



Housing LIN

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Viewpoint 105

Housing to span the generations: A 21st Century Almshouse for Bristol

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Could the reimagining of a concept that goes back over a thousand years provide part of the solution to the severe housing and care problems facing Britain's ageing population? Bob Durie OBE, having spent a lifetime in property, is looking to help pilot a new intergenerational housing project that he believes will do just that. To coincide with this week's promotion launch by [Generations Working Together](#) of Global Intergenerational Week in April, he talks to Tony Watts about how this pilot might just show a novel way forward.

Introduction

We know there is a chronic care crisis in the UK along with a housing one; and for the older generation, the two are closely connected.

Most older people want to remain living independently in their own home for as long as possible, but a broken social care system makes that massively difficult for a large swathe of them: continuing cut backs in council budgets mean that many are living with a variety of care needs that are no longer met. A 2022 study by Age UK for the Care and Support Alliance found that 2.6 million people aged fifty and above are living with some form of unmet need for care in England alone: they don't qualify for help and they can't afford to pay for it themselves.

In related news, the Government is currently pumping £500 million into a short-term fix to "unblock" the beds occupied by NHS patients who are well enough to return home... but don't have a care package in place to enable that to happen. NHS statistics show that in the week running up to January 1 2023, 13,000 beds were taken up by patients who were medically fit to be discharged.

Housing, care and health are inextricably linked: provide the right sort of housing and many people can be kept out of the care system for longer; provide the right sort of care and people can remain outside of hospital. If you have the personal resources to pay for your care, you can often find a way forward. But not everyone does: according to Age UK and JRF figures, around two million pensioners are officially living in poverty. Many more are "asset rich, cash poor": they might own their own homes but can't afford to maintain or adapt them, or to pay for care.

So, could a "21st Century Almshouse for Bristol" offer a way forward? Almshouses have a long and rich history: they were established from the 10th century onwards in Britain, originally to provide a place of residence for poor, old and distressed people. Today, some 2,600 almshouses continue to be operated in the UK, providing 30,000 dwellings for 36,000 people, mainly elderly: the time might be right for a reinvention to meet today's needs.

A new solution to a pressing problem

Bob Durie was for many years one of Bristol's leading property professionals, heading up several of the city's top firms. Now firmly in the "later life" age bracket himself, he is working with a number of local charities - particularly those that house or support older people - to come up with new solutions.

"I've really applied my professional background to my voluntary work," he says, "because there is a huge unmet need for affordable housing for older people in Bristol and we need imaginative new ways to provide that. Bristol itself has a terrific housing problem – not enough homes are being built for the city's growing population. It's a very popular place so house prices and rents are very high anyway. Around 18,000 households are on the waiting list for affordable housing here and over a thousand families are living in temporary accommodation.

"Older people can find it very difficult to find the housing they need which will allow them to live independently. Care homes are an expensive option and not everyone is ready to go into a care setting anyway. That potentially puts huge pressure on the local health services."

So now Bob, backed by a group of philanthropic investors in the city and with the support of one of the local universities, is developing visionary plans to build what he describes as a "21st Century Almshouse". Volunteers from The Anchor Society charity and the University of the West of England have spent the last eighteen months developing the idea of opening the UK's first inter-generational Housing Community based on pioneering projects in Holland and Spain.

"We have been studying projects overseas and we believe the time is right to learn from these and create our own version here in Bristol," he explains.

"The story goes back about ten years. In September 2012, Dutch student Jurrien Mentink left home to study Urban Design at University in the town of Deventer in eastern Holland. By Christmas, after the initial excitement of student life had begun to fade, Jurrien realised that he had a problem. Not only was he feeling lonely and homesick but he was finding it really difficult to make ends meet. He ended up working between his studies in the kitchens of the Humanitas Residential Care Home.



Humanitas Residential Care Home, Deventer

"This was perfect for him: he earned good money, got to eat decent meals and he enjoyed the company of the elderly residents, who were kind and welcoming to him.

"Jurrien discovered that the Care Home had a number of vacant bedrooms; he also knew that they needed more help in the kitchens... and that a number of his student friends were also struggling financially because of the high cost of accommodation. He talked to the CEO of Humanitas, Gea Sijpkens, who agreed to allow him and five other students to come and live there – and volunteer for thirty hours per months in exchange for free accommodation.

