

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and a very warm welcome back to Talk Richmond with me, your host Jim Millard. Today's episode is an important one. We're joined by Simon Westgarth, Chief Executive of the Richmond Furniture Scheme, a fantastic local furniture recycling charity. They provide fantastic quality, good value for money, second-hand and refurbished furniture, which is discounted for those receiving benefits. In this episode, Simon and I are going to discuss the issue of furniture poverty with the backdrop, of course, of the cost of living crisis and how the work that the Richmond Furniture Scheme is doing really helps those in need in the borough. So, without further ado, a very warm welcome to you, Simon, welcome to Talk Richmond.

Simon Westgarth: Good morning and thanks Jim for the nice introduction and I'm glad to be here.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic. Well, I've got loads of questions. Let's make a start with introductions. Can you tell us a bit more about Richmond Furniture Scheme and what you do in the local community?

Simon: Absolutely. Well, we have three main aims, Jim which we've summarised by sort of three phrases. One is building homes. The other is protecting the environment. And lastly, it's sort of building community, but just to add a little bit of flesh to that. So, we do a, we collect donated furniture from around the borough and people also bring it into us. We repair it, we clean it, where we can, and we make it available at a very reasonable price because our key aim is to help provide affordable furniture for people who need it. That's really our number one reason for being. As a part of that, though, we're also about protecting the environment. So, we're very much into reuse, recycling and trying to save as much waste as we possibly can. And I'll go into a little bit more detail about that when we talk about some of our stats. But the third key area is what we do for volunteering. And we call that building community. So, we have volunteers who come in to see us. We also go out and work with other groups like Shepherd Star and Castlenau Community Centre. And it's a great opportunity for people to learn new skills. We provide opportunities for those who are disadvantaged to get some skills. But we're open to all comers. So, lots of people from all sorts of backgrounds come and volunteer here with us at the Furniture Scheme.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic. It's clear that there's a huge amount of benefits across the community and I'm talking to you now. I can see you there in your office, down on the site. I've been down to visit. Can you tell us more about where you're based and how that all works?

Simon: We're on a little housing estate in the middle of Twickenham and it's a very tucked away location, so we're definitely a destination. You don't generally find us by accident and the Furniture Scheme is at a place called Fortescue Avenue, just off Twining and Fielding Avenues if anybody knows that part of Twickenham. It's a place that was formerly a social club for their housing estate. And over the years it's been given over to other activities. And for, I think the last 20 odd years or so, I might be wrong about the data, we have been here as the Furniture Scheme. And as well as having a warehouse with all of our furniture, which people are more than welcome to come down and browse whenever they like, we have a storage warehouse, we have a couple of other storage areas, and we have workshops where we do repairs. We make all sorts of things like the bed slats. We also do upholstery, and we do refurbishment of items of furniture. So, we like to breathe a bit of new life into some items where we can.

Cllr Millard: It's fantastic. It's well worth a visit. It's an absolute hive of activity and a kind of treasure trove of amazing furniture. I mean, I do recommend to everyone get down there, have a look. There are some wonderful things. And if you are on benefits or feeling that you are in a situation where you are perhaps experiencing furniture poverty, it's a great place to go and find things that you might need so. So, you know, obviously that is a key thing. Just to go back though, before we delve

into furniture poverty as a as a topic, I wonder if we can look back and sort of talk about what impact has the scheme had in Richmond community so far, all this time that you've been running.

Simon: Umm. OK. Well, let's give you some broad numbers, shall we? So, in terms of the number of people that we support annually, it's around about sort of 1300 to 1400 and just to sort of give you a breakdown of that, people who come to us who are on income support or with grants, we had 187 households with grants last year and 190 who were self-referred. So that's a good proportion of the of the local population. And if you skew the amount of furniture because they, people with grants in particular need quite a bit when they're setting up a home, a substantial amount of over 30,000 of our funds raised were from grants so a significant proportion. We also collected 113 tonnes of furniture last year. So, in terms of the service to the Community, in terms of supporting the reduction in waste and promoting reuse, that's a significant amount of furniture that may have found its way into, you know, onto a waste site somewhere. So we're pleased that we're able to offer furniture and new home in that way. And it was around about 95 tonnes of furniture that I think we distributed or was dished out to the community. And it doesn't stop there. So, when we talk about people who are supported in in housing, there's also people who, as I mentioned before, with volunteering. And last year we gave 82 opportunities for different volunteers. So, 82 separate volunteers came to the scheme, and they were from all sorts of, as I say, all sorts of different backgrounds, including local schools. Some youngsters doing Duke of Edinburgh awards. We work with local special schools to do work experience. We've also had a retired lawyer join us, an ex-farmer and teacher, coming to join us, who's very handy, by the way, and all sorts of things to do with DIY and repairs. And so, yeah, so in terms of the broader community, we cover quite a broad base. We also Jim, just to sort of help you with the geography, so we cover the whole of the Richmond borough. Our work tends to be more focused around the sort of TW postcode, so TW2, TW12 TW10, TW11 and TW9, but we do extend our service all out to SW13 and SW14 and I sometimes feel as though that portion of our community can be a little bit forgotten but is no less important. So, it's really important that we provide this service to as many people in the borough as we can.

