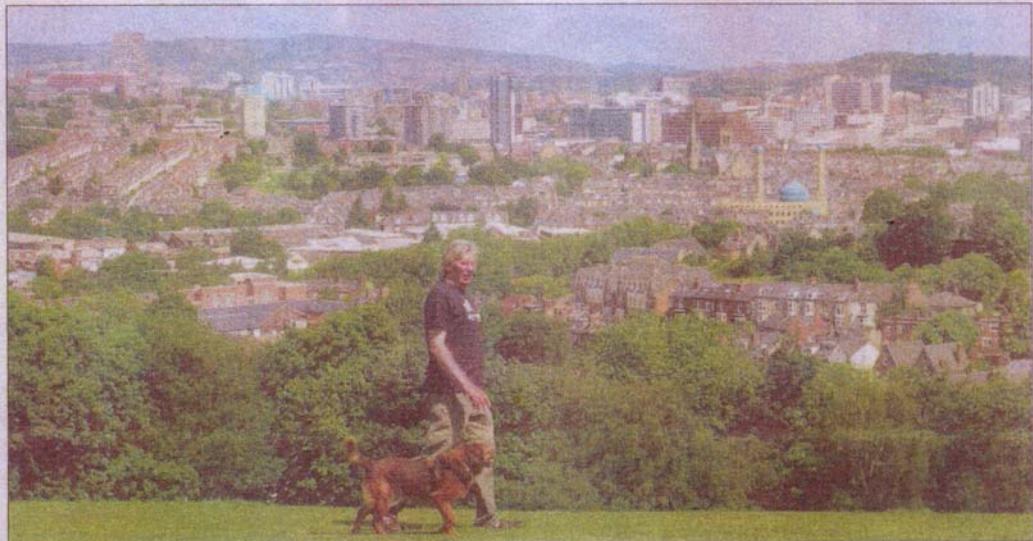


A former miner has won an award for his work promoting cleaner air in the traffic-clogged east end of Sheffield.
David Bocking
met him



Neil Parry, coordinator of the East End Quality of Life Initiative walking his dog Ali in Meersbrook Park

The air of a champion...

IT'S a sunny Sunday morning and Neil Parry is walking his dog Ali in Meersbrook Park.

The sky is blue, the air is clean and the view over the city is sharp and clear. But then we are on a hill on the south west of Sheffield and, as has always been the case, the dirty air tends to find its way to the east of the city.

Last week Neil Parry won the Care4Air Outstanding Achievement award – part of a campaign to raise awareness of air quality across South Yorkshire – for his work over the last ten years as co-ordinator of the East End Quality of Life Initiative.

Initially a one-year project looking at how transport affects health, Neil and his colleague Barbara Rimmington have built up expertise and information on transport related air quality which affects the whole of the city and other urban centres around the world.

"The linkage between poor air and health and quality of life is a lot stronger than people used to realise," he says. "In some parts of Tinsley it can have an effect on childhood asthma and as a child grows older it can affect their health in later life. And we need to do something about it."

A generation or two ago Neil Parry was a Barnsley miner. He became a NUM activist as a natural progression from his

teenage years, when he'd travelled to anti-Vietnam war demos in South Yorkshire and London.

"Social justice was the driver for me," he says. "As a teenager you're looking for a reason, aren't you? Life isn't just about going to Meadowhall, is it?"

His 18 years as a miner saw him work in several pits around South and West Yorkshire, finishing in 'Grimey' in 1993 after witnessing – and taking part in – all the upheavals and battles of the industry in the Eighties.

He saw at first hand the effects pit closures and redundancies had on the coal communities, how the links between generations were broken and how it seemed clear to miners that the authorities "just wanted to get shut on us", as Neil puts it.

"It had a devastating effect on the mining communities. It was a just battle and we had to take that battle."

When the last of his pits was closed, he used his redundancy money to take a degree at Sheffield Hallam University, with a view to working in community regeneration, and his initial job looking at transport and health became the East End Quality of Life job ten years ago, supporting the health service and others.

This work is a different kind of battle, it's clear. Neil comes across as a calm, mild

mannered persuader rather than an exhaust fume firebrand.

It's notable that his middle-aged dog Ali was once known as Tyson and was renamed in honour of Mohammed Ali when Neil picked him up from the rescue centre.

The facts about traffic pollution are there, in the measurements in test tubes around the city logged by Neil and Barbara and in the many reports collected by EEQOL.

Air pollution now comes mainly from traffic, Neil says, and affects respiration and

Politicians should stop worrying about being seen as anti-motorist. 'It shouldn't be a battle, there should be a consensus on doing what's right'

cardiovascular health, in the short and long term. That is, it can cause an immediate problem for people with lung or heart conditions and for children with asthma and it can cause a cumulative long-term effect for people who live with bad air every day.

"It can affect lung development in kids and it means they're more likely to grow up to have a chronic condition in later life."

Poor air quality costs Sheffield £200m a

year, he adds, due to health costs and days of work lost. And he notes that 240 people die early every year in Sheffield because of air pollution. But for Neil the important issue is the everyday life of people living near heavy traffic.

"It has a big effect on people who have chronic conditions, because when air quality is bad they may have to go to the doctor or the hospital. It affects their quality of life."

Hence the name of the initiative. If you live next to consistently high traffic pollution, and you have a heart, circulation or lung condition, your quality of life is going to be worse than if you live in the western hills or suburbs. For many people bad air is another factor in a community that may already be affected by poverty and all it can bring to bear on health.

So what's to be done? Low emission zones are being considered around the city, he says, initially where buses and HGVs can only enter if they have low pollution engines. The Highways Agency is looking at 50mph limits on the M1 near Tinsley to keep traffic moving at the lowest pollution speed.

But the main imperative for Neil seems to be getting the message across that traffic pollution worsens the health of people who live or work near traffic. Reducing air pollution is also going to help in cutting carbon and other emissions that hasten cli-

mate change, which he says will increasingly affect people all over the world.

"We should look at ways of reducing our use of vehicles and using public transport, or walking or cycling – methods of transport that are good for your health."

Part of the problem is that the media and politicians see it as a 'motorist' issue, he says. "I think we should stop thinking of people as 'motorists' as if that person isn't a mum or dad, with daughters or grandparents with health problems. It'd be nice for the media to look at a story from the point of view of human beings, not just 'motorists' who want to get from A to B as quickly as possible."

Politicians should stop worrying about being seen as anti-motorist. "It shouldn't be a battle, there should be a consensus on doing what's right."

After a life working for 'social justice', Neil Parry shows no signs of slowing down. Apart from the specific problems of toxic air pollution, he says the issue of climate change caused by centuries of burning oil and gas (and as he's well aware, coal) is now on a par in his mind with the battles against the Vietnam war and the battles for the mining communities of Britain.

"This is the big issue of our times. What we do now is important for everyone. We've got to do something."

► www.sheffieldeastend.org.uk