"Effectively it became an Intergenerational Housing Scheme – quite probably the very first."

The health and wellbeing benefits emerge

What evolved from there became more than just a handy financial arrangement on both sides. The older residents really appreciated the young students' company and the students began to teach them how to use the internet, make Skype calls, even how to work the remote control on the TV.

A new atmosphere began to fill the whole community and the mental health and wellbeing of both age cohorts improved. The older residents became more alert and interested in life as they shared their stories. The students prospered and passed their exams.

"The scheme is still running," adds Bob, "although fresh generations of students have since passed through the doors, and places there are much coveted! News of the Deventer success was picked up by the wider academic community and Alicante University decided to follow their example, but in a disadvantaged part of the city and on a much bigger scale."

Just before lockdown, The Anchor Society, together with All Saints Church Lands Charity, visited the award-winning housing Plaza America complex in Alicante which provides affordable housing for older people and younger ones too - mainly key workers. The development contains 74 one-bedroom flats, several community rooms and a garden. On top of that, the building is home to a GP practice, a non-residents day centre which enables older people in the local community to benefit and a two-storey underground car park.

Why the car park? "That's the really ingenious part," answers Bob, "as the rental income from the car park and the other facilities help subsidise the costs of the accommodation and cover the salary of the 'Guardian' who runs the building and whose role also includes developing the community spirit and building bridges between the generations."



Plaza de América, Alicante

Up to a third of the flats are let to people aged under 35 who stay for a maximum period of two years and commit to providing up to thirty hours per month to support and befriend the older residents in exchange for subsidised rent. The Alicante Project has been widely acclaimed as an exemplar of successful inter-generational living, not least by UNESCO, and is now being used as the inspiration for similar initiatives around the world.

Bringing the lessons home to Bristol

“The project team here in Bristol are now working to draw together a number of stakeholders to develop a modified version of the Alicante Project,” explains Bob. “The Bristol Vision would see post graduate students or essential workers living alongside older residents. The first pilot project would form the basis for academic research to help assess how best to measure the social impact of this type of community and to help fine tune the design and building of more such communities across the UK in due course.”

The Bristol Project involves The Anchor Society, which has a long history of helping vulnerable and frail elderly in the city, and of which Bob Durie has long been a trustee, and Age UK Bristol – which is the lead partner for the city’s age-friendly strategy. The University of the West of England (UWE) is also committed through the Wallscourt Foundation, an independent charitable trust which supports education and learning at UWE.

“Bristol has a huge student population, and accommodation here can prove very expensive. There is a particularly pressing need to provide housing for Post Graduate students – especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds,” adds Bob.

The next stage of the project is to find a suitable site in a city, and discussions are underway with Bristol City and South Gloucestershire Councils. The team are also in discussions with a number of Housing Associations and Almshouse Charities about new and existing buildings which could well provide the location for a first pilot project.

“It’s always going to be a challenge in Bristol, where land is in such demand,” says Bob. “But we are in early discussions on a site in Brunswick Square, which is conveniently located on the road out of Bristol towards UWE. That would give us space for some 40 units, with probably one student unit to every four older residents. The students would be expected to provide so many hours a week in return for subsidised accommodation.

“Young residents will not be expected to provide core support – care, cleaning, shopping and cooking, or things which should be done by social services or the family, but companionship and general support. We believe this intergenerational approach will reduce social isolation and anxiety, improve everyone’s mental health, allow older people to make the very most of later life and provide young residents with affordable homes.

“The overarching lesson of both the Dutch and the Spanish projects,” concludes Bob, “is that we don’t have to live in accommodation where we only see people of our own age, which is what all-too-often happens. The generations can live side by side and enrich each other’s lives. We really believe that Bristol can show the way forward and provide a template for other schemes around the country.”

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 20,000 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 live independently in a home of their choice
- provide insight and intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice to support sector learning and improvement
- showcase what's best in specialist/supported housing and feature innovative projects and services that demonstrate how lives of people have been transformed, and
- support commissioners and providers to review their existing provision and develop, test out and deliver solutions so that they are best placed to respond to their customers' changing needs and aspirations.

To access a selection of related resources on almshouses, visit our dedicated pages at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Almshouses/>

And for more information we curate about intergenerational housing, visit:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Intergenerational-Housing>

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