



FILLING THE GAPS: PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, RSPH published a report entitled ‘The Unusual Suspects: Unlocking the potential of the wider public health workforce’. In this report we shared our engagement with the wider public health workforce and identified the enormous potential they can have on public health in a way not before considered.

We also identified a number of key challenges affecting this workforce – such as lack of recognition for their role in public health, and improved career pathways into public health roles.

One area which was raised was difficulties filling vacancies across the sector, partly due to skills shortages, but also in some cases due to labour shortages. In other sectors, changes to visa rules have made recruitment more challenging. In this briefing we consider how immigration rules, partnered with a skills system which is not meeting demand, may be contributing to short term workforce shortages across the public health sector.



THE POTENTIAL OF THE WIDER PUBLIC HEALTH WORKFORCE

The wider public health workforce is a highly diverse group made up of a range of professionals who carry out functions in health protection, health promotion and prevention. This includes pharmacists, the emergency services, allied health professionals, pest control workers, sports and fitness specialists, and town planners – amongst many others (1).

The workforce has an important role in tackling the rising health inequalities that are currently facing the UK. A recent RSPH report found that a third of the workforce engage with individuals facing health inequalities at least twice a week, and that over half of the workforce are promoting healthy living (2). This shows the vast potential this workforce has in improving the health of the nation and reducing strain on the NHS.

THE WIDER PUBLIC HEALTH WORKFORCE HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN TACKLING THE RISING HEALTH INEQUALITIES THAT ARE CURRENTLY FACING THE UK.

As a voice for the wider public health workforce, RSPH has found that there are a number of specific challenges facing this workforce. This includes recognition for the important role they play in supporting the health of the nation, and retention and recruitment. We know that many sectors are facing increasing vacancy rates and have high levels of foreign worker dependency. Employers have expressed concerns that these issues could be worsened by the changes to the Skilled Worker Visa implemented earlier this year.



What are the changes to the Skilled Worker Visa?

The Skilled Worker Visa allows foreign workers to work in the UK in certain roles. In April 2024 the income requirement for this visa was increased to £38,700 (3). This will impact on overseas recruitment, and means that many individuals previously on this visa might not be making enough money to remain in the UK in their current role.

We know that there are exceptions to these changes. For example, health and social care workers can apply for a specific health and social care visa. However, this currently only applies to those working directly within health and social care – not individuals who work in the wider public health workforce.

There is also an Immigration Salary List (ISL), formerly known as the occupation shortage list, which provides certain occupations with a lower income threshold for the skilled worker visa based on UK demand.

However, there are a number of roles – often playing a vital part in supporting the public's health – which are excluded from these two schemes. This means vacancies are being left unfilled and vital preventative services are not delivered, thus hampering our ability to prevent ill health and tackle health inequalities. We have found that advertisements for roles in the wider public health workforce have risen 38% since 2018; hence, demand for workers in this sector is high (4).

How will the visa changes impact on the wider public health workforce?

RSPH define the wider public health workforce as 'all staff engaged in or who want to engage in public health activities, who identify public health as being an important part of their role but are not employed within the core public health workforce'. We estimate the active wider public health workforce to be around **1.5m people** (5). Within this workforce, we include roles such as pest control, food hygiene operatives, cleaners, town planners, amongst others.

Many of these roles have an important public health function, such as health protection, maintaining hygiene practices, infection control and environmental health, to name a few. If occupations working in these roles are unable to maintain sufficient workforce numbers, we are likely to see negative impacts on the public's health and safety. We have set out some of the industries where we are already seeing services suffer due to workforce and skills shortages. RSPH analysis has found that the average salary for professions within the wider public health workforce (not including medical professions) is £26,173 – significantly less than the visa requirement (6). Additionally, 85% of this workforce are working in roles with an average salary of £38K or less (7).

Impact on the Cleaning Industry

Cleaners have an important public health function in ensuring that we have safe and hygienic environments and infection control. During the Covid-19 pandemic we saw how important the role of the cleaning and hygiene workforce is in health protection. However, cleaning and hygiene operatives have typically been an undervalued service, with their skills and importance often dismissed or overlooked.

CLEANING AND HYGIENE OPERATIVES HAVE TYPICALLY BEEN AN UNDERVALUED SERVICE, WITH THEIR SKILLS AND IMPORTANCE OFTEN DISMISSED OR OVERLOOKED.

