

Working Paper

Park Home Living in England:
Prospects and Policy Implications

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PARK HOME LIVING IN ENGLAND: PROSPECTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This paper arises from research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council examining the choices and constraints that residents face who live in accommodation defined as non permanent¹

This category includes people living in caravans, mobile homes, converted railway carriages and houseboats (Department for Communities and local Government, 2009a). Households living in non permanent accommodation comprise a very small proportion of the total population in England. The 2001 Census showed that 0.3 per cent of households in 2001 were living in caravans or other mobile temporary structures. The overall project concentrated upon two groups of residents within this category: people who live in park homes and residential boaters. In comparison with research in other countries, very little attention has been paid to the experiences of people living in mobile homes or on residential boats within England (for examples of recent research on mobile homes in Australia and the United States, see Newton, 2008; Salamon and MacTavish, 2006). The research explored the extent to which the types of accommodation in which people were living, as well as the wider settings in which park homes and residential boats were located, affected residents' experiences of their homes.

The working paper focuses upon the role that park homes are playing in local housing markets, especially in terms of meeting the needs and aspirations of older people. However, a significant constraint upon the experiences of some residents within this sector arises from the behaviour of rogue operators (termed unscrupulous park owners), which has ramifications for the sector as a whole. The impact that unscrupulous park owners have on the sector is a continuing focus of policy attention. The policy implications arising from the research are located within the framework of proposed changes to regulatory regimes within the wider housing system.

Structure of the paper

The paper highlights some of the features of the sector and the characteristics of people who live in park homes. This is followed by the methods section, which sets out how park home residents were identified, and provides a profile of the respondents. The paper then describes respondents' motivations and reasons for choosing park homes, and explores their experiences of park home living, including relations with park owners. The paper also illustrates the ongoing problems that some residents face

¹ The author is grateful to the ESRC for funding the research upon which this paper is based (project RES 000-22-2279).

with unscrupulous site owners. The views of the respondents help to inform a consideration of the potential future role of the park home sector, including policy implications.

Background

Previous research has described park homes as set apart from 'normal' housing by their construction, their tenure and their history (Niner and Hedges, 1992, p1). Park homes are a unique form of tenure, relating to the historic links that this form of accommodation has with caravans. They do not count as dwellings under the law, but are classified as chattels. Park homes are excluded from building regulations that apply to bricks and mortar. Instead, park homes have to conform to British Standard 3632 if they are intended for residential occupation, as opposed to holiday use. Visually, modern park homes usually resemble detached bungalows in appearance.

Recent estimates have suggested that approximately about 160,000 people live on about 1950 residential sites in England (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008a). Most residents own their home, but not the land on which their home sits. Instead residents pay a pitch fee to the site owner, which covers the groundrent, maintenance costs of the common areas of the park, and also services provided on the park. The large majority of sites are privately owned but local authorities and housing associations own and run a few sites as well. There is a handful of sites that are owned and run by residents themselves. Park homes are covered by distinct legislation which has evolved primarily to address planning and licensing issues as well as security of tenure for residents. The Mobile Homes Act 1983 extended security of tenure for residents by supplementing the provisions of the Caravan Sites Act 1968. The Mobile Homes Act 1983 was amended subsequently by the Housing Act 2004. The provisions relating to park homes in the latter Act were intended to strengthen residents' rights.

Characteristics of residents

A key characteristic of the park home sector is the age profile of its residents, with the majority of park homes occupied by older people. The 2001 Census does not identify park homes as a distinct category, and instead they are included in the wider grouping of caravans or other mobile temporary structures. Other groups in this Census category could also include Gypsy/Travellers, agricultural workers and residential boaters. Therefore, Census data is only indicative of the situation in park homes. Nevertheless, in 2001 it showed that whilst about 16 per cent of the general population in England in 2001 was aged 65 or over, the proportion of people living in non permanent accommodation that were in this age group was about 32 per cent (Table 1). Thus, although the category of caravans and other mobile or temporary structures constitutes a very small part of the overall housing stock, the Census illustrates the significance of older people within these types of accommodation.

Table 1: Persons in households living in caravans, or other mobile temporary structures by age, England

	Age					Total (%)
	0-15 (%)	16-34 (%)	35-49 (%)	50-64 (%)	65+ (%)	
All people in households living in caravan or other mobile temporary structure	10.3	14.2	14.4	29.1	32.0	100
All people in England	20.4	24.9	21.5	17.6	15.5	100

Source: 2001 Census

¹Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding

It is likely that park homes have had a considerable impact upon the numbers of older people recorded as living within the category of caravans, or other mobile temporary structures in the Census. The trend towards park homes as a housing option for older people has evolved quite rapidly over the last couple of decades. Berkeley Hanover Consulting (2002) highlighted that whilst research in 1992 (Niner and Hedges, 1992) identified that about 55 per cent of park homes were occupied by people aged 60 or over, this proportion had risen to over 68 per cent a decade later. About two thirds of park operators have age restrictions, with the most common minimum age limit being set at 50 or over (Berkeley Hanover Consulting, 2002). Many parks advertise themselves as a retirement lifestyle option, and this selling point is also reflected in the literature on park home living published by the trade bodies and associations.

