



Housing LIN

Connecting people, ideas and resources

Viewpoint 114

From crisis moves to informed choices: Older People Deserve More Than 'Good Enough' Housing

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Introduction

This Viewpoint for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) captures what Appleby Blue Is Teaching Us About Ageing, Community and Housing – and summarises the learnings from the new Appleby Blue ‘One Year on’ Report.¹

Background

While the Older People’s Housing Taskforce² usefully put the spotlight on housing for older people and made a number of important recommendations in its report to government, in my view, housing for older people in the UK is still too often designed around assumptions, not aspirations.

At United St Saviour’s Charity, our experience from the first year of **Appleby Blue** - our 57-home, multi award-winning almshouse in the heart of Bermondsey, London - shows that it doesn’t have to be this way. If we treat later life as something to be planned for, designed with, and celebrated, then housing can become not only more functional, but more joyful.

Appleby Blue is more than a building. It’s a blueprint for what’s possible when we embed values, person-centric resident support, food, and research into the heart of housing. More than one year on of being fully operational, we’re seeing the transformative impact it can have - on individuals, communities, and the system around them. And I believe there are lessons here for every policymaker, developer, and housing provider.

The problem: Lack of choice is leaving people stuck until crisis point

Today, too many older people are ageing in unsuitable homes. Our residents frequently tell us they delayed moving because there were no attractive or affordable options available. This lack of choice leads to crisis-led decision-making, declines in mental and physical health, increasing demand on already stretched services, and under-occupied homes in a city amid a growing housing crisis.

By contrast, at Appleby Blue, we are inundated with requests. Why? Because it offers something rare (though it shouldn’t be): independent, beautiful, affordable housing where older people can stay connected to the city and the people they love. It demonstrates what can happen when you invest in homes that people actually want to live in - not just the only option they have to settle for.

(1) https://www.housinglin.org.uk/_assets/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/Appleby-Blue-One-Year-On-Report-2025.pdf

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

Our model: Housing, support, and community under one roof

Appleby Blue offers 57 social-rent almshouses for older people who have lived in Southwark for three years or more and are on low incomes. It combines:

- **Design quality:** Developed by Witherford Watson Mann Architects, it offers generous walkways, sensory planting, and communal areas designed to encourage connection and autonomy.
- **Personalised support:** Residents co-create wellbeing plans using the Older Person's Outcomes Star, with light-touch support and links to external health and care partners.
- **Community connection:** Ground floor spaces are open to the community for activities, and the community kitchen supports events ranging from shared meals to intergenerational games and workshops.

The research: Real-life outcomes and systemic benefits

We work closely with academic partners including UCL, Bayes Business School and Bournemouth University to understand the long-term impact of this model. Across these studies, insights are encouraging:

- **Longevity:** The Bayes Almshouse Longevity Study suggests almshouse residents live longer and enjoy a better quality of life than their peers in standard housing.
- **Health and wellbeing:** Residents report feeling safer, more connected, and more independent since moving in.
- **System-wide impact:** Appleby Blue has released over 100 bedrooms back into the local housing market and potentially reduced demand on social care services.

We're also proud of our ethnographic research model, piloted through our food-based **LEMONADE project** with Bournemouth University, where a researcher-in-residence lives alongside residents to better understand their experiences. It's an approach rooted in empathy and proximity - and one that humanises the research process ensuring research becomes accessible to often underserved communities.

Food, friendship, and cultural connection

Food has become one of the most powerful connectors at Appleby Blue. Our community kitchen has hosted events led by our team and external providers that honour cultural traditions, reduce isolation, and support intergenerational exchange. This isn't an add-on; it's an essential part of healthy ageing and place-making and is just one of many ways we ensure Appleby Blue reflects and celebrates the cultural richness of its locality.

Whilst each resident has a kitchen in their own flat, communal cooking facilities and meal sharing have a powerful impact on connection and a sense of belonging.

What needs to happen next

Appleby Blue is just one model - but the principles behind it are transferable. Based on the recommendations in our Appleby Blue 'One Year On' Report, we believe the following actions are essential:

1. *Invest in quality design*

Quality design should be accessible to everyone. Thoughtful design has a powerful impact on mental wellbeing and broader social outcomes, creating societal benefits whilst also preventing unnecessary retrofitting later down the line.

2. *Create collaboration across sectors*

Collaboration between the public, private, and voluntary sectors is essential. The voluntary and community sectors bring unique expertise and connections often overlooked. By working together, these sectors can achieve outcomes that benefit communities and enhance project success.

3. *Bridge housing, health and social care*

Housing, health and social care should work as an integrated system, not separate silos. Addressing them together creates a robust foundation for wellbeing. This cohesive approach supports older adults' needs more effectively, benefiting society as a whole and creating economic savings too.

4. *Engage communities in the built environment*

Architects and developers should view the community as a central client. Development should be co-created with communities, not simply for them. This community-centred approach strengthens ties and ensures that spaces meet the real needs of those who live there.

5. *Embed housing for older people within communities*

Older people's housing should be viewed as an integral community asset, connecting and embedding older adults in the heart of community life. By doing so, we celebrate the contributions of older residents and foster stronger, more inclusive neighbourhoods for all generations.

6. Create aspirational social housing

Social housing for older adults should offer dignity and choice, becoming a desired option rather than a last resort. Increasing quality housing options in cities for older people not only enhances their lives but also frees up larger homes for younger families, easing pressures across the housing chain.

7. Food is a social connector

Food serves as a powerful tool for bringing people together across generations, celebrating cultural diversity, and fostering connection. Integrating food-related activities into housing projects builds community bonds and enriches daily life.

8. Leverage community organisations in research and policy development

The expertise of community organisations should play a vital role in shaping housing policy. Their on-the-ground insights and experience of co-producing research bring innovative, practical ideas that can advance housing models for older people.

We explore these recommendations in our Appleby Blue 'One Year On' Report.

Conclusion

Too often, older people's housing is treated as a niche issue. But ageing well is everyone's business. Appleby Blue shows what's possible when we prioritise design, inclusion and trust. It invites us to imagine a future where housing is no longer something people "end up" in - but something they look forward to. I believe that's a future worth building.

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 Benzmira 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/>

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
- 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 developments operators, 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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