

Welcome back to another series of On the Air, a podcast brought to you by Stonewater. Every month, we'll be bringing you a brand new episode that will explore the role collaboration has in tackling the challenges and opportunities to ensure everyone has the opportunity to have a place they can call home. Host Anisha Patel will be joined by a guest co-host as well as special guests to explore the latest insights and stories from across the social housing sector.

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**Anisha:** Hello and welcome back, everyone. I feel so happy and pleased to be hosting a third series of On the Air, especially as today's discussion is taking us right back to a development that we first explored in series one, which feels like an absolute lifetime ago. Waterworks Lane, also known as Noden's Mews, was Stonewater's first community build project, aiming to help tackle veteran homelessness.

When we first launched On the Air, it was a development in progress, and so we sat down with some of Stonewater's development team and partners who had made the project possible to talk about how the project had come about and what, together, they were hoping to achieve. On this episode, we'll be catching up with one of the veterans and to see how they've been getting on since the completion of the project. And, of course, we couldn't talk about Waterworks Lane without inviting Matt back. So, Matt, would you like to introduce yourself?

**Matt:** Hiya, I'm Matt Crucefix, I'm the director of development for the South and West at Stonewater. Thank you for having me back; I'm really, really excited to be here. And it's good to be on the other side asking some questions rather than answering them!

**Anisha:** It's nice to have you on the other side, but I'm really happy to have you here. I just want to give our listeners, who might not know about the project, just a really brief overview. Matt, given your claim to fame of talking about the project on the BBC and Sky News, would you like to do the honours?

**Matt:** Okay, yeah, no problem. So, you know, it's a self-build scheme, ultimately, where we managed to find appropriate veterans to help to join the project – to learn construction skills and to be able to build their own home, ultimately. It came about through collaboration between ourselves, the self-build agency Alabare and Herefordshire council.

Herefordshire council and the self-build agency at the time approached us and some other housing associations to see if we potentially could take on a veterans' build project. So, we stepped forward and said that we'd explore it, and managed to find a piece of land that we owned with some homes on there that were not really fit for purpose and worked with all the parties to help to bring that scheme back into purpose, identify another piece of land to help bring it all together, and off we went and found the veterans and started working on the project.

**Anisha:** That's great. So, before we introduce today's guest here in our virtual studio, I just wanted to play a short clip from Fred, one of the veterans that worked on the project too.

*[Excerpt]*

**Fred:** I had a bike accident about 18 months ago and I shattered my wrist, and I got a metal plate on my wrist and some screws to hold it all together, and it took a very long time to heal. After that, I ended up where I wasn't working, I had no more savings left. So, it was either stay where I was and get in lots of debt or going to stay with my mum who was actually poorly because she had cancer anyway and look after her.

So I went to my mum's then last year, I was there for about seven months until she passed away. And at that point, I hadn't been there long enough for the council to actually let me stay, because it was a housing association anyway. And so I effectively ended up homeless and living in my van. And I think the idea of trying to actually build a community at the same time as you build the project is a wonderful idea. Actually, all of the people you're building with will be your neighbours, so you actually know everybody around you. The fact is that you're going to work with these people, you're going to get to know them, and then eventually when it's all built, you going to be working together. So, I think you can actually end... you should end up with some friends for life. You know, I think that's one of the best things about it.

*[End excerpt]*

**Anisha:** I think it's so easy to see how a veterans' build project can be such a fantastic opportunity for individuals like Fred that, you know, have faced such tough circumstances.

Our guest today is Dwaine, another veteran who worked on the project alongside Fred. Thank you so much for joining us today, Dwain. Do you think you could tell our listeners the situations that you were involved in before the project and also what you're up to now?

**Dwain:** Basically, before the build I was homeless. I broke up with my ex-partner and didn't really have anywhere else to go, nowhere else to be, to be honest. And I ended up homeless. I was sleeping in the woods and just sleeping wherever I could really to keep myself warm, you know, trying to find food and that every day.

I just randomly walked into town one day, just, you know what I mean, I liked walking into town hoping to find a bit of money or whatever, and I literally walked past the FirstLight Trust Cafe in Hereford, and there was a little black sign outside the window and it just said, 'we have veterans and blue light services', and I just had a bit of lightbulb moment. I thought, 'you're a veteran, Dwaine', so I walked in and then literally within an hour of being in there I got introduced to Gary from Alabare, I met Lynne from the FirstLight Trust, and between the pair of them they completely turned my whole life around. They put me on the scheme; obviously at the time when they first talked about it I was like 'ah', you know, sounds too good to be true. I didn't think it would actually come off. But, to be handed my keys and to be in there six months now – it's been amazing to be honest, I can't describe the feeling. Every time I walk from the door it's such a proud moment, do you know what I mean.

**Anisha:** It must be. I can't... I can't even imagine what that feeling must be like for you. I mean, if we go back to December, which feels like forever ago, what was it like moving into your own home, a home that you actually helped build from the ground up?

**Dwain:** Oh, it was amazing. When all the footings went down and we were putting all the plasterboard and everything in just before the plasterboard went it I spray-painted all the walls with my name – so it's definitely my house! That was a really, really proud moment. I can't... I honestly can't describe it. I mean, I've always got a home now. I mean, my boys know where I am and I have them every weekend now. It's amazing.

**Matt:** I mean, that sounds incredible, Dwain, and this makes us all so happy and proud, really, to be honest. And I can remember you doing the graffiti spray and I heard all about that, which is just great.

**Dwain:** Yeah.

**Matt:** What support did you get when you moved in? Because obviously it was just before Christmas, wasn't it.

**Dwain:** Yeah, it was literally just before Christmas. Yeah December 17 we moved in. So it was all hands on deck, really, just trying to make it a home and ready for Christmas for the boys.

