

Integrated Assessment: Evolving sustainability pillars

A 'new' impact assessment methodology termed "Integrated Assessment" has been applied to good effect over a number of years across a range of proposal types and has gained sufficient acceptance, professional following and practitioner familiarity to warrant wider use outside of Canterbury, New Zealand. It is suggested that wider application of IA to the development of plans, strategies and policies would contribute to better urban planning and more resilient communities.

What is Integrated Assessment?

Integrated Assessment is a formal approach used to predict the potential effects of a plan or policy, with particular attention paid to impacts on health and wellbeing, in addition to social, economic, cultural and environmental matters.

It is designed to inform development of plans and policies through early iterations. It is embedded in the evolving necessity for more collaborative multi-agency and cross disciplinary approaches to solving wicked problems. Involving a wide range of perspectives and expertise at the early phases of the development of plans, particularly but not exclusively in a post disaster environment, can lead to long term efficiencies and better outcomes for the environment and communities.

The foundation assessment was a Sustainability Appraisal approach based on a sustainability assessment think piece by Barry Sadler and Martin Ward (A Framework for Sustainability Appraisal in New Zealand: LC0708/090). After trialling with Central and Local Government agencies in 2008 the Canterbury Regional Council (Environment Canterbury) commissioned its application to the Canterbury Water Management Strategy.

Following a change in government in 2011, the term sustainability and sustainable development was removed from the public service lexicon and funding ceased for sustainability related activities. However, the novel and effective routines of the Sustainability Appraisal methodology appealed to some New Zealand professionals and they were used in a variety of applications in Canterbury, NZ and in Adelaide, Australia.

Integrated Assessment is firmly grounded in the impact assessment tradition as a prospective tool for use on draft proposals and for engaging affected or knowledgeable public in decisions about activities that affect them. It is also recognisably a multi-criteria assessment process but importantly with all criteria of equal weight. The assessment criteria are developed from the existing regulatory framework of policies, plans and strategies applying in the relevant area (from national through to local). The criteria assemble the relevant aims and objectives set for or guiding the development and delivery of the policy, plan or project subject to the Integrated Assessment. This ensures a clear 'line of sight' through the planning or policy framework, so that the proposed plan should generally align with the overarching framework, and therefore expectations of the community and decision makers.

Overview of the Integrated Assessment process

The key elements of the Integrated Assessment process are as follows:

1. Establish the assessment frame – what is it that you are assessing for?
2. Preparing draft assessment criteria – criteria and scale steps descriptions
3. Workshop the criteria and set the top and bottom lines
4. Apply the criteria to the draft proposal in the second workshop
5. Re-apply the criteria if helpful to a more advanced draft

1. Establishing the Assessment Frame

The foundation step for any Integrated Assessment is a clear understanding of the aims and objectives set for any proposal subject to the assessment process. It may also include the values of the organisation sponsoring the proposal. The proposal's objectives, clearly listed, are the starting point for assembling the assessment criteria.

In the foundation application of this methodology the frame adopted was a four pillar model of sustainability and in early applications a model of community health and wellbeing was referenced.

2. Preparing the draft Assessment Criteria

From a short list of the proposal's aims and objectives a long list of criteria is produced to test all aspects of the proposal for its alignment with them. For each criterion a clear definition is composed and a set of scale steps from low level of compliance with the criterion to a high level of compliance with the criterion.

This step requires relevant professionals with expertise and experience in interpreting and applying the existing regulatory framework, and some understanding of sustainability appraisal. A critical step at the outset is allowing adequate time to organise workshops, invite participants and align the timing of preparation of the relevant plan with stages of the IA process.

Some provisional work by a small specialist assessment team is also needed to:

- Identify capital assets under four pillars
- Develop assessment criteria to be used (from existing planning & policy framework)
- Agree scale (e.g. -1 to +3)
- Compose preliminary descriptors.

This is the most demanding step in the management of the Integrated Assessment process and benefits from the assistance of experienced practitioners. It helpfully draws on criteria used in past assessments referenced in this Guide.

When completed they are the principle focus of the first participant workshop.

3. Workshop the criteria and set top and bottom lines

A novel and important part of the process is the setting of bottom lines or safe minima, and top lines or aspirational positions for each individual assessment criterion prior to their use to test or score the draft proposals. These important boundary positions on the criteria scale steps assist those developing the proposals to measure them in draft form: for them to see how much further work is needed (or not) to achieve the objective set for their process, an example is provided below.


Guiding Principles	Criterion	Description	Small negative impact	Neutral impact	Small Positive impact	Moderate positive impact	Strong positive impact
			-1	0	+1	+2	+3
Support a balance between walking, cycling, public transport and driving	12	Public transport modes future-proofed	PT corridors able to cater for light rail or future transport systems	The plan takes light rail or future transport systems off the planning horizon	Light rail or future transport systems not addressed in the plan	Principal transport corridors provide for light rail or future transport systems	Light rail or future transport system proposed
							Light rail or future transport system proposed and funding sources identified

Figure 1 - Example 'scoring' of a draft plan

Red circle = bottom line; Blue box = top line Green cross is where the participants 'scored' the draft plan.