Whilst the Census can only be indicative of the situation in park homes, because of the inclusion of other groups noted above, it nevertheless points to a further important characteristic of people living in caravans and other mobile temporary structures (including park homes) with respect to self reported health (Table 2). The 2001 Census showed that about 31 per cent of all people living in caravans or other mobile temporary structures reported a long term limiting illness, compared with the national average of 17 per cent.

Table 2: Persons in households living in caravans, or other mobile temporary structures reporting a long term limiting illness, England

	All people with a long term limiting illness (%)	All people without a long term limiting illness (%)	Total (%)
All people in households living in a caravan or other mobile temporary structure	30.6	69.4	100
All people in England	17.3	82.7	100

Source: 2001 Census

As Table 3 shows, this trend is closely linked with the age profile of residents. As people get older they are more likely to report difficulties with their health, and this is likely to be the reason for such a high proportion of poor self reported health in non permanent accommodation. However, the table below also shows that younger people are also more likely to report a long

term limiting illness in caravans and other mobile or temporary structures than the general population. The conclusion is that people who live in caravans or other mobile temporary structures, which includes park homes, are more likely to be vulnerable in relation to their health. The implications of this point for policy concerns will be discussed later in the paper.

Table 3: Proportions of age groups reporting a long term limiting illness living in caravans, or other mobile temporary structures by age, England

	0-15 (%)	16-34 (%)	35-49 (%)	50-64 (%)	65-84 (%)	85+ (%)
All people in households living in a caravan or other mobile temporary structure	4.3	10.7	19.7	35.3	47.3	67.2
All people in England	4.2	6.7	12.4	25.8	46.6	71.3

Source: 2001 Census

However, not all parks have age restrictions and can provide a housing option for other people, including a route into home ownership for younger first time buyers. One reason for the orientation of park homes towards older residents is the attitudes of mortgage lenders towards park homes. Only two specialist agencies offer mortgages on park homes. Thus, park homes are increasingly only affordable for people with the capital to buy a park home outright, which tends to be home owners choosing to downsize from their previous homes. As with other elements of the housing market, the park home sector has experienced a sharp downturn in demand as a result of the recent worsening of market conditions during 2008.

Methods

Fifteen face to face and telephone interviews were conducted with national and local stakeholders to provide a background context for the study. These interviews included: representatives of the trade bodies (British Holiday and Home Parks Association and the National Park Homes Council); local authority practitioners; the National Association of Park Home Residents; the Park Home Residents Action Alliance; Independent Park Homes Advisory Service, site owners and a solicitor with experience of park home issues.

Forty semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with park home residents in England. The key aim of the interviews was to reflect the range of differing issues and circumstances that exist on parks, and to this end, a purposive sampling approach was used to identify respondents for the study. Two approaches were used to identify respondents:

- Firstly, 35 interviews were undertaken with respondents who replied to an invitation to participate in the research that was sent to the occupier of every tenth address on parks from the Valuation List for Council Tax. The parks themselves were identified using trade directories and reflected a geographic coverage across a range of different areas of England including the regions of the South West, South East, West Midlands, East Anglia, and the counties of North Yorkshire, Lancashire

and Lincolnshire. Parks that were members of National Park Homes Council's Quality Award Scheme were included as these parks are required to adhere to a voluntary code of conduct. A number of parks were also included that had were not members of the Quality Award Scheme.

- Secondly, five interviews were undertaken with residents who had been identified by a national residents' association as having experienced difficulties and were included in the research to reflect the diverse experiences of residents on parks, including living on parks run by unscrupulous park owners (UPOs). One of the five respondents had left their park home and was now living elsewhere, but reflected on their experiences of living in a park home.

The forty residents included in this research cannot be taken as a representative sample of all park home residents. Instead, the qualitative approach allowed an analysis of the experiences and views of the respondents to illustrate a range of issues about living in park homes. The interviews covered motivations for wanting to live in park homes; experiences of park home living, and future aspirations.

Profile of respondents

Some of the characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 4. As noted above, although park homes play diverse roles for different groups, the focus for this research was primarily upon older people. Further, the length of time that this group of respondents had been living in their current home showed that park homes were anything but a non permanent housing option for these people. In addition, thirty five respondents lived on 22 sites in private ownership. The remaining five lived on three sites in local authority or housing association ownership.

Thirty five respondents had owned their previous homes. Three respondents had rented from local authorities or housing associations. One respondent had previously been homeless prior to moving into a park home and another had been living with her mother.

Table 4: Profile of respondents

Characteristic		Number of respondents
Gender	Male	17
	Female	23
	<i>Total</i>	40
Household Type	Single	18
	Couple	22
	<i>Total</i>	40
Age (Years)	Under 50	1
	50 - 59	5
	60- 69	17
	70 -79	13
	80 and over	4
	<i>Total</i>	40
Economic status	Employed part time	7
	Employed full time	4
	Unemployed/long term illness	2
	Retired	27
	<i>Total</i>	40
Length of Residence (Years)	Less than 1	1
	1-2	5
	2-5	9
	6-10	12
	11-20	10
	Over 20	3
	<i>Total</i>	40

Moving to park homes

Respondents described arrival stories, highlighting many different reasons for wanting to live in park homes, based on ‘push’ factors for wanting to leave their previous homes, and also ‘pull’ factors, for choosing park homes. The analysis identified two main groups of residents. The first group comprised people who had moved to park homes primarily as a result of constraints within the wider housing market. The second group had decided to move to park homes more in relation to the lifestyle choice this form of accommodation offered, often downsizing from their previous homes. The final part of this section discusses the health and mobility concerns of some of the respondents. This latter motivation for choosing park homes included respondents from both the ‘constrained choice’ group and also the ‘retirement lifestyle’ group.

