

Evaluation of the Health Impact Assessments on the draft Mayoral strategies for London

Background

This briefing presents a summary of the findings of an independent evaluation of the London Health Commission's approach to health impact assessment (HIA).

The London Health Commission (LHC) is committed to undertaking HIA to support the development of effective policy and practice in London. The LHC is using HIA to support the development of the Mayor of London's strategies and has carried out a health impact assessment on all of the Mayor's statutory strategies. These are Transport, Economic Development, Biodiversity, Air Quality, Municipal Waste, Noise, Spatial Development (the London Plan) and Culture. The Mayor has also developed strategies for Energy and Children & Young People on which the LHC has also conducted HIAs.

The primary aims of each of the LHCs HIAs have been:

- To identify, using best available evidence, potential positive and negative impacts of the draft Strategy on the health and well-being of the population and the potential impacts on health inequalities
- To make recommendations for mitigating negative impacts and enhancing positive impacts, reducing health inequalities and plugging gaps in the strategy
- To raise awareness of the social model of health and to get HIA / public health on the agenda of a wider range of agencies.

The LHC's HIA model is pragmatic, prospective, multi-agency and multi-disciplinary. All the HIAs have been rapid appraisals as time restrictions have prohibited more in-depth work. The model includes:

- Scoping the HIA
- Rapid review of the evidence available from research
- Rapid appraisal workshop, usually conducted over a half day except in the case of the draft London Plan HIA which was conducted over a full day
- Report with recommendations comprising the research evidence and the stakeholder workshop
- Circulating the draft report to those who attended the workshop and London Health Commission members for comments and reporting to the Environment Committee of the Assembly for the HIAs on the Environmental Strategies
- Submission of the final report to the Mayor.

Evaluation methodology

In May 2002, Opinion Leader Research was commissioned by the GLA to evaluate four HIAs on the draft Mayoral strategies. With little HIA evaluation data to draw on and no agreed quality standards for HIA, a qualitative methodology was adopted to provide the flexibility to explore the response to the LHC approach to HIA in detail. The aims were:

- establish the perceived strengths and weakness of the HIA process
- determine its perceived usefulness
- assess the factors influencing its effectiveness and impact on:
 - Knowledge and attitudes towards health among participants
 - Working practices among participants
 - The final strategy
- make recommendations for the subsequent development of HIA methodology

The draft Waste and Economic Development strategy HIAs were evaluated retrospectively via one group discussion with the core HIA team and individual qualitative interviews with participants. We also had access to LHC self-completion workshop assessment questionnaires.

The draft Energy and London Plan strategies were evaluated concurrently via individual qualitative interviews and group discussions with the core team conducted immediately before and after the HIA workshop (wherever possible). We also observed at the HIA workshop and administered our own self-completion workshop assessment questionnaire (based on the LHC's version).

In total, we interviewed 26 participants and six members of the core HIA team. We also reviewed 59 post-workshop questionnaires.

Key learning

Key strengths and achievements of the LHC approach to HIA

“We’ve got quite senior level policy makers as well as a whole range of different stakeholders involved in our process, and that’s been, partly through the workshops, partly through the Commission meetings, and partly through the Environment Committee - through those three different pools...even if they are

only here for the process, they’ve made a connection between transport, economic development, waste, whatever and health, which may not have been made otherwise, and that is the thing that they are taking away with them.”

The Greater London Authority (GLA) Act 1999 states that the Authority must exercise its power in a manner calculated “to promote improvements in the health of persons in Greater London”. HIA is perceived as making a contribution to fulfilling this obligation. Participants considered it praiseworthy that the GLA has allowed the LHC to conduct HIAs on all the statutory Mayoral Strategies. In this respect, the GLA is perceived to have been more systematic in its consideration of health issues in strategy formation than participants expected.

