

Health Impact Assessment

A Short Guide to

Informing Healthy Decisions



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Strategy

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Informing Healthy Decisions

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Informing healthy decisions



It is now recognised that many factors can influence health.

Some of the major ones, such as poverty, the environment, education, transport and housing, lie beyond the control of the health service.

Which is why local government, the voluntary sector and business – as well as the NHS – all have important contributions to make to improving people's health.

But, in practical terms, how can the health of communities and individuals be improved, and health inequalities reduced? A useful starting point is to ensure that all policies and practice across different sectors are properly assessed in terms of how they will impact on health.

Health Impact Assessment is the term used to describe this approach, and this guide introduces the key features involved.

The guide is complemented by a fuller resource that provides an in-depth review and offers some practical tools for adapting the approach to different situations. The resource is available on the London's Health website at:

www.londonhealth.gov.uk

There is no single 'right way' of introducing or implementing **Health Impact Assessment**. Accordingly, the guide, and the fuller resource, concentrate on offering managers and others practical help in developing an approach which will be effective in their particular circumstances.

Dr Sue Atkinson

Director of Public Health, NHS Executive London

Not just good on paper

This guide introduces you to the key features of health impact assessment, an approach which enables policy- and decision-makers at all levels in public and private sectors to:

- work with stakeholders in the community to identify the potential health impacts of particular policies, projects or programmes
- explore what is already known about health impacts associated with these kinds of development
- make informed decisions about the impacts that these policies, projects or programmes will have on the health of the local population.

Both guide and resource come from the Coalition for Health and Regeneration, as part of the drive to ensure that improving health is on everyone's agenda across London.

The proposal looks good on paper – but what does it mean for people's health?

Is this a question you ask routinely? Or – perhaps not?

Through the use of health impact assessment, you can explore answers to questions that always were important but were rarely asked. And you can use that information to make better decisions.

What is Health Impact Assessment – HIA?

It is a relatively new approach that has attracted a great deal of interest internationally, nationally and across London. In essence, it offers a route to understanding the potential health risks and benefits entailed in any proposal – and doing so in a rigorous fashion. At the same time, health impact assessment is nothing if not adaptable. It is designed to be sufficiently flexible to match both the resources and the responsibilities of decision-makers.

So what is HIA, exactly? You may find it helpful to think of it as having three distinct, though interrelated, aspects:

- as concept – what are the thinking and values underpinning HIA?
- as process – what basic steps are involved in carrying out HIA?
- as tool – what can it be used for?

Thinking and values underpinning HIA

There is an increasingly widespread view that more has to be done to stop people falling ill. This means tackling the root causes of illness and health inequality. And that means addressing many issues beyond the control of the NHS – like poverty, unemployment, poor housing, social exclusion, transport policies, and environmental issues, such as air pollution.

By equipping those inside and outside the health service with the means of assessing the health dimensions of their decisions, HIA offers a way of helping all sectors contribute to health improvement. In particular, HIA emphasises the need to:

- work towards sustainable development
- aim for fairness and equity for all
- target disadvantaged and marginalised groups
- encourage the full participation of those likely to be affected by the policy, programme or project
- make use of qualitative as well as quantitative evidence.

Which type of HIA?

There are essentially three types of HIA:

- prospective (conducted before a proposal is implemented)
- retrospective (conducted after implementation)
- concurrent (conducted during implementation).

A **prospective** HIA offers the opportunity to consider potential health impacts before a policy is implemented – and thus make adjustments that will maximise the beneficial effects and minimise any harmful effects on health.

Many organisations have found that by carrying out a **retrospective** HIA, they have learned a great deal to guide them in the future development of proposals – and have enlarged the evidence base for future HIAs.

The advantages of carrying out a **concurrent** HIA are that you can act promptly to counter any negative effects associated with implementation of the proposal, and that you can monitor the accuracy of predictions about potential health impacts.

