



ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

(THE NEW BUZZ WORD)

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(Chairman's Note. The cost of this Conference was shared between the Dover Society and the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies. In my absence through indisposition it was attended by one of the members of the KFAS Executive Committee whose excellent report is subjoined.)

For many years there has been concern about the impact that development has on the environment; not just the obvious physical changes but the consequences of traffic generated, of air polluted, of lead deposited, of noise inflicted as well as of the losses of open space and countryside. It was widely felt that an assessment of all such factors should be made and considered before any planning consent was given – and in many cases this has increasingly been done.

However, in 1988 a European Community directive came into force to the effect that in certain cases an environmental assessment should be made to ensure that the impact of new development was fully understood and taken into account *before* the application was allowed to go ahead. In order to implement this the Government has made a series of Statutory Instruments of which SI 1199/88 is the legal basis in England and Wales.

Kent County Council, aware of increasing pressures for development in the 1990s, has been anxious to ensure that there is a common framework for EAs and has produced an Environmental Assessment Handbook. This sets out clearly the types of development which must have an assessment; those which might qualify; the responsibility of the developer to produce it; the points to consider, the people to contact, the way to present and publicise it; and guidelines for local authorities. The local planning authority, which may be the County or District Council, should then be in a position to make an assessment *before* the application is considered.

All this is well set out in the Handbook with relevant names and addresses in the various sections (though it might be easier for reference if these were also placed together alphabetically at the end of the Handbook.) Societies will find it – and it should be in all libraries – well worth reading and cogitation: for the effectiveness of environmental assessment depends on ensuring that all developments of the type requiring an EA have well drawn up statements, that the assessment is balanced and, when the decision is finally made by the Councillors, that it reflects the significance of the environment on the equation.

KCC launched the Handbook at a conference at County Hall in May. It was quite a marathon with a vast number of speakers, all of whom contributed much food for thought – but there was little time for questions or discussion. Those attending were mainly from local authorities in Kent or the Home Counties or from statutory bodies. There were representatives from the main conservation bodies such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and ourselves, but only one from a local amenity society (The City of Rochester Society). Perhaps the charge of £40 for the day was a deterrent, for most run on very limited budgets. It certainly underlines the value of our Wye Conference week-ends but it was a pioneering exercise on KCC's part and one for which it should be congratulated.

The County Planning Officer, Robin Thompson, said in his opening speech that the 1980s had been a time of economic growth with an emphasis in favour of development. In the 1990s there had been changes. Although there was still a need for growth, development must be sustainable; the environment and ecology were important and lively factors and a balance must be kept between them and development. KCC had a clear environmental programme and now had a county ecologist, archaeologist and environmental assessment expert. The recent 'Transport Challenge' Conference looked at transport and the environment and the current review of the Kent Structure Plan meant the environment would be having a greater significance than before. As we all knew, this was a very crucial time for planning in Kent with the Channel Tunnel, the High Speed Rail link, the new Dartford Bridge, motorways, the Broad Oak Reservoir, the King's Hill Business Park and so on, all posing threats to the countryside which had to be resolved.

In the context of the need to reduce noise at source from rail or motorway, examples were given of various bunds of earth or barriers of fencing. Slides were shown of a 'willow wall' – fencing made of live interlaced willow which continued growing and rooting to form a living wall. It looked an excellent solution but cost twice as much and needed maintenance. Considerable research was going on now into the assessment of air and land pollution from traffic, for not only was the air affected but, for example, the lead deposited on grass near a motorway could affect the milk from cows grazing there. Up-to-date techniques could give a much more sensitive picture.

Examples were given of the public consultation that had gone on over the Thanet Way dualling project and the various proposals to minimise the impact of the road. At one place,, in order to avoid severance of the land, it was proposed that the route should continue at road level, but a box-in effect, forming a tunnel, would be put over the road and this, in turn, would be covered with excess spoil from the cuttings so that when contured it would provide a man-made hill and a beneficial use for spoil.

As was mentioned by many speakers, the *quality* of the EA was the essential factor and it was depressing to hear that a national sample had shown that 25% were satisfactory against 47% which were not.

The *public contribution* was important and assessment should not just be an exercise by professionals for professionals. It was suggested that a non-technical summary could help not only the general public to contribute effectively, but also Parish Councils which, strangely at this moment, did not seem to be on the list of those likely to be consulted.

12 There was a danger that by being split up into smaller pieces certain developments might slip through the net. An example was given of the Lionhope development on Sheppey which came in five packets of which only two had EAs.

It was important, said one speaker, that all significant developments have an EA. It was already reported that a Judicial Review had been called for by an amenity body because an EA had *not* been called for in a particular case. The Council for the Protection of Rural England would like the list of developments which *must* have an environmental assessment to be *extended* to include drinking water plants, leisure centre complexes and golf courses. One speaker made a plea for consideration to be given to *alternative sites* for a new development and felt that it should not just be on the site which a developer happened to own.

The speaker from the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation perhaps put the significance of Environmental Assessments most neatly when he said:

"E.A.s should:-

- see that the development was sustainable,
- encourage developers to acknowledge and mitigate the impact,
- encourage research and public debate,
- increase survey data,
- identify the problems earlier and save time and money.

For many years we have all, in various ways, complained that the environment was the poor relation when the pros and cons of a project were being considered. At last there is an acknowledgement that it should be a significant factor. But *how* significant will depend on our keeping a keen and watchful eye and, for a start, reading the KCC Environmental Assessment Handbook and letting Elizabeth Street from the KCC Planning Department, who compiled it, hear of any shortcomings.

KCC Environmental Assessment Handbook: £10 + £1.30 postage from KCC Planning Dept., SPRINGFIELD, Maidstone, Kent ME14 2LX.

Environmental Assessment – a Guide to Procedures: £5.30 from HMSO.

Circular DoE 15/88 Environmental Assessment from HMSO.

Seven Societies Socialise

On 22 November the Deal Society, at the instigation of its new Chairman, Air Vice-Marshal Tim Lloyd, hosted a social evening at the home of one of its committee members, Mrs Judith Doré. The Chairman had expressed the wish to meet representatives from societies with the same or similar views as the Deal Society and invited four members from each of the six other local societies. Represented were The Dover Society, the Men of Kent, the North Deal Society, the Sandwich Society, the St. Margaret's Society and the Walmer Resident's Association.

The four Dover Society members who attended the function, Jack Woolford, Budge Adams and Bruce and Merrill Lilley, enjoyed a friendly and informative evening.

EDITOR