Hello and welcome to 21 Talks, the podcast series from Housing 21 that's challenging the way older people are represented and talked about in everyday conversation.

**John:** Hello, everyone, my name is John Simmonds and I'm the respect and inclusion lead here at Housing 21. I've been working in this organisation for just over a year now. My primary focus is to ensure that respect and inclusion is embedded into everything we do as a housing and care provider. So that means having an inclusive working culture, providing an amazing experience for all of our residents and all of their characteristics, as well as being an organisation that promotes diversity and inclusion in all spaces – and that also includes on our podcast. So, for today's episode, I'm going to be sitting down with two of our residents to learn more about the changes they've seen and experienced throughout their lifetime, particularly towards the LGBTQ+ community. So, Debz and Terry, thank you so much for joining me today. Would you mind just introducing yourself to our listeners by telling them a little bit about yourself and how long you've been a Housing 21 resident. So, Debz, let's start with you.

**Debz:** Yes, hi, I'm Debz, I'm based in Burnley. I've been a Housing 21 resident since December last year. I don't actually come from Burnley, I actually come from Yorkshire.

**John:** I always like that there's a distinction in Yorkshire and Burnley, everybody is very, very keen to point out exactly where they're from without sweeping statements of where they're from, but yeah, really nice to meet you, Debz. Terry, perhaps you could go next.

**Terry:** Yeah, hi, Debz, hi, John, nice to talk to you. I could tell you wasn't from Burnley by the accent.

[Laughter from John]

You might be able to tell that I'm from Manchester with my accent, but live in Chesterfield now, as I have been in Housing 21 for around about six years.

**John:** Terry, I didn't know people from Manchester liked to leave, for Derbyshire of all places!

**Terry:** I don’t actually. Well, Manchester, for me, it was brilliant while you were young and you had the clubs and everything going on. But you get a little bit older, you like a slower pace of life, and living in Chesterfield is a slower pace of life. It suits me. But the only thing I miss is that I have to travel over an hour to get to Old Trafford every other week.

**John:** Every other week. So you're a regular attender, are you?

**Terry:** Absolutely, yeah. Home and away.

**John:** I can only dream of what it must be like to support a successful football team [laughs].

**Terry:** Oh, I don't know whether that’s being a bit sarcastic because we’re not very successful at the moment!

[Laughter]

**John:** I'll leave you to make of that what you will. It's lovely to meet you both, thank you so much. So what led you both to moving into a retirement living court?

**Debz:** Yeah, I moved into Housing 21 because I live a long way from my family and I've actually lived in Burnley on and off since 2002. Frequented Burnley, went back to Durham, came back to Burnley, went back to Durham, and I came back to Burnley for my recovery because I'm a recovering alcoholic, which will be my journey for the rest of my life, you know. And I found that my sexuality was more acceptable here. And even at my age, I'm still…I’m 59 and I'm still a bit of a live wire [laughs], so to speak, you know and I feel it all happens in Lancashire rather than in the Northeast, which is where I did spend most of my life. And there's also, you know, quite a good life around Leeds and places like that.

**John:** Yeah. So there's plenty of activity going on there.

**Debz:** Oh, yes.

**John:** Terry, what about you? What led to you moving into a retirement living court?

**Terry:** Well, what actually led me to living here is… first, I get this out of the way: My wife died a few years ago, she was living with us here. Basically, what happened, my wife had a bit of an accident. She was disabled for quite a few years. Where we were… we were living in Chesterfield, the house wasn't suitable for her cos everything's upstairs and…

**John:** Yeah.

**Terry:** …so we viewed a few places, quite a few places around the area because we didn't want to move too far because my daughter lives close. And, basically, this one really suited us, and we spent a day here chatting to a few of the residents and, you know, we thought we could really settle here, and it was absolutely spot on. And like I say, my wife died a few years back and I've carried on here and I don't think I'll move now.

**John:** So I'm really keen to get your thoughts on what it's like at the courts where you live and whether you feel like you can be your true selves. But before that, would you both be happy to share with our listeners how you identify with the LGBTQ+ community?

