

Commodification of retirement and the emergence of rural gated communities: the associated challenges for rural planning

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This paper combines demographic ageing and retirement lifestyles with rural in-migration processes and suggests the emergence of a specific rural form of gated community; namely, park homes. All year round or permanent (as opposed to seasonal) residential mobile homes (resembling detached bungalows in design and appearance) are commonly referred to as 'park homes'. With a growing proportion of the UK population aged 65 and over, combined with increasing longevity, meeting the residential preferences and lifestyle aspirations of an ageing population is potentially 'big business' for the private sector. Park home living, with their resident age restrictions (normally 50 years and over), is increasingly marketed as a retirement option in rural and coastal locations of the UK. However, many areas are often remote with declining populations and limited community services. Operators have sought to tap into retiree aspirations for a 'place in the country' and 'sell' the concept of park home living as a specific form of housing, community and lifestyle. Park homes are frequently marketed as a means to release equity from the sale of a large family home to fund a retirement lifestyle and as friendly communities of like-minded people, always willing to lend support or provide assistance if required. The physical and social composition of such sites represent a form of rural gated community. This paper seeks to identify the rural planning issues which emerge from such developments and asks: who are moving to park home sites and why? Do park homes provide those who otherwise could not afford a 'place in the country' the option of rural living? Does park home living live-up to residents' expectations of the rural idyll or retirement lifestyle?

Do they give rise to issues of gentrification and geriatrification of the countryside? what are the prospects for residents to 'age in place'? might ageing residents become financially trapped in such developments giving rise to park ghettoization? what are the associated challenges for rural policy-makers and public service providers?