



Housing LIN

Connecting people, ideas and resources

Case Study 177

How Can We Reimagine Older People's Social Housing? Lessons from Appleby Blue, a 21st-century almshouse by United St Saviour's Charity

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Introduction

This case study for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) explores how we can reimagine older people's social housing for the 21st century, drawing on the first year of Appleby Blue – United St Saviour's Charity's multi award-winning¹ almshouse in Bermondsey, London. It shares lessons learned from design, development and day-to-day life at Appleby Blue, offering practical recommendations for planners, policymakers, architects, researchers and housing providers.

The case study also shares practical learning from the first year of operation, offering reflections and recommendations for those commissioning, designing or managing age-inclusive social housing. It highlights how a values-led, research-informed approach can result in homes that enhance wellbeing, promote independence, and enrich community life.

By combining high-quality design, personalised support, and deep community integration, Appleby Blue presents a replicable model for dignified, affordable and connected later life living.

Background

Appleby Blue is more than a development: located in the London Borough of Southwark, it's a reimaging of the almshouse tradition for a modern urban context. With 57 social rent homes for older people, carefully designed communal spaces, and an embedded community offer, the scheme demonstrates how thoughtful housing can support independence, dignity, and belonging in later life.

Through bold collaboration between public, private and voluntary sectors, Appleby Blue shows that older people's housing can be beautiful, well-located, and life-enhancing. It frees up under-occupied family homes, strengthens intergenerational ties, and reduces pressure on health and care systems, while placing older residents at the heart of a thriving neighbourhood.

This case study brings together practical learning, resident experience, and evidence from an ongoing programme of research and evaluation, with one clear ambition: to make Appleby Blue not the exception, but the standard for social housing in later life.



(1) Awards and recognition include RIBA National Award winner, RIBA Neave Brown Award Shortlist, Housing Design Awards, HAPPI Award and Winner of Winners. Pineapple award for Building award, Pineapple award for Healthy Homes, and Inside Housing award for Supported Housing Development of the Year

The housing landscape and need for change

England's ageing population is reshaping the housing landscape. By 2035, nearly 29% of the population will be over 60, requiring an estimated 38,000 new rental homes annually - including at least 21,000 for low-income older renters. Without this investment, the number of older people in insecure private rental housing is likely to double by 2046, further straining housing markets and public services.

Investing in age-friendly social housing has ripple effects:

As touched on by the Older People's Housing Taskforce², these include:

- Freeing up underused family homes
- Reducing hospital admissions
- Easing pressure on care services
- Curbing loneliness and isolation
- Supporting intergenerational community life
- Providing a sense of belonging and community connectedness

Appleby Blue exemplifies this impact. Its 57 homes house 65 residents, most of whom moved from under-occupied council homes or insecure private tenancies — releasing 118 bedrooms back into the housing system, known as 'the letting chain'.

Residents must meet three criteria:

- Be 65 or over
- Have lived in Southwark for at least three years
- Be in financial and/or housing need

"By senior citizens moving into more appropriate housing, family homes could be released with a positive ripple effect on the housing market generally."

— Professor Julianne Meyer, Chair, Older People's Housing Taskforce

(2) <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/News/Government-publishes-the-Older-Peoples-Housing-Taskforce-report/>

Officially opened by Lord Best, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Housing and Care for Older People, the development is not only a place to live but a catalyst for change:

- 57 new homes for older people
- 68 additional almshouse units in planning
 - Appleby Blue was the decant option for 19 residents from another Southwark almshouse charity who are now developing 68 units on their own site. Increased family housing availability in Southwark Council stock
- Expanded market supply through released private rentals



Lord Best with Martyn Craddock, Chief Executive, United St Saviour's Charity

"I sometimes wonder what a later living development would look like if funds were available to make it near-perfect. Now I know. Appleby Blue's brilliant design, its feel-good atmosphere, its fit within its wider community...it all adds up to the model we have been waiting for. Now let's see how we can learn from this experience and repeat it everywhere."

