



Housing LIN

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Case Study 178

Dovehouse Court – Modern Almshouses for Independent Living in Girton, Cambridgeshire

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Introduction

Completed in 2023, Dovehouse Court in Girton, Cambridgeshire, offers a modern reinterpretation of the traditional almshouses. Developed by Girton Town Charity, the scheme delivers 15 new one-bedroom homes for over 55's with a strong local connection, who can live independently. Winner of a RIBA East award and The Almshouse Association's Innovation for Living award, the project supports independent living and prioritises sustainability in affordable housing.

Established in 1521, Girton Town Charity has a long-standing role in supporting local people. It now manages 28 almshouses and delivers a wider programme of grant-giving and community investment, including building and funding the village community centre.

Background

Before redevelopment, the site on the village High Street comprised of six outdated one-bedroom almshouses and the charity's office, all constructed between the 1930s and 1960s. The homes were no longer fit for purpose; undersized by modern standards, poorly insulated, and with accessibility problems to people with mobility needs. Some were structurally unsound, and their arrangement on site made regeneration and infill development impractical.

In 2017, the charity committed to pursuing redevelopment. The vision was to create high-quality, low-energy homes that reflected the principles of traditional almshouses, while offering modern design standards and long-term affordability.

Eligibility and Allocation

All almshouses at Dovehouse Court are allocated through a licence to occupy, not a tenancy. This aligns with almshouse tradition and distinguishes the scheme from registered social housing. Residents must be over 55, demonstrate financial need, and have a strong connection to Girton through residency, employment, or close family.

Design Process and Approach



Design Model, Mole Architects

Initial capacity studies completed prior to Mole Architect's involvement explored layouts with centralised car parking, interspersed with homes, prioritising vehicles over people with fragmented green space isolated from people's homes. Instead we took cues from both historic almshouses and drew on learnings from [Marmalade Lane Co-housing scheme](#).



Charity's office, High Street elevation and access to the car parking

Using the Charity's understanding of their residents, we were able to argue for a reduced car parking of 0.8 spaces per dwelling. This enabled the car parking to be pushed to the northern edge, freeing up the majority of the site for calm shared gardens. The car parking area is accessed via a new road junction between the new office and a new electricity substation, providing a gentle yet important threshold between the High Street and the development.

This principle of removing car parking from shared living environments is not universally successful; one only has to look at many of the Radburn style estates from the 1970's and 80's to see the flaws. At Dovehouse Court, we took care to retain clear sightlines and secure boundaries. Passive surveillance of the car parking and entrance is supported by positioning the bungalow kitchen windows looking toward the parking area.

One enters the courtyard via a narrow path, acting as a further threshold to increasingly private spaces. All homes have front doors facing into the courtyard, and this central space is deliberately un-gated to retain the development's open relationship with the wider village, however, the containment creates a safe and peaceful environment.

Designed by landscape architect Jamie Buchanan, the courtyard features a variety of spaces including, a lawn and ornamental planting, raised beds for food growing, a small orchard of local apple trees, and a wildflower meadow.



Accessible landscape and bungalows beyond

Architectural Character

The development is made up of three buildings or "houses", each scaled and massed to reflect the surrounding village. Two-storey buildings sit at the front and rear of the site, whilst five bungalows run between. The site slopes down by three metres from the rear of the site to the High Street, and the buildings step down accordingly to maintain harmony with neighbouring homes.

The material palette is deliberately local in character, with off-white brick and render, and clay roof tiles reflecting the interwar semi-detached neighbours. Brightly coloured front doors give each

home individuality and add a joyful note, in line with the charity's brief for a "visibly uplifting" development.

Each ground floor dwelling includes a semi-private front terrace, the final threshold, creating a soft transition between personal and communal space. Ground-floor terraces are enclosed by low walls, while upper levels offer private areas where the plan staggers, creating localised additional depth to the deck access. These areas are somewhere for residents to 'make their own' and place seating, tables, planting, and storage for mobility scooters (with external weatherproof charging points).



