



Guidance Note on Public Participation in Strategic Environmental Assessment

Public Participation and Performance Criteria in
Strategic Environmental Assessment:
The Way Forward for Advancing Practice

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Public Participation and Performance Criteria in Strategic Environmental Assessment: The Way Forward for Advancing Practice.

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EPA Research Report

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How to use this document

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Chapter 2 | The Public Participation Process

The Public Participation Process

Effective public participation is based on robust preparation, clearly informing and meaningfully engaging the public, and integrating public feedback into the SEA and associated plan.

- 1 | Prepare
- 2 | Inform
- 3 | Engage
- 4 | Integrate

Click and go to the section of interest.

The ultimate goal of SEA public participation is to collect and integrate public feedback into the SEA and the associated plan.

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Chapter 2 | The Public Participation Process | Engaging

3 | Engaging the Public

The precise method of public participation is less important than the approach of the SEA and plan-making teams to the participation (e.g. the reasons for engaging the public, the questions to be asked and the strategy for integrating public feedback).

A wide range of public participation methods exist, and these can be placed on a spectrum from least to most engaging (Figure 2). The current legal minimum requirements for SEA public participation lie at the informal end of the spectrum, that is, the requirements merely to provide information but not to give ample opportunities for providing feedback (e.g. unannounced notices). This is unlikely to generate as much, or as valuable, public input as more deliberative approaches (e.g. workshops).

Figure 2: Public engagement spectrum

Empower	Sharing the final decisions in the hands of the public, and implementing what the public recommends.
Collaborate	Partnering with the public and seeking their opinions and innovative ideas on each aspect of the SEA plan-making process, including the preferred alternative and mitigation measures, and incorporating public recommendations to the maximum extent possible.
Involve	Working directly with the public throughout SEA plan-making processes, ensuring that public concerns and aspirations are reflected in the alternatives developed and providing feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
Consult	Obtaining public feedback on the assessment, alternatives and/or mitigation measures, acknowledging the public's concerns and aspirations, and providing feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
Inform	Providing the public with objective and balanced information to help them understand impacts, alternatives and mitigation measures.

Table 1 (not shown) gives examples of public participation methods that correspond with the different stages of the public engagement spectrum. The highest levels of commitment from all participants in terms of being involved and committed to integrating feedback into the final decision (i.e. the adopted plan).

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Introduction

This guidance note aims to improve the general public's engagement in strategic environmental assessment (SEA) practice in Ireland. It outlines principles and makes recommendations to ensure that the public are meaningfully informed and consulted during SEA processes, and that any feedback is appropriately integrated into the SEA environmental report and the associated plan/programme (referred to as the 'plan' hereon for simplicity). The guidance note is based on a review of international best practice, extensive consultation with SEA practitioners, plan-makers and public participation experts, and lessons learned from a good practice case study piloting novel approaches to public engagement in SEA consultation. These recommendations are transferable to other jurisdictions.

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The Public Participation | Key Takeaways

Key takeaways

Benefits of Public Participation	Public participation in SEA expands the knowledge and information available, increases the learning of the plan-making team and the public, and supports more democratic decision-making processes.
Current Barriers to Public Participation	Barriers to effective public participation in SEA include starting too late, a lack of resources, the technical nature of SEA and a lack of integration of public input eroding trust and willingness to participate in future.
Key Principles of Effective Public Participation	Effective SEA public participation entails processes that are comprehensively planned, to ensure meaningful, inclusive, open, collaborative and transparent participation.
The Public Participation Process	The ultimate goal of SEA public participation is to collect and integrate public feedback into the SEA and the associated plan.
Preparing for Public Participation	Preparing for public participation involves collaborative planning among stakeholders to define the purpose and scope of the consultation, engage a diverse cross-section of the public, and address potential barriers to participation.
Informing the Public	SEA documents and findings must be accessible and written in plain language, and must highlight key notable issues, so that people can understand them and thus meaningfully engage in the participation process.
Engaging the Public	The precise method of public participation is less important than the approach of the SEA and plan-making teams to the participation (e.g. the reasons for engaging the public, the questions to be asked and the strategy for integrating public feedback).
Integrating Public Feedback	The ultimate measure of the effectiveness of SEA public participation is the impact of public feedback on the SEA and the plan.

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Content

Introduction

This guidance note aims to improve the general public's engagement in strategic environmental assessment (SEA) practice in Ireland. It outlines principles and makes recommendations to ensure that the public are meaningfully informed and consulted during SEA processes, and that any feedback is appropriately integrated into the SEA environmental report and the associated plan/programme (referred to as the "plan" hereon for simplicity). The guidance note is based on a review of international best practice; extensive consultation with SEA practitioners, plan-makers and public participation experts; and lessons learned from a good practice case study piloting novel approaches to public engagement in SEA consultation. These recommendations are transferable to other jurisdictions.

Chapter 1

An Overview

Legal Framework

Aarhus Convention

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's **Aarhus Convention** guarantees the public's right to: access to information; public participation in decision-making; and access to justice in environmental matters.¹ **Articles 6** and **7** require public participation in the preparation of plans and programmes, and **Article 8** encourages public participation in the preparation of regulations.

Directive 2001/42/EC on SEA

Based on the principles of the Aarhus Convention, Article 6 of the EU's **Directive 2001/42/EC** on SEA ("SEA Directive")² requires public and environmental authorities to be consulted at least at the draft plan and draft SEA environmental report (ER) stage, stating that:

- ✓ The draft plan and the SEA ER must be made available to the public.
- ✓ The public must be given "an early and effective opportunity within appropriate time frames to express their opinion" on the draft plan and the accompanying SEA ER before the adoption of the plan.

It is up to each jurisdiction to identify "the public" (see page 4) and define the arrangements for public consultation.

Article 8 of the SEA Directive requires that the findings of the SEA ER and the opinions of the public are taken into account during the preparation of the plan and before its adoption or submission to the legislative process.

Article 9 requires that, after the plan has been adopted, the public should be provided with an "SEA Statement" that summarises how environmental considerations have been integrated into the plan and how the SEA ER and the opinions expressed during public consultation have been taken into account.

SEA Regulations

In Ireland, the SEA Directive is implemented through two sets of **SEA regulations** (S.I. No. 436 of 2004, amended by S.I. No. 201 of 2011, for regional and local land use plans; and S.I. No. 435 of 2004, amended by S.I. No. 200 of 2011, for other sectoral plans, such as those on agriculture, energy, waste, etc.). These Irish regulations mirror the SEA Directive with respect to public participation, but also require the planning authority to:

¹ UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe), 1998. Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. Available at:

<https://unece.org/DAM/env/pp/documents/cep43e.pdf>

² EC (European Commission), 2001. Directive 2001/42/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 June 2001 on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment. Available at:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32001L0042&from=EN>

- ✓ make a copy of the SEA screening decision available for public inspection at its offices during office hours and on the authority’s website;
- ✓ publish a notice of the preparation of the plan and SEA ER in at least one newspaper with a sufficiently large circulation in the area covered by the relevant plan, stating that the draft plan and draft SEA ER may be inspected at the planning authority’s office and on its website during a stated period of at least 4 weeks from the date of the notice, and that any written submission or observation with respect to the draft plan and draft SEA ER lodged within the consultation period will be taken into consideration before the finalisation of the plan;
- ✓ publish a notice of adoption of the plan in at least one newspaper with a sufficiently large circulation in the area covered by the plan, stating that the plan, the SEA ER and the SEA statement may be inspected at the planning authority’s offices and on its website during a stated period of at least 4 weeks from the date of publication of the notice (and ideally until the next plan/SEA cycle begins).

