

Our Impact

2020/21





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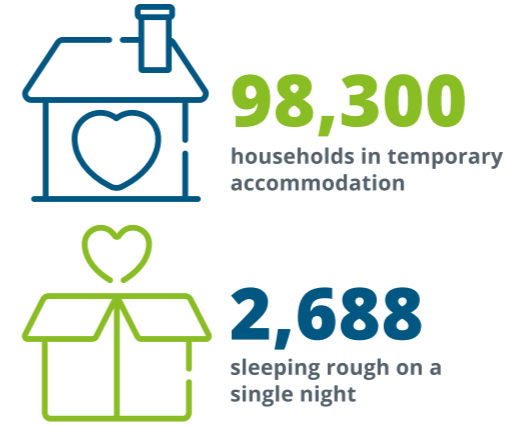
Promoting positive outcomes in Care & Supported Housing 23

Our Impact

Chief executive's foreword

Housing has long been recognised as one of the key social determinants of people's health and wellbeing, yet for millions of people in the UK, having a safe, decent, affordable home is far from the reality.

By the end of June 2020, there were 98,300 households in temporary accommodation in England, including 127,240 children¹. In autumn 2020, an estimated 2,688 people were sleeping rough on a single night².



However, our impact extends beyond being a housing developer and landlord. Through our resident involvement activities, we are empowering our tenants, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are embedded into services that directly contribute towards their quality of life. Our housing team makes a tangible difference to the lives of vulnerable tenants, through services such as financial inclusion and safeguarding for victims of domestic abuse and people living with mental health challenges. At the same time, our care and supported housing (C&SH) schemes enhance the lives of service users, helping them gain independence and take control, so they can enjoy the same opportunities as everyone. As a large local employer, we are also dedicated to developing our workforce through training, apprenticeships and wellbeing activities. Finally, we are committed to reducing our impact on the environment and contributing towards Net Zero by 2050, through increasing the energy efficiency of our homes and using sustainable construction methods.


These figures are just the tip of the iceberg. According to the National Housing Federation (NHF), nearly 8 million people in England have some form of housing need³. In the past year, the situation has been further exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, which has brought even greater hardship on people in low-paid, insecure employment.


Housing associations are at the forefront of addressing the housing shortages we face, with the knowledge and expertise to build good quality, affordable homes. As one of the fastest growing housing associations, Hightown has made it our mission to deliver the affordable housing that will contribute to ending homelessness. Over the next two years, we will add 1,000 more homes to our existing portfolio. As we are a not-for-profit organisation with a social purpose, any surplus we make is re-invested into developing more homes and improving our existing homes in the local areas in which we operate, namely Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Berkshire.

Our impact report covers all of these themes - and the stories that bring them to life. As no impact report of the past year would be complete without referencing the Covid-19 crisis, this year we have included a section on our response to the challenges we - and our tenants and service users - faced.

We hope you enjoy reading about our work.

David Bogle, Chief Executive

 [Click here to find out more about what we do](#)

 [Click here to learn about our development programme](#)

¹ UK Parliament research briefing: Households in temporary accommodation (England)
² MHCLG Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2020
³ Source: National Housing Federation (NHF), <https://www.housing.org.uk/resources/people-in-housing-need/>, People in Housing Need, September 2020.

Hightown at a glance

Our annual turnover
£90.1m



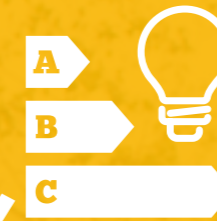
We own and manage
7,244
homes



Hightown



65%
rental properties in
EPC Band B or above



102

homeless
people given
a bed at the
Open Door
shelter



556

people
accessed
financial
inclusion
support



40%

lettings to
homeless
households



66

homeless people
moved on from
temporary supported
accommodation
to secure housing



We support over

726

service users
across

93 schemes



Our Covid response

The past year has been a time like no other, presenting us with multiple challenges across all areas of the business. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has also shown us our strengths – agility, adaptability, resilience and a commitment to getting the job done. Despite difficult, uncertain and often fast changing circumstances, Hightown staff have gone above and beyond to put the needs of tenants and service users first, while keeping themselves and others safe.

Our response to the Covid-19 crisis has included:

- Encouraging staff who are able to work from home to work remotely and creating a 'working from home' intranet hub to support staff
- Filming virtual tours of homes for prospective tenants and conducting virtual tenancy sign ups to avoid delays in letting new or vacant homes – during the first lockdown (April to June) we completed 74 new tenancies
- Maintaining statutory health and safety inspections and urgent repairs on our properties – throughout the first lockdown (April to June) we carried out over 3,000 repairs
- Working with our partners through social distancing and restrictions on the availability of building materials and supplies to finish 21 housing developments – totalling 429 new homes
- Ongoing communications with tenants about the importance of allowing our repairs team property access to conduct essential safety checks
- Responding to a significant spike in ASB and domestic abuse cases to ensure the wellbeing of tenants and the wider community
- Setting up a grocery hub at our central office when the pandemic first hit to ensure our care and supported housing (C&SH) schemes had adequate supplies of food and essential items and sourcing vital PPE for staff
- Our Financial Inclusion and Tenancy Sustainment Officers providing support to tenants who are experiencing extreme hardship to access welfare payments and grants – in April to July 2020 this included nearly £20,000 in discretionary housing payments
- Sharing regular advice and news with tenants about Government schemes and support available for those financially affected by coronavirus
- Moving learning & development online and delivering over 307 virtual classroom events to keep employees up to date with mandatory training and professional knowledge
- Switching to remote recruitment – throughout the year we arranged over 1,000 virtual job interviews and recruited over 200 new starters. Not needing to rely on agency staff means a better and more consistent quality of care in our C&SH schemes
- Care and supported housing (C&SH) schemes adopting a 'live in' model where possible, with staff moving into a scheme for extended periods to protect service users and their families from the virus
- Our C&SH staff creating imaginative ways to reduce feelings of isolation and boredom among our 726 service users during lockdowns, from arts and crafts, to reading, quizzes, games and themed events
- Supporting the vaccination rollout to our staff by creating a 'Covid vaccination hub' on our intranet with guidance on vaccination related matters.



