

Paula Palmer

Hi, and welcome back, everyone. How are you? I'm feeling really pleased to be back with our second podcast of Series 4. I'm feeling a little bit more relaxed this episode. I'm not quite an old hand now, but first-time nerves are out of the way.

Paula Palmer

I hope everyone enjoyed our first episode where we spoke about the way Stonewater, as a housing association, is trying to help customers through the energy crisis, and where we started to hear a little bit about the Longleigh Foundation.

Paula Palmer

Today we're going to dig further into our relationship with Longleigh, digging deeper into what the foundation is, and how it supports our customers. Like last time, I'm joined by some wonderful guests, but first of all, let's say hello to my guest host, Stonewater's Partnership Manager, Nicky Mason. Hey, Nicky.

Nicky Mason

Hello. Thank you. Thank you for having me. As Paula has said, I am Nicky Mason. I am Partnership Manager at Stonewater, and my role here is fairly broad. I'm involved with partnerships alongside our housing and development teams.

Nicky Mason

These partnerships are wide-ranging and they are a mixture of statutory agencies such as local authorities, parish councils, emergency services, as well as voluntary and charitable sector organisations, other housing providers, developers, and of course, Longleigh, which we're going to be talking about a bit more today.

Nicky Mason

Ultimately, in order to deliver the best possible services and outcomes for our customers, we cannot do things in isolation. We don't have the answers to everything. We don't have the solutions to everything. We can't do everything on our own. So that's where partnership comes in and is so important.

Nicky Mason

The current cost of living crisis is case in point, actually. We know that many of our households are struggling, and we know that some of our households are struggling for the first time. People that have managed to get by up until now are starting to struggle.

Nicky Mason

I support colleagues at Stonewater by exploring and understanding what our partners are doing in that field and making sure that the business know about it, that we're signposting and that we're also complementing what's available out there.

Paula Palmer

Thanks, Nicky. It's great to have you alongside me. Before we get stuck into today's chat, let's introduce our other guests. We have Tracey Leatherland, voluntary sector engagement specialist. Yes, I had to read that, who works here at Stonewater. Manjeev Muker, who is Individual Grants Officer at Longleigh. Tracey, let's start with you. Can you introduce yourself and tell us a bit more about what you do?

Tracey Leatherland

Hello, Paula. Thank you for inviting me on. Hello, everyone. I'm Tracey. As Paula says, I am the voluntary sector engagement specialist here at Stonewater. My role is to offer help and support to our customers who are in financial hardship and distress.

Tracey Leatherland

Voluntary sector engagement, what is this? Taking referrals from our customers who would like to apply for a Longleigh grant. Finding alternative sources of funding for our customers within the local community, making referrals to food banks and signposting to local other charities. Taking referrals from customers who would like to apply for a Longleigh grant, this involves me supporting our customers, submitting the individual Longleigh grants, making sure that our customers meet the criteria and providing the evidence.

Tracey Leatherland

These items can be covered with white goods, beds, wardrobe within our hardship grants. Crisis grants can be someone fleeing domestic abuse or customers needing food vouchers or gas or electric vouchers. Also, my role can also involve attending viewings and sign-ups, court hearings, joint visits, or property condition visits.

Paula Palmer

Thanks, Tracey. That sounds like a really busy role. I bet there's never a dull moment, eh?

Tracey Leatherland

No.

Paula Palmer

Over to Manjeev, who we mentioned earlier, joins us from Longleigh. Manjeev, could you tell us more about you and your role?

Manjeev Muker

Hello, I'm Manjeev and I'm the Individual Grants Manager at the Longleigh Foundation. Essentially, my role involves helping colleagues approve and fulfil grants. Sometimes we have prolonged discussions about, in particular, applications. If they get a bit nutty, they do need to be looked at in a bit more detail.

Manjeev Muker

But other than that, I deal with suppliers and alongside looking into the impact and the evaluation of our grants. One of my main tasks is helping Stonewater colleagues understand our application process. I have monthly little training sessions to help take Stonewater colleagues through our criteria documents so that they understand that and also understand our little application portal that allows people to submit and upload, well, submit applications to us.

Nicky Mason

Excellent. It's really good to meet everybody. Manjeev, for those listeners who don't know anything about the Longleigh Foundation, could you explain a little bit about what it is and why it was set up and how it works?

