

RETIREMENT

**SIT DOWN**  
A clubroom and community area at Austin Heath, Warwick, main and bottom



TONY BUCKINGHAM; PAUL BOX; BEN CONNELL; JOHN LAWRENCE

# On a quest to revive the local community

Far from an elderly enclave, many retirement developments welcome parents, schoolchildren and shoppers, says **Jane Slade**

**W**ith more shops closing than ever and one pub shutting every 12 hours, Britain's high streets are suffering. MPs were warned in May this year that the Post Office network is on the brink of collapse, with more than 2,500 branches facing closure in the next 12 months. A report from industry body National Federation of SubPostmasters found that the resulting loss of services, particularly in rural areas, would have "catastrophic" implications for local communities.

So could retirement villages fill the gap? James Cobb, co-founder of retirement developer Inspired Villages, thinks so. "For us, it's all about having purpose and making sure we fit in," he says. At Leeds village in Kent, the developer has been consulting with locals to work out what the new development can bring to the community. "They are looking forward to having a general store again and have asked if we could consider a post office, which we hope to be able to provide," he says.

Increasingly, retirees themselves are getting involved to help revive their communities. At the Chocolate Quarter, a retirement home near Keynsham in Bristol, locals are drawn to an indoor arcade of shops. A particular magnet is the little convenience store run by volunteers such as Jane Morgan (known as Cherry). Originally from Frome in Somerset, the 82-year-old is one of several

**THE OLD AND THE NEW**  
Cherry Morgan and Elizabeth Hepple at the shop they run, right; the Chocolate Quarter near Bristol, below right; a resident at Elmbridge Village helping a child to read, bottom right

retirees who take it in turns to man the shop, which is open to people who live in the neighbourhood.

It stocks the essentials such as milk, biscuits and tins, as well as wine and tonic water. The former teacher moved into her two-bedroom apartment in the village, run by the St Monica Trust and built on the site of the former Cadbury's Fry chocolate factory, 15 months ago. "We have carers popping in, local workers and mums who drop by after taking their children to school," she adds. "It's a very social history. We have two armchairs so people can sit and chat."

The arcade is a vibrant hub: there is a gym with a swimming pool, hairdressers, and cinema. Elsewhere in the grounds are a pottery, art studio and woodworking studio that are all open to the public. The retirement home also has a pizzeria with a 12-month apprenticeship scheme that is used for monthly visits from those on Bright Sparks, a work experience programme.

Retirees also represent an enthusiastic volunteer workforce that can help in primary schools and hosting parties, festivals and events to bring the whole community together. Residents at McCarthy & Stone's Wingfield Court in Sherborne, Dorset, have been helping children at the local primary school to learn to read.

"Not only are our homeowners helping the children with their literacy skills, but they're also able to impart some of their knowledge and life experiences," says John Tonkiss, the boss of McCarthy & Stone. "It's lovely to see the immediate bonds being



formed between them and the huge benefits it's had for homeowners and children alike."

Having taught literacy for more than 30 years, Jo Vincent, 77, says the scheme is already making a difference after just a year. "Every generation has a different mindset, a different history," he says. "The project opens doors to new opportunities for me to learn from the current generation of young children while teaching them too."

It's good for older people, too: a report by think tank United for All Ages found that children who mix with older people had an improved level of language development, reading and social skills. Wingfield Court's residents now want to extend their relationship with

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the children and are planning other activities including external field trips.

Ben Moir, the deputy head of Longacre School, a co-ed prep school in Guildford, Surrey, has just started getting residents at nearby Elmbridge Village involved, inspired by the Channel 4 series *Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds*, where a nursery was created within a retirement village in Nottingham.

"I was looking at the benefits of mixing our children with the residents," says Moir. "Particularly as some of our children do not have grandparents or live a long way away from them." The idea is that a class of pre-prep children aged between five and seven go to have a lesson with their teacher in the owners' lounge of the village.

"The teachers run a normal lesson and the residents join in," explains Moir. "The children love it and there is now a core of 12 residents, including one who has symptoms of dementia, taking part."

"The liaison officer at the retirement village says the smiles haven't left their faces. Children don't have preconceptions about older people, they are innocent and have no malice or harm. All they talk about is the new friends they have made."

The glitter and paint sessions are currently confined to the school, but



retirees at Elmbridge are now planning to form a joint school and village allotment and getting together for art classes.

Retirement homes are also helping to bring together local communities by hosting events. Inspired Villages put on an *Antiques Roadshow*-style day at several of its schemes this year, where BBC TV presenters, valuers and auctioneers Christina Trevanion and David Harper gave free antiques valuations to residents of the village and the local public. The most recent was at Austin Heath in Warwick.

Anthony King, who visited The Grand Antiques Tour with his wife Diane, was impressed. "The antiques event is a wonderful idea for the com-



munity, mixing together residents and those from the local area," he says. "I can see Austin Heath becoming an important part of the wider community as the public becomes more aware of the village and all it has to offer. I would say it has changed my perception of a retirement village radically too."

Austin Heath residents also supported the annual litter-pick in the nearby village of Heathcote for the second year running, joining schoolchildren and their families and providing equipment to help collect 30 bags of rubbish in two hours.

And residents from Inspired's Great Alne Park, set in 78 areas of rural Warwickshire, have been connecting with their neighbours this summer by challenging the local cricket team to a match. Residents even sponsored the Great Alne Cricket Club team sports kit and after the game, invited everyone back to a barbecue at the village clubhouse, opened earlier this year by BBC *MasterChef* presenter Gregg Wallace.

Perhaps there is a role for the retirement homes being built for the ever-increasing number of pensioners. "We inject life and soul into places that have lost their community hubs," says Cobb.

"Our shops and cafés are becoming the place to read the paper, grab a coffee and have a friendly chat."

