



# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Call to Alms

*#C21CalltoAlms*

## Introduction

We are in the middle of a housing crisis.

There is a greater need for affordable homes today than ever before. According to research carried out by Heriot-Watt University in 2019, 8.4 million people in the United Kingdom are living in an unaffordable, insecure or unsuitable home.

In our fast-paced modern world, people are also lonelier and more socially disconnected than at any other time. A study by The Co-op and the British Red Cross revealed over 9 million people in the UK are either always or often lonely. Loneliness, living alone and social isolation can lead to dementia, heart disease, depression, and even early death.

A 2016 UK study by Age UK found that there are 1.2 million chronically lonely elderly people. Social isolation and exclusion affect people of all ages and social groups, particularly those who are poor, as well as young care leavers, the bereaved, divorced, the disabled, and the chronically ill. The problems associated with insecure, unaffordable and unsuitable housing and the serious negative consequences of social isolation, then, are unfairly concentrated in those people who are already struggling and disadvantaged. These are the people that the Almshouse movement exists to support, in the heart of their local community.

## More than just a roof

Almshouses are more than just a roof. At its heart, the Almshouse Movement is all about people. Almshouses create communities, a sense of belonging, and provide social connection. They give people a place and a purpose. This in turn has a positive impact on their wellbeing.

For over 1000 years, almshouses have been providing safe, affordable homes. Today, there are over 36,000 almshouses in the UK. More than 1,000 new almshouses have been built in the last decade, and another 750 are in the pipeline. This is a faster build rate than at any time since the Victorian era. Back then, dire conditions for the poor prompted generous philanthropists to endow almshouses. Today, almshouse trustees nationwide have recognised the urgent need for more affordable housing, and that almshouses must continue to flourish and adapt to meet the demands of 21st century living.

At the Almshouse Association, we support over 1600 member charities who work tirelessly to deliver safe, comfortable homes across the country. Our mission is for almshouses to be recognised by all as an exemplar form of community housing.

## What is an Almshouse?

Whilst most people are aware of the traditional and fine almshouse buildings dotted all over the United Kingdom, few know exactly what they are, or realise how vibrant and relevant the almshouse movement is today. Almshouses are the oldest form of community housing. They are charities that provide accommodation to those in need locally. They are very often funded by local benefactors and are led by volunteers as trustees. Almshouse charities support all kinds of different beneficiaries, including individuals, couples and families. Some almshouses serve ex-members of a particular trade, like fishermen, or coalminers, others serve military veterans similar to the famous Chelsea Pensioners. Most serve those in need locally – young and old – who are struggling financially, are disabled, particularly socially isolated, or elderly and infirm.

Almshouses provide a strong sense of community; and make it possible for beneficiaries to continue to live independently, in a locality of their choice, often near to families. The Almshouse Association is the national voice and advocate for these charities, and since 1946 has worked hard to ensure that the Government, the charity sector and the general public understand and value the vital contribution that almshouses that have served the Nation for hundreds of years continue to contribute to our social fabric and national life.

*‘Coming to live in an almshouse has changed my life. Although I only lived five miles away from the town, I feel like I’ve moved a million miles’*

Colin, rurally isolated Army veteran

## Who are we and what do we do?

The Almshouse Association is a support charity representing a vast network of over 1,600 independent almshouse charities across the UK that provide affordable housing for over 35,000 residents. So well regarded is our work, we are the only UK organisation that has a partnership agreement with the Charity Commission.

Almshouse charities are woven into the fabric of almost every community; they are uniquely placed to understand and be responsive to local needs. Our role is to assist the trustees of these charities to manage their resources effectively, to support them in providing good quality housing for their beneficiaries, to promote the welfare and independence of residents, and to preserve the historic tradition of almshouses for future generations.

We provide a wealth of advice, guidance, training, information and services, to support the improvement and development of the almshouse movement across the UK. With our help and expertise, this unique and vibrant network of almshouse charities, and their armies of tens of thousands of committed local volunteers, can continue to develop their provision to support those who are most vulnerable in society. Customer service is a priority and our hardworking team takes pride in solving problems for members. In brief, we:

- Are the **National voice** and advocate for our 1,600+ members with government and policy makers to offset the impact of legislation and regulation e.g. we obtained an exemption from the Right to Buy which would have had a serious impact;
- Provide swift **guidance and support** to individual almshouse charities – we help with everything from a leaky roof, health & safety, public liability insurance, to information on the best way to refurbish homes with the latest energy saving technology;
- Come to the aid of almshouse charities in difficulty with over £1m in **Interest Free Loans, grants** for development and **crisis support** each year;
- Provide **guidance on fundraising** from other statutory and voluntary grant-makers, as well as working with the Almshouse Consortium, which since its inception has collectively drawn down £27m and supported the development of 1,226 residential dwellings;



