



WHAT IS AN ALMSHOUSE?

The official definition of an almshouse has been recognised by the Charity Commission in its new, approved guidance on almshouses.

After 2 years of hard work, this is a major milestone for The Almshouse Association – the membership charity representing over 1600 independent almshouse charities – which has long persevered for credible recognition of almshouses as an affordable housing provider.

For the last 1000 years, almshouses have existed as an affordable social housing model but there has been no clear definition of an almshouse by a Government department.

Today, as The Almshouse Association prepares to celebrate its 75th anniversary of supporting the Almshouse Movement, this community-led housing model now has the seal of official approval.

Says Nick Phillips, CEO of The Almshouse Association, “We believe that the Movement is growing at its fastest rate since the Victorian era, with a thousand new homes having been created in the last ten years and some 36,000 residents enjoying affordable living in 30,000 properties around the UK. Another 700 are being built or are in the pipeline.

We are delighted with this timely affirmation by the Charity Commission of our individual and long-established form of housing which is every bit as relevant today. This recognition will help us to move forward with our discussions with local and national Government, ensuring that our members are not hindered in their efforts to support their charities.”

The official recognised definition of an almshouse is:

An almshouse is a unit of residential accommodation (usually a house or flat) which belongs to a charity, is provided exclusively to meet the charity's purposes (for example, the relief of financial need or infirmity) and is occupied or is available for occupation under a licence by a qualified beneficiary.

An almshouse charity is typically a charity which is established for purposes which are to be furthered by the provision of one or more almshouses.

An almshouse charity is usually a charity for the relief of financial hardship by the provision of housing and associated services or benefits which must (or is authorised to) provide its primary benefit by the grant of a licence to occupy the accommodation that it owns to its beneficiaries.

In addition, an almshouse charity is likely to have one or more of the following features:

1. The origin of the charity is a private gift for the relief of poverty;
2. The beneficiaries are required to pay a weekly maintenance contribution that must not be set at a level that would cause hardship;
3. The nature of the accommodation is such that the licence requires that beneficiaries must show particular consideration for the needs of other residents;
4. A significant proportion of the accommodation is permanent endowment;
5. The beneficial class or the geographical area from which it can be drawn is restricted.

Note: Almshouses do not necessarily have the word “almshouse” in their name; they may be referred to by another title, such as ‘College’, ‘Hospital’ or ‘Homes’. This is due to the historical nature of some almshouses and the contemporary usage of these terms at the time the almshouse was established.

Principles of almshouses

- Almshouses are the oldest form of social housing dating back to 990
- Almshouses provide genuinely affordable community led housing which is protected from being repurposed (not subject to the Right to Buy)
- Almshouses are a sanctuary, a supportive retreat and part of an integrated community but respect independent living
- Legally, historically and socially unique
- Local leadership (trustees of charities) by volunteers
- Homes at a truly affordable cost, residents pay a weekly maintenance contribution that does not add to hardship
- Their distinctive three sided layout with separate living areas, often surrounding a central communal space, helps alleviate some of the feelings of isolation and supports a 'micro-community' spirit.



Image courtesy of Hopton's Almshouses - United St Saviour's Charity



Image courtesy of The Mills Charity

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