

## Season 1 Episode 4 Transcript

*You're listening to On The Air, a brand new podcast brought to you by Stonewater. Join us, as throughout this series, we'll be getting to the heart of what matters in the social housing industry today – from essential questions about shared ownership to celebrating community projects for veterans. Join Anisha Patel and her co-host, Sara-Anne Mills-Bricknell, and a whole host of industry figures, colleagues and customers for some lively and informative conversation about what matters most in housing in 2020. This is On The Air, a Stonewater podcast.*

**Anisha:** Hello and welcome back to On The Air. Today, we're going to be talking about a project that's the first of its kind for Stonewater, but one that is incredibly important and something we believe housing providers should consider doing, too.

**Sara:** Yes, so this week we're going to be talking about Waterworks Lane, a community self-build project in Herefordshire.

**Anisha:** Yes, this is an ongoing project and one the local council in the area wanted to get off the ground for a while, but we won't spoil anything. Let's welcome our guests.

**Sara:** So, joining us today, we have the director of Development West, Matt Crucefix, we have Clare Bray, who is development manager at Stonewater who worked on the project with Matt, and we also have Martin Walsh from the Royal British Legion.

**Anisha:** Hi, everyone, and thank you for being with us today, we do really appreciate it.

**Sara:** So, to get us into talking about the project and getting a better understanding of all of your roles in it, can you introduce what it is that you do and the part you play in it?

**Matt:** Okay, I'm the assistant director of development, so my role is mainly across a portion of the country, securing new opportunities and making sure that we hit the number of homes that we want to for Stonewater. So, for this project in particular, Clare and myself were involved right at the start. So, it's been about making sure that we can pull a site opportunity together, make sure it's viable, works through all of our proposals and how it's going to work alongside Clare in order to take it to our board and executive to make sure they're signed off and then get the projects on-site.

**Sara:** Okay, so just before we move on, I heard a rumour – I'm not sure how true it is – that this was a project that they wanted to get off the ground for a while, the council in particular. And I heard that a lot of other organizations weren't really willing to put themselves forward for the opportunity. But, Matt, I heard that it came into your lap and you thought it was really important. Can you just talk to us about that?

**Matt:** Yeah, so I think that's true. We had a meeting with the self-build agency which Herefordshire Council hosted, which would have been a few years ago. A number of other housing associations were in the room and we saw a presentation from the self-build agency. It wasn't without problems as they were presenting opportunities to work with a self-build agency, but there was a lot of resistance in the room from the

other housing associations, mainly around the supply of land and how would land be thrown into the pot, so to speak, to make these projects viable.

I think knowing the fact that we had lots of land around the area in terms of Leominster and Herefordshire, generally, I thought that there was opportunity for us to get involved. I could see that it was an opportunity that was a fit with Stonewater's ethos: of actually helping people who most need it and being able to provide people with skills, and also get a home when they can't get one themselves on the open market. So, I sort of thought to myself, 'well, actually, if we walked away from that and then we were asked why we didn't do it later on and someone else did, then we'd look a bit look a bit silly'. So, I jumped in and said, 'yeah', and I realized I was the only one!

**Sara:** And, Clare, can you tell us more about what Waterworks Lane actually is?

**Clare:** So, Waterworks Lane used to be 16 one-bed flats that we had as stock transfer from Hereford, well, Leominster District Council, it was. Weren't very nice. So, we went on a visit with the council, with the planning officer, and the veterans and company, and we decided that Waterworks was the ideal location because there was another piece of land on the corner that was actually owned by the council. As part of it, we've got one big site really now. Taken down the flats...

**Sara:** So it's in progress at the moment.

**Clare:** Yeah, we've started on-site. The foundations are going in now for the houses, so all the flats have now been demolished. So, it looks good!

**Matt:** It was quite amusing at the time because we took the self-build agency and some of the council around the land that we owned. We had a couple of clear favourites because we were sort of thinking we don't necessarily want it to be Waterworks Lane because we've got some people in there – they're occupied, that'll be challenging, more costly. But, after we walked around with the planners, that was their clear favourite.

**Clare:** It's because of the close proximity to the train station at the time and all the schools, really, wasn't it. It was all so very close. We had to get the tenants that were actually in there – there wasn't 16, I think it was about ten? Ten we had to move on, and they're really happy in their new houses now. We found them new flats and new houses, and they're really happy. I think it's only one of them that has actually given the indication they want to come back.

**Sara:** So, it wasn't a case of: they had to leave and that was it.

**Clare:** No, we gave them the opportunity, and if they want to come back, we can allocate them one of the properties, and there's only one of them that's actually said he might consider coming back, because the rest of them are all happy in their new properties.

