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What is Environmental Assessment?

Environmental assessment is an iterative process of gathering data and evidence, assessing effects, developing mitigation and enhancement measures and making recommendations to refine a plan or programme in view of its predicted environmental (and socio-economic) effects.

The overall aim of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is to help people make better strategic decisions. In the case of geological disposal the SEA will provide information on its likely environmental and socio-economic effects in communities that have taken a decision to participate in the site selection process. Such effects can then be taken into account during development of our geological disposal implementation plan (GDIP), in local decisions about continued participation in the process and in national decisions about which candidate sites to take forward to MRWS Stage 5. The SEA will also be a key source of information for the site identification and assessment processes during MRWS Stage 4.

Does RWMD have to do it?

Yes, it is a statutory requirement and the MRWS White Paper commits us to doing it. Notwithstanding this, it presents us with a number of opportunities.

Opportunities

- The SEA will be an important vehicle for engaging with our stakeholders and for taking on board their concerns and aspirations as we develop our GDIP.
- It will provide a framework for defining and articulating the subject of the assessment – the GDIP.
- It will be an important tool for promoting our “best practice” approach to addressing environmental and socio-economic issues.
- It will be an important tool for influencing plan and design development.
- It will cut across all of our work areas, so presents an ideal opportunity to promote and develop integrated working across RWMD.

Key aspects

In 2008/9 RWMD developed a Strategy for Sustainability Appraisal and Environmental Assessment in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. Two key elements of the Strategy¹ are:

- Engagement with stakeholders throughout the assessment process;
- An iterative approach to the assessment and development of the GDIP.

The whole assessment process must be developed to give stakeholders opportunities to influence what is assessed, how it is assessed and how the implementation plan and associated disposal system designs are developed to address the potential effects that are identified. To achieve this, the first stage in the environmental assessments is the scoping

¹ NDA (July, 2009) *Geological Disposal: A Strategy for Sustainability Appraisal and Environmental Assessment* (NDA -RWMD Report NDA/RWMD/014)

stage. This involves drafting and then consulting on a scoping report and enables stakeholders to influence the issues outlined above. The scoping stage would be one of the first activities that would take place if a decision to participate is made.

The Strategy notes that “*assessments will be developed iteratively as the desk based studies progress and the results will be fed into the development of the NDA’s proposals for implementing geological disposal*“. Development of the GDIP and associated disposal system designs during MRWS Stage 4 will take account of environmental and socio-economic issues identified during RWMD’s generic assessment work, environmental and socio-economic constraints identified by the SEA, and our sustainable design objectives². This will require a close working relationship between RWMD’s design and assessment teams.

Other environmental assessments in MRWS Stage 4

In parallel with the production of the SEA, RWMD will produce:

- A Habitats Regulations Assessment - this is also a statutory requirement and will analyse any potential impacts that implementation of the GDIP may have on designated “European sites”³.
- A Strategic Transport Assessment – an assessment of the potential transport effects of a proposed plan or programme.
- A Health Impact Assessment – an assessment of potential effects on the health of the population, and the distribution of those effects within the population.
- An Equality Impact Assessment – an assessment of potential effects on a variety of social groups, mainly focussing on the protected characteristics established under the Equality Act 2010: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. This will help us to ensure that our proposals will not result in discrimination against any individual or community and where possible will promote equality.

Preparing for MRWS Stage 4

We have recently published a number of documents that outline our approach to the SEA and related assessment work:

1. NDA (July 2009) *Geological Disposal: A Strategy for Sustainability Appraisal and Environmental Assessment* (NDA - RWMD Report 014, 10727503)
2. NDA (December 2010) *Geological Disposal: A proposed approach to Strategic Environmental Assessment during MRWS Stage 4* (NDA – RWMD Technical Note 13824468)
3. NDA (March 2011) *Geological Disposal: Strategic Environmental Assessment – Generic Scoping Report* (NDA – RWMD Report NDA/RWMD/058, ISBN 978-1-84029-442-2)

The first outlines our overarching strategy for undertaking environmental assessments and our approach to engaging stakeholders during the assessments. The second focuses on technical methodology (i.e. how we intend to undertake the assessment work). The third focuses on scope (i.e. what the SEA and related assessment work will cover). These documents form the basis for initial, informal discussion with our stakeholders on the proposed approach.

² NDA-RWMD, (March 2010) *Geological Disposal: Sustainable Design Objectives for a Geological Disposal Facility*. (RWMD Technical Note NDA/RWMD/1192365)

³ European sites are also called Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation. They are designated under European laws to protect Europe's rich variety of wildlife and habitats.