

Welcome back to a new series of On the Air. This series, Anisha Patel and her co-host, Sara-Anne Mills-Bricknell, will be sitting down with Stonewater colleagues, industry leaders, and customers to discuss inclusivity and what it means for the social housing sector. From exploring affordable options to supporting people with getting their foot on the property ladder, and specialist services to support those whose needs are not met by the mainstream market, this series will explore how, across the sector, we can ensure everyone has the opportunity to have a place that they can call home.

Anisha: Hi, everyone, I'm Anisha and welcome back to Stonewater's podcast channel. Yesterday marks a year since we went into the first national lockdown to help prevent the spread of coronavirus. A lot has changed over the last 12 months, and whilst we've all played our part in protecting and supporting one another, the response from the housing sector has just been remarkable. Don't you agree, Sara?

Sara: Definitely. Like most sectors, social housing providers have been propelled to invest in new technologies and rapidly change their way of working. They had to play their part in protecting colleagues and tenants from the virus whilst continuing to provide the services they know so many of their customers rely on, which is what will be shining a light on today.

Anisha: So, for today's episode, we're joined by Dave Lockerman, customer experience director at Stonewater, Debbie Chun, assistant director of IT at Stonewater, and also Steph Hurdman, head of mobilisation at Wates.

Sara: Thank you for joining us today. But first, we're going to hear from Stonewater resident, Natasha, to get her thoughts on the organisation's approach and the changes made throughout the pandemic. So, to begin, Natasha, as your landlord, what do you think of Stonewater and has your opinion changed throughout the pandemic?

Natasha: Well, I think they're alright. They offer so much more than other social landlords, and I think it's great they give incentives to tenants where others don't – the fact that they are still continuously working throughout the pandemic while others are not. To be fair, they're not using the pandemic as an excuse not to look after their tenants – doing repairs or anything else. So obviously with Stonewater, they're actually looking after their tenants.

During this pandemic, it's very difficult for face-to-face communication – it's just easy to either be on the phone, email or on Facebook. If you have a housing officer and you've got their number, you could WhatsApp them or text them and you could just call them. I use Facebook and there's a gentleman that always deals with social media, and he's fantastic and he always gets back to you. Very reasonable. You don't have to wait long like you do on the phones.

Sara: And have you had any problems or has that changed throughout the pandemic?

Natasha: When it comes to complaints, they deal with it swiftly and professionally. I've made a few complaints regarding contractors that they work with and they actually sorted it out, resolved the issue. So even if there's someone that is one of their colleagues, a few of their colleagues, and you make a complaint, they do actually tend to deal with it swiftly, and they do take it seriously.

Sara: Okay, that's very good to hear. As we mentioned in our introductions, we have actually got someone from Wates with us today who was a contractor that Stonewater mobilised during the pandemic to take care of repairs in certain areas. So, we'll get to find out a little bit more about the realities of getting that in place shortly.

[Musical interlude]

To begin, Dave, would you mind sharing what the biggest change has been for you and your team?

Dave: I can't believe it's a year on, really, and it's easy to forget just how much things have changed and what's been achieved, kind of, over that time. I think the biggest change for us is that we moved to home-working pretty much...well, it felt like overnight. And I honestly don't believe our customers would have seen any deterioration in services. I mean, even if you look at our retirement living service where we had scheme-based support right up until, kind of, Covid hit, you know, we moved to working from home and our colleagues started providing that support from home. But actually it's resulted in more contact to our customers in retirement living, and more engagement.

So, I think for the majority of our colleagues, that kind of move to home-working has worked brilliantly, really quickly. And I think it has meant more time at home with families, you know, it's meant more flexibility within the working day, you know, just being able to pop out to the gym. I know I've taken a couple of calls when I've been out running. So, it's been a kind of whole new way of working.

And I think it's important to recognise that it's not perfect for everyone, and for a few, we've had to work and try and make things as comfortable as possible. And I think, you know, kids have obviously made it more challenging recently with schools being shut. I really love, actually, the way that we've kind of got used to interruptions. It's quite nice to see other people's kids, kind of, make appearances in various Zoom meetings.

So, I think for me, that whole kind of shift away from being in an office or, in my life, parachuting into various offices, I can't really ever see why we would go back from that. And I think you see from time to time arguments, 'oh what about the, kind of, water cooler side' I think it's called where, you know...are we missing those kinds of conversations and bouncing off each other?

