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Sustainability Appraisal in neighbourhood planning in England

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The preparation of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) inclusive sustainability appraisals (SAs) for neighbourhood plans (NPs) in England may be required when significant environmental effects are expected to arise from an NP. In this paper, we report on the result of a Ph.D. project, conducted between 2012 and 2015, in which all 15 NP SEA inclusive SAs that had been completed at the time were evaluated. In this context, the quality of SA practice was found to differ substantially. SAs were prepared either ‘in-house’ (i.e. by neighbourhood planning steering groups) or by consultants. The quality of SAs was found to be associated with their overall perceived degree of influence on the underlying NPs. Whilst the focus of this paper is on practice in England, findings are expected to be of interest to a wider international audience, in particular to those experimenting with voluntary neighbourhood/local level plan SA/SEA.

Keywords: neighbourhood planning; sustainability appraisal; strategic environmental assessment; effectiveness; UK planning

1. Introduction

Sustainability Appraisal (SA) is an ex-ante decision support instrument, aimed at making policies, plans, programmes and subsequent projects more sustainable (Therivel and Fischer 2012). In English spatial and sectoral planning, SA is applied along with a range of other impact assessment (IA) tools, including e.g. strategic environmental assessment (SEA; for policies, plans and programmes), environmental impact assessment (EIA; for projects), habitats regulation assessment, health impact assessment and others (Tajima and Fischer 2013). IAs have been shown to come with varying degrees of effectiveness with regards to achieving their stated intentions (Chanchitpricha and Bond 2013). In the case of SA, these intentions may be expressed through, e.g. specific sustainability objectives that are to be fed into associated action (Hayes and Fischer 2015). Whilst the professional literature has reported on various IA examples that have not been effective in this sense (see e.g. Richardson 2005), overall IAs have been observed to exert at least a moderate impact on the decisions they are attempting to influence (see e.g. Arts *et al.* 2012; Fischer 2009). Effectiveness has been found to be correlated with a range of technical (Marr 1997) and contextual aspects (Fischer 2005). In this context, quality of the process, documentation produced and skills of those conducting IA, as well as wider institutional arrangements, has consistently been found to be correlated with achieving stated intentions (Fischer 2002; Phylip-Jones and Fischer 2013).

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There is ample experience in England with conducting SAs (Therivel and Fischer 2012). It is most extensively applied in Local (Spatial) Planning (LP). Associated practices and experiences have been reviewed and discussed by a number of authors (Fischer 2007; Kidd and Fischer 2007; Sherston 2008; Therivel and Walsh 2006; Thomas 2008).

Neighbourhood planning was introduced as a new component to the English planning system through the Localism Act 2011 (DCLG 2011) which came into force in April 2012. It is part of an attempt to decentralise planning, aimed at providing opportunities for local communities to influence planning of the places in which they live and work, going beyond the existing requirements for statutory LPs. The number of community-led neighbourhood plan (NP) making exercises in England has been growing over the past few years. Parker and Salter (2017, 482) reported that 'by October 2016, 1,908 neighbourhood areas had been formally designated' and that 'around 300 had passed the examination stage' (see also <https://www.ourneighbourhoodplanning.org.uk/>).

Neighbourhood planning is not a legal requirement, but an offer to local communities to engage in a voluntary exercise that aims to develop 'a shared vision for their neighbourhood and deliver the sustainable development they need' (DCLG 2012, para. 183). NPs can obtain statutory status if approved in a public referendum, organised by the local authority to which an NP has to be submitted. According to Parker and Salter (2017, 482) by October 2016 '245 plans had passed the referendum stage'.

Following the requirements of the European SEA Directive and the associated UK Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (DCLG 2004), SEA is required if a plan is expected to give rise to significant environmental impacts. This also applies to NPs. Furthermore, NPs are required to demonstrate that they are sustainable (DCLG 2012). Consequently, if significant environmental effects are likely to arise¹, NPs may involve the preparation of SEA inclusive SAs. However, to date, how many SAs for NPs have been prepared and their quality and impact has remained unreported and unclear. There is no reference to SA on the RTPI's dedicated website to neighbourhood planning (<https://www.ourneighbourhoodplanning.org.uk/>). Furthermore, SA only gets one very brief mention in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's neighbourhood planning guidance, with a link to the government guidance on SEA and SA (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-planning-2>).

When neighbourhood planning was introduced, some commentators were sceptical about whether it would be able to generate any tangible benefits, not least due to a perceived lack of local planning capacity, as well as insufficient financial support to deliver NPs effectively (Parker, Lynn, and Wargent 2015; Sturzaker and Shaw 2015). Despite a now substantial amount of published work on neighbourhood planning, the need to critically review emerging experiences, in particular, with regard to these concerns persists (see also Parker and Murray 2012). It is within this context that, in this paper, we look at NP making, focusing on the associated SAs. Subsequently, we will reflect on the overall quality of the SAs, establish possible reasons for differences and look at the perceived ability of SAs to influence NPs. Whilst our focus is on practice in England, results should be of international relevance, in particular for countries practicing or experimenting with voluntary neighbourhood and local planning SEA and SA.

2. Research methodology

Common to most existing evaluation frameworks for *ex-ante* IAs is a concern with matters of 'quality' and 'effectiveness' (also referred to as 'inputs and outputs'; see e.g.

Baker and McLelland 2003; Fischer 2010; Lawrence 1997; Retief 2006; Sadler 1999; Sherston 2008; Thissen 2000). The original idea of separating ‘quality’ and ‘effectiveness’ aspects when evaluating IA practice was brought forward by Lawrence (1997). In his work, he drew a basic distinction between the analysis of EIA institutional arrangements, documents, processes and methods (inputs) on the one hand, and direct and indirect consequences (outputs) on the other. The research approach underlying this paper is based on this dual ‘quality’ and ‘effectiveness’ principle. It follows on from numerous other empirical studies over the past two decades (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler 2005; Fischer 2010; Retief 2007a; Sadler 1999).

