

[Inside the new breed of almshouse | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](https://www.ft.com/content/a63bf568-53e5-4020-98f7-9ae34d526232)
<https://www.ft.com/content/a63bf568-53e5-4020-98f7-9ae34d526232>

FINANCIAL TIMES

LD UK COMPANIES TECH MARKETS CLIMATE OPINION WORK & CAREERS LIFE & ARTS HTSI

Stay one step ahead

Subscribe today and navigate your world with confidence

EXPLORE OUR BEST OFFERS

House & Home [+ Add to myFT](#)

Inside the new breed of almshouse

Today's charitable residences aim to be more accessible and aspirational, and end the age-old stigma surrounding them

Emily Rhodes SEPTEMBER 15 2023



The courtyard of Appleby Blue, a new almshouse in London © Philip Vile/Witherford Watson Mann Architects

Sitting in the bright, lofty lounge of Appleby Blue, a new almshouse in south-east London, I find myself waving to wide-eyed, curious passengers on the top floor of a double-decker, pulled in at the bus stop outside.

Stephen Witherford, director of Witherford Watson Mann Architects, who designed the building, is visibly excited by my interaction with the passengers on the bus. He says he always envisaged this almshouse as being “the opposite of retreat” after repeatedly observing older people’s desire to engage with street life rather than shy away from it. Witherford created double-height floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the busy Southwark Park Road to maximise this.

And yet there is a feeling of shelter and respite here; the noisy thrum of traffic is muffled by the double glazing at the front of the building while fresher air and the tranquil gurgles of a fountain drift in through the glass-paned doors that open to the courtyard garden on the opposite side.

Appleby Blue, providing 51 one-bedroom apartments and six two-bedroom apartments, is the latest addition to the UK’s collection of 1,700 almshouses, a traditional form of housing for those in need that dates back to medieval times, when religious orders cared for the poor. The oldest almshouse foundation still operating is thought to be the Hospital of St Oswald in Worcester, founded around 990. By the mid-16th century, there were about 800 “hospitals” — in the older sense of hospitality rather than our current sense of medical treatment — across the country.



The contemporary exterior of Appleby Blue, which has 51 one-bedroom apartments and six two-bedroom flats © Philip Vile/Witherford Watson Mann Architects

One is the handsome Christes Hospital, which dates back to 1607, run by St John's Winchester, a charity. St John's chief executive Clive Cook acknowledges "there is a real sense of history" about the almshouse, but he also voices the frustration of being unable to remodel listed buildings to better accommodate older people, who need amenities including: "level access, wet rooms, and windows that easily open and close."

This may soon change, however, as Nick Phillips, chief executive of the Almshouse Association, says forthcoming guidance from Historic England "encourages flexibility" regarding historic almshouses to make accessibility — and decarbonisation — more achievable. In the meantime, some almshouse charities provide both historic properties and better-adapted modern buildings, sometimes with on-site care; residents begin in the former and can then move into the latter as needs change.

Criteria for becoming an almshouse resident varies between charities, but tend to stipulate being of retirement age, connected to the area and having limited financial means. Living together as a cohesive community is the essence of almshouse life and Cook mentions the many groups run by residents, including a Good Neighbour's Network, where people help each other with shopping and doctor's appointments.

“

A study suggests almshouse living gives residents a ‘longevity boost’, with the best giving nearly an extra 2.5 years

“When people are applying to live here, we ask them: What are you prepared to contribute to the community?” he says. He admits “there may be downsides to living in close proximity” — no pets, for instance.

One of the benefits is evident in a study by Bayes Business School, published earlier this year, which suggests that almshouse living gives residents a “longevity boost”. The study gathered data from 15 almshouses; all were shown to increase life expectancy, with the best giving residents nearly an extra 2.5 years compared with people of the same socio-economic group from the wider population in England and Wales.

Professor Ben Rickayzen, who worked on the study, clarifies the two parts to this longevity boost: “If you’re taking someone from the lowest socio-economic grouping, they’re getting an increase to take them up to the average life expectancy of the population — that’s an achievement in itself — about 1.7 years for a 73-year-old. Then there’s an additional part, which is taking them to a higher level still, another 0.7 years.”

One almshouse included in the study is the Charterhouse in central London. I joined them for lunch to see what life is like.

[Inside the new breed of almshouse | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](https://www.ft.com/content/a63bf568-53e5-4020-98f7-9ae34d526232)
<https://www.ft.com/content/a63bf568-53e5-4020-98f7-9ae34d526232>



The oldest almshouse in the UK is thought to be St Oswald's, in Worcester, founded around 990

Lunch — sausages and mash, when I visit — is the only formal meal of the day, but breakfast and dinner are also served in the Charterhouse’s 16th-century great hall. “Brothers”, as both male and female residents are called, are encouraged to eat together as often as possible. Peter Aiers, master of the almshouse, says that on their first day, each brother is assigned a particular chair for the duration of their time there.

