

Understanding how people working in health protection in local authorities have adapted during periods of budget cuts and COVID-19.

What is the problem?

People working in health protection play a vital role in protecting us from infectious diseases in the United Kingdom (UK). They help manage the front-line response to outbreaks of infectious diseases such as E. coli, Salmonella and COVID-19.

Funding cuts to local authority budgets, and the recent global pandemic, may have impacted how people working in health protection manage infectious diseases. It is important to understand if services have been degraded or lost, and if budget cuts or COVID-19 have reduced or increased the capacity of health protection to manage infectious diseases.

Very little research has asked people working in health protection about their experiences of working on reduced budgets and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These understandings will help the UK improve its response to current outbreaks, and help it prepare for outbreaks in the future.

Why Now?

The UK government reduced local authority budgets by around 50% in real terms between 2010 and 2017. These budget cuts have not been evenly distributed. Local authorities with poorer residents have experienced greater budget cuts than areas with more well-off residents. In addition to these cuts, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has required a huge response from health protection staff. We need to know if budget cuts and COVID-19 have affected the ability of local health protection services to respond to infectious diseases.

What is my approach?

I will conduct 20-30 interviews with a range of people working in health protection across a range of organisations in three local authorities in England. Participants will include:

- Members of Public Protection Teams
- UK Health Security Agency staff
- Public Health Consultants working in local authority public health teams and
- Community Infection Prevention and Control nurses.

I will analyse these interviews to give an in-depth understanding of how budget cuts and COVID-19 have affected infectious disease work in local authorities.

Public Involvement

A public involvement group has already been involved in this project. This group advised on its focus and the use of plain English. Going forward, the public will be involved in analysing the results, working with stakeholders to find ways of using its findings to improve public health and sharing its findings with policy makers and the public.

Sharing Findings

We will share findings through publications, conferences and with participants. We will also share with the UK Health Security Agency, local authority public health teams, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health Officers, the National Healthcare Service and the public.

What difference will it make?

This study will help us understand if budget cuts and COVID-19 have improved or hindered the management of infectious diseases. We can use its findings to understand what we need to change in the future so that we can build resilience within health protection, and prepare for future outbreaks.