



Housing LIN

Connecting people, ideas and resources

Case Study 156

Almshouse flats for homeless people: Sir Thomas White Court, Worcester

AUGUST 2019

Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by **Frazer Bufton**, Director at Lett + Sweetland Architects



Summary

Following a presentation on the Almshouse Flats for Homeless People project at our recent Housing LIN Midlands regional meeting, this case study outlines the architectural qualities of the award winning scheme in Worcester.

For more information about the project, you can find the presentation given by Jenny Pannell, Housing LIN Associate, Martyn Saunders, CEO, Worcester Citizens Advice Bureau and David George, Manager, SmartLets Service, at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Events/Midlands-Region-Housing-LIN-Meeting-Birmingham/>

Project Description

Completed in October 2018, Sir Thomas White Court comprises of 10 apartments, 4 of which were converted from a former office building and a further 6 which were created in a new block on the redundant car park. The property was originally acquired by Worcester Municipal Charities¹ and offered as rent-free office accommodation to Worcester Home-Start. However, in 2014, the premises were left empty when they were forced to surrender the lease, following the loss of their funding from the Local Authority.



Fig 1 - Existing 'Goodrich House' Office Building with car park to the front. The car park was a magnet for antisocial behaviour and fly tipping in the community.



Fig 2 - Sir Thomas White Court with the new block built on the existing car park, better supervision and railings to the top of the existing wall to form a deterrent and stop the site being misused.

¹ <http://www.wmcharities.org.uk/homeless.html>

The development sits in an established and popular residential area close to the city centre and uses a palette of traditional materials including brickwork, render, and slate, accented by the judicious use of contemporary finishes, details and clearly articulated built forms, to echo the surrounding streetscape. It includes a mix of apartment layouts, with both of the two-storey blocks separated by a private courtyard which provides an external drying area and a social space for the tenants. A particular feature on the new building are the oriel windows, some of which include obscured glazing, and these were used to restrict direct views and minimise overlooking, something which presented a particular challenge in the densely developed urban location in which the site is set.

Internally the apartments were designed to maximise the feeling of light and space, with open plan kitchens and living rooms and good-sized double bedrooms, lit by large windows and with generous ceiling heights throughout. The fixtures and fittings were carefully chosen to reflect a contemporary apartment, rather than the more utilitarian or institutional feel of many similar housing models. Built-in ovens and gas hobs; and thermostatic showers and baths in the new-build units, all serve to reinforce the client's aspiration to engender self-respect in their tenants. Each apartment was supplied with a washing machine, curtain rails and blinds, whilst grants from the charity for additional white goods, such as a refrigerator, were available to those who were eligible, meaning that the apartment could quickly become a home for those moving in.



Fig 3 - Corner windows bring light into the open plan living room to a ground floor flat in the new block.

Energy costs were a paramount consideration and the new building was carefully detailed to keep energy use to a minimum whilst ensuring the build was affordable, with apartments in the new block achieving an Energy Efficiency rating of 81 (B). Photovoltaic panels on the roof generate the electricity used to run the landlord's services in the buildings, including lighting and power to the common areas and lighting and access controls externally, with any oversupply being fed back to the grid as part of the "Feed-in Tariff" scheme.

Poor ground conditions and the proximity of neighbouring buildings meant the new block was designed with piled foundations, however, extensive deposits of silt and made-up ground across the site resulted in the piles reaching a depth of up to 15 metres, significantly beyond the 5 metres originally anticipated. The additional piling potentially meant increased noise and disruption to neighbours, and with occupied houses on all sides, careful consideration and planning of the works were required to avoid unnecessary disturbance. This was particularly pertinent as several nearby residents had raised concerns regarding the development of the site at the planning stage.

These concerns had been discussed at length with the planning authority as the design evolved and in addition to alleviating worries about overlooking through the design of individual windows

and apartment layouts, the positioning of the new block and the addition of railings to the existing boundary walls meant that the completed project no longer afforded a place for all-day drinkers to gather, ending much of the resulting antisocial behaviour that had previously blighted the site and surrounding area.

