# when everyone has a home: People prevention and

People, prevention and partnership



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#### **About Housing Rights**

# when everyone has a home

#### We are Housing Rights

We have been helping people in Northern Ireland deal with housing and homelessness problems since 1964.

We help people with their housing and homelessness problems through our helplines and advice work. We use their experiences to bring change and improvements with our policy work. We educate and inform others working in the housing and advice sectors to help their clients.

We help people in Northern Ireland live in safe, suitable, and affordable homes. We provide services for the public and professionals working in housing and advice services.

#### What we do

Our services include:

- · housing advice via our helpline
- online housing advice and information via our website
- advocacy and legal representation including a Housing Possession Court Duty Scheme
- housing mediation
- advice and support for people in or leaving prison
- specialist support for young people at risk of homelessness
- · advice for landlords on good practice and complying with the law
- support and capacity building for generalist advice agencies through our Community Housing Advice Partnership service
- research, policy and participation services to positively influence decisions made about housing
- · homelessness training and events for housing and advice professionals

#### How we developed our strategic plan

Our strategic plan was developed over ten months and approved by our board in March 2024. Our approach centred on three key principles:

#### **Outcome focused**

We are committed to making and measuring impact through our work. For this reason, we developed our plan using an outcome-focused strategic planning framework. We acknowledge the Northern Ireland Executive's outcome-focused direction as outlined in the recent draft Programmes for Government.

We also see how the approach and content of this plan will have 'read across' to other strategic planning frameworks. We view our plan as having sufficient 'flex' to be relevant to the work of all major stakeholders. In developing this plan, we invested in a process which was robust and in keeping with our values and ambitions.

#### **Evidence led**

We have been rigorous in our strategic assessment. We spent time looking at the external and internal environment within which our work happens, assessing the opportunities and challenges for our work in the period of this plan, and beyond.

We considered our strengths and areas where we are best placed to improve lives as well as those areas, we need to work at to build our sustainability. Crucially, we carefully studied the needs of the communities we serve and looked at the best available evidence to determine how these needs may change in the years to come.

#### **Shaped by people**

In developing this plan, our focus has been on people. In addition to consulting widely with external stakeholders, our staff team and board spent time working together to understand, consider and review our plan.

This provided insight, challenge, and support to allow us to make strategic choices about our direction and where and how we would focus our efforts.

### How we developed our strategic plan

We are especially proud that this plan is user-centred; with a strong focus on involving people with lived experience of poor housing and homelessness.

In 2023, we held four workshops with 50 'experts by experience' in Belfast, Dungannon and Hydebank Wood College. We involved people of diverse genders, age ranges and backgrounds. Some of them knew about us and had used our services, some had not. We hosted:

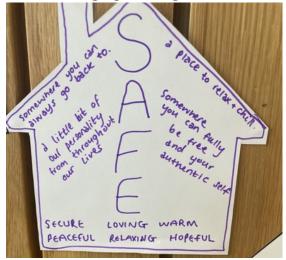
- participants from minority ethnic communities
- people navigating the asylum system
- people in prison

The workshops looked at:

- the importance of 'home'
- · housing challenges over the next five years
- how and why people use services and their preferences

We also asked people how we could better involve them in our work. The insights from these workshops reflect the strategic choices we have made in our strategy. 'Experts by experience: how you shaped our plan', a document recognising the involvement of experts by experience in developing this strategy is available at

www.housingrights.org.uk





Photos from workshops involving experts by experience. We used interactive methods to explore 'home' and housing challenges.

#### Introducing our strategy

#### Chair and Chief Executive's foreword

With 60 years' experience, Housing Rights can conclusively say that high-quality, independent advice changes lives.

First established in 1964, in response to the appalling housing difficulties linked to widespread slum clearance in Belfast, our founders understood the urgency of addressing the immediate hardship many in the city faced.

Six decades later, we work throughout Northern Ireland within communities and across sectors with our services extending from advice, advocacy and representation to policy and capacity building. While our work has grown, and the backdrop has changed significantly, many people still have trouble finding and keeping a home that meets their needs.

Poverty <u>remains</u> inextricably linked with homelessness. Housing conditions, while dramatically improved overall, <u>still</u> have a debilitating impact on health and wellbeing for some people on the lowest incomes. Law and policy protections can and should go <u>further</u>.

