

Real-life story - Bret Willers

Bret works to promote a good food culture using the Food for Life (FFL) programme. He encourages new partners to adopt FFL, provides advice and support, and uses his influence to get FFL principles included in local and national policy.



Bret Willers Programme development manager

Employer or university Soil Association

Salary range ?35k-?45k

How I got into the role

As an ecologist by training I have always had an interest in how environmental factors and human activity interconnect to influence health and wellbeing. I've worked in a variety of roles around the country and this has given me a good understanding of public health issues related to the environment. For example, I ran an environmental centre in South Wales, coordinating the development and delivery of Cardiff's environmental strategy, and then moved on to tackling issues relating to deprivation and community regeneration in Coventry, Sunderland and Birmingham. Most of this work focused on addressing factors affecting health, such as unemployment, crime, housing and the environment, as well as helping to shape the delivery of accessible health promotion and clinical services in partnership with the NHS.

Working in partnership with other agencies has been a key part of most of my roles, and I have a lot of experience in community development, strategy development and change management.

I have worked in local government and the voluntary sector, and just prior to taking up my current role I worked as a development director in the charitable sector with responsibility for campaigns, development, fundraising, public relations and communication. The charity was a member of the FFL partnership and I took the lead on FFL development work.?

What I do

I am responsible for the development of FFL programmes in London. The programme aims to improve the quality of food provided in institutions, mainly schools, but also other settings such as children's centres, care homes and hospitals. It takes a holistic approach, tackling the issue from different angles, for instance by aiming to change attitudes and raise awareness about the ways in which our food is grown and what constitutes a healthy diet, and by providing young people and families with the skills and knowledge to be able to grow, cook and eat fresh food that is produced in an affordable and sustainable way.

A good example of the FFL programme is improving the quality of food in schools. We aim to do this by increasing the uptake of cooked meals by children, and by encouraging healthy eating using the curriculum to engage teachers, parents and children in learning and health-enhancing activities, such as allotment gardening.

There are two key elements to my role at the moment. One is to create interest in the FFL programme and to attract new partners by helping them to see how the programme will help them achieve their own strategic goals. The other is to work closely with them, providing support and advice so that together we can successfully develop and deliver the programme.

I liaise with commissioners (who purchase services, mainly relating to public health, for their organisation), chairs of Health and Wellbeing Boards, and a range of potential partners. Besides my work in London, I also oversee the delivery of programmes in the East of England, supporting the programme managers in their work with schools, and liaising with public health commissioners.

Day to day I spend a lot of time in meetings with health professionals and senior managers from a variety of organisations. The purpose may be to develop strategy, agree performance indicators or produce progress reports.?

A holistic approach to improving the quality of food.

The best bits and challenges

No two days are the same and the work is really rewarding, especially when one sees children and families changing their dietary behaviour, purchasing locally sourced sustainable organic food and having the confidence to prepare and cook fresh meals.

I love the fact that that my role requires me to work with a range of different organisations. I get to understand the politics, cultures and motivational factors of a range of partners, and I enjoy helping people to see the importance of FFL and its wider consequences for health.

At times it can be a real challenge to shift people's thinking towards a more holistic view of an issue and get health promotion strategies put at the heart of action plans. I think I demonstrate that you don't have to be a health professional in order to understand health issues, and I am passionate about the work I do to support public health in a sustainable way.

Life outside work

I work from home and am able to be flexible with how I put in my hours. This is useful as I have children at school. I play tennis and squash and like to go sailing when I can. As a family we like gardening and to travel and I escape for the occasional game of golf too when I can find the time!??

Career plans and top tips for others

I am shortly to move on to managing the development and delivery of the Warwickshire FFL programme. The programme will cover all schools and children's centres across the county.

As a former chief officer in local government, now with more experience in the charitable sector, I can see myself as a chief executive officer or director of a charity at some point, and think this would be a natural next step for me to take.

Experience in community development is really valuable in helping you to understand the health and wellbeing issues faced by many people. It also helps you to understand sustainability issues and develop the right skills for effective partnership working.

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