

Network



PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

Meet Wilson & Cooper, a local funeral director that is beloved by the community and has made a name for itself by always putting families first. See page 1

A FORCE FOR GOOD

We speak to Suzy Brain England OBE, Chair of Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals, about keeping Britain tidy, looking after patients and being a great employer. See page 7

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Keepmoat Homes tell us about all of the work they do to make Doncaster a better place. See page 13

Doncaster Chamber April 2024

As we have underscored in previous issues of Network, Doncaster's business community is filled with cutting-edge trailblazers, world-beating industry leaders, and authoritative experts who know their respective sectors inside out. They are, of course, a credit to our city (helping to put it on the map) and it's always a privilege to shine a spotlight on the various entrepreneurial things that are happening on our doorstep.

However, one side of the business world that we haven't covered quite so extensively is its capacity to bring about positive change. We are blessed with many organisations here in Doncaster who, driven by more than just their bottom line, are regularly going above and beyond for the betterment of the region.

In some instances this might take the form of philanthropic activity, whilst elsewhere it could mean reaching out to engage with the local community, looking after our environment or creating opportunities for vulnerable people. Indeed, there are all kinds of ways that business can be a force for good and that's why we have decided to use this

issue to champion those who really are making a profound difference.

For our cover story, we have interviewed the team at Wilson & Cooper Independent Funeral Directors, who always go the extra mile for families, even when it means absorbing some hefty costs along the way. Having overcome adversity and misfortune themselves — trying to get a business started just as the COVID lockdowns were announced — they have boundless empathy for anybody who comes through their door and it has inspired them to make some truly remarkable gestures. No wonder that they won our 2023 People's Choice Award!

Next, we sat down with Mark Burley, Social Value & Partnerships Manager at Keepmoat Homes, to learn more about how the company serves its home-owners long after they've moved in by trying to improve things in the surrounding communities. Working with prisoners, young people and schools, they're certainly keeping busy, but it's all in service of one overarching goal and, as Mark points out, has commercial benefits for Keepmoat that will pay off

long into the future.

We have also profiled a staggeringly accomplished businesswoman for this issue, with a piece on Suzy Brain England OBE. As chair of both Keep Britain Tidy (a litter picking charity that's done a great deal for the environment in recent years) and the local NHS Trust — and that's without mentioning her involvement in countless other causes — she too has a lot on her plate, but still managed to find time to speak with us about what motivates her to do it all. Last but not least, we caught up with a trio of business leaders — Amelia Banful of Enviro Electronics, Chris Oldacre of IBM and Yetunde Elebuibon of Knowledge Pool — about their efforts to combat digital poverty in the region. For this one, we took a bit more of a backseat and let the experts lead the conversation, resulting in an incisive and in-depth piece that's sure to pique your interest.

With all of that said, we hope that you enjoy this exploration of these ethically-minded and progressive businesspeople, all of whom we are incredibly proud to have in the Chamber network.

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Putting People First



A funeral directors with a strong moral compass and boundless empathy, Wilson & Cooper have made a name for themselves by always putting families first.

At last year's Doncaster Business Awards, we introduced a brand-new People's Choice accolade. As the name suggests, this was an opportunity for the local population to have their say and name their favourite organisation in the entire borough.

The shortlist here was comprised of every single finalist from across every single one of our other categories, meaning that there were just over 50 businesses in the running. Doncaster's flagship employers, major corporations with national clout, and other assorted industry heavyweights were all vying for the trophy but, in the end, it was a humble little funeral directors that secured the most votes.

A quintessential underdog story, the team at Wilson & Cooper have overcome real adversity over the past few years. Right from the off, they were beset with various obstacles and setbacks, as they had to contend with the hardships of starting a business amidst a global pandemic. In those early days, there were even occasions when they considered throwing in the towel altogether because

it just seemed like the odds were stacked against them.

Yet they persevered in spite of those teething problems and ultimately came out with a thriving business that is now celebrated for putting the needs of its customers first and for always going the extra mile. To learn more about why Wilson & Cooper is so beloved by the community — and what they have done to earn such fierce loyalty — we met with the company's owners at their office in Scunthorpe.

A Modern Touch On Death

The first thing that strikes us about Steph Cooper and Adele Wilson is how incredibly welcoming and down-to-earth they are. For people in their line of work, they don't appear overly concerned with formalities. On the contrary, when we sit down for our interview, the pair are dressed in casualwear and greet us with chipper smiles that would instantly put anyone at ease.

Acknowledging how unorthodox this might seem to outsiders, Steph reasons: "When you go to a traditional funeral directors you are typically [met] by people in formal attire. You know, suits, black ties, dresses and so on.

"But the thing is, when people have just lost a loved one, they don't really care what you're wearing. They know why they've come here and they don't need reminding of the situation's [gravity]. They want a comforting presence at this difficult time and that's what we try to provide for them.

"Generally, whenever we are in the building we are going to be smart-casual. Sometimes Adele will have slippers on and I'll have yellow crocs, because I'll be going up and down stairs all of the time and God knows you just can't be doing that in heels!"

It is this good-humoured, almost nonchalant attitude that Steph believes resonates most strongly with the families that come through Wilson and Cooper's doors. Bereavement is naturally a seismic occurrence in anybody's life and, in her opinion, that's all the more reason to try and offer a fresh perspective that doesn't dwell on grief.

Describing this as a "modern touch on death", she explains: "We want to try and start conversations about this taboo topic and make it seem less scary. [That's why] we do Facebook live videos that walk people through what we do, answer their questions and try to make it all seem a little more normal."

This strategy has been really successful for the business so far, as evidenced by their recent People's Choice Award win and the dedicated following they have amassed on social media. They've even organised a webcast with the famous Dancing Pallbearers from Ghana (who rose to prominence in 2020 as a popular TikTok meme) to show how funeral services needn't always be sombre affairs.

Steph adds: "You know, if people want that traditional man-in-a-suit approach, then there are plenty of funeral directors out there who will do that for them. We just want to be ourselves, and our families seem to like that about us."

Going the Extra Mile

If there's anything that gives this team an edge over the competition (apart from their exceedingly friendly demeanour) it's the way that they go above and beyond for families. Whether it's taking care of a special request, tailoring their services for affordability, or even doing some pro bono work, nothing is too great an ask. Which is all the more commendable when you consider the pressures that they themselves have been through since 2020.

Reflecting on this, Steph muses: "Everything was against us at the beginning, but I think that's exactly what gave us the drive to do more for our families. Because these were not normal times. We want to be there for everybody. We want to be a funeral directors where nothing is an issue."