With regards to establishing effectiveness of assessments carried out at strategic (e.g. plan) levels, it has been widely acknowledged that this is more difficult to establish than at the level of projects, the reason being a longer time gap between strategic planning and implementation (Fischer 2007). Furthermore, and associated with this, clear linkages between strategic planning and implementation are often blurred (Gachechiladze-Bozhesku and Fischer 2012).

A range of evaluation criteria for strategic assessments have been established in the professional literature (see e.g. Bina *et al.* 2011; Fischer and Gazzola 2006; Retief 2007b). These acknowledge that there are different perceptions of the purpose of assessments and, as a consequence, there are different ways for evaluation (Bina 2007; Gazzola 2008). Generally speaking, it has been suggested that assessment effectiveness can be categorised in terms of the following criteria (Bina *et al.* 2011; Bond, Morrison-Saunders, and Howitt 2012; Chanchitpricha and Bond 2013; Fischer 2007):

- procedural – related to completing required assessment steps;
- substantive – related to achieving overall objectives of assessment, including (environmental) protection and development;
- transformative – related to achieving attitudinal changes and
- transactive – whether the assessment process was carried out effectively at least cost, in as short a time as possible, using the best skills possible.

When designing the research approach, first NP SA evaluation criteria were established (Table 1). These are based on both, formal requirements (as formulated by DCLG 2012), as well as on best practice principles (as outlined by Parker 2012; Turley 2014 and Therivel 2011).

In our NP SA evaluation framework, three categories of evaluation criteria are used, as follows (Table 2).

- Evaluation criteria related to process: revolving around the pro-activeness, integrativeness and fairness of the process, and including elements of public involvement, consultation of statutory bodies, the consideration of other plans at the neighbourhood level and involvement of consultants, as well as the components screening, scoping, consideration of alternatives, cumulative impacts, mitigation and monitoring.
- Evaluation criteria related to assessment documents: taking into account style and format, the justification of content, the extent to which documents are informative and clear and the extent to which they describe the wider policy context, the assessment methodology, sustainability baseline and the underlying process, as well as how clearly results are communicated.

Table 1. NP SA evaluation criteria.

NP SA evaluation criteria	Characteristics	Source
Guidance, organisational capacity, community planning skills, other neighbourhood level plans and consultant involvement	NP planning capacity	Parker (2012)
Tiering	NP should be in line with Local Plan	DCLG (2012)
LPA	LPA should support NP	DCLG (2012)
Financial capacity	Missing financial support in deprived area	Turley (2014)
Time arrangement, proactiveness and integrativeness	SA should be integrated into the NP	Therivel (2011)
Public involvement and fairness	NP should be voted on in referendum	DCLG (2012)
Screening and scoping	SA of NP is voluntary if no significant impacts are likely	DCLG (2012)
Statutory consultation, alternatives, cumulative impacts, mitigation measures and monitoring	Procedural and methodological issues of SA in NP are unclear	Parker (2012)
Contents, style and format, informative, description of policy context, description of the current sustainability baseline, description of process and communications of results	The requirements of SA report in NP are not clear	Therivel (2011)
Goals achievement, policies changes, decision making, planning skill improvement, administrative level improvement and conceptual/ideological improvement	Direct and indirect influence of SA in NP is important	Therivel (2011)

Source: Authors, derived from Parker (2012); DCLG (2012); Turley (2014) and Therivel (2011).

Table 2. SA evaluation framework.

Attributes	Criteria	Questions		
Quality	Institutional arrangements	Guidance	Was the guidance helpful for SA preparation?	D, I
		Tiering	Was the SA undertaken within a tiered system of SA?	D
		LPA	Was the LPA involved?	D, I
		Organisational capacity	Was the planning process well organised?	D
		Community planning skill	Was the SA carried out by practitioners with high planning skills?	D, I
	Processes	Financial capacity	Was the financial input sufficient?	D, I
		Time arrangement	Was the SA carried out within a reasonable time frame without undue delay?	D
		Proactive	Did the SA ensure availability of the assessment results early enough to influence the decision-making process?	D, I
		Integrative	Was the SA fully integrated with the plan or programme formulation process, from conceptualisation to implementation?	D
		Public involvement	Was a formal public participation process followed?	D
	Processes	Fairness	Was the process fair towards the community?	D
		Statutory Consultation	Have the statutory consultation bodies had a fair opportunity to contribute and have their views / comments been taken on board?	D
		Other neighbourhood level plans	Were other neighbourhood level plans produced during or before the NP process?	D, I
		Consultant involvement	Was the SA carried out in house or by a consultant?	D, I
		Screening	Was the need for the SA clearly defined?	D
		Scoping	Did scoping assist in defining the scope and extent of the SA?	D
		Alternatives	Were alternatives considered and the best option identified?	D
		Cumulative impacts	Were cumulative or additional impacts considered?	D
		Mitigation measures	Does a mitigation strategy exist to promote any enhancement and the reduction of potentially negative environmental effects?	D
		Monitoring	Did the SA propose a plan for monitoring, and does this take place?	D

(continued)

Table 2. (Continued)		Criteria	Questions	
Attributes		Style and format	Does the style and format suit the contents?	D
		Justification of Contents	Was the contents clearly explained, justified and logically arranged in sections or chapters?	D
Documents		Informative and clear	Did the SA report provide sufficient information for decision-making?	D
		Description of policy context	Was the decision-making contexts and linkages with other decision-making processes described?	D
		Description of assessment methodology	Were the different methods applied in the SA described (relating to for instance screening, scoping and assessment)?	D
		Description of the current sustainability baseline	Was a description provided of the current sustainability baseline?	D
		Description of process	Was a description provided of the SA process?	D
		Communications of results	Were the SA results well presented in the report?	D
		Goals achievement	Were the SA objectives achieved?	D, I
		Policies changes	Were any plans or programmes amended based on the proposals of the SA?	D, I
		Decision making	Were decisions changed or amended based on the outcomes and proposals of the SA?	I
		Planning experience/skill improvement	Were skill improved based on the preparation of SA in NP?	I
Effectiveness	Direct outputs	Administrative level improvement	Was the administration capacity improved after the preparation of SA in NP?	I
	Indirect outputs	Conceptual/ideological improvement	Has the SA been used as a guideline for other future development proposals?	I

Source: Authors, adapted from Lawrence (1997).