**Terry:** Yeah, I'm a cross-dresser. I have been all my life. I'm quite happy with it. Nowadays, I mean, obviously things have changed since the 60s where nothing was accepted. I’m quite comfortable with it, most of the residents know, they've seen me. And…I don't actually go around all the time, but people do see me and I don't feel the need to hide it. People talk and I feel accepted. How about you, Deborah?

**Debz:** Yeah, well, I came out fully when I was 25 and like I said, I'm 59 now and I don't have any qualms with anybody, you know, either in the independent living side, which is what I'm on, or, you know, the extra care side. I do frequent the main building, you know, and I talk to the residents. A lot of them know I'm gay and it seems to be accepted, you know, I don't have a problem at all. I'm very open about what I am and who I am, and I'm comfortable in my own skin. I've never had any conflict over my sexuality. You know, I give people time of day and they give me time of day, which I think is important to me. And I like to think that the other residents feel comfortable around me.

**John:** Yeah.

**Terry:** Do you feel attitudes have changed a lot, Deborah?

**Debz:** It has changed, it's changed immensely. When I first came out, it wasn't recognised, you know, even though there were other gay people in the town. There was no gay clubs or pubs or anything like that. And, you know, I tried to keep it low key, but then I thought to myself: “Well, why should I?”. And then I started travelling around. I used to go to Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester…

**Terry:** Manchester has a fantastic gay scene.

**Debz:** It's brilliant. It's absolutely superb, and you're not judged for who or what you are, you know, and I think we live in a more modern society now. I mean, when your 95-year-old grandmother says to you: “And where's your partner today?”, because my grandmother was in a care home and my partner was actually my wife at the time. And I was gobsmacked, you know, because at 95 I thought “wow”, you know. Bless her, she passed last year, 100 years old. It just goes to show just how much notice people do take now. Whereas before it was quite taboo.

**Terry:** Yeah, exactly, I think it's evolved over years. I mean, I remember, I mean, I was always a cross-dresser but obviously, being a cross-dresser, I mixed with a lot of gay people. And the attitudes, the sixties, seventies, it was really horrific. You know, you just couldn't do anything at all, everything was behind closed doors. I mean, round the gay village in Manchester, it's a fantastic… where you are accepted because I found people now, especially where we living, very accepting. There’s some older people can have old-fashioned views, and they say not to go out of your way to upset people that have, you know, their own views, I mean, everybody is entitled to their own views.

**Debz:** I live on quite a big site complex of Housing 21, and sometimes I feel I'm one of the younger ones.

**Terry:** Sorry how old did you say? 59?

**Debz:** Fifty-nine, yeah.

**Terry:** Oh, you don't sound it.

**Debz:** Thank you. I’ve been told I don’t look it either.

**Terry:** I'm 72. I don't feel it.

**Debz:** But diversity, it's a little word with a big meaning.

**Terry:** Absolutely, yeah.

**Debz**: I'm not a people pleaser now, I used to be a people pleaser, but I don't feel as though I need to be now, do you know what I mean? Like, I would watch how I, you know like, how I spoke about my sexuality and like I said, I'm out and proud, I really am. I don't know what happens behind closed doors. Obviously, I don't recognise other people as being gay or lesbian or, you know….

**Terry:** We label people too much.

**Debz:** That’s right, that’s right.

**Terry:** We’re individuals.

**Debz:** We stereotype, don’t we?

**Terry:** That’s the word: stereotype.

**Debz:** Yeah.

**John:** Sexual orientation and gender expression are such interesting characteristics because they're not always visible, are they? Many characteristics are visible, such as race and ethnicity, or in a lot of cases, gender, or in some cases disability. But sexual orientation is one of those hidden characteristics. How important to both of you is it to be, you know, to use your words there Debz “out and proud”, for other people around you to know that… who you are. You know, you bring your sexual orientation with you and that's who you are.

**Debz:** It's not important, to be honest, because in some respects it's a need-to-know basis, and sometimes people don't need to know because, you know, they do… it's like a label, isn't it?

**Terry:** Absolutely, and people do tend to put labels on…not just people same as us but everybody seems to get a label nowadays. But I find I'm accepted now as I am and nobody seeing me in the street are thinking “cross-dresser” cos I look a bit rough to be honest, but I have to say when I was younger I could get away with the red leather miniskirts well. I couldn’t now, I’m not good enough. Well, I do like to wear female clothes.

