

Thomas Fischer and Paola Gazzola

Conference report

Sustainability appraisal (SA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA)

This report covers the proceedings and conclusions of the joint conference held by the RTPI (Royal Town Planning Institute – North West Region) and IAIA (International Association for Impact Assessment – Ireland-UK Branch) at the University of Liverpool on 31 October 2006.¹ The conference was attended by 108 delegates, including members from regional and local government, consultancies and academia² and was divided into two parts: (i) a plenary morning session with presentations of papers; and (ii) an afternoon session, in which RTPI delegates were involved in practical exercises and IAIA delegates attended PhD students' presentations and held a Branch meeting. The day concluded with a general discussion on progress and problems with SA/SEA.

Six papers were presented during the morning plenary session:

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

Thomas Fischer, chair of the conference, is a Reader and Paola Gazzola, facilitator of the IAIA branch meeting, is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool, Gordon Stephenson Building, 74 Bedford Street South, Liverpool L69 7ZQ; email: fischer@liverpool.ac.uk

1 IAIA delegate sponsors included BDP, Taylor Young, the Environmental Agency and the Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool.

2 The participation of a Chinese delegate (Professor Xu He of Nankai University) was enabled by a British Academy Small Research Grant ('Towards an improved governance? Differences in perceptions of effective SEA application in the UK and China').

During the afternoon the RTPI delegates were sub-divided into six groups, consisting of about ten delegates each. Using a total of 12 SA reports and an SA quality review package, each group conducted practical exercises on the presentation and use of baseline data, the establishment and assessment of options and the differences between SAs prepared at different administrative levels. Facilitators from each group later reported back on the findings to all delegates.

IAIA delegates first attended presentations of three student papers by Ainhoa Gonzalez ('Spatial Data and GIS in SEA') and Susanne Tschirner ('GIS and expert systems for SEA'), both from the Dublin Institute of Technology, and by Lynne McGowan ('The role of options in plan making and SEA') from Liverpool University. These were followed by a general discussion on future Ireland-UK Branch activities.

Summary of paper presentations in the morning session

The papers in the morning session mainly focused on emerging good practice and identifying and discussing problems of current practice.

Andrew Teague talked about the BDP approach to presenting baseline data. In addition to the production of tables listing potentially relevant data, policies, plans and programmes, this task also involves providing explanations for how those elements 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 'does 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 she advised. 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 document clearly when options were considered, for what reason and why they were rejected/supported. Some good practice examples and a web link to the 'does 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*. In this context, he focused on the SA process and its integration with plan making and emerging evidence and problems. Within the process, various assess-

ment / 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 Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) not only included 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. A list of regional information sources provided to delegates is appended to this report.

Lisa Palframan reported on the experiences of a non-statutory consultee with the 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 organisations is not 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 is used rather 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, in which the quality of 92 SA statements was established using an SA/SEA quality review package. Statements from Scotland, the North West, the North, the West Midlands and the South West of England were analysed. They showed that poor quality was particularly evident in the use of baseline data, the establishment and assessment of options and in monitoring. On average, of all plans examined, the SAs for supplementary planning documents (SPDs) were of the poorest quality. Scottish local plans, on the other hand, were found to be of a good quality, most likely because of the presence of state of the environment reports, which had 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 the group workshops (Adam Barker, Joanne Dutton, Sue Kidd, Helen Meekings, Lisa Palframan and Andrew Teague) 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. The overall problems identified in the morning session by the different speakers were confirmed. In summary, the main issues raised and discussed included the following.

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. The presentation of baseline data was often found to be poor and the relevance to assessment of options often remained unclear. Moreover, somewhat worryingly, there did not appear to be much progress when comparing different statements from between 2002 and 2006.

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. Secondly, the main approaches included: (i) the generation of options for each plan policy, thus potentially generating several hundreds of options (an approach to be avoided; see, for example, Riki Therivel's presentation); (ii) 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; and (iii) 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 (i.e. RSS, LDF and AAP). 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 over the past two years since the introduction of formal SA/SEA require-

ments. In this context, participants suspected that there may be a fear of litigation among authorities trying out new approaches. It was then suggested that this might create a vicious circle of poor practice. While 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 in the regions should encourage better practice and actively support the preparation of higher quality appraisal statements.

IAIA delegate afternoon session

The IAIA afternoon session was divided in two parts, the first part consisting of three presentations from Ireland-UK PhD students on SA and SEA with an IAIA Branch meeting, including discussions on further Branch activities, being held in the second part of the afternoon. IAIA delegates subsequently joined the RTPPI delegates in the closing discussion.

PhD presentations

Ainhoa Gonzalez (Dublin Institute of Technology) presented her research results on applying spatial data and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in SEA. These revealed that while 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 (University of Liverpool) presented her 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. She had found that the greatest influence on developing options appeared 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. There also needs to be a 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 (Dublin Institute of Technology) presented the preliminary results of her research on the use of GIS and Expert Systems (ES) for SEA. She suggested that a combination of GIS and 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 the 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) and 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 Cashmore 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 it can operate. The Liverpool joint conference is the third event organised by the Branch, previous events having been held in Norwich and Dublin, both of 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:

- (i) The Branch should coordinate information on current/good practices in impact assessment, particularly SEA, and environmental and health impact assessment.
- (ii) 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.
- (iii) A regular e-newsletter would be welcome, concentrating on impact assessment matters.
- (iv) 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. (v) 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. These included: (i) the need to mobilize members, including students; (ii) the possibility of making it easier to pay for IAIA membership and event attendance, and using events to encourage new members to join; (iii) possible venues and topics for future events; (iv) coordination of event publicity and website design; and (v) an award scheme, including one 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. More needs to be known about good practice. If *Town Planning Review* readers are aware of good Ireland and UK SA/SEA cases, please send references (possibly web-based) to riki@levett-therivel.fsworld.co.uk. The current list, produced in 2005, (see www.levett-therivel.fsworld.co.uk) will be up-dated shortly.

Appendix

References provided by Matthew Wilkinson

NWRSS Appraisal website (<http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk/planning/rssappraisal.php>)

NWRSS 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 the draft NWRSS 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])

The NWRA's Planning, Housing and Transport Directorate (<http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk>)