**Matt:** And did you feel settled in in time? Did you manage to get the tree up, et cetera?

**Dwain:** Yeah, I managed to get it all done. The first two days I moved in, I didn't sleep, I just sorted the house out completely.

**Anisha:** We've all been there with the stress of things!

**Dwain:** It was pretty hard work.

**Anisha:** Yeah, it's definitely not easy. And, obviously your neighbours, you know, the other veterans that you've worked with.

**Dwain:** Yep.

**Anisha:** What's it like, sort of, living all together and now, you know, being neighbours in your own little community?

**Dwain:** It's pretty fun actually to be fair, you know what I mean, I walk down the road every day and I already knew half my neighbours, you know what I mean, which is...obviously makes life a lot easier anyway. It wasn't learning a whole new bunch of faces and what people are like, I mean, I already knew what they were like, so it's pretty good really. I walk down the road, I see Dennis every day and Fred, Kate.

**Matt:** It sounds great. You've got a real, kind of, community there haven't you between the group of you.

**Dwain:** Oh, yeah, definitely. Definitely.

**Matt:** Do you think you learned anything about yourself during the project, Dwain?

**Dwain:** I know I'm a lot stronger inside than what I thought I was. To come from where I was to where I am now. You know what I mean, I've come a long, long way. I mean, last year through the help of Alabare I became a qualified site supervisor, got

my telehandler licence, I've got both of my boys back in my life, and I lived a total of £200 a month for a year last year. So I definitely know I'm a lot stronger inside than what I thought I was.

**Matt:** Wow.

**Anisha:** I just think your story is absolutely incredible.

**Matt:** It's amazing. Could you tell us a little bit about working for Harper's now, because obviously you're working for the contractor, you qualified. Is that... does that feel strange being on the other side of it now, but not building your own home?

**Dwain:** Obviously, how I built my house, you know, how we done the work here and that, everything was done perfectly, I mean. So I've just carried that through onto what I'm doing with Harper's now. And already they've seen that I'm more than capable of doing what I'm doing and trust me with a lot more and let me do a lot more jobs on my own and that kind of thing. I've already been asking as well, because I've become a qualified site supervisor, at some point if I can start shadowing site supervisors on site and start learning his job. I mean, so just trying to progress and get better and better, basically.

**Matt:** I reckon the ultimate goal here has to be that we try and find another project with Harper's that's a veterans' project. And then, Dwain, you can help bring some of the veterans through in the future. That would be ideal, wouldn't it?

**Dwain:** I'd love to. The way it's helped me in the past. You know what I mean, I'd love to be able to do that for somebody in the future, you know what I mean.

**Anisha:** So, I guess my final question is...and I think you've already answered it, but whether you think more schemes like this one should be rolled out across the country.

**Dwain:** Oh, 100 per cent. There's a lot of blokes out there that need the help who are too proud to say that they need it. And I just took that gamble one day and I thought 'I know I need help'. And asking for that help, look where it's put me now: I'm in a much better place than I ever thought I would ever, ever be.

**Anisha:** I think we're all in agreement with that. It's been a really good project, and it's absolutely incredible to hear how far you've come, and to hear you say you're proud to walk through your door every day is just absolutely, absolutely amazing. It really makes you feel proud.

**Dwain:** It makes you feel like a little boy inside, a little giddy when I walk through the door, it's like 'hey, it's mine!'.

**Matt:** That's great. It's so good. And, you know, having your own home like that and being able to feel proud is exactly what we're all here for. And it's just amazing to hear.

**Anisha:** So, Matt, I do have a question for you actually as well. What advice would you give to other housing associations or partners if they wanted to set up a community self-build scheme like this one?

**Matt:** I think the thing for me really is, and it does sound a bit of a cliché, is just to have a real holistic view about what you are seeking to achieve from the project. And you can't just look at things via a balance sheet because there's a lot more to it in this sort of project. It takes time, it takes a lot of time; there's a lot of bumps in the road. I think we were aware that there would be those bumps at the start.

I think, ultimately, the things that you think might be risks, and concerns that you've got when you write in board papers about this type of thing, ultimately become things that aren't the risks. And there's other bumps along the way. And I think it's really about making sure that all your partners are engaged, making sure you've got the right people there and that you all stay strong together. And when those bumps come, that you can just ride those out because the rewards at the end are there for everybody, most importantly for our customers, for people like Dwain to be able to move into their homes and gain these valuable skills.

And, actually, the bits around the edges that the partners work in together is all, ultimately, our jobs. But it's the most rewarding part of our job because hearing these stories is incredible. And I just think: get over any preconceptions you may have. Just look at the view, look at what the benefits are and then jump in and get on with it, really.

**Anisha:** So, I guess following that, the question that's on my mind is, do you have anything else in the pipeline for Stonewater and future community self-build veterans' schemes?

**Matt:** We do. We're really keen to do more. We've got a couple of projects in our pipeline. We've got one that has got executive approval already. So, we think that'll be moving forward at a pace very soon. And we've got another one that's a bit further away, but we hope will happen shortly as well.

And we've actually had lots of approaches since we've been talking more about the projects at Waterworks Lane. We've had lots of approaches from other local authorities and councils interested in the projects, so we hope that will take off, and those partners will want to work with us some more as well.

**Anisha:** That's so great to hear, especially that we've got, you know, things in the pipeline that hopefully we could see come to fruition quite soon. I think, for me and for everybody listening, I think that's really exciting. And I just want to say again, thank you, Dwain, for your time today. It's been brilliant to hear your story and, Matt, thank you for being a wonderful guest co-host. And I hope to everyone listening that you've enjoyed it. I know I have.

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