

## **Supporting HIA in practice**

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## **Abstract / Summary**

Health impact assessment (HIA) is a process that aims to predict potential positive and negative effects of project, programme or policy proposals on health and health inequalities. It is recommended by national government and internationally.

Supporting health impact assessment is one of the roles of English Public Health Observatories.

The few centres in England with accredited health impact training centres have inadequate resources to meet demand. Currently, the London Health Observatory is providing the bulk of the training nationally. Some Public Health Observatories are currently investigating the preferences for support of those commissioning or conducting health impact assessment within their regions.

The availability of published guidance on how to conduct health impact assessments has increased substantially over the past few years. The Department of Health has funded a research project led by the London Health Observatory to develop advice for reviewing evidence for use in health impact assessment. Completed health impact assessments can be useful resources. Evaluation of the process and impact of health impact assessment is important in order to demonstrate its usefulness and to learn lessons for the future.

The focus for Public Health Observatories is to train and support others to conduct health impact assessment according to good practice, rather than undertaking health impact assessments themselves. The aim is to create sufficient skilled capacity around the country to undertake health impact assessments. The London Health Observatory plans to share its support models and to roll out a train the trainer programme nationally to enable effective local delivery of their national health impact assessment programme.

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**Keywords.**

Health impact assessment (HIA); Public health observatory (PHO); Training;

## ***Introduction***

Health impact assessment (HIA) has been defined as “a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, programme or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population”.<sup>[1]</sup> It is a phrase that is used increasingly often<sup>2;3;3;4;4</sup>, both within public health and outside the health sector, including by local and regional government. Health impact assessment is a process that aims to identify positive and negative effects on health and on inequalities of project, programme or policy proposals.<sup>[5;6]</sup> By gathering and interpreting evidence about potential health impacts and presenting the conclusions and recommendations to decision-makers in a timely and relevant manner, this information can be included in the decision-making process to help mitigate harm and increase health benefits.<sup>[7]</sup>

The value of health impact assessment has increasingly been recognised in the UK over the last decade. In 1992, *The Health of the Nation* white paper made explicit mention of the impact on health of government policies in non-health areas and of the need to assess these.<sup>[8]</sup> The first UK government publication in this area, *Policy Appraisal and Health*<sup>[9]</sup>, considered only economic appraisal. This is still the main approach taken in the regulatory impact assessment required in England, although properly conducted, comprehensive cost benefit analyses are the exception.<sup>10</sup>

*In the past six years, both regional<sup>11;12</sup> and national<sup>13-16</sup> initiatives have encouraged health impact assessment as part of planning and policymaking in the UK.*

The 1998 English Green (discussion) Paper, *Our Healthier Nation*, acknowledged the impact of government policy in non-health areas, such as housing, employment, and education, on physical and mental health. It promised that:

*“The Government will apply health impact assessment to its relevant key policies, so that when they are being developed and implemented, the consequences of these policies for our health is considered.”<sup>17</sup>*

A subsequent White Paper, *Saving Lives – Our Healthier Nation*, offered further incentives to undertake health impact assessments both locally and nationally.<sup>14</sup>

*“major new Government policies should be assessed for their impact on health. . . . This assessment process is important because it acknowledges for the first time the relationship between health and the impact of Government policy generally. We intend to make health impact assessment a part of the routine practice of policy-making in Government.”<sup>14</sup>*

Although other factors also influence decision-making, the National Assembly for Wales welcomed health impact assessment as a tool to help ensure that decisions are informed by an understanding of their health impacts.<sup>18</sup> The Scottish Executive identified health impact assessment as:

*“an ‘essential step’ towards placing health at the centre of the decision making process.”<sup>19</sup>*

The 2004 Wanless report commissioned by the Treasury (Finance Ministry) recommended assessment of future health impacts of major policy developments.<sup>16</sup>

The White Paper *Choosing Health*<sup>20</sup> refers to HIA as a tool for ‘health inequality proofing’ government policies.

Integrated impact assessment (IIA) is related to health impact assessment and is a method whereby health and inequalities are integrated into Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Sustainability Appraisal (SA). The London Health Observatory is an active partner in helping shape an integrated impact assessment approach to the five Sub-Regional Development Frameworks (SRDFs) being developed by the Greater London Authority.

