

Buying on a retirement estate as a couple

The demographics of retirement living are changing. Historically, widowhood was most likely to be the trigger to buying on a retirement estate; but today, Cognatum reports that new purchasers of their properties are as likely to be couples as singles.

John Lavin of Cognatum says, *“There’s a growing trend for couples to make the move to a retirement estate while they are still relatively young. They are reassured by the fact they can make the move together, allowing them to settle into a new home, and a new location. This is in many ways unsurprising, as the concept of retirement has changed over recent years. Now it is about having time to enjoy a life free of day to day career and family obligations; and it makes sense to enjoy that time as a couple.*

“However, making the decision to move is only the first step. One partner may have a greater desire to move than the other, one partner may not feel ready to downsize or move into an environment they consider to be for the ‘elderly’, or there may be disagreement about where and what they are looking for.

“While the good sense of a move is generally clear, it’s easy to find reasons to delay. The best thing couples can do is to keep an open mind and look at as many different options as possible, ahead of making a move. The trigger to make the move can come suddenly, and as in many situations the more informed you are the better. The internet should be used as a starting point only – try not to conduct your investigations from an armchair, only by getting out to see places will you get a proper picture. The feel of a place, and the atmosphere are as important as the square footage and the facilities.

“It’s sometimes the case that the older partner will be the main driver of the idea to move to a retirement property, possibly following a health scare. Their main concern is to protect their partner – from the difficulties of running an existing property without help, from not having enough support, or from having to make a move on their own should they become widowed – loneliness can be a big fear. There is mutual comfort in knowing that both partners are settled, hopefully both for the long term, but there is an added layer of reassurance and security if not.

“The word ‘community’ can be off-putting for some independent souls, but in retirement, when there are more hours of the day for leisure, a community that includes like-minded people can be a big positive, especially when couples have been used to spending the working day with other people. That’s why the demographic and atmosphere of a retirement community is so important. Go to lengths to discover what kind of lifestyle the other owners enjoy – if you have similar interests and view of life, a community is a wonderful thing. It is of course important that you establish that both partners will be happily occupied.

“One of the main issues around moving to dedicated retirement housing is that properties can be rather small, but times are changing, and developers have started to build bigger homes – indeed in some parts of the industry the focus has always been on good sized properties, smaller versions of traditional family homes. When one partner’s reluctance is around issues of space, make sure you filter out properties that are going to feel cramped before viewing. Don’t pay too much attention to number of rooms, concentrate on square footage. Many retirement properties have fewer bedrooms but plenty of space. The main objective is to ensure you’re not going to be living on top of each other – independent space in retirement is vital.

“Moving from a house to an apartment can be challenging, especially if partners are used to having their own space. In retirement this becomes more important than ever. Look for properties that have can make good use of the space, either by being flexible or with clever lateral layout – a large landing can easily become a study for example.

“Gardens in retirement properties can often be compact, so if outside space is important to you, a solution is to seek out retirement estates that have extensive communal grounds. The benefits of having gardens that aren’t exclusive to you are huge: they will be well kept, but you won’t be responsible for the work! They are often a great place to socialise with other owners too. Some will have allotment space which is perfect if you still want to be kept busy outside.

“The key to success in moving to a retirement property is that both partners are able to have what makes them happy; be that easy access to a golf course, a nearby amateur dramatics society, or good walking and pubs. Neither partner should feel that they are making too much of a sacrifice, although compromise is always inevitable. The most important thing is to choose a home that allows you both the lifestyle you want to enjoy.

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Case Study

Roy and Marion Coates are in their 80s, and moved to the Cognatum retirement estate, The Playing Close, in Charlbury in 1998 when they were in their 60s.

The Playing Close was still being built, but they were impressed by the plans and attracted by the location within a friendly small town with good communication links.

Roy liked the idea that the property was set over three storeys that would give each of them their own space. He was worried about moving to a property that felt much smaller than their existing home. Marion was attracted by the local community and the ambience of the town. Both were excited by the adjacency of Oxford with all its cultural and historic associations.

They recognised that as they got older, other benefits of living on a retirement estate would start to become more important, and now appreciate that they aren't responsible for the maintenance of the property, and don't have to worry about a large garden. Both are relieved that they are in a good place to deal with the difficulties should one or the other become ill or less physically able.

In the meantime, they continue to play an active part in the local community, including the forming of a U3A group, an Oxfordshire based botany group (the Wychwood Project), and Oxford Art Weeks. They have space for family and friends, and the added bonus of the communal swimming pool on the estate.

Roy and Marion Coates are happy to discuss their story. Please contact Amanda MacCaw, 01386 700068 / 07977 238175, to arrange an interview.

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Cognatum has 60 retirement estates in 21 counties across central and southern England, a total of 928 retirement homes. 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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Editor's Notes: Case studies of retirement home residents can often be found. Contact Amanda MacCaw in the first instance.