
The need to consider cumulative effects in planning and decision making has been required in the UK since the EC Directive (85/337/EEC) was implemented in 1988. The consideration of cumulative effects in planning and decision making is also set out in planning policy, in particular the National Policy Statement for National Networks (NPS) and National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Cumulative effects assessment (CEA) is an integral part of environmental assessment, and has been supported by a range of guidance. In practice, the CEA is generally regarded as a complex challenge, and research suggests that practice is poor globally (Therivel & Ross, 2007; Canter & Ross, 2010).

At the end of last year, the Planning Inspectorate’s ‘Advice Note Seventeen: Cumulative Effects Assessment relevant to Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects’ (PINS, 2015) was published, providing guidance on the application of CEA for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs). The Advice Note sets out a four stage approach to CEA:

- Stage 1: Establish the NSIP’s Zone of Influence (ZOI) and identify Long List of ‘other development’;
- Stage 2: Identify Short List of ‘other development’ for CEA;
- Stage 3: Information Gathering; and,
- Stage 4: Assessment.

The area of ZOI overlap was then the focus of cumulative effects for the respective environmental topic for each of the ‘other developments’, allowing for a more focused assessment. Error! Reference source not found. shows an extract of one of the drawings produced.

The guidance emphasises the development and clear presentation of a ‘long list’ and the final ‘short list’, ensuring that the reader is able to follow clearly the logical progression of the assessment. The guidance also provides template formats for documenting the staged CEA process in a consistent fashion (matrices contained in Appendix 1 and 2 of the guidance). Some adjustments were made to the assessment matrix contained in Appendix 2, however, to ensure that the environmental effects associated with the proposed development were not repeated, and to ensure that the assessment process was made clear (see Error! Reference source not found.). Overall, the matrices were a vital component in enabling a complex process to be broken down clearly.
There were several challenges that emerged during the use of this new guidance. The guidance requires that the proposed development is assessed cumulatively with each of the ‘other developments’ individually. A total of eighteen developments were included on the short list of ‘other developments’ for this NSIP, which subsequently required a substantial amount of time to research and complete, particularly as the nature of this chapter means that it can only be finalised following completion of all other ES chapters. Furthermore, there was also uncertainty over the level of detail to be included within the CEA for each of the ‘other developments’. Due to the number of ‘other developments’ that were being considered, providing a detailed cumulative assessment by receptor was too much of a challenge given the timescales, and the overall cumulative effect was therefore determined largely using the size of the ZOI overlap (see Figure A).

- which assesses combined effects by environmental receptor, rather than by environmental topic. As such, the combined effects and the cumulative effects assessments for this NSIP did not align, which perhaps further emphasises the need to assess cumulative effects by receptor.

This first attempt to use this guidance has been positive in several aspects. However, there are still clear areas of improvement needed, including the consideration of assessing cumulative effects by individual receptors within the ZOI overlaps. Although not mentioned in the guidance, it may also be a useful task for those undertaking the cumulative effects chapter to ask each of the environmental specialists involved in the production of the ES to explain the key receptors within the ZOI overlaps. The cumulative effects assessor can then use this specialist knowledge whilst still providing the high level nature that is required for this chapter.

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References


