

2012-03-06

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Lorcan Sirr

Technological University Dublin, lorcan.sirr@tudublin.ie

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Recommended Citation

Sirr, L. (2012, March 6) Planning Ahead Takes the Pain Out of Growing Old.p.54. doi:10.21427/kdxe-6h07

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Planning ahead takes pain out of growing old

We shouldn't let the process of ageing take us by surprise

THERE ARE very few certainties in life, but for an increasing number of people, getting old is one of them.

Most babies born in Europe since 2000 will live to celebrate their 100th birthday, and by 2060 more than one in five of Ireland's population will be over the age of 65. This will be just under 1.5 million people. Even sooner, by 2041, those over 80 will number about 450,000.

Changing age profiles bring up all sorts of new housing and community requirements. As those over 70 spend more than 80 per cent of their time at home, housing – both the building and the location – is something that requires careful attention. Where people choose to grow old significantly affects quality of life.

Planning for the aged and ageing is, in fact, planning for society. The physical requirements of the aged are almost identical to those of the young mother with a buggy and, co-incidentally, suit everyone in between. Ramps, easy access to local services and transport are things which make life easier under sometimes trying conditions. When the aged are planned for, so is everyone.

It doesn't work the other way around, however. Planning for developments such as large housing estates for young families, where one or both partners commute to work miles away, is only beneficial to a small proportion of the population.

In 2010, the Ageing Well Network commissioned a nationwide survey of ageing in Ireland. It threw up some interesting facts. For homeowners over 40, there is an 81 per cent probability that the house in which they now live in is the one in which they will end their days. This raises questions – how will this house suit if the occupants are affected by mobility issues, or arthritis, angina or a stroke?

More than 40 per cent of those over the age of 70 have their lives compromised by the location of their homes, half of these severely so. As

people age, the priority of what matters does too. As the importance of money declines, gardens and pets become more important. Friends become more important than family.

Respondents who moved within rural areas often did so because of their reduced mobility, or because they were moving to a nursing home, or over health concerns or the death of a partner.

Respondents who moved within urban areas do so for very different reasons: an increase in anti-social behaviour and a decrease in the quality of their neighbourhood being the main ones. Feeling less safe was also a factor.

There are huge differences in the reasons for moving, and the ones for moving within urban areas are much more easily resolved.

There is another significant, and surprising, difference between the urban and rural dwellers. More than half of urban dwellers cared for somebody else compared with 16 per cent of rural dwellers. This does not suggest that rural dwellers are less caring, merely that it is more difficult for them to care. People who need care may be further away, necessitating the use of a car.

Similarly, just under half of urban respondents said they were cared for by someone else. This dropped to 32 per cent in rural areas, probably for the same reasons.

All these issues have implications for quality of life, for society as a whole. So what can be done to make Ireland a decent place in which to age?

There are two elements to what planning can achieve, the first personal, the second public. On the personal front, planning can make people aware at an early stage that personal choices will have personal outcomes, which can turn into family consequences and ultimately to societal consequences.

It is difficult to encourage those under 40 to consider in detail what this house they're considering purchasing will be like for them at 80. But if planning can even get 10 per cent of people to make informed decisions at an early stage, both in terms of the building and its location, that will be a good start.

Personal planning such as this and the avoidance of ending up with lives compromised as the Ageing Well Network's survey highlighted, has both personal (wellbeing) and societal (mainly financial) benefits. It also means people are happier and live better, more fruitful and enriched lives.

The public system also has a large role to play, mostly through local authorities. It also involves input from other sectors, most notably the Garda Síochána and the public transport providers. For most of us, ageing is a relative certainty, so we shouldn't let it take us by surprise.

Dr Lorcan Sirr and Conor Skehan are lecturers in the College of Engineering and the Built Environment, at Dublin Institute of Technology.

Dr LORCAN SIRR and CONOR SKEHAN
