



Hightown

Building homes.
Supporting people.



Our Impact

2022/23



Contents

- 04 Chief Executive's foreword
- 06 2022/23 impact snapshot
- 08 Investing in homes & places
- 16 Championing people & communities
- 24 Ending homelessness
- 30 Creating opportunities
- 34 Building a greener future
- 38 Supporting independence

Chief Executive's Foreword

Welcome to Hightown's Impact Report covering the 2022/23 financial year.

The past 12 months have been very busy for Hightown. Thanks to the hard work and commitment of our staff and the support of our Board, our funders and other stakeholders and contractors, we have grown and provided, managed and maintained more homes than ever before, while delivering excellent services to just under 17,000 residents and 800 supported housing service users.

We continue to do this in a very challenging operating environment – one in which we must juggle the competing priorities of safety, net zero and building more homes while costs and interest rates have been rapidly increasing. Moreover, it's an environment in which we must navigate the demands of new regulation, most pertinently the measures set out in the Social Housing Act.

Meanwhile, the housing sector remains under intense scrutiny, with stories of poor practice and poor service by social landlords seemingly hitting the headlines daily. Sadly, this can sometimes detract from the great results that well-managed providers deliver.

Here at Hightown we believe there's still a lot to celebrate – in fact, our social purpose and the positive impact we have on people's lives is what drives us every day.

Our ambitious development programme delivers at least 500 good quality, safe and affordable homes every year – we're proud to have built 530 new properties in 2022/23, two thirds of which were for general needs rental. With an estimated 1.2 million households currently on waiting lists for a social home and nearly 100,000 households in temporary

accommodation, these are properties that will give people in housing need the security to thrive and prosper.

Yet we understand that for our more vulnerable residents and service users, the ability to live well and thrive requires additional support; as an anchor institution in the local community, we are there to provide it. The challenges created by the cost-of-living crisis over the past year have put this into even sharper perspective, particularly as other sources of support in the community fall away.

We also recognise that to truly deliver social purpose and impact, we must listen to and act upon the voices of our customers – our resident and service user involvement strategies aim to put customers at the heart of everything we do.

Finally, we must not forget the impact of our activities on the wider communities we serve. This year, for the first time, we have measured the impact of our development programme on the wider economy using the National Housing Federation's economic impact calculator; it estimates that Hightown's development programme added a staggering £72.5million to the regional economy last year.

However, building and managing good quality housing not only has an economic impact – it's also an investment in society. Our placemaking projects have a vital role to play in creating sustainable communities that will flourish for years to come, as does our focus on minimising our environmental footprint.

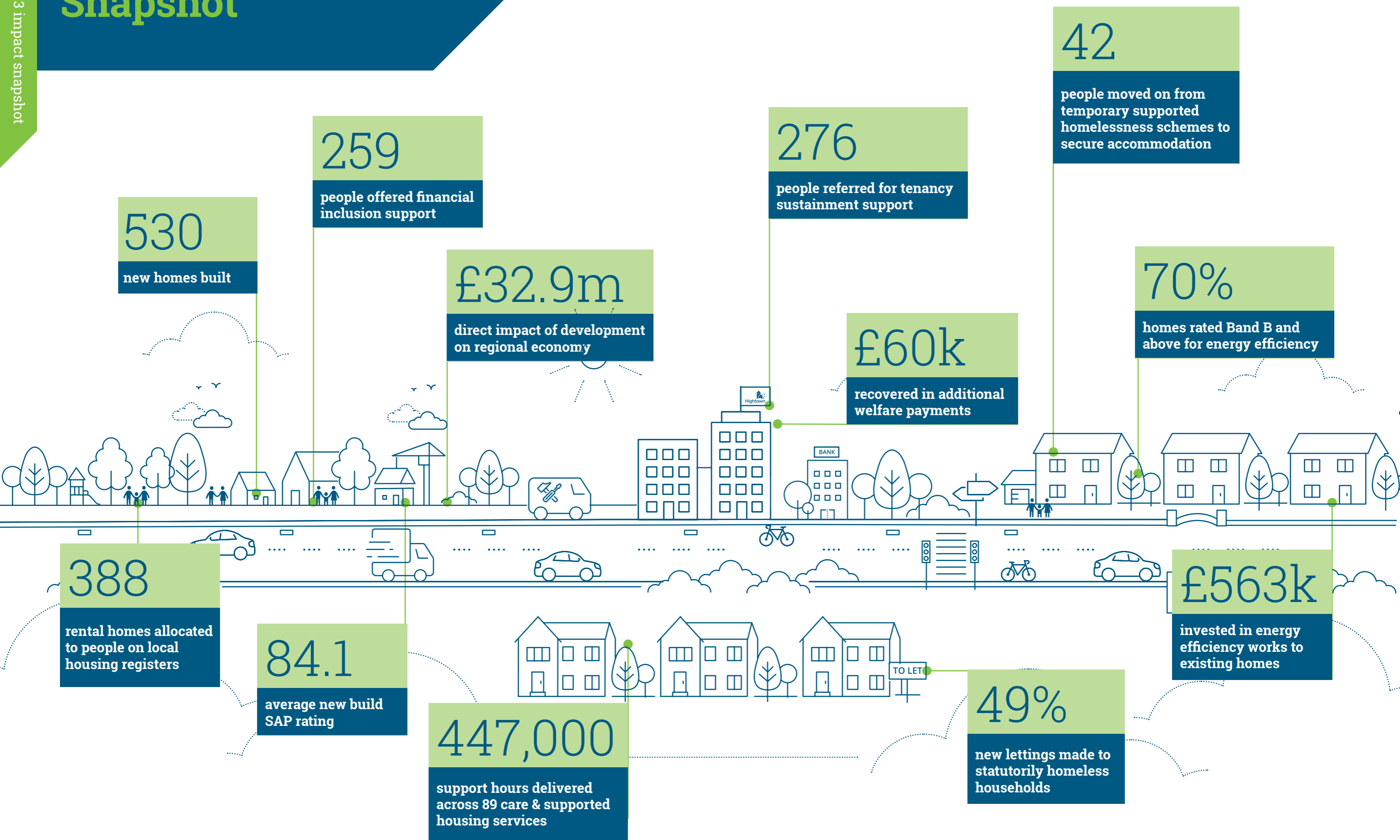
This report covers Hightown's impact in every aspect of our operations, using quantitative data and stories that bring our work to life – we hope you enjoy reading about the difference we have made.



