



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

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## Identifying pressures

The SEAWAY project aims to address two practical challenges in the implementation of strategic environmental assessments (SEAs): the need for effective public participation in SEA, and the need for strong key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure overall SEA effectiveness.

Public participation is mandatory under Directive 2001/42/EC on SEA and should be viewed as an opportunity for knowledge co-creation. It provides a platform to facilitate stakeholders' learning, to co-design sustainability solutions and to inform decision-making. Public participation in SEA can also help reduce stakeholder opposition to development. Despite its widely acknowledged benefits, SEA public participation is generally limited worldwide. This project aims to improve public engagement in SEA across Ireland for optimised assessment outcomes.

KPIs are measurable values that demonstrate how effective SEAs are in achieving their objectives. Previous research on SEA KPIs in Ireland has focused on procedural issues. SEA practice has significantly advanced since, and there is growing attention worldwide on other effectiveness dimensions, such as stakeholder involvement and achievement of sustainability goals. This research component aims to develop a KPI framework that covers all dimensions of SEA effectiveness.

## Informing policy

A guidance note on good practices was developed by SEAWAY to capture key principles for effective public participation and a defined participative process, with recommendations for preparing for public participation, informing and engaging the public, and integrating public feedback. The guidance note aims to support the work of planners within local/regional authorities and government departments, and private consultants who undertake SEA on behalf of public bodies.

The KPI framework identifies suitable and measurable KPIs to evaluate SEA outputs and outcomes to ensure the full range of dimensions for SEA effectiveness is covered. It enables a self-check for practitioners and will help to inform and structure the next review of effectiveness of SEA in Ireland.

## Developing solutions

This project responds to shortcomings identified in the Second Review of SEA Effectiveness in Ireland undertaken by the EPA (2020). The findings of the research highlight that effective SEA public participation involves a two-way process of communication and requires an inclusive and collaborative approach. Moreover, a willingness to learn from the public among planning and SEA teams, and institutional commitment to address current barriers to public participation, such as the allocation of adequate resources and time, are required.

Populating the 10 KPIs that were developed identified enduring shortcomings in current SEA practice, in particular with regard to public consultation, mitigation and monitoring. These KPIs provide a robust framework to measure and benchmark the effectiveness of SEA going forward.

The resulting public participation guidance note, supporting video for the public with information on how to get involved in the process, and KPI framework will continue to advance the effective implementation of the SEA Directive towards best practice.