“It may sound strict,” he says, “but the tables form cohesive groups and make it easy for brothers to look out for each other — they will quickly raise a concern if someone’s not there for breakfast.”

Aiers believes that communal meals are part of a predictable “rhythm of the day” that is beneficial for residents. “When they want to be on their own, they can be on their own — that’s no problem — and when they want company, they know exactly where they can get it and at what time. It’s always on tap; people don’t feel isolated.”



The Charterhouse, in central London; there are 1,700 almshouses in the UK © Charterhouse London

After lunch, residents Laurie (75), Susan (69) and Raymond (72), who preferred not to give their full names, show me the historic buildings including the Great Chamber — where Elizabeth I held court — tapestry room, library, chapel, cloisters and gardens. With wood panelling and gilt-framed paintings, The Charterhouse holds obvious appeal as a filming location and wedding venue, both of which help fund the charity.

In 2017, as part of the process of diversifying its income, the Charterhouse opened a museum; Laurie likes helping with tours, but wryly remarks, “I never thought I’d live somewhere with a gift shop.” Pride in their home is certainly evident — Raymond, full of historical nuggets on our tour, says he enjoys “showing off where we live” — but Laurie also notes the stigma of living in an almshouse: “It’s a bit of a taboo, isn’t it,” she says. “When you tell people, it’s almost like saying you’re going to live in the workhouse or something, they imagine you’re in really grim circumstances.”

Aiers is sensitive to this tension: “It is certainly a privilege to live here, but you are also becoming a beneficiary of a charity, and you need to reconcile yourself psychologically to that.”



A drawing of Trinity Almshouses, London, 1696 © Guildhall Library & Art Gallery/Heritage Images/Getty Images

Living in an almshouse is not free. All almshouse residents pay a monthly maintenance contribution, with the shortfall covered by charity. Historically, almshouse benefactors have included royalty, clergy, merchants and liverymen. Phillips launched [Friends of the Almshouse](#) Association this month to raise funds through a membership model: people who care about almshouses but don't necessarily live in one can donate £100 per year in return for visits to almshouses, events and a newsletter.

He would also like more businesses to set up almshouse charities as a way to give back to the community, and laments the fact that no new almshouse charity has been established since the 1980s. He suggests that after the second world war, philanthropists began to see the state as the sole provider of housing for those in need.

Almshouses rarely benefit from Section 106 planning gains, where developers need to invest in the local area in order to get permission for certain projects — often this includes providing some affordable housing. Planning gains tend to go to housing associations, so the Almshouse Association is endeavouring to amend the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill to make almshouse charities a clearer option.

“

It’s absolutely tremendous; it’s just so vibrant,’ says Rob. ‘It’s like being in a posh hotel,’ Sheree adds

Appleby Blue is an exception, having received funding from a Section 106 agreement for a high-end development on London’s South Bank.

Rob (68) and Sheree (66), who are among the first residents to move into Appleby

Blue, are thrilled. “It’s absolutely tremendous; it’s just so vibrant,” says Rob. “It’s like being in a posh hotel; it’s like being on holiday,” Sheree adds. The building has solid oak doors, bay windows, light-flooded rooms and assistive tech by each apartment’s front door. There is the feeling that every last detail has been carefully considered, down to the bespoke benches on the walkways — open on one side for wheelchair access, with wide arms to rest a cup of tea or to help lever oneself up — encouraging residents to sit side-by-side while taking in the view over the courtyard and roof-garden.

Alison Benzimra, head of research and influence at United St Saviour’s, the charity providing the almshouse, wants it to be “aspirational,” rather than somewhere people move only “at a point of crisis”. But can an almshouse ever hold sufficient allure to overcome the residual “taboo”, as Laurie puts it, of receiving charity?

Recommended



House & Home

Inside the Fuggerei, the world's oldest social housing complex

Perhaps one way to counter this stigma is to encourage connection with the wider community. At Appleby Blue, connection with the world outside is integral to its design and ethos: the central lounge will be open to community groups. Martyn Craddock, United St Saviour's chief executive, registers a degree of nervousness: "You have to ask: will residents like living around a community centre? There's distrust on both sides."

Rob and Sheree are keen for cooking and gardening classes, but are reluctant to make Appleby Blue too enticing. Sheree explains: "It's so lovely; I don't want it to be ruined."

At the Charterhouse Susan tells me about the "warm space" they've started hosting every Friday morning in the chapel cloister, welcoming people in for coffee and brownies. "It's hospitable", she says. "As a recipient of charity, it's nice to give back."

Find out about our latest stories first — follow [@FTProperty](#) on X or [@ft_houseandhome](#) on Instagram