

Understanding the impact of almshouse charities in the pandemic

Paul Hunter





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The Almshouse Association

The Almshouse Association is a membership charity that represents a network of over 1600 independent almshouse charities across the UK. These charities manage over 30,000 almshouses and support approximately 36,000 residents, providing affordable, micro-community homes for local people in housing need.

Almshouse charities are uniquely placed to understand and be responsive to local needs. As an umbrella organisation, the Association assists trustees and clerks of these local charities to manage their resources effectively, support them to provide good quality, micro-community housing for their beneficiaries, promote the welfare and independence of their residents and preserve the historic tradition of almshouses for future generations.

Its heritage and expertise make it possible for the Association to campaign on behalf of member charities and influence national policies.

The Association also provides loans and grants to member charities for redevelopment and refurbishment of their almshouses, as well as crisis support.

The Almshouse Association has the expertise and national reach to help almshouse charities tackle the affordable housing crisis.



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The Mercers' Company is a livery company focused on being a philanthropic force for good. They have a rich history dating back over 700 years with philanthropy as the common thread between our past, present and future. The Mercers Company has supported the almshouse movement and continues to own and manage almshouses today.

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Foreword

The almshouse model has been in existence for over a thousand years. It is based on the foundations of charity, compassion and companionship. Usually small scale, led by local volunteer trustees to provide affordable homes and small communities to those in housing need. Due to their close proximity to those they support, almshouse trustees felt an immediate and immense responsibility when the Covid pandemic began. Most residents are elderly and often use shared spaces in their almshouse community. Every one of 8,000 almshouse trustees was called on to plan their response to the immediate threat. Much about the threat was unknown other than its potential impact.

This research was commissioned in order to better understand how almshouse trustees navigated the challenge and as the dust settles, to learn whatever lessons can be learned to help improve the resilience of our member charities. The report reflects on first-hand interviews with trustees, residents and other housing providers. We hope that this report will be of help and interest to our members.

Almshouses are known to alleviate isolation and loneliness but, as Covid emerged, even these small neighbourly communities felt the impact of imposed restrictions on meeting up, going out or dropping into see a neighbour. The report recognises this change, but also highlights the fact that the level of loneliness and isolation was perhaps less in almshouses than in wider communities.

The flexibility, scale, and spirit of almshouses seemed to make it possible for almshouse trustees and managers to prioritise this aspect of their support.

"We maintained regular contact with people. We did a daily telephone service... I'd phone people every day, and in the early days we went out of our way to make sure that people were not struggling."

"The ethos and pastoral nature of almshouse charities was mentioned, as was the warden system by some."

Thanks to this report, The Almshouse Association has been able to learn more about the approaches taken by our members to continue to provide safe, secure homes for residents despite the menacing threat of Covid. The lengths so many trustees and clerks went to is extraordinary and above all the report identifies how the almshouse model was able to respond to a fast-changing threat.

"[trustees] could be close to their residents and agile."

"[almshouses] can steer quicker than a bigger organisation."

For almshouse leaders it seems clear that the robustness of resident's wellbeing relied on courageous leadership, driven by a sense of personal responsibility to protect residents. The sense of responsibility felt by trustees seems to stem from the small scale of the almshouse model, from personal relationships with residents and in some cases from the spirit of the charity's founder. In some cases, the residents increased their neighbourly vigil, looking out for and supporting each other proved vital to the wellbeing of many.

"If they see the residents' curtains aren't open and they know they normally would be open, then they would knock on the door and just check everything is OK."

The flow of communication from The Almshouse Association and great support from the network helped many trustees through their difficulties.

"The Almshouse Association are great. They really are, and we did rely heavily on their updates in terms of what we should and shouldn't be doing.... they were disseminating the government guidance and making it appropriate for almshouse charities and that was incredibly helpful actually."

But it is clear that the pandemic was far from painless in the almshouse world. The lack of understanding of the almshouse model led to difficulties with local councils. National and local government in many areas were not supportive and despite member charities being responsible for frail, elderly residents living in one place, almshouse charities were, as far as the council was concerned, left to fend for themselves because almshouses did not fit neatly into Care Quality Commission, or Care-Home criteria. The failure of some trustees and residents to engage with IT meant residents were less engaged and sometimes trustees less able to access support that was only available online. The age of the buildings and not being able to gain access for maintenance during

the pandemic was also a challenge. However, the greatest challenge on leadership during the pandemic seems to have been the weight of that personal responsibility felt by staff and trustees.

One of the key factors that gives the movement its strength was also a great burden.

"When you're on the phone and you've got a resident crying at the other end because they're so lonely, they're so fed up it takes its toll on you as well."

I hope those reading the report will recognise the challenges that were exposed during the pandemic and that it helps trustees and clerks to build plans for future.

"I was proud to be part of the almshouse movement which supported residents during a period of unknowns and fears."

The Almshouse Association would like to thank The Mercers' Company for their generous donation enabling this report to be completed. We would also like to thank Paul Hunter and Paul Hackett from The Smith Institute for their diligent work in researching and writing this excellent report

*Nick Phillips
Chief Executive of The Almshouse Association*

Executive summary

This independent study, commissioned by The Almshouse Association, seeks to understand the impact of the pandemic on almshouse charities and their residents; examine the difference almshouse charities have made; identify the lessons that can be drawn from the past two years; and highlight challenges the sector faces going forward.

The report was informed by desk research, a roundtable discussion hosted by The Almshouse Association and non-attributable telephone/on-line interviews with a variety of almshouse charities and other housing organisations.

Overview

Overall, the research showed that, like everyone, almshouse charities faced difficulties as a result of the pandemic – not least concerning support for their older and vulnerable residents, many of whom suffered from problems of loneliness. Despite the emergency restrictions and pressures on staff and volunteers, however, the almshouse sector in general proved itself resilient in the face of adversity. The vast majority of almshouse charities were able to protect their residents and continue to offer support.

The interviews with people inside and outside the sector clearly demonstrated that almshouses – big and small – have many strengths. Almshouse staff and residents reported a range of Covid-related concerns but said they were proud of the way they responded to the crisis and how they supported each other. Many cited the advantages of having a strong community ethos and strong focus on the value of independent living.

Nevertheless, the research also highlighted how the pandemic placed the spotlight on important existing challenges facing the sector, not least around how almshouse charities in general can best carry forward and adapt their longstanding purposes and unique organisational structure to a volatile and fast changing world.

Headline findings

- Almshouse charities were reported to offer personalised support to residents because of their size, their community nature, and being close to (and engaged with) residents. The size and close relationships with residents before the pandemic was said to make adapting to changes, including support for residents, easier.
- Interviewees most frequently mentioned loneliness and social isolation as the biggest effects of the pandemic on residents. This was not described as being unique to almshouse charities and has been noted across society. However, almshouse residents may have been particularly vulnerable because of a higher likelihood of needing to shield and/or being single.
- Many almshouse charities sought to more deeply understand resident needs and combat social isolation through regular contact with residents and Covid-secure activities. This was helped by many charities having large outdoor spaces which promoted covid-safe interactions.
- Some almshouse charities provided additional support, such as help with shopping and picking up prescriptions.
- Almshouse charities worked with other organisations throughout the pandemic. Their biggest concerns related to social care and stretched social services coming out of the pandemic. This was viewed as placing additional strains on almshouse charities and their residents, and the situation was felt to have deteriorated since the start of the pandemic.
- Most were taking lessons from the experience, which included communication with residents and the benefits of online working.

Impact of the pandemic on residents

- There were few reports of residents contracting Covid (especially pre-vaccination roll-out). Interviewees discussed the measures they took to make residents safe, including ensuring residents knew the rules, introducing social distancing measures and changing working practices.
- Some noted that (like many people) residents were very fearful of Covid and were reluctant to leave their home when lockdown ended.
- Isolation and loneliness were seen as the main impact of the pandemic on residents, as has been seen more widely. This presented challenges around mental health, residents becoming withdrawn and also some incidents of anti-social behaviour.
- The pandemic and government guidelines left residents isolated and meant that many almshouse charities were not able to offer the same level of community activities, which are valued by residents and provide opportunities for social interaction.
- Most residents were said not to have been financially affected. This was explained by low Weekly Maintenance Contributions, which were often covered, where necessary, by housing benefit. And as residents are older most did not see incomes drop due to unemployment or furlough but continued to receive their pension.

Impact of the pandemic on almshouse charities

- Almshouse charities described the way they adapted operations to government guidance:
 - Some felt forgotten and complained about a lack of specific guidance and PPE, especially at the start of the pandemic.
 - Some faced difficult conversations with residents regarding following the rules. Keeping residents safe was the primary concern, but rule following was a cause of friction.
- A minority faced financial challenges, largely around investment in commercial property, as well as challenges around filling voids (vacant dwellings) and maintenance works.
- A minority said that they faced no real organisational impact with staff treated as key workers.

Response of almshouse charities

- Many almshouse charities described how they contacted residents through regular telephone calls.
- Phone calls were used to assess the level of need of residents and were seen as useful ways of tackling social isolation. It was said that residents valued these conversations and for some residents they continued on a very frequent basis during the worst of the pandemic.
- Some almshouse charities also sought to tackle social isolation through newsletters and online activities (such as quizzes and coffee mornings). These were seen as valuable ways of tackling loneliness even if face-to-face meetings would have been preferred.
- Charities also noted how they benefited from better access to open spaces, due to the intrinsic design of almshouses, in contrast to many in high rise flats.
- Alongside making homes and offices Covid secure, contact with residents was used to help explain government Covid regulations and guidelines to help keep residents safe.
- Almshouse charities also provided direct support with shopping, picking up prescriptions and helping secure doctor appointments. A minority also mentioned financial assistance with grants or buying food. This support helped ensure those fearful of Covid and without wider social networks had the essentials and were kept safe.
- Some almshouse charities also worked with or signposted residents to the voluntary sector, with support through foodbanks and phone calls by other charities to tackle loneliness.
- Responses were diverse and, in some cases, little additional support was provided.
- Interviewees described the support they received, including advice from their boards, The Almshouse Association and networks of other almshouse organisations or housing providers.

Partnership working

- Generally, those interviewed said they had not formed new partnerships through the pandemic but worked with organisations they had known previously.
- Almshouse charities gave examples of working with other charities, notably foodbanks, but also Citizen Advice and Age UK.
- There was a mixed picture regarding local authorities, with some almshouses mentioning they had good relationships with their local council and others stating that councils did not really understand the almshouse model.
- There was real concern around social care coming out of the pandemic. It was generally felt that stretched social services presented a considerable challenge to all local residents, including those in almshouse charities.
- Interviewees gave their thoughts on successful partnership working, including raising the profile of almshouse charities locally and at a sector level; the importance of being an external facing organisation; using existing networks; and being open minded.

Benefits of being an almshouse charity during the pandemic

- Being an almshouse charity was generally felt to have helped with the sector's response to the pandemic. The reasons given mainly reflected the perceived strengths of the sector: size of organisations, community engagement, and close relationships with residents.
- A widely held view was that almshouse charities knew their residents before the pandemic and could therefore effectively support those that needed additional assistance.
- The ethos and pastoral nature of almshouse charities was mentioned as a positive. Some also referred to the benefits of the warden system.
- There was a recognition that other community-based or specialist housing and care providers operated in a similar way.
- It was said that larger organisations would have to rely more on the systems in place rather than personal relationships, which could be more remote and less tailored to individual resident needs.
- The modest scale at which almshouse charities operated was viewed by many as important. Emphasis was also placed on pre-existing trust-based relationships, which it was said allowed almshouses to be quickly responsive and adaptable to resident needs.

