EARTH SCIENCE & ENGINEERING

Who are you?

Florence Bullough

What do you do?

Policy Officer, The Geological Society

What does your job involve?

The Geological Society is a membership organisation for professional geologists and a registered charity with aims to promote Earth science education and awareness, professional excellence and ethical standards in the work of Earth scientists, for the public good. I work as part of the External Relations team covering policy and outreach work and though I'm based at our rather grand London office in Burlington House on Piccadilly I have also travelled to the devolved parliaments in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast as well as attending policy events in Brussels at the EU Parliament.

My primary role is to lead on the Society's policy work which can cover a variety of different things. The government, when designing, or modifying policy, will often consult with the science community and experts in the field in order to improve the effectiveness and robustness of policy through evidence-based policy making. At the society we use different approaches to assist government in designing effective policy where there is a key geological component such as consultation responses, responding to calls for evidence and publishing our own policy reports. In addition to this I also support outreach and education activities in the Society. These include attending events such as the Lyme Regis Fossil Festival, helping out with the annual Earth Science Week, helping out with social media and content for the blog as well as launching flagship projects such as the national 100 Great Geosites project that we ran in 2014.

How did you get there?

Ever since I started studying geology I have always been interested in the wider impacts of geoscience and how it plays into societal challenges and policy making. Geoscience has an important role in so many different aspects of life on earth and I wanted to work in an environment that communicated its importance. That started my search to find an area of work and expertise where science and policy crossed over.

It is fair to say that my route to this job and area of work has been fairly circuitous. At university I had a strong interest in hydrogeology and aqueous geochemistry and how these intersect with societal challenges, sustainability and development and so I focussed my MSci project on developing inexpensive water remediation technologies for arsenic contaminated drinking water in Bangladesh. After finishing my undergraduate degree I spent a year working in Environmental Consultancy training in the Contaminated Land and Groundwater team. This gave me a good grounding in UK water policy and also allowed me to complete a lot of on-the-job training in site work, data collection and statistical analysis.

Unfortunately, I started on the graduate programme the year that the financial crisis hit in 2008 and a year into the programme the outlook for progression and interesting projects was dwindling and

after a year I was looking for other opportunities. My next role was a short term research position at the Natural History Museum working directly behind the weather exhibit! I then won funding for a PhD at Imperial continuing my work on arsenic contamination in Bangladesh. Whilst researching I made the effort to engage in interdisciplinary activities, meetings, presenting my work at parliament and communicating my work in different publications. Unfortunately, after two years, the two supervisors that I was working with both left to take roles in the US and Australia and this rendered continuing the PhD, with no obvious replacement supervisors, very difficult. It was at this time that I saw an internship opening at the Society in policy which I was accepted onto. Since then I have been promoted to policy assistant and then policy officer and I have now been at the Society for 3 and 1/2 years and have not looked back!

How do you use your skills in geology and geophysics?

My academic background gave me an important overview of fundamental geological concepts and this allows me to think broadly about the different ways that earth processes and geological principles play into societal, policy and outreach themes. It allows me to see connections between concepts and disciplines that might go missed or unseen by those working in government and policy. The subsurface and all the provisions it affords are so often overlooked by virtue of being underground and therefore out of sight out of mind. Understanding and visualising the subsurface has been critical in seeing potential policy implications and raising the importance of the subsurface in other applications. I use all of this knowledge to feed into my policy work but also in all sorts of education and outreach work; and this can be anything from developing rock sample sets to designing geobakeoff challenges!

What do you love about geology/geophysics?

My favourite thing about geology has always been about how it plays into so many things we see, use and do in our daily lives. It's an area of science that sits at the centre of so many things that are critical to human prosperity and I like to explore those links from as many angles as possible. Geology is also naturally an interdisciplinary area of work and I'm all for pulling down barriers and working across disciplines.

Your best and worst moments?

Top 3 best:

1) Publishing my research in a journal for the first time, that was a great feeling.
2) Launching the massively successful Geological Society 100 Great Geosites project in 2014 (a great engagement activity that raised awareness of the outstanding geology across the UK)
3) Producing the Geology for Society policy report and having the opportunity to launch it in Brussels in 14 languages.

My worst moment has to be when I realised that I had to leave my PhD. It was a really difficult decision but it did fortuitously lead me to the Geological Society and into a job that I thoroughly enjoy.