



Local government reorganisation and environmental health

Introduction

Environmental health is public health in real life. It operates where people live, work and interact - ensuring homes are safer, air is breathable, food is safer and communities are protected from harm. It is one of the few local authority functions that simultaneously supports public health, economic growth and the environment, and can reduce demand on emergency services.

Environmental health uniquely protects the public by combining proactive prevention with effective regulation. It reduces risks before they escalate and enforces the standards that keep communities safe, healthy and resilient. It prevents illness, injuries and hazards, enforces standards and holds duty-holders accountable, works across multiple interconnected systems, and provides cost effective community level impact through targeted early action.

Authorities undergoing reorganisation must take care in designing their structure so that environmental health can make the most impact in their specific local circumstances. In some structures it will be part of public health; in others regulatory services. Whatever design is selected, environmental health must be recognised for the role it can play, properly resourced, and able to perform all its functions effectively.

Environmental health is a system enabler that makes prevention real, can reduce demand for health and care services and improves outcomes across the whole system.

Policy context: reorganisation, place and prevention

Local government reform is taking place alongside wider system transformation, including:

- Devolution and place-based leadership
- Growth and productivity agendas
- Reform to Integrated Care Systems (ICSs)
- NHS pressure and demand reduction

The **Department for Health & Social Care** focuses on:

- Reducing avoidable demand
- Tackling health inequalities
- Strengthening prevention

Environmental health aligns directly with all of these priorities by:

- Acting upstream of demand for health and care services
- Operating at population scale, as well as at individual and local level – supporting the whole community but especially the most vulnerable, dealing with poor business operators and rogue landlords, and reducing risks
- Connecting policy to place



Environmental protection and sustainability

Environmental protection is a core determinant of population health.

Key issues

- **Air pollution:** 30,000 deaths annuallyⁱ
- **Economic cost of air pollution:** ~£27 billion per year in 2019ⁱⁱ
- **Inequalities:** People living in the 20 % most deprived areas experienced 8 % higher average PM_{2.5} concentrations than those in the 20 % least deprivedⁱⁱⁱ

Water contamination and waste crime also present growing risks:

- 1.2 million fly-tipping incidents annually in England alone^{iv}

Role of environmental health

Environmental health practitioners:

- Monitor exposure and risk
- Advise businesses and communities
- Enforce compliance
- Intervene to prevent deterioration

Strategic importance

Environmental health provides the **operational delivery mechanism** for:

- Clean air and environmental improvement plans
- Testing, investigation and enforcement

Without environmental health capacity, these strategies risk **failing at implementation**.



Health, safety and wellbeing

Workplace and environmental safety are major public health issues.

Key issues

- 1.9 million workers with work-related ill health
- £22 billion annual cost
- More than a million working days lost each year
- 11,000 deaths annually from occupational lung disease^v

Role of environmental health

Environmental health professionals:

- Inspect workplaces
- Support compliance by providing advice or, if necessary, intervening
- Enforce safety standards
- Work within varying licensing regimes to uphold safety and welfare standards
- Manage risks such as asbestos and chemical exposure

Strategic importance

By reducing the risks of work-related accidents or ill-health which are proportionately more disruptive to micro and small organisations, this work directly supports:

- Economic productivity
- Workforce participation
- Local economic growth strategies

It is a critical but often under-recognised **economic as well as health function**.



Housing and communities

Housing is one of the strongest determinants of health.

Key issues

- 2.4 million poor-quality homes^{vi}
- £1 billion annual NHS cost to treat those affected by poor housing (first year treatment costs alone)^{vii}
- Cold homes linked to ~1 in 3 excess winter deaths
- Damp/mould linked to:
 - 5,000 asthma cases
 - 8,500 respiratory infections^{viii}

Role of environmental health

Environmental health:

- Identifies housing hazards in the private rented sector
- Enforces standards
- Supports improvement
- Tackles fuel poverty-related risks

Strategic importance

Housing illustrates the **system nature of public health**:

- Links to planning, energy efficiency and inequality
- Requires coordinated, place-based intervention

Environmental health, with its ability to act across the system, can bridge across different functions.



Food safety and integrity

Food hygiene and safety is a visible and essential public health function.

Key issues

- 2.4 million cases of foodborne disease annually^{ix}
- Growing complexity in food systems
- Annual UK hospitality, food service and retail food waste: 1.3 million tonnes^x

Role of environmental health

- Inspection and regulation, in communities and at ports
- Advice for businesses of all sizes, raising standards in all parts of the sector
- Enforcement and incident response

Strategic importance

Gaps in the regulatory framework, including the inability to take account of technological and societal changes such as growing purchases from online sources, lead to:

- Lower compliance
- Higher public health risk
- Reduced public confidence



Public protection and wellbeing

Environmental health is central to protecting communities from harm.

