

## **Stonewater On The Air Season 04 Episode 10 Transcript**

### **Intro**

Welcome back to another episode of *On the Air*, a podcast brought to you by Stonewater. Throughout season 4, we're bringing you 12 brand-new episodes that will explore four themes: the cost of living crisis, technology and housing, sustainability and professionalism within the housing sector.

### **Paula Palmer**

Hello and welcome back to Stonewater's *On The Air* podcast. Here we are again. Thanks for listening in. We really appreciate you taking the time out and hope that our conversations are sparking debate, action and interest.

We're nine episodes down in season 4, with three more to go and what a trio they are. In the next three episodes, we'll be exploring professionalism in housing. We start the series today talking about the importance of improving how we communicate and engage with customers. We take a long, hard look at how changes in regulations are going to affect housing providers, the increased scrutiny by customers, the media, and of course, the housing ombudsman.

Later in this series, we will also explore how housing providers like Stonewater are investing in their teams and in particular what we're doing to balance the call for professional qualifications while still valuing the importance of learning practical skills. Our final episode of the series, we'll dig deeper into why we consider the sector, and in particular Stonewater, a great place to work.

Let's make it start on today's episode by welcoming our guests. We've got Dave Lockerman, director of housing operations, Dani Bowater, customer engagement coordinator, both from Stonewater. We've got two special guests today. We've got Gareth Morgan, a Stonewater customer who is also chair of Stonewater's scrutiny panel. Last but not least, a warm welcome to Jenny Osborne, who is CEO of the tenant engagement experts at Tpas. Welcome, everybody. Let's have you all introduce yourselves to get started. Let's have you first, Dave.

### **Dave Lockerman**

Hi. As you say, I'm Dave Lockerman, I'm director of housing operations at Stonewater, so responsible for delivery and performance across our housing services.

### **Danielle Bowater**

Yeah. I'm Danielle Bowater, customer engagement coordinator here at Stonewater. My responsibility is ensuring that our customers are at the heart of everything we do here at Stonewater, involved in shaping our services.

### **Gareth Morgan**

Hi. I'm Gareth Morgan. I am chair of the scrutiny panel, which is one of the many engagement panels involving customers in Stonewater.

### **Paula Palmer**

Lovely. Last but not least, again, Jenny?

### **Jenny Osbourne**

Hi. I'm Jenny Osbourne, I'm the chief executive at Tpas. We're the tenant engagement experts working across the whole of England. We're a membership organisation working with tenants and landlords together around delivering great engagement.

## **Paula Palmer**

Lovely. Thanks, everyone, for joining us. It's going to be a cracking show. We should probably start talking about the upcoming changes in regulation and focus within customer consumer standards on brilliant customer engagement and communication.

There's been a real shift towards greater accountability and stronger regulation, which has meant that it's more important than ever that housing associations focus on delivering high-quality services that meet our customers' expectations. An important part of that is going to be our ability to communicate effectively with our customers and truly listen to them. Dave, will you start us off by giving us an overview of those changes?

## **Dave Lockerman**

Social housing used to be more regulated. We used to have standards that were set, and they were really explicit around what housing services should look like, and they were subject to inspection by the audit commission, and we used to get a grading. From about 2010, the government moved away from this. Our regulator changed, and we moved to a place where really the main focus was around governance and financial viability.

In the wake of the tragic events at Grenfell, there was a recognition that social tenants were not consistently being listened to and tenants needed a stronger voice and to be treated with respect, and also that we needed a fairer and safer system for all those living in social housing.

The Social Housing Regulation Act came into force last year and really gives customers a stronger voice in the sector and makes sure that our homes meet specific standards. Changes include, through the act, strengthening the regulator of social housing to oversee the sector and hold landlords to account, additional housing ombudsman powers when investigating tenant complaints. There are also requirements for housing associations like Stonewater to follow, which include new ways of reporting as well as collecting and reporting information around the new tenant satisfaction measures.

So really giving our customers a clear indication of how we're performing. New consumer standards which set out the level of service housing associations must provide for their customers. I'll talk about that a bit more in a sec.

New time limits for addressing hazards in homes, and as you mentioned, new qualification requirements for social housing managers. In terms of the consumer standards, we've had consumer standards since 2010, but they've been revised, and they've been strengthened requiring landlords to be open with customers and treat them with fairness and respect, so they can access services, raise complaints when necessary, influence decision-making and hold their landlords to account.

