WARD’S PODCAST

00:00 [MUSIC]

00:14 [MARK]

DICE, a series of six podcasts about social inclusion, housing and the experiences of older people from socially diverse backgrounds. This is part five, Ward's story. A man who identifies as gay and lives in an inner city housing scheme.

00:33 [WARD]

It's no fault of the housing association, but I don't think there's enough diversity here, but they have to house people as they get them, basically and I know there's some relationship with the Council for certain categories, but I think the scheme needs to be more diverse.

00:48

It's mainly whites, older people, nothing against whites, older people, I'm one, but we could do with more BAME and we could do with more LGBT people here, I seem to be the only gay in the village. Yeah, that's the diversity side of it.

01:02 [ALEX]

Hello. That's Ward, who lives in an inner city retirement housing scheme in the West of England, which was built 40 years ago. We'll be hearing more of his story shortly. But first, just to introduce myself, my name is Dr. Alex Vickery and I'm a Research Associate on the DICE study, which stands for diversity in care environments.

01:28

On this University of Bristol research project, we've been looking into diversity and the inclusion of older adults in housing schemes for retired people, and those requiring extra care.

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We're interested, for example, in how included older gay people, like Ward feel in their homes, as well as people from ethnic minority backgrounds and those with disabilities. Ward’s story is one of five we're hearing in accompanying podcasts on this website.

01:59

Standing on his scheme’s large and sunny roof terrace, looking out over the city, Ward explained where his deep commitment to social justice comes from.

02:08 [WARD]

I've got a very strong interest in equality and diversity and it actually started in primary school,

would you believe? At the time when I was that young, there were people coming over to this country from the Caribbean to work. There is this young black guy and it's just a boy like me being picked on because he was black and this other boy probably got it from his parents and there was a lot of racism and that.

02:29

I stood up for him and the other guy backed off. That's how I got involved in that to start off with. and then over the years, I was a bit unsure about my sexuality because I was actually brought up in the working class district where everybody was supposed to be heterosexual and this is in Manchester.

02:49

Years later, I realized that I was actually gay. I then decided that I wanted to do something about the oppression that we had at the time. So I got involved in gay rights, and then we had the women's movement started and I decided I must support these women because I believe in equality. So I more or less became an ally to the women's movement as well.

03:12 [ALEX]

Ward told me that the reason he upped sticks and moved city was because the LGBTQ Plus group he was involved in had ended. He was attracted to the flourishing equivalent group in his new home city because it had been going for 40 years.

03:26 [WARD]

Started off as a campaigning group and then became a social group. So I got quite involved in that and I'm now the vice chair. We actually had a gay bar here and then that went. So then we got another one, and that went.

03:39

We’re in a scheme of about 36 flats and it's not far from the actual centre of the city where there's quite a number of shops and that, and it's not far away from the bus station and the railway station. They've also got some docks here as well. Quite nice area that is, and they've also got a shopping center there and the multiplex cinema.

04:02 [ALEX]

Back indoors, Ward explained that he's very happy with his flat, one of 36 in the scheme.

04:06 [WARD]

Most of the flats here are single,there are a few double, but I don't think they're much larger than the single anyway. But in my flat, there's sort of, it’s self-contained, there’s sufficient room in the lounge. I've managed enough room so I can turn one area into desk area, one area into a television area, one area for a dining area and then we have a kitchen.

04:27

The bedroom is quite fine. In fact, I've got two wardrobes and there and then there's a big storage room. So I find it useful actually for me, for the office work because I can keep files on one of the shelves there.

04:39 [ALEX]

Although he's identified a lack of diversity among fellow residents at his scheme, Ward says he's impressed at the openness of management to improve their awareness of issues around sexuality, for example.

04:51 [WARD]

Yes, I've now got involved in the training. We've been trying for many years to get properly involved. I now meet with a couple of people from the LGBT group. Meet with the training team from the housing association, and we're doing ongoing work so that we're actually involved in the training for managers in regards to LGBT issues.

05:11

At a different meeting, some managers said this actually should have been more integrated across the organization as a whole and not just an individual bit of training, but it should be properly integrated into everything. You know, so I think the housing association has come on leaps and bounds over the last year or so.

05:27:07 [ALEX]

So for Ward, increasing diversity among residents is something he feels the management of housing schemes need to be paying more attention to, not just his own.

05:35 [WARD]

That's something they need to look into to make it more diverse because I found there's all different kinds of communities in this city.

