

Paula Palmer

Hello and welcome back to Stonewater's On The Air Podcast. I apologise if I'm a little gravely today, I'm getting over a bout of COVID. But that hasn't stopped us from getting together virtually. Today, we have the power, or more topically, the technology. This episode marks the second in our mini-series of podcasts talking about technology and housing. Last time, we spoke about Stonewater's partnership with Microsoft and how we harness data. Today, we're going to be talking about tackling the digital divide by finding out what it is and how we can resolve it, starting in our retirement-living homes. Let's start today's episode by welcoming our guest host, Linda Rayfield, who is the well-being and community capacity delivery manager. That's a long job title, again, at Stonewater.

Linda Rayfield

Thanks, Paula. Hello, everybody. As Paula says, I'm the well-being and community capacity delivery manager at Stonewater. In retirement-living specifically, we have five regions across the country, and I work in the South East with a colleague. She's a delivery manager. She looks after the buildings, and I look after the people.

Paula Palmer

Lovely. Thanks, Linda. Great to have you here with us, and I can't wait to hear more about the work you do. We've also got Charlene Barnett, who is a well-being and community connector at Stonewater.

Charlene Barnett

Hi, Paula. Hello, everyone. Yes, I'm the well-being and community connector for a retirement-living scheme in the central north. The same as Linda, I do have a partner that works with me who is a scheme coordinator. We manage a scheme called Norfolk House.

Paula Palmer

Great. We've got Kim - Kim Avantaggiato, who is our customer engagement coordinator at Stonewater.

Kim Avantaggiato

Hi, Paula. In my role here at Stonewater I'm a customer engagement coordinator, and it's my job to make sure that our customers have the opportunity to help us improve the way we do things. I've got to say, I love my job. I wholeheartedly believe putting customers at the centre of improving services is the right thing to do. Luckily for me, Stonewater feels as strongly about involving customers as I do.

Now, what does involving customers mean? Our customers receive services from us every day. They've got a unique lived experience about what works well and what needs improving. We make sure when we're updating a policy or modernising the way we do something. For example, we make sure customers

have a chance to tell us what they think. We can use surveys, workshops and customer feedback to help us make sure what we do is led by what customers tell us is important to them. That's my job in a nutshell.

Paula Palmer

Finally, we've got Pat Harvey, who is a resident at one of our retirement-living schemes and an Ageing Well board member.

Pat Harvey

Hello, Paula. Hello, everyone.

Paula Palmer

Thanks, everyone, for joining me on this podcast episode. Let's get stuck in. Charlene, could you tell us what does a digital divide mean to you? Perhaps you could give us some examples of how you see it playing out with the customers you work with.

Charlene Barnett

Yes. So, as part of my role, Paula. I am the well-being and community connector, as I've stated before, which I really focus on customers' health and well-being. This is an opportunity for me to be able to signpost, make referrals, and generally look at people's general needs, but to help them live independently in our Independent retirement-living scheme for as long as they can.

The barriers I do see and that we do face is that some customers don't have the ability to be able to use technology. They might financially not be able to afford to purchase technology. So it gives a barrier across some of the areas within Stonewater, like accessing their My Home online account and things like that, and generally just the understanding of it. But as times are moving, we are becoming more technical and as staff, we are introducing that as we go along. It is becoming more of a focus within the retirement-living schemes.

Paula Palmer

Fantastic. Good. So you're already working with our customers to make sure they've got the technology and are able to use the technology?

Charlene Barnett

Yes, absolutely, and accessing external resources as well as internal resources that we have at Stonewater for our customers and just being there to be able to support them and guide them, encourage them. Yes, the best we can, really.

Paula Palmer

Yes, sometimes it's just having the confidence to get stuck in.

Charlene Barnett

Absolutely. I think that is probably one of the biggest barriers, is the confidence, especially with the age range. It's having that confidence that they're not going to break a piece of item. They're not just by pressing a button, they're not going to destroy that piece of technical item. It's quite resistant and just building their confidence and using it really and encouraging how successful it can be to use the wider digital access and streams we've got.

Paula Palmer

Yeah, because so many of our systems and processes are all online now, from banking, talking to people, shopping. It's all online.