And they certainly have accommodated some out-there requests, including getting a New Orleans-style band to perform a rendition of "Bring Me Sunshine" at a crematorium, and arranging for a McLaren to be driven in front of the hearse at the funeral of an especially petrol-headed young man.

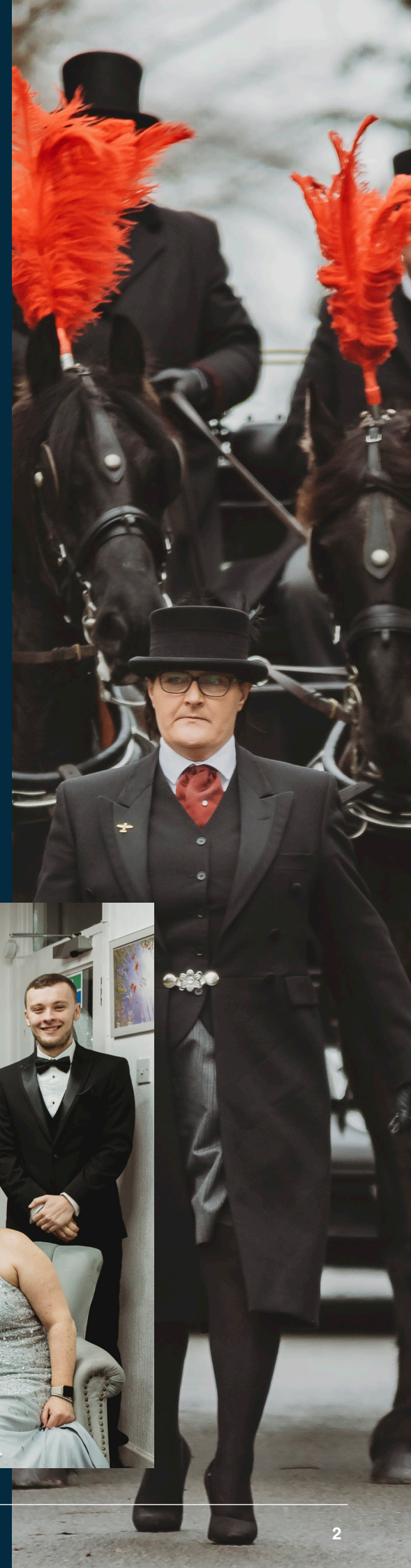
"They wouldn't have gotten that at Cop", Steph jokes. "Whatever they want, they can have. As long as it's legal! [Laughs]. We're all about spending time

with the families, going out to see them and fulfilling those special promises, no matter what."

This bespoke treatment is not something that you get from your average funeral directors either, and it's only feasible here because Steph and Adele adamantly refuse to compromise on quality. "We'd rather have 150 funerals a year and keep that personal touch than do 500 to a lesser standard. As a rule of thumb, you'll only ever deal with me or Adele and that's how we want it to be."

On a related note, Wilson & Cooper do an usual amount of work totally free-of-charge. In the past, they've been known to absorb costs for things like limousine rentals, photographers, direct cremations, tribute videos and even coffins. Elsewhere, they'll host a Santa's Grotto each year, where children are gifted free presents, and send a surprise bouquet of flowers to relatives on the anniversary of their loved one's funeral.

Justifying the rationale behind all of this, Adele says: "We're not pushovers, but when the bill comes along we don't want it to be another [unnecessary] stress for families. We don't want them worrying about whether or not they can afford it. At the end of the day, as long as we can pay our own bills and have a little money left over for us, that's all that matters."





Creating A Community

Perhaps the strongest example of Wilson & Cooper's generosity can be traced back to June of this year, when they decided to organise (at their own expense) a massive party for all of their clients to attend.

As you will no doubt recall, many people had unattended funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic and it was therefore difficult to properly celebrate the lives of those who had passed away. So, once said restrictions were lifted, it was only inevitable that families would want to belatedly send off their loved ones with overdue wakes.

Realising just how high the demand was for this on a local level, Steph had a new idea. Albeit one that raised her colleague's eyebrows.

"I said, we're going to do a big party to celebrate everyone that passed away", she recounts. "For all of our families. And we're going to pay for it too! Adele was admittedly sceptical of that last part."

As it turned out though, the cost was not really much of issue, as Wilson & Cooper were able to cover it by simply forfeiting part of their yearly advertising

budget. You see, up until this point, the team had been following conventional industry wisdom by paying for notices in so-called "bereavement booklets", which are distributed at hospices, hospitals and garden centres.

However, the amount of business that was actually generated from these adverts did not seem to warrant how much was being spent on them and — with Wilson & Cooper gaining so much attention elsewhere (like on social media) — dropping them didn't feel like a particularly big sacrifice. So, they opted to skip the next couple of bereavement booklets and used the £2,800 that was saved from this to pay for what would eventually become the first "Wilson & Cooper Big Wake."

A total of 350 families were invited to this event (each of whom were allowed to bring up to 4 guests) at The Pink Pig Farm, where they enjoyed outdoor games, separate bouncy castles for both the adults and the children, live entertainment in the form of a singer and, of course, free refreshments. When it came to the latter, Wilson & Cooper paid for all of the coffees, teas, hot chocolates, squash and hog-roast rolls, while one of

their customers (who happened to own a cake shop down the road) supplied some extra treats as a way of saying 'thank you'.

By all accounts, it was a truly heart-warming occasion, with a sense of bonding and good-will that seems very unique to the Wilson & Cooper brand. Everybody pitched in, with another attendee donating the balloons, for instance.

Looking back on it, Steph enthuses: "They all loved the Big Wake. We introduced people who had never met before, we had a wish tree that allowed them to leave positive memories, and I feel like we were able to create a [tight-knit] community there. I am so proud of what we achieved that day.

"It goes back to our [entire philosophy]. You've got to think outside the box, and be unwilling to settle for anything but the best. Okay, we maybe take a hit from time to time, but it's so worth it to see their faces when everything goes right."



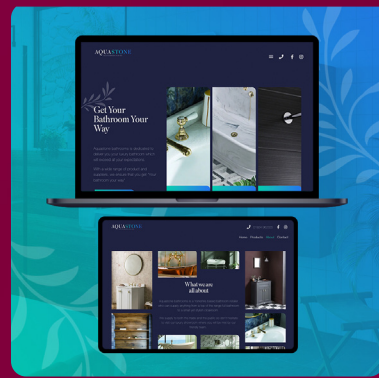
YOUR CREATIVE DIGITAL PARTNER



B:FRIEND

This charity came to us with an existing website that they had no control over, and they were unable to adapt to their evolving needs. The main focus of the project was to put the charity **back in control** of their website and enable them to maintain it going forward. They also required significant integration changes with their **custom CRM system**.

