



The unique contribution of public health specialists¹

What are public health specialists?

Public health specialists work as system leaders at strategic or senior management level or at a senior level of expertise such as epidemiology. They come from a variety of successful professional careers before entering a five-year training programme, which covers all aspects of public health, and are registered² and required to maintain registration through appraisal and revalidation. They have both leadership skills and technical skills.

Public health specialists work in three 'domains' of public health:

- **Health improvement:** focusing on inequalities, wider determinants of health (education, housing, employment and communities) and factors such as alcohol, tobacco and obesity, as well as surveillance and monitoring of specific diseases, risk factors, needs assessments, equity audit and impact assessments.
- **Health protection:** focusing on infectious diseases (eg. flu, legionella, meningitis), chemicals, radiation, environmental health hazards, emergency response (eg. flooding, major accident), screening and immunisation, vaccinations and sustainability.
- **Healthcare public health** (also known as health and social care quality): focusing on ensuring services meet the population need (prioritisation), are planned appropriately, are of high quality and are equitable and efficient (return on investment).

These are underpinned by specialist skills such as health intelligence, developing an evidence base, epidemiology, health economics, audit and research, and interpersonal skills such as communication, collaborative working, management and leadership.

Currently there are about 1,500 specialists in the United Kingdom. Around 1,200 of these are in England, 200 in Scotland, 70 in Wales and 50 in Northern Ireland. In England they are employed by local authorities (~45%), Public Health England (~35%), universities (~15%) and the NHS (~5%). In Scotland they are normally employed by the NHS, in Wales by Public Health Wales and in Northern Ireland by the Public Health Agency.

¹ This statement has been produced by the national Standing Group on Local Public Health Teams. The national group includes the Faculty of Public Health, Public Health England, the Association of Directors of Public Health, the Local Government Association and trade unions.

² With the General Medical Council (GMC), General Dental Council (GDC) or UK Public Health Register (UKPHR).

Public health specialists change employers during their career and may specialise in one or more areas. However, they all remain capable of working in any domain if needed – for example, responding to a flu pandemic.

There are a small number of statutory roles requiring a specialist, including director of public health (DPH) and in some areas of health protection.

What is their unique contribution?

The combination of leadership and managerial skills together with high level of technical skills and knowledge gives them a unique skill set essential for improving the health and wellbeing of populations. They can:

- Interpret complex information from a wide range of sources and present to a wide range of audiences.
- Ensure decisions are based on best evidence available (research, intelligence), as well as a full range of views and perspectives (community, political, expert).
- Provide resilience: they can cover any current public health problem and move quickly to deal with new threats to health.
- Work as system leaders across organisations – they have existing networks to draw on for expertise and have the credibility and are trained to develop new networks as needed.
- Work effectively with the NHS including clinical staff such as doctors and nurses understanding the context and language of both healthcare and social care.
- Provide teaching and training to the public health workforce – particularly specialists in training who are the DPH pipeline.
- Deputise for DPHs: they are the DPHs of the future.
- Shape and drive action and interventions that improve and protect the public's health.

Within the core public health team, public health specialists have an extensive role across the whole spectrum of protection and prevention. These include promotion of health and wellbeing and addressing inequalities within the population as part of the wider determinants-of-health agenda. Specialists also have knowledge and experience of a range of health-protection issues such as infectious disease outbreaks and emergency preparedness.

What roles can be done by others?

Specialists are much more effective when supported by colleagues who make their own distinctive contribution to improving and protecting the public's health. For example:

- Health protection specialists work effectively with environmental health officers, microbiologists and others.
- Staff who are skilled at data collection and analysis allow the specialist to focus on interpretation and decision-making.
- Staff who are experienced at procuring and contracting allow the specialist to focus on strategic commissioning.

What is the added value of a strong specialist workforce?

A strong public health specialist workforce provides leadership, capability and capacity that can:

- Ensure the delivery of public health functions.
- Provide a source of expert advice to political leaders and other policy makers.
- Provide high quality decision-making: the ability to bring in research and intelligence and integrate with community and other views.
- Improve health and social outcomes, ensuring the best use of scarce resources.
- Provide resilience: to lead in major events such as outbreaks and flooding.
- Anticipate changing environments and new hazards and threats.
- Reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases on health and social care.
- Ensure succession planning, including future DPHs and other key roles.