



Housing LIN

*Connecting people, ideas and resources*

## Viewpoint 100

# Almshouses for the 21st century: transformation in progress

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Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by **Jenny Pannell, Alison Pooley** and **Sally-Anne Francis**, Anglia Ruskin University



# Introduction

It is appropriate that this Viewpoint should be no.100 as almshouses are the oldest form of community-led housing, pre-dating other social housing by many centuries. Today there are 30,000 almshouse bungalows, cottages, flats and houses in villages, towns and cities. Almshouse charities have much to offer their local communities in meeting housing need with existing and new provision, but their role is not always understood.

This Viewpoint draws on Anglia Ruskin University (ARU)'s programme of almshouse research since 2017, to

- explain the distinctive contribution that almshouse charities can offer their local communities
- outline the extent and characteristics of almshouse provision
- explore partnerships, governance and management initiatives that are helping to transform almshouse provision for the 21st century
- identify case studies of new almshouse developments, including working with local authorities and a Community Land Trust
- provide local authorities, commissioners and other professionals with ideas and examples for working with almshouse charities, to meet housing need and complement local strategies for housing, care and support
- consider the direction of travel towards 2030 and beyond.

This Viewpoint updates Jenny Pannell's Housing LIN Report *Transforming almshouses for the 21st century* (2013): <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Transforming-almshouses-for-the-21st-century/> and is one of a series of resources offered by the Housing LIN looking at different housing options for older people and others in need of support and care. There are further resources on the Almshouse pages at: <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Almshouses/> and on community-led and cohousing opportunities including Community Land Trusts: <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Cohousing/>



Cover Image: Winnocks and Kendalls Almshouses, Colchester

Original Grade 1 listed 17th century almshouses (L) and new 21st century almshouses (R)

Image source: Authors

Above: Winnocks and Kendalls Almshouses: dedication plaques (above front door): 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th century benefactors

Image source: Authors

# What can almshouses offer their local communities?

Almshouse charities fit well with the growing interest in local, community-led housing solutions, offering affordable social housing in villages, towns and cities. With housing association properties at risk of the Right to Buy, almshouse charities can be an attractive partner because they are protected from future changes to legislation or practice and will keep affordable housing available in perpetuity. There is now significant interest within the almshouse movement about how best to adapt the model to ensure it is fit for purpose in the 21st century.

## What is distinctive about almshouses and almshouse charities?

The Almshouse Association and its 1600 member charities are now developing their networks, both within the movement and externally. Today, over 36,000 people live in 30,000 almshouse dwellings: most residents are older people (aged 50/60+). There are almshouses in most areas of England, but very few in the devolved nations for historical reasons. In a few localities, large charities are significant providers, for example Durham Aged Mineworkers Homes (DAMHA: North East) and Pickering and Ferens Homes (PFH: Hull, East Riding) with thousands of properties including new two-bed bungalows. Elsewhere, what almshouse charities offer is not so much the number of dwellings (compared with other social housing) but their convenient location, enabling people to maintain links with neighbourhood, family, and friends. Examples include almshouses in expensive areas (including central London), town centres (near shops and transport) and villages with little or no affordable housing.

The image may be of listed buildings (historic courtyards, pretty cottages) but many almshouses are modern purpose-built developments. Some larger charities provide sheltered housing (often with on-site staff), and a few provide extra care housing, but most almshouses are for people who can live independently (with additional support if needed). Some charities have always housed younger people or families; others have no lower age limit. A few developments are specifically designed for families, people with support needs or disabilities, or as inter-generational housing (see The Mills Charity below, and further examples in Pannell 2013 and Pannell 1999:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Almshouses-into-the-next-millennium-Paternalism-partnership-progress/>

Almshouses differ from other social housing because of their charitable origins: almshouse residents are licensees and pay a Weekly Maintenance Contribution which is eligible for housing benefits. The Almshouse Association has written a helpful definition of an almshouse.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **What is an almshouse? Almshouse Association Definition of an Almshouse**

An almshouse is a unit of residential accommodation (usually a house or flat) which belongs to a charity and is provided exclusively to meet the charity's purpose such as but not limited to the relief of financial need or infirmity and is occupied or is available for occupation under a licence by a qualified beneficiary who may be required to contribute a weekly sum towards its maintenance. An almshouse charity is a charity which is established to provide one or more almshouses.

