

Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project

Interviewee: Bob Green

Interviewer: Philip Cowell

Place of Interview: Stonewall Housing Office

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Key

BG: = Interviewee, Bob Green

PC: = Interviewer, Philip Cowell

[time e.g. 5:22] = inaudible word at this time

[5:22 1A] = inaudible section at this time

Word 5:22 = best guess at word

<Part 1>

PC: Can you please tell me your name and where you were born?

BG: My name is Bob Green, and I was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

<End of Part 1>

<Part 2>

P: Could you please tell me a bit about your background? And you can go as far back as possible if you want, i.e. your childhood or you can pick up somewhere at school. But we'd like to know a bit more about how you go here.

B: Yep. I was born in Northern Ireland and at the age of 20 I left Northern Ireland to go and train in religious college. Spent three years studying and then one year working in a church, and after, or during that year of working in a church I got involved in charity work. This was in Swindon in Wiltshire. I started to get involved in the church's work with the homeless, and that got me interested more in working in social work rather than I religious work. So I decided to leave working in the church and went to work in a hostel for the homeless fulltime. And I did that for a few years, well no, a couple of years and then went to college to study social policy and that was back in Northern Ireland. And then at the end of that period of time I returned to work with the same company I was working with before in Birmingham, working in a homeless hostel, and did so for ... well, a number of years.

I worked in the same organisation altogether for about eight years. After that I then moved to London to be close to the friends and stuff. So I decided to leave Birmingham and move to London, and continue to work with a different organisation but in a similar field working in homelessness hostels. And after seven years working there I then faced redundancy. So I was made redundant from my job due to restructuring in the organisation. And at the very same time a job in Stonewall Housing as their housing manager came up. And I went for it and thank heavens I was successful. And a year or so after I started as the housing manager the job of the Chief Executive became

available and I applied for it and was successful. So for the last three years I've been Chief Executive of Stonewall Housing.

P: So it seems to be naturally in between your work with homeless people and obviously the work of Stonewall Housing.

B: Yeah, I'm not sure if I'm obsessed, but I do look back on events in my life and realise that there has been sort of timing, you know the timing's been incredible. So all the way through from leaving the church into working with the homeless, and all the way from working in different cities, gaining different experiences, working with people with mental health problems, ex-offenders, people with drug and alcohol problems, people who have been sleeping on the streets, all for various reasons, sleeping in hostels for different reasons, losing contact with family or coming out of institutions like prisons or out of care and then ending up sleeping in a hostel. And then from that moving to London, going to a different organisation, working there very happily and then the organisation decides to restructure. And then at the very same time Stonewall Housing are looking for a housing manager, and being a gay man it sort of was incredible to think that I could use my skills and experience around housing and homelessness and work within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender communities. And the timing was incredible and since then, as I say, going to work as the chief executive and being able to learn more about the LGBT people's needs around housing, but also being able to share my own experiences and skills. So timing-wise it's been incredible.

P: So had you ever done any work or work experience with LGBT people before which you were able to bring into that role or?

B: Well working in the homelessness field for, well before I came here, so it was from 1990 right through to 2004, so that's 14 years. It's impossible to work in homelessness for 14 years and not come across lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people. But my experiences were always that people wanted to hide the fact or didn't want to talk about the issues, so this was right from 1990 right till 2004, so before civil partnerships. And it was quite difficult, I knew as myself as a gay man, who wasn't out initially, I didn't really come out until 1996? So for the first six years of working in that environment I didn't want to talk about it, and then only after I came out myself, I was more comfortable with my own sexuality and I was willing and keen to talk about it with my own friends and family. And then I began to realise that other people were in similar situations who I worked with and also who I worked for, so for the young people and older people living in the hostels. I would then see their experiences through different eyes having come out myself, and then I would be able to talk to them about my experiences because I was then an out gay man working in a hostel, which was quite rare, and to these days is still quite rare; it's quite hard for people to come out in those situations.

So yeah, I think it was difficult initially, but I think since then, sort of from '96 onwards and definitely since coming to London, I saw a lot more lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people living in hostels who needed specific support around those issues about coming out and identifying as trans. So definitely it became a larger issue for me because to me after coming out it was a larger issue. And then from 2004 working in Stonewall Housing it's opened my eyes even further about the experiences of LGBT people.

P: So you were working in the homeless sector, I presume, sort of 1990s or late '80s early '90s?

B: From '90s yeah.

P: And what was ... I was going to say challenging, you know working directly with people on the streets and I mean there must've been ... I just wonder is there anything in particular about the '90s that characterises working in that sector. Was it a tough time in terms of funding and, you know, for your work and just awareness of the issues?

B: In housing it was quite different than it is today; housing funding was through ... supported housing management grants from the government. So it was in a way easier to get funding for hostels and things back in the '90s because there was a pot of money that was there to just create these hostels and to continue hostels that had been there for years and years. The set up was a lot worse in that even then dormitories existed, shared bedrooms existed, living in hostels usually involved working or living in large houses, or large hostels geared towards specific client groups. So for a period of time I would work, for example, in probation hostels, so they were only for people who had connections with the police, or had been let out of prison on parole, or had been sent to a probation hostel for a specific period of time. And then also I worked in a mental health hostel which was geared towards people's mental health problems, and they were quite large, so we were talking about over 20/30 people in a hostel. So in the '90s there were these large pockets of people set up with these grants from central government and usually with a lot of different problems that people had. Now, after Supporting People came in 2003/4, it was a lot easier now to ... or the set up is a lot different so you have smaller groups of people living in smaller units, standards are a lot better in that they're not shared accommodation, they're not dormitories; they're working more and more towards en suites and single rooms, treating people with a bit more respect.