Defining “the Public”

Article 6.4 of the SEA Directive defines the public as any individual or group: “affected or likely to be affected by, or having an interest in, the decision-making subject to the Directive, including relevant non-governmental organisations, such as those promoting environmental protection and other organisations concerned”.³ The SEA Directive also requires consultation of specific consultees. In this context, this includes the following three groups:

Statutory consultees	Stakeholders	The public
Government bodies that can participate in the SEA process on account of their expertise in environmental matters, including designated environmental authorities. ⁴	Sectoral representatives and experts, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), representing specific interests.	One or more lay individuals interested in, concerned by and/or affected by the plan, its potential environmental impacts and any associated decisions.

This guidance note focuses on the general public, including “the public affected”. It does not discuss the involvement of statutory consultees, as they perform a formalised and more structured function in SEA processes, or NGOs, as they are typically more skilled in and have more knowledge about SEA and related policies than the general public.

³ EC (European Commission), 2001. Directive 2001/42/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 June 2001 on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32001L0042&from=EN>

⁴ In Ireland, these government bodies are the Environmental Protection Agency; the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications; and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Benefits of Public Participation

Public participation in SEA can bring many benefits, including those outlined below.

✓ **A wider information base**

✓ **Education and awareness-raising**

✓ **Amplification of the voices of vulnerable and marginalised people**

✓ **A more sustainable and equitable plan**

✓ **Reconciliation of conflicting agendas**

✓ **Democratic accountability and increased acceptability of the plan**

Public participation in SEA expands the knowledge and information available, increases the learning of the plan-making team and the public, and supports more democratic decision-making processes.

✓ **A wider information base**

The public can provide information and knowledge about their local environment that would otherwise be unavailable to SEA practitioners. Public “value-based” views that provide judgements about planning priorities, preferences and risk tolerances can also complement the more traditional “fact-based” approach of many SEAs.

✓ **Education and awareness-raising**

Through SEAs, the public can become more aware of and understand the planning and policy context (and how this can constrain the plan), the baseline environment, the planning alternatives and plan policies being considered, and the likely impacts of the plan and the mitigation measures proposed to address these impacts. In particular, the public can learn about strategic environmental issues that affect them and about long-term sustainability, which, in turn, may transform their views and future actions.

✓ **Amplification of the voices of vulnerable and marginalised people**

An open, democratic approach to decision-making, supported by SEA, can provide a formal forum for hearing, considering and integrating the views of groups that might otherwise be marginalised in plan-making processes (e.g. Travellers, rural communities, young people).

✓ **A more sustainable and equitable plan**

Increased public involvement in plan-making and SEA can help to promote both environmental sustainability and equity, for example by ensuring that the plan meets environmental standards and by testing whether the plan particularly favours or affects some groups or geographical areas.

✓ **Reconciliation of conflicting agendas**

Plan-making usually involves making difficult choices and trade-offs, which were traditionally made solely by the plan-making team. Involving the public can help to make these trade-offs and value judgements more inclusive and balanced, bringing new perspectives on an issue and/or suggesting areas of common ground.

✓ **Democratic accountability and increased acceptability of the plan**

Involving the public in SEA and plan-making increases the transparency of decision-making, as it facilitates external scrutiny of decisions. Even if the outcomes of public consultation are not subsequently fully integrated into the plan, the process itself can serve to increase a sense of fairness, ownership, democracy and “environmental citizenship”. This, in turn, can increase the public’s confidence in the plan, making the plan more publicly acceptable, and can avoid delays in plan implementation by identifying and dealing with contentious issues early in the plan-making process and minimising any public controversy or opposition.

Current Barriers to Public Participation

A range of factors limit the effectiveness of public participation in SEA and plan-making, as described below.

✓ Starting too late

✓ Resource and time constraints

✓ Interference with planning agendas

✓ Limited public input

✓ Integration of public feedback

Barriers to effective public participation in SEA include starting too late, a lack of resources, the technical nature of SEA and a lack of integration of public input eroding trust and willingness to participate in future.

✓ Starting too late

Public participation that starts too late (i.e. after most elements of a plan have been decided on) is particularly unhelpful, as it comes with all of the costs but few of the benefits. For SEA consultants and plan-makers, receiving public comments at a late stage in plan-making can be unhelpful and lead to extra work. For the public, being asked to participate late in the plan-making process can seem disingenuous, making them critical even of a plan that is otherwise uncontroversial.

✓ Resource and time constraints

Public participation requires time and resources at every stage: planning, preparing materials for dissemination and participatory activities, carrying out the participatory activities, and undertaking post-consultation tasks such as integrating public feedback. However, budgets for plan-making and SEA are often limited. Public participation beyond the minimum legal requirements may be seen as an unaffordable exercise that is beyond the planning team's remit.

✓ Interference with planning agendas

Public consultation adds an element of critical review and scrutiny to SEA and plan-making processes, which can be perceived as interfering with plan-making powers, particularly when plans are constrained by higher-level decisions that are unpopular at a more local level. Some planning decisions are too sensitive/confidential for public discussion; others must be made so quickly that public participation cannot be accommodated. The public themselves may have differing views.

✓ Limited public input

The public may not get involved even when extensive opportunities are available. This may be because they have previous experience of ineffective, pro forma, one-way communication at public participation events and do not feel that such events are worth their time. It may also be because it takes a long time for plans to be implemented, or because plans seem very abstract or technical. The public may feel that they do not have the knowledge required to participate or that their views are unlikely to make a difference. Limited access to the internet, difficulties in identifying a point of contact and cultural issues can also affect engagement.

✓ Integration of public feedback

Recommendations made by the public do not have to be followed, as SEAs must only "take into account" public feedback, i.e. generally public feedback informs the process, but the public does not participate in decision-making. Public participation is often treated as a means of validating SEA information and plan-making, rather than as an integral component of the processes; this erodes the public's trust and willingness to participate.

Key Principles of Effective Public Participation

To be effective – that is, to enable local information and concerns to be captured and integrated, increasing learning from the SEA and by plan-making teams, and enabling more democratic decision-making processes – public participation in SEA should be:

Meaningful	It should be valued by plan-makers, who should have a clear commitment to integrating public input into their decision-making; start early in plan-making; and encourage two-way communication.
Planned	It should be planned comprehensively, with clear objectives, scope, approach and methodologies of engagement and feedback provision.
Open	It should be accessible to all interested parties; enable access to information; enable the free exchange of ideas and opinions; and provide a platform for all voices to be heard.
Inclusive	It should be designed to ensure that different perspectives and interests are actively taken into account and captured in the decision-making process, and that the outcomes are in the public interest rather than serving the interests of a particular individual or group.
Collaborative	It should encourage participants to work together to identify and develop solutions to problems.
Transparent	The objectives of the public participation process should be clearly stated, including how public contributions will be used. In addition, communication and consultation processes should be clear, with well-defined mechanisms, to ensure that feedback is integrated.

