

Series 3, Episode 10 Transcript

Hello and welcome to part two of Inside Jobs, a special episode of On the Air, a podcast brought to you by Stonewater. Last time our guests talked about increasing financial pressures on households:

[Andy excerpt]

'The fact that there has been 4,500% increase in those grants is a symbol of, actually, the increasing struggles that people have got. And if we go back a couple of years where we went into the pandemic and now we think about the cost of living pressures that are on millions of households.'

...and the impact of remote working on low-paid workers:

[Dave excerpt]

'But for lower earners during the pandemic, generally, there've been, kind of, negative impact on, kind of, health and wellbeing. And we wanted to really understand: is that because the experience of lower earners just isn't as good? Or was it because the lower earners just didn't have the same opportunity to access this type of work?'

In today's episode, guest co-hosts David Button and Jenny Sawyer will be exploring what employers can do to ensure the benefits of homeworking are experienced equally, featuring special guests Dave Lockerman, Director of Housing Operations at Stonewater, Andy Peers, CEO at Longleigh Foundation, and Stonewater customer, Louise Kitson.

David: When Stonewater launched the research last year, we were looking a little bit around potential new poverties that have been created as a result of the shift to homeworking. But Dave, given the cost-of-living crisis has escalated since the publication of the report, and some of the impacts of homeworking might not have even been considered then or might be greater now, what are the challenges from the report that you think needs to be addressed immediately?

Dave: So, in terms of the challenges which came out, there were some, kind of, as you mentioned, we were interested in whether or not there could be new poverties that just hadn't been considered. And what came out really was around low-paid workers at home being more exposed to risks around, kind of, space and equipment. So when I joined the focus groups where Louise was at, some of the, kind of, conversations that came out were around, you know, just not having the space at home to accommodate, you know, a work space, so, you know, customers having to work from dining room tables, their kids around them, and, as a consequence of that, not have space for their own equipment. So there was some real clear, kind of, evidence that came out around that.

In addition, there was a piece around, kind of, connectivity and actually having access to, you know, affordable quality broadband was an issue for some. And obviously, in an increasing, kind of, cost-of-living crisis, affordable connectivity is

going to be an increasing issue. I think there were some really interesting points that came out around cost and actually so... low earners that were full time, kind of, homeworking were saving around £262 per year. But hybrid earners, we saw an increase in cost of around £466, and nearly half of low-paid hybrid workers said that their costs had gone up. And I think that points back to Katy's point around flexibility, so I think the hybrid models that this refers to is, kind of, a rigid model where your employer says 'right, you come in for, you know, three days, you work from home for two days'. And actually what we saw were, you know, workers having to then pay for the cost of commuting to work as you would: parking, et cetera, et cetera. But then have your increased costs from being at home and, you know, those increased costs from being at home – 60% of remote workers said that they are expecting to pay more for gas and electricity.

And, you know, at that point when we did the research, we were aware really that we were expecting to see increasing costs in terms of energy and look where we are now. So I think there is a real risk there around, kind of, lower earners being really exposed to these increasing costs around energy, particularly if you are in a rigid model where you're having to come into work for X number of days and then work from home and get exposed to both, you know, that's going to certainly be exacerbated in terms of the current climate we're at. So I think there are some real risks there and it comes back to that flexibility. Flexibility is absolutely key.

But what we shouldn't also lose, kind of, focus of: yes, the research really did expose some risks there for lower earners, but remote working was really seen as a good thing – 94% currently working from home said they'd like to in the future. And all homeworkers were really positive about the impact it'd had on productivity, work-life balance, autonomy, caring responsibilities, health and wellbeing, et cetera. So what we need to be careful of is, you know, those kind of positives being eaten up, if you like, by the, kind of, you know, increased costs and, you know, applying, kind of, a rigid model.

David: From both customers and also colleagues at Stonewater, how are you taking some of those issues on board and trying to support the people that you work with?

Dave: So if I talk through, kind of, what we're doing in relation to customers, I think, firstly, in terms of the research, it pulls out some really strong points in terms of influencing and policy points that we'll need to continue to influence on, and I think we'll absolutely continue to do that. So that is around, kind of, government and making employee contracts flexible by default, making sure the tax relief system covers these additional costs that we've spoken around.

And the government is really thinking about, kind of, remote working strategies because obviously the way we are working has shifted, and also around, kind of, ensuring that the benefits system actually supports customers. So at the moment, if a customer is using...has a spare room and is utilising that to work from, actually they're penalised in terms of the benefit system. For us directly, one of the things that we weren't necessarily that on to before the research was around social tariffs. So making sure that we are signposting customers to social tariffs around broadband, we need to make sure as well that we're not scoring an own goal, so making sure that our tenancies don't restrict our customers from working from home.