**John:** Terry, can I unpack that a bit, what does your wife and your family… I assume they knew that you were a cross-dresser.

**Terry:** Well my wife did, but I don't know if the family ever knew, but I got a feeling they knew and it wasn't mentioned, sort of thing. My wife, obviously we were married 46 years so obviously she knew and she'd been out with me and her sisters and, yeah, she got upset if I pulled more than her, like…

[Laughter]

**Terry:** …that's the other downside to it: you did tend to get a lot of male company because they see you as a cross-dresser and they often think, “Oh, you’re gay!” which, I’m not, I mean… if I was I’d be quite proud to say it, like I say, I have a lot of gay friends. I do, I used to attract more male company than I wanted sometimes.

**John:** So I assume that you're going out every weekend these days, Terry. Still frequenting all the nightclubs. How much have things changed since you first started going out compared to today?

**Terry:** I don't go out frequenting nightclubs nowadays!

**John:** I’m not having that Terry, I don't believe you.

**Terry:** No, no, but….I do go out, not as often because obviously we’ve all had the lockdown and…since then you tend to, well, I've decided I enjoy my own company more, if you know what I mean. I do get out and about, I'm not out every weekend like it used to be. For us it's not quite like Manchester they don't have the scene the same, you have to travel into Leeds or somewhere like that. Leeds has quite a good gay scene, Deborah might know that….

**Debz:** Definitely.

**Terry:** Yeah there’s quite a good scene in Leeds.

**John:** So how have things changed then? What's different in 2022, being gay in 2022 compared to 30, 40 years ago?

**Terry:** I think young people are more accepting nowadays than the older generation were.

**Debs:** Oh definitely, because you’ve got…I find that, like yourself in the past, there's younger people frequenting the gay bars and they're not necessarily gay. I love the gay nightlife, I love the music, I love the atmosphere and even now I still love it, you know… it's just so…it’s a whole new dimension.

**Terry:** It's a lot more relaxed, isn't it.

**Debz:** Of course, yes, it's more relaxed now and people don't stand staring at you like they used to.

**Terry:** I found particularly where I live, they encourage acceptance, you know…

**Debz:** Of course.

**Terry:** …through the management…staff, you know, they do sort of encourage things, like, just say, a new resident moves in, they have like what they call like a buddy system, where once a new resident moves in, they match them up with somebody that's been there a while, and it’s somebody to go to if they got a problem and show them around and whatever. Cos, a lot of problems they don't need to take towards management, that’s the sort of problems: How do you use this? Where do you go for that?

So this buddy system works really well, plus it makes people relax and get introduced to the…cos we do have quite a bit of a social life here but it's not compulsory – it's not like the old Butlin’s was in the 50s where you have to join into everything. You know, there's a percentage of residents who like to keep themselves to themselves, which is absolutely fine, but the social part is there if it's wanted.

**Debz:** Yeah it tends to be a little bit like that here: the manager tries to set things up and then people say “oh well I don't really want to go”, “I'm not going to that”, and then before you know it the whole lounge is full.

**Terry:** Yeah I know exactly what you mean.

**Debz:** You know it’s like I might…I might go up for a coffee with the manager on a lunch break and before you know it there's eight or nine residents, you know, around you and it's like they just join in the conversation. I think it's absolutely wonderful, that. Participation is important, I think, when you live in a place like this.

**Terry:** It’s going back a few years when my wife passed away. I didn't take it too well as you'd expect. I’d end up going into a shell, but I was encouraged to mix because I hadn't really socialised, because for…the last few years my wife was alive she needed 24/7 care, so I tended not to get out the flat, and once she passed I just stayed in the flat. And I was encouraged to come down and socialise and chat – I found fascinating people with life stories that lived the life and they've done various things.

And, you know, I miss it now, not going out of the lounge and chatting with everybody. Especially when new residents come in and, you know, their life stories – I find it fascinating and I'm glad I socialised now, where if I wasn't pushed a little bit I wouldn’t have done.