Constrained choice

One group of twenty respondents described their decision to live in a park home purely in terms of housing affordability. They had moved to a park home because the housing options that were available to them were very limited, and they often could not afford to buy a bricks and mortar home in the area they wanted to live in. This group of respondents described the decision to move to a park home in response to a range of reasons, such as

relationship breakdown, business failure or redundancy, or of being unable to afford to keep up mortgage repayments on reaching the age of retirement. A characteristic of this group was that they had often made quite short geographical moves, and had stayed quite near their previous homes, often in or near the same town or within the same local authority district,

It was really just down to affordability. You looked at ordinary properties that you liked, flats and one bedroom houses, but they were all so expensive. So I just said to my husband 'well what about a mobile home?' And he said 'well I'd been thinking about that, but I didn't know whether to suggest it' (Female).

Other respondents described the limited alternatives available at the time they needed to move. Often the choice appeared to be between flats, or park homes. Respondents felt that park homes offered better value for money in terms of internal space standards, and also the availability of a small garden. For instance, one couple found that their endowment mortgage was not going to cover the cost of their previous home,

We could possibly have gone into a smaller bricks and mortar home, but, having viewed some of them, the rooms were so tiny. So tiny. We then looked at park homes, because we moved in first of all to a very big double unit, and we found that the space, the living space was so much better in the park home (Male).

Initial attitudes and expectations of park homes were very mixed amongst this group. Some of the respondents were positive about moving to a park home. Two of these respondents had lived in park homes at earlier stages in their lives. Other respondents were, initially at least, more circumspect about park home living. There was more of a sense of taking this accommodation option either because it was perceived as the only one that was available, or in preference to other options such as buying a flat, or social renting,

I got divorced. My husband wouldn't let me have any business – we had our own business. And basically he left me with very little money. So once I sold the home, and paid the mortgage, there wasn't hardly anything left. So I knew someone who lived here. Initially it wasn't my first choice, but I don't regret it (Female).

These respondents described their housing options quite narrowly in terms of owner occupation and tended to view renting a home as a choice that had little relevance for them. Such respondents felt that renting was 'money down the drain', or stated that they just had not considered renting amongst the housing options open to them,

Well we done renting in the early years and it's just money down the drain. Because at the end of it there's nothing. You're just continually paying out. And it's very difficult with landlords and so on. Sometimes you get a good landlord and sometimes you get a bad landlord, you know it's just another worry. And you know these places do increase in value year on year, as opposed to

places like people who live in caravans, on caravan sites for eleven months of the year. They are living in them and that is money down the drain. It doesn't increase in value whereas park homes do, to a certain extent. So yeah, our property over the last six and a half years has increased in value so yeah, that's something else (Male).

Well, I was born and brought up in a council property, and then towards the end of my father's working life they bought his council house. And I thought after that, with council property or rented property, you have to be so careful, you have to get permission for everything. If you own your own property, then you can decorate it how you want. Make it as individual as you want, instead of being like a robot, run of the mill (Male).

Six respondents had opted for park homes because they wanted a lifestyle associated with a particular area, but could not afford bricks and mortar. Park home living enabled them to afford a lifestyle associated with retirement in rural or coastal locations. These respondents had often started looking for their preferred accommodation options, often bungalows, in their chosen area, but found such accommodation to be unaffordable, and had either settled for park homes as an alternative or found that park homes were a more attractive proposition than other accommodation that was available in the area,

Well we didn't originally plan on a park home, but we came down looking. My brother had already moved down in the two years prior to us coming. And he'd bought a park home. But we came looking at semi-detached bungalows. And the ones we looked at were no comparison whatsoever compared to what we could get for a park home, sort of half the price of a semi-detached house. There was no room in them at all and they were twice the price. So we plumped for this (Male).

Choosing park homes as a retirement lifestyle

A further group of twenty respondents wanted a retirement lifestyle specifically associated with park homes. In contrast to the constrained choice group, these respondents varied widely in the distances they had moved from their previous homes. Whilst some had made moves of a short distance, others had moved some considerable distance, for example from London to the south coast, or from Bath to the north west. A characteristic of these respondents was that they had planned for their retirements,

We decided, we did give some thought actually to ending up in these sort of park homes. because we toured on holidays in the North West. We had come into contact with this environment on the holiday situation, and it did appeal to us, you know. And we actually talked about it sometimes as being one of the moves that we were likely to make (Male).

I think, I suppose it was the empty nest thing. We'd got this huge house and the children had gone. Our daughter came back and stayed with us for a while, and once she'd gone, that made it even emptier if you know what I mean. So we decided that the time was good. And as it happened it coincided with the fact that my husband then had an accident at work. So the whole thing it was just meant to be really. My husband was a paramedic and had already been down here several times...and we thought it would be a really nice leisure lifestyle to go into retirement. And the fact that it's a fifty plus park, then we knew it was going to be quite peaceful (Female).

