

## Client focus: St Mary's Hospital

St Mary's Hospital Almshouses can trace its origins back to the 12th century. Key to its survival is careful management of its evolution in the 21st century.



**David Coulthard,**  
Communar and Executive  
Director of Chichester  
Cathedral.

The Communar is the senior lay administrator on the Cathedral staff and is responsible to the Cathedral Chapter for financial planning; personnel matters including acting as line manager for all the lay staff; managing the property portfolio and maintenance of the Cathedral Close; coordinating the restoration of the Cathedral building and the general administration of Cathedral business.

### David Coulthard introduces the charity and forthcoming changes

St Mary's Hospital Almshouses in Chichester can trace its origins back to the 12th century: a remarkable story of survival for a charity that stands on the verge of another moment of change in its long history.

The original hospital served the needs of travellers, the destitute and the sick – 'hospital' then implying hospitality and shelter. It moved to its current site in 1253. The timber-framed building originally had a large hall used as the infirmary and a chapel at the east end. After Elizabeth I's Poor Laws in 1601, the hospital began to take on its current form, ceasing to be a night shelter and housing residents who were allowed to remain until the end of their lives.

Today services continue to take place almost daily in the medieval chapel, but the hall has been reduced and sensitively converted into almshouse apartments on either side. With the addition of new cottages and flats the charity now has capacity for up to 36 residents. Admission is governed by the trustees and reserved for older people from the local area who are in financial need and sympathetic to the Christian ethos on which the charity's activities are based. Residents are supported by a dedicated staff team of wardens, a maintenance team and the Custos – a clergyman who leads services and provides spiritual support.

The hospital is supported by gifts and endowments collected over the centuries – invested in a mixture of equities and property – which give it a sustainable future. However, it is not immune to the pressures that affect the social care sector and those working with older people in the twenty-first century.

Residents who are in declining health can struggle to access the care they need from the state, and their understandable desire to remain in their own homes for as long as possible can conflict with the objective of 'independent living', placing staff and trustees in a difficult position. In common with other almshouses, the trustees must keep reviewing what level of care it is appropriate or possible for the charity to provide.

They also need to keep the balance between functioning as an almshouse and the other, broader, element of the charity's objects – the 'relief of need'. St Mary's Hospital has worked closely with a local homelessness charity, Stonepillow, over a number of years, and may consider other partnership opportunities in future.

Such issues will be discussed by an improved trustee body. Since 1898 the Trustees of St Mary's Hospital have been the Dean and Chapter of Chichester Cathedral; this long operational partnership has allowed the hospital to access specialist skills more cheaply through cathedral staff. Now the Cathedral Chapter has identified an opportunity to enhance the governance of St Mary's Almshouses, and to remove potential conflicts of interest, by separating the governing bodies.

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BWB has advised St Mary's Hospital and the cathedral on revising its governing documents, and on how to ensure that the distinctive Christian ethos of the charity – and its link with Chichester Cathedral – is preserved for generations to come. Members of the Cathedral Chapter will continue to serve St Mary's Hospital alongside a new group of independent trustees who will bring new skills to help this historic charity address future challenges.

BWB acted for the National Association of Almshouses as a third party intervener in the leading case of *Watts v Stewart & Others* ([2016] EWCA Civ 1247), in which the Court of Appeal confirmed that almshouse residents occupy as licensees and not as tenants with security of tenure.