So things are a lot better now and they're in smaller units, so that there are not 20/30 people or even hundreds of people, in one particular building. But now they're down, highest might be 30/40 people but that are going and sharing with six others or four others, so it's more manageable. And dealing with people better in that you can then meet their needs better on a one-to-one basis rather than losing them in the crowd, which is what happened in the '90s I guess – people were just thrown into these buildings and often left there for years and years. I remember working in hostels and there were old men there who had come over from Ireland, for example, in the '60s to do some building work, and they were still there in the '90s and now that wouldn't be taking place. I hope that we've learnt our lessons, are Supporting People funded projects are targeted for a two year stay so that people will not then be institutionalised and that people will then be able to move on quickly into their own accommodation. The flipside to that is in the '90s there was more social housing, there was more access to council housing. So people had the opportunities to move out of hostels if they wanted to and could do if they found employment, which was difficult in the '90s, just as it is now, but if they found employment we could access social housing. Today, in 2009, it's near impossible to find any social housing, which means it's more difficult for people with a job or without a job, they then have to go into private sector rented accommodation.

So there is good things and bad things comparing the two decades. I think Supporting People, the introduction of it in 2003 has been a positive step for people who need housing related support, whereas before there was a lot of warehousing of homeless people. Now there's encouraging people to find their own outcomes, find their own goals and achieve those goals with a bit of support from organisations like Stonewall Housing. The only problem is there's a lack of funding to devise new projects, and that's where we are struggling. We have a waiting list of 12 people which is always over subscribed. We only have 41 bed spaces in the whole of London and we could fill that twice over in any one time. I have approached many different local authorities saying we could open more and you're a local authority let's set something up, but they don't have the money, their money's being restricted. And it'll be even harder now after 2010 because the local authorities no longer need to ring fence, what they say, they don't need to ring fence any funds for Supporting People. So if they are helping people find accommodation or they're giving them supported accommodation, they no longer have to say, 'Yes we receive this amount of money from government, this is how we're spending it.' They get the money from government and they can spend it on whatever they want, so there's no guarantee, as there was before, that a certain amount will be spent on supporting homeless people which was the guarantee before.

So things are getting better, but things are also precarious and we wait and see how things pan out.

- P:** Yeah. Well I'll probably quiz you more about some of that stuff later. Perhaps just going back to this idea that you left the kind of religious work, as it were, and then moved over to the hostel work. Did you want to expand on that anymore? Was that a personal leaving of religion as well or was it you just wanted to work in a non-religious, but actually personally you were still religious?
- B:** I think it was part of a journey. I think during the period of time I went to a religious college – I started when I was 20, so quite young. And they taught us on a lot of different issues, and one of the issues was of the religions and why the Christian religion, according to them, was preferred to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions. But the whole way through the second year of the third year course I really began to doubt whether that was strictly the case, and you know I was born in a Christian environment and brought up in a Christian country with values. But if I was born in a different country with a different religion and different values, would I then be in a different college being taught exactly the same thing against Christianity. So I couldn't marry the two and I had doubts during the second year but I continued to finish the course in the third year and went to work in a church. But I think definitely about midway through the year working in a church I realised I couldn't ignore those doubts anymore and I had to then find a different option. And it was all the way through that year working in the church.

I was very lucky because the person I was working with had a social conscience, the pastor I was working with, and he was very keen on working with homelessness and he got me linked in with different agencies 'cause he saw that that was one thing that interested me. And through working in that I realised that that's where I wanted to put my energies into rather than in the religious field. And I guess looking back on it at the very same time I was also struggling with my sexuality which was, I guess, reared its head during the

college years but then I ignored it, and then it sort of reared again in 1996. So I guess from '90 through to '93/94 I continued going to church and I was an active member of churches and would speak at different events and stuff, but I would also ... when I didn't work in the church, I worked in the hostel for the homeless. And then it was during that time I then reflected more on my sexuality.

So I left the church and then I guess you could say I left my faith a few years later.

P: OK thank you. Perhaps if we move over to a bit more now about the Stonewall Housing, or perhaps more generally first actually the LGBT housing issues. And I wondered if you could tell me about the rationale for LGBT housing, just the roots of that, that would be great.

B: Yeah Stonewall Housing exists basically to provide...

<End of Part 2>

<Part 3>

B: ... specific housing advice and housing support to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. The reason why we believe that we should exist, and fortunately a lot of funders/charities agree with it, and that they give us money and we've been around for 25 years and secured funding right through to 2012 now. The reason why people have agreed with us is because lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people have specific housing needs which people who are not lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender don't have. We share, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community share housing issues with other people, we all suffer from the problems of lack of affordability, poor standards of accommodation, a lack of social housing. And we share similar issues with other groups such as disabled groups. Some LGBT people are disabled and they've got no or very poor access in their accommodation. We also share ... some of our LGBT people are from black and ethnic minority communities and it's proven that they have very poor access to good housing advice, and also they have very poor access to good quality housing and they suffer from overcrowding more than other people in the community.