**Sara:** Okay. Martin, what is your involvement in the project?

**Martin:** So, I've been involved in this right from the beginning. I had initial discussions with Herefordshire council about the possibility of having a veterans self-build option on their patch, because I was involved in a couple of self-builds down in Gloucester and down in Weston Super Mare. So, I supported them as an

organization and supported the veterans on the build. Because Herefordshire council do so much with veterans, it would be a good idea to propose this to them. And they were really interested, and I made the link, which is really good. With my housing background and housing veterans, I can hopefully provide some expertise in that process.

**Sara:** So, you mentioned that you were the first one on board with this project. When did it actually start for you?

**Martin:** Well, four or five years ago when I was just in a meeting with Herefordshire Council and mentioned that I had involvement with the self-build down in Bristol.

**Sara:** Really interesting that you mentioned about how long it's actually taken, because I don't think a lot of people realise how long it takes to get a project like this off the ground. When is it that we're expecting for it to actually be completed? When are we looking for people to move into their homes?

**Clare:** Well, officially, it's supposed to be August next year, but I'm pushing for the end of June for Armed Forces Day.

**Sara:** Ooooh!

*[Laughter]*

**Anisha:** It definitely sounds like Herefordshire has been really supportive and getting the project off the ground, and there's been so much work that everyone's put into making it happen, but why do you think that a scheme like Waterworks Lane is needed in the area?

**Martin:** On the Royal British Legion agenda is greater access to housing. And what this allows us as an organization is access to suitable, sustainable, really high-quality housing for the armed forces community, and the people who we support. I think in Leominster, as well, they are particularly keen on supporting the armed forces community. I think the community are really, really excited about this project and they're really all buying into that.

**Matt:** The point about local community is really, really important. We hold our hands up to say that we are going to have a, probably, challenging client group because we've got, you know, veterans who have got associated problems because of their past and current lifestyle, et cetera. Given that, one thing we expected when we held the public consultation for the scheme that there might be people that were concerned about it and concerned about the impact on local neighbourhoods, but we didn't get that at all.

**Sara:** And so it was a completely different response to what you were expecting.

**Matt:** Completely different, yep.

**Clare:** Once we explained what we were actually doing, everyone was really positive about it.

**Matt:** Really positive, and that's great. I mean, working in development, normally, we would have – if you were building some luxury houses for the highest people in

society – people complain about it, but we didn't have anyone complaining about this one. So, it's just wonderful.

**Anisha:** It says a lot doesn't it, reflecting on the need for a project like that. Do you think there are other areas in the country that would really benefit from a similar sort of scheme?

**Clare:** Yeah, I think they're starting aren't they, Martin. They're starting to come up all over the country now really, and we're using this one as a tester. And I'm sure if it goes well, we can do it elsewhere in the country.

*[Cut to first-person piece]*

**Gary:** My name is Gary Chapman and I'm the project manager of the Community Self-Build with Alabare.

When I first heard about this project and the great work Alabare and the community self-build are doing, I was very keen to get involved. Alabare are building more than just houses, they're rebuilding vulnerable veterans' lives, providing opportunity and individual growth and development. Historically, getting these projects off the ground has always been a challenge. It's vital that the partnership between Alabare and Stonewater is strong and they share the same vision. Stonewater bring valuable housing experience and local connections and knowledge to the project.

Being a veteran myself, I've gained a good rapport with the veterans in a short period of time. And from my experience I can see exactly what this scheme means to them. Not only will it provide much-needed security of their own home, but also provide training, skills and qualifications that they can use to gain for future employment. It's been very rewarding to see the veterans' confidence and self-esteem grow in such a short period of time. The veterans are already beginning to plan ahead, whereas before the build, thoughts of careers and qualifications were out of reach.

*[End of first-person piece]*

**Matt:** I think for us in particular, in Leominster, in Herefordshire, we do have a lot of homes there. But in Leominster, you know, it's quite a low-value area. There are limitations around opportunities and jobs. If Stonewater is your big landlord in the area and can do a bit to help boost skills training and get people onto, potentially, careers in construction, then I think, you know, that ticks a lot more boxes as well.

**Sara:** So, just for my understanding, the veterans are going to be on the projects working to build the homes, and then they also get one of the houses as well. Is that the idea?

**Clare:** Yeah, as long as they do a certain amount of time throughout the build, I think through each week, they automatically become the end user. So basically, there's 19 units and we're doing up to 10 –exclusively for the veterans. But it's a flexible allocation, really. So, if we had 19 veterans then... but at the moment we've got six working on them.

**Sara:** And for those veterans who are involved, do many of them have families, or are they being allocated to flats? What is it, generally, the consensus for that?

