



CROCUS CAMPAIGN

SAFFRON WALDEN ALMSHOUSES

Building homes, growing hope in Saffron Walden

For more than 600 years there has been an Almshouse in Saffron Walden. Originally established on the Orchard Lands of Roger Walden, Archbishop of Canterbury, the site now belongs to the King Edward VI Almshouse Charity. Thanks to the generosity of previous benefactors and support from the Almshouse Association, the Charity continues to offer accessible, affordable and secure homes in a heritage setting where the bonds of community are both visible and thriving.

Today, our Trustees manage a total of 47 homes in Abbey Lane, Primes Close and Freshwell Street, all of them centrally located, but tucked away from the town's main thoroughfare. We grant licences to applicants on a low income, with limited savings who are either currently living in the former borough of Saffron Walden or can demonstrate strong links with the town. The majority of our applicants presently are also of working age, making them ineligible to apply for much of the newly built socially affordable housing which is targeted at the over-55s.

Saffron Walden is a desirable place to live, well-located between London and Cambridge. The town has a significant shortage of small, affordable accommodation, as documented in the Saffron Walden Neighbourhood Plan and the District Council's October 2023 Housing Need Assessment, which limits the ability of local people to remain in their home town. The average price of a home in Saffron Walden is also many multiples of the average salary and most market rents in the town cost over a quarter of monthly earnings. In addition, Local Housing Allowance for those on benefits is insufficient to rent a local property due to the high rents charged in the area. This means that for many, access to a place to live in Saffron Walden is well out of reach.

Saffron Walden Almshouses

Unlike the majority of the 1700 independent Almshouse charities across the country, who prioritise their accommodation for the over-60s, we welcome applicants of all ages and at different stages of life. Many of these are very low on the local council priority list for affordable housing and even if they are successful in being allocated a home, they are often required to move out of the town. This includes the elderly, single parents and those whose life circumstances make it difficult to take on the high cost of market rents.

Of our current residents the youngest is a teenager and the eldest is 90, the average age is 59. Over half of the households on-site, have an income below the living wage of £22,308pa, over 60% are on benefits and 54% receive housing benefit. Without the Almshouse accommodation it would be impossible for many of them to stay in Saffron Walden and benefit from paying considerably less than private rentals. In addition, the poor public transport services in the area make it very difficult for people to travel into the area for work purposes without their own transport.

One of our recent residents, Simon, had worked as an electrician in the town for more than 20 years, often using his skills in a volunteer capacity. Sadly, he suffered a major stroke that made it impossible for him to get back to work, although with family support, he could still manage to live independently.

"...Without any property or capital, my situation was very precarious. Being granted an Almshouse flat enabled me to remain at the heart of the community, close to friends and family. The Charity



gave me a secure home which contributed greatly to my mental recovery from the stroke.’ (Simon, recent resident)

Another resident, Richard, was living in a council estate in Sheffield after leaving the armed forces and having suffered an unexpected health scare, which resulted in hospitalisation, he realised he needed to be nearer to his family for support with both his physical and mental health. Since being with us for over 3 years, he now feels more relaxed, optimistic and able to concentrate on getting better. Richard is an example of how the almshouses offer affordable accommodation to those with links to the town who do not necessarily qualify, or who may not be prioritised, for local authority or other traditional socially rented properties. He is also the latest example of how the almshouses help those of working age to put their lives back together.

“I know that as things continue to improve, my work prospects will change and that could mean earning more than the income threshold set for residents. If that happens, this will still have been a life-changing experience and a really important bridge to a brighter, more stable future.” (Richard, resident)

Whereas local Housing Associations are often constrained by criteria that make it difficult to place applicants near to other family members in Saffron Walden, our focus remains firmly with the individual or family in need. As an independent provider, we have the ability to keep people connected to the town and close to the jobs, schools and people they love. For as long as their financial circumstances remain the same, they also have the security of knowing their home with us is more than a temporary fix and effectively a ‘home for life.’

Project Crocus

Our response has been to examine our current site and explore the opportunities for building more homes and strengthening the sense of community that residents already enjoy.

The current single-storey units on Primes Close were added to the site in the 1950s and despite ongoing improvement and costly repair, they continue to suffer from significant condensation issues. This is a serious concern as it supports the growth of black spot mould which aggravates respiratory conditions such as asthma and bronchitis. Continued attempts to upgrade these units have been unsuccessful which has resulted in us keeping under review whether all these units can be used and the advice we have received indicates that they are no longer habitable. The problems result from the original design and build quality, from a time just after the second world war when buildings were not constructed for longevity, which also means that they have an exceedingly high cost of maintenance even before they were deemed to be uninhabitable. Six of the seven units are now empty and the final residents move out by the end of July 2024 when their new rented property is ready. Following further, detailed assessment by our architects and other consultants, we are advised that demolition and replacement would be a more cost-effective and enduring solution to the problem.