So we have a lot in common around housing but we also have specific housing needs. We become homeless simply because we are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender – we get thrown out of home by family members, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, cousins, uncles, whoever. We get thrown out of home because they do not agree with our sexuality or gender identity. We also experience homelessness in a completely different way following becoming homeless, because when we become homeless we then lose often the support networks that other people have, so we don't have the support networks of family members because they've basically washed their hands of us, they don't agree with our sexuality, gender identity. We also don't have the support networks of community groups, so if you are, for example, from fleeing persecution in another country or you're coming to United Kingdom for asylum, you're fleeing Iran for example because you're receiving abuse, you can't then go to the Iranian community in the UK for the support, because they're the community that you're fleeing persecution from. The LGBT communities can't, or often don't, receive the support from the services that are there to help homeless people, so we need extra support or we need

specific support, but the support that we need isn't there. Instead of receiving the support, we receive more homophobia or transphobia or biphobia, so we go to a hostel and we stay there and we want support, we want people to talk to us about coming out and the needs around coming out and the support that we need, but instead we get homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, from other residents or from staff. So it's a double whammy. We become homeless because of who we are, and then our experiences of being homeless is doubly worse, so we need services like Stonewall Housing to fill the gap, to provide specific housing advice, and also then to direct people to specific housing catering for our communities. And at the moment we have six houses in London which are for young people aged 16 to 25 who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. That's it. There's no other accommodation that we can recommend or that we have specifically. So if you're over 25 and you're fleeing domestic abuse or you're an older person who's over the age of 60 and you need or want specific accommodation, there's nowhere that we can recommend specifically for our communities. There are certain groups within our own communities as well that think that there shouldn't be specific accommodation because it creates ghettos and I totally agree with that, that a lot of ... or some lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people who are homeless will not want to live in a specific accommodation, and that they can get their needs met through mainstream services, and with organisations such as ourselves, we provide training, we provide advice for mainstream organisations to improve their services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender homeless people, and we, as well as providing training we then also provide training to clients and we also provide equality impact assessment work and reviewing of policies. So that their services will be more welcoming and more affirming of LGBT issues. So some people will be able to get their needs met there. However there will still be needs, or people who will want their needs met in specific accommodation, and that's why we think there will always be a place for organisations like Stonewall Housing, because I think we cannot go down the road where there will be one huge organisation that will meet the needs of all homeless people, because in a way that's who's going to guarantee that they meet the needs of the smaller communities? There's a danger that by mainstreaming everything we lose sight of the particular equality strands we're trying to work with, so we could have one huge big hostel or organisation that everybody goes to, but there will still then be a need for Stonewall Housing to be checking up on what they're doing and making sure. And within that huge big organisation there will have to be some houses which are specifically for LGBT people. Our young people who live in our houses thrive when they're living with other LGBT people, because they get support from workers but they also get support from the other young people, and they can share the coming out experience, they can support each other through finding employment, finding education, finding training, finding new accommodation, and they share their experiences with each other and then they can share experiences with people from other houses, and then our organisation also is a member of umbrella organisations who work with tenants across the country and they can share their experiences with people from different organisations. So there'll always be a need for that specific ... though I do appreciate that some will not want to live in that particular scheme, but a lot of others will.

- P:** That's an amazing argument for the work of Stonewall Housing. It was really clear that that's quite urgent work. Are there other hostels like the ones that you run in other big cities around the UK, or is literally just in London that there are LGBT hostels?

- B:** There are other organisations in London that have one or two houses for LGBT people. We work with them in sharing referrals and stuff. There are a couple in London. There is one organisation in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and there's one organisation that wants to open something in ...Hull I think. Other than that, ... no.
- P:** Are there LGBT housing officers in other housing associations or hostels? Does this post exist as a national post? Would you want every organisation to employ an LGBT specialist within their housing association, hostel or whatever?
- B:** I think what we would recommend is that all staff need to be trained on LGBT awareness and we recommend that they do at least one day's training. We have an introductory course and we recommend that they do one day's training on that. What was the Commission for Social Care Inspection did recommend something similar, that there should be an LGBT friendly staff that clients could say, 'I want to be working with that person'. We haven't gone as far as recommending that because we think it may water down the training offered to all staff, and that all staff may then say, 'Oh that's the one member of staff that works with the LGBT issues.' What we've recommended is actually we've started working very closely with Stonewall the lobbying group, and the chartered institute of housing, to do develop an LGBT information resource on line, so that all staff from all housing associations can access up to date relevant LGBT awareness training packages, LGBT research and other housing legislation, things which impact on LGBT issues, so that'll all be on one website. And also from that we are developing a network of housing associations, so they can then share employment practices but also client practices, so they can improve the services on offer to clients by raising the standards of the staff that they employ. A lot of it we believe will come from the monitoring of sexuality, and it's one thing that we're pushing for, that housing associations and local authorities start monitoring their staff sexuality and gender identity. And then monitor the clients' sexuality and gender identity. That's easier said than done because a lot of organisations have just introduced monitoring without discussing it with staff, without discussing it with clients, and a lot of people are very reticent about answering the question because they don't know how the answer will be used. So there's a danger of organisations wanting to tick the boxes on LGBT and say that they're doing a lot of work around it, but then not backing it up with proper training and awareness raising. And that what we have come out to say, that we are fully in support of monitoring, but only if it's on the back of a campaign to win over staff and clients. Because there's a lot of positive moves around legislation over the last ten/fifteen years, but it still has yet to filter through to the mindset of clients who live and use homeless services, and also staff who work in homelessness services, and until that's done I think we would really need all staff to be trained in LGBT issues. Maybe down the line there will be the potential to have LGBT staff, especially when we're considering older people, which Stonewall Housing is considering at the moment. If you consider opening an older people's care and housing support, retirement home/village, whatever you want to call it, and it's specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender older people, will they then want and need specific choices around people who provide them with care? So personal care, will they want a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender person providing them with that care, and should they then have that opportunity to make that choice? And that's a discussion that will need to be made, but at the moment we recommend that all staff get trained in it.

