Almost everything we do has some impact on health, so in planning policies, programs and projects of any kind and at any level, it is important to consider the implications and consequences for health.

In recognition of this, Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is being applied to inform government decision-making to ensure the effects on health are taken into account.

This case study series describes the experiences of Victorian local government projects, at Frankston and Dandenong, in which impact assessment was applied to inform planning and implementation. They are valuable in highlighting the potential benefits of the methodology as well as the challenges. The case studies therefore provide helpful insights for those who may be considering the potential role of HIA in their area.

The series aims to:

- highlight the links between urban planning and health and thus support understanding of the role of HIA in local government and more broadly
- highlight the important principles and process steps involved
- identify the potential benefits of this flexible, yet structured approach and it’s input into planning
- demonstrate the application of the approach across projects of varying size and focus
- share the learnings of those involved in impact assessments.

But first some background about the HIA process.

What and why?

HIA is defined as ‘a combination of procedures or methods by which a policy, program or project may be judged as to the effects it may have on the health of a population’ (WHO European Centre for Health Policy, 1999). HIA is a systematic and structured way of shedding light on the potential health consequences of a range of activities – including social, economic and environmental.

HIA aims to identify and explore the positive and negative impacts (anticipated and unanticipated) associated with policies, programs or projects. It also aims to identify options for how such activities might be modified to mitigate potential negative impacts or optimise positive impacts on health.

HIA aims to reduce any health inequalities that might arise, and to strengthen the likelihood of sustainable development.

HIA is based on the holistic, social model of health, which recognises the broad determinants of health and the importance of equity and social justice.

How?

There is no single agreed method of conducting an HIA – indeed the method and the specific tools used will be governed by the nature of the policy, program or project and the local circumstances. However, the process is characterised by six main steps.
Six Steps of Health Impact Assessment

Step 1  **Screening** asks whether it is necessary to consider health in a policy, program or project. Screening answers the questions: should an HIA be undertaken? Is an HIA going to bring sufficient benefits to warrant the time and resources needed? Is there opportunity to influence the decision making process?

Step 2  **Scoping** represents the initial planning phase for the HIA. It identifies the key health areas and populations likely to be most affected; establishes the terms of reference and sets boundaries for the assessment process.

Step 3  **Impact identification** identifies the potential health impacts (positive and negative) of the policy, program or project. It also considers how the impacts will be distributed.

Step 4  **Impact appraisal** assesses the impacts for their likelihood and severity using diverse forms of evidence. It also involves making a series of judgments about possible actions for maximising positive and minimising negative impacts.

Step 5  **Recommendations and report writing** involves formulating and presenting evidence based recommendations to guide decision-making and planning in relation to the policy, program, or project.

Step 6  **Monitoring and evaluation** involves determining whether the HIA has influenced the decision making process and whether it has influenced the impacts on health. (McCormick & Blau, 2008.)

Further detail about the practical application of these steps is found in the case studies, together with examples of methods and tools.

When?

Timing is an important consideration when conducting HIA. Ideally, it should be conducted at a time, which enables the recommendations to be acted upon and incorporated into policy or project planning – that is before the plan is finalised. This is a prospective HIA.

This is not always possible, so HIA may be carried out concurrently, during the implementation stage. This approach enables impacts to be observed as they occur which can be helpful if a project has potentially serious health impacts or the health impacts are unknown or uncertain.

Finally HIA can be conducted retrospectively, after implementation is complete. It aims to identify the actual health impacts and is valuable in informing ongoing work, including suggesting additional actions that may be required.

The case studies

The case studies presented in this series include:

- Frankston City Council – involving a prospective HIA to guide planning for a healthy eating program.
- Dandenong Council – involving a retrospective HIA of developments and activities within a local park, to guide future planning.
Frequently asked questions

1. What is the difference between HIA and other types of impacts assessment?

Various impact assessments are applied in project planning. The main types are Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and HIA, but there are others. They may be applied singularly but are often applied together in an integrated way.

The application of such assessments is context dependent, as they are influenced by legislative requirements which vary between States and countries. EIA and SIA are traditionally legislated activities, with SIA often incorporated as a subset of EIA.

EIA generally focuses on the physical environment and on hazards such as pollution or the risk of communicable disease. It does not address the broader determinants of health or assess the actual health impacts. SIA resembles EIA but addresses impacts such as population characteristics, community and institutional structures, political and social resources, individual and family changes and community resources.

Both EIA and SIA focus on identifying and ameliorating potential negative impacts. HIA has a stronger focus on strengthening positive impacts.

2. What is the difference between HIA and evaluation?

Retrospective HIA is often confused with evaluation. The key difference is that evaluation measures the extent to which the project’s objectives were achieved. HIA identifies the potential, and in some instances actual impacts, including those that were unintended and not directly related to the project objectives.

3. HIA can vary in terms of the depth and complexity of the assessment. What are the levels of assessment?

a. Desk top assessment

Desk top appraisal describes an internal process in which a project officer gains an understanding of the potential health impacts of a project or proposal by reviewing existing evidence and information. It does not involve external stakeholders.

b. Rapid assessment

Rapid assessment is also an internal process but involves staff from various disciplines, who usually undertake the appraisal step in a half-day workshop.

The process draws on information and evidence that is already available or easily accessible. This approach is possible when there is existing literature which describes the impacts of similar projects and when consultation may have already occurred in the community around a similar or related issue.

c. Intermediate assessment

Intermediate assessment usually refers to a situation in which part of the information required to undertake assessment is available. For example, the research may have been undertaken but the consultation step may not – or visa versa. Alternatively, there may be a situation where the impacts are reasonably well know but further research is required.

d. Comprehensive assessment

Comprehensive assessment involves the collection of new data and extensive stakeholder consultation. Methods may include a literature review, surveys, interviews and workshops.
References and further reading


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HIA essentials

It is important to have a clearly defined and agreed proposal before commencing the HIA process.