Community Impact & Engagement

Worcester Municipal Charities CIO supports an extensive range of groups throughout the city, including the historic provision of 32 almshouses specifically for older people, which due to an existing and adequate provision of similar accommodation for low income retired citizens, have very short, often non-existent, waiting lists.

Having reduced the 'local' qualifying condition for their present almshouses from five years to 12 months, and without an immediate increase in applications, the trustees took the decision to refocus their charitable activities towards the provision of "affordable homes" for the neediest group in the city - single people and couples without children, for whom sofa surfing and street sleeping had become increasingly commonplace.

Between 2013 - 2018, Worcester Municipal Charities had already exploited underutilised space in a large part of their existing property stock, to develop 27 apartments for the homeless in the city, and in 2017 they had taken the step to register as a Housing Association to access additional funding from the then Homes & Communities Agency (now Homes England) via The Almshouse Consortium.²

The client's brief for this, their first new-build project, built on their experience and asked that the scheme "... give 10 local, younger homeless people, a fresh start in life on the bottom of the housing ladder, in city centre apartments of good build-quality, that engender self-respect." Throughout the project, the client and their architect were committed to providing an environment that went beyond the 'minimum standard,' offering generous, quality accommodation, using quality materials and sensitive design to render those who live there a sense of pride and dignity in their new homes. The result is a new almshouse development that provides generous modern apartments in the heart of the city and offers the opportunity of a secure home to a group who have previously struggled to find one.



Fig 4 - The quality of design and construction engenders self-respect for tenants and compliments the surrounding area.

² A group representing almshouse charities in the UK that wish to develop their properties in co-operation with the Homes England through their Investment Partner system

Key learning points

- The importance of a shared aspiration for a project, along with explicit goals and outcomes, shared by all stakeholders including, the client; the design team; the planning authority and the contractor.
- The careful selection of materials and finishes to maximise building performance, whilst maintaining buildability, affordability and meeting the requirements of the programme and critical path.
- Quality of design and finish throughout promotes pride in the finished building and dignity for those who live there.
- Early dialogue and thoughtful design responses can alleviate concerns from neighbours and resolve pre-existing issues concerning the site.
- Coordination with HCA requirements from the outset is important and beneficial.

Conclusion

This project is a significant part of a growing portfolio of properties developed by Worcester Municipal Charities to provide homes for young people at risk of homelessness in the city of Worcester.

The client now has a total of 37 apartments of which the 10 at Sir Thomas White Court have undoubtedly set a benchmark for this type of accommodation. In looking to help those who would otherwise face an indefinite wait for a home in the city, Worcester Municipal Charities have embarked on an extensive programme of development to address the needs of this particular group for secure affordable housing, and the popularity of this project is testament to this need and the quality of accommodation on offer.

Sir Thomas White Court received the Award for Excellence and Inspiration for An Outstanding Almshouse Project at the 2019 Almshouse Association Awards.

About Lett + Sweetland Architects



Lett + Sweetland Architects www.lettsweetland.co.uk was established in 1990 and have an extensive portfolio of education, residential, leisure and commercial projects. They have worked with Worcester Municipal Charities on several projects including all of their apartments for the homeless. They are currently working with them to deliver a further two apartments converted from a Grade II listed building and due for completion in August 2019, with a further 25 units due for completion towards the end of 2020.

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 25,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by Government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently
- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and
- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

For further information about the Housing LIN and to access a comprehensive list of online resources on almshouses, visit our dedicated page at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Almshouses/>

Published by

Housing Learning and Improvement Network
c/o PRP, The Ideas Store
10 Lindsey Street
Clerkenwell
London EC1A 9HP

Email: info@housinglin.org.uk

Web: www.housinglin.org.uk

Twitter: [@HousingLIN](https://twitter.com/HousingLIN) [@HousingLINNews](https://twitter.com/HousingLINNews) [@HLINConsult](https://twitter.com/HLINConsult)