

The Guide To Later Life

Practical Guidance and Tips on Later Life





CHAPTER 5

The best decision you'll ever make

When is it the right time to leave the family home and choose new, more appropriate accommodation? 'Before it's too late', says Edwina Currie

Edwina Currie has had three successful careers -- so far! She was one of the nation's best known MPs in the 1980s. After leaving Parliament in 1997, she became a well-known radio and TV presenter, performer and author of six novels. Her life to date has been summed up by fellow writer and MP Sir Julian Critchley: 'Edwina Currie has a brass neck, a silver tongue and a golden pen.'

She is also a member of McCarthy & Stone's Greater Life Advisory Board (GLAB).

When my mother was 86, we had a serious conversation. She was still fit and active, in the house in Liverpool bought in 1952, an ordinary semi with an upstairs bathroom. Her request: that I'd pay for the roof to be fixed. Mine: that she'd find a ground floor flat, so that I could stop worrying about her falling down the stairs. We had quite a barney about that, I will admit. But six weeks later, she had located the perfect place, close to her old haunts and friends. The move, she would say later, had given her a new lease of life, and she continued well until her last days, just before her 93rd birthday.

Mum's move had worked magic, but her reluctance to do it at all was common. Most people refuse to think about the future, to the point where we fail to take decisions in our own interests. In so doing, we put ourselves and our families at risk. By most people I mean around 90 per cent of us. When McCarthy & Stone asked the owners of their retirement flats what made them live there, the answer was often bereavement, or an illness or disability in themselves or their partners. Ninety per cent only moved

when they had to. Yet you can't help feeling that if that decision had been taken earlier, some of the catastrophes might have been averted or their impact lessened.

Mum's example meant that as my husband turned 70, I also made plans. That included getting closer to my own daughter and grand-daughter (now aged seven) and to our northern roots. This time, I insisted on 'mains drainage and a pavement'. The spot we found has a doctor's, dentist, newsagent, chiropodist, physio, wine shops, hairdressers, restaurants, takeaways and a supermarket, and -- bliss! -- a station, all within a short walk. We are set up, I hope, for the rest of our lives.

Why don't more people do this? Whenever I knock on doors for elections, I'm struck at how many older people are rattling round in places that seem too big for them, properties which they may find a challenge to keep up. Sound familiar? One barrier is inertia, and dislike of change. It's easier to shrink our activity into a couple of rooms, than go through the upheaval of moving. Downsizing means throwing precious things away, cherished furniture, books. Worst, moving is a confirmation that the future is not going to be the same as the past; many people would simply rather not think about it. Until, often, it's too late.

So it's important to rope in the family; like me, with Mum, they may be relieved that the issue has been raised. Get them to do the heavy lifting -- literally! Going flat-hunting together can be fun. Don't rush: take your time. The move can be hugely financially beneficial too. A smaller home will cost less to run, obviously. Capital release by selling (or renting out) your old house is your money, free of encumbrances, to do with what you like.

If you like, some of the money can be passed on to the next generations, early enough for them not to incur tax (you have to outlive the gift by seven years). By contrast, the granddad who insists on staying put may be landing his offspring with an inheritance tax bill.

Some of my best conversations with Mum came as we chose curtains, carpets, a new kitchen and bathroom. Sorting through the stuff to leave is also an opportunity: take those old photographs, and write on the back who they are. I discovered a family photo from 1906 with my great-grandparents; it's wonderful to see those bearded gentlemen's faces, those huge hats and long dresses, looking (some of them) just like me.

We are lucky to be the first generation in history which knows we'll reach a grand old age. Our parents got to their 80s and 90s but did not expect to; we know we're likely to. Mostly, we've worked hard all our lives and done reasonably well. That required wise decision-making in our younger days. Now we're older, a few more decisions are needed. Then we can happily grow to be very old, and not have to worry about it.