

Series 2 Episode 1: Choose to challenge #IWD2021 Transcript

Anisha: We're back! Hi, everyone, I'm Anisha, and thank you for tuning in for series two. Last time we were recording On the Air, we were sat around a table in our lovely office with our lovely guests. But, of course, a lot has changed in the last 12 months: from the pandemic and working remotely to the Black Lives Matter protests. A number of events are reshaping what we do as individuals in our organisations and also across the sector. Being able to adapt and to show resilience has been a core focus for housing providers, but the need for inclusivity has never been greater. Sara, do you want to tell us a bit about what we'll be talking about over the next four episodes?

Sara: Hi, everyone, and thanks Anisha, I think you said it pretty perfectly there. And, to be honest, a lot of the work we do across the sector has 'inclusivity' at the forefront. But what we plan to talk about during this series is how it's not just a buzzword and actually discuss some of the key initiatives and highlight the support that is currently being provided.

Which brings me on to today's episode focus. So, between March and June last year, which was the first national lockdown, 259,324 cases of domestic abuse were reported to the police, which is a seven percent increase for the same period the year before. This is sadly a longstanding and complex issue that various charities, including Stonewater, are calling for greater action on.

Anisha: Yes, and with International Women's Day taking place next Monday on the 8th of March, we thought that we would unpick this year's theme, Choose to Challenge, to demonstrate what is currently being done to support survivors and their families, as well as explore what more we can do.

Sara: So, to help us dig deep and really understand the issues at hand, we're joined by Shamela, a coach at a South Asian Women's Refuge; Alison Inman, former chair of the CIH and founder of the Make a Stand campaign; Valerie Wise, national domestic abuse lead at Victim Support; and Sian from Stonewater's dedicated LGBTQ+ provision, the Safe Space.

Anisha: So, let's start by looking at the theme for this year's International Women's Day. Shamela, you work in a specialist area supporting women whose needs just simply aren't met by the open market. What does the theme Choose to Challenge mean to you?

Shamela: I think for us it's challenging women that can't be accessed into social housing because they have no recourse to public funds. So, a lot of the time they're turned away by social housing councils simply because their visa says no, they can't access the public funds. That's a huge area that we support with: helping them to secure indefinite leave so that later on, when they move on to independent living, that there isn't any barriers for them to go into any sorts of housing.

Anisha: Exactly, and following on from that, Sian, you obviously manage quite a different service. What does this year's theme mean to you?

Sian: I think, well, the majority of domestic violence awareness movements have been focused on heterosexual relationships, so for me, it's about focusing on the

LGBT movement and how, actually, people from that community are just as much a victim. And, if not, actually research shows that there are higher rates as well as being victims. So, it's about recognizing that and what we can do about that.

Anisha: Definitely. And, Valerie, your team at Victim Support obviously support such a wide range of survivors so the theme, Choose to Challenge, I can imagine means quite a lot to you this year.

Valerie: It does, and I think a major challenge for us, as I'm sure it is for you as well, is that we're still in the pandemic. We're still going to be in the pandemic, I think, for quite a while – never mind that we're getting the vaccines. And we've seen such a colossal increase in victims of domestic abuse coming forward. We've done some research in victim support, which shows that between, you know, the first lockdown on the first of November, we had an increase of 11,500 more victims being referred to us, which is a huge number.

And, also, we're finding that people are experiencing more violence – perhaps violence without injury, more coercive control. So, I think the huge challenge is how we're going to meet the growing demand for our services, you know, across the board.

Anisha: Exactly. And, Alison, from a housing perspective, what does Choose to Challenge mean to you?

Alison: So, for me, it's a couple of things. One is, I suppose, challenging the housing sector to bring about a sort of whole system change. I think we've done really well at raising awareness throughout the housing sector of the role that housing can play in a response to domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. But there's more, you know, there's much more that we can do.

