**Simon:** Hello and welcome to the first episode of 21 Talks, a podcast series from Housing 21 that’s challenging the way older people are represented and talked about in everyday conversations.

My name is Simon and I’m thrilled to have been invited to kickstart the series and host today’s episode alongside two of Housing 21’s colleagues and two residents to talk about sustainability.

Now when it comes to issues concerning the climate crisis, there’s a lot that as a group, I’m sure we could explore. For the purpose of today’s episode, however, I’m interested to find out more from our panellists about their own sustainability journey and the steps that Housing 21 is taking towards net zero. But also, what residents want to see from their landlord with regards to rolling out sustainability initiatives?

So, to begin, I’m joined by David and Heather who are both resident ambassadors for their Courts.

Can you just begin by telling us a little bit more about what that actually involves and give us a sense of how important sustainability is across the schemes where you both live? If you don’t mind David, we'll start with you.

**David:** The actual role itself, I find, is a liaison between the scheme manager and the rest of the residents. I’m the person they see on a day-to-day basis, they talk to, and therefore they feel most comfortable. I found that a lot of the residents don't really understand, apart from recycling, what sustainability is all about. So, one thing I would like to do with them is to have, like… go through a, sort of like, an educational process of: how can they, you know…from… flat by flat affect sustainability? How can they incorporate it into their daily lives?

**Simon:** Thank you very much. And, Heather, same to you. So, is your role similar to what David’s described and what's sustainability like on your scheme?

**Heather:** I don't think it's… it’s getting better, but I don't think it's that good at the moment. We're trying to do the recycling and things like that, but I don't think, with older people, the sustainability thing has really got in yet, and obviously it has to come from management and from the carers as well, and I think we're a little way away from being as sustainable as we could be.

**Simon:** Well, that leads quite nicely onto our next two guests. So, Antony and Ashley, I know you're both part of Housing 21 sustainability group. Can you tell us more about your involvement within that group and what your roles in the organisation are as well? Ashley, do you want to start for us?

**Ashley:** Yeah. I'm Ashley Norwood, Property Improvement Manager within our Asset

Management department. My involvement in the sustainability steering group is ultimately to be a group member and a voice for residents, for staff members, colleagues, peers – there to offer a technical advice from an asset management perspective around things like, sort of, carbon zero initiatives, ways that we can improve the performance of our buildings, and also where we can develop skills and expertise within the organisation. And, as part of that group, we get the opportunity to, sort of, challenge what we're doing, offer opinions and sharing with peers across different sectors within our company, such as housing, where Antony, for example, works. So, it's an opportunity for us to share our opinions and views and expertise amongst the group.

**Simon:** And same to you as well, Antony. So, what's your experience of the sustainability group for Housing 21?

**Antony:** I'm Antony Walker, Retirement Housing Manager at Housing 21. So, I think I came into it partly because I'm a bit of an ‘eco-nut’ as much as anything. So, it's very much an area of passion for me. I feel it's a really crucial cause where Housing 21 can play a really big role. Housing contributes such a big impact in terms of CO2 and, just in general, footprint, that we have a massive responsibility to make a difference and to act responsibly.

So, my role is more operational. Ashley has all the knowledge and everything, I deal more with the people, I suppose, within Housing 21 and the residents. So I'm regularly out at court, speaking at resident meetings, and we do get a lot of feedback and a lot of queries from residents about electric car charges or ‘what are you doing about our heating systems in the future?’, ‘What's your environmental policy?’, so there's clearly a real appetite and interest there from customers about what we're going to do and about how their life may change, as well, over the next 10 or 20 years. So, the sustainability group really is the driver within the organisation to push these things along.

And we've got various different work pieces, including electric cars and heating projects and sustainability plans, et cetera, that are all being… all going through various different threads. So, I very much see myself as that ‘eco-nut’ voice, trying to push things along, but also to make sure that our residents are heard as well, and thoughts have been considered about.

**Simon:** Fantastic. So, with that term in mind, that self-proclaimed ‘eco-nut’ title, is there anything you're doing in your own personal life, Antony, to try and be a bit more sustainable?

