

Part II

SECTION 3

Understanding why health impact assessment is important

Overview

The Government is committed to improving the public health by encouraging an awareness of health at every level of policy-making, and by making a concern to improve the public health routine during decision-making.

In this section, the reasons why health impact assessment has the capacity to make a significant contribution to the achievement of these aims are explored, including the compatibility of the values that underpin health impact assessment with the Government's aims.

3.1 Current policy drivers for the introduction and use of health impact assessment

3.1.1 Recognition of the need for impact assessment by central Government

In the White Paper, *Modernising Government* (1), a change in the way the Government makes policy was heralded. The emphasis over the last 20 years has been on management reforms which have brought successes that the Government is determined to build upon. However, there was an acknowledgement that too little attention had been paid to the policy process, and the way in which it affects the Government's ability to meet the needs of the people.

A more innovative and creative approach to policy-making is now envisaged, one that:

- is evidence based;
- is directed towards achieving long-term goals;
- better reflects the Government's focus on people-centred outcomes, as opposed to bureaucratic structures.

This change in emphasis is not without risk, and requires innovative approaches to be taken for it to be successful. There is also a need to develop some means by which the impact of the implementation of policies in the real world can be assessed.

A key component in the Modernising Government agenda is the adoption of an integrated approach to strategic policy-making, which will encompass evaluation techniques in existing priority areas such as regulation, the environment, health, the economy, gender, and human rights. Procedures that are common to many of these systems, such as community profiling, give scope for streamlining. The challenge during the next year or so is to produce a user-friendly tool that can help in unravelling the complex matrix of effects that a given policy decision can have in a wide range of different fields. The Cabinet Office is leading this work; further details can be obtained from their website (*see Section 7.1.6, Modernising Government*).

3.1.2 Commitment to undertake health impact assessment at a central level

In the White Paper, **Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation** (2), the Government made a commitment to assess major new Government policies for their impact on health. The aim is to ensure that the actions arising from policy would contribute to their two main public health policy aims:

- **to improve the health of the population;**
- **to reduce health inequalities (narrowing the 'health gap').**

The Department of Health is currently working with other Government Departments to develop an impact assessment tool, which will include health impact assessment, for Government policy (*see Section 3.1.1*). In particular, a **health impact screening tool** will be tested on a range of central Government policies from across Whitehall.

This specific commitment from the Government on HIA is made within a wider political climate in which:

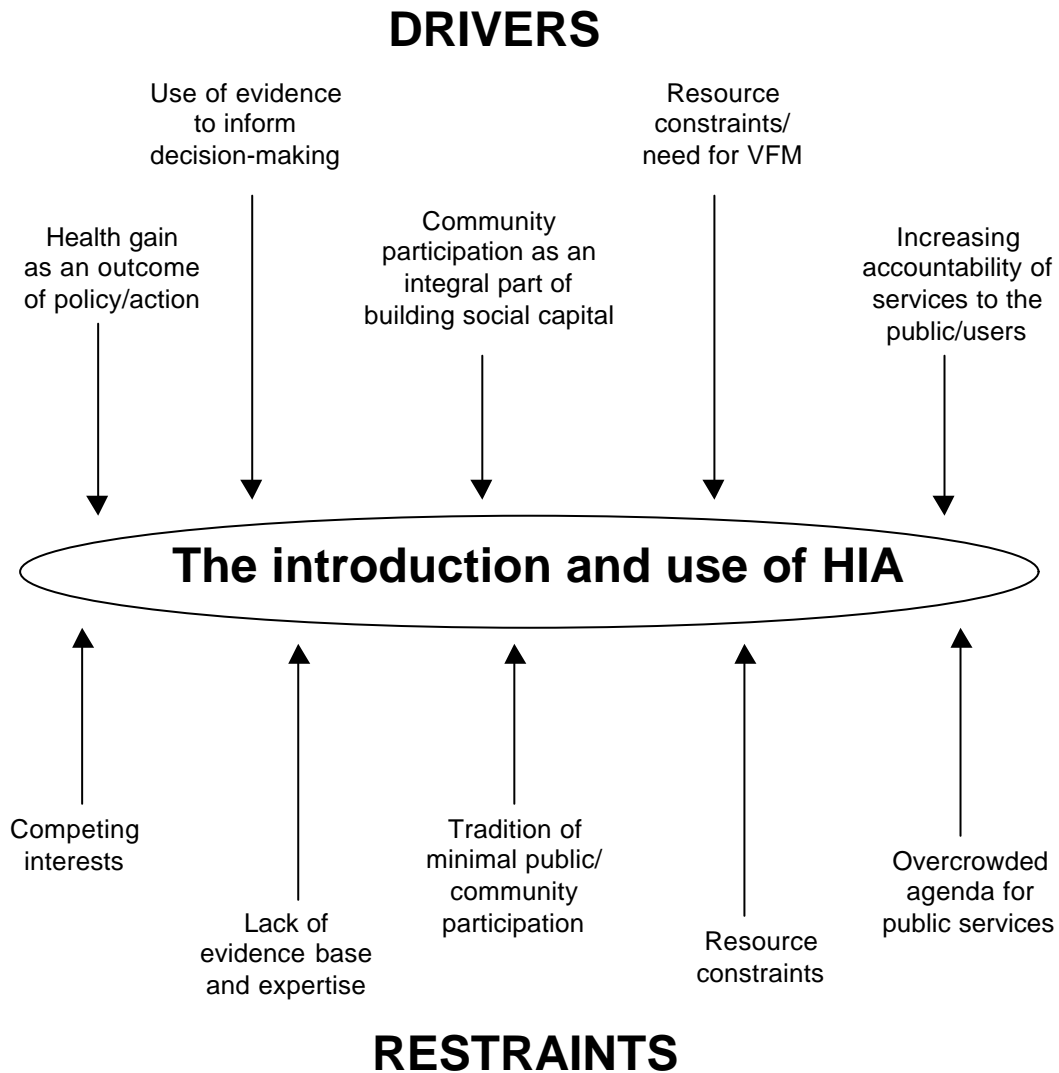
- **health gain** is increasingly viewed as an important outcome, and not a by-product, of various policies and programmes, particularly those relating to social renewal, and regeneration;