But I think it's just about us having to be more creative and creating those kinds of opportunities for an informal, kind of, unstructured time together. So, I've seen our teams do that through quizzes, lunches, coffee times, just finding different ways of just getting that opportunity to be with one another and share ideas. And I think, you know, personally, I'm really sick of being in my spare room as many hours as I am, but completely understand that kind of we don't work to live anymore, we kind of live at work. But for me, I'm no longer losing time commuting during the day. I spend ages in my car and having to stay away, you know, travelling around the country, having to stay away from family. So, yet while there's challenges, I just can't see why we would ever go back to, kind of, the inefficiencies, if you like, of the way we were working before.

Sara: I think prior to the pandemic, there was a big misconception generally about working from home. I feel like a lot of people thought that really limits what you're able to achieve from working from home. And I think that there was this belief that people kind of slack. But obviously everybody has been pushed to actually demonstrate that that is not the case, and you can do an excellent job from home. And I also feel like, for

Stonewater, you're an organisation that really champions everyone being and bringing their whole self to work. And now with work being at home, you're just ramping up that whole individualism and seeing people for themselves in their own space and allowing those kind of personality traits to shine through, which I think is just an added benefit.

Anisha: Yeah, I think it's so nice as well, because it's so weird that we're not together, you know, we haven't seen each other in over a year, but I've never felt closer to some of my colleagues. It's like in the moment you're on a video call, people are inviting you into their home. And to me, that's a really big deal. I feel there is something that is so personal about that, as opposed to just booking a meeting room and having, you know, a formal coffee that way. I think it just, sort of, shifts it all a bit, which is quite nice. Steph, it would be nice to hear at Wates what your experience was at the beginning of the pandemic as well, what changes were made to your teams?

Steph: Very similar to what Dave was saying: really kind of overnight we went to working from home. As the construction industry carried on working, we obviously had construction sites where we were on-site still functioning, but we had clear Covid risk assessments in place, signed off by our safety team to make sure that we were adhering to those guidelines and working safely. But, like Dave, the majority of the repairs and maintenance element of ways we're working from home, we've got the infrastructure in place to support that, and really robust disaster recovery plans in place that actually made that transition quite smooth for us because we had the structure there to support it. So, although it's been a big shock to the system, I also echo everything that Dave has said. It's actually been quite nice, in a way.

Anisha: Yeah, I definitely agree with that. And, Debbie, you joined Stonewater last summer, didn't you – during the pandemic in, arguably, a really critical role considering the importance of all things IT. What was it like to join remotely and that process having happened virtually?

Debbie: If I'm honest, it was a little bit scary. I think having just left my organisation where I'd been for eight years and joining somewhere new as a virtual new starter, it was a little bit odd. But thankfully it had a happy ending because everybody at Stonewater has been so lovely and welcoming and made the transition really easy.

And I suppose, in terms of the crucial role, we've all had to get used to doing things differently. I think we all thought we knew what it was like working from home. But, in reality, our old working from home was the odd day a week where we went and hid at home. We didn't share our homes or our pets or our children because we literally just wanted to get our head down and clear our email inboxes and clear the backlog. Whereas now actually we're all really productive at home, and I think it's quite a different experience.

And, in regards to my role, I have an amazing team who were able to roll out technology to everybody within 48 hours. I think it was a great achievement. And we are fully operational from home and it's all great.

Sara: Well, I'm glad to know you've settled in nicely and everyone has been welcoming – that would have been an awkward question!

[Laughter]

So, across the media and just on social channels, generally, every organisation has really been reflecting on their ability to have mobilised their teams. I think everyone's been really impressed with how efficiently and how, kind of, seamless it's been, in some ways. So, obviously for Stonewater, an additional challenge was the fact that they decided to mobilise a completely new contractor, which was Wates, during the middle of the pandemic. Steph, could you just talk to us a little bit about the reality of carrying out socially distance repairs? I know that's something that you guys have been able to achieve, but can you just give us a bit of insight into making that possible.

Steph: From Wates' perspective, we mobilised a number of contracts at the start of last year when the pandemic actually hit. So, what we had was a tried-and-tested method and we built on the learning of how we train and how we on-board effectively during a mobilisation when there is a pandemic. And we took all that learning and built on that and worked collaboratively with Stonewater to get such a successful mobilisation. I think what was really, really good with Stonewater is that, although everyone was working from home, we still held a virtual workshop between ourselves and Stonewater at the start of that mobilisation process. It was so effective, and you felt like you were meeting face to face and building that relationship. I think that echoes everything that Dave and

Debbie have been saying, around how open and welcoming Stonewater are as a client as well as an external contractor working with you. Those virtual workshops made a big difference and help us build that relationship to obviously get the mobilisation across the line.