**Antony:** So, yeah, as I say, I've always had a bit of a passion for this, and back at university I was making speeches for a colleague who… for a friend of mine who became one of the university councillors… council members at that point, so I think it goes a bit back for me.

We've got electric cars now at home, and they are so much better to drive. They are really nice. Anybody listening to this podcast now, if you can get an electric car because they're so much better. It's not even the environmental purpose, they're just more enjoyable to drive and so much cheaper to run. So, we've got an electric car, we've got solar panels now as well, so we can charge our car from our roof. We're looking at various tweaks around our heating because we'd like to move to an air source heat pump one day. Yeah, all areas really, trying to think about what we can do. I'm even so geeky as to tracking my carbon footprint across the year…

**Simon:** Very nice.

**Antony:** …I am that bad, but, yeah, we're trying to do what we can.

**Simon:** And what about yourself, Ashley? Is there anything you're doing outside of work to live a more sustainable lifestyle?

**Ashley:** I think it's about awareness and just being more aware of what you're doing, how you're doing it, and, you know, it's becoming, sort of, mainstream now. You look at Sky, for example, Sky Sports have done a net zero football game – everywhere you look. It's talking about sustainability and carbon and being net zero.

So, we've got a hybrid car, my wife's got a hybrid car. It's not fully electric so, Antony will….you'll be pushing me for that next time, maybe. But yeah, I think it's, you know, basic things like recycling, sort of, energy – looking at how much energy you use within your property. I think they're kind of par for the course to some degree now, people are aware of that. It’s: what extra can we do?

So, it's just about making sensible decisions around your lifestyle. And it goes much further than just… we talk a lot about heating systems and things like that, but there’s lots of other strands for sustainability, you know flooding, resilience, coastal erosion. There's many, many things that form part of that overarching heading of sustainability. So, yeah, just, sort of, being more aware of what I'm doing, how I'm doing it, you know, rather than attend a meeting in person, can I do it over a video? You know, reduce my carbon footprint from my mileage perspective, driving a car around, you know: is it efficient? Probably not. So, yeah, just that awareness, I think, is the key thing for me.

**Simon:** So, David, is there anything you're doing at your scheme, in your life, to try and live that more sustainable lifestyle?

**David:** Well, I'm a numbers person, I'm a bit of a number’s geek. So, I try and reduce my life to numbers, which is why I have a smart meter sitting on the table in front of me watching my power usage. I have LED bulbs, I turn lights off when I leave rooms, I don't leave anything on. I'm conscious of… even down to the fact that I know how much power my kettle uses, so, I minimize the amount of hot coffees I have every day, which is a really hard one to do!

**Antony:** I was just going to pick up on what David said about smart meters. And it's another thing where I know a lot of people are very wary about smart meters and think there's something that's going to zap them with alien ray beams or something like that. Actually, smart meters are ingenious little devices, and they could change how we use electricity quite a bit. Some of the newest tariffs that are coming out now are encouraging people to shift their usage to different times a day. And it's not like the old tariffs that was just overnight, it could be the middle of the day because the middle of the day is when it's windiest, when we’re producing the cleanest, greenest power, and so people can end up having to pay less for their electricity during that time. So, if we can shift our consumption around, actually that will make a greener grid and it will be cheaper for us in the long run as well.

The problem is that the grid as we have at the moment, it's lots of big power stations, all because of this peak around dinner time. So, we pay a fortune to have lots of extra power that we don't really need ­ we only need it between four o’ clock and six o’ clock. So smart meters, they're brilliant for helping you track your own consumption, but long term as well, they'll help us to move when we use our power to when it's cleanest and when it's cheapest for us as well.

**Ashley:** It's a good point, and there's a term called load-shifting, which basically means we can, sort of, load-shift energy and we're looking at… we have started exploring – if that does come, sort of, more mainstream, every energy provider offers it, everyone sort of gets used to that, where potentially at certain times of day, you'll get cheaper energy. Is there ways that we can, sort of, charge heating systems during those times where it might be a slightly lower price to run it? It's very new to market. It's not something that everyone's doing at the minute, but they're all, sort of, conversations that we are having and looking at in the background as to…to potentially, sort of, decarbonise our portfolio via electric, sort of, heating systems, but… yeah, interesting to see how that develops through the market.

