
STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

GUIDANCE

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DOS AND DON'TS IN SEA

GLOSSARY

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1. BENEFITS OF STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

1.1 Introduction

This non-statutory guidance is designed to support practitioners when undertaking a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in Scotland. The advice set out in this guidance is based on practical experience by those involved in the process. However, as non-statutory guidance, practitioners are not required to follow this advice and may opt to select other assessment methods that meet statutory obligations in terms of SEA.

1.2 What is a Strategic Environmental Assessment?

SEA is a means to judge the likely impact of a public plan on the environment and to seek ways to minimise that effect, if it is likely to be significant.

SEA therefore aims to offer greater protection to the environment by ensuring public bodies and those organisations preparing plans¹ of a 'public character' consider and address the likely significant environmental effects. Under the [Environmental Assessment \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#), those bodies preparing qualifying Scottish plans are required to undertake a SEA of plans that are likely to have significant environmental effects, if implemented.

1.3 Why should I do a SEA?

Fundamentally SEA is a statutory obligation for qualifying plans. However, notwithstanding this fact a SEA can provide a valuable opportunity to identify and address the environmental implications of public plans. SEA processes can help plan-makers to consider how to deliver a plan differently, in order to achieve better environmental outcomes, while still delivering important plan objectives. The environmental assessment process can be challenging, but also very worthwhile, and the benefits of SEA can significantly outweigh its costs. When undertaken in a proportionate and effective way, SEA can lead to:

- **Better environmental protection:** SEA can identify environmental effects and help the plan-maker to avoid potential problems by proposing alternative solutions.
- **Improved plans:** SEA can help to make plan making more systematic, and contribute to an evidence base by providing meaningful environmental information.
- **Providing insights:** SEA can offer a different perspective on a plan by ensuring that the plan-maker looks at it from an environmental view point.
- **Exploration of 'reasonable alternatives':** SEA can be a source of creativity for a plan-maker, through the consideration of reasonable alternatives. Some alternatives can even secure wider benefits, beyond the environment, that could otherwise be overlooked.
- **Enhanced communication and transparency:** SEA can help enhance the public's understanding of a plan's effect on the environment, so they are better informed. Reporting requirements improve the transparency of decision making and potentially greater appreciation of the reasoning behind decisions.
- **Reduced long term costs:** by helping to avoid unforeseen environmental effects, an effective SEA can minimise the need for potentially remedial action.
- **Streamlined consenting:** if significant adverse effects can be successfully tackled at the assessment stage, it may lead to a simpler approach to gaining consent or approval for a plan, or even for projects that may flow from it.
- **Potential smoother delivery:** more knowledge of the environmental effects could result in some interest groups and/or the public being less likely to oppose the final plan, particularly where adverse environmental effects have been resolved.

¹ Also covers programmes, policies and strategies

The outputs of an effective SEA can help to address environmental problems, or enhance positive or beneficial effects of plans. It can provide opportunities for the public to understand the environmental issues and engage positively with the assessment process. It can be a practical tool, setting out how environmental effects are to be dealt with, when the plan is being implemented.

The value of a SEA can be measured in several ways. For example, alterations to a plan, in light of an assessment, have come in many different forms, from simple changes to the wording of policies to the removal of whole proposals. These small alterations can help to avoid adverse environmental effects, or enhance positive ones. There are also examples where SEA has helped to avoid potential significant environmental damage, such as; helping to identify and avoid areas at risk of flooding; suggesting changes to development plans in order to reduce impacts on landscape; recognising the potential loss of important habitat; and identifying potential breaches of European legislation.

In summary, since the introduction of SEA, examples of how the assessment process has added value to plan-making in Scotland is numerous. In some cases, cumulative effects have been avoided by making simple changes to a plan. Although significant adverse effects cannot always be resolved in full, a number of small improvements can collectively lead to larger benefits, which can only benefit Scotland's unique and irreplaceable environment.

1.4 How can I realise SEA benefits?

Better integration of the assessment and plan preparation processes can help release the benefits of a SEA. Policy analysis is therefore an important element of SEA, as is ensuring that the environmental assessment is based on a sound understanding of a plan's aims and objectives. This helps to ensure that the right environmental information is delivered, at the right time in the preparation process.

Sharing information between the plan and assessment evidence base allows environmental considerations to be taken into account consistently in both processes. It can also encourage exploration of reasonable alternatives, by creating a better understanding of the likely environment issues and informing discussion on what opportunities are available to reduce significant adverse environmental effects.

SEA should not be just about practitioners following set procedures. To be effective it is important that practitioners understand the findings and are offered an opportunity to meaningfully influence the plan and to seek better environmental outcomes. To achieve this, practitioners must be good communicators, and be involved in regular and effective dialogue with plan-makers. Practitioners have to be prepared to demonstrate where environmental effects are most likely to occur, to clearly and succinctly explain their severity and implications and to provide mitigation solutions to ensure adverse effects can be avoided or reduced as far as possible.

SEA has an advisory role to play and is neither the only, nor the overriding determinant of a plan's content. However, the findings of the SEA are more likely to lead to action, where the process is undertaken in a practical and positive way, adding value to a plan rather than creating a barrier to its implementation.

Practitioners may have to work hard to play an integral role in the plan decision making process. To make a credible contribution, they must ideally have a good understanding of the plan making process, and directly address any concerns about delays or increased costs from the assessment process by matching timescales, maintaining proportionality and meeting deadlines.

1.5 How can I sell the benefits of a SEA?

It is important practitioners themselves appreciate the benefits of SEA before trying to 'sell' the assessment process to decision makers. Some of the benefits of undertaking a SEA are outlined in **Section 1.3 'Why should I do a SEA?'**

To sell the benefits of SEA it is important to ensure that the assessment process will add value to a plan's preparation. Practitioners need to work closely with plan-makers to identify ways of avoiding significant adverse environmental effects where possible. Positive working relationships are essential element to the effective delivery of SEA. It is therefore important that practitioners learn how to sell the benefits of the assessment process, to the relevant stakeholders, at each stage of the process.

It can be beneficial, at the outset, to discuss some of the perceptions and misconceptions about SEA. This can provide an opportunity to anticipate concerns and actively seek to strengthen working relationships and establish good communication.

Practitioners should aim to ensure that plan-makers are aware that there are a wide variety of approaches to undertaking an assessment, which can be adaptive and proportionate, and offer practical environmental information in a variety of situations. Providing some examples of Environmental Reports for similar type assessments, from other Responsible Authorities if necessary, may help to demonstrate what can be achieved and alleviate any potential concerns.

As awareness of SEA is still growing within interested groups and communities, where resources allow it can be helpful to provide some form of support for the public, to help them to access and understand the assessment findings and recognise their role in the consultation process. This can add value to the engagement process and sell to plan-makers the concept that SEA outputs can aid the consultation process and promote important values within the plan. To aid this, practitioners should remember to make their findings accessible and easy to understand for a wide audience.

The assessment process, as early as scoping, can help shape the content of a plan and encourage plan-makers to start considering reasonable alternatives. There are a number of simple practical steps a practitioner can take to facilitate integration of SEA into plan preparation and start to sell the concept that a SEA is not an unnecessary burden on plan-making. These are outlined in the table on the next page.

Whilst integration of the plan and SEA preparation processes is important, SEA has to remain objective and should not be viewed as a means to justify or 'sell' a plan to the public. The findings from the assessment should be an honest interpretation of the likely environmental effects.

Practical steps	Benefit
Build consensus about the role of SEA with plan-makers, senior managers and/or elected members, from the start.	Plan-makers and decision takers are more likely to be open to the views and ideas of practitioners, if they understand the role of a SEA. Effective communication lies at the heart of a good SEA. The findings of an assessment are just as important to those preparing a plan as those likely to be affected by it or with an interest.
Ensure the assessment findings are addressed at plan preparation meetings.	Practitioners have to ensure the findings of an assessment are viewed as part of the plan's preparation process, thereby ensuring the two preparation processes are properly combined and supportive of each other.
A practitioner should provide factual environmental information to colleagues preparing a plan, offering solutions, where available, rather than viewing the assessment as a 'critique' of the policies.	Working with and supporting plan-makers, rather than offering unhelpful opposition to proposals, can help to create a meaningful and cooperative working relationship, which can benefit both parties.
Use formal and informal communication as appropriate and aim to keep things simple.	Plan-makers have a lot to consider when preparing a plan, and finding opportunities to discuss the findings from an assessment can be challenging. Informal discussions can be used to seek clarification, offer feedback, raise awareness or to seek amendments minimising delays.
Gain the support of the Consultation Authorities	The support of the Consultation Authorities can help to ensure that the plan-maker recognises the importance of environmental advice.

1.6 What will happen if I ignore SEA?

Although SEA should be recognised as more than an exercise in legal compliance, it is important to bear in mind the requirements set out in the [Environmental Assessment \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#). Although there is no direct financial penalty for non-compliance, failure to meet the obligations of the 2005 Act can result in:

- **Delays:** if not undertaken at the appropriate stage, there may be a need for new or repeated consultation and reporting process.
- **Legal challenge:** Responsible Authorities could be challenged through the courts. This can be costly and can result in reputational damage to the authority concerned.
- **Indirect financial costs:** corrective action could involve further work being undertaken, and potentially additional costs arising from measures such as further consultation.
- **Environmental damage:** Failing to take proper account of the environment, prior to implementation, could result in environmental damage requiring remedial action.
- **Policy uncertainty:** Responsible Authorities could be forced to abandon a plan, resulting in a policy vacuum pending a compliant review process being undertaken.

Where a Responsible Authority fails to comply with the 2005 Act, Section 11 allows the Scottish Ministers to make a Direction requiring remedial action to be taken, even if a plan has already been adopted.

2. SEA: THE BASICS

2.1 The Scottish legislation

The SEA Directive² is implemented in Scotland by the [Environmental Assessment \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#).

2.2 The statutory Consultation Authorities

The Scottish statutory Consultation Authorities are:

- Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA),
www.sepa.org.uk/planning/sea.aspx
- Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), and
www.snh.gov.uk/planning-and-development/environmental-assessment/sea/
- The Scottish Ministers (Historic Scotland).
www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/sea

The role of the statutory Consultation Authorities within SEA is to bring their individual environmental expertise to the assessment process. This can help to ensure that the future consultation process undertaken by a Responsible Authority is more robust. This in turn means that the public can gain a better understanding of the likely effect of a plan on the environment and meaningfully contribute to the plan's preparation process by offering an informed view.

2.3 The UK legislation

A plan could fall within the scope of the [Environmental Assessment of plans and programmes Regulations 2004](#) (the UK Regulations), if its geographical coverage extends beyond Scotland. If a plan or part of a plan extends into another part of the UK, it has to be considered under the requirements of the UK Regulations.

Plans that are limited to Scotland, but which could have environmental effects on another part of the UK, are subject to the 2005 Act rather than the UK Regulations. In such cases it may be necessary to ensure that the relevant UK Consultation Bodies are consulted on potential cross border environmental effects. As with Scottish submissions, the SEA Gateway team can co-ordinate UK consultation correspondence. Examples of UK consultations, which involve Scotland are available on the [SEA Database](#).

In addition to the Scottish SEA Consultation Authorities, the UK Consultation Bodies are:

England: [English Heritage](#), [Environment Agency](#), [Natural England](#)

Wales: [Cadw](#) (Welsh Historic Monuments), [Natural Resources Wales](#)

Northern Ireland: [Department of the Environment](#)

² Directive 2001/42/EC <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2001:197:0030:0037:EN:PDF>

2.4 What plans require a SEA?

The 2005 Act requires Scottish public bodies or those exercising functions of a public character (Responsible Authorities) to undertake a SEA when preparing plans, if it is likely to have significant environmental effects. This applies to plans with significant positive or negative environmental effects. The following criteria can help to establish whether a plan falls within the scope of the 2005 Act.

Some plans are automatically exempt from the 2005 Act:

- national defence or civil emergency plans;
- financial or budgetary plans; and
- plans relating to individual schools.

Whereas plans that fit the following criteria, are likely to be subject to SEA:

- are prepared and/or adopted at the national, regional or local level;
- relate to matters of public character (this can be a public sector body or a private sector or voluntary body undertaking work of a public character).
- relate solely to Scotland.

