

Season 1 Episode 3 Transcript

You're listening to On The Air, a brand new podcast brought to you by Stonewater. Join us, as throughout this series, we'll be getting to the heart of what matters in the social housing industry today – from essential questions about shared ownership to celebrating community projects for veterans. Join Anisha Patel and her co-host, Sara-Anne Mills-Bricknell, and a whole host of industry figures, colleagues and customers for some lively and informative conversation about what matters most in housing in 2020. This is On The Air, a Stonewater podcast.

Anisha: Hello and welcome back. This week, we're going to be talking about something very different from the last couple of episodes. We're focusing on something that wasn't started by Stonewater, but it's something that we are definitely trying to drive forward and something that we really support.

Sara: Hello, everyone. And yes, I think you've definitely hit the nail on the head there. So, this week we're going to be talking about the Make A Stand campaign.

Anisha: And before we have a chat with our lovely guests, we're going to start with an exclusive interview with Jim Strang, former president of the CIH, who recently championed the campaign personally and professionally.

[Cut to first-person piece]

Jim: I'm Jim Strang, I'm currently chief executive of Parkhead Housing Association in the east end of Glasgow, a small but perfectly formed community-controlled organization in the heart of the great city of Glasgow. I'm immediate past president of the Chartered Institute of Housing. My good friend and predecessor as president, Alison Inman, started the Make A Stand campaign during her presidential year. This was off the back of her campaign and her charitable endeavours as president to raise money and raise awareness of the work of Women's Aid, and to tackle – and particularly housing's role in tackling – all forms of domestic abuse up and down the country.

When I was vice president, I was at an event in Edinburgh when Alison was discussing her vision for how housing can help tackle domestic abuse. And, as I was sitting there – at that time vice presidents were starting to think about what their campaigns are going to be. And at that point, I'll be quite candid – it was quite surreal – I began to have memories and flashbacks of when I was growing up. And it suddenly dawned on me, due to my upbringing, I came from a household that suffered domestic abuse at the hands of an abusive father.

It was important that I continue Alison Inman's crusade, and I've met some incredibly wonderful and brave women and men over that year. People whose stories are horrendous, but they're going to talk about it now, and hitherto it had been hidden and something that no one ever spoke about. Domestic abuse was between a man and a wife, and no one dared intervene, not even the police.

Yet every week, two women die at the hands of a father. And it was important to me, it was important to the memory of my late ma, who suffered greatly at the hands of my father, and for my big brother and my wee sister, that our story had to be shared

to make people aware, and that's why got into the Make A Stand campaign. It was a tough decision for me to start talking about things I'd buried for...oh... years – buried it, and tried to blot it out my mind so that it wouldn't ruin my career and my life as I was growing up. Yet, on that night, sitting at a dinner in Edinburgh, listening to one of the most wonderful people I've ever met in my entire life, Alison Inman, it suddenly was the right thing to do.

Sara: What I was going to say is I've actually seen you talk at a couple of events and I think I speak for everyone when I say that you have really inspired a lot of other people to get involved – similarly to how you've said that Alison inspired you. You said that it was quite difficult for you to talk about your personal experience. Do you have any advice, from your own perspective, on helping people to be able to talk and have these kinds of discussions?

Jim: Well, my advice is to be honest and upfront about it and don't hide it. It is difficult, particularly for men. And one of the things I've found that, when I have been speaking, men in particular have a great difficulty about this. Women have a difficulty about this too because very often their employers and friends and neighbours and folk in authority may not actually believe them. And that's where the Make A Stand campaign is so important, the four elements of the Make A Stand pledge that they ask organizations are designed to ensure that housing organizations are equipped to deal with the issue when it's raised.

But my advice is clear: people need to stand up and be counted. And everywhere I've been to speak about this, up and down the country, more and more people are coming up and getting involved. Particularly men, because men are the solution, because we are by far in the majority for causing the problem. And Alison warned me about this when she was speaking about women coming up to share their experiences, but also the fact that men were coming up to me and saying: 'I've got a problem, I'm actually doing that now'.

And that took me into the whole realms of, well, how do we deal with perpetrators? What resources are available? How can we help men who know they've got a problem, who know they're doing this, to improve their behaviours and what to do? So, it's an all-encompassing, holistic approach that we're trying to develop. So bottom line: people need to stand up to not be scared to let your feelings in this because you could, by your actions, save somebody; save a child from a bleak childhood, save a partner, save a life, save a woman from perhaps being brutalized and even murdered or being emotionally and physically scarred for the rest of her life. That's just how important your voice is.

