

**HOUSING
TECHNOLOGY**
2016 CONFERENCE AND
EXECUTIVE FORUM

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2016

1-3 MARCH 2016

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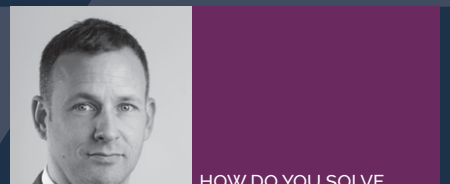
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Paying to stay or staying to pay?

The government's double whammies of universal credit and pay to stay can be thought of as two sides of the same coin in terms of their impacts on housing providers' operations and financial performance. We recognise that universal credit and pay to stay are obviously distinct areas, but there are similarities in terms of outside influences and over-lapping timescales.

As is now widely accepted, the most immediate impact of universal credit will be an increase in arrears for almost every housing provider, with a knock-on effect on cashflows, budgets and banking covenants. That's on top of the extra administrative resources likely to be needed by housing providers to make sure that, first, as many tenants as possible can handle their monthly budgeting themselves and, second, deal with and account for rental payments that could arrive on any day of the month once universal credit has been introduced.

While pay to stay is unlikely to affect housing providers' arrears, it is very likely to impose a huge administrative burden on them without much financial gain in return (see the article on page 4 from Chris Deery, Solihull Community Housing's head of ICT).

So, with universal credit and pay to stay both likely to have little net benefit to housing providers' financial performance, what's the best course of action? As ever, technology can help.

The most important thing for housing providers to do is to use technology such that they can scale up boring and repetitive administrative tasks without a corresponding increase in costs. As a simplistic example, the solution to dealing with, say, a five-fold increase in arrears isn't to hire five times as many people to chase those arrears. There is a plethora of software available that can help you automate the resolution of the majority of arrears cases, leaving just the most complex or intractable cases for human interventions and manual processing.

Leading the way with the internet of things

Readers may have noticed that Housing Technology has been covering the growth of the internet of things more frequently over the past few issues. This is because we believe that housing providers, possibly for the first time, are in a unique position to completely change the domestic technology landscape.

At the moment the majority of IoT-related devices and software, in a housing context, are being sold direct to consumers (B2C) on a piecemeal basis, albeit sometimes via resellers to allow for scale and reduced distribution costs. After all, the owners of No.10 Acacia Avenue have no connection with the owners of No.12 Acacia Avenue, apart from being neighbours. Therefore, IoT suppliers need to make a very large number of small sales in order to achieve the widespread use of IoT in a domestic setting.

By contrast, housing providers are, almost without exception, the only organisations in the country with direct access to large networks of properties under their control (unlike utility companies and their networks of customers). A single housing provider could, for example, roll out cheap IoT-based humidity or temperature sensors to thousands of its properties at a stroke. The same process in the private sector (for, say, Nest or Hive) would be much more expensive and complicated because it would involve thousands of discrete decisions by individual consumers.

With new IoT devices and software becoming more widely available and better understood, now is the time for housing providers to see how the IoT could transform their operations.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS



**HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2016
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1-3 MARCH 2016, OXFORD
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EDITOR
Alastair Tweedie
alastair@housing-technology.com
Twitter [housingtech](#)

PUBLISHER
George Grant
george.grant@housing-technology.com
Twitter [tibcomp](#)

DESIGN & PRODUCTION
Jo Euston-Moore
design@housing-technology.com

EDITORIAL AND NEWS
news@housing-technology.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Subscribe at www.housing-technology.com
or email: subs@housing-technology.com