Semi private terrace, for residents to extend their living area

Home Layouts and Flexibility



Each apartment has views over the communal gardens

Each dwelling is between 61–63 sqm, [HAPPI-inspired](#) and exceeding national minimum space standards for a one bedroom home. All homes are dual aspect, with open-plan kitchen/living/dining areas and views across communal spaces.

A second room in each house provides a space which has a variety of uses: guest room for visiting grandchildren, study, home gym, or occasional carer's room, allowing for long-term independent living and flexibility as residents' needs change.

Unlike many Almshouse schemes, no communal indoor facilities were included on-site. The charity operates a community centre elsewhere in the village, providing spaces for social activities, gently encouraging interaction with the wider village.

Sustainability and Energy Performance

From early design stages, the charity committed to achieving full Passivhaus certification. To overcome the design challenges posed by single-storey, small footprint homes (which have a less thermally efficient form) the timber frame of the bungalows was wrapped in an additional 20mm of insulation. The project was granted Passivhaus certification in 2024.

Key features include:

- Super-insulated walls, 300mm timber frame fully filled with recycled newspaper, wrapped in 60 or 80mm of woodfibre insulation
- Airtight building fabric, achieving 0.6 air changes per hour (buildings regs allows a maximum of 8 changes per hour)
- Mechanical Ventilation with Heat Recovery (MVHR)
- Airsource Heat Pump (ASHP) hot water generation
- Triple glazing
- Orientation and shading optimised for winter solar gain and summer solar shading for thermal comfort
- For the coldest days, direct electric radiators are provided in the bedrooms and living rooms.



Light filled generous living spaces

Outcomes and Impact

Beyond the physical transformation, Dovehouse Court has had a tangible impact on the lives of residents, with one resident, previously living in a one-room bedsit for nearly 30 years, sharing that the move had "*changed his life*." Another resident recounts how he spends a third of his salary on housing costs, whereas an "affordable rent" studio apartment would have cost 80% of his salary.

The success of the scheme lies in:

- High-quality, energy-efficient homes that are functional, beautiful and full of light
- A supportive, well-designed community that enables ageing in place
- Long-term affordability, secured by almshouse governance
- Strong alignment with local identity and needs.

Post-occupancy evaluation has confirmed very low energy use and positive resident feedback. On average each home's entire energy usage is less than 34kWh/m²/yr, compared to an average one bedroom apartment using around 180kWh/m²/yr¹, significantly reducing fuel poverty risks.

A changing climate requires us all to adapt how we occupy our houses. Rather than treating our homes as inanimate, we must learn how to moderate our own environment. Hotter summers mean we now have to consider night time purge venting and keeping windows and curtains closed during the day to minimise heat build-up. This is especially important when living in a Passivhaus, and we've found through continued monitoring and learning we can help residents tune their behaviour to use the houses and climate and ensure comfort year-round.



Semi private terrace, for residents to extend their living area

Conclusion

Dovehouse Court demonstrates how the almshouse model can be rooted in the traditional values of almshouses and meet the challenges of the 21st century, combining environmental performance and resident wellbeing. As pressures on affordable housing for older people increase, the ambition of the trustees offers a valuable template for other community-led housing.

Note

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

(1) Ofgem Typical Domestic Consumption Values for a 1 bedroom apartment annually = 9,300kWh

About the author

Ian Bramwell is a director at Mole Architects, a RIBA Chartered Practice founded in 1997, and one of the UK's most respected small practices.



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.

If you found this of interest, the Housing LIN curates a dedicated webpage on almshouses at: <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Almshouses/>

Ian also presented at the Housing LIN's HAPPI Hour on Tuesday, 17 June 2025. A recording of the webinar can be found at: <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Events/HAPPI-Hour-Webinar-Sustaining-Almshouses-for-the-21st-Century/>

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