

Real-life story - Caroline Harbour

Caroline's school work experience placement with the local council inspired her to choose a career in environmental health.

Caroline Harbour Environmental health manager
Employer or university Blaby District Council
Salary range £30k-£40k

How I got into the role

My mum used to work in local government and was able to get me a work experience placement with the local council. Although I was still at school, I had already begun to think about what I would or wouldn't like in a job. I was quite certain that I wouldn't want to be stuck at a desk all day so I found the role of an environmental health officer really appealing. The work seemed very varied and interesting and focused on helping people to improve and protect their health.

On leaving school I went to university to do a four-year environmental health degree. This included spending 48 weeks on placement in the third year, and I chose to spend this in a local government setting. During that year I also had to keep a learning log and complete reports to demonstrate that I met the professional standards required by the Chartered Institute of Environment Health ([CIEH](#) ^[1]).

I started work for my present employer as a senior environmental health officer in 2004 and took up my management post permanently in 2015.

What I do

I manage a team of environmental health and technical officers in the district council. Day to day we manage a broad variety of issues and situations that impact on the health and wellbeing of our population. For example, this might be investigating a food safety complaint, dealing with neighbour disputes or enforcing legislation in order to protect the public.

A large part of the role is case investigation and where possible we try to manage issues informally, advising and supporting people to make changes and take steps to improve. However when this fails, we have a duty to enforce action and serve notice or even prosecute offenders.

My management role means that a good portion of my time is spent supporting the team and enabling them to perform their individual roles. I contribute to service plans and strategies and play my part in ensuring that these are delivered effectively, escalating any issues through my own line management structure.

Each year I have to undertake at least 30 hours of core subject training to retain practitioner status with the [CIEH](#) [1], and I maintain my own competence by being involved with some of the more complex issues that we deal with or ones that require more than one member of the team.

In recent years the role has been strengthened through working in partnership with other agencies, such as the fire service, police and so forth. This joined-up approach has certainly enabled us to be more proactive and has often resulted in sustained improvements. For example, rather than just dealing with vermin-infested premises and moving on to the next case, we are able to work collaboratively to ensure that other issues affecting the premises are dealt with too, such as fire safety, support facilities, repair works and so on.

The best bits of the role come from physically seeing improvements and transformation.

The best bits and challenges

I really enjoy the fact that there are no typical days in this role as every day can be different. I also really value the information, advice and guidance function that the team provides for the public, although this is often a less tangible aspect with the investigation and enforcement aspects being more visible.

Some of the best bits of the role come from physically seeing improvements and transformation, and the sense of achievement this brings, not only for ourselves but also for the members of the public we work with. The role allows you to really make a lasting difference to people's lives. I recall a health and safety prosecution case that I was involved in where an elderly, vulnerable person had died in preventable circumstances. Taking action to prosecute this company raised the profile of the issue within the care home sector and clearly showed that breaches of health and safety legislation would be taken seriously.

Life outside work

As a parent of two young children and a full-time worker, life is obviously busy! As a family we enjoy travelling and generally being outdoors whenever we can.

Career plans and top tips for others

At the moment I have no major career changes planned. I am happy in this role and have had

two spells of maternity leave in the not-too-distant past so I'm just enjoying doing my job.

My top tips for others thinking of working in environmental health would be to give special attention to deciding which sector or area of work you would like to work in. I purposely chose local government because it provides such a broad field of practice, whereas another setting, such as private sector work, may be more specialised, and this will obviously have an impact on your ultimate skill set.

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Links

[1] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#CIEH>