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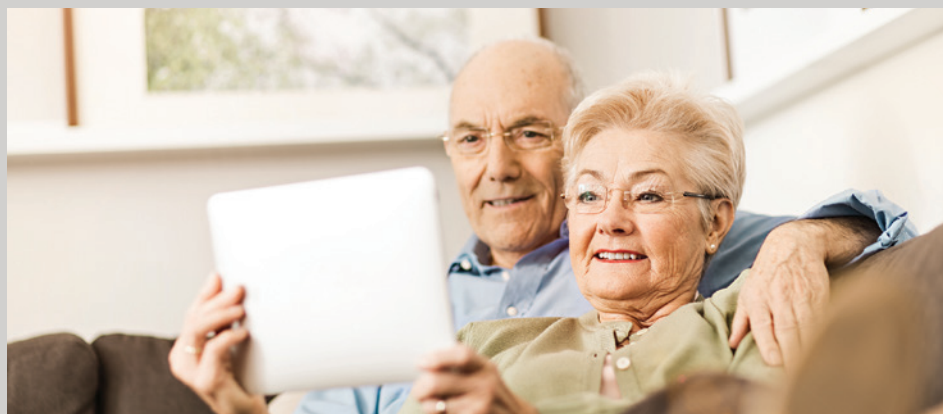


AAREON HMS CHOSEN BY ALMOND HOUSING

Almond Housing Association is in the middle of implementing a wide range of new business applications from Aareon, based around a main Aareon QL housing management system, as part of its plan to achieve a more integrated ICT strategy across housing, finance, HR and mobile working.

Almond Housing employed consultants Arneil Johnson to advise on the procurement process, taking into account the housing provider's requirement to accommodate the specific needs of its 140 factored owners and landscaping services for a further 50 owners in mixed-tenure estates.

Craig Porter, head of finance, Almond Housing Association, said, "Throughout the process of selecting a new ICT solution, we wanted a system that would enable us to streamline processes and



allow us to free up staff, enabling them to focus more on our tenants' needs. By selecting Aareon QL, we have bought a system that will enable us to improve our interactions with our tenants, achieve efficiencies and help future-proof us in the delivery of our business objectives."

The procurement process began in October 2014, with Aareon chosen as

Almond Housing's preferred supplier in July 2015. The actual implementation began in October 2015. The housing provider is scheduled to go live with Aareon QL Personnel & Payroll in April 2016, followed by the rest of the Aareon housing and finance management solution in October 2016.

GREENFIELDS IMPROVES VOIDS WITH ORCHARD



Orchard Information Systems has been working with Greenfields Community Housing to improve the efficiency of the housing provider's voids. It has done so by modifying the standard voids processes within its housing management system, Orchard Housing.

Amy Deer, business solutions manager, Greenfields Community Housing, said, "We have significantly improved our processes using Orchard's voids and lettings module and bespoke workflows. The module gave us the ability to add bespoke events into the process, to move the sequence on from 'keys' through to 'ready to let', and provide visibility of the status of voids to different teams who manage the various processes.

"We have created a workflow using Orchard's business process management suite so that we could adapt the voids process to meet our requirements. Using this, we have developed 'worktray' items that notify teams of particular void events. Throughout the life of the void, alerts are used so that teams are notified of the progress so there are fewer delays and shorter void periods."

Anna Paxton, neighbourhoods and lettings team leader, Greenfields Community Housing, said, "Orchard has given us much more transparency between teams. We can now see what stage each team has reached in the void process and the system has helped us to all communicate much better."

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THE 'PAY TO STAY' CONSULTATION BEGINS...

Chris Deery, Head of ICT, Solihull Community Housing

The government has launched its consultation on the new compulsory Pay to Stay scheme for England (www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pay-to-stay-high-income-social-tenants). The consultation is open to anyone with an interest in these proposals and will last until 20 November 2015. There is actually only four pages of any real content in the document and I strongly suggest that everyone takes the time to read it, says Chris Deery, head of ICT at Solihull Community Housing.

I work in housing IT and I have very much a systems perspective on this issue. I will leave it to others to debate the moral and ethical issues. But I believe that actually making the scheme work in an effective and efficient way will require an IT solution and it is that viewpoint that I would like to contribute to the debate. To that end, I have been consulting the Capita User group to understand the impact from an IT systems perspective (Capita represents around 110 housing providers using its housing management system).

