

St. Claires Church Crescent St. Albans



Hightown Praetorian
& Churches
Housing Association

St. Claires has been a registered care home for 10 people with mental health problems run by Hightown for 22 years. Hightown bought the building from the North West Herts District Health Authority in 2003.

The building is in need of refurbishment after fairly intensive use for 22 years. The County Council announced late last year that they could not commit to commissioning beds at the home in the future so it was agreed to resettle the residents to other accommodation. This happened in April.

Hightown has been considering the future use of the building. Hightown is a charitable housing association which aims to help local people in housing need who cannot afford to rent or buy housing at market rates. Hightown asked the local authority housing department for their views on the future use of St. Claires and they highlighted the need for short stay accommodation for single people and couples who are being assessed or have been accepted by the Council as statutorily homeless. The use of St. Claires for this purpose would reduce the need for the Council to place people in Bed and Breakfast or in the private rented sector.

Plans have been prepared to refurbish the building and convert it to 15 rooms with one bed, and one room with two beds. Each room would have a sink and cooking facilities. There would be shared toilet and bath/shower facilities and a staff office.

Hightown has been advised that it will need to get planning permission for a



change of use from a care home to a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO). Until planning permission is obtained, Hightown cannot progress any agreement with the Council to house homeless people in St. Claires. It is proposed therefore to submit the planning application in the near future.

Hightown has extensive experience of providing housing for homeless people. It manages three projects in St. Albans for homeless people and these are considered to be well run.

In addition, Hightown houses homeless people directly into the 1000+ self-contained, rented homes for families and couples that it owns all over St. Albans including a number of properties in the area surrounding St. Claires.

There is no evidence to suggest that 17 homeless people housed at St. Claires would be a danger to local children or would cause problems - any more than would be the case with any other group of 17 people living in the area. However, by providing staff on the premises, Hightown is more likely to be able to resolve tenancy problems before they escalate than other landlords in the area.

Following a local consultation event on Monday, October 13th 2014, Hightown agreed to provide a 'Questions and Answers' document about the proposed use of St. Claires for circulation to interested parties.

Hightown has therefore produced the attached document in good faith in an attempt to answer the questions that have been put forward by local residents, Councillors and other parties.

Hightown is also organising a public meeting (in partnership with the Council) on Friday, November 21st, 2014 between 7.00 pm and 9.00 pm in the Council Chamber at the Council offices in St. Peter's Street to present the proposals and the background to the proposals to a wider audience including Councillors and others who were not invited to the consultation event on October 13th.

The project is still a proposal which may or may not go ahead and is subject to planning and other approvals which may lead to changes of substance or detail.



St. Claires Questions & Answers Information Sheet



Hightown Praetorian
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Hightown

Who or what is Hightown?

Hightown Praetorian and Churches Housing Association (Hightown) is a local charitable housing association with housing stock throughout St. Albans. As a charity our focus is to provide affordable housing to local people who cannot afford to rent or buy at market rates. We also provide housing with support for people with disabilities and other support needs.

We are regulated by the Homes and Communities Agency and governed by a voluntary Board.

Current Use

What was St. Claires previously?

St. Claires is a registered care home for 10 people with mental health problems. It has been managed by Hightown for 22 years. However, the building is in need of refurbishment and recent changes in funding arrangements led to its closure in April.

Proposals

What are our proposals for the building's future use?

Following discussions with officers from St. Albans City and District Council's Housing Department we have considered several plans for the future use of the building. One type of housing which is currently in particular demand in St. Albans District is short-stay accommodation for people who find themselves homeless. In response to this need Hightown propose to refurbish St. Claires and convert it to a 16 room House of Multiple Occupation (HMO).

This change of use would require planning permission.

While the building is vacant, we will be employing the services of live-in guardians to maintain the security of the building and prevent squatters.

Future residents

What type of people would be living at St. Claires if the proposals go ahead?

If planning permission is granted, it is proposed to enter into agreement with the Council to house people who have made a homeless application for housing to the Council.

All of the rooms at St. Claires are designed to be single occupancy, with the exception of one room on the top floor which could be occupied by a couple. There are no family rooms.