All our websites are built in a modular fashion with ease of maintenance in mind. By listening to what the client needed to do with the site and their future plans, we put together a vibrant and engaging site that can **grow with their needs**. The finished site has already seen an increase in signups, as well as easier management due to more efficient form validation.



AQUASTONE

The client had just set up a new bathroom supplies company and showroom, and needed a new website to display their products and **build a local online presence**. This website is currently in the initial phase whereby it's used as a visual tool for engagement, primarily acting as a tool to showcase the amazing bathroom and wash ware products.

This client has plans for an upcoming evolution of the site which will see it grow into a **large e-commerce website**, shipping products all over the UK and accepting payments via a wide choice of methods.

We're excited to watch this site develop further and drive sales for this company.



ONSIDE TRAVEL

This website is part of a full suite of deliverables for the client, including a **full branding package** and a whole range of imagery and graphics. The brief was to help them launch their new corporate sports travel management brand, which aims to provide a full end-to-end service for corporate travel and sports management.

The site has made a strong initial impact, launching with a full range of service pages, **networking and booking integration**, and blog for content updates. We expect to see the site grow as the company expands with in-depth tailored service pages and engagement features.

OUR NEW WEBSITE IS NOW LIVE!

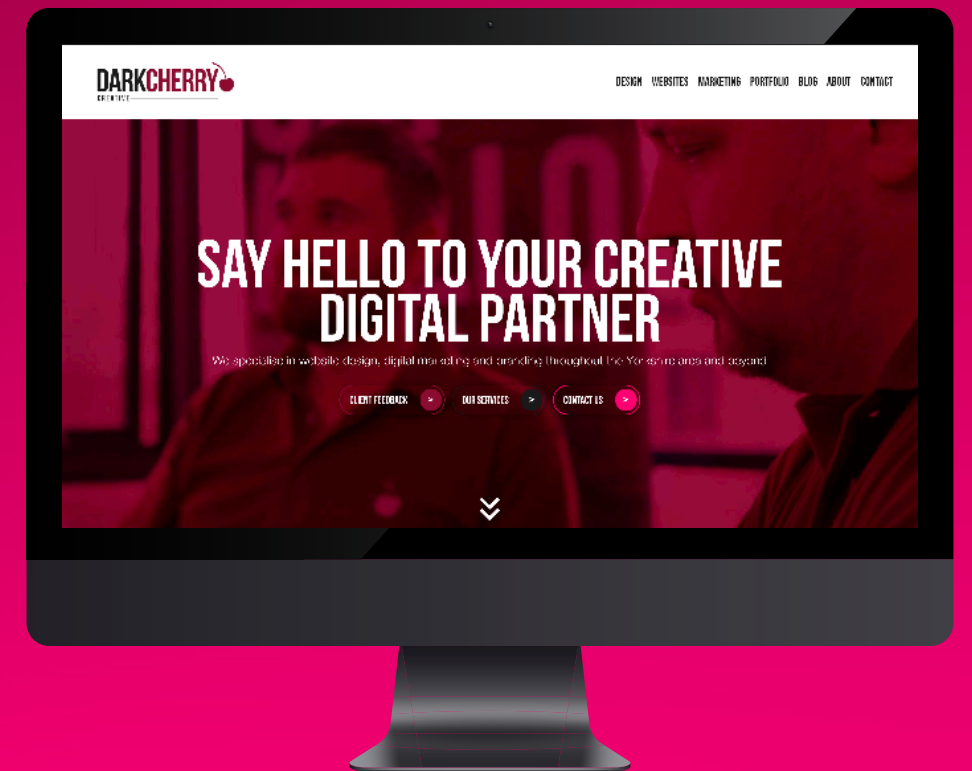
Our own site has seen several evolutions over the years, but this one is the biggest update yet. Nearly 200 pages of content and a complete visual overhaul that also encompasses subtle changes to brand identity and design language. We've focused on a highly visitor-centric layout and delivering a strong and concise message about what we do for our customers.

KEY GOALS ON THIS PROJECT:

- **Showcase:** our extensive portfolio of work throughout the site.
- **Results:** provide actual measurable results and figures from past projects.
- **Engagement:** Engage with the customer and provide the information they're looking for.

Behind the scenes is a completely reworked customer CMS that's built with the mindset of reusability. This platform will be the building blocks of our online presence for years to come and is designed to be highly adaptable.

We're particularly proud of this relaunched site, take a look and let us know what you think!
<https://darkcherrycreative.co.uk>



DARKCHERRYCREATIVE.CO.UK

Making A Difference

As Chair of both Keep Britain Tidy and the local acute NHS Trust, Suzy Brain England OBE is a real force for good in Doncaster.

Even by the standards of the entrepreneurs and business people we profile here in Network magazine, Suzy Brain England OBE has a particularly extensive résumé.

Said career has taken her from the bustling offices of Fleet Street through to government departments, independent charities and the National Health Service, where she now serves in a leadership capacity at Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals (DBTH). Working across all these different sectors, she brings a wealth of experience & managerial-savvy to whatever role she undertakes; whether that's as a non-executive director, a trustee or a chair.

Yet despite having so much on her plate (with many of her positions being coterminous), Suzy maintains that she doesn't find any of this overwhelming. Even on an especially hectic day — in which her diary is clogged with back-to-back appointments, including a meeting with ourselves — she still gives off a calm and collected demeanour.



"I don't know if other people would find it complex or not, it's just what I do", she reasons as we sit down for a chat in her office at Doncaster Royal Infirmary.

"The classic question I get nowadays — whenever I go to interview to be a chair for a new organisation — is: 'Will you be able to give us enough attention when you already have all of these other commitments?'"

"And, to that, my reply is: 'You don't know me'. You see, no organisation only has me part-time and I pride myself on being a 24/7 chairman. I don't go home and close the laptop. Whatever time of night or day they need me to respond, I'll flex my diary and we will work it out. That's just how it is. You might call that work but,

to me, it's just life. It's what I enjoy doing."

Being devoted to so many organisations and good causes transcends mere career ambition though. It takes genuine passion and a determination to make a difference. Luckily, Suzy has both of these qualities in spades.

