

Environmental health -

how cuts are putting individuals and communities at risk and damaging local businesses and economies

THE DAMAGE



INTRODUCTION

Environmental health services are provided by councils across the UK. They provide a vital service which protects and promotes environmental and public health in the community.

Environmental health officers working within local councils deal with a range of issues which may impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities, from pest control to food safety, air pollution to noise nuisance. The job is varied and complex, and involves long-term proactive and preventative work with local people, businesses and communities, as well as dealing in the short-term with immediate issues and emergency situations.

With so much good work going on in councils up and down the country, UNISON is keen to highlight what has happened in local authorities since our last report into the cuts to environmental health, published in 2012.

We have included quotes from our members throughout the report.

Environmental Health Officers carry out the following functions:

- Animal and public health
- Environmental protection
- Food safety
- Food standards
- Health and safety
- Infectious disease control
- Pest control
- Port health
- Private rented housing standards
- Public conveniences
- Waste management
- Water safety

“Our local authority has no Environmental Health contingency plans for Brexit to help ensure that the public is protected should there be a ‘no deal’.”

“There are more pests around as rubbish builds and people don’t have the funds to pay for a contractor to manage them. Food businesses are inspected less frequently so there is a risk to the public from foodborne diseases. We no longer provide training courses for businesses or carry out advice visits for those businesses that want to get it right first time.”

UNISON surveyed Environmental Health Officers working in local authorities in England and Wales in November/December 2018. In addition, a number of Environmental Health Officers responded to our survey of local government workers in June 2018. We received 761 responses over the two surveys of members.

We also sent a series of Freedom of Information (FOI) questions to local authorities in England and Wales. 197 out of a possible 374 local authorities responded. It is important to note that in England, environmental health services are carried out by unitary, metropolitan and district councils. In Wales, the 22 principal councils (unitary) are responsible for environmental health services.

The surveys and the FOI requests offer a unique insight into the issues our members face in delivering services to local communities and businesses in the light of cuts to funding.

KEY FINDINGS

Environmental Health services have been cut to the bone. Officers are seeing more non-compliance with the law which leads to more serious consequences. New businesses are being left without preventative guidance allowing some to develop bad habits that are creating risks for the public, which is likely to lead to an outbreak of foodborne disease. In effect, preventative work is greatly reduced. The problem is no longer stopped from happening, but work is carried out to minimise the problem after it has happened.

While programmed inspections have increased since 2015 (9.27%), staff numbers and budgets have decreased in real-terms resulting in a 40.95% reduction in programmed inspections when compared to 2009. In other words, an increased workload is being undertaken by a shrinking pool of staff. In addition, enforcement visits are slightly up from 2015 to 2018 (1.44%), but over-all visits are down by 49.05% when compared to 2009.

“The food team is already having to outsource some food inspections to contractors. Contractors tend to complete work quickly as each inspection is charged for, so (they) tend to be less thorough. Fewer animal health inspections are a major concern as farms are not being inspected to check on feed, animal movements for disease control. The last time we had a major disease outbreak in 2001 (foot and mouth) it cost the economy millions. All those measures put in place then are no longer checked due to all the cuts. At some point, something big will happen again as systems are not being maintained.”

Food safety premises inspections have risen by 8.35% since 2015, but overall they are down by 17.58% when compared to 2009.

This would suggest that the focus has shifted to reactive, enforcement work, in place of proactive, programmed work which would have traditionally allowed officers to spot potential problems before the need for an enforcement visit.

The number of enquiries and complaints requiring a response in 2018 was very slightly up from 2015 (0.07%) but down by 30.22% when compared to 2009. Noise complaints remained relatively unchanged with a small decrease (1.03%) from 2015 to 2018 and a decrease of 38.13% from 2009 to 2018. However, reported incidents of fly-tipping rose by 6.08% since 2015. In addition, in response to the survey, staff also reported an increase in unsafe, illegal or unlicensed activity.

The FOI data shows that between 2015 and 2018 there was an increase of 8.53% in the number of prosecutions commenced, but between 2009 and 2018 there was a 36.23% increase. This would suggest that there are simply not appropriate resources available to tackle these issues before they happen. This is backed up by staff reporting that little proactive and investigatory work is now being carried out and fewer incidents are being investigated.

WHAT THE PROFESSIONALS SAY

Key findings for councils in England and Wales:

- 58% of respondents have stopped providing some services
- 77% of respondents have seen less staff in environmental health
- 63% of respondents say that the public have to wait longer for a response
- 42% of respondents no longer investigate low-risk complaints
- 37% of respondents undertake fewer inspections
- 73% of respondents do less preventative work
- 29% of respondents are less likely to pursue complex cases
- 55% of respondents have introduced charging for services
- 56% of respondents do more revenue generation
- 27% of respondents are sharing services with other councils
- 40% of respondents provide less out of hours services
- 32% of respondents do less investigatory work

“Poverty is increasing the demands on our services, particularly in private sector housing, modern slavery, filthy and verminous/hoarding, neglect, septic tank problems etc, whilst our services have been cut.”

“There are more officers on sick leave due to mental health issues exacerbated by stress, which increases the workloads and stress of other officers.”

