# Understanding the Complexity of Inclusion in Everyday Places and Spaces: Deliberative Dialogue workshops to unpack what needs to be done and how to achieve enhanced inclusion

## Short Report



**This is a Living Document produced by Professor Judith Sixsmith and the IncludeAge Team**

# Acknowledgements

# The IncludeAge Team

- Prof Judith Sixsmith, PI, Health Sciences, Univ Dundee
- Dr Mei Lan Fang, Co-PI, Health Sciences, Univ Dundee
- Dr Darren Chadwick, Co-I, Psychology, Liverpool John Moores Univ
- Prof Kathryn Almack, Co-I, Health and Social Work, Univ Hertfordshire
- Dr Susan Buell, Co-I, Health Sciences, Univ Dundee
- Dr Jenna Breckenridge, Co-I, Health Sciences, Univ Dundee
- Dr Laura Rowe, Co-I, Health Sciences, Univ Dundee
- Dr Meiko Makita, Co-I, Health Sciences, Univ Dundee
- Prof Mark Smith, School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, Univ Dundee
- Dr Susan Levy, Co-I, Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, Univ Dundee
- Anna Marriott, Co-I, National Development Team for Inclusion
- Pat Scrutton, Co-I, Intergenerational National Network
- Ruth Callander, Co-I, Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities
- Leon Hamilton, Co-I, Outside the Box
- Grace Cardozo, Co-I, Sleeping Giants
- Dr Fiona Dobbie, Co-I, Medicine and Vet Medicine, Univ Edinburgh

- Sarah Offley, Co-I, Dudley Voices for Choice
- Joanne Waldron, Co-I, Dudley Voices for Choice
- Benjamin Thomas, Co-I, Tonic Housing
- Tracey Dixon, School of Art and Design, Univ Dundee
- Dr Marianne Cranwell, Project Co-Ordinator, Health Sciences, Univ Dundee
- Dr Richard Vytniorgu, Research Fellow, Health & Social Work, Univ Hertfordshire
- Dr Jacqui Lovell, Research Fellow, Psychology, Liverpool John Moores Univ
- Joanna Gregory, Research Fellow, Psychology, Liverpool John Moores Univ
- Dr Joe Tai, Post-Doctoral Research Associate, Health Sciences, Univ Dundee

3

# Contents

# Table of Figures

# 1. Introduction

The IncludeAge project explores middle to older aged people (40+) with Learning Disabilities and middle to older aged LGBT+ people's experiences of inclusion in everyday community physical places and online spaces in England, Scotland and Wales. Community inclusion is considered a human right and central to living meaningful everyday lives. However, past discrimination and stigma experienced by both groups can contribute to present-day exclusion, distress, loneliness and isolation. As place-based and online experiences of mid-older people with Learning Disabilities and/or who are LGBT+ are currently poorly understood, more information is needed to highlight ways to challenge exclusion and enhance inclusion.

Information gained in the IncludeAge project from people with lived experience, practitioners and policy makers will be used to develop practical solutions and policy recommendations with mid-older people with Learning Disabilities and mid-older LGBT+ people to improve inclusion within physical and online communities. In this way, the IncludeAge project works to reduce negative outcomes by generating knowledge and possible solutions that can be used by decision-makers to improve opportunities for inclusion in everyday places and spaces.

The IncludeAge project, led by Professor Judith Sixsmith from the University of Dundee and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. works together with Community Advisory Groups to recruit middle to older aged people with Learning Disabilities and LGBT+ people into the project to find out about:

- their experiences of inclusion and exclusion in different physical and online places.
- how past events, and social networks shape experiences in the present day and
- explore how groups and services can better support inclusion in different places and communities.

To find all this out, we have:

- Interviewed middle to older aged LGBT+ about their past and present lives
- Collected their real time experiences of inclusion (and exclusion) in their everyday places and spaces

At this point in the project (month 30 or 46 months), a series of Deliberative Dialogues workshops are being conducted to explore professional and practitioner perspectives on how to challenge exclusion and enhance inclusion. This living document reports on 2 of 4 planned IncludeAge Deliberative Dialogue workshops. The first concerned human rights and inclusion and the second considered inclusion from an intergenerational perspective.

