**Future baselines… crystal clear or crystal ball?**

| The concept of what constitutes the baseline scenario is intriguing. In simple terms, the baseline can be described as the environmental conditions against which future changes can be predicted and assessed. Sounds straightforward enough, but when has anything in Environmental Impact Assessment been straightforward?  

The current EIA Regulations do not make specific reference to the term ‘baseline’; however the need to collect and analyse existing environmental information is a well-established tenet of the EIA process. Without understanding the baseline conditions, it is impossible to accurately predict the likely significant effects of a development.  

The current conditions we see on the ground are often deemed to constitute the baseline scenario. Whilst a perfectly reasonable position to adopt, some types of assessment (e.g. noise) require projections to account for future changes, such as anticipated traffic growth on the road network. They may also be necessary where a development has a long lead-in time between assessment and construction, during which time the existing environmental conditions may evolve, or where there is linkage to and/or reliance upon somebody else’s proposals being implemented prior to the construction of the development under assessment.  

Trying to determine how the existing conditions may alter from commencing the EIA to when Mr. Developer arrives on site with a spade introduces a future baseline scenario, which then introduces a degree of uncertainty… a word that nobody likes to hear in EIA.  

Recent UK EIA guidance and the new EIA Directive reaffirms that the future baseline conditions which would likely transpire due to natural or man-made processes, in the absence of a planned development, require consideration. | In determining a future baseline scenario, judgement calls have to be made in striking an appropriate and defensible balance between what is likely to happen (certainty) against what could potentially happen (uncertainty) to the existing environment. Deciding what should be included is no easy task, but is something that stakeholders and authorities can assist with as part of pre-application discussions.  

A common approach is to identify those developments either under construction or which will be brought forward in advance of the development under assessment, and consider these within a future baseline scenario. More speculative developments, such as those being progressed through the planning process or the subject of scoping, are then accounted for in a cumulative assessment. This approach not only requires an understanding of the plans of others, but also their associated delivery programmes to establish the development ‘timeline’ which could potentially modify the baseline.  

My own practical experience of future baselines stems from my involvement several years ago in a local authority promoted link-road development. This relatively minor scheme formed part of a wider highways improvement solution, and was intrinsically linked to a larger Government promoted bypass. Whilst the bypass could function in the absence of the link-road, the link-road could not work as a standalone project and therefore relied on the bypass to operate.  

To complicate matters, both schemes were being progressed under two different statutory procedures, each requiring separate standalone EIAs to satisfy the prevailing EIA Regulations, with limited information available for the bypass scheme at the time of assessing the link-road.  

An underlying assumption in the link-road EIA was that the two schemes would likely be constructed together by one contractor. |
Complications arose, however, as potential existed for either scheme to be refused consent, and for the link-road to be subject to delayed consenting which could put combined construction at risk.

Parts of the EIA therefore required acknowledgement of a future baseline scenario, accounting for the presence of the bypass scheme ahead of constructing the link-road. In such a scenario, the baseline environment in parts of the link-road study area would have changed from one dominated by open agricultural use to one potentially accommodating sections of a bypass, thereby altering traffic movements and presenting a very different composition of elements within the local environment. This scenario required explanation and reporting in the link-road Environmental Statement for topics such as landscape effects, as the future landscape framework and visual environment would have proved markedly different to that which existed at the time of undertaking the baseline studies.

In this example, a degree of uncertainty was introduced into the link-road EIA as it was not possible to define the potential time-lag between implementing both schemes, as this depended entirely on the fulfillment of statutory procedures. Where worst-case assumptions had been made, these were clearly stated in the relevant section(s) of the Environmental Statement and were backed by project details and the environmental information upon which they were predicated, in order to provide transparency to the decision-maker.

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