- P:** That's really interesting. So I'm sensing things like working with older people, that seems to be something you want to do but haven't been able to get the funding for, the way things are at the moment, as you were talking about earlier. The demographics are changing.
- B:** Mm. It's very hard to get anything new set up, because a lot of local authorities are closing their homelessness services or their Supporting People services, rather than thinking of new ventures. However, one big new venture that the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender communities need is older people's services, specific older people's services. And our community is getting older just like anybody else, and we're getting more and more calls from people over the age of 60. Last year it was double the amount than the year before, and that's from people who want housing advice, and they're calling us up asking where is the nearest specific LGBT older people's service? And we have to answer that the nearest one is in Berlin, because there's nothing in the United Kingdom. And outside of Berlin, the nearest one is in Los Angeles, so there are two affordable retirement communities. So we need to think about setting something up here and we have, we nearly set something up in 2005, which was an LGBT friendly retirement home, they called it at the time; however, the partner agency that we were working with then decided not to get involved. Now we've started up a new group with Age Concern, Help the Aged and what was Polari and is now Age of Diversity. And also other groups, we've got Anchor Trust there, who provide older people's accommodation and they've got a very exciting LGBT group set up who go around training staff and training other organisations. They have joined us and what we're trying to do is either develop LGBT specific accommodation for older people, and/or to develop a quality mark or a charter mark for current housing provision or current support provision or care provision, to make sure that it meets the needs of LGBT older people, 'cause they have specific needs just as much as younger people do. We were lucky enough in that our younger people's services started in the '80s when there was some desire to start something up. Now I think there's a desire to start something up for older people; a lot more people are talking about it, the LGBT communities are talking about it, so what we're trying to do is get more and more people interested. We're applying for research grants to try and get the awareness of the LGBT needs. The government itself has agreed that the LGBT older people have specific needs and that the current provision doesn't meet those needs, so the government has actually said that, but what they've said also is they need more research, which is why we've then gone to other groups and tried to get money for it. So fingers crossed that will start soon.

And then we're also trying to fundraise for someone who would take a lead on these issues, rather than leaving it to people in these organisations that have got other jobs to do, but if we had someone to actually go out there and put a package together of this is what a charter mark might look like, this is what specific housing might look like, and then we could approach funders or central government, regional government with ideas.

So it's quite exciting because the way housing is being regulated has changed as of December 2008. There used to be the Housing Corporation, which would deal with any planning, regeneration, housing programmes, and also the regulation of local authorities and housing associations. So they basically were replaced by two organisations. One's the Homes and Communities Agency, which now looks after all of the planning and regeneration of housing in England. And then there's also the Tenant

Services Authority and they are the regulator for local authorities and housing associations, to ensure that all tenants get the service they need. And fortunately Stonewall Housing is on the equality boards of both groups and we're pushing for older people's accommodation, older people's needs is a huge issue. And people in those organisations are listening to us, so we're also on the Mayor of London's housing and equalities group, and we constantly stress to the mayor that older LGBT housing needs should be one of his top priorities and he's listening. Different organisations are listening, different agencies, national, regional and local, are listening. Different local authorities are really interested in developing something. However, what we need is one local authority just to go with it and go with the idea, and I think it's quite exciting because we're now at the stage where we were 25 years ago setting up young people's services, and we're now at that stage working with older people's services. So hopefully in 25 years' time you'll be interviewing somebody else about how this started, the way that the older people started.

P: That's exactly what my sense is, that 25 years down the line... you've done amazing practice and you've got best practice in terms of dealing with young LGBT people in terms of housing, and actually given the way that demographics are changing, the way you retire is different from the way you might become homeless, I think potentially ... you very successfully said why Stonewall Housing should exist. It seems to me that it not only should exist, it has to exist and it's going to have to expand to cope with this – services for older people might become an enormous part of what you do, so you actually become this very holistic organisations, which obviously you are at the moment but ... funding issues are there and you're grappling with them. It sounds really exciting.

B: It is a very exciting time, especially as we've got the new Equality Bill coming in in the next year or so and that will put a duty on local authorities and public bodies to show that they're meeting the needs of all equality strands, and we are also involved in developing the standards that the Equalities and Human Rights Commission will put out as guidance standards around the equality bill legislation. And we're pushing that older LGBT as well as younger LGBT issues need to be recognised.

We have been successful around the youth services. However, there is still demand for me and I would love to open six more houses tomorrow, and unfortunately when young people reach the age of 25 really we can't offer them anywhere, and more and more local authorities are restricting that age group to below that, to 21 rather than 25, so once you're over 21 or over 25, then housing options become much more limited for you. Also if you're experiencing domestic abuse and you need emergency accommodation there's nowhere that you can go to, especially if you're a gay man, a bisexual man or a trans man, because refuges will cater for women but not for men. Lesbians and trans women ... often feel ... uncertain about approaching refuges, or they've had bad experiences about refuges, so there may be more options for them but they may end up feeling they're not very safe. Gay men, bi men and trans men have very few options. I think in the whole of the United Kingdom I think about 20 beds, so it's very limited. And then also if you're an asylum seeker, you've got no recourse to public funds, where do you go to? Quite often to a UK border agency approved landlord or somewhere that the Home Office is sending you to, which could be in Bradford or Leeds and to a community that you're fleeing from originally. So if you're an LGBT asylum

