



Improving Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for Aggregates Planning Practitioners Network

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**Improving Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for
Aggregates Planning – Practitioners Network**

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Executive Summary

This document is the final report of the project *Improving Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for Aggregates Planning – Practitioners Network*. The study aimed to accelerate the learning of practitioners undertaking SEA/SA for minerals planning. This support was required due to the transposition of a new EU Directive on SEA (2001/42/EC) and concurrent changes to the English minerals planning system. The practitioners network was open to all stakeholders involved in minerals planning; minerals industry, minerals planners, statutory bodies, central and regional government and academia. To help create and support a network of practitioners the project used three key methods;

- Provision of a dedicated minerals web page on an existing website (www.sea-info.net).
- Development and publication of e-newsletters.
- Facilitation of face to face networking through seminars and workshops.

The project was successful in reaching a large audience with over 12,000 hits on the dedicated web page, and over 900 copies of the e-newsletters distributed. The seminars/workshops attracted 75 practitioners. Further engagement with the minerals industry (who were under-represented in the network) in SEA/SA and planning has been attempted through an open letter to the Quarry Products Association and the British Aggregates Association.

1 Background to the project

This report concludes the project, *Improving Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for Aggregates Planning – Practitioners Network*. This project was carried out by the Centre for Sustainability (C4S). It was funded by the Sustainable Land-Won and Marine Dredged Aggregate Minerals Programme, administered by MIRO (the Minerals Industry Research Organisation). The project commenced in July 2005 and concluded in January 2007.

The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive¹ came into force in July 2004 and was enacted through the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations² (also known as the SEA Regulations). This made it compulsory for plans and programmes in the minerals sector to be subject to an assessment before adoption.

The requirements of the Directive are coupled with the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004) which introduced the following new requirements for minerals planning at the county/unitary authority level: the production of a Minerals Development Document (MDD) which includes a core strategy, site specific allocations of land, area action plans (where needed) and a proposals map. The Act also required that a Sustainability Appraisal be conducted on the developing plans. Through guidance published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister³ the requirement to conduct a sustainability appraisal has been merged with the requirements of the SEA Directive.

2 Purpose of the project

Together the changes associated with the new planning regime and the requirements for SEA/sustainability appraisal presented significant challenges for mineral planning authorities, the aggregate industry and other stakeholders. During the period 2005-2008 there was a risk that if the new regime did not 'settle' quickly, delays and abortive/misguided planning and assessment work may have occurred. There was also a need to ensure that SEA/sustainability appraisals of minerals development plan documents were effective in improving the evidence base for the plans without becoming burdensome to minerals planning authorities and the industry.

As with any new process the main benefits would only be felt once authorities had learnt what did and didn't work. In the interim whilst learning took place, SEA had the potential to have a negative effect on industry and the authorities themselves. The central aim of this project was **to accelerate the learning of practitioners undertaking SEA for minerals planning.**

Bearing this overall aim in mind, the objectives of this study were:

- To increase the awareness and knowledge of SEA for minerals planning;
- To provide a web-based portal and e-newsletter to provide information and exchanging questions/problems/solutions on SEA of minerals plans; and
- To facilitate face to face networking to spread sound SEA practice in the minerals planning field through timely events.

3 Approach and Outcomes

The overall philosophy of the project was to make effective use of existing arrangements (e.g. an existing website and informal/formal networks) to deliver real benefits in avoiding the potential pitfalls of the early years of SEA/SA practice in the minerals sector. The approach taken by C4S was to work closely with practitioners from Mineral Planning Authorities, industry and other stakeholders to improve SEA/SA practice. The practitioner network comprised representatives from a range of organisations as identified in box 1.

1 European Directive 2001/42/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment

2 Statutory Instrument 2004 No. 1633 the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations

3 ODPM 2004 Guidance on Sustainability Appraisal for Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks

Box 1: SEA Practitioner Network Members

- Statutory Environmental Bodies (English Nature*, English Heritage, Countryside Agency – Landscape Access & Recreation*, and the Environment Agency) *As of 2006 English Nature and elements of the Countryside Agency merged to form Natural England
- Regional Government
- Regional Assemblies
- County Councils with minerals planning responsibilities
- Unitary Authorities with minerals planning responsibilities
- Minerals Industry
- Students involved in minerals planning and SEA

Based on the above approach, the following two key workstreams were proposed for the study:

- Workstream 1: Website pages and e-newsletter;
- Workstream 2: SEA for minerals planning - events.

