

Story: Child safety in York

Engagement exercises that consciously involve front-line staff are often not publicised, because they're done at an informal or very localised level within the organisation. However, in 2015, City of York's children's safeguarding team pioneered an approach that got public-facing employees in other departments to take a leading role.

The idea came about during a whole council senior management team development session. The local children's safeguarding board was running a campaign called 'It's not ok', to encourage residents to come forward more willingly if they suspected a child was being abused. As part of this, the children's safeguarding team visited the council depot, and spoke about 'It's not ok' to rubbish collection teams and other staff responsible for streets and house repairs.

To their surprise, not only had most already heard of the campaign but a number had considered making a referral, having seen suspicious things on their rounds. They had done this not because they saw it as their duty as employees, but because they were themselves residents and had a sense of civic responsibility. The increased knowledge and support gave them the confidence to act in the future.

Rather than just thanking them and moving on, York decided to build on this. The child safety team set up a second, employee-focused strand to the 'It's not ok' campaign, encouraging their workforce to report things. Part of this was just about giving staff the confidence to feel they weren't being busy-bodies or putting their jobs on the line by doing so.

Essential to the success of the idea was recognising that staff saw themselves as citizens first and employees second – and that this was okay. By normalising and formalising a role for staff in keeping children safe, public-facing employees became the eyes and ears of the council. This bolstered the campaign, helping contribute to a more engaged workforce and, as a result, a more engaged authority.

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