

Finding the right retirement housing for you

Whether you are looking to buy or to rent, moving from your current home is a big decision. If you are considering a form of retirement housing then the various terms that get used can be confusing. This guide aims to explain the different types of retirement housing that might be available to you and what your purchase or rent options might be.

The different types of retirement housing

There are four main different types of retirement housing:

1) Age exclusive housing

These are schemes or developments that cater exclusively for older people. They usually incorporate design features helpful to older people, and may have communal facilities such as a residents' lounge, guest suite and shared garden, but do not provide any regular on-site support to residents. The likely form of assistance present is an alarm system in the property to allow for help to be called in the event of a fall or sudden illness.

2) Housing with support (sheltered)

This is perhaps what most people will think of when they imagine retirement housing. These are developments of typically between 20 and 80 properties where residents have their own self-contained property and access to communal facilities and services, in the same way that residents of age-exclusive properties do.

In addition to an alarm system, many schemes also have their own 'manager' or 'warden', either living on-site or nearby. Their job is to manage the scheme and liaise with residents to resolve any concerns they might have. They can also act as an emergency contact in the event of a fall or illness.

3) Housing with Care (Extra Care)

Extra Care Housing is housing designed with the needs of frailer older people in mind and with varying levels of care and support available on site. People who live in Extra Care Housing have their own self contained homes, their own front doors and a legal right to occupy the property.

Extra Care Housing is also known as very sheltered housing, assisted living, or simply as 'housing with care'. It comes in many built forms, including blocks of

flats, bungalow estates and retirement villages. It is a popular choice among older people because it can sometimes provide an alternative to a care home.

As well as on-site care and support services being available 24 hours a day, there is also usually a restaurant or cafe serving meals throughout the course of the day. It is also common for residents to benefit from on-site leisure facilities such as gyms or hobby rooms.

These developments can vary in size from anywhere between 20 units to 200, which is why some sites can be referred to as a ‘retirement village’ or ‘retirement community’.

4) Close Care housing

Close Care schemes are a relatively new concept and consist of independent flats or bungalows built on the same site as a care home. Residents often have some services (such as cleaning) included in their service charge and other services can be purchased from the care home.

Questions to ask when viewing a retirement property

We have set out the most universal characteristics of the above specialist housing models but there is some variation between schemes and it is

therefore worth raising the following points when you go to visit a property that is for sale:

Pets – Are you able to bring a pet with you or have a new pet? Some schemes have a limit on the size or number of pets and may have a policy that pets are not to be replaced.

Transport – Are there good public transport links to nearby towns or cities? If you have a car, will you have a parking space close to your home? If you use a mobility scooter is there somewhere for you to store it and charge it?

Social activities – Are there accessible communal areas where you can socialise with other residents and visitors? Are there regular events and activities arranged through the management and residents?

Food & drink – Is there a restaurant or café on-site for the benefit of residents and their guests? If so you may wish to have a meal there to ensure that you are happy with the quality of the food provided.

Neighbours – Are you able to meet some of your neighbours? A problem neighbour can make your home life difficult, a good relationship is therefore important.

Guests – Are you allowed to have visitors to stay? If so, for how long? If you do not have enough bedrooms, is there a guest bedroom on-site that can be booked?

Management – A good on-site manager can greatly enhance the quality of a retirement housing scheme, take some time to talk to the manager and decide whether or not you find them easily approachable and understanding.

Your home – It is important to consider your needs now, but also in the future when your mobility may become more limited. Is the property easily accessible? If you needed to adapt the property, would you be allowed to make these improvements? Is there a garden that you are able to use and is this private or communal?

Location – Is the scheme on a busy road which may dissuade you from going out? Are you close to local shops, the post office, pubs and restaurants?

Care – Even if you do not need care at the time of buying, it is important to ask about whether you are able to receive carer visits in your home. Some retirement schemes will have terms in the lease that will require you to leave if you need a high level of care or have a diagnosis of a certain condition, such as dementia.

Financing (rent) - What is the total cost to live in the property? If you are renting are there any costs in addition to the rent? Are you responsible for paying your own council tax, TV licence and water bills? Is the rent likely to increase in the coming years? If so, by how much?