Providing homes...and more

As a social housing provider, Hightown owns and manages over 7,000 affordable homes for people who are unable to rent or buy on the open market, delivering a tangible, positive impact to our local communities.

However our remit goes far beyond building and managing properties. Our tenants are customers who live with the decisions we make; our resident engagement and involvement work ensures that residents are able to shape and scrutinise our services, and that they have a voice in the communities in which they live. We also act as a safety net for tenants in times of hardship and distress. Our housing, lettings and income recovery officers are often among the first people to be alerted when a tenant is experiencing difficulties, and they have the skills and knowledge to direct them to the necessary support, often from our own financial inclusion team. Working alongside our housing staff, our property services team are integral in ensuring properties meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard and that void properties are re-let to people in housing need as quickly as possible.

Involving residents

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the past year has seen Hightown consolidate its resident engagement and involvement work, aligning with the new resident charter set out by the 2020 Social Housing White Paper. Quarterly meetings of our complaints scrutiny group and resident voice and scrutiny (RVSP) panel moved online. Comprising nine residents, the RVSP scrutinised Hightown's performance in key service areas, including arrears recovery, lettings and repairs, as well as voting on bids for estate improvements, reviewing our annual report to

residents and considering the impact and value for money of Hightown's resident involvement activities. This year, two residents were also involved in the tender and selection process of our new cleaning contractor. Meanwhile, our ten estate champions fed back on neighbourhood issues and took part in estate 'meet and greets' with our property services inspectors.

In April 2020, we relaunched our mystery shopping programme, with ten residents taking part to obtain feedback on the customer service provided by Hightown against our customer charter. In December, our housing officers participated in our first virtual door knocking event by contacting residents at our Wisteria Court estate in Waltham Cross. Residents gave us positive feedback, and made improvement suggestions which we are progressing, including arranging inspections for condensation, liaising with our cleaning contractors regarding the cleanliness of communal areas and fitting the bin stores with new locks to prevent non-residents from disposing of their waste. Virtual door knocks continue every quarter.

Resident satisfaction

In 2020, our annual STAR satisfaction survey of general needs tenants showed that across key services tenants were most satisfied with the energy efficiency in their home (74% satisfied), safety and security (73%) and the service provided by Hightown (73%). Where tenant satisfaction scored lower - ease of dealing with Hightown (70%), the overall quality of repair work (70%) and the quality of their home (69%) – we are reviewing our practices with a view to making improvements.



Our Impact

Safeguarding vulnerable tenants

From the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020, our housing team saw a major spike in the number of anti-social behaviour (ASB) reports – up by 36 per cent year on year to total 778 cases. The Government eviction ban meant that the team had to use injunctions as an alternative legal route to deal with the most serious ASB cases, including noise nuisance from music and parties, threats of violence and actual violence. The team attended court hearings by video link or call, resulting in five successful injunction applications over the past year and a direct positive impact on the wellbeing of victims, witnesses and local residents.

The rise in ASB reports during lockdown was matched by a similar increase in domestic abuse cases being logged, from 35 in 2019/20 to 56 in 2020/21. Our housing team responded by introducing interim procedures to handle reports and concerns of domestic abuse during lockdown. Our housing officers continue to meet every six weeks to discuss domestic abuse and ASB cases, as well as working in partnership with police and social services to agree the best course of action.

Financial inclusion

The role of our two financial inclusion officers has taken on even greater importance this year, with many tenants facing financial insecurity and hardship as a result of Covid-19. Throughout the year, they have worked hand in hand with our housing and income recovery teams to give 556 residents support and guidance to manage their money and maximise their incomes.

Support offered by our financial inclusion team ranges from information about how to keep utility bills down, to how to sign up for low income tariffs. For those on benefits, our financial inclusion officers guide residents through the steps to ensure there is minimal interruption to their income when moving home. As a resident's financial situation changes, they can help check their benefit entitlements, and assist in applying for benefits such as Universal Credit, Council Tax Support, Personal Independence Payments, Carers Allowance or Discretionary Housing Payments. They also support tenants to challenge benefit decisions, helping to submit appeals for rejected disability benefit claims and benefit over payment clawbacks. In 2020/21, this resulted in over £119,000 being recovered for residents in additional welfare payments and grants.

“ My long term goal as a financial inclusion officer is to empower our residents to help themselves, but to also be there to offer support should they need help at any time. You often come up against challenging situations and it is incredibly rewarding when you are able to improve the financial situation for a person and their family.

JP Smith, Financial Inclusion Officer

Our impact in numbers

74%

tenants satisfied with the energy efficiency of their homes



778

ASB reports logged



5

successful injunctions to prevent ASB



56

domestic abuse cases supported



556

people offered financial inclusion support



£119,000

recovered in additional welfare payments



320

void properties re-let to people in housing need



average number of days to re-let void properties

Reducing void times

Our goal at Hightown is to enable people in housing need to move into their new homes as quickly as possible. Having an in-house voids team has been instrumental in achieving this, particularly during the past year's lockdown restrictions, as our in-house void operatives could continue to work with safety measures in place. Every one of our void operatives is equipped and trained to know what quality of work is expected of them, to ensure our properties meet the Decent Homes Standard. Despite the impact of the pandemic on lettings this year, our average re-let time in 2020/21 was 23 days, a figure that would be considered good performance for the social housing sector in normal times.

