

Anisha: Hello and welcome back to a very specially timed episode of On the Air. So, for those that don't know, this week marks Race Equality Week, which aims to unite businesses and organisations across the UK to take a collaborative approach with actively and seriously addressing race discrimination in the workplace.

The charity behind the awareness week, Race Equality Matters, have actually published a number of quite damning statistics on their website from the research that they've carried out with senior business leaders, race network leads and their diversity and inclusion experts. One figure that truly demonstrates the need for more to be done is that, from its research, 100% of respondents believe that there is a need for ethnic minorities to be heard and more action to be taken. But in addition to this, 75% of respondents said that they wouldn't consider their organisation as inclusive.

So, today I'm joined by my guest co-host, Tom Morris, who is the lead at Stonewater for internal communications and engagement. Tom, thank you very much for joining me today and making your podcast debut. Do you want to talk about this year's theme for Race Equality Week?

Tom: Absolutely, and thanks for having me, Anisha. First-time here but long-time listener. So the hashtag being used this year is #ActionNotJustWords, which is rightfully advocating that when it comes to racism, it's not good enough to just talk about eradicating racism in the workplace, but our actions need to follow through on our policies and our intent.

Now, we both work in the comms team at Stonewater, and I think I'm right in saying the work we do internally and externally is not just about PR gesturing, but rather demonstrating that, as an organisation, we truly live and breathe diversity and inclusion. And that's right from recruitment to encouraging each and every colleague to bring their self, their whole self rather, to work and celebrate each other's differences. Would you agree?

Anisha: Yes, definitely. I mean, for me, from day one of working for Stonewater, it was made really clear that EDI is a priority in every aspect of the business. And it's been really interesting and encouraging to see that, in the nearly three years I've worked here – I cannot believe it's almost been three years – how that's evolved further. Now, before I say too much and give anything away, Tom, would you mind introducing our guests?

Tom: Absolutely but, as it's my first time, should we ask each of our guests to introduce themselves and to explain why, in their role, promoting EDI is an essential part of their day-to-day job? So shall we start with David?

David: Hello, I'm David Blower, I'm our executive director for corporate services. I've got a fairly wide remit in the business in relation to supporting the organisation to deliver strategic goals. But one of the really important things is I'm executive lead for Equality, Diversity, Inclusion. And I chair our EDI board, which is made up of a group of enthusiastic colleagues that are wanting to drive EDI further in our organisation. So, it's a key part of my job and I'm also making sure that EDI cuts through all that we are doing as a business.

Anisha: Thanks, David. Cordelia, do you want to kick off next?

Cordelia: Hi, I'm Cordelia Johnney, I'm head of EDI at Stonewater. It goes without saying that EDI is an important part of my role. It's not only an important part of what I do, it's an important part of who I am. I've been in the equality and diversity and inclusion field for most of my life and it's something that I live, breathe and probably the biggest EDI geek in the country.

Tom: Thanks, Cordelia. And last but not least, Jade.

Jade: Hi, everyone, I'm Jade Bradford and I am the customer communications and engagement manager at Stonewater. I would say that EDI is important to my job. Firstly, the easy answer: it's important to everybody's job. It goes without saying that everybody needs to be doing their work with EDI in mind. And the second reason is I represent the interest of our customers. So my job is, kind of, listening to them and sending things out to them in return. So what we need to do is be able to listen to our customers, knowing what their needs are, knowing how, you know, they might vary or change, and then feeding that into the communications we send out to them; making sure everybody has access to the information they need in a way that works for them and in a way that, you know, really listens to them and knows who they are. So that's why it's important to me, but as I said, you can't do your job if you're not thinking about EDI. So I feel very strongly about that.

Anisha: Yeah, I definitely agree, you cannot. And thinking about this year's theme for Race Equality Week: action not just words, it would be great to hear what actions have been taken across Stonewater to not only promote EDI, but actually ensure that it's embedded across the organisation.