Whether the immediate focus is on the past, present or future, HIA as an approach is geared to helping you to:

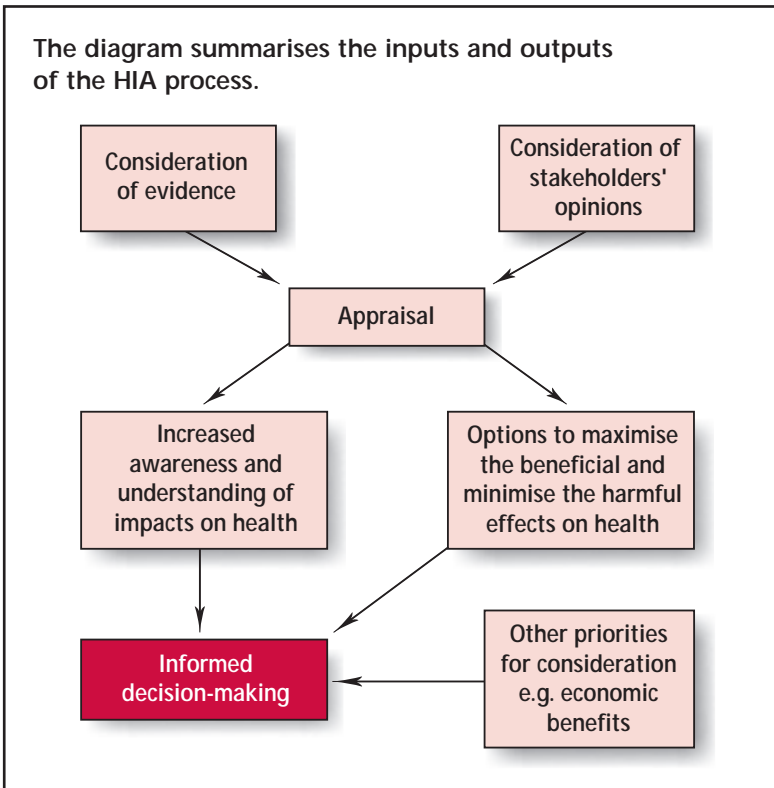
- **achieve better results**
- **identify and respond to health inequalities.**

Basic steps involved in carrying out HIA

There are five sequential core steps in HIA, as follows:

- screening
- scoping
- appraisal of the potential health effects/impacts
- decision-making
- monitoring and evaluation.

The diagram summarises the inputs and outputs of the HIA process.



Screening

Screening acts as a selection process during which policies, programmes and projects are quickly assessed for their potential to affect the health of the population. It offers a systematic way of deciding whether a health impact assessment is worth doing.

Scoping

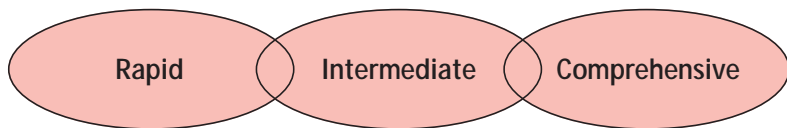
If, during the screening step, you decide that further investigation of health impacts is necessary, you are then ready to embark on scoping, the step that establishes firm foundations for the appraisal. Many organisations, especially when they are working in partnership, find it helpful at this point to set up a steering group to manage the HIA. Key tasks involved in scoping are: setting the boundaries for the appraisal of health impacts; agreeing the way in which the appraisal

will be managed; allocating responsibility for decision-making; and agreeing how to monitor and evaluate the HIA process and outcomes for health.

Appraisal of the potential health effects/impacts

Appraisal is the 'engine' of health impact assessment, moving the whole process along towards practical outcomes. Key activities during this step are: analysing the policy, programme or project; profiling the affected population; identifying and characterising the potential health impacts; reporting on the impacts; and making recommendations for the management of those impacts.

There are broadly three types of appraisal within HIA:



Many organisations use rapid appraisal as an entry point to HIA.

Decision-making

The decision-makers for any proposal may or may not regard health as a central issue. For example, they may prioritise economic benefits over health. And the decision-makers may or may not be part of the steering group for the HIA – it all depends on who agreed to take part during the scoping step of the HIA process. But, whether or not it has the power to make direct decisions on the proposal being considered, the steering group will be in a position to make recommendations to the decision-makers on the potential changes that can be made to a proposal to minimise its harmful impacts and maximise the health gain.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation provide valuable insight into the ways in which it is possible to:

- improve the process of HIA
- modify future proposals so as to achieve health gain
- assess the accuracy of predictions made during appraisal.

What can HIA be used for?