The existing, 1950s built Primes Close almshouse bungalows viewed from Park Lane

After many years of planning, the result is Project Crocus, a development of 16 brand new sensitively designed, highly energy-efficient, low carbon properties built for longevity that replace the existing seven bungalows on Primes Close. In adopting the historic emblem of the saffron crocus, our aim is to create a visible reminder of our shared sense of heritage with the town. The flower is also a powerful symbol of hope and connection to a unique community in this corner of Essex.

Project Crocus replaces the seven existing bungalows, increasing the number of homes available and enabling us to incorporate modern accessibility requirements, as well as a unit specifically for wheelchair users.

Project Crocus will have the following housing benefits:

- **Sixteen news homes will be provided** for local people in need, increasing our capacity on Primes Close by a further nine homes.
- We can ensure that **local people get to stay in Saffron Walden** and are not forced to move away from loved ones and work, purely for financial reasons.
- Our almshouses help to **maintain diversity in Saffron Walden**, meaning people from all economic backgrounds can live, work and play together.
- The almshouses help to **relieve pressure on social housing** providers through offering an alternative solution to those on low incomes.
- Our homes help to **reduce social isolation and loneliness** by creating a unique community of residents in a safe space.

As a charity, we also play a wider role in our local community, examples of which include that we:

- Provided a space for the **local clothing bank** to store its donations, an organization which was previously homeless itself.
- Allowed support groups collecting food, clothing and medicines for **Ukraine relief** efforts to compile goods in our chapel, prior to shipping.

We have just submitted our planning application having met with Uttlesford District Council Planning Department who have acknowledged the importance of the project and provided encouraging pre-application advice. We anticipate planning permission to be granted in the autumn of 2024, allowing demolition and construction to take place in 2025 or 2026 subject to fundraising progress. Our target is to have the new flats available for occupation in the second half of 2026 or first half of 2027.



The Crocus Campaign

The anticipated capital cost of the project is expected to be around **£5.25 million**. This figure is higher than initially expected, but encompasses significant contingencies, as recommended by our Quantity Surveyor, to mitigate against rapidly increasing materials costs and a fluctuating materials supply market. Just under £1m is available from the Charity's ring-fenced funds and £140,000 has been pledged or gifted by the Trustees of Saffron Walden Almshouses to date. We can see our way to close to 50% of the funds required with the addition of government funding and a commercially available loan, however we are still left with a significant shortfall. This is why we have launched the Crocus Campaign; to create not just 16 modern, affordable homes for people in financial hardship, but also to promote our broader vision with potential givers and grant-makers, so that we can secure our charitable activities for the long-term.

We anticipate that further funds might come from the following sources to help to transform the lives of local people in search of stability, community and a place to call home.

- High Net Worth Individuals
- Trusts and Foundations
- Corporates
- The Local Community

The Crocus Campaign offers opportunities for a direct gift which can be pledged over three years or made as a one-off donation and, for suitably sized gifts, we are very happy to discuss the options for naming the new accommodation in its entirety or for specific units. We are also be delighted to accept gifts that are dedicated either in the name of an individual or in memory of a loved one. Individuals may also show their support by making or by leaving a bequest in their will. We are happy to discuss with companies and organisations, which gift to the project, how they wish their support to be recognised. We also have a matched funding offer for the first £100,000 donated by the local community.

We are, of course, grateful for all gifts received, no matter what their size. Everyone who supports the Crocus Campaign will be recognised as being part of a special, philanthropic community of givers dedicated to improving life for local people and preserving our unique heritage in Saffron Walden.

'I've been here eight years now and I love it. It doesn't matter that I can't drive, because I'm only a 25-minute walk from mum's place and an even shorter walk to work. I also love the Almshouses community. It feels friendly, safe and we're fortunate to have welcome green spaces and so much nature on our doorstep.' (Catherine, Resident)

'...relieved from the anxieties of life.'

This is how John Player describes those living in our historic Almshouse, nearly 180 years ago. In his *Sketches of Saffron Walden and its Vicinity*, he is clearly impressed by the Charity's 'noble efforts' to serve its residents.

Today, our objectives are no less ambitious and even wider in scope. Project Crocus offers us a step-change opportunity to modernise a significant proportion of our accommodation, making it more accessible and attractive to an increasingly diverse range of applicants. No matter what may be going on in people's lives, our aim is to welcome all our residents into a caring community, where an Almshouse home becomes a bridge to better things; security, safety and a sense of belonging.

The Trustees Saffron Walden Almshouses

