

Supporting the environmental health workforce in local authorities

Parliamentary Briefing June 2021



Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH)

CIEH is the professional voice for environmental health representing almost 7,000 members working in the public, private and non-profit sectors. Building on its rich heritage, CIEH ensures the highest standards of professional competence in its members, in the belief that through environmental health action people's health can be improved.

Environmental health has an important and unique contribution to make to improving public health and reducing health inequalities. CIEH campaigns to ensure that government policy addresses the needs of communities and business in achieving and maintaining improvements to our environment and our health.

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Context

Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs) have played a vital role throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, from supporting contact tracing efforts, to business closure enforcement during lockdown, and were classified by the UK Government as 'Key Workers'. Following the gradual reopening of businesses, EHPs have been at the forefront of inspecting establishments to ensure that these are Covid-secure and working with businesses to help them comply with government guidelines.

Last month, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) published the results of a workforce survey of environmental health teams working in local authorities in England. This is a briefing to distil the key results and recommendations. Collected for the first time since 2014, the survey report contains the most comprehensive and up to date information on capacities, use of agency staff, recruitment difficulties, future pipeline of EHPs as well as the role played by EHPs during the pandemic.

Environmental health is one of a handful of professions working to ensure that new and existing laws are enforced and upheld. EHPs stand out from other regulatory professionals due to their focus and training in health impacts and health protection. Their knowledge of infection control has been a key reason for their wide redeployment during the recent pandemic. EHPs' wide-ranging skillset is an asset for local authorities, since they can perform a wide range of roles and duties, working flexibly across a number of different areas. This helps local authorities to be more agile and responsive to changes.

EHPs are directly involved in, and responsible for, a range of high-profile issues such as:

- Food safety
- Environmental protection
- Public Health
- Housing and energy efficiency standards
- Health and safety

Environmental health contribution during the pandemic

EHPs played a major role in protecting the public, supporting central Government, businesses and communities during the pandemic. Overall, around 8 out of 10 EHPs working for local authorities were redeployed last year in response to the pandemic. The most common activities for EHPs included: enforcing business restrictions (98%), advising businesses on trading safely (97%), developing COVID related policies and procedures (95%), managing local outbreaks (78%), emergency planning (69%) and contact tracing (59%).

Recommendations

- **Central Government to introduce a new role of Chief Environmental Health Officer, to work alongside and with the Chief Medical Officer in England to provide coordination and communication between government policy makers and local authorities.**

Resources, budgets and capacities in environmental health teams

There are around 3,300 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) fully qualified Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs) working for local authorities - on average around 10.1 FTEs per local authority (LA). In total, there are around 7,700 FTE professionals working to deliver environmental health services across England's local authorities – around 23.7 FTEs per local authority.¹

Whilst EHPs tend to work flexibly across many different areas, the biggest share of resources are devoted to food safety (33%), followed by private sector housing (25%) and environmental protection (19%).

During the past 6 years, the biggest proportion of environmental health services remains unchanged (45%), however, 31% of LAs reported that some services have been stopped, including discretionary activities such as advice and guidance provision to businesses and any non-statutory services. 11% of local authorities also reported that some services were outsourced, and 21% part-outsourced, in the last 6 years.

Whilst budgets remained unchanged in around half of all local authorities (51%), more LAs reported decreases (24%) in their budgets than increases (17%) in 2019/20, suggesting that budgets are continuing to shrink within environmental health departments. Looking ahead to 2021/22, 34% expect their authority's budget for environmental health services to decrease, whilst only 20% expect their budgets to increase.

Nearly a third (31%) of respondents told us that, in their opinion, the delivery of some statutory environmental health duties was at risk, due to resourcing issues in 2019/20. Whilst this is not a majority, it is still a large proportion, given that these are statutory obligations for local authorities. Of those who said that some duties were at risk of not being delivered, respondents estimated that a 29% uplift in resources would be needed to meet all statutory duties.

Recommendations

- **Central Government to increase financial support to local authorities in order to maintain resources for regulatory and public health work, especially following the pandemic.**
- **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to make an assessment of the resourcing needs across local authorities' private sector housing function, including to what extent civil penalties are being utilised and how much funding this is bringing in for enforcement teams.**
- **MHCLG to set out its future policy on selective licensing schemes and respond to its commissioned review, published in 2018.**
- **Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to highlight current resource shortages and the important role that local authorities perform to Ministers and officials, making a case for targeted funding in order to maintain safe levels of resource within local authorities for health and safety regulation.**

How have resources at local authorities changed over time?