David Bogle
Chief Executive

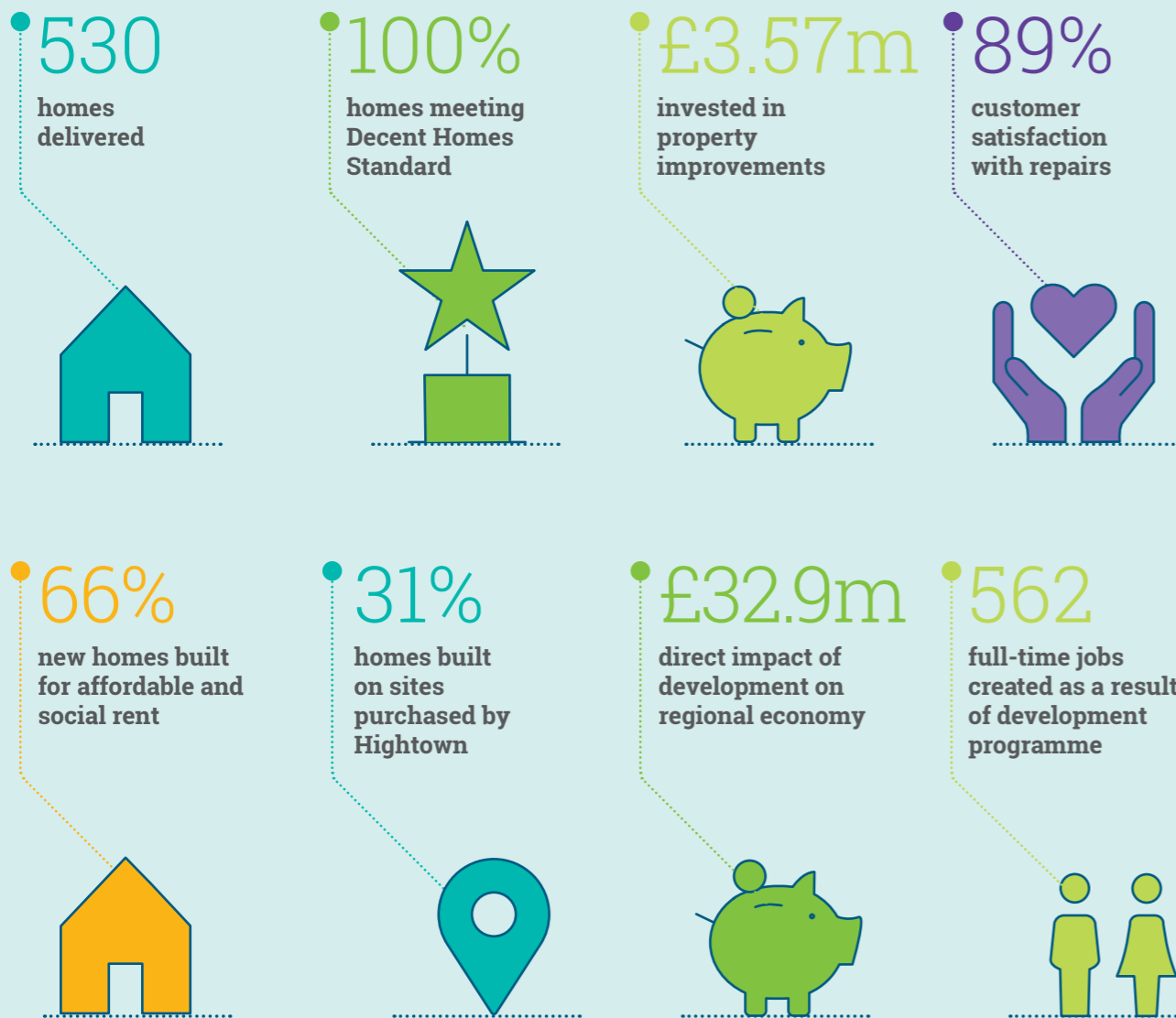
Hightown's development programme added a staggering **£72.5million** to the regional economy last year.

2022/23 Impact Snapshot



Investing in homes and places

Highlights



Amid a critical shortage of social housing in the UK, our development programme continues apace, providing much-needed, affordable homes to people in housing need.

In 2022/23, we added 530 new affordable homes to our portfolio, exceeding our own strategic target of 500. We also reached the milestone of delivering our 8,000th home, a property allocated to Jon, an army veteran who had experienced homelessness.

While our preference is to build social rented properties where they can be supported by grant subsidy, where this is not possible, our operating model is to develop sub-market rented properties let at affordable or intermediate rent and homes for shared ownership.

Of the new homes we built last year, 53% were affordable rent, 13% social rent and 31% shared ownership. New social rent tenures increased year-on-year from 14 to 67, the result of a combination of planning requirements and grant funding availability.

We continue to play a leading role in placemaking, boosting economic growth and creating attractive, sustainable neighbourhoods that will prosper for years to come. During 2022/23, our development team pursued opportunities for land-led development, giving us greater control of the building process and types of properties built; last year 31% of our new homes were built on sites purchased by Hightown, versus 69% on Section 106 sites.

The health and safety of our tenants is a top priority and we comply fully with relevant legislative requirements; 100%* of properties have an in-date accredited gas safety check and 100%* have an in-date and compliant Fire Risk Assessment.

* figure at time of reporting

Hightown's development activity makes a direct contribution to the productivity of the regions in which we operate; according to the National Housing Federation's local economic impact calculator, our 2022/23 investment in building affordable homes had the direct impact of adding £32.9 million to the regional economy, generating 562 full-time jobs and creating £17.9million in gross employee earnings.



In 2022/23, we invested £3.57m* in planned and major property improvements – to ensure tenants' homes remain safe, comfortable and energy efficient. An additional £3.59m was allocated to responsive repairs (excluding voids). Customer satisfaction with repairs was 89% across the year, against a target of 92%.

Developing a culture of continuous improvement remains a key priority for Hightown, alongside ensuring our tenants' voices inform our decision

making. Aligning with the proposals set out by the Social Housing Regulation Bill, we are committed to working with tenants to review how we deal with maintenance and repairs going forward; we use a blended approach to gain insight and feedback, including formal resident involvement structures and touch point surveys that track customer experience and customer service, enabling more immediate action to responses.

* excludes capital costs

Our belief that our homes should be good quality, safe and secure translates to a detailed asset register and robust programme of stock condition surveys, health and safety inspections and planned maintenance, with 100% of our properties achieving the Decent Homes Standard.



Jon's story: A brighter future after hidden homelessness

Jon, an army veteran, moved into Hightown's 8,000th home at our Whippendell site in Watford in November 2022. His new flat – part of a development of 81 affordable properties – is somewhere he can start to build a more positive future after experiencing months of hidden homelessness following a relationship breakdown. During the day Jon continued to work as a personal trainer and used his gym membership to shower and get a meal but in the evenings he had to return to his car to sleep. Single males like Jon make up 28% of households in need of homelessness prevention from Watford Borough Council*, according to government statistics.

The impact of hiding his homelessness from those around him and sleeping in his car through periods of cold weather and then extreme heat during the summer had quite an impact on his mental well-being. Moving into his new home has made a massive difference.