Source: <https://www.almshouses.org/what-is-an-almshouse/>

Most charities require applicants to have a local connection and limited resources. Some have additional eligibility requirements or give preference to applicants who meet certain criteria (including occupation, religion, gender). For more details, see the forthcoming RICS report *Almshouses: a model of community housing for an ageing population*, Pannell and Pooley (2020), and Pannell (2013).

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Almshouses/>

## Current challenges and opportunities: how are almshouses changing?

The 2013 Housing LIN report identified key challenges and risks for the almshouse movement if charities failed to meet rising expectations from residents and partner agencies. Issues included

- housing quality: disrepair, unsuitable design, bedsits, poor access, no lifts, difficult to modernise historic buildings; and
- governance (lack of resident involvement, outdated paternalistic image, lack of engagement with statutory and third sector agencies, charity structures, restrictive eligibility criteria for residents).

So how are these challenges being addressed?

## More resident involvement, greater inclusion?

In 2019, reflecting on recent changes and continuing challenges for the almshouse movement, a retiring Almshouse Association Board member (2008-2019) wrote:

*“From day one on the Board, I felt things needed to change ... As new people were appointed, the number in favour of change increased ... I see a bright future but there are things we all need to do ... We absolutely have to ensure that residents are treated as consumers of a service, not passive recipients of a charity. This involves setting and maintaining high standards of housing provision and management and involving residents in the service. The Birmingham Almshouse Charities are leading the way here ...*

*The other crucial change is that the movement must become more representative of society as it is today, which means greater involvement at all levels of the movement by people from minority groups [including] much greater resident diversity, and ... trustees”.*

**Alan Martin, Company Secretary, The Yardley Great Trust (The Almshouses Gazette, Autumn 2019 (page 15)**

Four Birmingham almshouse charities<sup>2</sup> have created a joint Residents’ Scrutiny Panel, with an independent facilitator and resident representatives from each charity. This provides an independent ‘critical friend’ to monitor specific aspects (starting with complaints processes) and an opportunity to share good practice, ensuring that services are resident-centred and continuously improving.

<sup>2</sup> Harborne Parish Lands, Lench’s Trust, Sir Josiah Mason Trust, Yardley Great Trust

To underline their commitment to improve services for the LGBTQ+ community, Sir Josiah Mason Trust is a HouseProud Pledge Pioneer.<sup>3</sup> Their CEO explains:

*“We know that many older LGBTQ+ people have experienced decades of discrimination and that making a decision to live in a historic almshouse organisation like ours can be daunting. We are an inclusive forward-thinking organisation that wants to better represent and reflect our community and the pledge will help us work towards achieving this inspiration.”*

**David Healey, Chief Executive, Sir Josiah Mason Trust and current Almshouse Association Board member**

<https://www.sjmt.org.uk/house-proud-pledge>

## Who lives in almshouses today?

Almshouse charities have always housed people at risk of homelessness; if they have vacancies, anecdotal evidence suggests that they can sometimes be more flexible than larger providers. After remodelling their almshouses, charities may also be able to offer housing to a wider range of applicants. Here we feature some examples from ARU research:

- a Staffordshire charity converted eight small bedsits (for single people) into four two-bedroom bungalows; trustees could then consider small families in need of affordable housing
- a Cambridgeshire charity owned eight Victorian almshouses in poor condition, built for “poor widows” and still housing single women: following remodelling, trustees could offer housing to younger disabled women
- a 63-year-old homeless man in Surrey was living in a shed (so had no address); trustees advocated on his behalf to ensure his entitlement to Housing Benefit so that he could move into their almshouse
- two people at risk of homelessness moved into refurbished almshouses in a Hampshire village, allowing them to maintain their local connections
- a pub landlady was losing her tied housing in London when the brewery sold the pub: she moved into a new bungalow nearby, built on spare land behind existing almshouses
- a woman affected by Windrush was homeless (sofa-surfing) and unable to access housing: she was rehoused by an East Anglian almshouse charity.

