



## **Why listening and making space for others matters**

*Claire Askham, head of mortgage sales, Buckinghamshire Building Society*

A few weeks ago, I pressed “submit” on the final assignment for my Master’s degree. It marked the end of three years of juggling work, study and family life. It gave me my first proper moment to pause and take it all in.

Like many people in our industry, I didn’t take the traditional academic route. I went straight into work after school, picking up my mortgage qualifications later on. Going to university later in life felt like a huge leap. After two days, I nearly gave up. It was completely outside my comfort zone, and I wasn’t sure I belonged there.

But I didn’t quit, I stuck with it and I’m glad I did. Not just because of the degree itself, but because of what the experience taught me. Growth doesn’t come from having all the answers. It comes from showing up, being open, and doing the work even when it’s difficult. That’s a lesson I carry with me every day as a leader.

### **People before process**

At Buckinghamshire Building Society, I lead our Key Account Managers, Decision in Principle, Product Development and Direct Advice teams. It’s a role I love because it’s practical and people-focused. It also gives me a clear view of what brokers and customers are dealing with every day.

For me, leadership is about making sure those around you feel heard, supported and encouraged. That applies to brokers as much as colleagues. I still regularly take calls from brokers working on live cases. Sometimes it’s someone new to the industry, just wanting to sense-check a situation. Sometimes it’s a more complex scenario that needs a bit more thought. Either way, I genuinely enjoy being able to help. It keeps me close to what matters and helps me shape our service in ways that make a difference.

We’ve made several practical changes to our mortgage operations over the past few years. From reducing admin through better systems to improving turnaround times and

streamlining our Broker Online platform. These aren't the kind of things that make headlines, but they make life easier for brokers and that's what I care about.

### **Making space for others**

One thing I care deeply about is mentoring, particularly helping more women build confidence in this industry. I'm proud to be part of the Working in Mortgages programme, where I've been able to support people at the start of their careers.

Early on in my own career, I didn't always have someone to turn to for guidance or encouragement. I set out to change that by being the support I once needed. Whether that's helping a colleague push for a promotion or just being a sounding board, these quiet moments often have the most impact. They're not always seen, but they matter.

I've also been involved in broader conversations around how we make financial services more inclusive. That includes flexible working, better support for parents, and helping to raise awareness around dementia and how it affects our customers. Again, these aren't always headline grabbing topics, but they're important and they shape how we all experience the industry.

### **Visibility isn't everything, but honesty matters**

Over the last year or two, I've spoken on podcasts and taken part in Q&As on topics ranging from first-time buyer challenges to market trends. When I do, it's not about raising a profile. It's about keeping the door open for honest, two-way conversations with brokers as that's how we improve together.

I've encouraged brokers to look beyond their usual lender panels, to ask questions and to challenge us when things don't work well. Because I believe service isn't something you set and forget. It's something you listen to, tweak and constantly work at.

### **A different kind of leadership**

I don't believe leadership has to be loud. The most effective leaders I know are the ones who coach rather than command, who make things clearer, not more complicated and who do the quiet work that helps others move forward.

The most joy I get is from supporting others and seeing them progress on their career journey, whether that's within my team or more widely across the Society. Helping people build confidence and grow is one of the most rewarding parts of my job.

I didn't set out to become a leader in the mortgage industry. I just wanted to do a good job, support the people around me and keep learning. That's still my approach today and I'm proud to work somewhere that lets me do that.

So, as I wait for the results of my Master's, I've already had what feels like a graduation of sorts. A moment to step back and see that leadership isn't about job titles, speaking gigs or awards. It's about consistency, empathy and the kind of small, steady actions that help someone else take the next step.

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that leadership is rarely about being the loudest person in the room. More often, it's about listening and quietly helping others find their voice.

## **ENDS**

A version of this article was featured in Financial Reporter.

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