

# Cuts in Food Safety & Environmental Health



## Introduction

UNISON Scotland has been investigating the impact of cuts on local authority environmental health departments and at the Food Standards Agency, where we represent meat inspectors. New staffing figures and responses from two surveys of UNISON members confirm our warnings that cuts are putting public health at risk.

## Staffing levels

Responses to a Freedom of Information request to all 32 Scottish councils show that the total number of Environmental Health Officers employed by 30 councils has fallen 13%, from 519 in 2008/9 to 450 in 2011/12. (Dumfries & Galloway and Highland provided incomplete data.) There has been an even bigger drop in other staff carrying out an enforcement role in environmental health departments, down from 507 to 423 in the same period - 17% (This is from 29 councils as Scottish Borders also did not provide this data.) EHO numbers in Edinburgh went down from 46.5 to 37. In Renfrewshire, they went down by 50%, from 24 to 12, and in South Lanarkshire from 41 to 31.

These reductions are in line with figures from the Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland, which found a 9% drop in EHO numbers and more than 20% fewer specialist Food Safety Officers between March 09 and Sept 2011. REHIS President Bernard Forteach said late last year: "Clearly the current financial climate is having a major effect on public services and this will undoubtedly affect our ability to be able to react to any public health emergencies thrown at us. But is this what the electorate wants?" UNISON does not believe that reduced service and increased risk is what the public wants for these vital services that can literally be a matter of life and death. The Sunday Herald editorial on 17 February described the situation as "particularly disturbing", reporting that food sampling has gone down by more than a third. It said: "It only adds to the toxic mix that these reductions in sampling and job losses have come about because of public sector cuts. Among all the priorities of government, surely ensuring the integrity of the food its citizens eat is one of the highest? What has happened must stop and be reversed."

UNISON conducted two surveys of members working in environmental health, one last summer and one a snapshot survey this month which also consulted meat inspectors. Almost 90% in the first and more than 95% in the second expect further cuts and job losses in the coming years. This is not surprising given that councils are already under immense financial pressures and the worst of the so-called austerity measures are still to come. However, already 43% say that public health is being put at risk, with 75% saying that there are major cuts, but that the public will only see the impact when

## KEY POINTS:

- Cuts are having a major impact on staffing levels in environmental health and at the Food Standards Agency. These vital services must be properly resourced
- The number of Environmental Health Officers is down 13%, from 519 in 08/09 to 450 in 11/12
- Meat inspector numbers have more than halved since 2003, down from 170-75 – shocking, particularly given the horsemeat scandal
- The planned new Food Standards body for Scotland must ensure independent meat inspection and must receive sufficient funding.



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something goes wrong, such as the horsemeat scandal. One member said: "We don't have the time to do the thorough job that FSA & Pennington Reports are quite rightly asking us to deliver."

### **Inspections – public health, food safety and health and safety**

The FOI to councils also asked how many public health, food safety and health and safety inspections were carried out in each of the last few years. The responses show a mixed picture, reflecting some of the recent changes to inspection regimes, with an emphasis on higher risk premises, meaning it is harder to compare figures over time or between councils, as some include different types of inspections in the totals for each category.

However, there is a clear fall in the number of health and safety inspections...down from 12,694 in 09-10 to 11,814 in 11-12, a drop of 7%. This includes falls in Shetland from 199 to 76, in Clackmannanshire from 141 to 25 (the council pointed out the big drop is due to changing to only higher risk inspections) and in Angus from 201 to 89.

More than 91% of members said health and safety inspections have gone down, with comments including: "I have major fears about the changes to health and safety inspections, having inspected a lot of businesses in the last seven years. About 76% did not have risk assessments or any awareness of the need to do them. Most knew nothing about accident reporting regulations."

Members fear that preventive and educational work is being squeezed, with potentially severe consequences for the future. One said: "With reduced staff, most time is now spent in focusing on higher risk business activity...We will be unable to spend time with businesses helping them comply with regulation...more reliant on formal action such as notices or court action. This has been shown not to secure long term change...education achieves that. I have spent time with parents whose child has been desperately ill with Ecoli poisoning. It is awful and preventable. We can help prevent this and other tragic things happening. But this will become less and less often. A rise in public health related illness and injury will happen."

