

Rising Star – Katie Sherriff, Payments Manager, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council – January 2020

Tameside Council's Corporate Plan 'Our People Our Place Our Plan' outlines our aims and aspirations for the area, its people and how we commit to work for everyone, every day. The plan is structured by life course – Starting Well, Living Well and Ageing Well, underpinned by the idea of ensuring that Tameside & Glossop is a Great Place, and has a Vibrant Economy.

Underpinning this plan is the need for outstanding, efficient and value for money corporate services, the importance of which shouldn't be forgotten in supporting key frontline services. With a drive and commitment to ensure continuous improvement and transformation in everything she does, Katie Sherriff has single handedly transformed one such corporate function – the Accounts Payable Service - from failing to flying in just 12 months. All the more impressive considering that Katie finished her apprenticeship after school only 3 years ago.

What has Katie Achieved in 12 months?

- Created a safe operating model for the Council's Accounts Payable service which processes over 35,000 payments at a value of nearly £200m p.a.
- Mitigated a potential financial pressure of £3m late supplier payment interest charges.
- Improved payment of suppliers within 30 days from 50% to 98%.
- In her first management role epitomised exemplar leadership through effective change management and staff engagement.
- Improved cash flow for Council suppliers, contributing to the Council's aim of a vibrant economy.
- Trained over 300 system users at 60 sessions to develop a supported self-service culture.
- Developed digital solutions to create capacity in her team and across the Council.
- Introduced robust controls for the mitigation of fraud.
- Worked across a diverse range of Council services and with suppliers to create and support a cultural shift from reactive to proactive.
- Achieved financial savings in excess of £100K in year one through supporting the recovery of old credits and introducing system improvements to prevent duplicate payments.
- Helped implement an innovative 'Early Payment Programme' where suppliers get paid early in return for a small rebate which generates income for the Council.

The Challenge!

The Council's Accounts Payable team had at least a 15 year history of inconsistent and poor payment performance with a 'fire fighting' approach to paying the Council's suppliers. Its reputation both internally and externally was not positive.

In 2017, a financial service review identified the need for an Accounts Payable Improvement project. It was recognised that the service was not operating effectively and that significant risks to the Council were in need of immediate attention:

- A potential financial risk of c£3m of suppliers claiming interest on late payments.
- Failure demand creating inefficient processes, draining capacity in Accounts Payable and across services.
- Difficulties meeting procurement requirements to pay all suppliers within required timeframes.
- Weakened controls for managing fraud risks.

Why Katie?

Since joining Tameside MBC in 2015 as an Apprentice, Katie has excelled at everything she has put her mind to. Her ability to turn her hand to and improve anything is evident from her rapid promotion to HR Assistant, Systems Project Officer and then Payments Manager in a 3 year period.

When Katie was made aware of an improvement project within Accounts Payable she jumped at the chance to make a difference.

With her calm and logical approach, Katie analysed data and networked with key colleagues to understand the granular problems underpinning the more strategic issues identified by the organisation. Using this knowledge she developed a 6 priority improvement plan to address what was a complex project:

1. **Introduce Policies centred on best practise** – Katie implemented key policies such as No Purchase Order No Pay and Good Invoicing which were introduced and rolled out to over 6,000 suppliers and thousands of employees across the Council. This established the high standards expected and foundations for the Accounts Payable operating model.

2. **Support services and suppliers** – Katie has the ability to see the whole picture. She recognised that effective payment processes are not the sole responsibility of Accounts Payable. They are influenced by a 3 way relationship including service and supplier as well as the team. By categorising the causes of late payments, Katie began to provide one to one support to suppliers and services in need. She introduced regular and mandatory training for the 550 staff who use the Council's financial system and developed and published over 20 bite sized user guides to enable services to self-serve.