#### The communities we serve face real and pressing challenges.

The experience of the pandemic and the economic shock which followed have not been felt evenly across society. Recent research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that housing costs take up three-and-a-half times as much of the budgets of low-income households compared to those on high incomes, with significant implications for living standards.

The stubborn challenge of poverty is now matched by a profound crisis in housing supply. Over the last twenty years, there has been a 72% increase in the number of people in need of social housing. In the same period, the number of homes allocated to those on the waiting list has fallen by one-third. Last year, there were more temporary accommodation placements than at any time since records began.

#### Introducing our strategy

New threats, posed by the impact of climate change, risk deepening long-standing inequalities in housing. Extreme weather events, including increased flooding are increasing and we want to ensure that those most in need of our services are not left behind in the 'race to net zero'. This provides a new lens for our focus on affordability and poor housing standards.

#### Our work has never been more needed.

We recognise the challenge ahead, but we are encouraged by our track record in effecting positive change. This strategic plan recommits us to our vision that everyone should have a home. We remain steadfast in our determination to provide quality services which prevent homelessness and help people with their housing problems.

We are values-led and solution-focused. This strategic plan sets out our ambitions to achieve change. We understand that <u>how</u> we work is as important as what we work on and so our strategic plan is shaped by a focus on <u>people</u>, <u>prevention</u> and <u>partnership</u>.

We also know that we must continue to be agile, to innovate, so we can best meet the needs of the communities we serve. We will shape inclusive, prevention-focused services by working with and through communities. Developments in technology and insights from data will help us make the best use of limited resources. We will strengthen our partnerships with others to deliver the best services.

As we look forward, we feel the same urgency and commitment as our founders did to ensuring everyone has a home. We are grateful to all those who shared insights, experience, and evidence in shaping our strategic plan.

We remain committed to our work with you in the years ahead.

**Rose Crozier** 

2.05°

**Chair, Housing Rights board** 

Kate McCauley

Kate M'Cauley

**Chief Executive Officer** 

# Our vision is a society when everyone has a home

#### Home is more than bricks and mortar.

Our work for the last 60 years underlines the debilitating impact of not having a home. The damage is complex and far-reaching for people, for relationships and for society. In recommitting to our vision, we are emboldened by the words of people with lived experience of housing problems and homelessness who shared their insights about what home means to them, in the development of our plan.



Places where I have been staying are not home

It is not a home if there is a threat that I might have to leave it at any time We feel sad because we have a daughter with autism and our house does not meet her needs

Home just means my hometown, I don't have a house

Home is a safety net, love, my everything, where I can be myself **Somewhere that lets you be you** 

My house is not a home Home is where love is safety Affordable Freedom love Relaxing

Image: Words experts by experience used during workshops to describe 'home'.

# Our mission is to improve lives by helping people to find and keepa home

To do this we provide independent specialist advice, advocacy and support. We are steadfast in our determination to prevent homelessness and help people with housing problems. Through our work, we seek to influence, innovate and improve standards for everyone.

#### **Our focus**

# Our focus is on PEOPLE

#### We will:

- work hard to make it easier for people who need our services, and those supporting them, to get expert help to improve their housing circumstances
- use our position to improve the lives of people facing housing problems and homelessness — strengthening the evidence and widening the spaces in which decisions are made so that policy makers prioritise peoples' lived experience
- support a culture which values our people through development, wellbeing, fostering innovation and active leadership — we could not do this work without the commitment, expertise and talent of our team

# Our focus is on PREVENTION

#### We will:

- continue to prioritise homelessness prevention where this is not possible, we will work to ensure that the experience of homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring
- build on our strength and expertise in prevention to shape inclusive services with communities most in need of targeted assistance, including women, young people and minority ethnic communities.

# Ourfocusis on PARTNERSHIP

#### We will:

- continue to work with trusted partners recognising that we can do more when we work together in the service of communities
- create new and deepen existing partnerships with community, public and private partners to pioneer better, more sustainable approaches to achieve our vision

## **Our values**

# Our values guide the work of Housing Rights.

These core principles shape the standards of our conduct and behaviour in our interactions with:

- people using our services
- external stakeholders
- staff and volunteers

Independence	We are a charity governed by an independent board. In our work we are independent of others, and we use our position to improve decision making.	
Equality	We treat people fairly. We challenge inequality to promote justice.	
Cooperation	We work together and with others to achieve shared goals.	
Quality	We are specialists. We strive for excellence in everything we do.	
Respect	We are inclusive. We treat people with dignity and compassion.	
Agility	We are passionate about making a difference. We will change and adapt to best respond to need.	

