

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the first episode of our two-part special of On the Air, a podcast brought to you by Stonewater. In today's episode, Inside Jobs, our guests will be unpicking the findings of our latest think tank research to understand the impacts of remote working on low-paid workers in the UK.

David: Hello, and welcome to On the Air. My name is David Button, and if you've listened to the previous episodes in this series, then some of you may recognise me from a podcast Stonewater published a few months ago about the launch of its most recent thought leadership research with cross-party think tank Demos. Today, I'm back to talk through the findings of the research and, more importantly, to unpick what it means for housing providers and their customers with our expert guest panel, who we'll introduce shortly. But, before we make a start, I'm going to hand over to my guest co-host for today's episode, Jenny Sawyer. Jenny, do you want to introduce yourself?

Jenny: Hello, David. Yes, I'm Jenny Sawyer, director of People, Culture and Change at Stonewater, which essentially means me and my team lead on HR training and development and OD. I'm very happy to be hosting with you today. Now we've got a great panel and I'd like to hand over to each of you just to introduce yourselves and give our listeners a little bit of insight into what you do. Andy, would you like to go first?

Andy: Hi, thanks, Jenny. My name is Andy Peers, I'm the Chief Executive at the Longleigh Foundation, and we are the charitable foundation that was established by Stonewater back in late 2015. And we exist to provide grants that are for the benefit of Stonewater's customers and the communities where Stonewater has a housing presence, and we do this through grants to individual customers and families. We provide grants to projects so they can deliver enhanced services that customers can access, and we also do grants for research as well.

Jenny: Thanks, Andy. Dave.

Dave: Hey, Jenny, I'm Dave Lockerman. I am Director of Housing Operations here at Stonewater, and essentially that means I'm responsible for frontline, kind of, housing services and delivery.

Jenny: Super, thanks Dave. Katy.

Katy: Hi Jenny, I'm Katy Neep. I head up campaigns at an organisation called Business In The Community, which basically works with businesses both large and small on their, kind of, responsible business journey – so how they work with their employees, what they do around the environment, and how they work on things like diversity and inclusion, so that includes many housing associations.

Jenny: Super thank you, Katy. And over to our final guest, Louise, I've heard you're quite the busy bee!

Louise: [Laughs] A little bit, yeah! Thanks Jenny. Yeah, I currently work for a charity that supports carers of disabled children called We Love Carers, in the West Midlands. I'm also a parent of a disabled child myself, and I also am a Stonewater customer, and I also support Stonewater as a community champion as well, feeding back. So, yeah, I've got quite a busy life, but hey.

Jenny: And you're here today to help us, so thank you very much for joining us as part of the conversation. Thank you all. So to kickstart, I think it would be great, Dave, if you could briefly talk us through the research project, just for any listeners who might not know.

Dave: So, yeah, thanks. The reason why we were really interested to do this research is we realised really the conversation nationally had really been in terms of new ways of working and kind of about the impact on town centre, so early in the Pandemic, we heard around, kind of, sales of Pret sandwiches, but we really missed, kind of, the individual, kind of, perspective and the experience of individuals. It...also, the coverage tended to be around, kind of, higher earners and lower earners seem to be missed from that conversation, and we recognise that, obviously, you know, a large number of our customers are likely to fall into, kind of, the lower category.

And I think if we think around the conversation within the sector as well, it's around, kind of, how housing associations were responding to the pandemic internally and how, you know, colleagues were moving to, kind of, new ways of working, but the customers seem to be missing in that conversation. We're also really interested in Demos's

previous research, so that showed that, for higher earners, there've been, kind of, during the pandemic, positive health and wellbeing impacts. 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?

You know, and we really recognise that the nine to five in an office is gone and we're just not going back to that. And if you think about, kind of, the link between where you live and where you go to work has really been, kind of, broken through, kind of, these new ways of working, so there's so much opportunity. And I think, without really getting in and understanding this stuff, there's a danger of, kind of, a deepening inequality and creating a two-tier workforce, but also really missing the opportunity to grab hold of something that can make a difference. And I think for us as a housing provider and within the sector, we really need to be responsive to, kind of, current but also future customer needs and continuing to make sure that our homes are places where customers can thrive from.