HIA is a tool designed to bring public health issues into the foreground of policy- and decision-making – in short, to make public policy healthy. It serves as a support to decision-making, not a substitute for it. Complex judgements still have to be made; arguments have to be developed and presented; and difficult decisions have to be taken.

However, a core strength of HIA as a tool is that its recommendations can be based on the participation of a wide range of stakeholders, working on an equal footing to provide a fully considered view on issues affecting the health of the local community. HIA has both intellectual and democratic legitimacy.

HIA is particularly useful to managers in the public, not-for-profit and private sectors who are concerned with the following activities and areas of work:

- policy development and analysis
- strategy development and planning
- commissioning or providing services
- resource allocation and capital investment
- community participation/service user involvement
- community development and planning
- preparing or assessing funding bids (for example, SRB, NDC).

Why is HIA important?

Some of the core reasons have already been mentioned – for example, bringing the public health agenda into mainstream decision-making. But there are also several specific drivers for introducing HIA into the work of organisations and partnerships.

Responding to public concern about health

Poll after poll makes it clear that the public are deeply concerned about their health. Accordingly, the organisation or partnership carrying out HIA as an integral part of its work programme can transmit a clear message that it cares about its population and is able to respond constructively to concerns.

Demonstrating health gain as added value

As you have seen, HIA is designed to help organisations make sure, at the very least, that their policies and programmes do not actively damage health. In favourable circumstances, the approach can be used to promote health gain for the local population and to reduce health inequalities. With a social renewal or regeneration programme, for example, health gain is increasingly viewed as an important outcome rather than as a by-product of the programme.

In a situation too where public sector services are provided on a basis of value for money, health gain from non-health policies represents added value from the resources invested.

Responding to Government priorities – and those of London

Central Government has made a commitment to assess major new Government policies for their impact on health. Clear messages have also been sent to decision-makers at a local level that:

- health impact assessment should be used to inform policy- and decision-making at a local level not only within organisations but also within partnerships
- health and local authorities are to act as champions for health when working or liaising with other organisations – one implication of which is the promotion of the use of health impact assessment.

In London, HIA will prove extremely useful to the Mayor and Greater London Assembly who have a responsibility to promote health, equality and sustainability. Members of the Coalition for Health and Regeneration, which is helping to take forward the London Health Strategy, will also find HIA very useful in their individual areas of concern.

Developing effective partnership working – inside and outside the organisation

The core activity of HIA – working together for a common purpose with people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives – gives rise to significant opportunities for joint learning and co-operation. Many organisations and individuals have already learned a great deal through involvement in partnerships like Health Improvement Programmes (HImps) and Health Action Zones (HAZs). HIA presents a further way of developing and building on this learning and networking.

How can you get started?

HIA has a great deal to offer – to the community, to partnerships, to organisations, and to individuals working within these organisations. But there can be sometimes be an understandable hesitation from some senior managers about introducing the approach into their organisations. They might point to the following factors, for example:

- limited resources – not enough time, money, personnel or facilities
- an already overcrowded agenda (for public sector agencies in particular)
- in some areas and for some sectors, a tradition of minimal public or community involvement
- lack of expertise or skills in health impact assessment.

It is important, therefore, to prepare carefully for the introduction of HIA. This will help reduce risks and maximise tangible outcomes.

Steps to consider include:

- identifying learning points from the experience of others – the case-studies in **A Resource for Health Impact Assessment** will give you a flying start here
- raising awareness about HIA
- identifying expertise that already exists within the organisation/ partnership and could be deployed in support of HIA
- deciding on an appropriate entry point for carrying out HIA.

Raising awareness about HIA

HIA is a relatively new approach and, as such, has attracted a fair amount of myth and misconception. Several organisations have found it helpful to begin their work by holding an introductory seminar or workshop. Presentation of accurate and interesting information about HIA can be followed up by free discussion on the potential benefits and barriers associated with the approach.

It is important that elected members and non-executive directors as well as staff have the opportunity to explore the HIA approach. Indeed, in at least one case, an open session with council members led to further development events and then to the passing of a council motion to carry out HIA on important policies.

Identifying and using existing expertise

One of the basic principles of HIA is that all stakeholders' views are accorded the same respect, regardless, say, of the funding of the proposal or of the assessment itself. Indeed, much of the value and creativity of the assessment lies in bringing different voices together and creating a new sound.