The following points in relation to the consultation document have been raised:

The user group strongly believes that the proposed start date of April 2017 is unachievable from an IT systems perspective. They believe that the

assumption, on page eight of the consultation document, stating, "We expect that local authorities already have systems and processes in place that could be modified to operate the pay to stay policy" is incorrect.

Local authorities, ALMOs and housing providers will need to make major changes to their existing systems. These changes are likely to be complex, will need considerable testing, and staff working in RSLs will require training on how to use the new Pay to Stay functionality. In the first year of the scheme, it is likely that the cost of making these changes will be greater than any additional revenue collected.

Capita and its customers will need at least 18 months from the point when the government publishes the details of the new scheme and the format of any interfaces to HMRC systems before they will be able to implement the necessary systems changes. This means that even if the government was able to issue detailed specifications for how the scheme will work and agree the necessary changes to HMRC systems by January 2016, we would still not be able to implement the Pay to Stay scheme until June 2017 at the very earliest.

In reality, because the detail of the new Housing and Planning Bill could change during its passage through parliament, it is likely that the details of how the scheme will work won't be known until next summer.

The government has two specific areas that it seems to be looking for information about. The first is how the scheme can support incentives to work and the second is what the expected level of additional administrative costs will be for RSLs in calculating and collecting the additional income. This second question will be very difficult for landlords to answer because most have no idea what percentage of their tenants are actually earning over the £30,000 (£40,000 in London) threshold. But the government estimates that approximately 9 per cent of all social housing tenants in England will be paying a higher rent as a result of this change. But I think that the actual number of tenants affected could be higher than this; it is possible that any tenant who does not receive any element of housing benefits could be affected by this measure.

Maintaining the incentive to work

First, I would like to make a proposal in relation to the first question concerning maintaining the incentive to work. This

SOCIAL RENT	PAY TO STAY MULTIPLIER	PAY TO STAY RENT	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	ANNUAL INCREASES
£600	1.000	£600	£30,000	0
£600	1.090	£654	£35,000	£648
£600	1.180	£708	£40,000	£1,296
£600	1.270	£762	£45,000	£1,944
£600	1.360	£816	£50,000	£2,592
£600	1.450	£870	£55,000	£3,240
£600	1.540	£924	£60,000	£3,888
£600	1.630	£978	£65,000	£4,536
£600	1.720	£1,032	£70,000	£5,184

Note: the first row represents household incomes of £30,000 or less, the second row represents £30,001 to £35,000, the third row represents incomes between £35,001 and £40,000, etc.

THE 'PAY TO STAY' CONSULTATION BEGINS...

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proposal assumes that HMRC will not provide details of the actual earnings of individual tenants; instead for each tenancy, HMRC should provide a Pay to Stay 'multiplier'. This would be a number by which the normal social rent is multiplied in order to calculate the Pay to Stay rent. The actual values of the multipliers would be decided by HMRC and could easily be changed at any point without having to make changes to the various housing management systems.

Let's take a very simple example of a fictional property outside London where the market rent is £1,000/month, the affordable rent is £800/month and the social rent is £600/month. If the annual household income was £30,000 or less, then the multiplier value would be 1.000. Therefore, if we multiply the social rent of £600 by the multiplier of 1.000, we get a Pay to Stay rent of £600. In other words, the household would not be expected to pay any increase in its rent.

However, if the household income was £50,000/year in the example in the table opposite then the multiplier would be 1.360. This would give us a Pay to Stay rent of £600 X 1.360 = £816. Therefore, a household with a combined income of £50,000 would be paying close to the Affordable Rent figure.

The table opposite is only a simple example. In some of the more economically-deprived areas of the country, the cost of private sector rents is actually a lot closer to social rents than it is in London. The government has a view that social rents are typically set at about 60 per cent of the market rent. But this is not always true; for example, at the time of writing, a one-bedroom council flat in the B37 postcode area is being advertised for £85.70/week or about £343/month (allowing for rent free weeks) by Solihull Council.