## 2. What is a Deliberative Dialogue Workshop?

Deliberative dialogue workshops are facilitated events which bring people with different expertise and different experiences together to discuss specific problem areas (in this case 'inclusion in places and spaces), encouraging them to seek shared understandings of the complex problem or issue at hand. The aim is to search for or develop common ground and co-produce action steps.

## 3. Workshop aims

IncludeAge deliberative workshops aim to encourage deliberation on how to improve the inclusion of middle to older aged LGBT+ people and people with learning disabilities in the physical places and online spaces in their everyday lives and to suggest actions which can drive improvement.

## 4. What we did

Two workshops were conducted to better understand the notion of inclusion of middle aged to older LGBT+ people and middle to older people with Learning Disabilities.

### 4.1 Workshop 1: The Value of a Human Rights Approach

The first workshop concerned the value of a human rights approach when considering the inclusion of middle to older aged LGBT+ people and middle to older aged people with learning disabilities. This online workshop was held as part of the NDTi hotspot work session and was attended by NDTi employees. The workshop was organised as follows:

#### *Welcome and Overview*
Prof Judith Sixsmith was introduced, and the purpose of the session was explained.

#### *Presentation*
The presentation (see figure 1) was entitled: "Perspectives and dialogues on Inclusive Place-Making with Mid-Older LGBT+ and Mid-Older People with Learning Disabilities: Placing Human Rights in Context".

#### *Q & A*
Workshop attendees asked questions of the IncludeAge project and talked about their own work-related experiences.

The problem of integrating human rights approaches to the issue of inclusion of middle-older aged LGBT+ people and middle to older aged people with learning disabilities in everyday places and spaces was discussed in relation to the following:

How a human rights approach might improve the community inclusion of middle to older aged learning disabled and LGBT+ people.

*Figure 1: Online Workshop on Human Rights Perspectives*
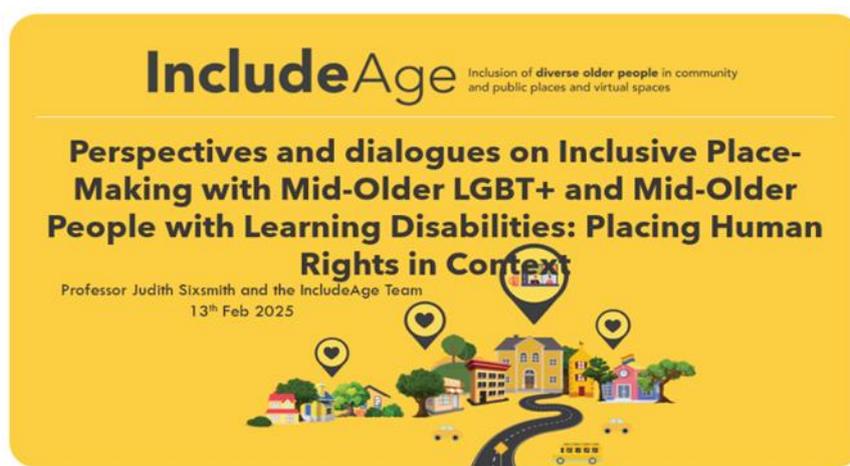


## 4.2 Workshop 2: Intergenerational Perspectives of Inclusion

This hybrid workshop took an intergenerational perspective to inclusion in everyday places and spaces. The workshop was organised with a range of NHS, police, social care, academic **and** environmental stakeholders as follows:

*Welcome and Overview*
Welcome and explain the purpose and planned activity of the workshop.

*Object exercise*
Participants either brought an object which symbolised inclusion for them or picked an Association Card (these are photographs of different objects and scenes) which represented inclusion for them.   Each person then showed their object or card and spoke about what inclusion in everyday places and spaces meant to them as represented by the object or the card.

*Presentation*
A presentation on the design, methods and key preliminary findings from the IncludeAge project entitled "Perspectives and dialogues on Intergenerational Inclusive Place-Making with Mid-Older LGBT+ and Mid-Older People with Learning Disabilities" was delivered focusing on intergenerationality in place. This shared insights about real-life experiences and discuss the challenges, barriers, and

8

opportunities faced by organizations, based on our IncludeAge research so far. A question and answer session on the IncludeAge project and findings was then held.