* Source: ONS Statutory Homelessness Annual Report 2021/2022, England



It's going to change my life. I get to share weekends with my daughter now so I'm a very happy man. It's a little bit different to sleeping in the car. I feel very lucky and fortunate that my new home will give me a platform to enjoy the rest of my life.



Scan to watch Jon's story

Improving estates

Following requests from residents, in 2022/23 our property services team worked hard to make improvements to the communal areas of several of our estates. Each resident improvement bid was scrutinised and agreed by our Resident Voice & Scrutiny Panel (RVSP), with improvements implemented across seven estates, including:

- New bin store doors to eradicate fly-tipping and inappropriate use
- CCTV to eradicate fly-tipping
- 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



Damp and mould

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

In November 2022 we introduced a proactive 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 November 2022 to March 2023, we carried out over 250 proactive inspections. Meanwhile, we updated our procedures to provide a more unified approach to internal reporting of damp and mould cases and have worked closely with our contractors to resolve cases in a timely manner.

In response to recommendations from the Housing Ombudsman, 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. 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.



We carried out over **250** proactive damp and mould inspections



Throughout 2022/23 our resident volunteer estate champions took part in estates champions forum meetings and undertook joint estate inspections with our property services inspectors, providing valuable feedback on the maintenance of communal areas.



Flooring in new-let properties

We recognise that for tenants to thrive in their tenancies, their property needs to feel like home, and good quality flooring is a vital part of this. All our new properties are let with carpets and flooring already fitted, keeping them warm and safe and reducing sound pollution.

When an existing property is re-let, our voids team assesses whether the flooring is suitable to remain in situ and, where appropriate, the new tenant is asked if they would like to keep it. In 2022/23, we utilised part of our tenancy sustainment fund to carpet homes re-let to 24 tenants experiencing extreme financial hardship.



We carpeted
24 homes
re-let to tenants in
financial hardship



A placemaking story: Regeneration at Houghton Regis

In 2015 outline planning permission was granted for a substantial housing scheme to the north of Houghton Regis in Bedfordshire on a former empty brownfield site. This has gone on to become Bidwell West Local Centre, a vibrant new community near Houghton Regis, supported by a range of local amenities.

Planning permission for Phase 2 of the site was given by Central Bedfordshire Council in May 2021 and Brickhill Construction, the contractor responsible for the build of the new development, started work in the same year.

The development received grant funding from Homes England and further grant allocation from Homes England was later secured to convert the affordable rent units to social rent; these properties have been let to a number of people coming from homelessness.

The 52-property development was completed in 2022, with residents moving into their new homes in December. A new local centre services the surrounding dwellings, providing a nursery, dentist, convenience store, coffee shop and two food takeaways.



Bidwell West Local Centre forms part of larger development of **1,900 homes**, employment land, a care home, two schools and playing fields.

Championing people & communities

Highlights



Hightown’s impact as a social landlord goes beyond bricks and mortar – we want our customers to be able to live happily and we support them to do so.

Our commitment as a founding member of the Homes for Cathy group is to help customers thrive in their homes, avoid tenancies becoming at risk and prevent the potential homelessness that can happen as a result.

Sustaining tenancies

Many of our tenants and service users face multiple disadvantage; the cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated this, impacting on tenants’ mental health and making our tenancy sustainment and financial inclusion provision even more vital.

During 2022/23, we invested in external training for our housing team to help improve engagement with tenants experiencing mental health challenges; this has encouraged a culture of empathy and trust, opening channels of communication so that tenants are confident to speak to us when an issue arises.


We also became a member of Housing Systems, an online portal that gives our housing team access to a wealth of tools and information to maximise customers’ incomes and resolve benefit problems.

Meanwhile, our income recovery team worked to promote tenancy sustainment by adopting ‘nudge’-style interventions with tenants regarding their rent accounts. Positively, tenants in a test group saw a 1% reduction in rent arrears, whereas the control group saw a 3% increase in arrears. We continue to monitor the outcomes of these interventions over time.

We believe in a ‘court as a last resort’ approach to evicting tenants; most of the evictions that took place in 2022/23 were the result of tenancy fraud including abandonment of the property.

Alleviating poverty

Rising inflation has disproportionately affected the lowest income households, who have fewer resources to cover energy bills and food costs. In 2022/23, we accessed the HACT Energy Hardship Fund to help 26 households struggling with their energy bills. As an authorised signatory for The Trussell Trust, we issued 96 food bank vouchers for households in financial hardship. Our website was also updated with energy saving advice.



We are proud to have reduced evictions by 30% since 2019/20, from 20 to 14





Aisha's* story: Holistic support

Our tenancy sustainment officers worked tirelessly throughout 2022/23 to provide holistic support to our most vulnerable customers. Their support has made life less overwhelming for Aisha*, who experiences multiple disadvantage.

Aisha had moved properties to escape domestic violence, causing a change to the Universal Credit she received, but her physical and mental health challenges meant she struggled to manage her benefits claim.

Having built a rapport with Aisha, our tenancy sustainment officer supported her with her Universal Credit claim and appealed against the Department for Work and Pensions' decision not to backdate for the first month of the claim.

She then advocated for Aisha through a successful appeals tribunal, which led to her receiving the backdated payments she was owed.

Having fallen behind with her rent, Aisha also needed support to get back into credit; our tenancy sustainment officer made a grant application to the Zakat Foundation on her behalf to clear the arrears and agreed a payment plan to bring her back into credit.

Having moved properties, Aisha was also supported to access mental health services in her new area and signposted to charities who could help her source furniture for her new home.

* Name has been changed to protect identity



William's story: Financial inclusion

With an in-depth knowledge of the benefits system, our financial inclusion officers play a vital role in maximising tenants' income by helping them to access welfare payments and grants.

Hightown tenant William, 66, was referred to financial inclusion via our income recovery team, having expressed concerns about paying his rent. At the time, he wasn't in receipt of any benefits and was using his savings to meet his rent payments. He was unsure how he would manage financially in the future.

Our financial inclusion officer made a successful claim for Housing Benefit on William's behalf – covering his full rent amount – assisted him with obtaining a water discount and a Council Tax credit refund, helped him progress his Pension Credit application and gave guidance on how the Energy Bill Support Scheme (EBSS) and Cost of Living Payments processes work. William is now in a much better position financially.



I was struggling to pay my bills and Hightown put me in touch with the financial inclusion officer who visited me at home. She was here for four hours on her first visit to try to help me with my situation. She ended up supporting me over the entire year, calling me once or twice a month to check how I was doing. It was an excellent service from her; she helped me get things that I was entitled to but never claimed. I could not have done it without her.



In 2022/23, our tenancy sustainment team accessed £33,786 of Hightown's tenancy sustainment fund to help tenants pay for:

- Flooring & carpets
- White goods
- Mattresses
- Curtains
- Laundrette pre-payments
- GP letters
- ID document renewals
- Furniture
- Skip hire

Improving life outcomes

According to a survey of 399 tenants during the final review of their fixed term tenancy in 2022/23, since moving to their Hightown property:

- 22% reported that their financial circumstances had improved
- 19%* reported an improvement in their employment situation
- 8% reported an improvement to their health
- 10% reported an improvement to training opportunities.