In the same postcode area, another one-bedroom flat is being advertised at £400/month on the Rightmove property website. This is a difference of only £60/month. This means that the social rent in this postcode area is already about 85 per cent of the full market rent. If the difference between social rent and market rent is small then it becomes very important that the systems used are highly efficient and administrative costs are kept to a minimum.

HMRC would need to keep a table similar to the one above for every postcode area in England. The exact values of the multiplier would be decided by HMRC, but it should be easily possible to set these values so that a household is always better off working and to ensure that social housing doesn't actually end up costing more than private rented accommodation.

The two main advantages of this proposed approach are:

1. Landlords do not have to be given access to confidential data about tenants' earnings.
2. HMRC can easily increase or decrease the value of the multipliers to achieve their strategic objectives. So, for example, the multipliers above assume a constant rate of increase throughout the household incomes. But if HMRC felt that the amount of increase should be greater for the higher salaries, then it could easily achieve this by altering the values.

Administrative costs

I would now like to return to the second question about administrative costs. It seems to me that the administrative costs break down into two elements:

The first element is the cost of gathering income data about tenants and calculating and charging the extra Pay to Stay element of the rent. As mentioned earlier, one of the starting assumptions listed in the government's consultation document is, "We expect that local authorities already have systems and processes in place that could be modified to operate the pay to stay policy. The additional administrative resource that is likely to be required is staff time in operating the scheme". I believe that this assumption is probably wrong. Section 79(4) of the new Housing and Planning Bill says, "The regulations may provide for interest to be charged in the event of late payment". This means that housing management systems would need to be able to calculate the interest due on some elements of rent but not others. In addition, housing management systems would need to be able to hold different rent values against a property in the same financial year. I am not aware of any of the major housing systems that are currently able to do this.

The majority of the cost, at least in the first year, will be around making fairly major changes to the way housing management systems work. Some, but not all, software suppliers may do this work for free if it is a legal requirement. But even if they could provide a free upgrade to their housing management systems before April 2017, the landlord will still incur considerable cost in testing and implementing the new system. April 2017 may seem like plenty of time to amend existing systems but it really isn't. January 2018 seems like a much more practical target date.

Section 76 of the new Housing and Planning Bill says:

- (1) Rent regulations may give a registered provider of social housing the power to require a tenant to provide information or evidence for the purpose of determining whether the registered provider is obliged by the regulations to charge a specific level of rent and what that level is.
- (2) Rent regulations may require a registered provider of social housing to charge rent at the market rate to a tenant who has failed to comply with a requirement.
- (3) Regulations made in reliance on subsection (1) may, in particular, make provision about: (a) the kind of information or evidence that may be required; (b) the time within which and the manner and form in which the information or evidence is to be provided.

But for me, the idea that landlords should try to gather information about household earning directly from their tenants is completely impractical for a number of reasons. I am also worried by the idea that if the tenant fails to provide earnings information, we should just assume that they have higher earnings and charge them the full market rent.

Section 77 of the same act is a little bit more positive from my perspective. It says:

"HMRC may disclose information for the purpose of enabling a registered provider of social housing to determine whether it is obliged by rent regulations to charge a tenant a specific level of rent and what that level is."

So that means we probably could get some sort of interface with HMRC's systems. The consultation document states, "We do not expect, for example,

Continues on next page

THE 'PAY TO STAY' CONSULTATION BEGINS...

Continued from previous page

that rents will be adjusted frequently" and "Income means taxable income in the tax year ending in the financial year prior to the year in question". This suggests that rents will be set for the entire financial year. But many tenants have incomes that fluctuate and it seems to me that a monthly interface file from HMRC is a practical solution and in line with the way universal credit works. The consultation document accepts, "However, there will be choices over how social landlords respond to changed tenant circumstances, for example, where a household is subject to a sudden and ongoing loss of income".

