

# Six steps to success with health impact assessments

Mark Teasdale gets under the skin of health impact assessments, explaining what they are and how to get the most from them

The links between public health and planning are already enshrined in a wide range of policies at both national and local levels. In London there is now a growing requirement from local authorities for major planning applications to include a systematic assessment of health impacts as part of their decision making process. Despite this, there is a shortage of clear guidance on when and how Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) should be undertaken.

## Health and planning policy

Both the National Planning Policy Framework and the accompanying Planning Practice Guidance recognise that the built and natural environments are fundamental determinants of health and well-being. There is a clear recognition in national policy that local planning authorities can do a lot to tackle health inequalities.

Since 2007, the Mayor of London has had a statutory duty and associated powers to lead on tackling health inequalities in London. Policy 3.2 of the London Plan identifies the need for the health and well-being impacts of major development proposals to be considered through a HIA. The Mayor of London's Social Infrastructure SPG published in 2015 provides more fine

grain advice on the most appropriate form of HIA (full, rapid or desktop) for different types of planning application.

## Why health inequalities matter

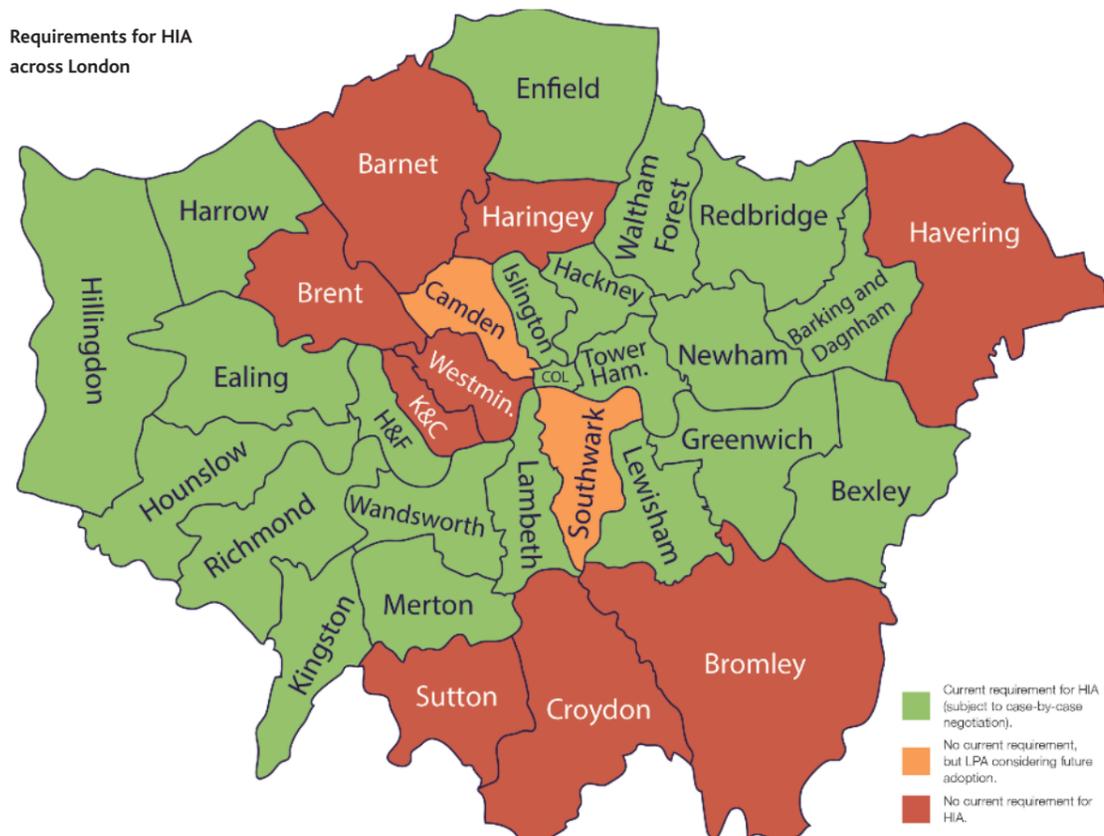
Health inequalities exist throughout London, even in some unlikely places. The London Borough of Richmond is one of the least deprived places in England, ranking a lowly 294 out of 326 districts on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, published with the English Indices of Deprivation in 2015 (EID 2015). None of the neighbourhoods in the London Borough of Richmond are ranked in the most deprived decile of local areas nationally.

