

HEALTH CHECK



Is the environment affecting your health?

Organisations including the World Health Organization, the Health Development Agency, the Welsh Assembly and health authorities have been promoting the use of Health Impact Assessments and have begun to develop good practice guides drawing on the experience of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), but where both have been undertaken the HIA has often added little value.

One of the problems with the current guidance (some might see it as its strength) is that it covers a wide range of applications and the type and scope of issues covered in a policy assessment will be very different to that covered for a specific development. Large developments already require an EIA, and from next summer government policies and plans will also require an EIA, to be known as a Strategic Environmental Assessment.

The past five years have seen a growing use of Health Impact Assessments (HIA) to assess new policies, plans and projects. Claire Holman* reports on the merits of Health Impact Assessments for land use planning.

EIAs can cover direct health issues, but are unlikely to cover indirect ones. For example, an application for a new industrial facility is likely to include consideration of air quality impacts and potential impacts on human health, but is less likely to include the beneficial health impacts of bringing new employment into an area.

The current planning system is unable to adequately cope with difficult public health issues. The consequence has been somewhat contradictory case law. For example, a High Court decision regarding a proposed chemical waste treatment plant in Wales concluded that perceived fears of the public, even though they were not soundly based upon scientific fact, were a relevant planning consideration. Another High Court decision, this time for an expansion of a landfill site in Cornwall, concluded that given the tentative nature of any health effects the council were correct in assuming that the risks, small as they were, could be adequately addressed by the Environment Agency as the regulator of the Waste Management License.

The planning system is set to change when the delayed Planning and Compensation Bill has passed through Parliament; however the

changes are unlikely to improve the situation. EIAs typically seek to identify whether an impact is significant or not and, for those that are significant, to assign degrees of significance. This is important to enable different environmental impacts to be weighed up against each other. Where there is a perceived health risk unsupported by mainstream medical evidence difficulties arise. This emphasises the need for good HIA technical guidance for land development projects.■

**Claire Holman is an air quality consultant with Peter Brett Associates and a member of CIWEM's air panel.*

CIWEM's air panel is seeking views on the need for technical guidance on Health Impact Assessments within the land use planning regime. The panel would welcome your comments. Please send your views to Helen Wilson, policy officer, at Helen@ciwem.com. The air panel has an active and knowledgeable membership with a wide range of expertise but we are still looking for some new panel members. If you are interested in joining the panel, please forward your CV to Justin Taberham, director of policy at justin@ciwem.com