

## **SEA Case Study: A Land Use Plan in the UK**

by Thomas Fischer

*Mr. Thomas Fischer is a Senior Lecturer of environmental planning at the University of Liverpool. He holds a PhD in SEA from the University of Manchester and an MA degree in Geography from the Free University of Berlin. Thomas has several years of practical work experience in environmental planning, management and assessment, public administration, and research in several European countries and Canada. He is Chair of the SEA section of the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) and is also an associate research member of the Viessmann Research Center on Modern Europe at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. Thomas has been involved in SEA training activities in Europe, Central and South America and Asia. He has published widely on SEA, including book 'SEA in transport and land use planning'.*

I'm going to talk about a Strategic Environmental Assessment application to a land use plan in the U.K. To start with, I have a map here to give you an indication of the geographical context. In the following 20 minutes, I am going to talk about the land use plan of Oldham, and it's called the Unitary Development Plan in Oldham. Oldham is located in Greater Manchester, and you see that here on the map. It's just east of Liverpool on this map.

What is it I'm going to talk about? First, I'm going to give you the context for the case study. I will introduce you to the case. I will then go on to talk about land use planning in the United Kingdom, and I will talk about the appraisal of development plans in the United Kingdom. Development plans are land use plans. That's the term used in the U.K. planning context.

Next, I will talk about the action, the objectives of the development plan and the SEA, and the timetable. I will then go on to talk about why and how SEA was conducted, I will tell you what was actually done, and I will present you with some key results in terms of the overall benefits arising from the SEA process, and I will also talk about the future requirements of the EU SEA directive. As you know, and as you have probably heard in other presentations, this will formalize SEA application in European Union member states. And, finally, I will give you some key messages from the case.

Now, the case I am presenting describes and evaluates the Sustainability Appraisal. In the United Kingdom, that is a type of Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Unitary Development Plan, and that's abbreviated by UDP, for the Borough of Oldham. The Borough of Oldham is part of Greater Manchester and is located in the region of Northwest England. And in this region, the Sustainability Appraisal of the UDP of Oldham is widely regarded as a good practice example. So, if you go to any practitioner or planning authority, and you ask, "Well, can you give me an example for a good practice case," it is highly likely that they will refer you actually to the UDP of Oldham.

Formalized Strategic Environmental Assessment is supposed to build upon the type of appraisal that is portrayed here. So, next year, once the European SEA directive comes into force, SEA will have to build on this particular case.

Now, on the context, land use planning in the United Kingdom. Planning is taking place at several administrative levels of decisionmaking, and it starts with the national level. At the national level, planning policy guidance is prepared by central government. This is followed by the regional level, and at the regional level, regional planning guidance or RPG is being prepared.

In the U.K., you then have the county level, and at the county level, structure plans are prepared or in those areas, usually metropolitan areas, that are not administered by a county, you have Unitary Development Plans, and the equivalent to the structure plan is UDP Part 1.

You then have the municipal or, as it is called in the U.K., the district level. At that level of decisionmaking, local plans are prepared. Again, in those areas that are not administered by a county, you have Unitary Development Plans Part 2.

So a Unitary Development Plan consists of two parts that are the equivalent of a structure plan plus a local plan, and, finally, at the local level, you do have master plans that are being prepared.

There is a history of appraisal of development plans in the U.K. that goes back to the beginning of the 1990s, and I will just summarize several phases here of the development, of Environmental Appraisal in development plan preparation in the U.K.

At the beginning of the 1990s, you had Environmental Appraisal, and that was a qualitative matrix evaluation which focused on ecological aspects, and it was usually done by one person and quasi ex-post, which means after the actual plan was prepared. Now, as you have heard in other presentations, this is not what SEA should do because usually SEA should be corrected. However, at that very early stage in the development of Environmental Appraisal, it was prepared after the main plan was prepared. There was guidance for that, and that was based on Planning Policy Guidance 12. Planning Policy Guidance, that's the guidance prepared by central government.

The second stage of Environmental Appraisal development in the U.K. was in the mid-1990s. At that stage, Environmental Appraisal, whilst still prepared as qualitative matrix evaluation, however, it was now also partly considering socioeconomic aspects, and that reflected the growing awareness of the sustainability agenda at that time. Also, now, it was done usually by more than one person, but still mostly after the development plan was prepared.