As well as 32 traditional almshouses for older residents, Worcester Municipal Charities funds an impressive programme of housing and support for single homeless people, in partnership with local third sector organisations (including the CAB) and Worcester City Council. The charity has created over 60 almshouse flats above shops and in empty office buildings with their own funds and Homes England/HCA grants, featured in LIN Case Study 156:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Almshouse-flats-for-homeless-people-Sir-Thomas-White-Court-Worcester/>

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<sup>3</sup> The HouseProud Pledge was developed by HouseProud (a network for LGBTQ+ people working in social housing) and the University of Surrey.

# How far is the almshouse movement engaging with statutory and third sector agencies, housing research and the wider public?

The Almshouse Association's recent engagement with central government and agencies in the housing and charity sectors has included regular meetings with MPs and Lords, discussions with the Charity Commission on the definition of almshouses (see above, page 2) and work with Historic England on managing the conservation of historic almshouses, whilst keeping them fit for purpose. A strategy to raise the movement's profile has led to more extensive media coverage, drawing almshouses to the attention of prospective partners and the wider public, via national and local press/ websites, TV programmes and social media.

Almshouses used to be noticeable by their absence from most housing research and reports (e.g. HAPPI and APPG reports). This is also changing (see for example Lady Lumley Almshouses, Thornton le Dale, North Yorkshire, a rural almshouse refurbishment featured in HAPPI 4: *Housing our Ageing Population: Preserving Independence*. APPG rural inquiry report.

[https://www.housinglin.org.uk/\\_assets/Resources/Housing/Support\\_materials/Reports/HAPPI-4-Rural-Housing-for-an-Ageing-Population.pdf](https://www.housinglin.org.uk/_assets/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Reports/HAPPI-4-Rural-Housing-for-an-Ageing-Population.pdf)

Almshouse involvement with the Housing LIN is another indicator of increasing engagement. The Housing LIN has featured service improvements of almshouses at its regional network meetings and, as referenced above, published case studies and guest blogs on recent innovative developments on the dedicated webpage. The Housing LIN consultancy activities are also increasingly sought after by almshouse charities to help with service transformation and advice on strategic review of assets and their 'fit for purpose' in the 21st century. Find out more at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/consultancy/consultancy-services/>

Research for Age UK and the Almshouse Association on the increasing links between almshouse charities and local Age UKs has identified advantages for local people, including successful referrals by Age UKs of people in housing need to almshouse vacancies, and independent support/ mediation/ advocacy from Age UKs to almshouse residents. Regional activities included The Sir Josiah Mason Trust and Age UK Solihull's 'Housing in Later Life' event (2018) for local residents to explore different options with local providers, and Age UK Somerset attending the Somerset Small Almshouses Forum meeting (2019) to discuss their local offer to almshouse residents and charities. Factors encouraging such links include reciprocity (i.e. advantages to both agencies), openness to new opportunities, and trustees/staff with experience of the benefits of working with other agencies, sometimes from their previous roles. Almshouse charities are also involved with Erosh, as trustees and with regional networks: in November 2019, there was a Midlands Almshouse Association and Erosh joint meeting with a presentation by Birmingham City Council Safeguarding team and discussion on providers' responsibilities.

# New and remodelled almshouses

Almshouse charities are building award-winning new almshouses, remodelling and upgrading older buildings, and making the most of different funding opportunities. They are working creatively to provide housing, sometimes with partners, often with limited or no public funding. ARU researchers found that over the past decade, at least 2,500 almshouse units have been provided, with over 1,600 new-build units (40% with no grant) and 900 units from remodelling outdated provision.