### The challenges we face

#### People in Northern Ireland are struggling to meet housing costs



320,000 people live in poverty, representing 17% of the NI population



More than 1 in 5 people in Northern Ireland experience fuel poverty



20% of people in NI are overindebted, the highest rate of all regions in the UK (15%)



26% of low-income families say they find it hard to cope with their mortgage repayments



As of August 2023, average NI rent prices have been rising in at a rate of 7.3% — the highest in the UK

More people are spending too long in temporary accommodation

The supply of social housing is shrinking



There were 10,253
placements in temporary
accommodation in
2022/23 — a 206%
increase on 2018/19
(3,354)



4,569 children live in temporary accommodation in Northern Ireland (July 2023)



There were 8,218
social homes
allocated in 2022/23
— the lowest in 20
years



120, 891 social homes were lost through the House Sales Scheme between 1979-2018

#### Lack of security leads to homelessness



Losing rental accommodation remains in the top three reasons for homelessness

Poor housing impacts negatively on health and wellbeing



Over **53** million — the annual cost of unfit homes to the NHS in Northern Ireland



2,892 households approached the Housing Executive for homelessness support due to loss of rental accommodation in 2022/23 — the highest since 2007/08

The demand for social housing is rising



Over 45,615 people are on the social housing waiting list: 74% in housing stress

— the highest level since 1993

Much more needs to be done to improve housing conditions and protect against extreme weather events



About 45,000 properties (~5%) are at major risk of flooding — expected annual damages for homes an average of £21.2 million (NI Flood Risk Assessment 2018)



62% of Northern Ireland's housing stock is below band 'C' energy performance certificate (EPC) rating

### The change we make

Our theory of change tells the story of how we make change and have impact. It shows how, through our work, we deliver change for people. The impact of our work directly supports progress towards a number of Programme for Government outcomes/priorities.

Our strategic plan for 2024-29 recommits us to this theory of change. We can evidence that our work produces the changes identified for people.

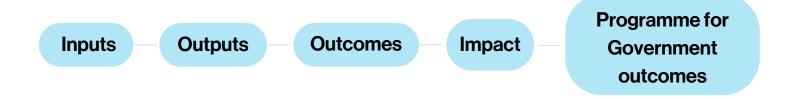
Our new strategic plan is about maximising this change. Our focus will be on how we maximise the impact of our efforts.

Our theory of change is a living document. During the period of our plan, we will continue to revisit it and the theories of change we have developed for each of our services.

We will make decisions about where to place our resources and how to deliver our activities based on how they best service the change we wish to make.

Our strategic plan outlines how we can best affect positive change in three broad areas:

- Improving lives through the delivery of our services
- Positively influencing policy and practice by ensuring decisions are informed by evidence and experience
- Ensuring we are an organisation that is up to the challenge: resilient, sustainable and innovative



### Theory of change

#### **Impact**



People live in good quality, affordable and sustainable homes that meet their needs



#### **Outcomes**



#### People we support:



know how to access accommodation



have the information they need to make good housing choices



are better able to meet their housing costs



are prevented from becoming homeless



live in better quality housing



feel better



can sustain their tenancies

#### **Practitioners:**



have up-to-date housing knowledge



are equipped to give housing advice



gain accredited qualifications

# **Everyone:**



benefits from improved law and policy



#### **Outputs**





digital advice



helplines



participation and engagement



training



policy work



mediation



casework



practitioner support



online housing advice



legal advice



inforrmation resources







income and funding



premises and equipment



# Our VISION is a society when everyone has a home

Our FOCUS is on:

**People** 

**Prevention** 

Our **VALUES** are:

Independence

**Equality** 

Cooperation

Strategic **THEMES**:

Improve lives through service delivery

Positively influence decisions through evidence and experience

 People live in good quality, affordable and sustainable homes that meet their needs.