Sara: Just following on from that: what progress have you seen as a result of this campaign either during your time as president and Alison's as well?

Jim: Well, since the campaign started, the figures – most recent figures – over 390-odd housing organizations which cover something like 4.5 million social tenancies up and down the country and will with something like 40-odd other organizations. These are organizations that are supporters. I mean, people like contractors who are in their houses every single day and with the other people from the private sector – private rented sector – getting on board. So, in total, 421 organizations have signed up to both pledges, and I think that's absolutely fantastic. That secondary element was getting the message across. But for me, the big successes are the political successes and that now in every jurisdiction in the country bar Northern Ireland, we

now have legislation either going through the system or enacted to bring about improvements in how we tackle domestic abuse.

In Scotland, for example, and I would urge everybody to have a look at the new legislative structure in Scotland and one of the benefits of a devolved administration and also our government that actually puts money where its mouth is when it comes to these things – the social issues – we've probably the best legislation on the statute book and more to come. So that's where it's important to me. And it's also now that after two years of raising the issue, this issue will never, ever disappear. It will become mainstream. It will be front and centre of what housing organizations in particular are all about. And that's the important thing: the mainstreaming of how we deal with domestic abuse.

Sara: That leads into my final question: you've talked about in a mainstream sense, but if say, for example, you were to dictate the democracy, what specifics would you like the government to do and what specifics do you think housing providers should do? You've said that they need to be more active. Is there anything from your perspective that they could start doing right now?

Jim: Governments have a huge role to play, not only setting a legislative framework and making it easier legislatively, for example, to terminate joint tenancies where you want to terminate the abuser's half of the tenancy so that the family don't have to move out of the house. One of the big issues, is with joint tenancies or where the abuser is the lead tenant, the families have to move. That's not always the right thing to do. So, we need to streamline that and governments can do that.

But I'll tell you one other thing governments can do: every year, year on year, women's aid organisations have to spend huge amounts of time and effort applying for grant funding. They should not need to do that. This service has to be part of the wider social care scenario, and governments should fund these services. No ifs, no buts. The role of the government is to protect its citizens, and we've got women's aid organisations scrambling about year after year, trying to get funding to keep people safe, to keep women and children safe. That's just outrageous. So, if you're going to ask me if I were prime minister, what would be one of my goals? It would be quite simply to make all our people safe, to make women and children who are suffering domestic abuse, to make them safe, to make them secure.

Sara: That was a really intense interview, Jim had a lot of thoughts on the campaign, and I think hearing from him and his past experience was, I think, as everyone listening will agree, was really touching.

So here in the studio today with us, we've got Helena from supported housing at Stonewater, Andrew, the regional manager of supported housing, and also Vanda, who works for the South Asian Women's Refuge. How at Stonewater do colleagues feel about the Make A Stand campaign? So what is it that you're currently doing or what is the general feeling that you think you should be doing?

Helena: In 2018 we launched it at our company day and that was a brilliant opportunity to have the whole organization together and for us to talk about the pledge and what we've signed up to. Since then, we've done absolutely loads in promoting it amongst our colleagues and our customers. So, we relaunched our domestic abuse policy for customers and we also introduced a domestic abuse policy for our staff. And that's the first time we've had that because we're as committed to addressing domestic abuse and supporting those who experience it regardless of

their position or what they do. We know domestic abuse doesn't discriminate and neither should we.

We've also started getting DAHA accreditation, which is the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance, and we're undergoing that process at the moment, with accreditation in February next year. We've streamlined our safeguarding training, and brought in a new provider to deliver it, to make sure that we're targeting domestic abuse and training our staff a lot more around that and what they should be looking out for.

And also through our commitment to Make A Stand, we've had the opportunity to work with some MPs and influence them around domestic abuse and some of the issues that our customers have told us that they're facing. And one of the things we got to do was speak with MPs around Universal Credit and single household payments, which was discriminating against families who experienced domestic abuse, particularly around financial control. We had the opportunity to influence them directly, which has been great. So, there's loads going on and loads more to do as well.

Anisha: Why is the Make A Stand campaign important for housing providers like Stonewater to get involved with?

