
**EXCERPT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE
COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 9 JANUARY 2003**

COS.7/03 FOOD SAFETY PERFORMANCE

Pursuant to Minute COS.151/02(a), the Head of Environmental Protection Services presented report EP.04/03 concerning the City Council's performance on Food Safety Inspections.

The Head of Environmental Protection Services reminded Members of the background to the matter, when it had been made clear that the Food Safety Team's ability to meet targets set internally as well as by external agencies, such as the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and Health and Safety Executive, relied upon the Team having an adequate number of suitably qualified staff at all times i.e. four qualified Officers.

Since the last meeting of the Committee in November 2002, another member of staff had left the Council's employment as a result of which it had been necessary to redirect the workload to high risk premises. Consequently during the period October - December 2002 performance in respect of planned inspections was:

80.7% high risk premises
16.6% others.

As regards performance, the Head of Environmental Protection Services considered 85% - 87% to be a legitimate target figure. Neither the FSA nor himself believed it to be physically possible to reach the 100% inspection rate claimed by certain Local Authorities and those Authorities were now subject to audit.

He then outlined a number of options designed to maintain and improve performance levels in the future, namely:

- The FSA and Local Authorities Co-ordinators of Regulatory Services (LACORS) were currently considering alternative enforcement strategies for those food businesses which posed the lowest risk to public health. The aim was to free up Officer time to concentrate on higher risk businesses.
- Implementation of any of their suggested strategies at Carlisle would remove less than 4 businesses per month from the Inspection programme and would therefore have a minimal effect on available resources. Resources would still be required to deal with these businesses by alternative enforcement options.

- Additional suitably qualified staff within the Team would help ensure that higher levels of performance could be achieved. That would apply to both statutory food safety and health and safety enforcement activity. Importantly it would also allow resources to be used in the Council's development, co-ordination and implementation of Health and Well Being Strategies within the community and the public health agenda of the Primary Care Trust.
- Suitably qualified staff may be either Environmental Health Officers (EHO) capable of carrying out the full range of Environmental Health duties, or Technical Officers who may be less well qualified and therefore only able to inspect low risk food businesses or carry out more routine tasks.
- Nationally there was a diminishing pool of EHOs and falling numbers of students enrolling on Environmental Health degrees. Until recently, Carlisle regularly sponsored a student EHO and had usually been able to offer them a full-time post at the end of their four year training. Funding for that had been removed two years previously.

The Head of Environmental Protection Services indicated that the cost of the above options, based on current salary levels and inclusive of on costs, would be:

Additional EHO (SO 1/2))	£30,000 per year
Technical Officers (AP 4/5)	£22,000 per year
Student EHO	£10,000 per year (for 4 years)

Each of the options would, however, have to be funded by way of a budget bid/supplementary estimate as the existing resources of Environmental Protection Services were inadequate to cover such an expansion in personnel.

In considering the matter, Members raised a number of issues to which the Head of Environmental Protection Services responded:

What would the impact be of one additional Technical Officer as opposed to two student EHOs?

As regards food, a student could not legally undertake inspections until they were fully qualified and therefore that avenue would not resolve the day to day inspection issues. However, if Carlisle gained a qualified student and a vacancy arose it would be possible for that person to take up such a post, thus removing the need to go through an advertisement/selection process.

Ideally, I would be looking for a Technical Officer, together with the reintroduction of student sponsorship.

To what did the increase in workload relate - Foot and Mouth or number of new premises for example?

There had been a large increase in food outlets from 1,100 - 1,400. The most significant increase, however, related to increasing regulations from the FSA, particularly three monthly inspections of meat cutting premises.

What needed to be done to meet the Council's statutory obligations, and was the Council meeting the same?

The FSA had not clarified their expectations of Local Authorities, but it was believed that an 87% inspection rate would be satisfactory. The FSA was in the process of undertaking a large audit programme and Carlisle expected to be audited shortly.

Clearly the Council must undertake inspections to satisfy the requirements of the FSA and, should it fail to do so, the Agency could remove the enforcement role, commission consultants to undertake the same, and charge the Council accordingly.

As stated above, during the period October - December the inspection rate for high risk premises was satisfactory, but had dropped as regards other premises, and that was cause for concern.

Would it be possible to redirect staff from the other two Sections to maintain food safety inspection performance?

There had also been significant increases in workload in these areas e.g. as regards abandoned vehicles, contaminated land, air quality monitoring, etc. The Sections were therefore severely stretched as it was.

Was it not a question of prioritising the workload?

The Health and Safety Executive was concerned at the failure of Local Authorities nationally as regards health and safety inspections and therefore the Council was trying to address that area which involved 1,400 premises.

Was it easier to recruit Technical Officers as opposed to EHOs, could Technical Officers become EHOs and was there merit in supporting people through such a training process?

Whilst that had been done in the past, experience showed that once a person became a qualified EHO they became increasingly marketable and often moved on. If, however, a Technical Officer extended their knowledge it could prove to be more applicable to the Carlisle area.

Members then suggested that the Executive be asked to look at the issue in detail, in particular, possible funding of a Technical Officer and sponsorship of a student EHO. Further the Head of Environmental Protection Services be asked to stress to the Executive the implications for the Council of staffing shortages in that area.

A Member sought clarity on this Committee's remit, commenting that he understood that to be the highlighting of problems associated with food safety inspection performance.

He added that that performance was acceptable when the Food Safety Team had a full complement of staff, with problems occurring only when vacancies arose.

A Member added that if this Committee was concerned at the current staffing situation within the Team that should be flagged up to the Executive with a view to implementing the best way forward.

The Overview and Scrutiny Manager suggested that a progress report should be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee and the Head of Environmental Protection Services advised that six months time would be an appropriate period.

RESOLVED – (1) That this Committee's concerns as regards the staffing levels within the Food Safety Team be conveyed to the Executive.

(2) That the Head of Environmental Protection Services be requested to submit a progress report to this Committee in six months time.