Our findings suggest that the LHC model generally fulfils its primary aims, within tight resource constraints. The London Health Commission has delivered, within the tight timescales set out for consultation, a health impact assessment of each of the Mayor’s statutory strategies and the Energy Strategy. Those HIAs have:

- Identified both positive and negative impacts, and highlighted the importance to strategy development of identifying both. Identifying positive impacts is perceived as helping to ensure that beneficial aspects of a strategy document are retained as it passes through the re-drafting stages.
- Both gathered and considered research evidence via a rapid review of literature and generated qualitative information in the form of stakeholder opinion via the workshop. In so doing, it has provided evidence and recommendations for decision-makers to consider.
- Engaged a wide range of stakeholders, who otherwise may have no direct input to the formation of these strategies.
- Raised awareness of HIA, the social model of health, and public health agendas amongst those whose primary roles are not health related. This has resulted in the GLA strategy development teams taking greater account of public health issues when drafting strategy, in advance of the HIA, and decision-makers placing greater importance on public health issues in re-drafting the strategies. HIA has played a role in public health considerations becoming embedded within the development of the Mayoral strategies.
- Provided a forum for participants to become more aware of other social policy agendas – the multi-disciplinary nature of the HIAs has provided an opportunity for a wide range of stakeholders to

exchange views and learn from each other.

- Most importantly, the HIAs have influenced strategy - GLA strategy development staff report that they have taken health into account during the drafting stage because they knew it would be subjected to HIA and that they have revised the strategy as a result of the HIA report.

Factors influencing the success of the LHC’s approach to HIA

The London Health Commission’s HIAs have generally fulfilled their primary aims and several factors appear to have been important in this. These include:

- The requirement to consider health issues is enshrined in the GLA Act, which provided a political imperative to do something. Health impact assessment was identified early on as a potential way to meet this requirement.
- The support and involvement of key decision-makers involved in the London Health Commission, particularly from the GLA, London Health Observatory, and the former Directorate of Health and Social Care (London) in developing the HIA model and raising awareness of public health agendas.
- The profile and importance of the GLA strategies themselves, particularly the draft London Plan. This encouraged attendance, both because people wanted to influence them and wanted to learn more about them.
- Growing interest in HIA generally across a number of other agencies in London, which was in part stimulated by the presence and activities of the HIA Facilitation Manager for London, including the provision of training workshops, which helped to raise awareness and knowledge of HIA.
- A consistent approach, with all the statutory strategies being subjected to HIA. Repeated attendance at HIAs also helped to ensure more active and effective participation, as participants grew increasingly confident and knowledgeable about the Mayor’s strategies, HIA and the LHC approach.

- GLA strategy teams knowing to expect HIA, which encouraged them to seek public health input early in the drafting stage.
- A multi-agency, collaborative approach, which ensured effective pooling of HIA, public health and health policy knowledge and skills.
- The availability of resources, particularly the ability to commission freelance researchers to undertake rapid reviews of the evidence from research.
- Engaging decision-makers from the scoping stage onwards and clarifying their questions, which ensured that the outputs of the HIA were meaningful to them.
- Adopting a reflective approach to HIA, with on-going critical appraisal, which ensured that the working model was adapted to maximise the effectiveness of the process.

Key considerations for the future

The London Health Commission's HIAs have generally fulfilled their primary aims. However, a number of perceived weaknesses of the LHC HIA model require further consideration. From an evaluators point of view there is little comparable evaluation data and no agreed quality standards for HIA and therefore it is difficult to really determine how well the LHC model achieves its aims and whether the LHC model is better or worse than other approaches.

Several study participants consider the aims of HIA ambitious and raise numerous methodological questions. These include:

How do you know if you have the best-available evidence from research?

Where gaps in research evidence occur, stakeholder consensus may be the best available evidence

In terms of the quality of rapid review of evidence from research, the HIA workshop provides a degree of peer-review in itself. Further formal and independent peer review of the evidence may help to reassure participants about the quality of the HIA in terms of whether or not the best available evidence has been used and whether it has been used appropriately.

How do you know if you have the right stakeholders at the workshop?

