



Meet the Team

Michael O'Regan, Port Health Technical Assistant

What does your job role involve?

We handle the first part of the document checking process at Ashford Port Health.

When we get notifications of impending imports on the Government's Import of Products, Animals, Food and Feed System (IPAFFS) we'll pull the entries off, create a job chart, check the right agent or importer is detailed, and then we'll do a document check. Once the document checks have been completed, they will – in the main – either go to a Veterinarian or Port Health Officer for endorsement and validation

How long have you been doing this job?

I've been here at Ashford coming up for nearly two years, and before that I worked at another Port Health Authority doing a similar role for just over two years.

How do you decide on this career path?

I kind of fell into it because of Brexit. When GB left the EU, free movement of goods between us and mainland Europe wasn't permitted. That's where document checks and health checks that are now carried out at the border started coming into it.

For my first role, they wanted people who had food handling experience and held a level two or level three food hygiene certificate, which I'd done previously. They were looking for people who understood customs clearance and that kind of thing. I'd done customs clearance when I first left school, so I had the qualifications and the experience that they were after.

Tell us about other jobs you've done.

I did pharmaceutical manufacturing for Pfizer in Sandwich, working for 15 years at their drug manufacturing plant. I'd also worked in food manufacturing, which is where I'd completed my food safety and hygiene qualification. I also taught English in Thailand for three years prior to that.

Describe a typical day

At the start of the day, we create a priority list in which we look for any consignments that have been called for inspection by IPAFFS, which is quite often due to the associated risks of the products being imported. For instance, meat and dairy products from certain countries and regions in Europe are, or have been, associated with Foot and Mouth Disease, African Swine Fever, PPR and Lumpy Skin Disease, and so products with specific CN codes coming in from countries that are known to have prevalence of these diseases will be prioritised as part of our mandate to maintain biosecurity at the border. CN codes are used to classify imported goods, including food, to determine the required food safety controls and risk categories.

We aim to get as far ahead with the document check process as we can and once that's done, we'll move onto other duties, including being the first point of contact for trucks coming on site for inspections, and we'll go into the inspection sheds with the Vets or Port Health Officers to assist them with the inspection process. We also respond to

email and phone enquiries from traders and from agents. The number of calls or emails that we get varies from day to day but on average it's a couple of hundred.

How do you relax outside of work?

The coastline on the other side of Dover is one of my favourite places. I like nothing more than to walk along the cliffs on a nice breezy day, getting a lungful of sea air and looking at the ferries crossing the channel. That's where I like to go when not on a shift.

How do you train for this role?

We have on the job training with access to courses published by the Food Standards Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and internally, including food law. There's a whole load of different scenarios on there that we can go through to supplement our practical experience.

What are you studying for at the moment?

I've finished the first year of the Higher Certificate in Food Control through the University of Birmingham which explains all the latest on legislation and topics such as microbiology. The new term started in October 2025 and I'm due to complete the final module this June. All this learning underpins the day-to-day knowledge that you get when you're doing the role.

As well as the academic side of things there are practical food inspections to complete. For this you have to do a food log, which you present to the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health to become a member of the institute.

There is also the opportunity for successful students to go on and study towards an MSc in Environmental Health for those who are interested in becoming Chartered Environmental Health Practitioners, so there are plenty of opportunities for professional and personal development here.

How are these learning opportunities for learning helping you in your role?

To be a Port Health Officer it is a requirement of the Food Law Code of Practice to hold the nationally recognised Higher Certificate in Food Control as a baseline qualification. That will help me develop in my role and once I become an authorised food officer then I'll be able to step up a bit in terms of responsibility.

It's been great to have this development pathway thanks to Ashford Borough Council, which operates Ashford Port Health at the Inland Border Facility in Sevington. We're very lucky as not all local authorities provide that level of support for career progression, and most other people on the course have had to pay for it themselves.

Do you love what you do?

It's difficult to say why I love the job, but I do. I'm at a certain age now where I can see the end of my career and can link this role firmly back to the start of my career when I first left school. I started off doing document checks for customs clearance and now it's moved full circle. I was the man that used to have to do all the documents and submit them to the authorities for their approval. Now I'm sat on the other side of the fence.

What difference has learning on the job made to the work you do?

It is a constant learning process, because there's no such thing as a standard import, if you like. There's always going to be different variables. So now and again, you'll get something thrown into the mix.

I've got three and a half years of working in a Port Health setting, but there are still situations or scenarios which come into play where you have to go and ask someone for their advice. It can be complicated, especially when you're dealing with legislation and microbiology. Then there's a lot of other things that you need to take into consideration - and you'll only get that through practical hands-on experience.

What's the one piece of advice you would say to anybody considering a career with a port health authority or in environmental health?

Do it. You'll be in demand. There's a shortage of fully qualified environmental health officers in the UK and working at a Port Health Authority offers lots of opportunity to further your career. The food safety side of things is only one small part of a career in environmental health. There are lots of different routes you can take. There's public health, housing, noise pollution and air pollution too so lots of opportunities. You just need to decide the area you want to specialise in.