Effective SEA public participation entails processes that are comprehensively planned, to ensure meaningful, inclusive, open, collaborative and transparent participation.

Chapter 2

The process

The Public Participation Process

Effective public participation is based on robust preparation, clearly informing and meaningfully engaging the public, and integrating public feedback into the SEA and associated plan.

Note: Click and go to the section of interest 

The ultimate goal of SEA public participation is to collect and integrate public feedback into the SEA and the associated plan.

1 | Preparing for Public Participation

Public participation takes time, resources and planning. Different types of plans will require different forms of public participation. A decision also needs to be taken about whether to have SEA-specific participation, or whether to integrate SEA participation with other plan-related participation activities. The public may need training in SEA and how to engage with it.

2 | Informing the Public

Providing the public with objective information is essential, to help the public understand the SEA/plan-making processes, alternatives, impacts and mitigation measures. Moreover, it is fundamental for communicating the objectives of a public participation exercise, what planning policies/aspects the public can influence and how public feedback will be used in the decision-making process.

3 | Engaging the Public

The degree to which the public are engaged in decision-making ranges from consultation (opportunities for the public to express their views) to involvement (working directly with the public and considering their opinions), collaboration (partnering with the public to identify issues and solutions) and citizen control of decisions (Figure 2). In all cases, effective public engagement is based on two-way communication.

4 | Integrating Public Feedback

The SEA and plan-making teams should make an effort to integrate public feedback into the SEA and associated plan. The extent of this integration should be captured in the SEA ER and SEA statement.

1 | Preparing for Public Participation

Preparing for public participation involves collaborative planning among stakeholders to define the purpose and scope of the consultation, engage a diverse cross-section of the public, and address potential barriers to participation.

Effective public participation requires that the planning team and other decision-makers are open to public input, and that adequate processes and resources are put in place.

To ensure a **positive approach and legitimacy**

- Start thinking about public participation early in the SEA and plan-making processes (ideally at the scoping stage), **engage the public at different SEA stages** (e.g. scoping, alternatives, mitigation) and aim to include public input in making **key decisions**.
- Ensure that the plan-making team is **willing to change** the plan in response to the results of public meetings.
- Run **training sessions on SEA** for plan-makers and decision-makers.
- Ensure **collaboration** between the SEA and plan-making teams when designing and putting in place public participation processes.
- Identify environmental **issues of key public concern** and aim to address these using public participation processes.
- Be transparent about **constraints** that limit decision-making (e.g. what alternatives are not on the table) and what decisions can be influenced by the public. Query whether factors initially perceived as constraints cannot be changed or whether there are more strategic alternatives available for public consideration.

To ensure **adequate time and resources for public participation**

- Provide **enough time for engagement and integrating responses** (the statutory minimum is often not long enough for effective engagement).
- Organise cross-disciplinary SEA-specific meetings with members of the tendering body prior to tendering for SEA consultancy services, to identify key issues that need to be considered when developing a **public participation and communications strategy**.
- Include in the **SEA tender details of the provision of public participation services** (e.g. how and when the public will be engaged, what engagement materials will be produced, what approaches to following up engagement will be taken).
- Consider **linking** SEA public participation to public planning **consultation processes**, but ensure that sufficient focus is given to environmental considerations.

To ensure an **efficient public feedback process**

- Make all SEA documents available on the authority **website**.
- Consider creating an **SEA submissions portal** to facilitate ongoing public feedback and input throughout the SEA process.

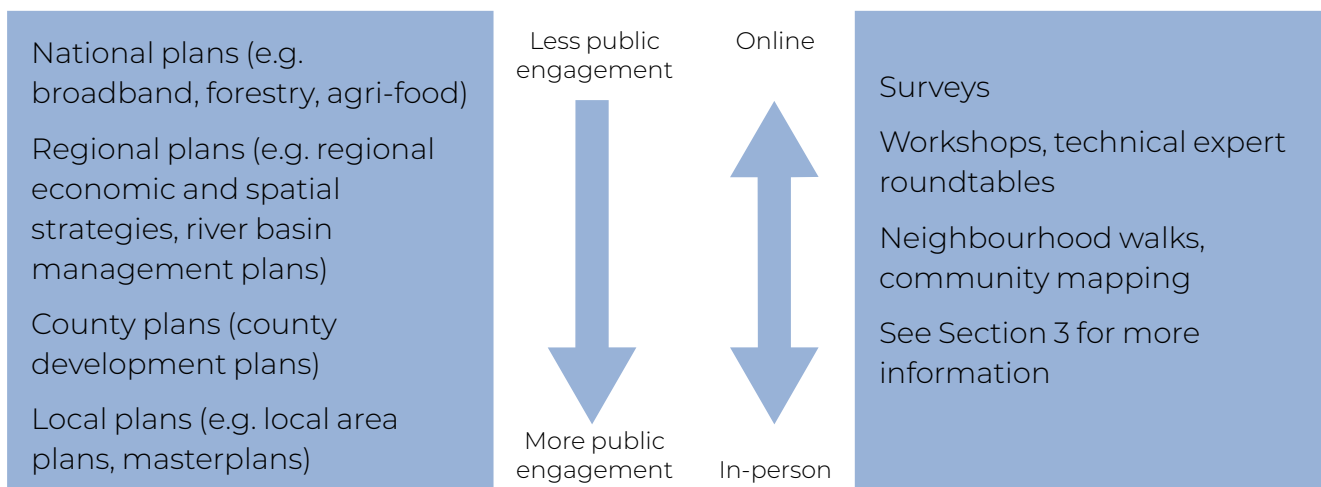
To ensure the **inclusion of a full cross-section of the public**

- Make the SEA consultation process accessible by using clear and transparent approaches that **enable a full cross-section of the public to engage** and participate (e.g. use plain language in all communications and material).
- Identify individuals who are not represented or who are under-represented and **take action to engage** with them (e.g. certain age or social cohorts).
- Reach out to relevant local groups and organisations (e.g. local county councils, public participation networks (PPNs)) for **advice about engaging diverse groups in the area**.
- Consider organising **multiple opportunities for engagement** to help include a diversity of voices (e.g. run events in the evenings/weekends, or at different times during the day).

Public Participation at Different Tiers/Scales

Different plan-making tiers lend themselves to different methods of public participation. People are likely to engage more proactively in local-level plan-making, as they may have a better understanding of the issues and relate better to planning considerations at that level. Individuals do not usually engage as proactively at the national level, where PPNs or environmental and social NGOs typically act as representatives of public values and ideas. In this context, different public communication and engagement methods may be better suited to different plan-making tiers (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Planning tiers and participatory levels and methods



Generating interest in and managing effective public consultation on large-scale SEAs (national level with potential transboundary interactions) requires the particularly careful organisation of public participation, including:

- Holding events/workshops in **different locations** to maximise their accessibility;
- Organising **themed events** relating to specific issues and concerns, while maintaining an openness to broader feedback on the SEA process and content;
- Creating a **submissions portal website** to manage the volume, range and form of submissions (the public can be directed to this during the events);
- Identifying and engaging the affected **public** in adjacent administrative areas if appropriate.

2 | Informing the Public

SEA documents and findings must be accessible and written in plain language, and must highlight key relatable issues, so that people can understand them and thus meaningfully engage in the participation process.

