

Local Authority Capacity and Capability: Chapter 3 Attracting people on relevant education and career pathways to roles specialising in food and feed within LAs

General perceptions of LA food and feed roles

Roles attractive to many students

In line with the results outlined in Chapter 2, people on relevant education pathways were also drawn to careers in LAs motivated by the ethos of public service. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, both EH and TS were considered to have a relatively low profile among the public. Overall, within LAs there was a perception that the pool of potential people who may be attracted to LA food and feed roles was therefore already too small.

“I think when young ones are picking their choices and choosing their A levels and trying to get into uni, not enough people know about environmental health, that's what I think. You know, I just fell into it by accident. You know, I don't think that there's enough promotion of EH.” (LA manager, EH, NI)

Once people have decided on a career in EH or TS, participants across stakeholder groups described LA roles as still being attractive for many, particularly for early careers. As discussed in Chapter 2, education providers said that many of their students wanted LA roles to establish themselves in their profession.

On the other hand, LA managers, officers and former employees described significant challenges around offering support to those in the early part of their career, after they had completed their initial qualification. This is considered in more detail below.

Professions that offer variety

Participants mentioned that food and feed are relatively small aspects of EH and TS professions. This means that not everyone on relevant education or professional pathways is aware of or interested in focusing solely on food and feed specialisations, even among those who work within LAs.

“When I first started it was the wider TS, so there's lots of different things that TS officers do. Food and feed is just an example. I originally was interested in TS because I see myself as a public servant, I've wanted to serve my community, basically.” (Former LA employee, TS, England)

Across stakeholder groups, an interest in public service and a desire to improve public health were seen as the main reasons that motivated people to consider LA food and feed roles. Generally, participants highlighted the relevance of public protection and regulation of food hygiene and standards to people's everyday lives.

“I believe in public service. I believe in working with my community. Looking at what my community needs from me and then basically improving the lives of the people that live in my community.” (LA manager, EH, England)

“As a team, we have an impact on the health of the county, and not only the county but flying the flag of Welsh food and Welsh produce.” (LA officer, EH, Wales)

The breadth of both EH and TS professions mean that those on relevant education and career pathways can choose between several specialisms because of personal interest or in response to job opportunities. These choices between different aspects of the professions can also happen at different stages of people’s careers and can impact those already working in LAs in different ways, with food and feed competing with other interests for some people – and with other needs in LA teams covering EH and TS.

This breadth was viewed in different ways by current and former LA employees with experience in food and feed official controls. For some, the opportunity to carry out other tasks, besides food and feed controls, allowed them to keep their job challenging and interesting. However, others found this overwhelming and negatively impacted their workload.

“There's a lot of pressure, there's a lot of work that needs doing. Some of them as well, also, have been pulled in all directions... I specialised really in food and feed, but sometimes you've got to do food, feed, weights and measures. You've got to do product safety. You've got to do doorstep crime. Sometimes for some people, whilst some embrace that variety, some people find that actually they are being asked to do too many subjects and they can't keep on top of their expertise to be able to do it properly.” (Former LA employee, TS, England)

Reasons people are attracted to LA food and feed roles

There were several common reasons people on relevant education pathways were attracted to food and feed specialisms and roles in LAs. Some join EH or TS professions already having an interest in food (this was less common for feed). As described in Chapter 2, previous experience of the food industry through other jobs was particularly important in attracting some people to EH qualifications and roles. Others developed an interest in food and feed while studying for their qualifications, either because of the class-based work, or through practical experience as part of their apprenticeships or placement opportunities.

LA roles were also seen as being the most familiar by students. Many were apprentices with direct experience of working for LAs. Non-apprentices tended to have some contact with those working in LAs during their studies, or through work placements.

As discussed in Chapter 2, students associated benefits with LA job roles, particularly early in their careers. However, LA managers, LA officers and former employees felt that the benefits that LAs were known for offering were not as attractive as in the past. More specifically, there was a perception that the effort to qualify to undertake food and feed official controls often outweighs the benefits that LAs are currently able to provide.

“The wages aren’t worth it for the amount of training you need to take on. If you’re leaving university, you can see plenty of other options with much better career progression and a quicker rise in pay.” (LA officer, EH, England)

“There's other benefits of working in LAs, but again, I think those benefits have diminished over the last 20 years, certainly I've seen, I think, the need to be far more flexible in their approach to work.” (Former LA employee, TS, England)

Professional qualifications and early career progression

One challenge raised consistently across stakeholder groups was that EH and TS professions have complex education and career progression pathways, particularly following the initial university or apprenticeship qualification. Although resources introducing the relevant education pathways are available online stakeholders mentioned that this information is often confusing and difficult to navigate. This was seen as making it harder to attract people to food and feed roles in LAs. The impact of this on retention will be considered further in Chapter 4 and infographics outlining the qualification pathways to EH and TS careers are detailed in Annex C.