- public sector services are to be provided on a basis of **value for money** (e.g. Best Value framework in local government, and the new performance framework for the NHS) - health gain from non-health policies represents **added value**;
- public sector decision-making is to be informed by the **best available evidence**;
- **community participation** is regarded as a vital component in the shaping of public services, and integral to building social capital;
- public sector services are to be **accountable** to the general public and service users.

These wider objectives act as drivers for the introduction and use of HIA (*see Inset 3.A*), which has the potential to contribute to their achievement. The anticipated outcomes of conducting health impact assessment are shown in *Inset 3.B*.

Inset 3.A:

**Drivers and restraints
for the introduction and use of health impact assessment**



Inset 3.B:

Outcomes of conducting health impact assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Health becomes established as a concern for all• Policy- and decision-making is informed by a consideration of health, based on an assessment of the available evidence and the perceptions of stakeholders• Proposals are enhanced to optimise the health gain for the population, particularly for those groups that are vulnerable, disadvantaged or marginalised• Greater transparency and accountability is introduced into policy- and decision-making.• Action is taken towards meeting national policy aims/objectives/priorities• Action is taken towards meeting local policy aims/objectives/priorities• Action is taken towards delivering the cross-cutting agenda• An increased awareness and understanding of health is achieved• A shared or common understanding of health and the determinants of health is developed

3.1.3 Central guidance to undertake health impact assessment at a local level

Apart from the commitment to examine its own major new policies, the Government has stated that:

"Local decision-makers must think about the effect which their policies may have on health, and in particular how they can reduce health inequality. In most cases this will require a change in the way that health authorities, local authorities and other local agencies see their role. They will in future need to act much more as health champions at local level and ensure health is on the agenda of all local organisations and agencies outside the health field. An important part of their role will be to encourage all local agencies to make local health impact assessments when planning investment in, for example, amenities, buildings or local communities and in the location of services."

Para. 4.47, *Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation* (2)

Thus, the Government envisages that:

- HIA will be used to inform policy- and decision-making at a local level not only within organisations but also within partnerships;
- health and local authorities are to act as champions for health when working or liaising with other organisations, one implication of which is promotion of the use of HIA.

3.1.4 Restraints at a local level

However, at a local level, there may be restraints to the introduction and use of HIA (*see Inset 3.A*). The restraints listed below have been identified by health and local authority staff during training exercises on HIA, or semi-structured interviews.

- Limited resources (money, personnel, time, facilities).
- An already overcrowded agenda for public sector agencies which fulfil statutory duties as a first priority.
- In some areas and for some sectors, a tradition of minimal public or community participation.