As well as ensuring landlords really understand the quality of their homes, it's about making sure that we also overlay that and understand our customer needs and make sure that we're flexing and adjusting to make sure that our service takes account of what our customers require. These revised standards come into force on the 1st of April.

Just to summarise, there's the safety and quality standard, the transparency, influence and accountability standard, the neighbourhood and community standard, and the tenancy standard. Alongside these becoming live from the 1st of April, the regulator will commence a programme of inspections to really make sure that landlords are complying with the new standards.

## **Paula Palmer**

Great, thanks, Dave. That's quite a lot to take in, and I'm sure we'll look forward to those inspections, won't we? Do you think, as we've prepared for the changes, do you think we've had to change a lot of what we're doing or do you think maybe we've just had to revise how we measure those different outcomes? Would you say it's had a big impact?

## **Dave Lockerman**

I think it's going to have a big impact on the sector because there's certainly the requirements are more explicit. I guess, from my perspective, we've always been listening to our customers, and we're going to hear from Gareth in a bit. We work really closely with our scrutiny panel. We look at our complaints, we look at other sources of feedback, and we've been alive to where we need to make improvements, where we need to get better.

There's a lot of stuff that's already in train that will drive up kind of performance, and we'll make sure even further that our customers are really at the heart of what we do. I don't think the actions that we're doing are because of the standards. I think there's a load of stuff that we've got in train that will make us better, and as an outcome of that, we'll demonstrate compliance with the standards.

## **Paula Palmer**

Brilliant. That's good. Dani, is there anything you'd like to add about what we want to see for our customers from the new regulations?

## **Danielle Bowater**

Yeah. For me, I think the new regulations provide a great consistent framework that I think will be really helpful for everybody in the sector, and of course, Stonewater. I mean, anything that comes from a place to support our customers in having their voices heard is a definite for me.

I think at Stonewater, and I guess across the whole sector, we can acknowledge there is some room for improvement. I think for me as well, especially in terms of accessibility for our customers, we needing to ensure that we're considering how we're tailoring our services to meet the needs of our customers. That goes for the work that we do in engagement as well.

Say, for some customers, they might really want to be proactively involved, like Gareth, who's our scrutiny panel chair, conducting in-depth service reviews across Stonewall and making recommendations all that's led into our governance structure. For some of the customers, they just simply want to be kept informed. Maybe they want to join one of our online communities, like our customer hub. I think for me that's the key. It's customers having a choice of how much they want to be involved.

I think from the range of opportunities that we have at Stonewater as well, for customers to get involved in shaping our services, sharing their experiences, that we essentially have a better relationship with our customers for that. Just to echo what Dave said as well, it's a relationship that's built on trust, built on fairness and respect.

I mean, for me personally, I've been at Stonewater nearly three years now, and for two and a half of those years, I've been leading our community champions programme. For me, we already have a better relationship with those 23 customers who are really passionate about making their areas a better place to live and work collaboratively with us to make that happen.

We do acknowledge there are some things that we need to improve as part of the programme, but we've really had some great feedback from our customers that them being involved in this programme has helped them to get out, meet new people, see their neighbours, give their other customers' reassurance that things are going to get better from them being involved and raising issues with us. Also, overall, just making a difference everywhere.

Just while I wrap up. That's from, I guess, what I hope for our customers and the customer's perspective. From the regulations, I really hope that colleagues see how important engagement is as well. It's not just all the light and fluffy stuff. It's really important that no matter what role you're in, that you acknowledge that we all work for a customer-focused organisation. Whether you're in customer services, whether you're a customer partner in neighbourhoods, a surveyor in homes, in development, finance, that everything you do, the work you do day to day, always comes back to our customers.

They're the ones that are best placed to be involved right at the beginning where they're going to be able to make such a big impact.

At the end of the day, they're the ones that are receiving a service from us, so they're going to be best placed to let us know what's going really well in that service, what we're doing great and to keep going, keep being great at that part, but also what we can really improve on.

### **Paula Palmer**

Yeah, ultimately, we don't have any jobs unless we have our customers, so we better keep them happy.

### **Danielle Bowater**

Involvement for the win.