Public Health Observatories, created in 2001 following the 1999 White Paper *Saving Lives – Our Healthier Nation*<sup>14</sup>, were given a primary function to advise on methods of health and health inequality impact assessments. The Acheson report<sup>13</sup> had recommended the introduction of health inequalities impact assessment but the consensus is that consideration of inequalities and potential impacts on specific disadvantaged groups is an integral part of health impact assessment<sup>[5]</sup>, although it is often included in a non-structured way.<sup>[6]</sup>

### ***Capacity Building***

The Public Health Observatories' main remit is to support others to conduct health impact assessment according to best practice rather than conduct or commission health impact assessments themselves. This involves provision of formal health impact assessment training; signposting to key sources of evidence for health impact assessments; responding to ad hoc queries; linking to resources and people who are able to conduct commissioned health impact assessments; and becoming involved in regional and national planning for health impact assessments.

## **Training**

Few centres in England have accredited health impact training centres. At present a few centres share the responsibility for training for health impact assessment across England.

*INSERT BOX 1 AROUND HERE*

## **Support through networks**

A number of email networks have been set up. The UK JICSMAIL and World Health Organization (WHO) networks are used for information exchange and support, with any member being able to post messages. A third email group comprises those who have entered their details on the English Health Development Agency's HIA Gateway website (Box 2) and requested a monthly email update, which is primarily about new resources on that site.

Some Public Health Observatories are currently investigating preferred support options of those commissioning or conducting health impact assessment locally within their regions.

## ***Ready availability of information***

### **Process**

The availability of published guidance on how to conduct health impact assessments has increased substantially over the past few years. An early summary was provided by the then Northern and Yorkshire Public Health Observatory.<sup>21</sup> Particularly useful

are the Merseyside guidelines <sup>12</sup>; the London toolkit <sup>22</sup>; the Faculty of Public Health guidance on rapid appraisal <sup>23:24</sup> and the recent comprehensive book titled 'Health Impact Assessment' <sup>6</sup>. The Health Development Agency has published a series of useful best practice health impact assessment leaflets on screening <sup>25</sup>, influencing the decision-making process <sup>26</sup>, addressing inequalities <sup>27</sup> and evaluation <sup>28</sup> and has reviewed existing reviews for evidence for the use of health impact assessment. <sup>29</sup>

A PubMed search in August 2004 found few items about health impact assessment; most of these described the potential benefits of health impact assessment and/or discussed methodological issues. The best source of published information on health impact assessment has been the internet. A Google search for 'health impact assessment' in August 2004 found 23,900 hits. The most comprehensive website is the Health Development Agency's HIA Gateway (Box 2).

## **Evidence**

There have been calls for the ready availability of good quality, generalisable, "off-the-shelf" reviews of evidence to reduce duplication of effort, improve quality, increase timeliness, and ensure local resources for health impact assessment are used most effectively to focus on local data knowledge and participation. <sup>30:31</sup> The Department of Health, under its Policy Research Programme, has funded a project led by the London Health Observatory to develop advice for reviewing evidence for use in health impact assessment ([www.lho.org.uk/HIA/Research\\_HIA.htm](http://www.lho.org.uk/HIA/Research_HIA.htm)). <sup>32</sup> This framework includes both minimum standards for a brief review and additional elements for a more comprehensive review.

## **Case studies**

Completed health impact assessments can be useful resources for generic or specific pointers as well as lessons learnt. Those having completed a health impact assessment are encouraged to post their work on the HIA Gateway website, which acts as a library of downloadable health impact assessment reports (Box 1).

*INSERT BOX 2 AROUND HERE*

## **Evaluation**

This is the most neglected aspect of health impact assessment, as often happens with new techniques. It is important not only so those involved with health impact assessment can learn lessons for the future but also to examine whether undertaking a health impact assessment was a worthwhile use of resources. The few that have been undertaken have demonstrated health impact assessment's usefulness in amending proposals and increasing local and regional government understanding of the importance of their decisions on determinants of health.<sup>33</sup>

Three types of evaluation have been described.<sup>[5;34</sup> *Process* evaluation examines the process of conducting the actual health impact assessment. This has been undertaken for health impact assessments of four of the London mayoral strategies<sup>35</sup>, a health impact assessment of a proposal to develop an airfield site<sup>36</sup>, and a health impact assessment of a proposal to create a commercial airport.<sup>37</sup> An *impact* evaluation, that examined the effect of a health impact assessment on decisions made subsequently, was conducted on a health impact assessment of another of the mayor's draft strategies.<sup>38</sup> *Outcome* evaluation, that assess what the eventual health impacts were and whether the health impact assessment predictions and recommendation were

correct is a longterm process that has not yet been conducted. Advice on evaluating a health impact assessment has been published.<sup>28</sup>

There is little support for evaluation in practice. Problems occur because evaluation is not planned at the outset and there is poor resourcing. Understanding the value of health impact assessment is key to obtaining support from central government and senior managers locally to undertake future health impact assessments.

