

Homes for Cathy Report

2023/24



Introduction

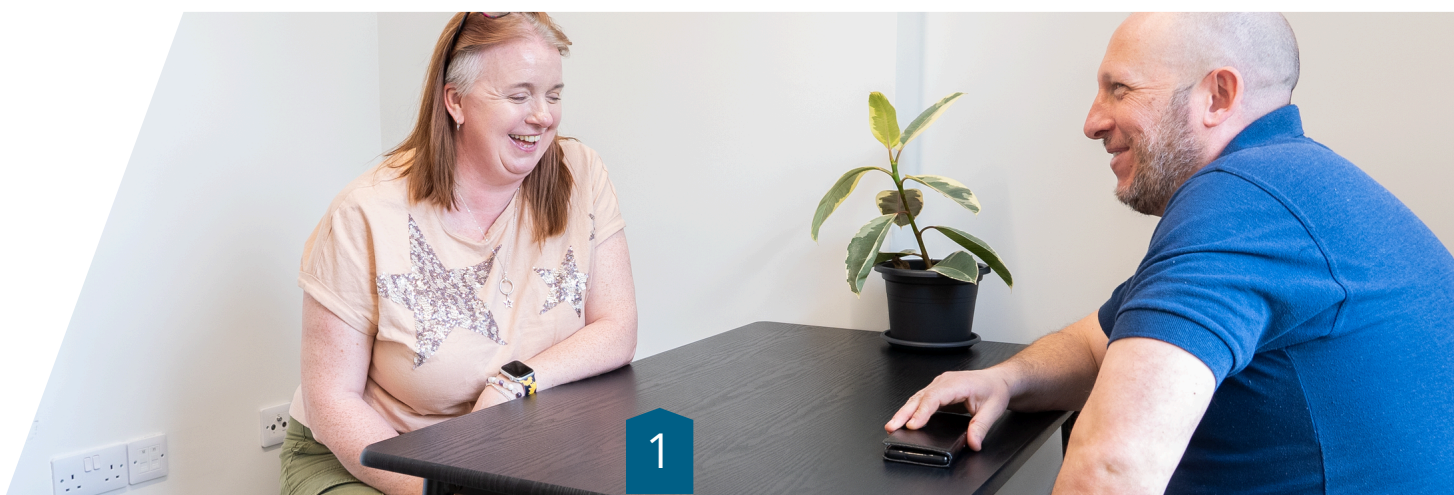
Hightown is a founding member of Homes for Cathy, an alliance of over 100 housing associations, local authorities and charities united by their aim to end homelessness.

Hightown has embedded the Homes for Cathy commitments – a set of homelessness pledges developed with Crisis – across its general needs housing and care and supported housing operations and policies. Hightown's membership of Homes for Cathy and adoption of the commitments has helped to maintain a strong culture of homelessness prevention within the association, fostering a better understanding of the needs of homeless people and their barriers to housing, together with a strong appetite to work internally and with external partners to offer solutions.

Hightown chief executive David Bogle chairs the Homes for Cathy group and the association provides its ongoing administrative, communications and member engagement support. Today Homes for Cathy maintains a strong 'voice' within the housing sector and with parliamentarians.

A recent campaign highlight was the 2023 Homes for Cathy national conference, which attracted 100 housing professionals who shared innovative practice around homelessness prevention.

The group has also sought to strengthen its relationships with key industry bodies including the National Housing Federation and Chartered Institute of Housing, securing speaking opportunities at the two key annual housing sector conferences. Meanwhile, it has backed both Inside Housing's and Crisis' lobbying campaigns calling for funding to deliver one million more social homes in the next ten years.



Meeting the Homes for Cathy Commitments

Reducing homelessness is a core ambition of Hightown's 2024-27 strategy and our Homes for Cathy action plan underpins the delivery of this objective. We report to our Board annually on progress made against the Homes for Cathy commitments and, since joining the group, have introduced new policies, practices and services to meet the needs of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Commitment #1

“To contribute to the development and execution of the homelessness strategies of local and combined authorities.”

During 2023/24, we continued to partner with councils to maximise funding opportunities to deliver supported homelessness schemes in St Albans, Hemel Hempstead, Aylesbury and Hatfield, while seeking opportunities to expand our commissioned homelessness service provision.

Our homelessness provision includes a night shelter – Open Door in St Albans – services for single homeless people and services for young people, which together support around 220 people at any one time.

