



## **HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT PEER REVIEW BRIEF: A PRODUCT OF THE PEER REVIEW WORKGROUP OF THE SOPHIA HIA PRACTITIONERS' WORKSHOP**

*Disclaimer: This brief was developed by the Peer Review Workgroup of the SOPHIA Practitioners' Workshop. The brief is intended to be a discussion piece and to help HIA practitioners request and receive useful critical feedback within health impact assessment (HIA). "Peer review" for the purposes of this paper and as the Workgroup conceptualized it for HIA has been defined differently than typical peer review associated with scientific journals. Please read on to learn more. The Peer Review Workgroup is happy to receive feedback to advance the collective understanding of peer review and to improve this document. Please contact Kristin Raab, [Kristin.raab@state.mn.us](mailto:Kristin.raab@state.mn.us), with useful feedback.*

**I. PURPOSE:** This brief offers guidance for HIA practitioners on using peer review in Health Impact Assessment (HIA) practice. Peer review for the purposes of this brief has been defined as “the evaluation of an HIA process or product by knowledgeable persons to maintain or enhance the quality of the process or product.” This definition is broad and could include aspects of “technical assistance” and “peer mentorship.”

The brief also describes the rationale for using peer review, the types of review possible, and the roles of reviewers involved in the process. It then further outlines when and how the process can offer the most benefit in improving the HIA processes and outcomes. The primary audience for the brief is practitioners planning to conduct an HIA. It is intended to help them voluntarily engage peers in an open process for learning and improvement. It might also provide additional validation and transparency for the HIA. Stakeholders including other practitioners and researchers in the field may also benefit from understanding the framework and using it to evaluate HIA practice more broadly.

**2. WHY PERFORM PEER REVIEW ON AN HIA?** Peer review of an HIA can provide a number of benefits, including:

- providing input on the approach, processes, and data that were used in the HIA;
- ensuring the quality and soundness of the conclusions and recommendations;
- assisting with the communication strategy for the HIA and recommendations to decision-makers, stakeholders and community partners; and
- advancing fidelity to current HIA Minimum Elements and Practice Standards.

The peer review can add value to the HIA and provide feedback to improve the overall effectiveness of the HIA process.

**3. WHAT TYPES OF PEER REVIEW CAN BE PERFORMED ON AN HIA?** Current HIA practitioners have used different types of peer review to help improve their products. The type of peer review can be aligned with the needs of the HIA. Many HIA practitioners are familiar with the peer review process for a scientific journal where peer reviewers serve as anonymous gatekeepers to publication. In HIA, peer review can involve more of a conversation between the reviewers and the HIA project team to ensure that feedback is useful. HIA peer review could be performed on a final product, such as the final HIA report, but it also could be performed on the HIA process or on a component of the HIA. Four types of peer review are described below.

**General Review:** A general review covers the entire HIA. It includes review of the writing style, the analyses used in the HIA, and the process of the HIA. It may include suggestions for how to frame and communicate recommendations.

**Process Review:** A process review concentrates on how to improve the way the HIA is conducted at each step of the HIA process. Process reviewers might draw from the North American Practice Standards, the National Research Council's report on HIA, the Guidance and Best Practices for Stakeholder Participation in HIAs, or other resources to compare the approach used in the HIA with current recommendations of best practice.

**Technical Review:** A technical review focuses on the analytical components in an HIA that are typically found in the scoping, assessment, and recommendation steps. A technical review may involve an expert in a particular field, such as modeling noise pollution or epidemiology. With HIAs that examine a variety of topics surrounding a particular decision, multiple technical reviewers may be desired for complex HIAs. The primary goal of a technical review is to ensure that analyses are conducted according to best practices and applicable scientific standards with the best available evidence.

**Political Review:** A political review examines the relationships among the stakeholders and decision-makers to help ensure that the recommendations are politically feasible and framed in a language that is likely to resonate with stakeholders and decision-makers. A political review may also examine and make recommendations for the HIA's engagement plan.

