

Anisha: Hello and welcome back to another episode of On The Air. Today's episode is exploring an issue that, for the last month, has been all over the news and dominating the headlines, causing concern for so many households. It's also an issue that we frequently talk about at Stonewater as being one of the core drivers for decarbonising the UK's homes, and that's combating fuel poverty.

In April 2020, it was estimated that 2.4 million households in the UK live in fuel poverty, and Covid-19 is believed to have added a further 600,000 to this number.

Not only does this make the UK the worst country for fuel poverty in Western Europe but, with the unprecedented rise in energy costs in conjunction with the end to the furlough scheme, reduction in universal credit and the planned rise in national insurance, even more families will be forced to make the impossible choices between heating or eating and be pushed into financial hardship. So, to help explore some of the challenges relating to fuel poverty, I'm joined by my wonderful guest co-host, Emily Batchford.

Emily, do you want to start by introducing yourself and explaining to our listeners your role at Stonewater?

Emily: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me, it's great to be here. I'm Emily, I'm Stonewater's Environmental Sustainability Officer. I sit within the sustainability team and we are responsible for all things environmental at Stonewater. We record and report on our office footprint, our travel; we also get involved in new builds and thinking about how we build them most efficiently, and work with our development colleagues on that. Then we also have a massive focus on existing homes and the retrofit journey that we're going to be going on over the next few years.

And then we also work with customers. So, we do a lot of customer engagement around our sustainability work. We want to make sure that our retrofit process has our customers really at the heart of it. So, lots of customer involvement and making sure that we listen to what our customers need through this process.

We also have the crossover into fuel poverty. So, when thinking about energy efficiency, we also think about the cost to run a property and can our customers always meet that cost? So the fuel engagement strategy, which is new, also sits within our team. So, that's another big focus for us and something I think is really important to everyone at Stonewater.

Anisha: Definitely. It's safe to say that your days must be very, very busy.

Emily: Yeah!

Anisha: Do you think you could give our listeners an idea of what's happening in this episode today?

Emily: Yeah, absolutely. So, we're going to be talking about fuel poverty today and joining us to talk about it is Sue Shirt, our Executive Director of Customer Experience at Stonewater. Who wrote a blog back in April about why 2021 must be the year that we put an end to fuel poverty. And we'll be discussing that shortly. Alongside Sue, we

also have with us Simon Francis, a Coordinator at the End Fuel Poverty Coalition, which Stonewater is a member of.

Now, to begin, I think we should start by just clarifying what we mean when we say fuel poverty. Simon, do you want to answer this one and just talk about what the End Fuel Poverty Coalition is and some of the work that you've been doing to date?

Simon: Yeah, sure. So, thanks for having us on the podcast, and the End Fuel Poverty Coalition was set up in 2014, and there's been campaigning on the issue since then. And fuel poverty, really, at its most basic, is the fact that people, after they have afforded... after they have spent money to heat their home and use energy, but they are then forced below the recognised poverty line. Which means, ultimately, that, if you're paying to heat your home or power your energy bills to the level that you need in order to stay warm, you can't then buy other things that you need to survive such as food, or you struggle with other household bills.

In addition to that, there is another element to it, which is that people who are in fuel poverty will be living in poorly insulated homes, which is where what you were talking about – about energy efficiency – is really important in that you can't hope to solve fuel poverty unless you are living in a well-insulated, well-heated home with, you know, kind of, a heating system, which is, kind of, up to scratch.

So, there's, sort of, those two elements that contribute towards fuel poverty, and that's what we campaign on – trying to tackle both getting immediate financial support for people who are in fuel poverty right now from the government and from local authorities, and then also looking at the long term to ensure that there is investment in energy efficiency in some of the things that you talked about, like retrofitting and decarbonisation – they're all going to help people in the long run.

But, you know, that is the long run. We have to help people in the here and now as well. So, that's, sort of, the two halves of our campaign.

Anisha: Thanks, Simon. That was really interesting to hear about that it's not just...you know, the fact that it pushes people into poverty, but the issue is much wider than that when it comes to making sure that homes are insulated properly. And following on from that, Sue, what impact does fuel poverty have on households?

