

Stonewater - On The Air - Season 4 - Episode 12 Transcript

Paula Palmer

Hello, and welcome back to Stonewater's On the Air podcast. It seems like such a long time ago since my first podcast, way back in July, when we started season four. But here we are at the final. We started the season talking about the cost of living crisis, which unfortunately hasn't really seemed to have gone away, but we're still supporting our customers in many of the same ways through the work that we do and through our partners like the Longleigh Foundation and Clean Slate, who we spoke to in episodes two and three.

In episodes four and six, we talked about technology and data and how we're using it to improve and make our services more inclusive. Then we had the sustainability triple bill, talking about how we're making our new and older homes and activities kinder to the environment and supporting the government's net-zero carbon agenda. To the final episode of season four and this miniseries in which we've been delving into the topic of professionalism in the housing sector.

Last month, we explored how housing providers such as Stonewater are investing in their teams and what we're doing to balance the need for professional qualifications and learning practical new skills and building the diversity of our talent pool. In today's episode, we're going to take a look at why we consider the housing sector, and obviously Stonewater, a great place to work.

Without further ado, I'd like to introduce our guests, one of Stonewater's HR advisors, Abi Deeprise, and Commercial Services Team Leader Ann-Marie Alexander, plus Jill Headford, an employment partner at law firm Tozers. Thanks for joining me on today's podcast. Would you like to get cracking and tell us a bit more about yourselves and what you do? How about you, Abi?

Abi Deeprise

I'm Abi, I'm HR advisor, so I work in Stonewater's people team. My role is just around coaching managers and speaking to colleagues, making sure everyone's got everything they need. As well as that which I'll be talking about today is around policy development as well.

Ann-Marie Alexander

Hi. I'm Anne-Marie. I'm the Commercial Services Team Leader. I look after resells of shared ownership properties, right to buy, right to acquire initials, retirement schemes, and selling their retirement properties. A bit of a mixture, really.

Jill Headford

Hello, I'm Jill Headford. As you said, I'm a solicitor and partner at Tozers, an Exeter law firm. My team advises Stonewater on employment law and related issues, and I have the pleasure of representing them in employment tribunals on the very rare occasions when they face a claim.

Paula Palmer

Lovely. Thanks, everyone. I'm glad it's very rare. I'm looking forward to this conversation and for a change, I feel like I might have something to add because as well as being host of this podcast, I am also an employee in the housing sector and more specifically at Stonewater. Between us, I'm sure we can have lots of lovely things to talk about. Let's get started. Let's explore why Stonewater and the housing sector is a great place to work.

Stonewater has a whole raft of what seemed to be forward-thinking policies, and we've got Abi here to tell us a bit more about some of those policies that not only prioritise employee well-being but also reflect Stonewater's commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive culture. Go on Abi, over to you to tell us some more.

Abi Deeprise

Yes. To me, policies form a really crucial part in holding the organisation accountable to that commitment because I think, for me, what they actually do is they represent what Stonewater stands for, and they are made up of commitments - that's sort of what they are. Businesses don't legally need to have policies at all. There's employment law and there's Acas Codes of Practice and things like that that should be followed.

It begs the question, when you're developing policies of, why are we bothering? Why are we here? What's the point? What is the value that they actually add? For me, it is just that it's translating complex legislation into plain English for our colleagues and our managers so that everyone knows what their responsibilities are and what their rights are. It's securing maximum value for our colleagues and taking a bit of a beyond-compliance approach, and it's also about getting commitment from the business on working practices that actually represent what you stand for.

To me, a suite of policies that aligns with your strategy and your values forms the foundations of a culture that we're trying to foster. It makes it sustainable because initiatives can gain and lose traction, but your policies are your commitments. That's a bit of an overview, but some of the policies that have really contributed to this, for example, has been our menopause policy. The aim of that was to bring together all the provisions and the tools that Stonewater have to support any colleague's experience in the menopause. But it also introduced a new provision. It enabled our colleagues to claim back for HRT, just fire expenses, the way that you claim back for a train or a lunch.

That for us provided a bit of a totem for who we are as an organisation and breaking down those taboos around that topic. But also looking at our demographics of our workforce, it also felt like something that would actually really directly support our colleagues to do their best work, and then ultimately, that impacts on our customers.

