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Starting your career

What attracted you to a career working in Sheffield's environment?

A background in housing management and trying to make over 400 Victorian terraces affordable for those who lived in them led me to see the need for a significant reduction in the impact of our houses on the environment, for the benefit of the environment itself and our pockets.

How did you find out about the career opportunities that were available?

By accident, really. I had been very heavily involved in energy efficiency and sustainability for the Housing Association for which I worked but, the way public housing was going, this was going to become an ever-decreasing part of my work. I had seen the Energy Project Worker post at Heeley City Farm advertised in 1999. I liked the idea of working full-time in the Energy field, and had got the 'bumf', but it had less money than I was getting, less security (a 2-year contract) and more hours (37.5 versus the 28 I was supposed to be working then.)

How did you get your career started?

I'd better be careful here! In 1999, I think, a certain Northern City which shall remain nameless 'privatised' its Housing Benefit service. The resultant melee (not the first word which came to mind, but diplomatic) so wore down those having to work with the system that, demoralised at having become glorified debt-collectors, they left housing in droves. I did not even realise how susceptible to this trend I had become, until the Heeley Farm job came up again, the first incumbent having left. This time, with still less money than I was earning, still more hours and, by then, only 5 months funding left, I leaped! 6 years and lots of funding crises (or is it all the same one) later I am delighted I took the job.

How long have you been working in the industry?

As stated above, 6 years at the 'sharp end', but 20 years before that involved with affordable housing, energy efficiency and sustainability.

Training and skills

What qualifications did you achieve before entering your career?

I had a BA in Housing from the then Sheffield City Polytechnic in 1983.

What job-specific skills training and development have you undertaken since starting your career?

I have done the City and Guilds certificate in Energy Awareness, the National Home Energy Rating Surveyor and Assessor courses, and have trained as a solar water-heating installer. I also trained in timber-framed building techniques and straw-bale building, things I now teach to others.



What have you gained from your training and development?

Not as much as I have gained by simply getting on with the job and being prepared, on occasion, to learn by my mistakes.

Your working day

What is a typical day for you?

There is not a typical day! One of my principal roles is to find enough money to keep the Energy Centre running. Although I was able to raise over £250,000 from Yorkshire Forward, Sheffield City Council and Yorkshire Water for the improvement works, and revenue funding was offered at one stage, this did not come to fruition. I need about £45,000 per year to keep the Centre running even on its current 'shoe-string', and I have secured income of approximately £6,000 so far. I think it's called a challenge....

My days vary greatly, but looking for money is a key feature of most of them. Take last Monday...

8.50: Arrive at the Energy Centre for a few minutes' 'volunteering' before my day starts officially. There was insufficient money to complete all the works, so a great deal has been done by volunteers. I am one of them. Paint some skirtings, and prepare the attic floor for varnishing. A bit of compromise here, using not-very-environmentally-friendly varnish, as the unspeakably expensive 'eco' wood-oil we bought simply does not cut the mustard.

9.30: Time to leave, as I have a survey to do at a local works depot, but the phone rings as I go downstairs...It's an architect who knows when he doesn't know things, and would like some consultancy. Good. Where? Ahhh. When? '3 weeks ago yesterday'. Oh good, no rush then.

9.59: Just made it in time for my 10.00 appointment. The appointment has been made by a colleague of the man I'm seeing, so the first thing is to establish what he wants me to do. It's a very wide remit. Lots of buildings, ranging from 50+ to 20 years old, massive gas, electricity and water use. A blank canvas, you might call it.

12.20. Finished the survey, and promise to try to write it all up into some recommendations. I might get back in time for my 12.30 Management Team meeting.

12.30: Made it! Lots to get my teeth into, and only about half as much time as I need.

1.30: Back to the Energy Centre to sort out volunteers, do a bit of 'volunteering' myself, and prepare for the next appointment. Did I maybe manage to fit some food in there somewhere? I doubt it. I don't usually.

3.00: My visitors are here. I know they want advice, but I am struggling to remember what about! Oh yes, they are building a new house, and want advice re renewable energy. I so wish the Government would fund a proper advice service. People are so much in need of high-quality advice, they'd like it for free, and agencies like us try to provide it. But we can't afford to. It is so frustrating.

Anyway, my visitors are happy, and very surprised because they had 'naturally assumed that your service was funded by the Council'. Oh, I wish.... It's funded by Heeley City Farm and by me working stupid hours, and by the goodwill of my wonderful volunteers. Oh, and blood, sweat and tears.

4.30: Another meeting, which I am still in at 5.30 when my wife rings and reminds me that I should have been home 30 minutes ago as she is due in Doncaster now. Oops. Never mind, tomorrow will be fun.....



What takes up most of your time?

The relentless pursuit of enough money to keep afloat and keep providing the service I believe the public needs.

What is the best bit about your job?

Probably the fact that it's a passion. It may also kill me if I can't slow down, so I tread a fine line.

The future

What are your aspirations for your career?

Quite modest, really; I want enough money to provide a really good service here. Every time someone says 'Oh, you're like the Centre for Alternative Technology, aren't you?' I feel very proud. I think every town needs somewhere like this.

How would you like to develop your skills further in the future?

I think I want to carry on doing this job well till I retire (my pension is so rubbish that I probably have to work till about 115 – no, not a quarter past lunchtime), and then I want to be an apprentice joiner.

Who has been an inspiration or influence on your career?

Don't know, really. I have worked with some pretty fine people (and the others I don't mention) over the last 30+ years. Something must have rubbed off.

If you had to "sell" a career in Sheffield's environment in one sentence, what would you say?

Your lifestyle helped get us into this mess – help us get out of it!