Cllr Millard: Yeah. Absolutely. And that touches on something really important. Actually. I was talking about getting down there and having a look, which is one way people who are in need of furniture can look. But you've actually got a really comprehensive website as it's very impressive. You've got everything logged, whether it's available, whether it's sold. I mean, can you tell us a bit about that, how people can access the website?

Simon: Absolutely so, without boring you with too much detail, what we do, what we aim to do is to catalogue everything that comes in and as soon as it comes in, we get a photograph, it gets a price. And as we do that, it gets pinged up onto our website. So, we have a pretty comprehensive list of options on our website and there's two important reasons for that. One is, as you mentioned, some people can't necessarily access our facilities as easily as some others may do. I should stress by the way we have parking on site if anybody is coming by car. But it's really important that anyone who feels that they need furniture can access it. So, we have set up our website specifically so that people can buy in a normal way. But you can also reserve items and that's really important if you're on a grant or if you haven't got much cash and you want to be absolutely sure about your purchase. We're quite happy about that. So people who want to reserve items, you just go through to pay in the normal way, there's a little button at the end that says 'grant' or 'pay in person' and that will keep your item for 48 hours, and if you're on a grant, we can just make sure that those items are transferred onto the appropriate documentation and we look after the back end as it were.

Cllr Millard: Hmm. Fantastic. And I mean, you know it's not just about, you know, the fact that it's affordable furniture or that, you know, it can be subsidised but also the fact that it is reusing furniture that would otherwise probably end up in a landfill. I've seen the amazing sort of new lease of life you can give to things. That's another side that must be growing in popularity, I'd imagine.

Simon: It is. I mean, we have people who come to us who actually are looking for a project. So, they might buy something that is looking perhaps a little bit tired but there's an opportunity perhaps to refurbish it, but we do a lot of that ourselves too. Probably the most common thing is to repair something. So typically, chairs might come in and they're a little bit wobbly or the draw runner doesn't quite work properly on a chest of drawers or maybe something's got a broken foot. And we can do quite a lot to repair and fix and mend as appropriate. But we also find that there are some pieces of furniture which are maybe a little bit out of fashion and by giving them a lick of paint, we can transform them into something much more, much more attractive and much more interesting. And we've had some good success with that. And then I also need to give a bit of a big up to my upholstery team because they've been doing wonders with old dining chairs. They can look a bit drab and can look a bit tired, but if you can re-cushion them and maybe give them a lick of paint depending on what the condition of the chair is, we've had some fantastic items done by the team and we're also always open for anybody who's interested to maybe learn some skills or maybe try their hand at fixing, repairing, upholstery, et cetera. Those are the sorts of things that we encourage people to come down and have a go.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic. Absolutely fantastic. Now coming back to furniture poverty, I mean it's a very sad fact that, you know, the current cost of living crisis is a very real thing. It's affecting a lot of people, probably all of us to a certain extent and are having a real impact on your work presumably. Are you seeing and expecting increased demand?

Simon: I think we are starting to see some increased demand and I expect to see more of it. We had - there was a very useful forum actually with the Council at York House last week and we were discussing the cost of living crisis and it's not uncommon at this stage for not all of the problems to have surfaced. I think people will start to potentially get into more financial difficulty as time moves on, people start to default on their rents or maybe repayments and this is where the problems start. And I know that Citizens Advice, for example, are starting to see an increase in the number of people asking for financial help and advice from there. So, we start to see that come through ourselves when it comes to people who are being rehoused or maybe looking at what's happening in social housing. It's also worth mentioning that we've seen a steady stream of refugees coming through the Furniture Scheme. We also look after a number of other constituents, including carers and people who are just generally disadvantaged, and we'll also get people referred to us from Achieving for Children or from local schools where we know that individuals concerned there are really finding life pretty tough. So, whatever we can do to help with that, we will obviously do, that's our priority.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic indeed. And yes, Achieving for Children. I know my housing officers will also, you know, refer people and get in touch with you for help. But if people do feel they need help, can we just recap on how they can access the service?

Simon: Sure. Well anyone could come to the service first of all, so there's no barriers to anyone coming and accessing the service. And if anybody wants to ask us a question about what help and support is available, we'll do our very best to signpost people to the right services. Specifically in terms of welfare support and the way the local authority works in Richmond, there is a Local Assistance Scheme which is accessible via the website. And there is support - financial support - available there to help people with their requirements, and that could stretch to furniture, but also

covers appliances and some other support as well. So, if people go to the Local Assistance Scheme for help with furniture the way that then works is that a grant will be referred to us and then we can help fulfil that grant. So just to give you an example, yesterday we spoke to a young mum with a 9-month-old baby who's just moved into a premises in Richmond. And it was refreshing to have a conversation with them to say, you know, to find that what it is that they needed. But they were also pleasantly surprised that they had a choice of furniture that they could access, which is one of the nicer things I think about what the Furniture Scheme can offer – is that we have a choice, so you're not just going to get a 'one size fits all' solution to your problem.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely, absolutely. So, I hope that everyone listening is very clear this is a fantastic idea. If you've got some furniture you'd like to donate, how do they go about doing that?