The public is not a cohesive entity, but comprises people with a wide variety of interests, skills and levels of understanding of the environment and of the plan and SEA process.

To ensure that people from a full cross-section of the public are **aware of forthcoming public participation opportunities**

- **Advertise opportunities** for public engagement **in different ways**, for instance using social media, television and radio, as well as traditional newspaper advertisements.
- Consider **indirect ways** to inform the public about the event (e.g. by advertising in sports venues, schools and other places where people gather).
- Consider new approaches for **exchanging information** with the public, facilitated by technological advancement. This could include SEA infographics or interactive online interfaces with a summary of the SEA process and its findings⁵.
- Reach out to the community and representative organisations (e.g. PPNs, local county councils) for **advice** on what **type of engagement** will work with the public of interest.
- Consult with local representatives to identify **potential barriers to participation** (e.g. inconvenient meeting times, lack of capacity) and address them accordingly.

To ensure that the public can **participate in an informed manner**

- **Raise public awareness** of SEA, and **provide training** as appropriate, to help the public understand how they can participate and work together to inform the SEA and the plan.
- **Make all SEA and plan documents** (i.e. the SEA scoping report, ER, statement, monitoring report and written plan) **available online**.
- **Make SEA documents** and resources informative and **fully understandable** by the public (use plain English, to ensure that there are no technical language barriers to clear communication).
- Ensure, in particular, that non-technical summaries really are **non-technical**.
- Present the plan and associated SEA in a manner that enables **people to relate to the issues**.
- Develop **easy-to-read** and **user-friendly material**, in addition to the required SEA documents, to provide an overview of the potential discussion and to inform the public about key environmental aspects that may be considered in the consultation.

⁵See, for example, SEAI (Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland), undated. Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan II. Available at: <https://oredpii-sea-digitalreport.com/>

3 | Engaging the Public

The precise method of public participation is less important than the approach of the SEA and plan-making teams to the participation (e.g. the reasons for engaging the public, the questions to be asked and the strategy for integrating public feedback).

A wide range of public participation methods exist, and these can be placed on a spectrum from least to most engaging (Figure 2). The current legal minimum requirements for SEA public participation lie at the inform/consult end of the spectrum, that is, the requirement merely to provide information but not to give ample opportunities for providing feedback (e.g. unmanned exhibits, leaflets). This is unlikely to generate as much, or as valuable, public input as more deliberative approaches (e.g. workshops).

Increased impact
on decisions

Figure 2. Public engagement spectrum

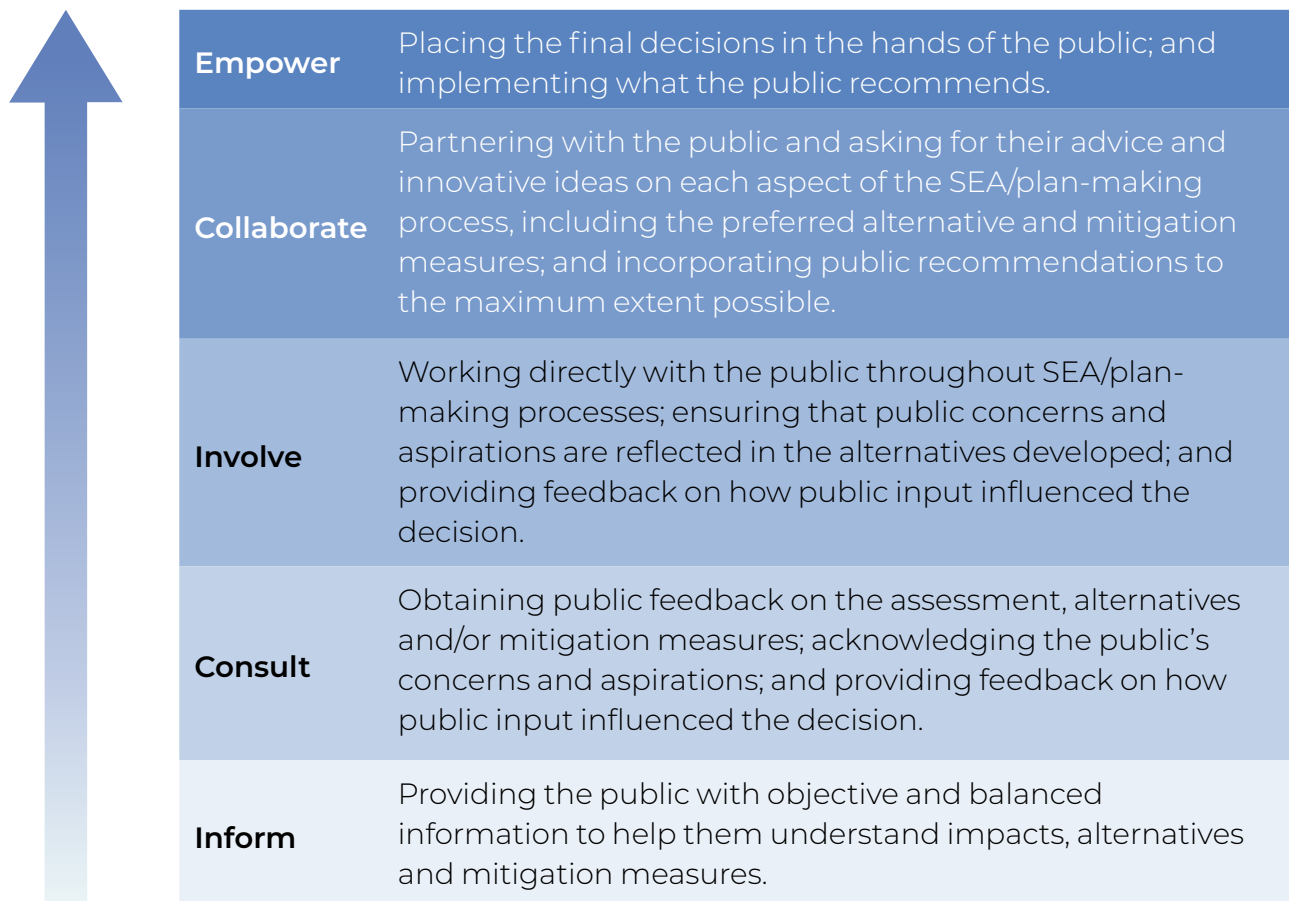


Table 1 gives examples of public participation methods that correspond with the different stages of the public engagement spectrum. The highest levels of participation on the spectrum (i.e. collaborate, empower) require the deepest levels of commitment from all participants in terms of staying involved and committed to integrating feedback into the final decision (i.e. the adopted plan).

