# Health Impact Assessment – an overview

| As a relatively new topic of focus, there is some uncertainty relating to what a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is and what it can do. This article aims to give an overview of HIAs and the possible health benefits that may ensue. | A look at the background  
One of the key phases of a HIA is understanding the health background to the proposal. In understanding the current health situation for an area, a proposal can be better placed in helping to determine what impacts will occur and how to remove/mitigate them or where possible enhance positive elements. |
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| **What do we mean by ‘health’?**  
When undertaking a HIA, the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of ‘health’ is generally used as the basis of the assessment;  

*“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.*  

An important point of note here is that this definition includes physical health, mental health and well-being as three connected central elements of health. Therefore, due consideration should be given to all three elements together, not just one or two of them in isolation. | **You may not know…**  
A HIA looks at all health impacts - BOTH negative AND positive. A lot of proposals can have upsides for the health of local people. A HIA can help identify positive impacts and help to maximise the potential of these impacts for the better. For example, ensuring that any green space is accessible for local people and managing the planting of trees and plants can help encourage biodiversity. Together, this might give access to ‘natural feeling’ green space that encourages someone to go for a walk thus potentially improving their physical health, mental health and well-being at the same time. |
| **So that’s sorted, what is a Health Impact Assessment?**  
A HIA assesses the potential health impacts that a project or proposal might have on the local population. Whilst other technical assessments might consider potential impacts to health, for example an air quality assessment might note the effects of more traffic and therefore an increase in emissions on the respiratory health of local people, a HIA specifically looks to the impacts to health of the whole proposal. It brings together the health impacts from all technical areas whilst going further to consider the impacts cumulatively. | **A decision making tool?**  
In focusing on the possible health impacts of a project or policy a HIA can be used as a decision-making tool for the Local Planning Authority (LPA) to determine a planning application. The process can also be used to inform the development of a policy or strategy. No other assessment mechanism looks to consider the health impacts in such a way therefore it is important that the HIA is undertaken where there is potential for significant negative impacts to health. This will ensure that the potential health impacts are understood before any action is taken therefore protecting the health of those likely to be affected. |
**The view from the WHO**
For the WHO, there are several reasons why HIA should be used. One of the key reasons is that the best available evidence should be provided to decision makers at an appropriate time in the proposal. As with other assessments, if negative health impacts are identified in the early design stages, then designs can be modified to remove or mitigate the severity of the impact. If the HIA is undertaken too late, it can then be difficult for the changes to make a clear difference for the better.

**Promoting sustainable development**
Linked to timely reporting of information, a further key part of HIA is its links to promoting sustainable development. If health impacts are identified early on in a proposal, health can be considered at the same stage as objectives in other areas such as social and economic impacts. This parity can then be used as a basis of moving forward with development that is sustainable across a range of objectives including health rather than health being an afterthought.

**Stand-alone assessment or included in the EIA?**
This depends on the potential significance of the impacts, the wishes of the LPA and the judgement of the assessor. RSK has projects that have included Health as a chapter within the wider EIA process and also looked to prepare standalone health impact assessments.

**Overall benefits for the health of the surrounding area?**
Going beyond references to what health impacts occur under each technical banner to instead considering all impacts cumulatively is a great way to further understand how a proposal will impact on health. This more direct focus on health allows further consideration of what impacts might occur and therefore how to remove or mitigate them.

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**References**
https://www.who.int/hia/about/why/en/
https://www.who.int/hia/about/why/en/index1.html

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