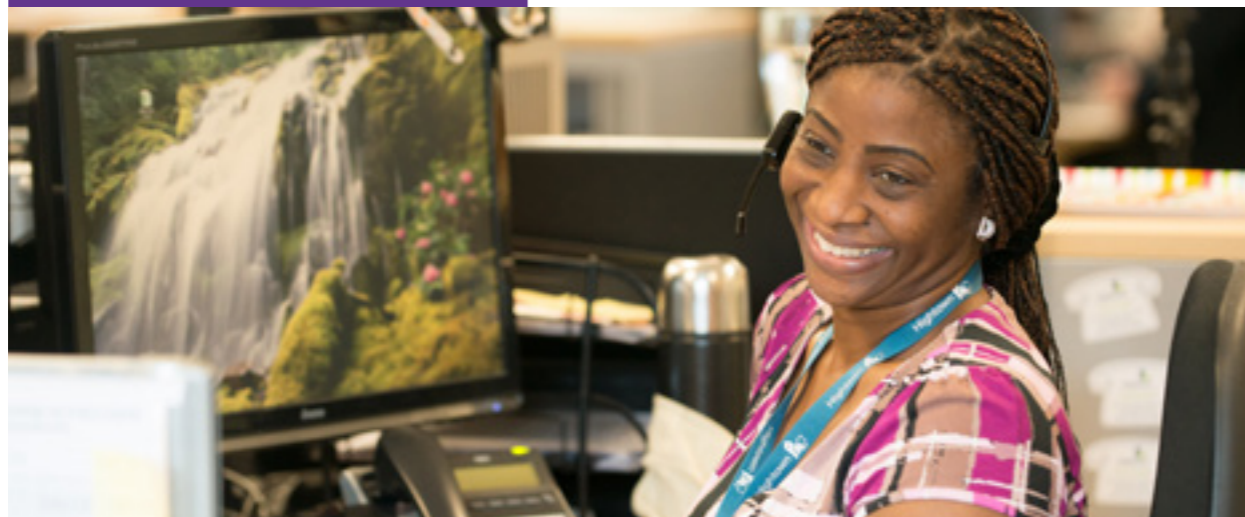


Case study



Pictured: Darren's housing officer

Case study



Helping Jessica maintain her tenancy

Recently one of our income recovery officers spoke to Jessica*, a resident whose relationship had broken down several months before. As Jessica's partner had left the property, Universal Credit had reduced the housing payments by 50 percent. Her partner had also been working, therefore Jessica was further impacted as she was now affected by the benefit cap.

The income recovery officer referred Jessica to the financial inclusion team, where our financial inclusion officers assisted Jessica in contacting Universal Credit to have her correct Housing Element entitlement paid. They then supported her with an application for Discretionary Housing Payments to meet with the ongoing rent shortfall. The payments were awarded and this gave her time to look for work so that she would no longer be impacted by the benefit cap.

* The resident's name has been changed to protect her identity

A new life for Darren

Darren* admits he was struggling when he found himself in temporary accommodation two years ago and was referred to Hightown to be housed. Darren, who has mental health needs and has struggled with alcohol addiction in the past, was keen to move into a permanent home as soon as he could.

Darren was pleasantly surprised when he was given the chance to rent a one-bedroom flat in Stoke Hammond, Buckinghamshire. At first, he was a bit wary of being in completely new surroundings without any friends or family nearby. However, the rural village location proved to be friendly and his neighbours soon introduced themselves and he began to see how friendly and trusting people in the village are. Having grown up in a similar rural location, Darren soon felt part of the community and absolutely loves living in the village.

What has surprised Darren is the continued support that Hightown has offered and the way staff have been sensitive to his mental health needs. He's been

grateful for the welfare checks and when a couple of repairs were needed to his flat they were sorted out quickly. When his tenancy reviews have come round, he's always felt the staff have been courteous.

Darren has now been in his Hightown property for 16 months and is over 600 days sober. He feels having been offered the right property at the right time plus having the support of his neighbours, has helped him start his life all over again.

* The resident's name has been changed to protect his identity

“ Being offered this property at the right time saved me. I don't think I'd be here without it. ”

Darren, general needs tenant

Preventing homelessness

Preventing homelessness is core to Hightown's social purpose. Our impact on the lives of people experiencing homelessness comes not only through the homes we own and manage, but also through the specialist support we provide. Last year, 40 per cent of our general needs properties were let to homeless households, ensuring that families and single people in temporary accommodation, bedsits or sofa surfing finally had a secure home to call their own. At the same time, our temporary and short-term supported accommodation schemes continue to provide a lifeline for vulnerable people in our community, giving them the specialist support and skills they need to rebuild their future. Hightown is also one of the UK housing associations leading the way with Housing First, an innovative model of homelessness intervention that is changing the lives of entrenched rough sleepers and people with multiple, complex challenges.

Local partnerships

The pandemic has galvanised a joined up approach around local homelessness strategies, helping us strengthen existing local authority partnerships,

build new ones and support Government homelessness initiatives launched in response to the pandemic, such as 'Everyone In' and the 'Next Steps Accommodation Programme' (NSAP).

In 2020/21 this included co-producing and delivering two brand new temporary supported housing schemes for homeless people with NSAP funding. Ardenham Lane is our first foray into specialist homelessness services in Buckinghamshire, and will provide self-contained properties with specialist support to 11 formerly homeless single people. NSAP funding has also allowed us to set up a new homelessness service in Hemel Hempstead; Queensway will provide five single people with a secure self-contained home and specialist support around tenancy sustainment and other life skills. Using NSAP funding, in 2020 we employed a new floating housing advice worker to help people out of temporary accommodation in St Albans and into secure housing, helping St Albans City & District Council (SACDC) with its ongoing 'Everyone In' commitment. In Hemel Hempstead, we allocated five general needs bed spaces at one of our existing properties to meet local temporary accommodation demands.