### *Persona and Visioning Exercise*

A persona (see figure 2) was presented about an LGBT+ couple and their experiences over their life in family, social and public places. Workshop participants read the persona and used a visioning circle (see figure 3, p.15) to discuss:

- What needs to be done to improve inclusion in places and spaces for people and situations depicted in the persona?
- How can improvement be achieved from an intergenerational perspective?
- Who are the stakeholders that need to contribute to positive change?

### *Action Planning*

Finally, the planned activity to list, categorise and prioritize steps needed to improve inclusion was not undertaken due to time limitations.

*Figure 2: Persona*

*Derek is 74 years old and lives with his partner John (45) in Manchester. Derek realised he was gay in his teens but came from a strict family where homosexuality was not accepted, making it difficult to 'come out' to his parents or siblings. Hiding his sexual identity was part of his everyday life and made him feel he was not accepted in or fully part of his own family. He classed himself as 'not normal' and this was a source of anxiety and depression for him*

*Derek married his wife in his early 30's but by his late 40's had decided that he couldn't hide his sexual orientation any further and got divorced to spend his life with the love of his life, John. Derek's parents and siblings either failed to recognise his sexual identity or actively avoided contact with him. John was not allowed to visit the family home or attend family events as this caused unbearable tension and outright arguments.*

*Despite this, Derek and John enjoyed a happy and supportive relationship. As the gay scene in Manchester became popular, Derek and John would spend time there and developed some lovely friendships. They campaigned for LGBT+ rights and were openly affectionate in public places. Late one night, coming back from a gay bar, they were identified as gay by a group of young men and were attacked on the bus home. This put Derek in hospital and injured John.*

*Subsequently, fearing youths in groups and possible homophobic attack, they stopped frequenting Manchester's gay bars and clubs and their social circle grew smaller. Both Derek and John are now hypervigilant in public places and on transportation which creates stress as they constantly assess who is in the environment, what they are doing and if they need to express or hide their relationship.*

# 5. What we found

In this section, key findings from the workshops are presented. This outlines participant definitions of inclusion and discusses the complexities and contradictions of the concept.

## 5.1 What is Inclusion?

Inclusion is about creating spaces, systems, and communities where everyone feels valued, safe, and empowered to participate fully, regardless of their background, identity, or abilities. It moves beyond mere tolerance and toward genuine acceptance, ensuring that people are not just present but actively engaged and respected. True inclusion acknowledges diversity, addresses systemic barriers, and fosters an environment where people can be themselves without fear or restriction. However, inclusion is also complex—it can sometimes require exclusion to ensure safety and empowerment for marginalized groups.

### 5.1.1 Access & Freedom

Inclusion means having the freedom to navigate life without barriers—whether physical, social, or systemic. It is about ensuring that people can access opportunities, places, and relationships without restrictions or fear of discrimination. Genuine inclusion provides the right to move, engage, and participate in society equally and without limitations. Inclusion means that people should have access to what they need and want, and able to go wherever you want, with whomever you choose, without the fear of judgment or discrimination.

"To go where I want, with whom I want, without fear, worry, concern of unpleasant comment or 'the look'".

A key aspect of inclusion is ensuring that people feel safe in all spaces. Inclusion guarantees that everyone has equal opportunities and is not restricted based on their identity or abilities.

### 5.1.2 Belonging & Acceptance

At its core, inclusion is about making people feel that they belong socially and in place and space. The micro-interactions (through greetings or being named) in shops or on the street can help people feel they belong and are accepted. Feeling welcome can be both an intentional effort and a natural process.

"Feel welcome, being made to feel welcome…passive and active."

Inclusion is not just about being present in a space but about feeling valued and accepted for who you are. Belonging means being seen, heard, and embraced without needing to conform to a single ideal. As such, genuine inclusion allows people to be accepted in their entirety, even when their views or identities differ from the majority.

*"Being accepted for who I am and everything that I might bring with that, even if that includes differences or contradictory views, and being valued for that."*

Inclusion fosters meaningful connections and relationships where differences are respected and celebrated. Inclusion also creates environments where people of different backgrounds can connect and interact in a friendly and meaningful way. This means going be beyond tolerance to embrace genuine acceptance. A sense of belonging can be as simple as being naturally invited into shared moments with others.