The next stage was the end of the 1990s. Again, Environmental Appraisal consisted mainly of a qualitative matrix evaluation. However, now the preparation process started

with the plan preparation process. So Environmental Appraisal now was done in parallel to the actual plan preparation which was a huge step forward.

Also, at that time, mostly Environmental Appraisals were considering socioeconomic aspects and the appraisal was done within an appraisal team. At that time, increasingly, Environmental Appraisal was called Sustainability Appraisal. However, if you see examples from that time simply based on the term that was used "Environmental Sustainability Appraisal," it is not possible to say really what the difference between the two were. They were used rather interchangeably at that time.

The fourth phase--that's the phase we are in right now--and that is the beginning of the new millennium, Environmental or Sustainability Appraisal is now increasingly seen as Integrated Appraisal, which is taking place within an objectives-led process, and this process is usually closely connected with the development of sustainable development strategies.

And then--and that's unavoidable--there will be a fifth phase, and that's based on the changes that will take place following the implementation of the European SEA directive in July 2004. Once this comes into force, current Environmental Sustainable or Integrated Appraisal will need to be adapted to the specific requirements of the SEA directive. The SEA directive is project- and environmental impact assessment-based, and that is actually a different approach to the current approach. So there will need to be some changes.

How about the action of the Unitary Development Plan? Well, there are objectives that were adopted by the elected council of Oldham, and these are the bases for both the Unitary Development Plan and the Environmental Appraisal.

First of all, communities are to be supported, and the council wants social inclusion. That means new developments shouldn't physically divide communities. The Unitary Development Plan should promote economic well-being which all can share. It should also conserve and improve the quality of physical resources, including air, water, soil, fossil fuels and minerals. It should improve accessibility and reduce the need to travel. It should protect and conserve the borough's natural, historical and cultural aspects, and it should also regenerate the older urban areas of the borough and support the wider urban renaissance.

Now, I come to the timetable. UDP development went over a number of years, and it started in March 2000, and the first stage lasted for three months, and at this stage, communities were invited to express the views on the future scale and direction of the development.

A year later, in spring 2001, the plan was placed on deposit for a 6-week period, and that was the first chance for the community to view draft policies and proposals. In the summer of 2002, the plan was placed on deposit for a 6-week period for a second time. During that stage, comments were invited on the changes to the first proposal. And, finally, and that's forthcoming, at the end of 2003, the final UDP version will be prepared.

Now, the Sustainability Appraisal or Strategic Environmental Assessment that I'm going to talk about was the one that was conducted leading towards the first deposits. So that was the one conducted in spring 2001.

Now, why was it decided that an SEA and how was it conducted? Well, first of all, there is guidance with central government on Environmental Appraisal for Development Plans. That's from 1993. So that's 10 years old, and it was called the "Good Practice Guide." Furthermore, in 1998, guidance for Sustainability Appraisal, a regional planning guidance was published. Regional planning guidance, that's guidance prepared for the regional level of decisionmaking. I mentioned that at the beginning of my presentation.

There is, however, currently no guidance for Strategic Environmental Assessment or Sustainability Assessment of development plans. For that matter, Oldham Council formulated a number of goals for the Sustainability Appraisal, and I'm summarizing those here for you.

First of all, Oldham Council decided that Sustainability Appraisal is a process that must lead to improvement of UDP performance. Secondly, it decided that Sustainability Appraisal should expose conflicts and choices, must be iterative and work alongside the planning preparation process. Sustainability Appraisal should be transparent rigorous and independent. Furthermore, the appraisal team should be different from the team preparing the Unitary Development Plan. However, both teams are supposed to communicate well with each other.

Next, results should be made available for scrutiny for public and consultees. The process--and that's one of the preconditions for effective Strategic Environmental Assessment--should be objectives led, it should have clear sustainability targets, and it should reflect local issues.

The process should also be set through consensus building, and that was very important in this specific case that I'm talking about. Consensus building, that was one of the basic ideas for doing this process. Furthermore, it was decided that means and information to measure the achievement of the targets that were set at the beginning were essential to test overall performance of the Sustainability Appraisal and the Unitary Development Plan.

