
CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

FOR INFORMATION

Title: Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Appraisal - Update

Prepared by: Hamish Trench, Park Plan Officer
Gavin Miles, Local Plan Officer

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to update Members on progress with developing our approach to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and carrying out assessment on the Park and Local Plans.

Recommendations

That the Board note the progress to date in developing the SEA and SA methodology and carrying out an assessment on the Park Plan and Local Plan.

Executive Summary

Initial discussions with the Scottish Executive and statutory consultees confirmed that the CNPA should carry out an SEA on the Park and Local Plans. The SEA should be distinct in process and reporting from any broader assessment of social and economic impacts which the CNPA has chosen to do.

We have now developed the assessment methodology, described in scoping reports that have been discussed in draft with the statutory consultees and will shortly be submitted formally. The reports include the environmental baseline, key trends and issues and a set of draft environmental objectives against which the plans will be assessed. An equivalent set of information for the socio-economic assessment will also be circulated for informal comment. Following receipt of responses to the scoping reports, we will be able to proceed with the assessment.

The Local Plan preliminary draft will be assessed and the report will be issued in support of the current consultation in August. The Park Plan will be assessed as the draft is developed by December and the report will be published for consultation with the Draft Park Plan in March 2006.

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY APPRAISAL UPDATE – FOR INFORMATION

Background

1. At the Meeting in February 2005, Members agreed that the CNPA should develop a Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Appraisal, to be applied to the Park Plan and the Local Plan. SEA meets our statutory requirements under the European Directive, while the additional SA is not a statutory requirement, but is consistent with the aims of the Park and helps to ensure best planning practice. The assessment methodology will provide a basis for the future assessment of plans and policies beyond the Park and Local Plans.
2. This paper provides an update on the progress to date in developing and carrying out the SEA and SA.

Issues/Discussion

Maintaining the distinction between SEA and SA

3. At the Board meeting in February, Members agreed that CNPA should assess the likely social and economic impacts of plans, in addition to the environmental impacts required under SEA. While we intend to integrate these assessments into a sustainability appraisal, the Scottish Executive and the statutory consultees have since given clear guidance that the SEA should be separate from any additional consideration of social and economic impacts.
4. This reflects the approach adopted by Scotland at a national level, which aims to ensure that environmental impacts are fully considered in their own terms, before any integration with social or economic impacts is considered.
5. We are therefore maintaining a distinction throughout the process between the SEA, which meets our statutory requirements, and the additional assessment of social and economic impacts. The final report will include a separate section which fulfils the requirements of the SEA Environmental Report.

Screening for SEA Requirement

6. The first stage of the process, carried out in March, was to formally seek confirmation from the statutory consultees (SNH, SEPA, Historic Scotland) that the Park Plan and the Local Plan should be subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment. The Scottish Executive SEA Gateway confirmed on 13 April that both plans should be subject to an SEA, and enclosed responses from the three statutory consultees with their initial views.

Developing the methodology

7. We have developed the methodology for carrying out the SEA and SA, which is set out in scoping reports for the Park Plan and the Local Plan. This common methodology will be able to be applied to other plans and policies in the future, following the pilot on these two plans. It will provide a framework for assessment that will contribute to the overall monitoring regime for the National Park, through the Park Plan.
8. We have prepared separate scoping reports for the Park Plan and Local Plan which set out the environmental baseline, key environmental issues and a set of environmental objectives, against which the plans will be assessed, together with the methodology for assessment.
9. We have consulted closely with the three statutory consultees in developing the scoping reports to discuss the appropriate coverage and familiarise the consultees with our approach. These will shortly be submitted formally and we expect the consultees to comment on the extent of the assessment and objectives within 5 weeks of submission.
10. In developing the methodology, it has become clear that we already have much of the information required through the way in which we have been developing the plans. In particular, the requirements for baseline information and consultation are common to the two processes. Given the nature of the Park Plan, and the aim to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage, the environmental objectives of SEA are similar to some of the objectives of the plan itself. The Plan objectives are able to take the SEA objectives to a more detailed level in the context of the Park. We perceive this correlation as a strength consistent with the purpose of SEA, to ensure good planning practice.
11. The scoping reports contain an Annex with the social and economic assessment details, on which we have invited comments, but which do not form part of the statutory process or obligations on the consultees. The Annex identifies socio-economic baseline data, key trends and issues, leading to a set of objectives against which the plans will be assessed in the same way as the environmental assessment.

Applying the Assessment

12. Once we have received the responses to the scoping report, we will be in a position to assess the objectives, policies and actions contained in the two plans. This process should form a part of the continuing planning process and document consideration of any likely significant environmental effects and potential mitigation.
13. By the nature of the Park Plan and Local Plan, consideration of environmental impacts and measures to minimise negative impacts and maximise environmental gain are a fundamental part of our planning process. The SEA should help to embed this and document it in a transparent form. The consideration of socio-economic impacts will follow the same model.

Consultation

14. We have consulted informally with the statutory consultees in developing the scoping reports and assessment framework prior to submitting these formally. The SEA process requires a formal public consultation period on the assessment report.
15. For the Local Plan, we intend to run this consultation starting in August 2005, to coincide with the ongoing consultation on the Preliminary Draft. For the Park Plan we intend to run it in parallel with the consultation on the Draft Park Plan starting in March 2006.

Policy Context

Delivering Sustainability

16. The SEA and SA framework provide a key means to ensure and demonstrate that the Park and Local Plans (and future policy and plans) deliver sustainability across the Park's four aims. By appraising the plans against the environmental, social and economic objectives of the SEA and SA, we can identify likely significant effects of the plans, build in mitigating measures where appropriate, and be transparent about the relative impacts of the Plans.

Delivering A Park for All

17. The SEA and SA objectives include reference to health, population and service accessibility, which build in the principles of a 'Park for All' to the appraisal and decision making process.

Delivering Economy, Effectiveness and Efficiency

18. In addition to meeting a statutory requirement, the SEA and SA process helps to embed best practice in the CNPA's approach to developing plans and policies. It will help to anticipate likely effects in the future, and therefore to better plan and make efficient use of resources. SEA and SA will form a key part of the CNPA's monitoring regime, in particular in assessing the extent to which the four aims are successfully delivered collectively.

Implications

Financial Implications

19. There are no immediate additional financial implications resulting from this paper. However, the development and assessment of the SEA and SA requires significant time from existing staff resources. There may be a need during the consultation phase to engage temporary assistance to collate responses and information but we anticipate that this can be covered within existing budgets.

Presentation Implications

20. At this stage there are no presentational issues arising. Consideration will need to be given to the format of the SEA and SA reports that will support publication of the Draft Plans.

Implications for Stakeholders

21. There are limited implications for stakeholders beyond the statutory consultees at this stage, although it will provide all with additional information in support of the Draft Plans when the reports are published.

Next Steps

22. On receipt of responses to the scoping reports we will carry out the assessment of the Draft Local Plan by September 2005 and the Draft Park Plan by December 2005. A summary of the assessment process and update will be brought to the Board in January 2006.

Hamish Trench, Park Plan Officer
Gavin Miles, Local Plan Officer
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hamishtrench@cairngorms.co.uk
gavinmiles@cairngorms.co.uk