**John:** So do you think that you can be your authentic selves then when you're living in your courts, you think that you can…when you get those opportunities to go mingle with others that you can be a lesbian woman and a cross-dressing man and that that won't be held against you – there's no fear of repercussion?

**Terry:** Absolutely, I don't find no problem. I can walk around in a nice frock and, you know, they don't bat an eyelid, you know, at first people said “woh!”, you know, and I just say: “Oh, did you see my sister the other day?” [Laughs]. Some people can be slightly shocked when they first see, but after a day or two, you know, they don't bat an eyelid. Do you find the same, Deborah? Do you find people more accept you as a person than the label?

**Debz:** Yes, most definitely…oh most definitely, yes. There are a couple of people already on this site that I knew before I came here…

**John:** Okay.

**Debz:** …you know, but they wouldn't say: “Oh there's a new lady coming on site and she's a lesbian” –they don't do that, you know what I mean? It's live and let live, I think. Or I feel as though it is, I mean they've seen me in all different shades.

**John:** I think that's so interesting as well, you know, I've been up and down England speaking to dozens of our residents that live in Housing 21 across, you know, our extra care schemes and our retirement living courts. And sometimes there's this sense that some older adults in the UK might be intolerant towards LGBTQ+ people in general, but that's not been my experience whatsoever. In fact, nearly every resident I've spoken to has… maybe gay themselves, or, you know, certainly know somebody through their family – quite often our residents have family members that are gay or bisexual or transgender. And our residents come alive when they're talking about their family because they love them and they love who they are, and that includes that sexual orientation, so, it’s a myth-busting experience for me, it's been really, really interesting speaking to our residents about sexual orientation, because I came with preconceived notions that many older adults in the UK are intolerant towards people because of their sexual orientation, but I don't think that's the truth.

**Debz:** No, not at all. I mean, I have a 34-year-old son and when I tell people, it sort of opens their eyes a little bit, you know. I just look at them and say: “Well, you know, I haven't always been like this”, and they sort of look at you from a different light, you know what I mean?

**Terry:** It goes back to, like you say, labelling you are a lesbian and put you in this little box and this is what they expect you to do or you can, you know, “Oh, do you have a son?” You know?

**Debz:** Yeah, yeah. I just…I do think that society is more accepting, which is good, you know. I mean, I've come across all walks of life and, you know, it's amazing how many people…older people… the older generation you come across and they say: “My grandson’s gay”, or “my daughter's gay”, you know, and things like that. And my mum is very accepting of my sexuality and she's accepting of me, full stop obviously because she's my mum. At the end of the day, it doesn’t… though there are people out there whose families have just totally disowned them.

**Terry:** My mother-in-law, she was an old Irish Catholic, my mother-in-law, and very strict and she couldn't even say the word lesbian. She always…you know what…if she had to…she’d say: “Them vegetarian ones, you know, that like the funny food”, you know, she’d always describe a lesbian as a vegetarian. It was…I mean, I'm going back a lot of years now but…she just couldn't bring herself to say the word.

**John:** Can I…can I…I want to circle back to that, actually, if I can. Can I just be absolutely clear that she wouldn't use the word lesbian she’d replace it with the word vegetarian to avoid saying it?

**Terry:** That’s correct, yes. That’s correct. It's weird to look at now, but…I mean… I'm going back 40, 50 or so years, you know, when I first met her. But yeah it's really strange and, you know, and if they’d see two girls walking now they're all holding hands, they'd be so shocked. I mean you don't think anything of it nowadays.

**John:** And you're absolutely right, we must remember as well that it's only since 1967 that it stopped being illegal to be gay. Although, in fact, it's never been illegal to be in a lesbian relationship. Anecdotally that goes back to Queen Victoria doesn’t it…

**Debz:** It certainly does. Yes, Queen Victoria stated that it wasn't illegal for two women to have a relationship because they couldn't sexually have a relationship, whereas two men could.

**Terry:** That was a wrong perception of things, wasn’t it! But that’s too detailed of course.

**Debz:** Well, I was being polite there, do you know what I mean. I could have enhanced a little further on it but no. So that's why…that’s why it was never illegal for two women than it was for two men.