Finance - (purchase) If you are purchasing a property, what are the costs of the service charges and ground rent? How frequently can these prices be increased and by how much? Is there a fee you need to pay when the property is sold? If so, how much is it and what is it used for? Also, are there any administration costs you have to pay if you want to make any home improvements or let the property out?

Tenure options

Depending on whether you want to purchase or rent a retirement property, there are different options available to you:

Buying a retirement property

There are three main options available:

Leasehold ownership: The most common form of ownership for retirement properties. As a leaseholder you will be given a lease that gives you the legal right to occupy the property for

a period of time, for new-build properties lease lengths tend to be either 125 years or 999 years. During this time you have the right to occupy the property but also the responsibility to maintain it internally and make any financial contributions set out in your lease.

Shared ownership: A fairly recent model of ownership whereby you purchase only a share (between 25% and 75%) of the property and pay rent on the remaining portion. Your landlord/freeholder is typically a housing association and therefore the rent is intended to be affordable.

Leasehold Scheme for the Elderly (LSE): Only a few freeholders offer this model of affordable home ownership. LSE allows you to buy a retirement property on a leasehold basis for 70% of its value. You do not have to pay rent on the remaining 30%.

When you come to sell the property you will receive 70% of the value back. For all other purposes you are treated as a standard leaseholder.

Resales vs New Build

When searching for a retirement property to buy, it is likely you will see newly built homes as well as those that are being sold on by a former owner. If

you are buying a new build then it is likely you will deal directly with the marketing team for the scheme, rather than estate agents who are more likely to handle resales.

If you are considering buying a resale then it is important to know who is in charge of the sale and ensure that they have the most up-to-date information. In some cases it will be the managing agents, but in many cases estate agents are used to sell retirement properties.

Some of the advantages to buying a newly built property are that you will have a full length lease and all facilities and appliances are likely to be brand new.

Whilst resale properties may also have a full length lease, you will need to examine the lease itself to identify the current time remaining. You may also find that resale properties, in return for a potentially reduced lease length and a previously lived-in home, will be of a lower cost than new-builds of a similar standard in the same area.

Renting a retirement property

There are three main options available:

Renting from a social landlord: The majority of all retirement housing is to rent and the vast majority of these properties are managed by local councils

and housing associations, also known as social landlords. Contact your council in the first instance to enquire about joining their housing register or choice-based lettings system to be considered for a retirement housing vacancy.

Most councils and housing associations will offer housing to those in greatest housing need first. This means that if you are a homeowner or considered to be adequately housed, you may not be treated as a priority for housing.

Rents are intended to be affordable and can typically be covered through Housing Benefit if necessary.

Renting from a private landlord: As well as a handful of private companies that let retirement housing on a private basis, there are many owners of such properties who let their properties to generate an income. You may wish to make enquiries with local lettings agents about any rental vacancies in nearby retirement housing schemes.

When renting privately pay close attention to the type of tenancy you receive. An Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST) will give you very limited rights as a tenancy once you are out of your fixed period. An Assured Tenancy on the other hand will give you a significant level of security.

Private rents can be considerable in cost and in the majority of cases you will not be able to cover the cost entirely through Housing Benefit, should this be necessary.

Getting a licence from a charity:

Charitable landlords, often known as 'Almshouses' typically offer licences rather than tenancies to the people that live there. Licences offer less protection than tenancies but as these charities often exist to provide accommodation, they may be less likely to evict their residents than a private landlord.

The cost of renting from a charity is usually affordable, although some higher-end developments can have a greater monthly cost that may make it unaffordable to some.

Finding retirement accommodation

To understand what retirement living is like, you may wish to visit a number of developments to ensure that the lifestyle is right for you.

You may find that there is a new development near you that has recently opened and has properties for sale. They are likely to have a marketing team that can show you around the site and answer any questions you may have about life in such a community.

As well as new sites, there are likely to be a number of older developments that will have properties being sold on (known as a 'resale'). If you are looking to buy a property and your budget does not extend to the new-build, higher end, properties, then you may wish to look into resale properties in older sites as you may find these are more affordable.

It is easy to find information on retirement developments across the UK by using the www.housingcare.org website - a directory of almost 25,000 schemes across the country. You can use the search function to filter by developments that have properties to purchase or rent and those that have on-site care services as well as those that are more focused on independent living.