There are societal consequences too. People in more deprived areas are not always receiving the assistance they require, according to our members' responses. Low or no wage earners are living in substandard accommodation. People who are very poor, the elderly and those with learning disabilities are more likely to become digitally excluded.

“Certain essential sampling is not being done to the detriment of the end user and the Council's reputation.”

Austerity has real consequences for public health and safety:

- 44% of respondents are seeing the public having to tackle problems like rats themselves
- 58% of respondents believe legitimate businesses are more likely to cut corners
- 55% of respondents have seen an increase in fly-tipping
- 42% of respondents say there are more rogue landlords
- 32% of respondents say there are more noise complaints
- 65% of respondents have seen a reduced level of police support
- 16% of respondents have seen an increase in animal cruelty or abandonment
- 39% of respondents have no time to regularly inspect food business operators
- 26% of respondents have seen more food businesses like takeaways, failing their inspections

Asked about their predictions for the future, our members offer a bleak outlook:

- 69% of respondents believe there will be more job losses in environmental health
- 57% of respondents believe there will be more attempts to outsource with 22% saying the outsourcing will be to social enterprises, mutuals or co-ops
- 68% of respondents say that some services will cease to be provided
- 67% of respondents say that there will be less active regulation and more paper-based auditing
- 86% of respondents say that there will be changes to staff roles and skills
- 75% of respondents say there will be more charging for services
- 60% of respondents believe there will be more mergers or shared services between local authorities
- 62% of respondents say there will be a reduced ability to deal with major incidents.

Our members in environmental health services are clearly demoralised. The public is being let down by austerity.

“I started in 1960 and this is by far the worst time I have been in.”

WHAT LOCAL AUTHORITIES ARE SAYING

UNISON carried out a Freedom of Information request in November 2018, sent to 374 Councils (in England and Wales). 197 responses were received. The request asked for data relating to Environmental Health services over a three-year period: 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18. We then compared data from 2009 to 2012 and in addition looked at the difference between our earlier set of data (2009) and our most recent data (2018).

Budget allocated per head of local population

There was a 52.92% reduction per head of population in the budget for environmental health between 2009 and 2018.

Number of posts deleted

The number of people employed in environmental health has stabilised, with an overall 32.33% reduction in the number of posts deleted between 2009 and 2018. This figure does not represent an increase in new Environmental Health Officers, but a reduction in the number of posts further lost in local authorities.

Number of trainee/student posts deleted

There was a reduction in the number of trainee/student posts lost to cuts by 99.58% when compared to 2009 to 2018. This figure does not represent an increase in trainees, but merely fewer trainee posts being cut.

Enquiries and complaints requiring a response

The number of enquiries and complaints requiring a response fell by 30.22% between 2009 and 2018. This trend is likely to be explained by the 63% of UNISON members who responded to our survey saying that the public has to wait longer for a response.

Number of notices issued

There was a 9.35% decrease in the number of [enforcement] notices issued between 2009 and 2018.

“Cuts or changes to environmental health services are often completed by those who do not understand or appreciate the work that is carried out. Pro-active work is vital to maintain standards across environmental health and protect the public. Reducing resources to breaking point is like playing Russian roulette and disaster will inevitably strike.”

“We are trying to do the same amount with less people, no control of workloads putting employees at dangerous risks to (their) health.”

“It feels like we are heading back to Victorian times.”

Enforcement visits

There was a 49.05% drop in enforcement visits between 2009 and 2018.

Programmes inspections - announced visits

There was a 40.95% drop in programmed inspections between 2009 and 2018.

Food safety inspections

There was a 17.58% reduction in food safety inspections between 2009 and 2018.

Prosecutions

There was a 36.23% increase in the number of prosecutions commenced between 2009 and 2018. This demonstrates the commitment and hard work of a reduced workforce but with the same dedication to the public.

Fees and charges

There was a 37.98% decrease in total revenue in environmental health services between 2009 and 2018. This result would suggest that cuts in staff and enforcement visits have had an impact on generating income.

Fly-tipping

There was an increase of 6.08% in incidents of fly-tipping between 2015 and 2018, though a drop of 41.39% between 2009 and 2018.

“Lower income groups get the brunt of austerity. Poorer rented housing, unpoliced in the main, is allowed to get worse. Landlords attempt to exert political pressure when enforced against. Illegal evictions are increasing.”

“I believe less justification has to be made to cut staff. Sick policies tightened are particularly bad for those with long term conditions often used to make cuts or dismiss people due to sickness or poor performance due to a disability - those with 'unseen' disabilities treated worse. I feel I was bullied out of my last post.”

UNISON RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the politically inspired austerity agenda, environmental health officers are protecting the public day-in-day out. They are the backbone of public health in local authorities. Therefore, moving forward as a society we need to:

- Invest in local government to protect environmental health services. This means ending austerity
- Ensure that environmental health is represented at the senior level of local authority management and decision-making in order to lobby and advocate for the service as a profession
- Undertake research and ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of long-term preventative approaches to environmental health issues in order to support the case that prevention is better than cure
- Encourage local authority employers and professional bodies to work together to urgently address the reducing number of opportunities for people to enter the profession in local government as trainees
- Invest in environmental health officers as a profession vital to public health and wellbeing.