In November 2023, we opened Alexandra Road, a homelessness service in Hemel Hempstead, commissioned by Dacorum Borough Council. The service provides homeless move-on accommodation and a stable environment for nine single adults in one-bedroom flats.

Partnering with St Albans City and District Council, in March 2024 we re-opened Martin House, following extensive refurbishment of the building, to provide 16 modern, self-contained flats for single people.

Our director and head of housing sit on the housing management forums of several local authority partners, including Buckinghamshire Council, Milton Keynes City Council, Luton Borough Council and East Herts District Council.

Our close working relationships with local authority partners facilitate negotiation around the terms and timescales of nominations agreements, including circumstances where the local authority waives its nomination rights on a new Hightown development. In cases where there is an urgent need for housing, Hightown can offer these properties to homeless households, including people moving on from our supported homelessness services and those from outside the local authority area.

Commitment #2

“ To work with stakeholders and people with lived experience of homelessness to provide a range of affordable housing and services which meet the needs of homeless people in their local communities. ”

Hightown delivered 664 new affordable homes in 2023/24 to meet local housing need. Where planning requirements/grant subsidy permitted, we developed properties at social rent tenures.

Our development team continues to consult with our local authority housing colleagues to identify and agree the size/type of properties required to meet local demand. For example, plans for a new 65 home development in Luton were revised to accommodate larger family homes to help meet the need for bigger properties for families on the housing register (over 1,000 families are in temporary accommodation in Luton). The team also has the flexibility to convert tenure type to respond to local need. For example, in 2023, we worked with St Albans City and District Council to use grant funding from the Local Authority Housing Fund to convert ten properties at one of our new developments that were originally allocated for shared ownership into affordable rent tenures to house refugees from Ukraine.

Recently, we have made it easier for people with lived experience of homelessness to contribute to the design and delivery of our services by creating roving resident involvement 'Voice Box' meetings in our temporary and short-term homelessness services.

Commitment #3

“ To operate flexible allocations and eligibility policies which allow individual applicants' unique set of circumstances and housing history to be considered and to monitor acceptances and refusals and benchmark performance. ”

Hightown continues to outperform the sector in terms of lettings to homeless households; in 2023/24, 46% of our new lets and relets were allocated to homeless households - over double the sector average - giving 414 families and individuals in precarious housing situations the security and stability of a decent and genuinely affordable home.

Applicants with a background of homelessness who do not meet affordability criteria are referred to our head of housing and signposted to our tenancy support team for advice and support with benefits, grants and budgeting.

We also recognise that some new tenants with a background of homelessness have complex needs and may find it challenging to maintain a tenancy; our lettings officers complete a vulnerability matrix for every new tenant to ensure they are directed to our tenancy sustainment team when they need extra help.



Commitment #4

“To work with local authorities and others to understand and remove the barriers that disadvantage some applicants with a background of homelessness, including people from ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community and migrants, from accessing Housing Association properties.”



Hightown has actively adopted the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) approach, a framework whereby local partners develop a coordinated response to address the needs of the most disadvantaged people facing homelessness in their local area.

By taking extraordinary decisions that fall outside of our existing systems and processes, in urgent circumstances we have been able to prioritise accommodation for homeless individuals facing multiple disadvantage, waiving existing barriers that may have previously hindered their access to housing. This strategy underscores our commitment to recognising and actively responding to the diverse and complex circumstances of some applicants, ensuring that our policies are as inclusive and effective as possible.

In 2023/24, we partnered with St Albans City and District Council, utilising funding via the Homes England RSAP programme, to create a new homelessness hub co-ordinator role to improve access to homeless services in the locality, enhance health and wellbeing, promote employment opportunities and support the development of tenancy ready skills.

Commitment #5

“ To offer support to maintain ‘at risk’ tenancies and to not make homeless any tenant who is engaging with the landlord. ”