- It was said by some that operating at too small a scale had downsides and that formal support, beyond that of volunteers or trustees, may be limited. It was mentioned that changes or sudden actions demanded by the pandemic would in some instances fall on the shoulders of a single person.

Lessons from the experience

- The importance of community was reinforced by the pandemic and was seen as a core identifier of the ethos and spirit of almshouse charities.
- The importance of maintaining good communication with residents was often mentioned, including understanding resident's changing needs and expectations.
- The high levels of commitment and personal responsibility shown by the trustees during the pandemic was a feature of most almshouse charities. Ensuring that continues with the next generation of trustees was seen as particularly important.
- The issue of digital exclusion was raised in several interviews. The pandemic highlighted the extent of this. While being online was particularly important during the pandemic, addressing digital exclusion of residents was viewed as critical to take on board over the longer term.
- Digital technology was also mentioned in reference to the way that almshouse charities themselves operated. Online working was viewed as an important way of improving organisational efficiency.
- Continuity plans were viewed by some as important to crisis management. These would need to be reviewed in light of the experience of the pandemic.
- The additional support during the pandemic highlighted the need to be focused on independent living.
- Not trying to provide all services inhouse was considered an important lesson by some interviewees.
- The need for better, tailored advice from regulators (including the Charity Commission and housing and care regulators) was mentioned. A review of current regulations was perhaps a way forward.

Other observations

- Networks of almshouse charities were viewed as important during the pandemic and more generally in providing practical advice and support. Support for smaller almshouse charities and recruiting trustees is important.
- Raising awareness about almshouses, especially among councils and other local organisations is often challenging. Sharing more widely the 'lived experience' of residents may be one way of promoting a better understanding of the sector.
- Almshouse charities as a sector may benefit from a forward-looking strategy that builds on the experience of the pandemic and more actively seeks to meet the expectations of future generations of residents and trustees.

Strengths and challenges

The research focused on the pandemic, but interviewees were also asked about the more general strengths and challenges facing the sector. These centred on:

- Providing a community as well as affordable housing for local people. The community nature of almshouse charities was mentioned frequently and was said to be highly valued by residents.
- The community dimension meant almshouse charities were able to offer additional support to residents to enable them to live independently.
- Some small almshouse charities said that being small was a benefit, which meant they could be close to their residents and agile. The sentiment was that by being small almshouse charities understood their residents and could provide support tailored to their needs.
- Others described their resources: commitment of staff, clerks or trustees, the quality of stock, and having a strong financial position.

The challenges included:

- While some almshouse charities may have resources and solid reserves others mentioned the challenge of maintaining listed buildings. This was said to be expensive given the new (and future) building and eco-regulations. Retrofitting homes was a constant financial pressure, especially given higher expectations of quality from residents and regulators.
- It was reported that some almshouse charities had failed to charge an adequate weekly maintenance contribution leaving them in a weaker financial position.
- Some interviewees noted the difficulties recruiting trustees and the need for succession planning. It was said that securing the appropriate balance of trustees is important but could be difficult.
- The small nature of the charities, especially those without staff, was felt by some to come with challenges – not least the pressures on volunteers' time.
- It was felt that there is generally a lack of awareness and misunderstanding of almshouse charities. It was said to be necessary

to continually explain what they are and what type of housing they provide.

- Some felt it was a real challenge to make sure almshouse charities were modern, fit for purpose and relevant to a fast-changing world.

There are approximately 1,600 almshouse charities in the UK today, the vast majority of which are located in England. Collectively they provide homes for 36,000 residents. Most of the almshouses have a long history – some dating back to medieval times – and a large proportion house older and vulnerable people.

The research for this report covers the wide variety of almshouses, including those that are very small (housing a handful of residents) to larger organisations, including some providing extra care and residential care.

More information on almshouses is available from The Almshouse Association <https://www.almshouses.org/>

Introduction

The pandemic has – and continues to have – a devastating impact on all of us. It is a major public health crisis costing tens of thousands of lives, as well as causing disruption and financial hardship to individuals and organisations. The effects of the pandemic have also not been evenly felt with older people much more vulnerable to Covid, while those on lowest incomes have disproportionately been hit by the subsequent economic downturn.

The fear of Covid and emergency measures to tackle the pandemic, such as lockdowns, disrupted the way we live and work. Public concerns were focused most on the health risks and issues of isolation and loneliness, especially for older people and the most vulnerable. All organisations in every part of society faced new and unprecedented pressures and additional demands on their resources.

It is against this backdrop that The Almshouse Association commissioned the Smith Institute to examine how the pandemic had affected almshouse charities. The research sought to understand not only the experience of staff, trustees, volunteers and residents, but also how almshouse charities as organisations adapted to the changing circumstances and continued to provide support. The research also explored how almshouse charities viewed their strengths and weaknesses; what lessons were learnt; what issues arising from the pandemic most need addressing; and how partnerships and collaboration with other organisations helped and evolved during the pandemic.

To understand the impact of the pandemic on the almshouse movement and examine these issues the Institute completed 36 telephone and online interviews between January and April 2022. 26 interviews were conducted with a total of 29 people from almshouse charities. A further 10 interviews were conducted with 12 people from housing organisations, some of which have a specific focus on almshouses. Interviews were conducted with trustees, clerks, chief executives, wardens, scheme managers and other staff. These covered a range of almshouse charities, including three interviews with charities with fewer than 25 homes, 12 with 25–100 homes, and 11 charities with over 100 properties. Interviews were conducted in England and Wales, and geographically spread across the different regions and between urban and rural locations. Alongside the interviews, a roundtable was held with representatives from the sector to discuss the issues and initial headline findings.

About the almshouse sector

Across the UK almshouses provide low-cost accommodation for 36,000 people, many of whom are on low incomes.¹ Despite having a similar purpose to other social housing providers (in providing sub-market affordable homes), they are unique, diverging from councils, housing associations or community-led housing organisations in terms of history, governance, tenure and rents.

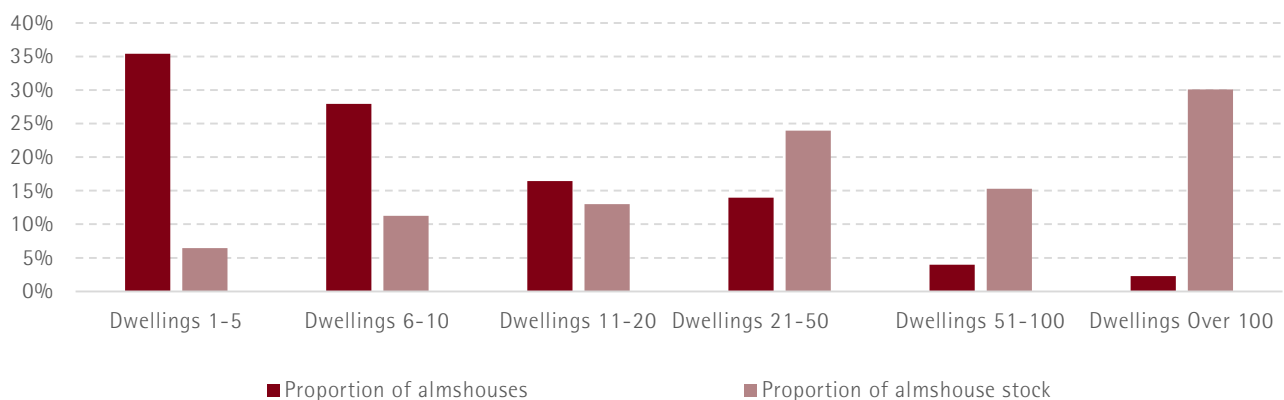
One of the most common perceptions people have with almshouses is their long heritage. The roots of some of today's almshouse charities date back to medieval times. The history and development of almshouses transitions from the Elizabethan poor laws to Victorian philanthropy to 20th Century war memorial fund homes.² The nature of today's almshouse reflects this long history. The sector has emerged over a millennium with a unique richness and diversity of approaches to charitable involvement in welfare provision. Indeed, almshouse charities have roots in churches, the monarchy, aristocracy and landowners, industrialists, trade unions, benevolent societies, and local government. Most are located in England.³

These different roots mean the purposes of almshouse charities differ. This includes who is eligible for the housing, even if the context changes. Some are just for men or women; others stipulate a local connection or religious affiliation. One of the most common purposes of provision (but not universal) is that they are homes for older people. Some almshouse charities provide residential or social care, but in the main they provide 'general needs' housing with the stipulation that the accommodation is offered on the basis of being able to live independently.

The age of almshouse charities is reflected in their properties. Many almshouses have unique architectural style with large outside gardens and communal spaces. However, the lineage of almshouse charities suggests this belies a diversity of buildings, including through sales of older properties and acquisition and development of new homes.⁴

The size of almshouse charities tends to be very different to that of local authorities or housing associations. There are more almshouse charities (1,600 almshouse charities and 2,600 groups of almshouses) than registered housing associations but far fewer properties (there are around 30,000 almshouses compared with over 2.5m housing association homes). This means many almshouse charities tend to be relatively very small. According to Almshouse Association membership data, two thirds have 10 or fewer units and only 6% have over 50 units.⁵ However, those 6% of almshouse charities with over 50 units own 45% of the almshouse stock.

Proportion of almshouse charities and almshouse stock by number of dwellings owned



Source: Author's analysis of data from The Almshouse Association

This in turn is reflected in the staffing of almshouses. Smaller almshouse charities have no paid staff, although they do have clerks to the trustees who act as a chief executive. A large minority also have wardens or scheme managers.⁶ Some almshouse charities are no longer managed by almshouses with day-to-day operations undertaken by housing associations.⁷

Almshouse organisations are registered charities, some are incorporated others are unincorporated organisations (with trustees personally liable).⁸ Trustees can be appointed according to specific rules (their 'Scheme') of the almshouse charity, including links with a local church, local authority, or the benefactor's family. The Scheme determines purposes, appointment of trustees and investment.⁹ As charities they are regulated by the Charity Commission. Some are also registered providers with Homes England and the Regulator of Social Housing,¹⁰ although this has declined in recent times.¹¹

Almshouses differ from other social housing providers as residents legally are not tenants but beneficiaries: there is no tenancy agreement.¹² Instead, residents have a Letter of Appointment which is accompanied by a resident handbook. Eligibility differs by almshouse charity with allocations in accordance with the bespoke scheme or rules.

The opportunities for involvement of residents within the governance of almshouses varies. Many have no formal right to involvement.

Those registered as social housing providers (or previously so) have requirements to be members of the Housing Ombudsman, something also recommended by The Almshouse Association for non-registered charities.