- Provide a comprehensive **website** with a special members area, where charities can download template documents and contracts, guidance manuals, as well as participate in a thriving online members' forum for peer support;
- Produce a quarterly **newsletter**, the Almshouse Gazette, which is a valued and appreciated means of sharing good practice and policy updates, as well as celebrating the success and achievements of our members;
- Deliver **training seminars** through the year across the country, which are always fully booked, and provide important networking and skills-sharing opportunities; and offer an online training package to support trustees in their work.
- Develop a network of **Regional Champions** across our membership to widen our reach and facilitate local networking and support structures.
- Engage with our network of **Ambassadors** to support our mission.

***From crisis to success with our help.***

*'When the future of the Trust was in doubt, I always used to look to the original benefactor for inspiration and am sure she would be delighted to see the residents happy, the almshouses restored and the future of her Trust secured.'*

Hilary and Dan, Trustees, Grade II listed Almshouse Charity, West Yorkshire

## What challenges are we facing?

Almshouses can be found in virtually every town and parish, but the immense social good they perform is still largely unknown. Many of our member charities have a history of supporting those in need going back to the medieval period, yet they remain crucial and relevant to the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> Century living. We believe that almshouses need to be a vital part of the affordable housing solution at the highest levels of national and local government. As we look to the challenges of the future, the Almshouse Association needs to:

- Raise awareness, and increase the profile and support of the almshouse movement, and its positive impact on people and places amongst MPs, House of Lords, policy makers and housing specialists, positioning almshouses as the preferred partner in affordable housing development, amidst the noise of (often competing) housing stakeholders and agendas;
- Ensure that our members and their trustees are empowered and engaged with delivering the highest quality service to their residents;
- Swiftly identify and support those almshouse charities that are struggling or in crisis, to ensure the improvement and sustainability of these charities going forward;
- Keep vulnerable people at the heart of everything we do whilst preserving the heritage of almshouse buildings and keeping alive their rich and important history for future generations.

## Fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Our Strategy

The Almshouse Association has the experience, expertise, management structure and national reach, to more than meet these challenges. We will lead the way as champions of the almshouse movement, so that it can adapt and flourish, and continue to provide good quality, affordable community housing, for the welfare of residents. Our carefully planned and costed strategy will allow us to:

- Continue to act as a bridge between almshouse charities and government, policy makers, and stakeholders – building relationships with parliamentarians, and decision makers, as well as attending relevant conferences, and networking events;
- Rebrand the Association, with a new logo, new website, focused social media campaign and augmented relationships with sponsors and corporate partners;



- Develop a UK network of 20 volunteer Regional Champions to raise the profile of our services with members, commissioners, associations and local government, to better meet the needs of vulnerable residents across the country;
- Develop our training offer and deliver nationally to continually improve the service to residents;
- Host 20 regular regional meetings annually, to increase the engagement of individual charities with the help and services we offer, and increase access to training, regional networking and skills sharing for our members;
- Grow and diversify our income so that we can improve and expand our services, Interest Free Loans, and crisis grants to safeguard and strengthen the services of our members;
- Increase our partnerships, working with organisations also committed to supporting those in need to access housing, particularly those who are isolated and marginalised;
- Invest in trustee recruitment, training, support and retention to ensure our member charities move with the times, and remain relevant and sustainable;
- Implement a 'health-check' system and outcomes framework to identify, and support, those charities in crisis, and work alongside them to return their charity to a sustainable position (remedial grants, training, support, evaluation);
- Increase our sharing of best practice, championing progressive almshouse charities, who have successfully re-interpreted the wishes of their founding benefactors, and are well networked locally, to meet the current needs and changing expectations of residents, partners, and funders in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Our Impact

Delivering this work will make a significant impact, not just for our members, but for the growing numbers of vulnerable almshouse residents throughout the UK. We will:

- Be the voice and advocate of 1600+ members Almshouse charities, and their residents, championing good governance, innovative practices, and sustainable growth, and exemplary service delivery;
- Put almshouses front and centre as a progressive, people and community-focused solution to the country's affordable housing needs with government and decision makers;
- Improve and refurbish 100 almshouses each year, bringing them up to first class standard;
- Support, both practically and financially, the development of 200 new builds each year to meet the diverse needs of the communities that our members serve;
- Help recruit and train 100 new, dynamic and progressive almshouse charity trustees each year to drive forward change and innovation in the movement;
- Ensure that every member charity benefits from the full services and support we offer through our nationwide networking and peer support programme.