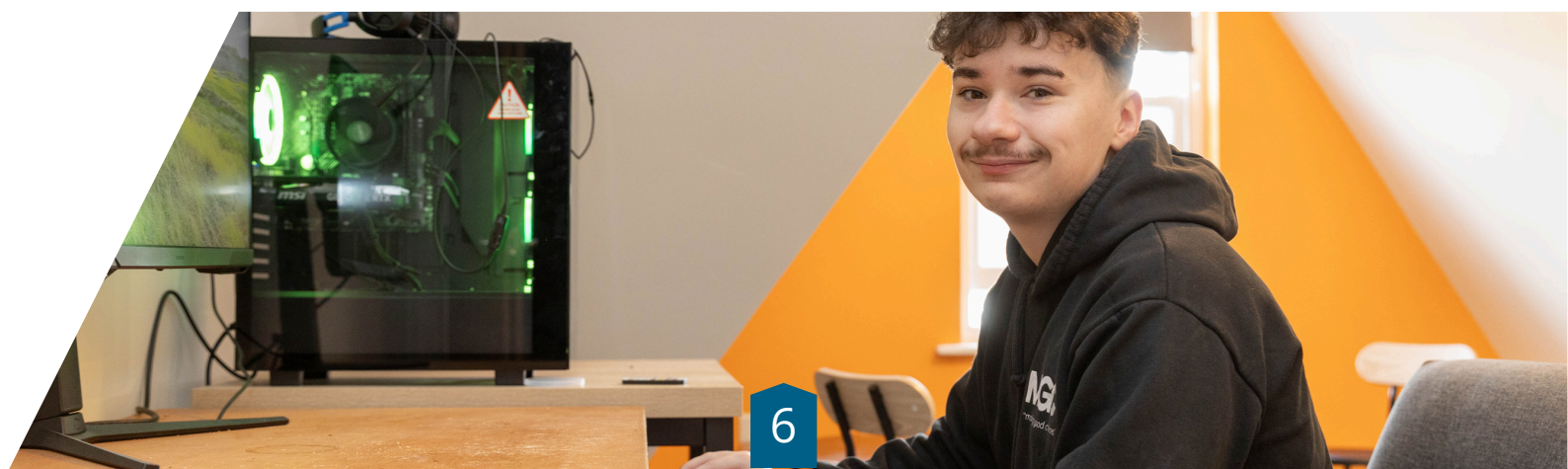
The cost-of-living crisis has had a marked impact on tenants’ ability to pay their rent, increasing the level of rent arrears over the past year. We have responded by expanding our tenancy support team, providing more capacity to meet increasing demand from tenants experiencing financial hardship.

In 2023/24, our tenancy support team assisted 372 tenants with their finances and wellbeing, made over 1,000 successful support calls and visits and recovered £568,000 in additional welfare payments on behalf of tenants.

Our income recovery team is often the first port of call when a customer is struggling, with just over two thirds of tenancy support referrals coming through this team. We provide all tenants with a welcoming and person-centred approach when they are finding it difficult to pay their rent; this has resulted in 90 compliments coming to the income recovery team this year. Our belief in a ‘court as a last resort’ approach has kept the volume of general needs evictions low, with 13 in 2023/24 compared to 14 in 2022/23.

As a signatory of the National Housing Federation’s voluntary Commitment to Refer, we refer individuals/households threatened with homelessness to the relevant local housing authority.

In our care and supported housing services, the rollout of psychologically informed practice across Hightown’s young people’s housing service (YPHS) and adult homelessness services is also helping to prevent evictions.



Commitment #6

“ To support new tenants who were homeless to access the essential items they need to make their property a home. ”



Hightown recognises that tenants who were previously homeless may be starting their tenancy without the essential items they need to make their property a home. Our lettings team completes a vulnerability matrix for every new tenant and tenants who require additional support to access essential items are referred to our tenancy support team.

In 2023/24, the team accessed over £8,000 from Hightown's tenancy support fund and £6,500 in grant funding from external partners to purchase essential items for tenants in extreme financial hardship, including flooring, white goods and furniture. We have also updated our tenancy starter pack provided to new tenants to include local sources of second-hand furniture and grant giving bodies.

Meanwhile, all our newly built properties are let with carpeting or flooring already fitted; 68% (458) of our general needs lettings (social and affordable rent) in the 2023/24 financial year were newly built properties.

Commitment #7

“ To lobby, challenge and inspire others to work to end homelessness. ”

Hightown's senior leadership team continues to lobby, challenge and inspire others to do more to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness, through the sharing of innovative practice across the sector and by building relationships with decision makers in local and national government.

Highlights in 2023/24 included a meeting between the chief executive and Daisy Cooper, St Albans MP and deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats ahead of the general election, to discuss local homelessness challenges and the need for government investment in social housing. Local officials attended opening events for several new Hightown homelessness services and housing developments, and the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire visited our Open Door night shelter to learn about the support provided to homeless people in St Albans.

Meanwhile, Hightown colleagues and service users participated in a learning session at the Homes for Cathy conference to share the benefits of psychologically informed environments in supported housing, and our successful co-production initiatives were recognised at the Regional Great British Care Awards.



To find out more visit www.homesforcathy.org.uk