

Conclusions of the joint RTPI (Royal Town Planning Institute) – North West Region, and IAIA (International Association for Impact Assessment) – Ireland-UK Branch conference on sustainability appraisal (SA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA) at the University of Liverpool on 31 October 2006, 9:30 – 17:00.

The event

The event was attended by a total of 108 delegates, including regional and local government representatives, consultancies and academia. The day was divided into two parts; a morning session with paper presentations and an afternoon session, in which RTPI delegates were involved in practical exercises and IAIA delegates listened to PhD students' presentations and held a branch meeting. The day was concluded with a general discussion on progress and problems with SA/SEA.

During the morning session, six papers were presented, as follows:

- Presentation of baseline data in local development frameworks (LDFs), core strategies, area action plans (AAPs) and supplementary planning documents (SPDs) (Andrew Teague, Building Design Partnership – BDP, Liverpool)
- Identifying and assessing suitable alternatives in LDFs, core strategies, AAPs and SPDs (Riki Therivel, Levett-Therivel/Oxford Brookes University, Oxford)
- SA of the North West RSS (Matthew Wilkinson, North West Regional Assembly, Wigan)
- Effective consultation and public participation (Lisa Palframan, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – RSPB)
- SEA in Scottish Spatial Planning (Neil Deasley, Scottish Environmental Protection Agency – SEPA, Edinburgh)
- Emerging evidence; reviewing the quality of 92 SA reports (Chris Bamber, Government Office North West – GONW, Alexandra Webster and Matthew Gregg, Liverpool MPlan students)

During the afternoon, RTPI delegates were sub-divided into six groups, consisting of about 10 delegates each. Using a total of 12 SA reports and an SA quality review package, these six groups conducted practical exercises on:

- The presentation and use of baseline data
- The establishment and assessment of options
- The differences of SAs prepared at different administrative levels

Facilitators from each group later reported back on the findings to all delegates.

IAIA delegates first listened to three student papers by Ainhoa Gonzales (Spatial Data and GIS in SEA) and Susanne Tschirner (GIS and expert systems for SEA), both from the Dublin Institute of Technology, as well as Lynne McGowan (the role of options in plan making and SEA) from Liverpool University. This was followed by a discussion on future branch activities.

Summary of paper presentations in the morning session

Papers in the morning session mainly focused on emerging good practice. Furthermore, problems of current practice were identified and discussed.

Andrew Teague talked about the BDP approach of presenting baseline data. In addition to the production of tables listing potentially relevant data, policies, plans and programmes, this also involves providing explanations for how those are relevant and how they are used in

assessment. Good practice examples were presented from appraisals conducted at different administrative levels. In this context, the usefulness of GIS mapping was highlighted.

Riki Therivel presented an overview of the dos and don'ts of identifying suitable alternatives/options. In this context, the importance of identifying 'real', reasonable and realistic options was stressed. 'Pseudo' options, such as 'plan or no plan' or 'made up' options, such as 'restrict amount of development land, not taking account of local needs' should be avoided. An approach whereby alternatives are established for each development policy (which normally results in hundreds or possibly even thousands of alternatives) should also be avoided. In appraisal, the focus should be on identifying the main issues dealt with in the actual plan making process for the authority early enough to influence the choice of alternatives. In this context, key options put forward by the public should be considered. Different scales require the consideration of different alternatives, ranging from broad scenarios over area wide strategic options to more detailed measures and site specific options. It is important to clearly document when options were considered for what reason and why they were rejected/supported. Some good practice examples and a web link to the 'dos and don'ts guide to alternatives' were presented (www.levett-therivel.co.uk, go to 'SEA').

Matthew Wilkinson provided information on the SA of the North West Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). In this context, he focused on the SA process and its integration with plan making and emerging evidence and problems. Within the process, various assessment / appraisal instruments had to be integrated, including rural proofing, health impact assessment and appropriate assessment. The SA framework was based on the Integrated Appraisal Toolkit (IAT). The main appraisal matrix of the RSS did not only include the listing of sustainable development objectives/criteria and the key baseline data, but also an estimation of urban, rural and outside the region effects, as well as short, medium, long-term and cumulative effects. The following list of regional information sources was provided:

- RSS Appraisal website (<http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk/planning/rssappraisal.php>)
- RSS Appraisal Framework (http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk/documents/index.php?group_id=90&expand=89)
- North West SA Framework – Entec Matrix (http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk/documents/index.php?group_id=90&mode=details&id=374)
- Final SA report submitted with draft RSS in Jan 06 (http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk/documents/index.php?group_id=133&expand=131)
- Integrated Appraisal Toolkit (IAT - <http://www.sdtoolkit-northwest.org.uk>)
- North West Sustainability Checklist for Developments (<http://www.nwra.gov.uk/sustainabledevelopment> [then go to 'Sustainable Communities' section])
- Planning, Housing and Transport Directorate, NWRA (<http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk>)

