

# **Public Health Committee Discussion Paper**

**Title:** Sectional Update (Environmental Health)

**Date:** 3 June 2019

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## **What is Environmental Health?**

We don't always see it, but our environment is shaping our health every moment of every day. Where we live, what we eat, and how we interact with the world around us can tip the scales (sometimes literally) between healthy or not. That's where environmental health professionals, policies, and programs all come into play. While we tend to think about health in terms of personal choices—like whether we exercise or get vaccinated—a lot of external things can influence how healthy we are, including whether we get sick or injured. Environmental stressors and advantages help shape the kinds of choices you make, or in some cases, make the choices for you. Environmental Health is the public health field that monitors and addresses those physical, chemical, and biological factors that we might not have direct control over, but can impact our health anyway.

It should be seen as crucial frontline defence in our public health system in protecting and improving the population's health and well-being through health promotion; reducing inequalities in health status; prevention of disease, injury, disability, and premature death; and protection from environmental and other hazards to health. Simply put, environmental health is the area of public health that deals with all the different ways the world around us can impact our physical and mental well-being.

The Environmental Health Section's remit is to safeguard health and improve the population's well-being by providing core environmental health services and enforce relevant legislation.

## **Environmental Health on St Helena**

Just like everywhere in the world, the unit of environmental health was previously referred to as public health, where much of the focus was on the physical environment growth i.e. houses and the issues of inadequate and often non-existent sanitation. There were at the time, strong links with ill health and mortality rates, hence at the time the Public Health Inspector worked closely with the hospital staff and district nurses by educating islanders to improve or find ways of bettering their standard of living and improving health and hygiene in their living environment.

The introduction of the Public Health Ordinance 1939, approximately 91 years after the introduction of the Public Health Act in UK in 1842, brought forth a legal framework with a goal to improve drainage by addressing public health nuisances, safeguarding food and places where the manufacture of the same took place, identification of notifiable diseases and housing issues. This initial concern in the 1900's, has set the scene for much of environmental health work today, we are therefore charged with the responsibility to maintain and improve housing standards (EH involved at planning stage, occupation stage i.e. overcrowding), suitable working conditions (i.e. Health & Safety at work), controls for the maintenance of the environment (environmental protection i.e. offering public health pest control services), investigate nuisances, the production of food safe to eat (i.e. food safety, standards), food

premise, inspectorate for competent authority for fish exports, and how all of this affects the health of the population.

Our main clients are the people of St Helena.

To achieve our mission to safeguard people's health we must at least work in three time phases:

- Repair past damage
- To control present risk
- To prevent future problems

### **Where do we fit in on the scheme of things on St Helena?**

Environmental Health has an important and unique contribution to make to improving public health and reducing health inequalities. The section is currently working to ensure that this contribution is fully developed and brought to bear, both in support of government policy and in campaigning for necessary additional measures. We believe that making environmental health concerns heard is essential to the achievement of long-term improvements in the health of the population, in creating and maintaining sustainable communities, and in addressing the health consequences of environmental degradation and global changes in climate, habitat, energy supplies and other key stressors.

### **Environmental Health 2028**

Our vision for the development of environmental health over the next 10 years, envisages a strengthened role for EH Officers/Practitioners who will play a leading part in local community health and well-being strategies and contribute to the public health agenda of St Helena focusing on the directorate's strategy now and for the future.

We are also working to ensure that the public health competences of environmental health practitioners are developed and acknowledged so that they can make their full contribution to joined-up public health management. For many years around the world and indeed on the island, environmental concerns have been dominated by government regulations and remedies and more often than not, to "Quick fixes". The approach now, should be that if there is a problem then we all must contribute to fix it, so in part, we are all contributing to a healthy environment by setting a stage for a new partnership between public and private sector.

Below is a list of Environmental Health functions (which is not definitive):

#### **Port Health**

- Inspection of ships to ensure that public health standards under IHR are met;
- Control of infectious diseases on board incoming vessels by undertaking health check visits to ships;
- Investigation of reported sickness amongst ships company or passengers;
- Inspection of foodstuffs and products of animal origin entering St Helena;
- Monitoring water quality and pest control around the port/s.
- Aircraft health clearance in accordance with IHR and local disinsection policy.

#### **Food Safety & Hygiene**

- Registration of food businesses and licensing of food premises;
- Inspection of food premises to ensure that legal requirements are met;
- Control and investigation of food-borne diseases;
- Investigation of food complaints;
- Taking part in local and educational initiatives to support health promotion;
- Undertaking regular food sampling under a set sampling programme, and
- Checking for illegal food imports, and
- Advice to businesses.

### Meat Inspection

- Checking the quality and safety of meat;
- Detecting and destruction of diseased meat;
- Assurance of clean and sanitary handling and preparation;
- Minimization of microbiological contamination of meat; and.
- Maintaining accurate recording of data for statistical data

### Inspectorate – Fish & Fish Products

- Undertaking annual audits of establishments, fishing vessels, landing sites, ice-plants, cold stores and means of transport;
- Preparing and submitting reports to the Competent Authority regarding approval of establishments/vessels etc;
- Ensuring the appropriate certification of fishery products for export through the use of different inspection forms and health certification processes.
- Ensuring the withdrawal or condemnation of non-compliant products.
- Participating in the development of inspection methods and the training of staff.
- Maintaining all documentation up to date and in line with current local and EU legislation.

### Health & Safety

- Enforcing controls in respect of areas to which EHO's are trained including the advertisement, sale, supply, storage and use for areas such as wholesale and retail premises, hotels and housing, warehouses, catering establishments, sports grounds and leisure facilities.
- Health & Safety training.

### Health Education

- Supporting health education with displays and exhibitions to disseminate educational materials and giving public health talks to a wide range of audiences.

### Land Application & Plan Approval

- Making site visits to ascertain suitability in relation to potential public health nuisances.
- Reporting back to the Control Board via the land application consultation process.

### Community Participation

- Initiating, organizing and attending community participation meetings where advice and guidance is required or offered.
- Promotion of awareness programmes.

### Pest Control Services

Responsible for taking pest control measures against pests that impact on public health. This undertaking is the primary responsibility of a sub-section of the Environmental Health Section: The Pest Control Unit.

Pest Control duties are undertaken as two broad components of work within the Pest Control Unit:

- Providing pesticide application programmes in response to public requests.
- Undertaking routine rodenticide baiting programmes in the rural areas for the management of rodents.

Other activities include:

- Regular monitoring of public water system, including swimming pool water and seawater at Rupert's and Jamestown.
- Fumigating premises against pathogens. Inspection of imported second hand clothing

- Undertaking routine control programmes for the control of pests in premises and around public properties, including the Jamestown sewer system.
- Undertaking surveys and inspections for infestations in premises (including ships' holds)
- Undertaking of surveys and inspections for the management of mosquitoes at the airport site.
- Providing advice/guidance to other government officials and others

#### **Key Challenges for the future**

- Successfully implementing new/revised legislation.
- Retaining staff to ensure continuity in procedures and processes.
- Ensuring staff are motivated and valued through better pay structure.
- Ensuring EHS team has appropriate training.
- Ensuring political backing for new activities pre/post airport.
- Maintaining EH standards to meet rising expectations.
- Influencing public expectations /changes relating to public/environmental health issues through social marketing techniques.

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**3 June 2019**