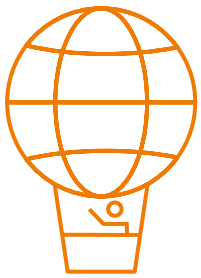
Founder & Director at Fothergill Training & Consulting Ltd

Josh is a Fellow of IEMA and Chartered Environmentalist. He has over 20 years' experience working to enhance the capabilities of individuals and organizations in relation to sustainability and impact assessment (IA). Josh has been involved in strategic IA across his career and is currently project managing such work to shape long-term water resource planning in England. Josh is also the UK's leading Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) trainer, having trained over 500 delegates in the past five years. Prior to founding FothergillTC, he spent a decade at IEMA as Policy Lead for IA, the circular economy, and the skills needs of a sustainable economy.

Josh is a strong advocate for improving practice and founded the EIA Quality Mark scheme to provide a mechanism to boost volunteering and good practice sharing related to IA. He has previously been a volunteer on multiple IEMA groups and co-author of IA guides, and currently acts as co-chair of its Strategic IA Working Group.

IEMA Transforming the world to sustainability

About IEMA



IEMA is the professional body for everyone working in environment and sustainability. We're committed to supporting, encouraging and improving the confidence and performance, profile and recognition of all these professionals. We do this by providing resources and tools, research and knowledge sharing along with high quality formal training and qualifications to meet the real world needs of members from their first steps on the career ladder, right to the very top.

We believe that together we can change perceptions and attitudes about the relevance and vital importance of sustainability as a progressive force for good. Together we're transforming the world to sustainability.

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