New-build and remodelling projects can stimulate change:

- projects may lead to (or follow from) partnerships and links with local authorities, third sector/ community organisations (and sometimes private developers)
- governance examples include almshouse charity mergers, seeking new trustees with finance and development experience, and new governance structures (e.g. becoming a CIO: Charitable Incorporated Organisation)<sup>4</sup>
- changes to update resident criteria<sup>4</sup> may include widening 'local connection' (e.g. from an ancient parish boundary or small village to a larger local area or county); enabling the charity to house people with disabilities, couples or families in wheelchair-accessible housing or bedsit conversions to larger flats; or 'giving preference' rather than 'requiring' an occupational link or religious affiliation

Our forthcoming report for the RICS Research Trust *Almshouses: a model of community housing for an ageing population* explores the creative ways that almshouse charities are building better housing for the 21st century.

The report includes five English and two Dutch almshouse case studies and further examples from both countries, including photos: three English case studies are summarised below.



*Thorngate Churcher Trust, Gosport, New-build enhanced sheltered housing*

**Images:** © Thorngate Churcher Trust

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<sup>4</sup> subject to Charity Commission permission.

## Case study 1: Almshouse charity and Community Land Trust: new bungalows in West Yorkshire village



*New bungalows under construction, 2019*

*Image: © Calder Valley Community Land Trust*

John Eastwood Homes is a mid-20th century almshouse foundation, with 12 bungalows (built 1962-2000) in the village of Walsden and two of the six new bungalows completed in February 2020. Calder Valley Community Land Trust (CVCLT, incorporated in 2014) is part of the fast-growing community-led housing network and (unusually for a CLT) a Registered Provider and Homes England Investment Partner.

Both charities are protected from the Right to Buy; their volunteer trustees had existing links and are willing to work together and make things happen. Shared objectives and mutual trust made a good fit. The almshouse charity's reserves funded preliminary costs and paid for their two bungalows. CVCLT accessed Homes England funding, other grants and loans, and the redundant school site (gifted by Calderdale Council).

The six two-bed bungalows exceed requirements for energy efficiency, with low running costs, more daylight and future-proof design, including provision for hoists. All are mobility standard and wheelchair-accessible, with external buggy-charging points. The almshouse charity manages all six bungalows, with an option to purchase CVCLT's bungalows in future.

*'Almshouses are clearly potentially within the community-led housing world ... but not very often in the literature ... For our CLT there are certain key partnerships - with the council, with Homes England, and with two small local charities (JEH and a local community centre). We see that as our way forward, we're not trying to do everything ourselves from scratch, we want to work with other organisations.'*

**Andrew Bibby, CVCLT secretary**

## Case study 2: Replacing a 1960s sheltered scheme with a new almshouse at no cost to the charity: St Clement's Heights, Sydenham Hill, London

In 1969, after two previous moves out of central London in preceding centuries, the St Clement Danes Holborn Estate Charity's almshouse relocated to Sydenham. The building was a typical low-rise sheltered scheme with asbestos, roof problems, ongoing high maintenance costs, poor design and small bedsits which were hard to let. From 2000 onwards, trustees were considering what to do: modernise or replace?

Remodelling to create one-bed flats was too expensive and no alternative site could be found. By 2008, the decision was taken to demolish and redevelop: the valuable site has extensive views to London and Kent, with room for private housing for sale. Crest Nicholson made the best offer: the design placed the new almshouse at the head of the site with town houses and apartments round a square. The deal was to build the new almshouse first so that existing residents could move in. Then the old building was demolished, the charity received a substantial additional payment and the rest of the site was passed over to Crest Nicholson to build their housing for sale. St Clement's Heights (completed in 2017) has 50 spacious flats to London Design Guide and HAPPI standards with balconies or patios, communal areas and private gardens, and a resident manager.



*New almshouse, garden and pond*

*Image: © Philip Durrant*

## Case study 3: Recycling outdated historic almshouses in Bristol: Haberfield House extra care scheme



*New almshouse and courtyard garden*

*Image source: Authors*

Bristol Charities have been evaluating, selling and replacing unsuitable Victorian listed inner-city almshouses over the past decade. John Foster's Almshouse, Henbury (2010) and Barstaple Almshouse, Brentry (2015) are both new-build retirement sheltered housing schemes. CEO Anne Anketell joined the charity in 2014/15 from a large housing association; already experienced in working constructively with local authorities, she contacted Bristol City Council (BCC) about future projects. Haberfield House, Stockwood is built on a former BCC care home site. Funding came from Homes England new grant, merger with Lady Haberfield Almshouse Charity (sale proceeds and recycled grant) and mortgage secured against Barstaple Almshouse.