Table 1. Examples of public participation methods in SEA and plan-making practice

Participation level Inform	
	Government websites can enable the public to find information about SEA and plan-making processes, including associated documents. These websites can include information on mechanisms for public input (e.g. surveys) and/or user statistics (e.g. number of visits), to garner insights into public interest.
	Traditional and social media , e.g. newspapers, TV, radio, email and social media channels (often linking to government websites; see above), can provide information on public feedback mechanisms, for instance through links to government websites. These channels can also focus on particular topics/issues, prompting interest and debate.
	Public information meetings , either in person or online, can be used to provide the public with information about the SEA and the associated plan-making process, and allow the public to ask consultants and plan-makers questions.
Participation level Consult	
	One-to-one consultations via individual appointments (either online or, for example, in a community hall) can be used to gather public information and opinion. These may facilitate the participation of people who may not feel comfortable speaking in a wider consultation setting.
	Surveys/questionnaires , which can be embedded into websites or other communication methods, can also be used to gather public information, opinions and concerns regarding plan-making and its environmental impacts.
	Workshops that bring together public representatives to discuss and actively address issues, and identify solutions, can be organised around SEA stages (e.g. alternatives, mitigation) or issues (e.g. water, amenities). These may involve breakout groups, critical design or collaborative mapping.
	Public inquiries , where the SEA/plan addresses something of significant public importance, can be held to find out the facts in relation to a matter. Inquiries help to legitimise decisions.
Participation level Involve and Collaborate	
	Focus groups can bring together a group of selected public representatives to discuss specific SEA- and plan-related issues. These could be themed for different public cohorts as appropriate (e.g. youth/elderly services, community needs).
	Technical/expert tables that engage (technical) experts in conversation with the public can be used to share technical details and expert opinion on a given topic/issue, and then invite and support informed public feedback.

Participation level | Involve and Collaborate



Neighbourhood walking involves inviting the public to walk through their neighbourhood or plan area, accompanied by SEA/plan-making team representatives, and working together to identify local strengths and weaknesses.



Community mapping, which brings people together around a map of the plan area and surrounds, can be used to identify problem areas and areas in need of intervention, leading to suggestions for zoning and locations for projects.

Participation level | Empower



Citizen advisory councils/committees, which commonly include public representatives chosen by lottery or popular vote, aim to enable agreements to be reached on given issues or co-design planning-related solutions.



Binding queries/referendum involve the plan proponent (e.g. government department, local authority) submitting matters of their competence to a (often online) direct vote, and the result is binding

To ensure **effective engagement**

- **Set out clearly the scope and function of the consultation**, including which decisions the public can and cannot influence and how their views will be used.
- Consider using **different methods to engage with different groups**. This may include hybrid approaches (online and in person); progressing from one approach to another (e.g. public meetings then thematic workshops); or individual as well as group approaches. Involving traditionally disenfranchised or minority groups may require approaches that are novel to the SEA/plan-making teams, requiring additional planning, personnel and time.
- Consider using emerging **collaborative approaches** (e.g. neighbourhood walks, community mapping, citizen assemblies) that provide opportunities for co-creation and innovation, particularly for the consideration of alternatives and mitigation measures.
- Consider **new approaches for exchanging information** with the public, facilitated by technological advancement (e.g. digital SEAs, social media, chat rooms).
- Consider organising **professionally facilitated workshops focusing on specific themes** and structured around a series of key questions, to maximise information-sharing and interest in participation.
- Ensure that **flexibility** is built into the public participation event, to make it possible to respond to and adapt to potential emerging issues (e.g. to adapt activities according to the characteristics of the location and audience).
- Record what worked well and what did not, to **build knowledge and capacity** for future public participation events.

Engaging in Person

In-person (or face-to-face) engagement methods require additional effort in terms of staff time and additional costs associated with hiring a venue and using a moderator, but they tend to elicit more engaged participation. Table 2 presents some recommendations for optimising both the running and the outcomes of such events.

Table 2. Recommendations for optimising meetings/workshops/focus groups

-
- Hold events in locations that are not daunting and are convenient for the public concerned.

 - Ensure that a sufficient number of events take place to cover the area and population directly affected.

 - Run event(s) at a convenient time for the full cross-section of the affected public.

 - Ensure that the times and locations of events are advertised sufficiently in advance, so that the public are able to prepare to participate effectively.

 - Make financial or other help available for participants who need support to participate (e.g. provide minibuses or bus fares).

 - Provide opportunities for two-way communication.

 - Arrange for the process to be mediated by a neutral party and/or bring in independent experts to help resolve conflicting claims.

 - Promote an egalitarian atmosphere.

 - Encourage reaching a consensus, general agreement or fair compromise.

 - Encourage participants to agree on rules to solve conflicting claims and on procedures to determine discourse closure when no consensus is possible.

 - Provide an appropriate balance between the provision of background information and the time devoted to questions and discussion.

 - Allow all claims to be questioned and challenged.

 - Keep meeting minutes, distribute them to the participants and make them publicly available.

 - Request feedback from participants regarding the engagement approach and address any suggestions at future events.

Engaging Online

Internet-based engagement can help to cover wider geographical areas and facilitate the engagement of people who cannot attend a public event at a given time/date. It can also enable people who do not engage well in group settings to have a voice. While this form of participation is not conducive to discussions, debates and reaching agreement on specific issues or topics, it can help in gathering opinions, perceptions and concerns in a more systematic manner. It should be carried out as an adjunct to in-person methods.

4 | Integrating Public Feedback

The ultimate measure of the effectiveness of SEA public participation is the impact of public feedback on the SEA and the plan.

The post-adoption SEA statement must provide information on how the public's views have been taken into consideration. Consulting the public on an SEA and plan can have some value, even when the public's views are not integrated into the plan. The public can learn about the plan-making process, including constraints that planners face, and learn why their initial ideas cannot be integrated into the plan. Plan-makers can learn about public preferences, even if it is not possible to integrate them into the plan. However, **not** integrating the public's views into the SEA and plan (or not involving the public in the SEA and plan-making) can erode public trust and make future participation less likely. Where possible, **plan-makers should aim to integrate public views into the SEA and plan, or at least clearly explain the reasons this cannot be done.**

To improve the likelihood of the public's views being integrated into the SEA and plan

- Define how the **feedback** is to be provided, recorded and combined.
- Try to ensure that heads of **plan-making and SEA teams attend public participation events**, so they can take on board the public's views and respond to public comments.
- Consider engaging the public in the **development of alternatives and the formulation of mitigation measures** when planning options are still open and people's opinions can still be incorporated into both the SEA and the plan.
- Aim to **achieve general agreement on or acceptance of the decisions**, ensuring that people feel "heard" and that their opinions are being taken seriously.

To provide feedback on how public views have been taken into account

- Provide **rapid feedback on public submissions** to acknowledge their input, even if these have not been fully integrated into the SEA/plan. The feedback should clearly state which public recommendations have been incorporated and should explain the reasons for not including others (please note that remarking "noted" is not appropriate feedback).
- **Include in the SEA ER a section on public participation** to inform the SEA statement.
- Consider including a section in the SEA ER on any **informal consultation**, to acknowledge and capture key issues discussed during SEA and plan-making processes outside the formal consultation stages and events.
- Make any **SEA feedback** on the integration of public participation comments **available to the public** (e.g. on the plan-making authority's website).
- In addition to official SEA documents, **consider a variety of ways and communication channels** to provide feedback (e.g. newsletters and social media).
- Finally, consider **measuring the satisfaction of the public** (e.g. via an online survey) in terms of how they were engaged in the process and how their feedback was incorporated, to learn from the process and improve future participation strategies.