The other thing around Challenge – my challenge would be to the people who are perpetrating violence and abuse. We need to challenge them to stop. And that means having a really, really grown-up conversation about perpetrator programmes. You know, we need a national strategy. I think there's going to be an amendment to the Domestic Abuse bill to try and ensure that that happens. It's going through parliament at the moment. But in the 30-odd years I've been involved in this sector, we've not seen anything get better. We've just seen more and more and more incidents. And I think it's time that we challenge ourselves as a whole society to just put a stop to this.

Sara: I agree. And, interestingly, in the first series of On the Air, we sat down with Jim Strang, also former president of the CIH, and he talked about the Make a Stand campaign and why it was important for him to continue championing that after you'd finished your term. Can you just give a bit of insight to our listeners why you decided to launch the campaign and why it was important to you?

Alison: I think it was, you know, sometimes events just sort of all happen, don't they, and lead you down a certain path. But I'd been interviewed as part of an oral history project looking at the history of domestic abuse services, women's refuges in particular, in East Anglia, which is where I live. And I was sort of thinking back to, you know, 35 years ago, what would I have predicted the world would look like? And at the time, you know, we all thought we were going to be obliterated by nuclear weapons.

But if we were here at all, I think there was an optimism amongst that generation of women slightly older than me who had set up that first wave of refuges following Erin Pizzey in the 70s. We thought we'd have sorted it by now. We genuinely thought that we celebrated the increase in reporting year upon year upon year, because we were saying we're lifting the lid, we're shining a light on this, we're going to change. And, in fact, it's got worse. I think that, you know, the ways in which we're seeing particularly young people as both, you know, people experiencing abuse and perpetrators of abuse. I think technology has given, you know, a million new ways to abuse people. We're seeing repeat offenders going down the generation, we're seeing people experiencing the abuse that their mum and their grandma perhaps experienced. It's not getting any better.

And in the houses that we pride ourselves on running, on building, on managing and on maintaining the best possible homes that we can – I think we'd all agree that's what we're here for – and if that home isn't a safe place, then it sort of means we're not doing our job properly. So, it's just an opportunity to, you know, start some conversations. And the response has been phenomenal, there has been such an appetite within the sector. But one of the things at the end of that time, for me, I realised I had never, ever been in a room full of people, talking, without somebody coming up to me at the end of it and making some kind of a disclosure about abuse that they'd experienced, or that their mum or their sister or their friend... And it's everywhere and that's why we wanted to focus on – as well as on the services that we provide as landlords – actually looking at our staff, because every single one of us works with a survivor... and that's sometimes, you know, that's really difficult. What's even more difficult is we undoubtedly work with perpetrators. We sit, you know, when were still in offices. We were sharing the kitchen with someone who would be perpetrating domestic abuse. And I don't think we're anywhere on coming to terms with that.

Anisha: I think it's so interesting that you say that, because that's something I've never even considered. You know, as a woman, I think about survivors and the experiences of my friends or my loved ones. And I never sort of think about the other side of that coin. And it's so easy to sort of dismiss that, to dismiss the... you know, as much as we are surrounded by survivors, we are surrounded by perpetrators. And I think there's still a massive misconception about what domestic abuse does entail. And so, just before I ask my next question, I want to share this clip from a resident who's actually been supported by the South Asian Women's Refuge where Shamela works, and she talks about being financially, mentally, and physically exploited by not just her husband, but his family as well.

[This clip is spoken by an actress]

They didn't support me, my husband didn't support me. When he didn't come home for three to four days, after four days, he came home. I asked him, 'where have you been?' I asked him, 'do you need food?' He pushed me, he abused me. His parents didn't support me, they supported their son. This place is very important for us because if this place wasn't here, our in-laws would threaten us. They'll send us to Pakistan because they didn't respect us and kicked us out.

[End of clip]

Anisha: From hearing that and also what you've all learned in your roles, I'd like to ask you about some of the issues that you believe women are still facing today. Valerie, do you want to kick us off?