From The Girl Guides to Fleet Street

While Suzy's CV spans a number of industries and roles, she argues that there have been a few constants knitting them all together.

Elaborating upon this, she tells us: "Public speaking has been at the heart

of my jobs and that is something that can be traced all the way back to my childhood, when I was a prize-winning schoolgirl. I used to come back from English Speaking Union competitions with rose bowls! I sincerely believe these things start early, long before your career does, with [...] extracurricular activities, Saturday jobs and holiday jobs. That's where you hone the skills that will go on to help you in professional life."

On a related note, Suzy attributes her leadership talents — which have allowed her to thrive in the workplace and even secure a coveted OBE — to her time as a Sixer in the Girl Guides. For her it all begins there, as opposed to with any high-flying jobs or prestigious titles (impressive though these may be).

That being said, things truly began in earnest for Suzy when she cut her teeth in the world of journalism. After graduating from university and presenting a programme on BBC Radio Manchester, she quickly climbed the industry ladder with a string of jobs that saw her racking up bylines in weekly, daily and regional outlets, as well as in national newspapers.

Eventually, she advanced to the role of sub-editor for the Daily Mirror before then going on to work at The London Daily News, one of Britain's first 24-hour publications. During her stint at the former, she also completed an MBA, juggling her studies with evening shifts so that she could receive a more formal education in leadership (going beyond anything that the Girl Guides could ever teach).

In Suzy's own words, it was this qualification that then gave her a "ticket into management", opening doors that allowed her to branch out from the world of journalism. And from thereon out, Suzy's career trajectory became far more eclectic.

Taking the Reins

A short-lived publication, The London Daily News closed after just a few months, and Suzy was subsequently made redundant. Rather than seeing this as a defeat though, she took it in her stride, looked for the inherent silver lining, and embraced an opportunity to move back up North.

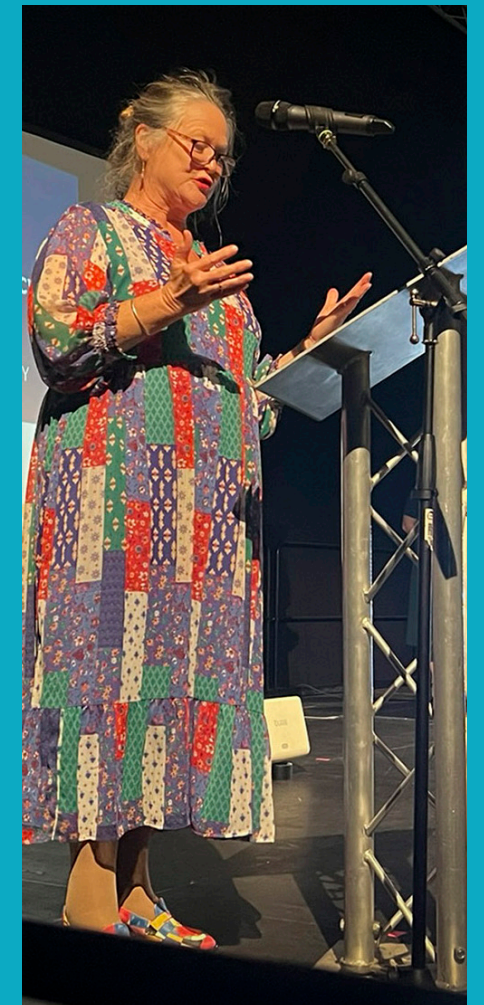
Putting her new MBA to use, she soon took on a Managing Director position at a business named Morley Books, which she describes as the "middle man between getting a book published and getting it shelf-ready for libraries". In a nutshell, this means that they would take care of things like barcodes, labelling, reinforced bindings and so on.

From an outside perspective, this might sound like a radical departure for a journalist, but Suzy actually sees it as quite a logical career progression. "Editing a newspaper is a bit like being a business leader anyway and so I was able to bring a lot of transferable skills to Morley Books. Before long, I was

speaking at library conferences and advisory committees. [That's] what's really fascinating about working in management. Once you're in, then you can change sectors with relative ease."

As if to prove this very point, Suzy then went on to secure a variety of (in some instances, overlapping) directorial, non-executive and executive roles at a wide range of companies. Among others, she brought her expertise to the Training and Enterprise Council, Focus Central London, the Ofcom Advisory Committee for England, Connections West Yorkshire, and the Department for Work and Pensions Standards Committee.

Yet, in between all of these, one job in particular (based here in Doncaster) would ignite a brand-new passion in Suzy.





An Environmental Education

Built in Conisbrough to commemorate the turn of the new millennium, The Earth Centre was an ambitious project designed to inform people about environmental issues and sustainability practices. Conceived of as both a visitor attraction and an educational resource, it had exhibitions on things like: recycling; renewable energy sources; water purification; and climate change.

It was also a troubled venture right from the get-go, plagued as it was by financial troubles that forced it to prematurely close its doors, relatively soon after it opened. That's where Suzy came in as CEO, to help get it back up-and-running. However, she concedes that she wasn't driven to apply for this role out of any existing passion for the environment.

"It was an opportunity for me to begin with", she admits. "I mean, I've always separated my waste and recycled, but I wouldn't say I was nerdy on any of that at the time. It's important to remember that what I do is work with organisations to give them leadership.

"What I'd say is that you can plan out your career as thoroughly as possible but, ultimately, you have to be prepared to take the best opportunities that come along. That's why I took on the job to

reopen the Earth Centre and [in the process] I led it through the two most successful years it ever had.

"But I soon came to appreciate that I was doing something that truly mattered there as well. It was so ahead of its time. 23 years ago [those] ideas about the environment and sustainability weren't so popular, and it was this that opened my eyes to their value. It was the start of my environmental education, so to speak."

Indeed, Suzy is far more conscious of these issues today and dedicates a great deal of her time to ensuring we look after our planet. Or, more specifically, that we look after our own country.

As Chair of the Keep Britain Tidy charity, she valiantly campaigns to protect local places from the negative effects of littering and waste. Outlining the vital work that this organisation does, Suzy explains: "It's such a great [charity] and we have grown phenomenally. I've been there for seven years now and we've made a huge impact in terms of everything from our Eco-Schools programme, to our efforts tidying up parks, beaches, riversides and other green spaces."

Urging Doncaster businesses to get involved here, she takes the opportunity to highlight one specific activity that always needs more volunteers: that being "The Great British Spring Clean". The

UK's largest mass-action environmental campaign, this litter-picking scheme already counts a number of major corporations — including Coca-Cola, Nestle, KFC and McDonald's — amongst its contributors and in, 2023 alone, helped remove over 500,000 bags' worth of waste across the country.

