

Local Authority Capacity and Capability: Executive Summary

Results available: Results available

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(3.61 MB)

Background and objectives?

The FSA has a key role as the central competent authority in overseeing official food and feed controls undertaken by local authorities. This supports the delivery of the FSA's mission, food you can trust, and helps ensure food is safe and what it says it is. The FSA seeks to work in partnership with local authorities to help them to deliver official food and feed controls.

Local Authority (LA) Environmental Health (EH), Port Health and Trading Standards (TS) teams deliver official food and feed controls using a range of interventions as set out in the Food Law Code of Practice (FLCoP) and Feed Law Code of Practice (FeLCoP). They are instrumental to the delivery of the FSA mission, across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure consumer confidence and protect public health.

Evidence from professional bodies, LAs and wider sources suggests that LAs are experiencing significant issues around the recruitment and retention of suitably/ appropriately qualified and experienced officers. [\(footnote 1\)](#) The FSA commissioned Ipsos UK to carry out this initial phase of discovery research to understand more about the barriers and facilitators encountered by LAs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Methodology and sampling?

This research aimed to build a holistic understanding of barriers and facilitators to the recruitment and retention of suitably and appropriately qualified and experienced officers across EH and TS career pathways, with a focus on delivering official food and feed controls.

A combination of online focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, with the number of participants included in parentheses: current LA officers (29), former LA employees (10), education providers (11), professional bodies and leadership bodies (7 individuals from 4 organisations), LA managers (42), and students, including apprentices (36). The Local Government Association (LGA) also took part providing contextual information. A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) of existing literature was also conducted (please see Annex B- reference list).

This report is based on qualitative findings and captures perceptions among key stakeholders. The research has focused on perceptions because these are valuable for understanding challenges around recruitment and retention and how these might be addressed. However, the complexity of the topic and range of stakeholders included means individual participants may not always have had a comprehensive understanding of the system-wide issues they raised. Participants themselves often said they were uncertain about specific points. This is described in more detail throughout this report.

Key findings?

Attracting people to relevant education pathways??

To be authorised to deliver official food and feed controls, officers are required to be suitably/appropriately qualified. This research shows that:

- The numbers starting and completing relevant qualifications to deliver official food and feed controls is not enough to meet demand in LAs, both in terms of overall supply of potential officers and relevant skills gained through study.
- Current students are motivated to apply to courses due to an interest in public protection and public health and safety, predisposing many to careers in LAs. However, the breadth of courses means students can choose between several specialisms and opt for careers unrelated to official food and feed controls.

Across stakeholder groups, participants attributed issues with recruitment of potential officers to three broad factors:

- Lack of awareness of EH/TS careers with scarce resources contributing to a decline in the level of awareness raising that LAs can do, particularly among school leavers.
- The complexity of the qualification system with multiple pathways making it hard for prospective students and LAs to navigate.
- Challenges around the practicalities of study, including financial constraints time and workload preventing individuals from starting or completing relevant courses.

As part of this research, efforts were made to identify how many students were applying to, studying and completing relevant EH and TS courses. This data was difficult to access consistently across education providers, limiting the extent to which it was possible to model student numbers.

Recruiting people on relevant education pathways to careers specialising in food and feed controls within LAs

LAs seeking to recruit people to deliver official food and feed controls typically seek officers who have already demonstrated they have the required qualifications and experience. This research indicates that:

- Food and feed are relatively small aspects of both EH and TS professions, which means that not everyone on relevant education or professional pathways is aware of or interested in focusing on food and feed specialisations.
- There is a perception that the current model of achieving a suitable/appropriate qualification is not producing officers who can be authorised as competent without further professional development. Some LA officers and managers were also concerned that professional qualifications and the requirements of LA job roles were not always aligned.
- Resource constraints within LAs, including lack of resources to provide relevant training on the job and insufficient experienced staff, act as a barrier to bringing early career professionals up to full competence.