Generally, a minimum of two workshops are used to agree the criteria and set the top and bottom lines, and then apply the criteria ('score' the draft proposal). The workshops involve selected participants with knowledge of the community into which the development or plan proposal to be placed and others with experience in managing the resources involved in the development and delivery of the proposal.

The purpose of the workshops is primarily to:

- Agree capital asset sets and criteria elements
- Amend/confirm assessment criteria and scale descriptors
- Set top and bottom lines
- 'Score' the plan/project options

However, one of the key benefits found with the workshops has not been the final 'score' or recommendations for the draft plan, but the discussion and generation of ideas, identification of issues and co-design of solutions with the plan writers participating in the exercise.

The workshops also require a good facilitator to corral invited participants to address the issues at hand in a constructive and positive manner.

The first of a minimum two workshops has two tasks. The first is for the participants to 'take ownership' of the assessment criteria through their systematic review of the set of draft criteria, adding or removing individual criterion and adjusting the wording to better reflect the participants' understanding of their use. Rarely they may add a further scale step if they believe there should be a more aspirational step.

The second task is the setting of the top and bottom-line positions across the assessment scale steps. This is generally a straight forward step which may be aided by the presence in the workshop



of technical experts that can draw attention to other reports, strategies etc in which commitments are made or information provided that supports the setting of a top or bottom-line position. This work is done entirely in absence of the draft proposal.

4. Apply the criteria to the draft proposal in the second workshop

Following immediately or after a short interval the participant group reassemble to receive a presentation on the draft proposal after which they assess it, choosing a position on each of the assessment criteria's scale that they agree best reflects the present state of the proposal. This 'score' position relative to the top and bottom line guides the planner, policy maker or developer on where their draft proposal needs further work to meet its objectives.

5. Re-apply the criteria if helpful to a more advanced draft

In an iterative planning or policy-making process this step may be repeated (and repeated) on later iterations of the proposal until the proponent is satisfied that the proposal is as good as it can be.

This opportunity was recognised and used in spatial and strategic planning by planners involved in the post-earthquake recovery work in Canterbury.

Integrated Assessment roll call

The seven impact assessments that record the development and successful implementation of the Integrated Assessment methodology are as follows:

1. Sustainability Appraisal of the Canterbury Water Management Strategy, 2009
2. Wellbeing Assessment of the Castle Plaza Development Plan Amendment, Adelaide, South Australia, 2011
3. Sustainability and Wellbeing Assessment of the Draft Christchurch Central City Plan, 2012
4. Integrated Assessment of the Draft Land Use Recovery Plan, Christchurch, 2013
5. Wellbeing Impact Assessment of the Draft Lyttelton Port Recovery Plan, 2014
6. Integrated Assessment of the Draft Waimakariri Residential Red Zone Recovery Plan, Canterbury, 2015
7. Integrated Assessment of the Otakaro/Avon River Corridor Plan, Christchurch, 2018.

The three Recovery Plan integrated assessments were a statutory requirement of the Recovery Strategy established by the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Act 2010. The other assessments were undertaken to meet good practice, and for the last application, as a result of Integrated Assessment's growing reputation for effective contribution to the planning process. The various labels given to the assessments reflect the particular focus of the funding or commissioning agency, not a variation in the methodology.

Most of the applications have been subject to formal evaluations which have confirmed their value to the proposal development and helped improve practise. Reflecting its place of origin, the methodology provides for the involvement or inclusion in parallel independent assessment process, of the Tangata Whenua, 'the people of the land'.

Legacy

The Integrated Assessment process was a success because:

- It starts early in the process. At each of the workshops the plan writers and key staff from organisations involved in preparing plans are involved. As this happens early on,

they are not ‘defending’ the plan, but are open to ideas, to identify issues and to find solutions together.

- It uses pre-established criteria in an easy to follow format and methodology, so the discussion is guided towards a constructive output, and discussions on the plan are therefore not starting from scratch. This makes the workshops efficient in terms of time, resourcing, and ultimately budgets. It has proved to be an effective and efficient way of testing early ideas, refining and developing other directions to take, and highlighting areas for improvement.
- It is useful for defending challenges. Some plans have been subject to legal challenge and successfully defended with the help of the IA process as backing for demonstrating robust and transparent decision making. Others from the community, political parties and elsewhere may try to challenge plans and strategies, but the IA process, together with other forms of consultation, evidence gathering and decision making, provides a robust basis for arguing against those challenges.

Lessons

Some lessons from the processes so far include:

- Allow lead in time to self-organise, define the problem, develop assessment criteria, establish understanding and benefits of the process, and build relationships, particularly across agencies, and time to organise workshops, invite participants, find space in busy people’s calendars.
- A good facilitator for the series of workshops is essential.
- Need a champion to promote and explain the benefits of the IA process, to plan writers, decision makers, and others.
- Collaboration and consensus building require good relationships, that relies on trust, which takes time and effort to earn.
- Preparing plans, strategies and policy is inherently political. While IA is at ‘arms-length’ from the political process, there is a need to be aware of the political climate, and how to frame the key messages and outputs from the process.

Where to next for IA?

- Refine base methodology with interested practitioners
- Finalise a ‘how to’ guide
- Further promotion/capacity building for:
 - IA practitioners and potential exponents
 - Urban planners and allied professions
 - Management/commissioning decision makers

References

To be added when final paper submitted.

Note formatting also yet to be finalised.