**4. WHO COULD PERFORM PEER REVIEW OF AN HIA?** The reviewer of the HIA can be selected according to the type of review and the expertise or knowledge beneficial for the review. Below describes the expertise desired for the different kinds of review. An HIA peer reviewer could be a steering committee member, a community member, or an expert outside of the HIA process. The key is to match the reviewer's expertise with the type of review being performed.

**General Review:** A general review could be conducted by someone familiar with HIA and the subject area of focus. This person may not be an expert in all the areas covered by the HIA, but they could be capable of identifying if and when additional consultation may be required. This reviewer could also be able to suggest edits and make recommendations about framing and communicating the message to ensure its accessibility to the target audience.

**Process Review:** A process review could be done by an experienced HIA practitioner who has a keen understanding of the HIA process and values, common analytic methods used, strategies to engage stakeholders, or experience identifying challenges and opportunities for improvement. Likewise, an individual with a broad range of evaluation experience may bring additional value to the process review given their ability to evaluate and articulate the effectiveness of a project.

**Technical Review:** A technical review of an HIA could include targeted reviews done by individuals with field and/or methodology expertise. This review could be conducted by reviewers that have the expertise to assess the validity of the approach and the particular analyses in the HIA. Reviewers can include HIA technical assistance providers, field experts, and individuals with qualitative and quantitative research backgrounds.

**Political Review:** The approach used for political review will often depend upon the type of agency leading the HIA and the decision target. A political review could be done by those with an understanding of any controversial issues being addressed by the HIA and the feasibility of recommendations made in the HIA. Reviewers might include steering committee members and community, non-profit, and/or advocacy organizations with an understanding of the political context and the relationship between stakeholders. Individuals with an understanding of the feasibility of recommendations from a decision-making standpoint could also be included in this review. This component of the review could be done by a staffer of the decision-maker, a community representative, or someone with knowledge about the sector and decision-makers in the particular locality. Depending on when this review takes place and the level of stakeholder engagement, a decision-maker of the targeted policy, program or project might also add value to the review. In some instances with industry-specific HIAs, industry professionals may be willing to provide feedback on pieces of the HIA report prior to the HIA team submitting final recommendations.

**5. WHEN TO PERFORM PEER REVIEW ON AN HIA?** Peer review of an HIA can occur throughout the HIA process, at every stage, at a few specific steps, or at the end of the HIA process. Timing of the peer review will depend on the type of review desired, resources available, timeline for the HIA, and goals of the peer review. The table below suggests when certain types of review may be most useful. General review and process review are helpful at every stage of the process. These types of review may be especially useful for maintaining buy-in of stakeholders and building relationships as the HIA proceeds. Technical review is most important during the stages connected to assessment: the scoping process when the parameters of analysis are determined; the assessment phase when the analyses are conducted; and the recommendations phase when the findings are translated into recommendations. Political review is most relevant in the formative phases of HIA, when stakeholders are being identified and the scope of the HIA is being determined, and later in the HIA, when political review helps increase the efficacy of recommendations and dissemination.

HIA stage	Type of review			
	General	Process	Technical	Political
1. Screening	x	x		x
2. Scoping	x	x	x	x
3. Assessment	x	x	x	
4. Recommendations	x	x	x	x
5. Reporting	x	x		x
6. Monitoring/evaluation	x	x		

**6. HOW TO ENSURE A USEFUL PEER REVIEW EXPERIENCE?** Identifying the type of review desired, the appropriate reviewer, and when the review could take place help ensure a useful peer review. Given that peer review can occur at multiple stages throughout the HIA and with various reviewers, communication is also essential for ensuring a valuable review. It is critical to discuss with reviewers beforehand what the expectation of the review is – general, process, technical or political – and what the time frame is for receiving comments. At times multiple reviews may be occurring simultaneously. For example, a steering committee member may be conducting a general review of the final report while a community partner conducts a political review. In all cases, setting expectations about the timeline and scope for each person’s review will ensure that the review is appropriate, timely and coordinated. Lastly, before beginning any review it is critical to establish communication channels with the peer reviewer. They can establish how best to communicate their comments, whether it is by track changes, over email, through phone conversations, or otherwise. Establishing the full expectations and parameters of the review before it begins will help ensure receiving the most valuable feedback possible for the HIA.

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