### **Paula Palmer**

I'm not sure if it's an adage or a saying or anything, but it's about giving the customer what they want, not what we think we want. That's really important, isn't it? That's where your job and all this engagement activity comes in really handy. Gareth, what about you? From a customer's point of view, what would you like to see from the regulations?

### **Gareth Morgan**

Yeah, I mean, the new standards obviously bring in inspections. It's nice to know where Stonewater are with regard to other landlords. Perhaps, see where we're sitting. From us, it makes the data and the information more freely available, so perhaps we can look at areas that perhaps aren't doing as well as they should be doing.

There's some things like the transparency and accountability standard. That means that Stonewater has to look at the quality of people's homes and the needs of the individual within the homes. I think that offers us the opportunity to tailor make engagement opportunities for certain groups of customers. There may be customers who want to be involved, perhaps there's barriers towards what they can do. Stonewater can look at these people and work closely with them. I guess that's pretty much from a scrutiny point of view.

The safety and quality standard is obviously looking at setting out a broad setting of what the home should look like, the quality and the safety and the repairs. We'd always welcome that. The changes, the regulations, will ensure that things hopefully are done correctly first time with the involvement of more customers and the emphasis on more engagement will always be welcomed by us in the scrutiny panel and hopefully by Stonewater themselves, because together we make a stronger team.

### **Paula Palmer**

Yeah, I agree. I think you said something quite important at the beginning of your section about being able to benchmark where we're at in terms of other housing providers, so we can either know we're doing quite well or we can improve our services by following other people's best practise.

Jenny, I know Tpas have been calling for a system of regulation that's more aligned to consumer regulations that tenants would be more familiar with. From your unique position of representing both housing providers and tenant groups, do you think the new changes are a step in the right direction?

### **Jenny Osbourne**

I absolutely think the new changes are a huge step in the right direction. From my perspective, when I'm looking at April the 1st coming and all of these changes, it really is a culmination of what, when it

happened straight after Grenfell and the conversations that happened with tenants up and down the country, asking them what they wanted and what needed to change. I see that where we're at now is a culmination of all of that.

We've got a regulator now that's doing far more to protect customers. We've got a housing ombudsman that's doing far more to deal with complaints. We've got a building safety regulator that talk, that's talking about resident engagement in safety. We've got panels with government of tenants. There's a huge amount of progress that's gone on.

I can trace a lot of what we're going to see coming forward from the 1st of April back to those conversations with tenants all those years ago, where they were saying, what was driving them mad, what was frustrating them, what was concerning them was things like communication with their landlord, was respect from their landlord, was repairs, was, in a way, day-to-day housing management issues that somewhere we'd lost, and we'd lost sight of in all of that. Obviously, safety was a big one as well, given when we were having the conversation.

I've always talked about when people said to me, but why do we need to do engagement, Jenny, in organisations? Why do we need to do it? I've always talked about three reasons why you do engagement well in this sector, and it's always been around. There's a huge business case to do it.

If you ask the people, as you mentioned before, Paul, if you ask the people who are receiving the service what they want, you deliver better services and better value for money. Huge business case to do that. Well, there's a huge community and personal reason why we would do engagement while in our organisations, getting out into communities, talking to people, people gain new skills by being engaged, et cetera. There's a huge reason there to do it.

What's been missing out of the triangle has been regulation, effective regulation that will really drive some of the changes needed. That's now here, you've seen it's coming, and that's really effective, I think. That real focus on safety, repairs, communication, absolutely critical.

Also, in terms of culture, that's what residents were saying across the country. We need to focus on the culture of organisations. I think staffing organisations recognise that as well. Staff are welcoming these new regulations as well, and how that can drive change. Like anything, nothing's going to change overnight on the 1st of April. This all will take some time.

I think we've got to get to a point of real acceptance of the reality where the sector is, and it sounds like Stonewater have a real good sense of where they are in this journey, but it is a journey that hackneyed phrase. We've got to focus on partnership. Tenants and landlords doing this together and doing that continual learning together as we go through inspections and see what comes out of those.

I've got real hope for what's coming. I think there should be a real sense of optimism. I just hope everyone, we all come to the table and really say this is the way forward for the future and not deviate from that and let's see where the learning can take us.