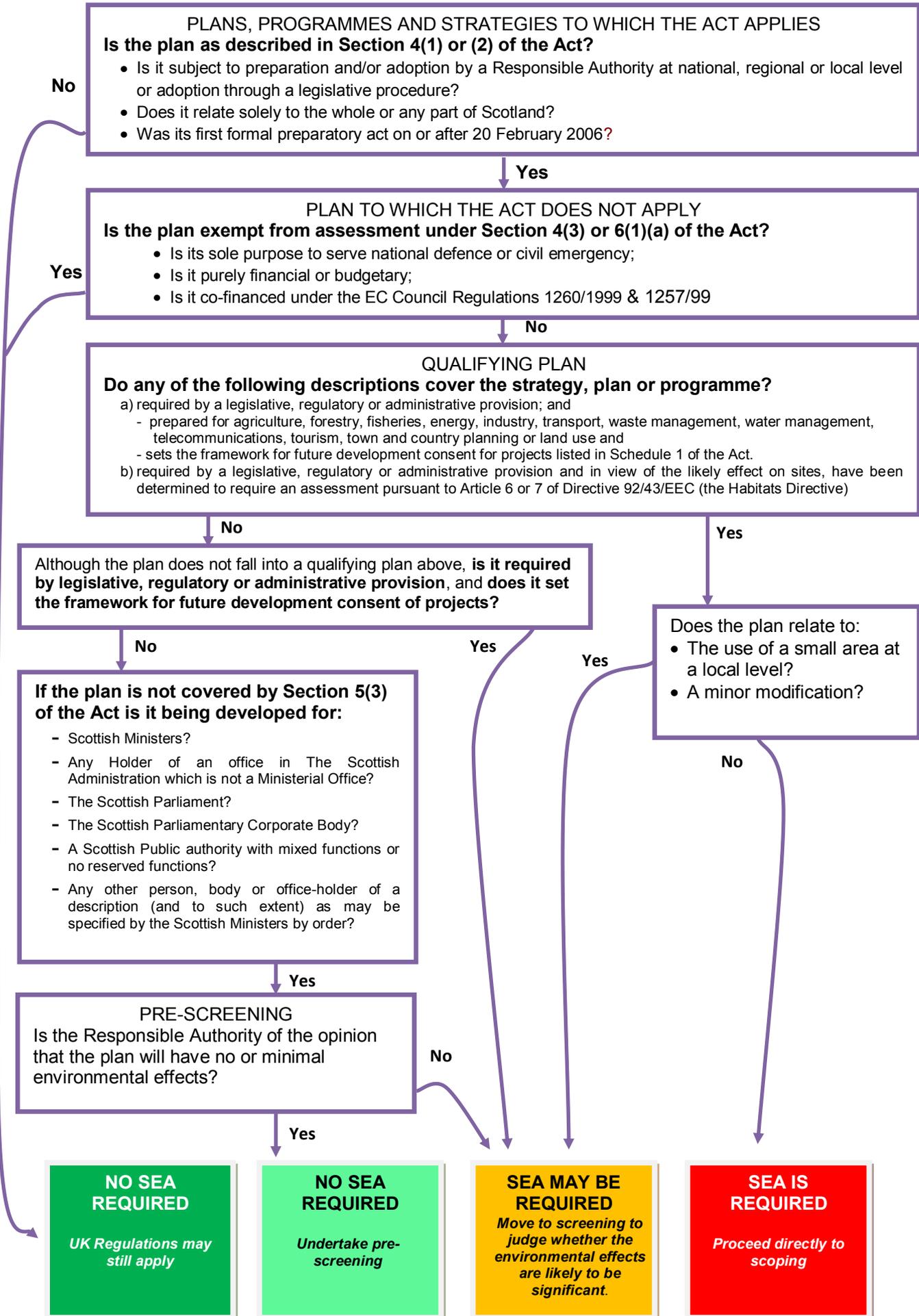
It can be beneficial and practical, in terms of proportionality, for practitioners to understand what Section of the 2005 Act, a plan falls under.

- [Section 5\(3\)](#): These are plans that require a SEA under the requirements of the original EU Directive.
- [Section 5\(4\)](#): This Section of the 2005 Act, extends the requirements beyond those of the EU Directive, but is only relevant to those organisations that fall into the description of a public organisation, as set out in [Section 2\(4\)](#) of the 2005 Act.

Once a practitioner has established which of these two Sections is relevant, they can then judge what options are open to them and whether pre-screening is a minimum option or whether screening is required. This can aid proportional engagement with the Consultation Authorities, as it ensures a Responsible Authority understands what options are open to it and selects an appropriate route i.e. those plans that come under Section 5(3) cannot be pre-screened and have to enter screening as a minimum.

The flowchart on the next page can help you to gauge whether a plan falls within the 2005 Act and what actions may be required.

How to apply the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005



2.5 When to undertake a SEA?

The SEA should begin at an early stage in a plan's preparation, as it is important that the future consultation on the plan and the Environmental Report takes place when ideas are forming and policy options are still being actively considered.

If a SEA commences too late, when the direction and content of a plan has already been agreed, the assessment is unlikely to add value. For example, if the SEA commences after public engagement has already been undertaken, further consultation would be required if it is concluded that the plan is likely to have significant environmental effects, even if those effects are likely to be positive.

On the other hand, if the assessment begins at a point when the content of the plan has not yet been fully considered, there is a risk that important, potentially significant, environmental issues that emerge later, could be overlooked. It may also prove difficult for the Consultation Authorities to offer an informed view, if the scope of the plan is unclear when they are formally consulted.

2.6 Who should be involved in a SEA?

The 2005 Act does not specify who can undertake a SEA. To secure added value from the assessment process, Responsible Authorities should seek to ensure that there is good interaction between those who are responsible for the SEA, and those preparing the plan. A SEA may not require a specialist practitioner, and in many cases can be undertaken as an integral part of the plan preparation process. Practitioners could include:

- officers employed by a Responsible Authority, either part of the team preparing a plan or from another business area;
- consultants working on behalf of a Responsible Authority; or
- a shared staff resource working on behalf of a number of Responsible Authorities.

Integration of SEA and plan preparation is crucial. Plan-makers, if different from those undertaking the assessment, should share early thinking with practitioners to ensure that they gain:

- a greater opportunity to embed environmental thinking into the plan and improve its overall environmental performance;
- a more effective and proportionate assessment, leading to more informed decisions;
- opportunities to share experiences from the assessment of comparable plans;
- benefits from an objective opinion on key issues, informed by relevant environmental information;
- a better understanding of the environmental context of a plan, before taking important decisions;
- the key environmental messages that can be transmitted to stakeholders earlier and thereby manage expectations.

Successful integration can be challenging when consultants or external practitioners undertake a SEA. It is important that when those undertaking the assessment are external that they work closely with plan-makers and build strong working relationships. Experience suggests that holding workshops at key stages and a collaborative approach to predicting environmental effects can improve prospects of successful integration. In addition, the impartiality of consultants or external practitioners can also prove useful, as a means to test the effectiveness of a plan and the alternatives selected, and therefore provide a form of 'validation'.

The Consultation Authorities are also an important part of this integrated preparation process and can offer advice and opinions to support a Responsible Authority. To play an active and successful role, the Consultation Authorities have to be given sufficient information on the objectives of a plan and its potential implications for the receiving environment.

Engagement within the Consultation Authorities is likely to be either formal or informal. Formal engagement is required by the 2005 Act. Further informal engagement is optional and can be undertaken, either as good practice or to help to achieve better environmental outcomes. Informal communication can help to ensure that a Responsible Authority's assessment is meaningful, and improve its influence on the plan. Although the Consultation Authorities are willing to engage in informal discussions, resources can be a constraint.

The Consultation Authorities can help to:

- establish what is important about the environment within the plan area and what might be affected by a plan;
- support design of proportionate and robust methods for the assessment;
- focus data collection on the most relevant environmental issues;
- provide useful data and share baseline information;
- help a Responsible Authority to focus on the relevant environmental issues, and identify environmental topics where no significant effects are likely to arise and can be eliminated.

It is recommended that Responsible Authorities contact the Consultation Authorities as soon as possible and early within a plan's preparation, to maximise the opportunities for them to get involved.

Including the public and any relevant interest groups, such as environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), early in the preparation process can be helpful as comments and opinions can sometimes be more readily accommodated early in the process. Early informal engagement can feed into the development of a plan and its SEA, and can help to build positive working relationships that can prove helpful during the latter, more formal stages.

2.7 Can a SEA be legally robust?

In the UK, the few legal challenges that have arisen cover a number of areas, including: timing of the main consultation, consideration of reasonable alternatives, quality of the assessment and procedural irregularities.

To minimise the potential for legal challenge Responsible Authorities should seek to ensure that they have the evidence required to demonstrate that the assessment process was meaningful and that it gave those with an interest in the plan an early and effective opportunity to contribute and participate in its preparation.

Whilst the risk of legal challenge is an important consideration, it should not be allowed to overshadow the importance of proportionality and the need to secure benefits from the assessment process. The risk of legal challenge has sometimes led practitioners and plan-makers to prepare assessments and reports that, albeit comprehensive, have been overly detailed and complex, with inconclusive environmental findings. This in turn has made it difficult for those with an interest in the plan to identify the key environmental issues.

2.8 Administrative Arrangements

The Scottish Government's SEA Gateway co-ordinates all SEA correspondence in Scotland. Electronic copies of formal submissions to the Consultation Authorities, e.g. screening reports and scoping reports should be forwarded to the SEA Gateway team, at SEA.Gateway@scotland.gsi.gov.uk. The team acknowledges all formal submissions and ensures that responses are returned within statutory timeframes. **Note: If after submission, no acknowledgement is received, please contact the SEA Gateway Team to confirm receipt.**

Hard copies, if preferred, can be issued to the SEA Gateway team at:

**SEA Gateway team,
2-J (South), Victoria Quay,
Edinburgh, EH6 6QQ.
Helpdesk: 0131 244 7650**

The SEA Gateway team can offer informal advice, but this should not be viewed as a substitute for professional, independent legal advice. The Gateway's advice is based on experience and knowledge shared by many practitioners who are involved in SEA in Scotland. If you are in any doubt as to whether the 2005 Act applies to your plan, it is advisable to contact the SEA Gateway team as early as possible to discuss the matter.

Other sources of advice include:

- the Consultation Authorities,
- The Scottish Government's: Environmental Assessment Technical Team,
- other Responsible Authorities and examples of good practice,
- [SEA Database](#),
- SEA Forum events
- [Scotland's Environment Web](#) (a useful source of baseline information)

Where resources permit, the Scottish Government's Environmental Assessment Team can provide assistance and support to Responsible Authorities. The team can be contacted via the SEA Gateway.

3. STEP BY STEP GUIDANCE

Pre-screening: Pre-screening is effectively a process of self-exemption undertaken by the Responsible Authority. This can be undertaken where it can be clearly established that a plan is likely to have no or minimal effects on the environment. This only applies to Section 5(4) plans – those falling under Section 5(3) of the 2005 Act, cannot be pre-screened.

Screening:

Screening takes the form of a formal submission, where the Responsible Authority seeks the views of the Consultation Authorities on whether a plan is likely to have significant environmental effects and therefore whether a SEA is required. The submission, referred to as a 'screening report' sets out the characteristics of a plan and its likely environmental effects, if implemented. Plans within the description of Section 5(3) of the 2005 Act can go direct to scoping, and do not require screening

Screening determination: *This is the point when a Responsible Authority judges whether a SEA is required or not. The views offered by the Consultation Authorities at screening should be taken into account in making this decision. Screening determinations have to be advertised in a local newspaper, whether a SEA is required or not.*

Scoping: Scoping reports should provide sufficient information about a plan and its potential environmental effects to allow the Consultation Authorities to provide an informed view. Providing sufficient detail to the Consultation Authorities at this stage, about the assessment, alternatives, data sources, etc. has proven to be useful, as comments from the Consultation Authorities in response can be more readily accommodated.

Environmental Assessment: The assessment establishes the likely significant (positive and negative) environmental effects of implementing a plan. The effects of a plan and any potential reasonable alternatives should be considered at this stage, along with viable mitigation measures to avoid, reduce or offset adverse effects.

Environmental Report: *This report outlines the findings from the environmental assessment. The content of an Environmental Report is outlined within [Schedule 3 of the 2005 Act](#).*

Main consultation: The main consultation on the Environmental Report and the draft plan has to take place at a sufficiently early stage within a plan's preparation, to ensure any views received during the consultation process can be taken into account.

Post-adoption SEA statement: This statement is produced after a plan has been adopted. It outlines how the assessment and consultation responses have been taken into account, within the finalised plan.

Monitoring: Monitoring is an important component of SEA, as it seeks to ensure that plans avoid generating unforeseen adverse environmental effects. It means Responsible Authority have to be prepared to take remedial action where adverse environmental effects arise.

3.1 Pre-screening

At pre-screening, the Responsible Authority considers whether the plan is likely to have **no or minimal** environmental effects. If this is the case, a pre-screening notification can be made and submitted to the SEA Gateway, and no further action is usually required.

Who to consult

A Responsible Authority is not required to consult the Consultation Authorities about pre-screening decisions. However, informal consultation may be helpful, where there is uncertainty about whether there will be no or minimal effects.

When to notify

If it's clear that a plan is likely to have no or minimum effects on the environment, a pre-screening notification should be undertaken as soon as possible. Where the severity of the environmental effects are uncertain it may be beneficial to wait, until those preparing the plan develop a better understanding of its likely extent and whether screening would prove more appropriate in the circumstances.

How to notify

Pre-screening notifications should be sent to the [SEA Gateway](#) team, who in turn forward them to the Consultation Authorities.

Consultation Authorities

The 2005 Act does not set out a statutory role for the Consultation Authorities at pre-screening. However, the SEA Gateway routinely seeks their views on pre-screening submissions, especially when the reasoning for the notification appears unclear.

Good practice

In some circumstances, it can be beneficial to discuss pre-screening notifications, prior to submission, with at least one of the Consultation Authorities. This can be an opportunity to discuss the plan and the likely effects that may be difficult to explain within a submission.

3.2 Screening

The purpose of screening is to establish whether or not a plan will have significant environmental effects.

Who to consult

If screening is required, the Responsible Authority must consult the Consultation Authorities. Once concluded, the Responsible Authority has to inform the public and Consultation Authorities, via a public notice, of the screening determination.

When to consult

Screening is best undertaken early in a plan's preparation, when there is sufficient information about a plan to form a view on the likely environmental effects.

A screening determination can be made once the Consultation Authority responses have been taken into account, and the Responsible Authority has reached a view on whether the plan may lead to significant environmental effects.

How to consult

A Responsible Authority issues a screening request to the Consultation Authorities, via the [SEA Gateway](#) team, setting out their view as to whether a plan has any likely significant environmental effects. The Consultation Authorities have **28 days** in which to respond.

