Effective resolution of alternative design options in the EIA / development process: tools and consultation

Proposed changes to EU regulations on EIA which set out, among other matters, a mandatory requirement for the consideration of alternatives, will provide EIA practitioners with an effective opportunity to work with statutory advisors in selecting the best environmental option for client projects. Although the consideration of alternatives has been considered best practice until this time, it has often not been followed. This mandatory requirement may well lead to greater streamlining of, and indeed the success of, project proposals once in the planning system.

Although these changes are not likely to come into effect until 2016, EIA practitioners are in a position to take the opportunity now to introduce tools and consultative methods at the design stage that have the effect of including statutory advisors in the development stage decision-making process. Historically it has been difficult to bring the consultees to the design table, and we often hear the refrain “We’ll form our opinion once a proposal has been submitted.” This approach has often led to conflict between developers, consultants and consultees once schemes are in the planning process as there has been no dialogue over, or weighting of, relative environmental risks.

On the current Conwy Falls hydro electric scheme, a 4.5MW scheme located in the heart of Snowdonia National Park and within the Fairy Glen SSSI, and which has not yet been submitted, the developer has sanctioned an early stage, pragmatic approach to resolving alternative layout options. Through utilisation of a simple comparative impact matrix and the hosting of design workshops with the principal statutory advisors, a process has been set in place that has helped all parties understand the implications of certain design and layout options, and jointly select the preferred option in terms of least environmental impact.

Timing of this process is critical. Too early, and there is insufficient information to inform the impact matrix. Too late and there may be no alternatives to consider. The particular staging of the Conwy Falls design process was timed to coincide with the completion of baseline environmental studies and initial design drafts for the scheme. Where alternative design options were open to consideration, a simplified comparative impact matrix was used. Simple, because EIA based matrices are often too complex for consultations and often fail to yield, in themselves, the desirable result. For this particular project, several alternative powerhouse locations were evaluated using the matrix, and each option was ascribed values against the known environmental attributes of the site to determine which were likely to have the greater impact.

Following is an example of the matrix used:
Consultations with the primary statutory advisors in the form of a design workshop were then hosted by the developer. The alternatives were discussed, the values in the table were scrutinised, and opinions on the alternatives were voiced. Some subsequent refinement after the meeting also took place to the matrix, which resulted in agreement with the parties on the preferred option. The benefits of this approach do not have to be spelled out in full, but at the time that the planning application is submitted the statutory advisors will have a strong sense of participating in the design and layout of the submitted scheme, and a full understanding of the justification for the final proposed development.

It is hoped that the outcome of the above approach will be that, following submission, the proposed development is regarded more favourably, both because advisors have been included in the design process and because the preferential option has been taken. Such an approach generally would enable EIA practitioners to pre-empt the potential EIA changes to EU regulations and support developers in delivering greater sustainability in new project and plans.