## **Dave Lockerman**

Completely agree with Jenny. I think it's great for customers, it's great for the sector. I think what it does is drive consistency. As Jenny says, I think pre-Grenfell, I think even when we had the Tenant Services Authority going back quite a few years ago and there was a big conversation across the country, the thing that came up time and time again was the basics. Getting the basics right, getting the housing management right. I think this actually really drives that and drives that consistency for customers and gives customers the ability to hold landlords to account where they're not performing. It has to be welcomed by the sector.

I think the other important thing to say is that recognition that it's a journey. I think when you look at the standards, okay, we've self-assessed against the standards, and we're doing well. There's a lot of places where, yeah, we can absolutely evidence strong compliance. There's other areas where we need to do more.

Dani mentioned earlier they really get into grips with understanding what our customer needs are and really being able to systemically flex and shift our services to make sure that we're responding to customer needs. That's an area where we've got some great examples where we've done it, but it's an area we need to go further. It is a journey. No one's going to be there by the 1st of April. But yeah, it's definitely a positive and agree with all the sentiment that Jenny's just said.

### **Paula Palmer**

Yeah, I think in part of that, communication is really key, isn't it? As long as we keep communicating with them and telling them what's happening, when it's happening, what we want to do for them and doing that with respect, then that's an important part of it as well, isn't it?

### **Dave Lockerman**

Definitely. I think communication's massive. I think as a consumer myself, I'm more willing to accept and understand where things aren't delivered on time, providing the communication's right. I think if you look at where we do get it wrong, it's communication that's the bit that's slipped. Completely agree.

### **Paula Palmer**

Great. There's clearly going to be some changes to the way we do things. Let's move on to how Stonewater is making those changes to improve our responsiveness, our relationships and the overarching support for our customers from board level all the way down to our customer-facing teams. Dani, would you start by telling us about some of the initiatives you and your team are working on?

### **Danielle Bowater**

Yeah. I think it's really important that we give our customers a wide range of meaningful opportunities to influence our policies and services overall. I think at Stonewater, we're doing a good job. I think we've got a range of groups, forums that can spark a variety of interest with our customers. I already highlighted a few earlier.

With scrutiny panel, they're a group of fantastic, engaged customers that conduct in depth service reviews, make recommendations with the wider customer base in mind. We also have our ageing well board, which is made up of a group of customers that are 55 and over. That board was created to improve opportunities for those customers, working together directly with Stonewater to help customers lead essentially happier, healthy lives in their homes for longer.

And then we also have more informal approaches, like I said earlier, with our community champions. They're, again, a great group of customers who are really passionate about making their areas a better place to live, working collaboratively with Stonewater to do that. They're essentially the eyes and ears on the ground, help us to report grounds maintenance issues, community-wide concerns like antisocial behaviour, parking, and we work really closely with our homes and neighbourhoods team to achieve that as well.

It's not just engagement. We also pull in the experts and other colleagues that are leading it in those areas. What's also really exciting is we've just launched a mystery shopping programme for our customers. That's an opportunity for customers to complete, say, shops and provide feedback on recent interactions with Stonewater across a range of services that they've accessed from us.

We also have online forums, like I highlighted earlier, our customer hub. We also have inclusion groups, which we're really working on at the moment. As you can see, we have quite a mix of informal, formal community-based, some which require some online interaction, some which require getting out there into communities. There's quite a range. But also, we do acknowledge that we can do better. Since working at Stonewater, I really feel that as a team—the customer comms and

engagement team—we're really open to trying new things and asking our customers what they want to and being able to adapt and react to new issues.

It's like we're forming our recent customer building safety group. That's a panel that's essentially customer representatives from three of our high-rise buildings to help us with issues there and be that customer voice for those blocks. There is quite a range there. But like I said, we're always looking at new things and what customers would like to see from us and different ways they can get involved.

### **Paula Palmer**

Dani, it sounds like there's loads going on already. That's fantastic. I like hearing how flexible the service is as well. You're flexing what we offer groups and opportunities to get involved in, depending on what you see arising or what our customers want. That's really fantastic.

Gareth, have you got anything that you'd like to add there? Do you think there's anything else we should be doing?

### **Gareth Morgan**

No, I think the scrutiny panel, particularly, we're quite diverse, although we lack in young people. I've gone to Stonewater and explained this, and they've given me the opportunity to try and promote the scrutiny panel to a younger crowd by going and doing some visits and things. I do believe they're really proactive in looking at how they're engaging with customers, very open to new ways of engaging. They're doing a really great job of that.

