## The Value of Screening in Scoping

The issue of proportionate EIA has been a hot topic for several years now – how do we break the trend of lengthy Environmental Statements which are difficult to digest? The purpose of an EIA is to identify the likely significant effects of a project and present these within an ES. However, the key effects are frequently lost in ESs which are hundreds of pages in length and appear to consider every conceivable effect that may occur. These disproportionate ESs are often the result of a risk averse approach taken by those involved in EIA, including co-ordinators, developers and planning authorities. IEMA have been leading the research on proportionate EIA, publishing the first Proportionate EIA Strategy in 2017. One of the actions identified by IEMA is to improve scoping, encouraging it to be thought of as a core component included within the iterative process of EIA, rather than a single stage undertaken early on in the project and rarely revisited.

As well as integrating scoping further along in the EIA process, it can be helpful to bring it forward to the screening stage. This approach brings the scope of an EIA ‘back to basics’ – what are the potentially significant environmental effects which require an EIA to be undertaken in the first place?

Screening is often seen by developers as a tool to avoid EIA, rather than to facilitate it. However, following adoption of the 2017 EIA Regulations, planning authorities are required to set out their reasons for requesting an EIA with reference to Schedule 3 criteria.

This has resulted in an increased number of screening opinions which clearly set out the potential significant effects on the environment, and what topics these relate to, providing an excellent base on which to determine the scope of the EIA.

On a number of occasions Wardell Armstrong have successfully liaised with planning authorities following receipt of a screening opinion, to agree a proportionate EIA scope which considers only those potentially significant effects identified within the screening opinion. IEMA have highlighted the need to ensure that those involved in EIA have the confidence to avoid taking a risk averse approach to scoping. The screening opinion provides an additional layer of support to the planning authority and developer when avoiding an overly precautionary approach.

Using the screening opinion to inform the scope of an ES can be of particular use on smaller developments for which there may only be one or two potentially significant effects and where the programme does not allow for a potentially lengthy scoping process. It is important on these occasions to ensure that the technical consultants are engaging directly with the relevant consultees to ensure that the scope of the technical assessment itself is appropriate.

Undertaking screening also engages the planning authority earlier in the process, encouraging closer collaboration between the authority and developer and a shared sense of responsibility to ensure the scope of the EIA is proportionate.
Wardell Armstrong were recently involved in a project which was screened in by the local planning authority due to the potential cumulative effects on highways and biodiversity, specifically the bat population within a nearby Special Area of Conservation. The authority stated within their screening opinion that a ‘limited EIA’ would be required to address these potential effects. Consultation was undertaken with the Highways Authority and the County Ecologist, and with the planning authority in relation to the scope of the cumulative assessment. To further focus the scope of the EIA, the biodiversity chapter of the ES considered the potential effects of the project on bats only, with other ecological effects scoped out. As a result, the ES produced was only 81 pages long, with only two technical chapters, ensuring its findings could be easily communicated to decision makers, consultees and members of the public. The potential significant effects of the scheme were fully considered and clearly presented, without the need for a cumbersome and lengthy ES.

To ensure that EIA remains a valuable tool within the planning process it is vital that action is taken to deliver more proportionate EIA. The use of screening as a scoping tool is just one approach that can be used to achieve this, based on the wider themes of increased collaborative working, integrating scoping throughout the EIA process and ensuring those involved in EIA have the confidence to avoid an overly precautionary approach.

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