* 260 respondents - 139 of 399 did not reply to employment question

“ Since moving here, everyone is much happier, less stressed and we have more space. ”
 Hightown tenant



Empowering tenants

Aligning with the expectations of National Housing Federation's (NHF) Together with Tenants Charter, and the new consumer regulatory regime set out by the Social Housing Regulation Bill, we have continued to embed a culture where our tenants' voices and experiences inform what we do. Both our Resident Voice and Scrutiny Panel and Complaints Scrutiny Group provide valuable feedback on our policies, services and communications with customers.

Between September 2021 and August 2022, our resident involvement activity included:

- Quarterly Resident Voice and Scrutiny Panel meetings
- Quarterly Complaints Scrutiny Group meetings
- Joint estate inspections with Estates Champions
- Setting up an Estates Champions Forum
- Resident Focus Group meetings
- Two residents taking part in the contractor tender and selection process
- Parking consultations for three estates
- CCTV consultations for three estates
- 84 residents participating in 'Have Your Say' door knocking events across eight estates
- 11 residents contributing to 'Have Your Say' remote estate surveys
- Anti-Social Behaviour Policy review focus group
- 50 residents taking part in tenancy fraud website page review survey
- 85 residents attending sustainability themed summer events across seven estates.



Meeting the needs of customers affected by domestic abuse

As a housing association, the nature of our relationship with tenants means we are uniquely placed to identify domestic abuse and support people; in 2022/23 we supported 93 cases, up from 79 in 2021/22. Our front-line staff are trained to be able to spot the signs of abuse, which is vital as not all tenants come forward to report it themselves. 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, a role funded by Hertfordshire County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner. In addition to identifying and supporting cases and preventing them from escalating, the IDVA has organised training sessions for staff to ensure their knowledge of domestic abuse is up to date and offers guidance with referrals to the Hertfordshire County Council IDVA service. Meanwhile, our reciprocal move arrangement with Buckinghamshire Council and other registered providers supports customers who want to re-locate.



Jane's* story: Spotting the signs of abuse

*Name has been changed to protect identity

Hightown tenant Jane* first came to the attention of her housing officer when her neighbour reported that she had been physically attacked. Her housing officer quickly identified that Jane's children were under child protection services and contacted her to investigate further, establishing that Jane was a victim of both domestic abuse and cuckooing. Jane eventually moved out of her property to live in a women's refuge. However, her housing officer maintained regular contact, offering help and guidance and meeting with social workers, the refuge and the police to agree a course of action that prioritised Jane's needs. Supported by her housing officer working closely with the local authority, Jane is now planning to relocate to an alternative property.



Tahlia's story: Giving residents a voice

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

Tahlia is an active member of Hightown's Resident Voice and 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:

"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 our Hightown

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

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 quarterly, has also enabled Tahlia to influence and shape Hightown's policies, services and communications.

She says:

"As a member of the RVSP, you're able to provide feedback and have a voice; it's nice to see when that has an impact. We're invited into various workshops and focus groups – for example if there's a policy that's being rewritten or a leaflet that's being redesigned – and we discuss the way that Hightown engages with and communicates to different tenant groups. I find these events really helpful and I know they have led to a number of changes, not only to the language, text and design of communications but also to where and how things are shared."



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.



Scan to watch Tahlia's story



Ending homelessness Highlights

388

rental homes allocated to people on local housing registers



49%

new lettings made to statutorily homeless households



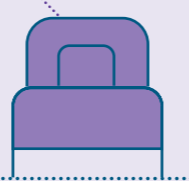
42

people moved from temporary homelessness schemes to secure accommodation



28

entrenched rough sleepers encouraged to access services by St Albans Safer Streets Outreach team



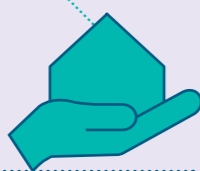
104

people given a bed at the Open Door night shelter



13

people supported through Housing First



30

people supported to maintain a new tenancy via community outreach and resettlement service



330

adults experiencing homelessness used emergency & temporary supported housing, floating support and outreach services



As a founding member of the Homes for Cathy group – an alliance of housing associations, local authorities and charities working together to end homelessness – Hightown is dedicated to meeting the needs of people experiencing homelessness through our provision, policies and practices.

We strive to meet the Homes for Cathy commitments developed in consultation with the national homelessness charity Crisis, including contributing to the development and execution of local authority homelessness strategies and working in partnership to provide a range of affordable housing options which meet the needs of all homeless people in the community.

Meeting local housing demand

According to DLUHC figures*, there were 20,849 households on social housing waiting lists in the nine local authority areas where Hightown built new properties last year. Our ambitious development programme enabled us to allocate 388 much-needed affordable and social rent homes to meet local demand in these areas, providing secure, long-term accommodation for people in precarious housing situations, sofa surfing or sleeping rough.

In terms of all new Hightown lettings in 2022/23, 49% were made to statutorily homeless households, nearly double the housing association sector average.

Homelessness service provision

During 2022/23 we continued to deliver emergency, short-term and move-on homelessness accommodation with support in St Albans, Hatfield, Dacorum and Aylesbury through nine schemes, as well as community and rough sleeper outreach support in St Albans, helping 330 individuals experiencing homelessness to move forward with their lives. Last year, 42 people living in our homelessness supported accommodation were able to move on to their own homes.

As the provider of rough sleeper outreach services in St Albans, we supported 30 individuals to access housing and other services and were a partner organisation for the St Albans Winter Beds Project, preventing 14 people from sleeping outside during the cold winter period.

Meanwhile, we remained a key delivery partner for Housing First in Dacorum and St Albans, supporting individuals with multiple, complex needs and histories of repeat homelessness in their own homes; three new Housing First clients were housed in 2022/23, bringing the total number of people supported by the service to 13.

This year, Hightown was a key partner in Hertfordshire County Council's successful application to become part of the MEAM (Making Every Adult Matter) Approach Network, which brings together a cross-sector partnership of providers, commissioners, people with experience of multiple disadvantage and key decision makers to develop coordinated interventions for people facing multiple disadvantage.



We believe that homelessness services work better if they are co-produced with the people that use them; over the past year we have rolled out staff training in co-production principles and boosted service user involvement through roving 'Voice Box' meetings in our temporary and short-term homelessness services.

A psychologically informed approach

At Hightown, we recognise that people experiencing homelessness are likely to have additional needs around their mental and emotional wellbeing; according to research by Homeless Link, 80% of homeless respondents reported experiencing a mental health issue. In response, we have introduced Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) across our homelessness services, ensuring they are delivered in a way that takes into account the emotional and psychological needs of the individuals accessing and working in them.

