

Overview from Northern Ireland 2008

Meeting of Council

11 December 2008

Report from Graham Jukes, Chief Executive

1. Summary and recommendations

- 1.1 This report summarises the key activities and progress in ongoing projects in Northern Ireland led by Gary McFarlane in 2008.
- 1.2 It also provides an overview of key challenges and activities for 2009.
- 1.3 Council is recommended to note the report.

2. Membership profile

- 2.1 The majority of non retired members in NI still work within the local authority EH Service. However, several of our members work outside this service including, notably, within government and also in some cases for other public bodies and agencies. It is hoped that this will increase in the future.

3. Environmental health and public health in NI

- 3.1 There are currently 26 local authorities in NI. From 2010, this will be reduced to 11 as a result of the recent amendments made to the Review of Public Administration (RPA). This will be accomplished through the amalgamation of the existing authorities and the exact details of this have been agreed and announced during 2008. Several key services, including elements of planning and roads, currently outside the local authority remit in NI will be incorporated into the new organisations. The new local authorities will also be given a statutory power of wellbeing and community planning.
- 3.2 Within the majority of the existing local authorities the EH service sits within a wider directorate. Of the current 26 authorities, 11 of them have an EHP appointed at strategic director level. In some other cases (5) the EH service still exists as a directorate in its own right.

- 3.3 In addition, whilst not part of the local authority service, NI still retains a Chief EHO post within the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). Given the very different public health structures in NI there are, as yet, no EHPs employed within the public health service itself. There are however very strong links between the two services.
- 3.4 The RPA proposals for health are due to be implemented in April 2009. During 2008 the minister responsible has announced his intent to create a new Regional Agency for Public Health and Wellbeing (RAPHWB). The minister has also signalled his intent that the new local authorities, working in partnership with this new Agency, will have a significantly enhanced role in public health improvement and protection.
- 3.5 We have continued during 2008 to provide significant input to this process. The future positioning of the environmental health service within these new structures is clearly something that is directly relevant to not only our membership, but also the corporate CIEH mission and objectives.

4. The CIEH NI Directorate

- 4.1 2008 has seen increasing opportunities coupled with increasing constraints on the activities of CIEH in NI. Some of the highlights from 2008 are detailed below. The full work programme for 2008 is available to trustees upon request. Almost all specific projects are either completed or underway. Activities can be summarised under two core headings namely: influence, policy and increasing profile; and education, professional development and membership services.

4.2 Influence, policy development and increased profile

- 4.2.1 As outlined in the previous section, the Review of Public Administration (RPA) is arguably the most wide-ranging review of public services in the history of Northern Ireland. The process began in 2002 and the CIEH has been involved from the start in providing policy advice, advocacy, and influence. 2008 has been a key year in this process as the Assembly has started to define the detail around the proposals. Of crucial importance has been the detail regarding the role and functions of the new RAPHASW. Following submissions (by invitation) to the task group established by the CMO to develop this work, along with a full written submission and meetings with the relevant minister, the minister has indicated that he strongly favours a working model for the out workings of the RAPHASW that is co located with the new local authorities. That has largely been as a result of environmental health thinking and input.

- 4.2.2 Whilst the detail continues to be refined and further expanded at the time of writing, it is probable that there will be several pilots established to take advantage of the sequencing between the RPA health reforms (from April 2009) and the local government changes (April 2011) which will see EHPs from local authorities working alongside and in collaboration with other public health professionals in jointly appointed local teams. This presents a real opportunity for EH to be tangibly reconnected with public health in NI and may have significant implications for where EH is placed within the new local authorities.

- 4.2.3 We are currently working closely with the Chief Officers Group in NI (CEHOG) to ensure that EH continues to maximise its influence, not only within the health context, but within strategic arrangements for the local government sector. There is currently significant debate around the concept of a regional tier of professional support for the new local authorities to achieve economies of scale on specialist functions; provide an strong interface with central government for policy development purposes; and assist in achieving consistency and efficiency across key local authority services. There has been a case advocated for the inclusion of EH within the suite of such services that could benefit from such an approach.
- 4.2.4 We have also continued to advocate for an expansion of the EH capacity within central government, and specifically for the enhancement of the EH staff compliment so as to better provide EH thinking and input to the policy development process across all 11 government departments.
- 4.2.5 During 2008, the CIEH completed the research project commenced in 2007 (similar to as in Wales) to assess the impact of the smoke free legislation on indoor air quality. In summary, Northern Ireland's indoor air quality is as good as, or better than, anywhere in the world as a result of a comprehensive smoking ban introduced in April last year. This study included partners from the Health Service Executive in Galway, The Health Promotion Agency in NI, Berkeley University and Roswell Park Cancer Center in the US and Derry Healthy Cities. The aim of the study, the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, was to investigate if the restrictions led to improvements in air quality and reductions in nicotine levels in licensed premises. It was combined with a qualitative assessment of the attitudes and perceptions of bar workers before and two months after the ban. Eighty-two bars were included, from Ballymena, Derry City, Dungannon and Belfast. All the premises sampled experienced significant reductions in indoor particulate matter. There was a 94 per cent reduction in fine particles. As a result average air quality will now be categorised as good rather than hazardous in the context of the US EPA Air Quality Index, the globally accepted marker for PM2.5. The air quality studies in Ballymena and Derry showed an 85 per cent reduction in air nicotine values, with reductions in 48 of 49 venues sampled.
- 4.2.6 The NI Directorate has been heavily engaged in advocacy work on climate change during 2008 and the director has delivered numerous presentations, participated in panel discussions, and also delivered a public lecture on this topic at regional, national and international level. This has included both CIEH specific work as well as input to the Climate Change Coalition for NI of which the CIEH is a participating member. The NI Directorate has also provided input to the recent CIEH publication on this issue and will be drafting a report, along with other colleagues, detailing proposals for a corporate way forward on this critical issue for initial consideration by PDB in early 2009.
- 4.2.7 The CIEH is and remains a core founding member of the Public Health Alliance for the island of Ireland (PHA). PHA has developed an advocacy toolkit specifically aimed at public health practitioners and during 2008 some preliminary work has been undertaken to try and develop case study material

