

Expanding the provision on almshouses to improve our future communities

© Thursday, 18 November 2021

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It may seem odd to suggest that our future communities might be improved by looking at a housing model which has existed for 1,000 years. However, there is a lot to learn from a model which has had to adapt and change to survive hundreds of years of change and turmoil. Furthermore, as our [recent research report](#) shows, this model provides savings of £43m annually. Much of this is through the encouragement of companionship and reduced isolation. So what role could almshouses play in our future communities?

Currently, we find that our communities suffer from a certain disconnect. During the pandemic, we all witnessed a new sense of community spirit; caring for our neighbours and those in need. Yet, as normality has resumed, we find that people are drifting away again as they move back to work and find other engagements. But what if, moving forward, we recognise the value of what we had for a few short months? Communities that encouraged more significant interaction and co-operation. Almshouses are multi-faceted in their ability to contribute to this challenge.

First, almshouse charities are designed mainly to serve a need to a particular locality, perhaps a town or village, allowing for a focused approach of supporting those most in need in the community. Second, they are managed by trustees drawn from, visible in and accountable to the community. These individuals have a better understanding of the local need than any national body. Third, many traditional almshouses have been built in the spirit of companionship. They are designed to encourage interaction through their beautiful courtyards and doors, which open onto one another. By learning from the spirit and designs of almshouses, we can provide a more significant opportunity for bringing people closer together in a living environment. As a cornerstone of the communities they serve, almshouses can get those in need together protected within the embrace of their neighbours.

Traditionally seen as housing for older people, many almshouses are now using the unique flexibility offered by the model to change and address those in need today. Many have re-evaluated the need within their local area and found that the elderly are perhaps not the most in need anymore and instead look to support young people and families. As a genuinely affordable housing option, bound by their Governing Documents to “not cause financial hardship” to the resident, almshouses present a fantastic option for young people and families who would otherwise be priced out of the communities they have grown up in. Through genuinely affordable Weekly Maintenance Contributions (almshouse rent), people have the appropriate breathing space to save and build a life of their own beyond the almshouse in an area of their choosing. This is a beneficial option in rural areas where affordable housing is scarcely available. Yet, due to the legal exemption enjoyed by almshouses, they can provide small scale solutions to these communities in perpetuity. If we are to improve affordable options in those areas currently lacking, almshouses must be considered a robust and viable option for the future!

We should look to bring ourselves closer to one another, encouraging neighbourliness and tackling loneliness and affordability. Although small, almshouses can continue to provide part of the solution for our future communities as they have for those of our past.

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