3.1 Workstream 1: Website pages and e-newsletter;

The key tasks for this workstream were:

- New web pages for minerals SEA - FAQ's, example SEA reports
- Develop and publish "SEA for minerals planning e-newsletter"

The Strategic Environmental Assessment Information Service www.sea-info.net was launched in February 2004. The popularity of the site has grown rapidly to attract over 4000 visits per month. A large proportion of the users of the site are local authority planners seeking the latest information to assist them in understanding and applying the requirements of the SEA regulations. The site already had a page dedicated to SEA and sustainability appraisal for minerals and waste planning (see figure 1). As such the site provided an ideal "hub" for an SEA practitioners' network and provided the opportunity to link with other sites such as "goodquarry.com" to provide an integrated set of resources.

Figure 1: The original SEA Information Service: Minerals and Waste Page



This workstream enabled additional functionality and materials to be developed for the sea-info site to improve the support offered to SEA practitioners in the minerals sector. Specifically, the following were developed and then maintained through the life of the project:

- Redesigned site with improved appearance and functionality (see figure 2);
- Question and answer pages on SEA/sustainability appraisal for minerals;
- Registration to receive copies of the minerals SEA newsletter and
- A virtual library of minerals SEA Scoping Reports, Environmental Reports and related materials such as guidance and research.

The updated minerals and waste web page on the site attracted on average 800 hits per month over the life of the project.

Figure 2: Updated SEA Information Service Minerals and Waste page



Alongside the new features of the website, a regular e-newsletter was prepared and published offering short articles and information on SEA for minerals planning. This workstream of the project provided funding for developing the layout and content of the e-newsletter in concept form as well as the preparation, editorial activity and publication of five issues of the newsletter over the 19 month period of the project. The e-newsletter was edited by the C4S project team and included articles from practitioners involved in SEA and related minerals planning work. The content of the e-newsletter complemented that of the website by providing space for MPAs, consultants, industry and stakeholders to describe practical experiences from ongoing work. The e-newsletter was emailed to network subscribers each time a new issue was available. A total of 5 e-newsletters were published with on average over 200 subscribers to each newsletter. The newsletters are available to download from the MIRO web site.

3.2 Workstream 2: SEA for Minerals Planning Events

The key task for this workstream was:

- Organise and hold 3 training/networking events

The second workstream of the project provided a mechanism for face to face contact between MPAs and others involved in SEA. A total of three events were held to enable sharing of experiences and an opportunity to receive training and guidance on SEA/SA of Mineral Development Documents (MDDs). The events were free for delegates and open to up to 30 people at each event. The following events were held:

- November 2005 – Recognising that SEA was at the time relatively new to many attendees; a training workshop was run by C4S SEA practitioners providing understanding of the Regulations, guidance and potential approaches to conducting an SEA/SA for MDDs. The

presentations and programme from the day are available to download from the MIRO website(www.miro.co.uk).

- June 2006 – A seminar was held to enable delegates to exchange experiences of the process to date and receive information on the next steps. The presentations and programme from the day are available to download from the MIRO website.
- November 2006 - A final seminar was held in November that focused on assessment techniques that could be used for minerals development documents. As an output of one of the seminar sessions an open letter was written to the British Aggregates Association and Quarry Products Association highlighting how planners and the minerals industry could better engage in the future. The programme, presentations and letters are available to download from the MIRO website.

Sample comments received from network members who attended the training events are provided in Box 2: Feedback Questionnaire Comments.

Box 2: Feedback Questionnaire Comments

- “Great to hear minerals specific information on SEA/SA – there’s been nothing else like it...looking forward to newsletters.” (*Minerals Planner, November 05*)
- “These sessions are an invaluable opportunity to hear views from others involved with the process” (*Statutory Body delegate, June 06*)
- “I endorse the importance of engaging the minerals industry in SEA/SA to help avoid potential challenges and delays in the planning process” (*Minerals Planner, November 06*)
- “The network has been a great support – it should continue beyond the current funding if possible.” (*Minerals Planner, November 06*)

4 Conclusion and Next Steps

The project has provided a unique opportunity to capitalise on existing knowledge and facilities within C4S to provide a support network for minerals practitioners involved in SEA/SA. The combination of e-newsletters, web site and mix of seminars and training workshops has provided a useful support service to minerals practitioners in the early stages of SEA/SA practice in the UK. Over 900 copies of the newsletter have been distributed to subscribers, there have been approximately 12,000 hits on the minerals and waste web page over the life of the project and 75 people have attended the seminars/workshops.

The SEA Minerals Network would have benefited from greater involvement from the minerals industry, particularly at the free seminars and workshops. To help identify engagement opportunities an open letter has been sent to the QPA and BAA for distribution to association members.

Although the project has now concluded C4S are actively looking for alternative sources of funding to continue the network; in particular the seminars which have been particularly well received. C4S will continue to update the minerals web page on www.sea-info.net for the foreseeable future.

References

European Directive 2001/42/EC *on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment*

Statutory Instrument 2004 No. 1633 *the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations*

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2004 *Guidance on Sustainability Appraisal for Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks*