

Strategic Environmental Assessments for Local Transport Plans

Some brief notes for local environmental groups

By Reg Harman, independent transport consultant, for Transport 2000, Aug 2005

Under the principles of the EU SEA Directive - see reference at end of notes - strategic environmental assessment (SEA) must now be carried out on all transport plans and programmes and an Environmental Report produced. This includes the current round of provisional Local Transport Plans (LTPs), submitted in July 2005. The Environmental Report is being published by most, probably all, PTEs and local transport authorities (LTAs) for consultation in autumn 2005 with the LTP (and with the Accessibility Plan).

Brief reference was made to SEAs by the Department for Transport (DfT) in the **Full Guidance on Local Transport Plans: Second Edition** (December 2004), in Part 5, paragraphs 13-15. This offers very brief and uncertain guidance about how the SEA should be handled at this stage of LTP preparation.

Full guidance on the principles and structure of the programme for SEAs is set out in substantial depth in the DfT manual **Strategic Environmental Assessment for Transport Plans and Programmes - TAG Unit 2.11**, issued as part of its series of Transport Assessment Notes. This can be found in Web site www.webtag.org.uk, under Documents / Guidance Documents. However, this does not define exactly what should be covered.

Local groups should look out for the SEA (Environmental Report) and assess what it implies for the provisional LTP. Most SEAs are likely to be very substantial documents, packed with assessment tables. Don't be put off! There are some key points to look for and assess, and it is worth focusing carefully on these. They include:

Whatever their previous experience, this is a new process for most authorities, and for most consultants. Because DfT have not laid down any specific rules on framework or contents, these could vary widely, and probably will. ***Does the structure and contents of the assessment soundly address real environmental issues for the area or does it look like another process to get through?***

The processes and some aspects of the environment overlap those of the New Approach to Transport Appraisal (NATA). In some cases authorities may have defined their SEA as a sustainability appraisal as well as an Environmental Report. ***Are the links for the SEA work to the NATA assessment principles clearly defined?***

In principle the authority should have considered various alternative principles for the LTP and the SEA should have assessed these as a basis of choosing which option to choose. In practice most SEA preparation began in late summer 2004, when LTP preparation was already in hand, so most authorities had largely defined their approach at this stage. ***Does the SEA show that choice of options for the LTP has been influenced by sound environmental appraisal, and if so to what extent?***

Spatial (land use) planning policies require close links to be made between land use development and transport (ODPM policy documents PPS12 and PPG13). ***So the SEA for the LTP should have close ties with the SEA for the new***

Local Development Framework (LDF): are such ties evident in the SEA or are they not apparent?

The SEA should include a review of the 'baseline situation', i.e. environmental problems and opportunities for the area at present, against which the LTP needs to be prepared and assessed. ***How effective is the review of the 'baseline situation' and is it used in practical terms to guide choice of LTP policies and measures?***

The initial work – development of methodology, data, background plans and baseline situation – should be prepared as a 'scoping study' and sent to the four designated environmental consultees (Countryside Agency, English Heritage, English nature, Environment Agency). ***Have the responses of these four bodies been properly taken on board in the Environmental Report?***

All assessments in the SEA should be based so far as possible against specific indicators and measured outputs from applying policies. However, serious problems may well exist in obtaining sufficient data for the area, or at all in some cases. In any case the LTP is largely made up of policies and programmes, and these are rarely site specific. Thus the assessments will be largely broad impacts: i.e. will a particular aspect of the environment be improved or worsened by a policy. ***Are the SEA assessments clear, justified by a short statement for each, and properly summarized?***

The guidance requires the Environmental Report to include a 'non-technical summary'. ***Is there a good executive summary that clearly outlines the work done and the main results and implications?***

Note:

- The formal document is European Directive 2001/42/EC **on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment** - transposed in England through **The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (Statutory Instrument 2004, no. 1633)**. The overall objective of the SEA Directive is defined as 'to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and to contribute to the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans ... with a view to promoting sustainable development'.
- These notes comprise an initial aid for local groups. They may be revised in the light of experience and need.