Lisa Palframan reported on the experiences of a non-statutory consultee with emerging SA/SEA processes. She explained that the RSPB has developed expertise in environmental assessment over the past twenty years, and sees SEA as a vital tool for ensuring biodiversity issues are tackled at all levels of decision making. Consultation with environmental organizations isn't just about fulfilling a legal obligation, it can also provide vital information to help authorities carry out effective SEA. The same is true of consultation with social and economic stakeholders during sustainability appraisal. Current SEA practice is very varied in terms of the quality of the process and whether consultation is considered adequate. In this context, she particularly stressed the fact that consultation needs to happen early enough in order to be able to influence appraisal and plan making. (see also www.rspb.org.uk/Images/seachangearticle_tcm5-120991.pdf).

Neil Deasley reported on the Scottish experiences, where SEA is currently not implemented within SA, but as an independent assessment instrument. In this context, the usefulness of

state of the environment reporting and the presence of good and precise guidelines was stressed. Scotland has released a Strategic Environmental Assessment Toolkit: (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/09/13104943/0>).

Finally, Alexandra Webster and Matthew Gregg reported on the results of a University of Liverpool Civic Design student project for the GONW, represented by Chris Bamber, within which the quality of 92 SA statements was established, using an SA/SEA quality review package. Statements were from Scotland, the North West, the North, the West Midlands and the South West of England. They showed that poor quality was particularly evident regarding the use of baseline data, the establishment and assessment of options and monitoring. On average, of all plans examined, SAs for supplementary planning documents (SPDs) were of the poorest quality. – Scottish local plans, on the other hand, were of a good quality, most likely because of the presence of state of the environment reports, which provided a very good starting point for assessment. Various good practice examples were also presented.

Summary of afternoon sessions

RTPI workshops and general discussion

The facilitators' reports (from Sue Kidd, Lisa Palframan, Andrew Teage, Adam Barker, and Helen Meekings) revealed some very interesting insights, particularly into the shortcomings and problems of current SA/SEA practice. Furthermore, participants were able to share their own experiences. Overall, problems identified in the morning session by the different speakers were confirmed. In summary, the main issues raised and discussed include:

- Generation, presentation and use of baseline data:
 - It was found that in most cases the generation of baseline data appeared to have been too unfocused; rather than establishing what data were needed in order to identify significant impacts, any available policies, plans, programmes and data were frequently listed, without giving these any real purpose in subsequent appraisal
 - Presentation of baseline data was often found to be poor and the relevance to assessment of options often remained unclear
 - Somewhat worryingly, when comparing different statements from between 2002 and 2006, there didn't appear to be much progress
- Generation, presentation and assessment of options/alternatives
 - None of the statements reviewed appeared to have provided for a clear generation, presentation and assessment of options/alternatives
 - Main approaches included
 - the generation of options for each plan policy, thus potentially generating several hundreds of options (to be avoided, see Riki Therivel's presentation)
 - the generation of a limited number of strategic options, which would have been positive, had the options not remained unclear and their assessment not appeared rather inconclusive
 - the generation of a limited number of options, that were, however, defined differently for different review areas, which reviewers perceived as very confusing
- Focus of SAs/SEAs prepared at different decision making levels
 - It was somewhat surprising that there were only minor variations between assessments at different decision tiers (ie Regional Spatial Strategy, Local Development Framework and Area Action Plan). More variation was felt to be necessary for assessments to really make sense

The final discussion revolved around the lack of progress that appeared to have been made since the introduction of formal SA/SEA requirements over the past two years. In this

context, participants suspected that there may be a fear of authorities to try out new things for fear of litigation. It was then suggested that this might create a vicious circle of poor practice. Whilst there appeared to be a great emphasis on trying to meet procedural requirements, substantive issues clearly received less attention. A particular problem appeared to be an apparent indecisiveness regarding what contributes to necessary/significant data. In this context, various delegates suggested that central government and government offices should encourage better practice and actively support the preparation of higher quality appraisal statements.

IAIA delegate afternoon session

The Ireland-UK IAIA delegate afternoon session was divided in two parts. The first part consisted of three presentations from Ireland-UK PhD students on SA and SEA. An IAIA branch meeting, including discussions on further branch activities, was held in the second part of the afternoon. IAIA delegates were subsequently invited to join the RTPI delegates and participate to the closing discussion.