Charlene Barnett

Absolutely. I think for us in retirement-living, more of our customers relied on the more digital accesses through COVID, especially, because like you just said, shopping online, accessing prescriptions and NHS apps that are online, booking COVID injections. It was more of a case of being able to try and support them and encourage them. Okay, they might not have done it independently, and they may have had our support, but it was about, look, this is what you can access. This is what you can do going forward.

Paula Palmer

In COVID times, talking to family members was probably really important, wasn't it?

Charlene Barnett

Absolutely, yes. A lot of our customers become socially isolated. For us, it was a focus on trying to keep the morale up for them, but also keeping those connections with their family members, with support workers. To be fair, we're really quite fortunate in Norfolk House because we do have a system which is a Tunstall ViIP system, and customers are able, free of charge, to be able to call one another within the scheme. If people or individuals were starting to feel isolated, they could rely on one another just to pick them up and give them that "I am here if you need me." It's face recognition, so they were able to see people's faces as well. I think it gave it that more human, personal touch, but using technology.

Paula Palmer

Fantastic. Linda, could you tell us some more about the work that Stonewater has done to bridge that divide, especially for our retirement-living residents?

Linda Rayfield

Yes. Since 2017, we've worked in various areas to improve the technology that people can access easily. It's understanding, I think, that a lot of our customers find it difficult and it's making it easy to understand how to... And the fear. There's a lot of fear around using technology, which is what we're working at, particularly moving on from the INVITE project. We've always been quite active trying to recruit volunteers to come in. Obviously, staff are very active in encouraging people to use computers. But we are really focusing now on getting some of our customers, volunteer customers as well, involved with the work following on from the INVITE project.

Paula Palmer

What was the INVITE project? That was about technology in older generations or retirement-living?

Linda Rayfield

Yeah, well, it's actually ageing well with assisted technology, which is gadgets. Some of the more simple gadgets were the ones that were the most successful. Things like jar openers, kettles are on stands, and hot water heaters. There were some of our customers didn't get a cup of tea until their carers came in in the morning. But now with these gadgets, they put the lid on, put it on, switch it on in the morning, put the cup under, and there's the hot water. Lots of these were very simple gadgets like that.

We had a partnership between researchers from Stirling University and our customers. This was a project to investigate the ways in which assistive technology can be used to improve health and well-being and activity and community participation, really. People can read the full report or a summary report on our website if they're interested in popping along. It's very, very interesting. Going forward, we are expanding now onto the next stage of INVITE. This is where we've actually got an advert currently running on our website and in a lot of voluntary organisations around in the south east here for volunteers to come along and get involved.

We've actually, again, the fantastic Longleigh Foundation have funded what Charlene would say is show and tell kits, which are bits of the gadgets that were most popular. We've got those kits now and we want to roll that out with other customers because there were only few customers in, I think, four schemes at the time across the regions that were participating in the INVITE project. Now we're going that step further and that is going to branch out because we've actually got customers that are going to be supporting remotely as well. They will be supporting people who remotely are using technology, which is fantastic.

I know from, as Charlene was saying with COVID, how small it made the world, really, and how people... We've got so many opportunities. We are still signposting our customers to Learn My Way, which is a free

online platform for learning. We're always focusing people on that. But we've also got customers on schemes that have been in IT most of their life and they've now retired, and their transferable skills are absolutely invaluable. We've got equipment again, which has been funded by the Longleigh Foundation, and we've got pockets of areas now where customers are helping other customers to get online, set up email addresses, and they're holding little sessions during the week, having a coffee and talking about.

It's amazing how we are using our communities and our communities are giving back. It's fantastic to see. I'm just hoping that as the volunteers come on board as well, this just keeps expanding and more and more people are getting online and enjoying all of the advantages of using the internet.

Paula Palmer

That's fantastic. I really like the approach of the shared learning. If somebody learns how to do it and they pass that on and share their knowledge within their communities, that's lovely. Pat, if I can come to you as a resident of one of our retirement-living schemes, what challenges have you come across and how do you think they can be resolved?