### **Paula Palmer**

Can you tell me some more about how we're trying to engage with those younger groups? What activities have you got going?

### **Gareth Morgan**

Myself and Dani are going to go and visit... They've got some sort of supported living where people who are a bit younger—it's like a transition before they get their own flat and things—are going to go down and sort of promote the scrutiny panel, explain what we do. We're going to offer a fluid place for a young person because we all know young people have got usually far better things to do than sit around and discuss housing things. It could be that one person finds that they're free for an hour one week when we've got a meeting, and they'll be able to sit on the meeting.

There's talk about offering some sort of recompense, like a little voucher or something. But I think their input into the panel made up of mostly older people will be amazing. It'll be very different to how we see things, and they make up a great population of residents and tenants within Stonewater, so their voices is really unique.

### **Paula Palmer**

Thanks, everyone. That's a resounding yes to always looking at ways to improve, then. I think it's really important and a reflection on Stonewater's desire, mission to deliver great customer service.

Jenny, let's go back to you. Can you give us a couple of examples of where Tpas member organisations are really getting this right? Perhaps we can take notes. What impact is this having on services and relationships with customers?

### **Jenny Osbourne**

We've seen a lot of work—across the whole of England—of organisations taking a long, hard look at their engagement structures again. Really, this time, the bits of practise I'm seeing is people involving

far more people in that review. So not just going to the engagement team, not just going to a few members of staff and saying, oh, what do we need to do? Also, a few involved customers. But really involving the whole organisation to make sure that everyone sees this as important and part of their job. I think that's really important that people are involving everybody in the organisation. That's a good example.

We're seeing the growth of, call them what you will, customer assurance panels, whatever you might want to call them, but the growth of panels that are made up of customers that have a direct line that are really reporting straight into the board in housing associations. We're seeing a lot of people flexing, changing, strengthening those links from involved customers to the board, making sure that voice is heard at board level. We're seeing some changes around that across the sector.

I think we're also seeing scrutiny coming up in the agenda again in many organisations. I know it's strong here at Stonewater. A lot of organisations moved away from scrutiny. It's hard to keep panels going, hard to keep people interested, hard to get new volunteers to come forward. But we're seeing that really reinvigorated across the sector, and I'm a big fan of scrutiny. It has a huge place in organisations to really see that tenant influencer voice really affecting services that matter most to customers.

Lots going on. I think the other thing I would just say where I'm seeing really good practise in organisations is not only where they're looking at scrutiny or panels or tenants on the board, but they're really focusing on what happens to all the tenants that they might have in their homes, in their organisations. What's the service they're giving to those day in, day out? When they pick up the phone, when they look at their website, when they look at the social media of an organisation, is that telling a story? Does that look like an organisation that wants to listen, that wants to welcome customer views, that wants to have their influence?

I'm seeing some really good examples of organisations taking a step back and thinking about every touchpoint that they have with a customer over the course of a year and thinking, how can we do better, and how can we use that information better than we perhaps have done in the past? That's really encouraging.

### **Danielle Bowater**

Jenny, the question is for you that do you think there's going to be more expected from customers, like as part of a scrutiny panel, in terms of their involvement and what they're scrutinising?

### **Jenny Osbourne**

I don't think it's about expecting more. I think it's about being absolutely crystal clear about what scrutiny panel's there to do. I think over the years, for some scrutiny panels, their role and remit has flexed and changed, and they've been asked to do different things, and they've become almost just performance monitoring groups, which isn't scrutiny.

True scrutiny, when it's done brilliantly, when it's done well, it's fantastic. Such a great thing in an organisation. But I think there's opportunities across organisations to get people involved in far more different ways than we've done before. Recognising that sometimes people only want to be involved, don't they, for a brief period of time. They only want to be involved for one particular project or one particular thing that's happening in their area, and then they want to do no more. That's absolutely fine, isn't it?

### **Paula Palmer**

Yeah. That leads me very nicely on to my next question, which sort of... We've been looking at an engagement toolkit that's been devised as a guide for colleagues. Dave, can you give us some more information about that and tell us all about it?