### ***Supporting specific health impact assessments***

The London Health Observatory has been highly active in this support role. A key example of this has been the London Health Observatory's support of the health impact assessments on the London Mayoral Draft Strategies (Box 2 and 3).<sup>34;38;39</sup> Members of the London Health Observatory team were part of the core steering group which developed the process for and organised the health impact assessments. The health impact assessments took place at the draft stage, prior to public consultation.

Recommendations presented in the health impact assessments were taken into account and changes incorporated into the final strategies. This presented a great opportunity to embed health into the work of the Greater London Authority (GLA), which exercises its duty to consider *"the effect which the proposed strategy or revision would have on the health of persons in Greater London"*.<sup>40</sup>

The Eastern Region Public Health Observatory (ERPHO) has supported various transport related health impact assessments, including Alconbury Airfield<sup>41</sup> and Cambridgeshire transport plans.

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The London Health Observatory health impact assessment team have also advised on the steering committee for the health impact assessments of the Kings Cross Channel Tunnel Rail Link, London's 2012 Olympic bid.

The South East Public Health Observatory (SEPHO) provided an introductory session on health impact assessment and a stakeholder workshop for people involved in the Thames Gateway development in preparation for the health impact assessment on this. The Eastern Region Public Health Observatory have conducted information workshops in Cambridgeshire.

In 2004, the South East Public Health Observatory and the Yorkshire and Humber Public Health Observatory (YHPHO) joined the London Health Observatory in having staff roles dedicated specifically to health impact assessment. This extra capacity will allow for more local support of health impact assessment, including better meeting training needs and a contribution to research.

### ***What is needed for the future***

Just like needs assessment and other analytical tools for assessing population health, capacity building in health impact assessment is crucial for its robust use. Provision for health impact assessment should be written into job descriptions across health and non-health sectors to allocate protected time and other resources to enable staff to use this tool to address health and health inequalities across the wider community.

The London Health Observatory plans to share its support models and to train trainers nationally to enable effective local delivery of their national health impact assessment programme. The London Health Observatory is therefore working with colleagues

across the country to determine the need for a “Training the trainer” course to enable each region to develop its own capacity to deliver training and ongoing support to public health, other NHS and local authority staff and other individuals within their own region who are interested or required to understand the principles of health impact assessment or commission, conduct, or use health impact assessments.

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### **Box 1 HIA Training**

- **IMPACT:**

The International Health Impact Assessment Consortium at Liverpool University ([www.ihia.org.uk/](http://www.ihia.org.uk/)) has run a five-day course twice a year since 1999. They also conduct half day, one-day and two day bespoke courses in HIA. A tailored 'apprenticeship' approach is also being trialled by a number of project teams who want involvement in health impact assessments. IMPACT also delivers a half module on HIA as part of the Masters in Public Health (MPH) at the University of Liverpool, and contributes to post-graduate modules in Public Health at John Moores University and Chester University College.

- **Public Health Observatories:**

The London Health Observatory (LHO, [www.lho.org.uk/hia.htm](http://www.lho.org.uk/hia.htm)) runs two types of courses in central London: a one-day Introduction to HIA course, run ten times per year, and a four-day HIA in Practice course, run three times per year. The LHO also runs external courses for other organisations, planned on an individual basis. Interest in these courses are increasingly from outside London, including health authorities, primary care trusts, local government, and public health training schemes, including Universities who have commissioned the London Health Observatory to conduct a health impact assessment module as a component of the curriculum. A three day training module has also been developed for training for external organisations. The London Health Observatory and the South East Public Health Observatory (SEPHO [www.sepho.org.uk](http://www.sepho.org.uk)) are currently developing a bespoke training module for public health trainees in conjunction with their postgraduate deaneries. At the time of writing, SEPHO were conducting a needs assessment on health impact assessment training, with a view to developing a training program. The Eastern Region Public Health

Observatory (ERPHO [www.erpho.org.uk](http://www.erpho.org.uk)) have conducted adhoc training sessions in conjunction with an external HA Consultant in Cambridgeshire.

