

RETIREMENT

OPEN AIR
David Greaves and Christine Gilbert, residents at St John's Lichfield, main



Answering the 21st century call to alms

Almshouses are springing up at the fastest rate for over a century and the charities behind them are on a very modern mission. By Laura Silverman

DAPH LAWRENCE, ANDREW FOX FOR THE TELEGRAPH; COMBES/GETTY IMAGES



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Almshouses are being built at the fastest rate since Victorian times – with more than 1,000 homes springing up in the past decade. Nick Phillips, chief executive of the Almshouse Association, says 257 new homes are being built, with plans for 455 more. This is partly in response to demographics: the number of over-85s in Britain is expected to rise from 1.6 million in 2018 to 3 million by 2043.

Almshouses have traditionally accommodated the elderly and people in need with homes below market price, funded by charities. Many of the original almshouses remain: Trinity Hospital at Castle Rising, Norfolk, was opened in the 17th century for single women in financial need who lived in surrounding villages. Back then, residents had to wear a red cloak with a black pointy hat, now the rules are more relaxed



COMMUNITY-MINDED Vera James, top, who lives in a cottage at the Robert Stokes Almshouse in Salisbury, above, loves meeting the local nursery children

and there is no dress code, although residents like to don the uniform occasionally. The almshouses being built now suggest the charities behind them have wider ambitions. Many of the new buildings are being built so that they are integral to the wider community; others are opening up to people of all ages in an effort to ease loneliness among the elderly. Almshouses, first built in medieval times, are coming into the 21st century.

LINKING UP

This spring United St Saviour's, a 500-year-old charity, will begin work on an almshouse for 80 residents in Bermondsey, south London. "We aim to create an innovative community building, where we can be experimental and take risks," says Martyn Craddock, chief executive of the charity. "We want older people to feel valued in community life and break down barriers that are increasing between generations."

Several projects, he says, will be aimed at improving social connections. A community lounge might welcome toddlers, as well as local people of all ages who might want to knit or socialise together. An on-site cookery school, open to residents, might also be used by students from nearby schools. Gardening clubs will be invited to the grounds. The charity aims to build links with nearby organisations and businesses – "our residents might even help out and volunteer for them," adds Craddock.

One site, run by Salisbury City Almshouses and Welfare Charities, is already putting a similar ethos into practice. Last year, Robert Stokes Almshouse held weekly activity sessions for residents (average age 88) and local nursery school children (average age four), where they decorated biscuits together, made models with Play-Doh and took part in a sports day. It has also been running a scheme with local students with learning disabilities, who are helping residents with their shopping.

Vera James, 90, lives in Brickett's Hospital, a neighbouring cottage run by the charity, and joins in with the activities as much as she can. James was born in nearby Alderbury and has lived at the almshouse for 26 years. "I've really enjoyed meeting up with the nursery-school children," she says. "They came in full of enthusiasm and chatted away." Residents drew pictures illustrating stories in the children's books. "How do you draw an alien that matches a three or four-year old's expectations?" says James. "That's not an alien" was the response to my effort." James is also using the service offered by the students. "They do a little shop for us, and we exchange news when they bring it round," she says. "It's good for all of us to interact with each other. I try to appreciate how many aspects of life do not come easy to them."

Their community activities don't just benefit the people living in the almshouses. "Some of the children have had little contact with their own grandparents, so now they've been able to know older people as individuals

rather than just "the elderly," says Susan Coen, clerk to the trustees at the charity. "Some of the residents can't get out much, so this has bought life and energy to them." The mini-shopping trips have also been successful: students have practised money skills, while residents get stamps or biscuits delivered to their door. "Everyone benefits from building relationships across generations," adds Coen.

GENERATION GAME

Some charities are building on this by opening up to all – not just older people. "There's a lot of interest in multi-generational almshouses," says Phillips. "We're starting to see a lot of interest from younger people who are in need and lonely becoming part of almshouse communities."

Spinnery Court in Bridgforth, near Wolverhampton, is open to residents of any age. Completed at the end of 2017, there are homes available to six people under 35, as well as 20 places for over-50s. "We recognise that financial need is prevalent across all ages," says Robert Davies, chairman of the trustees of Bridgforth Housing Trust, which runs the properties. "We want to create communities where the young and old can benefit from each other. Building multi-generational communities is the way forward."

The homes are available to those who are most in need of them. One man, aged 80, used to live with relatives, until the relationship became rocky. Time in care and the cost of rent left him feeling depressed and lonely, until he moved into the almshouses.

Another couple in their 70s started to find it hard to get around and struggled to get out when they lived in a rented second-floor flat. Now they live at the almshouses, on the ground floor, and get around on mobility scooters.

But the almshouses also provide homes to residents you might not ex-



pect. "People often come to us following marriage and relationship breakdowns," says Louise Davis, a clerk to the trustees.

One 25-year-old single parent who works at a care home couldn't afford private rent, nor could a couple in their 30s who both work in retail. A 45-year-old woman with learning disabilities needed a home, too. She had lived with her parents, until they became ill. Now at the almshouses, she has found a job as a cleaner.

Charities like Bridgforth hope that younger people might be able to help older ones out sometimes, carrying their shopping or taking them to a doctor, while older residents might be able to assist with childcare. The key is that they will support each other.

The provision of affordable accommodation is still the main driver behind new almshouses, but trustees are realising the buildings have other roles to

play: loneliness and isolation don't just affect the elderly.

"This is new thinking in almshouses," says Phillips. "They are part of a movement, a spirit of developing micro-communities."

GOING GREENER

The environment is a big factor in most new building projects – and almshouses are no exception. While residents' comfort and safety is the priority when it comes to construction, charities are also taking sustainable building materials, efficient heating and green spaces into account. "Environmental sustainability is becoming increasingly important when developing or refurbishing almshouses," says Phillips.

A new eco-complex is under way in Dartmouth, overseen by Dartmouth United Charities and Dartmouth Trust. The four one-bedroom flats will be

'We want older people to feel valued and break down generation barriers'

DESIGNS ON SUCCESS
Ladies at Trinity Rising in Norfolk, left; below left, the design for United St Saviour's new almshouse in Bermondsey, south London; below, St John's Lichfield

built using locally sourced materials and low-carbon concrete with solar panels.

Sarah Massey, manager of the Dartmouth Trust, says the buildings will be "extremely energy-efficient", adding that "an initial analysis suggests the scheme could be carbon neutral". Residents will benefit, too, from light and quiet homes with low running costs. "It's likely that energy bills will be next to nothing," she adds. Construction is due to be complete by the end of the year.

The Dartmouth complex will join a growing number of "eco-almshouses", including one run by St John's Almshouses in Lichfield, which opened a couple of years ago. These buildings, comprising 19 flats, use handmade bricks, and have clay roof tiles and meandering walkways. They are arranged around a courtyard with an oak-framed pavilion at the centre, encouraging a spirit of community. There's even a wild flower meadow in the grounds.

For the residents of the first almshouse established by this charity, in the 15th century, this design might not come as a surprise. The inspiration for the garden, with its raised beds for growing vegetables, is based on ones found in medieval monasteries. But the focus on sustainability and community seems even more important today. These are the almshouses of the future.



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