Pat Harvey

Well, mostly up to now we've been talking about technology as in the internet and for communication purposes, which obviously is vital because to get through on a phone to someone like an electricity company is null and impossible. A lot of people aren't accepting checks any longer, so you need to be able to transfer money. You can't easily go to a bank these days because there are so few of them. So all that's vitally important. Well, more or less, since computers were a thing, I've used technology. I'm no expert at all. I find some things very difficult. I've worked on a need-to-know basis.

Like a couple of years ago, I learned how to work on Teams and Zoom because that's when I needed them. It's been a need-to-know. But my main challenge hasn't been to do with that. It's been to do with physical disability and how technology might help with that. I've recently had an electronically operated front door to my flat. That was done through a disabled facilities grant working with Stonewater. I think this is something that Stonewater really needs to be thinking about because there are a lot of physical disabilities.

Now, if you're in a power-assisted wheelchair, it's quite difficult to open some doors unless you can press a button, and they'll open. We have a back gate here that leads straight onto the park at the back. I cannot open it from my mobility scooter, but the lock, you can't get the angle to open it and then push this very heavy metal gate back and get your key out. Just can't do it. That is such a simple thing to be able to just go into the park at the back and get some fresh air. I mean, pavements in Leominster are notoriously awful. I don't think with the best will in the world Stonewater can do anything about that. I think the Paralympian, was it Tanni Grey-Thompson said once that most people see doors and gates as a way to something. People in wheelchairs or on mobility scooters see them as a barrier. I really do think that's something we need to do.

Paula Palmer

Yeah, fantastic, Pat. I really hadn't thought of it that way. I'd thought of it in the approach of mobile phones, IT, computers and stuff. But actually, you're right. There's technology for pretty much everything these days, isn't there? Thanks, Pat. That's a really great answer. As we already know, you're a member of the Ageing Well board, which I'm going to ask you a little bit more about in a moment. But firstly, I want to get to know Kim a bit more. Kim, can you tell us more about what you do, more about the Ageing Well board, why it was formed, what it does?

Kim Avantaggiato

I can tell you a little bit more about the Ageing Well board, Paula. Feedback from customers and data showed us that lots of people wanted to live in their own homes, in the communities that they belong to for as long as they could. That matches really with what Stonewater wants. The Ageing Well board was created back in 2021 and Pat joined. The aim of the group, that's made up of customers who are 55 or older and Stonewater colleagues, is to help design better, more adaptable services not just for customers who are over 55, but everyone.

However, the main focus for the Ageing Well board, we do focus on our more mature customers. The group explores ways to improve services, communities, communities, and most importantly, communication. They explore what might be getting in the way for customers in terms of being happy and healthy in their own homes. As Pat mentioned earlier, electronic doors. They suggest ways to improve and they work with us on those ideas, projects and processes and services that customers need to stay active and independent.

Most importantly for the Ageing Well board, they just want customers to be happy in their homes for longer. In summary, the group just used their own views, their lived experiences, to help shape the way we do things here at Stonewater. Pat, that's about it in a nutshell, ain't it?

Pat Harvey

Yes, I think so, Kim.

Kim Avantaggiato

Anything you want to add do you think that I've missed?

Pat Harvey

Well, I know you're sick of hearing me banging on about mobility issues, so I won't talk about that again. But it's all these things, really. The things that are preventing people living the fullest possible life, no

matter what disability or age-related concerns they have and anything we can do to keep people happy in their homes, that's great.

Paula Palmer

Yeah, absolutely.

Kim Avantaggiato

That's really what we aim to do, isn't it, on the board? We've got a mixed group of people that chip in, people who live in retirement-living schemes, and people that live out in the wider community because the challenges are very different.

Linda Rayfield

That was really interesting, especially the part about we all see doors as opportunity, and yet you see them as obstacles, restriction. That really is something to think about, I think. I'd really, really be interested in talking to you about the ISPA Project, which is another project that Professor Vicky McCall is launching with some of our customers down in Eastbourne. Maybe not the right time to speak about it at the moment, but it is about places. It's about disabilities, it's about what's accessible, what's not, and it's lived experiences, Pat. I think you would really be very valuable in collating some of the information that Vicky would need.