Strategic OUTCOMES:

2. People's
experience of
homelessness, when
it does occur, is that it
is rare, brief, and nonrecurring.

3. People have the help they need at the right time, in a way that best meets their needs.

4. Decisions made about housing and homelessness are informed by the best evidence.

5. Experts by experience are supported to be meaningfully involved in decisions which affect their housing circumstances.

6. Housing standards are improved by working with others to promote good practice, compliance, and quality.

IMPROVE LIVES

INFLUENCE POLICY
AND PRACTICE

# Our MISSION is to improve lives by helping people to find and keep a home

**Partnership** 

Quality

Respect

**Agility** 

Strengthen our capacity so we are up to the challenge

7. Our people are committed experts, motivated and skilled in our areas of specialism.

8. Our organisation is sustainable, value for money and social value focused.

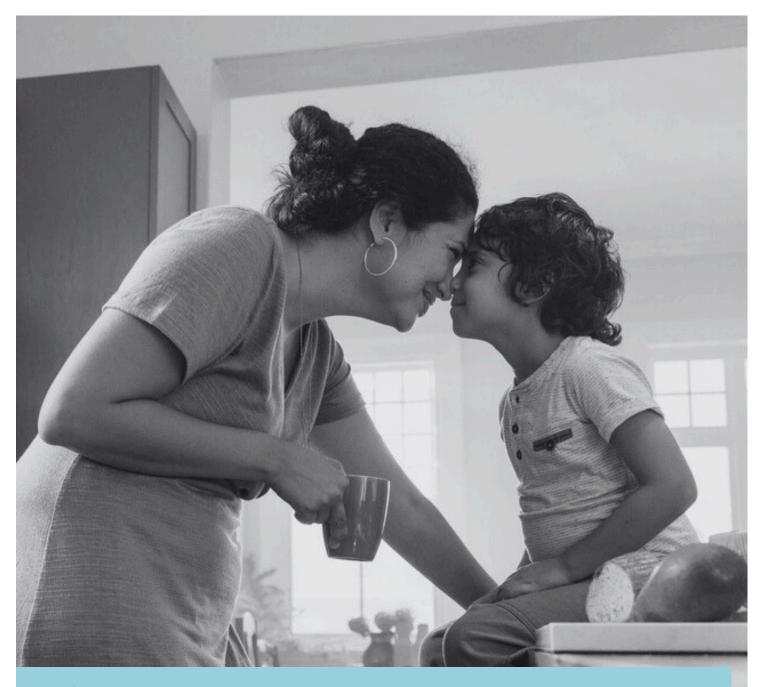
9. Our work is innovative, pioneering and collaborative.

# Our IMPACT:

People live in good quality, affordable and sustainable homes that meet their needs



## **Improve lives**



"The Commission envisions a country in which... a greater proportion of society's problems are stopped before they start, with civil society better able to focus on prevention than on crisis, and with all three sectors working together to solve the totemic issues faced by all. And when crises do inevitably occur...people emerge from those crises more swiftly and less affected, as a result of a stronger, more responsive and better-led civil society playing its part to its fullest."

The Law Family Commission on Civil Society, April 2023

#### We will improve lives through the delivery of our services.

At Housing Rights, we understand the pervasive links between housing circumstances, poverty and wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic shock have weakened efforts to support people to find and keep a home that meets their needs. The cost of living crisis and persistent shortage of social and affordable homes have deepened the problems facing many communities that need our support most.

Over the next five years, we will work towards the following strategic outcomes:

- People live in good quality, affordable and sustainable homes that meet their needs.
- People's experience of homelessness when it does occur, is that it is rare, brief, and non-recurring.
- People have the help they need at the right time, in a way that best meets their needs.

Within each outcome, we will improve lives for people by prioritising our efforts to achieve the following <u>strategic priorities</u>:

People live in good quality, affordable and sustainable homes that meet their needs.

Priority (a): Prevent homelessness

Priority (b): Improve housing circumstances for those in need

We are determined to prioritise homelessness prevention. To do this, we will work with families and individuals who, without our intervention, would be in danger of losing their homes.

Through our work, we will advocate for people who need help to secure physical improvements to their home, resolve disputes with their landlord, agent or lender and improve people's financial circumstances so that they can meet their housing costs.

#### **Improve lives**

People's experience of homelessness when it does occur, is that it is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

Priority (a): Alleviate homelessness

Priority (b): Support people most at risk of repeat homelessness

We recognise that for people who are already without a home, support can also make a difference by ensuring that their experience of homelessness is the least damaging experience possible.

