New EIA Regulations 2017: Considering Human Health within Socio-Economic Impact Assessments

With the forthcoming changes to the EIA Regulations in May 2017, a number of aspects within EIA will need to be revised to ensure compliance with the EIA Quality Mark commitments. One of the terminology changes to the assessment scope is the term “population” being replaced with “population and human health”. It is anticipated that this amendment to the terminology will affect the scope of socio-economic impact assessments (SIAs).

Human health is already considered within a number of sections of EIA, such as contaminated land, air quality, noise and vibration and wind microclimate. Although, it is a common oversight within EIA that health only relates to your physical health. It is understood within society that health covers a much wider remit, including wellbeing and mental health. SIAs are probably the natural home for these considerations. Health and wellbeing are influenced by a number of complex interrelationships between lifestyle and the physical, social and economic environments as shown by the health map (refer to Figure 1), originally developed by Barton and Grant.

People are at the core of the map, surrounded by a number of different factors which could directly and indirectly influence a person’s health and wellbeing. These factors include individual lifestyle choices; social and community networks; living environment and work environment. Operational businesses see how wellbeing in the office can increase productivity with the wider determinants of health now being embraced within sustainability assessments of internal offices, by applying the principles of the WELL Building Standard (2014). This standard sets performance requirements relevant to occupant health in the built environment – air, water, nourishment, light, fitness, comfort and mind. This confirms that industry is recognising the significance of health.

Local authorities aspire to have both a strong economy and a strong community. A measure of a strong community is their health. Health is a part of socio-economics that is becoming more of a fundamental consideration due to the increased recognition that a development’s design can have a vast effect on people’s health.

The London Plan has a requirement for health impact assessments (HIAs) on major schemes. Some local planning authorities have placed greater emphasis on the importance of assessing health impact. For example, the London Borough of Southwark has added HIAs as a requirement on their validation checklist for full planning permission applications on all major developments once their new local plan is adopted.

Figure 1: A Health Map for the Local Human Habitat
They have employed a very forward-thinking approach, as there is an increasing commitment by local authorities to ensure developers create conditions for people to take control of their own lives including their health.

Therefore the consideration of socio-economics in relation to new developments is becoming more of a focal point for developers as local authorities are becoming more stringent on their requirements. Consequently, these will need to be reflected within SIAs. This is also being driven by NHS clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) currently preparing ‘Sustainability and Transformation Plans’ (STPs) that make improvements to health and care built around the needs of the local population. These STPs require collaboration between local authorities and CCGs to understand how health needs are being met. In order for these plans to be successful, it will be vital for future developments to be specific to the needs of each local area to ensure issues are tackled effectively.

For all these policies to get put into practice, SIAs need to consider health to a greater depth at a much earlier stage of planning. This will involve considering health factors at the early design stages of new developments to influence a healthy design by embedding appropriate design measures. It will also be important to consult with both local authorities and CCGs to ensure local health issues are taken into account accordingly. This would formally get reported within SIAs and HIAs stating how the development is in line with STPs and what further specific mitigation measures are required, if any.

The world of health is complex, and it will be important for the associated effects to be kept focused and relevant on the development without getting drawn into wider matters.

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<th>Much of what has been described within this article is partly already taking place within projects inherently; however, there is certainly room for improvement. The main challenges will be to create a more streamlined approach to ensure all aspects are captured, and to ensure developers and the wider design team take note and support the health aspect of developments. This will be particularly important with the process becoming mandatory. Further guidance from the government will be required in due course to guarantee the future health of the population is being considered sufficiently within the planning of new developments.</th>
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<td>Ceara Shields is a Consultant within the Environment Planning &amp; Assessment team at CBRE UK, April 2017.</td>
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