I think with regards to the point on the reality of coming out socially distanced repairs, we've had to change the way that we work. There's a lot of nervousness around working in occupied properties at the moment, which we completely understand. And one thing that Wates have done is we've fast tracked a lot of innovations that we were currently working on anyway to support changes in the way that we deliver a service. So, one particular thing that comes to mind is when we send our 24-hour reminder text to customers, we've enabled a software that attaches a video to that text message. And that video will talk through or explain to the customer what to expect when we attend the site, the PPE that we'll be wearing in addition to, obviously, the face masks and gloves and everything; what to do when we're working in the property, so, for the residents, stay in a separate part of the house; how communication will work and everything else, just to try and put people's minds at ease really, so that when we are attending the site, they've got that reassurance that everything's going to be done safely and effectively, really.

Sara: It's interesting that you, then, talked about how this time has given Wates the opportunity to, kind of, fast-track some of the innovations, because I feel like that's something that Stonewater has also really done. Dave, can you talk a little bit about that?

Dave: Yeah, definitely. I completely agree in terms of fast-tracking innovation, I think we were on a – I hate using the word journey – but we were on a journey, if you like, towards digital prior to the pandemic, but, actually, the pandemic has kicked everything along. I think if we looked at something like lettings, so, at the outset of the pandemic, we were already in conversations around how we could look at paperless sign-ups, but actually within a couple of weeks we had paperless sign-ups in terms of moving customers into their home without needing to print off reams and reams of paper, and really looking to make the process as safe for colleagues and customers as possible. I think we saw, actually, other kind of housing providers through the pandemic actually shut down and not be able to let their homes. We continued through having these kinds

of safe processes and really working digitally and let over, you know, during the course of the pandemic now we've let over 1500 homes to those families that need them. And we're continuing to build on that, so we're now moving to completely virtual sign-ups so we won't actually have to attend site at all; working with our customers through technology like WhatsApp to actually show the customer the property and get the tenancy signed.

We've also really looked at kind of how we can improve some of those other kind of internal processes. So, if I look at our arrears collection, actually, over the last six months we've really shifted internal processes, looking at the kind of income management system we use to make sure it's as effective as possible for our colleagues, and moving forward with call masking.

Call masking enables our colleagues to be able to take payments from home. That's something that we were talking about quite a long time ago but, actually, is now in place, and we've collected over about £150,000 in income from bringing that in. And, I guess, it's not just, actually, digital where we've innovated as a result of the pandemic. If we look at income again, obviously, the pandemic raises a massive challenge in terms of rent recovery. We recognised from the beginning, really, that we were going to have customers struggling, possibly, to pay their rent for the first time. And what we wanted to do was come up with ways to really ensure that we were supporting our customers and making sure that our customers wouldn't lose their homes as a result of the pandemic. So, we introduced something called flexible and deferred payment arrangements where we can work with customers to either defer payment or agree an amount the customer can afford to a point in time where things are better. And I think, actually, that's something that we haven't necessarily seen other providers do but I think was a really innovative way to try and help our customers through what is a really difficult time.

And also, looking at our support service, actually, we recognise that during lockdown – and you see it in the media – that, actually, domestic abuse is prevalent. Obviously, it's been a real issue through lockdown and rates have massively increased. So, the support service being able to, kind of, extend the service and offer more bed spaces for people that are escaping domestic abuse, again, I think is something that not necessarily is seen throughout the sector but is us innovating on the back of the pandemic.

Anisha: It's so interesting, isn't it, because having a crisis forces us to adapt and it forces us to think creatively, and I feel like that's exactly what we've done and also, by the sounds of it, what Wates have done. And I think that... I keep hearing that people say, 'oh, we've moved, sort of, 10 years ahead in the space of a year'. So, we've, sort of, just really advanced everything we were planning to work on long-term and we've had to do it in a really short space of time.

Debbie, from an IT perspective, where do you see us in the future? What kind of things do you think we'll have to take on or continue to adapt further? Where would you like us to be?

Debbie: I think that we often underestimate people, and I think the pandemic has proven that in terms of how accessible technology currently is and how willing people are to give it a go. And I really see things like assistive technology becoming more critical in the way we deliver our services.