Jenny: Super, thank you.

David: So, Louise, you took part in one of the focus groups for the research, but you haven't actually been able to take up homeworking since the pandemic. Are you able to tell our listeners a bit about why that was the case?

Louise: Yeah, our charity is... basically we're all key workers, so we had to go into work physically to go and support our service users. There is no homeworking available for that. Our service users need support, they need counselling, they need support for the children during the pandemic, and that needs to be done on a physical basis where we need to go in. It cannot be done remotely.

David: For the people who you work with as part of your job. How are they finding working from home if they're able to do so, and has it made things easier or harder for them?

Louise: It's been very difficult for the people that I work with. Again, a lot of the people I work with are all parent carers, so it's been very difficult for them to work from home. They've got their caring responsibilities as well as their career responsibilities, so it has been quite a juggle for them.

Jenny: Andy, you weren't directly involved with the research, but your organisation really is at the sharp end of supporting individuals and communities served by the social housing sector that are right at the heart of its findings. How's the support provided by the Longleigh Foundation changed, you think, over the last couple of years?

Andy: The growth that we've seen in the grants that we make to individual customers and families over the last three years, and I'm going to give you a figure now that most people do a double take at, the individual grants have grown by over 4,500% in three years. And I say that very cautiously because I think there are some parts of the charitable world where growth is not a great thing. 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 – so if I look to the month of February, we did our busiest-ever month for individual grants.

So what we are seeing is that, if you go back a couple of years, those kind of grants might have been where a fridge freezer had broken and somebody needed the fridge replacing, or somebody needed a new sofa as they moved into a new home. What we've seen more recently is the grants are really just about helping people cope with the everyday costs. So most of the grants that we're giving out now are about longer-term support for food and for energy top ups and for the very, very basic essentials. And we are concerned about... it's the vocational hazard of anybody that's a grant maker: you always are concerned about whether you will ever have enough money to meet the need that's out there. And because of that, you have to start making priority decisions based on a set of criteria, and it pains you to do that because every time you have to set a criteria, you know that there are people that may well need your help that now sit outside of that. Covid affected so many people, the cost-of-living crisis is affecting so many people, but we've seen this continually sharp increase in the demand for these grants, and, like I say, the nature of the grants has shifted a bit in terms of: this is now about longer-term support for the most basic of needs.

Jenny: It's incredible, isn't it, that you could never have imagined I shouldn't think, when you first took up the role, just how much the demand would grow. And as you say, that's, you know, it's quite a challenge, to say the least. So do you think then that the financial pressures and the concerns that have been flagged in this research, I mean, is that what you're seeing first hand with the people that are being referred to Longleigh?

Andy: I think that, from the Longleigh perspective, I think there's a lot we can do in terms of what's coming out of the research. There's...I say this with every caution: I think there are a group of people that have got so many things hammering away at their daily lives that the conversation about 'what your aspirations around work?' is a difficult one to even get to. If through a Longleigh grant that can release some pressure that then allows that individual or that family to start to think about what the longer term might look like, what kind of work is the right kind of work for that individual based on their overall circumstances? I think that's one of the key roles that Longleigh has got: how do we help just create some space for an individual and a family to at least engage then in that conversation?

One of the other things that I think about with this is: I think the idea of embracing homeworking really depends on what home means to you. And one of the most commonly used pathways into the individual grants we provide is for people who are fleeing abusive relationships. Now, if home is a safe place and it's a happy place, then thinking about working in that place automatically comes a brighter prospect. But if home is a place that's a place where you feel insecure and you don't feel safe, and you're overcrowded or home is in disrepair, then home isn't a place where you may even want to work. And I think that's the combination here, which is that Stonewater, as a leading social housing provider, can make a home feel like a place that people may want to work from. There are individual grants we can provide that give people the breathing space to at least think about this conversation.

