

Discussion paper: Helping our members working in EIA prove competence

How can the IES support members working in EIA prove that they are competent experts? **Robert Ashcroft** and **Adam Donnan** summarise the results of the IES's extensive consultation exercise.



In 2017, the UK Government transposed changes to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive (85/337/EEC) into UK law, through the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017.

The regulations state:

“(5) In order to ensure the completeness and quality of the environmental statement –

- (a) The developer must ensure that the environmental statement is prepared by competent experts; and*
- (b) The environmental statement must be accompanied by a statement from the developer outlining the relevant expertise or qualifications of such experts.”*

The IES should support its members in adapting to this change, and to develop and demonstrate their own competence. It is important to members that their professional body sets out clear policies and expectations, both for clarity, and to protect them in the event their competence is challenged under the new regulations.

This discussion paper summarises key outcomes of the series of consultation activities taken between April and July 2018 ([Box 1](#)).

Addressing complexity

A key finding from the consultation exercises – which will be fundamental to how the Institution proceeds in this area – is that a one-size-fits-all solution will not work. The engagements of IES members with EIAs is too complex and diverse for any one definition of competence, or any registration/certification system, to adequately reflect the understanding and experience required to competently undertake these activities.

Our research suggests that no single definition of a ‘competent expert’ exists. Furthermore, given the complexity of the EIA process, the successful development and industry-wide acceptance of such a definition is unlikely.

To address this complexity, in advance of our July workshop, attendees completed a short activity, outlining what levels of experience and/or qualifications they consider necessary for an individual to be deemed competent to undertake EIA work in a range of different roles. These questions were discussed in groups at the beginning of the workshop.

Some common themes emerged across all groups, most importantly that the relevance of an individual's experience is key to their competence to undertake work on a given project, and more significant than the number of years' experience.

Box 1: Process of engagement

April 2018: Member survey

In April 2018 an online survey was circulated to IES members to gather their perceptions on how the new regulations would impact their work, what adjustments they may need to make in their practice, and what they felt the IES should do to support them. Any member professionally engaged in work on EIAs was invited to respond, and 93 members completed the survey. Results showed a large diversity in the type of EIA roles and activities members are engaged in, as well as a broad range of views on how individuals would demonstrate their competence under the new regime.



March-June 2018: Further information gathering

The IES Policy & Communities Officer (PCO) and CEO, began a process of information gathering. Eleni Antoniades Snell, IES Council member and independent EIA consultant, assisted with information about the sector and invaluable advice on how to structure this process. The PCO held a series of one-to-one telephone consultations with IES members with a professional interest in EIA, to gather detailed information, and follow up on trends identified in the survey.



July 2018: Workshop

A workshop was held at the IES offices on the 12th July. The aims were to further our understanding of what ‘competence’ means for members engaged in work on EIAs, and to generate ideas on how the Institution can support members to achieve, maintain and demonstrate their competence in the context of the regulatory changes. Nine members attended in person. These members were all consultants, but professionally engaged in EIAs in a variety of different contexts, including as EIA co-ordinators, project managers and topic specialists or leads. No public sector representatives attended, and this is a gap in our consultation which we will seek to address in future activities.



August 2018: Discussion paper & consultation

This discussion paper summarises key outcomes of the series of consultation activities taken over the past four months. It is published alongside some consultation questions to seek further feedback from members on a range of potential activities the IES could undertake.

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Discussions also highlighted the range of different ways in which the 'EIA roles' we had identified are defined and act across different organisations. Differences in definitions and terminology across consultancies made comparative discussion difficult. A suggested alternative approach is to consider the different activities undertaken in the course of EIA work, rather than job titles/descriptions.

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Approaches

In this section we outline models for determining competence in different roles or activities, reflecting on the workshop's discussions.

Model 1: Competence in roles

An approach to understanding competence (whether adopting a 'role-based approach', or an 'activity-based approach') is through competence categories. Workshop participants defined four competence categories:

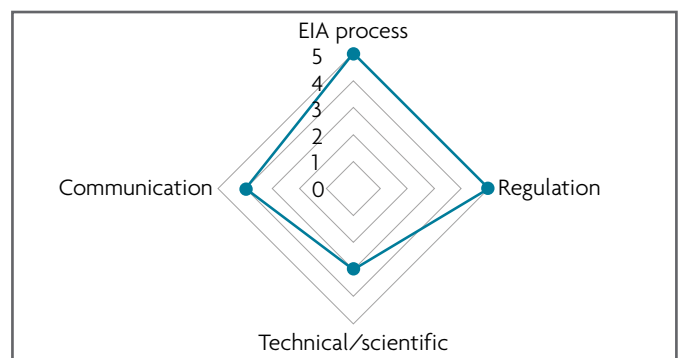
1. understanding of and ability to manage EIA process (including scoping and screening);
2. understanding of legislation and relevant regulations;
3. technical understanding (environmental, engineering and scientific)
4. communication skills, or the ability to effectively convey information.

Participants then weighted the categories' significance for a range of EIA roles. These short discussions yielded the graphs below (where 5 = extremely significant, and 0 = not significant at all), which may develop conceptual understanding of skill sets in different roles. These graphs are preceded in the summaries below by reflections on the key themes of discussions concerning what qualifications and/or experience are necessary to demonstrate competence in these roles.