Through our intervention, and work with partners across sectors, we want homelessness to become rare, brief and non-recurring.

Our services will work to alleviate homelessness and to support those most at risk of repeat homelessness through targeted interventions, for example, people leaving custody or care settings.

Through our work, we will also advocate for people who need help to secure physical improvements to their home, resolve disputes with their landlord, letting agent or lender and improve people's financial circumstances so that they can meet their housing costs.

"[The at court adviser] made us feel we could cope as we have never been in a position like this before! Without their help we would be on the street.

Now we have a bit of breathing space."

A person supported by our Housing Possession Court Duty Scheme

3.

People have the help they need at the right time, in a way that best meets their needs.

Priority (a): Ensure people know where to go to get help with their housing problems

Priority (b): Ensure people have access to timely, quality advice in a way that best meets their needs

Priority (c): Ensure people have the information they need to make decisions about their housing circumstances

We know we have a responsibility to provide services in a way that best meets the needs of the communities we serve.

We want people to know where to go to get help and we want them to feel informed and empowered to make decisions which affect their homes.

We have made critical strides forward to open more and better ways for people to access help.

We will continue to make the best use of technology through our digital offering and by ensuring a multi-channel approach to our services with continued access to telephone and face-to-face support.

## Influence policy and practice



"The work of Housing Rights is commendable. When they saw the danger, they contacted us all straight away. Some members were contacted, even before the bill was debated, about the problems with what the bill is now designed to do. They have worked tirelessly to try to rescue the situation."

Paul Frew MLA, March 2022

# We will positively influence policy and practice by ensuring decisions are informed by evidence and experience.

Housing Rights cares about creating lasting change.

While much progress has been made, the housing and homelessness issues facing policy makers and practitioners remain immense.

Over the next five years, we will work to ensure the following strategic outcomes:

- Decisions made about housing and homelessness are informed by the best evidence.
- Experts by experience are supported to be meaningfully involved in decisions which affect their housing cirumstances.
- Housing standards are improved by working with others to promote good practice, compliance, and quality.

Within each outcome, we will work to positively influence policy and practice by prioritising our efforts to achieve the following <u>strategic priorities</u>:



Priority (a): Comprehensively evidence people's housing needs to ensure they are prioritised by policy makers

Priority (b): Communicate the evidence from Housing Rights' work to influence decisions made by key actors in the housing sector

Priority (c): Secure positive change where existing laws or policy negatively impact those affected by poor housing and homelessness

## Influence policy and practice

Inadequate housing supply, poor standards, and weakening affordability continue to present real challenges to low-income households.

The emerging focus on the 'race to net zero' must also ensure that those households most badly affected by energy-inefficient homes and high housing costs are not left behind and that there is a 'just transition'.

The pathway to progress on all these issues is clearer when evidence and clear data inform decisions.

We will build on our position as solution-focused policy experts, ensuring the experiences of people using our advice services inform our contribution.

Over the period of this plan, we will strengthen the evidence base decision makers use making improved use of the data we hold to inform policy and create change.

"Homelessness is one of the most tragic forms of poverty [...] A new approach is needed that includes a commitment to improving people's lives through data and evidence as its centrepiece."

Centre for Homelessness Impact, 2020

Experts by experience are supported to be meaningfully involved in decisions which affect their housing circumstances.

Priority (a): Ensure the experiences of people affected by poor housing and homelessness influence decisions made by government

Priority (b): Widen decision-making spaces so that people affected by poor housing and homelessness are meaningfully involved in making decisions about housing and homelessness

Priority (c): Increase the involvement of experts by experience in decisions we make about the design and delivery of our services

"Don't listen to what I have to say and throw it away."

Expert by experience, September 2023

Housing Rights values and respects the contribution of experts by experience. Policy makers increasingly seek perspectives and insights from people with experience of poor housing and homelessness. Over the period of this plan, we want to:

- widen the decision-making spaces in which this contribution is sought
- support the meaningful involvement of experts by experience, and
- ensure such insight leads to better policy making and service delivery

As an organisation, we will show leadership in this area in our own service delivery and design processes.

