

High

# Building homes. Supporting people.

## Annual Report for Residents

2022/23



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## **Welcome** from the Chair of the Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel

It is an immense pleasure to be Chair of the Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel (RVSP) and to welcome you to this report. Over the last year, residents have worked hard alongside Hightown staff to improve the services provided by the Association. We have collaborated successfully on a range of resident involvement projects and reports. Hightown understands the importance of giving their residents a voice. Our views have contributed to shaping and influencing the services we use. This is demonstrated throughout the report.

This Annual Report provides an overview of Hightown's performance and achievements over the past year and highlights changes made following feedback from residents.

Unfortunately, the cost-of-living crisis has continued to be a problem; however, the continued excellent work of Hightown staff meant residents have been fully supported even in difficult financial circumstances.

As a member of the RVSP, we receive reports on all aspects of Hightown's performance at our quarterly meetings. This includes statistics such as the percentage of emergency repairs fixed the first time and the percentage of rent arrears. The Panel also reviewed the Local Arrangements, which happen every three years. It allows residents to be involved in influencing and developing standards relating to keeping homes in good repair and improving neighbourhoods and communities. We reviewed the Customer Charter, which sets out the standard of service Hightown aims to achieve. This includes all aspects of service, such as time taken to answer phone calls and reporting anti-social behaviour.

There was a continuing emphasis during last year on increasing resident involvement. This has always been important to Hightown as during RVSP meetings, there is a report on how successful events were in attracting residents.

If you would like more information about the work the RVSP does and how to get involved, please email involve@hightownha.org.uk

Hightown successfully held its first Open Day at its head office in Hemel Hempstead, where residents could meet staff and learn more about what the Association does.

In closing, I would like to thank all the RVSP members past and present for their commitment and enthusiasm for reviewing and improving Hightown's performance and the Hightown staff who have been so helpful in providing information and analysis.



**Kathryn Hallet** Chair of the Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel



## **2022/23** Highlights of the year





## Giving you a **voice**

Listening to our residents and ensuring your voice is heard is very important to us. Your views and experiences drive everything we do, which is why we offer a range of ways for you to have your say.

Following the review of our Resident Involvement Strategy last year, we developed and implemented an action plan to enhance opportunities for residents to provide feedback and scrutinise our services.

### In 2022/23, residents were involved in:

- Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel
- Complaints Scrutiny Group
- Estate champions inspections
- Estate champions forum
- Contractor tender and selection
- Parking consultations
- In person door knocking and estate events
- Estate surveys via post and email
- Anti-social behaviour policy focus group
- Open Day at Hightown House
- Review of Hightown's tenancy fraud webpage
- STAR survey action plan focus group









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### **Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel**

Our Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel is made up of and chaired by residents and plays a vital role in bringing their valuable insights and ideas to shape the development of Hightown's policies, procedures and performance. The Panel holds quarterly meetings with managers and a member of the Board.

Over the last year, the Panel assessed the impact and value for money of Hightown's programme of resident involvement activities, provided feedback on the results of the independent review of Hightown's support for people experiencing domestic abuse. In addition, they considered and approved resident bids for estate improvements, assisted with the drafting and publication of the Annual Report for Residents, reviewed Hightown's Local Arrangements and the Customer Charter, and examined Hightown's performance in key service areas.

We would like to thank the Panel for their work over the last year, and for their contributions to the production of this report. We currently have some vacancies for members of the Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel.

If you want to:

- Scrutinise Hightown's services and performance
- Influence change and improvement of Hightown's services
- Be involved in the development of Hightown's services
- Meet new people

We would love to hear from you. Please let us know by emailing involve@hightownha.org.uk

# Meet the Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel members











Following a very successful Open Day at Hightown House last year, we will be holding our second Open Day at our central office in Hemel Hempstead, in December 2023. The day is an opportunity for you to meet staff from different teams and find out more about the work they do. No appointment is necessary!

In autumn 2023, our Communications team will be working on a review and relaunch of Hightown's website. If you would like to take part in giving feedback on the new website, please contact us on **involve@hightownha.org.uk** 











As someone who believes in community and taking care of each other, becoming an involved resident was a natural step for Hightown resident Tahlia, a Social Worker by profession.

Tahlia is an active member of Hightown's Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel (RVSP), a group of volunteers who act as a collective, independent voice for residents. She's also an estate champion, representing the other residents on her estate and ensuring high standards are being maintained in communal areas through regular liaison with the Property Services Inspector.