Note: D: documents and I: interviews.

Not formally required.

- Evaluation criteria related to institutional arrangements: including the existence of guidance, clear tiering between policies, plan, programmes and projects, involvement of local planning authorities (LPAs), organisational and financial capacity, community planning experience/skill and time arrangements.

Table 2 also shows how evaluation criteria were categorised. Inspired by the approach introduced by Lee and Colley (1987), which has been used and tested in a multitude of evaluation studies (e.g. Phylip-Jones and Fischer 2013; Fischer 2010; Bonde and Cherp 2000; Marr 1997; Barker and Wood 1999), the following simple grading system was used

- (1) Grade A – satisfactory
- (2) Grade B – unsatisfactory
- (3) Grade C – task not attempted

Furthermore, a ‘no evidence’ category was introduced. This took into account non-responses in interviews and missing evidence.

In addition to the evaluation framework introduced above, those involved in preparing NP SAs were asked to specify the impact SA had on NP making and whether the opinions and attitudes of those involved had changed during the planning and assessment process, addressing an important element of substantive effectiveness. Furthermore, questions on the costs associated with both, NP and SA making were asked in order to address an element of transactive effectiveness.

In February 2014, at the start of the research project underlying this paper, around 1,000 neighbourhood areas had been formally designated in England. Most of the associated NP making processes were still at an initial stage, though, and only 29 NPs had been completed. Fifteen of them included SA. These are presented in Table 3.

Understanding inputs and processes is important, but outputs of SAs are the ultimate measure of their added value (Acharibasam and Noble 2014; Fischer 2002; Phylip-Jones and Fischer 2014). In terms of direct output indicators, ‘goals achievement’ is hard to investigate as it requires long-term monitoring. ‘Decision making’ is a complex indicator influenced by many different criteria and components. Therefore, the focus of research was on ‘policy changes’ in NPs triggered by SA (Kidd, Fischer, and Jha-Thakur 2011).

Evaluation of documents and interviews with those involved in NP making were employed as data collection methods. Thirty documents for the 15 NPs were collected and evaluated (see Table 4). These included the 15 SA reports (the main written outputs of an SA process), along with the 15 examiners’ reports², which provided important additional information not always recorded in the SA reports. This includes information on public involvement, fairness of the process, the role played by the LPA and the organisational capacity of the team preparing the NP and SA.

Interviews were used to obtain additional information to what was generated through document reviews. Interviewees included various representatives of neighbourhood planning steering groups, the bodies preparing the NPs (Table 5). Interviews were conducted for nine NP SAs. Next to who was interviewed, Table 5 also gives the reasons provided for declining requests for interviews. Whilst most qualitative data could be established based on document reviews, most effectiveness data (especially on outcomes) could only be attained through interviews.

Table 3. 15 NPs involving SAs in February 2014.

Cases	Region	Rural/urban	Area sq.km	Population	Local authority	Multiple deprivation index ranking	Consultant involvement
(1) Thame	SE T	Urban	12.7	11,561	South Oxfordshire	309	Tibbalds Consultancy
(2) Exeter St James	SW F	Urban	0.9	1,234	S. Oxfordshire	309	In-house
(3) Lynton and Lynnmouth	SW T	Rural	30.5	1,441	North Devon	127	Clare Reid Consultancy
(4) Cringleford	E P	Rural	4.1	3,200	South Norfolk	229	In-house
(5) Sprowston	E T	Urban	9.5	14,691	Broadland	273	In-house
(6) Ascot, Sunning-hill Sunningdale	SE P	Urban	19.3	18,121	Windsor and Maidenhead	306	URS Consultancy
(7) Woodcote	SE P	Rural	7.1	2,604	S. Oxfordshire	309	In-house
(8) Kirdford	SE P	Rural	20	1,603	Chichester	231	Terrafiniti Consultancy
(9) Strumpshaw	E P	Rural	11.7	634	Broadland	273	In-house
(10) Woburn Sands	SE T	Rural	1.4	2,916	Milton Keynes	181	In-house
(11) Tattenhall	NW P	Rural	11.8	2,709	Wolverhampton city	19	Lepus Consultancy
(12) Winslow	SE T	Rural	7.7	4,407	Aylesbury Vale	283	In-house
(13) Bembridge	SE P	Rural	9.1	3,688	Isle of Wight	83	In-house
(14) Cuckfield	SE P	Rural	4.3	3,500	Mid Sussex	321	In-house
(15) Chaddesley C.	W P	Rural	22.8	1,422	Wyre Forest	123	In-house

Source: Authors.

Notes: (1) E: East; W: West; SE: South East; SW: South West and NW: North West.

(2) P: Parish; T: Town and F: Neighbourhood Forum.

(3) The index of multiple deprivation ranking refers to DCLG (2015).

Table 4. Reviewed documents.

