



Environmental Assessment

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Introduction

Environmental assessment (EA) is a method for ensuring that the likely effects of new development on the environment are fully understood and taken into account before consent is given for the development to proceed. EA has been incorporated into the consent procedures for certain projects in the UK to give effect to a Directive agreed by the UK Government, along with the other member states of the European Community. The Directive came into force in July 1988.

This leaflet answers some basic questions about the requirements for environmental assessment in respect of development which requires planning permission under the planning procedures in Northern Ireland. In general similar provisions apply in Scotland, England and Wales.

Other major proposals not covered by the planning procedures, such as, certain drainage schemes, motorways, afforestation and harbour development below the low watermark, may also need to be the subject of environmental assessment before a decision is reached on whether they may go ahead.

What is environmental assessment (EA)?

Environmental assessment (EA) is the process by which information about the environmental effects of a project is collected, assessed and taken into account by the Planning Service in reaching a decision on whether the proposed development should be approved. The expression 'environmental impact assessment' (EIA) is also in common use and for practical purposes means the same as EA.

An environmental statement is a publicly available document. It sets out the developer's own assessment of the likely environmental effects of his proposed development. It is prepared by the developer and submitted with his planning application. While the responsibility for compiling the environmental statement rests with the developer, he is expected to consult those with relevant information, and public authorities who have such information in their possession are required to make it available to the developer. All environmental statements must include a description of the project and a summary of its likely effects in non-technical language.

What types of development are subject to EA as part of the planning procedures?

The statutory provisions apply to two separate lists of projects:

- a) 'Schedule 1 projects', for which EA is required in every case, for example, crude-oil refineries; major chemical and steel works; aerodromes with a runway length over 2,100 metres; and the storage or disposal of toxic wastes.
- b) 'Schedule 2 projects', for which EA is required only if the particular project in question is judged likely to give rise to significant environmental effects. Schedule 2 projects include, for example, large pig and poultry rearing units; minerals extraction; metal processing; chemical, food, textile or rubber industry; and waste disposal.

In the case of Schedule 2 projects, how will 'significance' be assessed?

There are 3 main considerations to be taken into account:

- i) whether the project is a major one of more than local importance especially in terms of its size;

ii) whether the project is intended for a particularly sensitive location, e.g. a national park, an area of outstanding natural beauty, or an area of special scientific interest, and for that reason may have significant effects on the environment even though the development is on a smaller scale; (not all Schedule 2 projects in sensitive locations will require EA);

iii) whether the project is thought likely to give rise to particularly complex or adverse effects, e.g. in the discharge of pollutants.

More detailed guidance may be found in the [Development Control Advice Note No. 10](#) obtainable from your [local Divisional Planning Office](#)

Who decides whether EA is necessary?

A developer may decide that his project falls within the scope of the statutory provisions and that an environmental statement will be needed, or he may apply to the Planning Service for an opinion on whether EA is needed in any particular case. He should ask the Planning Service as soon as he can provide a basic minimum of information about the proposal.

More often, it will fall to the Planning Service to consider whether EA is required when a planning application is submitted.

A developer who disagrees with the Planning Service's determination that EA is required may refer the matter to the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) for a hearing. The Department will take the PAC report into consideration before confirming, amending or withdrawing its decision.

What are the advantages of EA?

Environmental assessment should provide a basis for better decision-making for the Planning Service and other public bodies with environmental responsibilities. For developers, the process should draw their attention at an early stage to the potential environmental effects of their proposals so that they can incorporate remedial measures into their designs. A further advantage is that the implications of proposed new development should be thoroughly analysed before a relevant planning application is made, and more comprehensive information provided with the application. Quicker decisions may also be possible.

How will EA help the public?

The general public's interest in proposed new development is often expressed as concern about the possibility of unknown or unforeseen effects. By providing a full analysis of a proposal's likely effects, an environmental statement can help to allay fears created by lack of information. At the same time it can inform the public on the main issues which the Planning Service will have to consider in reaching a decision on the planning application.

How can I find out whether EA is needed for particular development? How do I find out what is in the environmental statement?

General advice on the circumstances in which EA is needed is given in Development Control Advice Note No. 10. Decisions by the Department on whether EA is needed for particular projects are held on the Statutory Planning Register in the [Divisional Planning Offices](#).

When a developer submits an environmental statement in support of his planning application, the Department must publish a notice of this in local newspapers and indicate where copies of the statement may be inspected or purchased. Statements can be inspected in the Divisional Planning Office covering the application site.

What about development that is not subject to EA?

The procedures outlined above apply to major projects whose likely effects require systematic and detailed assessment. Where EA is not required, environmental effects will be among the considerations taken into account by the Planning Service in deciding whether or not to grant planning permission.

Will EA affect my Permitted Development Rights?

It may do.

More detailed Information about this may be found in Information Leaflet No. 1, '[Your Permitted Development Rights & Environmental Assessment](#)', available from all [Divisional Planning Offices and Planning Service Headquarters](#).