for use specifically for EHPs interested and involved in advocacy. This work is ongoing.

- 4.2.8 2008 has seen the completion of initial scoping work and secondary research with a view to developing a potential methodology and framework for a tool that would provide an integrated environmental and health reporting framework, overlaid with community derived data that could be used within the context of developing sustainable communities. The outline proposal is now complete and we have had discussions with the University of Ulster with a view to developing a partnership project (subject to a successful funding bid). It is proposed to establish a small meeting of potential partners (to include RTPI and NILGA) early in the new year and also involving other key CIEH staff given the possibility/potential that this work might have for application in other regions of the UK.
 - 4.2.9 At the time of writing the CIEH NI Directorate is about to facilitate and host the second tripartite meeting for the devolved regions of the UK. This initiative was inaugurated in 2006 by the Welsh Heads of Environmental Health and involves representatives from the Heads of the three local government EH services in Wales, Scotland and N Ireland; representatives from the Governments in the three regions; and the CIEH Directors in Wales and N Ireland and REHIS. The purpose is to share experiences and good practice as well as identify areas of commonality with a view to potential collaboration on projects; policy issues and/or research.
- 4.3 Education, professional development and membership Services
- 4.3.1 Following the establishment of an Environmental Health Advisory Board in late 2007, this has continued to develop in 2008. The Board was established to provide a forum for external input to the EH undergraduate programme at UUJ. As well as internal university staff, it is currently comprised of key representatives from the EH service in NI, government, and the CIEH. Research and building capacity in this area is one of the key strategic themes currently being considered.
 - 4.3.2 Following on from the successes of previous years, the NI Directorate once again provided a low cost education and continuing professional development programme for members in 2008. This in turn supports our corporate objectives and mission and provides a direct benefit to members. The feedback from this programme and the specific events included within it continues to be extremely positive.
 - 4.3.3 The PA to the CIEH Director provides part time administrative support to the NI Region assisting with the organisation of membership meetings, events and conferences (including the joint NI Region and EHOA Conference). This is in addition to and separate from the CIEH Education and Professional Development programme described at 4.3.1. This development has helped in ensuring a better integrated programme of events between CIEH and the Region and it is hoped to build on this arrangement in 2009. The administrative support also extends to servicing the Regional Management Board and this, along with the revision of the CIEH NI website, it is hoped

will significantly assist in aiding communication with and access to information for members.

4.3.4 During 2008 we have made CIEH office facilities in Belfast accessible to the membership for the purposes of either providing occasional workspace or meeting facilities.

5. Looking forward - challenges for 2009

5.1 An ambitious work programme is currently in draft for 2009 although this may need to be amended following recent budget decisions.

5.2 In last year's report, we stated, as in previous years, that there was a need for Council to consider increasing central support and resources available to the NI Directorate if they wished to see the organisation develop further. Given this year's challenging budget, there are effectively no resources to support project work in 2009 and no future plans to develop further capacity and resource for the work of the CIEH in the Region. It should be noted that there has been no increase in the budget allocation to the NI Directorate since its creation in 2001, but the workload has increased incrementally as our positioning and profile within the region has increased. There is now no further capacity to respond to future demands and this is already resulting in a lack of presence at key meetings, a trend that is likely to continue.

5.3 We will continue to deliver the low cost, high quality training programme as always seeking to build upon and improve earlier successes. This will hopefully include at least one high level conference in 2009.

5.4 There are preliminary ideas, recently discussed with colleagues in the Dublin Institute of Technology, to establish an all island environmental health research institute with US links. Whilst the proposals are in their very early stages this concept represents an extremely exciting development.

6. Implications

Environmental	Continued contribution to the CIEH mission and vision
Equal opportunities	None
Financial	Within budget
Legal	None
Personnel	None
Public health	Continued contribution to the CIEH mission and vision
Public relations	Several opportunities

Background papers Available from Gary McFarlane, Director NI
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