

Are we forgetting something?

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Nick Sanderson considers a neglected area of the housing market

It is well documented that the UK is in the midst of a housing crisis. Not a day goes by when there isn't a news item about the pressure on an already-creaking national housing system.

For too long the focus has been on the wrong end of the market. A Housing Learning and Improvement Network report, [Viewpoint on Downsizing for older people into Specialist Accommodation](#), shows that 37% of all UK homes are thought to be underoccupied, of which half house those aged 50 to 69. Despite the fact that 58% of those aged over 60 are actively looking to downsize, as stated in the Demos report [The Top of the Ladder](#), the housing market continues to be flooded with initiatives for first-time buyers rather than providing incentives and high-quality housing for older generations. That's not to say it should be a case of 'either/or?', but the other factor at play here is the increasingly ageing population.

Over-65s are expected to be the fastest-growing age group by far in all regions of England: the [Office for National Statistics' long-term projections](#) show the number of people over the age of 90 passing 500,000 in England in 2017 and reaching 1 million between 2033 and 2034.

A gap in the market

The supply of high-quality retirement housing is not keeping up with demand. The growth potential for the retirement village sector is huge, and enabling older people to move into appropriate housing will free homes for others, creating vital movement in the property market.

In the 1980s, I founded and ran Beaumont Healthcare with Dr Andrew MacDonald. We would talk about the appalling housing options available for people in later life, many of whom were his patients, and in 1986 that led to the development of close care housing that offered independent living to older people in their own homes, adjacent to a Beaumont care home.

Despite this step forward, it became increasingly apparent that there remained a significant gap in the market offering this style of living for older generations. The care home model was becoming increasingly redundant, except for the few who had a high level of dependency. Those aged over 55 wanted to live in their own homes while being safe in the knowledge that extra support could be made available easily.

In 1991 Beaumont was acquired by AXA PPP, but it was from this model and an understanding of the growing market need that Audley Retirement Villages was born. The villages offer aspirational and luxurious living for older people, allowing owners to live in their own homes, in control of their independence and the lifestyle that they are used to, with flexible care and support on site as needed.

The current situation

It is 15 years since we welcomed the first owners to our first village, [Audley Willicombe Park](#) in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. Audley Retirement Homes now has significant backing from major investors around the world, and it is evident that the demand for providing this high-quality housing is only set to grow, providing future opportunities for investors and developers alike.

As a result of this growing demand, more units and new villages are being developed and the model expanded to a broader demographic, which included the launch of [Mayfield Villages](#) in April 2016. Mayfield properties are the result of extensive research to determine the potential for contemporary, mainstream retirement accommodation across the whole market. They respond to the needs of those who wish to continue their current lifestyles in modern, attractive and secure environments. Properties include 1-bed units and 2-bedroom apartments, with starting prices at ?200,000.

Today, Audley has a portfolio of 12 retirement villages across the country and manages 2 others, providing more than 1,000 properties across several regions. Over the coming 5 years, it plans to double this number by developing its current villages and acquiring new sites in prime locations such as London and the Home Counties.

In the past few months, new owners have been welcomed to [Audley Chalfont Dene](#) in Buckinghamshire and properties are now available at [Audley Ellerslie](#) in Great Malvern, Worcestershire, while construction is due to reach key stages at several other villages this year. A new scheme in [Englefield Green](#), Surrey is expected to open in early 2019.

Comprising luxury apartments, penthouses, cottages and houses, each village offers a mixture of 1-, 2- and 3-bedroom properties for those looking to downsize from larger family homes. At the hub of each village is the Audley Club; these buildings are often restored Tudor halls, Georgian mansions or Victorian villas, and include luxury facilities such as a gym, spa, bar and restaurant, which are open to all the owners as well as the local community.

This helps to reinforce the sense of community in the villages, integrates them with their surrounding areas and reduces the feelings of isolation that can too often be associated with older age.

The right way forward

The [All-Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People](#) has called for greater incentives for the 8 million people aged over 60 who are reportedly interested in downsizing. Help-to-buy assistance for older buyers, exempting them from stamp duty when moving to a smaller property and encouraging councils to ensure that local plans give priority to their needs are some of the proposed reforms. While these are promising signs, the fact remains that the level of choice of suitable housing for those aged over 65 must be improved.

Research by the [International Longevity Centre \(ILC\) UK](#) found that communal living in retirement villages can significantly reduce the risk of social isolation among those who live there, as nearly two-thirds of respondents were classified as not feeling at all lonely. Continued investment in preventing loneliness through better options for retirement village properties will improve older people's quality of life and support the struggling NHS.

The ILC research also found that accommodation that enables independent living yet offers flexible care is associated with a lower uptake of inpatient hospital beds. A [study by the](#)

[University of York](#) has highlighted the fact that increased loneliness and social isolation can have a significant impact on people's physical wellbeing and mental health, including heightening the risk of heart attacks and stroke, and increasing blood pressure.

Ultimately, it is essential that people can enjoy retirement on their own terms and that there are appropriate property choices to enable this. The benefits of this model are clear. It is now time for the government and the rest of the property sector to help turn the spotlight on the right area.

Nick Sanderson is CEO of [Audley Retirement Villages](#)

Further information

- Related competencies include [Housing management and policy](#) , [Housing strategy and provision](#) , [Land use and diversification](#) , [Planning](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Property journal* (September/October 2016)