Key takeaways

Benefits of Public Participation	Public participation in SEA expands the knowledge and information available, increases the learning of the plan-making team and the public, and supports more democratic decision-making processes.
Current Barriers to Public Participation	Barriers to effective public participation in SEA include starting too late, a lack of resources, the technical nature of SEA and a lack of integration of public input eroding trust and willingness to participate in future.
Key Principles of Effective Public Participation	Effective SEA public participation entails processes that are comprehensively planned, to ensure meaningful, inclusive, open, collaborative and transparent participation.
The Public Participation Process	The ultimate goal of SEA public participation is to collect and integrate public feedback into the SEA and the associated plan.
Preparing for Public Participation	Preparing for public participation involves collaborative planning among stakeholders to define the purpose and scope of the consultation, engage a diverse cross-section of the public, and address potential barriers to participation.
Informing the Public	SEA documents and findings must be accessible and written in plain language, and must highlight key relatable issues, so that people can understand them and thus meaningfully engage in the participation process.
Engaging the Public	The precise method of public participation is less important than the approach of the SEA and plan-making teams to the participation (e.g. the reasons for engaging the public, the questions to be asked and the strategy for integrating public feedback).
Integrating Public Feedback	The ultimate measure of the effectiveness of SEA public participation is the impact of public feedback on the SEA and the plan.

Abbreviations

- ER** Environmental report
- NGO** Non-governmental organisation
- PPN** Public participation network
- SEA** Strategic environmental assessment

Appendices

Appendix A | Effective Public Participation Checklist

The following checklist can be used to prepare and conduct SEA public participation processes. It brings together the considerations listed and discussed in previous sections. It should be noted that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to consultation.

Preparing for public participation	
Collaborate to plan the consultation	Key stakeholders (e.g. SEA consultant, planners and other decision-makers) arrange to collaborate in the design and planning of the public consultation event(s).
Set the purpose	The purpose of the public consultation is defined and agreed on by all stakeholders, including constraints that limit decision-making and what decisions can and cannot be influenced by the public.
Include the public	A full cross-section of people, including minority groups, are identified and invited to participate.
Contact local representatives	Key local representatives are identified and contacted to discuss: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ potential barriers to participation; ▶ the best engagement strategies; ▶ the most appropriate and useful communication channels.
Plan the public consultation strategy	The public consultation strategy is developed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including the objectives and scope of the public participation event; how and when the public will be engaged; what engagement materials will be produced; and what approaches to following up engagement will be taken.
Identify and address barriers	Barriers to participation in the process and any support needs are identified, and measures are put in place to facilitate engagement.
Define times and resources	Key dates are defined and agreed on with relevant stakeholders. Where possible, a budget for consultation is secured, including a budget for any support activities (e.g. walks, workshops) needed to carry out the consultation.
Develop the programme for public participation	An SEA public participation programme is developed, including a detailed description of how the consultation will be carried out (e.g. key dates, engagement activities with dates and times, necessary resources and facilitators).

Informing the public	
Identify communication channels	A variety of communication channels are identified, including direct (e.g. social media, web portals, newspaper advertisements) and indirect (advertising in places where people gather) ways to inform and invite people.
Distribute good-quality materials	User-friendly communication materials are distributed, including calls to participate, relevant information needed to participate and educational material about SEA and relevant environmental considerations.
Distribute communication materials in good time	The communication materials are advertised in adequate time, and a contact person is provided in case of additional questions.
Engaging with the public	
Put engagement activities in place	When appropriate, multiple forms and channels are put in place, including a portal to receive SEA written submissions, and in-person and online opportunities to engage.
Prepare user-friendly materials	User-friendly and easy-to-understand consultation materials are prepared and ready to use.
Involve facilitators	The consultation process is managed by facilitators who are well-informed, unbiased and competent.
Communicate consultation objective	The objective and scope of the consultation are clearly stated, including how public feedback and contributions will be used.
Reflect and explain next steps	Participants are prompted to comment about the consultation (e.g. what can be improved in future consultations) and the next steps of the plan-making are explained to them, including how feedback about the issues raised and the findings will be provided.
Integrating public feedback	
Record feedback	All public feedback is appropriately and anonymously recorded and reported.
Verify findings	Takeaways and key findings are identified and verified by the team involved in the public consultation.
Provide feedback	Feedback from the consultation is provided in SEA documents (e.g. ER and SEA statement). When appropriate and to build trust in the process, participants are informed about the takeaways of the consultation (e.g. via a newsletter, social media).

Appendix B | Examples of Engagement Materials Used in a Case Study of Effective Public Participation

The following materials were prepared to conduct an SEA public participation event for the Dundalk Local Area Plan, as part of this research project. The purpose was to pilot the novel approaches to engagement described in this guidance note.

The materials presented are examples of those used for communication and other activities carried out as part of effective public engagement. The informational video will be relevant to most SEAs. However, the other materials may not be suitable for all SEA public consultation processes.

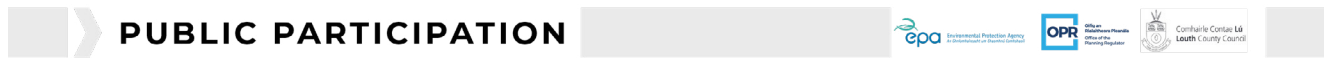
Communication materials

1 | **Informational video** (1 min 11 sec) that provides a concise description of what the SEA is and invites the public to participate in the SEA consultations.

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4unFmQVyzQk>



2 | Flyer inviting people to participate in the SEA process.



HAVE A SAY

IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF THE DUNDALK LOCAL AREA PLAN

JUNE 13TH, 2023

16:30 SHARP - 17:20 | **NEIGHBOURHOOD WALK**

17:20 - 17:30 | MAKE WAY TO DUNDALK LIBRARY

17:30 - 17:45 | REFRESHMENTS

17:45 - 18:00 | SUMMARY OF WALKS

18:00 - 19:00 | **COMMUNITY MAPPING WORKSHOP**

19:00 - 19:30 | FINAL REFLECTIONS, Q&A



This public participation event aims to identify environmental considerations that should be considered in the Dundalk Local Area Plan.

We want you to **share your knowledge** of the town and **get your feedback** to develop Dundalk sustainably.

COME AND JOIN US FOR:

16:30 - 17:20
SHARP
NEIGHBOURHOOD WALK

Join us at the meeting point that is of most interest and/or convenient for you.

18:00 - 19:00
COMMUNITY MAPPING WORKSHOP

Join us at the Dundalk Library to explore environmental considerations for the development of the town.

NEIGHBOURHOOD WALK MEETING POINTS

- A** Riverside Crescent
*54.013053, -6.400378
- B** Castletown Motte
*54.013823, -6.430399
- C** Market Square
*54.004415, -6.402581
- D** Costa Dundalk
*53.990606, -6.378278

COMMUNITY MAPPING WORKSHOP MEETING POINT

- E** Dundalk Library
*54.004238, -6.397982 *coordinates

Scan the QR or go to <https://arcg.is/1lrrny> to find out more about the meeting points and to discover important environmental and planning considerations of the Dundalk Local Area Plan.

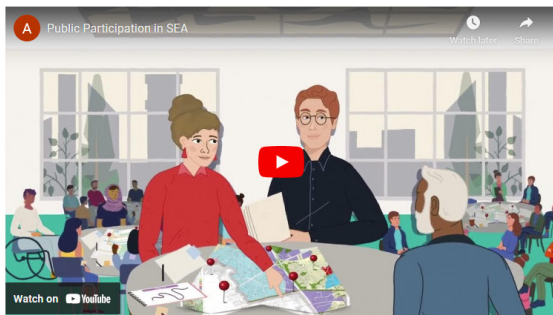


3 | **ArcGIS StoryMap** to inform the public and raise awareness about SEA. This also contains surveys intended to capture public interest in participating and to provide an opportunity for the public to write online submissions.