Sue: That's a really interesting question, and I think back to a situation a couple of years ago when I had no heating at home. Now, I earn a good wage, I am financially resilient, and for four days we didn't have access to any heating. We had a problem with our supply and it was a significant job. We had to move out. There was no way I could have lived in this home as a single parent with two young children, because houses get very, very cold very quickly and they take a lot of, then, warming up.

And the consequence was just so wide that it gave me a really good insight into the situation that some of our customers may well feel, you know, on a really regular basis. So, for example, actually doing work, whether you were working or whether the kids were doing homework, was really hard to do. You went to bed, you didn't get undressed to go to bed, you just went to bed. Well, how do you get a shower or a bath if you can't put your heating on? Indeed, maybe your supply, if it's interrupted, if you can't afford to put money in the meter – the card things that people have nowadays – then you can't have hot water.

So, it really just eats in. You can't have people round; so the consequence on people's mental health, the consequence on people's physical health, the consequences on people being able to engage in education or employment, or even society to have people round to their homes – I can only describe that it was painful. It was painful to the point where I had to actually find somewhere that I could move with the children.

Simon: Can I just come in on that, I mean, you know, you just touched on the mental health impacts that are absolutely huge, but the physical health impacts are significant. You mentioned, sort of, from a developmental point of view, research from the National Children's Bureau and from the IPPR think tank does show that fuel poverty leads developmental problems and poor performance at school, or for people taking days off work because they just can't focus – that's the impact that being cold has on people. And, you know, it's estimated that – this was before the pandemic – that, in terms of other health impacts, that fuel poverty was costing the NHS £3.6 million every single day.

We have, you know, figures going back looking at the actual number of excess winter deaths directly linked to fuel poverty, so it's really serious. And the biggest challenge that we are going to face this winter is that, in addition to all of that and the rising levels of fuel poverty, that fuel poverty is really, really bad for people with respiratory illnesses. So, people either with Covid or with long Covid are going to find those conditions getting worse if they're in a cold home. We often describe fuel poverty as a public health emergency that can only be solved through economic and, in some ways, construction; I mean, so it's a really difficult topic to try and tackle.

Emily: Yeah, and I think, when thinking about fuel poverty, sometimes I think about the stress of not knowing where the money is going to come from to pay that next bill. But I actually forget about all of the wider health implications of living in a cold home – it is really serious, isn't it.

I wondered if, Simon, I could ask you: Do you know how many people are estimated to be impacted by fuel poverty this winter?

Simon: Yeah, and I mean, as I say, the numbers are rising. I think in the introduction we heard some figures. Well, the latest estimates are that, before the latest price rise that came in from Ofgem in October, the number was around 3.66 million households in England alone. And, from this winter, we're expecting that to go up to 4.15 million households. So, in every household, one to five/six people, you know, so the numbers are, you know, in their millions.

What's really concerning for us is that the system that we are in at the moment, with the ever increasing energy bills and the price cap system that Ofgem operate, means that we... unless something is done, that the numbers will increase to 5.3 million households from next April, and that would be about just under a quarter of all households in the country.

So, it's everyone. Everyone will know someone who is experiencing fuel poverty. This isn't an urban or rural issue; it isn't, kind of, a north or south issue; it isn't people who are in good jobs, in bad jobs – anyone can be a victim of fuel poverty because of the different nature of people's houses, because of their energy supplies, because of their energy efficiency, it can affect everyone. And it's growing really significantly and that's why we need, kind of, significant action from the government this winter to stop the problem from getting worse whilst the longer term solutions start to kick in.

Emily: Absolutely, yeah.

Sue: It must be disproportionately impacting those customers who are working or maybe not working, but on the lower income levels, because your financial resilience is...is much less secure, isn't it.

So, maybe you've got more choices if you are a higher income earner – it may be the design of the insulation of your home, but you probably have choices to downsize. If you're earning less than £20,000 a year, which of course we know that the vast majority of our customers are and yet are in work, then the choices become fewer and they're very reliant upon the intervention of their landlord perhaps, because they don't have the ability to be able to just X, Y or Z, and that situation is just getting very much harder for people.