Valerie: Yes. Well, one of the interesting things about our research, again, when we've looked at what's been happening during the pandemic is, because I understand about what was being said about age of women, and often it is younger women that might come forward. But, interestingly enough, there's been a notable increase in survivors over the age of 55 coming forward, which I think is really interesting because we know it happens to people of all ages, but we also know it's actually much harder maybe for them to be able to seek support. They might not realise what's available. So, I think it's really, really important that we recognise that.

Also, what we found is that we're getting... you know how domestic abuse is categorised. I mean, from a victim's perspective, I don't think it makes much difference, to be honest: if you're a victim, you're a victim, or you're a survivor. But people that perhaps haven't experienced such severe abuse – classified as standard or medium risk – again, we've had a massive 93 percent increase in those referrals coming from people.

So, in one sense, maybe that's good because they're actually coming forward, but maybe it also shows that perhaps it's been more frequent, which is what we believe, because people have been shut in their homes, often with their perpetrators, feeling incredibly isolated. And I think it's just really, really important that people recognise, you know: don't put up with it. There are obviously places like yourselves, there's us, there's other places that you can go for support. And I think it really, really is important that you don't just, you know, put up with it.

And I mean, again, I think with the pandemic, what's been really critical is often people who are experiencing domestic abuse feel anxious, have mental health issues. That's just been magnified because of the situation of being, you know, locked in our own homes, not being able to go out, not being able to see our friends and things like that; having a reduction in our control and independence.

Financial pressures have obviously also added to things. So, I think we're going through a really difficult time and I don't think it's actually going to improve for quite a long time after we, hopefully, one day get back to normal. I think we're going to be seeing the repercussions of this for many, many years.

Anisha: Definitely. And I think it is very clear that this is long-term work. Sian, how about you? What sort of challenges do you think women are still facing today?

Sian: I was recently researching domestic abuse and I was actually quite surprised to see that, actually, women with disabilities are at a higher rate of domestic abuse than people with not. But what really is shocking is the lack of provisions for people with disabilities. So, I think that's something we need to look at and how we can help people with disabilities.

Anisha: It's so difficult, isn't it, because the world – our world – is not built for people with disabilities and we still have, again, a massive way to go. Shamela, from your perspective, what challenges do you think women are still facing today?

Shamela: I think they're still facing a fear of being homeless. I think there are still a huge number of people that are still tolerating and living in that abusive relationship because they're still afraid of being homeless. They're afraid of the disruption that comes with that. A lot of people have, you know, a lack of knowledge about: What are refugees? What do they provide? What can they expect? For them, it's leaving their homes, leaving their towns, leaving, you know, the whole community of people.

And I think there needs to be more work done around to break those barriers and raise awareness of what support they can expect to receive if they reach out for help.

But I think, you know, a lack of knowledge about services – also a fear of deportation. With our client group, we often find that they're threatened that they're going to be deported. They're threatened that no one could help them, that they don't belong to this country, why would anybody in this country help them when they're from another country. So, that fear of being deported forces them to continue to stay in that abusive relationship.

Sara: And the pandemic has really shone a light on the realities of domestic abuse, with calls from every direction for greater action to be done to support survivors and their families. Can you each just give listeners an insight into how your organisation has responded to the increased demand for special services to support people fleeing domestic abuse?

Valerie: One of the things that we've done is we have a live chat – Victim Support has live chat – and we were able to make our live chat go 24 hours. And it's interesting, the majority of calls are outside normal office hours, so outside Monday to Friday, nine 'til five. And we're getting a huge number of the people going on live chat that are women and are victims of domestic abuse. So, I think they're maybe finding – if they're living with the perpetrator – they're maybe finding an opportunity when, you know, he or she is not in the house, that they can actually get in touch with us, maybe even in the middle of the night. So that's one of the things that we've done that's actually proved really, really successful.