seeker your housing options are incredibly limited, and also probably incredibly dangerous, because you can't come out, you can't talk about your sexuality or gender identity to staff or people that you're supposed to be getting support from. And then it branches into the older people's, in that older people's services at the minute, what we're finding is that a lot of older people are going back in the closet when they go into older people's ... care homes or supported accommodation or when they're accessing care in their own home, they're having to hide LGBT publicity or LGBT leaflets, or even pictures of them and their partner or pictures ... having to hide them because they don't want the questions or the risk of homophobia. So there's a whole spectrum, and unfortunately ... there has been a lot done around youth but there's still a lot more that needs to be done, and that goes right across the board, and we've got big issues that we want to see. We need more emergency accommodation, older people's accommodation, youth accommodation and refuges. So we've done a lot but there's still a lot more to be done.

P: Could you see Stonewall Housing being double the size in terms of its staff, say, quite soon?

B: In an ideal world yeah. Definitely I would open another six young people's accommodation, I would open a direct access emergency hostel, I would open ten older people's accommodations, smaller units, larger units, older people's cooperative housing, where there's people who own their properties and people who rent their properties, so there's no us and them but everybody's on the same level. I would have floating support services, which we are developing because that's another thing that will become a huge issue over the next year or three years, the personalisation agenda. A lot of older people are already going through this, in that they get money from central government or local authority, to buy the care or buy the support that they want. That will, I think, reach out into the Supporting People world and housing support will then, rather than as it is at the moment be paid through one grant to one organisation, the money will go to individuals who will then buy their support from whoever they like; which is great, people need more choice. However, how's it going to impact on the small organisations like Stonewall Housing? If number one, local authorities don't ask homeless people if they're lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, so they don't know the size of the LGBT population, and they don't then recommend to them, 'Here's an LGBT support network that you could buy into'. So if they're not aware of the population, they're not aware of the organisations that will meet their needs. And also if what I think will happen is, if it does become personalised we have a lot of young people, a lot of old people wanting the support from organisations like Stonewall Housing, so suddenly we will be inundated with thousands of people, but we will have no capacity and we will suddenly have to change, overnight, into a huge organisation. So we will need a lot of support about preparing for that personalisation agenda.

P: There's lots of tough times ahead then.

B: Yeah. Challenging, but I think very exciting as well, because I think it's the way that it should go. People should be able to buy what they want to buy, because if I had the choice, living in a hostel that I used to work in in the '90s, I may not have bought into the support that was automatically given to me through a central government grant with no questions asked. I would want to

buy something which was LGBT specific and hopefully that option will be coming soon.

P: I suppose there's a kind of marketing question as well there for you? It's not just about people asking the right questions and suggesting that homeless people go to you; it's also you've got to up the game potentially as an organisation. There might be lots of challenges there.

I wonder if I could ask you a very tangential question about empty houses. As a Londoner I've noticed over the last five years that actually that debate about empty houses is an important one. There are so many empty houses that there's a register and blah blah blah. Isn't there a solution somehow in amongst the whole empty houses debate, or is it completely redundant how they make [28:57 IA]

B: No there is, there's definitely something and the mayor's put his finger on the button of part of the problem, and that is that is because the mayor's got his new housing strategy out at the moment, Mayor of London, and the big recommendation for him is that he wants to do away with the council tax rebate for second homes or empty homes, so the local authorities can, if this goes through, the strategy goes through, they can then charge landlords for second properties, council tax, and empty homes, and no longer have windows of six months where you don't have to pay council tax for a home that's been empty for six months. So I think there's definitely things that will be done and the mayor's starting to do stuff around empty homes. However, I think it may not release as many properties as people imagine. I'm not sure that there are enough empty homes out there to meet the needs, especially in London. The mayor's talking about building 50,000 new affordable housing units over the next three years, which will only touch the surface, and I think empty homes properties ... I can't remember off the top of my head, but it's a tiny amount, and also the standards of those empty homes is very poor. The private rented accommodation that we have, most of that I think, works out at 40% I think, has been built before World War 1. Empty homes is an even worse standard. So to actually bring empty homes into the marketplace would actually cost us a lot more and we'd have to bring it up to standard, and also ... it's not going to be suitable for ... what the mayor has rightly pointed out, a lot of the housing we need at the moment is for larger families, because what we have are larger families living in smaller units. We need to move them into larger units to free up the smaller units, and a lot of the empty homes are not of either not large enough or, if they are large enough, it would just cost too much money to refurbish or to retrofit into the current standards. So there is something going to be done which will bring some empty homes in, but I think it's missing the point in the fact there needs to be more new build and needs to be more social housing and I think by dwelling too much on the empty homes people are neglecting the fact that there needs to be more social housing built. And concentrating on the empty homes I think will detract from that.

P: It's interesting, it's perhaps a question about quality in a way and how [32:18 IA], in a way empty homes, second homes are an afterthought and the standard isn't going to be high enough. And actually you've got a duty of care to people to give them a good home, a good standard of living.

B: Absolutely.

P: [32:35 IA] We'll just move on for a second. Thanks so much for all that, Bob. That was really interesting.

<Part 4 starts>

P: You talked about your first job at Stonewall Housing; you were a housing officer, is that right?

B: A housing services manager.

P: Can you tell me some more about that role?

