



2021 AGM – 29th September 2021

The Almshouse Association Chair, Elizabeth Fathi presented a reflection of The Almshouse Association for 2020 and thoughts for the future direction

The Chair opened her presentation by saying how proud she was of The Almshouse Association and its members and went on to say:

“The hard work, dedication, commitment and steely determination shown by trustees and staff looking after almshouse charities up and down the country in the middle of a pandemic must and should be recognised by all of us in the almshouse movement. These are the cultures and values that have stood the test of time over the last millennium. There is no doubting the sense of purpose and responsibility held by our members, and it is applauded not just within your Association but by our Patron, those in Westminster, reporters and documentary makers as well as residents and their families. There is a wealth of support for the almshouse model and the almshouse movement and there is no doubt that this year has seen a surge of interest, illustrated by the activities and media interest documented in our Annual Report.

This support cannot be underestimated. Over the last year we have been honoured to welcome new ambassadors: The Archbishop of Canterbury, Baroness Joan Bakewell, Theresa May, Dan Cruickshank and Kevin Crossley-Holland, all who join our existing Ambassadors. Their high profile commitment to almshouses allows us an invaluable platform high enough so that we can shout from the rooftops.

What is it that our many supporters see in almshouses that means they willingly give their time and energy? Well far be it from me to speak for them, but I feel confident from the conversations we have had, to summarise as follows.

Almshouses provide homes. Places of sanctuary often located in a central position and within a familiar community, part of a distinctive small group that is a visual marker of a sure-footed and solid charitable beginning. There is often a name to the building, a nod to the original provider perhaps, but nevertheless one or two words that shows compassion has lived in this place for many a year. Residents often show a sense of belonging - that can border on territorial – and why not. These are places where you can be. Where others are there. Just a few. Nothing too big, nothing too impersonal.

I do not mean to take you down the garden path wearing rosy spectacles. You will also know the challenges faced daily by those who look after the buildings, the residents and the charity governance all of which make up an almshouse trustee’s work. I hope this, your Association, provides the support and assistance for you as you face those daily decisions. There is no doubt that being a trustee of an almshouse is a very different prospect than being a trustee of many other charities. Not many have to balance the needs of the beneficiaries as they become older and more frail with the limitations around the buildings (often old and listed – though beautiful nevertheless) and then add to the mix regulations affecting those activities and specific duties of care.

But it is worth it. To hear a resident exclaim that living in an almshouse is better than winning the lottery, to be chosen as where a resident would rather spend Christmas, to be the custodian of the most beautiful buildings holding pride of place within the town – these are just a few of the reasons why we are all here.

At our 75th anniversary garden party this year, Nick reminded everyone present of the reason behind the establishment of the Association. He took us back to the minutes of a meeting in 1946 between a small group of people who could see the light fading over almshouses as the government led a vigorous post war housebuilding programme. Those visionary few set the pace for the rest of us and, I think, (I hope they would say) we have responded. Here we are some 75 years later with 1600 members looking after 35,000 almshouses.



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That is some achievement. Perhaps the hard work and determination of our predecessors over the last 1000 years is what is keeping us on our toes!

We can, of course, always do more.

At the quarterly meetings of the Association, we always spend time looking at how we are measuring up to the strategy we set three years ago. A strategy we are about to review at an Away Day planned for November. Thanks to Nick's skill and expertise, along with all the staff at Billingbear, and despite the pandemic, our aims to improve member services and to extend the representational reach are being met. We have provided more detail in the Annual Report to the Accounts and I hope they provide a good read. As we move into the next phase, we are aiming to further improve our core services whilst also focussing on greater support for those almshouse charities that are in greatest need of our help. This is not at the expense of working with those almshouse trustees who are at the forefront of innovative work perhaps extending existing charities, assisting neighbours in need or even those new benefactors thinking of setting up a new charity or partnership. Our strategy is an inclusive one and our services are here for all members.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Nick and all the staff at Association for their commitment, their diligence and their hard work. It does not go unnoticed.

I have so many people I need to thank – this is an organisation of many moving parts with many wonderful, dedicated and loyal supporters. As well as our Ambassadors, there are Regional Champions who work closely with almshouses in their own local patch, our Advisory Board who willingly give their specialised skills and expertise without charge, our Awards Panel chaired by former chair of the Association Simon Pott, and our much-appreciated Honorary Treasurer, Simon Ling.

There are our sponsors and donors without who we could not provide the level of services, grants and loans to members.

Thank you, to one and all, though two words just doesn't seem quite enough. We have listed all our supporters in the Annual Report and repeat our huge appreciation there too.

I cannot close without thanking my fellow board members for their loyalty, their independence of thought, for their skills and expertise, and for their friendship as we work through the challenges and opportunities faced by the Association and the wider movement. It is a great pleasure and a privilege to work with you.

This Association, your Association, really is the result of a huge team effort.

To you, our members, please keep in touch. Our door is always open and we always appreciate hearing from you.

I hope 2021 is a good year for all and look forward to seeing you next year at The Member's Day in Wolverhampton on the 15 June.

Until then, thank you for joining us today.