- HIARU:

Birmingham University's Health Impact Assessment Research Unit

([www.publichealth.bham.ac.uk/hiaru/index.htm](http://www.publichealth.bham.ac.uk/hiaru/index.htm)), runs a one-day course every 8-10 weeks, using materials developed in Birmingham (also available to download from the above web address). They also run sessions for other organisations on request. In addition, The Masters of Public Health (MPH) course at the University of Birmingham now includes an HIA module, and a session on HIA is also taught on the Masters in Environmental Health (MSc). Access to the HIA components of the masters courses is limited to those registered for the courses.

- Queen Mary University of London ([www.geog.qmul.ac.uk](http://www.geog.qmul.ac.uk)) runs a twenty-four week course for a postgraduate certificate in health and urban renewal 'Urban Renewal and Health: Strategies for Health Impact Assessment', and the City/QMUL MSc in Urban Renewal and Public Health combines this training with a public health masters programme.

Health impact assessment is also covered briefly in other courses, for example one day of the Health Risk Assessment module of the MSc in Environmental Technology at Imperial College London but this can be accessed only by those enrolled on that year-long course.

## **Box 2 HIA Websites**

- **HIA Gateway** [www.hiagateway.org.uk](http://www.hiagateway.org.uk)

This Health Development Agency (HDA) Website provides access to HIA related information, resources, networks and evidence to assist people participating in the HIA process in the UK. You can search for HIA contacts across the country and download reports on over 80 completed HIAs.

- **World Health Organization** [www.who.int/hia/en](http://www.who.int/hia/en)

The HIA component of the WHO website contains information on why to use HIA and evidence that it works, definitions of HIA and a glossary of terms and a list of short guides instructing on HIA methodology.

- PHeNeT site (to be launched)

This site can be password protected and access to specific information is controlled by the individual providing that information. It acts as a database of people in South East England and what HIA work they are involved in. Its purpose is information sharing and peer support for HIA work in progress. It does not duplicate the HDA website which posts information on completed HIAs and does not provide a moderated email discussion function. This site is administered by SEPHO. The new LHO website, to be launched spring 2005, will have similar facilities through its PHind function.

- **London Health Observatory** [www.lho.org.uk](http://www.lho.org.uk)

Provides information on HIA theory, HIA training dates and how to register for a course.

Useful tools include:

1. A directory of consultants willing to be commissioned to carry out HIA
2. A checklist for points to consider when commissioning an HIA
3. A costing tool for HIA to calculate how much an HIA will cost and how many person hours will be required

- **IMPACT** [www.ihia.org.uk](http://www.ihia.org.uk)

The International Health Impact Consortium of the University of Liverpool. Provides information on HIA, training courses and has a search function for further information such as books, journal articles and completed HIAs

- **HIARU** [www.publichealth.bham.ac.uk/hiaru](http://www.publichealth.bham.ac.uk/hiaru)

The Health Impact Assessment Research Unit of the Department of Public Health and Epidemiology at the University of Birmingham. Contains information on HIA in Practice and has a list of useful HIA references.

- **The London Health Commission (LHC)** [www.londonhealth.gov.uk/hia.htm](http://www.londonhealth.gov.uk/hia.htm)

Includes reports of the HIAs on all of the Mayor of London's draft strategies and the evaluation of these HIAs. Comprehensive **Resource for Health Impact Assessment** available including an overview of the models and application of HIA as well as case studies.

### **Box 3 Health Impact Assessment of the draft Mayoral Strategies for London**

The London Mayor has published a series of strategy documents setting out his policies for London:

Air Quality, Biodiversity, Children and Young People, Culture, Economic Development, Energy, Noise, Spatial Development, Transport, Waste.

The London Health Observatory participated as core members of the steering group which planned and facilitated the health impact assessments on draft versions of each of these strategies.

A rapid appraisal approach to HIA was taken on all strategies, involving the following stages.<sup>39</sup>

- scoping;
- commissioning a rapid review of published evidence of potential impacts on health and inequalities;
- a stakeholder workshop;
- preparation of a draft report;
- review and recommendations;
- submission of the final report to the Mayor.

The Greater London Authority commissioned an independent evaluation of the HIA on the Mayoral Strategies.<sup>35</sup> It was found that the recommendations from the HIAs were reflected in the final Strategies. The HIAs have also been an exceptional opportunity to embed health into the work of the Greater London Authority and its functional bodies and to institutionalise HIA as an effective public health tool at government level. As a result, a greater understanding of the wider determinants of health and health inequalities has been created.<sup>34</sup>