
Thursday 22 April 2021

Having the right nose for the job

Environment Protection Authority staff are being invited to take a sniff test to see if they've got the right nose for the job.

EPA Environmental Scientist Shiloh Gerrity has been providing odour sensitivity testing and training to EPA 'authorised officers' for more than a decade to see which staff may be suitable for investigating odour complaints in the community and determining odour sources.

"The odour sensitivity test is designed to identify staff with the right range of sensitivity," Shiloh said.

"One person may be 300 times more sensitive to odour than another, and I'm keen to identify staff who fall within the right sensitivity range.

"People who are too sensitive can get nasal fatigue which is when their brain interrupts their sense of smell so they don't become overwhelmed.

"You may have experienced this when you've been somewhere with a really offensive odour, and then find after a while that you can no longer smell it.

"People who are not sensitive enough can find it difficult to tell the difference between similar smells, so their sense of smell can be unreliable.

"The olfactometer we use, (a piece of equipment which measures odour dilution) has an odour sensitivity test to identify people who fall within the right sensitivity range.

"These staff can then be used to check out odour complaints in the community and we can have a degree of confidence that field observations will be consistent between different staff.

"To determine if staff are suitable, they are blindfolded and invited to sniff up to 14 different test tubes, or felt pens, which contain differing concentrations of n-butanol - a colourless liquid which some people find smells a little like a banana.

"In this way we are able to determine a baseline odour reading and work out a score for each individual. Anyone who scores between 4 and 12 falls within the right range.

"How the human nose detects odour is still a bit of a mystery. As there is still no reliable way of replacing a human nose with a chemical or electronic test, we find the most reliable method of testing the intensity of odours in the community is to use suitable staff who are trained to use our 'Nasal Ranger' olfactometers."