EIA Reviewer/Project Lead

The workshop suggested that such a large variety of activities could fall under EIA Reviewer or Lead, that the category should probably be split. However, some common points did emerge:

- Project leads and reviewers need a good understanding, and ideally practitioner experience, across a range of topics and specialisms. This is important to be able to understand the implications and significance of specialist's findings, and the interlinkages between different elements of a project.
- Chartership is a useful qualification in demonstrating competence, but not sufficient on its own.



To undertake these activities, full understanding of EIA process and regulation is fundamental, with communication a key part of this work. A strong baseline of technical understanding is important to work across disciplines.

EIA Co-ordinator

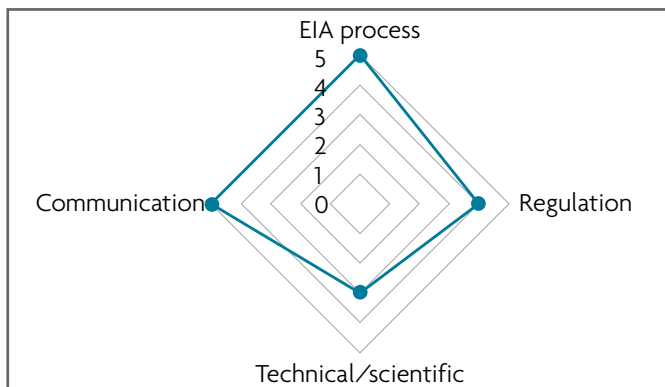
Putting aside differences in how the role of an EIA Co-ordinator is defined, discussion primarily focused on the core activities they undertake: project management and preparation of the environmental statement. However, co-ordinators require a wider skillset, and different projects may require these professionals to undertake different packages of responsibilities.

- Membership of a relevant professional body was consistently highlighted as important.
- Project management is a key skill, and a specific project management qualification may be beneficial.
- Organisational and communication skills are essential, as these professionals must work with a range of specialists to compile the environmental statement and may also have a client facing role.
- Co-ordinators need a broad knowledge across the range of disciplines included in an EIA, with a strong level of technical understanding, to enable them to work effectively with specialists.
- Excellent understanding of the EIA process and regulations are essential.

Co-ordinators, as the project managers and compilers of the environmental statement, again require a strong baseline of

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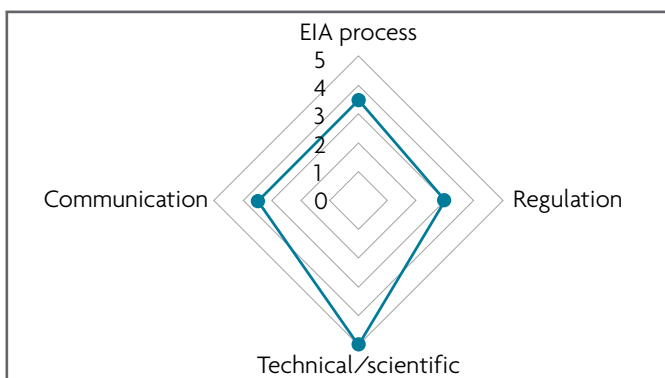
technical knowledge, but their understanding of the EIA process and regulations, and ability to communicate and interact effectively with clients and a wide range of specialists is most important.



Topic specialists

Competence was considered to be easier to define for topic specialists, where existing frameworks may already exist in the professional context.

- A relevant professional qualification and membership of the appropriate professional body is essential.
- An academic qualification in the specialism, or equivalent professional experience is required.
- Specialists should be able to demonstrate EIA-specific experience, as the requirements of impact assessment are specific, and professionals must be able to work appropriately within this framework.



The group highlighted that it would be beneficial to also differentiate the further responsibilities held by technical leads, who sign off specialist chapters. These individuals need to have strong communications and translation skills to demonstrate the significance of chapter findings in the context of the broader environmental statement.

Unsurprisingly, the workshop concluded that detailed topic-specific technical knowledge is crucial for topic specialists and technical leads. Technical leads may require stronger communication skills than other specialists.

Staff at Statutory Consultees & Planning/Competent Authority

The amended regulations require planning authorities to have access to “sufficient expertise”. The workshop felt that statutory consultee staff required a similar skill set to technical leads/topic specialists. Relevant practitioner and academic experience are important, as is an understanding of the commercial environment. Of course, a very strong understanding of the role of an EIA (to ensure adverse environmental consequences are avoided) and all relevant legislation is key.

Planning authority staff require a balanced skill set, with a good holistic overview of the technical elements of projects, strong communication skills, and a very good understanding of the regulatory and policy environment in which projects are taking place. Planning authority staff can be topic specialists, for example contaminated land specialist working at the planning authority.

It was noted by participants that individual competency can be undermined where Local Authorities are resource-limited. This can make it difficult for staff to build and demonstrate competence. Even when competent individuals are involved in projects, they may be unable to dedicate sufficient time to the work, so difficulties can arise. This is important context in which to consider competence in these roles. The IES needs to consider low-cost/free, easy-access solutions for this group.

