

Ellen Rhind Housing Advisory Panel Member

Hello everybody, my name is Ellen and I live in a sheltered housing scheme in Atherton. I know there are many reasons why we choose to live in sheltered accommodation, my reason being I wanted to feel safe after a traumatic event in my life. Thanks to Wigan Council and their sheltered housing officers and staff my wishes came true and I now live in lovely flat, am well looked after and feel totally safe. My scheme manager ensures the safety of her residents by ensuring that our building, surrounds and flats nurture us and make us feel welcome and safe.

I feel I have had a very privileged life insomuch that I travelled extensively from the age of 10 back in the 1960's which, in those days was very unusual. During my teens and twenties I lived in Bahrain, Nigeria and Zambia. Bahrain was a bit like a desert when I lived there and my memories are of donkey's, terrapins, American cars, air conditioning (essential as it use to reach 40 degrees Centigrade during summer), frozen food and lots of sand. After there we moved to Nigeria which has a very humid and hot climate - this was my first taste of Africa and I loved it. I use to cycle to school which was around 3 miles away and, not being a seasoned cyclist, I crashed a lot and still have the scars to prove it. My education at this stage was due to travel rather than academic achievement as our school was frequently invaded by troops of baboons who held us hostage for hours until rangers managed to disperse them. I suppose that is when I realized that animals had as much right to invade our space in the same way as we had invaded theirs. My school also burnt down during my attendance so I had around 6 months of freedom and 'natural' education.

After Nigeria we moved to Zambia and that destination holds so many beautiful and dangerous/adventurous memories that it is somewhere I will treasure always. We first lived in Lusaka which is the capital and typically urban. At this stage I was still at school but unfortunately baboons and fires didn't interrupt my education so had to hunker down and become more academically involved. Around a year after being there we moved to my most favourite place in the world called Livingstone. Livingstone is home to Victoria Falls which is an awe-inspiring waterfall. It is situated on the Zambezi River and plunges around 350 feet. During the rainy season the falls become akin to a kaleidoscope and it is an unforgettable sight that takes your breath away. As I was still youngish and stupid at this stage of my life I actually use to swim in the rapids above the falls and it is by pure luck that I am still here to tell the story. What I love about Africa is that you could walk into your back yard and feel that nobody has ever been there before and that is a feeling I have never experienced elsewhere.

Due to my early years of travel and return to the UK in the 1970's I unsurprisingly commenced my career in travel and remained there for most of my working life. I was predominantly based in London but also took time out to live in Holland and Malta. The reason I ended up in Wigan was when the company I worked for bought a tour operator based in Farnworth called Sunset Holidays. I was so impressed by the caliber of staff at Sunset that I decided to move my departments up to the North West. I happened to have met a lovely couple on one of my visits abroad who lived in Wigan and, due to time constraints, asked them to recommend some places to live and found a lovely home in Standish Lower Ground. At this stage I was a single parent with a young and beautiful son so location was important and we never

looked back as both he and I absolutely loved living here. Sadly, due to a further merger, I had to move back to London and neither my son or I enjoyed life back 'down south'. I was contractually obliged to remain in London for 2 years but once this was complied with we both decided to move back to Wigan and it has proven to be the best move we ever made.

It was by mere chance that I found a way of thanking Wigan Council for contributing to making my life better by way of a flyer that offered a chance to use my business/analytical skills for the good. Tenants were asked to apply for a role within the Council to carry out independent scrutiny of their Housing Services and my application was approved. There are currently five tenant representatives and I had the pleasure of being part of a 3 person team that recently carried out a scrutiny of the Council's caretaking service. The committee we belong to is called the Housing Advisory Panel (HAP) and our meetings are available online and open to anybody who is interested in their discussions which happen around four times a year. The tenants scrutiny focuses on housing as a whole and not on specific types of accommodation and is therefore beneficial to everybody rather than the few. This voluntary job has been a blessing during lockdown as it gave me a purpose rather than just trying to avoid getting Covid.

The last 15 months have been very difficult for everyone and I truly hope that you found ways of keeping yourself safe and occupied. Please check the flyers/leaflets that Wigan Council send you as you may find opportunities to make your voice be heard. I wish you all well and thank you for taking the time to read my article.