Who says that retirement means disconnecting?

Getting smart online, residents of retirement homes are keeping busy and in touch with their community, writes **Jane Slade**

Just because you're retired, it doesn't mean you should check out. Using the internet is hugely important for accessing services and keeping up with friends and family. But according to the Office for National Statistics, of the 4.8 million people in the UK who have never used the internet, nearly 80 per cent are over the age of 65. Without gaining these online skills, retirees can feel dependent and isolated. Retirement homes are hoping to change this, helping to make residents digitally savvy OAPs, and connecting them with like-minded people as they do at private members' clubs such as Soho House.

Churchill, a retirement house-builder, teamed up with Google to help get its residents connected online. Google reckons its digital training gives older people the opportunity to learn the basics, build their confidence and enjoy the benefits of getting online. Its Digital Garage, which has online courses on everything from machine learning and coding to public speaking, set up new digital workshops and face-to-face training in digital know-how and online networking.

Spencer McCarthy, Churchill's chairman and chief executive, has invited members of the local community to join in these sessions too.

"Since we also know that older people are almost twice as likely to feel isolated or lonely if they are not online, we hope that by inviting local people to come and take part in these sessions we

SHARED SPACE The bistro at Platinum Skies' Chapters development in Salisbury

can help them meet new people as well as developing their skills and confidence," he says.

New retirement homes are being built with meeting rooms and breakout spaces, according to Carsten Swift, from Knight Frank's Senior Living team. This is something you'd expect in an office rather than a retirement home – but there's an important reason for it.

'My friends asked me where I kept going, so now I take them with me, and they join in'

"Networking isn't simply about building friendships between residents, but creating a cooperative skill-sharing environment," says David Hines, chairman of retirement developer Platinum Skies. "People learning about an inter-

esting area of their local history from a fellow well-read resident gives them the chance to share knowledge, be challenged and broaden their horizons in a way that wouldn't necessarily happen in everyday life, as well as simply have a good time together."

Many older people are putting their retirement to good use, such as 80-year-old John Gimson, who is busy working as a volunteer tour guide at Bude Castle, close to his home at PegasusLife's Atlantic Rise development in Bude, Cornwall. He is also a co-founder of the Atlantic Rise Tablet User Group, helping other retirees to navigate their technology.

One homeowner at McCarthy and Stone's Carrick Court scheme near Portsmouth in Hampshire has even inspired her fellow residents to follow her lead quite literally. Bunty Davison, 81, has been a great networker through her connections with the voluntary sector. "Some of my new friends here asked me where I kept going, so I have taken them with me and now they are off joining in things and going on day trips," she says.

Some of her neighbours are using their retirement to take on big challenges. Leslie Scott, 86, project manages the restoration for the United Reform Church in the village of Rowlands Castle, assisted by neighbours Barbara Legg, 73, who helps with the church accounts, and Sylvia Coombs, 80, who does catering and baking for charity church events.

"I feel that the support that I have found from meeting new homeowners who are willing to help and are mentally encouraging and supportive of what I believe in is very comforting," says Scott. "And it's good for me to be involved in something that is an extension of my working life during my time in the Royal Navy."

TABLET TIME A Digital Garage workshop at St Johns Lodge in Timperley