Haberfield House, Stockwood (completed in 2019) has 60 spacious flats to HAPPI standards with balconies or patios, communal facilities and a large courtyard garden. It adjoins Housing 21's Bluebell Gardens extra care scheme: residents have access to both sites, including Bluebell Gardens café-restaurant and hairdresser, with care from Housing 21's care team. Applicants must have some care needs and limited income and savings; applications come via BCC's 'Care Direct' (adult social care) team and are then considered by a joint panel.

Anne is looking at working again with Bristol City Council for the charity's next development, using proceeds from the sale of another unsuitable almshouse, recycled grant and other funding sources. The charity hopes to find a site that can be multi-use, outward facing and with the potential for intergenerational living.

Other almshouse developments featured as examples or case studies in the report include:

- The Mills Charity, Framlingham, Suffolk: inter-generational housing: houses for families, flats for younger and older people, including some units for people with disabilities
- St John's, Lichfield: new-build eco-development in grounds of Grade 1 listed almshouse featured in LIN Case Study 150:  
<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/A-21st-Century-eco-almshouse-St-Johns-Almshouses-Lichfield/>
- Thorngate Churcher Trust, Gosport, Hampshire (see photos, page 6): remodelling bedsits into one-bed flats, new-build enhanced sheltered housing (case study)
- Winnocks and Kendalls Almshouse Charity, Colchester, Essex (see cover photos): new-build almshouses replacing outdated 1930s bedsit bungalows, alongside Grade 1 listed almshouses (case study).

Case studies and examples show how English almshouse charities are:

- contributing resources to make limited public funding go further
- redeveloping existing sites to provide modern housing
- selling unsuitable or poorly located buildings to build new almshouses elsewhere
- merging with other almshouse charities to make better use of resources (land, buildings, governance)
- developing in partnership with local authorities or private developers.

## Reflections on the future: 2030 and beyond

The almshouse movement recognises the value of its past, social history and its historic buildings but is focusing on the future value of almshouses. Our future-focused research shows that almshouses remain part of the solution to meet housing need and complement local strategies for housing, care and support. Examples of partnerships, governance and management initiatives are helping to make almshouse fit for purpose for the next century. This will continue to require engagement between almshouse charities and their local communities, agencies and stakeholders, and a willingness to re-think their role, re-interpreting the past and re-imagining for the future. We leave the last word to Nick Phillips, Chief Executive of The Almshouse Association since 2018. Writing in *The Almshouses Gazette* (Winter 2019/20), he asks:

*“when is it or is it ever time to put residents’ wellbeing before the historical value of the building? Sell up and build new? Or can the building and residents’ welfare be maintained as a joint priority? ... When trustees are planning their next 10, 20 or 50 years ... I believe that the next decade will see this question climb high on the trustees’ agenda ... there is no simple answer, that is certain.”*

# Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

## About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 25,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'ideas lab' on specialist/supported housing, our online and regional networked activities, and consultancy services:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing that enables older and disabled people live independently in a home of their choice
- provide insight and intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice to support sector learning and improvement
- showcase what's best in specialist/supported housing and feature innovative projects and services that demonstrate how lives of people have been transformed, and
- support commissioners and providers to review their existing provision and develop, test out and deliver solutions so that they are best placed to respond to their customers' changing needs and aspirations

To access a selection of related resources on co-housing, visit our dedicated pages at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Almshouses/>

And for more information about how the Housing LIN can advise and support your organisation on community-led approaches to shaping your 'offer' for an ageing population, go to:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/consultancy/consultancy-services/>

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c/o PRP, The Ideas Store  
10 Lindsey Street, Clerkenwell  
London EC1A 9HP

Email: [info@housinglin.org.uk](mailto:info@housinglin.org.uk)

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