Positive features that were identified with park home living were having the resources to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle, free from worry about having sufficient income throughout retirement; money available to fund holidays or to fund extended stays abroad over the winter; the opportunity to visit family who lived overseas on a regular basis, or to enable leisure pursuits such as golf or bowls. Further, these respondents often highlighted downsizing from their previous homes to release capital to fund their retirement lifestyle of choice,

This option was one of the things that came up. By selling the house we could buy a park home outright. Also the lifestyle was an issue and the fact that living in a residential park home gave you security, peace and quiet, and all the factors like that. So they were all brought together. And our age as well, brought all these factors into play and this is what we decided to do (Male).

This view stands in contrast to the constrained choice group, for whom park home living was a response to restricted choices within the wider housing market, either in terms of finding a home within an area associated with retirement lifestyles, or, as in the case with the first group, simply finding somewhere to live that they could afford, as noted by the respondent below,

I've noticed that the people who are living on mobile homes sites don't have to be here. I'm here because I didn't have any other realistic choice if I wanted to have a place which I could call my own. Whereas I've noticed that a lot of people are just choosing to move here. But my only other alternative would have been to rent somewhere, and I didn't have an income to furnish me with enough money to pay a monthly rental (Female).

Choosing park homes because of health worries

One reason for choosing to live in a park home that cut across the two groups of respondents above related to health issues. For some of these particular respondents part of the motivation for buying a park home was due to having affordable accommodation with an internal living space that was that was all on one level,

We were living in a house, but my wife has Parkinson's disease. She also has severe arthritis. And she couldn't get up the stairs, so we had to sell the house and try and get a bungalow. But down here they're about 500,000 pounds, for a decent one. So, well, we'll go for a park home (Male).

For these respondents, the feature of park homes of having two or three steps up to the front entrance did not appear to be a cause of difficulty,

I was talking about this to some friends a while ago, and I think these little parks are ideal for the older person, or for the elderly, because you are totally on, once you're inside, you've got three steps obviously, or four steps to go in, but you're on a total level, you know. It has all the advantages of a flat or bungalow, a bungalow more than anything, and you know, you have total independence (Female).

Indeed, for respondents with more limited mobility, ramped access and/or lifts had solved this particular issue. Other respondents noted that their choice of park home living reflected part of a decision-making process and planning for retirement, including the possibility that any future deterioration in their health could be more readily accommodated in a park home setting than in their previous accommodation. These respondents had often lived in flats or apartments off the ground floor, and also often commented on the peace and quiet of park homes compared with living in flats.

The maintenance of park homes also featured as a reason for choosing this form of accommodation, both in terms of their physical upkeep and also cleaning and housework,

I: Were there things about living in a park home that appealed?

R: Yeah, you see I have to do most of the work, cleaning and that. We've got a lady who comes and helps a couple of hours a week. But I do most of the work and it's so quick (Male).

I still think it's cheaper than the cost of doing a bricks and mortar make over. I think you still spend money on the home. I suppose it depends how much you want to keep it up or whatever. Painting it isn't such a chore and you can reach it with just a step ladder, you can reach the top. So that keeps the expense down because it doesn't take too long to do. And you paint it in a special waterproof paint, which lasts. We've done ours every couple of years (Female).

Another reason for choosing park homes identified by two other respondents was that park homes offered the opportunity to afford home ownership on the very limited wages that resulted from the type of jobs they could take on because of their health difficulties.

The experience of park home living

The majority of respondents across the groups highlighted above expressed considerable satisfaction with their accommodation and the lifestyle associated with park homes. Indeed, respondents often felt that their actual experiences of park home living were better than initial expectations. The very positive views by these respondents echoed the findings of previous research on park home residents, which found that residents often 'waxed lyrical' about park home living (Niner and Hedges, 1992).

The positive attribute that they described in the most emotive terms was a strong sense of community, and being with a set of people who had a similar outlook on life. A recurring theme amongst respondents was descriptions of their parks as being 'like a little village',

There's a very relaxed atmosphere here. It's quiet, ever so quiet. But you do get people at weekends will do their garden and everybody smiles at you. Everybody says hello. And I was finding myself, after being here for a couple of weeks, going into Oxford and smiling at people, and , oh dear, you know, they might think I'm a bit odd. But you know, I mean, I've made friends and everybody seems to care about everybody else. It's like an old fashioned village, if you know what I mean (Female).

Respondents discussed the ways in which residents often looked out for each other, or helped each other out. This point is illustrated in the following quote,

It is very much a community here. We do help each other out with odds and ends. We look out for each other. One old chap who lived near me, my friend and I we looked out for him. But he was reaching the point where he was expecting very personal care, you know, he was refusing help from the proper authorities "cos I've got the neighbours. They're ever so good, they'll help". And he was calling us out three or four times a day or night. Things like that. So when I say look out for each other, we make sure that everybody is all right and if somebody needs help, appropriate help is found (Female).

However, this sense of community on parks was not universally recognised by all respondents. A couple of respondents emphasised that although their home itself was important, the wider surroundings of the park in terms of social relations were not; the park was simply a place to live and no more. A couple of other respondents also discussed disputes between neighbours, which had led one couple to put their home up for sale.