On receipt of responses, a Responsible Authority can make a determination as to whether a SEA is required or not. Once a determination is made, the Responsible Authority has to, within **28 days**, send the determination and statement of reasons to the Consultation Authorities and make these available on its website and at its principal office.

If a Responsible Authority and the Consultation Authorities cannot agree on the likely effects, the Scottish Ministers can make the determination. In these circumstances a Responsible Authority should contact the [SEA Gateway](#) team to discuss.

Once a screening determination is made, a Responsible Authority has to place, within **14 days** of making the determination, an advert outlining the decision within at least one newspaper circulating in the area to which the plan relates. The required content of an advert is outlined in [Section 10\(2\)\(c\)](#) of the 2005 Act.

Consultation Authorities

Consultation Authorities provide a view or opinion on whether implementation of a plan is likely to lead to significant environmental effects or not. Where significant environmental effects are likely to arise, Consultation Authorities often also highlight important matters for the practitioners to consider at the next stage - scoping.

Good practice

Certain plans can benefit from early informal discussions between the Responsible Authority and the Consultation Authorities. This can be an opportunity to discuss issues that are difficult to capture within a submission, or which are particularly complex or unique. To establish what others have done in similar situations, Responsible Authorities can refer to the SEA Database for screening examples.

3.3 Making a screening determination

All plans that fall within Section 5(4) of the 2005 Act, and are likely to have significant environmental effects, require screening. Screening criteria, set out in [Schedule 2](#) of the 2005 Act, provide a step by step approach to gauging whether significant environmental effects are likely, and can be used by those with little or no experience of dealing with or considering the environment. The criteria are set out in two Sections: those that relate to the characteristics of the plan and those that relate to characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected. The table below can be used help practitioners to understand the criteria in Schedule 2 and how to apply them effectively.

<p>1. The characteristic of the plan</p>
<p>1(a) the degree to which the plan sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources</p>
<p>Plans that establish a framework or prescribe a decision making process, are more likely to generate significant effects. Greater weight should be given to plans that go further than broad policies by allocating resources or setting out where development takes place.</p> <p><i>For example, Supplementary Guidance for Developer Contributions would not state where or what future development should take place. Where in contrast, Supplementary Guidance on wind energy developments would provide guidance on where windfarms should be built, and is therefore more likely to lead to significant environmental effects.</i></p>
<p>1(b) the degree to which the plan influences other plans including those in a hierarchy</p>
<p>On its own, the response to this question would not necessarily provide a measure of significance. It can however be a helpful component of a wider analysis. Establishing how far a plan influences other plans, can help to define to what extent important environmental decisions are being taken.</p> <p><i>For example: plans produced by the Regional Transport Partnerships establish the broad strategic goals that have to be achieved within the region. These are influential for determining the likely content and focus of the next level, within the local transport plans.</i></p>
<p>1(c) the relevance of the plan for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development</p>
<p>A plan that has the potential either to reduce or restrict certain environmentally harmful elements, within other plans, has to be viewed as having the potential for significant environmental effects, albeit beneficial ones.</p> <p><i>For example, a plan that has environmental criteria, such as identifying areas with known air quality issues as a means of restricting where other plans can locate new transport infrastructure is likely to require assessment.</i></p>
<p>1(d) environmental problems relevant to the plan</p>
<p>Certain types of plan by their nature can raise significant environmental issues. To gauge significance, it can be helpful to explore whether a plan could cause or exacerbate known environmental problems within the area of the plan, be constrained or affected by existing problems, or contribute to solving or reducing them.</p> <p><i>Examples could include a renewable energy plan within a sensitive landscape which has already been affected by change, or a housing development near designated sites where the condition of these sites has been recorded as declining.</i></p>
<p>1(e) the relevance of the plan for the implementation of European Community legislation on the environment (for example, plan linked to waste management or water protection)</p>
<p>European Community legislation on the environment is extensive. It is therefore beneficial if a Responsible Authority identifies the specific Community legislation of relevance to the plan being considered. In certain circumstances, the links can be obvious,</p> <p><i>For example, a River Basin Management plan would primarily relate to the Water Framework Directive; whereas a minerals plan would consider the Mining Waste Directive.</i></p>

2. The characteristics of the effects and the area likely to be affected

2 (a) the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects

The more complex, widespread, long lasting or serious the environmental effects, the more likely that an assessment would be required. If an effect is likely to be short term, not repeated and easily reversible, it is less likely to be considered a significant effect. All environmental topics listed in the 2005 Act should be considered.

2 (b) the cumulative nature of the effects

Cumulative effects can be considered in terms of synergistic effects, additive impacts and secondary effects. Cumulative effects can arise from the combined effects of plans. They can also arise as a result of interaction between different components of a single plan.

For example - proposals to enhance connectivity in a high level transport strategy may collectively result in fragmentation of natural habitats. Similarly, a number of development proposals along a linear route, such as a transport corridor, may cumulatively affect the landscape qualities experienced along that route.

2 (c) transboundary nature of the effects

Transboundary environmental effects arise when a plan being prepared by one Member State is likely to affect another Member State. Plans in Scotland are unlikely to result in transboundary effects.

Examples have included national level marine related plans that extend to the limits of territorial waters and have the potential to effect mobile species or the international use of marine waters.

2 (d) the risks to human health or the environment (for example, due to accidents)

Consideration has to be given to whether a plan which could give rise to issues such as an increase in pollution, noise, vibration, and other environmental problems, has implication for human health too.

Plans which have social impacts, e.g. proposals to reduce levels of crime or increase access to further education, are less directly covered by the terms of the 2005 Act. However, practitioners may opt, as good practice or to address local concerns, to explore wider health implications through a voluntary Health Impact Assessment.

For example, contaminated land and flooding could have an effect directly on physical and mental health and wellbeing, mineral extraction plans or waste plans, could raise concerns about dust or odours from identified sites.

2 (e) the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected)

This is an important means for distinguishing between strategic and project scale assessment. High level plans typically cover a larger plan area, whereas plans such as design frameworks cover a specific site, where the principle of development has already been established and assessed. There is therefore an important connection between the spatial extent of a plan and the magnitude of the likely environmental effects.

However, scale is not the only measure: local effects can be significant where they arise in particularly sensitive areas, whilst some national plans may be judged not to have significant environmental effects. This judgement has to be undertaken on a case by case basis by a Responsible Authority.

2 (f) the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to-

- (i) special natural characteristics or cultural heritage;**
- (ii) exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values; or**
- (iii) intensive land-use.**

This criterion tests whether the areas likely to be affected are specially designated areas and / or more generally valued or vulnerable. Gauging the likely environmental effects of a plan in terms of capacity or limits can be complex as even small environmental effects may have a 'tipping' effect. At the screening stage, a full analysis of this criterion is not necessary.

2 (g) the effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, Community or international protection status

Practitioners need to consider carefully the extent and degree to which a plan is likely to affect designated sites e.g. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Ramsar Sites, National Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and National Scenic Areas (NSAs).

Effects on a European designated nature conservation site, which are likely to lead to a Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA), are also likely to trigger the requirement for a SEA. It is important, when considering the potential effects on such sites, to look beyond the site boundaries to recognise areas and species which form part of the integrity of the designated sites.

For example, the designated site may be a breeding area for a protected species of bird but their feeding grounds may lie outside the site.

In the event that a Responsible Authority and the Consultation Authorities cannot reach agreement on the likely magnitude of potential environmental effects arising from a plan and whether they could be significant, it can be useful to have further discussions with the relevant Consultation Authorities to discuss the screening opinion. In some circumstances, further insights into the plan or additional environmental information may add clarity and help to resolve the matter.

3.4 Scoping

The purpose of scoping is to define the level of detail to be covered in the assessment, and to reach agreement on the consultation timescales.

Who to Consult

A Responsible Authority is required to consult the Consultation Authorities at scoping.

When to Consult

A Responsible Authority has to contact the Consultation Authorities before deciding on the scope and level of detail of the information to be included in the Environmental Report and the proposed length of the period of public consultation. This is an important stage and should be undertaken as early as possible in a plan's preparation process.

How to Consult

The Responsible Authority has to send the Consultation Authorities sufficient details about the plan to enable them to form a view on the scope and level of detail of the Environmental Report and the proposed consultation period. Common practice is for this information to be contained within a Scoping Report. The Consultation Authorities have **35 days** in which to respond.

After receipt of the Consultation Authorities' views, a Responsible Authority must take account of them. The Responsible Authority also has to inform the Scottish Ministers of the proposed consultation period. Scottish Ministers shall then notify the Responsible Authority within 7 days, if they consider the period does not provide an early and effective opportunity to the Consultation Authorities and public to express their opinions. These notifications should be submitted to the [SEA Gateway](#) team.

Consultation Authorities role

The Consultation Authorities provide a view on the proposed scope and level of detail of the assessment, including confirmation of any environmental topics which, in their opinion, could be scoped out. They may also offer a view on the appropriateness of the environmental baseline selected, the proposed approach to assessment and the proposed consultation period.

The Consultation Authorities provide views and opinions relating to their areas of expertise. For example, Historic Scotland would consider likely significant effects on the cultural and historic environment. Whereas the Scottish Environment Protection Agency would be more likely to concentrate on issues such as quality of the water environment, air quality, climatic factors and population and human health. Scottish Natural Heritage would focus on issues relevant to biodiversity, flora and fauna, landscape, and recreation and access.

Good practice

There is nothing to prevent a Responsible Authority from having earlier, informal discussions with the Consultation Authorities, prior to the formal scoping stage. Indeed other potentially relevant groups can be included in informal scoping discussions, if desired. Some Responsible Authorities also include the public in informal scoping discussion. This 'frontloading' of engagement and advice can help to achieve a more efficient and effective assessment.

3.5 How much information should be provided at scoping?

A meaningful scoping exercise can lay down the foundation for an effective assessment process and a proportionate Environmental Report. To maximise the benefits of this stage, the Responsible Authority has to invest time in taking the views and opinions received into account.

The scoping stage is the ideal opportunity to explain the objectives of a plan, where, how and when it aims to achieve them, and what the likely environmental outcomes could be. Some plans are straightforward or standard, requiring only a simple description. Others, including those which are strategic or non-spatial, may have to provide a more detailed explanation of a plan to help the Consultation Authorities to fully understand the likely environmental effects. In such cases, a well-developed and focused summary of the plan, along with consideration of relevant information to inform the environmental baseline is important. This can help those being consulted to understand, and ideally fully explore, the key issues and accurately judge the information that would, and would not be required in an assessment.

The Consultation Authorities provide a view on the likely environmental effects arising from a plan, based on the scoping submission. The aim of this advice is to enhance the assessment process, thereby ensuring that the likely environmental effects are clearly understood and to identify and capitalise on opportunities to influence the plan. To achieve this successfully, Responsible Authorities have to outline what is going to be assessed, why it is to be assessed, how it is going to be assessed and how this is going to be outlined within the Environmental Report.

3.6 Do all the environmental topics have to be assessed?

A Responsible Authority has to provide sufficient information at scoping to allow others to gain an understanding of the likely significant environmental effects on (but not necessarily limited to): biodiversity; population; human health; fauna; flora; soil; water; air; climatic factors; material assets; cultural heritage, including architectural and archaeological heritage; landscape; and the inter-relationship between these topics.

Identifying where significant environmental effects are likely to arise, allows practitioners to understand the scale of the assessment required. If it can be shown and agreed that significant environmental effects on specific elements of the environment are unlikely, these elements can be removed from the assessment. This allows the Environmental Report to focus on the most significant environmental topics, aiding proportionality and ensuring accessible reporting.

When scoping out an environmental topic, it can be beneficial for those consulted, if the Responsible Authority offers a concise and reasoned justification, backed up where possible by environmental data. As well as being helpful for the Consultation Authorities, it can provide a useful audit trail for later reference.

A Responsible Authority which is unsure whether a significant environment effect is likely on a particular environmental topic, can opt to retain that topic in the assessment until likely effects become clearer. If, during the course of the assessment, it becomes clear that no significant effects on a topic are likely, it can be scoped out. However, it can be beneficial to alert the Consultation Authorities, on an informal basis, to any proposed amendments prior to the main consultation, and document this in the Environmental Report.

Whilst reporting requirements at scoping are limited in the terms of the 2005 Act, the type of information that the Consultation Authorities expect to see at scoping is outlined in the following table.

Useful information to include in scoping reports

A brief outline of the main objectives and contents of the plan. This allows those being consulted on the scoping report to understand what the main role of the plan is and what it aims to deliver. If an early draft of the plan has been produced it is helpful if this is shared.

A short summary of other relevant plans, programmes or strategies that can influence the plan being subjected to assessment. This should be restricted to only the most relevant plans that directly impact on the plan and ideally include a brief comment on why each is relevant.

A summary of the environmental characteristics of the area covered by the plan. This should be concise and focused on the key issues for the assessment and include information about any relevant environmental problems within the plan area.

Baseline maps can be a good way to present information. Ideally, the environmental information should be well developed, to enable those being consulted to understand the key environmental issues and help identify where there may be inaccuracies or omissions. However, to avoid delays, it is acceptable to outline the baseline information sources which will be referred to in the Environmental Report.

A statement about whether any environmental topics are being scoped out of the assessment and the reasons why. To aid proportionality, a Responsible Authority should aim only to scope in those SEA environmental topics, upon which the plan is likely to have significant environmental effects. Therefore, elements of a plan that are unlikely to have significant effects on the environmental topics or that have already been meaningfully assessed for other, potentially higher level plans, would not have to be assessed and could be scoped out. A succinct explanation to the Consultation Authorities within the scoping report can prove helpful in these matters.