Andrew: It's really important for us as an organization, as a social housing provider, to be showing a commitment and a raising of awareness around domestic abuse. In supported housing, we run specialist services that supports survivors of domestic abuse. And so I think it's equally important that we show, in a wider context, that we've got that commitment. And one of the things that we've worked really hard on and Vanda has had a great part in, is actually raising the profile of that work we do and making sure that people understand it, particularly within the organization. We're a large organization, we're running these specialist projects, but actually there was a huge proportion of the staff team who didn't understand what we were doing in that specialist sector. So, I think that's been really vital and really important.

Furthermore, engaging into the wider communities so that they understand what we're doing as well and what other providers are doing in this sector. At the moment, we're going through the 16 days of action, which happens every year. And Vanda's team, for example, up in Bedford, have been really raising the profile of the work they're doing there.

Vanda: Yeah, we offer the specialist project for South Asian ladies, the South Asian community, and for 16 days, we've had quite a lot of events involving other agencies to raise the profile of the work that that we're doing. So we've involved the mental health lead from Bedford, art therapists, we're doing a project through paint, which has been really successful for the ladies, where they're putting their feelings onto a canvas or pottery, so that then they can just put it in a box at the end of it so that they can manage their feelings.

Sara: So, following on from that, I've had a couple of conversations with a couple of the women that actually have stayed at the refuge for a different campaign – that was the Starter Home campaign – and I think there were a lot of misconceptions about the type of people... well, if you can say there is a type... that are actually affected by domestic abuse. Would you agree?

Vanda: I think refuge in itself is a misconception because people automatically think that it's not a very nice place to go to. They don't really feel that it's the beginning of

their life. They feel that they've been humiliated and taken from their own homes. The changing of the face of refuge has been really important. But the ladies, when they come, it's always known that that's the beginning of their journey. So, when they come in, the support goes on from day one, so we can identify the needs very carefully from day one to see what the need is for the individuals.

Actually SAW in itself is a beautiful project. We have a move-on refuge as well, but SAW is a beautiful project. And it is filled with beginning of friendships, stability, the change in their life, the understanding that actually domestic abuse doesn't have to be a secret. And it doesn't have to be something that controls the rest of your life.

Sara: And the refuge is really accommodating in the sense of that it's not just for individuals, it's also for their families as well isn't it? I think I spoke to someone that... she was quite older, I think she was in her 60s or 70s. That really surprised me, because when I think of a refuge or a place for domestic abuse victims, I never, ever imagined a kind of older person. I don't know why, it's probably my own ignorance.

Vanda: That lady is amazing. She had experienced domestic abuse for about 45 years. She'd gone and told somebody what she was feeling and she'd made the decision that she wanted her life to change that day. So, we brought her into SAW and she has achieved so much. She's now in independent living. Her story is so successful.

Sara: What other misconceptions do you think there are about people that are affected by domestic abuse?

Helena: I think you've touched on a really good point, and I think Jim touched on it earlier as well. So, there's often a conception or misconception around domestic abuse that it only occurs to women and children, and also younger women and children. And a lot of the campaigns that we've seen in the past around domestic abuse, you'll see a poster campaign with a woman in her 30s and a child, whereas actually part of what we're trying to do here at Stonewater is challenge a lot of those misconceptions. And, as well as breaking the stigma around abuse, look at who abuse affects. And it's absolutely everyone.

You mentioned earlier around older people and abuse, and we're actually working on a project as part of our graduate scheme at the moment to look at abuse for older people, and how they're experiencing it. And Andrew will talk in a moment about our LGBT safe space, which is a service for people who identify as LGBT. So, we think there are loads of misconceptions, and I think part of the solution, which Jim also talked about, is everyone being part of that conversation. Men, women, absolutely everyone. And that it's not just seen that it's a women's problem because that's been a problem for a very, very long time. And that's why I think there's been a lack of progress around it. It's everyone's problem. It happens in homes. We provide homes. So it's really important that we challenge misconceptions.

Sara: Andrew, do you want to talk about our safe space?

Andrew: Yeah, I completely agree. I think the misconceptions are wide and far around who can experience domestic abuse, but also around the types of abuse as well. I think that's why we use the term domestic abuse and not domestic violence, because domestic violence actually limits then the type of abuse that you're talking about. And the representation for domestic abuse in the LGBT community is

something that we recognize and lots of people have recognized is lacking, nationally.

