

Local Authority Capacity and Capability: Chapter 4 Retaining suitably/appropriately qualified and experienced staff within LAs

General perceptions of LA food and feed roles

Overall, experienced staff working in LAs saw their roles as important and felt proud of their contribution to public safety and wider society. The flexibility, regular working hours, variety of work, and working closely with colleagues in LAs helped to support retention. However, the benefits of working for LAs were described as becoming less clearcut, and retention is a significant problem for many LAs.

“Slowly but surely, over the years, all of those advantages that you had in an LA have either gone or the private sector and other sectors have caught up. So it's just not as an attractive prospect as it was previously...a lot of it's down to the resources and the finances that LAs have... I think that is certainly the biggest challenge they've got in terms of retaining people.” (Former LA employee, TS, England)

Pay and benefits were seen as a key retention issue. LA managers and LA officers were concerned that the pay and benefits on offer were not sufficient to retain staff when other alternatives were available. This was exacerbated by the increasing demands on staff and the wider economic pressures for individuals.

“We can't offer the salaries that are needed to retain people. We don't have any good incentives to keep people, you don't get private healthcare, the pension isn't what it was, lease cars have gone, lump sums are going. So, you can't offer any of that.” (LA officer, EH, England)

“Salaries and a lack of resource, really... I think this job is not all about the salaries, but obviously with the cost of living, there are pressures on people personally, which means that they're more likely to be attracted to move for salary increases than perhaps they were 10 years ago.” (Professional or leadership body)

Beyond pay, challenges around retention differed based on the specific context of the LA and were also different at different stages of EH and TS professionals' careers. Common themes for both EH and TS professionals included limited support for early careers staff, experienced staff retiring early, a lack of career progression, declining job satisfaction, and increasingly attractive alternative options. Each of these challenges is considered below.

Barriers to retaining qualified staff

Early careers

The challenges around supporting early careers staff have already been discussed previously in Chapters 2 and 3. As well as making attracting and recruiting new staff difficult, this was also an issue for retaining early careers staff.

“Well, I think the problem is that you have a split within the work force. You have people who are very well qualified and have been for a very long time... and then you've got people coming in newly qualified. But there's no resource within the LAs in order to train people up.” (LA officer, EH Port Health, England)

Concerns were also raised over the lack of support provided to those completing qualifications, including their professional portfolios. Rather than this being something they could do through their day-to-day roles, completing qualifications often felt like taking on an extra responsibility. Participants reported having to complete this work in their lunch breaks, after hours and at the weekends. Some felt this did not reflect what they expected from a career in EH or TS, or did not match the pay, benefits and career opportunities available.

Later career / retirement

As they reflected on their experience of working as EH or TS professionals, long-standing employees described increasing workloads and challenges brought on by financial constraints over many years. They also discussed the more recent impact of the pandemic. Learning and enforcing the new regulations on top of normal workloads placed added pressure on officers and narrowed the focus of delivering the core aspects of their responsibilities. Participants found it difficult not having the resources to carry out work to previous standards and the way it 'should be done'.

"We all very much inherited the Covid role of being the Enforcement Officer. Well, there was no qualification for that, but we were expected to serve notices on legislation ... and that put a whole new pressure on everyone, and quite frankly was enough to make ... quite a lot of people leave the profession." (LA officer, EH, England)

Some experienced officers who are able to access their pensions, are considering or taking early retirement as a result of these pressures. Overall, participants across stakeholder groups understood why individuals would make the choice to retire as soon as they could, even though this was causing a resource issue when it came to the delivery of official controls.

These findings compare with other studies suggesting that a reduction in funding has a negative impact on retention in LAs (see Annex B). For instance, Assan (2019) claims that a lack of funding has had multiple effects on LAs, including the reduction of staffing levels through offering early retirement to senior EH professionals and reducing their recruitment to below a replacement ratio, while maintaining the same workload targets.

“We've prioritised and reprioritised and lots of things have fallen off the bottom and we're firefighting now, and that's very wearing... when it gets towards the end, people are retiring or going off earlier, because they can and they've had enough. I'm not sure what anyone can do about that.” (Professional or leadership body)

There were also consistent concerns about the skills gaps that result from experienced staff retiring. The ongoing pressures on EH and TS professionals, combined with experienced people retiring mean there is a lack of knowledge transfer, and the problems this has created are expected to get worse. This has left participants worried about how early careers professionals will learn the necessary skills to carry out their roles effectively.

“LAs have had such a long time where they haven't invested in training, there's a big gap. There's quite a lot of officers who are in their 50s and who are all, obviously, looking to retire. There is quite a big gap, so some of the more younger ones, it's where do they get their experience from? How can they be supported?” (Former LA employee, TS, England)

Some rural LAs were particularly concerned about their workforce reaching retirement age. Their more remote geography means they have tended to retain staff for longer, as there are fewer options for experienced EH and TS professionals locally. They also struggle to attract people to the area, particularly younger people at the early stages of their careers. This raises concerns about the future of regulatory teams and for the next generation of LA officers delivering official controls.

