

FREEING UP THE FRONT-LINE BY LIBERATING THE METHOD



By Mark Smith

A key theme from our Putting Relationships First cell is the importance of giving freedom to the front line to build relationships so they can understand what's needed and do what's right. Mark Smith writes about what they've been doing in Gateshead to make this happen.

It all started with a (wonderful) soul in the Council Tax Recovery section of Gateshead Council – let's call him Jim – who decided he would try to help a single mum – let's call her Juliet – who had fallen behind in the payments. The de facto purpose of his department was to get money from Juliet and others like her. And, if they don't pay, the normal method was just to send the bailiff round.

But Jim was one of the people working in that section who said, this isn't working, this doesn't feel right.

So he rang Juliet and just said, 'Hi, I'm from the Council, I'm not chasing you for the money, I just wondered what we could do to help?'

It turned out that Juliet was caught in a trap, and when he asked her this question she was so moved she cried. The underlying problem she was facing was that she needed to move because she was literally frightened of her neighbours, but because she owed a lot of rent, the Housing Company wouldn't let her. She

used to get by with two zero hours contracts, with her mum looking after the kids. But her mum decided she didn't want to babysit at night any longer because she was also really frightened of the neighbours. So Juliet had to reduce her hours and that's when her financial problems began.

Her mental health also declined, the children became disruptive at school, Juliet couldn't cope and the discussions with social services turned to the children being removed and also towards homelessness...

Jim learnt that if she could move, she had a chance ... more hours, more money, a new start. He started a train of events which not only gave Juliet and her family a new beginning but also changed how we work in his section and more widely in Gateshead too.

Jim called me about Juliet and we worked with the housing department to allow her to move. But as a result I also went down to the Council Tax Recovery section and

listened to lots of phone calls and we did a bit of research and discovered that only four per cent of the people we were chasing wouldn't pay and 96 per cent just couldn't pay, with not paying being a signal of a deeper problem, yet we treated both groups as if they were the same.

This was not something that could simply be tweaked, so we set up a small six-month prototype for doing things differently with a small team from Citizens' Advice, the Department of Work and Pensions and the Council Tax Recovery team. And we gave them the freedom to do things differently. There were constrained by two rules only – do no harm and don't break the law – and we told them they could do anything else they liked for a list of 40 people who would otherwise be about to get a bailiff visit.

We also 'liberated the method' – that's what we called it – giving them four operating principles or freedoms:

- Front-line authority to make decisions in their work, without having to escalate things to my office.
- No assessments. Instead, they should ask people 'what can we do for you?' and try to discover what a good life looks like to them.
- No referrals – because we know that this just leads to people going round and round in circles. Instead, the team pooled expertise so they could establish a relationship with the people who weren't paying council tax and solve the underlying problems together.
- Measure only to learn and improve, not to keep scores or to make a point. If we learn something's working, that's great, and if it isn't, we adapt.

We gave that team a pot of money and we gave them six months and asked them to tell us what they learnt. The team found that, like Juliet, the people they were working with were already struggling, many had been going round in circles for many years, moving from service to service in desperation. They were able to get 70 per cent of those they worked with out of it – for example, into work, into education and onto the benefits they were entitled to. They also built connections locally, working with lots of third sector organisations as partners because they know a lot more than we do about what's going on.

We've since tried to develop the same approach through homelessness and through area-based working and it's setting the platform for reform across the council and – I'd like to think – beyond.

What we've found is that those two rules and four principles have really stayed with us. They haven't been adapted. What we're now trying to do is make that much more normal and we're finding it is beginning to get some traction, though the pandemic hasn't helped.

The truth is Jim is a hero but we also have buildings full of Jims whom we must set free before they give up, leave and take up less stressful and frustrating careers. And there are many Juliets out there whose lives can be helped if we 'liberate the method'.

Mark Smith is Director of Public Service Reform for Gateshead Council.