Have a say!

In the environmental assessment of the Dundalk Local Area Plan

SEA Public Participation Event Date: June 13th, 2023
19 May 2023



Public Participation in Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

Louth County Council is currently working on the drafting of the Dundalk Local Area Plan. As part of the planning process, a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is being conducted to minimise damage to the environment while ensuring that the town gets the development it needs. This SEA public participation process will allow your knowledge to be shared and your views to inform and influence the drafting of the plan.

This is also an opportunity to suggest what you consider to be an appropriate land use for the area.

Come and join us for a Neighbourhood Walk

Meet us at your most convenient meeting point and help us identify key aspects that need to be considered to take care of the local environment and develop the relevant areas.

Neighbourhood Walk: 16:30 sharp - 17:20.

The following map shows you the meeting points and important information specific to those locations.

Explore each meeting point and click to participate in a brief survey that will allow us to understand your concerns and aspirations for the areas.

Meeting Point A: Riverside Crescent

[Address link](#)

Castletown River Area

Dundalk benefits from its unique location along the Castletown River. This River is rich in ecology and biodiversity. The river flows into Dundalk Bay, which has

Click and participate in this survey to share your knowledge about environmental considerations in these areas.

[Local Knowledge Survey](#)

Join Us for the Community Mapping Workshop

Community Mapping Workshop: 18:00 - 19:00.

Location: Dundalk Library

54.004238, -6.397982 (coordinates)

[Address Link](#)

We want you to share your knowledge of the town and get your feedback to develop Dundalk sustainably.

Dundalk SEA Public Participation event.

Date: June 13th, 2023

16:30 sharp - 17:20 Neighbourhood Walk

17:20 - 17:30 Make way to Dundalk Library

17:30 - 17:45 Refreshments

17:45 - 18:00 Summary of Neighbourhood Walks

18:00 - 19:00 Community Mapping Workshop

19:00 - 19:30 Final reflections, Q&A

Let us know at which meeting point you will join us for the Neighbourhood Walk. This information will help us organise the event.

[Attendance Survey](#)

Get in touch if you have questions.

DundalkLAP@louthcoco.ie

Event by:

Louth County Council, CAAS Environmental Services Ltd., Environmental Protection Agency, Office of the Planning Regulator, University College Dublin, and Levett-Therivel Sustainability Consultants

Activity materials

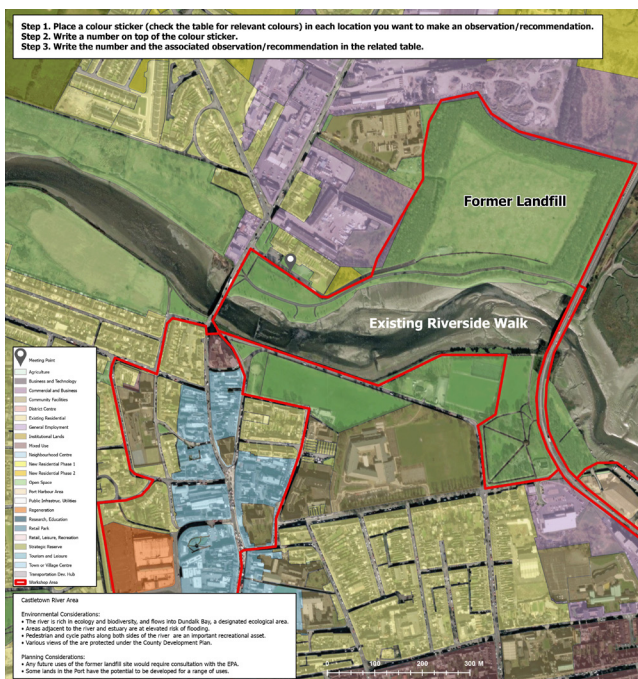
1 | Neighbourhood walk

This activity focused on identifying the existing strengths and weaknesses of four key locations in the town. For each neighbourhood walk, a meeting point and a project team to guide the walk were established. Participants were given a printed colour map of the areas and green/red stickers to mark the positive and negative aspects of these areas. The project team took notes of the issues raised.



2 | Community mapping workshop

This aimed to address future development and identify potential issues and solutions related to SEA themes (e.g. climate change, water provision and quality, wildlife, soil and land cover). Participants were provided with a map and coloured stickers (one colour for each SEA theme), to identify zones that could be affected, and a table, to note potential issues and recommended solutions related to each of the SEA themes.



Visited Area:

Strategic environmental assessment topic	How future development of the area should deal with this topic
Climate change (e.g. flood risk, energy/transport and GHG emissions)	(Potential) issues in the visited area (if any) – Record any locations with a numbered yellow dot
	Recommended solutions/actions to improve the area in relation to this topic – Record any locations with a yellow dot
Water provision, water quality	(Potential) issues in the visited area (if any) – Record any locations with a numbered blue dot
	Recommended solutions/actions to improve the area in relation to this topic – Record any locations with a blue dot
Wildlife, nature, soil and land cover	(Potential) issues in the visited area (if any) – Record any locations with a numbered white dot
	Recommended solutions/actions to improve the area in relation to this topic – Record any locations with a white dot
Health, transport, air quality	(Potential) issues in the visited area (if any) – Record any locations with a numbered purple dot
	Recommended solutions/actions to improve the area in relation to this topic – Record any locations with a purple dot
Heritage, townscape, landscape	(Potential) issues in the visited area (if any) – Record any locations with a numbered orange dot
	Recommended solutions/actions to improve the area in relation to this topic – Record any locations with an orange dot

Appendix C | International Good Practice Examples of Public Participation

Participation level: consult
Good practice method: public survey

Plan name: Sintra's Municipal Master Plan, Portugal^a

A public survey was sent to the entire municipality, complementing a workshop with key stakeholders, asking about the five most positive aspects of Sintra and the five aspects that most needed improvement. The survey received 2282 answers (1.3% of Sintra's population). The plan's strategic objectives were modified to incorporate the key recommendations from this participation process: the inclusion of ecosystem services and their valuation, and the promotion of activities associated with the coastal area.

^aMonteiro, M.B. and Partidário, M.R., 2017. Governance in strategic environmental assessment: Lessons from the Portuguese practice. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 65, 125-138.

Participation level: involve/collaborate
Good practice method: neighbourhood walks

Plan name: Local Spatial Plan for Nembro, Italy^a

Six neighbourhood walks took place, one for each neighbourhood, with 20–30 local residents participating in each walk. During the walk, participants were asked to point out places they deemed to be relevant to the community or to have particular problems. They identified degraded areas, areas lacking accessibility and areas with safety issues, annotating them on a map. A final workshop with all participants reviewed all the findings to reach a consensus. This information was then incorporated into the SEA ER and used to steer the definition of the plan's objectives and actions.

^aBonifazi, A., Rega, C. and Gazzola, P., 2011. Strategic environmental assessment and the democratisation of spatial planning. *Journal of Environmental Assessment Policy and Management* 13(1): 9-37.

