Health Impact Assessment and its links to improving sustainability

The 2017 Environmental Impact Assessment regulation changes have brought Human health to a sharper level of focus within EIA. Whilst health has always been a strong consideration, this increased attention has led to RSK re-examining the best approach to future EIAs and subsequent Environmental Statements (ES).

In a recent EIA project, a standalone health chapter helped to ensure that all of the potential health impacts, both good and bad, would be suitably captured in what was a sensitive area with challenging underlying circumstances. The resulting chapter demonstrated that the negative health impacts could be nullified with standard mitigation measures but also highlighted the potential for strong health benefits for the local population.

The 2018 NPPF retains the basic premise in favour of development as long as it is sustainable. Additional understanding of the health benefits for local people as part of such sustainable development can help incorporate ever more forms of and increasingly greater levels of sustainability. For health, this is manifest in a multitude of direct and indirect effects for all affected people.

Directly, managed public open space that is accessible and safe can encourage people to get ‘out and about’, whether this be a conscious decision to exercise more or simply to spend time in the open space. This can lead to an improvement in respiratory health across the population and increase general happiness as noted in recent developments RSK have been involved in. Indirectly they might meet neighbours or new people whilst doing so, therefore giving them a greater connection to surrounding people and as such a greater sense of community and belonging. The effects of both of these elements are good for helping mental health, an aspect just as important as physical health in contemporary societies.

By working with developers and the relevant Local Authorities to understand and enhance such benefits the positive impacts can be ever greater. A central aspect of health assessments is to ensure that all parts of society are considered with particular focus on those people or groups that might be marginalised. Pre-planning consultations with a Local Authority before a health assessment has been undertaken can give further insight into the pre-existing health problems in the area and expose such inequalities amongst the local population.
If the development can demonstrate that the identified deficiencies will be improved through the proposed development; then the potential for positive impacts and increase in the level of sustainability for the local people can only help with positive planning determinations.

A greater consideration of health is also driving an increasing use of standalone Health Impact Assessments. They aim to prevent harm to health and wellbeing, reduce health inequalities and to maximise the benefits to health for all affected people. Despite its rising prominence in wider impact assessment there is no set format for how to undertake a HIA. This reflects the unique and individual characteristics and situation of any such environment where development is taking place. It is both a challenge and an opportunity for those undertaking HIA, a lack of standard guidance gives cause to constantly challenge what should be assessed and why. However, each time health is reconsidered it gives a chance to better understand a place and make real, tangible and positive changes to the lives of affected people.

At RSK, we approach HIA with a blend of best practice advice, theoretical and practical knowledge gained through postgraduate study, ongoing professional memberships and through previous health assessments for clients. We are seeing that there is a greater call for health assessments and this in turn is helping us to guide developments towards a greater level of holistic benefits than before.

The bottom line is this; health is receiving a greater focus following the 2017 EIA regulation updates. This spotlight has helped to ensure that the potential health impacts of a scheme are understood in a greater level of detail than ever before. The result of this? An even better design for the local people with ever more sustainable development designed to help in a multitude of ways. The extension of this into more formalised HIAs should therefore result in benefits for developers and local people alike.

David Horrocks BSc, MSc, AIEMA, Environmental Consultant (EIA), RSK Environment Ltd, +44 (0)161 236 2757, dhorrocks@rsk.co.uk.