- There may be competing interests - within organisations, between partners, between certain sectors, and between the political parties operating in different jurisdictions.
- Lack of expertise or skills in HIA.
- Paucity of HIA tools for which there is a long history of use.
- Lack or absence of evidence concerning the impacts on health of various policy actions.

With respect to the last three mentioned restraints, it is vital to be aware that HIA in the UK is at a relatively early stage of its evolution. Methodologies are still in the process of development and require further testing, and at only a few centres has much experience been gained, for example, Merseyside, Wales, and Scotland. However, there is now a great deal of interest in HIA, and the number of projects being initiated around the UK is growing – centres of expertise are being developed in the following regions: East Anglia, London, North, South East, Trent, and West Midlands.

Signpost

- For *Case-studies* of work already completed, or in progress, see *Section 8*.

3.2 Values underpinning the use of health impact assessment

One of the fundamental reasons why health impact assessment can be used effectively to drive policy- and decision-making in the direction of current Government policy is that the values underpinning its use and development as a methodology (see *Inset 3.C*) are compatible with the Government's aims. The current policy drivers are shown in relation to the values underpinning health impact assessment in *Inset 3.D*. A further reason why HIA can be used to achieve these aims is the nature of the methodology itself; the distinguishing characteristics of HIA are shown in relation to the values underpinning its use in *Inset 3.E*.

The dominant value underpinning the use of HIA, and that from which all the others stem, is sustainability (for further discussion, see *Section 3.2.1*).

Inset 3.C:

The values underlying health impact assessment

[Source: adapted in part from European Centre for Health Policy (3)].

Sustainability

Appraising health impacts in both the short and the long term, and those that are direct and indirect; working to prevent negative impacts, to reduce disability and social dependence, and to promote empowerment and self-help (for individuals and communities); using limited resources effectively to achieve health gain that may affect several generations.

Promotion of health

Working to attain the maximum health gain for the population.

Democracy

Fulfilling the right of people to participate, both directly and indirectly, through their elected decision-makers, in a transparent process for the development, implementation and evaluation of policies, programmes and projects that affect their lives.

Equity

Addressing not only the impact of a policy, programme or project on the health of a population, but also the distribution of that impact within the population, in terms for instance of sex, age, ethnic background or socio-economic status, which accords with the UK Government's aim of reducing inequalities in health (see *Section 3.1.2*).

Equality

Involving members of the community as full and active stakeholders whose views are accorded respect; according the same status to all stakeholders irrespective, for example, of source of funding for either the proposal or the HIA.

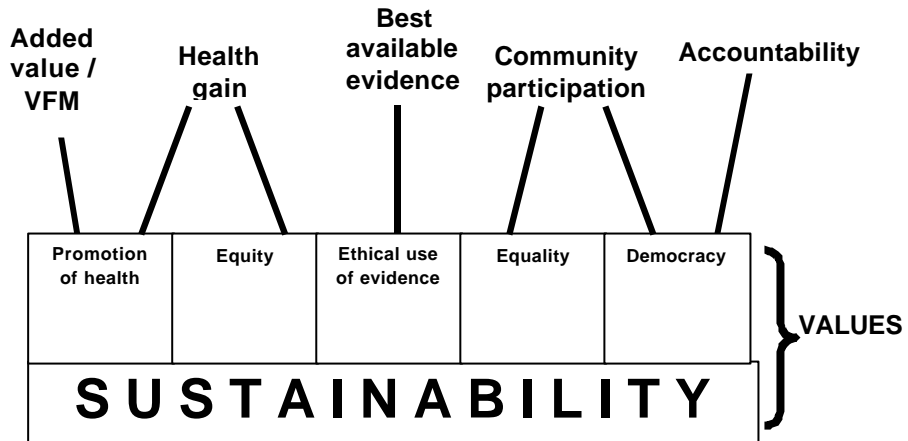
Ethical use of evidence

Using evidence in a rigorous manner, and employing a range of disciplines and methodologies, to achieve a comprehensive assessment of the health impacts.