Some of the figures around domestic abuse in the LGBT community are quite horrific. Almost 50 percent – I think it's 49 percent – of gay and bisexual men have stated that they've experienced domestic abuse at least once in their lifetime. And that's absolutely shocking and appalling that that's happening. But there's no service provision or very little service provision. We know large organizations such as Galop have done a lot of work in that area and have set up the National Abuse Helpline, which is open to all members of the LGBT community.

We made the decision when an opportunity of a project came up to us that we would apply for funding to open a project specifically to support that client group from the LGBT community who had either experienced domestic abuse, hate crime, or family breakdown. Ultimately, anything that means that they could no longer live safely in their home and needed a safe space to come where they could be provided with support. the opportunity to live, thrive and grow, and move on to live a healthy life and have healthy relationships that maybe they hadn't experienced before.

So, we're very fortunate that we were successful in bidding for funding from the Longleigh Foundation, which is obviously the foundation arm of Stonewater, and that's provided us with three years' funding to open this four-bedroom project in the Swindon area where we have specialist, dedicated coaches who support our customers who move into that project. And it's been really encouraging, the feedback that we've had. Our teams have been going out to other local authorities, and other organizations and other professional bodies, and explaining to them about the safe space and why it's there. Unsurprisingly, the knowledge amongst those wider colleagues was very limited and it's great to know that we've touched just a small, small area of the country and have been able to raise that profile, and hopefully continue to do so and hopefully that will grow, as well.

Sara: I think you've identified that there's already a lack of these kinds of provisions around the country, and it's one thing to be able to provide that and get the funding, but a lot of these issues are so sensitive and really complex. How do you actually tell people about your organization and how do you get people involved? And, is it difficult for the support workers at work in these provisions to actually be able to have those conversations? How do you approach it?

Vanda: I think it is difficult for staff to have some conversations about the growing of the organization in different areas. We've supported the LGBT in our 16 days campaign and we've promoted it through...we had a whole day where one of the coaches came down to speak to the ladies, to educate them about LGBT so that they could understand that it's not just gender-based domestic abuse, and to understand that it's in different cultures.

It was an amazing day and the ladies were very understanding. But, initially, because they South Asian, it was seen that the possibility was that they wouldn't understand it because it's not accepted outside of the UK. So, to bring that in and for the ladies to embrace, and understand and want to learn more have been absolutely amazing.

Anisha: What do you think the importance is of changing the narrative in the way that we have these conversations and make sure that we aren't contributing to the misconceptions and really being as open as we can?

Andrew: It's really difficult because I think that there is a culture within this country, really, of not talking about these things. It's kind of the unspoken truths. And what we need to do is open up those conversations. I mean, if we make a comparison to the sort of mental health campaigns we see nowadays, where we recognize that people aren't talking about their mental health, for example, and actually getting that message out there that it's okay to talk about it and it's OK to seek help. And that's the same sort of message that we need to get out there. And I think, slowly, that's happening, but we're nowhere near the end of that campaign.

Helena: And lots of people don't speak up because they don't think they'll be believed. They don't feel that their experiences will be listened to. And if you think about mainstream media, TV programmes, over the last few years, there's been a bit of a shift. We're still on a journey; historically, there was always this image that someone said they experienced abuse, or were raped, and people didn't believe them. They were forced to prove themselves. Slowly, that's changing. It will take a massive cultural shift. But by having these conversations, like we're having today, we're starting to do that. And that's so important.

Sara: And how do you think Stonewater, specifically, makes those conversations easier to have with customers?

Helena: By training our staff so they know what to look out for when they're out and about on the ground. That's really key, so that they feel confident to have those conversations because, bear in mind, you're talking to someone about something so sensitive that they could have experienced for years and years of their life and not told their closest family member or friends. So, for someone who's a worker to come in and talk about that, that's quite a difficult thing. By equipping our staff to have those conversations, they feel more able and they feel able to signpost as well. So, once they do find something out, they're able to put people in touch with professional organizations, which is really important. The other key thing for us as a housing provider is training our contractors. Contractors are in and out of our customers' homes every day. In many ways, they're our eyes and our ears so we want them to have the ability – when they become concerned about something – to tell us that we can get the appropriate support in.

Anisha: What's great about Stonewater, and I think that you mentioned this, Helena, was that you offer support for internal employees, for domestic violence. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

Helena: We recognize that domestic abuse happens and we believe that it happens. So, we want to create an environment for our colleagues where, if someone is experiencing domestic abuse, they feel able to tell someone. We recently trained up 16 mental health first-aiders within the organization, and these are colleagues who people can go to and speak to about their concerns, how they're feeling, and have a confidential, supportive conversation, which also offers some signposting to professional external agencies.

