

## **Environmental health**

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

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Summary

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**THE  
DAMAGE**



**WARNING: DISMANTLING  
COUNCIL SERVICES WILL  
SERIOUSLY DAMAGE OUR LIVES  
AND OUR COMMUNITIES**

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## Environmental health – how cuts are putting individuals and communities at risk and damaging local businesses and economies

Environmental health services are provided by all councils in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and by unitary and district councils in England. 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 port health. 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.

**“ Our success is that ‘nothing happens.’ It does, however, take a considerable infrastructure to maintain the status quo and also to respond to emergencies. ”**

With so much good work going on ‘under the radar’, UNISON wanted to find out just how services were being affected by the drastic cuts to funding imposed by the Coalition government as part of the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review.

### Overview of the cuts

UNISON’s 2012 research, based on data provided in responses to a Freedom of Information request from 70% of councils in England, Cymru / Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, shows:

- The average budget allocated to environmental health services per head of the population has fallen by 8% in two years
- A total of 1,272 jobs (headcount) have been lost in environmental health services in the UK over the past two years
- A total of 60 trainee and student environmental health officer posts have been deleted over two years across the UK
- Revenue earned by environmental health services fell by 4% between 2010/11 and 2011/12

### About the survey

UNISON has 4,000 members working in environmental health services across the UK. Our online survey was conducted in June 2012. The survey attracted 422 responses and offers a unique insight into the issues our members face in delivering services to local communities and businesses in the light of cuts to funding. Members responding represented 206 separate local authorities – just over 50% of those providing environmental health services.

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## How the cuts are starting to bite

“ Optional preventative services have been reduced such as provision of advice eg. during business start up... This has the long term implication of requiring more remedial regulatory work to do in the future. ”

Members were asked to comment on how cuts made over the past two years had impacted upon their ability to deliver environmental health services. The responses show a clear picture of a **diminishing workforce and reduced services**. This often means that staff have less capacity to undertake proactive work with communities and business, and many members feel this is a **false economy**, effectively storing up greater problems in the long-term.

The issue of a sudden loss of officers with many years of experience due to widespread redundancies was highlighted , along with the fact that many local authorities are cutting back on positions for trainees. These two factors combined spell a difficult period for the profession ahead if it **struggles to train and retain new talent** within local government.

- The majority of respondents (87%) reported that fewer staff were now a feature of their workplaces
- Well over half (60%) reported that there was now less emphasis on preventative work within the service
- Over half of respondents (51%) reported that their employer had now ceased to provide some services
- Longer response times now appear to be a common feature, with over 50% of members reporting this as an issue
- Just under half of all responses reported a new emphasis on services which generate revenue (49%)

## Austerity and the recession – can we no longer afford environmental health services?

“ We are finding that residents are trying (often unsuccessfully) to DIY treat pests. Treatments do not work, and in some cases have placed them and others at risk having purchased poisons and equipment, and not understood how to safely use it . ”

Members were asked for their views on how austerity and the recession had impacted upon the need for environmental health services. A whole range of issues owing to the recession were highlighted in members' responses, including the increased likelihood of legitimate businesses attempting to **cut corners** on issues such as health and safety because of financial pressures. Many felt that such cost cutting could **compromise the safety of the public** and employees of businesses. **Straitened financial circumstances** were also leading to individuals choosing to tackle environmental health issues, such as pest control themselves.

- Two thirds of members reported that the recession meant that legitimate businesses were more likely to cut corners on issues such as health and safety in order to keep costs down
- Over half of respondents reported that the introduction / increase in charging for pest control services meant that people were more likely to try and treat problems themselves
- An increase in fly-tipping, largely as a result of charges being introduced or increased, was seen as an issue by nearly half of all respondents (47%)



- Rogue landlords were seen as an issue by 42% of members, and this was also borne out by comments made (including that previously conscientious landlords were now more prone to cut corners and delay maintenance work / repairs)
- Nearly a third of members (30%) expressed concern at the reduced level of police support, particularly in relation to issues such as noise complaints, where council officers conduct out of hours site visits
- A quarter of members felt that the recession had led to increased animal cruelty / abandonment, with further anecdotal evidence of an increase in stray horses and families unable to afford charges for the release of a pet dog picked up by the warden service.

### **What is the public perception of cuts to environmental health services?**

**“ We will be unable to spend time with businesses helping them comply with regulation and so will become more reliant on formal action such as notices or court action. This has been shown not to secure long term change in businesses behaviour - education achieves that. ”**

Members were asked for their views on how the public would be affected by cuts and reduced capacity within environmental health services. Many people made the comment that when environmental health services were successful **‘nothing happens’** and it would

only be when an issue arose that the public would be aware of the cuts to services. Responses talked of the safety net for the public disappearing and a ticking time bomb waiting to go off.

Again and again members raised the issue of health and safety being presented as a ‘burden’ with **‘red tape’** stifling the growth of the economy. Many decried the attitude of the government and parts of the media in this regard, pointing out the positive record of health and safety legislation in providing protection for employees in the workplace and improving public safety.