Residents as named beneficiaries are not charged rent. In the past the endowment was intended to cover the running costs with residents living "rent" free. However, with the introduction of rent rebates (and then housing benefit) - and encouragement from The Almshouse Association after the Second World War to improve properties - almshouse charities have introduced charges.¹³ These have taken the form of a Weekly Maintenance Contribution (WMC). This is often up to an equivalent 'fair rent', similar to social housing.¹⁴

Alongside tenants receiving state support through Housing Benefit and Universal Credit, almshouses have also at times been funded directly through government housing grants. This has sometimes come through repair and improvement grants, although with the shift of funding towards private registered providers it has also been for new build accommodation.¹⁵

What is an almshouse?

The recognised definition of an almshouse is:

An almshouse is a unit of residential accommodation (usually a house or flat) which belongs to a charity, is provided exclusively to meet the charity's purposes (for example, the relief of financial need or infirmity) and is occupied or is available for occupation under a licence by a qualified beneficiary.

An almshouse charity is typically a charity which is established for purposes which are to be furthered by the provision of one or more almshouses.

An almshouse charity is usually a charity for the relief of financial hardship by the provision of housing and associated services or benefits which must (or is authorised to) provide its primary benefit by the grant of a licence to occupy the accommodation that it owns to its beneficiaries.

In addition, an almshouse charity is likely to have one or more of the following features:

1. The origin of the charity is a private gift for the relief of poverty
2. The beneficiaries are required to pay a weekly maintenance contribution that must not be set at a level that would cause hardship
3. The nature of the accommodation is such that the licence requires that beneficiaries must show particular consideration for the needs of other residents
4. A significant proportion of the accommodation is permanent endowment
5. The beneficial class or the geographical area from which it can be drawn is restricted

Note: Almshouses do not necessarily have the word "almshouse" in their name; they may be referred to by another title, such as 'College', 'Hospital' or 'Homes'. This is due to the historical nature of some almshouses and the contemporary usage of these terms at the time the almshouse was established.

Source: The Almshouse Association

How almshouse charities view their strengths and challenges

To provide some context to the impact of the pandemic interviewees were asked in general about the strengths and challenges almshouse charities face. Despite the aforementioned diversity some common themes emerged.

Strengths and benefits

The most frequent theme in the interviews about the strengths of almshouse charities was community - that almshouse charities provided more than just housing. Interviewees reported that almshouses offered residents not only housing services and affordable accommodation but also the opportunity to be part of a community.

The nature of the buildings and the way that almshouse charities are run meant there was an additional social dimension to living in an almshouse. In addition, the community dimension came through support from both those within the almshouse organisation and other residents.

"We're a community rather than just a housing provider."

"I think almshouses to a large extent are about community."

"I got an invite within a couple of weeks to join the UFO club. Hey UFO club, so what about Unidentified Flying Object? They're just six almshouses on the site and they decided to form a club amongst all the residents in this little, small community. And so, they did. But then they found by their own description that they were chatting so much and enjoying themselves so much that they never actually finished. So, they made up the UnFinished Objects and just kept going. I thought, wow, that's brilliant. Actually, you know, and that sort of typifies the best of the of the of the almshouse movement and the beauty of it is it can occur at a really small scale, and arguably otherwise it might not occur."

This was seen as offering something attractive to residents:

"The strengths are community. So, we're not just a roof over people's heads, we're a community and that's what elderly people are looking for."

"I believe it's about community... You know they [residents] identify very much with their locality. It's not about race or class, it's about location and backgrounds and where you're brought up. People feel that strong bond and they feel that strong bond to each other and that still exists."

This is seen as an important dimension to the service provided to residents. By offering a community it means almshouse charities can be close to their residents, enabling them to offer support when needed. This included knowing when people's routines were different or were acting differently and then enquiring as to whether anything needed addressing. This knowledge of residents was felt to come from the small nature of almshouse organisations which allowed staff and wardens to know residents by their name and form trust-based relationships.

"If they see the residents, the curtains aren't open and they know they normally would be open, then they would knock on the door and just check everything is OK."

"We're very lucky, we are a small charity, therefore we know the residents extremely well."

"We all know the residents by name."

"We have high levels of resident engagement - as you know it's recently the flavour of the month, post-Grenfell - but we've been doing it for decades."

Being smaller scale and rooted in a community, meant some organisations with staff described themselves as being like a small housing association. Indeed, some did not distinguish themselves from small housing associations.

"We are an almshouse, which we find it quite useful on the sort of charitable side and need to protect our assets. However, I think we are more functioning as a mainstream small housing association."

"Probably run more like a very small housing association."

"I tend to think of ourselves as a small housing association."

The small, community nature of almshouse charities was seen as offering agility (and ability to respond to local challenges) as well as closeness and engagement with residents. This was often contrasted with large housing associations – a view given by some staff who had come from larger registered housing providers.

"We can steer quicker than a bigger organisation"

"Our strength is our size. We're all small housing providers. We really know our residents. We can be really people centred, people focused. We're not like great, huge housing associations where tenants can never speak to somebody. We have a human face."

"I've been with them for 18 months from a larger housing association. They are smaller so has more of a community feel to it, especially compared with larger housing associations."

This level of engagement with residents was not uniform. From the interviews it appeared to depend on the ethos of the almshouse charity and whether they have staff or a live-in warden.

Interviewees also described a strength as providing affordable housing and meeting the housing needs of low income, older people.

"Housing is one of the essential planks of our community and it's natural that an almshouse delivers housing for people in need, and they do it extremely well"

"What they offer is affordable housing for older residents in the communities where they're located."

One interviewee acknowledged that the small nature of the sector, which rooted them in the community, meant the total volume of housing was smaller compared with larger social housing providers. However, while small, the almshouse sector was seen as playing a vital role in its own way:

"We're all trying to do our little bit for people who otherwise, would, and actually lots of people who are, really struggling with either unaffordable rented properties or dilapidated dangerous, nasty rented properties, exploited by unscrupulous landlords."

Some described their core purpose of offering (predominantly older) people the opportunity to live independently as an important strength. Almshouse charities were viewed as giving residents their own home with their own front door but with the support to enable people to live independently. This was viewed as an attractive proposition for residents and enabled people to live fuller lives.

Similarly, the governing document was also described as a strength in the way it gives an almshouse organisation a clear mission and purpose. This gives both trustees and any staff a clear focus on what the organisation is seeking to achieve. In a number of cases this focus was around independent living.

For some, the charitable nature of almshouse organisations was in itself viewed as a strength with one person stating that they were first and foremost a charity and secondly a housing provider. This ordering of priorities allowed almshouse charities to focus on supporting their beneficiaries (to live independently) rather than prioritising bricks and mortar.

"The fundamental gesture of the almshouse is independent living for people."

"Good old fashion charity that sticks to its mission statement."

The core purposes around independence were sometimes associated with the services that almshouse charities offer to enable residents to live independently. As one interviewee described it:

"We provide accommodation for people who must be capable of independent living. But there is no doubt that we provide some sort of scaffolding around those human beings, and so probably one of the things I'm most proud of is that we have people living in almshouses who were it not for that additional support that we provide would not be able to live independently on any other street, and I think that's a special thing."

For some the ability to deliver for residents was also seen to be down to trustees and staff of almshouse charities. Dedicated staff and active trustees were cited as strengths of some almshouse charities:

"It's extremely well run by a very dedicated bunch of trustees."

"I think we've got a lot of good experience within our staff team, so all of my team actually came from a care background and"

that was deliberate. We deliberately recruited staff with care because we wanted to ensure that our services were very much focused on the care and support of residents rather than just the building management."

"Rachel [the warden] is devoted to the almshouse. She lives close by and comes in off duty if required."

Some interviewees mentioned the quality of the stock and the nature of their residents as strengths, which enabled them to focus on doing more:

"We don't have a lot of antisocial behaviour... We don't have lots of difficult to let properties... we can concentrate on what we do, rather being distracted by some of the unpleasant elements of the business."

"People feel proud of being here."

"We try and maintain our stock to a very high level, perhaps above the average for housing association and local authority kind of levels and what we are prepared to do in terms of maintenance and decorating and is a bit more than and we can afford to do that because we've got residents that respect the properties."

The ability to provide more services was also said to be down to their financial position (although this was not universally the case – as outlined in the next section). The strong balance sheets and investment income from endowments meant that some almshouse charities were felt to be able to offer more than other housing providers. This covered investment in buildings, additional services, more staff and grants for residents. The financial position of charities was also felt to offer almshouse charities a degree of independence.

"I think the great thing about almshouses is that we are able to provide services, beyond the services that you would see with other social housing providers."

"We're an endowed charity, which means that we're able to subsidise a lot of our housing services, so we don't have to rely on the bare minimum of income from the almshouses to drive the services that we provide."

"[We are in an] incredibly fortunate position, because we own property... and the investments and the property that we own creates our income and that goes to subsidise the running of our almshouses."

Challenges facing the sector

Some of the challenges the sector faces are downsides of the strengths of the sector, such as being small housing providers. This was felt specifically relevant to those small almshouse charities with just a handful of properties and no staff.

Most of the smaller almshouses in fact rely on the time and dedication of a few trustees. As such, they are particularly vulnerable to changes in personnel. One interviewee mentioned the stress some trustees are under and said some could not cope with the changes and demands of being a "landlord" (something said to have been exacerbated by the pandemic). Others spoke about the huge responsibilities that are placed on the clerk to the trustee board, including ensuring that all legal and safety requirements are fulfilled.

It was noted by an interviewee from a larger housing association that they had a legal team and solicitors, so they received internal briefings on changes to the law and the introduction of new standards and guidance. An interviewee from outside the sector said that there was less information about the small almshouse charities because their resources were limited. Another commented that smaller almshouse organisations were "an unknown quantity".

The issue of ensuring active trustees and having succession plans in place was also mentioned by some of those interviewed. It was said that people are wary of committing the time and some lack confidence in their ability – both these were said to act as barriers to candidates coming forward. There were also concerns that the time demands made it hard to secure the diversity of candidates, with those working unable to commit to becoming a trustee.

"You know the people don't have the time to come here, particularly here at 10:30 for an hour and a half on the first Thursday of the month, so I think it's because they don't have spare time."

"Many clerks take on a lot of responsibility and they feel that it always lands on their shoulders."

While some almshouse charities interviewed mentioned their strong financial position, for others the reverse was true. This was often attributed to weekly maintenance contributions being very low, and sometimes too low to cover maintenance costs.

"We've acquired charities that have not built-up adequate reserves and very often that's because the charity trustees have not taken full advantage of increasing weekly maintenance contributions."

The view from some interviewees from outside the sector was that almshouses should be charging a rate closer to the Local Housing Allowance (LHA).¹⁶ It was said by others inside the sector that low rates were often due to trustees seeing almshouse organisations as charities and not wanting to charge residents too much. One interviewee said some almshouse trustees did not understand the housing benefit system (which would mean many residents would not be worse off) and as a result they were effectively "subsidising the housing benefit system."

A related challenge was the cost and difficulties of maintaining (and adapting) old and sometimes listed buildings. While listed buildings can be attractive housing which residents feel proud of, they also create issues with repairs and planning departments. Improving energy efficiency is hard (but important as energy prices rise and new energy efficiency regulations are introduced) and improvements to modern standards more broadly can be impractical. One interviewee noted that if they wanted to put a hoist in a property, there would not be space. Another noted the cost and difficulty finding trades people. One person commented that upgrading properties would be increasingly important as baby boomers become residents - that preferences and expectations were changing.