Open Door

Open Door is our 12 bed St Albans night shelter and drop-in, run by Hightown with the support of the Open Door charity. Covid-19 brought about major operational changes for the shelter during 2020/21 and its staff have worked tirelessly with other local agencies to support the community's rough sleepers throughout the pandemic.

Most importantly, Open Door began operating as a 24 hour staffed service. Due to restrictions on movement, normal 28 day stays became indefinite, with our longest stay being over five months, and this impacted on the number of people we accommodated over the year. During the first few weeks of the pandemic, we responded proactively to the Government's 'Everyone In' campaign to house rough sleepers, making use of external partnerships as well as internal services, to provide accommodation for an extra 18 people.

Some great partnership working was achieved by the Open Door team working alongside two local charities in St Albans - Open Door Charity and Centre 33 - to ensure food or food parcels were provided for those who needed it, whether they were homeless or not.

The team also worked collaboratively with SACDC and local charity Druglink to secure accommodation for five rough sleepers who had no recourse to public funds.

Covid vaccinations were offered on site at Open Door, and were taken up by all our service users.

During the winter months, Open Door works with other agencies in St Albans to deliver SWEP provision (severe weather emergency protocol). In 2020/21, 34 people accessed this service, amounting to 720 nights. Our outreach team continued providing their services in St Albans and Dacorum, engaging with rough sleepers, helping them with benefit claims, food, registering with a GP, sourcing furniture for people about to be housed, delivering food parcels, signposting to drug and alcohol services, and making referrals to mental health services.

“ All staff have been professional, courteous and informative...the speed and kindness that my case was dealt with was amazing.

BM, Open Door service user

Our impact in numbers



40%

general needs properties let to homeless households in 2020/21

102



number of people given a bed at the Open Door shelter

54



number of planned move-ons from Open Door into other accommodation

9



people housed by Housing First

66



people moved on from temporary & short-term supported accommodation (St Albans) to secure housing

16



new homelessness units delivered through Next Steps Accommodation Programme

9



young mothers moved to independent living

Housing First

Over the past year, our new Housing First service has gone from strength to strength. A partnership between Hightown, SACDC and Dacorum Borough Council, Housing First provides affordable housing with tailored, intensive support. The approach helps people with complex histories address negative behaviours, such as alcohol and drug dependency, from the basis of a permanent home, with no pre-conditions on their tenancy. Nine local people are now benefitting from the service, with funding secured for another year. [Watch our Housing First video]

Temporary and short-term supported accommodation

Hightown's temporary and short-term supported accommodation schemes provide a safe haven for people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness, however our aim is to prepare service users with the skills and knowledge they need to move on to independent living. In 2020/21, 66 people moved on to secure housing from our five schemes in St Albans, taking the first steps to rebuild their lives. At Oysterfields, our St Albans scheme for young mothers, nine service users were able to move on to permanent accommodation.



Case study



Brayden, Housing First

After leaving the care system at 18, Brayden spent five years in and out of hostels and temporary accommodation, never having a home to call his own. As a transgender person, Brayden experienced transphobia which affected his mental health. Without a secure place to live, he also found it impossible to access the support he needed to start the process of medical transitioning. Through engagement with our team at Open Door, in 2020 Brayden was identified as someone who would benefit from our Housing First service and the process began to find a suitable property for him. Brayden has now taken on a tenancy in a newly built one-bedroom Hightown flat and can start planning for the future. His Housing First co-ordinator, Nicky, is undertaking training to support him to transition and once settled, he hopes to find employment. Eventually, he would like to mentor other people who lived through similar experiences.



[Click here to find out more about our Housing First scheme](#)

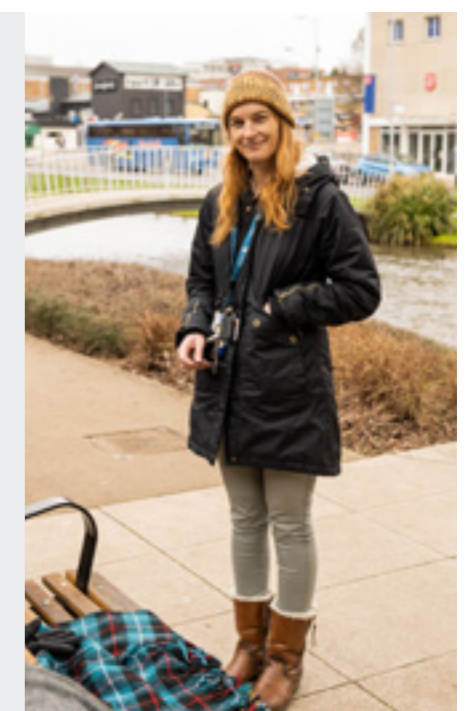
Case study

James

James* is in his 60s with a public school background and previously had a good career in the City of London. His story is not what people may think of when they hear that someone has found themselves with nowhere to go, however he was referred to our temporary supported housing scheme, St Claire's, in a vulnerable and helpless position. Our case workers, Martha and Felicia, supported James to register with a local GP, apply for Universal Credit and open a bank account and our floating housing advice worker, John, helped him find suitable private rental accommodation.

Although his stay at St. Claire's was brief, its impact for James was significant and he can now look forward to a more secure future. He says: "Martha and Felicia were always there for me. John has always been so reassuring and has that 'can do' attitude, regardless of how busy he is. He makes you feel as if you are the only person he is currently having to deal with."