During 2022/23, we conducted a review of processes across our homelessness schemes to identify areas of strength and development, creating a PIE action plan and undertaking internal training in PIE principles in consultation with Homeless Link. In adopting a PIE approach, we have piloted independent clinical supervision and reflective practice for staff members, supporting our homelessness teams to manage relationships and work in a more therapeutic way. Through our cyclical scheme improvements, we are also working to adapt physical spaces to support service user engagement in line with the PIE approach.



Guy's story: Influencing how services are delivered

Like many people who become homeless, Hightown service user Guy has been affected by past trauma. He lost close family members to illness at a young age and, kicked out of his home at just 16, spent time sofa surfing. Despite this, he secured work and somewhere to live. However, his mental health deteriorated and, suffering with depression, he eventually lost his job and his home.

Fortunately for Guy, last year a room became available at Kent House, Hightown's temporary supported housing service in St Albans. Supported by staff at the service, Guy has started to feel more like his old self and is gradually getting his life back on track.

Since moving to Kent House, Guy has joined the service user Voice Box Panel, a focus group which provides in-depth feedback on how Hightown can improve services, and a new Voice Box group for temporary and short-term supported housing services.

He adds:

"These are little things that you should feel good about. You've got nothing to lose and it takes your mind away from other stuff."



The staff here ask me how I'm feeling on a daily basis. Now I'm joining in more, talking to everyone. I'd like to get active again; I used to do a lot of running, I was a football coach, I've worked in film and on scaffolding. These are all the things that I want to get back. While I'm here, it's step by step. It would be nice to get my own little place, to put my stamp on it. Then I can work on the bigger picture of trying to apply for jobs I might be interested in.



Through the Open Door night shelter and drop-in, we provided emergency overnight accommodation to

104 people



Scan to watch
Guy's story

Fulfilling our Homes for Cathy commitments

As part of Homes for Cathy, we take our pledge to end homelessness seriously, reporting to our Board annually on how we are delivering against the group's commitments. In 2022/23, we:

- Participated in St Albans and Dacorum councils' Homelessness Forums and Buckinghamshire Council's Housing Management Forum, influencing strategic decision-making and promoting best practice at local level.
- Reviewed our allocations and lettings policy to ensure flexibility around eligibility for applicants coming from a homeless situation, referring any homeless applicants who do not qualify on affordability grounds to our Head of Housing for reconsideration.
- Updated our general needs direct lettings policy to increase 'qualifying points' in favour of applicants moving on from our supported homelessness services, with additional points awarded to individuals who do not satisfy the local authority's local connection criteria.
- Reduced evictions to 14 – from 20 in 2019-20 – through a 'court as a last resort' approach and more person-centred income collection practices.
- Reviewed and streamlined our tenant vulnerability matrix for new tenants, to identify individuals and households who require referral to our tenancy sustainment and financial inclusion teams, allowing for early intervention to prevent tenancies breaking down.
- Secured £60,000 in welfare payments and grants and utilised our tenancy sustainment fund to pay for essential items such as flooring and furniture for tenants experiencing financial hardship, at the same time providing holistic welfare support for our most vulnerable tenants.
- Produced an information and advice pack for new tenants on sourcing furniture, in order to provide homes that are ready to move into.
- Supported 93 victims of domestic abuse to remain in their home or move to an alternative property, depending on their needs.
- Provided a range of housing and support options for 330 people experiencing homelessness in the local community through our emergency, temporary, short-term, move-on and outreach services, ensuring services are psychologically informed and co-produced.
- Contributed to ending migrant homelessness by providing a general needs property to an Afghan family under the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme and supporting 60 young people through our Separated Migrant Children service.
- Championed the needs of homeless people and best practice to the housing sector and beyond through senior management contributing to key industry events.



Olena's story: Preventing refugee homelessness

Olena and her 14-year-old son fled war-torn Ukraine to seek safety, first crossing the Ukrainian border to neighbouring Poland before coming to the UK in August 2022 to live with a British host family under the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme.

Sadly, the hosting arrangement broke down and, without alternative accommodation available to her, Olena was eligible for statutory homelessness assistance from Buckinghamshire Council. She joined the council's social housing register and was thrilled when a modern, two-bedroom Hightown property became available in the market town of Buckingham.

She was able to move into the property in March 2023, having been supported through the tenancy sign up process by Hightown's lettings team who answered her questions and offered advice, and is now enjoying life in her new home.

"The property is just perfect – I love it. The location is great – it's in a nice, quiet area but also very close to the centre of Buckingham. Buckingham is a lovely town with lots of history – I love all the old houses.

With experience in graphic design and teaching English, Olena is now hoping to find employment in the UK, but for now she's happy to have a settled and secure home, adding:

"You never know what will happen tomorrow, so it's important to appreciate every moment. I just want to live my life."



“

We've moved many times since the start of the war in Ukraine so we're happy to be able to stay in one place at last – we're both much calmer since moving in. I've noticed that my son is a lot better psychologically; he's started at the local school and he's very happy to be there. ”



Creating opportunities Highlights

£228.5k
invested in staff learning and development



£34k
invested from apprenticeship levy pot



5
staff successfully completed an apprenticeship



14
staff started an apprenticeship



345
in-house training courses delivered



£2,000
donated to The Trussell Trust through staff fundraising



Hightown's staff are critical to delivering services that put people first. Investing in passionate, committed teams is imperative for us and we strive to create opportunities for employees, not only in terms of their professional development but also through a culture of workplace wellbeing and a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion.

Continuous learning

In 2022/23, we invested £228,500 in staff learning and development – up by more than 60% year-on-year – covering a range of training courses, e-learning and professional qualifications. In order to maintain the highest standards of care quality, we introduced more specialist training for our Care & Supported Housing staff, including psychologically informed environments, trauma informed care and reflective practice, restraints training, forensic mental health, eating disorders and hoarding disorders.

In addition to staff training, we invested £34,000 from our apprenticeship levy pot. Aligning with our strategic goal to improve our ability to support service users' independence, we introduced a new Level 4 Children, Young People and Families Practitioner apprenticeship to equip staff with the skills they need to support service users in our Young People's Housing Service. Last year, five staff members successfully completed an apprenticeship, all with a distinction, while 14 staff members started an apprenticeship across six different standards, from sign language to payroll.

Workplace wellbeing

At Hightown we champion the importance of staff wellbeing to create a positive working environment, get the best out of people and attract and retain staff. We use the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' – connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give – to support staff to find balance, build resilience and boost mental health and wellness. Our team of volunteer wellbeing champions promote regular events and activities for staff, including lunchtime walks, a Couch to 5k group and meditation sessions.

