

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 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.

Anisha: Hi, everyone, and welcome to another episode of On the Air. I'm Anisha, and today I'm joined by my guest co-host David Button, from Cavendish Advocacy, to talk about our new research project, Modern Poverities, which is aiming to explore the potential challenges and barriers faced by households on a low income from the growing shift towards working from home.

David: Thanks, Anisha, and hi everyone. It's great to be here to talk about this report by Demos, which is being funded by Stonewater. It could not be a more timely piece of work, and I think it'll have a real impact on how we can support those on a lower income in the 'new normal'.

Anisha: Thanks, David. Of course, earlier this year we were one of the first housing providers to announce that we were going to remain predominantly home-working, following Covid restrictions being lifted. But this was actually something that we've been exploring prior to the pandemic as part of our future operating model.

David: Yeah, which I think is really the key element – that you were already shifting towards this. So, rather than moving backwards in a post-pandemic world, it's giving you the opportunity to continue bouncing forward with a lot of work gone into how best to support colleagues long term. But, as this project will explore, that won't be something that everyone has access to. So, with that said, to talk more about the project, we're joined by Stonewater's Customer Experience Director. Dave Lockerman. and Rose Lasko-Skinner, Senior Researcher and Project Manager at Demos. Welcome, Dave and Rose.

Dave: Hiya.

Rose: Hi.

Anisha: Hi both. We'll talk a bit in a moment about why Stonewater decided to support the project, but I wanted to start by asking, Rose, how the research is going and why Demos were keen to work on this project with Stonewater.

Rose: Thank you, Anisha. We're really excited about this project. Demos has a long history of research and policy development in the field of flexible working. Since 1993, we've advocated for the right to share parental leave and the right to work flexibly. And during the pandemic, we've seen a massive shift in the way that people work, with roughly a third of people working from home. But, a lot of the focus over the past year has been on higher earners, often forgetting that lower income groups also work remotely. And we feel that, without understanding their experiences properly and what they want from home working, the conversation can't really move on and think about how new forms of flexible working can really be capitalised on – in terms of inclusion and spreading good working opportunities for all.

Anisha: So, Rose, can I ask, how is this project going at the moment?

Rose: Yeah, the project is going really well. We're in phase one of the research, conducting focus groups with low-paid remote workers to better understand their experiences of remote working, and any barriers that they're experiencing to accessing home working too. We're putting the poll out into the field in early September, and this will help us understand how, at a national level, remote workers across different income groups are experiencing remote working during the pandemic. And now, as we transition into the, kind of unknown, really. And then we'll be hoping to launch in October.

David: Great. So we were expecting that the report will include a number of important recommendations – for the Government, for industry more widely, and the housing sector – on how to support those on low incomes. Rose, I know it's early days and we don't want to give too much away, but are the recommendations becoming clear to you yet?

Rose: As it still is early days, there's not a huge amount to give away. The key things, though, that we'll be looking at is what the Government, what employers, and what the housing sector in general can do to adapt to the new forms of remote working that we're seeing now. What's clear is that, at the end of the day, what we want to see is a more strategic vision for the future of remote working. If there are challenges, for example, like a lack of broadband or lack of digital skills, how can these be overcome to make sure that we can really see and maximise the opportunities of remote working?

And at the flip side, if there are any opportunities, like a significant saving for working families from childcare, how can we make sure that those opportunities are available to everyone in the most beneficial way?

Anisha: Thanks Rose. I find that really interesting, and I think seeing those recommendations about the challenges, and having more of a strategic oversight of how we can better support people on low incomes working from home will be really beneficial for not just our sector, but hopefully wider than that. So, Dave, you're Stonewater's lead on the project and working really closely with Rose and the Demos team. Could you talk to us about why this issue is so important to Stonewater and why we're funding the research project?

Dave: Yeah, of course. So, we know that inequality in the UK has been really exasperated by the pandemic and I think Demos's existing research has been really interesting. We know that home working for those on higher incomes has been linked to improved eating habits and stress levels, and correlated with a range of mental, social, physical health benefits. But for those on low incomes, under £20,000, which a large number of our customers will fall into, the experience of the pandemic has really had a negative impact on well-being.

So, for those on higher incomes, home working has been a really good thing, with individuals over £50,000 flourishing. But there's a real danger, with new ways of working, of deepening inequality. And I think the debate, as Rose said earlier, nationally, has been focused really on impacts such as things like city centres, and, you know, you see more around declines in prepped sandwiches rather than really the impact and opportunities and challenges for individuals. And for us, work has been so tightly knit, I think until now really around kind of where you live. But with

remote working, it really breaks that. So, it's really important for us that we understand about lower earners, our customers – are they being left behind?

We're really excited to be working with Demos and this research to really get underneath the bonnet, understand the barriers to accessing this type of work, which we know will bring about better outcomes. I think, without understanding that, there's a real possibility of missing an opportunity to help level up society and, if we miss it, we could actually further, kind of, drive inequality.

David: So earlier on, Rose mentioned that, as part of the research, we've been holding a number of focus groups with low paid workers, including a number of Stonewater's own customers. I wondered if you could both tell us if there's anything that particularly jumps out at you from those sessions, starting with Rose.

Rose: Yeah, the focus groups have been really, really interesting and a fascinating insight into the real nuances of people's experiences of remote working. We found a real mixed bag, with some people who absolutely love it and really want to work remotely forever, and others who really don't. And those, sort of, two feelings are often underpinned by those who had busy working lives and also had children, and lots of things that they were juggling, and are now having the opportunity to save a huge amount of childcare costs. For example, one participant said that she was saving £57 a day from childcare, which is a significant saving.