The type of people who would be referred to St. Claires depends upon the individual circumstances of the people who apply to the Council. The proposed scheme is not designed for people who need a high level of support from staff.

How long would a typical tenancy be?

The typical stay in our similar schemes is about 6 – 9 months. Statistics from the Council show that, at the end of September 2014, homeless households were spending an average of 25 weeks in temporary accommodation.

What would be the eligibility criteria for St. Claires?

At this stage, it is likely that the following eligibility criteria would apply:

- Applicants must have made a homeless application to the Council
- Applicants must be aged 18 years old and above
- Applicants must be referred from the Council
- Applicants must pass the risk assessment process.

In addition to the criteria listed above, it is highly likely that some or all of the following eligibility criteria in use at our similar schemes would also apply:

- Applicants must be willing to comply with the occupancy rules
- Applicants must either be eligible to receive Housing Benefit or have the means to pay the full weekly rent.

Safeguards

What would be the risk assessment process?

All applicants would need to provide details of their:

- Identification
- Current Employment
- Work History
- Physical Health Assessment
- Family and Current Relationships
- Education
- Benefits
- Care Record (if applicable)

Prospective residents would also be assessed in relation to drug and alcohol use and criminal activity.

Applicants would also have completed a Council Homelessness Application form and the information provided would be shared with Hightown. This information becomes the basis of Hightown's risk assessment process.

Who would be excluded from St. Claires?

Typical exclusions at similar schemes managed by Hightown include:

- Applicants with a history of sex offences
- Applicants who have committed arson within the past 10 years
- Applicants under the age of 18 years old
- Applicants who have committed violent, aggressive or racist offences within the past year

How would St. Claires be managed?

All residents of St. Claires would be directly referred to the scheme by the Council. It would not operate as a drop-in centre or as an emergency night shelter – as these services are already provided elsewhere in St. Albans.

St. Claires would have a Night Concierge Worker on shift every night and a Housing Support Worker available during the day. Although it is unusual to have Houses of Multiple Occupation staffed overnight, our past experience of neighbour feedback at consultations has been that the presence of overnight staff would be welcomed. It is for this reason that Hightown has been proactive in assuming that overnight staff would also be desirable in this instance.

What skills and experience would the staff have?

Staff working at the service during the day would have particular skills in supporting people to maintain their tenancies and are likely to have experience working in a housing management setting.

Overnight staff would be skilled in assessing situations and providing first contact in any situation that may arise. They would have experience in undertaking regular health and safety checks. They would monitor any security.

All staff would have an understanding of the issues that affect homeless people.

What would be the role of the daytime staff?

Daytime staff would focus on housing support and administration tasks. This would involve assisting residents to maintain their tenancies while they live at St. Claires and also to help them plan for their move into permanent accommodation.

What measures would be put in place to safeguard the residents of St. Claires and to maintain the security of the surrounding neighbourhood?

In terms of safety, each bedroom would be fitted with smoke/ heat detectors and fire blankets. The building would meet all Fire Regulations, including the installation of a fire panel. Each room would have a lockable door with an intercom system to the main front entrance door. All guests would need to sign in upon arrival. No visitors would be allowed to stay overnight. CCTV would be installed and monitored for the safety of the residents of St. Claires, the staff and the neighbours. There would also be regular checks of the internal and external areas undertaken by staff at set intervals. Behaviour requirements and expectations would be included in all tenancy agreements. If these requirements were not met, this could lead to the resident being evicted.

Would crime and anti-social behaviour increase with the presence of homeless accommodation in the street?

There is no evidence that levels of crime or anti-social behaviour are higher in areas where there are HMO's or properties used for housing the homeless.

Would full risk assessments be completed for fire, alcohol, drugs, noise and cars?

The building would comply with Building Regulations and Fire Regulations. Appropriate risk assessments would also

be completed by staff and would include resident-specific assessments of drug and alcohol use, if appropriate.

Staff on the premises would enforce the tenancy conditions which prohibit alcohol or drug misuse and noise nuisance.

How would negative impacts on the nearby Victoria Park be prevented, such as increased litter, drinking and discarded needles etc?