## **Dave Lockerman**

Engagement toolkit sounds really posh, doesn't it? I think it's not new. It's basically all the ways that customers can get involved with us. It's our involvement framework at the end of the day. It's from our brilliant scrutiny panel who are doing their deep dives into our services and really coming up with solid recommendations for improvement. It's our focus groups, it's our community champions, which Dani spoke about. It's our mystery shopping, it's our workshops, it's our Facebook live events, it's our surveys, it's our inclusion groups. It's all the ways in which customers can get involved with us.

As Dani said, basically there's something for everyone because our customers are us. People are busy, people have different things going on. Really, there's a menu of options that suit or hopefully offer something to everyone. Obviously, we're really grateful for any kind of feedback that our customers can give us anytime that they can give us because it's that feedback which helps us get better.

But also, of course, it helps colleagues because I think in terms of our colleagues, as Dani says, we are on a bit of a journey in terms of culture shift. Customer engagement shouldn't be an addition to people's roles. It should be front and centre of what we're doing and to help recruit and get customers involved and have decent conversations with customers about doing so. That engagement guide really helps along... helps our colleagues to have those conversations.

While I've got the floor in terms of the toolbox, some of the successes we've had over the last year through that involvement structure, we hosted 21 ad hoc workshops attended by 68 customers. Some of the stuff we spoke around in terms of those workshops has been around the new consumer standards. We've consulted customers on eight policy reviews.

For me, it's not about just ticking a box to say, what do you think of this policy? And just tick it off. Actually really getting customer feedback around what that policy means for our customers, whether there are any gaps in it, whether we've got it right. We've done that eight times, included customer complaints, neighbourhood management policy, our vulnerable person's policy, our own social behaviour policy, and our customer voice policy. Some really meaty policies where we've had some really good customer feedback.

Our customer scrutiny panel have carried out two reviews this year, but made 24 recommendations. They're 24 really decent recommendations grounded in wider customer feedback, really, really sensible and really driving our services forward. Our community champions have carried out over a hundred site visits, so really helping us drive up the standards in our community. There's a lot of stuff that's delivered through what we call our toolbox, but basically, all the ways in which our customers can get involved. It really is shifting service and improving things for all of our customers.

## **Danielle Bowater**

I guess from my perspective, to summarise, is with the engagement toolkit, it'll provide customers with a better understanding of how they can get involved, the commitment it takes and what their influence will be, and then for colleagues to have more of a detailed understanding of how we engage customers at every level. I think it's a really great tool that will be available for all customers in different types of ways that's accessible to them, whether it's online, in print, different translations and accessible formats.

All we want is for colleagues to come to us for opportunities for customers to get involved and ask for our help and for us to also reach out to colleagues to see what's going on in different areas. Are there any opportunities we can grab hold of to say, right, we need some customer engagement there. How we're going to do it? It'll be... I only see it as a positive.

## **Paula Palmer**

How do you think you'll keep track of all these improvements and ideas and suggestions and feedback and making sure that it gets used, rather than just, oh, yeah, we heard you, but whatever?

## Dave Lockerman

We've done a lot of closing the loop and "you said, we did" but we know there's a lot of stuff that we do that's not necessarily captured. So wherever we use customer insight, for instance, to change a service, we are working with our colleagues to make sure that we capture it and through our systems as well, make sure that we do have a better track of it because I think it is really important. It's really important that we're able to track it, so I can tell you how many customers have been involved, how many services have changed. But the "so what" bit is really important for us, being able to really properly demonstrate what's been achieved.

I just wanted to give a couple of examples whereby we are listening to customers and really shifting service. Our customers were saying it was too hard to get through. It's difficult to speak to the right person. I don't know who my housing officer is. I don't see them enough. The couple of things that we have in train or have done so far... We've invested in our customer service centre, and we've doubled the size of our customer service centre listening to our customer. Actually, our call wait time, they were, on average, around 20 minutes, but they're now down to under six minutes.

This used to be a really hot topic for our customers. If you looked in customer satisfaction surveys, it's always there. If you dropped into the Facebook, you could see comments there. But it isn't an issue any more, which is fantastic, and I think a real sign that it's not necessary about having to wait for your involvement framework. It's just really important that we use all sources of insight and really listen to our customers.

The other one is around the pilot that we're just launching—or have launched—in Somerset. I think in the sector, a concern is that it's really easy, with all the kind of changes in regulation, to go backwards to what's safe and what feels comfortable. For us, a lot of our peers around us are jumping back into having housing officers, small patches. But we used to work with housing officers and patches, and it was a problem for us for a couple of reasons.