Simon: Yeah, absolutely, it is. And I think one of the challenges that the government has faced over the last year is – there's a report out a couple of weeks ago from the Committee on Fuel Poverty, which found that just 15% of government spending on energy efficiency is actually going to improve the homes of people in fuel poverty. So, clearly, there's a problem in terms of how the resources are being targeted. And you look even this week at the announcement around heat pumps, that was, sort of, in the news, and the cost of those and, you know, the grant for £5,000.

Well, sadly, a heat pump costs between £6,000-18,000, depending on the size of your home. Well, you know, £5000 isn't going to cut it, really. Even, as you mentioned, people who perhaps live in a smaller property so therefore won't need such a bigger heat pump system. They're still going to have to try and find £1,000.

Anisha: Definitely. I wonder if, Sue, do you think that we've seen an increase in Stonewater customers who were in fuel poverty? Have we had more customers getting in touch, you know, concerned about their heating bills or even just struggling to keep up with rent payments?

Sue: Yeah, I mean, the biggest impact on our customers goes back to that point about financial resilience. Most customers we know – 85%, in fact – are just about managing; well, they were just about managing before. And now we've just pushed a great big hill in front of them – in terms of all the challenges that have been identified on this call previously. So that 85% is going to go up or, alternatively, they'll move from just about managing to absolutely not managing at all.

But the real pressure on customers is when something happens. So when something happens that's outside of their general activity – and, certainly from my perspective, something happens every month –so, perhaps the fridge breaks or perhaps a child comes back and says 'I want to go on a school trip', and that could be quite a small amount that, actually, that's what causes pressure.

And about half of our customers go into debt on their rent within the first six months of starting a tenancy. And that's a real focus for us because we need to understand why and how do we ensure that we put things in place to both be able to support people who find themselves in that difficult situation or, alternatively, look at how we avoid them getting there at all.

In terms of people approaching us saying 'I'm struggling', it just doesn't tend to come in with 'I'm going to ring you up', 'I'm going to ring up my landlord and say I'm

struggling to pay for my heating bills'. That's not how it comes across. It comes across in a series of 'I've got damp in my property' or 'I've got an issue and I need to move' or people ending their tenancy with us. So, it tends to be, sort of, hidden. And I think to myself, why is that? Well, we're not very good are we, in Britain, about actually having conversations about financial things. We're a bit embarrassed about it and, yeah, I think that customers are just the same as us.

So, you've got to really trust someone. If I was in that position, I benefit in the fact I own my own home, but when I go to my building society? No, I wouldn't. Why wouldn't I? Because I don't think they're there to help me to deal with that sort of issue. So, I think we've got to build trust with our customers to be able to share more openly, and we've got to build our ability for people to see that we are here to help and what we are actually doing in various guises. And I know, Emily, that you're doing an awful lot in leading the activity. So yes, of course, our customers are suffering from fuel poverty, but they're just not saying 'hi, I'm suffering from fuel poverty'. That's just not how it works.

Simon: But, hopefully, kind of, if people are listening and thinking 'this is me', 'I think I might be struggling with my bills and I'm having to make those decisions'. The fact that what we're saying is, you know, 'there's millions and millions of people who are feeling this – you're not the only one'. And not only are there organisations like, you know, kind of, Stonewater – if you're a Stonewall tenant – that will help you, but there are other organisations as well. You know, Age UK do a lot of work if you're an older person, the Citizens Advice Bureau offer a lot of advice, there is a lot of advice online about what you can do. But talk to people; talk to people who can try and help you because you aren't alone. They will have heard this before, and there are lots of people in your position.

Anisha: Definitely.

Sue: That's a really important message, Simon, a really important message, because I do think that people are embarrassed. And older people who are, of course, more likely to suffer from fuel poverty because they need a warmer home, are very resilient and known for saying 'no, no, I'm okay, I'm okay' when, in fact, all the indicators are demonstrating that they're probably not.

Simon: Yeah, if you're even thinking about not putting the heating on because you need to and you're an elderly person, if you're even thinking that, then talk to somebody. There's helplines, they can be anonymous. But, as I say, there are literally millions of people out there in the same position as you and there are organisations that can help.