**Antony:** Ashley has all the knowledge and the terms, I just get excited about things!

**Simon:** And, Heather, I think the pressure is on you. Is there anything you're doing in your sustainable lifestyle that hasn't been said by anybody else?

**Heather:** I think plastic comes up to the top of the list, quite honestly, for me. So, recycling and making sure – or trying to make sure – that I use things that are less one-off plastics. I worry deeply about the ocean. I think we've got a long way to go yet, and we may be poisoning things, so that's probably really my main one. And actually, I want to do some beach clear up when I get a little bit fitter so that I can go and do some of this plastic stuff on the beach myself.

**Simon:** So according to the Committee on Climate Change, I've got my stats here: 40% of UK emissions come from households, and, to reduce emissions and achieve net zero – and actually, I believe we've already picked up on this – decarbonising homes needs to be at the heart of housing providers such as us here at Housing 21 and our efforts.

Now on the news and across trade media, there's a lot of information about what developers and housing providers are planning to do to maximise the efficiency of new homes that are being built. But, Ashley, can you explain what's currently being done by us here at Housing 21 to improve the efficiency of our existing housing stock, especially in terms of that low-carbon heating?

**Ashley:** Yeah, the existing stock is the biggest headache for all housing associations, sort of, new build… you know, you can design things into new builds, but where you've already got buildings that have been built maybe 20, 30, 40, 50 years ago, they present the greatest challenge.

Housing 21, actually, have already done a lot and have got a lot, sort of, planned in. So, we're way ahead of government targets to achieve EPC band C across all of our stock. So, by March this year, all of our housing stock will be at EPC band C. I'm not aware of any other housing associations that are the same size as us that have achieved that. So, we are doing really well on that. There's been a big piece of work to get us in that position. Lots of energy efficiency work is done, so that's one element. But also, ultimately, we want to become…we want to be net zero. So, there's a lot of work still to do. And, as part of that, all of our building surveyors that we employ, they're domestic energy assessors, so they've got a degree of knowledge around what different materials and components that build up a house, how they affect, sort of, the energy efficiency and the carbon footprint of a home.

We are measuring our carbon footprint. We've put things in place to start measuring that. So, whenever we do a project on one of our courts that, for example, if we replaced some loft insulation and increased the size of loft insulation in a loft, we would record that we've done that to demonstrate that we've made an improvement. And, at court level, we're in the process of completing a bespoke court sustainability strategy for every court that we own. Those are going to be completed around March-time this year. We've done circa 75% of the stock. And what that assessment does is it looks at five key areas, starting with what heating system is in the building, what are the effects if you do X, Y or Z? If you change that heating system and did this, what happens? Looking at: is the court close or in a flood-risk area? Would PV go on the roof of the court? It's a huge piece of work to capture a lot of data, which we can then start to analyse and see where we can have the biggest impact. So, once we've done those, the idea is that, of course, we'll engage with residents to share the findings of that and look at what we can do on a court-by-court level, because every court is different and every court… there's not one-size-fits-all solution to this.

So, a lot of things are happening, and a lot has happened to get us to this place. But I suppose, sort of, the headline would be that we're going to be at EPC band C by March this year. I think that's quite a strong position to be in.

**Simon:** Well, I know that last year we were on Housing Digital's list of the top 30 sustainable housing providers. And as you say, yes, given the size of Housing 21 and given how many housing providers are currently in the UK, certainly not something to sneer at.

So, you've mentioned how we're wanting to inform and also get feedback from residents. How do we feel residents can be included in Housing 21’s plans going forward? Is that a case of informing them of their own behaviours on a site level? Or Heather and David, do you feel like that's a responsibility, perhaps, for you, as those resident representatives on your scheme? How do you feel that residents could be more involved in achieving Housing 21’s goals, if they can be?