Some of the respondents also commented on the way in which the physical layout of their parks helped to facilitate a sense of security. Many parks only have a single entrance and exit, meaning that there is no through traffic. Occasionally, the entrance also has a barrier or gate of some description, and

often the site office is located close by. Respondents also highlighted that the social relations between residents themselves that helped to foster the sense of security on parks. These respondents discussed arrangements between neighbours where residents looked after each other's properties while they were away from the park for any length of time, and also the degree to which residents 'kept an eye' on any visitors to the parks.

Some respondents did identify concerns about specific aspects of park home living. One issue was the running costs of living in a park home. Whilst maintenance was generally viewed as easier, and cheaper, than bricks and mortar, day to day costs such as heating and pitch fees were noted by some respondents as a cause of difficulty, particularly in older park homes,

The cost of heating, it's prohibitive. I've got electric fires all around. And of course the construction is not unlike a car, you know the walls are at most two inches thick, at the most, and it's like being in a car (Female).

Nevertheless, the balance of views was that running costs, especially heating, were not a cause of concern,

I was telling the wife the other day, when we lived in a house we had a lot of expense, doing it up and everything, and you've got the maintenance every year. And here, they've both been new homes we've moved into and I think we'd get away with about two hundred pounds a month. Whereas about 400 or 500 in that house (Male).

They are very good places to heat. They are all double glazed, the walls are well insulated. You imagine, I came back in April from Portugal. We arrived and it was bloody freezing – within an hour, no problem (Male).

One negative issue was accessibility to shops and services, particularly for older people who could no longer drive. A feature of many parks is their rural location, and, just like any rural community, there is the potential for poor accessibility. This was an issue that varied park by park, and on the individual circumstances of respondents. For example, one respondent commented that she often used a local Dial a Ride service because of the location of her park and the nature of public transport in the area,

I don't drive, and they are a bit inclined to be off the beaten track. And we have a bus here. I think there's two in the morning and one in the afternoon, So it is a little bit, you know, if I suddenly decided to go out, because I don't drive, it would either have to be a taxi, or wait until tomorrow (Female).

Relations with the site owner

The majority of respondents reported that relations with their site owner were satisfactory or positive,

I: how do you get on with your site owner?

R: He's always wandering around here. He's great. I mean we've got a site owner and a site manager. Well, the site manager I play golf with so....and the site owner, yeah, he's fine. He's very proud of it and has a lot of people round (Male).

However, in addition to the five respondents who were identified at the outset of the research as experiencing problems with their site owners, five other respondents from three other parks also described significant difficulties with their site owners. The types of difficulties that respondents referred to included:

- Problems with the process of buying a park home, such as an attempt by the site owner to charge more for the park home than the advertised price, after a deposit had been paid;
- Sales on the open market being blocked by the site owner, forcing residents to sell for a reduced price to the owner;
- Poor maintenance of the park, and not adhering to site licence conditions;
- Large increases in the pitch fee;
- Allegations of attempts to force respondents from their homes; and
- Allegations of harassment and intimidation of respondents.

For example, one potentially significant issue related to the ability of residents to sell their homes on the open market. The factsheet recently published by the Department of Communities and Local Government (2009b) sets out the rights that park home residents have with respect to the sale of their homes. It emphasises that the sale must be to a person that has been approved by their park owner but that the latter cannot withhold their approval unreasonably. Nevertheless, two respondents noted the difficulties they had experienced in this regard, with sales on the open market being blocked by their respective park owners. One respondent described the large financial loss she had incurred through selling her home to the park owner,

It's just what he's prepared to pay you. What he could get back from selling it off with a profit on top. Nothing about the fact that it's in a beautiful location, well located, which is what you'd paid

for in the beginning. You don't get that back. I lost significantly (Female).

A respondent on a different park highlighted the difficulty they were facing in trying to sell their home,

I: How do you feel about paying commission on the sale of your home?

R: That's fine with me if we could sell our home, which at the moment we can't. We don't mind the commission at all. It's just that the owner is blocking a lot of the sales (Female).

Another respondent noted that difficulties with the site owner were a consequence of trying to run a residents' association on the park where she lived,

I formed a residents' association and we had four hundred members, which was quite good. But the landlord harassed me so much. He let the tyres down on my car, threw stones at the house in the middle of the night. Did all sorts to, you know, until finally my nerves frayed and after four years I had to give it up. And no one, no one, everyone's afraid to take it over. ..but I'm not the only one he's done that to, so I don't get paranoid about it (Female).

However, a respondent on another park where residents had experienced difficult relations with the site owner felt that the creation of a residents' association had been significant in providing support for more vulnerable residents the park,

There are a few vulnerable people on the park, and the residents' association helps them and gives them a bit of confidence, and comfort, knowing that if they have a major problem with the park owner we will step in and try and arbitrate and do what we can that way (Male).

The quote above also alludes to a point that was raised on three other parks, which was that their respective park owners were targeting vulnerable individuals, as noted by another respondent,

I would just say to people who live on parks to get together in an association, because these owners can be unscrupulous and will target the elderly especially (Male).

A wider issue that these respondents returned to time and again was the fear amongst residents on parks where there were significant difficulties with park owners. One respondent noted at the start of an interview that,

It's a minefield. I'm frightened to pass on an opinion because I'm frightened of repercussions. But no, he [the park owner] can be very unpleasant to deal with. He can be very charismatic when he

wants to be, when he's selling. But once he's made the sale, all the promises he's made he conveniently forgets (Female).

