Through topics such as air quality and noise, EIA already recognises that development projects can have an impact upon human health. The forthcoming May 2017 changes will require us to take a broader consideration of the factors that influence health (the determinants). Moreover, in accordance with the World Health Organisation’s definition of health, the EIA will assess health in terms of “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. The health impact assessment (HIA) within an EIA has the potential to be a tome of analysis, extensive in both breadth and depth. Careful scoping of the human health chapter will be critical to avoid the assessment of determinants that are unlikely to result in significant effects.

Despite the deadline for transposing the EU Directive being only a matter of weeks away there remains little guidance from the England, Scotland or Wales governments on how the assessment of human health as part of the EIA process is to be carried out. There is no single accepted methodology for undertaking HIA and no accredited body to control the quality of HIAs being produced. Moreover, there are few experts within local authorities with a strong understanding of the planning system, EIA and public health. This vacuum in guidance and expertise could result in requests for unwieldy and unfocused assessments.

This issue could be compounded further given that HIAs are commonly prepared to support policy creation while the requirement for HIAs for development proposals is still relatively rare.

During the preparation of statutory development plans a full range of determinants are considered in order to reflect the extent of issues covered in those documents. The need to differentiate between HIA requirements for policy creation and for EIA may need emphasising to those who input into the scoping stage. This principle should also be applied when planning stakeholder engagement. Engagement is a core aspect of HIA but it must be framed within the purpose of EIA. With a lack of national guidance or best practice, there is a risk that the assessments will be scoped and assessed with insufficient focus on ‘significant effects’. In these circumstances, it will be necessary to provide guidance to those unfamiliar with the underlying principles of EIA.

Such guidance must start with defining the characteristics of the project to help to identify a local impact area. The availability of data at the relevant scale will be an important part of focusing the scope of the assessment. Within the identified impact area, it will be necessary to establish a profile of the general population and to then identify vulnerable groups for the project assessment. By understanding which groups of people might be affected, a clearer picture of whether the project is likely to give rise to significant effects will start to emerge. There is a tension between anticipating the likely effects at scoping stage and having certainty provided through the detailed modelling of the scheme as the designs evolve. However, this challenge is already managed by the EIA co-ordinator with close inputs from the consultant team.
The widely accepted determinants, pathways and outcomes approach for HIA demonstrates a complex web of interactions which are also influenced by factors unrelated to development or the characteristics of the impact area, such as genetics. Whilst scientific evidence on individual determinants is often extensive it is extremely difficult to reliably extrapolate or interpolate that evidence at the individual project scale. As such, the assessment outputs will more often than not be qualitative in nature to reflect broad trends in statistical evidence, rather than concluding how many people in a particular area will be affected by a particular determinant or pathway and what that outcome would be. The scoping stage needs to guide the expectations of the authority or stakeholders in this context.

In summary, the four key principles that should underpin the scoping of the health chapter for EIA are:

1. Identify the determinants of health from the likely significant effects of the project;
2. Establish a clear profile of the general population and identify vulnerable groups within the context of the characteristics of the proposed development;
3. Work with those within a local authority and stakeholder groups who do not have a clear appreciation of EIA and the requirement to test likely significant effects; and,
4. Ensure that the scope establishes a clear steer on how the impacts will be assessed and the nature of the conclusions that will be reached.

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