**John:** But do you know, how things have changed though, so 1967, the law was passed that stopped it being illegal to be in a gay relationship. We had the moral panic of the 1980s and the AIDS pandemic and the blame falling on gay people. We have Section 28, which made it legal to discuss being in a same sex relationship and that was only repealed in 2003. We've had the Armed Forces Act so you couldn't be gay and be in the armed forces until 2001 and then only just recently, the same sex couples…the…the Same Sex Couples bill, which completed its historic journey through parliament in 2013, so it made it legal to be…to have a gay marriage as well. So these are pretty landmark dates…

**Debz:** They certainly are.

**John:** …lots of things have changed haven’t they. How did this impact on you?

**Debz:** I got married in 2015 and I had a white wedding. My wife wore a white dress and I wore a morning suit. We actually got married in a register office. We had talked about Humanist commitment ceremony but we wanted to go the whole hog, so we had a proper white wedding, you know, and God bless anybody that wants to have a wedding because recently the Church of England has made it legal for same sex couples to marry in the church, and I would have loved that.

**Terry:** There's a much more liberal attitude now, isn’t there Deborah.

**Debz:** Yes, most definitely.

**John:** So what does it mean to be married and not in a civil partnership? How do the two differ?

**Debz:** I think it makes… well, I thought at the time it made for a more static, you know, joining of two people, if you will. Now that they've brought this one into the church, I think that's even better, you know.

**John:** It’s equality of experience for all, isn’t it…

**Debz:** Of course, of course.

**John:** …and that's the important thing

**Debz:** And I think once that bill was passed, I think…it was as if there was a rush for everybody to get married that was in a same-sex relationship.

**Terry:** A lot of people, they do want to make a commitment to each other, and…

**Debz:** Of course

**Terry:** …through a marriage ceremony, say with a straight couple, bi couple, anybody – it’s making a statement that you are committed to that person.

**Debz:** That's right.

**Terry:** Itdoesn’t always last, well normal….well, I say ‘normal’, ­marriages don’t always last… and you travel a rocky road in any marriage. Like, I was married 46 years and, you know, we had ups and downs, well on the whole I say it was a really happy marriage, but…I mean, if she could put up with me for 46years, my God!

**John:** So we’re kind of coming to the end of the podcast shortly, but we’ve spoken about how things have changed. I'd like to ask you if you've got any advice for any of our listeners who perhaps haven't felt like they can embrace who they are and feel free to be themselves? What advice would you offer to them? Who wants to go first?Shall we go Terry.

**Terry:** Putting me on the… well, I’d say: do it gradually. You know, speak to one person first and tell them, don't have to make it a great big announcement. You know, feel the water. You know, don't rush into something and then think to yourself: “God, what have I done?”. You will find the majority of people will be accepting of you, but I mean, you will get the odd one that doesn't…that’s their loss, to be quite honest.

**John:** Yeah.

**Terry:** What do you think, Deborah?

**Debz:** Yeah, I think it should be free for all. We've all got our own minds, we've all got our own hearts, we've all got our own stomachs. And I think, you know, there are still going to be people out there that don't like homosexuality, lesbianism and, you know, same-sex relationships. And I think because we're living in a better….more accepting society, I think people won't, sort of, come across the kind of things that we came across when we were younger. Most definitely speak about it to your family before anybody else.

**Terry:** Absolutely yeah.

**Debz:** And you know I think… I think, once you've broke the ice with your family about it, then it gets… it's got to get easier.

**Terry:** Well, once you've told your family, nobody else matters because…

**Debz:** That's right.

**Terry:** …your friends are your friends. And if they're not your friends after you've told them they weren't really your friends were they.

**Debz:** Not at all.

**John:** So lots to reflect on there. Debz, Terry, I hope you've both enjoyed being on your first podcast. It's been a pleasure to speak with you actually. Thanks for sitting down with us and sharing your thoughts. This is sometimes quite a sensitive area, sensitive to talk about, so I really welcome your candour.

Just to add, so for any Housing 21 residents listening today who's been inspired by today's conversation perhaps, and has a conversation that they would like to hear on a future episode of 21 Talks, please do get in touch by clicking on the link in the show notes. But from me, thank you very much for tuning in. Bye from me and from Debz and Terry.

**Debz and Terry:** Thank you.