Pat Harvey

I've been reading quite a lot about it because I was involved in the INVITE project with Stirling University.

Linda Rayfield

Yes, the ISPA is the Intersectional Stigma of Place-based Ageing. Yes, it's really, really interesting. Very exciting opportunity, again, with Stirling University. From what you're saying, Pat, about electronic doors and things like this, do you feel that's something that certainly Stonewater... I mean, part of the ISPA project really is about building a living toolkit that supports organisations in looking how they can improve their accommodation and facilities for older people. Do you think that's obviously something that Stonewater could be looking at, having more automatic openers?

Pat Harvey

Yes, I certainly think so.

Kim Avantaggiato

Maybe that's something the Ageing Well board could take forward, Pat.

Linda Rayfield

Pat. I think you're absolutely... It's all valuable. It absolutely is. We need to hear and then the important part is that we listen and that we do take action.

Pat Harvey

I would never have understood the needs of somebody who can't walk very well until I became that person.

Paula Palmer

That's great. I guess that's where all these panels come in, isn't it? It's actually getting real people's feedback and knowledge about systems. Because with the best will in the world, we can't be out and experiencing everybody's lives. But if we have a really good mix of people on panels like our Ageing Well board and our scrutiny panel, then we get real people's opinions of what works and what doesn't work, don't we? It's a great idea. Thanks, Pat. You've got lots of fantastic ideas about what we could be doing. Is there anything, Kim, maybe that you think you've seen from other housing associations or different sectors that Stonewater could implement?

Kim Avantaggiato

Stonewater is unique, as far as I'm aware, for having their Ageing Well board. We were one of the first organisations to get the group off the ground. I've already mentioned how important we think it is to work alongside customers to co-create age-friendly homes and communities. There's already heaps of great stuff going on, the stuff Linda spoke about and Charlene. These things that really make a difference to people's lives, organising activities, support and events, they're the bedrock of communities. That ripple effect is the real friendships that grow and the Ageing Well board is an example of that.

If we can build those strong and active communities, then people are generally happier and healthier and love where they live. Linda, you mentioned earlier about digital training, and for about four years now we've offered practical help in the shape of We Are Digital Training. It's a training program for everyone that wants to build their online or digital skills. One to one support is given to customers that take part. They're gifted a tablet to be able to continue with their learning journey. Once they've completed that training, they can continue to surf the net in confidence.

Practically, they can video call family, friends, as Pat mentioned, access online banking, order prescriptions, and then also it's a lot easier to manage a Stonewater account. They can use My Home and we'll give training on how to access My Home. Now everyone can improve and Stonewater is no different. We don't have all the answers, which is why we make sure we're part of these bigger research projects like INVITE and the new project Linda has just mentioned.

But to build on that and especially the work of the INVITE project, that's where the idea for the Ageing Well board came from. We know that our collective ideas will grow into something great. I don't think that really answers your question, Paula. But there is some great work going on out there across loads of other housing organisations, but Stonewater really took on board the learning from the INVITE Project and wanted to make sure that customers were involved. Those customers with lived experience who are involved in shaping the way we do things, hence the Ageing Well board.

Paula Palmer

Perfect. Charlene, I'm sure Pat's trying to influence you massively, but is there anything else that you do in your scheme or that you've seen around that you think could help?

Charlene Barnett

Yeah, so for me, I think Kim summed it up, really. I'm very passionate about retirement-living, and since I've been working here, I've been really fortunate at Norfolk House that we have it as a health hub within Stonewater. We've got accessibility to what we call an experience table, which is a piece of technology that the customers have got which is available to them at all times. I can deliver either health sessions using it or they can play games to help with cognitive functioning or with their physical ability. We have been really fortunate here. Like I said before, as a part of the rebrand, we had the ViP system installed.

But I've been so fortunate since I've been working at Norfolk to have somebody and a customer like Pat that can influence and speak out as a customer, because sometimes it's not that we get ignored. But actually coming from real life experiences and really wanting to engage and participate in all of our networking groups that we've got can really influence. And, like Kim said, shape the service that we've got and really look into the future and hopefully with this new project that Linda has been talking about, really look at our accommodations, really look at our environment, really make it sustainable and suitable for our customers in retirement-living.

