

Environmental health officer

D4

Job Description

Environmental health officers (EHOs) use their specialist skills and knowledge to develop, co-ordinate, implement and enforce public health policies. They work to ensure that people have a better quality of life and live within a healthier society.

EHOs are committed towards improving, monitoring and enforcing public/environmental health standards. Important aspects of their work include: food safety and nutrition; workplace health and safety; housing conditions; noise levels; odour emissions; industrial waste; animal health; contaminated land; air/pollution control; and communicable diseases.

EHOs tend to be employed within distinct divisions of regulation, such as food safety, health and safety, housing or environmental protection.

Typical Work Activities

Typical work activities vary according to specialism and area, but tasks may include:

- carrying out routine health and safety, food hygiene and food standards inspections;
- ensuring food for human consumption is produced, manufactured, processed, stored, and presented for sale without risk to the health of consumers - this will involve taking samples for laboratory analysis and investigating complaints, and dealing with unfit food through voluntary surrender, detention or seizure;
- inspecting all allocated premises for compliance with health and safety legislation and initiating appropriate action to secure enforcement;
- investigating accidents occurring in the workplace and responding to employees' complaints;
- visiting private and rented accommodation, including caravan sites, and taking action to improve conditions - this may involve liaising with other council departments to organise grants for renovations and repairs;
- investigating and advising on the control of rodent and insect pests, eg taking appropriate action to reduce/prevent the spread of infestation and disease;
- maintaining and improving water standards in swimming pools, bathing areas and private water supplies by taking water samples and investigating complaints;
- periodically monitoring radiation activity and taking action when safety levels have been exceeded;
- advising on health and safety issues in relation to new buildings and developments;
- arranging for the efficient removal of abandoned vehicles and illegally dumped refuse;
- licensing pet shops, animal boarding places, zoos and riding establishments;
- monitoring port health;
- monitoring levels of noise, air, land and water pollution - this may include liaising with other professionals in order to deal with issues such as the contamination of land with toxic waste, or complaints about noisy neighbours;
- mounting displays and exhibitions to disseminate educational materials and giving talks/lectures to a wide range of audiences;
- participating in legal proceedings;
- complying with administrative and monitoring systems, and keeping appropriate records.

Work Conditions

- Range of typical starting salaries: £25,000 - £34,000 (salary data collected Jan 06).
- Range of typical salaries at senior/managerial level (eg, after 10 - 15 years in role): £30,000 - £60,000+ (salary data collected Jan 06).
- Salaries vary considerably and can be influenced by the size and location of the employing authority and the type of work undertaken. Environmental health officers (EHOs) working in private companies may earn more than those in the public sector.
- Many EHOs receive a car allowance as remuneration for the use of their private car; others have a car provided under a leasing scheme. Additional benefits include final salary pension schemes, between five and six weeks' annual leave, childcare subsidies, and relocation expenses.
- The working week is generally 35-39 hours for public sector EHOs, with flexible start and finish times. Occasional evening and weekend work may be necessary but you will normally be given time off in lieu.
- The majority of EHOs are based in offices, although a great deal of their time is spent visiting workplaces, shops, factories, and people in their homes, hence a degree of flexibility is required.
- Working conditions may occasionally be dirty and unpleasant, eg when inspecting bad housing.
- Self-employment, job-sharing and flexible working schemes are sometimes possible. Freelance work may be available for experienced EHOs who have specialised in particular areas, eg acoustics. Career breaks are possible, although it is necessary to keep up to date with current issues and practices.
- In 2005, the practising EHO membership of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) (www.cieh.org) was 2,554 females and 3,905 males. This is set to even out over time as more women are entering EHO training.
- Jobs are available countrywide in most towns, cities and rural areas.
- The work is diverse and varied. Aspects of the job require working to tight deadlines and may be stressful and confrontational, sometimes requiring police help, especially when enforcing regulations.
- Travel within a working day is frequent. Absence from home at night is uncommon. Overseas work or travel is uncommon, although there are opportunities for EHOs to obtain employment abroad.