One dominant theme running throughout the survey responses was the notion of going back in time and improvements that have been made over years and decades effectively being reversed. Whilst some referenced going **back to the 1970’s**, others went further, likening the conditions as **‘going back to the Victorian period’**.

With references to a **‘ticking time bomb’**, some members spoke of the large scale incidents and outbreaks that bring environmental health issues to the fore, such as the outbreak of Legionnaires disease. Many felt that this would be the only point at which cuts to environmental health services and their impact would be taken notice of, by both the public and politicians.

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## Who suffers when services are cut?

“ Environmental health impacts on all strata of society, but inevitably, socially and economically vulnerable people will suffer most. ”

Members were asked to comment on who in the community would be most likely to suffer from the effects of cuts to environmental health services. Comments ranged from those identifying certain groups of people such as the elderly or those for whom English is not their first language to the impact on local businesses, their employees and local economy.

**Rogue landlords** were a common theme, with many commenting that less active regulation gave many the confidence to act with impunity. Respondents pointed out the impact of poor housing and exposure to pests such as bed bugs on the health of families, and particularly the effect on children. Ever-widening **health inequalities** within society were a concern for many of our members.

The impact of cuts to environmental health on legitimate local businesses and the knock-on effect on local economies was a concern to many members; as well as the feeling that many **rogue employers** and businesses would thrive in a climate of reduced regulatory capacity.

## What does the future hold for environmental health services?

“ The red tape challenge and drive to reduce regulation of businesses will particularly reduce health and safety at work ... not visiting premises regularly will result in poorer knowledge of what is happening in the business community and a rise in workplace injuries and death. ”

The survey asked members for their thoughts on what would happen to local authority environmental health services over the next three years. A large proportion of respondents expect that some **services will be withdrawn** altogether in the future – some local authorities already no longer provide a pest control service to residents. In a similar vein, many people expect **charging for services** which had hitherto been free to become a more common occurrence.

A real concern of members is a change in the very nature of the job caused by the cuts. Less officer time and capacity means a shift towards more desk-based paper auditing of risk. Our members feel this is a direct consequence of the cuts and is **fundamentally changing** the role of an environmental health officer to the detriment of public safety. Members report that proactive work directly with the community and local business and taking a long-term preventative approach, is most effective rather than a short-term enforcement route.

Many are of the view that services will only be proved to be at **breaking point** when it is too late, and that the ‘slash and burn’ approach being taken by many local authorities is **decimating any resilience** to deal with a major environmental health emergency.



- The vast majority of members (85%) felt that further changes to staffing are likely over the next three years, with many commenting that the trend is to move towards generic job roles rather than specialisms
- Despite the levels of job losses already reported, 83% of members expect more to occur over the next three years
- Nearly three quarters of respondents (73%) expect some services to no longer be delivered in the future, whilst 60% expect charging for services to become more prevalent
- Many members feel that different models of service delivery will be introduced over the coming years, with shared services cited by 64%, privatisation by 49% and outsourcing to other models such as mutuals and co-ops cited by 16% of respondents
- Over half of members (51%) feel that the impact of cuts will lead to a reduced ability to deal with major incidents – several people anecdotally made reference to the two recent outbreaks of Legionnaires disease as an illustration of this
- And well over half of members (56%) feel that services will have less capacity to deal with active regulation and that the job will become more concerned with desk-based paper auditing

### **A long term future for a vital public service**

Despite the likely continued impact of cuts on the service over the coming years and further austerity ahead, members in their responses made a number of constructive suggestions about how environmental health services could be improved and made more sustainable.

- 1. Ensure that environmental health is represented at the senior level of the local authority management and decision-making in order to lobby and advocate for the service as a profession**
- 2. 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 the cure**
- 3. 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**
- 4. Use the opportunities created by the transfer of public health to local authorities to promote environmental health, including advocating ring-fenced funding for public health and engaging with Health and Well-Being Boards to promote preventative approaches**
- 5. Undertake work both locally and nationally to raise public awareness of the vital role of environmental health services to individuals, communities and local business in order to promote the profession and the benefits it brings.**

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Many believe that the cuts are counter-productive and are likely to cause more damage and added costs in the long-term. What environmental health needs is investment to enable a focus on long-term planning and preventative educational-based approaches to the issues in order to proactively protect individuals, support communities and advise local businesses.

## **Conclusion**

**“ Environmental health is a service that is not important, until there is a problem... the media and some politicians dislike ‘health and safety’, however should someone be injured...questions are quickly asked by those same people – ‘why was this allowed to happen?’ ”**

When cuts are made to services that the public can't immediately see there is a danger that they won't realise how much they rely on them until the services are gone.

By highlighting what is happening to environmental health services we hope to warn the public of the danger of cuts – before the damage is done.

**Visit the [UNISON website](#) for the full report and statistical evidence accompanying this research.**



# THE DAMAGE



**WARNING: DISMANTLING COUNCIL SERVICES WILL SERIOUSLY DAMAGE OUR LIVES AND OUR COMMUNITIES**

This UNISON report is one in a series of studies looking at some of the vital services provided by councils. In it we explore the long-term damage to the public and to the economy caused by ongoing austerity cuts.

a million  
voices  
for  
public  
services

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