Tahlia sees resident involvement as vital in strengthening the relationship between Hightown and its residents and in enabling residents to hold the Association to account. She says:

"It's important because if there's not a direct link with residents and a relationship, it's difficult for Hightown to do a good job. I talk a lot about resident involvement with other residents - very often they will come to me with issues, and I will ask if they have reported it and whether they will attend a resident involvement meeting. I'm quite passionate about working together and how that affects our community and housing in general.

"I'm also really interested in how information is shared back with Hightown because that's how things are improved. When my son and I first moved into the estate, it was a new development, so there were a few issues - other residents would come to me to ask questions and give me information, so becoming an estate champion felt like a logical link."

Tahlia's work as an estate champion has resulted in some positive outcomes for her estate.

"We've had a few problems with the lighting outside our block and also inside the block with heating and decoration, so it's been really good to have a direct channel of communication with Hightown. I have a very good relationship with Hightown's Property Services Inspector, which is helpful because we often communicate about different issues - it's made things much more streamlined. I also think it's nice for other residents who perhaps aren't as confident or who don't feel like they can get involved in the same way to feel like they have someone to share information with," she adds.

Being part of the RVSP, which meets guarterly, has also enabled Tahlia to influence and shape Hightown's policies, services and communications.



Recently, there's been a package of training for involved residents, covering topics like safeguarding and the new legislation around social housing; it's been amazing to learn more about that and how Hightown is responding. I would encourage anyone to get involved – it's so important if you want to make a difference.

## How are **we doing?**

### **Complaints**

We aim to provide excellent services to all our residents, and we welcome complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve our services. Sometimes things go wrong, but we work hard to put them right.

We have a two stage formal complaints process, which may be preceded by an early resolution step to guickly address the problem.

We are a member of the independent Housing Ombudsman Service and assess the way we manage our complaints against the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. You can find out more about our complaints process and read our self-assessment against the Ombudsman's code here: www.hightownha.org.uk/ complimentscomplaints





### We received a total of 169 complaints for head office departments in 2022/23.





### You said, we did - learning from complaints

We made several changes to our services as part of learning from complaints, including:

- Improving the way we record evidence of recharges when a resident ends their tenancy
- Reviewing the way we give information to ensure that the way it is given is supportive and helpful to residents
- Reviewing the inspection timescales for reports of damp and mould
- A weekly reporting process has been put in place to identify any overdue repairs orders so that these can be followed up with contractors
- Amending the grounds maintenance contract specification for retendering the contract

- Updating our Development Employers **Requirements for new developments** to ensure parking spaces are clearly marked
- Improving monitoring reports for end of defects for new build properties
- Reviewing the placement of electric car charging points during development to ensure they are accessible
- Updating the Hightown website to clarify that the AllPay telephone number is not a freephone number
- Reviewing affordability assessments for applicants for housing, taking into consideration the level of detail required



### Compliments

We welcome all forms of feedback and are pleased to receive compliments. In 2022/23, we recorded 181 compliments, an increase from last year. The services they relate to are:

Income Recovery	100
Housing	28
Repairs	28
Estates	11
Lettings	8
Home Ownership	4
Development	1
Reception	1

### **Compliments** from residents:

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for all your help during this exchange. You have been prompt, informative and very helpful. I look forward to being a Hightown tenant.

I just wanted to say thank you for everything. Receiving your help and support has been amazing, especially getting the house ready for me – it's much appreciated.



### Looking ahead

We have used the feedback received from the Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR) survey carried out in summer 2022 to develop an action plan to help improve our services. We will be carrying out the next annual survey in summer 2023, which will include the new Tenant Satisfaction Measures published by the Regulator of Social Housing in April 2023.

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Thank you for your gentle courtesy and kind forbearance throughout my application; you have been incredibly professional and proficient.



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## **Equality, Diversity** and Inclusion

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) matters to us at Hightown. We aim to have a culture where everyone is treated fairly and are not discriminated against. We are committed to creating equal opportunities for our residents no matter their age, sexuality, gender and religion. We want to be recognised as a fair and inclusive employer and landlord

We produced an EDI plan which focuses on three key areas. One of the areas include 'residents and people who use our services'. Action points are as follows:

- Review our resident and service user involvement strategies, ensuring we promote engagement opportunities and resident voice from underrepresented communities.
- Undertake a review of Hightown's EDI presence on our webpages.

We're also seeking residents from a diverse background to join our Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel so the services we provide reflect the communities we serve.

### **Tenant Household Profiles** Based on current residents 28/03/2023

#### Household Age Group Breakdown







#### **Total Number of Household members:**



#### Household Gender Breakdown

Household Religion Breakdown

#### **Household Composition Breakdown**

Household Disability Breakdown





Household Economic Status Breakdown





### Looking ahead

Gathering information on resident equality and diversity characteristics helps us to improve services to meet your needs. In 2023/24, we will be carrying out a census of residents to invite you to update the information we hold.