*"Less about tolerance and more about acceptance. These are very different things."*

*"Being part of a family. Being invited in and just being in… when all the, you know, the family photos were getting taken, they were like, 'come on in'."*

## 5.1.3 Structural & Systemic Inclusion

Inclusion is not just a personal attitude—it must be embedded in structures, policies, and institutions. Ensuring inclusion requires systemic change, from representation in leadership to designing accessible public spaces and services. Institutions and companies must take responsibility for protecting, respecting, and accommodating diverse needs rather than placing the burden on marginalized groups to advocate for themselves. Meaningful representation requires decision-makers to reflect the experiences of diverse communities and educators to step up to ensure inclusion in embedded in education programmes.

The design of transportation systems is crucial to inclusion, as they can create feelings of vulnerability and entrapment. Companies and service providers must take responsibility for ensuring safety and accessibility in public spaces

*"Transportation is important because you are in a confined space and if anything, horrible happens that you are trapped. Don't feel safe and you are not supported…Transportation companies have a responsibility of protection and ensuring safe and comfortable places."*

*"Education…but it shouldn't be the role of the people with lived experience. And people can resist education and feel resentment and then there could be a backlash."*

### 5.1.4 Emotional & Social Well-being

A truly inclusive environment does not just provide access—it nurtures emotional and social well-being. Inclusion ensures that diverse people feel safe, empowered, and supported in expressing their identity and needs, without feeling as if they are a burden or as if they are 'in the way'. It also recognizes the importance of human connection and the need for environments that allow people to interact at a pace that suits them, rather than forcing them to fit a predefined mould. For example, spaces should be designed to allow people to engage at a pace that suits them rather than being dictated by the majority.

"Being at a pace that works for all: when I used to help my mum with her shopping at Sainsbury's and she'd use a wheelchair and it very much kind of shaped the pace at which you went round the shop, and it made you incredibly conscious of the speed at which everybody else was going."

Communication must be adaptable and inclusive so that different needs are naturally accommodated. Good communication formats and mediums can help build relationships across differences, and this is a key part of inclusion.

## 5.2 Understanding the complexity & contradictions of inclusion

Inclusion is often seen as an unambiguously positive goal, but in reality, it is a nuanced and sometimes paradoxical concept. Striving for inclusivity can occasionally lead to necessary exclusions, raise questions about conformity, and challenge common social expectations. True inclusion requires an ongoing negotiation between ensuring safety and empowerment for marginalized groups while also avoiding creating new forms of exclusion.

### 5.2.1 Inclusion Sometimes Requires Exclusion

One of the more challenging aspects of inclusion is that achieving it sometimes necessitates setting boundaries. Safe spaces for marginalized communities—such as LGBTQ+ spaces, disability groups, or women-only environments—can be essential for fostering inclusion, even though they inherently exclude others:

"Achieving inclusion can mean mandating exclusion (e.g., CIS men, some occupations e.g., army, police). This is where inclusion and exclusion sometimes meets."

This acknowledges that some groups, particularly those historically associated with oppression or power imbalances, may need to be excluded from certain spaces to create environments where vulnerable communities feel safe and supported. While this can be viewed as a contradiction, it is a necessary part of ensuring equity, pointing to the duality of inclusive and exclusive places and spaces. This means that even spaces designed to be inclusive can, in practice, exclude certain people. The way spaces are used, who dominates them, and the underlying social norms all influence whether they truly foster inclusion.

> "Inclusionary places can also be exclusionary depending on who is using them and how they are being used."

For example, a public park may be theoretically inclusive to all, but if it is dominated by a particular group (e.g. drug users, young people, dog walkers) that may make others feel unwelcome, it can become de facto exclusionary. Similarly, workplace diversity programs may promote inclusivity but could unintentionally alienate those who feel their views or identities are not represented. This highlights the need for constant reflection and adaptation to ensure spaces remain truly inclusive.