Sara: And so, for each of you, what do you think is next for Stonewater in the sense of the Make A Stand campaign? What are the future plans or what would you like to see the organization do?

Helena: We want our voice to be stronger, and we want to get our message out and be really loud and clear, and for that to reach every part of the country and absolutely every household that we work with. So, a lot of campaigning with our customers to

raise awareness and to make sure that we're picking up on where they've got concerns, how we can best support them.

We also want to achieve our DAHA accreditation, which we're going through the process of, and we want to make sure that we're influencing local government and parliament around domestic abuse going forward, and working with the new domestic abuse commissioner once she's in post.

Andrew: For me particularly and personally, I'm really proud of the work Stonewater has supported so far in championing the national response to domestic abuse in the LGBT community, specifically. We're so under-resourced at the moment. My personal dream is that the safe space that we've opened grows into something much bigger than it already is, and that through that there's opportunities for great partnership work and, you know, just a real opportunity to influence and make a change in that area.

Vanda: I think the same. I think Stonewater are great for all the campaigns that they're doing. I think they support their staff very well and I would like that to continue.

Sara: The refuge actually won an award didn't it, recently. Congratulations.

Vanda: Thank you. I am proud.

Sara: You should be. I think it was very, very well deserved. Another question I'd like to ask is: we often hear about organizations offering less supported housing services. Why is this an area so important to Stonewater?

Helena: Stonewater wants to do the right thing. We're a social landlord, but we also recognize that some people need more support. They need somewhere to live with a helping hand as well. And so, in order to get them onto their journeys so they can live independently, there's a huge need for supported housing. Stonewater is massively committed to supported housing, and we've signed our five-year growth plan around it, which is signed off at board level to show massive commitment, continuing to grow our supported housing and invest in it throughout the organization.

Sara: And Vanda, you talked earlier about the 16-day campaign. What actually is the 16-day campaign?

Vanda: Sixteen days against gender-based violence. Last year it was 'let's go orange'; this is a chance for people to understand different abuses: honour-based, modern-day slavery and all the new abuses. It's also a chance for everybody to get together so that we can see how we can all work together as organizations, and for the ladies to share their stories and for our voices to get heard. It has been a lot of work, but it's been really good because we've managed to work with so many different people, get some local funders back in.

Sara: So, this final question is a bit of a personal one: can each of you tell us why you actually work in supported housing? What led you to this career path?

Helena: For me, I just can't cope with the thought that anyone should have to sleep on the streets. It's such a horrific thing to actually see. And I think we can all become a bit blind to it every day when you're walking around and you see someone bedded down.

Sara: Weird that it's a social norm in that respect.

Helena: Absolutely, and it's so not okay, because actually just to have to get down and sit on the pavement would be really, really hard and make you feel so invisible. And it just feels so wrong to me that I feel if you spend time in your life working, you should work doing something that's really worthwhile and going to make a difference.

Andrew: Yeah, I think, for me, I started my career in social housing and I worked across many different departments. And I think one of the things I really struggled with was that I felt blocked from carrying out my desire to help the people I was working with. And that was mainly because of the job roles that I was in and the remit that I had. And after a couple of years then working in the private retirement living sector, it became really apparent to me that I wanted to work for an organization and for a department within the organization that helped and supported people.

And here I am at Stonewater to working in supported housing, and I genuinely couldn't see me now working for another area of this sector. I think I've found a real passion here. You get these real tangible results and success stories that you get to take home with you at night. And yeah, I absolutely love my job.

Vanda: I think, for me, I've been working in the homeless sector for many years. I think I only really started to understand it when I started to do... we used to sleep on the streets. So, we did a big campaign about no second night out, and you understand just how bitter life is actually sometimes. And I never wanted somebody to feel the way that I felt that night when it was so lonely by yourself. I never wanted anybody to feel like that again. That's why I've come in to support housing, because I know that what we need to do to make a difference in their lives. Stonewater is so outstanding, because actually their motto is: customers at the heart. That's the absolute truth of them.

If you would like any more information about everything that we've talked about in today's podcast, check the episode description and we'll have all the links so you can find out all the relevant information.

We hope you've enjoyed this episode of Stonewater's On The Air. Thanks for listening. We'll be launching a new episode every other Wednesday, so stay tuned for some more great conversations.