20

	576	576	987		1031		
8				306		91	
vernment training / new deal	Job seeker	Long term disability	Not seeking work / at home	Other	Part time work less 30 hours	Retired	

## Residents' **events**

Last summer, we ran sustainability themed events for our residents at seven Hightown estates across Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

Over 80 residents attended the events and met with staff and partner agencies including the police and representatives from local authorities. They received information and advice on various environmental topics such as, waste awareness, recycling and green volunteering opportunities.











## Supporting **residents**

### 



#### **Tenancy sustainment**

A robust tenancy sustainment service is vital for housing associations as we must ensure that none of our residents become homeless because they are struggling with their tenancy. We aim to quickly identify residents who are experiencing difficulties and work with them to resolve their issues so they can sustain their tenancy. We want all our residents to live successfully in their homes.

Our Tenancy Sustainment team provide holistic support to residents when times are tough. Their expertise and person-centred approach will help you to get on top of your tenancy and access support from external agencies.

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### In the past year, our Tenancy Sustainment team supported residents with:



Mattresses



White goods



Curtains



Furniture



**Flooring and carpets** 



Laundrette pre-payments



ID document renewals



#### **GP** letters

Skip hire

### **Financial Inclusion**

With the cost-of-living crisis being felt in many households, the role of our Financial Inclusion Officers is more important than ever. The Officers offer an important service providing support and guidance to those facing financial hardships.

The support offered by the Financial Inclusion team ranges from information on how to claim the correct benefits to tackling rent arrears issues.



### Some of the support includes:

- Assist in applying for benefits such as Universal Credit, **Council Tax Support**, **Discretionary Housing Payments**, **Personal Independence Payments** and Carers Allowance
- Assist residents to manage their benefits accounts
- Help residents check their benefit entitlements
- Provide residents with advice on maximising their income
- Help residents to budget on a low income
- Tackling rent arrears
- Correct benefit entitlements





# Case Study Lisa's Story

Lisa, a Care Leaver, was referred to Financial Inclusion by the Lettings team for assistance with benefits, budgeting and setting-up utility accounts as this was her first general needs tenancy after living in various temporary and supported accommodation.

With English not being Lisa's first language, she was finding it difficult to apply for welfare benefits, so our Financial Inclusion Officer stepped in and made several successful benefit applications on her behalf, including Council Tax Support, Council Tax Single Persons Discount, Child Benefit and Healthy Start vouchers. In addition to completing the applications, the Officer also checked Universal Credit housing cost payments and requested direct payments to avoid rent arrears.

Within a short space of time, most of Lisa's benefits are now in place and she can start settling into her new home without the extra worries of tackling this alone.

\*Name has been changed to protect identity



### Looking ahead

We are expanding our Tenancy Sustainment and Financial introduced in 2023/24.



## Inclusion teams, with a new Tenancy Support Supervisor post being

# Meeting the needs of customers affected by domestic abuse

As a housing association, the nature of our relationship with residents means we are uniquely placed to identify domestic abuse and support people. Staff are trained to be able to spot the signs of abuse, for example, our Asset Management team looks out for signs that can be spotted inside a customer's home, or when receiving reports about repairs.

In 2022/23, we continued to work with an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) from the charity Refuge. The IDVA was co-located in Hightown's head office one day a week to advise Housing Officers and provide training. The post is currently vacant, but we will be continuing with the co-location once a new IDVA is in post. In addition to identifying cases and supporting residents, the IDVA has organised training sessions for staff to ensure their knowledge of domestic abuse is up to date.

The RVSP commissioned an independent review of how Hightown supports residents experiencing domestic abuse, and this was carried out by Refuge. This involved a review of Hightown's policies, procedures and guidance relating to domestic abuse, the customer charter, the structure and staff resource allocated to domestic abuse, and insight into case studies from the co-location of an IDVA in the Housing team at Hightown House.

The review found several strengths in Hightown's approach to managing domestic abuse, including a robust policy and procedure, which are supportive to readers and promote good service delivery, well and appropriately trained staff across different teams, good involvement with local and national domestic abuse events and organisations, and a proactive approach to seeking service improvements.

## Your Home

As a social landlord, we are passionate about creating places people can call home and thrive in. As well as building affordable homes, our priority is to make sure your homes are safe, secure and well maintained. Over the past year, we invested £8m into the improvement and maintenance of our housing stock.