Suzy continues: "Now in its 9th year, the Great British Spring Clean makes an immediate and visible difference to local areas, as well as to the mindsets of people who live in them. I'm really proud of what we have achieved and would encourage all Chamber members to take part as well."

For those who are interested in answering this call to be a "#LitterHero", the campaign has returned once again for 2024. More information about it can be found on the Keep Britain Tidy website.

Caring For Patients And Caring For Staff

Doing right by the environment is not the only laudable cause that Suzy believes in, however. For almost 20 years, she has been fully committed to the health sector and to supporting NHS organisations in their efforts to provide the best possible care.

Her journey in this space began when she was appointed as a non-executive director at Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, before she then served yet another term as a NED (this time over at Barnsley Hospital). She then finally became Chair of DBTH, where she is currently enjoying her 7th year in post.

In that timespan, she has inevitably witnessed many ups-and-downs for the NHS, most notably a global pandemic that tested the limits of both the service itself and of its people. Crucially, though, Suzy maintains that the resilient spirit of our courageous health workers never faltered throughout that crisis.

She reflects: "That was the very intriguing thing about the pandemic. It showed just how incredible our staff here at DBTH are. At the same time, it also emphasised the need for us to do more for them. In the beginning, we were very focused on efficiency and effectiveness, but it's only through our people that we can achieve these goals in the first place."

Detailing how the Trust therefore went the extra mile for its staff, she continues: "We thought we were a compassionate employer before, but the various stresses and strains related to COVID-19 made it clear there was still room for improvement. It made us think more paternalistically and drove us to introduce new wellbeing packages. For example,

we now offer a bike repair service to our staff, alongside reiki therapies, a tea trolley that goes around all the different departments, debt advice, menopause talks and more.

"I sincerely believe DBTH has always been a very welcoming and very friendly environment to work in. But we've done a lot to enhance that culture lately because it's what our staff deserve."

The judges at our 2023 Doncaster Business Awards must surely have agreed with this assessment, as DBTH ended up taking home the "Employer of the Year" trophy there. This was in recognition of all the steps that the organisation has taken over the past 12 months to nurture and celebrate its workforce, beyond what might be expected.

Summarising this, Suzy adds: "We were thrilled to win [this accolade] because we truly want to be a good employer for our staff. There are unsung heroes at DBTH, some of whom have worked in the hospital for 50 years. That is a lifetime and such loyalty should not, and does not, go unnoticed.

"We all know somebody who makes use of hospital services, but what many people overlook is that we have to invest in our own people too. After all, DBTH is one of the largest employers in the region, with over 7,000 colleagues across

a range of clinical and non-clinical roles. That's everyone from our porters to our kitchen staff, nurses and, of course, our doctors. We believe it's important to look after them because they [in turn] look after the population of Doncaster. It's a privilege to be part of that."



Awards Roundup

While we're on the subject of those who are making big waves in the region and beyond, we held our 25th annual Business Awards ceremony back in December.

As always, this prestigious evening was dedicated to honouring the achievements of exceptional firms and enterprising individuals from across our borough, with accolades for standout SMEs, major corporations, inspiring apprentices, caring charities, promising start-ups, exemplary education providers, intrepid entrepreneurs and more.

All of the finalists underwent a rigorous judging process — which saw them being scored by expert panels and being interviewed by their peers — to ensure that the most deserving recipients were selected for each trophy and it's safe to say that we ended up with an impressive list of worthy winners. So, in case you missed it, let's revisit the night and see who ended up taking home the trophies.



Lifetime Achievement Award – Sponsored by Twenty Four IT Services

Paul Stockhill, Managing Director of Agemaspark

People's Choice Award – Presented by The 2023 Doncaster Business Awards Headline Sponsor, Yorkshire Wildlife Park

Wilson and Cooper Independent Funeral Directors

Apprentice of the Year – Sponsored by Doncaster College

St Leger Homes (Jack Aston) - Winner

Rebecca Dickenson Hair, Body and Soul (Annie Beckett) – Runner-Up

Active Fusion (Dawid Paskernak)

Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (Jason Mitchell)

Metro Secure24 (Maisy Matheson)

Wabtec (Harvey Wood)

Campaign of the Year – Sponsored by Harrison College

Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust - Winner

The Sleep Charity – Runner-Up

Active Fusion

Eco Power Recruitment

Footballerz Ltd

Rotherham Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust

Customer Service of the Year – Sponsored by Dolphin ICT

Berjen Ltd - Winner

PAB Languages – Runner-Up

Connectus Business Solutions Ltd

Footballerz Ltd

Memoria

Premier Partnership

Local Impact of the Year – Sponsored by LNER

Today Publications - Winner

Enviro Electronics Ltd – Runner-Up

Ametek Land

Footballerz Ltd

Keepmoat

One Call

Partnership of the Year – Sponsored by First Bus

Harrison College - Winner

darts – Runner-Up

Automated Analytics

Connectus Business Solutions Ltd

Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Energise Energy

Innovator of the Year – Sponsored by SYNETIQ

Virtual Reality Machine Training - Winner

Automated Analytics – Runner-Up

Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

DSOC

Premier Partnership

The Sleep Charity

Employer of the Year – Sponsored by One Call Insurance

Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust - Winner

St Leger Homes – Runner-Up

512 Doncaster Ltd

Aalberts IPS

Eco Power Recruitment

PAB Languages

Green Business of the Year – Sponsored by The University of Sheffield

Highland Carbon - Winner

S2S Group – Runner-Up

Energise Energy

Enviro Electronics Ltd

Memoria

Education Provider of the Year – Sponsored by Fastline Services

Pro Aspire Rail and Construction Training - Winner

DN Colleges Group – Runner-Up

Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Doncaster UTC

Harrison College

Swimstars and Dolphins

Charity of the Year – Sponsored by Keepmoat

Active Fusion - Winner

The Sleep Charity – Runner-Up

Caged Steel

Changing Lives

Club Doncaster Foundation

Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

New Business of the Year – Sponsored by Launchpad

Wilson and Cooper Independent Funeral Directors - Winner

Southwell Kelly Recruitment – Runner-Up

Eco Power Recruitment

Jiggle Staffing

Level Up Training

Stride Yorkshire

Self-Employed Person of the Year – Sponsored by Discover Financials

Rebecca Dickenson Hair - Winner

Philippa Pears Photography – Runner-Up

Be More LnD

Level Up Training

Rob Campbell Weddings

Shalom Holistic

Small Business of the Year – Sponsored by Sheffield Hallam University

Harrison College - Winner

DSOC – Runner-Up

512 Doncaster Ltd

Fastline Services

Feast

PAB Languages

Medium Business of the Year – Sponsored by ORB Recruitment

Kustom Design Printing - Winner

SAS Rope & Rail – Runner-Up

Flourish

Delivering Social Value

“I’m very lucky because I get to be involved in supporting our communities”, opines Mark Burley, as he reflects on all of the fantastic work that Keepmoat does for the betterment of our region.

