

## PAT KNIGHT – LIFT



PHOTO Jem Sahgun

**The pandemic wreaked havoc on household finances, particularly for those already struggling before Covid. Recognising the gap between what support benefits residents claimed and the financial resources available, Kent County Council (KCC) formed a task force to address hardship. The task force enlisted the expertise of Deven Ghelani, a former Universal Credit, Welfare and Employment Specialist at the Centre for Social Justice and founder of Policy in Practice, who was developing a programme called LIFT — Low Income Family Tracker.**

Gravesham Borough Council (GBC), a local authority in Kent with particularly acute areas of deprivation, saw potential in LIFT. Pat Knight, GBC's Assistant Director (Corporate Services) and a self-described 'data geek', took a keen interest in the initiative and persuaded councillors and senior management to support a trial. Pat was not a fan of traditional debt recovery approaches and wanted a system that scrutinised the data, emphasising the need to support people more efficiently and proactively in paying their bills. His personal background influenced this perspective: raised in social housing, Pat was fortunate to attend a grammar school, but his parents worried about the costs and had to work weekends fruit picking to cover the extra expenses.

Working with Policy in Practice, GBC developed the unpublished Poverty Gap Report to highlight poverty levels in the borough. It identified households with high vulnerability and low affordability — those who genuinely could not pay. The council then began contacting these families to inform them of the support available.

### IMPACT

The impact of this initiative has been substantial. Approximately 800 children have been lifted out of relative poverty in the borough, reducing the number of affected households from 3,000 to 2,400 out of 44,000. Financial support has included:

- £125,000 in council tax support
- £250,000 for energy assistance
- £2.2 million in pension credit over the next six years, with £1 million proactively paid out to those in need.

### WHAT'S DIFFERENT? £19 BILLION!

The money being paid to residents is not GBC money; it is unclaimed funds set aside by central government. The Guardian newspaper (23 April 2023) reported that "UK households are missing out on £19bn a year in unclaimed welfare benefits". The article noted that the "complexity of the system and the perception of government handouts as 'shameful' are stopping people from accessing much-needed support".

"But the study found even bigger sums were not unusual. In one case, advisers helped a pensioner couple in Kent (GBC residents identified by LIFT) living on £280 a week secure an extra £222 a week in pension credit — £11,500 a year."

The report highlighted that pensioners are particularly likely not to apply for benefits, perceiving them as shameful. An estimated 850,000 pensioner households fail to claim £1.8bn annually in pension credit.

### BIG DATA

LIFT uses data linked through council records and postcodes, cross-referenced with DWP records, without using names or addresses. "The Digital Economy Act should have made sharing data easier but it still remains extremely difficult," Pat explains, "and the DWP is very strict on data protection." He continues "GBC has a dedicated Information Governance Officer to ensure strict compliance with these stringent laws."

"We don't know the true value of poverty," Pat points out. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) provides good ward-level data on deprivation, but it does not reveal where the pain is most acutely felt. GBC sought household-level data to monitor and actively assist households in reducing their liabilities. Reducing the number of forms claimants had to fill in was another goal, easing their burden and reducing the workload for GBC staff.

### ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

"£1 million has been actively paid out to GBC residents — money that would otherwise sit idle in a pot in central government," Pat says proudly, "and this money nearly all flows back into the local economy, boosting trade for local businesses."

Pat strongly believes the improvements brought about by LIFT demonstrate the effectiveness of targeted financial support and data-driven intervention. At the time of the interview, Pat was in discussions with Southern Water regarding a social tariff on water rates and targeting families by assisting with funding for school uniforms.

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— Pat Knight, Assistant Director, Gravesham Borough Council

### THE FUTURE

There are genuine concerns about big data and data sharing, and these should not be ignored. The Digital Economy Act (DEA) addresses many of these concerns, making it clear that the only lawful reason to use data is for the benefit of the person. The DEA encourages institutions to work together and provide services like those LIFT currently offers. Maintaining proportionality is essential, but the benefits highlighted by these early years of LIFT are encouraging, demonstrating how lives can improve when data is expertly scrutinised. ■

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