Anisha: Thank you both, I think that that's...it's a really helpful discussion for our listeners to hear. Especially, Sue, when you touch on that people may be struggling, but it comes out in different ways. So it's our job as a landlord to interpret those flags, whatever they may be, with a different lens – and I think that was really helpful to hear.

Simon, I wonder whether you could touch on what the English Fuel Poverty Index is and how it can be used by all local authorities. Do you think that there are any areas in particular that are of concern?

Simon: Yeah, so one of the things that we've been trying to do this year is to – as part of the coalition – is to look more at how we can work with local authorities more,

to raise awareness of fuel poverty and think about things that they can be doing to help. So, some very clever data people at Age UK helped with creating a Fuel Poverty Index, which looks at not just the statistics around how many people are in fuel poverty based on the, sort of, official data, but also then looks at, kind of, how much work is being done by a local authority area to offset that fuel poverty.

So, there's lots of schemes with lots of complicated names, and I'm not going to go through them because there's lots of abbreviations, but there are schemes out there that are there to help people. But what we want to know is how good are local authorities at delivering those schemes or requesting support from them. And that's where we came up with the index. So, it takes a combination of different measures that look at, kind of, the extent of the problem and then, also, what's being done to solve it.

And that revealed a new way of looking at a map of England with very large areas of fuel poverty without much support, in places such as Barking and Kingston on Hull and Stoke-on-Trent were all up there at the top. There are areas that obviously performed a lot better. It isn't, though, our intention for this to be, kind of, a blame game of this council is doing worse or this council is doing better. I mean, clearly, councils can look at where they are on the index and they can look at what's happening.

But what we wanted to do was to highlight the fact that there are some councils who do some amazing work, and that's not just, kind of, you know, in terms of this phrase 'retrofitting', which means, kind of, you know...or decarbonising, which means improving people's homes to make them more energy efficient. There's local authorities that do a lot of good work in enforcing minimum energy standards, so listeners may have friends or family or might be in private rented accommodation. Well, there are minimum standards there that should be enforced by the local authority to ensure that they are in an energy-efficient building.

There's also a lot of financial support that local authorities can deliver, either through applying for government schemes to then deliver those into a local area or recommending people for the Warm Home Discount who don't normally apply through other eligibility criteria. So, there is a lot of stuff that local authorities can do to help people who are in fuel poverty, so what we've designed as well is a motion for councillors to take to the local authorities, so the council can pass that motion and can say, 'well, yes, we are going to take all the steps that we can to solve fuel poverty'.

Obviously, local authorities can only ever do so much. There is only ever so much money that the council will have – we totally get that. But we certainly think that they should be doing everything they can do within the budgets that they do have available to help people in fuel poverty, and that's why we launched this campaign earlier this autumn.

Emily: That was so well explained – thank you. It really helped me and I'm sure it will help our listeners, too. It's interesting listening to you talking about minimum energy standards because, at Stonewater, that's something that is important to us, and we're working to get all of our properties to an EPC band C by 2030, which will go some of the way to supporting customers who are in fuel poverty. And also doing quite a lot of training at the moment as well. Most of our frontline colleagues are going through training with National Energy Action, who are supporting them in understanding energy efficiency, understanding how to give advice around that to customers, and

then also spot those people who are struggling and need more support from us, and then where to refer them on to as well. So, it's a really exciting time. I think a lot is going on at Stonewater and many other organisations.

Simon: And that goes back to the point that we were making earlier that the help is there, and there you go – that you've got advisers at Stonewater who are there, you know, kind of, getting the right training from the national experts on helping people with their energy efficiency at NEA, and you know, will then be able to go and help residents. So, absolutely, the first port of call if you're struggling and you're thinking about... you might be affected by fuel poverty is to get in touch with yourselves because it does sound like there is support already there for people.

Emily: Absolutely, yeah. Thinking about that and helping customers, Sue, I wondered if you could highlight some of the measures that housing providers like Stonewater are undertaking to support customers and mitigate concerns about energy prices and that, sort of, struggle between having to choose heating or eating.