PhD presentations

Ainhoa Gonzalez, from DIT (Ireland), presented research results on applying spatial data and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in SEA. These revealed that whilst current GIS use in Ireland is limited, there are opportunities for its uptake. The basic concepts behind a systematic GIS-based methodology to assist the various stages of SEA were described. The methodology is currently being applied to real case studies to evaluate its applicability as well as its limitations, barriers and potential benefits.

Lynne McGowan, from the University of Liverpool, presented MA research results on the role of options in SEA and plan making. Nine Core Strategy SA Reports were reviewed in order to determine current practice in developing and assessing options. It was found that the greatest influence on developing options appears to be the need for policies to be in conformity with higher level strategic plans and policies such as RSS, and that public consultation contributed little to the development of additional options. It was also found that there needs to be greater distinction between predicting the likely effects of options and the appraisal of options as both of these stages use ambiguous terms that identify positive/negative effects but do not explain how these effects are achieved. Overall, although decision making appears to be based on the economic and social aspects of sustainability, the process of developing, assessing and refining options does mean that they become more environmentally sustainable incrementally as plan making progresses.

Susanne Tschirner, from NUIM (Ireland) presented preliminary results of her research on the use of GIS and Expert Systems (ES) for SEA. She suggested that a combined GIS/ES in SEA can help to achieve the integration of environmental issues into the decision making process, providing decision makers with the right information at the right time. Because of the information needs of SEA, and the iterative and quickly changing nature of the process, information will have to be reviewed several times, and GIS/ES can contribute to a high quality and cost-effective SEA process. The presentation outlined an “ideal” GIS and ES system for SEA, and demonstrated necessary resources to support this system.

IAIA branch meeting

This open session was chaired by Mat Cashmore (outgoing Chair of the provisional Branch Committee) and Adam Boyden (newly ratified Chair of the nominated Branch committee). It was aimed at allowing IAIA members present to raise any issues concerning the future development of Branch activities. Members of the newly ratified Branch Committee were introduced at the meeting: Elsa João, Pilar Clemente-Fernandez, John Fry, Josh Fothergill, Mat and Adam (Lianda d'Auria, Ross Marshall and Shane Larkin sent their apologies).

Mat gave a brief progress report. The Ireland - UK Branch is only the second Branch of the IAIA to be established, and is operating on a trial basis until next year, so there is a fair amount of flexibility as to how this can be operated. Liverpool is the third event organised by the IAIA Ireland-UK Branch, previous events having been in Norwich and Dublin, which were well attended and received. Publicity material has been produced, several e-newsletters have been circulated, and there is provision for a presence on the soon-to-be revised IAIA website. The results of the members' survey, completed by 17 members, were briefly discussed, including the desire for an e-newsletter and a Branch award scheme of some sort, and contributions to future events or sponsorship. It was noted that the Branch needs to be sensitive to the differences in legislation between member countries, and that it should develop links with other organisations. The Branch also needs to avoid being seen to duplicate the role of IAIA annual conferences by potentially reducing attendance, as this is crucial to the IAIA.

The open session with members raised a number of points including the following:

- The Branch should coordinate information on current / good practices in impact assessment, particularly SEA, Environmental and Health Impact Assessment.
- A website for the Branch would be welcome and could include various links to relevant good practice guidance and information, and reports/proceedings of the Branch meetings.
- A regular e-newsletter would be welcome, concentrating on impact assessment matters.
- Theme-based workshops and other events would be welcomed, with time included for discussions which are essential to be able to talk to each other about current practices and how to resolve problems. A national conference could be organised. Other organisations should be contacted including those 'non-converted' or relatively unaware of impact assessment.
- The Branch could concentrate on where good practice has made a real difference to projects, plans or policies, and the barriers to this.

A Branch Committee meeting followed, where several issues were raised and discussed:

- The need to mobilize members, including students.
- The possibility of making it easier to pay for IAIA membership and event attendance, and using events to encourage new members to join.
- Possible venues and topics for future events.
- Coordination of event publicity and website design.
- Award scheme, including for the best IA-related dissertation.

Other outcomes and action points

- Central government and government offices should become more active in supporting good practice, particularly regarding the quality of statements and substantive requirements. In this context, authorities should be encouraged to focus on those issues that are significant, rather than attempting to include everything that is found and not distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant policies, plans, programmes and data.
- We need to know more about good practice! If you are aware of good SA/SEA cases please send references (possibly web-based) to riki@levett-therivel.fsworld.co.uk. The current list, which was produced in 2005 (see www.levett-therivel.fsworld.co.uk) will be up-dated shortly!
- The next IAIA Ireland-UK branch meeting on EIA and SEA will take place in Edinburgh Castle on 27 April 2007 (please contact Elsa Joao - elsa.joao@strath.ac.uk)

*Thomas Fischer, chair of RTPI/IAIA conference and
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(both Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool)*