The higher costs of maintaining listed buildings were said to place specific pressure on the finances of some almshouse charities. In one case, they questioned the viability of their building over the longer term because of the additional financial costs and meeting modern standards.

"Modernisation of the flats is extremely expensive."

"One of the challenges that we have is around the listed status of the buildings and trying to ensure that they meet modern standards and the expectations of our client groups as well in terms of thermal efficiency."

"The residents love it, but now I can see that's going to be a problem going forward as people expect more and more. So, we do spend quite a lot of money on upgrading when needed. And that will be an ongoing challenge, and it'll be a very difficult decision at some point in the future."

Some interviewees also drew attention to the tension between their ethos of providing independent living and the deteriorating health of their residents. The discussion included where that line should be drawn between supporting and providing housing for residents and the need for people to live independently. One interviewee said that they were happy to have cleaners and carers in the day but drew the line at overnight care. For some almshouses, this was seen as a sensitive area which needed to be managed as they were not care providers. For others it was more fluid and something they reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

"Nothing stays the same, and by definition with the nature of our community, they're likely to get less able to live independently rather than more. And so, we have to keep assessing."

Providing housing for older people was seen as a positive for many residents who moved into almshouse charities. However, some noted the downsides and challenges. One interviewee noted that they were bound by their charitable purposes but tried to ensure new residents were at the younger age spectrum. Another almshouse charity noted that they tried to ensure their site was open to the wider community, including younger people.

Ensuring openness to the wider community was also viewed as an important way of combating a perceived lack of understanding about almshouse charities. A number of interviewees said that the sector was poorly understood. This included not understanding who almshouse charities are, what they provide, and around independent living (rather than being a care home). This was felt in some cases to put almshouse charities at a disadvantage compared with other housing providers when seeking to work in partnership. It also meant the community did not fully benefit from what almshouse charities had to offer.

"People don't understand what we do and who we are."

"The sector is vital in my view but misunderstood because they all think that it's got to be the housing associations and all these big things supported by government."

One interviewee commented that for smaller charities it was especially hard to raise the profile locally. The size of the sector was viewed by another interviewee as challenging. Having fewer homes meant it was hard to get across the fact they offered something different and niche. It also presented almshouse charities with a challenge about how to be more in touch with the wider community. For some interviewees work had been undertaken to change this which was bearing fruits.

"The council here is finally starting to recognise that what's important in the borough is not simply the numbers of affordable housing, but the variety and the range."

It was felt by some that the sector had a challenge of being modern and relevant for today's world. This extended beyond the buildings

to the organisational systems. One interviewee noted that IT and HR systems of the almshouse were not as modern as those of the larger housing association from which she had moved.

"I've stepped back ten years in some sense"

One interviewee from outside the sector put it more bluntly, and felt some almshouses lacked professionalism and could be parochial.

"Their practices and culture are very outdated"

This included the language around wardens and clerks which was felt to be off-putting and said that "housing as a charitable gift is questionable." The issue of tenancies was raised by others as causing confusion for those outside the sector. One interviewee said that not having a tenancy may appear backward and speak to paternalistic philanthropy.

However, it was reported that the issue was how almshouse charities managed relationships with people. It was stated that this relationship should be based on appointments based on assessment of need and any changes to the relationship based on legal process. It was commented that it was also about the *right* attitude of trustees and staff.

"We are open with our application process, so we try to recruit residents from the whole of the wider, diverse community."

One interviewee acknowledged that there was a perception - because almshouse charities did not offer tenancies - that the accommodation was not secure. However, they went on to state that their accommodation (licence to occupy) is in fact much more secure than the private rented sector.

The impact of the pandemic

The pandemic has had a significant impact on public health and how people live their lives and interact with one another. Both individuals and organisations – public and private – had to change the way they operate and communicate. Meanwhile, the reduction in economic activity arising from Covid and the emergency measures that were put in place had sweeping financial implications. Individually and collectively, we were all affected. To understand the specific impacts of the pandemic on almshouses, interviewees were asked about how their residents were specifically impacted and what the implications were for their organisation.

The effect of Covid on almshouse residents

The physical health implications of Covid were central to the responses of almshouse organisations. However, the impact most mentioned and felt to have had the biggest impact on residents was isolation and loneliness. Throughout the interviews the issue of isolation was raised time and again. It was reported that the lockdown made people feel cut off which in turn adversely affected people's mental health.

This was not viewed as specific to almshouse charities, but it could be inferred through the interviews that the demographic composition of residents meant they may have been more vulnerable to isolation. Specifically, more likely to be shielding, more likely to be living alone, and less likely to be online. As a result, there were reports of people being withdrawn, becoming much less sociable (even as lockdown measures eased), that mental capabilities deteriorated and there were increased incidents of anti-social behaviour.

It was also noted that especially among older people there is still a stigma around mental health, which made the issue much harder to address.

"The main impact for our residents has been on mental health."

"Isolation has been the biggest impact."

"The big impact for residents was loneliness and social isolation"

"The feedback from residents was they were isolated."

"All of a sudden my staff might have been the only ones about."

One interviewee also noted the challenges and stigma around talking about mental health, which they felt was more acute amongst older people and something which urgently needed to be addressed.

"I think with our younger generations we talk about mental health a lot more and we did it with staff, but I'm not sure with that generation whether they feel as comfortable talking about it."

It was noted by a number of interviewees that the pandemic undermined their almshouse charity's purpose of providing a community. It was said that people are attracted to almshouses because of the communal areas and activities which all had to stop. It was noted that this resulted in residents not being able to meet, interact and socialise with each other, which in turn added to the sense of isolation.

"The particular angle of the almshouse is that this is a community that wasn't really able to operate much as a community for many months."

"They really missed being able to interact with each other."

Some interviewees did note that the situation for residents was made better by access to open space and contrasted this situation with what it may have been for those in high-rise flats without outdoor space. A contrasting view from one interviewee from outside the sector was that almshouse properties may have smaller space standards which could have made the experience harder. However, as one person remarked almshouses do not face problems with overcrowding and the quality of the homes is often high.

Several interviewees spoke of the fear that residents had about Covid. This was felt particularly acute for those continuously watching the news.

"If they didn't have Netflix or whatever and they were just watching the terrestrial channels. And it was only when they were watching that this kind of panic came. But when you got them away from that, they were very calm about it, and they trusted us."

"There were other residents that really retreated into their homes. Got very anxious. Were very, very frightened of catching Covid so stayed indoors a lot, so I would honestly say that the impact on people's mental health and their ability to socialise were the things that hit us most hard, and the fact that we weren't around at the beginning during lockdown one - that we weren't around to manage that. It had a really negative impact."

The lockdown rules were also a cause of tension. It was said that some residents were angry about the rules and did not feel they applied to them. This in turn caused friction between residents themselves and residents and the almshouse charity.

Despite the risks of Covid, especially for older people, most of those interviewed felt that they had kept Covid out of their almshouses or at least until after the vaccination roll out. Nevertheless, some noted the deteriorating physical health of residents from being at home all day.

"We've done well to keep Covid out."

Although loneliness and isolation were mentioned in most interviews, there was awareness that it did not affect people equally. However, there was not a consistent view on this. One interviewee described three groups of residents pre-pandemic: those out all day, those in the almshouse grounds and those inside. They said it was hardest for the first group as they had to stay inside. However, another said it was those with dementia who suffered more than those in their 60s and 70s who could be more active.

Others noted that while social isolation was a huge challenge it was not universal, and that people were resilient. Some even felt that the situation brought people together.

"In fact, I think it brought them together a little bit more."

"Wherever you have groups of people you get little cliques, little factions... but a lot of those things I think had calmed down or had dissipated."

"People seem remarkably resilient actually and just sort of carried on."

The impact of the lockdown was also felt dependent on how almshouses operated and whether people were onsite.

"Members of staff were onsite and were able to do socially distanced conversations."

The presence of staff onsite, the activities that almshouse charities could put on and social isolation rules all changed over time. The easing of restrictions was viewed as making the situation easier and helped with addressing the issues of isolation and loneliness. However, the interventions during the pandemic had an impact of almshouse charities and residents, not least regarding independence. As one interviewee noted, pre-pandemic they had been doing a great deal of work on independence which was reversed as they had to provide a lot for vulnerable residents.

"We were trying to encourage independence, whereas actually we flipped that on its head."

This has created challenges as the situation heads towards being more normal. It was also noted that some residents remain very worried about the virus.

"We've got some residents now that want to be back to normal, whatever normal might be... We've got others who are still very wary, and some who still haven't come out to anything, and they're still very careful who they're seeing."

Lockdown, shielding and self-isolation rules were said to have affected residents' access to services. Several interviewees noted the difficulty seeing GPs and social services and getting prescriptions. Others noted the challenges of accessing food and shopping, which was particularly severe at the start of the pandemic when there was panic buying. There were also mentions of people being discharged by hospitals back to almshouses, including those with care homes attached, without the resident having taken a Covid test.

"It was quite disheartening for them to go to a shop or a supermarket and find what they'd gone to buy wasn't there because the shelves were empty."

In one interview it was said that the pandemic was also felt to have affected the resident because of the difficulties of the almshouse charity staying in touch with them. Despite efforts to continue to engage residents one woman had not paid her council tax and bailiffs were involved. As a charity they were able to resolve the issue and then get the resident to pay them the money back. However, they felt they may have been able to support the resident earlier without the restrictions of the pandemic.

Some interviewees commented on the financial implications of the pandemic for residents. The general consensus was that the pandemic had not affected residents financially as they were predominantly pensioners (and not impacted by not being able to work) and those on low incomes were already on housing benefit. As such, rents continued to be paid and pensions remained unchanged.

"It's older people, so they're all on a pension, on housing benefit and so on."

However, it was noted in a couple of interviews that those of working age had faced problems. In one case the almshouse had worked with the resident to agree a repayment plan. Another noted that those under retirement age would notice the loss of the Universal Credit top up.

"Nearly all residents seem to cope extremely well. We had to take more of a benevolent attitude towards several residents who still work because they were furloughed or lost their jobs because they were in a casual industry. So, we've got several residents now with quite substantial arrears on their weekly maintenance contributions. So, we've negotiated with those residents a repayment plan. And, it will take them several years to clear up."

The financial challenge identified by some interviewees was yet to come with the energy crisis and inflation set to affect the cost of living for residents.

"This year is now the big one for our residents, with inflation going through the roof and the cost-of-living crisis."

Implications of Covid for almshouse charities

Several implications for almshouse charities were identified. Many of those spoken to as part of the research stated that the immediate consequence of the pandemic was shifting the way they operated and ensuring people were safe.

"The first impact was crisis management."

For many almshouses charities this meant staff moving to remote working, not providing face-to-face services and activities and closing communal areas. Some decided to only provide essential repairs, health and safety and cleaning services. Some interviewees said that staff remained in the office but were avoiding direct contact with residents. Others closed offices and worked solely from home. This shift inevitably created organisational challenges around reconfiguring the way services are delivered and how governance arrangements functioned with a shift to online meetings.

"The community aspect, of course, has been drastically curtailed."