However, the prospect of setting up and working through an assessment can be daunting. At the appraisal stage, one chief executive of a PCG commented in a worried fashion, 'I can't do this. I need an epidemiologist.' In fact, she went on to offer incisive insights into the different scenarios that emerged during the stakeholder workshop. It was also true, however, that the public health specialists there offered valuable 'framing' information and suggested fruitful lines of inquiry.

The moral is that a public health specialist is not needed to set up HIA – but it is very helpful, and confidence building for everyone, to be able to draw on public health skills during assessment. These skills, of course, can come from a wide range of people – community nurses, for example, as well as public health physicians.

Entry points for HIA – rapid appraisal and policy review

Because it can be undertaken in a short space of time and does not require the intensive use of resources, **rapid appraisal** offers many organisations and partnerships a real and appealing opportunity to make a practical start in HIA.

Like rapid appraisal, **policy review** can be undertaken in a short space of time and does not require the intensive use of resources. Another potential advantage it offers to those undertaking HIA for the first time is that it does not require the participation of all stakeholders. Policy review is usually undertaken by the officers employed in an organisation or working for a partnership.

Finding out more

If you want to explore health impact assessment in more depth, you'll find it useful to check out the fuller HIA resource:

A Resource for Health Impact Assessment

This is available on the London's Health website

www.londonhealth.gov.uk and you can dip into and print out different parts as you need them.

It is a substantial resource, containing three main parts. At the start of the sections in the first two parts, an overview highlights the main issues covered; while at the end of each of these sections, review questions support you in exploring the potential relevance of the key points to your own organisation and/or partnership.

Part I Introducing health impact assessment

Key terms and concepts have been used in rather different ways by different writers and practitioners. Accordingly, Part I of the resource aims to:

- draw together the key terms and the range of current usage so that you can be clear what writers and practitioners means by terms like 'stakeholder', 'community', or 'qualitative evidence'
- present an overview of the subject – both of the health impact assessment framework/ process as a whole and of its constituent parts and how they fit into the framework/ process.

Part II Applying health impact assessment

HIA is a tool designed to support policy- and decision- making. It is well suited to fulfilling many of the requirements set down by central Government and called for by London's Coalition for Health and Regeneration. But, as with the successful use of any tool, careful preparation is rewarded. Part II explores the work that needs to be done before embarking on HIA – and outlines some suitable entry points.

Part III Resources for health impact assessment

Much work, academic and practical, has been done on HIA; much remains to be done – and on a continuous basis. Part III offers you a starting point for finding out more. You have the opportunity to explore the range of models and approaches currently used in HIA. You are referred to relevant websites and bibliographies which can help you deepen and extend your understanding of HIA. And made available to you is a unique **collection of case-studies** which describe the use of HIA in a wide range of situations -- a rich source of learning points for anyone embarking on HIA.

Contents of fuller HIA resource

Part 1 Introducing health impact assessment

Section 1, What is HIA?

Section 2, The process of HIA

Part II Applying health impact assessment

Section 3, Understanding why HIA is important

Section 4, Preparing to introduce HIA into your organisation/partnership

Section 5, Embarking on HIA

Part III, Resources for health impact assessment

Section 6, Models of HIA

Section 7, Sources of further information

Section 8, Case-studies.

Websites for further information on HIA

London's Health website: www.londonhealth.gov.uk

Our Healthier Nation website: www.ohn.gov.uk



I am pleased to support this Short Guide to Health Impact Assessment (as well as the fuller supporting resource) developed by the London Region NHS Executive as a contribution to improving London's Health. I said in my manifesto that 'improving the health of Londoners is a central objective of all the Mayor and Assembly's policies.' This guide will be a vital tool in helping to ensure health is a central element to all our strategies. It will also be of particular value to members of the new London Health Commission which will be helping drive through improvements in health for all Londoners.

Ken Livingstone

Mayor of London



I want to see this guide used to improve the health of everyone in the capital, and the health of the worst off in particular. Nationally, the government is reinvigorating and transforming our health services into a new NHS. Let us play our part in London – it will be vital in assessing our policies at the Greater London Assembly to ensure that public money is invested to promote and support healthier Londoners.

Trevor Phillips

Chair of the Greater London Assembly

