

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) in Practice

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ABSTRACT

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a systematic process that examines the potential, and sometimes unintended, effects of a project, program, plan, policy, or strategy on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population. This paper synthesises findings from RPS' IAIA 2024 conference poster and HIA briefing, highlighting the application of HIA in three case studies, across different stages: early, mid-point and late. Results suggest that HIAs that added most value were commenced early in the planning process, achieved high input into the design of the project, and effectively engaged with stake holders and/or the public.

Keywords: Health Impact Assessment, Equity, Equality, Sustainability, Population Health, Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a systematic process that evaluates the potential effects of a project, program, policy, or strategy on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population¹. The primary aim of HIA is to improve population health by providing evidence-based insights that inform decision-making processes¹. This paper integrates findings from the RPS 2024 IAIA conference poster (see Appendix A) and linked HIA briefing², focusing on the application of HIA in three case studies. The aim is to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of HIA in practice, highlighting its benefits, and outline best practices for its implementation.

Core Principles

The core principles guiding HIA include a comprehensive approach, sustainability, participation, equity and equality, and the ethical use of evidence¹:

Box 1: Core Principles

- **Comprehensive approach to health:** HIA considers a broad range of influences on population health, including social, economic and environmental factors.
- **Sustainability:** HIA is part of delivering sustainable development.
- **Participation:** HIA centres around those affected by a decision, emphasising the importance of involving stakeholders and the public in the assessment process.
- **Equity and equality:** HIA identifies if some people would be more affected and assesses the fairness of these impacts.
- **Ethical use of evidence:** HIA is transparent and rigorous in the sources of evidence it uses, ensuring that decisions are based on the best available information.

Benefits of HIA

HIA is worthwhile to undertake for the following reasons:

Box 2: Benefits of HIA

- **Cost saving:** Good population health is cost-saving for society and governments, reducing the burden on healthcare systems^{3,4}.
- **Public good:** Improving population health has intrinsic value and is aligned with the implicit duty of governments to protect and enhance the wellbeing of their citizens.
- **Better policies:** HIAs aid policymakers in understanding the health impacts of their decisions, leading to more informed and effective policy-making.
- **Understanding:** HIA provides evidence-based insight into complex health pathways and trade-offs, allowing for a deeper understanding of how decisions affect health.
- **Clarity:** HIA provides clear conclusions and recommendations on the health implications of decisions, aiding decision-makers in identifying the best courses of action.
- **Benefits all stakeholders:** HIA benefits the goals of other sectors through improved population health, thereby supporting broader societal and economic goals.
- **Solves big problems:** HIA can tackle cross-sector challenges, e.g. climate change adaptation, by integrating health considerations into broader strategies.

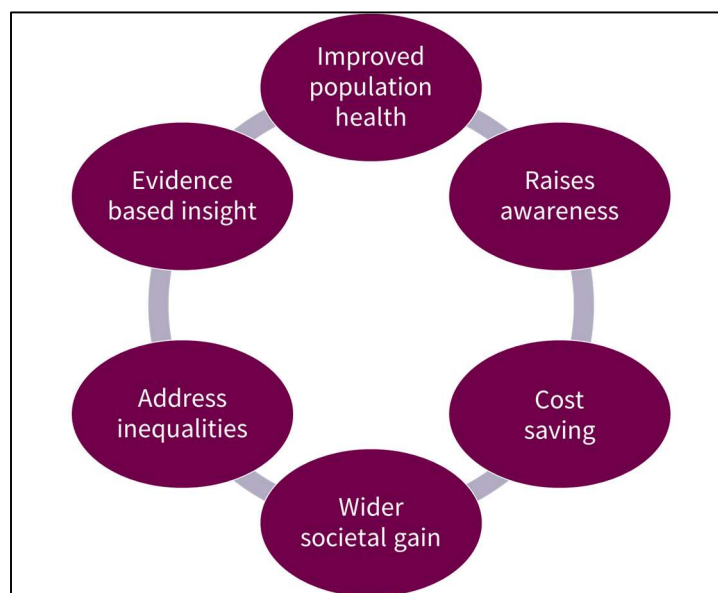


Figure 1: Benefits of HIA

APPLYING HIA

The methodology of HIA is flexible and can be adapted to various contexts. It involves the following key stages: Screening, determining whether an HIA is needed; Scoping, identifying which health impacts to consider; Assessment, evaluating the potential health impacts; Recommendations, proposing measures to mitigate negative impacts and enhance positive ones; Reporting, documenting the findings and recommendations; and Monitoring and Evaluation, tracking the implementation of recommendations and their effectiveness¹.