If there is uncertainty about whether a significant environment effect is likely to arise, a precautionary approach may be advisable, scoping the issue in until such time as it becomes clearer. It is also important to remember that if an environmental topic is scoped in, information should be proportionate to the level of significance. Not all aspects of an environmental topic will be relevant. For Example, areas prone to flooding may be relevant to a development plan but the quality of the water environment may not.

A brief description, if available, of the type and range of reasonable alternatives that are or could be considered. Whilst not a requirement at this stage and in many cases it may be too early to define, inclusion where feasible allows those being consulted to understand what alternatives are likely to be addressed in the assessment. Although there is only a requirement to consider reasonable alternatives, as this has been a focus of previous legal challenges, a robust but proportionate approach to this aspect of the methodology is advisable.

A summary of the intended approach to the assessment and its level of detail. This can include details of proposed environmental objectives or indicators which may be used to support an assessment or other methods of assessment. It can prove helpful if a worked example of the proposed approach is included. The summary should include information to describe the proposed level of detail of the assessment, to enable those being consulted to come to a view about whether it is likely to be sufficient.

The proposed period of consultation on the Environmental Report. Typical consultation periods range from 6 to 12 weeks depending on the scale and nature of the plan being assessed. The Consultation Authorities are likely to confirm in their responses whether or not the proposed period is acceptable.

3.7 How to get the most out of the Consultation Authorities at scoping?

The role of the Consultation Authorities is not to criticise the proposals within a plan, but to offer help to ensure that the likely environmental effects are clearly understood and addressed. The Consultation Authorities can offer advice and practical help on sources of environmental information, likely effects and opportunities for mitigation and enhancement.

Communication can hold the key to gaining the most from the Consultation Authorities. Engagement has to begin early and continue throughout a plan's preparation and adoption process. This should not be viewed as just two or three statutory steps within the SEA procedures, but rather as a continuous process that can deliver real benefits.

Keeping engagement in mind and to secure better environmental outcomes, both parties need to provide sufficient information to allow each other to identify and understand the main environmental issues. To build an effective working relationship and secure successful environmental outcomes, a Responsible Authority has to be able to set the scene for the Consultation Authorities, by outlining the plan's main objectives, what alternatives are available and the overall potential environmental effects. In return, the Consultation Authorities should point out any potential environmental issues and opportunities to enhance the consultation process.

3.8 How to handle issues raised by the Consultation Authorities at scoping

The 2005 Act requires Responsible Authorities to take the views expressed by the Consultation Authorities at scoping into account, when judging the appropriate level of detail for an Environmental Report.

In most cases, as comments made by the Consultation Authorities are likely to be about how to improve the environmental assessment, or where to find the latest baseline data, Responsible Authorities are likely to be able to accommodate such comments. However, it is ultimately for a Responsible Authority to judge whether a point raised by a Consultation Authority is valid and can be accommodated. If a Responsible Authority is unable to implement a point, informal consultation with the relevant Consultation Authority may resolve the situation or at least clarify potential differences of opinion or any misunderstandings.

3.9 How much environmental baseline information needs to be included?

Baseline data has to be collected at the level of detail that is appropriate to the plan and the SEA. This part of the assessment does not need to be concluded at scoping, but it can be helpful to make a start on data collection at this stage. Practitioners should begin by taking a sharply focused approach to gathering data, rather than collecting every scrap of information which may be related to the plan area. Further baseline information can be added later, if required, to inform the assessment as it progresses.

Environmental assessment relies on awareness and knowledge of the likely effects on a receiving environment when implementing a plan. Baseline information should be applied and used to inform the assessment findings, and be viewed as more than just an inventory of relevant baseline information. Sufficient information about the current and future state of the environment is required to ensure that a practitioner is capable of judging the vulnerability of the receiving environment to change. Data availability can constrain the method or scope of an assessment, but gathering new data is not a requirement of the 2005 Act.

The following should be borne in mind:

- Baseline information can be both quantitative and/or qualitative. Quantitative information is usually built up from existing monitoring and research activities while qualitative information is more likely to be based on judgement and wider evidence.

- Not all baseline information is readily available. Practitioners may have to consider whether data gaps can and should be filled. Sources of reliable data can vary and depend on a range of factors, including timing, topic, area and cost.
- Monitoring can provide an opportunity to improve the availability of trend data. Monitoring obligations from other plans have the potential to provide a valuable source of information in the future.

For spatial plans, baseline data can include a stocktaking of 'environmental assets' including any sensitive areas or services provided by ecosystems. For more strategic plans, baseline data can reflect the main type of environmental effects anticipated, and appropriate indicators can be selected.

Overlay mapping or GIS can be used to identify the spatial distribution of habitats or species and other sensitivities and where cumulative effects and their interactions are likely to occur. This can provide a composite geographic picture of the baseline environment, identifying the sensitive areas or resources; to show the influences of past, present and future activities on the receiving environment; and to identify where several effects can cumulatively affect one particular environmental topic.

3.10 Sources of baseline data

Baseline data can be drawn from a wide variety of sources. Prior to trying to source data, Responsible Authorities should consider what environmental effects are likely to arise, based on the scope of a plan. This approach can help ensure the future assessment is focussed onto the right environmental topics that are capable of clearly identifying the environmental effects of a plan.

A practitioner may have access to a wide variety of sources of environmental baseline data, depending on the environmental topics that are likely to be affected. Sources include:

- Scotland's Environment website www.environment.scotland.gov.uk;
- State of the Environment Reports;
- Scottish Government publication and monitoring;
- other environmental assessments / previous work;
- Consultation Authorities;
- Environmental monitoring data within a Responsible Authority;
- other public bodies e.g. National Health Service;
- Non-Government Organisations and environmental groups

3.11 Handling environmental baseline data gaps

Gaps in data are most likely to occur where there is: no formal or statutory requirement for the data; demand for the data is low; or there are complex issues surrounding its collection. Where baseline data is not available, collecting and analysing new data could prove time consuming and expensive.

Practitioners have to try to secure relevant data and if not available, state this clearly in the Environmental Report. Similarly, if data is incomplete or could be potentially deemed unreliable, this should be reflected in the assessment and explained in the Environmental Report. When Responsible Authorities are uncertain about whether baseline data exists, the Consultation Authorities may be able to provide advice. Experience has shown that even in the absence of extensive baseline data, robust environmental assessments can still be undertaken, based on a practitioner's judgement and available evidence.

3.12 Structuring an assessment

At the outset of the assessment process and continuously as the plan evolves, a practitioner has to be able to identify the key components of a plan and be clear about whether or not the components, individually or collectively, are likely to generate significant environmental effects.

To help structure the assessment, it is useful to map out the contents of a plan and consider which elements are likely to raise significant environmental issues. For example, vision statements, any known objectives, policy statements or spatial proposals could have or contribute to environmental effects. The map can be useful in distinguishing between different types of actions and developing suitable assessment tools to reflect the varying characteristics and levels of detail.

Although the assessment of high level plans, which contain overarching or broad aspiration can be challenging, they are nevertheless worthwhile. Therefore, when assessing such plans it is important, at the initial drafting stage, to maintain a broad overview. This can help to build a clearer understanding of the environmentally relevant aspects of the plan as a whole. Once this is established, practitioners can then focus in on the relevant areas, to identify the key elements that will have environmental effects and consider, together with the plan-maker, reasonable alternatives and opportunities for mitigation.

3.13 Choosing an assessment method

A variety of methods can be used to undertake an environmental assessment. An effective assessment depends on a flexible process, which keeps pace with a plan's preparation. To gain the best results from a SEA, experienced practitioners tailor assessment methods to reflect the context and character of the relevant plan.

The specific tools to be used in an assessment, and the resources required, can vary between plans. In identifying a suitable assessment method, the complexity of potential environmental issues, the objectives to be achieved and the environmental context should be taken into account. The approach has to be fit for purpose and should:

- reflect the location, type and significance of the environmental sensitivities in the area and the likely environmental effects,
- highlight reasonable alternatives to delivering the plan's main objectives that can be discussed with the Consultation Authorities during the preparation process,
- focus on identifying measures to avoid, reduce, or offset environmental effects and where positive effects found, measures to enhance.

A combination of methods can be used for a plan containing different types of objectives and alternatives. The table below sets out different assessment methods and explains their advantages and disadvantages.

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Assessment questions can provide a systematic way of interrogating plan options. Relevant environmental topics can be used to develop an appropriately focused assessment. Questions can be developed on the basis of the analysis of relevant environmental protection objectives. For example, assessment questions could focus on whether a plan effects designated environmental features. Questions can be used to target specific potential effects identified at the scoping stage.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can help to focus the assessment onto key environmental topics and features likely to be directly affected. • Can provide a strong link to the evidence base. • Well worded questions can help to communicate results transparently in the consultation process. • Questions can be answered in a table or narrative, providing different options for reporting and presentation of the findings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad or poorly defined questions can lead to an unfocused assessment. • Questions must be focused on relevant issues to identify the main effects. • Questions need to cover the full range of relevant topics and effects. • A large number of questions can at times result in duplication or a lengthy assessment process. • Presenting extensive text based answers can be challenging.

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

The review of relevant environmental objectives can be used to construct a framework of objectives against which a plan can be assessed. This can identify whether a plan supports wider environmental objectives or whether there are any environmental gaps. Alternatively, objectives could focus on the most relevant local environmental issues, derived from engagement.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers a systematic and structured approach to the assessment. • Can be constructed and undertaken by those with limited environmental background. • Can be tailored to focus on key environmental topics. • Can help to promote environmental aspirations within a plan that might otherwise be overlooked. • Provide a strong link to the evidence base • Questions can be answered in tables or a narrative, providing options for reporting assessment results. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poorly defined objectives can lead to an unfocused assessment. • The assessment can sometimes become lost in the subtlety of wording - leading to different conclusions. • A large number of objectives can at times result in duplication and a lengthy assessment process. • Broad or very aspirational objectives may be difficult to apply to specific spatial options, particular where actions are localised.

MATRIX BASED APPROACHES AND SCORING SYSTEMS

The use of matrices is well established with SEA, offering a reliable approach to undertaking an assessment. Assessment matrices are normally based on objectives, questions or environmental criteria. Scoring systems can be used in matrices to distinguish between the effects of different alternatives.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a systematic means of recording decisions. • Can offer a clear approach to comparing alternatives. • Can be used to display results of an assessment in a logical format. • Can help to identify effects that might otherwise be missed. • Can be used easily in conjunction with objectives, questions, indicators and baseline data. • When using scoring systems matrices can be linked to significance criteria and relevant data helping to communicate the type and scale of effects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality of the assessment is dependent on the framework. • Over quantification of findings can mislead readers and important issues may be overlooked. • Can be difficult to establish consistency in decision making across a matrix, particularly where multiple assessors are involved. Requires clear guiding principles for decision making to overcome this. • Use of symbols can sometimes be too simplistic. Matrices are often more effective where supported by explanations of key decisions. • Can be time consuming to use and repetitive and key environmental effects can be lost within matrix tables

MAPPING AND SPATIAL ANALYSIS

Mapping can be an effective means of collecting, analysing and displaying information, and can be particularly useful for spatial plans. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can be used to map several layers of environmental constraint and to contrast spatial options. GIS can enable a 'deep' assessment, considering effects on specific spatial constraints and a 'broad' assessment that considers the effects across a broader spatial extent.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can handle large amounts of data with a clear spatial component. • Can be used to both display important environmental constraints and the location of proposed activities to a diverse group of stakeholders. • Particularly useful to layer constraints to help identify cumulative effects. • Can be an effective communication and reporting tool. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs to focus on identifying significant effects, rather than just what can be displayed. • Complex assessments and data manipulation can have an effect on transparency. • Mapping can be time consuming and require specialist input. • Needs to be supported by commentary to explain the significant effects. • May not be accessible to everyone.

CRITERIA BASED CHECKLISTS

Checklists of environmental criteria can provide a useful framework for assessment. Examples of their use include local development plans identifying a large number of development sites, where analysis forms an integral part of the preparation process. Criteria included in the checklist should cover the environmental topics scoped into the assessment. Environmental checklists can be easily integrated with other factors of relevance to the plan.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can provide a clear, logical and consistent approach. • Easily integrated into a sieving process for comparing several options. • Works well when assessing spatial options with identified boundaries and clear localised environmental constraints. • Good platform for engagement as it presents information in a local context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some environmental topics lend themselves better to criteria checklists than others. • Some environmental issues are cross cutting and difficult to assess in a checklist, such as climatic factors. • Some checklists can be quite lengthy. • Does not work as well with strategic level or non-spatially specific policies and options.

ENVIRONMENTAL TOPICS BASED APPROACH

This is both an assessment and reporting method, focusing on each of the environmental topics in turn. If reported on an issue by issue basis, this broader approach can help consultees to focus on the chapters that are relevant to their particular area of interest.

The assessment (and reporting of the findings) could use the following structure:

- What is the relevant policy context / key relevant environmental objectives?
- What is the current baseline and how will it evolve without the plan?
- What are the effects on this topic?
- Could any significant effects be mitigated or enhanced?

If using an environmental topic based approach, it is important that the practitioner considers and reports on the interrelationship between environmental topics, cumulative and synergistic effects. This approach can be used in conjunction with other methods to amplify an assessment where the plan includes more detailed components.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used in conjunction with other assessment methods. • Key findings and baseline information can be considered in an integrated way. • Suitable for higher level assessments of strategic plans. • Especially robust when used with other more targeted methodologies. • Highlights the key environmental issues clearly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships between issues can be overlooked. • May not be suitable for reporting purposes for more specific plans, such as development plans. • Can be difficult to identify effects arising from each specific component of the plan.