But, at the other end of the spectrum, other people are feeling really lonely and really isolated after a year of being locked down in their house and no longer seeing their colleagues. And I think, for these groups of people, a lot of them maybe didn't get a huge amount of work satisfaction from their day job, but really did from their colleagues and the community and the atmosphere that they had from working from home. And so, these are the things that people are going to miss.

And so, I guess the question is how you can marry those two things together? How can you have the working family working from home full time, saving thousands on childcare, with the other people who really want to go back to the office and see their colleagues.

David: Thank you. And Dave?

Dave: Yes, so first off I've been really surprised, actually, by the amount of, kind of, take up, actually, we've had in the focus groups. We had a number of customers that really wanted to get involved and talk to us about this. I think, so far, we've only spoken to those customers who currently are remote working and really got to speak to them really around their experience. And the couple of bits that jumped out, to me, that I hadn't really thought about, if I'm honest.

Connectivity came up, but there was an increased cost element to this as well that I hadn't really thought about. So, our customers spoke to us about, actually, they've got broadband at the moment, for instance, but actually because their kids are doing their homework, gaming, et cetera – to work from home as well they've had to invest in, kind of, a higher broadband package. And this is one of the things that I found quite interesting was, as Rose said, we had customers talking to us about, you know, they've saved money in terms of childcare costs, but actually not always seeing that in their pocket. So, seeing a trade-off on, you know, your broadband expenditure or on utility costs.

So that, to me, was quite interesting. I don't think I'd completely recognised, kind of, those additional costs and actually outweighing some of the benefits or at least, kind of, wiping them away. One of the other things, the things that came out really clearly was around, kind of, space at home, working from kitchen tables or dining room tables, et cetera, which is all right – until you're trying to live your life at the same time, having your kids running around, et cetera. So, I think that was really clear to me around, kind of, space and, you know, what could be done to, kind of, help with that.

The other thing that came out, as Rose said, was around isolation. So whilst the number of our customers talked about the benefits, actually, of home working and how it suited them and suited, kind of, that work-life balance. That kind of isolation part did come out. And of course, where you live, I think, has a bearing on that. So customers have spoken around, you know, it's different if you've got a garden, it's different if you've got more space, et cetera. So, I think isolation is... it definitely came out, but really, kind of, linked to, kind of, where you live. So far, as I say we've only had one focus group with our own customers, but really interesting insights so far.

And the other thing actually, one of the things that I hadn't thought about again was some of our customers spoke to us about what they called 'house-barrassment'. So, you know, they'd be having a Zoom call, but actually really conscious of what their home looks like in the background, and spoke around whether or not if there could be anything, not only this kind of help to deal with, kind of, space and having room for your equipment at home, actually, what your home looks like. And that's, again, something that I hadn't really thought about.

Anisha: I can definitely relate to the 'house-barrassment'. There have been times where I'm like, 'I can't have my camera on because the room is a mess', and I need a good ten minutes to really quickly blitz through it all, so I definitely understand that.

We mentioned at the start of the podcast that Stonewater, we did recently announce that we've moved to working from home by default, which is part of our hybrid working model. Dave, I'm wondering if you could share with our listeners what Stonewater is doing to support colleagues that are working from home.

Dave: So yes, at Stonewater with our hybrid model, what we've been doing is looking to create collaborative spaces, really, across the country. So, while we've shrunk our, kind of, office footprint, what we have done is look to create collaborative space, recognising that there are definitely going to be times where colleagues will want to come together to share ideas, and where it can bring value. And not necessarily just colleagues within your own team, we recognise, actually, bringing colleagues together, kind of, locally can bring benefits in terms of sharing ideas and working across teams.

So, we've moved to create these collaborative spaces across the country, which is kind of enabling our colleagues, really, to deal with that kind of isolation point, really, in terms of, 'yep, we're working from home, we can absolutely embrace those kind of benefits in work-life balance', but actually recognising that there are going to be times where we will want to come together. Humans are naturally, kind of, social animals, but also, in terms of that idea fertilisation, it's going to be really important that we come together and we'll have the space to do that.

The other thing we recognised is, coming back to what our customers were saying, really, that, actually, to fit your equipment at home, you know, 'I've got an office chair and a desk' and creating the space to be able to work doesn't always come cost-free and isn't necessarily always easy. So, we've set up an interest-free loan of up to £10,000 to help colleagues create self... kind of, safe and healthy designated work space in their homes. And, as I say, we're aware that obviously not all of our customers are going to be offered the same, which brings us back to, kind of, the importance of this research.

David: Thank you, Dave, that's really interesting. Rose, I wondered if you could tell us what kind of impact you hope this report will have and, ultimately, what you think it might achieve?

Rose: Yes, we're hoping the project will do two key things. First, we're hoping to have a clearer understanding of the experiences of low-paid remote workers during the pandemic and the barriers that low-paid workers might experience to accessing good remote-working opportunities. And, as part of that, what this particular group of people want from remote working. Do they even want to work remotely? We want to have a better understanding. The second thing is, off the bat of that, is enabling a more nuanced discussion about the future of home-working and being able to create that vision and strategy; having a better sense of the full picture of what remote working has been for people and what it can be for people so that we can make sure that remote working is ultimately a positive force for everyone rather than just a few.

Anisha: Thanks so much for that, Rose. I think it's really helpful to understand what we're hoping to get out of that research, and it was really great to have you both on today, and thank you, David, as well for being a great guest co-host. Thank you, everybody, for joining us today, and thank you again to our listeners for having a listen on this episode. We look forward to hearing some more updates about the project – hopefully very soon.

Thank you all for joining us. The research report will be launched in October this year. Listen out for more updates and keep an eye on Stonewater's webpage for the project, which is linked to in the show notes.