We see no reason why there should be a negative impact on Victoria Park as a result of this proposal. There is no evidence that levels of anti-social behaviour are higher in areas where there are HMO's or properties used for housing homeless people. In addition, the people who are referred to St. Claires would generally have a local connection and would therefore be likely to already live in the area and use the local facilities. Their move to St. Claires should not negatively affect the way they live in the community.

What is the experience of neighbours living next door to the other temporary accommodation facilities in the district?

Hightown has received no recent complaints from any neighbours at any of our other homeless schemes in St. Albans. This includes one scheme which is directly opposite a school.

Would there be a point of contact and one number to call in case neighbours wish to report any problems?

Yes – if the project gets approval then before the first residents move in there would be an opportunity to meet the staff team. We would also distribute details of the contact number for the office in St. Claires' and also a contact number for one of our staff team based in our central office in Hemel Hempstead.

Are we aware of the problems caused by the residents of the Council-owned property on Worley Road?

Hightown was informed during the evening of 13th October that there had been problems with the residents of a property on Worley Road. The Council have informed us that the property concerned, which is owned by them, has been used for many years as temporary accommodation providing two flats for homeless families. In most cases there have been no problems caused to neighbours that the Council is aware of. However two families housed there recently did cause some problems. These families are no longer in occupation at this property. The housing department has restructured the management of its temporary accommodation which is now managed by the housing management team. This should help avoid a similar situation in the future.

Has an impact assessment/feasibility study been completed?

The process so far has included needs identification by the Council and conducting our own in-house financial appraisal and design assessment.

The need

Is there an increased need for smaller accommodation in the District? Why is this?

We have been advised that at the end of September 2014, the Council had 113 homeless households in temporary accommodation, compared to 89 at the end of September 2013, reflecting the upward trend which has been experienced in the District.

There has been an increased demand for smaller units of affordable housing following changes to the rules by the Government on housing benefit.

In January 2012, the government changed the rules for most single people aged 25 –

35 years old. Instead of over 25s being able to claim the local housing allowance (housing benefit) for a one bedroom privately rented property, under 35s were moved onto the rate for shared accommodation, which was lower.

Another measure, fuelling demand for smaller accommodation was the removal of the 'spare room subsidy' (sometimes referred to as the 'bedroom tax') by the Government for social housing tenants from April 2013. This meant that social housing tenants whose homes had more bedrooms than they were judged to need, had their housing benefit reduced by 14% if they had one extra bedroom and by 25% if they had two or more extra bedrooms.

Changes in the local housing allowance made by central Government make it difficult for those on low incomes to access accommodation in the private rented sector. This is a particular issue in St. Albans due to property prices and the level of market rents compared to the local housing allowance rate offered.

What is the most common reason for people becoming homeless in St. Albans, and is homelessness increasing?

The most common reason for a person becoming homeless is due to eviction by family or friends (often as a result of relationship breakdown). The next most common reason is the ending of tenancies in the private rented sector.

What provision for homeless accommodation for single people already exists in the District? Where is it located?

Hightown manages three properties for single homeless people in St. Albans. All are in residential areas. Two of these are designed for residents with support needs. The other property is a night shelter. It is proposed that St. Claires would primarily focus on providing housing for individuals who do not require additional support.

There are also other properties in the District providing homeless accommodation for single people which are not managed by Hightown.

The Council has advised that it has 91 units of temporary accommodation for homeless households including two small hostels, mobile homes and other self-contained accommodation. Most are located in St. Albans. The size of units ranges from bedsits to three bedroom properties. The Council uses this accommodation flexibly as more than one unit may be used for larger households and even one bed properties are not solely used for single people and may be used for a person with a single child. North Herts Homes (another housing association) manages Brandon Mews in St. Albans, which provides 23 units of accommodation including 15 single units. This is used in the same way as above and receives all referrals from the Council.

How has the Council assessed that this type of accommodation is needed and how does it fit with the Council's homelessness strategy?

