



Social enterprises **ROCK** and are the best type of business.

To celebrate Social Enterprise day (21st November) Seagulls and Leeds Wood recycling have come together to celebrate the marvellous work they do in the city of Leeds. Both enterprises have people and planet at the heart of their business. I asked their Founders and CEO's some questions. Let me introduce you to Cat and Charlie.



Cat

Founder and CEO of Seagulls has developed and established Seagulls over the last 23 years. She came to Leeds from Bristol to go to University in 1998 and wanted to bring some of Bristol's Independent spirit and recycling awareness to Leeds.

Charlie

Founder and Managing Director of Leeds Wood Recycling. LWR is part of a national network called National Community Wood Recycling Project which was founded in 2003. She founded LWR in response to a shout-out from the NCWRP, St Luke's Cares, Hyde Park Source and LS14 Trust in 2018. Charlie saw an opportunity to support, educate and grow people whilst repurposing wood for the community.

Q) What is a social enterprise and why are they the best?

A) A Social enterprise is a purpose lead business. A social business addresses social problems with commercial responses. We want to make profit for good.

Q) what do we mean by purpose?

A) Purpose is driven by inequality and injustice. A social business will always have people or the planet or both as its core motivations.

Q) Why or who was motivated to start our organisations?

Cat - Seagulls was started by me as a direct response to a lack of recycling and reuse awareness in Leeds (there were no green bins at the time) and a desire to generate jobs for myself and others. I was and still am passionate about the environment and social justice. I believed that one man's rubbish is another's gold and I wanted to find a way to make money from waste. Obviously, it was a team effort establishing Seagulls, I worked with another Founding member for many years and gathered a team of like minded people to help. I had zero business experience and was fresh out of university!

Charlie - I have had a variety of jobs which have always centred around people and practical skills. I've worked in theatre and the events industry for most of my career, alongside running a community pub and also working as a handywoman (whenever there was time).

I'm known for rescuing items doomed for the skip and have a long list of stories about random junk I have repurposed into a new life. In my 20's I was part of a house renovation which repurposed anything from roof slates to toilets, and have worked on theatre shows which raided local tips to make giant puppets to tour Europe. In short, I've always got my hands dirty.

I've been a long standing Director of Scrap Creative Reuse and Louise's introduction to the world of social enterprise has always been inspiring. I could see that many of the industries I have worked in did not prioritise waste and recycling and it wasn't really aligned to my roots (daughter of a carboot queen) I was ready to do something with a purpose. So, in 2018 when there was a shout-out to set up a wood recycling enterprise in Leeds, everything dropped into place for me - and I was in!

Q) Why do you do what you do?

Cat - Simple, I wanted to make a difference to the planet and for people. I wanted a job with purpose. I wanted to create a legacy.

Charlie - I do it because it makes sense! There is no logic in resources not being reused or repurposed! Repurposing timber is a great platform for us to upskill and offer free training to people. I love sharing skills with volunteers and people who come in. So yeah, to be honest I get a buzz out of things about getting a new life, and that people grow and get more confident. It's a privilege seeing people's whole lives change. I'm really lucky to have a job that does that.

Q) Why do you care about equality?

Cat - It sounds cheesy, but I have always felt very lucky with my lot in life. I had a comfortable upbringing and was surrounded by parents and grandparents who did worthwhile jobs. I wanted to make my family proud. I was very worried about climate change from a young age (think Greta but obviously not as influential) and very passionate about social justice. I felt inequality strongly and wanted to do something about this in my community.

Charlie - Like Cat really, I think life is really hard for many people. I want to be able to offer some kind of small change or at least respite from the many challenges people face. I've always been a people person, and my work with Mind the Gap Theatre company taught me so much about equality in particular for people with learning difficulties, which is why I'm so proud to have run the specialised work experience program in 2023 - which is now funded to start again in 2025! I'm just super passionate that we all need to support each other as a community, and give a place where we feel heard, and part of something.

Q) Why is it your job to tackle climate change?

Cat - it's everyone's responsibility to help tackle climate change. I wanted to show a practical and useful way to reuse a valuable material (paint) for the benefit of the environment and people. I felt keenly (and still do) that change is now or never. I feel sad that we haven't really moved on in the past 20+ years but I try not to dwell on this and keeping plugging away at what is in my control.

Charlie - It's all of our jobs because we created the mess!! I think we have all lost our way with the things we use and consume. I guess it's my job to keep repurposing in the conversation and show it's not as complicated or inconvenient as people think. People feel powerless and sceptical that they can change anything, but I guess I want to highlight that because things can take more effort or time (repurposing something) it's worth it, we can all make a change!

Q) Why is purpose more important to you than profit?

Cat - I guess I am not motivated my money. I do come from a fortunate position in that I have had support from my family but not in the sense of being given money on a plate but, for example my parents have been able to help with a mortgage and I was left a small pot of money by my grandparents and I wanted to do something purposeful with this as a legacy to their hard work. I also think profit and purpose are as important as each other. Without profit (or at least breaking even) Seagulls wouldn't be able to do the work we do.

Charlie - Purpose is what gets you out of bed in the morning, profit (in personal terms) still needs purpose and connections otherwise it's just a lonely possession, more stuff for the sake of stuff - that's a bit deep. Sorry :)

Q) Why do you think you can make a difference?

Cat - Why not? Thinking about it I have always been a passionate person. I channelled my worry about the climate emergency and my anger at the social divide into something useful. At Uni I spent a summer working in a BT call office and vowed never to work in an office again and I'm stubborn enough to have stuck to this vow.

Charlie - Because look how far we've come! I always say to our team, "let's do one thing everyday to make things a bit better" It can be adding new mugs to the tearoom, moving stuff around to make it look better, or listening to someone talk about how they're feeling. It all makes a difference, I guess I've always just believed in myself and those around me. Just being nice can make a difference.

Q) Why are you so special?

Cat - I'm not. I'm lucky to have had determination instilled in me and the belief that I can do whatever I put my mind to. I very much know my shortcomings (don't ask me to do anything on an excel spreadsheet) and have never been afraid to ask for help. I feel very lucky to have the career I have and am very proud of the work of Seagulls and our contribution to the city of Leeds.

Charlie - I don't think I'm special, like Cat I think I'm just determined and loyal.

These “why” questions were taken from Liam Black's book ‘How to Lead with Purpose’. If you don't know who Liam Black is he is a social entrepreneur Guru and his book ‘There's no business like social business’ and his Cat's Pyjamas training were very inspiring for Cat and other budding social entrepreneurs 20 years ago.

We hope you have enjoyed this blog and feel inspired to come and visit our enterprises. I will end this blog with a quote by the pioneer Florence Nightingale, as I'm sure Cat and Charlie are always in the surf, riding the waves:

“Rather, ten times, die in the surf, heralding the way to a new world, than stand idly on the shore.”