Career progression

A lack of career progression opportunities was highlighted as a key challenge to retaining suitably qualified EH and TS professionals. Much of this was thought to be a result of financial constraints over recent years. Participants described how budget cuts had caused LAs to reduce headcount at different levels to save money.

“In some LAs, you might have a Technical Officer, EHO, Senior EHO, Principle EHO, but some LAs, because of finances, it's just levelled everyone. So, all you have is officers, doesn't matter where you're coming from, and team leader.” (LA officer, EH, England)

This has resulted in an increasingly flat structure in some LAs, which has made it significantly more challenging for staff to progress. In turn, this can demoralise highly experienced staff. For example, some LA officers at the top of their pay band described feeling stuck and frustrated, with very limited opportunities to take on more responsibility. Others who had left LA roles cited a lack of progression as a key reason for their decision.

“Once you are an EHO, you don't go anywhere. You stay on the same salary, unless you get a senior or principal job. So, basically, when you start, you stay on that salary for the rest of your life until you find a promotion. So, you're basically waiting on somebody to retire, you know, until you get a promotion and that's a fact. Most of the officers here are on that salary for the rest of their life. There are no promotion opportunities.” (LA manager, EH, NI)

Any progression opportunities that were available were mostly managerial positions leading teams. However, these are commonly filled by long-standing officers who stay until they retire, and therefore do not come up often within an individual LA. Some participants also said that they liked being on the frontline and wanted opportunities to progress based on their technical expertise or specialism. Managerial positions were viewed as taking qualified people out of frontline work, creating more gaps in teams when it comes to delivery.

“[It's] fairly classic when you're making cuts in a department, you remove those middle management roles, but of course that makes it very hard to progress because the leap into the next role is much bigger. So, yes, I would have said for my role, there is progression, I could progress into a team leader role which would be a more management role... which not everybody is interested in.” (LA officer, EH Port Health, England)

“I personally had got to the point where... the next step for me would have been a Head of Service, and it wasn't something I aspired to. Which, actually now we talk about it, maybe actually one of the reasons perhaps I did move on, because I didn't see myself advancing in my career within the LA.” (Former LA employee, TS, England)

The lack of obvious career progression opportunities means it is common to see suitably/appropriately qualified staff moving sideways – transferring to other teams within their LA, to a similar role in another LA, or taking secondments. Officers being recruited by other LAs that offer them more money for a similar role has become increasingly common, particularly with the current cost of living crisis. However, for those with families and other local ties, relocation, and therefore progression, may not be an option. LAs covering larger geographies, including some

county councils, perceived their geography to be a barrier to a sidestep move.

“County councils are geographically bigger areas, usually. There wasn't very much movement between authorities at that level because you physically would probably have to move house. If you were, for example, working in a London borough or some of the metropolitan boroughs, places around Birmingham and Manchester, it's easier because you can still live where you are and still go and work in another LA.” (Former LA employee, TS, England)

There was also a perception that career progression was generally more difficult in rural LAs. In smaller LAs, in particular, participants said there was no way to progress while remaining in a similar role.

Job satisfaction

Although some aspects of LA roles in EH and TS are considered attractive by students and early careers staff (as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3), those who have worked in LAs for longer described how their roles have become harder. These more experienced LA officers and managers felt that careers in LAs were not viewed in the same way by those doing them, with fewer resources, benefits and long-term pressure having a detrimental impact on staff. Often this was described in terms of frustration around not being able to perform their roles properly, which was described as causing increasing numbers of officers to look for other roles. This is also consistent with findings from the CIEH Workforce Survey report (2021).

“It seems to me that certainly since austerity, there is a sense that there is less prestige [associated with] working in local government and... you feel like you're not doing enough/more needs to be done... because of a lack of resources.” (Professional or leadership body)

“We are all passionate about our job and we want to do it quality and we want to do it well and you are getting to the point where you have to prioritise and get to the point where it's good enough – I've done it [so] there isn't going to be a public risk but I would have liked to have gone that step further for my own personal professional enjoyment. I think that can be an issue.” (LA manager, EH, England)

Participants with experience of working in LAs described how added pressures over the past few years had further reduced morale and job satisfaction. Both Covid-19 and Brexit have had significant impacts. Learning and enforcing new regulations on top of existing workloads has placed additional pressures on LAs and they are still trying to catch up.

“We were given all the Covid regulations to deal with and trying to tick over with all the new food businesses that were set up in lockdown. Everyone got inundated with them. And obviously our normal work didn't happen, so we're still all battling back from that.” (LA officer, EH, England)

“I would say, bearing in mind the amount of new legislation that we've had coming in, all the changes for Brexit. I don't think we've had, perhaps, enough of the right style of training to make us as competent as we could be or would like to be.” (LA officer, TS, England)

LA staff and managers from coastal authorities and those working in Port Health described particular challenges and pressures associated with Brexit. They highlighted how they were either taken out of their teams, creating a backlog of other work, or had to do extra import/export and regulation work on top of their normal tasks.