And another thing that we've done is increase our online presence. We've got something called My Support Space, which actually is like self-help tools that you can use. And again, I think that's really important because, you know, it means you can choose the time when it's safe for you to make access because not every service can be 24 hours a day in terms of domestic abuse. But I think it's important to try and ensure that you are reaching out as much as possible. So those are a couple of really practical things that we've done which have, I think, made quite a difference.

Sian: So, we have got our extended domestic abuse service, which is great. We have more provisions for people, especially during Covid, to flee. But one thing I have noticed is, as much as having more provisions, it's been harder for victims to flee because their abuser is at home with them all the time as well.

Sara: It's been the sad reality that people are now trapped at home with their perpetrators, isn't it.

Alison: Yeah, and one of the most chilling things I heard from research from one of the national domestic abuse charities was the testimony of a young woman who, when the first lockdown was announced, her perpetrator turned the television off, turned to her and said, 'now let the fun begin'.

There was one week at the beginning of the first lockdown where 10 women and children lost their lives. You know, we've seen levels of sustained abuse that we've never seen before.

And I think, you know, from what we see from housing organisations, there's a real will to make a difference. But I think sometimes housing isn't able to help. You know, if I look back 30-odd years to the route a woman would often go who was

experiencing abuse, it would be to go into refuge; probably stay in refuge, you know, six months – probably the time taken to begin to heal and that sort of therapeutic input. And then, almost without exception, leave refuge and go into a lifetime secure tenancy in what at the time would have been a council house. That was almost invariably what happened. And we don't have that now. But, you know, listening to Jess Phillips talk about her constituents who may have been in refuge, who then spend two years in a Travel Lodge on the M5 services at Frankley. No, that is not a place from which a woman and children can rebuild their lives.

And we've got this housing crisis. I think we also have people who move in together before they know each other almost, because the housing crisis forces people into that cohabitation in a way that, you know... I'm sounding like my own mother, but there's very little courting, as it was. So, people don't know each other well enough. They don't know how it's going to be like to live together. And by the time they've moved in together, that's often too late.

I think what we have seen during lockdown has been some absolutely stunning work from the domestic abuse sector. I give a shout out to an amazing woman called Mina, who runs an organisation called Hope Training. I don't know if you've come across them, Shamela, but every every Friday during lockdown, she has, you know, Zoom meetings for anyone who's working with black and minority ethnic women in the domestic abuse sector. I think the women's sector stepped up to the plate but there's a funding crisis and we need to find more ways to get more women able to access services. And that's going to cost money.

Sara: I think you touched on a really pivotal point in terms of the transitioning from a refuge and the kind of aftercare, if you will, and how we continue supporting those individuals. Shamela, I've spoken to a few women from your refuge when they are about to move on and the kinds of things that they're excited to begin. Can you just talk a little bit about what kinds of support Stonewater does offer or what the kind of journey is, if you will, for the approach you guys take?

Shamela: I think we're very lucky because in 2015 we had our Move On refuge. So, where residents had been with us for a little while – six, eight months – and then they're ready for independent living, they have that transition to our Move On refuge where there's less support. We're still there to support, but the support is reduced because we're trying to empower them with their independent skills. They get to see what it's like to live on their own, have a bit of that taster before they move into the community. So, I think that's a great transition for them to have while they're waiting to be rehoused in the community.

Once they are rehoused, we support them up to six months and we can support them longer, if needed. And that's in terms of, like, just setting them up with their bills, just checking that they're okay. Once they move into their own homes, it's quite lonely, and sometimes people can go on a high and then come back down again. So, it's making sure that they're okay and they're accessing services, they're still doing things to keep themselves busy and develop themselves. So, we carry on with that support as long as that lady requires it. And I think it's important that we carry on with that. We don't say: 'You've been offered a property now, that's it. So, it's phased out very slowly.