## 5.2.2 The Tension Between Inclusion and Conformity

A common assumption is that inclusion means everyone fitting together seamlessly, like pieces of a puzzle. However, this idea raises important questions about conformity and whose standards people are expected to fit into. The analogy of a jigsaw puzzle captured this:

> "Inclusion means that everything fits together and then when that happens, clarity happens. But that implies a high degree of conformity and rules. Begs the question: who are we conforming to? I prefer the jumble of (jigsaw) pieces rather than the picture of uniformity."

This suggests that inclusion should not mean forcing people to conform to a single, predefined way of being, but rather embracing a more fluid, diverse, and even messy reality where different ways of existing coexist without being forced into rigid structures.

## 5.2.3 Challenging Stereotypes and Social Norms

Inclusion also involves proactively challenging dominant narratives and societal expectations. Many of the traditional ways society organizes itself can be exclusionary, reinforcing privilege and magnifying marginalization. There is a need for disrupting common ideas or tropes:

"Inclusion is about opening doors that maybe shouldn't be closed."

This requires questioning not just who is included, but how they are included. Are people welcomed as they are, or are they expected to change to fit a pre-existing norm? Genuine inclusion must go beyond surface-level representation and actively challenge exclusionary practices embedded in society.

## 5.2.4 A Shift from Deficit-Based Thinking to Celebration

A common pitfall in discussions about inclusion is framing marginalized groups in terms of what they lack rather than what they contribute. This "discourse of deficit" focuses on barriers and struggles rather than strengths and achievements. Given this, it is important to embrace an asset based, empowering and human rights approach.

"Important to have a celebratory perspective to avoid assuming a discourse of deficit. Also look at the achievements and contributions people make."
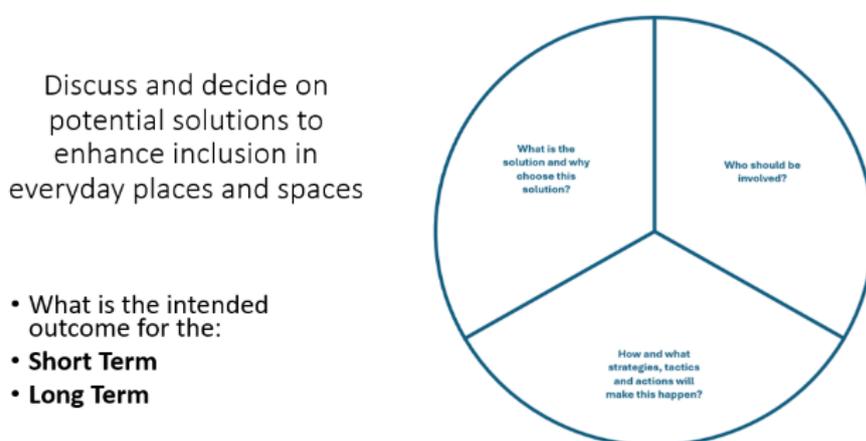
Instead of viewing inclusion as merely accommodating those who have been excluded, a more empowering approach recognizes the unique value that diverse people with different circumstances, identities and experiences bring to their communities. This shift is essential in moving from passive inclusion to active appreciation and also to proactive integration.

The complexity and contradictions of inclusion remind us that it is not a 'one-size-fits-all' concept. Ensuring inclusivity often requires difficult decisions about exclusion, a willingness to challenge dominant norms, and an openness to non-traditional ways of structuring our places, spaces and communities. True inclusion must be dynamic, proactive, and rooted in a deep understanding of social power dynamics, rather than simply assuming that more diversity automatically leads to equality. By acknowledging and addressing these contradictions, we can work towards a more meaningful and effective form of inclusion. Building relationships across differences is a key part of inclusion.

# 6. Ways Forward to Enhance Inclusion for Older People Who Are LGBT+ or Older People with Learning Disabilities

Analysis of the workshop deliberations suggest a range of potential solutions to enhance inclusion in everyday places and spaces, how to achieve success and who are the responsible parties, using the visioning circle (Figure 3):

*Figure 3: Visioning Circle*

Discuss and decide on potential solutions to enhance inclusion in everyday places and spaces

- What is the intended outcome for the:
- **Short Term**
- **Long Term**

What is the solution and why choose this solution?

Who should be involved?

How and what strategies, tactics and actions will make this happen?