Cases	Author or examiner	Publication date	Pages
Thame	SA Tibbalds Planning Urban Design (consultancy)	November 2012	33
	EX Nigel McGurk	February 2013	35
Exeter St James	SA Exeter St James NP Forum	December 2012	26
	EX Graham Self	February 2013	16
Lynton and Lynmouth	SA Clare Reid (Consultancy)	November 2012	68
	EX Graham Self	August 2013	22
Cringleford	SA Cringleford Parish Council	June 2013	33
	EX Timothy Jones	November 2013	43
Sprowtson	SA Sprowtson Parish Council	May 2013	363 (30)*
	EX Elizabeth Wrigley	December 2013	24
Ascot Sunninghill and Sunningdale	SA URS (consultancy)	September 2013	11
	EX Nigel McGurk	January 2014	45
Woodcote	SA Woodcote Parish Council	September 2013	64
	EX Nigel McGurk	December 2013	38
Kirdford	SA Terrafiniti (consultancy)	June 2013	55
	EX Janet L Cheesley	January 2014	30
Strumpshaw	SA Strumpshaw Parish Council	October 2013	110 (44)*
	EX Elizabeth Wrigley	March 2014	18
Woburn Sands	SA Woburn Sands Town Council	April 2013	15
	EX Peter Biggers	March 2014	39
Tettenhall	SA Tettenhall NP Forum	May 2013	35
	EX Jeremy Edge	May 2014	49
Winslow	SA Winslow Town Council	December 2013	19
	EX Nigel McGurk	May 2014	31
Bembridge	SA Bembridge Parish Council	October 2013	68
	EX James Derounian	April 2014	22
Cuckfield	SA Cuckfield Parish Council	July 2013	55
	EX Ann Skippers	April 2014	37
Chaddesley Corbett	SA Chaddesley Corbett Parish Council	January 2014	36
	EX Peter Biggers	June 2014	31

Source: Authors.

Note: SA: SA report and EX: examiner's report.

*Sprowtson SA report is 30 pages but had an additional range of appendices attached and Strumpshaw SA report is 44 pages but had an additional range of appendices attached.

3. Findings

Main findings with regards to SA quality are summarised in [Table 6](#). Overall, the NP SAs of Thame and Bembridge had the highest number of criteria that obtained satisfactory scores and are judged to be 'very satisfactory' (79% and 76%, respectively). For the Lynton and Kirdford NP SAs, around half of the criteria were found to be delivered in a 'satisfactory' way. Furthermore, another four NP SAs obtained a 'just satisfactory' score with about 40% of the criteria being met, including Cringleford, Ascott, Tettenhall and Cuckfield. Finally, while Winslow had 30% of the criteria obtaining satisfactory scores

Table 5. Interviews with NP steering group members.

Interview No.	NP	Interviewee background	Interviewee role in SA preparation	Note
	<i>Thame</i>			<i>The person in charge has retired</i>
	<i>Exeter St James</i>			<i>Not prepared to be interviewed</i>
Interview 1	Lynton and Lymouth	Town councillor	Chairman	13 November 2015 by phone
Interview 2	Cringleford	Retired geographer	Coordinator, wrote the first draft	12 October 2015 by phone
Interview 3	Sprowston <i>Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale</i>	Town councillor	Chairman	14 September 2015 by phone <i>Prepared by an external consultant</i>
Interview 4	Woodcote	Parish councillor	Chairman	15 September 2015 by phone
Interview 5	Kirdford <i>Strumpshaw</i>	Parish councillor	Chairman	16 September 2015 by phone <i>No response</i>
Interview 6	Woburn Sands	Town councillor	Wrote the report	16 September 2015 by phone
	<i>Tettenhall</i>			<i>Clerk has left</i>
Interview 7	Winslow	Town councillor	Chairman	8 October 2015 by phone
Interview 8	Bembridge	Parish Clerk	Wrote the report	11 September 2015 by phone
Interview 9	Cuckfield <i>Chaddesley Corbett</i>	Parish councillor	Chairman	10 October 2015 by phone <i>The person in charge has left</i>

Source: Authors.

(‘just unsatisfactory’), this dropped to less than 20% (‘unsatisfactory’) for Exeter St James, Sprowston, Woodcote, Woburn Sands, Strumpshaw and Chaddesley Corbett.

The following two questions are subsequently elaborated on in further detail.

- (1) What are the potential reasons for differences observed in SA quality?
- (2) Is the quality of SAs connected with their overall ability to influence NPs?

3.1. Reasons for SA quality differences

All interviewees acknowledged that experience and skills played an important role for the quality of SAs. This is influenced by a number of factors. An NP steering group is the body preparing an NP SA and relevant experiences/skills of those in the group can influence the quality of the resulting SA. Experience with community-led plans, SA and usage of relevant guidance are of particular importance. Furthermore, LPAs and consultants can contribute with their own experience and skills and may enhance SA quality. However, to involve a consultant requires financial means that are not always available. It is important to add that whilst we found a positive correlation between experience/skills and SA quality, it does not mean an automatic achievement of ‘very satisfactory’ or ‘satisfactory’ SA quality scores. However, and importantly, none of the NP SAs that were found to be associated with a high experience/skills capacity was found to be of an ‘unsatisfactory’ quality.

Table 6. SA quality evaluation outcomes.