The Council has advised us that this type of accommodation is needed because of the increase in numbers of households requiring temporary accommodation. This has increased from 31 in March 2011 to 119 in October 2014. There are currently eight households in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. The Council's Homelessness Strategy (available on their website) is supported by the Homelessness Contingency Plan developed in 2011. This is reviewed regularly by Council Officers to respond to the upward changes in the numbers approaching the Council or requiring temporary accommodation. One of the contingencies in this plan is the requirement for additional temporary accommodation and this proposal, if it goes ahead, would assist.

Other options considered **What other options has Hightown considered for the building?**

Initially, Hightown investigated converting the building into self-contained flats for families. However, this option was not financially viable.

Scheme details

Would levels of parking change?

No - The level of parking would remain unchanged under these proposals. As the levels of staffing would be lower for a HMO than a Care Home this should allow more spaces for residents parking to be available in the current car park.

Are the plans really suitable for shared living? Should the residents not be entitled to ensuite rooms like student accommodation?

Although desirable, there is no requirement for HMO's to provide ensuite rooms.

Where would all the cooking fumes go?

Extractor fans would be provided in each bedroom to remove cooking fumes. These have been sited to avoid impacting upon neighbouring gardens.

Are there any plans to upgrade the pavement on Folly Lane?

No – this is a Change of Use planning application and so no changes to the external areas would be taking place, with the exception of removing the conservatory.

What arrangements would be put in place for those residents who smoke?

Typically, residents are allowed to smoke in their room. There would also be a greater terrace area to the rear of the building once the conservatory has been removed, allowing residents to smoke

outside if they wish. The building would meet all current fire safety standards and a comprehensive assessment of the risk would be undertaken.

Planning

Who from the County Council and the local Council have you been in contact with to date and what was the nature of the discussions?

Our discussions with Hertfordshire County Council were prior to the care home being closed, when they informed us that they were decommissioning the service and rehousing the residents. Since then we have been in discussion with the Council's Housing Team – mainly David Reavill (Strategic Housing Manager) and Karen Dragovic (Head of Housing). We have also been in discussion with the Council's HMO Licencing Officer.

We did attend a pre-application meeting with the Council Planning Department earlier in the year to discuss whether a new building could be constructed in the St. Claires' car park. This discussion formed part of our design options appraisal and we did not discuss the change of use to a HMO at this meeting. Although the Council planners were not against the principle of a new building, this was dependent upon the final use of St. Claires. The current proposals do not include building on the car park.

Have the Children's Centre, the NHS, Aboyne School and Muriel Green Pre-School been informed of the proposals?

A letter will be sent to these parties along with a copy of this information sheet.

How can local residents formally register their views on the proposals?

As a standard part of the planning process, local residents would be able to formally register their views on the

proposals. As the final decision on the use of St. Claires will be made by the Council's Planning Department or their relevant committee, this is the best avenue to register any feedback.

What are the key dates in the development process, including the anticipated date of completion and first occupation?

How soon the works start would ultimately depend on the length of time it takes for the planning application to get through the planning process and for Hightown to agree with the Council a referrals policy.

If the final decision is to approve the planning application and to proceed with the project, then, from the date of approval we would anticipate 15 weeks before any work starts. This is to allow time for working drawings to be produced, for the work to go out to tender and then for a contractor to be instructed. Once the work starts we would anticipate that it would take around 20 weeks until completion.

Once the work is completed it would be inspected by Building Control and the HMO Licencing Officer. Once the building is signed-off first occupation could be within two weeks. Prior to the first residents moving in the staff team would be introduced to the neighbours.

Relationship with the council Is there not a conflict of interest between Councillor Ellis being on Hightown's Board and being the Council Housing Portfolio Holder?

As far as Hightown is concerned, it has been our policy for many years to seek Councillor nominations from St. Albans and Dacorum Councils to be co-opted on to the Hightown Board.

The current St. Albans Council nomination is Councillor Brian Ellis. The purpose of this arrangement is to demonstrate a

degree of accountability and transparency to the elected members of the Councils in whose areas Hightown holds the majority of its housing stock. Hightown does not believe that it receives any more favourable treatment from local authorities where a Councillor representative sits on the Hightown Board and this is certainly not the purpose of inviting local authorities to nominate Councillors for co-option. The Hightown Board currently consists of 13 members - all of whom are unpaid.