OTHER SUPPORTING TECHNIQUES

There are a number of other techniques, which can be incorporated into an assessment. For example:

Network diagrams or causal chain analysis: A network diagram is a way of illustrating how impacts can be related and what the consequences of these impacts are on the environment. This technique can provide a useful means of communicating the likely effects.

Ecosystems Approach: Considers the integrated management of land, water and living resources, promoting conservation and sustainability. Recent examples have shown this approach to have strengths, but care is required to avoid overly complex reporting.

SWOT analysis: Offers a structured method to evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats within a plan. A simple approach that can form a useful starting point for an assessment. It helps to focus on relevant and significant issues.

3.14 What should be included in the Environmental Report?

The required content of an Environmental Report is set out in [Schedule 3](#) of the 2005 Act.

As plans come in a variety of shapes and sizes, covering different sectors and affecting different aspects of the environment, a range of techniques and levels of detail may have been included in the assessments. Similarly, when drafting an Environmental Report practitioners should provide an appropriate level of detail, and consider how they can best provide consultees with a clear insight into the relevant environmental information that has emerged from the assessment.

The structure and content of an Environmental Report is best considered at the scoping stage, in terms of 'scoping in' and 'scoping out' of environmental topics and the level of detail required. This can help to provide a sharper focus on the key environmental findings and lead to clearer, more succinct, relevant and engaging Environmental Reports.

3.15 Consulting on an Environmental Report

The purpose of environmental assessment is to identify the likely environmental effects of a plan, and to avoid any adverse environmental effects occurring. Assessment findings are used to populate an Environmental Report, which is then used as a key tool for public engagement in the main consultation.

The main consultation has to include a draft plan and the appropriate Environmental Report, referred to in 2005 Act as 'the relevant documents'. These documents have to be available for comment, at the same time, for a set period that has to be agreed in advance with the Consultation Authorities and the Scottish Ministers.

Responsible Authorities provide access to the main consultation materials, through their website. This is convenient and likely to be accessible for those who are likely to have an interest in the plan. If a hard copy is required, this can either be made available through the Responsible Authority's principal office or by issuing a paper copy. In the case of the latter, the 2005 Act permits Responsible Authorities to request a reasonable charge for this function.

The following table provides a guide to who and when to consult at the main consultation stage.

Who to consult

Responsible Authorities are required to consult:

- The Consultation Authorities,
- The public; those likely to be affected or with an interest (includes Non-Governmental Organisations),
- Other EU Member States if a plan is likely to have significant transboundary environmental effects. A Responsible Authority in this situation should contact the [SEA Gateway](#) team for handling advice.

When and how to consult

Referred to in this guidance as the main consultation, consultation should include access to the plan and the Environmental Report at the same time. The consultation period must also provide the Consultation Authorities and the public with an early and effective opportunity to express their opinions on both. This is the point when those who are likely to be affected or have an interest in a plan can express their views and have them taken into account.

Within **14 days** of preparation of the Environmental Report, a Responsible Authority must send the relevant draft plan and Environmental Report to the Consultation Authorities and make them available on their website and at a principal office. A Responsible Authority must also place, within the same period, an advert within at least one newspaper circulating in the area to which the plan relates. The advert invites expressions of interest and state where a copy of the relevant plan can be inspected. [Section 16\(2\)\(a\)](#) of the 2005 Act sets out the required content of adverts.

The costs associated with advertising public notices is likely to vary from plan to plan, depending on the newspapers selected and the area a plan covers. Advertising in more than one publication may be required. A more specific, locally focused plan may only have to advertise in one newspaper within the local area.

In certain circumstances, where a plan is amended as a result of the main consultation and the amendments are likely to result in additional significant environmental effects, that had not been considered or assessed previously, a revised Environmental Report may have to be prepared and consulted on, along with the amended plan.

Consultation Authorities role

The Consultation Authorities do not have to respond to formal consultations but often choose to do so and within the timescale set by Responsible Authority. Their responses are likely to reflect any comments made at the scoping stage and whether these have been taken into account, as well as offering additional views on the assessment findings, proposed mitigation or monitoring measures.

Good practice

A Responsible Authority can benefit from informal discussions with the Consultation Authorities, during the assessment process, prior to publication of the Environmental Report.

3.16 Early and effective engagement

The 2005 Act requires early and effective engagement in the SEA process, and specifically at the main consultation stage. The main consultation may be the first opportunity the public has to offer views on both the plan and the Environmental Report. The views and opinions offered in this consultation have to be taken into account by the Responsible Authority and used to help shape and finalise the plan.

'Early and effective' consultation can be gauged by considering whether a plan has reached a stage where all the available options have been identified and the public can still have a meaningful opportunity to help shape the plans content.

What can be considered early and effective is unique to a plan and the circumstances surrounding its preparation. There are some guiding principles which may help a Responsible Authority to judge what is early and effective. These are:

- Can new ideas, proposed by the public at the main consultation, be easily accommodated within the plan if desired? This includes reasonable alternatives to the plan.
- Has the public been given sufficient time to respond to the main consultation?
- Is the Responsible Authority able to clearly outline the important features of a plan and its likely environmental effects?
- Does the consultation material meaningfully define how the plan fits with other plans and programmes and their influences?
- Is the main consultation material relevant and accessible to all with an interest?

Meaningful engagement requires a Responsible Authority to keep an open mind and to allow the consultation process to help shape the plan. This means that the plan, at the main consultation stage, has to be in draft and the Responsible Authority has to be willing to accept that new proposals could lead to alterations in the plan.

Effective engagement, at the main consultation, is enhanced when the Environmental Report is proportionate. Clear, concise and engaging reporting is encouraged, as accessibility (and therefore effectiveness) can often be hindered by lengthy, technically detailed reports that do not clearly define the most important conclusions of the assessment. Responsible Authorities should consider the following factors when preparing an Environmental report:

- **Language:** The use of plain English and a clear explanation of diagrams (including matrices) can improve accessibility of reports. Use of jargon and acronyms needs to be avoided.
- **Proportionality:** Counting the number of pages within an Environmental Report is not an effective means to measure proportionality. However, as good practice Responsible Authorities should aim to minimise the size of reports, by being concise and only reporting environmental effects considered to be significant.
- **Structure:** It can be helpful for the reader if the layout of an Environmental Report includes headings that reflect the plan being consulted upon. This can allow the reader to switch easily between the plan and the report.
- **Accessibility:** As consultees are likely to read a plan and Environmental Report on line, it can be beneficial to divide reports into separate, downloadable sections. This means that rather than having to download one large document, consultees can select areas of interest. These bite size chunks can be easier to access.
- **Equalities:** Most public organisations are familiar with equality issues and ensuring publications are made available in different formats, if requested.
- **Content:** The content of Environmental Reports is set out in [Schedule 3](#) of the 2005 Act and can be a useful checklist for Responsible Authorities to ensure compliance.

3.17 Environmental indicators

Indicators have a number of applications within assessment but are ultimately used by practitioners to show the current status of a plan area or trends. Indicators can also offer the means to measure the success of environmental goals, once a plan is implemented. Indicators can originate from a number of sources, including the Consultation Authorities, Government and other public bodies, environmental baseline data, or environmental bodies, as well as Responsible Authorities.

Indicators can be used to highlight relevant baseline information, which can provide practitioners with the means to gauge the current state of the environment within the plan area. Indicators can provide environmental background, which can then be extrapolated and used to determine the likely evolution of the environment without the plan.

The versatility of indicators does not stop at assessment. Indicators are also an effective way of communicating predicted effects to the public or those with an interest in a plan. As a tool for engagement, indicators can offer a clear message that presents the expected environmental effects and how the plan aims to address these effects. Indicators can also be used meaningfully in monitoring, as a means of measuring the likely significant effects of a plan and identifying whether mitigation has been effective.

It is not uncommon to find that indicators selected by Responsible Authorities linked to existing monitoring schemes, either within the Responsible Authority or by external bodies, such as the Consultation Authorities. Bespoke monitoring arrangements are not normally prompted by a SEA, unless there is a new environmental issue that has to be addressed.

It is possible to select meaningful indicators from existing monitoring regimes, to save resources and avoid duplication. It is important, if and when selecting a suitable indicator for use in monitoring, that it reflects both the cause and the effect. For example, a development plan might usefully monitor the percentage of sites developed within known flood plains, whereas, monitoring the number of listed buildings within the plan area would provide little insight into a plan's effects.

3.18 Characterising environmental effects

Assessments are used to identify significant direct, indirect, cumulative or synergistic environmental effects. Whilst direct effects are more immediately apparent, identifying indirect and cumulative effects can be challenging.

Assumptions used within an assessment can be influenced by the knowledge and experience of the practitioner. Practitioners should record and explain their assumptions to aid transparency. Absolute scientific proof of environmental effects is not required, but practitioners should provide information within Environmental Reports on how conclusions have been reached.

(a) Cumulative effects

A cumulative effect can occur when two or more environmental effects combine to have a greater effect. Cumulative effects can occur from different actions within a plan or from the combined actions of a wider range of plans. They can occur over space or time, or arise from multiple individual effects on a single receptor.

It is only really possible to take a comprehensive overview of cumulative effects once all aspects of a plan have been assessed. A cumulative effects assessment provides information on what environmental effects are likely to occur and how significant they could be. The assessment identifies whether the same environmental effects are occurring within different aspects of the plan. The assessment should evaluate the combined significance of these overlapping effects and judge whether, together, they result in a greater effect than would occur individually.

For example, spatial cumulative effects can arise from multiple developments in a confined area. One small scale wind farm development may have a limited and local effect on landscape character, assessed as a minor negative effect. However, several small scale wind farm developments within the same area can in combination have a greater effect on landscape character, generating a significant negative effect.

Effects can combine to impact on specific environmental receptors. If several aspects of a plan have an impact on disturbance of protected bird species using a specific waterbody, the cumulative effect may be significantly adverse. Whereas, if the effects of the plan caused small levels of disturbance to a bird species at a few sites, dispersed across the plan area, cumulative effects may not arise. The source of the effect may vary, e.g. increased marine traffic or an increase in coastal recreation together could result in a greater overall increased level of bird disturbance.

(b) Interrelationships between effects

Environmental effects are often interrelated. For example, direct effects on soil or the quality of the water environment, as a result of increasing the background levels of pollution within a specific area, could have a secondary significant effect on biodiversity.

Practitioners can also consider how existing environmental trends, outwith the scope of a plan, may interact with likely environmental effects resulting from a plan. For example, predicted future increases in rainfall will increase the risk of flooding and its severity.

Where possible, consideration of potential interactions is best undertaken early in the assessment process, to ensure it is properly understood. The Consultation Authorities may be able to highlight or provide advice on potential interactions at scoping. The use of network diagrams and causal chain analysis can be useful when considering these interactions.

When considering interrelationships and secondary effects, the assessment would only have to consider the effects that can reasonably be attributed to the plan. Interactions arising from external factors, beyond the control of the plan, do not need to be included.

(c) Synergistic effects

Synergistic effects occur when two or more effects identified within an assessment, are capable of working together to create a new effect, or a magnitude of effect which does not arise from the individual effects.

Synergistic effects are not always straightforward to identify within an assessment. This requires knowledge of sometimes complex interactions, and an understanding of where synergies can occur. Practitioners sometimes confuse synergistic effects with indirect effects. In simple terms, indirect effects are consequences resulting from a plan, which are secondary to the intended consequence, whilst a synergistic effect is a result of interaction between two effects.

For example, synergies can result in new effects. A plan includes proposals for two different industries, each likely to discharge a different pollutant into the same watercourse. Alone, these pollutants are not harmful to the water environment. Together they result in a chemical reaction creating a new pollutant which is harmful to waterbodies.

Synergies can also magnify individual effects. A plan includes a proposal for a development, which results in low levels of discharge of a pollutant into a watercourse. The pollutant is dispersed by the volume of water and does not have a significant effect on the water environment. The plan also includes a proposal which results in water abstraction from the same watercourse, which does not have a significant effect on the water environment. However, together the water abstraction concentrates the levels of pollutant discharged, and thus potentially affecting the quality of the water environment.

3.19 Handling uncertainty within the assessment

Uncertainty is expected within an environmental assessment. The environment has many intricate and sophisticated links, which can sometimes mean it is difficult to predict how certain actions are likely to effect the environment. Monitoring can help to manage these uncertainties within assessments. Identifying unforeseen environmental effects early can help minimise the potential scope for environmental damage.

Ignoring uncertainty could undermine an assessment's findings and communicate an inaccurate message to stakeholders. It is therefore important that practitioners are clear about what can and cannot be substantiated through the assessment findings.

It is therefore important that the Environmental Reports acknowledge the nature and extent of any uncertainties or data limitations, especially where this is material that is essential to the overall appraisal and potential acceptance of a plan. An Environmental Report can also reflect any measures taken to reduce uncertainties, such as; gathering additional data, holding early and meaningful consultations and demonstrating the implications of uncertainties.

3.20 Understanding significance

The level of significance of environmental effects can be difficult to define, and can be a matter of professional judgement. Significance depends on the character, quality and sensitivity of the environment which will be affected by the plan as well as the scale, magnitude, frequency and certainty of the effects occurring. Importantly, what may be a significant effect in one location may be insignificant in another.