“Port Health recently went through a massive recruitment phase in order to cover import checks since we left the EU, and then cut funding by 75% and a lot of my colleagues were made redundant. (LA officer, EH Port Health, England)

Participants linked the workload pressures and low job satisfaction to a lack of suitably qualified staff to deliver core role requirements, including food and feed official controls. They described this as requiring some LA staff to take on more work or additional responsibilities, but without always receiving the expected recognition for doing so.

“So now I’m lead officer... I mean, it sounds very glamorous, but it doesn’t actually come with any benefits. You don’t get, like, a pay rise for being the lead officer. You don’t even get time off to focus on the lead officer job, you’ve just got to fit it in with everything else.” (LA officer, TS, England)

LA officers also described having to carry out more challenging inspections and other stressful tasks. These pressures were seen as not only eroding job satisfaction but having tangible effects on individuals. Some current and former LA employees reflected on this, with similar issues across EH and TS professions.

“Resources were just getting cut and cut all the time, less and less opportunities to do things. You felt, often, that you were firefighting. You were just getting the job done and it was almost a bit, you weren’t able to go and get any depth in some of the things that you wanted to.” (Former LA employee, TS, England)

LA staff moving to private sector and other public sector role

The challenges outlined in this chapter are making alternative opportunities in the private sector and other public sector organisations increasingly attractive to LA staff delivering food and feed official controls. Although many of those working in LAs still enjoy their work and see it as valuable, the pressures described above were seen as outweighing the benefits for many. This means many said they were looking for similar roles that contribute to public health and safety elsewhere.

“We've got a very devoted team of dedicated officers who just want to do a good job. Unfortunately, there isn't always the platform available for us to do a good job. We haven't got enough people, we haven't got enough resources, we haven't got enough time, we haven't got enough training. So, you know, people go contracting because you can get so much more money.” (LA officer, TS, England)

Opportunities to retain qualified staff

Overall, participants struggled to suggest ways to address retention challenges given their understanding of the difficult context LAs currently face. The barriers they identified were seen as considerable and would require significant change to tackle. Even so, addressing these barriers was seen as crucial for the future of EH and TS professions. While it was hard for individuals to identify how best to do this, there were some specific suggestions for changes that may help individual LAs retain staff for longer.

Changes to pay and conditions

Some LA officers and managers suggested that increased pay was needed to retain staff. They felt the current pay was not in line with the expertise and qualifications of staff, and that this was an important way to address workforce challenges.

Linked to this, some discussed how to address the movement of EH and TS professionals between different LAs based on relatively small increases in pay to perform similar roles. To address this, some participants suggested removing pay disparities between LAs and having more consistency across the profession.

“I think all the councils should be upped to the same pay that we're on. And I think that would help retain staff too.” (LA officer, EH, NI)

Current and recent LA employees suggested other benefits such as more flexible working as an opportunity to improve retention. While many LAs felt they had good flexibility, others thought this could be improved. Some LAs expressed how resource pressures meant they often were unable to work as flexibly as they would like. For example, one LA in Northern Ireland highlighted how hybrid working was not an option in their team. Given the workforce profile, many EH and TS professionals described having caring commitments, and thought more flexible working might encourage them to continue working in LA roles.

“It's tough, isn't it? Other than, you know, salary increases because I think, unfortunately, money talks, for that. Or it's some way finding some other benefits that the LAs can provide that no one else can... so whether it's more opportunities for more flexible working, implementation of 4-day working weeks but without affecting the salary, those type of things.” (Former LA employee, TS, England)

Valuing EH and TS within LAs

There was a perception that the importance of EH and TS was often not recognised within LAs. Some cited that this was also reflected in the resources and budgets allocated to EH and TS regulatory teams. Finding ways to make EH and TS professionals feel more valued was seen by some as another opportunity to help retain staff.

“It's that value thing as well, I think people don't feel valued anymore in the role, and that takes a strain as well. So, I think it's people recognising how important the career is...” (Former LA employee, EH, England)

Developing new ways of working

In response to the existing recruitment and resourcing challenges LAs are facing, some LAs said they have implemented new ways of working through collaborative service strategies. This was seen as being more realistic about the challenges around recruitment and retention and taking steps to ensure services could continue to be delivered effectively in the challenging context.

For instance, LAs that are facing capacity and recruitment challenges and struggling to meet their targets have seen in shared services an opportunity to share expertise and improve delivery without placing all the burden on individual LA teams.

“We established the shared service because of the resilience issue. There was a cohort of EHOs who were in their late 50s, 60s and all going to retire at once. So, the Chief Execs decided that it would be a good thing to put us together.” (LA manager, EH, England)