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### Major works completed 2022/23

Туре	Quantity	
External decorations	300	
Door replacements	262	
Kitchen replacements	184	
Internal decorations	114	A DESCRIPTION OF THE OWNER
Electrical upgrades	64	
Heating and hot water replacements	59	
Bathroom replacements	29	
Communal area flooring replacements	26	
Window replacements	9	
Other (including roof replacements and works to paths and paving)	65	







Major repairs **£3,230,805** 



## **Damp and Mould**

There has been an increased focus on damp and mould across the social housing sector during the year. Producing moisture through daily living is unavoidable, but we are working hard to support residents to resolve the issue and ensure that properties can cope with this.

At Hightown, we recognise that damp and mould have the potential to be a serious issue for residents; over the past year, we have reviewed our procedures around damp and mould to identify problems before they escalate and deliver a more consistent approach to interventions.

In November 2022, we introduced a proactive and robust regime of in-depth inspections, investing in specialist equipment and extending the scope of damp and mould diagnosis to identify and eliminate all possible causes; in the five-month period from November 2022 to March 2023, we carried out over 250 inspections. Meanwhile, we updated our internal reporting procedures for damp and mould cases and have worked closely with our contractors to resolve cases in a timely manner.

Our Property Services Inspectors are equipped with specialist equipment and are trained to assess and identify causes of damp and mould, however we also use external specialist damp companies for diagnosis and reports where necessary. In early 2023, we contacted all customers who had reported damp and mould in the last two years, to ascertain which cases required further examination.



### Looking ahead

Two new fixed term posts have been introduced in the Property Services team to specialise in, and focus on, damp and mould cases.

We will be developing an animation on damp, mould and condensation, which will include tips and guidance on managing moisture levels in the home.



Communications via our website and resident newsletter were issued to keep residents informed on how to avoid and treat damp and mould and make it easier to report an issue.

When reports are received from Hightown residents, we arrange for a Property Services Inspector to attend to assess the extent and cause of the issue. Since April 2022, there have been 482 reports of damp and mould, covering 368 properties, of which 104 were due to leaks. Inspection forms have been reviewed and a more robust inspection introduced which considers many different factors, including the type of property, type of heating, household composition, and calculations of thermal measurements and the heating requirements for the cubic measurements of each room.

The majority of our damp and mould cases have involved working with the resident to manage ventilation in the property, and in some cases positive input ventilation systems, which provide fresh air into the property and improve the indoor air quality, have been installed to assist with this.

www.hightownha.org.uk/residents/ im-a-tenant/your-home-repairs/ condensation-and-mould/



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## Your neighbourhood

Last financial year, we carried out 7,817 estate inspections – an increase from last year – and actively engaged with residents to identify improvements to your estates and neighbourhood.



Each year, Hightown's Residents' Voice & Scrutiny Panel consider requests for estate improvements following requests from residents.

In 2022/23, the Panel agreed several improvements to our estates,



- New bin store doors and **CCTV to eradicate fly-tipping** and inappropriate use
- Parking signage and restrictions
- Creation of hard standing area with bike rack and canopy
- Community seating area
- New shrub and bark area
- Creation of shrub bed
- Creation of hard standing footpath





Bedfordshire	15	Luton	171
Broxbourne	169	Milton Keynes	172
Buckinghamshire	1,547	North Hertfordshire	234
Central Bedfordshire	743	St Albans	1,502
Dacorum	2,121	Stevenage	97
East Hertfordshire	369	Three Rivers	225
Hertsmere	441	Watford	432
LB Hillingdon	12	Welwyn Hatfield	44

32

0,000

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### **Money matters**



#### How we spend our income, per £1

Managing your homes	£0.09	
Paying loans to build your homes	£0.40	
Repairing your homes	£0.20	
Improving your homes	£0.26	
Reserves	£0.04	

### **MyHightown**

### Your online portal

### Did you know?

You can use our online resident account portal any time, anywhere, to check your balance, report a repair, update your details or pay your rent.

### Signed up yet?

#### Visit: https://myaccount.hightownha.org.uk



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I find the MyHightown portal very easy to use. What I like is that I can access the portal at any time and on any device. It's made a huge difference as I can easily check on my rent payment and balance and it reduces how often I need to call Hightown. Everything you need to know is available on the portal.



## A greener future

Last year we continued to focus on sustainability. The average energy performance certificate banding (EPC) across Hightown's rented stock is Band B, however Hightown does have 17 properties below a Band C. We are continuing to work towards improving the energy performance ratings of those properties to help residents lower their energy bills and contribute to the affordable warmth of their homes. The average energy performance rating for new homes developed by Hightown was 84.1. 98% of new homes achieved a Band B rating or higher, with the remaining 2% achieving a Band C rating.