**Clare:** We've got one family, which is going to be allocated a three-bed, and then we've got a couple of gentlemen who've got access to their children, but no suitable

accommodation at the moment. So, they're going to get one-bedroom houses with gardens so they'll be able to play with the kids in the gardens. And then there's a couple that are having flats.

**Martin:** Some of the veterans have a garden and in the past, the relationships have gone up and down, and then sometimes what happens is someone's got a chaotic or unstable life, the relationship with their children breaks down as well so they don't access their children. And that causes terrible stress on them, their families, their children. Well, I see the self-build as helping the person, and then what I'm hoping that will happen now is it does bring the families back together. And that's a great part of the process, and hopefully that will still happen.

*[Cut to first-person piece]*

**Barry:** I'm Barry Durkin, I'm a county councillor at the Herefordshire Council, and I'm also chairman of the Herefordshire Armed Forces Covenant Partnership. Herefordshire Council worked with the Self-Build Agency to provide this opportunity at Waterworks Lane in Leominster. We are a major stakeholder, working with the self-build agency, Royal British Legion, Stonewater and SSAFA, and also with the local contractors, Harper. The project is to provide 19 homes overall with nine homes specifically allocated for the county's veterans. Herefordshire Council gifted the land for the projects and provided a substantial amount of funding to enable the project to go ahead.

We consider that the veterans are an important part of our community. Waterworks Lane had the potential to be life-changing for those actively involved. The project will provide lifetime accommodation to enable those who live there to live a normal life as we would understand it, and to be part of their local community. Waterworks Lane is a beacon project for Herefordshire Council and an approach which we intend to learn from, which will provide a vision for the future of our county's veterans.

We would encourage other councillors to assess the needs of their veterans and to explore partnership-working to address these and implement similar projects. The active involvement of veterans with this building project will enable them to obtain life skills outside the military. Also, by working on-site, they will receive training and experience, which will then provide them with a solid base for their future. And by living there, they will be part of their local community.

*[End of first-person piece]*

**Sara:** If I'm honest, I don't think it's too bold to say that this actual scheme is life-changing in the respect that it's helping families, it's work, it's actually giving them a home. When you look at the big picture, it's a really great project in that sense.

**Clare:** And for some of them, it's given them their self-worth back as well. But for them, it's not just the home, it's the whole lifestyle. And they're not going to be giving them back.

**Anisha:** Exactly, then on top of that, you get to really build a community. And I guess what will be interesting to know is what do you think has been the most difficult challenge in getting this project off the ground, in planning and the execution...

**Clare:** All the different parties!

*[Laughter].*

**Clare:** There's a lot of people involved. Lots of meetings.

**Matt:** It is definitely that. And I think, from our perspective, the community thing is really important. I think it's exactly what housing associations should be there for; it's what Stonewater should be there for; it's what we all should be striving to do. Because you can build homes, but you've got to be able to put those building blocks in to make people be able to step up and not fail in that accommodation. If you can give them skills, if you give them the opportunity to then go and get jobs, then, you know, it's better for the community, it's better for that person, it's better for us as well.

But, in terms of the challenges, I think there are a lot of people involved which does, you know, often slow things down, but it's for the right reasons. I think, for Stonewater, one of the challenges was definitely around making the project viable. And in that sense, we mean because it's a low value area, the rents that we charge are quite low. So, if you look at the financial figures, it doesn't necessarily stack up. But Stonewater was committed to put in those additional funds in order to make it work, because they could see the value in the project.

**Clare:** And making people understand why we were knocking down some flats.

**Matt:** Exactly.

**Clare:** We did a site visit in the end, didn't we, so that we could actually see...

**Matt:** And I think, for us, we're the two people who have to go and sit and talk to our director of finance to say, 'hey, we've got this project and financially it doesn't work out, but if the benefits are great...'. But actually, you know, our executive is really supportive and they really bought into the project and the idea of it.

**Anisha:** It says a lot about the execs at Stonewater, I think, that financially it might not be as attractive as something else, but the value...

**Clare:** The social value...

**Anisha:** Yeah, massive.

**Sara:** So, we had a chat with a couple of the veterans working on the scheme at the moment and got their thoughts and just a bit of background from them about why this project was important to them.

**Veteran 1 (Fred):** I think the idea of trying to actually build a community at the same time as you build the project is a wonderful idea. You know, actually, all of the people you're building will be your neighbours so you actually know everybody around you. The fact is that you're going to work with these people, you're going to get to know them, and then eventually when it's all built, you can be working together. So I think you can actually end up...you should end up with some friends for life. And I think that's one of the best things about it.