"We were very careful to always follow the government guidance in terms of how to manage our sheltered housing blocks, so we continued to do the basic health and safety. But generally speaking, we encouraged our staff to work from home."

Interviewees noted the challenges they faced around information and guidance. One interviewee felt the Charity Commission was helpful in providing them flexibility to manage through extraordinary times. However, some felt they were forgotten (including by the Regulator of Social Housing) or fell between general needs housing provision and care homes. The lack of tailored information caused confusion about exactly what they should be doing and what they were allowed to do, be it undertaking repairs or guidance from the Charity Commission on holding meetings remotely. This was felt to be particularly challenging as the regulations were frequently changing.

"We were forgotten"

For those interviewed with care facilities attached it was reported that it took some time before they received information from the Care Quality Commission (CQC). Some almshouse charities stated that they relied on The Almshouse Association for information on what they should be doing. While the initial stage was felt to be most difficult for organisations, the situation remained challenging as rules were relaxed and it became more about the discretion of individual organisations.

Alongside the challenges around adjusting operations and having an understanding of rules, acquiring PPE was also mentioned as significant challenge for almshouse charities at the start of the pandemic. This required some almshouse charities to spend time and resources sourcing equipment and cleaning materials to ensure the safety of residents, staff and volunteers. For one interviewee the issues continue, with difficulties at the time of speaking sourcing lateral flow tests.

"What would have been useful was more support for the PPE and everything to support our staff to keep the place safe."

The lockdown had an impact on how almshouse charities undertook repairs and on filling voids. Some interviewees spoke of the difficulties with the availability of contractors and trades people. There were also mentions of getting hold of supplies and materials

(which have also risen in price). This slowed void turnarounds, which was exacerbated by fewer people seeking to move during the pandemic.

"Probably we couldn't get them through as quick as we'd want because we couldn't get some of the carpets and some of the work done that needed doing, but they, the customer group weren't looking either at that time because they obviously became nervous to move."

"A broken loo seat is a big deal to someone who's housebound. You know, a dripping tap if you're stuck in the room with it can drive you bonkers... We were conscious that we couldn't do the level of service that our residents wanted and needed, and they were gracious. You know they understood, but they were having to put up with stuff that was probably having a bigger impact on them than the average human being"

This was not a universal view with one interview saying their relationship with their contractor meant works continued and another saying as no one else was on the almshouse site, contractors could get on with refurbishment works.

Those interviewed also spoke of the need to communicate to residents what was happening and provide up-to-date information on the changes to rules and guidance. Many organisations interviewed also undertook assessments of needs and risks facing residents.

"Staff pulled out all the stops."

Difficulties with some residents not following the guidance was mentioned. This caused tensions with residents who blamed the almshouse charity for the guidance, and therefore these tensions needed to be managed by the almshouse charity. Some also spoke of residents becoming anti-social towards other residents and holding parties.

"We saw a distinct increase in antisocial behaviour. We actually had people arguing with each other in the block because we weren't there to manage that. We saw people getting drunk outside which was kind of new, we hadn't had to manage that before."

"One of my residents was like 'Oh dear heart', she said, 'I'm 93 years old. I've lived through the war. And if you're telling me now that I can't leave my home and I can't go and do my shopping and it's for my own safety, you know you can forget it.'"

"Some of the more rebellious residents started breaking lockdown and having little parties and playing bingo and it was really difficult because we're not the police."

For others the reverse was true with misinformation and fear being considerable organisational challenges. One interviewee noted the positive result of tackling this:

"There was something really quite magical about that. Because it meant that the staff... all of a sudden, the names that they knew and the faces they'd seen but didn't really know became real, and they started to learn a lot about each other."

Most interviewees did not state that they had staffing challenges, and many were able to move to home working. However, there were challenges around ensuring PPE for those in face-to-face contact and some having to self-isolate. There were also a few reports of staff wanting to return to office working. Some of the almshouses providing care reported acute issues recruiting staff. This was seen as mainly owing to people being reluctant to come into the industry during a pandemic because of health concerns, as well as ongoing general recruitment problems.

A minority of interviewees said the pandemic had a significant financial impact. This was most acute for those almshouses with commercial property which was used to cross subsidise other activity. While the high street was in long term decline, the pandemic was viewed as hastening its demise with tenants not paying rent, leaving properties and facing challenges reletting.

"As a result, our income dropped precipitously in the early stages of the pandemic, it has now reached more of a steady state, but in terms of gross returns, our income is probably down about 30%."

"Tenants going bust, and you know leaving us with repair obligations and of course no rental income. So, that's been a very significant impact on the finances of the charity."

"We went from a situation of earning £120,000 a year on that property to having a rating liability of £60,000 a year."

The impact of the financial loss differed by almshouse charity but included changes in development plans, closing a care home, stopping activities and reductions in grant giving.

"We've had to cut our grant making budget by 50%, and that is devastating in that we know the needs never been greater."

"It's impacted on our development plans with our new build."

Others faced financial costs of the pandemic which were less severe. One interviewee had an investment in residential properties which was affected as tenants became furloughed or unemployed. They had agreed repayment plans and alongside government's Covid welfare support it meant that the financial damage was limited. A couple of interviewees mentioned investment in the stock market, which was initially hit but has subsequently rebounded. There were also mentions of fundraising activities being curtailed by the pandemic and of the additional costs of PPE. Increased voids in some almshouses and care homes (viewed as having a significant impact) were also identified as having a negative effect on finances as were increased costs of repairs and maintenance.

"It was a really tough time."

The negative financial impact was not universal. Some said that they had not been affected, one interviewee felt they had saved money and others highlighted their strong financial position going into the pandemic.

"Looking at the finances we have reserves and so on, so we've not been impacted,"

"Not a big financial impact on the charity. In some areas it meant we saved money."

In some interviews the view was that the pandemic had little financial or organisational impact. Some said they continued to operate normally, including staff (for those with staff) being treated as key workers and services being maintained.

"The impact on the organisation has been relatively mild."

One interviewee noted that while they had made changes, the almshouse charity had a business continuity plan which gave them confidence in their response.

"We knew that we'd already had so much in place to be able to respond."

For others, rapid changes and additional work placed more strain on staff.

"For me, as a manager, we were dealing with situations we'd never experienced before."

How almshouse charities responded

As outlined in the previous section, the pandemic had a wide range of impacts on almshouse residents, including on how they could operate and protecting staff and residents from Covid. The almshouses charities interviewed responded to these challenges in different ways, including by providing advice, support, and signposting residents to services.

Understanding residents' needs

The first step many took was to speak to residents to understand their needs. This was viewed as a way of understanding what might be required, prioritising support and as part of their approach of maintaining contact and combating isolation. At the start of the pandemic and during the first lockdown, face-to-face contact was banned or discouraged. This meant staff had to make telephone calls, often daily, to residents to ensure they were receiving adequate support and to understand if any residents were struggling to cope.

"We maintained regular contact with people. We did a daily telephone service... I'd phone people every day, and in the early days we went out of our way to make sure that people were not struggling."

Some of those interviewed divided residents into groups to phone. One interviewee used their resident rep system to understand the situation. Others were more reliant on live-in wardens. The phone calls were used to evaluate the level of support needed, assess the risks of individual residents and to tackle loneliness.

"We went above and beyond."

"Everyone was tasked with basically keeping in touch with a number of residents, sort of almost adopting them as it were. We didn't put it that way obviously, but in essence people were tasked with having some kind of regular phone communication and then those that were not in the welfare team fed back to the welfare team."

Several people interviewed described how their almshouse charity introduced newsletters. These were seen as ways of tackling social isolation and as a way of providing updates on the changing Covid guidelines. As one interviewee explained:

"I introduced this weekly newsletter... it was just telling people this is what we're going to do. Here's the guidance, this is about staying indoors. Here's how to wash your hands. You know it's that kind of thing, but we also put in puzzles and, we got other residents who were coping well to write little stories... That really did help. That regular communication, even though it was just a newsletter through the door, really did help residents not to feel so alone."

Some interviewees also spoke about how they liaised with family members to ensure the right support was being provided and to keep people updated, including on when they could visit.

"We're in the fortunate position that we've got direct lines of communication with some of the families of the residents. And we have permissions to make contacts with family members and so in that way, through strong and frequent communication, we were able just to sort of keep an eye on people, understand what they needed, what they lacked."

"We also helped people do video calls with their relatives if they couldn't see them and they weren't able to do that at home."

Many almshouse charities highlighted how they tried to tackle their concerns about isolation and loneliness not only through conversations but also via Covid-secure activities which built a sense of community. As a result, a number of almshouse charities spoke of how they circulated quizzes and also organised activities online. As the rules evolved and more activity was feasible, some almshouses charities sought to hold activities outside or with windows open.

"We just redoubled our efforts to create engagement. So, for example, we still have a weekly quiz that we did, and we pushed it through people's doors. We did it online so there were a number of things that were organised through Zoom and Teams to keep people engaged and keep people amused during the pandemic. There's a local book club who we partner with, so we got books for people... we got a boom box and mince pies and a VAT of Sherry."

"We had a distanced choir in, so we had these set piece events."

"That was a bit of a lifeline again for everyone actually, and it kept us all in touch."

Alongside organising activities, some almshouse charities also sought to provide other forms of support. This ranged from buying and delivering food, contact with foodbanks, help with online shops, picking up prescriptions and spending time on the phone trying to secure doctor appointments.

"We're a landlord so we wouldn't normally provide food, we wouldn't normally provide medicine or access to medicine, but as a care organisation in lieu of families you do the right thing. So, if you know there's an older person who you know can't get to the chemist and it's dangerous for them to do that, you make sure that someone you know can get it delivered."

"There's been a lot more work around trying to get people doctor's appointments and what they needed. Sitting on phones for hours, that's taken a lot of my staff time."

Alongside direct support, interviewees described how mutual aid was used during the pandemic to support residents. This included residents doing shopping or picking up prescriptions for other residents. Other almshouse charities worked with local volunteers to provide support via phone and support for shopping or signposted residents towards charities and voluntary and community organisations. These instances appeared to be where there was an existing relationship between the almshouse charity and the wider community which could be mobilised during the pandemic.

"So, we enlisted an army of volunteer shoppers. It was one of those things that really restores your faith in human nature."

Some interviewees also described how they provided financial assistance to both residents and the wider community. This included using their discretion to buy food, providing grants for white goods and gift vouchers as replacement for not having a Christmas meal together. One interviewee said they were giving residents a £250 grant to cover the post-pandemic hike in energy and food prices.

"For our residents, the financial impact of the pandemic is going to be this year [2022] rather than 2020 or 2021."

Another interviewee also described how they employed an anger management professional to work with a resident whose behaviour had deteriorated since the first lockdown:

"He was putting his housing at risk because he was being rude to people visiting the block and he was being quite abusive, and it was unacceptable behaviour... I linked him up with somebody who was a professional anger management therapist. And it was absolutely fantastic. I mean, it's completely changed the way he approaches us now... That was the best £300 I ever spent... it might not always pay off, but in this case, it really did and it really it really changed the dynamic in the block as well."

Others were providing care beyond what they did previously because there was no one else there (See section on partnerships for more details).