So, you know, I think that people generally have smart devices in their home, so, whether that's an Alexa, whether it's Siri on their phone. And what's to say we can't start ordering services for our homes from those devices and utilising that technology? What we often do in the sector is we overcomplicate things and we will tend to develop bespoke applications to do things, whereas actually there's existing technology that people already readily engage with, such as WhatsApp and Alexa, as I've just mentioned. They're used to that, that's just their everyday life. And the more that we can embrace and harness that, then the better it will be.

Sara: And of course, to add to that, Stonewater also provides a lot of workshops for those that don't know or have not used technology before. I know I've seen a couple of workshops across a lot of the retirement living schemes, where they've been shown how to use iPads and how to pay their rent and things like that. So, obviously, it's good to be able to offer those technologies, but then also the provide additional support to make sure that everyone is able to maximise them.

So, Steph, earlier you talked about how Wates has really changed a lot of how it's providing its services and making sure that you give as much information as possible to

make it as easy for people to understand. Dave, can you just give us a little bit of background into some of the changes that Stonewater has made and any of the innovation that's gone into that?

Dave: Yeah, of course. So, earlier I was talking around our digital offer, but I think where we've really kind of moved is we have really invested in digital and MyHome. And that isn't just because it's more efficient for us, it actually is easier for our customers. Our customer satisfaction data really shows that customers find us really easy to deal with online. So, let's build on that, and we really have. So, we've improved functionality on payments, repairs and managing tenancy within MyHome, and really trying to get that to be the go-to place, really, for customers to be able to manage their home. But recognising that's not going to suit everyone; what we've also done is put a lot of focus into, kind of, 'right first time'. So, where a customer contacts us, actually, where the service centre can't necessarily give them the answer there and then, to have colleagues on hand who can assist with that to make sure that we can actually resolve that query in that first contact because, actually, what our customers have said is sometimes they feel like they're passed around too much within the organisation. And sometimes when that happens, we're not necessarily brilliant at getting back. So, we've really tried to improve that in terms of, actually, when contact comes in first time that we try and resolve it.

We do recognise, though, that there's going to be situations where we can't always resolve in that first contact. And previously, where it would have been passed off to an area housing officer or tenant services officer, who would have a lot of various queries and a huge workload to try and resolve, what we've moved towards is a national model where, actually, it's built on specialisms. So, if we can't resolve it right first time, we have specialist colleagues who are on hand who can help to resolve that customer query.

Anisha: So, across the sector, it feels like we've all, sort of, been pulling together to provide advice and share best practice, while we're all trying to navigate through the craziness of 2020. What words of advice would you guys give to other people working in the sector right now?

Steph: I think for me it's true collaboration, not only with clients and customers, but across the sector itself; not being too proud to share those best practices, but to also

support each other – particularly, not only just during a pandemic, but for the future as, you know, the pandemic starts to loosen its grip slightly. I think: don't be too proud to share best practice and learn from mistakes or lessons from others as well – across the whole sector. I think: stick together, learn together, and we can all make a difference.

Debbie: I think it would be: don't be afraid to try new things. Failure isn't failure; you know, you'll never learn something new, you'll never try different things if you're afraid to fail. And, I suppose, the only other advice I would give is just be kind and a bit more patient whilst we all get used to these new ways of working.

Dave: Yeah, so I think similar, really. I think the one thing for me is, you know, let's not forget that we're in really difficult times; it's alright to feel a little bit low sometimes. Let's not pretend that this isn't hard, that the pandemic isn't tough for us all. And I think there is a need for us to be quite human and open with our colleagues around that, and understanding that everyone is going through a lot at the moment. But I'll definitely pick up on that, kind of, asking for help. I think that the housing sector is a great place and it's quite a small sector as well, where everyone seems to know everyone. I think it's a great place to actually say, 'how have you approached it?', or 'we've done it this way' and actually sharing some of that really good practice – I think it's a great time for that. And also, actually, I'd agree with Debbie as well that failure... actually, we've tried stuff in the pandemic – some of it's been great, some of it's worked really well; some of it hasn't, and let's be honest about that.

Anisha: So, thank you everyone for joining us today. It has been quite a year, but it's been really great to hear exactly how organisations like ours and Wates have adapted and shown resilience where it's been possible.

Sara: Yes. Thank you so much, and thanks to everyone who has listened in. Our next episode will be the last episode of the series, and it's going to be focussing on a new and innovative home ownership scheme. So, if you've not subscribed already, make sure you do so you don't miss out.

We hope you enjoyed listening to the latest episode of On The Air. We'll be publishing a new episode every Wednesday, but to stay up to date, subscribe to our channel.

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