Our Recommendations

1. Invest in Quality Design

Appleby Blue reinterprets the traditional almshouse model through contemporary, people-centred design. Created by Stirling Prize-winning architects **Witherford Watson Mann**, it balances independence with connection and brings age-inclusive housing into the heart of the city.

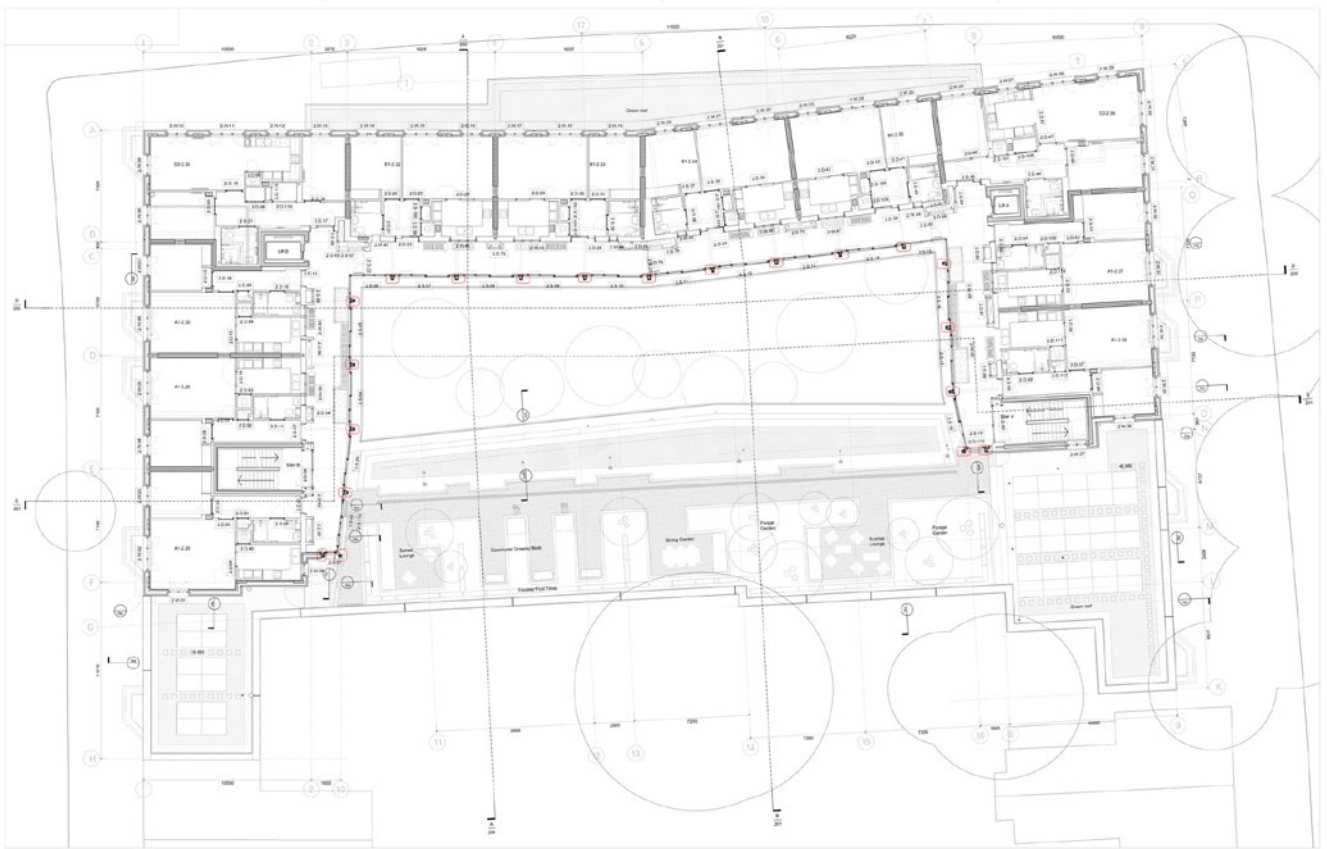
Quality design enhances mental wellbeing, supports independence, and improves social outcomes. While Appleby Blue required around 25% more capital investment than comparable schemes, this resulted in improved resident outcomes, greater satisfaction, and lasting value for the wider community.