Assessing significant effects is not always straightforward. Activities that may seem to be low key, such as water extraction, construction of footpaths, low level emissions, can have significant effects in certain circumstances. At the other end of the scale, seemingly damaging activities may have less significant effects when they occur in areas where, for example, industrial use or development is already long established. Significant effects can arise where there has been little previous change to natural features, or conversely where adverse effects over time have led to increased environmental sensitivity.

Understanding significance is important throughout the SEA process, from screening to post adoption statements. At screening, understanding significance helps to establish whether the plan is likely to require a SEA. At scoping, it can help to focus the assessment onto the relevant environmental topics and aid proportionality. At the assessment stage, it is essential, as it presents the means to appreciate the findings and to identify where mitigation or enhancement can be considered. At the Environmental Report stage, it can ensure attention is focussed on the key environmental issues. Finally at post adoption, it allows a practitioner to demonstrate where the SEA has made a difference.

It is useful to establish criteria that can be used to determine significance in a consistent and transparent way across many plans within a Responsible Authority. For example, establishing environmental principles that can be used to determine significance could be used to consider a combination of factors, including the nature and scale of effects, combined with the character and sensitivity of the receiving environment. In practice, the application of the principles may vary from plan to plan as different people apply their own judgement but this is likely to be a small variance, especially if supported by clear user instructions. As a practical tool, the following table provides some examples of where practitioners have identified potentially significant effects.

Type of plan	Aspect of Environment considered	Summary of impact
Housing development on a two hectare greenfield site	Ecology	Development of the site has the potential to have significant adverse ecological impacts both within the site and on the neighbouring wildlife site.
Coastal defence options - land raising in a protected coastal area	Biodiversity, flora and fauna	Given the importance of the tidal estuary and the sand flats, land raising has the potential to have a significant negative impact on the environment.
Waste Strategy: overall proposals	Material assets	Significantly positive: There will be greater use of local recycling facilities and encouragement for reuse of construction and demolition material onsite, as well as greater levels of reprocessing.
Heritage Strategy: overall proposals	Cultural heritage	Achieving a 'steady-state' for physical, cultural heritage assets will have an overall significant positive effect on the canal historic environment.
Water resourcing strategy	Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna	The provisions for monitoring water quality and working with landowners within catchment areas has the potential to lead to significant long-term benefits for water quality and biodiversity in the water environment.
Forestry and Woodland Strategy: proposals for vacant and derelict land	Soil	Reuse of vacant and derelict land for woodland will have significant benefits for soil quality, potentially helping to address contamination, improving water infiltration, organic content and fertility.
Supplementary Guidance: Wind turbine development	Cultural heritage	If clusters of wind turbines are sited near to known archaeological sites, the effects are likely to have a significant impact cumulative on their setting.

3.21 Reasonable alternatives

The 2005 Act requires practitioners to identify and assess the effects of 'reasonable alternatives' to a plan. This can be used to achieve environmental benefits and, where well executed, can be an opportunity for the SEA to add value to the planning process by encouraging lateral or creative thinking. Alternatives must be realistic and are likely to emerge from the plan-making process. However, the SEA can encourage further thinking around alternatives, and highlight where environmentally preferable options exist.

Consideration of reasonable alternatives can vary between assessments and plans, and can be challenging for both the practitioner and the plan-maker. Alternatives have been a focus for several legal challenges within the UK, and so it is important to ensure reasonable alternatives are meaningfully considered. More positively, reasonable alternatives should be recognised as an opportunity to minimise environmental problems and enhance the environmental benefits of the plan.

If there are genuinely no reasonable alternatives to a plan, alternatives should not be artificially generated. Responsible Authorities should also not attempt to justify their preferred approach by suggesting unrealistic alternatives that would generate more negative environmental effects, just to make the preferred option look good. It is also not appropriate to have alternatives, such as 'business as usual' or 'do nothing' scenarios where this is not a feasible option.

3.22 Identifying and recording reasonable alternatives

Plan-makers will often consider alternatives during the initial preparation of a plan, but this can often be difficult for the practitioner to report and assess later, as it may not even be well documented. It is therefore important practitioners or those undertaking the assessment work closely with the plan-maker, from an early stage in the process.

When the various components of a plan have been identified, a practitioner or plan-maker can consider whether there are reasonable alternatives for each element of the plan. Small alterations to components within a plan, through considering reasonable alternatives in a focused way, are capable of providing significant environmental benefits.

High level plans are likely to have reasonable alternatives which reflect the broad character of the strategy, whereas lower, more locally focused plans may, require more specific alternatives. In considering whether or not an alternative is reasonable, Responsible Authorities should consider potential restrictions to their implementation, for example parameters set by relevant legislation and any relevant policy commitments. Each layer of plan can potentially set restrictions that govern the next level, narrowing what may constitute a reasonable alternative. When preparing plans within a hierarchy, plan-makers may want to consider whether alternatives in lower level plans should be limited, or whether to build in flexibility, in order to allow further alternatives, as this can impact on the scope of the assessment.

3.23 Comparing reasonable alternatives

Any reasonable alternatives covered within an assessment should be considered to the same level of detail as the preferred option.

Comparison of reasonable alternatives can fall into two categories; those alternatives that are mutually exclusive, and those that can be “mixed and matched” to offer a combination of alternatives. Those that are mutually exclusive offer fewer choices, as the plan-maker can only select one. For example, in a high level transport plan a practitioner may have two alternative routes for building a new road. However, only one can be selected and the other is then excluded. Where a combination of alternatives can be selected, as with areas selected for housing within a development plan, a practitioner can look at the effects of a variety of combinations, each potentially offering a different environmental footprint.

3.24 Selecting reasonable alternatives

Practitioners, when comparing reasonable alternatives, may draw on a number of assessment methods to establish the likely environmental effects of each.

As well as environmental considerations, it is important to remember that plan-makers are free to consider other factors when selecting alternatives, such as costs, other policy drivers, practicality, timescales and public need.

The SEA should inform decision making, but is advisory rather than prescriptive. The role of an assessment is to provide environmental information on the likely effects of a plan and any reasonable alternatives. The plan-maker can then use this information to make more informed selections. It is therefore the plan-maker and not the assessment process that ultimately determines the preferred approach within the plan.

SEA cannot stop a less environmentally friendly alternative being selected by a plan-maker, for other overriding reasons, but the assessment process should help to clarify where significant adverse environmental effects are likely to occur. Where alternatives with negative environmental effects are selected for other reasons, the SEA has an important and practical role to play in identifying mitigation measures to avoid or reduce these effects as far as possible.

3.25 Mitigation

The 2005 Act states practitioners have to outline *'the measures envisaged to prevent, reduce and as fully as possible offset any significant adverse effects on the environment of implementing the plan or programme'* within the Environmental Report. These measures are often referred to as mitigation measures.

The process of identifying suitable mitigation typically follows a series of steps, this is often referred to as the 'mitigation hierarchy' and is set out below in order of desirability:

- **Avoid / prevent:** This is the best outcome, as the other levels of mitigation accept a degree of environmental damage. Examples can include a change to the plan or utilising a **reasonable** alternative to deliver the same plan objective, without the adverse environmental effects.
- **Reduce / minimise:** Where avoidance is not possible, reducing or minimising the severity of adverse environmental effects is the next best option. Examples could include amending the original plan objectives to reduce the scale of the effect, using licensing at a later stage to identify technical measures, reorganising spatial plans to avoid the most harmful effects or including policies outlining some level of protection.
- **Offset / compensate:** This aspect of mitigation means a practitioner and plan-maker have accepted there is going to be an unavoidable adverse environmental effect that cannot be meaningfully reduced. Examples of compensatory measures includes; making a commitment to improving or enhancing another sensitive habitat for an effected species to use, or promoting landscape restoration in another location.

In terms of mitigation, there is little point identifying measures that cannot be successfully implemented. There are various approaches to mitigation, including:

- making a significant change to the broad aim of a plan,
- changing a specific proposal within the plan,
- adding further policies to the plan,
- adding technical measures e.g. buffer zones or construction methods,
- changing specific wording or adding specific references within existing policies,
- identifying specific effects to be addressed at the project level, or steering other plans, lower in the hierarchy, for example guiding the EIA process to manage potential effects.

A combination of the above mitigation measures could be used to tackle more complex environmental issues.

3.26 Implementing mitigation

The success of mitigation ultimately depends on the likelihood that measures will be taken forward. As a result, being specific about how they will be implemented can improve the influence and effectiveness of an assessment. When thinking about ways in which adverse effects can be mitigated or positive effects enhanced, the following questions may be helpful:

- (a) what specific measure(s) are required?
- (b) how are measure(s) going to be implemented?
- (c) when are the measure(s) required?
- (d) who would be responsible for implementing the measure(s)? and,
- (e) how will implementation of the mitigation proposals be monitored?

Thinking these issues through can help to ensure that mitigation measures are implemented. Practitioners should not assume that mitigation will be implemented if they are only described in broad terms in the Environmental Report. Issues around timing of mitigation can sometimes appear obvious to a practitioner but may be overlooked by those with less direct involvement in the SEA. It can be particularly beneficial to integrate mitigation measures into an implementation framework, such as an action programme. This can help ensure that stakeholders are clear about their responsibilities, and help to ensure the successful delivery of mitigation measures, alongside other plan objectives.

Mitigation should be considered throughout the process, and be used to inform the development of the plan. Practitioners should record mitigation that has taken place during a plan's preparation, and set this out in the Environmental Report.

3.27 Applying the assessment findings

SEA is more than an academic exercise, and does not conclude when all of the policies have been assessed. To get value from the process, the findings must be taken into account within the decision making process. To achieve this successfully, practitioners and plan-makers need to work together to consider the issues and, if required, find solutions to identified environmental issues. Practitioners can facilitate this by sharing information in 'real time' during the assessment, through on-going verbal or written feedback, which could take the form of recommendations or checklists of issues to be addressed.

There are a limited number of options for handling environmental concerns produced by an assessment, these include:

- *Abandon the plan* – this option is extremely unlikely to be required or feasible, but cannot be ignored for example in situations where the SEA identifies risks to human health and safety or to European protected sites. This option can have significant cost and presentational implications and should be avoided through early and effective assessment work. It is unlikely that adverse environmental effects alone will be the sole factor in a decision to abandon a plan.
- *Seek reasonable alternatives / amend the plan* – this can reflect an effective SEA, but requires an open mind on the part of decision makers, and is reliant on robust evidence and clear recommendations from the practitioner.
- *Introduce mitigation to prevent, reduce or offset an adverse effect* – this is commonly the approach taken to addressing environmental effects. As noted previously, this solution can be substantially strengthened by setting out a clear plan for implementing mitigation measures.
- *Accept the effect, be open about it and consider compensation* – whilst not ideal, this may be the only option available and can go some way towards offsetting environmental issues.

Certain options are likely to be more popular than others when it comes to addressing significant adverse environmental effects. Simple changes that are easy to accommodate within the plan, such as the reconfiguration of a development, can suffice as mitigation options. Similarly, adding specific mitigating policies within a plan can be straightforward, whilst achieving the same benefits as a more radical change.

3.28 Links to other assessments

a) Habitats Regulations Appraisal

In circumstances where both SEA and Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) apply to a single plan, the individual requirements for reporting, as well as the timing and breadth of consultation, will differ between the two assessment procedures. Whilst, in the interests of simplicity, current guidance on HRA does not recommend full integration of SEA and HRA, nonetheless there may be value and efficiencies to be gained from linking the two processes.

In particular, SEA can provide an early opportunity to screen for any likely significant effects of a plan on European sites and there is scope to combine the evidence gathering stages. For example, HRA requires an understanding of the qualifying species and habitats that contribute to the integrity of European sites and that may be affected by the plan. Data gathering is likely to include identifying the relevant sites, their conservation objectives and qualifying interests (bird, animal and plant species, and habitats) to assist in establishing a broad understanding of how they may be affected by the plan. The SEA scoping stage, or baseline development, can provide early opportunities to gather and document this information.

HRA can also play an important role in the development and assessment of reasonable alternatives for inclusion within a plan and its SEA. Alternatives with a real possibility to have an adverse effect on the integrity of a European site would be unlikely to be considered reasonable. When developing alternatives for a plan, the HRA work can be usefully undertaken alongside initial SEA alternatives assessment. As part of this process, the work undertaken in the HRA can be used to confirm the significance of effects identified in the SEA. A linked approach can help plan-makers to consider HRA implications earlier and aim to avoid or mitigate likely significant, or potential adverse effects early in the plans preparation leading to efficiency savings.

Finally, SEA and HRA have different consultation requirements. Unlike SEA, there is no obligation to consult the public for HRA purposes. Responsible Authorities are not obliged to include an HRA record in the SEA Environmental Report, but in some circumstances this may be considered good practice. In these cases the title of the document should include reference to the HRA as well as to it being the Environmental Report. It is also important the findings of both appraisals are clearly documented, that the HRA record is clearly separated within the Environmental Report and uses the correct, precise HRA terminology.

b) Environmental Impact Assessment

SEA of development plans offers an opportunity to strengthen and streamline subsequent Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) undertaken at project level. Identifying environmental issues at strategic level, may help to inform the screening and scoping stages of EIA, as well as providing an early indication of any additional survey work which may be required.

There is considerable potential for strengthening the links between SEA and EIA, to facilitate more proportionate approaches to project level planning and assessment. For Example, Strategic mitigation measures identified through the SEA process can help to inform project level design, where relevant. SEA also provides an ideal opportunity to explore potential for cumulative effects at an early stage in the process of developing multiple projects within a given area.

