

Stonewater On The Air Season 04 Episode 11 Transcript

Intro

Welcome back to another episode of *On the Air*, a podcast brought to you by Stonewater. Throughout season 4, we're bringing you 12 brand-new episodes that will explore four themes: the cost of living crisis, technology and housing, sustainability and professionalism within the housing sector.

Paula Palmer

Hello, and welcome back to Stonewater's *On the Air podcast*. Thanks for joining us again for our penultimate episode of Season 4. Hasn't that just flown by? This will be the second episode in our final miniseries where we've been exploring professionalism in housing.

Last month, we took a look at the importance of improving how we communicate and engage with customers right across a sector as we rise to the new increased challenges we face and the new regulations. Next month, we're going to conclude the miniseries and season with why we consider the sector and in particular, Stonewater a great place to work.

But back to today, we've got two wonderful guests who are going to help us to understand how housing providers like Stonewater are investing in their teams and what we're doing to balance the call for professional qualifications while still valuing the importance of learning practical skills and having a diverse pool of talent across the organisation.

Let's kick off today's episode by welcoming our guests, Donna Warr, Head of Organisational Capability, and Sair Leahy, Organisational Development & Learning Experience Manager here at Stonewater. Thanks so much both of you for joining us today. Can you tell us a bit about your roles at Stonewater? Go on, Donna. You go first.

Donna Warr

Hello, Paula, and good afternoon, everybody. I am Donna, and I'm Head of Organisational Capability and that means that essentially I look after all of our learning development and our talent development as well as supporting teams through change.

Paula Palmer

Lovely. Sair.

Sair Leahy

Hello. I'm Sair Leahy. I am very happy to be here today. At Stonewater I look after the day-to-day L&D stuff with a bit of change thrown in for good measure as well in organisational development. I get involved in quite a lot of stuff, really.

Paula Palmer

Lovely. All in making sure that our people know what they're doing, I guess.

Sair Leahy

Yes.

Paula Palmer

Excellent. I think I'm going to get you to tell us a bit more about that as we go on. Perhaps it'll be easier to tell your story as we go.

Sair Leahy

Okey-dokey.

Paula Palmer

It's great to have you both here. I know that here at Stonewater and across the wider housing sector, there has always been a lot of work done to ensure that our teams are well-equipped. I know it's one of our aims here in our people strategy to ensure that our colleagues are equipped with knowledge and physical equipment to do what at times can be very challenging roles.

Before we get into detail of the initiatives that you two have been involved in, I want to talk a bit more about the government's plans to introduce new competence and conduct standards for UK's social housing professionals and how that's been received across the sector. Would you give us a bit of an overview of what the government want to do and how we've responded?

Donna Warr

For those who don't know or aren't aware, probably over the last 12 months or so, we've been going through a process of looking at and responding to government proposals from the Department for Levelling Up. I always get that wrong, and maybe I have got it wrong today, but basically, that government department, to respond to the proposals where they want to bring in mandatory qualifications for senior housing managers and senior executives in housing associations.

That is in response to a number of high-profile situations that have hit the sector over the last few years, whether that's some of the damper mole cases, Grenfell, et cetera. There's a view really that as a profession and as a sector, we should have a level of standard and professionalism that qualifications can underpin.

In terms of how we've responded, we've very much, I suppose, as Stonewater, as we always do, wanted to get ahead of the game. We really took the opportunity to work and speak with bodies like the National Housing Federation and the CIH, joining on different networking groups' roundtable discussions to really try and help shape how those proposals were taking going forward.

At the point in which then the consultation actually went live from the government, we were already in a really good proposition of understanding what they might look like, so we could very clearly as an organisation respond to those proposals because we'd had that involvement early on in terms of trying to influence and shape them.

Paula Palmer

Okay. Thanks, Donna. I guess some of the difficulty lies in there's still some uncertainty about what the standards are going to come out with, isn't it? But for a large complex organisation like Stonewater, it might mean quite a lot of change. What have we been doing to start planning and preparing for that change?

Donna Warr

To start with really getting to grips with the detail behind those proposals and trying to understand exactly what they mean. What some of the phrasing and terminology means, who's really impacted, what roles are impacted, etcetera.

And understanding the different elements. There are two parts. There's the qualification piece, but there's also an additional piece around having much more structured approach to ensuring all colleagues who deliver housing services have the skills, knowledge, experience, and behaviour required to deliver their roles.

For that last piece, we're really good as an organisation doing that. We provide a lot of training around role-specific learning. Whether that's antisocial behaviour, domestic abuse, training, safeguarding, health and safety, et cetera. Lots around roles, specific training.