*(More comments from members are on the next page.)*

### **Action for Branches**

- **Monitor local situation in environmental health/food safety work and ensure major concerns are raised with the employer**
- **Monitor the impact of issues such as loss of expertise, or insufficient admin support as these also impact dramatically on the service, putting staff under pressure with big workloads. Many say admin support has had major cuts.**
- **Update the Bargaining & Campaigns team on local campaigns**
- **Incorporate other campaigns with the food safety/ environmental health work, such as, for example, UNISON's Food for Good Charter for schools, hospital and prison food**

#### **Further info**

**Reintroduction of meat inspection 'victory for common sense'**

<http://unison-scotland.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/reintroduction-of-meat-inspection-in.html>

**Sunday Herald 17 Feb 'Food protection tests slashed'**

[www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/food-protection-tests-slashed-by-a-third-in-scotland.20243376](http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/food-protection-tests-slashed-by-a-third-in-scotland.20243376)

**UNISON comments on Jan 13**

**Audit Scotland report that raised concerns about food safety, staffing and training levels and a loss of expertise**

[www.unison-scotland.org.uk/news/2013/jan-feb/3101.htm](http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/news/2013/jan-feb/3101.htm)

**UNISON UK report, The Damage-Environmental Health**

[www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/21256.pdf](http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/21256.pdf)

**UNISON UK report, The**

**Damage- Trading Standards**

[www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/21254.pdf](http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/21254.pdf)



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Comments from the members' surveys:

*"The FSA, following on the heels of DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), is heavily biased in favour of industry at the expense of the consumer."*

*"Qualified EHOs in my council are now doing ALL their own admin work due to reduction in admin/clerical staff. This has reduced ability to do the job by 30-40%."*

*"The food safety inspection numbers have fallen mainly due to the implementation of the cross contamination guidance. This means more time being spent with higher risk premises ensuring they reach compliance but no time at all with the lower risk premises."*

*"This sounds sensible but for a large number of 'lower risk' businesses this lack of attention will see them increase in the risk they pose to public health. That is when we will have to pick up the pieces and try and get back to a structured inspection programme."*

*"The number of health and safety inspections is extraordinarily lower than it used to be - driven largely by the Government's 'Better regulation' agenda."*

*"The almost complete withdrawal from any real health and safety work is leaving the country's workforce wide open to injury and occupational ill health. We all know that that costs a vast sum in terms of lost worker hours to the employer, the health service and the individual."*

*"Short term financial gains are being made at the expense of significant future cost. We need to view investing in health and safety as a means of investing in the future economy of the country."*

*"I have major fears about the changes to health and safety inspections having inspected a lot of businesses in the last seven years. About 75% of them did not have risk assessments or any awareness of the need to do them. Most knew nothing about accident reporting regulations."*

*"We regulate not just food and health and safety but animal welfare, tattooists, air quality, contaminated land, housing disrepair, landlord registration, regulation of houses in multiple occupation, pest control, infectious disease control and public nuisance amongst other things. With reduced staff most time is now spent in focusing on higher risk business activity. That is not to say the rest is low risk! 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 business behavior – education achieves that."*

*"I have spent time with parents whose child has been desperately ill with E-coli poisoning. It is awful and preventable. We can help prevent this and other tragic things happening. But this will become less and less often. A rise in public health related illness and injury will happen. But possibly more gradually than most think. Un-noticed maybe. But it will happen."*

*"Our public health team has been halved recently and work farmed out to other council departments who are not properly trained and have no thought about the wider implications. Work is not carried out with public health in mind."*

*"Environmental health is one of the few remaining bodies set up to protect public health at ground level. We are good at what we do and have helped maintain a standard of protection for the public that has come to be expected. I worry about what is ahead when these services cannot be offered and the impact on quality of life for some more vulnerable people"*

*"Numbers reduced may not look large on paper, but when already a small team, can have significant implications."*