CIEH's workforce survey gives an indication of environmental health resources across England at a point in time. However, there are a number of official sources that give an indication of the changes in resources over time.

In England, the number of food safety and hygiene officers dropped from 1,489 to 1,217 FTEs between 2010/11 and 2019/20 – a drop of 18% in 9 years.² However, this is one of the areas of environmental health that has fared better in terms of resources, due to the monitoring of local authorities' statutory duties by the Food Standards Agency.³ Food standards capacity in district and unitary level local authorities has dropped much more – 171 posts were lost between 2010/11 and 2019/20 – a reduction of 47%.

The number of practitioners working to enforce health and safety at work has dropped from 895 to 455 between 2011/12 and 2019/20 in Great Britain, according to the Health and Safety Executive. This is a reduction of 440 posts or 49% in 8 years.⁴

Unchecked UK has also made some estimates of the drops in resources for environmental protection. Local authority spend on environmental protection services has dropped by 31% and local environmental health staff by 32% between 2009 and 2019.⁵

Taking just these four specialisms, we estimate nearly 1,000 FTE environmental health posts have been lost in England's local authorities in the last decade.⁶

Difficulties with recruitment

The vast majority - 4 out of 5 local authorities - reported that they use agency staff to deliver their environmental health services. We estimate there were around 510 FTE agency staff used across England in 2019/20 - an average of 1.6 FTE per LA.

9 out of 10 (87%) local authorities told us that agency staff were used because of shortages in resources or delays in recruitment of EHPs. By contrast, only 30% used agency staff because of an unprecedented demand for services and 23% due to specialist knowledge not being available in-house.

56% of local authorities reported that they had vacancies in their environmental health teams that were left unfilled for 6 months or more. We estimate that there were approximately 375 FTE posts left unfilled in 2019/20 for 6 months or more across England – around 1.2 FTEs per LA. The top reasons for the vacancies point to a lack of available EHPs who are fully qualified and experienced.

Recommendations

- **Central Government to take forward and implement all the recommendations from the ongoing cross government regulatory review.**
- **MHCLG to provide support to CIEH for future recruitment campaigns in order to increase the future pipeline of Environmental Health Practitioners.**

Future pipeline of Environmental Health Practitioners

Our survey has found that more than half of local authorities are not supporting the training of a new generation of EHPs. In 2019/20, 52% of LAs did not have a single apprentice or trainee in place. Not having any budget (66%) and not having capacity to mentor (52%) were the primary reasons given for not taking on any trainees. Only 20% said that no trainees were taken because there was no demand from students.

Whilst the use of environmental health apprenticeships is increasing, despite the effects of the pandemic this year, the number of LAs using apprenticeships is still in the minority. 122 local authorities did not take on any apprentices in environmental health in either 2019/20 or 2020/21 – 70% of all respondents.

52% of LAs said there were barriers to training and development for Environmental Health Practitioners in their authority. Barriers cited included lack of capacity to undertake training (58%) and inadequate training budget (57%).

Recommendations

- **Central Government to introduce a local authority ring-fenced fund to ensure that every local authority can afford to support the salaries of environmental health (EH) trainees or apprentices.**
- **Food Standards Agency to continue to provide funding for training for EHPs engaged in food inspections in line with Code of Practice requirements and training specifically to deal with the impact of Brexit on the food industry and novel foods.**
- **HSE to share tools and resources with local authorities.**

The CIEH workforce survey report also contains further recommendations directed at local authorities, Local Government Association, Universities and also a set of actions for CIEH.

What can you do to help?

We would be grateful for your help in raising awareness of the work being done by environmental health practitioners in parliament and the reductions in numbers of EHPs over time. We would be particularly keen to raise the need for a ring-fenced funding for apprentices and trainees in environmental health. We would be happy to support you in any way, so please do not hesitate to get in touch.

References

1. All data presented in this briefing, unless referenced otherwise, will be from the recent [Environmental health workforce survey report: local authorities in England](#), CIEH, April 2021.
2. Local Authority Enforcement Monitoring System (LAEMS) Data, [Food Standards Agency](#).
3. [Food law code of practice](#), FSA.
4. Data collection – analysis of LAE1 2019/20 data from Local Authorities, HELA paper, Health and Safety Executive, March 2021.
5. [The UK's enforcement gap 2020](#), Unchecked UK, Oct 2020.
6. This figure was worked out using the data presented above and combining it with the estimates in our [workforce survey found in Table 1](#).