Then on the behaviour side, we've got our My Customer Promise training, which really is all about the behaviours you'd expect from our colleagues when they interact with customers. It's really trying to understand whether the proposals change our current approach and if so, how much?

That's where we've been at. I think we're at a point where we do really understand what the government is expecting to implement depending on the outcome of the consultation. Rather than sit and wait as we don't do at Stonewater, we've been looking at what we can do to get ahead of the game.

Understanding who out of our managers already have qualifications, where those sit across the organisation, what that means in terms of gaps. We have a fantastic response from our managers. With that information, we've been able to pull together some proposals around how we think we could meet the consultation proposals if they come into force come next April.

Rather than wait till April, we're looking at, can we get some people qualified now? We've got some people chomping at the bit to get qualified because they understand it, the benefit of it. We're looking at what that might look like, the impact on the business, et cetera.

We're not waiting, but we're also not jumping in feet first because some things may change as a result of the consultation, and we don't want to have to undo work either. But ultimately we, as an organisation, believe that it's right that our colleagues are invested in and have opportunity to develop and gain skills and qualifications.

We've always had that in place, so it's not much of a change for us, it's just more the mass of it, the number of people in a short period of time that potentially, we'll have to put through a qualification rather than a couple of people at a time when they've chosen to opt into that.

Paula Palmer

Fab. I can imagine there'll be teams all over the sector trying to get to grips with the implications of the change. I don't think I'd realised that there was that implication of it being quite organisation-wide with that behaviours and the skills, the basic levels of that. I purely thought it was the qualifications of the senior manager. It has got quite a big scope, isn't it?

Donna Warr

Yeah, definitely. And I think there's less detail around that other piece, and there is not a qualification bit associated to it, so our organisations are going to be able to shape that much more in line with what they do already. I suppose that's probably why it's being talked about less because actually most of that exists. We wouldn't be able to do our job if we didn't already train people.

That is slightly less of a change. It's just the structure around it and there's nothing wrong with that and also nothing overly tricky about bringing that piece in. I suspect that's why it's been talked about less because actually in one way, shape, or form, it already exists.

Paula Palmer

Brilliant. Okay. I can see that there are pros and cons of the new standard. I expect the implementation of the new standard will be really key to its success. Then we've got Sair here to talk about some of the things we're already doing to develop our teams and colleagues, and we'll get into that in a moment. How do you think Stonewater will be impacted? How many of our senior leaders do you think will be affected by this

Donna Warr

There's two groups that we're looking at there, and the proposals identify senior housing managers. Of those, we think we've probably got about 45, something like that. Forty-five in terms of as defined in the proposals.

Paula Palmer

As far as we know just now.

Donna Warr

Those would be looking at a Level 4 qualification. Then we've got about 10-ish for the senior housing exec roles. They're the roles like Patrick or Sue as our exec officers of our housing and customer areas, and people like our directors of housing or directors of asset areas, and some of our assistant directors as well.

Again, that list is almost down to us to define, but there are some guidelines within the proposal. As we've interpreted, it's probably around 60 roles, but we know because certain people have already got qualifications. Roughly around 50 people that maybe will have to go through some level of learning either additional or a qualification in its entirety.

Paula Palmer

Okay. And does that have to be started from April 2025, or does that have to be in progress by April '25?

Donna Warr

We think it's going to be kicked off from April, and the expectation is within the 1st 6 months, I think, is around 50% needed to have enrolled and then working towards. There's some quite specific percentages and timescales in there. As you can imagine, it's that level of detail that housing associations are probably challenged a little bit in the consultation. Because that 50% within that 1st year is a challenge without then impacting services.

Paula Palmer

All those people and their lives and roles.

Donna Warr

Yeah. It's-

Paula Palmer

And the investment levels, isn't it?

Donna Warr

It's a day, a week of time given to that. But we've got to keep our customers in mind, and what we can't be doing is doing full pelt on qualifications, and it impacts our services. We've really got to balance that.

Those requirements may change slightly, that they're the unknowns, I suppose. There is a high expectation of at least 50% starting a qualification relatively quickly after this becomes fact, I suppose, rather than a proposal.

Paula Palmer

Okay. One of the real positives of working for Stonewater and of our culture is the fact that there's a place here for people with all backgrounds and experiences. How do you think we're going to be able to preserve that important aspect of Stonewater?

Sair Leahy

It's a super question. I think we have the ethos here at Stonewater that everybody's welcome, and we firmly believe that everyone from all different backgrounds and walks of life are welcome at Stonewater and can add massive value in what we're trying to do here.

We've got several projects going on at the moment that can help that. I think the one we've already talked about, My Customer Promise, as Donna said, it absolutely underpins the behaviours of what we do here and how we speak to our customers and interact with our customers.