One of the big pieces is around making sure that, you know, this isn't going away now and making sure that our homes are places where customers can continue to

thrive from. So we are looking at including working space within all of our new properties that we are developing.

And going back to Andy's point that you made earlier, we need to be working with our supply chains and making sure that we're linking our customers to employment opportunities.

More generally, obviously, as we've spoken to, there is a significant cost-of-living crisis at the moment. You know, I've worked in the sector for 22 years and it's the worst that I certainly remember it. And I think we've done a number of things, so we work really closely with the Longleigh Foundation and Andy has spoken around in terms of individual grants, but also in terms of the Circles of Support project, which is essentially making sure that we have holistic support available to customers around physical, emotional and financial challenges. And we are absolutely making sure that where we are meeting customers that have struggles, that we are able to refer into Circles of Support and make sure that we're able to support in those circumstances.

We've been really conscious that actually we need to make sure the customers are aware of our financial inclusion offer. So we've just gone out and we've spoken to all customers to make them aware of the support that's available. And, you know, we've had over 500 contacts from customers wanting to speak to us and access some of that support, which is some of the driver in terms of what Andy's seen in terms of the increase in grant applications, et cetera. So really, it's just making sure that we're able to support customers that are experiencing those challenges and we've got those referral pathways available, and that we continue to communicate and make sure that customers are where they can talk to us and we will work with them if they are struggling.

David: Jenny, following on from that, the Institute for Employment Studies highlighted after we launched the report that, while many people working from home found real benefits, employers must be mindful of the downside. And in particular, he pointed out that younger and lower-paid workers were more susceptible to feelings of isolation, poor mental health, and often that's because of living in and working in cramped conditions and the extra costs of heating and lighting and things like that. As an organisation that predominantly works from home, how does Stonewater ensure that it's providing the right support to colleagues to combat these challenges?

Jenny: Yeah, I mean, I was reflecting on what Katy was saying about flexible working, and it reminded me of our early days of the pandemic, because I think we had something of a game changer quite early on, to be honest. We probably were one of those organisations you talked about, Katy, when it came to flexible working, you know, we've got a policy and, to be honest, there wasn't a huge appetite for thinking about flexible working patterns. And then, of course, like everyone else, we were faced with the challenge of the schools being closed – it's not something you just ever imagined ever happening. And so within sort of 24, 48 hours, we'd had to come up with a solution for that for colleagues. And we said, 'well, if you've got secondary school children, they're probably going to be okay', you know, chuck them some food in their room and they'll probably look after themselves. But if you've got primary or younger children, how on earth are people going to do their job? So we made the decision that we would say, 'you work around that childcare, you do whatever you need to do, whenever you need to do it, if you want to take some time out in the week and catch up in the evenings'. And in a way, that just changed the whole landscape for us when it came to flexible working, because once you've established that that can work well, then never again can anyone really object to

somebody starting a bit later or finishing a bit earlier or having a sort of flexible week. So that was, you know, that for us I think changed a lot.

I think one of the things about the approach that we've taken is that we're not stipulating how often or how long colleagues have to work from home. When we open up our hubs after the Easter holiday, we'll be encouraging colleagues to get out, meet each other and work wherever it suits them. We've developed an online directory for people to, sort of, rate their local spaces. If you find a really fabulous coffee shop that's nice and quiet or a free space in a community hall or, you know, wherever there is locally. And we've really listened to colleagues in designing those new hubs in terms of what those spaces need to, sort of, be like, because we made the mistake of assuming everybody would want to get to those spaces to collaborate, because there's just as many people trying to get away from an overcrowded house or, you know, just a difficult environment, they just want some quiet space to work on their own.

And Katy mentioned about benefits, so we've been constantly updating our benefits to offer support through things like an online GP. So you haven't got to worry about trying to get to the doctors, especially at the moment, it's very difficult. And also off the back of this research, actually, we offered up to £10,000 loan for people to create some space at home to work. We've seen some really creative things and it really shows what people can do on a budget. So, yeah, I think it's probably the simple things that have made the biggest difference, though, so things like blocking out the lunchtime in everybody's diary, to say 'there's no meetings, so get out and get some fresh air' or just, you know, 'take a break'. Those are the things that have been really popular.

There's a number of recommendations in the report that almost calls to action for the government, but also employers to better support low-earning employees. So is there anything housing providers can do? Do you think that better support low earning customers to meet the challenges of new ways of working? Andy, what do you think?

Andy: I think that there is a very big topic on this one that we haven't addressed yet. And I'm just going to refer back to the work of Professor Guy Standing, who did a book about ten years ago called *The Precariat*, and in that book he talks about that, on average, when somebody went into the workplace in the 1950s or 60s, by the age of retirement they may have had about four different jobs. Now, when somebody goes into the workplace by the age of 30, they might have had at least nine different jobs. And if we think about the new customers, there's about 1.2 million families on a housing waiting list in this country, and in any one year only a third of that number will be offered a social let. So that means that, out of 1.2 million, 400,000 people have risen somewhere to the top of a list to say you are now a priority for housing. If you think about some of the challenges that those families are facing and think about how far away from the workplace they may be, I think we have to address the issue of precarious work because we're expecting a real agility in the workplace against a system that is anything but agile.

