

Information Sheet

Food Act Authorised Officer Development Project

Part 1 - Pathways

Victorian Food Act Workforce

The Victorian Auditor General's follow-up report on the *'Management of food safety in Victoria'*¹ (2005) recommended that the Department of Human Services Food Safety Unit (FSU) and local councils work together to address workforce issues and ensure that councils meet their statutory obligations related to Victorian Food Act 1984 administration. The Department plans to work together with the Municipal Association Victoria through a collaborative project to address this and a range of other issues raised in the Auditor General's report. This project will engage stakeholders in its work, including working closely with Environmental Health Officers in local government. In addition, the Department has commissioned research that contributes to the understanding of the size of the workforce problems and the issues that require addressing.

Authorised Officer / Environmental Health Officer Workforce Research

In 2005 the Food Safety Unit commissioned a research project called the *'Authorised Officer / Environmental Health Officer (AO/EHO) Workforce Review Project'* (Department of Human Services, 2005)². This research asked all local government Environmental Health Officers and managers to complete surveys. From this information it found that there is currently a short supply of EHOs to administer the Victorian Food Act 1984 and that this shortfall is likely to become larger over the coming 3 to 10 years. The increasing shortfall was partially due to inadequate supply of graduates. It was found that a significant number of EHOs are leaving the profession to undertake other careers. It found a range of issues relating to workforce skills and knowledge, job design and changes in the demographics of the workforce that are important for Victorian Food Act administration and enforcement. The full report can be found at: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety/research/workforce.htm#eho>.

In addition, the research confirmed that local councils have found it difficult to employ suitably qualified and experienced EHOs, and some local councils employ other staff who are not qualified EHOs to undertake some of the work. Rural councils have more difficulty in filling vacancies than metropolitan councils, however an EHO working in a rural council is more likely to spend less time on Food Act enforcement as a portion of their daily activities.

The Health Act Review

Currently the Victorian Food Act does not enable councils to appoint an authorised officer. However, people who have been appointed as Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) under the Health Act are deemed to be authorised officers under the Food Act. As a result of these provisions, EHOs are the only council officers who can be authorised officers under the Food Act 1984. In Victoria, an EHO undertakes a broad range of activities, but Food Act Administration represents their main activity.

The Health Act is currently subject to review.³ It is proposed that the new Public Health Bill would enable a council to appoint a person to be an authorised officer under the Public Health Act if the person has the appropriate training or qualifications. It is also proposed that the

Victorian Food Act should have a similar provision and enable councils to appoint an authorised officer under the Food Act if the person has the appropriate training or qualifications. This would mean that a person who is not an EHO could be an authorised officer under the Food Act if the person had the appropriate training or qualifications.

If this amendment was made to the Food Act, the Food Safety Unit would need to provide guidance to local government about who would be an appropriate person to appoint as an authorized officer under the Victorian Food Act 1984. It is important that authorised officers under the Food Act have the appropriate skills and knowledge to undertake this work.

The AO/EHO Workforce Review project investigated the skills and knowledge needed to administer the Food Act 1984 in Victoria and developed a skills and knowledge list. This list of skills and knowledge is useful to assess the suitability of all courses aimed at training an individual to administer the Food Act 1984, including existing EHO programs, and could help to focus professional development activities to the specific needs of the food regulatory system in Victoria.

Professional Development Opportunities for EHOs

In 2005 the Food Safety Unit commissioned a study called the *'Identification of Training Needs for Environmental Health Officers (2005-2008) in the Administration of the Food Act 1984 & the Health Act 1958'* ⁴. This research found that many qualified EHOs require considerable ongoing professional development in relation to Food Act enforcement to ensure they have the adequate skills to administer the Victorian Food Act 1984. These gaps were identified through a number of questionnaires completed by EHOs and their managers. The gaps included Food Law and enforcement procedures, collecting and presenting evidence in court, food product knowledge, assessing food safety programs, temporary premises, and communication/managerial skills.

This project together with the Workforce review research provides a clear picture of where EHOs perceive their needs for professional development. The research found that professional development programs may both address the skills gaps and encourage those thinking of leaving to stay in the profession. The Food Safety Unit is looking at means to assist in addressing these skills shortages by providing professional development training in the future. This may encourage existing EHOs to remain in the profession and therefore contribute to reducing the workforce shortages currently faced.

Moving Forward

It is important that clear advice is able to be given to local government to ensure that they can make decisions about who they employ to be Food Act Authorised Officers once the Food Act is consequentially amended.

Food Act Authorised Officer Development Project Part 1 – Pathways

The Food Safety Unit has commissioned research to be conducted from July – December 2006 to investigate ways that a person could acquire the skills and knowledge needed to undertake work as a Food Act Authorised Officer.

The aim of the Food Act Authorised Officer Development Project Part 1 Pathways is to determine the options for nationally accredited training an individual needs to gain the skills and knowledge required to administer the Food Act 1984 in Victoria. The result will be advice about how a person can gain the skills and knowledge to be a Food Act Authorised Officer. The intention is to gather information about:

- What training would be appropriate for a person to be a Food Act Authorised Officer
- How this could be facilitated
- How this could provide benefits to EHO's
- How this could alleviate workforce shortages

Part 1 – Pathways is a detailed scoping research project to determine the range of training possibilities. As the name suggests (Part 1), the Food Safety Unit believes that this scoping research will provide a range of information on which it can then develop further work. Only after careful consideration of the outcomes of Part 1-Pathways will the Food Safety Unit consider moving forward.

Should work on the project proceed after Part 1, the Food Safety Unit believes that in subsequent parts it would be important to consider a range of issues including:

- The provision of Recognition of Prior Learning
- Defining the pathways for articulation from a training program into a degree in Environmental Health
- Determining the range of employment models and conditions
- Developing linkages between the professional development needs and the training
- Developing a range of supports for the delivery of quality training and accreditation.

The Food Safety Unit has commissioned Culinary Perspectives to undertake Part 1 and the contractor will commence in the next few weeks. Part 1 Pathways will involve a range of consultation with stakeholders (including the Australian Institute of Environmental Health) and the research is expected to be completed by December 2006.

Further information about this project's progress will be available on the Food Safety Unit website at: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety/research/workforce.htm>

¹ Victorian Auditor General's Officer 'Management of food safety in Victoria: Progress made on our 2002 report', Victorian Government, 2005 <http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/index.html>

² Department of Human Services, Food Safety Unit 'Authorised Officer/Environmental Health Officer Workforce Review Study', 2005 <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety/research/workforce.htm>

³ The discussion and policy papers and submissions to the review are on the internet at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/healthactreview>. The earliest time for the introduction of a Public Health Bill would be 2007.

⁴ Department of Human Services, Food Safety Unit, 'Identification of Training Needs for Environmental Health Officers (2005-2008) in the Administration of the Food Act 1984 & the Health Act 1958', 2005 (unpublished)