Cordelia: So, yeah, Race Equality Week is really important to us and EDI is working with our employee networking group, Together, which is our ethnicity group, to put on a week's worth of events, to spotlight race equality and to educate and inform our colleagues. So the week... we're kicking off the week with a session on understanding race equality and microaggressions. We're having a My Voice session and we use My Voice to give colleagues the opportunity to actually have a voice, to share their lived experiences, and to educate other colleagues and to share learning.

It's also a place where allies can go and be active because I believe to be an ally, it's not enough to say "I'm anti-racist", but it's also an opportunity for you to step up and actually get involved in the conversation and help shape that change. So we're having a My Voice session; it's open for positive and negative stories; it's going to be led by our colleagues.

We've also got a panel discussion on women and race because we recognise that our colleagues are multi-layered. They're more than just a woman, they're more than just an ethnic background; so we're going to have a session and it's called Women and Race: Are We Still Running? And it's to look at all aspects of issues that impact on women, regardless of your ethnic background.

And then we have our final event, which is called The Uncomfortable Truth; and we've been fortunate enough to get a special guest speaker who is none other than the legendary footballer who has credits for Liverpool and England: it's John Barnes. And I'm really excited about having him and hear him talk about race equality from his perspective as an ex-England footballer, but also his take on race equality because he definitely has a unique take and there's a lot of learning to be got.

Anisha: It's definitely going to be a packed week, I think. Jade, it would be great to hear from you as well because obviously you joined Stonewater last year; just to hear your perspective on how you've seen EDI be embedded into the organisation?

Jade: Absolutely, so I think I've been in the housing sector for a while; probably not as long as some of the people on the call, but I have been around for a while, and I've definitely seen a shift from 2015, 2016. There was a real commitment to EDI in the housing sector and, you know, people started getting EDI leads in their businesses and people started focusing on certain topics to try and make improvements. And I think that's carried on and it's grown and grown and grown. You're looking at seeing equality awards in housing and all those sorts of things, and that's all really great, but some of that stuff can seem like grandstanding or talking about it but, actually, the customers aren't feeling it.

At Stonewater, it's always been clear in no uncertain terms that people are about action here. I found that, you know, the strategies that we're putting in and developing are being developed with EDI in mind, and also understanding that we're not perfect and that we do need to listen to our customers and we do need to make changes or improvements, and we need to find out how they're feeling, learn more about them, find out what their characteristics are, find out what matters to them, and then feed that back into our work. And that's not an easy job, but it's something that the business is committed to. And one of the commitments the business has made is inventing the team that I'm in, which is Customer Voice and Influence.

And the influence part is really important there, because that means anybody who is one of our customers who have something to say can influence our services. And they don't have to do that formally; they can do it if they make a complaint or just call us to tell us something. All of that data is fed back. And I think the way that happens at Stonewater is so much smoother and more positive than in other organisations that I may have worked in in the past, or the way I've seen other people do it, that I feel like the commitment is really strong and I feel like there's genuine action rather than people just looking at our equalities data saying: "oh, those people are okay", and then carrying on. It is actually feeding in that information, seeing where we can improve and making changes where we can.

Anisha: It's really helpful hearing that, actually, because this is the first housing provider I've ever worked in; so it's nice to hear that, from your experience of working for others, that Stonewater does do things a bit differently and that, you know, that change is really felt. David, from a leadership perspective, what sort of actions do you think Stonewater have taken to not only promote EDI, but ensure that it is throughout the organisation?

David: One of the things that we... we regard EDI as strategically important for us as a business. You know, the society which we all live in is diverse. We have to reflect that society, and we want to reflect that society. If we're going to be a successful business, we want to learn from that... what we can learn from our customers and what we can learn from our colleagues.