And then there is a strand of the grants that we do that we feel is painfully underutilised, and that's the strand which is about education, training and employment. So, if people are engaging in the conversation about what work could look like, and then there is the access to those forms of grants, that's where the partnership-working comes in. And I think one of the big calls I'd be making is – looking at Stonewater on this one – which is,

there's...I think there's a big influence that Stonewater can have throughout its supply chain and across the wider social housing sector that says to businesses of all shapes and sizes: 'We want you to be thinking about how our customers – that are working or ready for work – what is the breadth of the roles that you can offer at home? I mean, Louise has talked about some roles that... it's very difficult to do from home. I think Stonewater has got a great opportunity to influence that supply chain and the wider sector about saying: 'Come on, folks, there's a far broader job...set of jobs here that can be done from home'.

Jenny: Thanks, Andy. It is a sobering thought, isn't it, but you're absolutely right, unless somebody has, you know, the fundamental basics that they need, you know, to have a safe home, then working at all, you know, is probably, you know, a long way down the line. And then thinking about whether or not you work from home, it's, you know, almost going back to Maslow and his hierarchy of needs, isn't it: unless the fundamentals – the foundation is there – then the rest of this is, you know, is irrelevant to a degree.

David: Lou, how do you find taking part in the research and how did you get involved?

Louise: Yeah I just got invited via Stonewater. I like to get involved wherever I can, really, anything they ask me to do I try my best to actively get involved.

David: Katy, you commented recently in HR Magazine that the findings of the Demos report was similar to research that your organisation has carried out. Could you tell us a bit more about that and what it is you learned in that process?

Katy: Yeah, definitely, so in 2019 we did a piece of work alongside Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which basically looked at good work for all. And in that what we were trying to define is, ultimately: what is good work and what does that mean? And there are three key areas that really came out, and it's great to, kind of, hear Andy's take on this, but the first was, first and foremost, about fair pay and benefits. So, you know, ultimately, let's not shy away from that fact: if we want people to be successful in employment, we need to pay them fairly, appropriately, you know, at least the voluntary minimum wage.

But also that we need to look at broader benefits, so I think in the context of your research with Demos, it is about looking at those organisations that not only gave access to technology, but also then thought about: how are people going to pay their Internet bill? How are they going to ensure that they have the skills they need to now access some of the technical changes that employers were asking them to do? So it's about looking at benefits in its entirety.

The second element that really came out was about structure and security, and I think that's where this is also interesting. And the conversations that we're seeing employers and organisations have are around, ultimately, job design, and how can we work with your employees to create good jobs that work for them? So, I think, one of the difficulties that we've got is: we start talking about flexible working and everyone now goes: 'Oh, that just means working from home'. That isn't what flexible working is for lots of reasons. And also, sometimes, employers get stuck in a trap of thinking: 'Oh, flexible working or working from home means that I offer this', and it's a kind of set standard. When actually I think what we've learned over the pandemic is that employees want to have a bit more of a voice or a say and want to say: 'Actually, trust me to deliver my job, be productive, but that might mean for me that I need to drop my kids off in the morning and pick them up and therefore we'll work outside'. Or it might mean that: 'Actually I really benefit from two hours in the middle of the day where I can go have some wellbeing, I can go do some caring responsibilities'. But it's about having that conversation, so I think the structures and security is an interesting one that I see some progression.

And then the third one, as Andy has already alluded to for us, is very much about skills and development. And actually a good job is one that enables people to access continued lifelong learning, to access skills, to continually develop so that we can support them, I guess to move between different job roles, and to really kind of support them to grow in their employment. So Good Work For All was a piece of work that we did in 2019, but I think over the pandemic we're really seeing, I guess some of those conversations come to fruition and some of those challenges around, actually, when we get into talking about job design or we get into talking about homeworking, we do see this divide grow. As your research has shown, you know, middle-class people saved money; lower-paid workers, it cost them money. And so I think we need to, kind of, address that and ensure that the success of moving jobs that lots of employers said 'no

no no, we could never do those from home' into homeworking isn't just benefiting those that were already okay, if that makes sense.