* The resident's name has been changed to protect his identity



Case study



Natasha

As with many people who find themselves homeless, a series of events led to Hightown tenant Natasha ending up in a situation she could never have imagined. Forced to escape from an abusive marriage and living with a painful health condition that left her struggling with her mental wellbeing, Natasha found herself at the Open Door night shelter in St Albans.

She eventually moved on to Kent House, Hightown's temporary accommodation service for people experiencing homelessness, where she spent the next 18 months. However, she longed for a place she could call her own so she could begin to rebuild her life.

Fortunately, in May 2020, Natasha received the news she had been waiting for – a Hightown affordable rent property had become available. Natasha moved in to her one-bedroom apartment in June and she couldn't be happier.

"It's lovely - so bright and airy with a wonderful view. It's so refreshing to at last be able to clear my mind and think. I viewed the property virtually and moved in during lockdown. Hightown has been amazing in every aspect of the move - I can't fault them in any shape or form."

With the support of Hightown's lettings team, Natasha has been able to secure a voucher from community network Herts Help to buy some basic household items. She now has her sights set firmly on the future and would like to volunteer to help people who have had similar experiences to herself.

“ My new home is the light at the end of the tunnel, the hope, the future for my beautiful life.

Natasha, Open Door and Kent House service user



Hightown is a founding member of the Homes for Cathy group, an alliance of over 100 housing associations and charities united in its aim to end homelessness. We play a key role in the group's day to day running, delivering regular workshops and communications to members in order to share best practice in homelessness prevention, as well as lobbying government and other stakeholders to keep homelessness at the top of the national agenda. Throughout 2020/21, Homes for Cathy events moved online, with six successful workshops taking place over the course of the year, covering a range of topics from the Covid-19 response, through to Housing First, preventing evictions and furnished tenancies. Lobbying activity has highlighted the need for homeless people to be classed as housing association customers and housing associations formally measured on their efforts to house them.

As a Homes for Cathy member, we incorporate the group's nine 'commitments' into our own organisational policies, practices and activities. Developed in consultation with the homelessness charity Crisis, the commitments act as a benchmark for progress, helping us map out our annual homelessness action plan by which our board holds us to account.



People making a difference

A key value for Hightown is developing passionate and committed teams, people who share our vision to 'be the difference', are proud of the work they do and feel valued in return. 2020/21 was a time when this passion and commitment was required – and valued – more than ever, as teams pulled together and members of staff went above and beyond to continue delivering our services to customers and service users throughout the pandemic.

Employee investment

As part of our commitment to developing our workforce, we invested £155,370 in learning for staff in 2020/21, covering a range of training courses, e-learning,

external qualifications, conferences and professional development opportunities. Learning and development moved online, with a total of 307 virtual classroom courses delivered since April 2020 in subjects ranging from administering medication to management skills to support for staff dealing with violence and aggression.

In addition, we invested £64,440 from our apprenticeship levy pot, with 20 staff successfully completing an apprenticeship since 2020, having switched from face-to-face to online support. Two staff are currently studying an apprenticeship and 15 staff have started one since April 2020.

Our impact in numbers



20
number of staff successfully completing an apprenticeship

15
number of staff starting an apprenticeship since April 2020

£64,440
invested in apprenticeships

£155,370
invested in staff learning

307
virtual classroom courses delivered

2
Time to Talk virtual lunches

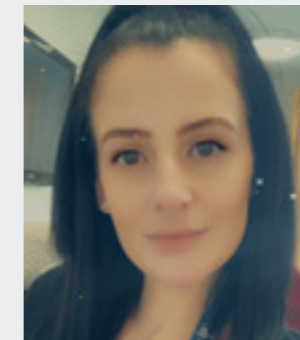
Staff wellbeing

We support Five Ways to Wellbeing as a tool to help staff maintain their physical and mental health. Wellbeing advice, challenges and quizzes are shared regularly through our intranet wellbeing hub. In November 2020, all staff were asked to complete a short wellbeing survey to understand how staff were feeling and for our team of staff wellbeing champions to use the feedback when planning future events. Based on the results, Five Ways to Wellbeing is being added to team meeting agendas, managers are receiving guidance on spotting

signs of stress in their staff members and the wellbeing champions are sharing information about different individual and team activities that can help develop resilience. Our wellbeing champions also organised two 'Time to Talk' virtual lunches, giving staff the chance to reconnect and chat informally about mental health.



Case study



Rachel, Apprentice

“
Between my two managers and my assessor, I had a really great support network. If at any point I had concerns, I was able to voice them and my assessor or manager was able to support me in resolving it.

Rachel, Lead adult care worker apprentice

Rachel, an assistant support worker at The Elms, an extra care housing scheme, completed her apprenticeship in 2020.

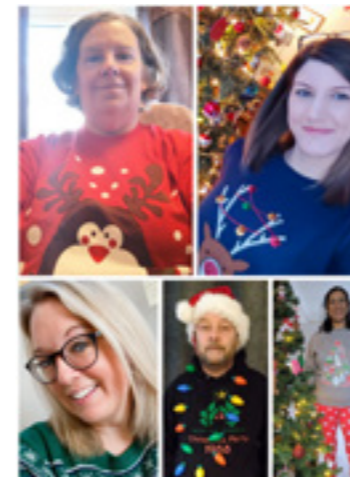
Rachel said: “Completing my apprenticeship despite the changes throughout the year was a big accomplishment for me. I learnt and understood my role in greater depth, and had a better understanding of not only what is expected of me, but also what I am already putting into practice daily whilst at work.

“This, I feel, has helped me gain new skills and methods

as well as enhancing the skills I already had. Following this, my manager has already supported me with a personalised learning plan and objectives through my annual appraisal to help me put my new skills and knowledge into practice at my scheme.

“I appreciate this, and how well staff are supported with personal development is something I have always commended Hightown on. This is not the first apprenticeship I have undertaken and hopefully, it will not be the last!”