So we've done a whole range of initiatives; one of the things that we spoke about... Cordelia spoke about is Together. Together is one of our set of employee networking groups, and these are a set of groups that come together of like-minded individuals. They may be individuals who have a particular protected characteristic, or they may be individuals who are just interested, or have allies who have protected

characteristics and come together. And those employee networking groups are... they do create a two-way communication. They enable us as a business to talk to that group, but most importantly, they enable us as a business to listen to those colleagues. And we've learned so much from these employee networking groups from particular perspectives, particularly some of the challenges around Black Lives Matter that helped us as a business make an appropriate response to what was the right... what was right for us.

And, as Jade spoke about, there is the customer voice. Understanding what our needs of our customers are is absolutely critical for us going forward. So you spoke about earlier, around 75% of respondents didn't feel their organisations were diverse. If you're going to change that, you've got to understand what people... what people are feeling, what people want, what people need, and be able to adapt the organisation in response to that.

So a number of other initiatives that we've been doing, we've adopted something called the Opportunity Pledge. So that is based on... it comes from the US, it's based on what's called the Rooney Rule in the US, but for... certainly for senior roles, we ensure that when we have a black, Asian, minority ethnic candidate that meets the person specification, we will shortlist them for interview. This is helping us making sure that we have a more representative leadership community in our business with helping us be more representative of a wider society.

We've also chosen to voluntarily report our ethnicity pay gap, so organisations are required to report their gender pay gap, but we've chosen to go beyond that and voluntarily report our ethnicity pay gap. I'm really, really pleased with the results of ethnicity pay gap. We've got a very small ethnicity pay gap, but it reveals different things to us. And the gender pay gap, it helps us learn different things and it helps us develop different initiatives that makes us a more equal and a more representative organisation.

Tom: Amazing, thank you, David. I've certainly joined a few of our networking groups and they've always been really rewarding experiences, and I'm lucky enough to sit on the committee together alongside Jade and Cordelia. I suppose everything we do at the moment is against the backdrop of the pandemic. And there's been a number of reports published about how there's been a disproportionate impact of Covid-19 felt by ethnic minority communities. How important is it for organisations like Stonewater to address this? And what is Stonewater doing to support its communities internally and externally?

Cordelia: We've been a really supportive organisation and a really caring organisation, and we've given colleagues, regardless of your ethnic background, that opportunity to ensure that Covid isn't such a traumatic background, and that you can get through it and come back to work and provide your best self.

Tom: That's great. Thank you, Cordelia. And I suppose our hybrid working approach has, kind of, an impact on that as well. David, do you want to cover how we feel our hybrid working approach will support this?

David: Well I think, firstly, for me, Covid has shone a light on our society and has really highlighted inequalities that have existed for generations. If we not only recover, but we really learn from the pandemic, we should be building back a stronger, more equal society. And as housing providers, it's absolutely integral that

we are... form a fundamental part of that – so the roles that we're doing in relation to both customers and colleagues.

So... we undertook some research with Demos recently that looked at the impact of homeworking on low-paid individuals, so individuals in low-paid employment, are disproportionately affected by that. So that's helped us galvanise action in relation to encouraging Government to take initiatives, but also we've been taking initiatives ourselves. So, for example, all the new homes that we develop, we seek to provide homeworking space in all of our new homes. But also, in relation to supporting our colleagues, we have a unique employee benefit, that's My Own Home, which enables people to part-buy and part-rent, go out in the open market, find a home that's suitable, that meets their needs. We will buy that with them and they can buy some of it and then rent the rest of it from us.

We've also introduced our homeworking loans, which enables the colleagues to create the best homeworking environment for them. So it needs to meet business needs but to suit their circumstances. So that can be anything from a foldaway desk in the corner of the kitchen right the way through to a garden pod. So that, again, that's another benefit that we're doing. So there's some very practical steps, but also, as Cordelia said, there's a lot of stuff about listening and understanding what those needs are, because this is what we think people need at the moment. But we need to continue to listen and understand what our customers and our colleagues feel they need so that we can continue to respond to that.

Tom: Thank you, and Jade, David touched a bit there on, sort of, listening to customers. Is that, sort of, yeah... how is that working from your team's perspective?