## Our Funding Needs

The Almshouse Association delivers exceptional value for money, given the scope and scale of our work, providing invaluable help, support and guidance to our 1,600+ member charities. For voluntary trustees, however, running an almshouse charity and navigating all the legislation governing the provision of homes and their upkeep, raising funds and managing finances can be difficult and very time-consuming.

Many almshouses are listed buildings and upgrading them is complex and expensive, requiring planning and conservation consent. It is a huge task, particularly since the housing shortage means almshouses are under pressure, with demand almost trebling in the last 12 months. We need to ensure that vacant almshouses are upgraded and needy residents housed, and new ones are built to address the current need.

Over the last year, we have also seen a significant increase in the support needed by our member charities, with more and more trustees approaching us at crisis point, very worried that they might not be able to carry on. We are currently supporting over 70 charities with complex issues that are threatening their sustainability, and applications for our interest free loans and grants have quadrupled in the same time.



We need to ensure that our members are making full use of our services, not just at crisis point, as well as put in place detailed action plans, and a package of support, for those almshouses in difficulty.

Our members pay a subscription fee which covers around 50% of our annual running costs. To achieve our ambitions and continue to respond to increasing demand, we need to increase our income and invest in capacity.

### We need to raise:

- £250k annually for grants and holistic support to an additional 50 almshouse charities and their 200 trustees who are at absolute crisis point – struggling financially, with governance and upkeep of the buildings – to get them on a sustainable footing;
- £500k annually to support the delivery of new builds and refurbished almshouses across the country (with 300 planned for 2021);
- 250k annually to build capacity of the Almshouse Association at a regional and national level, to enable us to provide the increased support our members need.
- A specific fund to support our Welsh members following a recent audit to assess the need for targeted support and development in Wales.
- £500k annually to support the sympathetic refurbishments of our listed almshouses.

*“My ancestors in this area go back over 450 years and could well have walked the ground that our almshouses were built on in 1604 – that’s a good reason to be involved. There is much joy in the doing”*

*Tony, Chair of Trustees, Almshouse Charity, rural Somerset*

### Our History

At the Almshouse Association, we support over 1600 member charities who work tirelessly to deliver safe, comfortable homes across the country.

Almshouses have been in existence for more than 1000 years, with the oldest surviving one opened as far back as 990 in Worcester. Of the 1,600+ member almshouse charities today, over 30% occupy Listed buildings and many lie in the heart of towns and villages, ensuring that they remain closely integrated in the local community, with the added benefit of ensuring residents are close to shops and services. Almshouses provide a sense of safety and security without isolating residents from the outside world.

The Almshouse Association traces its roots back to February 1946 when, at a meeting held in the Chapter House of Southwark Cathedral, representatives of London’s Almshouses formed a committee to safeguard the interests of Almshouse buildings and the welfare of residents. In 1950, the committee extended its remit, and the National Association of Almshouses (The Almshouse Association) was born.

We hope you will join us and be part of the movement to ensure the growth and sustainability of these wonderful charities for the next 1000 years. **#C21CalltoAlms**



## Case Studies

### Colin, resident



Colin, an army veteran, was offered an almshouse following a difficult time living in a rurally isolated location, unable to drive and with no access to facilities.

He felt isolated, abandoned and not connected to the community. He moved into the converted 'Breadhouse' with his extensive book collection and is now able to see his family more often, enjoy local cricket matches and be part of the micro-community that the almshouses provide.

**'Although I only lived five miles away from the town, I feel like I've moved a million miles. Coming to live in an almshouse has changed my life'**

### Dan, trustee



Dan, a young businessman worked with a fellow trustee to take a struggling charity from crisis to success, providing safe, comfortable homes in Grade II listed properties in a small village in West Yorkshire.

**'You can't help but be intrigued and humbled by the history of almshouses and what they stand for – it is our duty to keep such places going and we are proud to do so'**

## Sheila, trustee



Sheila moved to Somerset and became Clerk to the local almshouse charity because she wanted to get involved with the thriving community she had chosen to settle in. Today she is a valued member of the community and has been asked to represent the almshouse movement at this year's Royal Garden Party.

**'There is no doubt that our residents love and respect their homes and are proud that they are on the Tourist map of our town. They are a pleasure to know'**

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