Conclusions

It is interesting to note that the lowest weighting given to any category in the charts above is 2.5. This highlights the need for all EIA professionals to have a balanced skillset and broad cross-disciplinary knowledge. Active engagement in CPD activities is essential for maintaining this knowledge.

The above exercise reinforces that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work for EIA practitioners. The requirements of different EIA activities mean a universal method to demonstrate that an individual is a ‘competent expert’ will not work. Instead a more flexible approach, reflective of the complexities of EIA projects, will be necessary.

Model 2: Competence in activities

During the course of the discussions, participants highlighted differing definitions or ‘job descriptions’ which can be associated with the roles the IES team had presented for

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discussion. It seems terms such as 'EIA Co-ordinator', for instance, cannot and should not be considered to represent a static and consistent package of activities undertaken by a specific type of professional: in practice this will vary depending on the needs of a project, internal company structure, or a range of other variables.

As such, a more fine-grained approach, focusing in more detail on the types of activities undertaken by groups of professionals as part of an EIA, may be more appropriate.

Advantages of this approach

This 'activity-based approach' would lead to a fuller and more representative understanding of competence in the EIA context, which is more broadly applicable than a one which makes assumptions about individual roles and responsibilities within different professional contexts. This would enable companies and individuals to better assess their own competence, or that of others, to undertake different EIA responsibilities. From a development perspective, such an approach may also help professionals to better target their CPD activities to progress within their organisations and the profession as a whole.

Disadvantages of this approach

Given the complexity of EIA projects, solutions using this fine-grained approach would be challenging, time consuming and potentially costly to develop, monitor and maintain. Any solution developed must be efficient, transparent, and easy to understand in order to succeed.

Conclusions

Participants in our workshops favoured this approach, but recognised the challenges it brings. Therefore, although the IES will attempt to adopt this approach to its future engagements on EIA competence, this will be guided by the principles set out by the IES Council, to ensure that solutions do not become too unwieldy to manage or use for individuals or the Institution. As such, an approach based on a better understanding of the activities undertaken by environmental professionals as part of EIAs, but structured around some kind of categorisation system (be it role, or some other term) is likely to be most effective.

What's next?

Our consultation exercises indicate that multiple activities or solutions, with different levels of complexity, may be necessary. As set out in the working group's principles, the IES is committed to designing solutions which do not exclude any EIA participants either on the basis of role, complexity, or expense. As such, we are adopting a flexible approach to the next stage of this working group's work, and are keen to hear

further views from members on these, or any other ideas and suggestions.

"the IES is committed to designing solutions which do not exclude any EIA participants either on the basis of role, complexity, or expense."

The proposed activities are briefly outlined below in order of increasing complexity.

1. Publish IES guidance on the experience and qualifications necessary to demonstrate competence to undertake a range of different EIA roles or activities

Guidance would be reflective of the complexities outline, and favour the relevance of experience over a 'tick-box' approach.

2. Publish IES guidance on best-practice in undertaking certain EIA roles or activities

This guidance would be more detailed, addressing specific best practice in carrying out certain EIA responsibilities, for instance, acting as a co-ordinator to compile environmental statements, or programme a range of specialist investigations. The document would be prepared by a committee of experienced professionals and could include case studies.

3. Accredit relevant training courses

The IES could develop, accredit or certify training courses for practitioners, setting a minimum standard of formal training to undertake specific EIA activities.

4. Extend our CPD tool to cover EIA

Modifications could be made to the IES CPD tool, or could function as a separate online tool, to allow members to track EIA relevant project work or learning, to assist in developing and proving competence.

5. Develop a toolkit for self-assessment of competency

A scoring system could be developed, where academic or professional qualifications, CPD activities, and project-specific professional experience could be combined to produce a competence score. Weighting different activities, and setting a threshold for certification would be challenging. IT solutions could be developed to facilitate such a system.

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6. Develop a new register or individual certification for certain EIA roles or activities

Development of a new formal register – a new register specifically tailored to EIA professionals, based on assessment and peer review could be developed. This is the most complex solution proposed. This is most likely to be applicable to EIA leads or reviewers and could be addressed in several different ways. Such a programme could develop a form of ‘quality mark’ or certification for individuals to demonstrate their competence. Addressing the complexity of EIAs and the broad range of experience that may be required in some cases would be a challenge here.

The proposals outlined above are early stage ideas – the IES is considering all options with an open mind. To help us progress, we are keen to hear the views of as many members as possible on these ideas. To this end, we have created an online questionnaire. Feel free to discuss with any colleagues involved in EIA who are not members. The IES will review these comments and decide upon the next steps.

[Respond to the consultation questions](#) (closes 2nd October 2018)

Robert Ashcroft is the Policy & Communities Officer at the Institution of Environmental Sciences. He holds a BA in Geography and an MSc in Biodiversity, Conservation and Management. Prior to joining the IES in 2014 Robert worked as a researcher focusing on European biodiversity and nature conservation policy.

Adam Donnan has worked at the IES since 2006. In 2013 he was appointed as the organisation’s first CEO.

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