We also recently reviewed... Not that recently any more, actually, probably about a year ago, reviewed our domestic abuse policy with our domestic abuse team. That introduced 10 days of paid safe leave for anyone experiencing domestic abuse to do things like attend court or find a new home, that kind of thing. Actually, one of the benefits of working for a housing provider like Stonewater is that we have experts in house that know best practices in those areas and who can develop those policies with you so that you're really working with those subject-matter experts to provide genuine best practice for your colleagues, essentially.

We're about to launch our flexible and predictable working policy. That was catalysed by some legislative changes. But again, if we're taking that beyond-compliance approach and listening to our colleagues and what they have to say about these sorts of things, we've not just become compliant with that legislation through policy, but it's also meant that we've produced a procedure and a toolkit for managers to really practically respond to flexible working requests in a much more creative and sustainable way.

That forms quite a good basis to our suite of policies because you can respond to lots of different issues with flexible working. If we're talking about responding to and being there for people in the moments that matter, flexible working is a really all-encompassing type of approach or if you've got a flexible culture that can help colleagues and loads of different situations. Since COVID, we're a hybrid organisation. We've got people that work from home all the time anyway. We've got people that work in schemes and in refuges. We've got people that work out on the field. Flexibility can look really different to all of our different colleague communities.

It's also about supporting not just a flexible culture, in inverted commas, but actually how do managers practically make that happen for different colleagues that have different ways of working and making that feel really fair and really equitable across the whole piece. Essentially, summing all of that up, it's just about equipping all of our colleagues to do their best work so that they can do what they do best for our customers.

Paula Palmer

Yeah. We're talking about Stonewater being a great place to work, in recruitment terms, I guess. But actually it's great for retention, isn't it? We don't want people dropping out of the workforce because they're going through their menopause and don't feel able to cope or supported. Recruitment is an expensive process in it, and we want to keep our valued employees and people who experienced and know their jobs, don't we? We don't want to lose anybody.

Abi Deeprose

Absolutely. That's exactly it. When you're thinking about employee engagement, it's not just about what attracts people to work for you, but it's also about why do they stay and why do they leave? What's all that information telling you? Like you say, recruitment is very expensive, and we do work within social housing. We've got limited resource, we've got to prioritise. It's an interesting puzzle, really, trying to put together what provisions and what policies will be sustainable and will really help people, but that don't then overstretch. You don't overpromise because of the capacity that you've got in the resources you've got. It's about doing it in a way that's ethical and sustainable as well.

Paula Palmer

I was thinking earlier. Now, as individuals, we always focus on the ones that matter most to us in our particular circumstances. When I was having children, I was looking at the maternity policy, and then it was flexible working for childcare, and I'm getting closer to menopause. What do we offer there? What am I going to do? But from everything you talk about and from what I see, I think... You mentioned earlier, didn't you? The moments that matter. I think that we do sound like we've got a fairly encompassing supportive culture that really will support anybody from whatever stage of life you're in or situation. That's fantastic. Do you have anything to add, Anne-Marie?

Ann-Marie Alexander

Yeah. I think one of my biggest ones is obviously the hybrid working. I have a two-year-old little boy. To be able to have the flexibility that I have really does help our home life and our childcare, so I can drop him off, and pick him up when I need to. If he's got appointments, I've got the flexibility to take out time in the middle of the day, and take him to that and then come back to work. It's really helped us out with my work-life balance, having that flexibility.

Also working from home, I found that I'm more productive as well. I feel a lot more satisfaction with my role because you can actually get down and knuckle on and get a lot done. It also helps with that flexibility. If I need to take a few hours out in the middle of the day, then I can always work a bit later in the evening, which obviously in the office wasn't always possible because you had to be in that office environment. It has really helped us as a family.

Paula Palmer

That's great. It's good that you feel that it's been really useful. I think it's also like hybrid work, and it's also helped with opening up a job market, isn't it? I live in rural Herefordshire. Comms jobs are very far and few between. I get to have this opportunity and a good salary without having any impact on my home or having to commute massively. In terms of that as well, it's really helpful, isn't it?

Jill, let's have a chat with you. How do you think our policies align with legal frameworks surrounding employee rights in some of the policies we've just discussed?