Figure 2: HIA Stages

HIA uses ‘determinants of health’ to describe the main ways that population health is influenced by a decision. The following are illustrative⁵:

Box 3: Illustrative determinants of health taken into consideration in HIAs

- Healthy lifestyles, such as opportunities to exercise and eat healthily.
- Safe and cohesive communities, such as access to good quality housing and transport.
- Socio-economic conditions, such as job opportunities and training availability.
- Environmental conditions, including air, water and soil quality, and noise exposures.
- Health and social care services, covering medical, occupational, and other care services.

HIA considers the ways health is affected, including if there are health inequalities i.e. the decision causes differences between the health of groups within a population. Different groups may include: young people; older people; people on low incomes; people with existing poor health; people who experience social disadvantage; or people more affected because of where they live or work.

Box 4: Practical activities in undertaking the HIA

- Practical activities in undertaking the HIA include:
- Evidence reviews including population health indicators, scientific literature and health priorities.
 - Understanding the behavioural patterns, lifestyle choices and cultural practices within a community.
 - Assessment of how the change would affect peoples’ health, directly and indirectly.
 - Review the implications for healthcare services, including changes in demand on hospitals and clinics.
 - Considering if there may be unintended consequences of a decision, including in other sectors.
 - Recommend measures to mitigate any adverse health effects and enhance beneficial health effects.

Types of HIA and Their Applications

Strategic HIAs are applied to major decisions such as new policies, plans, or legislation. They provide early identification of potential adverse health effects and integrate beneficial health considerations into the decision-making process. Strategic HIAs are evidence-based and can significantly influence public health outcomes with relatively low resource input.

Checklist HIAs use a structured tool to ensure population health issues are considered in decisions. They are rapid and often rely on existing data, making them suitable for small- or medium-sized projects where rapid health assessments are needed.

Comprehensive HIAs provide detailed analyses of the likely health impacts of decisions. They draw on extensive evidence sources and may generate new data through stakeholder engagement. This type of HIA is often used for large projects or detailed plans and offers in-depth recommendations to avoid significant adverse effects.

RESULTS

Case Study 1: Strategic Residential HIA (Early HIA)

The first case study involved the development of a new community of around 5,000 homes. The focus was on assessing the likely positive and negative impacts on various groups, including vulnerable populations and considering both short- and long- term impacts. Recommendations included equitably distributing green space, promoting active travel, including healthcare premises, and avoiding homes near flood risks. The outcome was a greatly enhanced design promoting public health, effective engagement with health stakeholders, and responsiveness to local needs.

Case Study 2: Waste Transfer Station HIA (Mid-Point HIA)

The second case study focused on the redesign of a waste transfer station to improve efficiency and meet zero landfill goals by 2030. The HIA addressed community concerns and aimed to improve design efficiency. The outcome was a refined design, high engagement with stakeholders and the community, and responsiveness to community concerns.

Case Study 3: Industrial Park HIA (Late HIA)

The third case study concerned the development of a general industrial and distribution area. This HIA was undertaken very late in the design process with minimal engagement. The outcome was no change to design, no stakeholder engagement, and compliance with minimal added value.

DISCUSSION

The integration of HIA into decision-making processes is critical for promoting public health and achieving sustainable development goals. The case studies presented demonstrate the diverse applications of HIA and highlight the importance of timing and stakeholder engagement in maximising benefits.

Early Integration of HIA

The first case study on the strategic residential HIA illustrated the significant impact of integrating HIA early in the planning process. Early HIAs allow for comprehensive assessments and meaningful contributions to the design and implementation phases of projects. This proactive approach ensures that health considerations are embedded into the project from the outset, leading to more sustainable and health-promoting outcomes.

Stakeholder Engagement

Effective stakeholder engagement is another key factor in the success of HIAs. The second case study on the waste transfer station HIA highlighted how engaging with the community and health stakeholders can lead to refined project designs that address local concerns and improve public health outcomes. Active participation from stakeholders fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that the HIA process is responsive to the needs and priorities of the affected populations.