"There is an obvious and significant overlap between people who experience poor housing and homelessness and those who face barriers to participation, because the factors that contribute to inequalities also often constitute the barriers that prevent people from taking part, such as poverty, education, confidence, work and caring responsibilities, language and literacy barriers, and disabilities."

Involve UK research for Housing Rights, October 2022

#### Influence policy and practice

Improve housing standards by working with others to promote good practice, compliance, and quality.

Priority (a): Promote our role as the 'go to' provider of independent specialist housing advice

Priority (b): Support practitioners to provide the best outcomes for peoples' housing needs

Priority (c): Promote good practice and encourage statutory compliance across all tenures

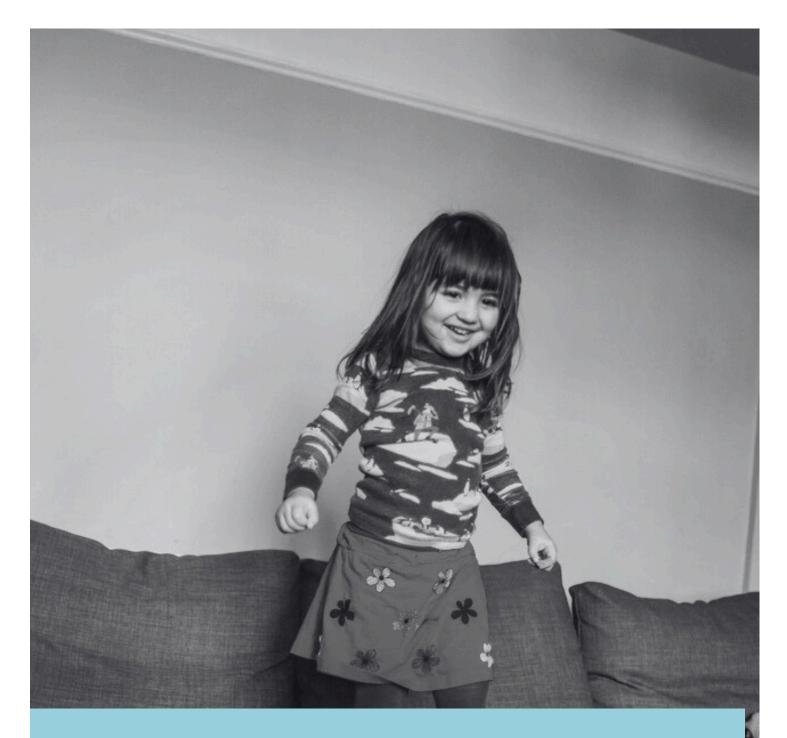
Priority (d): Advocate for the adoption of quality standards in housing advice provision

Housing Rights recognises the important roles played by landlords, lenders, and other practitioners in preventing homelessness and improving housing conditions.

We will build on our position as the 'go to' provider of housing advice and continue to promote good practice, compliance, and support practitioners to deliver the best outcomes for people.

"I am a landlord of 3 properties and over the last couple of years I have had a number of problems arise [...] Each time I have been able to phone the housing advice line for expert and impartial advice. The advisors have never rushed me, allowing time to truly understand my issues and have then given me expert advice, that has always given me the confidence and a way to move forward, in very difficult times."

Landlord Advice helpline user, August 2023



"This project provides peer and volunteer-led housing advice for minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. It illustrates how barriers to justice can be addressed by providing services that are culturally sensitive and appropriate for people of different cultural or language backgrounds."

'Innovation in Housing Advice in the UK Private Rented Sector' report by UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, May 2021

# We will strengthen our capacity to be an organisation that is up to the challenge. We will be resilient, sustainable and innovative.

We are operating in an increasingly challenging environment.

We expect the need for our services to continue to grow over the period of this plan while also anticipating that the financial pressures associated with delivery will remain. Like many organisations, the impact of the pandemic and the subsequent financial shock have meant we have had to adjust our working practices.