However, this rosy picture masks some striking health inequalities. A boy born in the most deprived part of the borough between 2012 and 2014 can expect to live for 5.2 years less than a baby boy whose home is in the least deprived local area. The life expectancy gap for girls is smaller at 4 years, but still shocking in a place like Richmond.

## How have London planning authorities responded?

Local planning authorities in London increasingly ask for a HIA to be completed as part of planning submissions for major >>>

Requirements for HIA across London



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schemes. Our recent review of the validation checklists for all 33 London authorities, supplemented by a telephone survey of 26 boroughs, revealed some striking findings:

- 67 per cent of London authorities (the 22 boroughs shown in green on the map) now require a HIA to be submitted with certain types of planning applications
- Four authorities (Enfield, Greenwich, Merton and Richmond-upon-Thames) require a HIA for all major planning applications
- 18 London authorities have identified the need for a HIA for certain applications in published planning policies or during our telephone survey
- The requirement for HIAs is largely decided on a case-by-case basis, although there is very little guidance from London planning authorities about how HIAs should be undertaken
- The exception here is Islington Council, which does provide guidance as it now requires all major planning applications to undertake screening to determine whether or not a HIA will be required

#### What does a Health Impact Assessment involve?

A HIA is a coordinated approach to considering the potential health impacts of a development proposal. HIAs are relevant to a wide range of development schemes, not just on projects that have an explicit health element to them.

HIA work is typically an ex ante evaluation looking at the anticipated impacts of a scheme on health outcomes in advance of the scheme being delivered. Ideally, the HIA will help to inform the choices made during the design development of a scheme.

The London Healthy Urban Development Unit has published a comprehensive and user-friendly Healthy Urban Planning Checklist (second edition, June 2015), which recommends the assessment of potential health impacts under four main thematic areas:

- Healthy housing;
- Active travel;
- Healthy environment; and
- Vibrant neighbourhoods

The Healthy Urban Planning Checklist raises a total of 30 questions relating to the potential health impacts of a development proposal. Not all of these questions will be relevant to all schemes, but each needs to be considered as part of a rigorous HIA.

#### Six steps to success

Given the patchiness of guidance from London planning authorities about how to undertake a HIA, it is important to think (and plan) carefully before embarking on one. Here are six steps to success in completing a HIA that will support a planning application in London.

#### 1 Engage early

For developers and scheme promoters, it is crucial to get a clear view from the local planning authority about their expectations for a HIA. The case officer might not be very familiar with HIA work so you may have to help calibrate their expectations for the assessment.

For case officers working on major planning applications, it is vital to agree on the need for a HIA at an early stage in the pre-application discussions. If the requirement is identified late, the HIA will inevitably become a tick box exercise and the opportunity will have been lost to influence the design development of the proposals.

#### 2 Scope wisely

HIAs are intended to be practical tools that facilitate objective consideration of a development's positive and negative effects on health and well-being. As always, you need the right tool for the job in hand, so be sure to check the following:

- Is there a preferred methodological framework for completing the HIA?
- Does the planning authority require a high level desk top HIA or a more detailed evaluation involving primary research?
- Will the proposed development create a new residential population large enough to place noticeable pressure on local health provision? If so, you may well need to include an audit of local healthcare infrastructure as part of the HIA.

#### 3 Talk to the experts

Borough Public Health teams will have unrivalled knowledge of the health issues facing their local communities, as well as understanding the priorities for (and pressures on) health investment.