The first was the workloads weren't necessarily visible, so you could have all kinds of things sitting in a housing officer's inbox. The second is quite often with our housing officers, you could be really strong in one area, not necessarily strong in another. Actually driving that kind of consistency of service was an issue. But also, our geography meant that we could have someone sat in a car for an hour and a half to go and see a customer and an hour and a half back. That is never going to be the best use of our customers' money. We need to be efficient, and that didn't play to it.

We moved to that national specialist model, and it brought a load of advantages. It brought the visibility, it brought specialism, it got rid of the inefficiency in terms of travelling to site because we moved to a more digital model. But our customers have been telling us, as I've said, sometimes they find it hard to get hold of the right person. They don't necessarily know who does what. That's been a challenge for them and not see us on site as often.

Rather than just go backwards, what we're doing is building on the way that we work. Our specialists are coming together in local areas. In Somerset, rather than just go back to small patches and housing offices, what we're doing is we're having a specialist team. There's someone who's a specialist in antisocial behaviour, someone who's a specialist in neighbourhoods, someone who's a specialist in tenancy changes, et cetera, and someone who's out there visiting our estate. So a mobile social. What's important is we've been able to tell our customers that this is who's in your area, this is what they do, this is how you contact them. With this new model, hopefully we're working more around the customer.

I just wanted to get in, really, that our involvement framework has given us so much, but we need to work in addition to that, and we need to make sure that we are using all the feedback that our customers give us and the insight that we have to continue getting better, but also to be careful that we don't just jump backwards just because it feels safe and that's where peers are going. It's important that we really do listen, work out what the key issues are for our customers and make sure

that we're fixing those, and not just going full throttle into a world where actually perhaps it's more expensive, perhaps it's not the right fit for us. Thank you.

## **Paula Palmer**

Jenny, can you tell us a bit more about the work that Tpas does to support housing providers to improve levels of engagement?

## **Jenny Osbourne**

Yeah, absolutely. That's a really key and important part of our work with our members across the whole of England. It's been lovely to get back to conferences again and do those. We've just done one for 120 housing professionals. We'll do one in the summer for 250 tenants. Without a doubt, we've got to make picking up that point around learning, which I think was just really well-made around.

As a sector, we do a lot of the same things. We cannot sometimes think as organisations, or we're individual organisations. But actually, a lot of what we do is the same, isn't it, across different people. So if we can share that learning better, if we can all move faster on sort of some of those things... I mean, an example would be, I suppose, for me, is we often talk, don't we, about the kind of letters we send to customers? Say, someone's going to rent arrears. We've all learned over in the past that to send letters worded badly or very aggressive or whatever it might be doesn't get you the response that you're looking for. We all know that, and yet some of us continue to keep to do it.

So I think sharing with the ICT has a real role to do that sharing and learning. I think, as well, we all need to be part of the consultations that are going on in the sector. There's so many. I do know that at the moment. There's consultations from government and the regulator all the time. But we've all got to collectively make sure that staff and tenants are responding to those consultations as quickly and as best that we can because we have seen the evidence that we can influence policy. Much as we are now wanting to influence at an organisational level and landlords and tenants want to, rightly so.

We need to keep that on a national level as well, in terms of influence, that's really important. We're really keen to make sure, again, at a national level, that a diverse range of voices is being heard. Gareth picked up on this earlier around young people. That's always really difficult to get that in any organisation. We're doing a piece of research at the moment around representation from BME communities as an engagement. There's a piece of research going on. You can see it on our website if you want to fill in the survey, being led by a tenant that we work with called Kai. Really important piece of work. How can we do more about that?

We also know the regulator will want to see how organisations across the sector are doing more about that. Hearing those diverse voices, really challenging ourselves to go, who haven't we heard from? Who hasn't spoken to us? Why not? And really digging deeper around all of those things. Lots of learning. I think, obviously, we've all got to keep an eye on, and Tpas is doing this all the time, digital engagement, and we've moved forward a long way in all of that.

Where does digital engagement? Where does face to face? Where do they sit together? Where do they come together? And keeping a look on things like the apps that we can all be using, the platforms we can be using. Obviously, AI is as crucial. We're really starting to get our heads around that as Tpas about where that might take us in engagement. Again, I think used in the right way, all of these things hopefully will complement each other.