Another respondent commented on this issue, also highlighting the proactive attitude of her local authority,

If it hadn't have been for the local authority I don't think we would have survived, because I think his behaviour would have ratcheted up. We're only talking about minimums of behaviour there. Just small intimidation, but a lot of people went. It shows that it works - through the fear factor. It's not what takes place, it's the fear factor. And when people heard what was going on at [name of another site], that instilled fear in people (Female).

The interviews with stakeholders and residents highlighted a number of difficulties in trying to address the problems that exist on some parks. One issue was the limitations of current policy instruments for tackling unscrupulous park owners. As one resident noted,

I think it is absolutely appalling that people like [site owner] have been taken to court and proved to be inappropriate as park owners and they can go out and buy another property. And get a licence from the council. That's abysmal (Female).

A further issue noted by some of the stakeholders was awareness amongst statutory agencies, not only of the nature of the problems, but also of the potential remedies that already exist. For example, one of the problems identified was in relation to trying to involve the police on parks where problems have occurred. However, there are two examples of very proactive approaches taken by police in the West Midlands. Residents on one park noted that the police were very sympathetic to call outs to their park, after a catalogue of incidents with the site owner. In another case, there has been considerable recent publicity about 'Operation Kingpin', to secure the conviction of several men for arson, blackmail and fraud with respect to their activities at Glen Park, noted below. Both examples illustrate the way in which police action can intervene to mitigate the impacts of rogue operators in the sector.

With such a small number of respondents, it is not possible to define the scale of the issue within the sector, or the extent to which the findings are generalisable. Instead, the research illustrates the types of the problems that residents on a number of parks have recently experienced. However, the qualitative findings highlighted in this paper sit within a broader context of research that has drawn attention to the problems within the sector caused by rogue operators (Marsh *et al.*, 2000). Recent debates in the House of Commons have also highlighted some of the difficulties that residents have

faced in this regard². Indeed, the range and type of issues described above are very similar to the difficulties recently identified on a number of parks in Scotland (Bevan, 2007).

Disputes between park owners and residents are a contentious area, and there is considerable potential for disagreement over what constitutes legitimate behaviour by park owners. In their study of harassment and illegal eviction in the park home sector, Marsh *et al.* (2000) found that the incidence of disputes between park owners and residents could lead to allegations of harassment by the latter, even though park owners were actually acting well within their rights. Further, the Department for Communities and Local Government (2008a) has recently highlighted not only activities by unscrupulous park owners, but also unreasonable behaviour by some park home residents. Nevertheless, policymakers also make specific reference to the 'unacceptable, and in some cases, illegal practices of some licence holders' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009c, p4) associated with the financial exploitation of residents and especially the replacement of existing homes with new units. Indeed, some unscrupulous park owners do not wait for a resident to try and sell, and intimidate and harass residents to vacate their homes. In extreme examples, arson has been used to force older people out of their homes, as a recent case on Glen Park in the West Midlands shows (Bromsgrove Advertiser, 2008).

Challenges for the future

Park homes are a form of accommodation that has previously enabled lower income groups to become, or remain, home owners in localities that would otherwise be inaccessible to them within the housing market for bricks and mortar. Park homes have generally been less expensive than bricks and mortar accommodation and have constituted a form of low cost home ownership within the context of the local housing markets in which they are situated. However, this role appears to be changing as the park home industry focuses increasingly on providing for retirement lifestyle options, especially with regard to the price of new homes. Further, park homes tend to be concentrated in areas of England that are popular locations for retirement such as coastal and rural areas. For example, Hampshire, Cornwall and Devon have the highest concentrations of parks in England. However, second hand sales in park homes continue to provide a source of lower cost accommodation. The differing roles played by park homes in local housing markets, as well as the diverse quality of park homes themselves, is reflected in the range of prices for park homes. Prices can range from ten thousand pounds up to in excess of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds

² For recent debates on park homes in the House of Commons see: Hansard, 26 Mar 2008: Column 69WH

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080326/halltext/80326h0001.htm>

Hansard, 2 Mar 2009 Column 701

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090302/debtext/90302-0022.htm>

(Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009c). Up until the recent downturn in the housing market, prices of over two hundred thousand pounds for new park homes were not uncommon in areas of high housing demand, especially in the South of England.

This focus upon providing for retirement lifestyles has implications for how the park home sector might position itself with regard to demographic trends in the future. A variety of housing options are available or emerging in both the public and private sectors, with a specific focus on meeting the needs and aspirations of older people, which includes park homes. However, meeting these aspirations is not only about providing a diverse range of accommodation in order to facilitate the choices that are available to older people, but also about providing environments where people can successfully age in place. The latter concern is about enabling older people to continue living where they are, and limiting the need to move in response to a change in their circumstances, especially around health and disability. Partly this issue comes down to the design of environments around people's homes: lifetime neighbourhoods. It is also about providing supportive environments, either in relation to informal support provided by friends, neighbours and family, or formal support by agencies, which could include the park home sector.