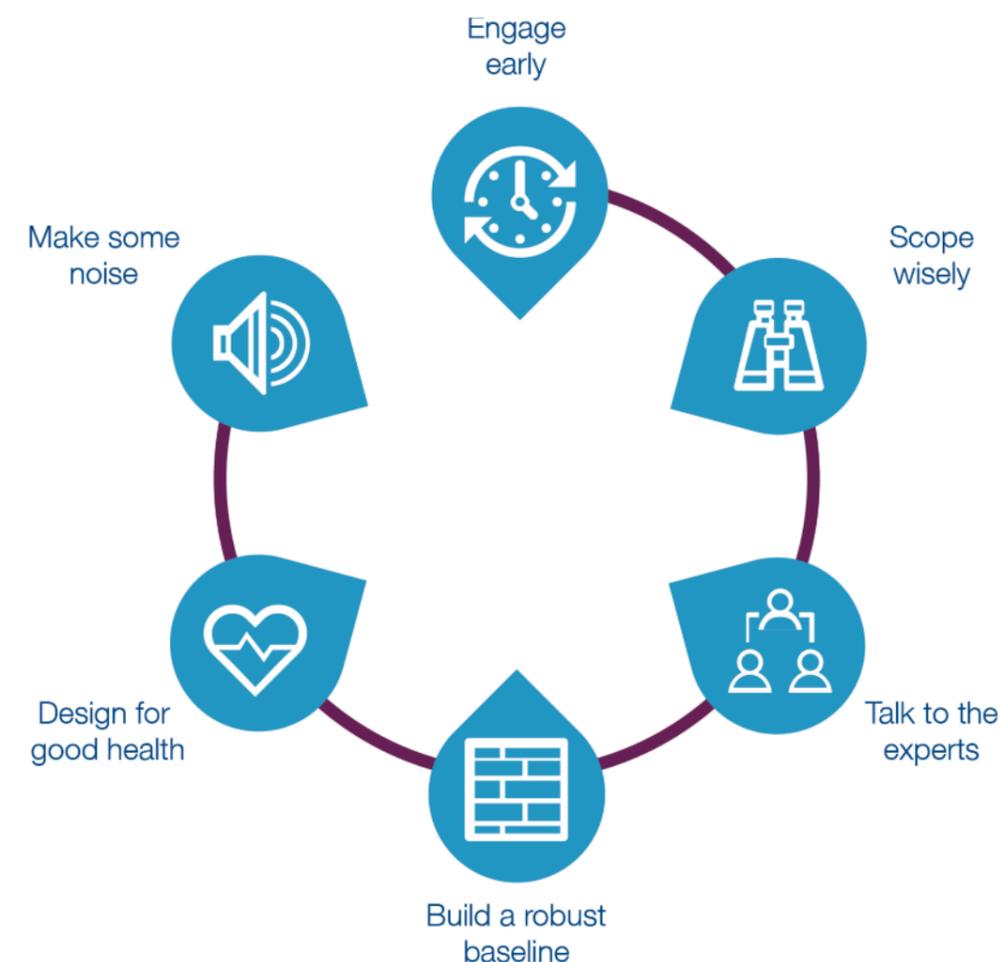
They will be able to help with the scoping of a HIA, provide access to useful health intelligence and identify key people to speak with on the ground.

For major planning applications with potentially significant strategic health implications, it is vital to develop a meaningful dialogue with the relevant Health & Well-being Board that has strategic influence over commissioning decisions across health, public health and social care.

#### 4 Build a robust baseline

Understanding local health conditions is fundamental to producing an effective HIA for new development proposals. Fortunately, building a baseline of health conditions is made easy by the availability of a range of sources providing health data in user friendly packages.

- Public Health England provides health profiles and separate child health profiles at local authority level. Although bite size, these health profiles contain a mine of useful data, including



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Six steps to success

comparisons between the local authority in question and the England average for 32 different health indicators.

- For more localised health information in London, try the ward profiles in the London Data Store.
- The EID 2015 enables comparisons to be made for a range of deprivation indicators at local or neighbourhood level, including the health deprivation and disability domain that forms part of the overall index of multiple deprivation.

#### 5 Design for good health

The most effective HIAs are those in which the consideration of health impacts is embedded within the design development of the scheme. The emphasis should be on maximising the potential of a scheme design to secure health benefits, rather than designing to the minimum standard to pass muster with the relevant regulatory authority.

The potential for good design to promote physical health benefits is well established and widely understood. Less so is the opportunity for the thoughtful design of buildings, spaces and landscapes to secure positive mental health outcomes. Start-up think tank the Centre of Urban Design and Mental Health has identified several key priorities, including the provision of social or communal spaces to combat loneliness and making sure that interior spaces offer sufficient daylight to lift the spirits of residents.

#### 6 Make some noise

The public engagement supporting planning applications provides a golden opportunity to make some noise about the positive health impacts of development proposals. It is worth taking the time to talk with local residents and other stakeholders about how a scheme is likely to affect local health conditions, especially for developments that do not have an obvious health component to them.

Having completed a HIA, it is vital to consider where and how best to present the findings in order to ensure that the key messages reach the right decision-makers in the local planning authority.

#### What next?

There is a growing demand across London for comprehensive HIAs to support major planning applications. Failure to recognise the need for a HIA early on in the planning process could cause unexpected additional costs or unwelcome delays to developments. It could also mean that opportunities are missed for new developments to make a real contribution to delivering positive health outcomes for Londoners.

Greater focus on the end users of new developments – the people who will live, work and relax in each new building or open space – makes projects more attractive and more likely to deliver lasting health benefits. Forward-looking developers are already making a feature of the benefits health impact assessments bring – long before they become mandatory across the capital. ■