

An equity-focussed social impact assessment of the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy

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Abstract: The Lower Hunter Regional Strategy prepared by the Hunter Department of Planning identifies how development in the region will be managed on a sustainable basis over the next 25 years. In order to inform decision-makers about the potential social and health impacts arising from the proposed population increase, the Hunter Regional Coordination Management Group, in collaboration with the NSW Premier's Department and Hunter New England Health, completed an equity-focussed social impact assessment of the strategy. The assessment illustrates how equity can be systematically addressed within an impact assessment process and provides insight into the mechanisms which led to equity considerations influencing the policy and planning agenda.

Population growth and its distribution, along with the availability of social and other services, have the potential to significantly affect the health and wellbeing of communities, both existing and new.^{1,2} A holistic approach to planning for population growth is required that incorporates an assessment of impacts on health and wellbeing, as well as on the environment and economy.³ One process that investigates these impacts is social impact assessment.

The Lower Hunter Regional Strategy, prepared by the Hunter Department of Planning, identifies how development in the region will be managed on a sustainable basis over the next 25 years in 35 sites that were configured by geographic location. The Department released a draft strategy in November 2005 and invited agencies and community members to comment by January 2006. The strategy, which projects a population increase of 125 000

people, has the potential to influence the health and social wellbeing of the community and the equitable access to and distribution of services across the region. The Hunter Regional Coordination Management Group, in collaboration with the NSW Premier's Department and Hunter New England Health, identified the need for a whole of government or multi-agency response to the draft strategy and consequently formed the social impact assessment Working Group to coordinate this response.

A social impact assessment provides the framework within which predictions can be made regarding the potential positive and negative impacts of a proposal while it is at the planning stage, to both maximise desired outcomes and minimise the costs or losses to communities.⁴ The Working Group agreed that it was important to consider the social and health impacts of the strategy by conducting a social impact assessment.

Currently, within the Hunter region people experience varying levels of vulnerability.⁵ The Working Group defined a vulnerable population as a subgroup of the overall population that is at higher risk of problem(s) that could be defined by age, gender, ethnicity or health status. To ensure that further vulnerabilities were not created by the strategy, and given that vulnerability is distributed inequitably across the Hunter region, the Working Group agreed that the assessment would have an equity focus. The aims of the social impact assessment were to: (1) assess levels of existing social vulnerability and access to services within the geographical sites identified by the strategy and (2) make recommendations based on the assessment of the appropriateness of proposed growth areas.

Equity was systematically addressed within the social impact assessment process by the use of an 'equity lens'.⁶ This enabled the Working Group to assess whether the impact of increasing population in the proposed development areas would have a positive, negative or neutral impact on the wellbeing of the proposed communities, and if there would be a beneficial impact on wellbeing from the proposed population growth. In order to apply the 'equity lens' when deciding if the impact of implementing the strategy, whether negative or positive, was fair and just, the Working Group established a set of criteria which asked:

- Are we creating vulnerable communities?
- Are we increasing vulnerability?
- Are we re-allocating vulnerabilities?

For ease of analysis and to ensure that the recommendations were practical, the 35 sites were clustered to 17 sites. A social vulnerability profile was created for each site to identify the impacts of the proposed population growth. This profile was based on a set of indicators that reflected the social determinants of health and well being (Table 1). These indicators were supplied by each agency participating in the Working Group and were based on their established links to social wellbeing and whether they were measurable at a collector district level. For each indicator a literature review established the evidence providing the link between the indicator and the effect on social wellbeing (see Table 1). These indicators were plotted for each of the 17 aggregate geographical sites to create a vulnerability profile. A consensus process was used by the Working Group to categorise the social vulnerability of the sites.

In addition to the social vulnerability profile, each agency represented within the Working Group was then asked to individually review the identified impacts for the 17 sites and comment on the findings according to each site's: (a) current level of social vulnerability, (b) current service capacity and (c) potential service capacity in the context of the proposed population growth.

The assessments of service capacity and the outcomes of the vulnerability assessment formed the basis of recommendations to the Hunter Department of Planning. The recommendations were framed to answer the question: 'What would need to occur for the area to accommodate the proposed population growth?' The results of the social impact assessment were submitted to the Hunter Department of Planning on behalf of the Hunter Regional Coordination Management Group, as a submission during the phase inviting public comment.

The recommendations were:

- strategic directions to be used to underpin regional planning in the Lower Hunter

Table 1. Indicators used to determine the level of social vulnerability at 17 geographical sites covered by the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy

- Percentage of new dwellings within walkable distance of public transport (over five kilometres)⁷
- Individual and household weekly income
- Employment and unemployment rates
- Smoking rates among pregnant mothers⁷⁻⁹
- Socio-economic indexes for areas – socio-economic disadvantage^{7,10}
- Socio-economic indexes for areas – index of economic resources
- Educational attainment score¹⁰⁻¹³
- Percentage of home ownership¹⁴
- Volunteer rates^{15,16}
- Average distances nearest public transport

- changes to infrastructure within vulnerable sites for the area to accommodate the proposed population growth
- ongoing monitoring of social vulnerability levels.

Feedback from the Hunter Department of Planning indicated that these recommendations were considered in the development of the final strategy.

The social impact assessment was a valuable tool to facilitate a whole of government approach to population and infrastructure planning and provide support to decision-makers in considering the potential consequences of their decisions. This social impact assessment also illustrates how equity can be systematically addressed within the process of impact assessment and provides practitioners with a practical example of how equity considerations can influence decision-makers.

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