“I just think that the routes into EH need to be clearer, they need to be more linear, and it needs to be explicit. When you apply for the job or when you go for the course, what it is you need to do and what else you need to do in order to actually qualify, and what that qualification actually means, what being an authorised officer actually means, what being a technical officer actually means. It's very, very muddled and very muddy, and it makes any kind of... career progression or any kind of decision really, really difficult.” (LA officer, EH Port Health, England)

“I think the institutions, CTSI have done it as well in terms of overcomplicating and putting in barriers [...] having to do all certain modules before it can get a certain qualification and that doesn't then, you can't actually do anything unless you get that qualification. And so, bringing someone in, with the timeframe to actually get someone competently qualified to do the job, is just beyond the scope. And that's where the problems lie.” (LA manager, TSO, England)

As well as being seen as complex to navigate, there was also a general perception that professional pathways can be too rigid and onerous. Furthermore, there were also concerns about the changes applied to the current pathways and the lack of clarity around how the range of different qualifications in EH and TS relate to the competency framework requirements for people carrying out official food and feed controls in LAs. This is explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

“You potentially end up with people who haven't gone through the right routes, and I think that's what the CIEH then started doing was, we suddenly had a shortage, so it's like, 'Oh let's change the process, now you can do your professional qualification at Asda.' Well, how do you work at Asda for 12 months and learn the whole of EH? You can't. They've gone from one extreme to the other. And I think we're now starting to get a few people through that haven't had the right professional experience and background, but the likes of us now as heads of service, do not have the money to be able to offer student placements to show people the correct, right way through local government and to learn the right things. I mean how can private industry like Asda show somebody the full remit of EH?” (LA manager, EHO, England)

For example, some LA managers mentioned that currently there are several routes for officers to become competent, but not necessarily to the standard required to perform their role. In addition, these routes generally take a few years for officers to complete as they cover a wide range of topics that, in some instances, are not relevant to their roles. Some LA managers suggested that it would be better to simplify requirements and focus on training professionals in specific competencies required to perform their roles.

“I think what the FSA need to do is, two things, they need to facilitate people to get to a point where they can be competent to do an enforcement role in bite-sized chunks which don't necessarily require people to go off for long periods of time... and the other thing in terms of the existing officer base, the FSA need to reinstate what they used to do which was to provide core training opportunities. As a national regulator they have a national role to facilitate national training standards.” (LA manager, TSO, England)

“The fact that we've kind of put TSOs and EHOs on a pedestal and you've got to go through all these qualifications to get to be that person. And actually real life is, we need a

variety of people to do a variety of jobs, and we need some people who don't need that top level qualification. We need people who can be specialists in roles, but we also need more generalists and I think there needs to be more flexibility across the board.” (LA manager, TSO, England)

Some LA officers and managers were also concerned that professional qualifications and the requirements of LA job roles were not always aligned. For example, there was a sense of frustration among some TS professionals in rural LAs regarding the CTSI Weights and Measures module ([footnote 1](#)). They believed this had to be completed if they want to study and become recognised as competent in food and feed roles. They suggested that the module was challenging and not directly relevant to their roles.

“You basically have to do the whole thing [including] Weights and Measures... I know a lot of the smaller authorities don't really see the need for it. And talking to our guys, our apprentices and our trainees, it is one of the things that puts them off. It is that it's perceived as being a scary and really difficult thing to do.” (LA manager, TSO, England)

“Not a simpler qualification, but more of a flexible qualification. So once you've done one module, you don't have to then do another one unrelated to get the whole qualification.” (LA officer, TS, England)

Some ways LAs in England have sought to support officers through training and qualifications include internal training provision, supporting EHOs via funding and mentorship to gain professional qualifications. Some LAs have pooled resources across regional LAs to provide EH and TS services.

Barriers to attracting people to LA food and feed roles

Lack of suitably qualified staff

Overall, participants across stakeholder groups highlighted the lack of suitably qualified staff as a key barrier to filling LA food and feed roles. Their view was that more needed to be done to attract people to relevant education pathways to provide a larger pool of people for the professions. This reflects other evidence about the lack of suitably qualified staff (see Annex B- Local Government Association 2022).

“I think you need more people in university getting [either] their food safety diplomas or their EH degrees because there's not the numbers there. I think that the FSA need to reverse their thinking back a bit and think, 'How can we get people into education?’” (LA officer, EH, Wales)

Managers mentioned that LAs often have vacancies that remain unfilled after jobs have been advertised for some time. To fill these gaps, LAs are often using contractors to carry out food and feed controls. This is consistent with findings from the CIEH Workforce Survey report (2021), which shows that 80% of LAs use external agencies to deliver regulatory services and 87% of these do so due to resource shortages.

Although contractors were usually experienced and suitably qualified on paper, there was a perception that they were not as thorough and motivated when delivering official controls. This issue was raised across different types of LAs and in different nations and regions.

“We have had contractors for feed, and they've been shocking. It would be easier to just do the job myself, because I have to organise them, tell them what you want to do, and then the quality of the work that they have returned has just not been up to par really.” (LA manager, EH, England)

“I saw a team of 8 go down to around 3, and then I had contractors effectively. So instead of managing employees who care about the local community, I was managing contractors who were less caring about local communities but were just there, effectively to earn money and deliver food hygiene inspections and health and safety inspections for us.” (LA manager, EH, England)

Pay was also mentioned as a factor impacting recruitment of both suitably qualified and experienced staff, and early careers staff. LAs managers, education providers and students mentioned that apprenticeships paying the minimum wage were not attractive to some early careers staff. Also, competition across LAs for suitably qualified staff means that LAs with fewer resources and lower salary scales struggle to attract candidates. Candidates are increasingly thought to choose LAs offering better pay and benefits. LA managers also discussed related challenges around retention, which will be covered in Chapter 4.