		TH	EX	LY	CR	SP	AS	W	KI	ST	WO	TE	WI	BE	CU	CH	
Institutional arrangements	Guidance	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory								Satisfactory		Satisfactory			
	Tiering	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	
	Local planning authority	Satisfactory			Task not attempted at all			Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all				Satisfactory				
	Organisational capacity	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all		Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
	Community planning skill			Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all		Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all
	Financial capacity				Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all		Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all
	Time arrangement	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory				Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all		Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all
Processes	Proactive	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory				Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory			Unsatisfactory	
	Integrative	Satisfactory						Unsatisfactory									
	Public involvement	Satisfactory			Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory		Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all		Unsatisfactory		Satisfactory	
	Fairness	Satisfactory		Satisfactory			Satisfactory							Unsatisfactory			
	Statutory Consultation	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all					Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	
	Other neighborhood plans				Satisfactory			Task not attempted at all			Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all		Unsatisfactory			
	Consultant involvement	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all		Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all
	Screening	Satisfactory			Unsatisfactory			Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory
	Scoping	Satisfactory			Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory		Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
	Alternatives	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all
	Cumulative impacts	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all
Mitigation measures	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	
Monitoring	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	
Documents	Style and format	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	
	Contents	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	
	Informative	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	
	Description of policy context	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory
	Description of methodology	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all
	Description of sustainab. baseline	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all
	Description of process	Satisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all
	Communications of results	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all	Task not attempted at all
Overall score	TH	EX	LY	CR	SP	AS	W	KI	ST	WO	TE	WI	BE	CU	CH		

Criteria scores:

Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Task not attempted at all	No evidence
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Overall scores:

	Around 80%		Around 50%		Around 40%		Around 30%		Around 20%
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'very satisfactory' 'satisfactory' 'just satisfactory' 'just unsatisfactory' 'unsatisfactory'

Source: Authors

Note: TH: Thame; EX: Exeter St James; LY: Lynton and Lynmouth; CR: Cringleford; SP: Sprowtson; AS: Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale; W: Woodcote; KI: Kirdford; ST: Strumpshaw; WO: Woburn Sands; TE: Tettenhall; WI: Winslow; BE: Bembridge; CU: Cuckfield; CH: Chaddesley Corbett

4. Use of guidance

Most NP SAs mentioned using guidance for SA of Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Documents (ODPM 2005). The extent to which this is useful in NP SA making is questionable, though, and those who decided to prepare an SA in-house on that basis faced difficulties, as it is not designed for NP making. However, in 2011, a tailor-made guidance document on NP SA making was released (Therivel 2011) and the interviewee for the Bembridge NP SA ('very satisfactory') said that this 'DIY SA of Neighbourhood Plans' document had helped greatly in preparing the SA in-house. However, when conducting the research underlying this paper, this guidance document was not yet widely known, and only interviewees from Bembridge as well as Lynton and Lynmouth ('satisfactory') mentioned it³.

5. Experiences and skills

Generally speaking, relevant experiences and skills were limited in most SA cases. The interviewee from Bembridge ('very satisfactory'), for example, said; 'I knew nothing about SA. It took me two years to learn and write the report. It was really tiring having to learn almost everything' (Interview 8). Suitable NP SA specific guidance (DIY SA of NPs; Therivel 2011) was said to have been a key factor in achieving a 'very satisfactory' SA, though. Furthermore, the LPA provided important support and the available funding for producing the NP and SA was also said to be adequate.

Crangleford provides an example for an NP steering group with several members that had planning experience and skills. These included a geographer

with some experience of planning in Southampton. (Interview 2, see Table 5)

a professional planner who

had worked as a development management officer. (Interview 2)

a retired local government officer with

expertise in environment and transport management at county level. (Interview 2)

and a retired accountant and the parish clerk who

managed the finances and generally serviced the group. (Interview 2)

Overall, though, the Cringleford NP SA was found to be only 'just satisfactory'. This is partly due to an absence of any evidence for the use of any NP SA guidance. Furthermore, the LPA did not contribute to the NP SA and whilst steering group members had general planning experience, knowledge and skills associated with SA appeared to have been non-existent. This lack is expressed by a number of omissions, including no consideration of alternatives and no satisfactory description of the SA process.

Previous experiences with preparing other community-led plans (such as Parish Plans or Village Development Statements) can contribute to experience / skills capacity. Lynton and Lynmouth ('satisfactory'), for example, had prior experience with community-led plans. The interviewee here believed that this was helpful in baseline data preparation. However, other interviewees suggested that overall,

Neighbourhood Plan and Parish Plan are two entirely different things. (Interview 9)

Also, importantly, none of those who had prior neighbourhood level planning experience had been involved in any SA.

6. Role of LPAs

Participation of LPAs differed amongst the NP SAs. In some cases, LPAs helped in dealing with specific planning issues. Winslow ('just unsatisfactory') and Thame ('very satisfactory') were two prominent cases that had been supported by the LPA (Table 6). Here, it was said that the steering group of the Winslow NP 'had worked closely with officers of Aylesbury Vale District Council since the start of the project' (Winslow Examiner's Report, 17) and there is evidence of 'significant joint, collaborative working between the two bodies (Neighbourhood community and LPA)' (Winslow Examiner's Report, 18). However, reasons for the 'just unsatisfactory' performance include an unsatisfactory description of the SA process, in particular with regards to screening and scoping. It is therefore questionable whether those from the Aylesbury LPA that supported the NP SA had SA experiences and skills. In this context, it is interesting to note that the associated Local Plan SA had been prepared by a consultant and it is unclear to what extent the LPA had been involved.

In many other cases, support from the LPA was very limited. For instance, the interviewee from Chichester District replied that

they did not undertake work for Kirdford. (interview 5)

However, the NP SA was found to be of a 'satisfactory' quality, mainly because the parish had front runner funding and they were thus able to conduct the process themselves with the support of a consultant. It was also noted that since the LPA was focused on their emerging Local Plan, it was sometimes difficult to keep the NP up-to-date with the District's overall position. Furthermore, the interviewee for the Woodcote NP SA ('unsatisfactory') said that the

Local Planning Authority didn't trust the NP steering group. They thought that the NP preparation would be a distraction, so they were not at all supportive at first. They started being more positive when they realised that this group did not just try to stop development. (Interview 4)

Finally, in the case of Cringleford ('just satisfactory')

our Local Planning Authority gave the impression of not being enthusiastic about a parish being involved directly in preparing a development plan. (Interview 2)

7. Role of consultants

Five of the 15 NP steering groups commissioned consultants to prepare the SA report. The other 10 were prepared in-house (i.e. by the NP steering group). A similar picture was observed for Local Plan SA practice. According to Fischer (2010), in England over half of the LPAs were carrying out SAs for LPs in-house⁴; about 20% were delegating the work completely to consultants, about 20% prepared SA jointly with consultants and in a few cases, SA was carried out by a wider group of stakeholders.