Sara: Is that you as an individual – as a coach – that really cares about the women you support and therefore you go the extra mile to make sure that, you know, you do check in with those individuals, or is that just the culture of Stonewater?

Shamela: I think that's the culture of Stonewater. I think, as an organisation, we like to go that extra mile. It's not about just doing what we need to do, but it's just making sure that we've done it and that our customers are completely, you know, that they feel supported and they feel confident to be left. At the end of the day, we're trying to empower them to make informed choices and support them with making those independent choices and, you know, we'll hold their hands as long as they need us to hold their hands, and we'll support them with that transition.

Sian: I agree with Shamela. That's exactly what we do with a Safe Space. So, it is about holding their hands and helping them move forward, and being there as long as they need us.

Alison: And I think there's something about Stonewater as well. I spent quite a few years now, you know, wandering around the housing sector, talking to any room that will have me really. You have to become shameless when you want to change the world! One of the most disappointing things has been the number of rooms full of women I've spoken to with very, very few men. You know, if you're going to a conference and people can choose a workshop and, you know, I've often done those with the women from the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance, and you get a room full of women – men don't choose to come to those things. But there are usually two men there, one of whom is a bloke called Mike Gaskell, who used to work for Trowers solicitors and is a housing association chair. But the other one is Guy from Stonewater. And I think when you have senior management buy-in from a bloke, I think that's really, really important because this is everybody's issue. It's not just an issue for, you know, people experiencing abuse; it's not just a women's issue, it's a whole system's issue. So, you know, it was lovely to be invited today, but hardly surprising because I think, you know, Stonewater is an organisation that really does take this stuff seriously.

Anisha: Yeah, we definitely do, and it's funny because Sara-Anne and I have had this conversation before. We were talking about it in the context of race. But, you know, we can't do this work on our own. Everybody has to chip in; this is a whole societal shift that we're looking for. And the work is not done and it won't be done until everybody buys in.

Sara: So, I wrongfully used to argue that domestic abuse was a women's issue. And I had a conversation with someone who said that that is completely wrong, because what you're doing is saying that the men that do commit that act, you're kind of justifying it and saying it's the women's fault; and you're almost saying that that was OK and that they couldn't control themselves. It does a disservice to the men that actually do know how to act correctly. That was a really empowering conversation for me, because I completely never looked at it like that.

Alison: It was like the discussions we've had since Black Lives Matter, and the message that you get – which is a message we need to, you know, absolutely shout out loud and clear – is this is not the work for people of colour to do. It's white people that need to do the work around racism. And, similarly, that's why I think a proper perpetrator strategy is absolutely vital.

We can do all we can for survivors and we always will. But we also need the people who are committing these acts of aggression, wherever on the scale they are, to stop doing it. And for a lot of people, that's really hard because, you know, I spent 10 years in the family proceedings court as a magistrate, and the one thing I learned

from that was that there's a family history to everything. So, if there's violence in one generation – it's not invariable – but there's a really, really high chance that there was violence in the generation before that, and before that. These are learned behaviours. And I think that's why, you know, a lot of male perpetrators are doing what their dads did. You know, if that's what you see when you're growing up then that becomes normal. So, we can't just expect people to change overnight. We need to put, you know, there needs to be work put into that.

And it's complicated. But I think one of the things we can do is accept that it's complicated! That there's no easy answers. And the answers for the women that Shamela is working with might be different to the answers that Sian needs for the service that she's running, and that's fine as well.

Sara: There's no one size fits all in achieving the ultimate outcome for this; definitely.

Anisha: Exactly. It's interesting because my mum works at Refuge and we have this conversation a lot about sort of a public health approach to violence. I think what we do a lot of the time, especially in this country, is we treat symptoms and we don't treat the disease. And the work that we do at Stonewater and the work Valerie does at Victim Support is incredible. But I think we often miss getting to the root of the problem, which is dealing with perpetrators.