Charitable giving



Alongside our day-to-day operations, staff give their time and money to support other charities. In 2020/21, despite fundraising activities being curtailed due to the lockdown, staff and service users took part in Halloween pumpkin carving and Christmas jumper day fundraising events, raising a total of £347 in online donations for our chosen charity, Herts Mind Network.

During the first lockdown, staff donated over 27kg of essential personal care and beauty items to one of our local charities, DENS, to help vulnerable people in Dacorum isolating at home.

A Hightown development site in Chesham was also used as a temporary facility for a Christmas toy charity to recycle old toys and distribute them to local families. We also allowed one of the previous owners, an event catering and logistics specialist, to stay on rent free while they prepared and cooked more than 4,000 meals a week for Buckinghamshire's NHS Trust.



Preserving our environment

Preserving our environment and ensuring our business practices are sustainable are key priorities for Hightown. Our commitment to greener, more energy efficient communities influences all areas of our organisation, from the maintenance of our existing property portfolio, through to new development planning and our own offices and business activities.

Existing properties

A large proportion of Hightown properties have been built in recent years therefore have relatively high levels of energy efficiency. The average SAP (Standard Assessment Procedure) rating of Hightown's housing stock is 80.63, up from 80.1 in 2019-2020 and a substantial improvement on the 72.7 recorded in 2012. This rating is also higher than the average SAP rating for all dwellings in England (65) and all social rented sector dwellings (69) (Source: English Housing Survey 2019-20).

Energy efficiency works are programmed into our annual repairs to increase the energy performance of homes and provide affordable warmth for residents; in the past financial year we invested £766,194 in these measures, an increase of 3.5 per cent on the previous year

(£739,000). Work undertaken includes the replacement of boilers, heating systems, doors and windows as well as the installation of insulation.

Our Board's strategic plan aims to achieve homes with a minimum EPC rating of Band C. At the end of the financial year, we had just 32 buildings awaiting works to increase their energy rating to this minimum, down from 43 the previous year, and a review of these properties is being undertaken with a view to increasing their banding. Our investment will continue in order ensure our homes meet the criteria set out in the government's Future Homes Standard to future proof homes and we contribute towards Net Zero by 2050 targets. While the benefits to the environment are clear, there are also benefits to our tenants in terms of reducing fuel poverty, with an estimated annual saving of £247 for every household moving from EPC Band C to Band A/B (Source: English Housing Survey 2018).

Our communications to residents also urge them to play their part in preserving the environment; our quarterly 'Outlook' e-newsletter for tenants includes regular articles on recycling and tips and advice for improving energy efficiency in the home.



New development

Our approach to building is first to focus on high levels of fabric efficiency - Fabric First - to ensure that the building is well insulated. Where renewables are required by planning, Hightown uses technologies which deliver reliable and established benefits, particularly for residents, such as solar panels for electricity and hot water. Where appropriate, we also design water saving measures into new homes - such as dual flush toilets and water saving shower heads - as well as providing rain water butts for gardens.

Further to the requirement outlined in the Future Homes Standard that fossil fuel heating systems are no longer installed in new homes built after 2025, we have commissioned an 'after gas' report to consider alternative heating systems, keeping in mind the financial implications these could have for our residents.

Where possible, we invest in green spaces on our new build developments to enhance the quality of the environment for residents and improve biodiversity, while ensuring we maximise the number of homes we create.

Case study



Rossway Drive, Bushey

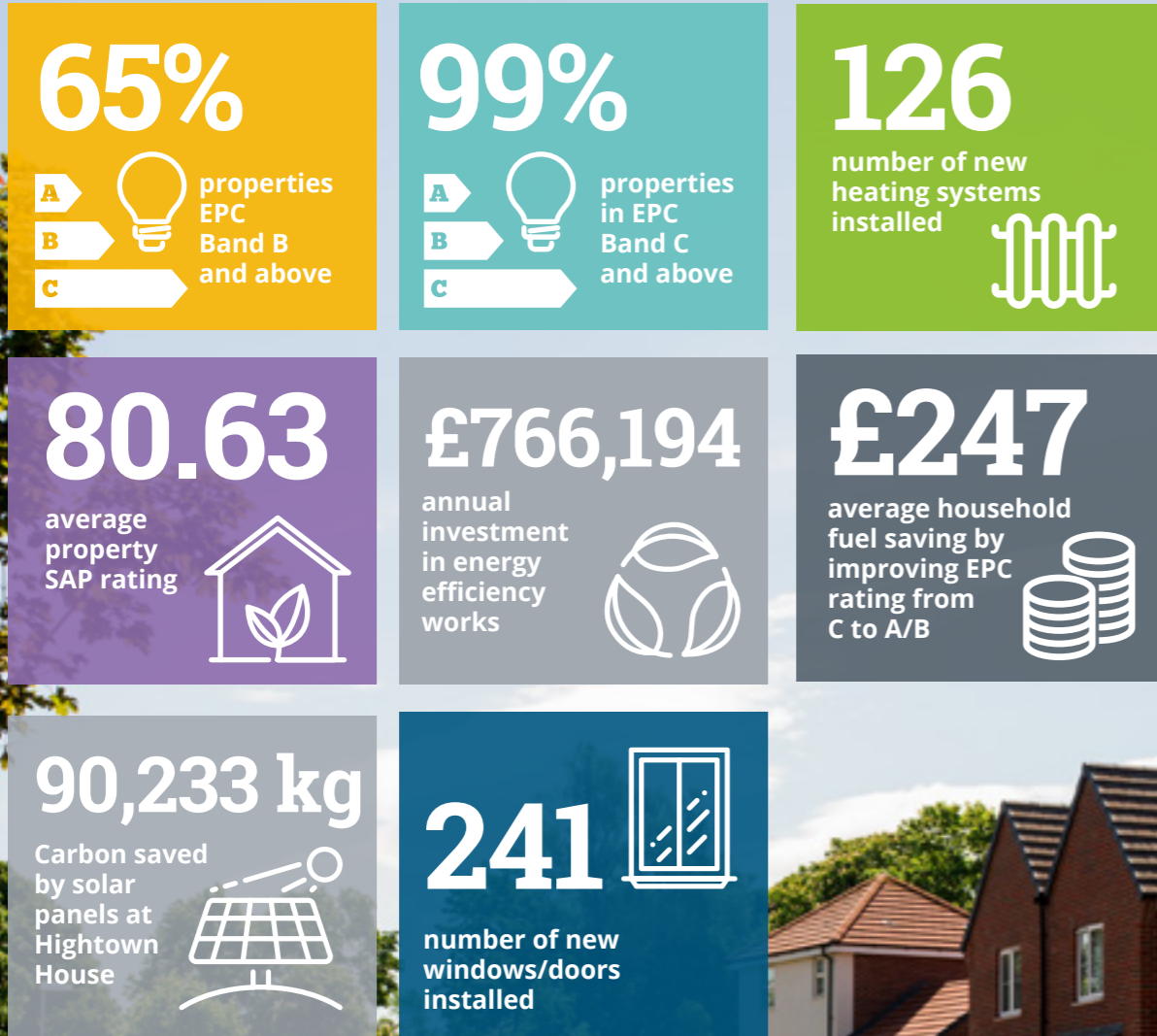
One of Hightown's newest housing developments, Rossway Drive in Bushey, is transforming what was once a run-down industrial estate into a green and attractive haven offering 55 affordable homes. Built on the site of a former car repairers, the development is set around an inviting central communal garden with a play area. Hightown partnered with a local landscape consultancy, Alban Landscapes, to make the most of the open spaces, incorporating a wide variety of planting into the plans, including 77 small, medium and large trees as well as hedges and shrubs. A large forest tree dominates the centre that will be able to grow to a considerable size and form a focal point for the whole development.