3.29 Who is ‘the public’?

Responsible Authorities should consider the term ‘the public’ in its widest sense. It should be interpreted as encompassing a wide group of people covering not only the general public, but also wider organisations, specialist groups, non-government organisations and other government bodies. Interest in a plan can be influenced by a range of factors, including sector interest, geographic proximity, nature of the proposal and potential effects. ‘Communities of interest’ are not just geographically focused, but can extend to dispersed individuals with a common interest.

Advertising the main consultation is a statutory requirement. It is important, when advertising, to consider who is likely to want to contribute to the consultation and ensure those identified are made aware of the opportunity to contribute. In some cases, it can be beneficial to go beyond statutory requirements within the 2005 Act and, where possible, actively seek the views and opinions of known stakeholders, such as interest groups and non-government organisations.

3.30 How to encourage people to engage with the SEA

It is important to engage with key groups early in a plan’s preparation, to ensure issues that could arise later are identified and captured, when they can be more readily accommodated.

Good practice indicates there can be benefits if the public, communities, non-government organisations or other interest groups are offered an early opportunity to comment on the SEA process, such as at scoping. This approach can be especially helpful when involving members of the public, who may have an interest but are not required to be contacted until the main consultation, as it can allow some matters to be resolved prior to the formal consultation process.

Responsible Authorities can adopt a number of techniques, as good practice, beyond the statutory public notices, to encourage public interest. Techniques include:

- Inviting representations from the public and interested parties at earlier stages in assessment process, such as scoping or on a draft of the Environmental Report.
- Introducing SEA elements to plan preparation workshops. This can help stakeholders to develop a better understanding of the assessment process and to engage earlier. Providing environmental information at workshops allows practitioners to start collecting views on potential environmental effects, mitigation, and reasonable alternatives, all of which can help shape the assessment.
- Including the main findings of the assessment in the draft plan, this can raise awareness of the environmental topics.
- Establishing an email alert system, to keep those with an interest in the plan up to date and aware of opportunities to engage.
- Offering SEA awareness raising opportunities, where possible, to key groups who are likely to have an interest in a plan.

3.31 Improving the level of response to the main consultation

In general, the number of responses received is likely to be directly influenced by the type of plan and whether it is likely to attract a lot of public or media attention. For example, development plans often have higher response rates as the public and stakeholder will be interested in specific development proposals, which may directly affect them.

Increasing the number of public responses can help develop a more robust plan, but time constraints and perceptions that SEA Reports are difficult to understand, can mean that generating public interest in a consultation on the Environmental Report can prove challenging. A strong local interest in a particular plan can sometimes create the right medium for greater public scrutiny of its SEA, with stakeholders cross-referencing their responses to the plan to findings within an Environmental Report.

Many Responsible Authorities opt to supplement the statutory requirements with a wider range of methods to encourage people to contribute. Workshops, meetings, questionnaires, forums, road-shows and drop-in events can be effective in different situations. These practical tools are designed to distil and disseminate important factual information in an accessible way. Whilst some Responsible Authorities may wish to focus on specifically raising awareness of the SEA, the same results can be achieved where the assessment findings are an integral part of the plan information.

Responsible Authorities seeking to improve engagement, may wish to consider the following tips:

- Ensure all consultation documentation is easily accessible on websites, with clear links between a plan and its SEA.
- Use maps or graphics in reports to highlight important environmental issues, which are likely to be of interest to the public.
- Matrices, tables and graphs are useful tools for practitioners to visually convey findings, but are only effective for the reader where supported by an explanation.
- Integrate elements of the assessment findings with plan consultation material. This can improve transparency, combat consultation fatigue, and focus the reader's attention onto the most important assessment findings,
- Ensure the Non-Technical Summary is accessible and clear, with links to the main report. This can be a very effective tool for engagement with the majority of people.
- If preparing a questionnaire to gauge the public's opinion about a plan, include questions on the key findings of the assessment. For example, add questions seeking views on the baseline information or the assessment findings.
- Use supporting information to help people navigate through the process and its outputs. Tools such as an 'easy read' or quick reference guide can aid transparency, and thereby encourage a higher level of response from the public.
- Never assume that people are already aware of SEA, or understand its role in the policy making process.

3.32 What happens after the main consultation?

The end of the main consultation can be viewed as a transition point, when a Responsible Authority can start to finalise the draft plan. The comments received during the consultation period, on the plan and the Environmental Report has to be fully considered by a Responsible Authority and taken into account.

The requirement to take the public consultation process into account is influenced by the [Aarhus Convention](#). The extract below from the implementation guide for the Aarhus Convention offers advice on what that means:

"...In general, it can be said that taking account of the outcome of public participation requires the relevant authority to consider seriously the substance of all comments received, regardless of their source, and to include the substance of the comments in the motivation of the final decision. It does not require the relevant authority to accept the substance of all comments received and to change the decision according to every comment. However, the relevant authority is ultimately responsible for the decision based on all information, including comments received, and should be able to show why a particular comment was rejected on substantive grounds."

If, following the main consultation, a Responsible Authority wants to include new options put forward by the public, it is possible that further public consultation may be required, especially, if the new options have not been assessed previously and are likely to have significant environmental effects. In this situation, a Responsible Authority could produce an addendum to the existing Environmental Report and consult on the new options and the addendum.

The analysis of responses to a public consultation can raise certain issues, such as how to handle group responses, or reconciling conflicting responses. As public bodies, Responsible Authorities are likely to have their own approach to handling responses to a plan. Taking the views of those who were invited to comment into account, should be an integral part of the process of finalising a qualifying plan.

It is unlikely that every comment received by a Responsible Authority would result in change to a plan. However, each comment has to be evaluated by a practitioner or plan-maker, who can then consider whether the comment can be accepted, accepted in part, or rejected in full, providing defensible reasons for the decision. A number of possible actions could arise from the different types of responses to a main consultation, the following table offers some examples:

COMMENT	POSSIBLE RESPONSE
<p>“The Environmental Report lacks sufficient baseline information. You should have taken into account data on X from source Y”</p>	<p>Review the validity of the source suggested and consider how it could affect the findings of the assessment. If this does not require significant change to the Environmental Report, acknowledge the response and build into future assessments.</p> <p>If this significantly changes the conclusions of the assessment and would ultimately result in a change to the plan, consider whether further consultation, to remedy the problem, is required.</p>
<p>“We disagree that the plan is unlikely to generate significant effects for the following reasons.....”</p>	<p>Consider the view and any available supporting evidence. If this is accepted, judge whether the Environmental Report needs revision to reflect the amended conclusions of the assessment.</p> <p>This in turn could trigger a need for additional consultation if the Responsible Authority is not confident that the Environmental Report has been complete or robust.</p> <p>However, if the Responsible Authority is content with the original conclusion, or the view does not generate significant amendments, this may not be necessary.</p>
<p>“Based on the findings of the Environmental Report, we believe that you should change the plan in the following ways....”</p>	<p>Seek to ensure the views are taken into account by the plan-maker, as far as possible and appropriate. This could mean that proposals within the plan are removed or revised, or could be achieved by adding policy commitments to environmental measures that reduce the environmental effects identified. However, if a Responsible Authority believes there are genuine reasons why suggestions or proposals cannot be accommodated, these should be recorded and outlined within the post adoption statement.</p>
<p>“The SEA has not considered the reasonable alternative of</p>	<p>A plan-maker would have to first determine if the proposal was a reasonable alternative, in terms of the plan. If judged reasonable, it could be evaluated against any criteria used in the earlier assessment process, prior to the consultation.</p> <p>If consultees have raised a legitimate reasonable alternative, the Environmental Report may need to be amended to explain the alternative environment effects, and an additional consultation may be required. Whether or not further consultation is required would depend on the plan and whether the Responsible Authority considered the addition of the new reasonable alternative, could have affected the outcome of the original consultation. Clear and transparent reasoning of any such considerations are vital.</p>

3.33 What is proportionality, why is it important and how can it be supported?

Proportionality is not simply about minimising work levels or reducing the length of Environmental Reports. It aims to provide the right level of relevant environmental information at the right time. It should be a consideration throughout the process, from screening to post-adoption. Proportionate reporting improves transparency, by helping to ensure SEA has a better focus on relevant environmental information and the significant environmental effects.

A number of factors can influence the level of detail that is required in a SEA. The scale of the plan (i.e. national and local plans require different levels of information), the subject matter, and the complexity of the proposals can all be key factors. Proportionality depends on using the right approach in the assessment. For example, where a land use plan allocates an area for development, spatial assessments maybe a useful method for identifying environmental effects. Whereas, a more strategic or high level plan, that sets out a broad vision for an area or sector, an assessment which is more thematic could prove helpful.

Understanding where a plan lies within a hierarchy is useful when considering proportionality. A practical assessment only assesses what is relevant at that level and leaves what can be more meaningfully undertaken, by a lower plan, for others to undertake. It is however important to strike a balance and ensure that items are not inappropriately dropped to the lower plan assessment, which are later found to be restricted or governed by the higher plan.

There are likely to be particular opportunities for streamlining SEA assessments and outputs, where it relates to plans that are likely to have only significant positive environmental effects. Opportunities for this approach can be explored at the scoping stage, with the Consultation Authorities.

Opportunities for proportionality may increase as assessments move into the reporting stage. For example, whilst the Consultation Authorities would expect the significant effects of site specific allocations to be assessed, detailed individual assessments could be clustered together and summarised, to focus on the broad significant environmental effects within the Environmental Report.

3.34 How can scoping help to achieve proportionality?

Scoping out certain environmental topics to focus an assessment on significant effects can help to achieve proportionality. It is equally important to remember that 'scoping in' a topic should not automatically lead to a comprehensive account of everything that may or may not be relevant under that heading. The assessment only has to consider the environmental issues that are relevant and should focus on receptors that could be significantly affected by the specific plan being assessed. Where this is successfully achieved at scoping, the subsequent Environmental Report is likely to be shorter, more focussed, and easier to understand.

Baseline data collection often begins at scoping. The following measures may help to make data collection more proportionate and resource efficient:

- A robust scoping exercise focuses an assessment onto the key environmental topics and reduces the amount of environmental data required.
- Focus the level of detail for data to the information provided in the relevant plan. For strategic level plans, national or regional data would be relevant, whereas a local level plan, data which is specific to a local authority area would be more relevant.
- Discuss information requirements with the Consultation Authorities, who may be able to help with datasets or agree an appropriate level of detail.

- Where possible and relevant, the use of spatial information to show the scope of a plan can be helpful. This can reduce the need for text and complex tables. The Consultation Authorities may be able to make some Geographic Information System shape files available to assist with this.
- It may be possible to use baseline data from other recent SEAs as a starting point.
- Avoid listing data in full (e.g. long lists of every listed building or protected area) as this adds little value. Instead spend time analysing which data is most relevant to the plan and presenting this concisely in the Environmental Report.

3.35 Proportionate assessments

Most plans will include components that are likely to have significant environmental effects and others which will not. The latter can include descriptive or contextual information or references to actions to be undertaken in other plans. In terms of the assessment, it is useful to identify the components that will have no significant effects and remove them from the assessment at an early stage. This can be an important step in successfully undertaking a more proportionate assessment, that focuses only on the policies and proposals that are likely to have significant environmental effects. It is important to record these actions in reports, as this can provide an audit trail of how decisions to include or remove components from the assessment were reached.

Judging significance relies on a number of factors, not least evidence, knowledge and experience. Effective identification of significant effects, and being able to differentiate them from less important environmental effects, can contribute towards proportionality at the assessment stage. Responsible Authorities can often identify a range of environmental effects during the course of an assessment. It is important that smaller, less significant environmental effects do not obscure those which are significant and are therefore important considerations for plan-makers and consultees.

If the environmental effects arising from a plan have been adequately considered in a higher tier assessment, it is unlikely that value can be added by duplicating this in a similar SEA for the lower level plan. In this situation a pre-screening (if appropriate) or screening submission could be submitted to the Consultation Authorities, outlining where the original assessment was undertaken and how that assessment encompasses the significant environmental effects of the forthcoming plan. However, care must always be taken to ensure that any new policies or proposals, which had not previously been assessed within the higher tier, are not overlooked. In addition, assessment of lower level plans need to take into account any new information emerging at that stage, and consider if it would have changed the conclusions reached in the higher level assessment.

To appreciate where the environmental assessment is best focussed, it is helpful if practitioners identify where key or important decisions are being taken that cannot be considered elsewhere. For example, if an energy plan outlines a decision to increase renewable wind energy generation, but does not specify where sites would be located, then the initial assessment would focus on the implications of the increase in broad terms, but leave the assessment of sites for lower plans. This approach can help support proportionality as it reduces potential for duplication between assessments.

Proportionality is an important objective for practitioners to aim for, but should not be the detriment of an assessment or reporting process. Public engagement is fundamental to environmental assessment, and the information in the Environmental Report has to offer sufficient information for the reader to reach a fair and valid conclusion on the likely environmental effects of the plan.

3.36 Resourcing, cost savings and efficiency

The resources required to undertake a SEA can depend upon the nature and complexity of the plan that is being assessed. SEA resources can be wide ranging and go beyond direct staff costs and time. Wider costs may include, advertising, publishing reports, and seeking specialist data or support from consultants. However, understanding and appreciating proportionality, throughout the assessment process, can help to manage the need for such resources.

There are a number of opportunities to ensure a more proportionate approach to resourcing a SEA, these include:

Within a Responsible Authority:

Shared services: Inter-departmental shared services can reduce duplication of resource. Seek opportunities for staff with SEA experience to co-ordinate assessment work across the Responsible Authority.