Key issues

- 2.4 million cases of foodborne illness annually, resulting in 222,000 GP visits and 16,400 hospital admissions, with an estimated cost to society of £10.4 billion^{xi}
- 305,000 noise complaints per year in England and Wales, with impacts including increased risk of cardiovascular and metabolic disease, annoyance, sleep disturbance and cognitive impairment^{xii}

Role of environmental health

Environmental health:

- Identifies and mitigates risk early
- Enforces safety standards
- Responds to incidents and complaints
- Creates safer community environments

Strategic importance

This work:

- Reduces avoidable demand on fire and NHS services
- Improves quality of life
- Supports safer and more resilient communities
- Mitigates climate change and supports decarbonisation



Cross-cutting issue: workforce and capacity

Across all domains, a consistent theme emerges:

Environmental health capacity = public health protection

Key issues:

- ~1,000 roles lost in the past decade in local authorities
- ~13 % vacancy rate
- High turnover and recruitment challenges
- Increased reliance on agency staff

Impact of capacity gaps - leading to diluted coverage and reputational risk:

- Fewer inspections
- Delayed responses
- Weaker enforcement
- Increased risk and cost



Conclusions

Environmental health is:

- A **key public health function**
- A **driver of prevention**
- A **system integrator across place**

Backed by regulatory and enforcement activity

It delivers:

- Reduced illness and mortality
- Lower NHS demand
- Improved economic productivity
- Reduced inequalities

For reorganising authorities, environmental health is not peripheral - it is **foundational**.

Recommendations for Local Authority decision makers

1. Embed environmental health within place-based leadership

Ensure environmental health is integrated into:

- ICS partnerships
- Local growth strategies
- Housing and planning systems

2. Strengthen prevention-led regulatory approaches

Through its practical interventions, environmental health creates safer and healthier conditions. Think prevention first, with regulation that protects. We call upon system designers to maximise environmental health's ability to use both its public health perspective and statutory levers.

3. Invest in workforce capacity

Investigate and address:

- Vacancies at all levels
- Skills gaps
- Training and pipeline into different roles

4. Integrate across systems

Align environmental health with:

- Public health
- Housing
- Climate and environment
- Economic development
- Regulatory services

We recommend that, where possible, environmental health remains as a single, integrated team, so that connections are not scattered

Public health leaders should have an understanding of the contribution that environmental health can make to public health delivery, and the relationships and objectives of their environmental health team, even where that team is aligned to regulatory services rather than public health.

5. Position environmental health as a core public health function

Recognise its role across prevention, protection and place.

6. Protect environmental health's ability to deliver its statutory duties

Questions for consideration

- Which of our public health outcomes depend on environmental health?
- How will EH influence strategic decisions?
- How will EH connect with Public Health?
- How will EH connect with Planning?
- How will EH connect with Housing?
- How will EH connect with Economic Development?
- How will we protect statutory delivery?
- How will we grow workforce capacity?
- How will we use EH intelligence to inform population health decisions?
- Who is accountable for ensuring EH contributes to prevention agendas?

ⁱ Royal College of Physicians, 2025. A breath of fresh air: responding to the health challenges of modern air pollution. RCP

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2026. Flytipping statistics for England, 2024 to 2025. Available at [Fly-tipping statistics for England, 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK](https://gov.uk/fly-tipping-statistics) (accessed: 29 July 2026)

^v Health and Safety Executive (HSE), 2025. Summary statistics booklet 2025. Available at: [Health and safety statistics 2025](https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/booklet2025/) (accessed: 29 July 2026)

^{vi} Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2026. English Housing Survey 2024-2025. Available at [English Housing Survey 2024 to 2025: headline findings on housing quality and energy efficiency - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/english-housing-survey-2024-2025) (accessed: 29 July 2026)

^{vii} Building Research Establishment (BRE), 2023. The cost of ignoring poor housing. Available at: https://bregroup.com/documents/d/bre-group/bre_the_cost_of_ignoring_poor_housing_report_web

^{viii} Milczewska, K., 2023. Damp and Mould: understanding and addressing the health risks for rented housing providers, UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA). Available at: https://researchportal.ukhsa.gov.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/65360158/Damp_and_Mould_understanding_and_addressing_the_health_risks_for_rented_housing_providers_SD.pdf#:~:text=We%20estimated%20that%20damp%20and%20mould%20in%20homes,of%20new%20cases%20of%20allergic%20rhinitis%20in%202019 (accessed: 29 July 2026)

^{ix} Food Standards Agency – Foodborne Disease Policy Overview, 2024 [ARCHIVED CONTENT] [Foodborne Disease Policy Overview | Food Standards Agency](https://www.food.gov.uk/foodborne-disease-policy-overview)

^x WRAP, 2025. UK Food Waste and Food Surplus – Key Facts. Available at: [Report](https://www.wrap.org.uk/resources/infographic/uk-food-waste-and-food-surplus-key-facts) (accessed: 4 September 2026)

^{xi} Food Standards Agency (FSA), 2020. The Foodborne Disease Estimates for the United Kingdom in 2018. Available at: <https://www.food.gov.uk/print/pdf/node/3831>

^{xii} CIEH, 2026. Noise Complaint Data Briefing. Available at: [noise-complaint-data-briefing-2026.pdf](https://www.cieh.org.uk/noise-complaint-data-briefing-2026.pdf) (accessed: 29 July 2026)



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Published September 2026 © CIEH 2026