The cleaning industry is reliant on foreign workers and has an ageing workforce, partly because there are not enough UK born workers entering the industry. However, cleaning roles are not eligible for the Skilled Worker visa or for the Health and Social Care visa. In future, this could limit the number of cleaners who can come to the UK, leading to workforce shortages. This could include shortages in high-risk settings such as hospitals, care homes, and GP surgeries, likely resulting in increased ill health due to the spread of communicable diseases and additional strain on the health system.



Impact on Food Safety

There is further evidence that the new minimum wage requirement for the skilled worker visa will also impact those working in food safety, food hygiene and other food personnel such as butchers. For example, butchers have an essential role in food production within the UK and in ensuring proper preparation of meat to ensure correct hygiene standards and protect against food borne illnesses, such as Listeria and E.coli.

In 2023, the Food Security Agency identified a number of roles that were suffering from labour shortages, including meat hygiene inspectors, as having a dependency on foreign labour and shortages in the UK labour market due to other factors such as an aging workforce and recruitment and retention rates. The FSA further identified that this could have ‘potential increase in public health, food safety and animal health and welfare monitoring risks’ (8).

According to Glassdoor, the average income for meat hygiene inspectors is £22,000-£31,000 (9). There is a clear danger that the increase in thresholds for skilled worker visas may depress the number of foreign workers, creating further difficulties in filling the UK labour gap as the majority of roles will fall below the £38,700 income requirement.

Impact on Environmental Health

Environmental health officers are a valuable part of the public health workforce and play an important role in health protection. However, they are facing a workforce shortage. According to a 2021 survey:

“9 out of 10 (87%) local authorities told us that agency staff were used because of shortages in resources or delays in recruitment.

By contrast, only 30% used agency staff because of an unprecedented demand for services and 23% due to specialist knowledge not being available inhouse”(10).

Furthermore, 52% of local authorities have reported that they did not have a trainee or apprentice in 2019/20 (11).

In other industries, shortfalls such as this may be resolved on a short-term basis through the recruitment of qualified staff from overseas. However, this is not possible in environmental health as practitioners will not be making the required salary. The average salary is between £27,000 and £40,000 annually, with the higher end of the pay scale applying only to highly experienced workers (12). Without a sufficient environmental health workforce, we could be at increased risk of disease outbreaks and other public health crises.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to support the nation's health, we need to have good public health and proper health protection. The current visa system means that several occupations important to health protection such as food safety, hygiene and environmental health could be facing workforce shortages, severely impacting the public.

The Government's commitment to filling skills shortages through improved training and lifelong learning is welcome, and it is vital that any reforms broaden access to training across public health roles, filling the skills gap and creating career pathways to enable workers to develop across their lives.

However, this is not a quick fix, and may take several years to lead to tangible results. Therefore, on an interim basis, [the Government should extend the health and care visa route to cover a wider range of health protection and public health roles](#), including those which may not traditionally be seen as part of the health system.

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ENDNOTES

- (1) <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wider-public-health-workforce/unusual-suspects-unlocking-potential-wider-public-health-workforce-report.html> (briefing)
- (2) <https://www.rsph.org.uk/static/b8b096e5-6c79-449c-a40360fc03e0896a/J2042-rsph-unusual-suspects-report-FINAL.pdf> (pg. 16)
- (3) <https://www.gov.uk/skilled-worker-visa/your-job>
- (4) RSPH Analysis of ONS (2024) [Labour Demand Volumes by Standard Occupation Classification](#)
- (5) <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wider-public-health-workforce/unusual-suspects-unlocking-potential-wider-public-health-workforce-report.html>
- (6) RSPH Analysis of ONS (2022) [Earnings and hours worked, all employees: ASHE Table 14](#)
- (7) Ibid.
- (8) <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/impact-of-labour-shortages-summary-of-casual-determinants-of-labour-shortages-in-uk-food-systems#4-meat-hygiene-inspectors>
- (9) https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/Salaries/meat-hygiene-inspector-salary-SRCH_KO0,22.htm
- (10) <https://www.cieh.org/policy/campaigns/workforce-survey-england>
- (11) <https://www.cieh.org/policy/campaigns/workforce-survey-england>
- (12) <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/job-profiles/environmental-health-officer>