

Social housing

'Affordable and stress free': how almshouses are the unsung heroes of UK social housing

Experts say the model could work well for many people, not just the elderly, suffering in the UK housing crisis

● Almshouse residents may live up to two and a half years longer, study finds



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Kim and Terry Baxter at the second viewing of their new almshouse flat in Southwark, London. Photograph: Sean Smith/The Guardian

Every morning after he gets up, Gary Hiercock presses a green button outside his bedroom. That's how the warden of his Leicester almshouse knows he's up and about - that he hasn't had a fall or become ill overnight.

"It's just one example of how everything is thought of here: nothing is left to chance: everyone is safe at every moment of the day," said the 71-year-old former department store manager. "I have absolutely no worries at all here. I'm completely content."

Hiercock has lived in the Wyggestons Almshouses in Leicester for just over a year, since his partner of 53 years had to go into a care home with advanced Alzheimer's.

"I start every day feeling happy and grateful to be here," he said. "I was very isolated where I lived before but here, everyone is so friendly. If I'm ever feeling a bit lonely, I just need to go for a stroll and I'll come across someone to do something with."

Almshouses are the oldest form of social housing in the world: the oldest foundation still in existence dates from about 990. Legally, historically and socially unique - exempt from right to buy legislation and so remaining as a permanent part of the community once gifted - there are 30,000 throughout the UK, providing affordable housing for more than 36,000 residents.



📷 Garry Heircock in the grounds of his Almshouse at Lancaster House in Leicester where he has been a resident for 12 months. Photograph: Fabio de Paola/The Guardian

They are owned and managed by a network of more than 1,600 independent charities, and nearly all market towns in the UK have at least one almshouse. In some rural areas, they are the only provider of affordable, community housing.

In a time of a severe shortage of affordable rental accommodation, almshouse charities have long been trying to get attention from philanthropists and the government to make the case that their role is more vital than ever - that they should be put at the forefront of the community housing concept, providing an “exemplar housing model”.

Now, a [new research project](#), the Almshouse Longevity Study from Bayes business school, has given extra ammunition to their call finding that those fortunate enough to live in an almshouse receive a longevity boost of almost two and a half years - equating to an extra 15% of future life for someone aged in their early 70s.

Despite not looming large in the public’s awareness, more almshouses are being built today than have been since the Victorian era; while most are for elderly people, some have no age restrictions and are able to accommodate families, people with disabilities and key workers.

Kim Baxter is about to move into a new almshouse in south London while her old one is refurbished. “My husband currently has to sleep in a chair because he’s got such severe leg disabilities,” said the 68-year-old. “This new flat is adapted for someone with his disabilities. Our lives have been so restricted for so long that this is going to give us both a new lease of life.”



📷 Kim and Terry Baxter: 'This is going to give us both a new lease of life.' Photograph: Sean Smith/The Guardian

Baxter moved into her first almshouse five years ago. “We were not in a good way,” she said. “We were stressed because my husband’s disabilities meant debt was piling up. Had we not been able to move into an almshouse, where everything is affordable and stress free, I don’t think we’d be here today, I really don’t.”

Charlie said that he too would probably not be here today had his local almshouse not taken him in. When his partner died a few years ago, the 77-year-old found himself grieving, depressed, facing homeless, without funds or family support. “The local authority said they couldn’t house me. I was facing God knows what future. No future at all, probably,” he said.

“But now I’m looked after in every way, with neighbours and a community that is always there for me,” he said. “It’s transformed my life. I feel like I’ve got a big, protective family around me. It was the perfect rescue.”

Up to 12% of rough sleepers are estimated to be over 55 years old. In 2018, the latest figures available, there were 2,500 people aged over 60 who were officially homeless - double the number in 2009. In 2017, the Local Government Association warned that the scale of existing elderly homelessness was set to double by 2025.

But, say experts, it is not just the older population who could benefit from the almshouse model being adopted more widely.

Nick Phillips, the chief executive of the Almshouse Association, is calling for today’s philanthropists to set up almshouses for the various groups suffering from the housing crisis. “The model would work brilliantly for young families, young people, for those coming out of the care system and for refugees,” he said.

Paul Mullis, the chief executive of the Durham Aged Mineworkers’ Homes Association, the biggest almshouse charity in the UK, agreed. “Our residents know they can look forward to tomorrow because the things that make people’s lives worth living haven’t changed in the 1,000 years that almshouses were created to target: community, safe and secure housing, a sense of purpose.”