**Heather:** I think it's quite difficult here because a lot of our residents are actually in bed a lot of the time, but that doesn't mean for some of them they couldn't interact if they knew that things were going on. And I'd like to see more information but put out in a way that people can understand it. Not just that “we're going to do this type of thing”. Not easy in a place like ours, because you do have a huge range of people; a lot of them are older, a fair few of them aren't as clever as they used to be, let's put it that way. But they do have relatives, and it would be nice to bring the relatives in as well, perhaps, to make things even more sustainable and to get the word out even further.

For me personally, I don't need the heating on in the winter at all because this place is very or normally very hot. And in the summer, it's unbelievable. So, in fact, on that side, not really so sustainable because I have to have an air conditioning unit on, and I feel guilty about that, quite honestly. I think we need to look a lot more at the buildings and how we're actually going into each flat and making each flat separate so there's no overall heating going on.

**Simon:** What are your thoughts on that, Ashley?

**Ashley:** Yeah, overheating is something that we've, sort of, we’ve got an awareness of, and there is a piece of work that's taking place, or there's a lot of work already taken place, on that, where courts have reported that as an issue and there's been an area focus for us. And I think, Heather, this is actually a great example of where the court sustainability strategies would really work. So, we do a piece of work on assessing your court with our local building surveyor and then along with the housing teams and residents like yourself, we can have conversations about the specific courts and look at what can we do and what do we need to do to sort of remedy issues at court level. And I think that's where this whole piece of work really starts to tie together, and we can start to make some real good strides in the right direction. You know, and again, I just think that it's going to be really good for us to engage with the likes of yourselves and other residents on that subject.

And another thing that we've done as a business is we've started some trial heating systems. So, we've trialled a ground source heating system at one of our sites over in Norwich. We've got a thermal store which is an electric wet central heating system at a site in a court.

**Antony:** Oh right!

**Ashley:** And we've also got a…. potentially a biomass heating system that we're going to be trialling at a court in Oswestry. So, we've sort of got two trials that are in place now that we're monitoring, and a third… a third trial of totally different heating systems that is going to commence shortly. So, keen to see how they go, our residents, sort of… what the feedback is from residents, how they take the system, what the benefits are and what might issues be with it, and review that to see if they might be options for us moving forwards to step away from gas. Our driver is to move away from gas.

**Simon:** That sounds amazing. Okay, so let's go to you, David. So, you've already mentioned how you yourself are putting all this effort in, you've got your smart meter, you're changing your behaviour. From your point of view, David, let's say we give you the crown tomorrow and you can say to your fellow residents what behaviours you feel they could do to live a more sustainable lifestyle on the scheme. What would you advise to those people?

**David:** First I would ask what is their understanding of sustainability? What do they know of it? Because you can't know a journey's end until you know where you've been starting from. So…

**Simon:** Of course.

**David:** …education is an important thing, but I also think that Housing 21 need to introduce sustainability as a core part of the narrative when they're talking to residents. Yeah, it is a standard part and, I'm trying to think what I'm going to say, yeah, education is the key thing: if people can understand that their little bit makes a big difference, then that's important.

And when you talk about the heating of the schemes and so on, in my past jobs, I used to do a seasonal review to see when it's too hot or too cold so they can adjust the thermostats. I mean, little things like in our flats here, there's no numbers on our thermostats, so I can't adjust it down to, say, 25 degrees because I don't know where 25 is on my thermostat. I just have to adjust until it feels a little bit comfortable for me, but it could be 25, it could be 27, it could be 30, it could be anything. I have no idea what temperature it’s actually at. Maybe I should just get a thermometer!

**Antony:** They are useful!

**Simon:** But it could be something as simple as that, you're absolutely right! And, Heather, we'll say the same for you, so you get the crown for the day, and you get to advise your fellow residents little ways they could make a more sustainable lifestyle. What would you recommend?

**Heather:** It is all about education. That's going to come with time. I mean, I've got a little time left, hopefully! I've just taken on the role of ambassador here, so that may give me a little bit more to be able to talk to people without being me, if you know what I mean. So that I'm hoping to…I’m hoping that we are going to do the garden – that's a big thing. Because if we can get people out into the garden, yeah, even that is… here is a really big incentive because if people can go out there and sit in the sunshine – obviously not for too long – but it makes things better for people to get together and that, in the end, is how we're going to survive really, because we can't go on the way we are.

