

Helen Sisson



Helen Sisson is Group Technical Director at Greencore. Greencore has a turnover of over £1bn and is a leading manufacturer of convenience foods, employing around 11,000 people in the UK and US. One of its roles is to provide a range of chilled foods to customers such as Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury's and ASDA. After graduating in microbiology from Leeds University Helen's first role was in dairy.

What does your role involve? What are your responsibilities and how many people report to you?

I am responsible for food safety, Health and Safety and environment standards across all the company's 17 UK sites and I support the teams in our six US sites.

My job entails ensuring sites operate to the appropriate company-set standards. This means setting the standards, implementing them and then measuring them using tools including KPIs and audits.

I also oversee standards within Greencore's supply chain, ensuring suppliers of ingredients, packaging and relevant services meet the Greencore criteria.

I am also responsible for the development of the technical teams.

Another key element is external liaison with customers and retailers on technical matters, ensuring that the company is meeting customers' needs. I represent Greencore on external bodies and groups such as CFA, universities, government and non-government bodies. And I am responsible for the company's sustainability work.

A central team of five report to me directly and I have functional oversight across the business.

Thinking back to school days, did you know what you wanted to become?

I knew from 'O' levels that I wanted to work in food, but from the science rather than cookery perspective. This influenced 'A' level choices which were science based, including Food Science; I did microbiology as part of my biology 'A' level.

What were/are your main interests, e.g. science in general, food, technology, microbiology, nutrition, something else?

I took a microbiology degree at Leeds University, with special interest in food microbiology.

In rough outline what was your job pathway - companies and job titles + anything of particular note, e.g. level of responsibility, exposure to any particular developments/issues?

My first job was in a small dairy business who were pioneers in soft cheese/ fromage frais production. The small, family run company meant that I was able to perform many different roles across QA (Quality Assurance), production and purchasing and after 2 years was running the soft cheese operation

I then joined Sovereign Foods as QA Manager. My next post was as Technical Manager and then I took a position in auditing working with suppliers to what is now Greencore direct to store and developing and implementing standards within the company warehouse and distribution chain.

I was then approached for a troubleshooter role after Hazlewood Foods took over the company. This was great experience and led to the position of Technical Director for Hazlewood Prepared Foods, specialising in prepared meals and quiches. From there I went on to be Group Technical Director of the group's entire chilled foods portfolio. I had always aspired to a Technical Director role and was pleased when, in 2004, Greencore (who took over Hazlewood) asked me to become Group Technical Director for the whole Greencore Group.

What were your aspirations when starting your career and what are they now?

I have spent 22 years with Greencore although over the years the business has been owned by 3 different plcs. This has given me the chance to expand my experience and take advantage of opportunities. I feel fortunate enough to have been in the "right place at right time" but I've also worked hard and apply my knowledge. I've also had encouraging, supportive bosses as well as fantastic teams.

My career goal was to be in a senior technical role by my late 20s and I feel I made pretty good going to be Technical Director by 32. With the company expanding and growing I am happy to stay with Greencore - there's always something to learn. The organisation has continued to grow and the challenge I enjoy is still there. Each year I feel driven to do a better job. And it's never boring, and always changing.

What single piece of advice you'd offer someone curious about working in the sector?

"Go for it!" Get a good science background and be passionate about what you do and how you do it.

What would you say to encourage them further? What is the best bit?

Chilled food is fast-paced and constantly changing. If you work hard and are flexible there are many opportunities. The industry is crying out for good people and you don't have to stay in technical. There are always opportunities across a range of disciplines. There will always be jobs on offer - people always have to eat (food and funerals guaranteed to always be in demand!) It offers an exciting career, work hard and have fun and you'll reap the benefits.