Jade: I think, in relation to Covid and listening to customers, the most important thing for all of us, regardless of who we were, was access to information. And it can be really, really difficult if you're already marginalised or you have... there's some reason why you can't get the information you need to understand what's going on in the world that is literally changing by the second in a way that it hasn't before.

So one of the things that we do is this mantra that one of my old bosses gave me, it's like if you get it right for the person who needs it most, you get it right for everybody. So it's not looking at people needing a type of information or to be communicated with in a specific way. It's not looking at that as something above and beyond; that's your basic level, because if you get it right for that person, everybody else can access that information too. So that might be something as simple as making information available digitally and in paper format, and having translations available and alternative formats like Braille and audio and all those sorts of things. We can do those things, but it's also just about being accessible as a business.

And so that's, you know, understanding our limits, because we're not medical experts, but signposting people, making sure that we have a place – for us it's our customer hub where we can tell people this is the information we can give you, this is the information that we have, but also: these are other organisations that can help you. And we've done that throughout Covid but, more recently, we're working on doing that on our financial support information. So making sure every single one of our customers has access to that in a way that we know works for them. Some of our customers love emails, do not want a letter through their door; we'll email those people. But some people, you know, the people who need it the most, might not have access to the internet; we'll send that to them in the post, it will come through their

door and they'll have a paper copy, and they can have the opportunity to call us and ask for a different format if they need to.

And it's those things, for me, during the pandemic, which I think has been really important because if you're isolated anyway, if you're in your home, you're on your own or you're with your family, you don't have access to the information, you might not have access to the internet. And things are just changing, and it was really, really scary for a lot of people. And by making sure that we're making a commitment to get people the things that we can get them and telling them where else they can go, I think that makes a real difference in the community. And obviously it got harder during the pandemic because we weren't able to do things like going to people's homes like we would have done before. So I think Stonewater – and I can't take credit for this because I wasn't here – but Stonewater really had to think on their feet and try and deliver services in a different way.

And I think, you know, I won't say it all went great because there are some places where everybody in the country just didn't get it right the first time. But we really learned and we adapted. And I think that people are still getting a good service from us now because we've learned how to do that. But, as I said, I just really want to, kind of, take it back to, like, access to information is just the most important thing. And we found that, in my community for instance – and I'm going to talk about my dad here, and I'm sorry if he's listening – but he gets a lot of bad information from WhatsApp. And that is something that an older Jamaican man will do often: just get bad information from WhatsApp and pass it on to me, and I have to say to him: “Dad, absolutely not, this is not true, this is not a real doctor, this is not a real university scientist, this information is not true.” And I can signpost him to things that, you know, *are* true. But as an organisation that works in the community and builds communities, we also have a responsibility there to help with those things. It's not always the daughter's responsibility, though I do understand that it is mostly my responsibility!

Anisha: I cannot tell you how much I relate to everything you've just said!

[Muffled laughter]

Cordelia: So do I. My dad's banned from WhatsApp!

Anisha: I totally understand that. And I think... you touched on so many important things there, Jade. And it reminds me of something that I was told when Black Lives Matter was happening, and it was that diversity is like being asked to the party and inclusion is like being asked to dance. And it really, for me, solidifies the difference and the importance of that difference between the two. And I know earlier on you touched upon customers being involved in that feedback process and actually shaping the services that we offer. It would be great to understand that a bit more and how customers are included in, you know, shaping what they get.

Jade: So at the most basic level, we have our Scrutiny Panel and our Friends of Scrutiny Panel, and those guys are the most important thing for us in terms of us turning things around and creating comms that works. So we work with them in a variety of ways: we have meetings, we've got online groups. But, literally, if I'm putting something together I will send it to those groups – and they are diverse groups, they're made up of lots of people – and they'll read things to me and say: “Jade, why have you put this in there? What does this mean?” And it's a real challenge to me to improve the way that we work.