Therefore, one direction that the park home sector could move towards is offering more formal support for residents. There is a tradition of offering support on some parks (Niner and Hedges, 1992). On a couple of parks respondents referred to support such as handypersons services. However, parks could also build upon the sense of safety and security that exists on many parks, and which has been one of the motivations for living on parks, for example, through the use of community alarms, or a warden style service. The direction which parks could potentially take is highlighted by the example of the proposed extension to Wyre Vale Park, near Garstang. This extension is for the development of park homes to accommodate the changing health needs of older people on the park, and also elsewhere in the locality. The development is to be called 'Acresfield', and will consist of 43 park homes offering warden assisted living, as well as a multi-purpose communal facility. As such, this planned development reflects the movement of parts of the park home sector towards the definition of retirement communities offered by Phillips *et al.* (2001):

- A retirement element – residents are no longer in full-time employment and this affects their use of time and space;
- A community element – an age specific population living in the same geographically bounded area;
- A degree of collectivity – with which residents identify, and which may include shared activities, interests and facilities;
- A sense of autonomy with security

Parks face a number of barriers in terms of new development, including competing with bricks and mortar developers on price for land, or achieving

sufficient densities to meet planning requirements. A further challenge in terms of new developments is in relation to raising awareness of the park home sector, and overcoming the perceived antipathy of statutory agencies towards park homes which belies the contribution that park homes can make within local housing markets. The example at Wyre Vale is significant because it demonstrates that the barriers in terms of attitudes of local statutory agencies can be overcome and indeed, won round to the extent that they can be very supportive of the role that park homes can play in the context of an ageing society.

A further barrier for park homes is the negative impact that the activities of rogue operators are having on the sector as a whole. The increasing orientation of the park home sector towards an accommodation and lifestyle option for older people brings with it a concomitant growth in the proportion of vulnerable individuals within this group. This vulnerability is not based on age per se, but on increasing frailty and poor health amongst older people, as reflected in Table 3 earlier in the paper. If the park home sector were to develop its role as a provider of housing and support options for older people in the future, this would include a proportion of vulnerable households, and the issue of tackling rogue operators would become necessarily more urgent. The following section considers potential policy mechanisms for addressing the issue of rogue operators.

Tackling unscrupulous park owners

Whilst most residents appear to be very satisfied with park home living, for some people the activities of unscrupulous park owners continues to be a cause of considerable distress. The experiences of the residents who have had to live with the fear of arson on Glen Park, in the West Midlands, may well mark a watershed in the way that policymakers view the development of policy mechanisms to address this issue. In spite of the successful conviction of several individuals in this particular instance, this case threw into sharp relief the inadequacy of current policy instruments to tackle these extreme abuses.

Policymakers at national level have recognised that the problems posed by unscrupulous park owners have continued unabated, and discussions are currently taking place to develop policy instruments to curb these activities. There have been a number of proposed changes for the sector. For example, disputes under the Mobile Homes Act 1983 are currently heard at the County Court. It is hoped that the intended transfer of park homes jurisdiction to the Residential Property Tribunal in the near future offers the potential for more accessible and affordable dispute resolution. Further, the recent guide for residents about selling their park homes published by the Department for Communities and Local Government (2009b) highlights the Fraud Act (2006) as another potential avenue to tackle issues such as some park owners blocking sales, or forcing a resident to sell to the park owner.

The list of problems identified by respondents earlier in this paper covered a diverse range of issues, only a couple of which could be potentially tackled by enforcing the conditions of site licences that are in force at present. There is currently far less scope for intervention by local authorities in the key area of management practices by park owners, and it is in this area where there is still a gap in the suite of existing policy instruments for addressing the activities of rogue operators. A further option that is being explored by policymakers is to introduce a revised and improved park home site licensing regime, to include the management practices of park owners (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009c).

The potential for residents of park homes to experience these types of problems has similarities with other parts of the housing system. For example, although the legislative context is very different in the privately rented sector or for leasehold properties, the underlying principle of the financial exploitation of residents by some unscrupulous landowners remains the same (see Marsh *et al.* 2000; Blandy and Robinson, 2001; Carlton *et al.* 2003). Previous research has recommended reading across developments in other parts of the housing system that are relevant to the park home sector, especially in relation to management practices on parks (Niner, 2000). It is certainly worth taking a wider perspective in terms of the potential remedies that could be applied within the park home sector by looking at proposals for other tenures with regard to greater regulation. Indeed, the subject of regulation within housing has been the focus of considerable recent attention (Carsberg, 2008; Jones, 2009; Rugg and Rhodes, 2008; Law Commission, 2008).

In relation to the addressing management practices on parks there may be merit in looking at the proposals to come out of the Rugg Review of the Private Rented Sector (Rugg and Rhodes, 2008). This independent review was commissioned by the housing minister and the results were published in October 2008. Obviously the specifics of the Rugg Review relate to the private rented sector, but it is the underlying principles which are worth consideration with regard to their potential applicability to the park home sector. This Review set out a model for light touch licensing whereby all private landlords, existing and new, are brought within the framework of a regime. The model was for a system that should be as simple as possible, such that the impact on operators who work to sound management principles should be inconvenienced as little as possible. The Review also suggested that enforcement policies should target the 'worst first'; again, sending a clear message to the sector that any policing activity on the sector is being targeted appropriately.