Inset 3.D:

**Values underpinning health impact assessment
in relation to the current policy drivers for its use**

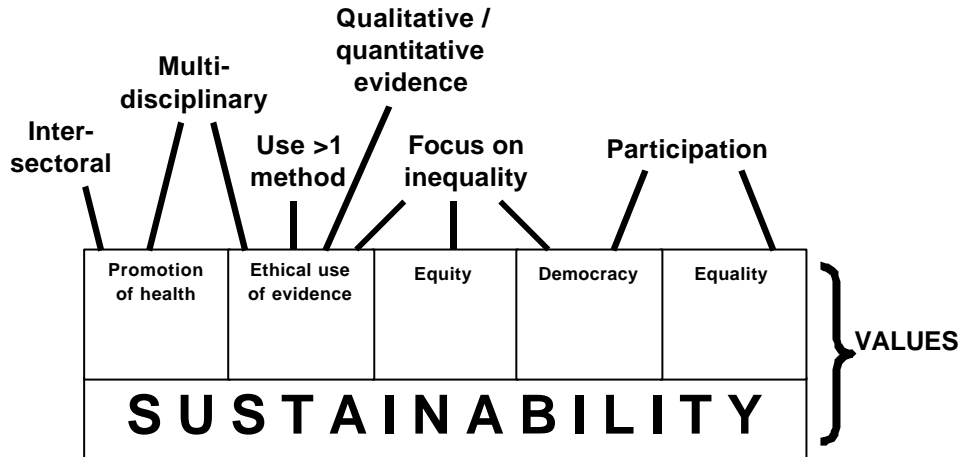
Current policy drivers



Inset 3.E:

**Values underpinning health impact assessment
in relation to the distinguishing characteristics**

Distinguishing characteristics of HIA



3.2.1 Sustainability

As sustainability is the dominant value underpinning the performance of health impact assessment, HIA is a tool that can be used not simply to promote health gain, but to do so within the context of sustainable development.

3.2.1.1 The UK Government's strategy for sustainable development

The Government has four main aims for sustainable development in the UK (4), which are compatible with the values underpinning HIA:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;
- effective protection of the environment;
- prudent use of natural resources;
- maintenance of high and stable levels of growth and employment.

In the Government's strategy (4), the promotion of health is viewed as only one component of sustainable development in relation to building sustainable communities. However, the Government's other objectives for building sustainable communities (*see Inset 3.F*) would also act to promote health gain by having a positive effect on the broader determinants of health.

Inset 3.F:

The UK Government's objectives for building sustainable communities <i>[Source: Ref.4]</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthening regional and local economies• Meeting people's social needs - promoting better health, housing and access to services and recreation• Improving local surroundings - revitalising town centres, tackling degraded urban environments, and ensuring that development respects the character of our countryside• Reducing crime and the fear of crime• Addressing problems of poverty and social exclusion in the most deprived communities• Making it easier for people to get involved in their communities• Co-ordinating policies to bring these objectives together

Therefore, actions to promote sustainable development would be expected to promote health, and health impact assessment can be used to ensure that health gain does indeed arise from sustainable development. Furthermore, using the principles of sustainability can extend the process of HIA to ensure that consideration is given to:

- short-, medium- and long-term health impacts;
- framing recommendations to change proposals such that they may have a positive effect on the health of not only present but also future generations in a community.

Signpost

- For the values identified by Healthy Hillingdon for conducting HIA on the Interim Transport Plan, *see Inset 5.C, Section 5.2.1.*

References – Section 3

1. Cabinet Office (1999) *Modernising Government*. The Stationery Office, London.
2. Department of Health (1999) *Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation*. The Stationery Office, London.
3. European Centre for Health Policy (1999) *Health Impact Assessment: Main concepts and suggested approach*. The Gothenburg consensus paper, December 1999. WHO Regional Office for Europe.
4. Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1999) *A Better Quality of Life: A strategy for sustainable development for the UK*. The Stationery Office, London.

Review questions – Section 3

- How is your organisation/partnership responding to central Government's current emphasis on the need for local decision-makers to develop policies which improve the public health and reduce health inequality?
- Can your organisation/partnership discover ways round the restraints operating at local level?
- What forms of impact assessment are you already using to appraise policies? Can you identify ways in which concern for health can be integrated into them? Would undertaking health impact assessment complement the other forms of assessment that you currently use?
- Might it be helpful for your organisation/partnership to consider the ways in which the Government's other objectives for building sustainable communities would also act to promote health gain? And can you see ways in which HIA could be used to deliver these objectives of sustainability and health gain?
- Within your organisation/partnership, how might you start discussing the values underlying health impact assessment, with a view to putting them into practice?