Four contrasting experiences of life in a purpose-built retirement village

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Introduction

The marketing materials for purpose-built retirement communities emphasise their leisure, social and supportive aspects. However, there are relatively few studies in the UK that explore what everyday life is like for people living in such environments, particularly once they have had time to settle in and potentially create new lifestyles for themselves.

Denham Garden Village (DGV) is a purpose-built retirement community in Buckinghamshire. It comprises 326 mixed-tenure apartments, bungalows and houses. Facilities include a café bar, Medical Centre, and gym. This poster draws on data from 20 qualitative interviews conducted with DGV residents as part of a mixed method PhD study. The lifestyles and attitudes of four of these residents are used to illustrate their contrasting experiences of life in DGV. All resident names used are pseudonyms.

“I’m an extrovert, I like to show off”

Ed Heath, 75

- Lives with partner
- Lived in DGV for 15 years
- Renting property

Ed’s life was mostly organised around helping other residents (e.g. driving them to hospital appointments). Despite describing himself as an extrovert, Ed did not feel that he had friends in the village. He tended to distance himself from other residents:

“I treat everybody as a friend... but they’re not close friends. I’m not a great lover of old people... socially I would like to be with younger people.”

Ed did not take part in any organised activities at DGV, but he recognised that the facilities did have an impact on his life:

“I walk up the hill and I’m in the gym. If I had to get into a car and drive three miles down the road I don’t think I’d be quite so responsive.”

The main issue that Ed felt was having a negative impact on his life was his financial situation:

“I struggle now financially... I used to go all over the world for my holidays, I can’t afford it now... I can’t eat out as I used to.”

“I’m quite a happy person... I’m pretty easygoing”

Judy Mills, 72

- Lives alone
- Lived in DGV for 4 years
- Owns property

Judy talked about how she had two typical days: one where she was out with friends or family; and one when she was at home all day - staying in her pyjamas sometimes until lunchtime. Since moving to the village Judy had started walking more and catching the bus rather than going out in her car. She found it easy to join in with village life and felt that her social life had changed:

“I used to see my neighbours from time to time... but we didn’t really socialise, whereas here [in DGV] I socialise with people a lot more... I always attend any meeting that we have here, because I like to be part of the village... I try to participate in everything that there is”

While Judy felt that she was lucky to live in DGV, she did not feel that her apartment was as private as she would like.

“I’m a bit of a loner, I’m just sort of idle”

Henry Nicholson, 85

- Lives alone
- Lived in DGV for 13 years
- Renting property

Henry depicted his everyday life as comprising walking, drinking, reading and sitting in the sun. He described himself as ‘a bit of a loner’ and did not have any friends:

Henry had limited financial resources. He did not go to the bar in DGV because it was too expensive, and he could not afford to go on holiday.

On one level, Henry’s attachment to the village was fairly weak – he would ‘leave tomorrow’ and move to a warmer climate if he won the lottery. However, he also explained that he felt settled and at home in the village:

“For thirty nine years I was a publican. I moved from pub to pub to pub... So, when you talk of home you feel it’s somewhere where you’re settled for the rest of life. And I’ve never sort of felt that until now.”

“l feel very vulnerable, very small, very, very lonely, very worried”

Enid Foster, 69

- Lives alone
- Lived in DGV for 12 years
- Renting property

Enid’s husband had died very recently. He had required 24-hour support and she had spent the last three years caring for him, only leaving the house briefly once a week:

“My quality of life certainly was nil over the last three years... I was stressed, I was not on my knees, I was on my elbows mentally and physically.”

Enid was obviously still grieving for her husband, and said:

“It’s like you’ve lost half your body...Lost your leg and your arm and half your mind with it”

She was finding it difficult to adjust to a new role, and talked about how visiting the churchyard every day meant that she could still feel like she was doing something for her husband.

Despite describing how difficult the last three years had been, Enid frequently talked about how lucky she was to be living in the village, and commented ‘we’re truly blessed’.

Discussion – types of lifestyle and attitudes

While Judy is, in effect, living the lifestyle of leisure and socialisation portrayed in the brochures for many developments like DGV, Henry’s lifestyle is very solitary.

Ed and, until recently Enid’s, everyday lives were focused around meeting the needs of other people. For Ed this appeared to fulfill a need to be recognised and visible within the community. Enid’s caring role was more private, although her lifestyle was in transition due to her recent bereavement.

Judy and Enid repeatedly stated how lucky they were to be living in DGV. Ed and Henry were generally positive about DGV, but their accounts focused more on ‘acceptance’ because their lives were both compromised by their financial situations.

Conclusions

Past experiences, individual preferences, resources and attitudes, and the built and social environments affect both the experience, and the meaning, of life in a retirement village – Judy found when in sociability, and Henry in being solitary. In addition, residents’ lifestyles and attitudes may change or be in transition. This poster highlights the diverse range of lifestyles residents are living – from stereotypical lifestyles of activity and high social contact, to solitary lifestyles of choice, or because of caring responsibilities.

References

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