

Linda Boyer, Chair of the UNISON North West Local Government Service Group

'Better Regulation' – Better for Whom? Launch event, Liverpool, Tuesday 27 April.

In the world of environmental health, the continuing cuts mean reprioritising services and functions, stopping functions altogether and closing down pilots that might have informed the way forward for adequate service delivery. Services have reached a tipping point where further funding cuts will seriously impact on businesses as well as the long term health and wellbeing of the UK population, especially the most vulnerable in our society.

The worst hit will be unitary authorities and those in metropolitan areas with large populations. The continual slow down in the ability of local authorities to address the preventative agendas that stop people getting ill in the first place, will place further pressure on the NHS which is already under enough stress.

Managers report that councils have so far remained resilient to cuts by maintaining in-house services, although they are increasingly looking to alternative approaches including sharing services with neighbouring authorities. Resources are currently just adequate to provide a basic statutory service and there is no longer any contingency.

Pest control services have seen a 72% cut in budget across the board and other services have been curtailed including business support, health promotion, dog warden services and contaminated land.

There has been an 11% reduction in qualified environmental health professionals, mainly falling on middle managers involving the loss of older and more experienced staff.

The cuts have been spread across almost all services, however environmental protection including noise control has been worse impacted. Cuts have also been more severe where partnerships have been set up to create shared services.

Most people see Environmental Health Officers as protecting the safe food that you eat. However, think back over the last few months – EHOs have been the people helping residents and businesses recover from the storms and floods that we had during December. It is environmental health staff who have been going door to door checking people were safe once the dirt and contaminated flood water had receded. We also have to pass on public health advice and respond to businesses who want inspections for insurance purposes.

Work place safety – the Health and Safety Executive have announced in January this year that they are to focus on tackling work related ill health a part of a new 5 year strategy. The HSE is also concerned about Council capacity to undertake health and safety inspections which is another service under considerable threat.

In 2014/2015 1.2 million people suffered an illness they believed was caused or made worse by their work and more than 140 workers were killed at work, Up to 50,000 people die each year in the UK from work-related ill health and incidents. Although few UNISON members die in workplace incidents, many suffer injuries and

work-related ill health, including: stress, back pain or RSI, hazardous substances, bullying or harassment, and workplace violence. Health and safety in our workplaces also protects those in the wider community. Whether it is a hospital, school or care home, our elderly and vulnerable relatives, our children and our communities are protected by measures intended to keep everyone safe from harm. UNISON knows that the key to providing a good and safe service is well-trained employees who have the time and protective equipment to do their job properly; along with strong laws, strong enforcement, and strong unions. That's why we UNISON are supporting IWMD this year which is in fact tomorrow.

Food poisoning cases are now under-investigated compared to previous years, where those affected are sent a questionnaire rather than a personal visit from an EHO to determine the source of their illness and give practical advice to prevent the spread, particularly if the affected person works in the food industry.

Another request on the time of EHOs comes from senior fire officers who have recently called for closer collaboration to stem a shocking 5 year increase in fires in sheltered accommodation, housing the elderly and vulnerable. There is a request for the opening up of the primary authority relationship between the fire sector and social landlords to include EHO's; we should also engage with other sectors in that discussion about doing regulation better and smarter.

General fitness standards has been another impact of the cuts.... that local authorities are far more likely to take informal action against landlords following complaints about poor housing conditions. The evidence is that councils are using informal means such as a letter even in cases where they have a statutory duty to use one of the courses of action under the Housing Act 2004. This is a result of lack of resources and therefore the time it will take to do an inspection, to draft a notice, to explain the process and to liaise with the landlord, and wait for the work to be done. Research shows that formal action is now rare and even non existent in some. Local authorities took 95 prosecutions in 2013 which is an average of less than one per Council.

The public is also being put at risk as councils are being starved of funding to tackle contaminated land. Land remediation work is slowly grinding to a halt and the situation will get worse unless more money is injected into this area. Concerns have been raised that contaminated land poses risk to human health, and findings have suggested a correlation between brownfield sites and possible contamination and self reported ill-health. With the government pushing ahead with house building plans and favouring the development of brownfield sites, more work needs to be done in this area.

