

Sustainability Appraisal (SA)

Sustainability Appraisal (SA) evolved in response to a perceived need to assess the economic, social and environmental implications of a proposal. SA is an iterative process undertaken during the preparation of a plan or strategy, which identifies and reports the extent to which the implementation of the plan or strategy would achieve sustainable development objectives.

SA is an 'objectives-led approach', as opposed to SEA's 'baseline-led' approach, i.e. SEA relies on the environmental baseline and problems to set the objectives. The agreed sustainable development objectives are the principal components of a sustainability appraisal. It is the performance of a strategy, policy or project in meeting the sustainability objectives that lies at the heart of the process.

Status

In the UK, SA evolved in the 1990s from the environmental appraisal of development plans by local planning authorities. In 1999, the UK government revised the guidance on development plan which recommended that environmental appraisal could also encompass economic and social issues. It suggested that the appraisal should begin with an 'awareness' by the local authority of nature of the environment in the plan area, and that alternative policies, proposals and locations for development should be evaluated where possible.

In the same year the government produced guidance on how regional authorities should carry out 'sustainability appraisal' of their regional planning guidance (now named Regional Spatial Strategies) which sets the framework for developing plans. The guidance suggested that sustainable regional planning guidance objectives should be developed first, then indicators which test whether strategic options achieve the objectives: in other words, it promoted a full integration of objectives for regional planning guidance and for sustainability.

By 2001 the great majority of the UK's 400-odd local authorities had carried out at least one appraisal of their development plan. On average these took about 30 person-days. All eight of the English regions had carried out sustainability appraisal of their regional planning guidance.

Under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, Sustainability Appraisal is mandatory for Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks.

Application

Plans which will require SA:

- Regional Spatial Strategy and its revisions
- Local Development Framework (including Mineral and Waste LDFs):
 - o Development Plan Documents (and revisions)
 - o Supplementary Planning Documents (and revisions / additions)

Documents which will not require SA

- Statements of Community Involvement
- Local Development Schemes
- Annual Monitoring Reports

Procedure

Figure 1 illustrates the SA procedure (detailed in the DETR guide published in 2000) and relates to the SA of a regional planning guidance. It is basically a seven-stage linear process, although two stages – scoping, and recording and reporting – should be undertaken periodically throughout the appraisal process.

The SA process begins with the appointment of an independent appraisal team. This may include independent consultants, academics, regional stakeholders or Regional Planning Body (RPB) personnel not involved in the preparation of the strategy. The first task is the development of a set of regional objectives and targets for sustainable development to act as a benchmark against which the performance of the strategic options (or ‘alternatives’) should be appraised. The performance is summarised against the defined level of impact, expressed in terms of the strategy’s ability to deliver sustainable development. The ability to compare options is important in undertaking an appraisal, guiding the spatial strategy to the ‘best’ overall choice. The various options taken forward are modified or dismissed by the strategy-makers in light of the appraisal.

Figure 1. The Sustainability Appraisal process (before the integration of SEA)



Source: Smith and Sheate (2001)

The DETR Guide also suggests that scoping should be undertaken periodically during the strategy’s preparation. Scoping investigates the degree to which the appraisal objectives and targets are supported by strategy policies.

The findings of the appraisal and the methods employed should be recorded throughout the process and formally reported on at discrete stages in the strategy’s evolution. Finally, indicators linked to the strategy should be monitored and changes in their future status used to inform subsequent evaluation and review of the strategy.

Integration of SEA and SA

Recent guidance has been drawn together by the ODPM (2004) to ensure that Sustainability Appraisals meet the requirements of the SEA Directive. The main outcome of creating an integrated appraisal is to widen the Directive's approach to include social and economic as well as environmental issues. Key areas of emphasis include:

- Collecting and presenting baseline information,
- Predicting the significant effects of the plan and addressing them during its preparation,
- Identifying reasonable plan options and their effects,
- Involving the public and authorities with social, environmental and economic responsibilities as part of the assessment process,
- Monitoring the actual effects of the plan during its implementation.

Methods and techniques

The appraisal of options as part of the SA process involves multi-criteria methods, (particularly when comparing the different options), impact assessment methods, risk assessment. More than likely SA will rely on software tools, performance matrices, and expert judgement.

Obviously the integrated (SA and SEA) appraisal will employ similar methods to those identified in SEA but with more of an inclination towards methods and techniques to address social and economic concerns.

Advantages and disadvantages

The main advantages are:

- Positive contribution to plan making: effective use of SA enables environmental, social and economic aspects to be considered in terms of planning decisions and policy formulation,
- Transparent process – the use of matrices to record detailed individual decisions provides a transparency and depth in the process,
- Potential to aid decision making.

The main disadvantages of Sustainability Appraisal are:

- Often seen as an end in itself – it is clear that many local authorities are not using sustainability appraisals as an integral part of the plan making process,
- Degree of influence relatively low (but increasing),
- 'Tick-box' approach is often executed,
- Not seen as part of a continuous process – sustainability appraisals have often been undertaken as a 'one-off' exercise,
- Lack of consistent methodology – there is no consistent methodology and practice has moved on significantly since the Good Practice Guide (DETR 2000), which only related to Regional Planning Guidance,
- A qualitative approach lacks objectivity – SAs carried out to date are wholly of a qualitative nature where the results are based on the subjective views of the appraisers informed by access to background documentation where possible.

To find out where to learn more about Sustainability Appraisal, go to [Further reading](#).