Jill Headford

Well, I was amused to hear Abi's comment earlier about trying to avoid overpromising. What I would say is that Stonewater's policies are very comprehensive, and that's great. They go, in many instances, well beyond what the law requires, and that's good and very laudable. We always have to run a rearguard action about overpromising because it's easy to get carried away on a wave of enthusiasm. A dedicated HR team always want to offer the best working environment they possibly can. But we have to be careful not to... Should avoid clichés, really, but not to make a rod for our own

back by offering a counsel of perfection, because if we then fall short of it in the wrong circumstances, then we'll be held to account for that.

But yes, I would say that they are very comprehensive. They're not generally off-the-shelf policies, which Stonewater have simply adopted and taken on board and put them in the drawer and put them on the internet, and that's fine. They're very much dynamic procedures which have been developed over a long period. They're very good policies in the sense that they fit the organisation very well, which is great. As Abi said, a great deal of thought and effort goes into that process of developing the procedures. A lot goes into induction and training so that the principles in the policies and procedures run right through the organisation like Blackpool rock, and that's really, really important because that way, you're following the spirit as well of the letter of the procedures.

Now, of course, it's impossible to receive 100% success and contentment. Inevitably, there will be grievances which occasionally lead to tribunal claims. That's where I come in. I have to say—and not just because you've been kind enough to invite me to speak on this podcast—Stonewater are a pleasure to represent at tribunal because they do have such impressive policies and good practices and because I can generally be confident about the way matters have been dealt with. Because in a tribunal, you're essentially under the public spotlight, and you're there to justify every little letter of every single thing that you did. You have to justify every step you took and why you took it. Because Stonewater's practices are so good, we can have confidence in that.

Can I just add something else? Every tribunal is... It's a battle to be one; of course it is. But it's also a learning experience because those hearings provide very, very valuable feedback. Then, we have wrap-up sessions following every hearing. We're able to look at what lessons we've learned, how we could have done things better, an honest, objective look about things that we might not have done very well. It's always about improving the situation for the future.

The corollary of that is not only avoiding claims but maintaining an enthusiastic and stable workforce within Stonewater to directly benefit Stonewater's customers. Recruiting and retaining the right people is very important. It comes full circle to what Abi was saying, that crafting the right policies that properly reflect the employers we want to be helps with recruitment and retention. It also... This is a slightly esoteric point. But it also raises awareness of discrimination issues because those arise under the Equality Act in the provision of services and the provision of housing, which, of course, is what we do. Staff are aware that the same principles feed through into their service provision. It's a very broad cultural thing, which I think is one of the things that Abi touched on.

Paula Palmer

Yeah, absolutely. I liked your analogy there with the stick of rock and how the policies help to be throughout all of our business and everybody to know what the process is. That's brilliant. Abi, from what Jill was to say in there, we're obviously doing something right. How are your team? How do we work out policies? How do we make sure our workplace culture reflects that of our workforce?

Abi Deepro

When you're looking to implement any policy, I suppose it's probably across the board, but it's important to take an evidence-based approach that's going to be sustainable. Like I've mentioned, it's going to be reliable. That means considering insights and data from lots of different sources. That could be just your industry best practice, scientific literature like the CIPD has commissioned, and things like that. But as well as that, our own organisational data is absolutely key. That is our demographic makeup feedback from colleagues. Because when we're talking about moments that matter, matters to who? Who are Stonewater? Who are the people that work here really need to understand our own organisation.

One way that we've done that is setting up a lot of infrastructure, essentially to maximise colleague voice. We have a colleague forum, of course, and we've got our employee networking groups as well, so there are more formalised ways of doing that. We also have our annual engagement survey, best companies, and regular pulse surveys on wellbeing with our management cohort as well, and lots of

cultural work that goes on to ensure that we have a culture where colleagues feel like they can speak up. But more crucially than that, the organisation is listening as well.

I've mentioned a couple of different ways of colleagues getting their voice heard. I just wanted to pick up on some examples that have come out of that, of changes that we've made as a result of actually just colleague voice. The menopause policy that I've already spoken about is a really clear example of this, because it came following a lot of work that the Alliance Gender Equality Committee had been doing, working with industry experts. We hosted monthly listening groups for colleagues experiencing the menopause.