Waste offences are also on the increase, business owners and householders are unable or refuse to pay additional charges incurred on them by the Env Agency and at local household recycling centres, and so decide to fly tip the waste which then means local authorities have the expense of the collection and disposal of this matter and, where evidence is found, the investigation of the offence; from experience a very lengthy often unproductive process!

Local authorities are struggling to ensure that half a million residents dependant on private water supplies are drinking safe water. 45% of relevant supplies have not undergone risk assessment in the last 5 years. 13% of private water samples taken in 2014 tested positive for e-coli, The presence of these pathogens indicates faecal contamination and the investigation to determine the source of such contamination can, and often is very lengthy. 6% of tested supplies have failed to meet EU quality standards and 491 private supplies are considered to pose a potential risk to human health requiring owners to take steps to protect public health. Over half a million people in England live or work in premises that rely on a private water supply. A further 1.4 million people attend festivals, shows and other events served by private water supplies every year.

Testing these supplies is very resource intensive with environmental health practitioners often having to drive long distances to reach remote rural areas to carry out risk assessments. Another example of how the ongoing squeeze on local authorities can have a direct impact on public health.

The lack of enforcement notices in housing has also been replicated in food hygiene departments with the number of inspections and audits falling. There is a big increase in less strict actions. The number of written warnings issued increased by around 14,000 over the last 2 years, while the number of hygiene improvement notices issued has dropped by 2000. Again, this is a time saving exercise to do advice visits to premises rather than enforcing formal notices.

Professor Hugh Pennington who has chaired two public inquiries into e-coli outbreaks criticised the decision to cut local Council funding. He has said "It is bizarre that local authority support should fall, considering the ongoing financial pressure on them and that they deliver frontline regulation. It is disappointing at a time when we know that local authority environmental health departments are struggling to carry out their work. It would be interesting to ask the Food Standards Agency what this is likely to mean in terms of specific support currently provided."

Contacting colleagues in local councils has shown a pattern that Environmental Health Officers are now being asked to be generic and therefore cover environmental protection, housing standards, food and health and safety, also planning and licensing consultations etc. The impact of this is less experienced staff and expertise has been lost.

There is no scope in the system to cope with any leave or sickness absence, due to vacant posts being unfilled. Managers are having to decide which work must be done rather than which work ideally should be done.

Moving to generic working has been done to give more resilience in the teams, however there are still elements of specialism that env health practitioners will struggle to become fully conversant with such as dealing with an approved food premise, air quality and some of the very technical environmental protection permits. The transition to generic working has been very difficult for staff and a lot of time and money has had to be spent on re-training

Many colleagues are off work with stress directly because of this generic working and having to cope with the change from being a food EHO to generic and the difficulty in dealing with different sorts of customers. However, many Managers have told me that this is the reactive way they now have to work and although it is difficult for some members of staff, it needs to be done to cover the statutory duties of the service. There is a lot of pressure on the team to retain service standards from both the customer and councillor expectations which are still very high. Many staff are too afraid to put their head above the parapet as they fear they will end up redundant in the next restructure.

Branch Secretaries are reporting to me that many environmental health staff are contacting them regarding illness, fear of redundancy and capability issues and are struggling to cope with the pressure being placed upon the department, they have a great deal of pride in their role and feel they are letting themselves, their colleagues and the public down. Uncertainty in departments is very unproductive and difficult for managers to maintain morale. There are also some concerns over other changes such as the Food Standards Agency moving towards more self regulation, like the Health and Safety Executive did.

As budgets reduce and staff resources are being stretched, the managers say we will have to adapt; we have to make it happen, we have to protect the public..... but... at what cost?

UNISON has been campaigning on these issues for some time. We appreciate the work that Steve and his colleagues have done for us and continue to do to get these issues out into the public domain. UNISON is pleased and proud to work with Steve and to lend our support.