So how was the Sustainability Appraisal conducted? First of all, there was a Sustainability Appraisal Team, and that consisted of 19 persons. This team was split into two groups. First of all, there was a Sustainable Appraisal Group, and this group consisted of representatives of public administration, the Chamber of Commerce, environmental and economic fora, and this group carried out a detailed appraisal at each stage of the preparation process.

And, secondly, there was what was called the Sustainability Appraisal Sounding Board, and this sounding board consisted of elected members and a what was called critical friend who watched over the process. The critical friend was basically a consultant

making sure that elements of good practice were reflected in the process and that the process was going according to the aims and objectives set by the council.

The Sustainability Appraisal, as I mentioned earlier, was conducted for the Unitary Development Plan draft from June 2000 to July 2001. So it took roughly a year.

What did the process look like? At the start, members of the appraisal team were provided with UDP, Sustainability Appraisal and overall regional objectives for development. And in this context, it was referred to the regional sustainable development strategy, and that was called Action for Sustainability.

Secondly, an appraisal took place of what was called an issues paper, and this issues paper consisted of current policy, drivers for quality change and trends.

Thirdly, local sustainability objectives were developed.

Fourthly, a step-by-step methodology for future site selection was developed, and that is to help appraisal, when it comes to concrete projects, later, after the development plan has been approved. So, at this stage, a tool, an aid was developed for assessing actual projects.

At the fifth stage, the first draft policies were appraised; after that, a second draft of the policies were appraised. Future use of so-called difficult sites was appraised, and those are sites, for example, of former industrial use.

A consultation strategy was drawn up, and finally future appraisal stages were identified.

So what were the key results and the benefits that arose from the Strategic Environmental Assessment application in this particular case?

First of all, flexibility was considered a big benefit by all members of the appraisal team. They said it was good that the process was started as a flexible process, that there was not a straightjacket which needed to be followed. What was very beneficial is that it was a consensus-building process and that members representing different sectors and different administrations came together, discussed the issues, the problems and found common solutions.

The integration of social, economic and environmental aspects was considered a big benefit. The fact that cross-sectoral cooperation took place, something that didn't take place to the same extent in the past, was considered a benefit. Consistency with regional aims and objectives was considered a benefit, also, the consistency with regional sustainability strategy, what I mentioned earlier, Action for Sustainability.

It was found very beneficial that all Sustainability Appraisal Team participants conceive the process as a learning process. All of them said, well, we learned quite a lot from other

sectors, from different administrations. Also that the process had a proactive character was thought to be very beneficial.

Now, these were the perceived benefits. If we compare the results, and if we compare what was done with the future requirements of the Strategic Environmental Assessment directive, we get a somewhat different picture. And I've drawn that up here on this slide.

The SEA directive will have certain requirements, and these refer to tiering, profiteering, communication, consultation, reporting and alternatives, follow-up monitoring and review. And what we find is that, well, tiering was actually done quite well, also, in terms of the requirements of the directive. Consultation, communication and participation were okay. However, during the assessment process, the general public was not consulted, and that's obviously something that should be avoided in the future.

The biggest problem was reporting, and particularly reporting on the alternatives that were considered. The Sustainability Appraisal was very much process driven. However, to the outside world, it wasn't really clear what alternatives were considered, how they were considered, based on what aspects they were when rejected. So, here, there is the major point for change in the future.

And on follow-up, that was really left open because, as I said at the beginning, the Sustainability Appraisal was done for the draft UDP, and the appraisal process will now continue for the final draft, and then only after that has been done, more can be said on the actual monitoring end follow-up.

Finally, the messages from this particular case. Well, first of all, talking to the Sustainable Appraisal Team members, it was found that all of them had very positive perceptions of the Sustainability Appraisal. However, for those who are not involved in the process, it is actually totally unclear what exactly happened--when something happened and why something happened.

The problem is that the report that was done before the Sustainability Appraisal only describes the process, however, not the expected impacts, the alternatives considered and all of these substantive issues.

The reasons for the positive perception of the Sustainability Appraisal. And they will have to be carefully evaluated in terms of the real outcomes. If we compare those, for example, with the future requirements of the European Union SEA directive, we find that, whilst procedural compliance is quite strong, substantive compliance isn't. And one of the conclusions from this particular case really is, well, do consensus-based approaches actually improve processes, but avoid tackling critical content-related issues?

This summarized my presentation today. Thank you for your attention.