B: As the housing services manager I looked after the six supported housing officers. We have six houses in four local authorities and each of the houses ranges in size from five people right up to nine people, so quite small houses. There are only two self-contained units in those six houses, so people are sharing either a two-bedroom flat or a six-bedroom house or a nine-bedroom house, so it's shared living and they have one support worker who is based in each of those six houses, and they spend their time developing support plans, risk assessments, needs assessments, with each of their clients who live there for a couple of years – the idea to get them into employment, education, training, and find their own more permanent accommodation. So as the housing services manager I would supervise them to make sure that they were meeting the standards required by the funders and that's, each of the local authorities have a supporting people contract for the services in their borough and they have to meet quality standards and that's around the support that they receive, the risk assessments, needs assessments, carried out throughout the life of their time with us; also around health and safety and complaints, and equality issues. So my job is to make sure that certain standards were met and they carried out inspections and reviews by local authorities and we passed them all, thank heavens, and we special came out very well on our work around protection from abuse and equalities, I think because we recognised that our client group came from a particular background and a lot of them were fleeing abuse, and we would always put in very strict protections around keeping our houses' addresses safe and confidential, so that no one outside of the work environment knew the address.

What my job also entailed with them was liaising with other agencies to ensure that they worked with us in providing the best support possible and also liaising with our funders to ensure that as well as providing good quality service, that we were value for money and that we were strategically relevant, because you can get a supporting people contract only if you cover all three, so you have to be good quality but you also have to be value for money and you also have to be relevant strategically in their local authority. So it's arguing the point across all three and getting them to recognise all three.

We did very well. We now have a secure three-year contract on all of the houses except one, and that's basically because that one particular borough is reviewing how they give contracts. So the staff have done incredibly well, they've worked very hard in bringing the standards of service up and we've done very well in reducing our costs and also we've done very well in arguing our point about why we're around and why we're relevant, in each borough but also in London and also nationally.

- P:** Have the boroughs always been as supportive as it sounds like they are, or has there been a change of culture within the boroughs?
- B:** The four boroughs have always been supportive. They've recognised why we need to exist. Over the last two or three years it's been hard work explaining that in very small detail, and also reviewing our budgets and reviewing our cost, but we've managed to persuade all of them and they've all continued to be very supportive of what we're doing, so right from the outset when we opened our first couple of houses in Islington and then we branched out to Hackney and Haringey and Newham, they've always been supportive, and right through the introduction of Supporting People in 2003 again very supportive, wanting to review how much money we got and making sure there was enough to cover each of the different projects. And then through the whole review process over the last couple of years, which was quite stressful for the staff members, they've done very well and they've been very supportive. Every review that has been carried out on our houses has been very supportive. The Supporting People team officers have been incredibly helpful, incredibly warm and friendly, and throughout the whole contract negotiation period last year each of the supporting people managers was very helpful and recognised that we had a very key job to do. However, each of the boroughs do recognise that they also have a responsibility to their council tax payers, so they have negotiated particular targets or quotas, and that is they give us so much money, therefore they want a lot of return for that money. So in each of the four boroughs they have given us quotas for the number of people that we need to house or support from their borough. So for example in Islington we house 17 people, so in any given time they want to see 75% of that 17 coming from Islington, so 12 people from 17 need to be from Islington. And in a way that's fair enough; they pay council tax, our people pay council tax and they want a return for it, and there is a need in Islington that we can meet. We will definitely be able to find 12 people at any one time who want to live in one of our houses from Islington. However, it's then limiting the access that people from other boroughs have to our housing, so we've got four boroughs, all with quotas, which limit then the number of boroughs or the number of people from outside of those boroughs that can access our housing. So we've had to introduce something new, which is a point system, and that point system then awards more points to people who come from the four funded boroughs. So the people who come from outside of that, they may come from Westminster, Southwark, Bexley, Bromley, unfortunately if there's a vacancy in one of our houses but we need to give it to one of the four boroughs, we cannot house someone who's LGBT and in desperate need because that space needs to go. So what we want to do is to approach, and we have approached, people or local authorities in South London and West London, 'cause our six houses are all in North London and East London, and we've approached South and West London boroughs to say would you be interested in opening something similar, because we have this amount of people who want to move in from your local authority, and as yet we've had no response. And we have houses, I have a house in Croydon for example, someone wants to give us and they would be more than happy for us to use it in any way that we want; the only problem is I don't have Supporting People funding.
- P:** So that's a private donor effectively?
- B:** Yeah, they would take some money for rent but willing to give us I think it's a six-bedroom house. I also have another house in Islington which is a six-

bedroom house. We're being offered these houses, especially now with the downturn, people may not be able to sell houses, they want to use them and also use them to gain for our own communities, and the only thing stopping us is that we don't have Supporting People money to carry on the service. We could fill the house but I don't want to put six young people or six old people in a house and then wash my hands of them. If I want to put them in, I want to be able to provide them with a proper support package, but that's not available at the moment.

P: But the irony there is that during the recession people are able to offer their houses more because of the way the climate is, but as a result of that climate, councils don't feel able to put in their resources.

B: They don't have the money.

P: That's a really tricky one. It must be really frustrating for you.

B: Very frustrating.

P: This is in your role now as Chief Executive, isn't it?

B: Mm

P: So you moved from your role as housing officer to the role of Chief Exec. Was that quite a big leap?

