

## **Urgent action needed to support local authorities in training the next generation of environmental health professionals**

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) has published the results of its workforce survey of environmental health professionals, which finds that over half of local authorities are not taking on trainees or apprentices in environmental health, due to funding and capacity issues. Both trainees and apprenticeships are key routes into the profession, as practical training is a key part of the qualification process.

The survey results highlighted:

**There are difficulties in recruitment of qualified and experienced environmental health practitioners (EHPs).** 9 out of 10 environmental health teams used agency staff last year because of shortages in resources or delays in recruitment, while 56% of local authorities reported that they had vacancies that were left unfilled for 6 months or more. There are now only around 3,300 fully qualified EHPs working at district level local authorities in England – averaging 10.1 FTEs per local authority.

**EHPs have played a major role during the pandemic, including providing business advice, strategic planning for local authorities and supporting the vulnerable in the community.** Around 8 out of 10 EHPs working for local authorities were redeployed last year in response to the pandemic, due to their varied skillset and infectious diseases training. Most were involved in 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%). Additionally, some EHPs also ran food banks and other community support programmes.

**Budgets and resources are still under pressure and are having negative impact on local services.** Nearly a third (31%) of respondents told us that the delivery of some statutory environmental health duties was at risk, due to resourcing issues. More environmental health departments reported decreases (24%) in their budgets than increases (17%), in 2020/21, suggesting that budgets are continuing to shrink.

**A lack of funding in local authorities to recruit new trainees and apprentices in EH leading to shortages of qualified and experienced EHPs across England.** In 2019/20, 52% of LAs did not have a single apprentice or trainee, whilst 70% did not take on any apprentices in environmental health. 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.

Recommendations call for a range of stakeholders to come together to support the future of the environmental health profession. In particular, the report asks central Government to:

- Provide ring-fenced funding to pay for the salaries of environmental health apprentices
- Provide increased funding to support regulatory and public health functions in local authorities
- Deliver the recommendations of the Cross-Government working groups in England
- Establish a new role in England of a Chief Environmental Health Officer to mirror roles already in place in other UK nations reporting to the Chief Medical Officer, and work with the newly established UK Health Security Agency, which will seek to prevent future pandemics.

The report also includes information on capacities, budgets and the future outlook for environmental health teams in local authorities in England. The survey was completed by environmental health teams in 55% of English local authorities. The data presents one of the most comprehensive pictures of the profession at the present time.

Environmental health professionals were classified as ‘key workers’ early on in the first lockdown and have since been heavily involved in the Covid-19 response on behalf of local authorities. Environmental health practitioners have a range of skills and wide knowledge base, which focusses on the impact of the environment on human health. This focus on public health is why the profession has been invaluable in many areas of the pandemic response.

**Dr Phil James, Chief Executive of CIEH, said:**

“Environmental health professionals have played a huge role during this past year, from ensuring that businesses re-open safely to supporting vulnerable members of the community and putting together strategic plans locally. Now it is time to focus on this multi-skilled profession and provide support to the people who have been working tirelessly to protect us in recent months.

Our research clearly points to shortages of fully qualified and experienced officers and we need to put plans in place right away to ensure that we are supporting young people and career changers to enter the profession as well as providing the necessary funding to support employers in training the next generation of environmental health practitioners. We know that many people have lost their jobs during the pandemic and many have had to rethink their career path. This is therefore a way for the Government to begin to address the shortages of environmental health professionals and help to get people back into work.

We welcome the Cross-Government review of regulatory services and urge the Government to adopt the recommendations in this report and its own review in order put this vital profession on a more sustainable footing.”