



If you walk down Sheen Road in Richmond upon Thames, you may stop to admire a row of attractive Grade-II listed buildings. What you may not realise is that these buildings are almshouses – built in 1834 for ‘14 poor men and 14 poor women’. Over time, additional almshouses have been built on the site, and altogether they now provide a home for more than 50 people.

The estate is called Hickey’s Almshouses, after the man who bequeathed the estate back in 1728. It’s owned and managed by **The Richmond Charities**. We caught up with Samantha Maskell (right), Head of Finance, Policy and Governance at The Richmond Charities, to find out more...



Can you give us an overview of The Richmond Charities?

The charity dates back more than 400 years; our first almshouses were founded in 1600. Several almshouse charities in the suburb have merged over the years, and wealthy philanthropists have donated land and money to build more properties, so we now look after 145 almshouses across 12 different estates.

Can you explain the difference between an almshouse charity and a housing association?

Our almshouses have residents rather than tenants. Instead of rent, residents pay a weekly maintenance contribution, which is a lot lower than market rent.

Almshouses focus on building communities rather than just providing homes. Each site has a scheme manager to support residents. We have a monthly magazine and organise a range of weekly activities, such as bridge, bingo and arts & crafts, to bring residents together. We also employ a chaplain, who runs Sunday services and is available for emotional and spiritual support.

Who lives in your almshouses?

To be eligible for a home with us, applicants must be over 65, on limited income and have lived in the borough of Richmond for at least two years. We do allow a small percentage of residents from outside the borough, but they must have a strong connection to Richmond, such as having close family here. Most of our residents are retired and on benefits, but some work part-time.

Presumably, residents have a home for life if they want it?

Yes. Generally, an almshouse will only become vacant if a resident dies or goes into long-term care. In the past, people had a much shorter life expectancy, so would only have stayed in an almshouse for a few years, but now we have residents who’ve lived in their home for more than 30 years.

Do you have a long waiting list for houses?

We have a register, but people are prioritised based on their need rather than how long they’ve been waiting for.

Why are almshouses still so important today?

One study found that almshouses add, on average, more than two years to people’s lives¹. The community feel and on-site scheme managers help to reduce loneliness and increase wellbeing. Plus, many almshouses are beautiful, historic buildings, which are being maintained and preserved.

How are almshouses changing for modern times?

Traditionally, almshouses were one-up, one-down properties situated around a shared courtyard. New almshouses tend to be larger and more suitable for people with mobility needs. We have two building projects underway, which will create 12 more homes at our Queen’s Road estate, and five at our St Mary’s Grove estate. The St Mary’s Grove bungalows are being built to the Passivhaus standard, with solar panels and ground source heat pumps. All of the properties will be wheelchair accessible.

The Richmond Charities also have investment properties. Why aren’t they used as almshouses?

Most of those properties have been donated by wealthy benefactors, but they’re not on our estates and many are family homes, so they’re not suitable for use as almshouses. Instead, they’re let out to private tenants, and the money supports our charitable work.

Along with the almshouses, you also offer welfare grants to those in need across the Richmond borough. What can you tell us about those?

We manage three small welfare charities – The Richmond Philanthropic Society, the Richmond Aid in Sickness Fund and the Misses Thomson & Whipple Charity. They provide emergency grants of up to £400 to people in the borough, through charities such as Age UK and Mind. We also give welfare grants direct from The Richmond Charities.

The grants have a big impact on people’s lives, particularly with the cost-of-living crisis. They mean that people can put money in the electricity meter, buy essentials such as a fridge or bed, or access counselling and other support.

At the end of the day, The Richmond Charities is here to support the people who need us, whether that’s by providing an affordable home, reducing loneliness or just making life a bit easier for people in our community. ♡

For more information on The Richmond Charities, visit richmondcharities.org.uk

1. [bayes.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/731297/Almshouse-Longevity-Study-Report.pdf](https://www.bayes.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/731297/Almshouse-Longevity-Study-Report.pdf)



Almshouses

Almshouses are believed to be the oldest form of social housing in the world, and date back to the 10th century. Today, some 36,000 people live in almshouses across the UK. Most residents are over retirement age and would struggle to afford private rental costs. Right-to-buy legislation doesn’t apply to almshouses, so they’re very rarely sold. Instead, they’re owned and managed by charities for the long-term benefit of local communities.



The new almshouses being built at Queen’s Road

Do you support a local charity that you’d like to see promoted in *Venture*? Email kate.venture@afwm.co.uk and we’ll see what we can do!

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