One of our services who had previously struggled with the payment process said:

"I have worked with Katie to improve the process for the use of Agresso, previously if there were any issues I felt that I went round in circles there were delays in getting invoices paid etc. we looked at the different ways we can get things through the system as for care orders it is sometimes complex. If I have any issues or invoices are blocked she has made time for me to meet with her and clear back logs. She is absolutely fantastic at putting staff at ease.....Nothing is too much trouble."

3. **Manage risk** – Katie worked with our internal audit department who made 31 recommendations around accounting, late, incorrect or fraudulent payments, and system failure. Katie tenaciously developed and implemented approaches to address each recommendation.
4. **Excellent customer service** – Katie lives and breathes an ethos that nothing is too much trouble and this creates a culture of excellent customer service. Whether bespoke training or the development of a service specific intervention, Katie is passionate about ensuring excellent customer services. As a supplier customer recently fed back:

"Without Katie helping us each week we wouldn't be back on track with our payments. Every week she is extremely helpful, liaises with Clients and is always happy to assist. All our payments are now regular and on time! Thanks Katie!"

5. **Go Digital** – Katie recognises that digitisation is key to system efficiency. Her thirst to learn has made her the expert in our authority's financial system with no formal training and has underpinned this improvement journey. With the support of colleagues, Katie has successfully implemented a shift from paper to users inputting

directly into the system and created automated interfaces to reduce manual input creating additional capacity across the Council and her team.

- 6. Support to Staff** – Katie is an advocate of the Council's People Plan, living the Plan's STRIVE values of Support, Trust, Respect, Integrity, Value Difference and Engage. Her values underpin her behaviours and are at the heart of everything that she does which is just as important as *what* she does. Katie has created a positive team culture where every member has embraced the changes and challenges ahead, whilst delivering our key priorities. She's also developed over 25 internal team process notes and successfully put forward a business case to create investment of 2 posts in the team.

In Summary

Katie truly is an asset to Tameside Council!

She demonstrates on a daily basis that she is one to watch for the future with the potential to be a senior leader at the highest level in the public service. She works autonomously, requiring very little support or guidance, instinctively being able to make the right decision at the right time. Her ability to effect change whilst bringing people along with her is a unique and incredibly valuable skill set. In fact, sometimes I wonder who is learning from who!

She has already made such an impact to the Council by managing significant financial risk during a time of austerity, and implemented change that supports and stimulates the borough's local economy. Her contribution will undoubtedly continue with Katie already being asked undertake a bespoke piece of work for the Children's fostering service to positively review the foster carer recruitment journey - something totally unrelated to her current role.

The performance numbers speak for themselves but achieving such high performance metrics whilst engaging and motivating staff and partners is rare, even more so when considering that this is Katie's first management role. These final testimonies from her staff sum up why Katie should receive this prestigious award.

"Katie is one of the most hard-working, passionate and genuine individuals I have ever met. Throughout her time as Payments Manager, she has overcome many obstacles with grace and determination, always pushing forward with a smile no matter what. Nothing is ever too

much for her; she is always offering to help everyone and anyone, sharing her endless amount of knowledge, and going above and beyond to ensure people are confident and happy within their roles. Not only is she passionate about developing the team, she has always championed us as individuals too, encouraging us to be the best possible version of ourselves we can be. In the short time she has been manager, she has achieved so much from recruiting a full team to ensuring 98% of invoices are paid within their terms. We are very lucky to have her and we can't wait to see how far she will go."

"For me Katie has been a god send.....she has been brilliant. I am so glad we have someone like her as our manager"

"Katie is an extremely dedicated knowledgeable manager to our team and she has achieved amazing results with her hard work and sharing best practice within the team she has created a great happy team environment and thus a great place to work, she has a natural gift of approachability with such a supportive nature with mentoring within my job role, always has time to listen and always wants to help everyone where she can, and if she can't she'll go out of her way to try to! I feel really happy and lucky to work with Katie and have her as a fantastic manager, she's an asset to Tameside MBC!"