



COMMENT

## How the Church of England can help solve the housing crisis

Building almshouses on its 100,000 acres of land would be locally popular, nationally valuable and give the church a fresh sense of mission

James Vitali | Wednesday April 24 2024, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

**F**or centuries the Church of England was the defining institution of British community life. Today it is faced with shrinking congregations, declining religiosity and unfavourable ideological headwinds.

The church is having difficulty articulating its social function to an increasingly secular public. And so it is compelled to affix itself to tokenistic causes more likely to divide churchgoers than to unify them, like spending £1 billion on reparations for the slave trade.

Instead the church should help solve arguably the greatest socioeconomic challenge of our time, the chronic housing shortage, by delivering a new generation of beautiful, affordable, community-based almshouses.



St John's almshouse in Sherborne, Dorset

ALAMY

Wherever you live in the UK you have probably walked past some almshouses. Their origins are religious; private charity and the giving of alms to the poor is a duty prescribed to Christians in the Bible, and almshouses were established first by churches to house the needy. They've been around since the 10th century, making them the oldest form of social housing.

Almshouses continue to provide shelter for tens of thousands of people in the UK. They are operated by charities and their trustees are bound by governing documents, which gives them some discretion over who qualifies to be housed by them.

Occupants of almshouses are known as "residents". They are neither tenants nor leaseholders, but beneficiaries of the charitable almshouse association.

Almshouses are essentially micro-communities with a strong emphasis on neighbourliness, expressed architecturally through the arrangement of almshouse buildings into three-sided courtyards.

The almshouse model is uniquely suited to tackling a number of objections to new housebuilding. If you speak to residents in rural England, they know we need more housing, but they don't want it to fundamentally change the character of their community, they don't want it to be a visual scar on their village or town, and they want it to serve local people, such as those who have grown up in the area but cannot afford to rent or buy there themselves.

Almshouses would meet many of these legitimate concerns. They are undeniably high quality; just look at St John's House in Sherborne, Dorset, or the Thrale Almshouse in Streatham, south London. They are affordable and well maintained. Almshouses are not rented for profit, and are run by dedicated volunteers who are often connected with a church. They are designed specifically for the benefit of the community to be held in perpetuity by the charity in the interest of local people.

The scope for expanding the number of almshouses in this country is significant. The church owns in excess of 100,000 acres of land in England and Wales, and that land is often in exactly the right location for added housing density.

There are two handbrakes on building almshouses that need to be lifted, however. First, the church's legal framework for the disposal of assets often prevents the release of land. This needs to be altered so that it is easier for it to earmark land for charitable housing.

Second, the almshouse model must be made a recognised form of social housing so that it can qualify for government funding and support. The government could also insert a clause in the planning policy framework's "presumption in favour of sustainable development" that explicitly cites affordable housing on small sites.

Almshouses will not solve the housing crisis, but they could be part of the solution. They are more likely to win the support of local people than identikit estates dumped on the sides of rural communities.