I think one of the other projects we've got going on at the moment which is the Roots into Stonewater project. It's really hard to describe, Paula, because it's a thing rather than a project. It underpins, and it is about us doing a lot more outreach. It's about us finding underrepresented groups of people that might not think that either a housing association or Stonewater is somewhere that can offer them a really great career.

We're working really hard with lots of partners to get ourselves out there to work with underrepresented groups to help them come into Stonewater. There's amazing stuff that we've already done. It's quite a new project. Can't think of another word to say other than project, Paula. You're in comms, what can I call it?

Paula Palmer

Initiative, that's probably one of those, isn't it?

Sair Leahy

We've done some great work already. I'm slightly biased, but I think it's great work. We've interlinked it with another project, and I can call this one a project because it absolutely is, Paula. It's the Step up to Manager programme.

Step up to Manager is an opportunity for our brand-new managers or aspiring managers to get together every other month. It's an opportunity that we can help them understand what it's like to be a line manager, what you need to do, the cultural bits of being a line manager, that's stuff you need to know when you're managing a team.

One of the other things that's really interesting about Step up to Manager is what do you do for aspiring managers? A lot of people at Stonewater before we did this project, was people who were applying for a manager role and couldn't get it because they didn't have the experience. Step up to Manager is absolutely there to help our aspiring managers get the experience they need so when a job becomes available, they are ready and willing.

One of the projects we've just finished was a Roots into Stonewater project. Are you still following? I need a flipchart, and that was a Circl programme. All of our Step up to Manager colleagues were offered the opportunity to apply to do reciprocal coaching, and this with our partners called Circl.

The reciprocal coaching meant that they would coach a young person, a young professional from an underrepresented group. They would both go through a qualification together, and then they would coach each other on what's going on in their world, but also a little bit about their work, what they're doing.

We had 15 managers and aspiring managers from Step up to Manager, partnered up with 15 young professionals from Circl, and it was incredible. They've got a coaching qualification, so all of them have got that, so 30 people are now amazing coaches.

It really opened their eyes to both ways really. It was opportunity for them to see what we do at Stonewater. Opportunity for the young professionals to understand that working in housing can be just as exciting and rewarding and interesting as working in any other area. But also for our aspiring managers and new managers, opening their eyes to the possibilities of doing more targeted outreach, and getting different types of talent into the business is just so enriching, you get so many different points of view, and that can be incredible.

What's been so lovely about that programme not only was it massively rewarding, but the 15 Step up to Manager aspiring and managers, have now all gone on to mentor our graduates. The Circl, I feel like there's a Simba moment coming up here, interlinking everything. They're now mentoring our new graduates, which is just phenomenal. They're giving back, and they're using their coaching qualification to be able to coach people. How great is that going to look when they apply for a manager role?

We're giving them... It's not lots of PowerPoint presentations about how to be a manager. It's practical. It is if you want to get involved, if you want to really understand what it's like to be a line manager, get involved, you can do these really great things. It has been fantastic and massively rewarding to see that.

There's so much going on at Stonewater if you want to develop yourself. As Donna said at the beginning, we do lots and lots of things, but the other thing is the fact that we're very welcoming, that we talk about the adult-to-adult relationship and everyone has a part to play in Stonewater.

Paula Palmer

Yeah. I think there's a lot of value in that grow your own initiative, isn't it? Through the apprenticeship, and the Step up to Manager. They've got that started early on and formed a basis of knowledge about the business and how it works and then they step up to-

Sair Leahy

Exactly.

And use that and pass on that.

Exactly. It's so interesting, isn't it? Because you always say it takes a village to grow a family. I think when you're in the world of L&D, I think it takes a whole city because this is not just one person that is helping you develop. There's lots of people that are involved.

All of our Step up to Manager and our graduates, they have the opportunity to have a mentor, they can do a qualification. Our Step up to Manager will use SEL, another fantastic partner we work with, to offer apprenticeship Level 3 ILM Management. Also, we do a Level 2 for our aspiring, which is a shorter course.

It was so interesting, our partners at SEL helped with that because it wasn't really an apprenticeship qualification for people who aren't managing people at the moment, but they've been able to supply this for us, which has been really rewarding.

There's so much going on, isn't there? You need so many people to help you develop, and I think at Stonewater, you have that group of people, you have that network of people who really want to see you develop and grow.

So many people they don't have to come through L&D to get what they need. They can ask, they can network, they can find the answers to some of the questions that they might have. I think it's really important that they're able to do that, that it's all about signposting and empowering people to be able to be in charge of their own development as well.