This point leads to the recommendation that a system of 'light touch' licensing of park owners should be considered for the park home sector, drawing in current park owners as well as prospective ones. A future licensing regime should be predicated not only on the attributes of a site, but also the behaviour of the site owner. In other words, license the site owner, not just the site. The current consultation by the Department for Communities and

Local Government (2009c) puts forward an approach to incorporate management practices within its proposals for changing the current site licensing regime, including proposals for a fit and proper test. Nevertheless, if a new duty is to be established for local authorities to monitor site licences then it is essential that the new duty includes a consideration of the ongoing management practices of park owners, even if a fit and proper test is introduced.

Conclusions

Demographic projections suggest that the range of niche markets that offer accommodation for older people are likely to see a significant intensification in demand in the coming decades. The increasing orientation of the park home sector towards older people suggests that it has the potential to be part of the response to meeting the housing aspirations of a growing older society. There has been the suggestion that the origins of park homes mean that they are viewed as an anachronism in modern housing which is at odds with the role that they can legitimately play in local housing markets (Passmore, 1987). Certainly the views of the majority of residents in this research illustrated the popularity of this form of accommodation as a niche market, not only in terms of the accommodation itself, but also the lifestyles associated with park home living. Often these respondents were downsizing from larger properties. A wider role that park homes were playing therefore, was not only providing greater choice for older people within housing markets, but also freeing up larger family sized properties.

There is a challenge for the park home sector in the extent to which it can meet this potential. Part of this challenge relates to how the sector aligns itself with emerging policy developments with regard to an ageing society. The strategy Lifetime Homes: Lifetime Neighbourhoods has set out the government's vision Department for Communities and Local Government (2008b). A key element of this strategy focuses upon encouraging the incorporation of lifetime homes standards into all future housing. Although park homes are not subject to building regulations there is certainly an issue of how far the design of park homes can move towards an incorporation of the key features of lifetime homes standards, in parallel with housing that may be required to meet these standards. Further, parks could develop their role as providers of formal support for residents, looking at the potential of services such as community alarms, reducing isolation and handypersons services. The example of Wyre Vale Park serves to highlight the potential of park homes to widen housing and support options for older people, and also to raise awareness amongst statutory agencies of the positive role that park homes can play in this regard.

A further challenge for the sector relates to the continued damaging impact that rogue operators have upon residents and upon the sector at large. The research illustrated the difficulties that residents in parts of the sector have experienced with respect to the activities of rogue operators by drawing

upon recent examples of residents with very negative experiences of the sector. The increasing orientation of the park home sector towards providing accommodation which includes a proportion of vulnerable people has implications for the necessity of a policy response to tackle the activities of rogue operators. A crucial factor that was noted by respondents who lived on parks where there were problematic relations with the site owner was the level of fear experienced by some of the residents. This factor hampers attempts to build evidence of the difficulties that residents experience, and leads to the problem remaining largely hidden. The suspicion that elder abuse is occurring on some parks certainly requires examination.

The key issue revolves around the management practices of unscrupulous park owners. There are a number of welcome policy developments in train, with potentially others to follow, such as proposals to strengthen site licensing arrangements (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009c). The licensing of the site owner, not just the site, would afford greater protection for residents in this regard, and would enable greater leverage over the area of management practices by local authorities.

Nevertheless, the development of policy instruments can only go so far, and adequate enforcement is a necessary component of addressing the problematic elements of the sector. The Residential Property Tribunal certainly offers the potential for a more accessible avenue for residents themselves to enforce their rights. However, recent wider reviews of regulatory frameworks in housing discuss the principle of the protection of residents. The characteristics of the park home sector suggests that a high proportion of residents are vulnerable with regard to their health status, and this factor reinforces the need for a regulatory regime for park homes that can afford greater protection for these households through the activities of statutory agencies, rather than the onus being upon residents to help themselves. One respondent emphasised the essential role that her local authority had played in mitigating the behaviour of her park owner. Any regime can only succeed in its objectives if it backed by adequate enforcement. Hand in hand with any development of a revised licensing regime ought to be an examination of the factors that would assist local authorities to utilise the mechanisms that are available to them, and to develop a greater understanding of the nature of the barriers that prevent local authorities from taking up these options. For example, it would be helpful to know how many park owners have been convicted of an offence under Section 3 of the Caravan Sites Act 1968. A crucial theme to draw across from reviews of other parts of the housing system is the principle of tackling the 'worst first', and there needs to be an expectation of the active monitoring and enforcement of any new duties and powers targeted on the problematic end of the park home sector, rather than the industry at large. The consultation on proposals to introduce revised and improved park home site licensing (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009c) draws attention to the practical difficulty of uncovering evidence in deciding whether or not a proposed licence holder is a fit and proper person. This difficulty should not be underestimated, and reinforces the need for

collaborative working and data sharing between a range of stakeholders including local authorities, police, resident groups and industry bodies to build the evidence base against unscrupulous park owners.

Park homes play a small, but significant role in meeting the housing needs and aspirations of a diverse range of households. Given the sector's increasing orientation towards an accommodation option for older people, a challenge for the park home sector is to maximise the potential contribution that it can make towards the broader policy objectives for housing an ageing society. A fundamental aspect of this challenge is to address the impact of unscrupulous park owners, who are damaging the concept of the park home lifestyle.

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