



The journey from the Royal Oman Police to the Federation of Small Business may seem an unusual one to take. But for Julie Lilley, chief operating officer for the FSB, it was a case of coming home — in more ways than one.

She swapped her role running a department in the special branch of the Gulf country's law enforcement agency, dealing with army intelligence, to oversee the Blackpool-based small business network of 200,000 members. And she couldn't be happier.

## Making the voice of small business heard

Not only is the FSB's national headquarters in Julie Lilley's home town, small business is in her blood and she relishes both its role and her job as chief operating officer.

She is a passionate advocate for the self-employed, revealing: "My parents had a hotel in Blackpool; I grew up in a small business. When I left school in Poulton I also had my own business — a café in Cleveleys that is still there today.

"I only gave that up to go abroad. Being self-employed was a very attractive idea for me. The second best thing is supporting other small businesses to be successful.

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And that's where the FSB comes in. Led by its members and funded solely by subscription, it began life in 1974 down the coast in Lytham St Annes, the vision of a local travelling salesman.

Today it describes itself as the UK's leading business organisation, with around 200,000 members. Lancashire and Cumbria, Julie says, remains a hotbed with 7,500 small business signed up.

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Members range from sole traders to firms employing 250 or so people. More than 80 per cent have a workforce below 10.

The Blackpool head office, sitting at Squires Gate on the edge of the town's airport, has just expanded to create a new commercial and customer service department.

Additional office premises across the car park now house the growing staff, following the decision to take the department's work 'in house'.

Julie reels off some strong figures that would be the envy of many a company: the FSB has 200 staff across the country and this year the not-for-profit organisation's turnover was an impressive £26m.

The 55-year-old worked in the Middle East for 14 years, travelling around the Gulf region, before her return to the UK.

She applied for a job with the FSB after her husband Martin, former owner of the TVR car company in the town, spotted an advert in the paper. She says: "He said, 'why don't you apply because this is an organisation that supports British business'. He is a big supporter of buying British and had always been self-employed.

"I had a strong administration background. I got the job and worked my way through the business, managing most departments. I'm a good all-rounder."

An MBA at Lancaster University followed and when her predecessor retired some five years ago she moved into the hot seat.

The federation prides itself on being the voice of small business and Julie believes it is a voice that is heard — and more importantly listened to — in the corridors of power.

She says: "To be fair the government does listen to us,

we've had some good battles with them. They consider us to be a credible organisation.

"We get the message straight from the grass roots to the very top in a quick and effective way.

"And we are proud of having an independent and strong voice. One of our core objectives is to lobby government on the right to be self-employed and to promote and protect small businesses, from Westminster right through to Brussels.

"Our research operation is second to none and our size and the fact that most other organisations aren't member led also give us an important structure.

"That grass roots information from active members, the people who are actually out there, running businesses is key to us.

"For us small businesses will never have enough of a voice. That's what we aim to do, to put them at the heart of things and to get the government to listen.

"It is tough being in business yourself, you have to do everything. But people just love it."

They also face many challenges, Julie says, as she explains: "We lobby those in power on issues such as business rates reform, late payments and access to finance, all great challenges to our members.

"Then there's employment legislation. It can seem very unfair for a small business to have to cope with some of the stuff that comes out.

"In January we held our first policy conference, and it was attended by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the leader of the opposition. All were quizzed by delegates on key issues affecting small business in this country."

The federation also provides help and assistance to companies that

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haven't got the access to large HR and legal departments.

Julie says: "People running small businesses have to carry out a whole range of functions from payroll to marketing, but in many cases there's only one of them.

"They can just pick up the phone to us and get legal advice, for example, or help on how to deal with staffing issues."

She adds: "Small business is so very important to our economy and that is why it is vital we continue to support and encourage people into small businesses and help them to grow and become bigger. They are the job creators.

"It is important that people know what is important for small business and also that we are here fighting their corner.

"Blackpool — this is the heartbeat of it. This is where we were founded. It's our home.

"It's also important that we encourage small business as an option for school leavers. That's what I did when I left the classroom. If you have the innovation and the ideas... then why not?"