- Pay – especially for early careers including apprentices was viewed as relatively low and not necessarily competitive with other equivalent roles in LAs and elsewhere. This was seen as particularly problematic given high workloads and ongoing requirements for professional development.

Retaining suitably/appropriately qualified and experienced staff within LAs?

Once suitably/appropriately qualified staff have been hired and gained the professional experience to be authorised to deliver some or all official food and feed controls, the following issues were commonly reported as negatively impacting retention:

- A lack of career progression opportunities. This was linked to a reduction in headcount at different levels in LA regulatory teams, making them increasingly flat and limiting progression.
- Reductions in funding for LA regulatory teams contributing to increased workloads and reduced ability to participate in CPD. This was also described as making it harder to support early career professionals and promote the profession externally (e.g., visiting schools/careers fairs).
- Early retirement among experienced staff because of increasing workloads and challenges brought on by financial constraints and the impact of the pandemic. This was identified as having an impact in the reduction of experienced officers to support and train early careers staff.
- Amount and type of CPD required by the Codes of Practice as well as professional bodies such as CIEH. While perceived as necessary and valuable in principle, aspects of the current CPD offer were considered repetitive and to not adequately support individual skills and development.
- Changing nature of the role impacting job satisfaction. The pandemic, the UK's decision to leave the EU, and an increasing focus on the highest risk businesses were thought to have made the role more challenging over recent years.
- A less attractive employee offer. While levels of pay were one important aspect of this, other parts of the LA employment offer (broader terms and conditions, work life balance, vehicle allowances, pensions, flexibility, etc) were also perceived to have been (or as being) eroded.
- Perceptions that other types of employment and other employers have better offers in terms of pay, career progression, and work-life balance.

Perceived challenges with the FSA Competency Framework

The research identified a key challenge across recruitment and retention of suitably/appropriately qualified staff related to the FSA Competency framework.

- LA managers and officers find the FSA Competency Framework difficult to use in practice. Managers reported challenges judging who can deliver which official controls. Similarly, officers found it hard to know what their qualifications allowed them to do, and therefore what roles they could apply for.

Suggestions for supporting the delivery of official food and feed controls

Participants made a number of suggestions for potential ways the delivery of official food and feed controls could be supported. Their suggestions included promotion of EH and TS careers in LAs, schools and universities, greater collaboration across FSA and government department with regulatory responsibilities and education providers, and attracting more new students to training, promoting apprenticeship routes and simplifying qualification requirements, as detailed in the conclusion to this report.

Next steps

The issues raised in this research are wide-reaching and are not all within the scope of the FSA's role and remit. A summary of responsibilities for official food and feed controls across different LA types and by nation is included in Annex D.

This Phase 1 research focused on discovery, aiming to achieve a more holistic understanding of barriers and facilitators to the recruitment and retention of suitably and appropriately qualified and experienced officers across EH and TS career pathways.

In Phase 2, the FSA will work with key stakeholders to assess the findings and recommendations from participants to:

1. Identify which findings are for the FSA to address in its role as the Competent Authority. The FSA will then review any associated recommendations from interviewees and assess the cost and deliverability of these to take forward a project which will tackle the issues identified.
2. Act as a convenor and collaborator to bring stakeholders together to assess the findings and recommendations that do not sit within the FSA's remit and to encourage collaborative working that seeks to address these issues.
3. Identify which findings the FSA has no remit to change and make clear where these will not be taken forward.

1. 1 The language of suitably and appropriately qualified staff reflects that used in the Food and Feed Law Codes of Practice. The Feed Law Code of Practice (FeLCOP) section 4.3. states "Competent Authorities must: ensure officers, involved in the assessment of compliance with feed law, hold an appropriate qualification" unless undertaking specified activities, while the Food Law Code of Practice (FLCoP) section 3.3.2 states "before Competent Authorities authorise or extend an officer's duties their lead food officer(s) must ensure officers: (a) carrying out official food controls or other official activities hold a suitable qualification, listed in sections 3.4.1, 3.4.2 and 3.4.3, relevant to their role, and the activities they will be authorised to undertake" unless undertaking specified activities.