B: Yeah, it was. I worked since 1990 around housing support, and specially around housing management, which is around collecting rents, chasing tenants for arrears, chasing them about antisocial behaviour and making sure they've complied with tenancy agreements. Then when I came to Stonewall Housing in 2005 I managed six housing support officers, and their role was support; it wasn't housing management. However, for one worker it was for another year, because we handed over housing management back to the landlord just before I started, except in one house where we handed it over the year after I started. So we were handing over housing management of arrears and antisocial behaviour, tenancy agreements. Very hard to get my head around suddenly not being involved in any of those issues and we had to hand those back to the landlords, and basically concentrating on support and support only. So quite hard to get used to that idea, after fourteen years, fifteen years, but I managed to do it. And all of the staff had very clear guidelines about what was our job, what was not our job, what was the housing management job, and we're still in discussions with some landlords about who does what. It's not easygoing. So the move from housing manager to Chief Executive was quite a jolt, because then it was managing the advice services as well as the housing support services, and I had very little experience of housing advice. However, it wasn't such a drama because I had great staff that I'm working with, I had a very good advice services manager at the time who is now the chief executive of Galop, Debbie Gold, and she was tremendous, so we worked very well, very closely together and worked well in thinking about different fund-raising opportunities because when I started the Chief Exec role, the advice services future was in doubt, because funding was coming to an end. Housing services future was becoming more and more secure, but the advice services was becoming more in doubt and we were thinking that maybe we would have had to have relied more on volunteers rather than paid staff to carry out our advice, which was a bit frightening. But

luckily we were very successful in applying to London Councils for our advice services and they awarded us a four-year grant to provide specific housing advice for the LGBT communities for four years, and so that started this year ... or 2008, so we've got another three years.

They also funded a new venture which was a partnership project with Galop, Albert Kennedy Trust who work with young LGBT people in supported lodgings, and PACE who are a mental health charity. So we worked with those three around our youth network, so it's providing housing advice specifically for young LGBT people. But as well as housing advice it's also helping them around finding employment, going to mental health support groups and also helping them report crime and domestic abuse. So the four partners then work very closely together and that's funded by London Councils in another four year project. Also got funded a new rent deposit scheme, which is developing an idea that we have that maybe we could start our own rent deposits, so helping LGBT people find private rented accommodation and offering them the month deposit and the month in advance that many landlords ask for. So we're in the middle of that two-year project funded by the Tudor Trust, and that hopefully will either set something up ourselves or we'll be able to use other rent deposit schemes for our clients.

So in 2006 when I became the Chief Executive the housing advice team was very much in doubt, I was very nervous about taking it over because it was in such a precarious ... but we did very well. We submitted all these grants, we got new ... we got the current services funded and we got new services starting through it. So very good, very exciting times after a period of uncertainty when all of the team were facing redundancy.

So that was good. It was nerve-wracking at the time, taking on such a huge responsibility, but I had been a head of operations and a director of housing associations in the past, so I had been aware of running organisations and budgeting and running organisations with a management board, so lots of the procedural stuff was already in place and I was aware of what to do, so I was quite confident in doing the job, that aspect of the job. It was the advice services which were quite ... made me nervous. But I had Debbie on hand for a good six months and she was a tremendous help, and now I have a great advice supervisor, I've got a great advice team, a great housing team, great housing manager, and I think that's the joy of it. We started off as a cooperative, Stonewall Housing, and then we went to be a hierarchy, or hierarchical management structure, but I hope that in practice we're still quite cooperative in that we still help each other out. We have the training programme for example, and we train organisations around LGBT issues, housing issues. I do some of that training but I don't do all of the training. It's shared out amongst us all and we all go out and we all represent the organisation. So we only have fourteen staff, but we respond to as many consultations as possible, we try and get LGBT housing issues on local, regional, national agendas, we train as many organisations as we can, and we provide as much advice as we can to organisations. And hopefully it's done through a team effort, rather than ... it's not just me, I know it's not just me, so it's a good group of fourteen that we have.

P: I presume Stonewall Housing is a charity?

B: It's a charitable housing association. We're registered with the Financial Services Authority under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act. So we're

a housing association with charitable aims, not registered as a charity because there's quite strict rules about who can and can't, and because we're registered with the Industrial and Provident Societies Act we're seen as a cooperative, and it stands us in good stead in that we are a housing association, we're a member of the National Housing Federation, we get a lot of perks working with other housing associations: we get cheaper insurance for example, we get a very good medical care through the insurance providers and also personal accident cover. But we're also a charitable housing association so we get access to a lot of different trust funds and we can make fund raising bids here, there and everywhere. So yeah, people do see us as a charity so it's quite useful. It does lock the door on certain occasions, because certain trust funds will not accept fundraising bids from anyone who's not registered with the Charities Commission, which we are not. So we cannot apply for certain things. But it opens just as many doors as it closes.

P: You mentioned Galop. We're heading towards the end of our conversation now, but you mentioned Galop.

<Part 5 starts>

I just wondered if you could perhaps tell us a bit more about your involvement with Galop, and perhaps your slant, your take on policing for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; particularly your point of view as to the effective on Stonewall Housing [0:20 IA]

