This paper is an opinion piece that seeks to set out the pertinent issues and provide possible visions of the future of EIA, for the purposes of promoting discussion.

The recent transposition of the 2014 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive into the 2017 EIA Regulations, together with the prospect of leaving the European Union, presents a future opportunity to review the EIA process and wider requirements for assessing potential impacts of development on a broad range of topic areas. Whilst the consensus view appears that EIA will largely proceed as is for the foreseeable future, there could be scope in future to review this position.

It is widely acknowledged that, over time, the scope of EIA has been expanded for a number of reasons including ‘best’ practice, local planning authorities requesting additional topics be covered within the EIA, and a desire to limit the risk of legal challenge. Additionally, it could be said that methods of impact assessment are being ‘shoehorned’ into a specific format to create consistency within an Environmental Statement (ES) or that, in some cases, ES Chapters are produced needlessly (i.e. in cases where supporting technical studies are reviewed/considered by statutory consultees, rather than the ES Chapter itself). These factors often add unnecessary cost to a planning application and generate repetition, inconsistencies and increased workload for developers, project teams, local planning authorities and their statutory consultees.

Perhaps, given the demands on our planning system and developers to deliver more, for less, to a shortened programme, there needs to be a change in the way in which impact assessments, including EIAs, are managed and delivered as part of a planning application.

So how could this be implemented? Of course, the environment should not, and indeed, must not be forgotten. Perhaps a solution to this is expanding the scope of impact assessment topics outside the confines of what is or isn’t typically considered to form part of an EIA, such as Retail Impact or Aviation Assessments. Technical studies would be prepared in accordance with legal requirements, industry led guidance and / or best practice, in the absence of ES Chapters. This information, together with provision of a more detailed project wide over-arching summary describing all the associated effects, could create a more meaningful and accessible decision-making tool for the local planning authority, wider statutory and non-statutory consultees and the general public, without the volume, repetitiveness and cost of an ES.

The process by which technical assessments are undertaken could be the same as, or similar, to that already required by current UK EIA Legislation. The overarching principle would remain that assessments must consider the likely significant effects of a project, both on its own and cumulatively with other developments.
It is further proposed that this would not be restricted to environmental effects but could be expanded to include other more wide-ranging likely significant effects as indicated above. The impacts to be assessed would need to be proportionally scoped to ensure that only technical assessments (and parts thereof) where a likely significant effect is anticipated, are submitted as part of the application.

Preparing a project wide over-arching summary of all technical assessments would dovetail well with a move towards a more digitally focused planning submission. In digital form, with hyperlinks to the detailed technical reports, this approach would enable members of the public, and statutory and non-statutory consultees, to have a better overview of the development, whilst still ensuring that the level of technical rigour required to assess the impacts of a development remains available to all.

The role of the impact assessment coordinator remains as important in this suggested process as in current EIAs to ensure consistency in the parameters assessed across the various topic areas, that the assessments are comprehensive and cover the agreed scope and that cumulative schemes are appropriately considered. Given the broad range of topic areas that may be covered, more than one impact assessment coordinator may be required on a larger project to ensure a suitable range of expertise.

Given current and future potential changes in the political and legal framework, now appears to be a good time for EIA and planning professionals to consider how we can influence the planning application process and transform EIA, into a more effective decision-making tool than it is currently.

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