Supporting residents and maintaining communication placed an extra strain on staff members. There was also pressure on senior staff to keep staff and residents safe, make changes at speed, and ensure they were on top of regulations. With small teams this could mean a lot of additional work. In addition, some described the emotional strain they were under, often speaking to residents who were deeply distressed about their situation.

"When you're on the phone and you've got a resident crying at the other end because they're so lonely, they're so fed up it takes its toll on you as well."

Use of digital communications

An important dimension, mentioned in several interviews, to the way almshouses charities communicated with residents and provided services during the pandemic was their online offer. Email and video calls were viewed as important tools for not only enabling organisations to function during a pandemic but also for continuity of services with residents and tackling social isolation.

Digital communication was viewed as important for those with family abroad and providing online activities, such as Zoom coffee mornings and quizzes. Email was said to be important for sending newsletters and the internet for accessing Covid guidelines and connecting with the wider community in a way they normally would not have been able to.

"They also knew that there were other ways of being able to socialise with each other, so you know they all got used to using laptops. You know we had tablets that we were passing around and making sure that people had that even on their iPhones."

Online activities were also helpful in ensuring people continue to feel part of a community. It was also said that the pandemic experience has led to growing expectations on digital use from residents.

"It was a surprise for us because even the ones we thought that weren't tech savvy... Once they had some support around it, they were all over it, so that was really good."

However, it was noted by several interviewees that some residents were digitally excluded (often because of their age and income). Digital exclusion was said to be due to not having access to the right device, not having access to the internet, not having the skills or confidence, and not having an interest in being able to access things online.

"[The pandemic] highlighted digital exclusion and things like that, which we hadn't really appreciated before."

It was said that as a younger cohort of people go to live in almshouses, levels of digital exclusion will decline, but that it was still an on-going issue. One interviewee said that during the pandemic it was hard to sit next to someone who was unfamiliar with new technology and talk them through an online shop. One interviewee said that they ran online courses but take up was poor. It was said that being older is not necessarily a barrier to being online, but for many it is still likely to mean that other forms of communication are needed.

Some interviewees described how they were trying to overcome barriers around access to broadband and smart devices. This included providing tablets and ipads during the pandemic and having systems for video calls in all homes. One interviewee describe how they were installing VOIP telephones (phone calls over the internet) so they can access the emergency call centre alongside free 5G wireless broadband for all residents. Another interviewee said that while some residents may not pick up email most have mobile phones and so SMS messages were an effective way of staying in contact with residents.

Despite efforts to stay in contact with residents via phone, video-call, zoom and newsletters, the situation was not viewed as ideal.

"We got some genuinely bad feedback, and I could see that people were finding it difficult."

As a result, some of those who had worked remotely during the first lockdown reviewed how they were providing frontline services and reopened offices and returned to doorstep visits. One interviewee noted that they thought those who continued with a purely homeworking approach may have lost some contact with residents. In some cases, this was felt to have caused tensions with residents:

"To be honest, after lockdown one we kind of reviewed that and we, as safely as we could, reintroduced those frontline services again and we've never closed the office again since lockdown one because we just felt that it had such a negative impact on the residents. So, we've probably spent a year rebuilding a lot of the relationships that were quite damaged in lockdown one, and so I feel like we're back in a good place."

"This organisation does not interject into people's lives, so people live independently."

Support almshouses received

Levels of direct support and signposting of services to residents varied. One interviewee viewed their role as providing homes for people to live independently which was interpreted as providing little additional support. Another interviewee felt the level of support differed by size, whether they had staff, whether they were a registered provider and what trustees and residents understood by independent living. It was also noted that almshouse charities that struggled to meet during Covid may have also struggled to provide support during the crisis.

Many almshouse charities provided additional support for their residents, but some also drew on additional advice and support from within their own organisation, external networks and from other charities. Some also noted where support was lacking and the pressures on those providing support, notably trustees.

Several people noted the support they were given from their boards. This included advice on Covid-related issues, encouragement, and signing off additional support for residents.

"The board were helpful for advice and someone to speak to."

"Without a strong board, that would have been much, much harder."

Others described some of the real pressures placed on boards. One interviewee described how hands on board members struggled as they could not get involved during lockdown periods. Another spoke of the difficulty of not being in touch with residents. One interviewee whose almshouse charity had a care home described the real concern from trustees around being responsible for a Covid death.

In some cases, it was said that the pandemic had highlighted existing strains on trustees. These included challenges around keeping up with regulations for those with no staff or only a part-time clerk. One person gave the example of trustees deciding to step back or stepping down following the demands of the pandemic. Another said that after the pandemic had first hit the charity started to consider whether current arrangements were a sustainable way forward, with concerns around the difficulties replacing ageing trustees. They were currently exploring different operating models.

"Their commitment and dedication as volunteers was something to be admired... I think that there has to be an acknowledgement that for this group of people they were giving up their time and commitment to this cause... But I think that the pandemic has made us review a lot of our working practices."

Some of those interviewed also spoke of the support they received from the Almshouse Association and through networks of other almshouse charities and housing associations. The Almshouse Association was seen as useful to both large and small charities in providing information on regulations and advice through its website and by phone. The support was viewed as invaluable.

Several interviewees said advice and support from other agencies fell short of what they needed but the Almshouse Association was there to provide guidance. This included gaining reassurance that their approach was what should be done. They were also described as responsive to queries with questions answered on the phone or shortly after via email.

"The Almshouse Association are great. They really are, and we did rely heavily on their updates in terms of what we should and shouldn't be doing.... they were disseminating the government guidance and making it appropriate for almshouse charities and that was incredibly helpful actually."

"The Almshouse Association offered a lot of support."

"The Almshouse Association is quick and responsive to deal with."

Networks were also seen as useful as other almshouse charities often had practical knowledge which could be used to support other charities. It was mentioned that networking and training sessions had moved online but that people were looking forward to resuming in person meetings. The Larger Almshouse Charities Networking Group was specifically mentioned as providing a sounding board prior to the pandemic and as a forum for helping people navigate through the crisis.

"You email in the morning and say is anybody coming across this and you will get a handful of replies by the evening."

One interviewee mentioned regional networks organised through The Almshouse Association, although noted that in their region it was not properly functioning during the pandemic (so went to a neighbouring area). It was suggested that this was an issue that the Association could look to address. Another said that almshouse charities had different levels of resources and the challenge for The Almshouse Association was to support those with less.

"It's lonely, especially the clerks who are on their own, you know they're on their own, and so you know it's important to know you can ring somebody."

There was also mention of informal support through networks of local housing providers as well as through the national consortium for older people's housing and support - Erosh. Some interviewees also mentioned the support they received from the voluntary and community sector for residents. For others, the main challenge was accessing support, especially social services. Not all organisations said they needed external support. Many said they were self-sufficient.

Partnership working

How almshouse charities were able to respond to the pandemic and the new challenges they faced was in part shaped by other organisations.

While some new partnerships emerged most said that they had not formed new working relationships with other organisations. Some did note that they had stronger relationships with organisations as they sought to cope with the disruption of the pandemic. For others, relationships became more distant as they were more internally focused on managing day-to-day through the pandemic.

Partnership working focused largely on local authorities, local charities and health and social care services, there were also some mentions of housing providers. However, the foundations and nature of these partnerships were for the most part unrelated to the pandemic.

"They were probably about the same as before and as they are now. I wouldn't say that anybody particularly swept in."

"We didn't make any new partnerships, but as I said, we do rely heavily on Age UK."

"Because we were all hands to the pump, we were all so busy, it led to us all becoming very insular."

Charities

A number of those interviewed spoke of their relationship with charities and the voluntary and community sector. One theme that emerged among those almshouse charities that were grant givers working with local charities was in respect of partnership working to meet local need. A London-based almshouse, for example, spoke of the successful collaboration through London Funders, which offers grants and social investment.

"I mean these charities are friends, but the level of collaboration amongst them was really productive and we gave away that money in about four months."

Others spoke of longer-term relationships with charities. This included providing low-cost meeting space, funding the local Citizen Advice centre to provide a money management adviser and provision of accommodation for homeless people. Others described how they worked with local charities and local branches of Age UK for befriending services during the pandemic and food deliveries. Foodbanks were also mentioned as important for some almshouse charities.

"We do work closely with Age UK, and we did joined-up working with other organisations for people that were eligible for food deliveries, we coordinated with them."

Some interviews mentioned the challenges of there being multiple overlapping charities and organisations which can become confusing. One person also noted that the local Age UK branch was in another area to where the almshouse was located. Another almshouse organisation was creating a database of local organisations and services to navigate their way round local charitable provision.

Housing providers

Some almshouse charities worked with local housing associations. One relationship with a housing association grew out of the local VCS working together through a local hub organised through the local authority. It was reported that they are now looking to develop intergenerational housing. Other examples included almshouse maintenance works being undertaken by housing associations. In one instance an interviewee described the relationship being a financial one built around property services. They spoke of some of the difficulties faced during the pandemic, such as delays in maintenance works.

There was also mention of the value of informal networks and information sharing with housing association chief executives, which was particularly useful in the pandemic to solving issues, such as sourcing PPE, as well as just "letting off steam."

Local authorities

There was a mixed picture regarding relationships with local authorities. Some people said that councils were confused about almshouses (and the terminology around different types of housing for older people) and that they had little to do with the local authority. Some noted challenges because they do not have a waiting list. The small size of some almshouses was seen by some as a barrier to forming relationships more broadly.

There were few examples of almshouse charities forming new partnerships with councils during the pandemic, except for mentions of Covid-related support such as food provision.

"The local authority appreciates us, but we'd like them to appreciate us a little bit more."

In other cases, the pandemic meant there was little opportunity to collaborate because the council was focused on their core responsibilities and their own pandemic response, while almshouse charities were equally getting on with looking after their residents.

"In terms of the pandemic, I think the Council recognised the really gold star service that we were giving to our residents and that meant that 160 odd residents who weren't needing to call on council services and I think they recognised that we were quick off the mark as well and we could really respond to the individual needs of our residents."

While a number of interviews said they struggled to engage with the local authority, others said they had a good relationship with theirs. The basis for these relationships included, historic nature of almshouse charities, tradition of grant giving, having a councillor on the board, and having development ambitions.

"Generally speaking, we've been part of the furniture for many years and people know us, and we've been who we are for a long time."

One interviewee who was involved with two almshouse organisations noted the difference between their relationships with their respective local authorities: one with a single site and where the council and councillors know them well and another where the almshouses are spread across several district authorities where building relationships is harder.

Health and social care

Relationships with health and social care services were frequently mentioned in the interviews. Some mentioned new or improved partnership working. One interviewee noted the working relationship with a GP surgery and pharmacy during the pandemic. Another, with a care home, mentioned a strengthening of their relationship with CQC. They noted that they were proactive in liaising with them during the pandemic and were able to have an open and frank relationship.

"I think it brought us closer to the CQC because from the beginning we were proactive in liaising with them, explaining what we were doing and so on. We bonded, we created a good working relationship with them, which is very useful!"

However, the main response was about how stretched services were. This included the difficulty residents faced getting GP appointments, but more acutely the challenges around social services for older people. In a significant number of cases people described what this meant for residents and how it was placing additional stress on almshouse organisations.