But for me, going back to your original question, we've got to look within the sector, share our learning, but also keep looking outside of sector as well. Engaging customers is not just something that social housing needs to do well, is it? Lots of sectors are doing that. Let's make sure we lift our heads and do a bit of looking outside. I see Tpas has a role for that as well.

## **Paula Palmer**

Fantastic. Thanks, Jenny. You were talking there about the digital engagement part as well. I know, in one of our previous episodes, episode six, I think it was, we were talking about that sort of communication being there for when people are ready to engage with it. It might be an online form, it might be a chat box, it might be information that you can pick up, like our how-to guides on our hub and stuff like that. But that, again, is another way of interacting, isn't it?

Some people don't want the face to face. They don't want to be able to phone somebody between the hours of nine and five, but if they can get the information when they're ready for it at the click of a button, that's really useful too, isn't it?

### **Danielle Bowater**

I was just wanting to add to that, to say, I think it's all about managing expectations as well. We live in a world where everything is that instant gratification, isn't it? Where you order something, like with Amazon, and it can come within a matter of hours or by the next day. I think that can sometimes translate with us and our customers and making sure that we're really clear on our roles and expectations with our customers getting involved and stuff. So that was that.

I also wanted to touch upon in terms of being digitally enabled. We partner with We Are Group, who provide free one to one remote or face to face support for our customers in getting online. But I think it's always that challenge as well, that you can help those customers that might not have those IT skills to get access to our services and not online, where everything pretty much is online now, but how do we reach those customers that aren't online, don't want to be online, don't want to wait 40 minutes on the phone to get through to us and things like that. I think it's a bit of a million-dollar question, isn't it?

### **Paula Palmer**

More work to be done, clearly. Thank you very much, everyone. It's been a great discussion. Does anybody else want to add anything else before we sign off?

### **Danielle Bowater**

I just wanted to make sure Gareth tells me to shut up if I'm putting you on the spot, but I thought it might be quite nice to just hear a little bit about why you actually got involved, why you join Scrutiny and maybe what you get out of it. I thought it might be quite nice for people to hear that.

### **Gareth Morgan**

I guess I find myself quite lucky to live where I live. I get a good service. I want my community, my neighbours, to have a good service, too. Initially, there's a few people around here who perhaps weren't involved or couldn't get involved, so it was about making sure that I could be their voice. Perhaps I got into it for the wrong reasons to start with, because I had a bit of a gripe and I thought I could join a Scrutiny panel and fix my gripe.

It wasn't really quick to see that it wasn't, but really quick to see the good work that can be done and the benefit of me and my neighbours and my community, so that's really why I got involved.

### **Danielle Bowater**

Do you see things a bit differently now, Gareth, that you're part of the panel and obviously the relationships you've built with colleagues at Stonewater, and you kind of see, I guess, more of the inner workings at Stonewater, don't you, especially being like chair?

### **Gareth Morgan**

I guess so. I can appreciate the difficulties, but I can also see the good work that's being done. I think we've spoken about the reviews, perhaps, we want to review something that is going really well within

Stonewater. I want to have a look at some positive things, bring some positivity and see if we can use aspects of what's going right in other areas of the business and see why it's going right. It could be particular groups, particular people. I really like being involved. I really like doing things for the community, for the tenants.

But I would encourage all residents, tenants, to get involved in any way they can. Stonewater, I think, just by asking the question, what can we do better to certain people who aren't perhaps involved? That could be a good way of involving those people without taking up time and listening to their issues, their points of view.

### **Paula Palmer**

Thanks so much for all your interesting information and feedback. As always with all of our guests, I'm struck by your passion, your dedication to your work, customers doing the right thing. I know it's a juggling act, but I can see that there's so much going on in every field, to make sure that we meet our customers expectations, that we know what our customers expectations are, and to make sure our homes are comfortable and safe. So thank you very much.

Join us next time for part two of Professionalism in Housing, where we're going to talk all about balancing the need for qualifications with practical skills and experience.

### **Voiceover**

We hope you enjoyed listening to the latest episode of *On the Air*. We'll be publishing a new episode again soon. To stay up to date, subscribe to our channel. Thanks again for listening, and don't forget to share your thoughts with us on LinkedIn or Twitter by tagging hashtag SW on the Air.