



Reviewing the quality of strategic environmental assessment reports for English spatial plan core strategies

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarises the results of a research project from early 2008, involving the author of this paper, as well as 18 post-graduate University of Liverpool students, in which the quality of European Directive based strategic environmental assessment (SEA) reports of English spatial plan core strategies (conducted within the context of the spatial planning sustainability appraisal—SA—regime) was reviewed. The project aimed at establishing the extensiveness of emerging spatial plan related SEA practice, as well as highlighting shortcomings and problems. Overall, it was found that whilst some aspects of assessment were done well, others were not of a satisfactory quality. Shortcomings were connected particularly with the practice of listing potentially relevant baseline documents and data without distinguishing sufficiently between those that are important in terms of significant impacts and those that are not. Problems were also found to exist with the evaluation of options and impacts, the consideration of substantive aspects, such as health, as well as regarding the formulation of final recommendations and monitoring.

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1. Introduction

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) has been a legal requirement in spatial and other sectoral plan and programme making in European Union (EU) member states since 21 July 2004, following implementation of Directive 42/2001/EEC ('SEA Directive'). Whilst the international professional literature has reported on various post SEA Directive case studies (see e.g. Hanusch and Glasson, 2008; Jiricka and Pröbstl, 2008; Geneletti et al., 2007; Therivel and Walsh, 2006), to date, systematic research into SEA systems and regimes throughout Europe has remained limited (Fischer, 2006). However, improving current SEA practice as well as advancing the conceptual and theoretical basis of SEA requires a good understanding of this practice (Fischer, 2003). In this context, an important aspect is the evaluation of the quality of SEA documentation.

This paper aims at contributing to fill the empirical knowledge gap by reporting on a project within which a systematic quality review of spatial plan core strategy SEAs in England (applied within the spatial planning sustainability appraisal - SA - regime) was conducted. Apart from the author of this paper, this also involved 18 post-graduate students from the Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool.¹

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¹ In this context, the contributions of George Alston, Nathaniel Colley, Louise Edwards, Sanaz Ziaei, Samuel Falco, Laura Harnasz, James Truscott, Amanda Stevenson, Caroline Green, Sarah McCain, Yaki Chiyokoma, Natalie Francis, Emma Wade, Ezikpe Kalu, Xianbiao Ouyang, Kate Ward, Qi Wang, and Patrick McCurdie are gratefully acknowledged; thanks also to Paula Posas for helping with the interpretation of the results.

The reviews were conducted in January/February 2008. Main objectives of the project were:

- To establish the extensiveness of emerging SEA practice in English spatial planning, as applied within the overall context of sustainability appraisal—SA.
- To identify shortcomings and problems of emerging English spatial plan related SEA practice.
- To provide for some recommendations on improving current spatial plan related SEA practice in England, based on the outcome of the quality reviews.

In order to meet these objectives, the following methodological approach was applied:

- The websites of all English local authorities were consulted in order to establish the number of spatial plan SEA reports.
- All available SEA reports for spatial plan core strategies were downloaded and reviewed, using an SEA Directive based review package (following Fischer, 2007; see Box 2).
- Results were interpreted, relating to e.g.:
 - whether the SEA report was prepared at the scoping, issues and options or final stages of the core strategy preparation;
 - the time of SEA report preparation (i.e. 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008);
 - the involvement of consultants in the SEA report preparation process.

Each of the 18 students involved in the project was responsible for reviewing an average of 13 to 14 SEA reports. Each of the reports was

Box 1**Local authorities of which core strategy SEA reports were considered.**

1. Ribble Valley
2. Chorley, Preston, South Ribble
3. Wirral
4. Liverpool
5. Pendle
6. Rochford
7. Three Rivers
8. Uttlesford
9. Portsmouth
10. Rushmoor
11. Salford
12. Stockport
13. Trafford
14. Northamptonshire
15. Ashfield
16. Gedling
17. Mansfield
18. Havant
19. Chesterfield
20. NEDerbyshire
21. Charnwood
22. Leicester City
23. Allerdale
24. Northshropshire
25. East Staffordshire
26. Waverney
27. Mid Suffolk
28. Weymouth & Portland
29. Cheltenham
30. Cotswold
31. Bath & NE Somerset
32. Rugby
33. Bexley
34. Camden
35. Greenwich
36. Hammersmith and Fulham
37. Cambridgeshire
38. Peterborough
39. Brighton
40. Basingstoke
41. Isle of Wight
42. Arun
43. Hyndburn
44. Dacorum
45. Thurrock
46. Tunbridge
47. Bury
48. Oldham
49. Wigan
50. Christchurch
51. Harborough
52. Purbeck
53. Forest of Dean
54. Gloucester
55. Mendip
56. South Bucks
57. Dudley
58. Malvern Hills
59. Sandwell
60. Stratford
61. Walsall
62. Westminster
63. Wolverhampton
64. Worcester
65. Wychavon
66. Wyre Forest
67. Wakefield
68. London
69. Barking and Dagenham
70. Brent
71. Enfield
72. Castle Point
73. Eastbourne
74. Chiltern
75. E Hampshire
76. Epsom
77. St. Helens
78. Rossendale
79. Runnymede
80. Bolsover
81. Blaby
82. Hinckley/Bosworth
83. Wandsworth
84. Huntingdonshire
85. Adur
86. Lancaster
87. N Hertfordshire
88. Redcar
89. Southend on Sea
90. Teinbridge
91. Kettering
92. West Sussex
93. Barrow
94. Telford and Wrekin
95. Breckland
96. Forest Heath
97. Sheffield
98. Colchester
99. Reading
100. Bracknell
101. Bassetlaw
102. Newark/Sherwood
103. Rushcliffe
104. Worthing
105. Wokingham
106. North Wiltshire
107. West Dorset
108. South Gloucestershire
109. Stroud
110. Sedgemoor
111. Coventry
112. Nuneaton
113. Salisbury
114. Haringey
115. Brentwood
116. Canterbury
117. Bournemouth

also reviewed by at least one other student and jointly agreed marks were allocated. Furthermore, reviews were repeated after a full round of initial reviews. Finally, all reviews were checked by the author of this paper. Only results of those reviews are subsequently presented that had been found to be meaningful and consistent. These include about half of all reviews originally conducted by the students (117 of 240). A list of those local authority core strategies covered in this paper is provided in [Box 1](#).

Subsequently, first the spatial planning and SEA system in England will be outlined. This will be followed by a general overview of the extent of spatial plan core strategy related SEA application. The SEA reports' quality

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