

Retirement estates a safe and attractive option – highlighted by the current pandemic



While the coronavirus has seen many of us reassessing our pre-pandemic lifestyle and priorities there is perhaps no group for whom that is more true than the retired generation.

The enforced seclusion of the past months, along with the government's classification of the over 70's as 'clinically vulnerable', has resulted in a something of a reassessment and a new air of caution is particularly prevalent among this age group.

Cognatum has seen a huge spike in enquiries, understandably many from older children looking to move their parents and grandparents closer, but the number of retirees at the younger end of the spectrum investigating life on a managed estate is also steadily climbing above the norm.

"We see people looking to continue to lead their own lives, and are fiercely protective of their independence, but are also now looking for an element of reassurance", says John Lavin of Cognatum.

"It seems that Coronavirus has changed the way the retired perceive themselves. Prior to the pandemic, seventy was considered the new fifty. Now anybody over seventy has had to come to terms with the fact that the pandemic does have a disproportionate impact on the health of the over 70s."

"The easing of the lockdown is allowing much of the population more freedom, but some of the older generation may continue to feel unsafe until there is a vaccine or a cure. And of course, this is the generation who invented rock and roll – never has there been a group of more reluctant 'old people'."

As Coronavirus took hold in the UK, Cognatum swung into action. There are a number of communal spaces and facilities such as swimming pools across their portfolio of estates which were closed prior to lockdown, and all but essential maintenance was suspended, including window cleaning. Whilst a full estate management service was maintained, other facilities such as guest suites and the estate office were closed.

The cleaning regimes were upped and although estate managers were no longer going into individual properties, every resident was contacted and new ways of keeping in frequent contact were implemented, to suit the preferences and choices of individual owners.

"It was essential to us that no-one felt left alone" Lavin continues, "and our estate staff are absolutely key to that". Through ARHM and RHG, Cognatum was instrumental in lobbying the minister for care for recognition that those working in retirement housing were indeed essential workers, and they were recognised as such in early April.

"While the set office hours may not have been in place, estate managers were always available to residents by phone or email. They continued to maintain the grounds and carry out the daily walks and checks so they were very visible around the estate which many of our residents found reassuring."

"Even for those residents who were not particularly alarmed by the pandemic, the regular sight of the estate managers did a great deal to stave of feelings of loneliness and isolation. The extensive gardens and grounds remained open at all times for residents to enjoy, allowing not only exercise but contact with their friends and neighbours appropriately socially distanced."

As some level of normality returns, the pressing concern for Lavin is ensuring that this 'newly vulnerable' generation aren't left behind.

"While some residents are desperately keen to return to a more familiar, pre-pandemic way of life, there are many others who are concerned by the prospect. The government is still advising the over 70s to take particular care to minimise contact with those outside their households. So the question becomes how to avoid effectively a two tier system, with the vulnerable or concerned left behind."

"We acknowledged early on that loneliness was a potential problem amongst residents. For so many technology was obviously proving the answer and we have many tech-savvy residents – indeed one of our estates had moved their Pilates class entirely online within a fortnight of lockdown. For those who were less confident we connected them with those who could help them stay in touch with loved ones. This is a legacy that I'm sure will pay dividends."

"All our estates are close to either a village or town, and were part of the local community prior to the pandemic. Many residents are on local committees, and use local facilities and services, so connections already existed. These have been cemented in recent months to the benefit of all involved, and will continue to be vital for the weeks and months ahead."

Retirement estates with not only excellent hygiene protocols but also a concern for wellbeing have become safe and reassuring places to be, offering peace of mind for residents and their families alike. At the time of writing, the confirmed cases among Cognatum's some 3000 residents number less than 10.

John Lavin says, *"As the UK's population continues to age, where and how people live in later life is a growing challenge; the current pandemic has highlighted the system's terrible inadequacies. Is it time that the Government looked at the examples set by retirement estates and villages as a blueprint for housing an ageing population?"*

Cognatum has over 60 retirement estates across central and southern England. All are in prime locations within vibrant market towns or villages, within walking distance of shops and restaurants. Each estate benefits from thoughtful architecture, landscaped grounds, and a dedicated estate manager.

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