Offices and other business activities

Our central office, Hightown House, has solar panels installed to generate electricity and an air source heat pump to provide efficient heating/cooling. Since the installation of the solar panels in 2012, we have benefitted from around 166,741kWh of electricity, saved more than 90,233 Kg of carbon and earned over £10,500 in Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) payments. The RHI payments along with a reduced electricity bill has allowed the system to repay itself.

Occupancy/motion sensors are also installed around Hightown House to reduce energy use in areas of the building not occupied for periods of time. Lights are programmed so that in all appropriate areas they turn off after 10 minutes since last detecting motion and will not turn on again if the natural light level is adequate.





Promoting positive outcomes in Care & Supported Housing



Business innovation

In 2020/21, service users and staff began to reap the benefits of the new Hightown 'growth model' and service user assessments moving to a dynamic, digital platform. Working in partnership with their support teams, service users now set and track their support needs and growth goals using our 'Growth Tree', a visual representation of where they started, where they have grown and where they are growing to in key areas such as physical health, mental health and living skills.

Over the past year, the growth model has formed the basis of a new C&SH managers' internal audit, which focuses on assessing not only mandatory service provision but also the quality of delivery, ensuring our service users' needs and progress are at the forefront of everything we do.

A new mental health working party has been established with involvement from the charity Mind to address improvements to the quality of mental health support in our schemes and a new mental health activities co-ordinator is supporting service user wellbeing jointly across schemes with activities such as walking clubs and music nights.

One of Hightown's core strengths is our knowledge and experience of care and supported housing. We run 93 care and supported housing (C&SH) schemes across Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire, caring for 726 service users with a range of needs, each of whom is supported to reach their full potential and live with confidence, independence and choice. Our mission is to be an outstanding provider across all of our services and, despite the challenges brought by the pandemic, 2020/21 has seen us introduce innovative new business practices to improve our quality of care.

Covid-19

The pandemic has had a huge impact on the lives of individuals living in our care and supported housing schemes, however our staff have risen to the dual challenge of keeping service users safe while continuing to support their mental wellbeing. Every scheme underwent a Covid risk assessment, and, with many of our more vulnerable service users shielding throughout the lockdowns, access for family and friends has at times been limited. Despite this, our schemes pulled out all the stops over the past year to keep residents occupied and working towards their growth goals with activities including arts and crafts, cooking, movie nights and music.



Service user involvement

Hightown's C&SH service users continue to be closely involved in shaping the delivery of our services, which in turn gives them the opportunity to build new skills and forge new relationships. Although the lockdown limited some service user involvement activities, during the past

year service users participated in digital meetings for our complaints scrutiny panel, nominated staff for the 'Hightown Heroes' staff awards, wrote articles for our Care & Share 'Covid Special' newsletter and made video presentations for our annual staff conference.

Case study

Henry, The Trees

Henry's family were looking forward to him joining Hightown's The Trees service in Buckinghamshire in March 2020, after previous placements hadn't worked out. Henry, who has autism and fairly high sensory needs, had struggled to leave the home he shared with his mother and was initially reluctant to stay somewhere new. With the support of staff at The Trees, he started his transition plan to move into the service and attended two sleepovers. The lockdown meant it would be another four months until Henry could come back and visit The Trees. Instead, Henry started to build a relationship with the team by choosing to send them emails, photos and videos of what he was doing during lockdown. The staff also learnt a lot about him from his family during this time.

Preparations were made for him to move into The Trees but shortly after he moved in, the second lockdown took place, so his weekend visits had to be cancelled. The team were concerned since Henry had not left home successfully before and they knew he would miss the regular contact with his mum. For someone who has autism, these sudden changes were particularly stressful. Staff offered Henry the additional support he needed and he began to feel more settled.