Alison: I think it's all about what happens early, you know, early days for families: the support we give to young mums, the support we give to young dads, how we talk about what it means to be a man. It's about attachment disorder; it's about some really, really complicated stuff.

I think, housing: we can do what we do really well so we can make sure that we're a good landlord; we can make sure that all our staff are cognizant of the signs of domestic abuse. So, if you make sure that our repairs team really know what the warning signs are, we can make sure that we take really quick action.

But we also need to be part of that broader conversation, which is about what kind of a world we want to live in. Why do we say that some women are worth more than other women? If we say we've got services and we're specifically saying they're not available to migrant women, what does that say about the value that we're putting on those women's lives? So, we need to think, you know, do something about no recourse to public funds. I think that is the one thing that would help the most women. We're absolutely nowhere there, politically.

Sara: If we were to sit down a year from now and talk about International Women's Day again. What would be the one call to action or the one call to change that you would have liked to have seen in the last year?

Shamela: I think we're still seeing that the amount of people that we're turning away in terms of signposting is still incredibly high. We accommodate customers, but there's a lot more that we have to signpost and turn away to other services. There needs to be more services, there needs to be more refuges, more specialist projects, to cater for this higher demand that we're seeing, especially in this pandemic. And, we always say, we've been working at the refuge for about 12 years now, and with domestic abuse it's always the survivor who's having to leave her home, her children.

There needs to be more done in terms of: is there a way that, if that person does not want to leave their home, we're able to do something to make the perpetrator leave?

You know, because a lot of the time it's the case that the person who is suffering the domestic abuse has to relocate. So, it's almost like double abuse. They've suffered the abuse in the home and also the abuse of having to relocate. So, those people that are not ready to move, how can we support those women that are still living in the home because of that fear that they don't want to have that disruption in their life? If they've got children going to school, they don't want to disrupt schools that children are going to, the community that they're in. What we can do around that.

Sara: Sian, same question for you.

Sian: I think, like I was talking about earlier about disabilities, I'd like to see more provisions for people with disabilities to help them to flee domestic abuse. But also work with perpetrators. I think we need to do a lot more work there to stop abuse at its source.

Sara: And Alison, I imagine you've got lots of thoughts on this.

Alison: How long you got? I think a year from now, I'd like to see the Domestic Abuse bill having gone through its parliamentary journey with all amendments that have been put in from the domestic abuse sector. This is wishful thinking but, around now, calls for public funds about what we do around joint tenancies to allow more survivors to stay in the home. Amendments around post-separation abuse, which continues changes to the family court. But actually, if we got all that stuff through parliament, got the royal assent and then we had a serious conversation about the money that needs to sit behind it to make that a reality. On a really local level, I think on a housing level, I'd love to see, you know, more organisations, more HR departments actually thinking about their responsibilities around both perpetrators and survivors within organisations. Some really difficult conversations that we need to have. I'd like to see that.

And the last thing is, although we are a sector that, you know, we have massive ambitions to develop, we need to be building more social housing. We are one of the very few people in the public sphere that have any money. And housing associations do make eye-watering amounts of surplus that they then use for good, but they can choose what they do with that money. And, actually, choosing to use a little bit more of it to support the people in their communities who are experiencing abuse would be on my shopping list and maybe Stonewater can lead the way. Who knows?

Anisha: I was about to say: I hope you can deliver your shopping yesterday! So, thank you all for joining us today. I feel like we could talk for hours, but I think we've definitely given all of our listeners something to think about and to take action on, not just for International Women's Day, but to bring about long-term positive change.

Sara: For more information about Stonewater's specialist support services, click the link in this episode's show notes to find out more. Next time, we'll be talking about creating opportunities for aspiring homeowners and exploring a topic that always finds itself in the middle of a debate: shared ownership.

Anisha: That episode will be live a week from today, or you can subscribe to be notified automatically. Thank you again for tuning in. Bye for now.