Design features include:

- External walkways that encourage neighbourly encounters
- Windows placed to offer privacy while connecting to city views
- The Garden Room: a communal space for events and relaxation
- A peaceful, biodiverse central courtyard
- Thoughtful use of natural materials and green planting

"Appleby Blue is thoughtfully designed to connect residents and the community, promoting health, activity and wellbeing."

– Stephen Witherford, Witherford Watson Mann



Appleby Blue design plan

2. Create collaboration across sectors

Appleby Blue was delivered through a bold partnership between United St Saviour's Charity, Southwark Council, and property developer, JTRE London. Funded via a Section 106 agreement linked to a private luxury development, it reinvests value back into the local community.

This voluntary-private-public collaboration demonstrates the potential of creative funding models and trust-based partnerships across the three sectors. It also shows that local charities can play a key role in delivering housing innovation when enabled by the right relationships and resources.

3. Bridge housing, health and social care

Appleby Blue operates with a resident support model that bridges housing and health, with a focus on prevention, personalised support, and overall wellbeing. While it remains an independent living setting, our team works closely with each resident to co-develop an individual plan using the **Older Person's Outcomes Star**.³ Staff also liaise regularly with external health and care professionals to prevent crises and promote long-term independence.

(3) <https://outcomesstar.org.uk/using-the-star/see-the-stars/older-persons-star/>

Residents consistently report feeling safer, more connected, and healthier since moving in. A recent independent survey also revealed **95% satisfaction** among almshouse residents – positioning United St Saviour’s in the top performance quartile nationally. This translates into better outcomes across health and social care systems – as well as potential cost savings.

“It’s changed my life completely. I’m a different person. I don’t have to go into the Maudsley [Mental Health Hospital] — nothing, no more. All my problems, where I was living before, they’ve all gone, which I’m very, very thankful for.”

— Gwen, resident at Appleby Blue

4. Engage Communities in the Built Environment



Walkway seating

Appleby Blue was shaped through listening. Residents of United St Saviour’s existing almshouses were consulted throughout the design process, offering insights that directly influenced layout and features.

For example, residents expressed that private balconies felt isolating. In response, those spaces were reimagined as generous walkways with seating and planting – encouraging informal connection between neighbours and guests.

The building’s ground-floor spaces remain open to the community, and our team continues to co-design programmes in the kitchen and centre with residents and neighbours alike.

5. Embed older people’s housing within communities

Rather than being pushed to the margins, Appleby Blue is embedded in the heart of Bermondsey. It is located near primary and secondary schools, sits near shops, parks, is opposite an Age UK centre, and has the Number 1 bus stop just outside the front door.

This centrality reduces isolation and allows residents to remain part of the city’s everyday life. The community kitchen and centre foster intergenerational connection, inviting people of all ages to gather, learn and share.



Local bus stop, seen from outside and inside the building

6. Create aspirational social housing

Appleby Blue challenges the idea that social housing must be modest or marginal. Instead, it shows that it can be something older people look forward to - secure, dignified, and beautiful.

Too often, older people are left with little choice, remaining in unsuitable housing until crisis forces a move. Meanwhile, many private later-living schemes cater to the wealthiest 1%, offering spa-like amenities but little connection to community.

Appleby Blue offers an alternative: **a well-designed home, in your city, connected to your community** - regardless of income.

"We're trying to get society to rethink the way we view social housing. It's not about shutting older people away — it's about designing places where people can live fully, with dignity and choice. While the initial cost of building well is higher, the value to society accrues over decades, even centuries."

— Martyn Craddock, Chief Executive, United St Saviour's Charity

7. Use food as a social connector

At Appleby Blue, food plays a central role in daily life — not just as nourishment, but as a tool for connection, culture, and care. From shared meals in the Garden Room to growing herbs and vegetables in the rooftop garden, food helps build relationships and create a sense of home.

Across the first year of operation, food-based activities have been instrumental in fostering trust and belonging. Shared meals reduce loneliness, connect neighbours, and offer space to celebrate the borough's rich cultural diversity.