**Veteran 2 (Kate?):** It's not nice to just exist. I'd like to have the opportunity to give my children nice things, basically. I'm really, really grateful for the opportunity and Ken and Carl and Lynn at the Breakfast Club, and Martyn at RBL. I just I can't thank them enough, really.

**Sara:** How was listening to that? So, were those the types of things that you expected to hear from the veterans about what this project means to them?

**Clare:** Yeah, because I've been working with them for a number of years now. Yeah, I knew what was going to come and what it meant to them, really.

**Matt:** It's great to hear what it means to them. I know I particularly talk about Fred when you hear about the fact that he was living out of his car and he had family bereavement. So, he's really, really been through the mill. But, actually, he's got so many skills and he's done lots of trades, but has just fallen upon hard times. Through this project, he might be the sort of person that puts his arm around some of the other people and give them support.

**Sara:** Were some of them friends before the scheme actually happened, or did they all actually meet each other on the scheme?

**Clare:** I think some of them met at Breakfast Club, didn't they, Martin?

**Martin:** Yeah, that's right. It's just like an informal support chinwag and it's all veterans together.

**Sara:** Do you think that other housing providers and local authorities should be able to do schemes like this?

**Matt:** I think for me it's about making sure that every party that's around the table realizes that they've got to put a bit in and a bit more than they would do normally to just go and build a bog-standard housing estate. So, everyone's got to jump in with a bit of extra...maybe financial resource, more than they would normally be comfortable with, like we've done; a bit more extra time and emotion, particularly from Clare's perspective.

From Hereford's perspective, it wouldn't have happened without putting in the land for, you know, a pound from their section, which is unbelievable of them to do that. Local authorities don't tend to do that these days. And, you know, everyone's got to take a little bit of a leap of faith. I think if you're on board and you like the idea of it then you've got to be able to pull the strings to make sure that everybody can make that happen and commit.

**Anisha:** Would you recommend the other housing associations and councils work together to make schemes like this happen?

**Matt:** Definitely.

**Martin:** I would, yes, absolutely.

**Sara:** And there's another company involved in the project that weren't able to come along today, and that's Harper's. I believe, when they were bidding for the work, they actually included someone specifically to work with the veterans.

**Clare:** Yeah, that was part of the tender. We actually requested that as part of the tender that we sent out to all the contractors, because we've been told by Martin and the veterans agency that we had to have an allocated site manager, so to speak, on site that would actually allocate all the work to the veterans. I think it's a veterans

coordinator or something, it's called. As well as the coordinator from Alabare as well, which is the veterans agency. So there's a lot of personnel involved.

Harper's were chosen because they were a local business. They are literally a quarter of a mile away from the site. They're trying to keep everything local on there; we're sourcing some artwork for the scheme as well, and that's local. The hoarding has been done by local schoolchildren. So, we're just trying to keep it community-based.

**Anisha:** Yeah, that community feel, I think, makes a massive difference to how it's going to be received once it's built. And then once people are living there, how they'll be able to integrate with the community that's already there.

**Clare:** Exactly. We want it to work so we're doing everything we can to...

**Martin:** I think the contractors have got some veterans working for them as well, haven't they.

**Clare:** Yeah, so Scott, who's the one that's been allocated as the liaison – he's ex-army, I think.

**Martin:** Yeah. There is a common language between them. You can almost say it's like a different culture if you're not a veteran, and I'm not a veteran.

**Clare:** I am though.

*[Laughter]*

**Sara:** Well, thank you all of you for making the time to speak to us today.

**Anisha:** Everyone who's listening, please don't forget to tweet us or let us know on Facebook what your thoughts are on today's episode. And to round off, we're just going to share with you a few more thoughts from Kate, one of the veterans from the scheme, about why her current housing situation is less than ideal and why this new home is really important to her and her family.

**Kate:** It means a lot because the house I'm in at the moment isn't terribly suitable. Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful to be housed, obviously, but it's a three-storey house and I have problems with my knees and my back. It's not the greatest, I sometimes can't make it all the way up to the top storey to go to bed, so I end up kipping on the sofa which isn't ideal for my back. And retraining, new skills, hopefully actually getting hands-on with the building work and helping with anything from bricklaying to putting up shelves and electricals and all that sort of thing, which is going to be great. So hopefully fingers crossed that it will all go well.

**Sara:** If you would like any more information about everything that we've talked about in today's podcast, check the episode description and we'll have all the links so you can find out all the relevant information.

*We hope you've enjoyed this episode of Stonewater's On The Air. Thanks for listening. We'll be launching a new episode every other Wednesday, so stay tuned for some more great conversations.*