"I mean, one social worker actually apologised to me when she did come out and see one gentleman with me because we've had two review calls to date before on the phone and she said I am so sorry we should come out the first time."

"So, we've been having a huge battle with health services to try and get doctors to actually come back out and see these people. And then when they do see them, they go bloody hell!"

"It took us two and a half hours with someone with a fractured hip before the ambulance got here."

"The spirit is willing, but the resources often aren't there."

"One resident who has been kind of managing and all of a sudden is really not managing, and social services will come and see him in six weeks. And you quite understand it's not their fault. It's not the individual's fault, but crikey... What's gonna happen for those six weeks?"

The situation was felt to have worsened during the pandemic, but as one person explained challenges preceded Covid:

"Ten years ago when I started, you know, before austerity had really kind of kicked in if a resident became incapable of living independently then we need to find another form of accommodation that's sheltered accommodation or care home... 10 years ago that could take three months to find a place, nowadays it can take two years. So, you've got somebody who's really not managing very well or increasingly less able to manage living on their own, potentially for two years."

One interviewee noted that they had tried to improve relationships with social services, but the issue was down to the lack of resources. Another said they paid to get an assessment because of the long waiting times and in another case, they relied on Mind and the Alzheimer Society for support. Others are seeking to cope by providing additional support even though some residents need specialist care.

"We asked one of the managers from social services to come for a chat and try and improve the process of working with them. And basically, she just said look, there's no money, we've got a huge waiting list for everything."

"The charity paid for an occupational health assessment because with social services it is going to take six months."

"It's not their fault. I feel sorry for them. They're clearly hugely under resourced and overworked and overstretched. One of the issues is that as people get really, really old and frail there are times when they struggle to live independently and they probably would be safer and happier in a care home environment, but it's absolutely impossible."

"We don't actually provide care, but we have to provide a lot of support to people who are really not able to live independently anymore."

"The waiting list for assessment or support is horrendous. I think when it comes to that is much better to try to find some support from charities. Yeah, you've got Mind, you've got the Alzheimer's Society and we turn to a number of them as we normally do for advice and support. Statutory services are in a bit of a mess."

Successful collaboration

Several interviewees made comments and suggestions about the lessons learnt from successful partnership working. These included:

- Raising and maintaining the profile: raising awareness of what almshouse charities are at a sector level through the Almshouse Association and the role of individual almshouse charities can play well locally, including by engaging councillors. This involved working hard to just stay in touch with organisations because of staff churn
- External facing: including sitting on local forums and using almshouse grounds or buildings for activities for external organisations
- Being active: developing homes was cited as how relationships with council have changed but also working with council teams in offering support or facilities
- Being open minded: being open to new or different approaches, including with regards to council waiting lists
- Being honest: being honest about what an almshouse charity can do, and what it cannot
- Using networks: making the most of networks of trustees and having trustees that have those links into the community

"Frankly, you do have to be proactive, and it is time consuming, but I think it pays dividends because it's about partnership working."

"We've never been an island."

"We did a lot of work, especially with our ward councillors and we did a lot of work with them right from the very beginning. Basically, saying look, this is what we're thinking about doing and they knew the almshouses, they you know they came in every year to the canvas, but they knew who we were."

"I think being a bit more open minded might help."

Beyond how to build relationships, there was a call from interviewees for the link between housing and health to be a bigger theme around the almshouse sector and social housing more broadly. This link was very apparent during the pandemic, with almshouse charities providing advice and support to keep residents safe and over the longer term their work to enable older people to live independently.

The pandemic also highlighted some of the tensions in the care system, not least around securing an appointment with social services for an assessment and where an almshouse charity's responsibility starts and ends to residents and where it becomes the responsibility of those providing acute health and social care.

"I think the disappointment, and it's something which ought to be more on the agenda not only of almshouse charities, but housing associations, is the relationship [between housing and] health."

Benefits of being an almshouse charity

Interviewees were asked how being an almshouse charity helped and hindered their response to the pandemic. Many of the responses echoed the comments that people made when describing the strengths of the sector, for instance around community, closeness to residents, housing and services that enable people to live independently, the ethos of almshouse organisations, and dedication of staff and trustees.

Respondents often spoke about how almshouses gained their resilience from their community, and how drawing on the community ethos helped during the pandemic.

"You already have a pre-existing community with pre-existing relationships, either involving directly members of the community or the almshouse charity itself and its residents. So, if you've got that structure in place all you need to do is activate it in a different way when something like the pandemic comes along and that's a beauty of almshouses."

"We knew our residents really well."

It was frequently mentioned that the small size of most almshouses meant the staff and volunteers were in touch with residents, and that it was possible to build and maintain strong relationships – with and between residents. These relationships had been built prior to the pandemic which could then be mobilised during the start of the health crisis. During the crisis relationships were maintained through regular contact by familiar people. Some interviewees referred to knowing residents by name which made the process of offering new or adapted support easier.

The small size and close relationships with residents meant the almshouse charity could be more responsive to resident needs and more able to prioritise support to those most in need. It was felt by some interviewees that larger housing providers would struggle to be able to operate in the same way. There was a view that larger organisations would have to rely on systems and frameworks, rather than personal relationships, which could be more remote and less tailored to the individual needs of residents.

"Because of the smaller scale of the community, everybody sort of knows each other. There are those personal relationships, trust-based relationships, and if you're providing services at scale, it's just harder to do that. You can do it by having a good culture and a proper framework, et cetera, but actually, I think it's easier on a smaller scale."

"Housing associations and local authorities have got so big they're not able to find solutions to resident needs."

This close relationship with residents meant that there was a lot of trust and faith in the leadership of almshouse charities from residents. The closeness with residents was said in one interview to be two-way. Not only did almshouse trustees, clerks and staff know residents by name, but residents also knew them by name. This meant almshouse charities not only felt a personal responsibility regarding the services to residents but there was an additional level of accountability.

However, several interviewees suggested that operating at too small a scale can limit levels of support. One person also noted bigger organisations would have had departments providing support with HR issues and IT (such as setting up working from home). It was said that at smaller charities it often fell to one person to drive this.

"I think we went over and above, but I think that's because we had staff."

"I've never worked so hard in my life."

The type of service that almshouse charities provide was also mentioned in some interviews. Almshouse charities were seen as providing additional services that support residents (to live independently), which was seen as especially important in the pandemic. Almshouse charities were also viewed as being able to contact everyone and offer tailored support where possible.

"The landlord would have taken the call if the taps had started leaking, but would the landlord have been saying well are you getting out and about and getting your vitamin D?"

"The nice thing with being an almshouse is that we were able to contact everybody. Offer them a kind of suite of options, you know, what did they need from us? Was it shopping? Was it picking up prescriptions? Was it just a daily phone call? Was it nothing? Did they want us to find their relatives? We were able to do a sort of bespoke package for every individual."

"We always say to trustees that we provide intensive housing management."

While interviewees spoke of how the almshouse model was able to support residents during the pandemic there was a recognition that

other community or specialist providers operated in a similar way. For example, one interviewee noted that similarly sized affordable and community-based housing providers had close relationships with residents and offered tailored support.

"We function more like a housing association."

One interviewee who looked after almshouses and other specialist housing said that they operated similarly. They provided daily welfare calls across the portfolio, depending on age or vulnerability.

"We straight away put in place daily or regular welfare calls to all of our residents living in any properties that were age specific."

One respondent from outside the sector stated said that scheme managers at housing associations or specialist providers would be doing similar things to almshouse charities, such as contacting residents and ensuring they have support. As such there was a view that almshouse charities like similar organisations were able to provide support during the pandemic helped by their size and purposes.

The ethos and caring nature of almshouse charities and their staff was mentioned in some interviews. One person gave an example of their chaplain arranging a funeral for a former resident who had moved to a care home. The charitable ethos of almshouses was viewed as important way of building relationships with residents and providing pastoral care.

"We're quite a pastoral bunch of people really."

"If you've got any problems then pick up the phone and talk to us. So, it's a very different relationship we have."

Having a warden was mentioned in some interviews. Those with wardens viewed them as particularly important during the pandemic as residents were not left on their own, could offer support if needed, and could identify support needs. Some without wardens said their service was not diminished by not having someone onsite 24-hours a day. For others this option wasn't available.

"We have wardens onsite, therefore, we have seen the residents regularly. We've been helping them through this. We supported them through questions or queries or worries, or you know, medical issues. You know when you sat there ringing an ambulance for seven hours."

Having grounds and open space was also mentioned by some as an important way that almshouse charities could make lockdown easier during the pandemic. The quality of the stock was also mentioned as a benefit that almshouses provided to residents who were often confined to their home.

Some interviewees mentioned that the healthy financial position of their almshouse charity enabled it to offer a level of support that could not be provided by other housing providers. This included buying grocery essentials and white goods for those in need and offering more intensive services.

There were some common themes about how being an almshouse impacted the response to the pandemic. For example, regardless of any differences between almshouse charities and other community-based housing providers, the strengths of the almshouse model were seen to come to the fore in the pandemic. This was centred on the community nature of almshouse charities meaning they knew residents well going into the pandemic and could use these trust-based relationships during a very disruptive period. The size and closeness to residents also meant that changes could be made quickly to adapt to the circumstances of residents, that housing services were Covid secure and wider support needs were met.

Lessons learnt

The majority of those interviewed said that they had taken away lessons from their experience over the past two years. As one person noted:

"I don't think that we could go through what we have over these past 20 months and not really learn from it."

The lessons learnt varied greatly and in part reflect factors such as the size of the almshouse. However, there were some common themes:

Communication

A number of interviewees mentioned there was a clear lesson around the importance of communications in understanding resident needs and maintaining morale. One interviewee noted that the pandemic had shown that you could not take people's understanding of things for granted (citing the example of ability to take lateral flow tests) and therefore good two-way communication was important.

As mentioned, some had improved communication systems over the pandemic and were not completely reliant on doorstep and phone contact, with the use of digital communications an essential part of this. Better communications extended beyond contact with residents to include relatives. The importance of digital exclusion was also noted with them learning which residents are digitally excluded and what support they might need.

"If it comes again, then we want to be in a position to have better and easier communications and a full set of communications with residents as opposed to just relying on sort of phone contact or window contact."

Online working

A number of interviewees described the value and benefits of online communication and homeworking as a key lesson they had drawn from the pandemic. Some noted that video meetings saved time, including for trustee and grants panel meetings (although some also said it was not a replacement for face-to-face meetings). Online and homeworking was also seen as delivering productivity gains and efficiency savings.

"There are benefits for the staff. I hope for the residents that they've benefitted from that approach too. From staff being able to be more effective in their roles and having that better work-life balance means that people hopefully come to work feeling more motivated and able to deliver better services for residents."

The provision of online activities also helped some almshouses reach a much wider community. As such, some have invested in equipment to ensure hybrid activities continue.

"There was one lady who lives in a village, probably about 8 to 10 miles [away] and she heard about the Zoom and started to get the newsletter and so she will always be one of our hybrids. You know she's not mobile enough to be able to come for face to face."

Managing through a crisis

Continuity plans were mentioned as important. Several interviewees mentioned that they had not planned for a global pandemic. However, some had continuity strategies which were viewed as an important tool to use during the early period of the pandemic. Others said that a lesson they had drawn was not to panic and to be as flexible as they could in the way they worked.