Sue: I mean, I think that we need to start at a really practical level, and that practical level is when people find themselves in a difficult situation, then how do we step up to the plate and provide – whether that's funds or something that is causing them a challenge that may then be playing out in terms of people not being able to put the heating on. So we've been working with Longleigh for several years; that was created by the organisation back in 2015. And the one thing that we identified as we moved into the pandemic, and indeed beyond, was that we had to be there when customers really found themselves in a difficult position.

And over the last twelve months, we've seen nearly a 100% increase in the number of customers that are coming and being helped through hardship grants, and, in terms of the amount of funds that have been paid out, that's gone up by nearly 3,000%. So, more people and bigger amounts in order to help them in that situation – that's really practical at the point that people end up in a real hardship crisis situation.

I think we've then got to go beyond that to looking at how are we ensuring that the work we're doing to invest in the efficiency of our homes – how are we investing our funds in making sure that our homes are actually easier to heat and therefore use energy more efficiently? And, then, the other side of that is: how do we ensure that our customers are given information on how they can use their home in the most efficient way? So, there's a little bit of 'step in when you're needed'; there's a little bit of 'actually design your services in a way that will make those costs affordable'.

And that goes to the rent as well, that speaks to the rent, our rents need to be affordable for people to be able to thrive and work from those homes; and then you've got the support to customers; and then you've got other stuff. So, this is not one piece, there is no magic bullet here.

There are lots of things about how do we support people to get the skills and experience to be able to access employment and higher paid employment so they're not under such financial pressures? How do we ensure that we work with our customers to understand, actually, what matters to them in connecting with their local community, because we are the landlord but people don't exist in the world of their landlord, they exist within their local society.

So, how do we make those connections so that people are able to see themselves in that community and be supported by that community and, indeed, offer support to

that community? So, I think there's just so many things. It's about it being part of your DNA. Part of our DNA needs to make sure that everything we're doing is about customers thriving, not surviving, in their homes.

Anisha: Thank you, Sue. I feel like the last phrase you said: 'they're thriving, not surviving', is so incredibly important. It's very clear that tackling this issue for our customers is such a priority, but it's not going to be a 'one size fits all', it's not going to be a quick fix. It's something that's going to be long term and hopefully really make a sustainable difference.

To round off today's episode, Simon, if our listeners want to get in touch with you about the coalition or the work that you're doing, how can they do that?

Simon: Well, I think the big thing if people wanted to get involved is to look at our website, endfuelpoverty.org.uk, and you'll find on there not only, kind of, social media content that you can share, which raises awareness of the issue, but also, actually, has the motion that you could ask a local councillor to put forward to their local council.

And, certainly, we don't want people to do anything they're not comfortable with but – you know, that's not the aim of the campaign – but, if people did want to suggest writing to their local councillor and asking them to do more in their local authority to tackle fuel poverty, then the motion is there on our website and you can send them a link to that and say, 'please, could you ask the council to consider this motion?'. And that would be a fantastic achievement if anyone was able to do that.

Emily: I think we can say that to all our listeners: come on, everybody, won't take you long!

[Giggling]

Simon: It's just one email, that's all it takes.

Emily: Absolutely, yeah, we can commit to that. Thank you so much, Simon and Sue, for letting us pick your brains today, and talking about some of the challenges around fuel poverty. The passion here is just really exciting, and I think that, together, we're going to make a huge difference. So, thank you and thank you as well, Anisha, for having me as your co-host.

Anisha: Oh, any time, Emily, you are welcome back any time. You've been a fantastic co-host, and it's safe to say I've learned a lot this afternoon. So thank you, everybody, for taking part today. And, as we've highlighted, I think, in this episode, for so many, fuel poverty is just poverty by another name and few people self-identify as being affected by it. So, conversations like this, I think, are so important to have and hopefully draw a wider attention to the issue.

And, of course, thank you to all our listeners for tuning in today. Everything that we've referenced can be found in the show notes for this episode. And if you do have any comments about what you've heard, please do get in touch with us on Twitter: @Stonewateruk. Until next time, bye for now.