And I'm just hoping that I can actually get through to people that the recycling and the single plastics and maybe the balloons, which is a bit of a problem… I have trouble with. I worry about the sea life in truth…

**Simon:** Oh, I see.

**Heather:** …with those sorts of things. I would never in my own life have balloons and things now.

**Simon:** Antony and Ashley, it's interesting to hear both David and Heather mention about education in terms of informing residents, but I know that there's a lot we might still need to do in terms of informing, well, everybody about what Housing 21 is up to. When it comes to Housing 21’s efforts in sustainability, do you know anything we're trying to do in terms of being as informative as possible, but ensuring that. as an organisation. we're not greenwashing and we're not just doing things for the sake of it.

**Antony:** So, I think there's an element of building up to this. So, we've put an article in last year's annual report about our, sort of…some of our first steps on this to communicate with residents. And I think but for Covid, we'd have probably had our regular resident conferences and would have had some items on that because that's usually a good way of doing things.

But I know when I go out to my courts on a regular basis and I've often kept my residents updated on where we’re going with the sustainability agenda, and I think that's one of the most positive ways of engagement we have. That when the area manager goes out to the court and you've got these well-attended meetings, you can have these discussions. And, rather than just information, sort of, directed straight at resident, you've got a two-way element of communication there. So, residents are often quite keen to have a chat about, you know, the pros and cons of the electric car or alternative heating or whatever else. And it can just… it can help to dispel some of the myths, I think, just to clarify a few things.

And on the points around greenwashing as well, we are acutely aware that this is not a PR stunt for us.

This is about our ethics, our moral obligations as a company. We are very keen on doing the right thing, and doing the right thing is helping the environment, is being sustainable, is moving away from fossil fuels, so that this is going to be our ethos, our purpose. And when we put the actions out there, when we start to deliver on them, we want to show we're being entirely genuine in what we're doing and that we're having that impact.

**Simon:** So, I think… oh yes, Heather?

**Heather:** That's the trouble, the baby boomers, we had it so good, yes, but we didn't know, we were ignorant of what damage was being done. But we do know now, and we should be making much more of an effort from our point of view for those next generations. I mean, if we poison the world now, it's not going to get better and it's going to be very much more difficult. The longer it goes on, the worse it's going to get. So, yes, all of us should be in this.

**Antony:** Yeah, I think our generations are feeling a responsibility, aren't we? I've got two very young children, and, you know, by the time they're getting towards my age, it will be 2050. And the earth they inherit from me and from us, I hope, is going to be somewhat similar to what they have now, and we're not going to be seeing some of the disasters that you are seeing on the news in recent years with the wildfires, the floods, the extreme weather. We all have that collective responsibility to make a difference, and, as I said, I feel it very acutely that I want to leave the world in a better place if we can. I think there's loads of residents like you out there, Heather, who also feel that.

**Heather:** I mean, if we can do it, then anybody can do it. That's another point, really.

**Antony:** I do think there's a mix, though, because there's those of us who are motivated in that kind of way, but I think there's also got to be an element of making things exciting and that, actually, having a sustainable future isn't just doing the right thing – actually, I think it'll be a better future. I'd much rather drive around in an electric car because it's better, it's more enjoyable to drive, it's cheaper to run. All these kinds of things, you know. You can have an autonomous electric car in the future – all these things. It's not just about that ethical purpose and everything, but actually we have to appeal to people and say: “This is a better future, a brighter future, it's not just about no emissions, it's that it's going to be fun”.

And I think the biggest thing that's pushed electric cars, for example, in recent years, is Tesla, because they're cool. Lots of people think they're great cars. They're very fancy. You can watch Netflix and things in them and all this kind of stuff. So, lots of people buy Tesla’s not because they're ecowarriors, but because they want to keep up with the Joneses. It's attractive, and we have to sell that. And, again, in Housing 21, and the fellow ambassadors like yourselves, our responsibility is to sell that exciting future to people, I think, and get people excited about it, like we are.