Simon: Great question. So easiest thing is contact us via e-mail at admin@rfsonline.co.uk and what we asked there is if anybody wants to donate furniture, if you can please send us some photographs, explain where you are, if you've got contact information, that's even better. We are also – because we raised funds from the sale of furniture to help run the scheme – we are also in the position to claim Gift Aid. So, if you can give us permission for that as well, that's even better because that's worth an extra 25% on top of the sale price of anything we generate. And then if you contact us, we can do the rest. We will get back in touch with you to say what we can or can't take. One thing worth mentioning is that unfortunately because of fire safety regulations, we have to make sure that things like sofas and soft furnishings have the prerequisite labels attached. So normally there's something to say that the materials used are compliant with the fire safety regulations or words to that effect. So, if we can just make sure that those are on there please. Otherwise, I'm afraid it's something we're not able to accept.

Cllr Millard: Yeah. OK, that's a good point and it's worth thinking of as an exit strategy when you buy your next sofa, keep the tag. Don't take the tag off.

Simon: And I don't mean the little tag that says carelessness causes fires and that sort of thing. It's actually something that's sewn in, stitched in, normally to the lining of a sofa or underneath the poof or something like that. But yeah, sometimes they do get removed so if you can keep them that's even better.

Cllr Millard: And are there any particular items that you need the most?

Simon: Yeah, really good question. So, our most popular items tend to be small sofas, wardrobes. So somewhere to hang your clothes, chest of drawers probably right up there with the best of them. And then it's anything from coffee tables to dining tables and chairs – a place to eat. But I generally categorise it as somewhere to sit, somewhere to put your things, frequently somewhere to sleep as well. So, let's not forget beds in that equation, and we tend to be a little bit fussy around beds, unfortunately, because of the amount of space that we have to take items. But I think the simple point there would be ask us a question and we'll get back to you with an answer as to whether we can take it or not. But don't be afraid to ask.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely fantastic. So, this is an amazing service. Thank you for explaining more about it. There's loads of ways people can access it and get involved. We've talked about all the volunteering opportunities. If people listening want to get involved, and there's so many ways you can get involved, will they contact the same e-mail address?

Simon: Absolutely. Yeah. We all function through that admin e-mail address. So yes, please. Send us your inquiries that way. And also, just if you're inquiring about volunteering, please don't be afraid

to say what it is you're interested in doing and I'll just recap on that one more time. So, in terms of volunteering opportunities, we always in need of help in our warehouse, in our showroom, because if nothing else, we need to be able to sign post people to what it is that we've got and help people through the process if it's the first time they've been to us. And I hasten to add, there's always a bit of shifting of furniture to be done as well so that's always important. But we also do, we like help with administration. So just keeping on top of the mailbox and dealing with inbound phone inquiries and that sort of thing. And we occasionally need help with our van. So, you've probably seen our mobile advertising van going around the borough of Richmond, and that's out pretty much every day doing deliveries and collections. So that's a busy operation. And last but by no means least, as I say, there's the recycling and repair and the opportunities to take part in refurbishing and creating some new stuff.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely fantastic. Well, thank you so much. That's all we've got time for. Simon, is there anything else you want to say about the scheme? Anything you want to let people know?

Simon: I think the only thing, the only other thing I would add, which I don't think I've mentioned already, we have a fantastic social media volunteer. I'm going to embarrass her and say her name. Jessica, Jessica Andrews. She's been amazing, but it's worth that if anybody wants to follow what we do, all our activities are generally plastered over Facebook and Instagram as well as Twitter and LinkedIn. And on Facebook and Instagram, you can also see new items that have been added to our shop because we've got a link into that as well. So yes, that's probably the other thing I just wanted to make sure I added.

Cllr Millard: OK. Fantastic. Thanks, Simon. It's been fantastic talking to you. I love Richmond Furniture Scheme. As I say to everyone, you know, have a look at the website, get down if you can have a visit. It's an amazing place. It's a wonderful use of a Council site. I'm very proud of that and going from strength to strength under Simon's fantastic leadership. So, it's been great to hear all about it. Thank you for the amazing work you're doing. Please listeners do check the show notes for links to the Furniture Scheme as we mentioned that will be there and details of how you can get support or get involved. We also have included links to the Richmond Cost of Living Hub which, of course, includes details of all the support available in the borough at this most difficult of times. If you have any questions or concerns do e-mail talk@richmond.gov.uk, we'll do all our very best to help answer them. Please do share this episode with any friends or family if you think it would help and of course feel free to leave a review. Five stars is always welcome to help spread the word. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks very much for listening.