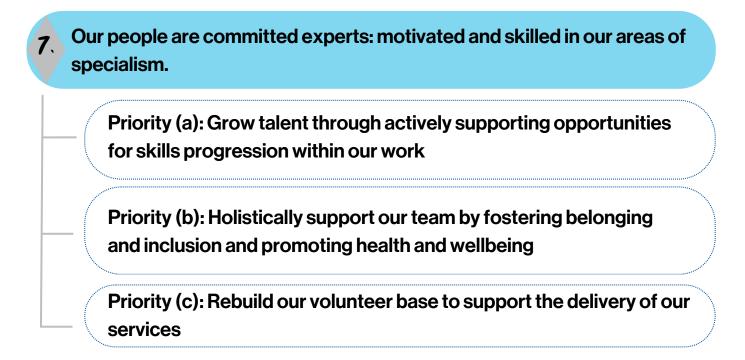
But we are resilient. Our strength is in our energised and expert people, who put their skills at the service of the communities we support. Our strength is in our track record of delivering high-quality, value for money services which are agile and responsive to need.

Over the period of this plan, we will build on these areas of strength and harness our resilience, sustainability, and innovation in service of our mission.

Over the next five years, we will work to ensure the following <u>strategic outcomes</u>:

- Our people are committed experts: motivated and skilled in our areas of specialism.
- Our organisation is sustainable, value for money and social value focused.
- Our work is innovative, pioneering and collaborative.

Within each outcome, we will work to be up to the challenge by prioritising our efforts to achieve the following <u>strategic priorities</u>:

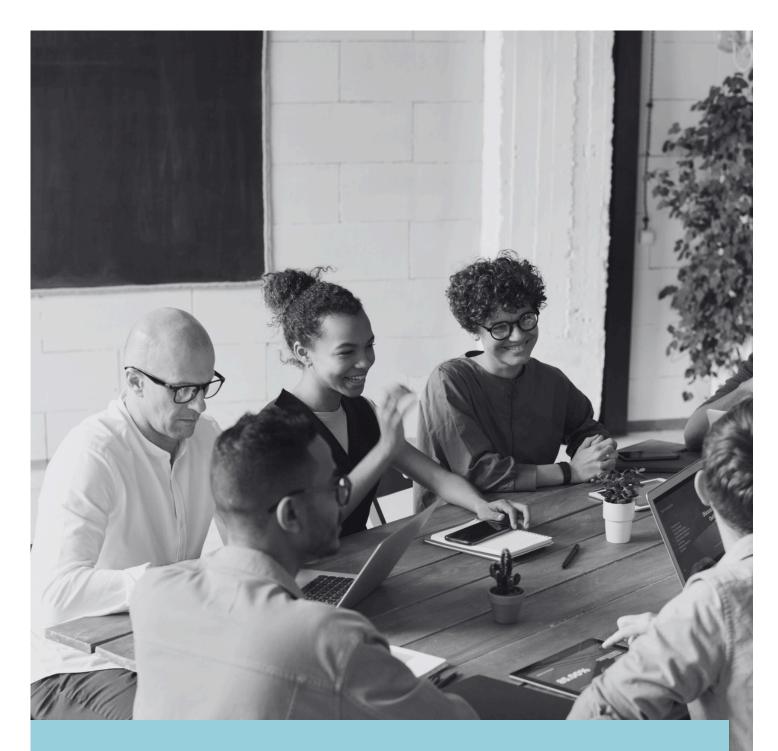


We are committed to a culture that values and supports our people. We will fully resource a programme of learning and development, supplemented through active talent development.

We will actively express our commitment to our values of Respect and Equality by promoting a positive workplace with a comprehensive health and wellbeing programme.

During the period of the plan, in recognition of our commitment to a diverse and inclusive workplace, we will become signatories to the Diversity Mark Charter and apply for accreditation.

We remain committed to recovering and strengthening our volunteer base, which was affected by the pandemic. During the period of the plan, we will secure Investors in Volunteering accreditation.



"The results of the survey strongly indicate that staff are passionate about their role, feel challenged in their job role and feel fairly treated and supported. This provides a positive foundation for Housing Rights moving forward."

Housing Rights independently commissioned staff engagement survey, May 2023

8. Our organisation is sustainable, value for money and social value focused.

Priority (a): Diversify income generation to support the longer-term sustainability of the organisation

Priority (b): Adopt approaches which better reflect our commitment to environmental sustainability

Priority (c): Ensure our premises serve the needs of the organisation now and into the future

Priority (d): Improve how we demonstrate our social value impact

We want to operate sustainably in a way that meets the needs of our users and key stakeholders, demonstrating our commitment to the environment.