Entry Requirements

An honours degree (BSc) or postgraduate qualification (MSc) in environmental health, accredited by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) (www.cieh.org) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland or the Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland (REHIS) (www.rehis.org), is essential. Accredited courses are available in full-time, part-time and integrated/sandwich formats.

Graduates from relevant science/technology-based HNC, HND or foundation degree programmes may be able to enter directly onto the second year of a BSc course. An alternative route for HND Diplomates or foundation degree graduates is to enter employment at technician level and study on a part-time BSc accredited course.

A postgraduate qualification is only required if the first degree is not in environmental health. MSc courses are offered at the University of the West of England (Bristol), the University of Birmingham and the University of Strathclyde. (At the time of writing, January 2006, an MSc course at the University of Derby is awaiting validation.) Potential entrants are usually expected to hold a second class honours degree in a science-based discipline or qualifications/experience that is considered to be equivalent.

It is advisable to try to gain some pre-entry work experience as this will provide an invaluable insight into the profession and enhance the likelihood of success in securing training placement opportunities with local authorities.

Potential candidates will also need to show evidence of the following:

- excellent written and oral communication skills;
- decision-making skills;
- sound numerate and IT skills;
- assertiveness;
- tact, diplomacy and sensitivity to other people's views;
- the ability to work independently and as a member of a team.

A full UK driving licence is required for most positions.

Apply early for course places as institutions may be able to offer assistance to applicants who are seeking training placements (in some cases, a pre-requisite to obtaining a place on a course). It may be easier to get a placement if you are already known to the local authority through previous work experience. Therefore, where relevant, apply to your home local authority first. In addition to local authorities, training placements are also offered by a wide range of other organisations, including private sector companies, central government departments and The National Health Service (NHS) (www.nhs.uk).

Students may be able to obtain sponsorship from the local authority with whom they have a training placement. In recent years, due to limited budgets and an increase in environmental health officers (EHOs) employed by local authorities, there have been fewer sponsored placements. However, the number of people entering the profession is declining so sponsorship opportunities may increase. At present, the majority of students on accredited courses fund themselves.

From 1 October 2006 it will be illegal to discriminate against candidates on age grounds but, in practice, age may continue to be used in selection criteria by some employers. For more information on equality and diversity in the job market and how to handle discrimination, see the AGCAS information booklet, Handling Discrimination (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/discrimination).

Training

Accredited courses cover the same syllabi, although emphasis may vary:

- science, technology, statistics, social science, and law are studied at a general level;
- food, housing, occupational health, environmental protection, and public health are covered in greater depth.

In addition to these studies, it is necessary to complete at least 48 weeks' practical training with a local authority, either as an integrated part of the course, during holiday periods, or on completion of the course.

To qualify as an environmental health officer (EHO) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, graduates from accredited courses must submit a satisfactory work-based learning portfolio of evidence and pass professional examinations comprising five written case studies, a risk audit and an interview. On successful completion, the Certificate of Registration is awarded by the Environmental Health Registration Board (EHRB), which is administered by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) (www.cieh.org). This signifies qualified EHO status and is the qualification recognised by government bodies and local authorities.

In Scotland, graduates must produce a training record that details the practical work carried out (and indicate its connection to the achievement of particular skills and competencies), pass professional interviews in the six main subject areas and submit a case study. Successful graduates are then awarded the Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland (REHIS) (www.rehis.org) Diploma in Environmental Health and become qualified EHOs.

Throughout their careers, EHOs are required to undertake continuing professional development (CPD) in order to keep abreast of changes and to ensure their competence in the delivery of high quality and effective services. This will involve attendance at a range of courses, seminars and conferences, where other relevant skills, such as management training, may also be developed.

Career Development

Most environmental health officers (EHOs) operate in teams, each of which usually has a team leader/principal officer. Due to the re-organisation of local authorities and the complexity of legislation, EHOs tend to operate within specialist divisions, such as food safety, occupational health, environmental protection, housing, and public health. As a result, they may have more narrowly defined roles. However, some EHOs do remain in generalist roles, dealing with all environmental health-related issues.

Progression to senior EHO positions encompasses additional responsibilities, such as formulating and implementing policies and procedures, and assisting with the delivery of training/assessment programmes for student EHOs, qualified EHOs and technical officers. You may also act as the nominated 'responsible officer' for the council regarding contact with lead government departments and agencies.

