Environmental Impact Assessments must be Integral to Developments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Submitting a planning application is an expensive business and too many are failing because of flaws in their Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is too easy to underestimate the importance of EIAs. They are critical and, as such, should be embedded within the planning process. An EIA should be seen as much more than a box ticking exercises. It is a formal and in depth process, governed by EU Directives and UK Regulations to predict the environmental effects of a development project and assess what steps should be taken to avoid damage to the environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditionally, it is often sub-contracted to a firm of technical consultants who are left to work in isolation to the rest of the project team, with limited understanding of the development project being assessed, and with no or limited opportunity to allow the EIA process to influence the project design and to integrate with the rest of the planning application process. As such, the resulting report often looks like (and can be) a bolt on piece of work that runs alongside the planning application, rather than being embedded into it. A successful EIA should be a good fit with the design of a development, rather than a hand me down.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Far too many developers still see EIAs as a necessary evil and don't give them the time they need"

Why EIAs Go Wrong

From the above, it's easy to see that EIAs are now more important than ever, subject to more scrutiny than ever and easier to derail than ever. As such, it would be reasonable to think that they would be treated seriously. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Far too many developers still see EIAs as a necessary evil and don't give them the time they need. For example, an EIA is often treated as an 'add on' to the application, rather than an integral part of it.

The Consequences of an EIA Going Wrong

An EIA that goes wrong can have an extremely serious impact on a development, potentially pushing it back years and sometimes causing it to be scrapped altogether.

A developer may only have a limited time to build a scheme and any delay could lose advantage. If funds have had to be borrowed to purchase the site, the financial damage could be catastrophic and it's not just financially where a developer could lose out. The damage to reputation, both within the business community and the public at large, could be substantial and jeopardize the prospects for other projects.

Getting an EIA Right First Time

Planning consultants, who will already be leading the project team in preparation of the planning application, are best placed to co-ordinate and manage the EIA process. With specialist consultants appointed to feed into the process, the planning consultant is in a prime position to ensure that the EIA is integrated into the project from the word go.
A planning consultant can ensure that the EIA process can adapt and respond as the project evolves, identifying early costs of mitigation and the impact this could have upon the overall viability and delivery of a project, whilst having the overview of the entire project to understand how each of the technical aspects produced by specialists are integrated and reported in the Environmental Statement, which is then submitted with the planning application.

Planning teams can also ensure that an EIA is appropriately timed. This is particularly important when it comes to ecological issues. If for example, a rare bird regularly nests on your site in May and the EIA fails to survey during this period, there's an extremely good chance it will be challenged. Developers shouldn't be scared of EIAs. Although they are important, many projects are not required to have one, which can make a failed EIA particularly galling. Any good planning consultants will have sufficiently strong contacts within the Local Authority Planning Department, to work with them over the scope of the EIA, or even to decide whether one is needed at all. A little preparation at the start of the project will save a good deal of trouble later.

James Alflatt is an Associate in the Planning Division at Property Consultants Bidwells.