Once the second lockdown restrictions were eased, Henry began to see his mum on some socially distanced walks before this had to stop when the third lockdown was imposed. He had to overcome these challenges and try and get a new routine in place.



Unfortunately, Henry contracted COVID-19 and then had to cope with further restrictions, including only being able to use certain rooms within the house for a specified time. He learnt to use a visor and a mask and started to adapt. Henry coped remarkably considering everything he faced, and began using an exercise bike instead of having his usual walks, which helped him burn off some of his energy. Henry has taught the staff how he wanted his room to look and how he prefers not to have any clutter or too much furniture. Now with the support of the team, he's learning how to cook and likes to prepare meals for his housemates. A year on from his first sleep over, Henry is settled in his new home.



We have seen Henry develop his independent skills including his household duties like tidying and cooking. He always speaks positively of The Trees and his care staff and is seeking less assurance about 'home'. Overall this year has been a very positive period despite the COVID challenge. Having these firm boundaries imposed on us by Government, may have helped Henry with the move.

Parents of Henry, service user

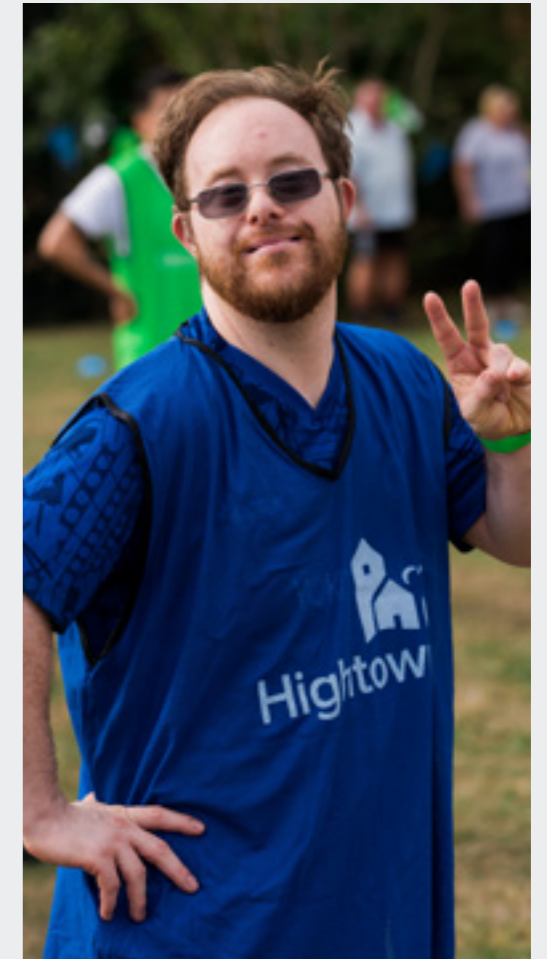
Case study

Gareth, Verney

Gareth lives at Verney, one of Hightown's schemes for people with learning disabilities in Buckinghamshire. Over the past 3 years, he has been working towards a healthier lifestyle to benefit his physical and mental wellbeing.

After his GP advised him to lose weight to help control his cholesterol levels, Gareth started eating healthily and attending the gym for two hours a week. Gareth participates in the local sports and good health group with the charity Talkback, where he now shares his knowledge on nutrition with other members. Last year Gareth became a member sports coach with the Talkback Sports Academy encouraging others to participate in physical activity.

Gareth has been supported by Talkback and the team at Verney to help with his change in lifestyle, helping him to plan healthy meals and encouraging his regular fitness activities. At times when Gareth has felt a bit low and unmotivated, scheme staff have pointed out the positive effects it has had on his health and general wellbeing. Staff have also supported Gareth by setting up his badminton net in the garden so he and others at the scheme could continue to play during lockdown. During the pandemic, Talkback has also set up virtual exercise sessions, which Gareth has fully engaged with to keep up his fitness and wellbeing.



Case study



Michael, Culverton Court

Before the pandemic, Michael, who is autistic, was used to going to church, meeting with his family and volunteering at a local charity shop. Unfortunately, some of these activities had to stop during lockdown and others had to change. Michael had to get used to visits being outside and church services taking place over Zoom.

During 2019, Michael began shopping for his own food and he's made further progress this year, even with lockdown restrictions in place. Encouraged by the team at Culverton Court, he has used his time over lockdown to gain new skills in preparing and cooking his own meals and doing his own cleaning, which has given him more independence.

Before lockdown staff were supporting him with these tasks, by helping him cut vegetables and plan his meals, and as lockdown started he was guided through these tasks with a staff member standing in his lounge and directing him in his kitchen. He's now started to prepare and cook his meals by himself, including one of his favourite dishes salmon curry. He's cooking for himself six days a week. He's now feeling so much more confident in his abilities and has told the staff that he doesn't need help with these daily tasks anymore.

“ I enjoy living here and staff have been very supportive. Lockdown was especially difficult for me but I managed well. I have learned how to do all my own cooking and cleaning and no longer need support in this area of my life. A huge thanks go to all the staff who have helped.

Michael, service user, Culverton Court

Our impact in numbers

93
care and supported housing (C&SH) schemes

726
service users supported

531,374
digital support notes recorded

100%
registered care homes rated 'good' by Care Quality Commission

110
young people housed & supported to learn life skills

40
unaccompanied asylum seeking minors given accommodation & support

Our Impact

2020/21



Want to find out more?

If you would like more information about anything you have read in this report, you can contact us in the following ways:

Email: communications@hightownha.org.uk

Call: 01442 292 300

Hightown House, Maylands Avenue Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP2 4XH

www.hightownha.org.uk

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