Effective EIA for large scale projects

Senior environmental planner Jennifer Rea discusses key considerations for effective EIA of large scale projects

'Understanding effective EIA' is the theme of IEMA’s 2014 Quality Mark Forum. The approved revisions to the EIA Directive aim to improve, streamline and simplify EIA. This is particularly pertinent for complex, large scale projects. Through our experience of producing ESs for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) and reviewing ESs on behalf of consenting bodies, LUC has first-hand experience of the pressures faced when preparing and delivering an effective EIA. The case studies below set out some of the key practicalities which can be addressed to ensure the EIA process remains effective, manageable and robust.

Thames Tideway Tunnel
The Thames Tideway Tunnel is a major new sewer urgently needed to protect the tidal River Thames from increasing pollution. Staff from LUC formed part of the environment team responsible for coordinating the EIA. The following elements of effective working particularly benefitted this project:

Working practices
Emails and teleconferencing have revolutionised the way we work. However face-to-face meetings often remain the most effective way to make decisions and resolve issues. Due to the scale of the project a vast team was required to support the preparation of the application for Development Consent. Project staff specialising in environmental assessment, planning, design, construction and logistics, communications and law were co-located in a project office which was vital to build relationships and facilitate collaborative and effective working. This added real value to the EIA when considering mitigation measures. The co-location of project staff in one office, enabled close working between the environment and design teams to assess, refine, design and discuss.

Likely significant effects and design changes were revisited frequently to ensure all avenues for reducing effects had been explored.

Consultation and engagement
The Thames Tideway Tunnel is a large NSIP which spans 14 local authorities and huge value was gained from coordinating consultation activities with a range of parties interested in similar issues. For example, the project held joint workshops for local authority EHOs, and for local authority transport officers and Transport for London.

Capturing and recording the advice given and decisions made at workshops was key. The workshops helped shape the scope of the EIA in terms of data collection and approaches to assessment. Later on these records allowed the decisions made at these workshops to be tracked and incorporated into statements of common ground with relevant parties.

Brechfa Forest West and East Wind Farms
Brechfa Forest West NSIP is a consented 28 turbine wind farm and Brechfa Forest East is a locally consented 12 turbine wind farm in Carmarthenshire. The EIQs for these schemes were undertaken in parallel by LUC. The following elements of effective working particularly benefitted these projects:

The Environmental Statement
Time spent on consistency checking and cross referencing within and between documents is time well spent and was vital when producing two ESs in parallel. This attention to detail results in a clear and consistent ES which reduces the frustration of consultees who have to read both and make comparisons and compare judgements. The increasing size of ESs is a key issue. There are often pressures to satisfy the expectations of many audiences, rather than simply meet regulatory requirements1, which often leads to an increase in document size.
The role of an effective scoping process to ensure the EIA is proportionate, and a well thought out non-technical summary becomes even more important in these circumstances.

The information contained in an ES often needs to be referred to out in the field, for example when explaining visual effects on site to stakeholders or inspectors. Large folders of printed material are becoming impractical for these situations. As the amount of material produced increases (applications for recently submitted NSIPs run into the hundreds of documents) practitioners need to investigate opportunities and technologies for the alternative presentation of information.

The EIA coordinator/project manager
The two parallel Brechfa schemes were managed and coordinated by the same team. Having a highly skilled and dedicated EIA project management team added huge value to the process, ensuring the finished ESs were robust, proportionate and effective through involvement in every aspect of the process (including the coordination and review of assessments and the management of people, risk and programmes). Project management is challenging within budget and time constraints but its value and the time required for it should never be underestimated.


Jennifer Rea, LUC, June 2014.

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