“We've recruited I would say for about a year with very little interest in post... the wider discussions particularly within the region suggest that's consistent across the patch.” (LA manager, EH, England)

Lack of experienced officers to mentor new staff

While students and apprentices were often attracted to LA roles to enable them to establish themselves in their career, other stakeholders described significant barriers to achieving this in practice. The lack of experienced staff to mentor new staff emerged as one of the key issues in ensuring there were enough suitably qualified staff to carry out food and feed official controls now and in the future. Given their limited capacity, LAs described needing to fill vacancies by finding experienced staff. They often preferred to do this rather than hiring new joiners with limited experience who would need mentoring from experienced LA officers.

LA managers said that recruiting apprentices was not generally a concern, particularly among unitary LAs who could offer more variety. LA managers recognised the importance of supporting and developing those early in their careers, but feel they are not well-equipped to do so.

“Apprenticeships are not problematic for recruitment... what is problematic for me is going out to try to recruit somebody with experience and qualifications to do food work and when we do that, there is zero interest. My worry is, if you think about the pipeline is that we're going to get so many people falling out the far end that as the apprentices come on stream, there's nobody to support or mentor them.” (LA manager, TS, England)

The general context for LAs was described as challenging. Reflecting the articles listed in the REA (see Annex B), funding was cited as a recruitment barrier among LA managers. Resource constraints, the pressure to deal with backlogs following the Covid-19 pandemic, and difficulties retaining experienced staff have resulted in a difficult environment across the EH and TS professions in LAs.

“I think we're reaching a point where the whole viability of developing new entrance into the profession is really compromised because we've lost so much knowledge and experience, it's difficult to expose those new entrants to sufficient practical experience.” (LA manager, TS, England)

We need to be able to train up and give time to less experienced officers, and we just haven't got the capacity to do that because we haven't got enough people to do the job. So, I think that is a difficulty, having experienced people to give time to less experienced officers, as well as obviously funding, in terms of funding posts.” (LA manager, EH, England)

Challenges attracting people back to LA food and feed roles

Among those who have left LAs, the hands-on aspects of the job and the opportunity to work with the public are potential motivations for them to return. However, the current challenges and pressures facing LAs were generally thought to outweigh the expected benefits of returning. For instance, some former LA employees said that their current roles provide the training, support and career progression opportunities that were not available in their previous LA roles.

“I probably don't see myself back at an LA. I think, I really enjoy my job now, I enjoy working at [company name]. There's definitely more variety available, there's definitely more career progression available here, just by virtue of being such a big company. I speak to ex-colleagues and just know its not getting any better, budgets are just being squeezed tighter and yet they're wanting more out of them, so it's almost an impossible task really.” (Former LA employee, EH, England)

Opportunities to attract people to LA food and feed roles

Supporting routes to work in LAs

Overall, the findings suggest that many of those on relevant education pathways were interested in careers in LAs delivering food and feed official controls. Across stakeholders involved in education pathways, it was seen as important to support those who want to work in LAs to do so.

Education providers said that many students were employed in LAs after graduating from EH degrees. This was seen as the typical route for EH graduates to gain experience in the sector. Students also often intended to seek employment in LAs once they graduated, if they were not already employed by an LA during their studies. They tended to see employment within LAs as stable, supportive and interesting, which appealed to many starting out in their EH careers.

From the perspective of LAs, having the opportunity for early careers staff to receive training on the job was considered essential for the future of the profession, and something that would attract new recruits. Support to develop as an EH or TS professional focused on food or feed was seen as having motivated existing and former LA employees to pursue their careers. LAs suggested that sponsoring students to take relevant professional qualifications could attract more people to LA roles.

“I think it would be an incentive for students to want to qualify in environmental health if there was even some sponsorship or some help with getting qualified.” (LA manager, EH, England)

“I suppose, actually, thinking about it, there was the feeling that I would be trained and be qualified to do a job, I think that was quite important as well, actually. I think that probably comes back to the fact, what I said to you, that I did my A-Levels but I didn't see a career path for me through university. [...] I thought, there is a job role where they will train me, and I will be qualified to do something. I think that was an appeal as well”. (Former LA employee, TS, England)

In addition to resources, the other main challenge around offering support was the availability of expertise within LAs. This was linked to retention challenges around experienced staff, who were seen as essential to mentor newly qualified professionals. Being able to support staff through their professional qualifications to demonstrate competencies was seen as particularly important. However, this challenge of keeping hold of experienced staff was generally thought to be very difficult to address. This is discussed further in Chapter 4.

1. The Food Law Code of Practice does not have an explicit requirement that individuals have to complete Unit 4 Weights and Measures to be suitably qualified to undertake food controls, so this perception creates a barrier.