Staff at Hightown fully embrace 'giving' as one of the Five Ways to Wellbeing; throughout the past year, our volunteer charity committee has raised nearly £2,000 through staff donations and corporate match funding for our nominated charity The Trussell Trust, supporting a nationwide network of foodbanks. We also handed over the final tranche of funds from a four-year staff fundraising campaign for Hertfordshire Mind Network, amounting to nearly £10,000.



Equality, diversity and inclusion

Improving equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is integral to Hightown delivering social impact and effective governance. We are committed to creating equal opportunities for both our staff and our residents, no matter their age, gender, ethnic background or sexuality, and have driven forward EDI by:

- Producing an EDI Pay Gap report for the last three years.
- Producing a Gender Pay Gap report for the last four years.
- Becoming a Disability Confident Employer.
- Becoming a Mindful Employer.
- Creating an EDI forum that meets regularly and produces articles for our intranet.
- Training EDI Forum members to become EDI Champions.
- Providing Equality and Diversity training for all senior managers, directors, chief executive and board members.
- Training some staff members to be mental health first aiders.
- When recruiting new members to the Hightown Board, actively seeking more applicants from diverse backgrounds, and welcoming a new Board member from a diverse background in March 2023.

Over new EDI plan for 2023-26 focuses on three key areas: residents and people who use our services, leadership and our staff.



Tony's story: Professional development

Tony – an assistant manager for two of Hightown’s care and supported housing schemes for people with learning disabilities – is currently studying for a Leader in Adult Care Level 5 apprenticeship. He completed a Level 3 Apprenticeship in Adult Social Care with Hightown in 2018/19 and, although it was challenging, he found the support from his tutors and Hightown invaluable. Now he’s progressed to a Level 5 apprenticeship, he’s sharing knowledge and understanding with peers in leadership roles and is gaining an excellent understanding of managing a service at leadership level.

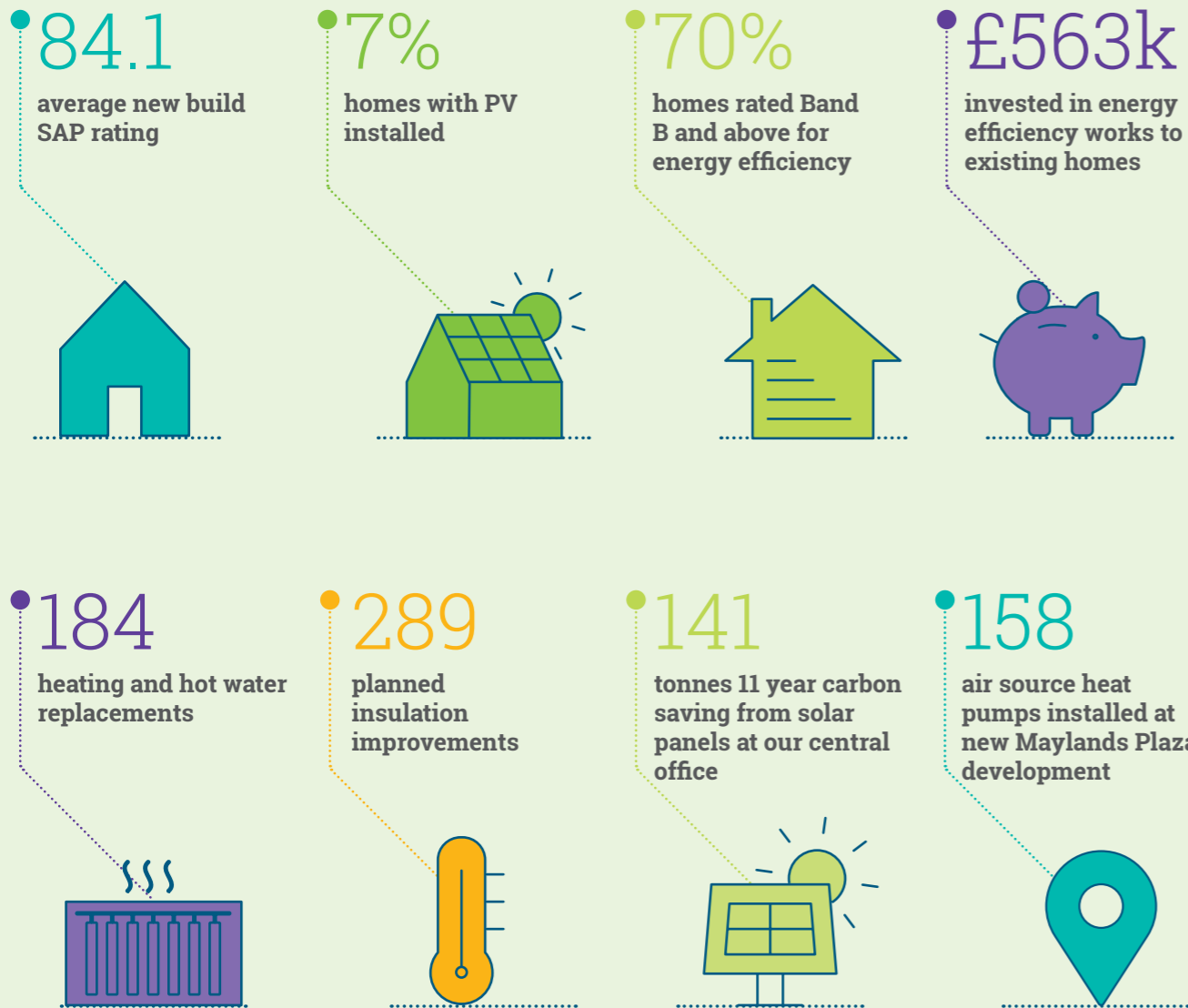


If you have a love of learning and are someone who questions how to continuously improve, it’s a fantastic experience! It also feeds into my own wellbeing; I enjoy making contact with those in similar roles and completing the learning and being able to apply it for the benefit of others.



Building a greener future

Highlights



Creating greener, more environmentally friendly communities is an ever-evolving challenge that Hightown continues to embrace. With England's homes generating more carbon emissions than all of its cars*, the housing sector has a significant role to play in achieving the Government's net zero targets.

Our ambition is that all our new homes must have an energy efficiency rating of Band B or better, an aim set out in our 2021-24 strategic plan. A Band B energy efficiency rating – a 81-91 Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) score – necessitates a 'Fabric First' approach to building design, whereby we maximise the energy performance of all the components and materials that make up the building to reduce heat loss, including insulating walls, floors, lofts and roofs and installing full double glazing. In 2022/23, the average SAP 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, several of which were attributed to the use of Calor gas where there was no mains gas supply.

Where planning requires, we install photovoltaics (PV) – solar electricity panels – on new properties to generate renewable energy and improve the property's energy efficiency banding. By the end of 2022/23, around 7% of our properties had PV installed.

Across Hightown's entire portfolio of over 6,000 rental homes, 70% are rated energy efficiency Band B and above. Only 16 rental homes remain in Band D and one remains in Band E; we are reviewing the viability of remedial works to improve the energy efficiency of these properties. Last year, 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.