Consultants can provide independent advice, which may be less influenced by long-established institutional networks and mind-sets. They may also be able to 'cross-fertilise' good practice between their client authorities (Therivel 2010). However, on the other hand, ODPM (2005) warned that SAs carried out separately from the strategic action by 'remote' consultants may have less of an impact compared to those carried out through workshops, involving the Local Plan makers (i.e. the LPA). Furthermore, Fischer (2010) observed that consultants at times either control the process with little involvement of the plan making authority or are concentrating on very specific

substantive details only. In this context, some authors have suggested that, ideally, consultants should perform the role of a ‘critical friend’ to provide the necessary planning skills instead of leading the planning process (Therivel and Fischer 2012).

Those SAs where consultants were involved usually performed well with regards to overall quality, including Thame (‘very satisfactory’), Lynton and Lynmouth (‘satisfactory’), Kirdford (‘satisfactory’), Tettenhall (‘just satisfactory’), and Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale (‘just satisfactory’). However, and importantly, consultant involvement has financial implications. According to the 2015 indices of deprivation (DCLG 2015), for the five NP SAs that commissioned consultants, only Tettenhall (‘just satisfactory’) was found in a lower rank, i.e. with a rate of higher deprivation (Table 3). In this context, Parker (2014) observed that the financial capacity becomes an obstacle for deprived areas if they wish to buy in support of consultants.

SAs that are prepared ‘in-house’ (i.e. from within the NP steering group) are likely to contribute to the development of the skills of those involved. However, both, NP and SA require some existing knowledge and skills at the initial stages. This could come from steering group members, the LPA and/or may also be provided by suitable guidance. Some NP processes had steering group members with planning skills (e.g. Cringleford; ‘just satisfactory’). However, none had specific SA skills. Usually, only one person with limited skills and financial support prepared the SA. Although Kirdford (‘satisfactory’) obtained central government and LPA frontrunner funding, most resources were spent on NP preparation, while a very limited amount was said to have been spent on the preparation of the SA. However, the authority was unable to specify what the exact amount was. This was also the case for other NP SAs, making it impossible for us to make any judgement on ‘value for money’.

7.1. What influences SA preparation capacity

As noted above, SA quality can be influenced by many factors — the skills of steering group members, the involvement of consultants (Figure 1), the support by a LPA, as well as the use of suitable guidance. Overall, skills capacity can be described as a ‘pool’, and

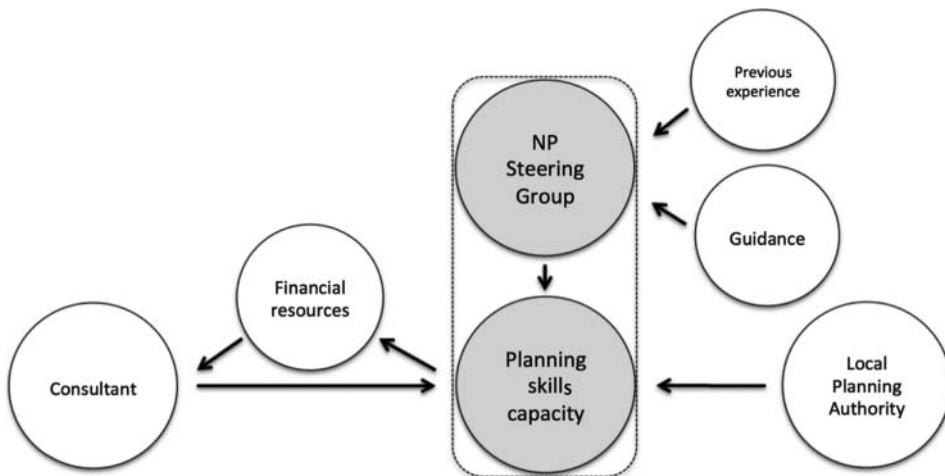


Figure 1. Factors influencing skills capacity.
Source: Authors.

those coming together to conduct SA can put in ‘water’. Good quality SAs are based on enough ‘water’ in the ‘pool’. Following [Table 6](#), higher quality SAs generally obtained high scores on associated skills capacity and poor quality SAs were associated with low skills capacity. However, planning skills capacity on its own is not a guarantor for preparing a satisfactory SA, as the case of Cringleford shows. Here, whilst there were planning skills present in the steering group, these did not extend to SA.

In addition to skills capacity, different neighbourhood contexts may also have an influence on SA quality. [Parker \(2012, 14\)](#) argued that “the basis for designing the NP process appears to carry certain assumptions about the homogeneity of neighbourhoods and the receptiveness of communities to such schemes”. [Turley \(2014, 13\)](#) confirmed that the variable characteristics in different cases means that the range and scope of policies included in an NP varies significantly. Some NPs focus on strategic housing, whilst policy in others relates to other local issues. It is in this context that SA should help those preparing an NP to critically reflect on what may be appropriate solutions for the challenges and problems faced in order to meet aims and objectives of the local community. This is associated with pro-actively supporting the consideration of different alternatives/options for development.