A wide-range of stakeholders was invited to the HIA workshops. Each workshop was attended by around 50 people, approximately 20% of the total number invited. However, concerns were expressed about the range of stakeholders actually attending the workshops and individual breakout groups within each session, on the day. Such concerns can undermine confidence in the process. Therefore, it is important to assess and report the potential impact on both the process and its outputs if some groups of key stakeholders are missing on the day of the workshop. It may be worthwhile considering incorporating the views of a wider range of stakeholders

into the assessment using different methodologies, for example individual interviews or separate and smaller group discussions.

Can the stakeholders really get a grip on the evidence from research and policy proposals in the strategy in such short time-scales?

The HIA workshop is clearly the engine of the HIA process. However, it is a complex process and can be challenging for participants, who are required to get to grips with a large and complex strategy, digest the evidence from research and bring them together to generate practical recommendations in a relatively short time-span. It can be difficult for newcomers to take in complicated presentations at the beginning of workshops and participants may feel intimidated by the process. It is important that people know what to expect. As a minimum, it is important to convey to participants that:

- Everyone's input is valued and that they do not need to be experts in the field covered by the strategy to make an important contribution.
- The workshop is seeking to generate the best record of stakeholder views about both particular proposals within the strategy and how that relates to the evidence available from research.
- Strategy team members and 'experts' are available as a resource for other stakeholders on the day, providing clarification on points of detail about the evidence, strategy, and GLA remit, but that they will not actively participate in the discussion.
- Facilitators will work systematically through the detail of the strategy (working from an agreed discussion guide) to obtain a prompted response to key sections including reading out specific detail on which a response is required and that they are seeking to encourage participation from stakeholders rather than put forward views themselves.

The HIA workshops, with around 50 attendees, consume significant resources. It is important that the outputs are maximized. To maximise the effectiveness of the workshop, it is important that:

- The strategy and evidence is broken down into comprehensible chunks and summarized to enable people to deliberate both more effectively
- Where used, pro forma should guide and structure discussion, rather than be used slavishly as a prerequisite HIA tool

How should different types of evidence be managed – should evidence from research take priority over stakeholder views if they contradict each other?

The information gathered in the workshop and evidence gathered from research are both potentially important resources for influencing subsequent strategy

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development. It needs to be made clear how the different types of information are managed, whether stakeholder views are prioritized over the literature review evidence, and in particular, how limitations of the evidence, including gaps and conflicting data are tackled. It is also important that it is made explicit how the recommendations finally included in the report are formulated and agreed. Any limitations in the data available need to be made explicit. The reports could undergo more rigorous scrutiny.

Most importantly, will the HIA ultimately influence the wider determinants of health, the health of Londoners and health inequalities? And can this be measured?

Not everyone is convinced that HIA is worthwhile. Therefore, it is essential that the outcomes of the HIA are monitored. Monitoring needs to include:

- Demonstration of whether or not the strategy is changed as a result of the HIA recommendations and why?
- How implementation of HIA recommendations subsequently influences the wider determinants of health, health itself, and health inequalities by monitoring whether or not recommendations are implemented and what impact they have.
- Effective communication of the outputs of monitoring, both to participants and wider audiences, to enable them to assess and determine the value both of the HIA itself and their individual contribution to the process.

Further information	
The London Health Commission has produced a number of publications on HIA, including evidence summaries and reports on the HIAs of the Mayor of London's draft strategies. All documents are available from the Commission's website at www.londonhealth.gov.uk/hia.htm	The London Health Observatory currently facilitates training in conducting health impact assessments. E-mail: register@lho.org.uk

The London Health Commission seeks to improve the well-being of all Londoners and reduce inequalities in health. The LHC promotes a co-ordinated approach to the factors that influence health in London, and will do this by:

- Building partnerships involving the health sector, local and national government, the private sector, community and voluntary groups
- Influencing decision-makers
- Supporting local action

MAYOR OF LONDON



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