*Research by the National Housing Federation

According to an independent audit carried out during the 2021/22 financial year by the SHIFT consultancy, each independently heated home Hightown manages generates **1.75 tonnes** of carbon dioxide equivalent, compared to 2.53 tonnes across other social landlords assessed by SHIFT.



Trialling sustainable energy solutions

As part of the UK action plan to reach carbon net zero by 2050, the Government is banning the installation of gas boilers in newly built homes from 2025. At Hightown, we have started to trial gas alternative energy solutions in preparation, including installing air source heat pumps in 158 properties at phase two of our landmark Maylands Plaza development in Hemel Hempstead.

The heat pumps work by capturing heat from outside and moving it into the home. Although the pumps use electricity to do this, the heat energy delivered is much more than the electrical energy used to power the system. This makes heat pumps an extremely low carbon heating option – one which will become greener in future as the electricity grid decarbonises with renewable energy sources.

According to the Energy Saving Trust, an air source heat pump can save 1,800 kg of CO₂ per year compared to a new A-rated gas boiler*. Air source heat pumps also offer benefits for residents in terms of reducing energy bills, saving around £115 per year compared with a new A-rated boiler and £870 compared to new electric storage heaters*.

* Source Energy Saving Trust – based on fuel prices under the Energy Price Guarantee running from April 2023 to the end of June 2023 and an average sized, three-bedroom semi-detached home.



Scan to watch
Maylands
Plaza Phase
Two video

Reducing energy consumption at our central offices

In early 2023, we commissioned an independent assessor – SHIFT – to carry out an audit of our central offices to understand where we could make energy savings.

The audit revealed that the biggest sources of CO₂ emissions are our heating and air conditioning – generating over 39 tonnes of CO₂ every year – and internal lighting, creating an estimated 11 tonnes of CO₂ per year.

Throughout 2023, all the fluorescent light tubes at our central offices will be replaced with environmentally friendly LED tubes, saving an estimated 78% in energy consumption and 9.75 tonnes of CO₂ annually, equivalent to five cars driving on petrol for a year. Our facilities team is currently assessing our heating and cooling system with a view to improving its efficiency and, through internal communications, we continue to educate staff on how they can help reduce energy consumption while at work.

Our central offices already generate renewable energy through photovoltaic (PV) roof panels; in the 11 years since installation, these have saved 141 tonnes of CO₂ emissions.



We are reducing energy consumption by

78%

by replacing our office lighting with environmentally friendly LED tubes

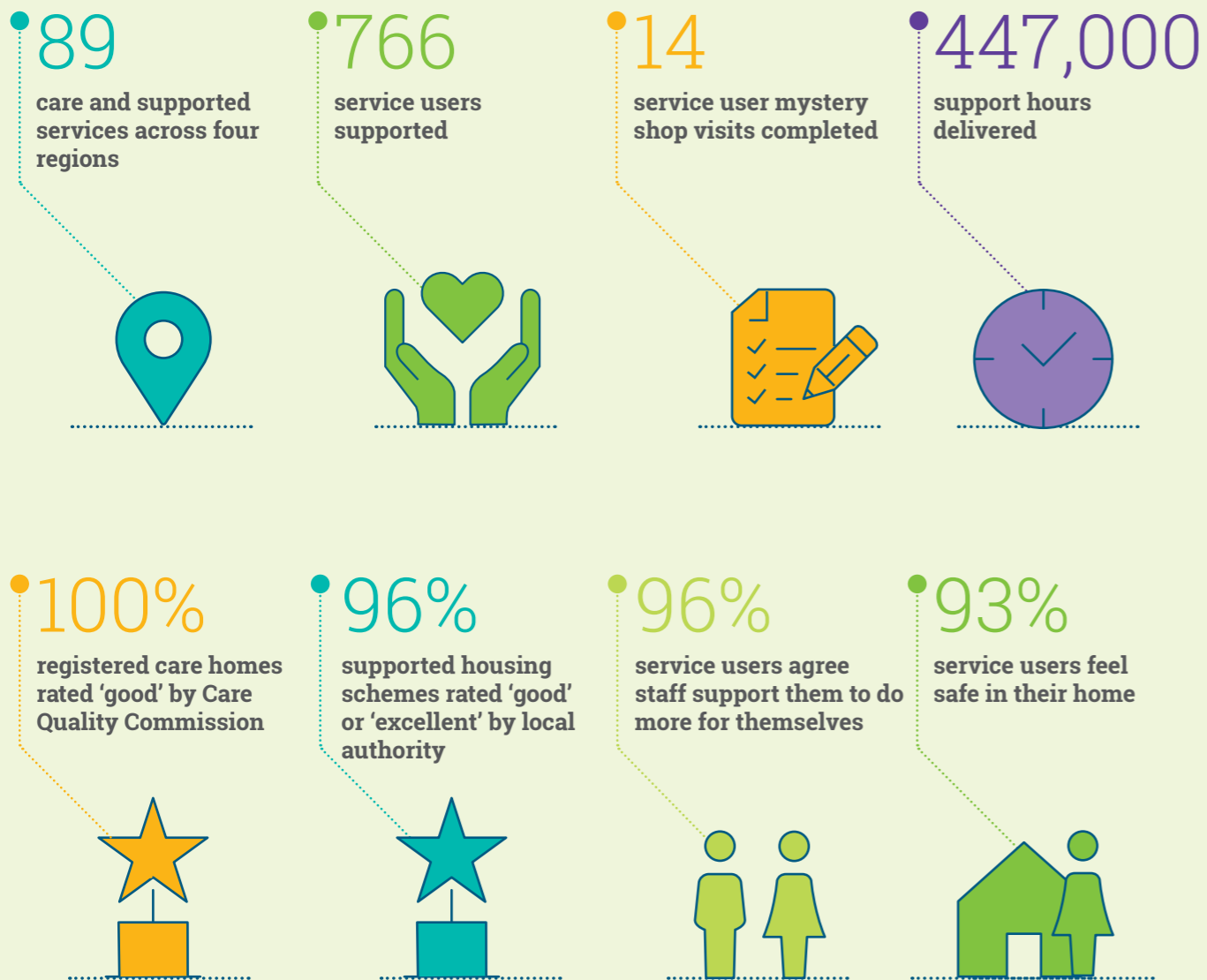


Resident events

During summer 2022, we ran sustainability-themed events at seven Hightown estates, attended by 85 residents. Residents received information and advice on various environmental topics, including waste awareness and recycling, green volunteering opportunities and the 'Energy Doctor' energy advice scheme. Meanwhile, we continue to encourage residents to consider their impact on the environment via regular communications on our website and through our resident newsletter.

Supporting independence

Highlights



Hightown is a key provider of care and supported housing services in Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Bedfordshire, ensuring 766 vulnerable people have a safe and secure place to call home and can live independent and fulfilling lives in the community.