05:44

Recently, I've got an Indian next door neighbor. I suppose, I think they made a start. At the end of the day, and we can only have influence because we don't actually run the place, the housing association does have a public responsibility duty and to the 2010 Equality Act to be inclusive, but I don't just want to throw that at them because they're trying to do that anyway, I think.

6:03 [ALEX]

What Ward is drawing upon is his confidence and experience built up over long years of involvement in local politics, having also served as the deputy mayor of his city. So what, I was curious to know is Ward's experience of homophobia, his housing scheme?

06:24 [WARD]

You see this scheme, they’re quite proactive, because if you look at the notice board downstairs, you'll find not only the statutory notices about inclusion diversity, but you'll find one for the local LGBT+ group, and that was the manager leading with me on that particular area. But all schemes are not the same.

06:42

They have wonderful policies at national level, but a lot still depends on how the manager and the residents are at a particular location and because I know people in another scheme who are not happy at all, they find they've been oppressed and suffering from homophobia.

06:59

Here it's changed, when I first moved in, nobody knew who I was. I was introduced to people at a coffee morning by the then scheme manager, previous one, and they made a remark, which I could say that could have been homophobic.

07:12

And then some people apologized but said didn't know you were gay. So I thought, oh, it's OK, then to make homophobic comments if I'm not here I thought so, but over the over time, I've managed to get on with people but I think there might be some sort of unconscious bias, should we say.

07:26

Well, I did make a formal complaint at one stage about somebody as well here because I thought it got too far. But with other people I've managed to get them to understand, you know, there's not everybody is the same as them.

07:43 [ALEX]

Ward feels that the experience of the lockdowns during COVID has brought out the best in his fellow residents, while acknowledging that people have different attitudes to safety and their privacy.

07:55 [WARD]

Yes, and sometimes you don't see people anyway despite COVID because they may be stuck up in their flat. What you actually see, you do get some people who know others and then they look out for them and they actually go and see they’re alright.

08:06

You know, and we've kept in touch with people who've been in hospital and that as well, and not just COVID, but generally. There is a sort of underlying current of looking out for people, hoping they are alright. I mean, I now sympathize with somebody. I think her cat’s died. You know, I know what it's like to lose a pet, you know when I see her I’ll, well, given my sympathies, you know.

08:16 [ALEX]

Although Ward says he doesn't feel he has any close friends in the housing scheme itself. He does maintain a wider network of connections and friendships in other parts of his life.

08:38 [WARD]

Yes, I've actually got some friends in the local political party because although most of the people are colleagues and they've, you know, obviously we’re sort of you know, friendly towards each other because we're the same party.

08:52

You know, some of them, I wouldn't actually call friends, but I call them good colleagues. But I have a few friends, actual friends there, and I've made actual friends within the actually local LGBT group.

09:04 [ALEX]

Finally, I asked Ward how he would set about building a new scheme for older people right from scratch.

09:11 [WARD]

Well, first of all, this was built on an old office block, I think. So a new scheme would be completely different, we’d have the gardens. When we advertised we’d actually say we are a inclusive organization and we, you know, would appreciate inquiries from people of all backgrounds and put something like that into the advertising.

09:33

I'd actually go out to the various communities and ask them and tell them about it, not be proactive like that and tell them that there’s this place for older people and if they have only older people they think would be, you know, would like to move there, they'd be most welcome.

09:50

But of course, there's only so many vacancies at the time. Well, if that's the new scheme completely, then you started from scratch and everything would be empty at first wouldn’t it? So, and then also make sure that the place has been more suitable to modern day living and I’d also have more adaptations done for people with disabilities because some people don't go straight to a dementia home if they've got dementia, so I'd make sure the scheme had facilities that people who were got slight dementia could find their way around better.

10:27 [ALEX]

In terms of our findings on the DICE research project, Ward clearly feels supported by the manager at his scheme and takes pride in his involvement in the housing company's ongoing staff training around LGBTQ+ awareness

10:41

For Ward, inclusion is more than just focusing on the fact that he's part of a minority. It's about general values too, such as respect. Staff need to be aware of unconscious bias and homophobia and to think about how to challenge it and how to support residents who might experience it.

11:00

He has a voice that’s heard. He flags up the importance of micro-neighborhoods being respectful and good neighbors and looking out for each other. It's also the case that for some people, social connections outside the scheme are more important than those within it.

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Alongside this podcast, you can listen to the experience of four other people in the context of their housing and a sixth one about how and why we've conducted the DICE research project. Thank you for listening.

11:37 [END]

11:59 [MUSIC END]