In 2022/23, we invested £563,000 in energy efficiency works to existing properties, including improving the insulation of 289 properties with new doors and windows and carrying out 184 heating and hot water replacements.





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## Meet our **Board members** &

## **Executive leadership team**



**Bob Macnaughton** Chair

Joined Board in 2015

Chair since September 2017 Member of the



**Cordelia Pace** Vice-Chair

loined Board in 2017

Nominations Committee<br/>and Member of Operations<br/>and DevelopmentCommittee and<br/>member of Risk & Audit<br/>and Remuneration &<br/>Nominations Committees

Designated Board member for Whistleblowing



Sarah Pickup CBE Vice-Chair

#### Joined Board in 2017

Chair of Operations



**David Bogle** Chief Executive

Years with Hightown: 28 Years in Role: 28



Gemma Richardson Director of Care & Supported Housing – job share

Years with Hightown: 18 Years in Role: 1.5 years Years in Sector: 18



**Sarah Barton** Joined Board in 2021

Chair of the Risk & Audit



#### **Charmaine De Souza** Chris Ellmore Joined Board in 2021

Member of Operations

Diversity & Inclusion



Co-opted January 2023

Member of the Risk &



Zeena Farook

Co-opted January 2023 Member of the

Development and Operations Committees



**Alan Head** Joined Board in 2018

Committee and member of the Risk & Audit



**David Matthews** Joined Board in 2020



**Anne McLoughlin** Joined Board in 2021

Member of the Operations and Development Committees



**James Steel** Joined Board in 2013



Director of Financial Services Years with Hightown: 14

Years in Role: 14

Years in Sector: 26

**David Skinner** 



Susan Wallis Director of Corporate Services

leave from 25 April 2022 Susan decided to leave Hightown in April 2023





#### Andrew Rovall Director of Development

Years with Hightown: 20 Years in Role: 6



**Amy Laurie** Director of Care & Supported Housing – job share

Years with Hightown: Years in Sector: 19

Natalie Sturrock Director of Housing

Years with Hightown: 14.5 Years in Sector: 14.5



#### Sarah Salter (to 30 April 2023) Interim Director of

Corporate Services

Years with Hightown: 27 Years in Sector: 30

## Value for **money**

We measure how we are performing against similar housing associations to make sure that the services we provide give you value for money.





## Useful contacts

Hightown main contact	01442 292300	housing.services@hightownha.org.uk
Did you know you can look up the contact de Log in at https://myaccount.hightownha.org.		responsible for your home on MyHightown?
To report a repair during office hours	01442 292301	maintenance.services@hightownha.org.uk or on MyHightown at https://myaccount.hightownha.org.uk
To report an emergency repair out of office hours	0845 160 0077 0203 701 3525	
To talk to your Housing Officer about anti-social behaviour	01442 292300	housing.services@hightownha.org.uk
Report nuisance neighbours	07768 286694 (Text or phone)	www.hightownha.org.uk or on MyHightown at https://myaccount.hightownha.org.uk
Having difficulty paying your rent, or to set up a direct debit	01442 292 387	www.hightownha.org.uk
Pay your rent with your AllPay swipe card	0844 557 8321	www.allpayments.net or on MyHightown at https://myaccount.hightownha.org.uk
Report subletting/fraud	07768 286694	housing.services@hightownha.org.uk
To join an inspection of your estate	01442 292300	property.servicesadmin@hightownha.org.ul
Additional resources		
Reporting a gas leak	0800 111 999	housing.services@hightownha.org.uk
My Home contents insurance	0345 450 7288	www.thistlemyhome.co.uk
The Money Advice Service	0800 138 7777	www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk
National Debtline	0808 808 4000	www.nationaldebtline.co.uk
Step Change debt charity	0800 138 1111	www.stepchange.org
Turn2Us – for help accessing benefits and grants	0808 802 2000 0203 701 3525	www.turn2us.org.uk
Crimestoppers	0800 555 111	www.crimestoppers-uk.org
Police (non-emergency)	101	
Homeswapper/options to move		tenants@homeswapper.co.uk
Samaritans	116 123	www.samaritans.org
Citizens Advice Bureau	03444 111 444	www.citizensadvice.org.uk
Women's Aid	0808 2000 247	www.womensaid.org.uk
Mind charity	0300 123 3393	info@mind.org.uk
Housing Ombudsman	0300 111 3000	www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk







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