I get that we're only probably 10% of the business. However, retirement-living is very important and it's very important to keep customers living in their homes independently and keep them happy and healthier for as long as we can by supporting them. For me, it's just about giving, engaging, encouraging, and accessing, like I said, internal and external partnership working. So working with Age UK, we've had digital groups come in and do groups like that. I've had 10% of probably Norfolk House doing We Are Digital. We had quite a few of ours that participated in that and we've delivered some digital sessions too.

I think it is about that slow-release, drip feed, but it might not just be about the technology. Sat here today, listening to everybody else it's about a bigger picture. It's about the physical side as well and really looking at the bigger picture overall for our accommodations, for our customers.

Kim Avantaggiato

Paula, just to chip in there, Charlene, the wider community can access those services as well at some of your schemes, can't they? Some of our older customers in the wider community.

Charlene Barnett

Yeah. We're based in Herefordshire, so we've got seven other schemes within the area. Actually, it has a bigger impact because the scheme itself is classed as a health hub. Actually, we communicate and share that information if there's things going on, then other customers from different schemes can come and access the building and the items if they wish to.

Kim Avantaggiato

I think that's brilliant.

Paula Palmer

That's fantastic, everybody. Just there's so much passion there and so much desire to want to really help improve services for our customers and help them live happier, healthier lives. There's clearly lots going on about how we can best support customers, not just about the digital, but also about the physical technology and stuff there. Technology moves on at such a pace that even as a relatively young person that I think I am, it's easy to feel overwhelmed at times, isn't it? We're probably more capable with the technology we grow up with because we're familiar with it and we use it routinely. But then at some point, is it going to get beyond our confidence levels as well? Are we always going to have this problem there that technology outpaces you? Let's keep talking about how we can help this generation. Linda, tell us a bit more about that ISPA project and what's next for Stonewater.

Linda Rayfield

Well, I think, as I spoke earlier about the successes of the INVITE project and how initially it was just a few schemes that took part in this research. Now we want to follow on with the next steps, as I mentioned before, and giving a lot more of our customers the opportunity to explore what could make their lives a lot simpler. Obviously, that comes into the physical side, which is where the ISPA project, which is the Placed, Aged and Disability, it looks at under-deprived areas and stigma around disability and access, against stigma, exploring how all these aspects come together.

As I mentioned, Professor Vicky McCall is coming down to Highland Lodge, which is down in Eastbourne, on the 16th of November. She'll be running a couple of videos for customers, volunteers, and people that would like to participate in the next steps. That is available at Highland Lodge at 10 o'clock till 12:00 PM. So anyone in the area, please come along, whether you're customers or just members of the public that are really interested in this supporting people. Lots of opportunities for everyone to get involved, opportunities for your early career prospects, customers as well that are working. Absolutely amazing opportunities.

We're looking specifically for customers with lived experience to build this inclusive living toolkit, as I said, that will guide organisations, as Pat mentions there, about having more of these auto-opening doors. That had quite an impact on me with her saying that doors to her are an obstacle and a no-go area. That's sad because it's something simple that opens up, gives you so much, your well-being. That's where we are with that. But please have a look on our website, have a look at the volunteering opportunities. I do understand volunteering is very special because people are giving up their time. But I think if you really like helping people and doing a lot for your communities, please volunteer your time. We really, really are very, very grateful for that as well.

Kim Avantaggiato

I was just going to say it's really rewarding. You make some great friends.

Linda Rayfield

And so many people have those transferable skills that really we want to identify and let's use them. Let's all help each other to live a better and a happier life, Pat, absolutely.

Paula Palmer

Absolutely. Well, we're drawing this episode to a close. What I want to say to Pat, keep on going. Keep telling us what we're doing right and what we need to improve on. We're absolutely there for that. Linda, yes, let's keep in touch. We want to know all about the ISPA project. Kim, thank you very much. Charlene, thank you ever so much.

Kim Avantaggiato

Thank you.

Charlene Barnett

Thank you.

Paula Palmer

Thanks again to you, our guests, and thanks to everyone else for listening to our podcast once again. Look forward to seeing you next time.