The conversation around the menopause was gaining a lot of traction. But equally, it felt like, looking at our colleague demographic, it was a very relevant conversation to us as well. We were hearing that directly from our colleagues. That's how that policy came to be. Now, there's a lot more activity that can hang off of it. Like I say, it acts as a totem.

Another thing that's come out of alliance is what some of the colleagues on this call might have heard of is green days, which they essentially act as a duvet day. If you feel like you just want to get your head down, you don't want to be on camera, you don't want to... There's work to be done. You don't need to be sick, but you don't necessarily want to be front and centre. You can just tell your manager, "Look, I'm having a green day. I'm not going to turn my camera on."

For those more personal things, maybe such as the menopause or menstrual problems or anything really, that provides a bit of a language that's now, I think, quite widely recognised throughout the organisation. Helps to reduce absence because if you don't necessarily need to take a full sick day, but you're just feeling a little bit eugh, have a green day. Obviously, that's down to your management capability as well. Sometimes, you do need to take a sick day.

Again, that can be felt really differently across the organisation because if you work from home, it's very easy to take a green day and turn your camera off. But if you work in a refuge, you can't just say, "I'm not speaking to customers today." You might need to take a green hour or a green 17 minutes and go and have a cup of tea or something. But that's something that we do here a lot throughout the organisation, especially around reasonable adjustments in absence meetings. That people do feel like they can take green days and that does help them.

We also have things like our Best Company's Engagement Survey, which I've just touched on. It actually for some protected characteristics, we can measure results that come in from best companies by things like gender, so we can see what engages the women in the organisation, what engages men in the organisation, and what's the difference.

Some of the changes that have come out of looking at our best company scores, we consistently had lower scores against giving something back, which is one of the factors that best companies use to measure engagement, which initially strikes you is quite strange considering the organisation that we're in, and we're mission-led organisation with a really strong purpose. We give back every day just as business as usual. But what I guess you take from that is people want to be able to do that by their own definition and have the autonomy to do that in their own way. What we introduced from that was a volunteer policy. That enabled colleagues to take eight hours of paid leave every year to spend volunteering however they wish.

I've spoken about a number of internal volunteer roles that we have in the organisation as well, such as Colleague Forum. As part of that as well, that now gets recognised. We push that recognition in performance development reviews, because there's lots of ways that people can give back to their local communities, and it's up to the colleague to decide what that means and what that looks like. That's just a couple of examples.

Ann-Marie Alexander

I'd say definitely the menopause groups with the alliance was really helpful. It's not something I'm going through myself, but obviously, eventually, I would probably go down it. But one of my

colleagues was going through menopause—she's premenopausal—and so it was better to understand her working way, and obviously, she could forget certain things, and she'd set reminders. It was quite useful for me to understand what she was going through and be able to try and help her a little bit as much as I could possibly.

Also, a lot of my team do take the green days. They take them up regularly, which obviously, we've seen a decrease in absence, which is really good for the team. Also, a few of my team have also taken up the volunteering days as well, which is really good.

Paula Palmer

Yeah. I think I'd agree with you that the networking groups, they're really educational as well, aren't they? They make you aware of things that aren't necessarily going on in your sphere but do affect your colleagues and the people you're working with and affect their levels of work and capacity. I also think that they really empower those communities to talk about what matters to them. We can see that their feedback has been taken on board into our workplace cultures. That's brilliant.

Jill, as an employment lawyer, you must speak to quite a lot of companies on issues such as policy. Do you think Stonewater stands out in terms of our policies, and what difference do you think they make to employees, both our existing and potential new employees?

Jill Headford

First of all, I just wanted to comment on something that I think both Abi and Marie mentioned about menopause. The government have been considering, considered on at least two occasions, whether or not menopause should be regarded as a disability and therefore something a condition that should receive special protection and treatment as a matter of law. So far, the answer to that has been no, but it might come one day.

Obviously, employers like Stonewater who are already sympathetic and are already geared up to managing those types of things will find it a lot easier should the law suddenly change. Even now, it could possibly be protected as a part of a sex or gender, as a protected characteristic in a way. Just mention that.