B: Yeah. I guess I first became aware of Galop when I started working in Stonewall Housing, so that's 2005, four years ago, because we work very closely together our advice team make a lot of referrals to Galop around third-party reporting, and we also do, or we're involved in a partnership research project called *Filling in the Blanks*, which I took over the partnership, or membership of the steering group as Stonewall Housing's member of the steering group when I became the Chief Executive. So that research was launched 2009, just a few months ago, and it was fantastic, it was really good for us to be involved as an organisation, because it showed that a lot of the hate crime that's experienced by people takes place in or around the home. So maybe not necessarily as some people think or assume, it takes place on a Friday or Saturday night walking home from the clubs and pubs. It does happen there, but our experience and our information going through to the research showed that the majority of it happens in the home or around the home, so from neighbours and from family members. And there was great experience to be involved in that research, because it was a good opportunity for us to share what was happening with the clients that approached our advice line and also the clients that approached our houses or who live in our houses. In my time we've had one assault, serious assault, in one of our houses, because someone brought in friends and she hadn't ... unfortunately she hadn't told the friends what kind of house she was living in, and when they found out they weren't very happy and they attacked one of the other residents quite seriously. Police were involved and with Galop's help the police were able to secure a conviction against the people involved. So quite a shocking event, but one that received a very good solution in the end, in that everyone living there now feels a lot safer and the police who are working with us actually recognise what kind of houses we're providing. We don't actually call them safe addresses, or they're not flagged up on the police computers, but we have very good relationships with the LGBT liaison officers in each of the boroughs, with the community safety police, and they're all

aware of what we're about and if we know of any incidents which may arise or something's coming up, they're very happy to flag us up as a safe address for a period of time. So it's ... we've had very good experiences with the police lately, and working with Galop we've been able to share the experiences our clients have had, which may not be so good. So we've been able to show that as well as a lot of the reports happening in and around the home, a lot of the reports don't go to the police, and there are clients, whether they're from the advice team or the housing team, don't feel comfortable in reporting, and the research project was very good in raising certain issues why that might be the case, and previous experience, also fear of homophobia and fear of having the police come round to your address and then being ... having to come out to the police and explain who you are and your background and how far is it going to go. If it has to go to court, will other people that you know then be aware of who you are and your identity? So that was very good getting involved in that.

And then through that period when I decided then to join the Galop management committee and as a sort of agreement Debbie also joined our management committee for a period of time. We were two new chief executives and our management committees were very small at the time, so we agreed a partnership joining of the management boards, and we both then became the vice chairs of each committee, just to help each other out. For example Stonewall Housing was down to three members when I took over, the management committee, which is frightening. Luckily that's now gone up to ten members, twelve members in a few months, and that's quite a good progress, but at the time we really needed Debbie's input and Debbie needed my input, because of the quite small committees. And I've learned a lot from just being on the management committee of Galop. The number of incidents that have taken place and the number of fatalities that have taken place just over the last few years, even while all the positive legislation is coming out people are still being murdered, they're still being attacked, and people's experience of the police is still not 100%. I mean they're still not satisfied with the behaviour of some of the police, and they don't feel confident in reporting hate crime to the police. So therefore something needs to happen, something needs to change. And there's still a very valued role for Galop in helping people report, helping organisations such as ourselves improve third-party reporting, but then also helping the police to improve how they work with our communities.

And then also working with the communities in how they can have a better say on the police. Having Galop's representation on the LGBT Advisory Board of the Met Police has been incredible. So she's been able to as well as go round on specific incidents, try and get the Met Police to consider the community's wishes. And then from that we then developed partnership working with Galop. So as well as informal partnership and the referrals between the two offices, we also did the research, *Filling in the Blanks*, but then from that we then decided to do partnership bids around fund raising. So we have the Youth Network which is funded by London Councils, and then we also have a domestic abuse partnership and that's funded by London Councils with Galop as the lead. So we then advise people around housing issues, Galop then revise around reporting of domestic abuse and there are other agencies involved around providing support. And then hopefully ... and this oral history project as well, this has come out of our developing new ways of working together. We've got so much in common in that we shared a lot of history, we started around the same time. A lot of the staff know each other

because we're only three or four offices apart on the same floor of an office building. And we share people who maybe work here and were on the management committee of Galop. Because policing and housing are quite related, inter-related often, because hate crime happens where you live, you are going to call the police and your experience of the police and your experiences of housing will be related. And I think the partnership that's been developed is just getting closer and closer and we're doing things like this, which is a wonder. It's fabulous.

P: So it sounds like it's really important that you're separate, but you've got this amazing friendship as organisations and as people who work there, and that can only be a good thing. I can't believe that there are any possible complex ...

B: No. I mean we are different organisations and we will apply for similar funding, and that will unfortunately be in competition, but I think ... I know from my frame of mind and Debbie Gold at Galop's frame of mind is our communities need to be working more closely together and the agencies working for our communities need to be working closer together, and that means we should be doing more partnership bids. And funders want to see more partnership bids, so therefore it stands to reason that we'll build these up more and more and we'll have in the future a lot more partnership bids and a lot more partnership working about different issues, housing and police definitely being one of them.

P: Great. I think we're at the end of our conversation Bob, today, but I just wondered if there's anything I've missed, anything perhaps as a story or any issue that's on your mind that you would like to use this moment to talk about? We've had a really comprehensive conversation.

B: I can't think of anything.

P: Then can I ask you a question I always throw in, which is what are you passionate about? You can answer that question however you want!

B: I think ... I will move away from here whenever that is, pass on or whatever, a very happy man if I can get some older people's accommodation. That's the *one* thing I really dream about, having ... 'cause as I said earlier, older people phone us up ... and I'm getting on, twenty years' time I'll be sixty, and if I phone up I hope I don't get the same answer that we're giving people at the moment, where the nearest LGBT safe accommodation is in Berlin. I really hope in twenty years time when we're doing this, fifty years of oral history, that we're going to be able to talk about how the older people's services started and I know more and more people are becoming passionate about it, more individuals, and I know more organisations and I know governments are becoming more passionate about it. All we need to do is get everybody actually doing something rather than talking about it.

P: Fantastic. Thank you very much.

B: Thank you.

<End of recording>