

Almshouses being built at fastest rate in decades

The Almshouse Association says it has seen the biggest spike in development of housing run by charities since the Victorian era.



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Image:Almshouses, such as these in the West Midlands, are still in great demand

Almshouses are being built at the fastest rate in decades, with a thousand new homes being created in the last 10 years.

The Almshouse Association says it has seen the biggest spike in development of housing run by charities since the Victorian era.

The resurgence is being seen by some as one way of tackling the shortage of social housing, offering another option particularly for elderly people who struggle financially in their retirement.



Image: Many almshouses were built during the Victorian era

In Solihull in the West Midlands, a modern building with a brand new extension is in stark contrast to the more traditional images of almshouses.

Inside, the residents of more than 60 flats share communal areas and there are daily opportunities to socialise.

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Like most almshouses, there are strict entry criteria. Residents have to be over 60 and those in greatest financial and housing need are given priority.

Once they're given a flat, the rent is heavily subsidised by the Sir Josiah Mason Trust, a fund established by a Victorian philanthropist in the 1860s.

Residents pay an agreed contribution, dependent on their means, towards maintenance.

The extension in Solihull, which was completed in the summer, contains 13 new flats.



Image: Margaret Smith says her new flat had given her 'a second life'

Margaret Smith, 74, moved into one of them in September. She hadn't even been aware that an almshouse would be an option until her family read about Mason House.

After her husband passed away in January, she had been feeling isolated living several miles away from relatives - but when she applied for a council house in Solihull, she was told there would be a long wait.

"This has given me something for the future to look forward to," she said, gesturing around her new flat.

"Knowing my children are there and knowing how friendly everyone is, you know you're not isolated.

"It's like having a second life. I have got something now hopefully to live for."



Image: There are opportunities for residents to socialise

Trust chief executive David Healey said the new flats were built in response to a growing demand.

"We have an ageing population as a country as a whole and also a housing crisis" he said.

"We know that we are experiencing a greater level of financial hardship."

Nick Phillips from the Almshouse Association said there are currently around 700 new homes currently being built or in the pipeline.

He likened what is happening now to the Victorian period, when a large number were built, adding: "Over the last 10 years there have been about a thousand new almshouses built, that's a thousand new homes."

Nita Sunderland, 70, and her husband John live on a cul-de-sac of bungalows in Erdington, north of Birmingham.

All the homes on their street are almshouses and there's a waiting list of people wanting to move in.

She said it has made a real difference to their retirement as they would have struggled in their old age after John was made redundant, and thinks more people deserve the kind of help they are getting.

"Everybody is going to be old one day and I don't think they're looking at the long picture," she said.

"Everyone's going to be old - and how would you like to be looked after when you're old?"