We will continue to aim to attract funding from a range of sources on a full cost recovery basis. We will be responsible and make the best use of both our financial and non-financial resources.

We will publish our environmental policy and encourage new approaches to reduce our consumption and minimise our impact on the environment. We will ensure our premises provide a welcoming, positive environment, accessible to the people we support and meeting the needs of the organisation sustainably.

We will explore how, in partnership with others, we can deepen the value we contribute to society and we will improve how we demonstrate this impact.

"The organisation continues to demonstrate a high level of compliance with the Lexcel standard."

Our work is innovative, pioneering and collaborative.

Priority (a): Ensure our governance and support infrastructure meet our needs now and into the future

Priority (b): Innovate to future-proof services so they meet the evolving needs of people affected by poor housing and homelessness

Priority (c): Work in partnership across sectors to achieve our vision

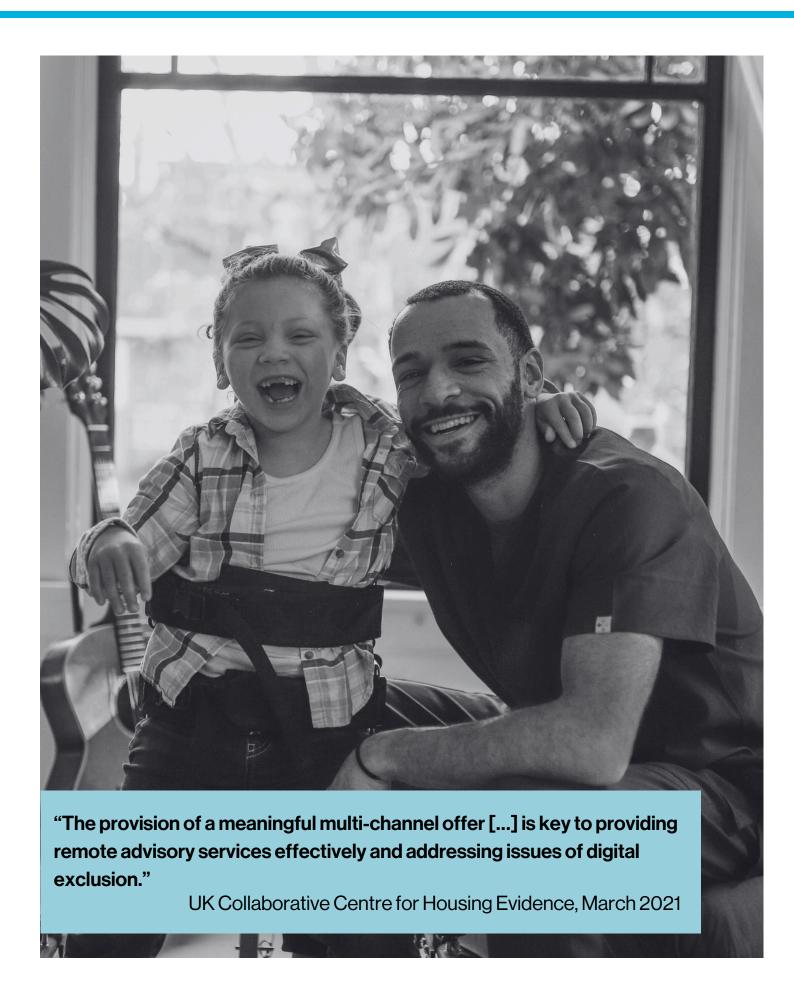
Our governance and support infrastructure will continue to enable our progress. Robust, dynamic approaches to assure compliance and quality will be the hallmarks of our approach.

We will continue to pioneer services that are agile and respond to existing and emerging needs of communities.

We are especially committed to communities whose needs are not always fully met by housing and homelessness services, including women, young people and minority ethnic communities.

We value our connections and partnership working. We will deepen existing and develop new strategic partnerships across sectors, helping us to ensure that everyone has a home.

## **Implementation**



#### **Implementation**

This plan contains the strategic outcomes and priorities which will guide the direction of Housing Rights over the next five years.

To support this, we will produce an annual business plan containing performance indicators, targets and key actions under each strategic priority. This will allow us to monitor our progress as we work towards helping more people live in good quality, affordable, sustainable homes.

Our board will monitor regular updates on our progress and we will publish updates on our progress on our website as annual impact reports.



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