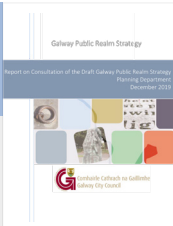
Participation level: involve/collaborate
Good practice method: focus groups

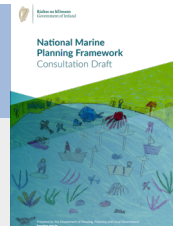
Plan name: Local Energy Planning, Sweden^a

Three participative and iterative workshops were undertaken with citizen representatives (lay people, members of local business and industry) that enabled a basic analysis of energy systems, to define the vision of the plan, develop alternatives and identify associated actions/projects. The environmental concerns and measures proposed by the citizens informed and influenced the plan.

^aIvner, J., Björklund, A.E., Dreborg, K.-H., Johansson, J., Viklund, P. and Widlund, H., 2010. New tools in local energy planning: Experimenting with scenarios, public participation and environmental assessment. *Local Environment* 15(2): 105-120.

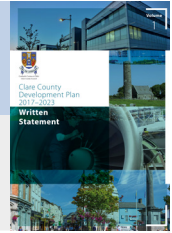
Appendix D | National Good Practice Examples of Public Participation

<p>Participation level: inform/consult Good practice method: workshops and live tours</p>	
<p>Plan name: Galway Public Realm Strategy 2019^a</p>	
<p>A communication strategy was developed at the beginning of the plan-making process, and a hybrid approach of online and in-person consultation events was adopted. Consultation stalls were erected on key thoroughfares to raise awareness of the plan-making and SEA processes, and focused workshops were conducted with key stakeholders, with SEA and plan-making team representatives present at these events. In addition, live tours were delivered to local inhabitants to identify problems and gather their visions regarding streets and public spaces. The issues identified included drainage, commuting and climate change mitigation; these informed the policies and design interventions of the strategy.</p>	
<p>^aAvailable at: https://www.galwaycity.ie/public-realm-strategy</p>	

<p>Participation level: inform/consult Good practice method: themed meetings and submission portal</p>	
<p>Plan name: National Marine Planning Framework 2021-2040^a</p>	
<p>Meetings were held around the country, over a 6-month period, on key issues for each of the sectors considered in plan-making, and structured around themes (e.g. fisheries in Killybegs; offshore renewable energy in Arklow). The meetings were conducted in a “town hall” format, with an expert in the particular theme sitting on the panel alongside the in-house SEA team and SEA consultants. Rather than attempting to record specific feedback at these meetings, participants were directed to the online submissions portal. Issues relating to marine spatial planning were communicated using X (formerly known as Twitter) and newspaper advertisements. A new GIS (geographic information system) map viewer was developed for public information, and reports detailing the consultation outcomes were prepared at each stage. Feedback from the meetings and online submissions helped inform the SEA and further develop the mitigation measures contained in the framework.</p>	
<p>^aAvailable at: https://assets.gov.ie/41184/cbff0d0d79284cc883f245a629f6b8e6.pdf</p>	

Participation level: inform/consult

Good practice method: open town-hall meetings and targeted events



Plan name: Clare County Development Plan 2017-2023^a

In-person events were held in individual town/community halls, with a high number of events in an informal setting enabling significant public participation. Events were held in the evening with an open window of 2.5 hours, where people could drop into the community centre, have a cup of tea, and talk about the plan/environmental issues with both the plan-making and the SEA teams. Display boards were used to explain the plan-making and SEA processes. Young people were also invited to participate, targeted through a series of school events. The submissions received influenced decision-making by providing baseline information that helped shape the SEA's mitigation recommendations. These informed the zoning designations and policies of the plan.

^aAvailable at: <https://www.clarecoco.ie/services/planning/ccdp2017-2023/vol1/clare-county-development-plan-2017-2023-volume-1-written-statement-24125.pdf>

Participation level: inform/consult

Good practice method: roadshow events and storytelling



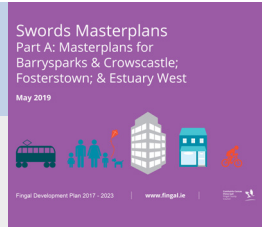
Plan name: Shannon Tourism Master Plan 2020-2030^a

A roadshow was held, with in-person events at three locations and attended by approximately 100 people at each event. The events featured presentations and workshops revolving around storytelling. People meaningfully engaged, as everyone had a story to tell about their area. There was a facilitator at each table who wrote down stories, and these were shared with the rest of the participants to elicit feedback. The agreed stories were directly integrated into the plan by developing them into visitor experiences.

^aAvailable at: <https://www.waterwaysireland.org/shannon-masterplan>

Participation level: inform/consult

Good practice method: consultation committee

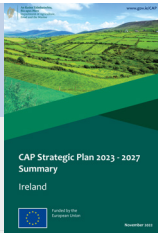


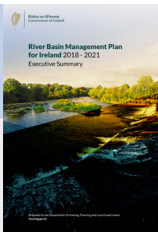
Plan name: Swords Master Plans 2019^a

A series of workshops were run, where participants were divided into groups, discussed issues and annotated map boards. They identified opportunities and constraints associated with the identified site and marked these on maps showing the previous land use zoning. They were aided by pictures illustrating different land use types, residential densities, connectivity, etc. These opportunity and constraints maps informed the drafting of planning zones.

^aAvailable at: <https://www.fingal.ie/swords-masterplans-may-2019>

<p>Participation level: inform/consult Good practice method: individual online appointments</p>	
<p>Plan name: Limerick County Development Plan 2022-2028^a</p>	
<p>A mix of online and in-person group meetings were held. Most importantly, individuals could sign up for online appointments, which were held over 2 full days and were attended by a representative cross-section of people (e.g. rural and city dwellers) who asked questions about the plan and raised their concerns. These informed both the SEA and plan-making process.</p> <p>^aAvailable at: https://www.limerick.ie/council/services/planning-and-property/limerick-development-plan/limerick-development-plan-2022-8</p>	

<p>Participation level: inform/consult Good practice method: consultation committee</p>	
<p>Plan name: Common Agricultural Policy 2023-2027^a</p>	
<p>A consultation committee was set up as part of the plan-making process, with about 200 different members, including representatives from environmental NGOs and farming groups. There was regular communication with the committee. Scoping and alternatives workshops were also held, where participants formed groups and worked through the same set of five or six key questions. This informed the development of the policy.</p> <p>^aAvailable at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/76026-common-agricultural-policy-cap-post-2020/</p>	

<p>Participation level: inform/consult Good practice method: consultation committee</p>	
<p>Plan name: National River Basin Management Plan 2018-2021^a</p>	
<p>A dedicated project webpage was published, which included an online survey. Public information meetings and workshops were delivered during a 6-month public consultation process. A total of 938 submissions were received from private individuals and groups, which were brought together in a comprehensive consultation document. In addition, the Local Authority Waters and Communities Office delivered 120 in-person and online public information meetings, and gathered over 1000 submissions. The plan was influenced by this feedback, reflected in expanded policies, additional supporting information and new policies. A new collaborative approach to drinking water source protection was also created as a result of consultation.</p> <p>^aAvailable at: https://assets.gov.ie/131979/f92ad5f1-0c6a-42a5-9c94-73057c118e9e.pdf</p>	

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