Paula Palmer

It's fab, but when we talk about a career in housing, don't we? But actually, the opportunities across a housing association are vast. We've got finance and HR and comms and IT development, and then all your more traditional housing customer-related roles. Whatever your skill set or your career aspirations, there's something for everybody, isn't there really? It's really great to see pushing those initiatives out and getting more people into our sector.

Speaking from my own experience, it's been a wonderfully supportive sector to work in. I started in the post room as like an office junior during an apprenticeship and was massively supported in my career and to develop my role in comms. In turn, I supported business apprenticeships who I now see working their way up in the association into lots of different housing roles, and it is massively rewarding. It's lovely to see those people go on and have higher-level roles.

Apprenticeships are great, aren't they? Because you don't have to do higher education. It's not for everybody. Not everybody can access it, they can't afford it, or they just don't attune with doing education setting roles. I think apprenticeships are great.

Tell me more about our current culture, how it's already supporting professional development, how we're already on our road to attaining these things?

Sair Leahy

Yes. That's a great question. It's so lovely to hear your experience as well because it feels like you want to give back then when you've seen it in action, haven't you? You want to tell everyone that housing is great.

I think apprenticeships are so important. I think the people that we have in the organisation doing apprenticeships offer so much. As you quite rightly say, higher education isn't for everyone, but I think being more practical and being able to work towards a qualification and seeing your development is massively rewarding.

You get so much from doing it that way if you're very practical like I am. You prefer to learn on the job rather than read a textbook, and you can see it in action, and you get feedback all the time, so you're massively supportive when you're doing an apprenticeship. You get your tutor and you get, a mentor. As I've already said, it takes a village, it takes a city.

You also get lots of other help and support in Stonewater, which I dearly love, and I think people are really happy to help, and that's one of the biggest bits of feedback we get in our team from our apprenticeships and from the graduates as well, how welcoming everyone is and how everyone wants to see you succeed. Everybody wants to make sure that you get the best experience possible, and you're able to learn what you need.

Do you know what's really interesting before this meeting? I was meeting our graduates and a couple of them were doing an assignment, and it's so interesting that they were stuck on something, and one of them said, "I just rang someone in our health and safety team because I needed to know something." They were brilliant. They just gave me some hints and tips of what I need to do for my Level 4 CAH qualification and set up a meeting and was just so helpful. You asked about the culture of the organisation, I think that's it there.

I think there's a lot of people wanting to see everybody else grow and wanting to see people succeed. I think that goes a very long way. It's a very welcoming organisation and I think housing sometimes has a bad rap if you just look at the news, maybe. I think are so sector is a fantastic sector to work in.

Talking of graduates, can I talk about graduates, Paula? [crosstalk 00:25:12] What's been great is, obviously, graduates. They come in and then they go. What's been really interesting is you see them go, and that's what you need them to do. We want them to stay, but also the whole point of graduate scheme is they go on and fly.

When you see them stay in the housing sector and doing incredibly well, that's just brilliant, isn't it? It just feels like we're developing people for other people in the housing sector. I love that. I love that our graduates from last year, we've got a couple of them. We've got one in particular who works the CIH doing incredible stuff. It's just amazing. They get very excited about every aspect of housing and that energy and enthusiasm and how they see themselves fit into that is just fantastic, isn't it?

Paula Palmer

Yeah. I think what's come across at the podcast as we've gone is that the housing sector is a collaborative sector, and we're all in it together. We want to make things better for our customer. We want to make sure that there are houses out there for people living. If we're growing these wonderful graduates and giving them all the knowledge and then pushing them out into the world to help fight our corner, then that's only a good thing.

Sair Leahy

Exactly.

Paula Palmer

I think that's been a brilliant discussion today. I think whatever the outcome of the new professional standards, I am absolutely confident that you and your team will be able to offer our colleagues the right level of support and will rise to the challenge and implement any changes needed. No doubt at all.

Donna Warr

Thank you.

Paula Palmer

In the meantime, we have offered a start... You're very welcome. In the meantime, we've offered a great starter for 10 on next month's episode, which is Stonewater, a great place to work, with all the detail we've talked about today on personal and professional development here at Stonewater.

Thank you again to my guests, Donna, and Sair, and to everyone listening at home. Don't forget, you can catch up on anything you've missed wherever you get your podcasts. I'll see you next time. Bye.

Sair Leahy

Bye.

Donna Warr

Bye.

Voiceover

We hope you enjoyed listening to the latest episode of *On the Air*. We'll be publishing a new episode again soon. To stay up to date, subscribe to our channel. Thanks again for listening, and don't forget to share your thoughts with us on LinkedIn or Twitter by tagging hashtag SW on the Air.