As Social Value and Partnerships Manager for the house builder’s Yorkshire East division — which, tangentially, was identified as our Large Business of the Year in 2023 — it is clear that he takes immense pride in his job. And with good reason too. After all, it puts him in a unique position to make a real difference within the local area and to bring about meaningful change that not only benefits residents here in Doncaster, but that also extends far beyond our city limits.

Describing the sense of purpose he derives from his role, Mark continues: “It’s about seeing communities evolve and figuring out how they can become more sustainable. I took on this job because I believe in that goal and in Keepmoat’s mission to transform lives.



A Career-Long Mission

Indeed, Mark has been in the Social Value space for a while now. Before joining Keepmoat, he cut his teeth at Sheffield Council, where he oversaw numerous regeneration projects that were related to improving the city’s infrastructure and employment.

From there, he started his own consultancy business (Square Orange) that specialised in equality and inclusion programmes and counted the likes of Next & G4S amongst its high-profile clientele. It’s also where he happened to connect up with Keepmoat Homes and, in the process, set in motion the fruitful next stage of his career.

Giving us the background on this, Mark tells us: “Towards the end of 2013, a lot of the funding streams that were instrumental to our work at Square Orange began to dry up and so we



Using students from Doncaster College, Keepmoat Homes helped to revamp the garden area of the People Focused Group, a local charity that helps those who are struggling with their mental health.

had to look at closing down. Luckily, that’s around the same time that I was approached by Keepmoat to become Special Projects Manager and, then later, Group Corporate and Social Responsibility Manager.

“I then stayed in that role for about 5 years, before I was seconded to my current post as Social Value and Partnership Manager with the Citywide Developer Partnership. And the experience has been so rewarding! Granted, there are a lot of plates to spin, with us working across multiple different areas and linking in with all kinds of organisations, but it’s always worthwhile and we get 100% backing from the business to propose new ideas and think outside the box.”

Sure enough, Mark does have a lot of these proverbial plates to spin, as Keepmoat is involved with a frankly dizzying amount of social value projects that keep him rather busy. From working with young people in care to those who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), residents with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and also the local prisoner population; it’s overwhelming for us to contemplate how much he’s doing. Yet Mark has capably managed to keep on top of his responsibilities and in fact, has aspirations to do even more in the future.



Building Communities. Transforming Lives

When we ask him how Keepmoat decides which causes it’s going to support, Mark clarifies: “There’s a whole raft of environmental and social impacts that we can make and that means we’ve got to be selective about the projects we choose to take on.

“The other important thing to note is that we cannot always support all of the requests we get, there has to be a shared purpose to these activities somewhere down the line, otherwise, we cannot justify us dedicating so much of our resource to them, as hard as they might be sometimes. Because it can be difficult to say ‘no’ when, for instance,

we’re declining a promising sponsorship opportunity or turning down an ethical project that will have a positive impact for somebody. But we [ultimately] have to think about what best aligns with our goals of building more sustainable communities in the region.”

Examples of recent initiatives that did make the cut include: helping to establish a new pop-up Youth Hub in Broadsworth (with the aim of reducing antisocial behaviour); sponsoring and supporting New Beginnings and last year’s Recovery Games (an event that celebrates those who are overcoming drug or alcohol dependency); and developing a board game for local secondary schools that’s intended to raise awareness about various social issues (like vaping, sleep deprivation, self-harm, and knife crime)

while also offering careers advice and guidance.

What unifies all of this disparate activity is that everything Keepmoat does is focused on making sure that local communities, within which its housing sites are situated, are the main beneficiaries.

Elaborating upon this idea, Mark says: “Most of our customers are moving into their first-ever homes and they’ll want to feel safe, engaged, and like they’re part of a good neighbourhood. That’s why we try to look at things like how to bring down antisocial behaviour, how to foster a deeper sense of community via clubs, activities and allotments, and how green spaces can be utilized.”



On a related, the team have recently been involved in scoping out an ambitious project that’s all about looking after the environment. The way it works is that school children are incentivized to collect plastic waste and take it to a relevant depository so that it can be reused.

The amount of recycling they do under this scheme is then recorded on a bespoke app, which they can use to generate a reward. Not to mention, there are additional plans to use this resource as a way of raising awareness about the career opportunities that are available to young people in Doncaster’s bustling green sector, although the specifics of this are still being figured out.

The app isn’t the only way that Keepmoat is engaging with the next generation either, as they also run the innovative Roots to Roof programme, wherein primary school children pretend to be the owners of their very own housing company and must then construct a miniature home (keeping in mind practical considerations like costs, sustainability and environmental impact). The hope is that, at the end of this extended role-play, students will be inspired to take up a career in the construction industry.

Describing the rationale behind this, Mark expounds: “We’re in a sector with an ageing workforce and it’s going to result in a skills gap eventually. The industry needs almost 30,000 extra tradespeople by 2026 to meet growing demand, and that’s a daunting challenge when you consider that staffing dropped by 5% in 2021. So being able to engage with young people through all of these activities, and introducing them to construction when they might otherwise never have thought about it, is a massive opportunity for us. It’s CSR work that has a real payback.”

Opening Doors

Zeroing in on another case study, Mark then talks us through the HMP Moorland Bricklaying Academy project.

One of the first institutions of its kind in Britain, this is a collaborative effort between Keepmoat, His Majesty's Prison Service and the National House Building Council (NHBC).

Together, these three organisations have created a bespoke training programme for inmates at HMP Moorland that will support them in learning valuable new skills and potentially securing employment upon release. It's all wrapped up in a 12-month course that is designed to get the prisoners up-to-speed with the latest NHBC bricklaying standards, so that they are not at a disadvantage when they enter the labour market.

Mark elaborates: "We'll train them in everything from how to use specific tools to how to properly mix cement and how to build different types of walls. In addition to the basic trowel skills that they'll obviously need to thrive on a building site, there's also an element of employability teaching [embedded] in there as well.