**Simon:** Fantastic, I’d agree. So, we'll finish with a question for David and Heather. David, is there anything you'd like to see from Housing 21? We've already heard about the many, many trials currently going on, how we're decarbonising not only our new stock, but also our current stock. But is there anything else you feel Housing 21 could do that you personally would like to see?

**David:** I was thinking about solar panels. How does everyone feel about those? Putting solar panels on top of all the schemes and then the electricity can then be sold back to the national grid. It also reduces our carbon footprint as well. So how does that work?

**Simon:** Antony, Ashley, has anything… has any discussions taken place regarding solar power?

**Ashley:** We've got two sites that have got PV – solar PV – on the roof already, but to refer back to the court sustainability document, one of the questions that the building surveyor for your court has to document within that piece of work is: what percentage of the roof faces in the right direction for solar? So, the idea is that over the period of time that it takes us to complete these assessments, we can then analyse nationally. What, you know…if we've got 500 courts of those 500, how many of them have got a decent amount of the roof that points in the right direction? So that, as David sort of suggested, if, in future, a decision is made for us to put solar en masse, which impact does that actually have on our stock? You know, so, yeah, they’re things that are being considered.

There’s lots of other factors as well as… because ultimately the biggest contributor to our carbon footprint is our heating systems. And if we can move away from fossil fuels, we will dramatically reduce our carbon footprint as a business. The difficulty is actually doing that without massively affecting people in terms of fuel bills, in terms of the energy performance of the property. So it is a big jigsaw, and we’ve got to make sure we put all the little pieces in the right place, and that's the challenge for us. But absolutely, solar is something that's on the agenda. It's something that has been discussed and that we will continue to review.

**Heather:** When…obviously, if we've got the…. it’s sustainability within the heating problems, if we…. heat sink would be one way of looking at it, to do that, to try and get us self-sufficient in our heating, rather than us taking from outside that we manage enough of it, that maybe we can give some back as well. I mean, I know that there are problems the… you know, with some type of things when your roof doesn't face the right way, but I'm sure there's more we could do on that. And the heat sink one is one that doesn't need that, it just goes into the ground, and that might solve some problems over the heating of water and things like that.

**Ashley:** David made a good point about solar and things like that. I think one of the challenges for us as an organisation is to make sure that we get our timing right when we try new things. The whole of the market, the whole of the housing sector has got a challenge to get the buildings to perform better. But as it stands, there's not one technology out there for a heating system that fits all. So, the challenge for us, Heather, is to, sort of, get our timing right and make sure that what we do, sort of, invest in is the right thing. So, whilst we want to… we do want to press on and make sure we make great strides now, it's as equally as important that we don't, sort of, rush to that and then the market's gone in another direction. So, I think it's a time of exploration for us in terms of that: heating systems and things like that. We're in a period of exploration.

**Antony:** I think just on a point of, kind of, going back to the past as well. With food, actually, going back to the past there, having a milkman is actually quite an eco-choice in many ways.

**Ashley:** No, you're right.

**Ashley:** These refill shops that you can get now, instead of, you know, getting yourself a pack of cereal or whatever, or getting a load of plastic. It can be a lot better instead to go to a refill shop and just get your plastic tub refilled. So, a lot of things, the ways that things were done 10, 20, well, 30, 40 years ago were far more sustainable than anything we have today. So, I think there is a bit of a ‘back to the future’ there.

**Simon:** Heather, David, Antony, Ashley, I think if we kept talking, we'd probably put the entire world to rights. But for now, I'm going to just thank you all so much for joining me today. It's been very interesting to hear each of your thoughts on the issue that is impacting every single one of us, no matter where we are in the world. So, thank you very much.

**David:** Thank you.

**Heather:** Thank you.

**Simon:** And thank you to all of our listeners for tuning in. We’ll be publishing a brand-new episode every month. So make sure you subscribe to our podcast channel so that you’re notified as soon as our next episode is live.

If you are a Housing 21 resident who has been inspired by today's conversation and are interested in getting more involved, then why not join our resident engagement groups? You can find out more about these and more on the resident information section of the Housing 21 website and we’ll also include the link in the episode’s show notes.

Thanks again for tuning in.