Manjeev Muker

Well, the Longleigh Foundation was set up by Stonewater as a way of helping its customers get settled into life in a new home. Given the financial pressures that increasingly nearly everyone is facing, Stonewater thought that a means of support to help alleviate this pressure would be beneficial.

Manjeev Muker

I mean, at a wholly basic level, considering how expensive it is to move, I think the best example of how Longleigh can help is to fund beds, sofas, washing machines, and cookers, and the like for those moving into a property, for example, after a period of homelessness.

Manjeev Muker

The applications for a Longleigh grant must come from a member of Stonewater staff, and so customers would need to get in touch with a Stonewater colleague to discuss their eligibility. In this way, customers can first check that they meet our criteria. Together with the help of Stonewater colleagues, we can make sure that customers can get the right help at the right time.

Paula Palmer

Thanks, Manjeev. Yes, setting up a new home is a really expensive business, isn't it? There's such a lot of stuff you need. I think I'm right in saying that whilst Longleigh was set up by Stonewater, you operate very independently, and so the grants and support services that you offer are just brought about by what you see the demand in. It's not led by Stonewater.

Manjeev Muker

At the moment, we're working very closely with Stonewater, primarily because Stonewater is our only funder. We're working with Stonewater and its customers to help Stonewater customers get over little bumps in their road. Although, admittedly, the bumps might not be so little.

Manjeev Muker

As Tracey alluded to a little bit earlier on, there's a variety of ways in which we can help. There are a variety of pathways which determine if and how Longleigh can help, as it were. As long as a customer meets a number of conditions, for instance, if they live with somebody with a disability, for instance, or as I mentioned a little bit earlier on if somebody is moving in from a refuge or supported living scheme into independent living, then we can help then.

Manjeev Muker

If, for instance, somebody needs help with carpeting, there are very specific examples and instances of when we can help with carpeting, but we certainly can help with a new floor. At the moment, Longleigh is geared specifically towards Stonewater's customers.

Paula Palmer

Great. Nicky, can I throw it back to you? Could you tell us a bit more about how the partnership came about?

Nicky Mason

Yeah, sure. Longleigh was established in 2015. It was initially set up on the back of the welfare reform that was taking place at that time. I think people will remember the introduction of things like the bedroom tax that people talked about, and the overhaul of the welfare system in this country, and that came at a time where austerity was also playing a part.

Nicky Mason

Not only did households face a cut in income, they also lost a lot of vital local services. I think, as a landlord, one of the most important things that we can do is help customers to sustain their tenancy. It's really, really important.

Nicky Mason

When you lose those local services, it's really difficult for customers to have that. Manjeev talks really well about the grant, but I think it's really also important to mention that alongside the financial support that Longleigh can offer, they also offer circles of support.

Nicky Mason

Not only do they offer financial wellbeing, but they can offer emotional and physical wellbeing because that often goes hand in hand when people are facing issues. But we know, as Manjeev has said, setting up a home is really expensive.

Nicky Mason

But people have become less resilient as a result of cuts in the income. So when the washing machine breaks or the car breaks down, suddenly that's a crisis. If you're not resilient, you don't have the backup to face that. This is where the Longleigh Foundation can come in.

Nicky Mason

Alongside that stuff as well, Longleigh also supports Stonewater in wider research. There are lots and lots of issues facing the housing sector at the moment. You only have to watch the news about the housing crisis and things that are going on. They help us by commissioning and funding wider research that will help us drive change through the housing sector and also increase the social impact.

Paula Palmer

What a really valuable partnership. I mean, offering really great support. I imagine it makes a lot of difference to those people who need it. We've already started to hear about some examples of the support offered by Longleigh. Tracey, could you give us a few more examples or talk about the support that you've seen being offered?

Tracey Leatherland

Yes, Paula. I can advise Longleigh's help and support to our customers make such a huge difference by helping them to sustain their tenancy or feel safe in their new home. This can also reduce their stress and worries and improve our customers' wellbeing. Longleigh can help our customers... Customers fleeing domestic abuse, need replacement of white goods, and setting up a new home for customers who've

been homeless. Longleigh also offer circles of support. We can make referrals to Clean Slate or Health-Works.

Nicky Mason

As Paula already alluded to, I mean, moving home, setting up home is hard enough for lots of people, and it's a very expensive time. If you're fleeing domestic abuse or you've had a period of homelessness, it's even harder. Thank you, Tracey.

