

Take me to where I can breathe in the clean, fresh air

Pollution is driving people into the country, with families wanting to 'try before they buy' boosting the rental market, says David Byers

The search for the perfect school, better value for money and more space to bring up a family have always been key reasons for city dwellers to up sticks and move to the country. Now,

however, estate agents specialising in the rural market say that there is another factor prompting homeowners to move from urban centres — pollution.

Agents report that parts of the prime rural market have been buoyant in recent months as townies move to the countryside in increasing numbers, and there has been a particular surge in demand in the rental sector as the urban migrants “try before they buy” in a slow market. For the first time, agents say, escaping pollution is being given as a reason for why people want to move.

Last week *The Times* highlighted how pupils at London schools are exposed to an average annual pollution rate higher than ten milligrams per cubic metre, the World Health Organisation’s guideline level. This newspaper has launched a campaign for a Clean Air Act to

introduce tighter pollution limits in what would be the biggest change in this type of legislation since the 1956 act implemented in response to the Great London Smog.

Analysis by Savills of Office for National Statistics data on migration flows in and out of London by age group shows that the level of “flight” from the city is soaring. The analysis found that for every age group except the 20-29 bracket there is a net flow of outward migration — and this has increased in pace almost universally since 2012.

It shows that some of the biggest outflows are among the under-20s as parents decide that cities are not the best place to bring up children. In the 0-9 age group in 2017, 30,462 more

children left London than arrived in the city, compared with 19,980 in 2012, a rise of 52 per cent.

In the 10-19 group there was a 60 per cent rise in outflow, with 21,454 more leaving than arriving in 2017, compared with 13,400 in 2012.

In the 30-39 bracket the figures show rises of 89 per cent, and 52 per cent in the 40-49 and 50-59 groups, and 18 per

cent among those aged 60 and above. Only in the 20-29 group did arrivals outweigh departures, but this is slowing.

“I expect we’ll continue to see younger households moving out of London,” says Lawrence Bowles, a Savills analyst. “Quality of life is a driving factor, but with London’s house prices right up against the limits of affordability, the possibility of getting more home for their money remains a key consideration.”

Lindsay Cuthill, the head of Savills’s country department, says that the trend will accelerate unless something is done about pollution in our cities. “If we continue to live in cities that are clogged up and fail to enforce more traffic bans and embrace public transport, it will cause people to move in larger numbers,”

he says. “For those who can afford it, the levels of outward migration will soar.”

Data shows that the rental market in the countryside is booming. Analysis by Hamptons International found that 21 per cent of buyers in the country this year had previously been renting — the

largest proportion since the agency started collating records in 2010, when the figure was 17 per cent.

Where are people moving?

The rental market in the London commuter belt is booming. Agents in

counties such as Surrey, Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Suffolk have reported a

dramatic increase in demand as migrants from London make their move.

Areas such as Maidenhead in Berkshire, excellent for the Crossrail into London, are particularly buoyant. Savills is letting a four-bedroom house, which are in demand there, for £1,154 a week. “We’re seeing a 50 per cent increase in would-be buyers in the country opening themselves up to rentals,” says Jemma Scott, a partner at the Buying Solution, a buying agency. “Those looking to move and ideally buy in the long term are realising that they’ve got to live the country life before firmly putting down roots.”

The market is so popular that she warns tenants who are looking to move now or over the summer for a September school start should budget for at least a year’s tenancy because landlords are becoming less amenable to six-month break clauses. This is because, as the rental market heats up and stock diminishes, landlords can afford to be picky.

Another area reporting a big rise in rental demand is Ascot in Berkshire. Caroline Clark, the head of lettings at Strutt & Parker in the town, says that some people moving from the city want to try before they buy, while others have contracted work, so know that they will only be there a set number of years. The schools in this area are a big draw.

Papplewick in Ascot is the *Tatler* UK Prep School of the Year, while ACS International School in Egham and TASIS, the American school, in Thorpe, are near by.

The proportion of prime-market buyers coming from London is highest in Esher, Surrey (41 per cent), followed by Loughton in Essex (38 per cent), Sevenoaks in Kent (33 per cent), Amersham in Buckinghamshire (28 per cent), Cobham in Surrey and Tunbridge Wells in Kent (both 27 per



cent). According to Savills, the East Anglian market also benefits from the outflow of people from London — 25 per cent of prime buyers in Ipswich come from the capital, despite it being 82 miles away.

Living by the water

As people's desire to escape urban pollution increases, some experts expect

waterside towns to be among the main beneficiaries, particularly those in the West Country. "I think that the waterside market will increase dramatically, more than the country market, over the next 12 months," says Richard Speedy, the head of Strutt & Parker's waterside department.

He expects the key growth areas to be the east coast in Kent and the South West. "Pockets of the West Country command a higher premium than others, in places like Dartmouth, Topsham, and Salcombe in Devon, well known for their yachting scene."

Don't rush, or you may regret it

With so many people packing up to move, agents say there is the possibility that many will find they have relocated to a place in which they are not happy.

Linda Jeffcoat of [Stacks Property Search](#) says that some who rush from the city to rural areas have done so without conducting sufficient research and can end up feeling isolated. "There's a world of difference between living in the middle of a field miles from anywhere and living in a vibrant market town," she says.

Those who want to relocate should think about "how you will feel about always getting in the car to go anywhere", she says, and whether you would be better off being located in a semi-rural or village setting, or a market town, where you can live within a community.



In Hampton, Wiltshire, this house with six bedrooms is for rent at £1,615 a week through Strutt & Parker



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Above and left: This eight-bedroom house in Winchester, Hampshire, is available to rent for £10,000 a month through Savills