"You see, it might not be immediately apparent to those outside of the industry, but the vast majority of workers in construction are self-employed. Our sub-contractors will have a small core team that they keep on the books, but generally people are working for themselves and so will need to have a firm understanding of concepts like tax, insurance, eligibility proofs, and bank accounts. Which is quite intimidating if you've never had to deal with those things before! But through our academy, we are trying to cover all bases and get them suitably prepared for a career outside of the prison walls."

While this is undeniably in service of a societal and moral good (research suggests that prisoners who are employed within the first twelve months of release are 80% less likely to re-offend), Mark is quick to point out that Keepmoat's motivation is not entirely altruistic. As you'd expect, there's a win-win here for both the community at large and for the company itself.

He continues: "Prisons are very prominent in our locality — with Doncaster having 4 of them and Hull having a couple as well — so we obviously wanted to focus on how we can support that aspect of our population. [If] they are properly integrated back into society then not only does it help them but it also lessens crime in the community, which in turn makes our residents feel much happier and safer.

"Having said that, we also benefit from the prisoners maybe joining our workforce one day, equipped with the skills they need to succeed on one of our construction sites. After all, we've already taught them how to build to both quality and speed, so that they can meet industry standards without slowing down the rest of the bricklaying gang. We hope that they'll remember us for that and want to come and work for Keepmoat as a result."

The programme is progressing well, which is why there is now talk of expanding it to Humber Prison in the future. Of course, it's still early days with the original Moorland academy, so it might be a while before we find out more about these plans. For the time being, however, it's abundantly clear that Mark and his team really do have a knack for this sort of thing and that they are tapping into something of a cultural zeitgeist.

Reflecting on all that he's achieved in his role thus far, he says: "Since the pandemic, the emphasis on social value has really accelerated and I am proud to say that we've done some fantastic work in that field. If you look at a lot of marketing nowadays, it's less about the actual product or service a business is selling and more about things like sustainability practices. Because businesses are recognising that people, especially the younger generation, are choosing to buy through organisations that have an ethical focus.

"For us, looking at social value is therefore not only the right thing to do but also the smart thing to do. And I have been very fortunate to be part of that journey."



Digital Poverty

The notion of a “digital divide” is of great concern to many up and down the country. And those on the wrong side of this worrisome gap can be put at a severe disadvantage.

Smartphones, tablets, laptops and convenient internet access are not mere luxuries anymore but essential parts of modern living. Without them, people, businesses, and indeed, entire places, can be left behind. It’s therefore imperative that we have a society wherein everybody has the relevant technology and skills they need in order to thrive.

Alas, rampant inequality when it comes to digital skills and equipment leaves many vulnerable people unable to qualify for jobs, to perform everyday tasks or even to simply communicate with others.

Eager to address this disparity, there are a number of phenomenal businesspeople and entrepreneurs based right here in Doncaster, who are doing outstanding work to combat Digital Poverty.

To find out more, we assembled a panel of these specialists to talk about why this is such a hot-button issue and what more can be done. Before we delve into these nuances, though, let’s meet our experts.

Chris Oldacre, Director for Customer Success at IBM and Chair of Doncaster UTC Local Governing Board

IBM is one of the world’s biggest technology companies and has been around for an awfully long time. We’ve invented things that have genuinely changed the world, whether that’s the magnetic strip on the back of your credit card or, more recently,

advancements in the realms of AI and Quantum Computing.

It is truly a remarkable company and one that has a very rich history of giving back and trying to improve the world around it. For instance, just a few years ago, we made a commitment to train 30 million people in digital skills by 2030. That’s a huge statement!

The thing is, while IBM does a lot of fantastic work around the globe, that doesn’t necessarily translate into me making a huge impact closer to home in Doncaster. However, I was determined to help my local community, having grown up here, which is why I decided to get involved with the University Technical College as well.

I believe that Doncaster has lots of fantastic talent, but that there are obstacles holding them back from unlocking their potential. It’s not always easy to navigate the various career pathways that are available and opportunities aren’t immediately apparent in some cases.

Yet through the UTC we are trying to change that. It’s an educational institution, one that’s still founded on the principles of academic rigor, but it’s also deeply intertwined with industry.

The hypothesis behind it was that: If we give students a solid academic background — with a golden thread of employability skills and digital understanding — then that would result in more work-ready people at the other end. So that’s the difference we try to make.

Yetunde Elebuibon, Founder of Knowledge Pool

We are a social enterprise that similarly tries to teach people the skills they need to thrive in today’s high-tech world.

Specifically, we offer training for those who are “digitally disadvantaged”. There are lots of different reasons why people could be less tech-savvy, ranging from their age to their income or some other personal circumstance.

Our goal is to bridge that competency gap and help them get to grips with the tools they need; whether that’s by showing them how to power-on a device, where to plug in their chargers or how to use specific applications. [In turn] we could be helping them to progress in their existing careers, to qualify for a brand new job, to advance into further education or to just keep in touch with their loved ones.

In this capacity, we’ve work with organisations like Changing Lives, Age UK and a lot of faith groups too, the latter of whom really needed our help during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Amelia Banful, Head of Business Strategy at Enviro Electronics

And we look at the other side of digital poverty; thinking about how people can get a hold of the actual devices in the first place.

Our aim is to help businesses and educational institutions [the latter comprises roughly 80% of Enviro Electronics’ clientele] when their tight budgets don’t allow them to stretch any further and they can’t get the equipment they need. We will recycle anything from PCs to laptops, microwaves and hoovers and a percentage of what we collect then goes into community projects. Organisations we have supported include the Deaf School, The Refugee Council and Voluntary Doncaster, to name but a few. And the donations are made completely free of charge.



Amelia Banful, Head of Business Strategy at Enviro Electronics



Yetunde Elebuibon, Founder of Knowledge Pool



Chris Oldacre, Director for Customer Success at IBM and Chair of Doncaster UTC Local Governing Board

Network Magazine: There are obviously countless ways that a business can be a force for good. Why have you all chosen to focus specifically on this one area: digital poverty?

Amelia: We are extremely dependent on technology nowadays and there are so many things that you simply cannot do if you’re not literate in that area. Times are changing and it will soon reach a point where you cannot even function if you don’t know how to use certain devices or applications.

Yetunde: Exactly. If we don’t ensure that people have the requisite knowledge, then we’ll be leaving [vast swathes] of the population behind. For example, I was recently working with this nursery school manager who didn’t know how to create a calendar appointment, and it made their job quite difficult.

