

Real-life story - Helen Ross

Helen's experience and expertise are in the wider determinants of health, which are the social, economic and environmental factors that influence people's lifestyles and health.



Helen Ross Insight specialist in public health

Employer or university Nottingham City Council

Salary range Unknown

How I got into the role

My career started in the Civil Service, which provided a good grounding in public service and administration. I next worked as a placement officer for the Council for Voluntary Services, developing opportunities for unemployed people to get paid work experience in voluntary organisations such as Age Concern, arts centres and neighbourhood centres through a Government employment scheme.

Later, I worked with health and social care professionals in a role relating to the planning of community care services. I gained experience of getting care service users, their carers and voluntary organisations involved in the development of health, housing and social care services.

At this time I volunteered for a week with the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales, which inspired me to establish the Derbyshire Alternative Technology Association (DATA) in a voluntary capacity. There are a wide variety of alternative and sustainable technologies that aim to protect or improve our environment for ourselves and future generations through energy efficiency, recycling, and the use of renewable resources. DATA shared information about improving the insulation of homes, installing solar water heating, promoting cycling and walking instead of driving, sourcing and growing food locally and organically, recycling, composting, and constructing environmentally friendly buildings.

Over time I combined these two important aspects of my career by doing strategic work in public health in

the NHS, to inform organisations about the relationship between health and the environment and how to create opportunities for improving both. Whilst in this role I was able to take a Master in Public Health at Nottingham University, which gave me the necessary academic public health skills to inform my work.

What I do

I work in a local authority as an insight specialist in public health. An important part of my role involves developing strategic documents such as Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs). JSNAs aim to assess the current and future health needs of the local population. They are used as guidance by the local authority and health organisations when commissioning their health, housing and care services.

I am also an Honorary Member of the Faculty of Public Health, and in that capacity I have developed and chair their national Special Interest Group on Sustainable Development. Sustainable development ensures that our generation can meet its needs without affecting the ability of future generations to do the same. The group aims to embed the principles of sustainable development into all the Faculty's work, in order to create a healthy, equitable and sustainable future.

I work in partnership with professionals from a variety of backgrounds and focus on health inequalities and public health. I have no formal staff - but willing allies in a variety of places who are also reducing carbon emissions in the NHS, improving health and reducing health inequalities, even if their focus is on different agendas.

I come into contact with a great variety of people from cleaners to chief executives, all of whom have a role to play in tackling climate change and improving health.

The most important skills required for this work are negotiation, leadership, advisory and innovation skills. These skills are required to support staff, Councillors and other elected members in understanding the challenges, eg the pressures on services, how sustainable development relates to other public health challenges, and what local authorities and the NHS can do to make improvements.

Public health has the potential to improve health, reduce illness, save money and make our environment locally and globally a great place to live.

The best bits and challenges

I deal with challenges by enjoying them and having fun. I enjoy partnership work because I like to solve problems with people who are very different from me as well as those who are like-minded. This is because together, we can share a greater range of experience, knowledge and skills, and we can all learn from the experience and get a better outcome.

One of the main rewards for me is using "action learning" to overcome obstacles to change. Action learning is a method to support individuals in partnerships and projects (with the help of a facilitator) to work on and resolve the challenges that each is facing.

So far, my proudest achievements are: being made an honorary member of the Faculty of Public Health for my work on sustainable development and public health; and developing with partners the East Midlands NHS Carbon Reduction Project that saved over £1.5 million in the first year.

If I could leave an impact on public health, it would be to bring sustainable development into the mainstream

of public health by clearly illustrating the actions needed to tackle climate change. By consuming sustainable food, travelling on foot, riding our bikes, using public transport, insulating and installing renewables such as solar panels in our homes and public buildings, we can reduce costs and improve our health and environment all at the same time.

Life outside work

For relaxation I enjoy live music, cycling to work, practising yoga and walking in the countryside.

Career plans and top tips for others

The most important characteristics I possess include positivity, the courage to challenge when necessary, creativity, thoughtfulness and a sense of humour.

This is a challenging area to work in. However, by remaining positive and constructive, and by taking a “win-win approach” to help others to see the links between sustainable development and traditional public health topic areas, it’s possible to make progress. In other words, think: “How can my work in this area help you to achieve your outcomes?”

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