Externally run programmes use the community kitchen as a platform for intergenerational exchange, cultural celebration, and skill-sharing, reinforcing the idea that everyone has something to bring to the table.

These moments, whether a pot of soup, a shared harvest, or a cooking session with neighbours, are small acts of care that build a stronger, more connected community.



8. Leverage community organisations in research and policy

Appleby Blue is also a hub for **community-driven research and policy influence**. The researcher-in-residence model invites ethnographic learning from within - enabling residents and researchers to connect as neighbours.

We work with partners such as **UCL**, **Bayes Business School**, and **Bournemouth University** on studies including:

- **The Almshouse Longevity Study**⁴ (Bayes): found that residents live longer and report higher quality of life
- **ARC Project**⁵ (UCL): created a national Knowledge Hub for resilient communities
- **LEMONADE Project**⁶ (Bournemouth): co-created food activities with 120+ older adults to reduce isolation and promote health
- **Serious Game**⁷ in partnership with SCIE, Housing LIN, Vivensa Foundation, Southwark Council and The University of Stirling



Serious Game by Socialudo



School Food Matters rooftop garden



LEMONADE Project

(4) https://www.bayes.citystgeorges.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/731297/Almshouse-Longevity-Study-Report.pdf

(5) <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Almshouse-Resilient-Communities-ARC-for-the-Future-project/>

(6) <https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/projects/lemonade>

(7) <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Developing-local-housing-partnerships-a-Serious-Game-for-older-peoples-housing/>

Case studies: Our residents



"I've had a lot of stress, lots of disappointments in life, and now it's just chill, peaceful and quiet... When I come back home now, it's my sanctuary."

— Rohan Lopez, Resident

"Living here has given me a new lease of life. I still work part time, and the location means I can stay connected to everything I care about. The building is peaceful and supportive without being institutional."

— Fran, Resident



"Everyone says hello. No matter who they are. You talk to each other across the balcony. It's fantastic."

— Dawn, Resident

Summary

Specialist housing for older people thrives when it is co-designed with residents, rooted in community, and led by a vision of dignity and possibility. Appleby Blue shows how early integration of thoughtful design, sector collaboration, and lived experience can transform outcomes for residents and the wider housing system.

Every site and scheme are different, shaped by local need, service offer, and budget. But the principles outlined here – from embedding older people's housing in communities to leveraging food and design as connectors – offer a roadmap for creating housing people are proud to call home.

The next generation of social housing for later life must be aspirational, not institutional. Appleby Blue shows what's possible – and what's needed – to make that ambition real.

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 author

Alison Benzimra is Head of Research & Influence at United St Saviour's Charity, which provides high-quality social housing and invests in community-led change across Southwark.

Appleby Blue also features as a Housing LIN Inspirational Achievement at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/Inspirational-Achievements/appleby-blue/>

And if this was of interest, read Alison's Housing LIN Viewpoint on Appleby Blue, One Year On at: <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Older-People-Deserve-More-Than-Good-Enough-Housing>

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About United St. Saviour's Charity

Founded in 1541, United St Saviour's is a Southwark-based charity working to create a united and thriving borough where everyone has the opportunity to live well. We work alongside communities across Southwark – building and providing high-quality social housing, investing in people and places, and creating the conditions for everyone to thrive. We're committed to finding better ways of doing things and sharing what we learn.

Our almshouses – Appleby Blue, Hopton's Gardens, Helen Peele Cottages and St Saviour's Court – offer high-quality, age-friendly social housing. Each year, we invest over £1 million into grassroots, community-led projects across the borough, and we lead One Southwark, a long-term initiative nurturing the next generation of Southwark leaders.



Kitchens at Appleby Blue

About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 15,000 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 'ideas lab' on specialist/supported housing, our online and regional networked activities, and consultancy services:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing that enables older and disabled people to live independently
- provide access to intelligence on the latest funding, research, policy and practice developments
- raise the profile of specialist and supported housing with developers, commissioners and operators, and
- attract business to help and support clients plan, design and operate aspirational housing and services for people of all ages.

United St Saviour's Trust sponsor the Housing LIN and its dedicated webpages on almshouses at: <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Almshouses/>

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