

## Claire Binnington



**Claire Binnington is Group Technical & Sustainability Director for Greencore Group**

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

I have seven direct reports. In Greencore over 1,400 colleagues are classed as being part of the Technical function, which I lead.

The Technical function provides technical, hygiene and sustainability direction, strategy and operational guidance at all stages of the supply chain, to ensure the legality, safety and quality of all our products. We ensure compliance with all relevant food legislation and customer requirements. This includes development of the Food Safety & Quality Culture strategy.

My role is very wide-ranging and varies from one day to the next. I might be visiting a site to catch up with the Technical Team, meeting a customer or talking to our regulatory body, the FSA. No two days are the same!

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

When I was younger I really wanted to be a vet. I studied very hard and was lucky enough to spend one summer holiday working at my local vet's practice. Although this was great experience, I quickly realised that emotionally it would be very hard to deal with losing animals regularly, and sadly I decided it wasn't the career for me.

I first became interested in the food industry when I was sponsored by Mars to attend a week's summer school at Reading University after winning a competition in the local area. Without this opportunity I might never have become part of the food industry!

I studied Animal & Food Science at Nottingham University and have spent the last 30 years working in the Food Industry.

*Also thinking about school, did you have a particular teacher that inspired you to take the career path you've followed?*

No, not at all. The food industry really wasn't talked about as a great option when I was looking for a career path at school. This is a great shame as over 1 in 8 jobs in the UK is in the wider food supply chain.

My very first role in the food industry was as a packing operative at a Stilton factory as a summer job while I was studying at university. On my very first day an older member of staff took me under her wing and really looked after me. 30 years later I still remember her and how important that extra support and friendly face was to me when I was just finding my feet. Memories of people like these stick with you for a long time and she was instrumental in helping me decide that the food industry was for me.

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

I've always been very studious and enjoyed science and technology. Working in a lab never really interested me however – I was always looking at more practical applications of science!

*What qualifications do you have? GCSEs? A Levels? Degree(s)/other?*

Science-based GCSEs and three A levels. I then studied Animal & Food Science at Nottingham University. I completed a Master's in Food Law from Leicester DeMontfort University while working as a Technical Manager – it was tough studying and working at the same time, but I did it.

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

The majority of my career has been in Technical roles but I have also worked in operational roles and even covered NPD for a period.

I worked my way up through Technical from my original role as a factory QA, but I also spent time as an Operations Controller. Working in Operations really helped me to have empathy with other functions, and helped me to grow my breadth and transferrable skills.

My first role in Technical came once I graduated, I was looking for work and had the opportunity to take up a QA role in the factory where I'd done my summer work. I had a really brilliant manager called Didier, – he was my first ever manager and I really liked his style. He always spoke to everyone, always had time for people and really believed that although every role has differing levels of responsibility, everyone is equally important to the business. I've really carried that with me and try to reflect that in my own leadership.

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

I never had aspirations to be Technical Director – I didn't really have a detailed career plan, it just sort of happened! I'm still fairly new in role (around 18 months) so I still feel like I'm learning every day!

*What single piece of advice would you offer someone curious about working in the sector?*

It's a fantastic industry that has given me lots of opportunities throughout my career. There are so many diverse types of roles that there will definitely be something that will suit you and your interests!

The degree apprenticeships that Greencore offer, like lots of other food businesses, are a great way to start out in the industry. They give you the opportunity to earn money while you study for a degree, and I only wish they had been around when I was starting out.

*What would you say to encourage them further? ie: what are the best bits?*

Aim high! I've learnt that you don't have to wait until you feel you tick all of the boxes for that next career move or to start your career. When I first applied to be a Technical Manager, I'd only been a QA Manager for a short period of time. I only really applied for the exposure and to show I was interested – I never expected to get the role as I didn't have the experience. But be careful what you wish for! Another candidate was successful at interview stage, but dropped out a week before they were meant to start in the role – so I was offered the job instead. That was a really challenging time in my career; I was taking on a huge new role and also trying to back-fill the role I had just stepped up from. I learnt a lot very quickly!