IncludeAge *Inclusion of diverse older people in community and public places and virtual spaces*

## 6.1 Understand Individual and Group Perspectives

- o Identify their specific needs and priorities through direct engagement.
- o Conduct focus groups and one-on-one interviews to gain deeper insights.
- o Partner with local LGBT+ and disability advocacy organizations to ensure representation.
- o Provide platforms for their voices to be heard, ensuring they are central to decision-making.

*Who should be involved:*
Community organizations, advocacy groups, researchers, and policymakers.

## 6.2 Listen and Engage in Genuine Community Consultation

- o Ensure that consultation efforts are meaningful and accompanied by allocated resources.
- o Example: The Maxwell Centre's work on a community bandstand illustrates how community-led initiatives can bring tangible benefits.
- o Implement long-term consultation mechanisms rather than one-off engagements.
- o Encourage intergenerational solutions that foster mutual understanding and solidarity.

*Who should be involved:*
Local government, community leaders, urban planners, and grassroots organizations.

## 6.3 Create Spaces for Storytelling and Experience Sharing

- o Establish safe environments where individuals can share their experiences and perspectives.
- o Organize community events, digital storytelling projects, and publications where individuals can share their experiences.
- o Recognize and validate their lived experiences as essential contributions to policy and social change.

*Who should be involved:*
Cultural institutions, media organizations, educators, and community centres.

## 6.4 Avoid Assumptions and Judgment

- o Respect diverse relationships, identities, and personal histories.
- o Reduce the need for individuals to constantly explain or justify their identities and experiences.
- o Train professionals and community members to recognize and challenge their own biases.

*Who should be involved:*
Healthcare professionals, educators, legal advocates, and social workers.

## 6.5 Implement Positive and Inclusive Education

- o Develop educational programs that emphasize commonalities rather than differences.
- o Prevent the reinforcement of stereotypes or resentment by promoting mutual respect.
- o Incorporate anti-discrimination and inclusivity education in schools and workplaces.
- o Work with the media to ensure positive representation of diverse identities.

*Who should be involved:*

Schools, universities, employers, training organizations, and media professionals.

## 6.6 Incentivize Social and Societal Change

- o Recognize that change is often resisted and find ways to make inclusion beneficial for all.
- o Encourage policies and community initiatives that create a more accepting and supportive society.
- o Provide financial or social incentives to encourage businesses and services to adopt inclusive practices.

*Who should be involved:*

Business leaders, economic policymakers, nonprofits, and government agencies.

## 6.7 Plan to Counter Backlash and Support Community Networks

- o Anticipate resistance to inclusion efforts and develop proactive strategies to address opposition
- o Ensure that support systems are in place for those affected by discrimination or exclusion.
- o Engage policymakers and community leaders in proactive advocacy and protection measures.
- o Set up dedicated helplines and community support groups.
- o Provide legal and psychological assistance for those facing discrimination or exclusion.
- o Encourage peer-support networks to foster connections and solidarity.

*Who should be involved:*

Lawmakers, human rights organizations, advocacy groups, and legal professionals.

## 6.8 Challenge Ignorance and Misinformation

- o Address misconceptions through awareness campaigns, training, and advocacy.
- o Engage media and influential figures in promoting positive representations.
- o Develop community education initiatives that challenge stereotypes and promote acceptance.

*Who should be involved:*
Journalists, social media influencers, educational institutions, and public relations specialists.

## 6.9 Reduce Communication Barriers

- o Ensure accessibility of information and services for individuals with different communication needs.
- o Implement inclusive language and formats that consider diverse abilities and identities.
- o Ensure information and services are available in multiple formats (e.g., braille, large print, easy-read versions).
- o Develop digital platforms that are user-friendly for individuals with varying abilities.

*Who should be involved:*
Technology developers, accessibility experts, government agencies, and communication specialists.

# 7. Final comment

The concept of inclusion is complex and nuanced and people's concepts of inclusion vary. However, there is a core of human rights thinking that runs through all identified concepts of inclusion from workshop participants. Workshop participants were also able to articulate a series of potential actions to improve inclusion. By prioritizing these actions and approaches, and ensuring the involvement of appropriate stakeholders, work towards more inclusive communities, places and spaces can begin. These are where older LGBT+ people and older people with learning disabilities can live with dignity, respect, and full participation.