Nicky Mason

Manjeev, you're in a great position of being able to provide these grants. Could you tell us about a customer or give us an example of the support given and the impact that these had?

Manjeev Muker

Well, I think, again, I think the word *alluded* is probably going to come up quite a bit. But I think as everybody has alluded to, the range of support that Longleigh can provide is broad.

Manjeev Muker

One individual that I can think of is a chap called George who came to us with an application for vouchers for both food and utilities. He had a number of respiratory conditions. Well, he has a number of respiratory conditions, sorry.

Manjeev Muker

Together with those medical conditions, he had debts that were piling up and needed dealing with. Longleigh was able to help with some supermarket vouchers and utility vouchers over a period of about six weeks. In doing so, we were able to help keep his fridge stocked and on, essentially, amongst his lights and other electrical appliances whilst he was getting his debts and finances in order.

Manjeev Muker

I think it's safe to say that the impact was quite significant, so much so that he e-mailed me soon after I sent him the last voucher to say that there weren't enough words to express his gratitude.

Manjeev Muker

I think, again, it's a good example of how attacking, as it were, a number of problems at the same time and providing help in a number of different aspects at the same time, certainly helps pull people out of situations in which they couldn't potentially see a way out of at the time.

Paula Palmer

Crikey, Manjeev. That's a good day in the office, isn't it? When you get an e-mail through like that, it's a very rewarding position to be in.

Manjeev Muker

We're in a very lucky position.

Paula Palmer

Tracey, you're also someone who has a lot of interaction with our customers too. Are you able to tell us about the impact the cost of living crisis has had on our Stonewater customers?

Tracey Leatherland

Yes, Paula. The impact of the cost of living has affected our customers too, in a way of having no money to buy food or able just to top up their gas and electric meters. Also, the amount of debts are increasing. Again, that's just to buy food or just to pay normal bills.

Tracey Leatherland

Stonewater has given our customers support and advice around the cost of living. We can make referrals to our food banks, referrals for home assessments to LEAP, or the NEA, Green Doctor, or local support if needed.

Tracey Leatherland

Then also, recently, we are able to apply for funding, for fuel funding, via HACT. This is cash-out vouchers for gas and electric top-ups, or a cash-out voucher if someone has debt on their utility bills. Then again, potentially applying for a Lingleigh grant for fuel or food if the customer is in hardship and struggling to heat their home or just choosing between food and fuel.

Paula Palmer

Sorry. Tracey, what was that voucher? A cash-out voucher, was it?

Tracey Leatherland

Yeah, it's fuel funding with the HACT. What they're doing is offering out three payments, £49. You can claim this through your local PP shop, and that automatically puts credit on their gas or electric meters or an underpaying cash-out voucher to the customer towards any debt on their gas or electric bill.

Paula Palmer

Okay, thanks for explaining that one. Manjeev, have you seen an impact at the foundation too, perhaps in terms of application numbers or the type of support needed?

Manjeev Muker

Absolutely. I started at the Longleigh Foundation about two years ago, so about July 2021. Between then and about February 2022, we were dealing with predominantly helping people buy the likes of fridges and cookers, washing machines, sofas, beds, cupboards.

Manjeev Muker

But I think from about February 2022, we noticed a sizable shift towards applications asking for help with the very basics, like food and utility bills. In March 2022, we were able to source a provider that helped specifically with utility vouchers.

Manjeev Muker

With our financial year ending on the 30th of June, between March 22 and the 30th of June 2022, we spent nearly £6,000 on utility vouchers. But between July 2022 and February this year, we've spent about £18,000 on utility vouchers.

Manjeev Muker

We're still in the midst of pulling together our facts and figures for the full '22-'23 financial year. But I think that increase will go some way to illustrate the shift upwards, as it were, in the increase in the applications that we're receiving and the fact that they're asking for help to get food and make sure that people can get food and make sure that they can keep their lights and heating going.

Paula Palmer

The type of support that's needed shows that people are struggling much more on a daily basis rather than, like we said before, it used to be the big-ticket items, the fridge, or one-off expenses. Now it's things you need every day. That's a bit scary, isn't it? A bit heartbreaking.

Manjeev Muker

Absolutely.

Paula Palmer

We mentioned earlier that Stonewater supports Longleigh Foundation. Nicky, could you tell us a bit more about that one, please?