So I think that if people are offered security of employment, I think straight away you're going to engage more people in a conversation about work. But when we're asking people to think about all the changes they need to make in their life to accept work, only to be told that it's then on a fixed-term contract for 12 months, or think about the fact that it's zero hours contract or there are some companies that say that you are actually employed, but then you're actually really self-employed, there's a bit of a mess going on out there. And so I think that if we want to really support

customers into the world of work and that's even before we think about homeworking, I think the one thing that we've got to try and get right in our society is the stability and the security of employment. So we might think here some of the people on this call, we might have worked in a company where actually our length of employment with them may have been, say, eight years, but we might have had three different jobs within that time. So whilst we didn't have role security, we did have job security because we were people who were given an opportunity in a company and then given the opportunity to progress.

I'm thinking about people who actually may be trying to re-enter the workplace after a period of time away for a number of reasons. When I look at the individual grants that we provide, a couple of the biggest pathways into those grants are for people who are moving from homelessness. The other one is people who are moving, sorry, people who have got a diagnosed health condition or disability, and a big number of people who are citing mental health conditions. That's the customer base of Stonewater that we are providing grants to. If we want to help those people coming to work, imagine the motivation if that job came, as Katy said, with fair pay and benefits, but actually also came with some security of employment as well.

David: Did anyone have anything to add to that?

Louise: I just wanted to say, as a Stonewater customer, that I felt very supported by Stonewater, that they provided extra help for me, which has helped further my job where I work as well, providing an IT course to learn more skills. And I've seen in my community as well, being that community champion, where they have helped residents get the support that you've mentioned already, and it's really, really refreshing to see. And having been a Stonewater customer for 20 plus years, I've only just noticed this change happening and it's becoming more advertised out there, the awareness is being spread much better through the way that they inform you through the technology – it's really, really good. So I just wanted to point out that, you know, a time where there's a lot of negativity that there is some positivity in this.

David: That's great to hear, thanks Louise. Katy, did you have anything you wanted to add?

Katy: Well, I guess just to the broader point, I think historically when we are looking at, kind of, employment programmes, there'd been a move to like, 'let's get people into any job and then a better job and then a career'. And I think that what the pandemic has done and actually what these conversations demonstrate is: it's not actually good enough to just get people into any job that isn't going to support them. What we need to be doing is progressing towards all jobs being good jobs. And I think, as Andy really rightly pointed out, that includes making sure that the security is there to support people, to kind of look at all the other challenges or elements that they may have in their lives and then to progress from there. But I think people can't progress from a job that isn't good for them, so we need to make sure that all work is good for you in its entirety, and make sure that those opportunities are open and accessible for all. So as Louise is saying, sounds like it's great – Stonewater are now communicating this out in more accessible ways. Employers need to make sure that people are aware of what is out there and are aware also of, kind of, what their rights are when they get into work.

Dave: So from a housing association point of view, I think one of the things coming into this research, I guess I was worried that when we went to speak to our customers, our customers would say: 'It's all right for you, you're working from home,

but we don't have the opportunity to do that'. But actually in terms of lower earners, 37% said they're already working from home. And I think, you know, it speaks to... there are a large proportion of our customers that are currently working this way, and we need to be mindful of that and make sure that our homes continue to meet needs and offer our customers a place to thrive from. So, you know, thinking around connectivity space to work is going to be really important and increasingly so as we go forward, so I definitely think that's a consideration for the sector.

Really simple point is around the social tariffs and making sure that, you know, we're aware as provider and we can signpost towards them. But the other point, I guess we've not spoken to that came out in their research is: 87% of those currently not working from home or remotely said it would be impossible for them to do so. And of course, there will be, you know, sectoral-type issues. So, you know, if you're a gardener, you're not going to be able to do that from home. But it does also speak to a skills gap potentially and anything around, kind of, opportunity and flexibility. So there is something for obviously, employers, as we've spoken around in terms of flexibility, but for providers, is making sure that we're aware that there's potentially that skills gap and making sure that we've got offers to be able to support that. You know, Louise spoke around the digital skills that we've been able to offer customers. But coming back to that point around being able to link customers up to opportunities and, you know, providers will be working with significant supply chains, and being able to do that is going to be really important.

David: It's been really interesting to hear each of your thoughts and the various perspectives on this still highly topical discussion, so thank you very much for joining us.

Jenny: Yes, thank you, and thank you to everyone who's tuned in. We'll feature the links to everything we've mentioned on today's episode in the show notes for further information. So thanks again, and until next time.

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