




We need a united front for charitable housing providers

COMMENT 08.12.25 BY LORD RICHARD BEST

The current systems of government funding and regulation favour large registered providers, but we should also be encouraging almshouses and housing charities, writes *Lord Richard Best*, chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People



Sharelines

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The government's target of 1.5 million new homes is looking optimistic. But there is no denying we need all the new homes we can get.

In particular, we need the kind of homes that are affordable and supportive to those on low incomes and with special needs. So surely government and its agencies should welcome the contribution of small housing charities like the almshouses – some founded hundreds of years ago – and of supported housing charitable providers.

However, these are difficult times for these smaller players. Just as private sector housebuilding has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few volume house builders, so the not-for-profit sector is increasingly consolidated into a few bigger social housing providers.

The current systems – the government funding, the planning regime, the regulatory framework – all favour the largest registered providers.

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- <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/comment/comment/almshouses-need-to-be-recognised-as-social-housing-to-be-able-to-reach-their-full-potential-89092>
- <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/comment/comment/do-we-need-a-new-almshouse-for-refugees-74624>

At a time when thousands of children and vulnerable adults are being placed in entirely unsatisfactory temporary accommodation, there is a crying need to expand, not contract, supported housing provided by local charities.

These smaller bodies are so often exemplars in offering care and support as well as a place to live. They contrast with the dreadful conditions and lack of care of many profit-making companies that led to the passing of the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023.

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On the almshouses front, a wonderful example of relevance today is this year’s Stirling Prize winner, Appleby Blue – a masterpiece of new social housing in Southwark from the United St Saviour’s Charity, an almshouse trust that dates back 500 years.

The Appleby Blue development provides not only brilliant accommodation for older people but also acts as a centre for the neighbouring community. However, it required an enlightened local planning authority – the London Borough of Southwark – to navigate the governmental guidance on Section 106 and the funding rules that made it possible.

Sadly, many of the older almshouses face impossible barriers to extending their work, while many of the charitable supported housing providers are on the verge of giving up. They are undermined by a well-intended set of regulatory requirements that impose extensive obligations on them, alongside insufficient funding from statutory sources.

The Almshouses Association convened a session at the end of November to determine what mitigation might be achieved to sustain the contribution of these smaller charitable enterprises. We agreed that a united front was needed to press the case for proportionality in the regulatory regimes devised for larger providers.

Might it be possible to devise regulation that allows access to financial support and planning privileges akin to the help available to bigger registered providers, but which recognises the realities of small local charities?

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While the Charity Commission is supportive, it is the Regulator of Social Housing, the Housing Ombudsman and the resources of Homes England that we must look to for a changed approach. What is right for a registered provider with 1,000 homes – let alone one with 100,000 homes – may be unworkable for the smaller charities.

An almshouse with half a dozen ancient dwellings may have land to double in size. But its hands are tied if a regulatory regime imposed upon it drives out the volunteers upon whom everything depends.

And for the charitable supported housing provider doing wonderful work with inadequate statutory help, a significant additional regulatory burden can be the last straw.

With leadership from the Almshouses Association, and understanding from a sympathetic housing minister, I hope a tailored regulatory regime can now be devised to prevent the irreplaceable loss of some of the nation's most important social housing providers.

Lord Richard Best, co-chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People