Challenges of Late HIA Integration

The third case study on the industrial park HIA demonstrated the limitations and challenges of conducting HIAs late in the design process. Late HIAs often have minimal impact on project design and lack meaningful stakeholder engagement. This reactive approach can result in compliance with minimal added value, highlighting the importance of integrating HIA early in the decision-making process.

Comparison of HIA Types

Table 1: Comparative results across case study 1, 2 and 3

Results	Case study 1	Case study 2	Case study 3
Stage	Early	Mid-point	Late
Design input	High	Medium	Low
Engagement	Effective	Effective	None
Value added	High	High	Low

Strategic, checklist, and comprehensive HIAs each offer unique advantages and are suited to different contexts. Strategic HIAs are valuable for major decisions and long-term planning, providing early identification of health impacts and integrating health considerations into overarching strategies. Checklist HIAs offer rapid assessments for small- or medium-sized projects, ensuring that key health issues are considered without extensive resource input. Comprehensive HIAs provide in-depth analyses for large projects, generating detailed recommendations and new evidence through stakeholder engagement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings from this analysis have important implications for policy and practice. Policymakers and practitioners should prioritise the early integration of HIA into decision-making processes and ensure effective stakeholder engagement to maximise the health benefits of their decisions. Additionally, selecting the appropriate type of HIA based on the context and scale of the project can enhance the relevance and impact of the assessment.

CONCLUSION

HIAs offer a structured approach to evaluate and enhance the health impacts of projects. The integration of HIA early in the planning process, coupled with effective stakeholder engagement, can lead to significant improvements in public health outcomes. As we face complex challenges and pursue sustainable development, the regular use of HIA will be instrumental in creating healthier, more inclusive, and equitable communities globally. The case studies illustrate the diverse applications and benefits of HIA, reinforcing its importance in achieving broader societal goals. By adhering to best practices and adapting HIA methodologies to specific contexts, decision-makers can leverage this tool to make informed, health-conscious choices that benefit all stakeholders.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – IAIA 2024 Conference Poster

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) In Practice



Aim: This poster examines the strengths and weaknesses of each case study

Key Messages

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a systematic process that examines the potential, and sometimes unintended, effects of a project, program, plan, policy, or strategy on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population.

HIAs that added the most value were:

- Commenced **early** in the planning process
- It achieves a **high** input into the design of the project
- There is **effective** engagement with stakeholders and/or the public

Results	Case study 1	Case study 2	Case study 3
Stage	Early	Mid-point	Late
Design input	High	Medium	Low
Engagement	Effective	Effective	None
Value added	High	High	Low



Approach

Activities undertaken and evidence sourced

- ✓ Scoping health determinants and vulnerable groups
- ✓ Policy review
- ✓ Local health priorities
- ✓ Baseline health profile
- ✓ Local development objectives
- ✓ Literature review
- ✓ Stakeholder engagement



HIA benefits



Case Study 1: Strategic Residential HIA (Early HIA)



- HIA for new Garden community
- Assesses likely **positive** and **negative** impacts of a development proposal on the **health of different groups**
- Considers how the proposal will affect **vulnerable people** and considers both **short- and long-term** impacts

Example recommendations:

- ✓ Equitably distribute green space.
- ✓ Include routes to promote active travel to school and work.
- ✓ Dementia friendly design.
- ✓ Include healthcare premises.
- ✓ Avoiding homes close to flood risk/habitats (disease vectors).

What the HIA achieved:

- Greatly **enhanced design promoting public health.**
- **Engagement** with health stakeholders.
- **Responded to local need.**

Case Study 2: Waste Transfer Station HIA (Mid - point HIA)



- **Redesign of waste transfer station**
- **Improve efficiency and meet zero use of landfill ambition** by 2030

Engagement benefits

- ✓ Engaged with concerned community.
- ✓ Active participation.
- ✓ Develop community ownership of the process and outcomes.
- ✓ Lower tensions.
- ✓ Cooperation and mutual understanding.

What the HIA achieved:

- **A refined design.**
- **High engagement** with health stakeholders and community.
- **Responded to community concern.**

Case Study 3: Industrial Park HIA (Late HIA)



- General industrial and distribution (c.2,000m²).
- Checklist approach.
- HIA commenced **very late** in design process.

What the HIA achieved:

- **No change** to design.
- **No engagement** with health stakeholders or the community.
- **Compliant, but limited added value.**

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