But more in relation to equality and diversity policies in general, I think that they do contribute to the removal of potential barriers to social mobility. For example, a flexible working policy. This is useful to everybody, but just imagine for a moment, you've got a young working mother from a socially less advantaged background, not on a high wage, no bank of mum and dad, maybe not even a spouse to share the load. It applies equally to young fathers, of course. Perhaps I should say, young parents. That parent can't buy their way out of the difficulties. Childcare is very expensive, and so they're very dependent on their employer being empathetic and, most importantly, flexible, particularly about remote working and part-time, etc.

It's important to everybody in terms of quality of life, as we've just heard from the comments a few moments ago, regardless of means. But it's particularly important, crucial to people with perhaps limited means, which may often depend, or be reflective of their social status. That's one example.

Another one is disability. A key feature of the law against disability discrimination is the duty of employers to make reasonable adjustments to try to remove or mitigate the disadvantages of the disability, whatever it may be. Again, this particularly helps those people who really do need to work and can work with a bit of help from their employer. There is a social mobility element to it in my view.

Then, I suppose another obvious example would be managing poor performance. This is something that gives rise to a lot of tribunal claims because it ends up often in a termination of employment or a grievance. It also has social implications. Picture someone who has challenges at home. They're trying to do their job. They might have intermittent absences, or they might just be hampered. That may often be a social issue. The challenges people face at home are not limited to any particular social class. But I think you probably get what I'm driving at.

An employer like Stonewater, who goes the extra mile to try and understand the underlying causes and provides support, is an absolute godsend to employees in that situation. They may be in that situation temporarily. The support they get from an employer like Stonewater may help them to move up and on and out of it into a position where they're better able to manage their own difficulties. It's wonderful.

Paula Palmer

We talk about it, don't we? Bring your whole self to work. You aren't just a face that you bring to work. You're an income manager, or you're a social media manager or something. You are everything. Your family life, your problems at the weekend. That can all have an impact on how you deliver, your capacity, and your capability at work. Absolutely. Having those things, all of our benefits around wellbeing days, duvet days, hybrid working, and flexibility, they do all help to support the person, don't they, and make sure that you're able to give as much as you possibly can.

We are here talking about employees and working at Stonewater. But actually, the more we put these beliefs in our colleagues, and the more they're likely to take that into their day-to-day job, getting the basics right for our employees helps them to take that sense of equality, equity, and inclusion into the work they do as well.

Down to my final question for Abi and Anne-Marie. Stonewater plays a significant role in the communities in which it serves. For many of us, it's not just a job. It's important to work somewhere with a real sense of purpose. What is it about Stonewater and giving you a good sense of job satisfaction that makes it a great place to work for you?

Ann-Marie Alexander

As part of my role, I look at the right to buy and the right to acquire applications. That's where rented customers can purchase their home via discount, so they're renting their property. It helps them get on the property ladder as well, so we support them a lot through their process and help them buy a discounted rate depending on eligibility. But it really does give me some pride making sure that I'm helping them give them their own home and give them that first step onto the property ladder. We also support with selling and shared ownership properties. We help the seller and also the new incoming purchaser. It gives us that sense of pride to be able to give everyone a place that they want to call home.

Paula Palmer

Lovely. Abi.

Abi Deeprise

I guess for my job in particular, working for someone with such a sense of purpose provides a real deliberateness, if that's a word, a sense of being deliberate to your work because I guess our colleagues do such incredible, important work every day, like Anne-Marie's team. All of the amazing services that we provide are provided by people. To hear that Anne-Marie's team do use the provisions that we put in place, and it does help them do that good work, for me, it provides that sense of job satisfaction of the things that you're doing for the people that work for Stonewater, does help them to then go about and do their jobs and do what they do best for our customers as well. It's less direct, but you can really see that flow of engagement and into our service delivery.

Paula Palmer

Yeah. Fantastic. Jill was talking about social mobility, and having a home and somewhere to base yourself is really important in that step, isn't it? Knowing that our colleagues and through our support they're doing that is very rewarding too, isn't it?

That's been a really great discussion today. Of course, if anybody out there is listening thinking Stonewater really is a great place to work, they can check out our vacancies on our website, www.stonewater.org/careers. But all that remains for me to say today is, thank you to our guests, to Anne-Marie, Abi, and Jill, and thank you everybody for listening in.

Today, of course, has been the last episode in our current season of *On the Air*. But don't worry, we'll be back after a short break in September with season five. In the meantime, catch what you've missed wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks very much.