With 89 services across our operating regions, our care and supported housing specialisms cover learning disabilities (45%), mental health (30%) and homelessness (25%). Each year, our dedicated teams deliver over 447,000 support hours, regularly achieving life-changing outcomes for the people we support. We deliver these outcomes in a complex and challenging operating environment, one in which we must juggle the pressures of increasing overheads, staff recruitment and retention and funding cuts with the need to provide efficient yet high quality services.

Despite these challenges, 100% of Hightown's registered care homes are rated 'good' by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), while 96% of our supported housing schemes are rated 'good' and above by local authority 'Provider Assessment and Marketing Management Solution' (PAMMS) assessments of the quality of care delivered, with 21% rated 'excellent'.

According to our last biennial service user survey, carried out in 2021, 87% of service users enjoyed living in their home, while 93% felt safe in their home. In terms of the support provided by staff, 90% of service users agreed that staff support them to live their routine; 93% agreed that when they need things



staff support them; 96% agreed that staff support them to do more things for themselves; and 95% agreed that staff are kind to them.

At Hightown, we use our own bespoke digital 'Growth' model to plan and track each service user's journey towards achieving their goals, with a focus on physical health, mental health, feelings and relationships, communication, responsibilities, living skills and safety, and managing finances. In 2022/23, staff and service users completed over 1,300 digital support plans together.





Involving service users

One of the key ways we deliver impact is by providing structured opportunities for service users to voice their opinions, feedback, ideas and suggestions, ensuring their 'lived experience' perspective influences how our care and supported housing services are planned and delivered.

During 2022/23, regular service user 'VoiceBox' discussion groups ran across four key service areas: long-term supported housing, short-term supported housing, youth and mother and baby. VoiceBox group members were also involved in staff recruitment processes, focus groups and the production of a seasonal editions of the 'Your Voice' service user newsletter.

Meanwhile, our service user complaints panel met quarterly to scrutinise the quality of our complaints handling procedures and follow-up actions; last year, the panel's recommendations led to us:

- Improving the accessibility of our 'How to make a complaint' website page.
- Co-producing telephone etiquette guidance for care and supported housing staff.
- Introducing a complaints training package for care and supported housing staff.
- Reviewing staff disciplinary procedures.

Last year also saw the return of our 'Mystery Shop' programme, with service users completing 14 unannounced visits to care and supported housing schemes to observe staff behaviour, the environment and the support given to service users. Mystery shopper feedback was provided through quarterly focus groups and used to inform improvements to specific services or practice across our entire operation. As a result of mystery shopper feedback, during 2022/23 we:

- Co-produced templates for activities and support planning.
- Collected evidence of the activities undertaken at individual schemes.
- Gathered documentation to support scheme audits.
- Redesigned our mystery shopper feedback form.
- Devised templates for assessing the condition of properties and communication.



We supported
199
young people through
nine specialist schemes

Young People's Housing Service: A psychologically informed approach

Hightown delivers housing and support for 199 young people aged 16-24 through nine schemes that make up our Young People's Housing Service (YPHS). This includes specialist schemes for separated migrant children (SMC), mothers and babies and care leavers. In 2022, the YPHS in Watford and Hemel Hempstead received an 'Outstanding' rating in an assessment by Hertfordshire County Council.

Since 2021, staff working in the YPHS have implemented a PIE – psychologically informed environment – approach; staff focus on building a therapeutic relationship with the young people they support, recognising how past trauma can influence behaviour and being non-judgemental, validating individuals' emotions and feelings and helping them create safe environments and boundaries.

"When I came to live at Watford YPHS, I was involved with a gang – the staff helped me to get away from the people that were bringing me down. They helped me with getting an apprenticeship in barbering and showed me how to budget my money. The staff have honestly saved my life."

Service user, YPHS



Gareth's story: Influencing services

Gareth lives at Verney Road, one of Hightown's schemes for people with learning disabilities in Buckinghamshire. He's a busy, active and sociable person with a passion for photography, Lego and jigsaw puzzles. As a valued member of Hightown's service user VoiceBox, he attends quarterly panel meetings to review how our care and supported housing services can be improved and is an enthusiastic contributor to discussions.



“

I'm independent and outgoing. I love going to VoiceBox. We look at procedures and complaints. It makes me feel involved and I have a say. I feel like I contribute. And I enjoy the lunch! ”



Chris's* story: Rehabilitating in the community

Moving into Hightown's mental health supported housing scheme Lord Alexander House was a turning point for 31-year-old Chris*, who has a diagnosis of schizophrenia and autism.

Prior to starting his tenancy in February 2021, Chris had spent several years as an inpatient in secure mental health units. At Lord Alexander House, he has his own self-contained flat and 24-hour on-site support from fully trained link workers, allowing him to rehabilitate in the community.

When Chris first moved to the scheme, staff helped him with daily living tasks such as setting up his gas and electricity supplier and applying for benefits. However, one of his main goals was to take responsibility for managing his medication, an aim he has accomplished over time with support from the Lord Alexander House team. As a Type 2 diabetic, he's also prioritised his physical health, successfully losing 25 kilos in weight by improving his diet and regularly visiting the gym.

Chris is now ready to move on from the service and is in the process of applying for social housing through the council's choice-based lettings scheme. He's also looking forward to starting work again and is planning to qualify as an aerial lift operator, with a view to starting up his own business.

*Name has been changed to protect identity



When I moved into the flat, I was able to decorate and make it my own, which was great. It was strange to leave hospital after so long but Lord Alexander House has been a safe environment to come into and the staff here are always happy to help.



I'm feeling positive and looking forward to the future.



John's story: Achieving goals

John lives at Willow House, a supported living scheme for people with learning disabilities in Aylesbury which was rated 'excellent' in a 2022 'PAMMS' assessment of care provision by Buckinghamshire Council.

John recently learned that he has kidney failure and is now on dialysis. Following the sad news, the team at Willow House went to extraordinary efforts to create memories with John. Armed with a list of activities that John would like to do, they created a bucket list for him.

John has a huge interest in the armed forces, so the team took him to Duxford Air Museum. He was also supported with a helicopter ride in Oxford, which he thought was amazing, a visit to the model village in Beaconsfield and a tank ride in Bicester. The team at Willow House documented each experience for John by taking photos so he can relive his memories.

As well as supporting John with his bucket list, the team have been assisting him with visits to his sister's grave. Most recently, John was speaking of his mum, dad and brother and said they were buried at the same cemetery as his sister. The staff team liaised with the church Reverend and together they found their graves. John was extremely appreciative and happy.



John has been through so much recently with him losing his sister during Covid, so we wanted to do something special for him following his diagnosis. These adventures have given him so much joy and a sense of fulfilment.



Julie Monaghan,
scheme manager at
Willow House



Scan here to
learn more
about Willow
House



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