



# introduction

2004 may well prove to be significant year for the environment with some significant new pieces of legislation emerging nationally along with the emergence of the first regional plan for the East of England.

Information may well be the key to the future for environmental improvement and in 2004 we saw some significant additions to the legislation in this area. The Freedom of Information Act (2000) came into force on the 1st January 2005 as did the Environmental Information Regulations (2004) both of which will give the public a right of access to information held by public bodies relating to the environment and other matters. Together these pieces of legislation should promote a culture of openness and accountability within public bodies.

In addition on the 21st July 2004 the Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA) Directive was enacted within the UK. This directive requires the SEA of a wide range of plans and programmes and is intended to assist in providing a high level of protection for the environment and to contribute to the environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans with a view to promoting sustainable development. Initially this directive will apply to all land use plans prepared at the regional and local level as well as transport plans prepared by Highway Authorities and possibly some community plans. The findings of the SEA will have to be compiled in to an overall "Environmental Report" and published alongside the plan for public scrutiny.

2004 also saw the most significant reform of the Town and Country Planning System come into effect since its inception in 1947. The first elements of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act came into force in August 2004 with significant alterations to the development plan process in the abolition of County Structure Plans and Local Plans and the introduction of Local Development Frameworks. However the inclusion of a statutory purpose for planning to achieve sustainable development should be warmly welcomed.

The coming year (2005) will be a challenging one for all involved in the planning system, as they have to get to grips with the new planning act and respond to the Draft Regional Plan for the East of England which was issued in December 2004. This plan sets out a blueprint for development in the East of England region, including Hertfordshire up to 2021 and is out for consultation until the 16th March 2005. Information on the regional plan and how to make comments on the draft strategy can be found at [www.speakuphertfordshire.org.uk](http://www.speakuphertfordshire.org.uk).



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Front cover: The River Lee at Stanstead Abbots. Photograph by in-press.