We do more strategic things that are less ad hoc. So, for instance, around certain topics or groups we'll do surveys and we'll do workshops or engagement groups where my team will get together a group of customers – and they don't have to be formally engaged, and that's really important because you don't want to hear the same three voices every time – so we will put it out to any of our customers who it's relevant to and ask them to give us feedback on services or things they'd like to see us do. They've even helped us with interviews – interviewing staff. I was interviewed by our Scrutiny Panel when I got this job, and it's just really important to have that perspective.

But we've done groups around a range of things so we've got...we're launching our Ageing Well board at the moment and so that's, you know, taking the interests of our customers in general needs and in retirement living who have a great perspective on what they would need to age well in the communities that we've created. And having those spaces for people to be listened to is really important. We do it on all sorts of things; we try and get people in on the ground floor, so when people are developing strategies or when people are improving services, reviewing policies, we want to make sure that there's no disproportionate impact on anyone.

And that can be something like, for instance, we entirely reviewed our pet policy and we had over 1000 customers speak to us about that and where we thought... where they thought the impact might be, where it would be positive, where it would be negative. And we did see that, you know, certain different groups did have different opinions on why it was good or bad to have certain types of pets, what they thought the pitfalls were. And in the end it was a really simple human answer that, you know, within reason, people should be allowed to have pets.

It's a really simple thing, but listening to the way our customers felt about it allowed us to make a decision that we could be sure that our customers really, really believed in and would benefit from. And now, like, more of our customers have got pets; it's been really important for people during the pandemic to have access to that sort of thing. And it's just a really, really simple thing but sometimes when you get tied up in creating policies, creating strategies and you don't talk to people, you miss really tiny things that can make a huge difference.

Tom: Thank you, Jade. And so, David, as a senior leader of a large national housing provider, how do you and the rest of the executive team promote EDI throughout the organisation?

David: There's a whole range of briefings that we do as an exec board. So firstly, I act as the chair of our EDI board, so I take EDI's exec lead for that, and I chair our EDI board, which is made up of a group of colleagues from across the organisation, representing from the customer, from colleagues, from different parts of the organisation about how we can address that. But also we have... each of our employee networking groups has an executive sponsor and that has a two-way benefit.

Firstly, that means that not only do they hear my...the EDI's... not just my voice in the exec room, but also it's other people's voices. So those employee networking groups have got a direct link into the exec room, but also – on this whole two-way communication thing that we spoke about throughout – we are helping to educate our exec colleagues in particular areas. So, for areas where we may not demonstrate a particular protected characteristic, we can understand the impact of particular issues on that particular protected characteristic, and that can help us... help us be an ally,

help us understand what those needs are, help us prompt and support and support those, because we want to create a fairer, more equal society, and we can do that by being... voicing our... what we want to do and how we want to do that and by leading by example. So that's why we put it very much central to our strategy and going forward about how we can develop us as a business.

Anisha: I think the idea of having a member of the exec at all of those networking groups is so important. I remember at the last Together networking group that I was at, I was able to ask our exec director of development a direct question, and just having that kind of exposure and really appreciating that, you know, it was important for him to be there and to be present, it makes a real difference, I think, and it's really nice to see it appreciated at that level.

And just to round off the end of the episode – I feel like we could talk about this for a very long time – but I'd really like to hear from each of you: what advice you'd give to other housing providers – to not just talk about a policy, but to actually do more and put that into action and how they can work to embed it into the heart of their organisation. Tom, I'd actually like to start with you.

Tom: Yeah, I think certainly implementing things like these employee networking groups, they've been such a powerful way of, kind of, getting to know the experiences of colleagues along... of how different groups are experiencing the organisation. I mean, certainly for me, it's been really eye-opening going to the Together networking group, just, sort of, getting a completely different view of the organisation than I was used to. And at points quite a shocking one – not in a bad way, but just, yeah, really seeing a different side of Stonewater than I'd experienced. So I think, yeah, any organisation that hasn't done that, that's certainly a great first step.