Shared information: As baseline information requirements are likely to be similar for different plans within a Responsible Authority, this data should ideally be shared.

Combine advertising: Try to minimise advertising costs by seeking opportunities to incorporate statutory adverts into other mandatory plan advertising requirements. Responsible Authorities undertaking more than one SEA at the same time, could combine the statutory advertisements, providing timing is suitable.

Between Responsible Authorities:

Shared expertise: Look for opportunities to pool staff with assessment experience between organisations, e.g. strategic and local development planning authorities. Share good practice and training and attend the national SEA Forum to meet other practitioners.

Exchange resources: Consider whether there are opportunities to exchange staff with assessment skills for specific topics between Responsible Authorities,

Look across boundaries: Designated areas, catchments and green infrastructure rarely follow organisational boundaries. Any environmental baseline data gathered which crosses a boundary, could be shared with the neighbouring authorities.

3.37 Post Adoption statement procedures

Once a plan has been adopted, the Responsible Authority has to prepare a SEA Statement (widely referred to as a 'Post Adoption Statement'. This statement outlines how the assessment findings and the comments received at the main consultation, both on the plan and the Environmental Report, have been taken into account. The statement is designed to improve the transparency of the decision making process within plans.

A Responsible Authority also has to advertise a post-adoption statement, in at least one newspaper circulating in the area to which the plan relates. The required content of an advert is outlined in [Section 18\(1\)\(b\)](#) of the 2005 Act. [Part 3](#) of the 2005 Act, sets out the content of a Post Adoption Statement, for plans that have been subject to SEA.

Practitioners and plan-makers often view the SEA process as being complete, prior to the Post Adoption Statement being prepared and published, with available resources having all but dried up. However, the importance of a post adoption statement should not be overlooked. Apart from being a statutory requirement and outlining the monitoring programme, it is an important public document, offering transparency and drawing the process to a close.

There is no specific timescale for preparing a Post Adoption Statement, the 2005 Act leaves it open for a Responsible Authority to gauge, by stating that it should be published 'as soon as reasonably practicable' after the adoption of a qualifying plan. Experience indicates that it can be beneficial for practitioners and plan-makers to undertake some of the preparatory work when both the assessment and the consultation process is still relatively fresh in the mind. Ideally, practitioners should undertake this alongside, if not as an integral part of, the process of finalising the plan.

3.38 Understanding monitoring

Monitoring the significant environmental effects for any unforeseen adverse environmental effects is a statutory requirement within the 2005 Act. Decisions on what and how to monitor can be discussed with the Consultation Authorities, who can share experience and ideas in this area.

The 2005 Act does not require the establishment of a bespoke monitoring regime. However, focusing monitoring on the significant environmental effects identified in the assessment is likely to encourage the creation of new monitoring regimes. It is therefore practical to make a clear link between the significant effects predicted within an assessment and the indicators selected to monitor the likely environmental effects.

The detail within the monitoring programme should reflect the severity and likelihood of the predicted environmental effects. In some cases this may involve a series of specific or targeted measures to monitor a particularly significant issue e.g. erosion of green space. Other potential effects could be monitored in existing monitoring mechanisms e.g. effects of planning policies within development plan monitoring. To establish if the monitoring findings are highlighting adverse unforeseen effects, assessment findings may have to be revisited.

Monitoring should aim to add value to the plan review process. It may be useful to think ahead to the next plan review and use the current assessment to inform future data collection. Practitioners could also monitor indirectly for changes to the environment that a plan may be contributing to, perhaps by considering longer term trends and changing environmental problems. Several qualifying plans, within a Responsible Authority, could share the same monitoring regime, if the information is relevant to each. This can reduce resources required for monitoring by avoiding duplication.

Specific timescales associated with monitoring are not outlined within the 2005 Act. However, as the monitoring is with regard to the implementation of the plan, it is likely to reflect the implementation timescale for a plan.

3.39 Unforeseen adverse effects and remedial action

When unforeseen environmental effects are identified through monitoring, remedial action may be required and is likely to vary between plans and contexts. There is therefore no standard list of remedial actions for Responsible Authorities to use at this stage. However, examples of potential remedial action, may include:

- revising a plan's objective(s);
- seeking mitigation, e.g. additional restrictions within plan's policy;
- relying on a lower tier plan to resolve the effect;
- working with others to find solutions;
- exploring whether issues could be resolved through additional interventions.

If the desired remedy is to amend the plan or implement a physical intervention, in light of the adverse effect, the proposal may require further consideration under the terms of the 2005 Act, as a modification.

3.40 Measuring the success of a SEA

The success of a SEA can be measured in a number of ways. The extent to which it has influenced the plan, and avoided or reduced adverse environmental effects are key indicators of success. The following questions may provide a useful reference point throughout the process:

- *Did the assessment make a difference to the plan, in terms of its environmental effect?*
- *Were environmental issues highlighted early and avoided within the plan's preparation?*
- *Did the assessment stimulate new ways of thinking, or promote alternative solutions?*
- *Did the plan-maker alter or adapt its approach in light of the assessment?*
- *Did the SEA identify mitigation measures, and can we be confident they will be implemented?*
- *Has monitoring highlighted any unforeseen environmental effects?*

Raising awareness of environmental effects and involving stakeholders in finding solutions, as part of a plan's preparation, can also secure better 'buy-in' to a plan's objectives. The measure of an effective consultation processes can be gauged by considering whether a SEA has promoted effective and constructive discussion, and encouraged dialogue between the plan-maker and practitioner. The number of responses and the extent to which they have produced constructive comments on how to improve the environmental performance of the plan, are also therefore important considerations.

SEA can add value to a plan when allowed to meaningful influence its preparation and its likely effects on the environment. On conclusion of an effective SEA, a Responsible Authority should be able to identify environmental problems that have been addressed, but which may have otherwise been overlooked. SEA is not just about addressing negative effects – it can also add value by enhancing policies, and improving the overall environmental performance of a plan.

Do...	Don't...
Commence the SEA as early as possible.	Leave the SEA until the last minute: it is likely to take longer and be less influential.
Make SEA an integrated part of the plan preparation process. Integrated approaches are more likely to result in a smoother assessment and a better, more informed, plan.	Do the SEA as a separate exercise with limited contact with those preparing the plan. This approach could leave the plan open to challenge through the courts.
Aim to identify the important environmental issues early. This will help to focus your SEA process and facilitate early engagement with Consultation Authorities, stakeholders and the public.	Automatically cover all environmental topics in the assessment for fear of legal challenge. This can lead to lengthy reporting, that can take more time and resources, and lead to key issues being missed. Scoping is one of the main opportunities to improve the assessment process by focusing on the key significant environmental topics.
Develop early and meaningful stakeholder engagement on the plan and the SEA. This may not be a statutory requirement at certain stages but can help to focus the assessment on the significant environmental topics.	Limit engagement with the Consultation Authorities, stakeholders or the public, to statutory requirements. Informal contact, either through meetings or workshops, can provide real benefits and identify key areas of interest prior to the main consultation.
Make the key findings of the SEA clear so those preparing a plan and those being consulted, can see what the significant environmental effects are likely to be and if and how these effects can be addressed.	Use the SEA to defend a plan or attempt to sell its benefits. The Environmental Report has to be objective, outlining factual environmental information.
Use your scoping process to clearly focus the assessment on the significant environmental effects. This will save time, focus resources on the things that matter most and can result in less complex reports.	Try to cover every possible effect.
Take the opportunity to have continuous dialogue with the Consultation Authorities. This can help to identify the key issues and resolve questions at an early stage.	Leave all discussions with the Consultation Authorities to the formal consultation stages. This is likely to result in lengthier responses. Informal dialogue can improve mutual understanding of the plan and its effects.
Consider mitigation throughout the SEA. Clearly identify in the Environmental Report those measures that are required, to address adverse effects.	Think of mitigation as something you add at the end of the process just to please the Consultation Authorities and environmental groups.
Use the results of the SEA to highlight reasonable alternatives. Experience indicates reasonable alternatives are one area where plans can be vulnerable to legal challenge, if it has not been properly considered.	Construct unrealistic or unfeasible alternatives just for the sake of comparison in the SEA. As important to avoid setting out unrealistic alternatives, with hugely inflated adverse environmental effects, in order to make the preferred option look good.
Align the baseline data collection with the scoping process. Focusing the baseline information on the key issues of importance for the SEA can help to make the assessment more proportionate.	Include unnecessary background information in the environmental baseline. This can confuse the reporting, making proportionality harder to achieve successfully.
Take time to explain to plan-makers or decision takers the role and desired outcomes of the SEA process. Building capacity and understanding among this group can help the SEA to contribute to policy making.	Assume everyone knows about SEA and how to consider it in plan making and decision making. Selling the values of SEA to those who have to use its findings, is as important as the assessment itself.
Where possible use spatial data when describing the baseline or when identifying environmental effects. This can reduce the length of reports and make them easier to understand.	Make the environmental report so long or detailed that its findings are inaccessible. This will put people off reading the report and engaging, and could also undermine any future assessments.
Try to include some of the key findings and outcomes from the SEA within the plan. This helps to integrate the processes and helps to raise awareness of the issues.	Obscure the implications of the assessment findings with unnecessary or superfluous descriptive information in the Environmental Report.

Glossary

Baseline: This outlines the environmental characteristics of a receiving environment and provides the starting point for an assessment.

Consultation Authorities: Public bodies, who because of their environmental responsibilities, are designated within the 2005 Act. The Consultation Authorities are; Historic Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA).

EIA: Environmental Impact Assessment, undertaken at the project level.

Environmental Assessment: A method or procedure for predicting the environment effects of a plan, programme or strategy.

Environmental Topic : Although referred to as environmental issues within Schedule 3 of the 2005 Act, practitioners use a variety of terms to describe the different features of the environment that may be relevant in a SEA. Alternative terms include 'environmental receptor' and 'environmental indicator'.

Environmental Report: The publication used to set out relevant information emerging from the assessment. This includes background environmental information and context, a description of the plan being assessed, the significant environmental effects identified in the assessment. The Environmental Report is a key tool for early and effective engagement, and is not simply a compendium of all of the work undertaken in the earlier stages.

European Site: Includes Special Protection Areas (SPA), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and candidate Special Areas of Conservation.

Frontloading: Voluntary exploration of issues early in the process to facilitate early action.

Habitats Regulations Appraisal: The Conservation (Natural Habitats, & c.) Regulations 1994, as amended, require that certain plans which are likely to have a significant effect on a European Site must be subject to an "Appropriate Assessment" by the plan-making authority. The process for determining whether an appropriate assessment is required, together with the appropriate assessment itself - where necessary - is known as 'Habitats Regulations Appraisal'.

Hierarchies of plans: Relates to the tiering of plans from the highest level (for example a strategy) to the lower level (for example a plan or policy).

Indicator: Normally associated with monitoring, is used to measure achievement of a plan's main objectives or can be deployed to gauge environmental effects over time.

Mitigation: the measures taken to prevent, reduce or offset, as fully as possible, adverse effects on the environment. This does not extend to compensation measures, or enhancement, but these are also important.

No or minimal environmental effects: Relevant to pre-screening, this is when a Responsible Authority believes the environmental effects from a plan is likely to be minimal or less.

Objective: An intended goal, specifying the desired direction and outcome

Plan: Within this guidance can mean a plan, policy, programme or strategy.

Plan area: Area covered by the plan, for example some plans may cover the whole of Scotland, where others may be more focussed onto a specific location, such as a region or town centre.

Post-adoption statement: The summary produced by the Responsible Authority to outline how the assessment and consultation process have been taken into account in the adopted plan.

Pre-screening: Where the likely environmental effects of a plan, which falls into the description of [Section 5\(4\) of the 2005 Act](#), are considered to be no or minimum, it can be self-exempted. [See Section 7 of the 2005 Act](#).

Public plan: The 2005 Act applies to plans which relate to matters of a public character. Public plans are produced by a wide group of organisations, including the private sector e.g. utility companies. The term 'plan' within this guidance also covers policy, programme and strategy.

Reasonable alternatives: The alternative approaches considered while developing the plan, which can be considered realistic. The potential scope for reasonable alternatives is heavily dependent on the plan and the options that are likely to be open to a Responsible Authority, in terms of delivering the main objectives or goals of the plan.

Receiving environment: This relates to the scope or area of the plan and the environment that is likely to be affected by the implementation of a plan.

Responsible Authority: Any person, body or office holder exercising functions of a public character. Where more than one authority is responsible for a plan they should reach an agreement as to who is responsible for the SEA. Where an agreement cannot be reached, the Scottish Ministers can make the determination.

Scoped out: This is when a plan is unlikely to affect certain environmental topics, as outlined in the 2005 Act. For example, if a waste plan was likely to have no significant effect on soil, this would not have to be considered within the assessment.

Scoping report: Produced by a Responsible Authority, it should set out, as a minimum, the proposed level of detail to be included within an Environmental Report, along with the estimate consultation periods.

Screening report: Produced by a Responsible Authority, it sets out the likely significant effects on the environment of a plan, and includes an opinion on whether or not a SEA is required.

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

Set the framework for future development consent: The plan contains criteria or conditions, which guide the way in which the consenting authority can determine an application for development consent.

Significant environmental effects: Schedule 2 of the 2005 Act sets out specific criteria for determining the likely significance of environment effects of a plan. The need for an assessment can be triggered by either be positive or negative effects, providing they are significant.

The public: is defined in SEA Directive guidance as following the Aarhus Convention definition and 'any natural or legal person should have free access to environmental information at their request...' It also goes onto state an association, organisation or group of natural or legal persons is also covered by the term.



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