8. Population and area size

Within the 15 cases, Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale (‘just satisfactory’) had the largest population (18,121), while Strumpshaw (‘unsatisfactory’) had the smallest (634). Neighbourhood area sizes also varied significantly. The largest area size in the sample was that of Lynton and Lynmouth (30.5 sq. km; ‘satisfactory’), with the smallest being Exeter St James (0.95 sq. km; ‘unsatisfactory’). Whilst larger population areas can be expected to need more resources and involve a broader range of people, in small neighbourhood areas conducting SA may be a challenge, as there may be neither sufficient financial nor human resources available. This challenge is confirmed when looking at the ‘unsatisfactory’ quality of Strumpshaw and Exeter St James.

9. Economic status

[Parker \(2012, 14\)](#) argued that neighbourhood planning in deprived areas is a challenge, suggesting that ‘there is a real concern that deprived areas will not engage with neighbourhood planning through a combination of inertia, lack of resources and skills and a general cynicism about governmental programmes’. [Parker and Salter \(2017, 485\)](#) later confirmed that this was an issue and that only 3% of neighbourhood planning areas that had passed a referendum were in multiple deprivation areas. The state of the local economy was indeed found to be associated with the quality of NP SA.

Generally speaking, the main sources of financial support are central government (only for frontrunners), foundations (e.g. the ‘Locality’) and the LPA. Usually, more than £10,000 was spent to prepare an SA inclusive NP and interviewees suggested that steering groups had to be very careful on how to spend their resources. As mentioned above, interviewees were unable to distinguish between NP and SA spent, though.

10. Neighbourhood forums

Neighbourhood forums are community groups that are designated to take forward neighbourhood planning in areas without existing parish or town councils. Only one case, namely Exeter St James, established a neighbourhood forum for preparing their NP

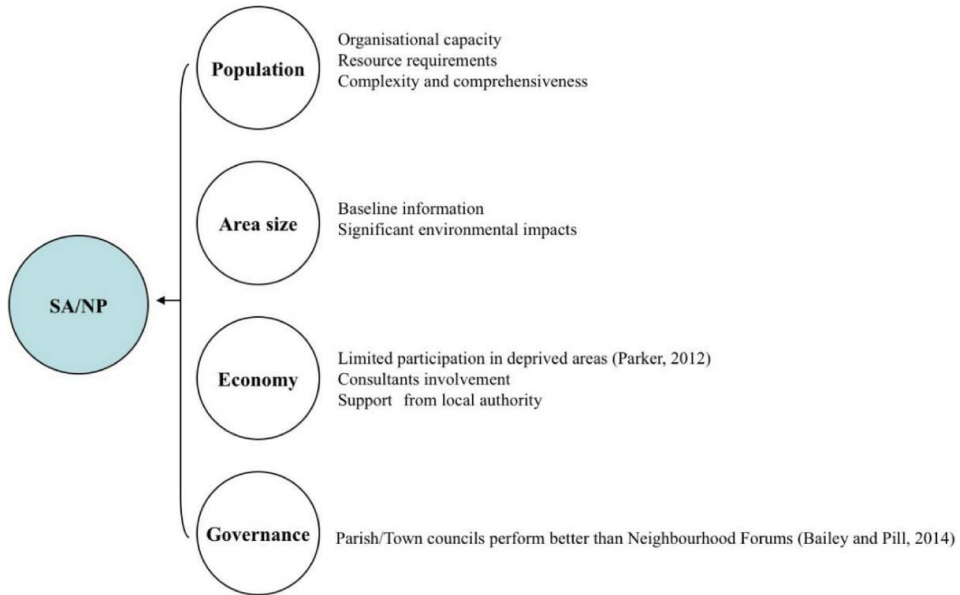


Figure 2. Influence of neighbourhood context.
Source: Authors, drawing on Bailey and Pill (2014) and Parker (2012).

(i.e. accounting for 7% overall). All other examples were areas with parish or town councils. This is in line with observations by Parker and Salter (2017) who established that only 9% of all NP were prepared by neighbourhood forums. Unfortunately, as only one case involved a neighbourhood forum, we cannot say anything meaningful on associated governance issues, even though the NP SA was found to be of an unsatisfactory quality. However, others (e.g. Bailey and Pill 2014) have suggested that parish councils appear to perform better in the development of NPs than neighbourhood forums. Figure 2 illustrates the overall influence of the neighbourhood context on the NP SA, taking this observation into account.

10.1. Quality of SAs and perceived influence on NP making

A proactive approach of SA was directly linked with resulting policy changes. Two interviewees (Woodcote and Woburn Sands; both ‘unsatisfactory’) indicated that their NPs were not changed because SA was prepared too late and therefore was not able to act in a pro-active way. The interviewee for the Woburn Sands SA said

actually we did it in a wrong way. We did it a lot later than the plan. (Interview 6)

and

the Local Planning Authority told us that we probably need SA, so we went back to rewrite the story of SA. (Interview 6)

How alternatives were dealt with also directly influenced outputs with regards to changes of policy. Considering different alternatives allows decision makers to look at different solutions. Through SA, alternatives are more likely to be identified as ways of meeting future objectives at a strategic level rather than being proposed in response to problems at

the project level (Therivel 2010). The interviewee from the Bembridge (‘very satisfactory’) NP SA said that they

developed sufficient alternatives, and the analysis of alternatives allowed them to change some policies to follow the sustainability objectives. (Interview 8)

In the Thame case (‘very satisfactory’), “the SA helped us to understand how each option could be changed in order to improve its performance in relation to the sustainability objectives” (Thame SA Report, 28). In contrast, others did not include alternatives in their SA reports, e.g. Winslow, Woburn Sands, Strumpshaw and Woodcote (all ‘unsatisfactory’), resulting in a reduced influence on the NP.

As mentioned above, SAs commissioned to consultants generally performed well on various quality aspects. However, in these cases, learning and skills development of steering group members appears to have not been positively influenced (see also Jha-Thakur *et al.* 2009). This was observed in e.g. Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale NPs. Here, requests for an interview were rejected because the NP ‘was produced by an external consultant’ (email response).