"With the pandemic, it's the first time any of us have ever lived through it, isn't it? So, we just didn't know what to expect. And so, we just had to manage it. I think we had to manage it in a flexible way. I think that's the only way I can describe it, so we had to be ready to change our approach and we realised that when people were getting unhappy with us not being around, we had to change that a bit."

Delivery of services

Some interviewees said that they had taken lessons from the pandemic in how they deliver services. These lessons though were not uniform. One interviewee stated that initially they had someone onsite 24-hours-a-day, but this became too much for staff who were needed during the day to respond to the pandemic. They took the decision with residents to stop having someone round the clock onsite in order to support residents in a different way.

"We have been so fortunate, and we've really looked after and supported our residents, but it hasn't stopped us from moving forward and thinking now taking some really great learning through the pandemic."

One interviewee said the pandemic provided the impetus to update the data they held on residents, including up-to-date contact details for them and their residents. Another said that they realised that home visits were not the only means of communicating and their time could be better used.

Independent living

The additional support provided during the pandemic was often remarked upon. This was seen as essential during the pandemic, but it was an important lesson in how almshouse charities were supporting independent living. One interviewee noted that some residents easily come to rely on almshouse charities for everything and they had to think about how they can best support residents to be independent. They noted that it convinced them of the benefits of co-production of services.

More broadly it was remarked that the pandemic highlighted the tension between safeguarding residents and providing independent living. Being clear on what independent living means was viewed as important but, as mentioned, so too was ensuring that independent living was not used as a "fig leaf" for withdrawing services (which had been the case for other providers).

"Actually, I think the pandemic has served to show me how capable our residents are of doing things. That they are living independently."

Working with others

One interviewee stated that they had learnt the importance of working with other organisations. For them, the pandemic had shown how many services there were out there. Almshouse charities did not need to "reinvent the wheel" if another organisation was already providing a service. Another said a lesson had been to actively seek support and advice from other organisations.

"I would say that the bond with the other organisations that we work with has probably become even stronger because you know, we were working together to seek solutions, to know and to share information."

"The general lesson was really don't be frightened to ask for help."

Advice

Several interviewees mentioned the challenges of changing Covid regulations, but there was also concern around the lack of specific advice for almshouse charities. As such, there was potential for the sector to work with regulators to ensure that almshouse charities have the right level of advice and support for the benefit of their residents.

Importance of community

A couple of interviewees stressed that the pandemic had reinforced and highlighted the importance of almshouse charities providing a community, and also how they engaged residents.

"Strength of community is really important."

"It's confirmed the value of the resident system. We knew it worked for us, but it's demonstrably given us evidence that it's really, really helpful."

Supporting people's health

Lessons around the health of residents was mentioned in some interviews. This included the importance of mental and physical wellbeing, keeping people active and giving people "something to look forward to". One person said that they had taken lessons away from the pandemic around respiratory diseases and around measures to safeguard resident's health.

Rethinking new development

One interviewee currently in the process of developing a new almshouse said that the pandemic had made them consider the design for the new homes. This included entries and exits of the building and ensuring flats have balconies and terraces, so people have access to outside space.

Acknowledging the effort of staff

The commitment of staff, unpaid clerks and volunteer trustees during the pandemic was remarked upon in several interviews. Some noted the pressures they were under and potential burnout from the amount of work that was undertaken during the pandemic to keep residents safe and follow Covid regulations. The emotional strain of the period was also noted, including supporting residents who were struggling and distressed during the lockdown periods. One interviewee stated that it is really important for almshouse charities to recognise and acknowledge this effort.

Conclusion

The pandemic has been all encompassing, affecting everyone, every community, and all organisations. It is therefore little surprise that almshouse organisations and their residents were impacted by the public health crisis and lockdown measures.

As this report has shown the pandemic had a detrimental effect on residents, notably in terms of loneliness and social isolation. Interviewees described challenges around mental health and the negative impact Covid emergency measures had. The issue of isolation was mentioned time and again and presented a major challenge to the residents and staff of all almshouses. However, the evidence gathered in the interviews showed how almshouse charities rose to the challenge and successfully maintained their community ethos and spirit of cooperation and mutual support.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic and lockdowns, almshouse charities – large and small – were generally responsive and resilient, and those spoken to had been largely unaffected by serious Covid cases. Interviewees described how different measures were taken to keep residents safe from the pandemic, including ensuring they understood the guidelines and made changes to the way that buildings functioned and staff worked.

Almshouse charities were generally quick to respond by changing the way they provided services and support. Many made daily phone calls, sought to provide activities online or through newsletters and gave direct support through help with shopping and picking up prescriptions. They also had to change working patterns, with homeworking becoming more common.

For a minority the pandemic came at a significant financial cost. However, much of the pressure fell on the shoulders of almshouse staff – paid and volunteers. It was often mentioned in the interviews that the sense of community and commitment of staff – and the close two-way relationship with residents – made all the difference.

Many of those interviewed felt proud of keeping their residents safe and giving them the support that was required. It was generally agreed that almshouse charities had proved themselves to be robust and flexible, even though many residents struggled with the effects of isolation and social distancing.

Although few new partnerships were formed during the pandemic, others were drawn on. It was noteworthy how stretched many interviewees felt a key partner, like social services, was. This was a real concern across the sector, with particular worries around care for older residents.

Recommendations and observations

The almshouse sector withstood the pandemic and its trustees, staff and residents are rightly proud of what they have achieved. It has been a difficult and stressful journey. However, interviewees felt that important lessons had been learnt which would be useful in planning ahead. The main lessons highlighted in the interviews covered:

- Community: continuing to invest in the community and relationships with residents which was drawn on heavily during the pandemic
- Focus on health: learning the lessons around social isolation during the pandemic to tackle loneliness and mental health challenges
- Acknowledging staff and volunteers: almshouse organisations were often described as going beyond the call of duty. It may be important to recognise and acknowledge the efforts of staff and volunteers
- Independent living: staying focused on independent living and how to return to 'normal' post pandemic
- Working with others: the importance of not trying to do it all and working with other charities and service providers
- Communication: improving and ensuring good communication with residents, including addressing digital exclusion
- Improve communication with The Almshouse Association: making sure trustees have access to all the available information
- Online working: making the most of online and remote working to improve organisational efficiency
- Continuity strategies: importance of having continuity plans to manage through a crisis
- Delivery of services: learning lessons from the pandemic regarding the way services are and can be provided to best meet the needs of residents

- Advice: the importance of having regulatory advice tailored to almshouse charities

The interviews also pointed to lessons that can be drawn in forming partnership and collaborations, such as:

- Profile raising and staying in touch with other relevant organisations, including participating in local forums
- Strengthening relationships with councils and local councillors, notably around the provision of new affordable homes, waiting lists and the provision of services and facilities to residents and the wider community
- Raising local and national awareness of almshouses, with stronger promotion of the sector through The Almshouse Association
- Making the most of networks that trustees are part of and having trustees that have those links into the community
- Being open minded to new ideas and approaches, including regarding council waiting lists, but honest about what as an almshouse charity you can do
- Stressing the importance of housing and health: the need for the sectors to work more closely and for the almshouse sector to make the case for what they are doing

Through the research some other challenges and observations emerged. These included:

- Networks: The importance of networks between almshouse charities was considered an important and potential area of focus as we come out of the pandemic and are able to meet more easily
- Supporting smaller charities: small almshouse charities were seen as most vulnerable and need of support. This ranged from weekly maintenance contributions being too low to maintain properties to the pressures on clerks and trustees. Mutual support and the role of The Almshouse Association was viewed as important
- Recruiting trustees: The importance of good trustees was raised in relation to support through the pandemic. Challenges recruiting trustees was also noted by some – understanding how recruitment can be improved could support almshouse organisations
- Getting people online: It was remarked that some almshouse charities are not online and others struggled using Zoom during the pandemic. Training for trustees and organisations could support improved efficiency and the service for residents
- Addressing criticism about almshouses: concern was raised by some social housing organisations about the fact that almshouse residents were licensees, and not holding lifelong assured tenancies similar to those offered by housing associations. It was noted that there was still a degree of misunderstanding about the exclusion of security of tenure for almshouse persons¹⁷
- Forward-looking: almshouse charities have a rich history. However, for some this can appear old fashioned, including around the terminology. The sector may wish to examine how almshouse charities can communicate their narrative better to the next generation
- Meeting the needs and expectations of new generations: related to the question of being forward-looking is how almshouses adapt their offering for baby boomers and younger generations with different expectations and service needs
- Buildings fit for the future: a number of almshouse charities mentioned the challenges of maintaining and renewing old and listed buildings. There could be scope for the sector collectively to examine the implications of net zero for almshouses
- Understanding the views of residents: the research focused on the views of largely trustees, clerks and staff of almshouse charities. The sector may wish to gain insights by undertaking similar exercises with residents

While each almshouse charity will have its own unique reflection on how the pandemic affected them, the interviews highlighted a common, shared experience. They showed pride in keeping residents safe and supported. They also showed the resilience and strength of the sector to be firmly centred around a sense of community and a commitment to an ethos that allows residents on low incomes to live independently as they grow older. It was noted these qualities cannot be measured on a balance sheet. However, it is these very characteristics that have enabled almshouse charities to support people during the public health crisis. That experience has also given the sector a strong foundation to build on as it moves forward to face the challenges of a fast changing and ageing society.

"Maybe it's just a prejudice on my part, but the most valuable things don't have a price you know. It's that spirit of family and you know, you can't put that on your balance sheet. You can put your investment in mobile technology on your balance sheet, but you can't put the spirit of the organisation on the balance sheet."

"I was proud to be part of the almshouse movement which supported residents during a period of unknowns and fears."

"We were able to really support our resident community. We kept them safe. We kept them happy."

End notes

1. Almshouse Association - www.almshouses.org/
2. Pannell, J *Almshouses into the next millennium. Paternalism, partnership, progress?* (Policy Press, 1999)
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. The Almshouse Association, *Annual Report 2020*
6. Housing LIN, *Transforming almshouses for the 21st Century* (2013)
7. Pannell, J *Almshouses into the next millennium. Paternalism, partnership, progress?* (Policy Press, 1999)
8. Housing LIN, *Transforming almshouses for the 21st Century* (2013)
9. Pannell, J *Almshouses into the next millennium. Paternalism, partnership, progress?* (Policy Press, 1999)
10. Housing LIN, *Transforming almshouses for the 21st Century* (2013)
11. Pannell, J *Almshouses into the next millennium. Paternalism, partnership, progress?* (Policy Press, 1999)
12. Ibid
13. Pannell, J *Almshouses into the next millennium. Paternalism, partnership, progress?* (Policy Press, 1999)
14. Housing LIN, *Transforming almshouses for the 21st Century* (2013)
15. Pannell, J *Almshouses into the next millennium. Paternalism, partnership, progress?* (Policy Press, 1999)
16. The LHA rate is 30th percentile of median rents
17. The Court of Appeal confirmed that residents of almshouses occupy as licensees and not as tenants with security of tenure (*Watts v Stewart and others* [2016] EWCA Civ 1247)