Due to the flatter management structures of some local authorities, there are fewer opportunities for promotion to senior positions and, in some cases, career progression may necessitate relocation.

There are increasing opportunities for experienced EHOs to diversify into other fields in central government, consultancies and the private sector.

Typical Employers

The majority of environmental health officers (EHOs) are employed in the UK by local authorities. Local authorities are the agencies responsible for the protection of public health, in particular food safety, housing conditions, health and safety at work, and environmental protection.

Opportunities also exist in the private sector with employers, for example:

- large retailers, especially food suppliers (monitoring quality assurance);
- holiday companies (checking the standards of foreign hotels and resorts);
- airlines/shipping companies (ensuring health and safety requirements are being met).

EHOs are also employed by the armed forces, The National Health Service (NHS) (www.nhs.uk), universities and colleges, as well as central government and its agencies, including:

- the Food Standards Agency (www.foodstandards.gov.uk);
- The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (www.hse.gov.uk);
- Environment Agency (EA) (www.environment-agency.gov.uk);
- the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) (www.sepa.org.uk).

Experienced EHOs work for private consultancies in specialist roles, for example advising businesses of their legal duties and helping them maintain good environmental standards. They are also known as environmental health consultants.

A few EHOs have become lecturers in the subject.

EHOs are able to work abroad, in some cases with the European Commission, whilst others gain employment as far afield as the US, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. There are also opportunities in the developing world where EHOs work to ensure the sustainable development of communities.

Sources of Vacancies

- Prospects Graduate (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/graduate);
- Environmental Health News (www.cieh.org/ehnl);
- Local Government Jobs (www.lgjobs.com);
- Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland (REHIS) (www.rehis.org) newsletter;
- Opportunities: The Public Sector Recruitment Weekly (www.opportunities.co.uk);
- New Scientist (www.newscientist.com);
- national newspapers, including The Guardian (www.guardian.co.uk) (Wednesdays);
- local newspapers;
- local council vacancy lists;
- local council websites.

Recruitment agencies rarely handle vacancies.

Related Occupations

- Environmental consultant
- Environmental manager
- Health and safety adviser
- Inspector of health and safety
- Quality assurance manager
- Radiation protection practitioner
- Trading standards officer
- Water quality scientist

Information Sources

Bibliography

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

AGCAS Publications

[Environmental, Food Chain and Rural Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing
[Handling Discrimination](#), AGCAS Information Booklet
[Local, Regional and National Government Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing
[Options with Environmental Science](#), AGCAS Options Series

Graduate Prospects Publications

[Prospects Graduate](#)

Other Publications

[Environmental Health News](#), Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH), Weekly
[The Guardian](#), Guardian Newspapers Ltd, Daily
[Municipal Year Book \(MYB\)](#), Hemming Information Services, Annual
[New Scientist](#), Reed Business Information, Weekly
[Opportunities: The Public Sector Recruitment Weekly](#), Opportunities, Weekly

Websites

ENDS Environmental Consultancy Directory, www.endsdirectory.com/search/
Local Government Jobs, www.lgjobs.com
The National Health Service (NHS), www.nhs.uk

Addresses

Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH), Chadwick Court, 15 Hatfields, London SE1 8DJ Tel: 020 7928 6006
URL: www.cieh.org

Environment Agency (EA), Visit the EA website to check for details of regional offices Tel: 08708 506 506 URL:
www.environment-agency.gov.uk

Food Standards Agency, Aviation House, 125 Kingsway, London WC2B 6NH Tel: 020 7276 8000 URL:
www.foodstandards.gov.uk

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Headquarters, Rose Court, 2 Southwark Bridge, London SE1 9HS
Tel: 0845 345 0055 URL: www.hse.gov.uk

Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland (REHIS), 3 Manor Place, Edinburgh EH3 7DH Tel: 0131 225 5444
URL: www.rehis.org

Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), Erskine Court, Castle Business Park, Stirling FK9 4TR
Tel: 01786 457700 URL: www.sepa.org.uk