Yet while having digital skills can open up so many doors, and potentially lead to higher earnings, the needs can run much deeper for some people. The other day, I was reviewing a document that explained how there’s a big challenge when it comes to digitizing the NHS, because a lot of people are not equipped for that change. You know, if an 80-year-old wants to be seen by their GP, it’s going

to be a major obstacle if they don’t know how to work a digital device but are told that they can only have a remote appointment.

So if we’re going to continue trying to digitize everything, that we need to make sure it’s fair and that we bring everyone along with us.

Amelia: I came to a similar realisation lately when I was working with the Refugee Council. A representative from that organisation came to us in an hour of absolute need. They had all of these families from the Ukraine who, because of the situation in that part of the world, had to flee and relocate.

And what struck me most was this doctor who was struggling to get work. She was highly educated and qualified, but hit a fundamental stumbling block right away because she had no means of connecting to the internet and, therefore, to the modern world.

On top of that, they also couldn’t connect with their family back home either to see what’s happening with them. The lady was completely and totally overwhelmed because their lack of digital access was putting them at such a disadvantage. That really hammered home the importance of this issue for me. We need to be able to support people like her in that position.

Chris: I’ve got to say, that’s a real cold-water shock for me. We often make this assumption that everyone at least has access to a device in the first place, and so our focus [when tackling digital poverty] tends to be about helping people to use said technology effectively. It becomes about education and about training them.

Whereas Amelia’s point is that some people don’t even have the device to begin with! That’s a really interesting aspect that I hadn’t considered before.

From my perspective, the reason [the UTC’s mission] is so vital is that digital skills are the skills of the future. We used to consider reading, writing and numeracy the most essential parts of any education. But nowadays we have to acknowledge that digital literacy is literacy and you simply cannot communicate in the modern world without it.

The pace of change is only accelerating as well because of the global economic environment. Companies are looking for efficiency and that tends to breed automation which, in turn, leads to a greater adoption of tech. If you can’t navigate that environment, then it will only make things more difficult for you father down the line. Both in terms of employment and in everyday life as Yetunde just pointed out.

Network Magazine: So what are the biggest issues to tackle when it comes to digital poverty?

Chris: I'd say it's very hard to predict which digital skills you'll actually need in the future, because all of this is evolving so quickly. You could feasibly spend years learning how to use a specific technology, only for it to then become obsolete one day. You don't want to run the risk of investing too much in a particular niche for that very reason.

That's why, at the UTC, we emphasise what we call "Swiss Army Skills" [whereby you have intermediate knowledge of a broad range of things]. It enables our students to pivot more easily, should the world change around them.

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Network Magazine: And do you think any of these challenges are unique to Doncaster?

Chris: Of course digital poverty is of global relevance, but what I would argue is that it doesn't impact everywhere equally. Let's say you live somewhere that is really affluent and has lots

of investment, like Silicon Valley for instance. You're going to have a completely different experience to someone who is living in South Yorkshire. Not everyone has access to the same opportunities but we are all exposed to the same risks.

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Network Magazine: Does that mean there's no panacea for it either?

Amelia: That's absolutely right. We need to consider a whole range of factors. It's one thing to make devices available, but we also need to make sure that people know how to use them and understand the implications of doing so safely. We are not in a world where we can say: "Okay, let's pick just one thing to fix all of our problems".

That's why we need a forum, like the one provided by the Chamber here, to amplify our voice. There is so much noise out there distracting from this issue but it is so important. If we don't help people with digital access, then we're not going to have a fair society.

Network Magazine: The word "fair" has cropped up a few times already in this conversation. Is that the ultimate goal; to make things fairer? Is it something that you believe is incumbent upon all businesses?

Amelia: Absolutely! Businesses are vital to every community. I mean, that's how we evaluate the success of a country right? By measuring its GDP. It's a great indicator of how well we are doing.

So [by extension] the success of a place like Doncaster is linked to the success of its businesses. Not just in terms of how they boost employment or the economy, but in terms of what they're doing to better the communities they serve.

That's why we look at things like CSR. We want to encourage organisations to look beyond their profits and think about how well they impact the people around them. It's so crucial for us to be doing things like this.

Yetunde: That's right. By virtue of being a social enterprise, everything we do at Knowledge Pool is about serving the local population and making things fairer.

That being said, I believe that all organisations are, and should be, responsible for improving their communities. Like Amelia said, business should not be driven by profit alone and — whether it is in service of combatting digital poverty or something else entirely — they should give back. I believe that is key.





Network Magazine: It's clear that you all feel very passionately about these issues but obviously there is a limit on how much any one business can do. Presumably, you've got to think about your own finances as well. Are you ever put in a position where you have to say 'no', cannot afford to give a service away, or just wish you could do more?

Yetunde: It can be quite painful when you see someone in need staring you right in the face and there's nothing you can do about it. But you can only do so much for free and will run into barriers if you don't have sufficient resources.

Amelia: Without a shadow of a doubt. Don't forget, we are in the midst of an economic crisis after all! People can't even afford to pay their electricity bills and, with us providing these services for free, it can be difficult.

There have been so many instances lately where we've had to consider changing our strategy, because we too need to survive. We've had to do a lot of thinking about how we can make sure we cater to those who need us most.

The truth is that we'll be able to achieve way more if the whole business community pulls together here. Instead of just sustaining what we're already doing, we could go even further if everyone pitches in.

Chris: And just to build on Amelia's point, that's why I think organisations like the Chamber are so critical, because through these networks we can build a vibrant and diverse community of perspectives. We can get together as local businesses to discuss these problems, adapt to them, learn from one another, and creatively solve problems. That's how we overcome our challenges.

Network Magazine: To wrap up on a more positive note, what is the single thing you are proudest of when it comes to your work with digital poverty?

Amelia: Being able to make a device available to somebody who otherwise wouldn't have it is incredibly rewarding. Especially when you get the stories about how it has changed their lives.

Yetunde: I'd echo that point. When you enable people to do simple things that the rest of us might take for granted, it can be quite emotional. For instance, through working with Age UK, I met a lady in her 80s. She had lost her husband of 60 years during the COVID pandemic and she was obviously devastated.

She came to a digital class that I was running and I showed her how to use a tablet, how to take photos, where they are stored and things like that. I didn't know that this would make a huge impact for her, until one day she showed me that she had managed to make a picture of her husband the background on her tablet.

And she said to me: "I can take him with me, wherever I go now." I honestly willed up after hearing that.