David: Great, thank you. I thought it was really interesting, the point you just made about job design. Are the businesses you support looking at how to create properly flexible work that enables employees to live better and work well? And, I suppose, what the barriers that they're facing at the moment to help their employees to do that?

Katy: Yeah, so, I mean, we work with a number of employees on just this issue, and I guess also across different lenses, so we have, you know, a wellbeing campaign and a gender campaign. So we launched only a few weeks ago our Who Cares? campaign, which is actually to try and challenge the norms of what you think about in terms of caring. So typically it would be a woman, typically you would be thinking about them returning after maternity leave or supporting their child, and that's the extent of, kind of, flexible working is to do with part-time working for a woman. So actually through Who Cares?, what we're trying to do and what we're working with employers is to unearth actually those stories of shared parental leave, but also to say that carers come in all forms, it's not just about, you know, post having a baby, you know, as Louise and the charity she works with could, I'm sure, talk for a really long time. It is about supporting children, maybe with a disability, or actually it's about supporting, you know, a parent or a loved one who needs care.

So I think employers are beginning to look at this in the sense of: how do we offer that flexible working?

I think, as I mentioned previously, there are some challenges around them creating a policy that's like 'well, you can choose from this menu of: you either go four days or you do five days in four, or... to actually then really having that individual conversation with that employee and helping to shape something that's going to work for them as the employer, but also for the employee, and recognising that there isn't really a 'one size fits all'.

I think it's also about: how do they make this an opportunity for all employees? And how do they celebrate and shout about maybe some of the examples that we're not as used to seeing so that we, you know, can then normalise it? Ultimately, if we heard and saw

more men do some of the caring responsibilities, maybe we would have equality across flexible working.

David: Great, thank you. I think that point about a person-centred approach to this is vital to make sure that everybody's circumstances are taken into account. Louise, did you have anything to add to that?

Louise: Our charity have been very supportive, they've been absolutely fantastic. They've supported me as a parent carer as well as working for them. As Katy said, with flexible working, they've been fantastic with me in saying: 'If you need to do this, you need to do that, then that's fine, you go and do that'. We just try and do what we can where we can, in order to help everybody where we can.

David: Great, thank you. Katy, it's really interesting: the focus on person-centred approaches to this. Are there any really innovative examples that you've come across that are, sort of, outside the norm, that you think could benefit other organisations that are looking at how to do things differently?

Katy: Yeah, so I would say this one is definitely an emerging area and I think any employer would bite anyone's hand off if you've got the answer to: what is flexible working and hybrid working? How do we make it work for each individual employee? But there are definitely organisations who are trying to understand what they can do for the individual employee, organisations who deliver things like midlife MOTs, so that is used predominantly with, say, older workers who traditionally might have fallen victim to that 'oh, we're not going to look at progression because actually your pathway is retirement', but actually stopping and really focusing in with those employees to say: 'Well, what is important to you now in work? What does work mean to you?' But also: 'What's important in terms of your life, your caring responsibilities, your family, if you have that, and what's important to you in terms of what you want the next phase to look like?'

So that midlife MOT, that opportunity to sit down with somebody within your business to cover those three areas, and not just look at progression or look at how you're performing at work, but also understand the other elements that will influence you and that are important to you, I think then really supports that employee to look at what

training and development they might want to do, what kind of flexibility they might want to look at and how they can phase that in or maybe flex that out. And I think it really gives that opportunity for a bit more of a coaching and mentoring conversation, and I think that is an element that is really important and actually will help to drive some of the change. So, that's just one little example.

David: Thank you, Katy, that was great.

We hope you enjoyed listening to part one of Inside Jobs. Next time our guests will be exploring what employers can do to ensure the benefits of homeworking are experienced equally...

[Dave excerpt]

'We need to make sure as well that we're not scoring our own goals and making sure that our tendencies don't restrict our customers from working from home,'

...and the role housing providers can play...

[Katy excerpt]

'Historically, when we're looking at, kind of, employment programmes there's 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.'