



Meet the Team

Emma Hutchinson, Port Health Officer

When did you join and from where?

I started at Sevington Border Control Post three years ago. Before that I was cabin crew with Virgin, flying the Atlantic, the Far East and Japan.

I became aware of Port Health for specific checks in certain circumstances where they would need to come on board the aircraft to check for any communicable diseases.

How do you become part of the Port Health team?

When I had enough of flying and wanted to clip my wings, stay on the ground and settle I took a job at a vets' where I worked through the Covid pandemic.

After being in customer service for 30 years I wanted to do something different and so when a job came up at Sevington I applied and got the job. Things like safety and the science element really appealed to me.

What is it about the job that you love?

Working for an airline you had to be safety conscious, so this job has sort of tapped into that psyche. Even document checks where you're looking out for things that just don't add up

We get thousands of CHEDs every day (Common Health Entry Documents) and it's important to treat each declaration individually. It is not so much customer service that we provide, but a professional service.

Tell us about a recent issue that you've had to resolve

The other day there was a job I was looking at. They were supposed to come in for an inspection, but they'd submitted their documentation the day after they said they were arriving, which is a big no no.

I had to ask them to explain. It's my responsibility in those circumstances to understand what the trader or agent is saying and do a bit of homework to be sure they're not trying to pull a fast one on us or have simply messed up. This job isn't about trying to catch people out. For many, it's a learning experience and they don't do it again.

So, are there reams of paperwork to complete or hand in?

It's all online now. We have a computer system where traders or agents upload their CHED declaration. I make an analogy when I used to train up anybody new. Your CHED is like your plane ticket. If it requires an export health certificate that is like their passport. Our job – like at the airport – is to make sure your passport and ticket details match.

So, you know you won't be going anywhere if your name is spelled differently on your ticket to your passport. If somebody has paid for your ticket and you have a different name. That will flag for security reasons. It's all very similar to what we do here at Ashford Port Health.

Do you mainly deal with the drivers who brings the consignment to be checked or someone else?

Sometimes it will be a shop or supplier in the UK or it might be a cargo agency that acts on their behalf, a bit like a travel agent. We do deal with

the drivers too that arrive on site but it's mostly through the exporters/importers or their agents.

Tell us about the qualifications you've gained for this job?

I was fortunate when I joined that going live was put on hold. It gave me an opportunity to do a higher certificate in food, law and microbiology at the University of Birmingham.

I'm also an official fish inspector. We get a lot of bass and sea bream in from Turkey and they're beautiful. I'm sure a lot of my team say, "...there she goes again when I say 'look at the gills'," but you know, you've got to have enthusiasm for the job.

How do these help in doing the work you do?

The qualifications are essential in giving us the knowledge that we need to do our jobs effectively. We work with legislation and have got to get it right.

You've heard the phrase farm to plate? Ours is farm to freight. We want to know, through traceability, where goods have been or gone before they arrive at our borders. We also want to know that it's been handled correctly at approved establishments that we know adhere to hygiene and safety standards.

There's a lot of knowledge to take on board and I can't believe in my twilight years that I've been given a wonderful opportunity to learn even more with a master's degree in environmental health that will help potentially with future career progression. It challenges the grey matter for sure but I'm loving being able to learn and put it all into practice.

What's the most important thing about what you do?

We give people confidence about what is coming into the country. Our role is to protect the Public and Animal Health and safeguard the flow of

trade through efficient and effective Port Health controls. That's our mantra as a team.