Anisha: That was really nice. Yeah, for me, you're a very valued ally, so I appreciate your presence. Cordelia, you're next.

Cordelia: I think it's really important to listen. And when I say listen, I mean hear. People talk about listening an awful lot, but they don't always hear what's being said and I think that's essential, and I think that's a top down, bottom up thing. So it's one thing Stonewater has gotten better at over the years, and a prime example of that was Black Lives Matter. People took the time to actually hear what was being said and that made us stand out from other organisations, and it made me proud to be a member of Stonewater because it was obvious that people were actually hearing because a lot of things were being said, but it was important that a lot of things were being heard; so that would be my first thing.

The other thing I would say is to reach out to other housing associations and other sectors to get that learning and to be able to bring that learning back. It's... I think it's really important to do that, and at Stonewater we're trying to do that. We are members of a lot of different EDI networks so that we can bring that learning in, but also so that we can share that learning.

So those are some of my big tips. The other thing is to remember that being an ally isn't just saying "I'm an ally", it's actually being active, it's actually doing something. I look at allies and I think you're the secret weapon, because when you're from that protected characteristic, people expect you to say those things, people expect you to raise those issues. They don't always expect somebody who's not from that protective characteristic to talk about them and to talk about it with passion. So, for

me, allies and the word allyship is not a noun, it's an adjective – it's a doing word, so get out there and do.

Anisha: Oh, I love that. David, any final thoughts on your advice you'd give to other housing providers?

David: For me, it's: see the potential that EDI can bring your organisation, if you fully embrace this. Our vision is for everyone to have the opportunity to have a place to call home. Other housing providers have slightly different visions and missions, but fundamentally we're about creating homes. We're creating places where people should feel at home, and people should also feel at home at work. If we are creating an inclusive organisation, we are bringing ideas, thoughts, lived experiences – all of that is making our gene pool so much stronger. They're making us a business that can solve more complex issues. That has to benefit the organisation, it has to benefit society and, as a consequence, it will benefit individuals. So embrace EDI, embrace the potential that it can bring you, because you actually don't... you don't know what it really, really can bring you unless you're really trying.

Anisha: That was really great. And, Jade, lastly you.

Jade: So Cordelia stole some of my points, but that's fine.

[Laughter]

I think that it's really important to get the basics right. Our customer promise is: if it matters to our customers, it matters to us – and that's really, really important. I think if a customer can't see themselves represented in our work; if they look on a form and they can't see their ethnicity or their gender or something else represented and they have to tick 'other', that's a really difficult position to be in and that can be alienating before you've even – it might be – at sign up, it might be, you know, something that's really important to you and suddenly you feel a little bit like you don't belong – I think that's really important.

With all of our staff committed to our customer promise, what that means is that we're genuinely committed to listening. Every time a customer tells us anything, if there is any risk or doubt that we think that our customers are not getting the right service, if they are being discriminated against, whether they feel that Stonewater or someone in the community or a service they receive, it's really important that we take that through the right channels and act on it and see what we can do to improve.

It runs through everything we do. So I would say to other housing providers: you don't have to have a customer promise, but you do have to have that at the heart of what you do. You do have to know that if something matters to their customers, it matters to them for a reason, and you have to take it seriously and you have to take it to heart and see what we can do to fix, help, change – anything. But that's the most important thing. Just, it's that listening, it's taking things on board and it's responding accordingly.

Tom: Amazing, thank you, Jade. And I think Cordelia is doing herself a discredit really, not talking about how much you've reached outside of our sector too to look for, sort of, inspiration for, sort of, how to tackle EDI in the workplace too.

Anisha: As Tom said, again, thank you to each of us for joining us today. And thank you to our listeners, too. If you've been intrigued by anything that we've said in

today's episode, then do get in touch with us on Twitter @Stonewateruk. Similarly, if you are looking for a new role and you want to work for an employer that wants you to be nothing less than yourself, then make sure you check out our latest vacancies which we'll link to in the show notes. Thank you again for tuning in.