Planning skills improvements were evident in those cases where SAs were prepared in-house. In the case of the Bembridge SA, the interviewee suggested that

there was lots to consider, to do, and to learn. (Interview 8)

and, after preparing the SA in-house, he believed that

I learnt relevant policies and regulations, so I think my planning skills have improved a lot, and I am more confident now. (Interview 8)

Therivel (2010, 75) argued that “the plan-making team should carry out [SA], because of the importance of making it an integral part of decision-making and having full knowledge of all the judgements made within [SA]”. Moreover, the usage of relevant guidance also enables learning, with the interviewee for Bembridge SA suggesting that he learnt a lot from the ‘DIY SA of Neighbourhood Plans’ guidance document.

10.2. Factors influencing SA quality

Four factors were found to be correlated with the overall quality of NP SAs, including (1) the application of a proactive approach, (2) the consideration of alternatives, (3) the use

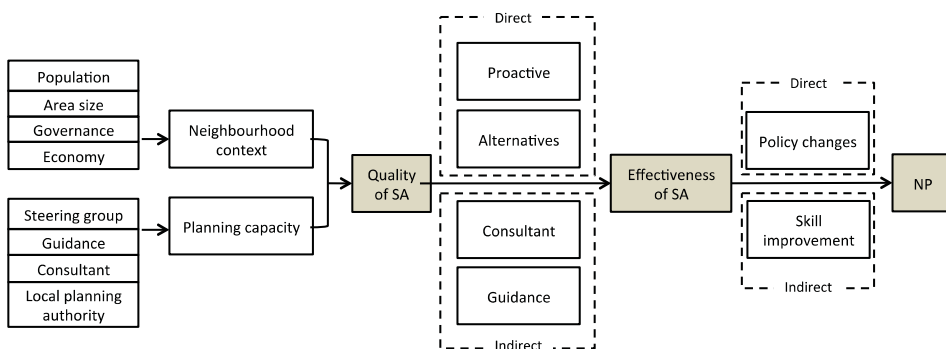


Figure 3. SA chain of influence.
Source: Authors.

of consultants and (4) the use of relevant guidance. Moreover, there are indications that (5) LPA involvement was also able to influence SA quality.

Based on the results presented above, a 'quality influence chain' can be designed. Figure 3 summarises factors influencing the quality of SAs and how this, in turn, may impact on SA's ability to influence NPs. Two aspects are included twice, namely the involvement of consultants and the use of guidance. Whilst consultant involvement can improve the quality of the SA report, it is likely to reduce learning effectiveness. Guidance can improve both the quality and effectiveness of SA in NP. However, it needs to be sufficiently specific in order to be able to guide the user.

11. Conclusions

In this paper, results of a review of English NP SAs are presented, using a framework consisting of inputs/quality (institutional arrangements, processes and documents) and outputs/effectiveness (impact of SA on the NP). Thirty-four evaluation criteria were used to evaluate a total of 15 NP SAs. In addition, interviews with representatives of NP steering groups were conducted. The research underlying this paper concentrated on the initial wave of NP SAs and included all cases that were available in 2014.

Our results show that, whilst a neighbourhood can produce a good quality NP SA, external support is important. Generally speaking, the quality of SAs was found to be influenced by a range of aspects. These include (1) a proactive approach, which is associated with an early application; (2) the consideration of alternatives in an NP through SA; (3) the use of consultants, acting as a 'critical friend' rather than as someone either taking over the entire SA or only focusing on specific details and (4) the use of suitable guidance, which is specific enough to be able to guide the user in the process. Moreover, there were some indications that (5) effective wider LPA involvement was also influencing SA quality.

NP steering groups were found to be reluctant to engage in preparing SAs. Those that had to, on the basis of likely significant environmental effects of NPs (therefore, conducting SEA inclusive SA), admitted that if it had not been required for their neighbourhood, they would not have done it. However, preparing a simple SA does not necessarily need a lot of resources (Therivel 2010) and it is important to raise awareness for this amongst neighbourhood steering groups in England, in particular in the light of the positive contributions SAs can make to the sustainability of NPs. Whilst the experiences and skills of LPAs can be of importance for preparing a good quality SA, they may not always be available. Also, planning skills may not extend to SA. If an LPA with SA skills can be involved, a neighbourhood may see less of a need to commission a consultant. Once an SA has been prepared in a neighbourhood, reluctance to do one again in the future may decrease.

In the introduction, we mentioned that there were concerns about the capacity of neighbourhoods to produce good quality and influential NPs and associated SAs, in particular with regards to inadequate skills and resources. Based on our observations, these concerns persist. In particular, less wealthy neighbourhoods are likely to find it more difficult to engage with NP SA processes effectively, mainly due to a lack of necessary financial resources. However, we also found that in the presence of adequate external support, the production of good quality SAs is possible. Providing adequate support, whilst a challenge in times of austerity and cuts to local government funding, will be key for ensuring SAs turn out to be beneficial in NP making. This is important, as our results suggest that SAs that are of a good quality can influence NP making positively.


Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. As SA and SEA have similarities and areas of overlap, a joint SA and SEA process has been promoted in Government guidance (ODPM, 2005). This usually follows a SEA process, whilst also considering social and economic next to environmental issues.
2. Any NP needs to be reviewed by an independent examiner who needs to produce an examiner's report.
3. By the time of writing this paper (i.e. February 2018), the RTPi was also in the process of preparing guidelines for SA of NPs. Furthermore, at least one local authority had prepared a neighbourhood planning guidance note (Breckland Council, 2016)
4. The extent depends also on the particular stage, with consultancies being involved most extensively during the final stages of the SA.

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