Nicky Mason

Yeah, of course. We do support Longleigh through funding. Obviously, there is a budget set each year that Longleigh receive from Stonewater as an organisation. However, again, at this point, I do think it's important to reiterate that Longleigh are an independent organisation. We are their only funder at the moment, but they have their own governance and board.

Nicky Mason

We also operate a Give As Your Earn scheme here, and a number of staff also donate regularly to the Longleigh Foundation through that. As part of that agreement, donations are matched by Stonewater and Gift Aid is applied and that money goes straight over to Longleigh for use.

Nicky Mason

We also have Pennies from Heaven, which is a similar principle to a Save the Change type account. Staff are able to donate the odd pence from their salary to Longleigh. Again, these are matched by Stonewater and automatically have Gift Aid applied.

Nicky Mason

We know that through our regular staff survey that giving back is really important to staff here, to our colleagues. I think that this commitment to Longleigh Foundation is demonstrated through these things.

Paula Palmer

I think staff and colleagues here will see the effect it's having, won't they? They'll see the value of it. It is a great partnership and so worth its weight in gold, particularly to those who it's supporting, makes you wonder where they'd find the help otherwise. Tracey, on that note, you must have some fantastic feedback. Can you give us some examples?

Tracey Leatherland

Yeah. Most common feedback is through... Our Trustpilot is Stonewater. Most customers will leave fabulous reviews stating what a difference the Longleigh Foundation grant has made to them and their family. Also, most importantly, how quickly the Longleigh Foundation deal with the grant, and even if it's for fuel or food, how quickly the money sent over or the food vouchers are sent over. So yes.

Tracey Leatherland

I'd like to share one story with you. I was dealing with a customer. She called me on this particular Friday afternoon, may have been about 3:00 PM. It was going quite late in the afternoon. She reached out. She was really upset. She got no electric. She used all emergency credit, and she got debt on a meter. Also, she had no money till the following week.

Tracey Leatherland

I applied for a crisis grant within that hour and then sent an e-mail to the Longleigh Foundation asking if they could review this particular case for me urgently. Within the hour, the money was sent over to the customer, and the customer was able to put credit on her electric just in time for the children to return home. She was so happy, obviously, to reduce her stress and improve her wellbeing, and just having that electric on for when the children returned home. So that was a good result for our customer.

Paula Palmer

What a turnaround. That was super quick. Well done, Tracey. Very well. Good way to finish your week, eh?

Tracey Leatherland

Yeah, it really was. Thank you to Manjeev and the team.

Paula Palmer

Manjeev, you spoke earlier about a customer that you'd supported. Are you getting the same feedback from customers?

Manjeev Muker

Very much so. But again, we're in a fortunate position to be able to use the funding that we get from Stonewater and to make sure that that money goes towards helping those that need it. In a similar fashion, we do ask for a spot of feedback. Very generally, most people are very appreciative. Also, they find the process of both applying for a grant and the fulfilling of a grant to be straightforward.

Paula Palmer

It needs to be accessible, doesn't it? To not put people off asking for help.

Manjeev Muker

Yeah, absolutely. We get little notes to say things like, "Without the grant..." One person, in particular, said that without their grant, they wouldn't have been able to afford the washing machine, and the cooker, and the fridge-freezer that Longleigh was able to provide.

Manjeev Muker

Being able to have those goods, they feel, has been a blessing. People constantly say to us that they can't thank us enough, which is really lovely. Again, similar to Tracey, I've got one case in particular where a family had been Stonewater customers for a wee while, but due to a number of complications that had added up over time, they weren't able to replace a faulty fridge and a faulty cooker. Longleigh was able to do that.

Manjeev Muker

Having spoken to the family after the goods were delivered, the mum said that with her being an ex-chef, she was once again able to provide for her family in the way that she knew best by being creative with food, because in doing so, she was able to draw on her experience to make sure that she felt that her family was looked after in the way that she knew best.

Manjeev Muker

Being able to provide these items has a massive impact for the families that need them and the people that need them more generally.

Paula Palmer

Absolutely. Well, on that very heartwarming high, I think we should end there. Longleigh grants make an incredible difference in people's lives and long may it continue. But at the same time, I sincerely hope the cost of living improves, that pressures on finances reduce, and people become less reliant for everyday essentials. We live in hope.

Paula Palmer

So that's us for today. Thank you to Nicky, Manjeev, and Tracey for talking with me and to all of you out there for taking the time to listen.

Manjeev Muker

Thank you very much.

Nicky Mason

Thank you.