You might think this relates only to someone losing their job or having their hours cut. But we are talking about household income, and the make-up of a household can change quite frequently, such as grown-up children moving out and then back in again at a later date, or relationships breaking up and new ones formed with new partners with or without children. Keeping track of who lives in a property is complex and most landlords simply don't bother trying. If landlords are expected to keep track of who is living in their properties then the cost of doing this could be considerable.

The second element of the cost is the cost of actually collecting the extra rent. The administrative costs of collecting the additional Pay to Stay element of the rent will differ from one tenancy to the next. For example, if a tenant pays promptly via direct debit then the cost would be very low. However, if they pay late by cash or cheque then the costs are likely to be much higher. I believe that if the administrative costs are to be kept to a reasonable level and any money returned to the Exchequer, there will need to be an agreed point when the local authority writes off the Pay to Stay debt and the responsibility for collecting it transfers to HMRC.

The consultation document states that the scheme will probably work in the same way as the existing voluntary scheme works. That is to say, a "household means the tenant or joint tenants named on the tenancy agreement, and any tenant's spouse, civil partner or partner where they reside in the rental accommodation. Where several people live in the property, the highest two incomes should be taken into account for household income".

This means that one of the people responsible for paying the Pay to Stay

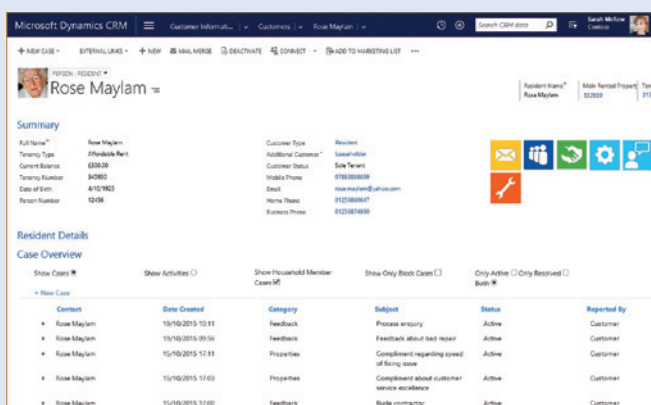
element of the rent might not actually be named on the tenancy agreement. The final responsibility for collecting revenue for the Exchequer should therefore always rest with HMRC.

The consultation document says, "A full impact assessment will be published at a later date. It will be important for that work to be informed by the questions in this consultation on the administrative costs of the policy". The second reading of the Housing and Planning Bill in the House of Commons is scheduled for the 2 November 2015, more than two weeks before the end of the consultation period.

I feel strongly that everyone who has any ideas about how this scheme can be made to work efficiently should respond to this consultation. There are a lot of creative and committed people working in social housing and the quality of the government's impact assessment document will depend to a great extent on the quality of the housing sector's responses to this consultation. So, please take the time to read the consultation document and make constructive suggestions for how we can work with the government to make the scheme work.

Chris Deery is head of ICT at Solihull Community Housing.

ADVANCED LAUNCHES ONE-STOP SHOP FOR HOUSING MANAGEMENT



Advanced Business Solutions has launched a new housing software suite which integrates CRM with a wide variety of back-office solutions.

The Advanced Business Suite for Housing includes a tenant and housing management solution running on Microsoft's Dynamics CRM platform, powered by Goldcrest Solutions (itself recently acquired by Advanced). The suite also includes modules for rent accounting, asset management, HR and payroll, and procurement.

The software is already being used by Radian Group to resolve 80 per cent of tenant enquiries at the first point of contact, provide a single and accurate view of its 42,000 tenants and streamline case management.

Simon Fowler, managing director, Advanced Business Solutions, said, "If tenant and property data is stored in separate systems that don't talk to each other, it can make daily tasks time-consuming and frustrating. By bringing all these systems together into one place, housing providers can not only capture more information about their tenants but also access it quickly and easily. This allows them to offer a more informed, responsive service with minimal effort."



SOCIAL HOUSING 3.0: THE INTERNET OF THINGS

Lucie Glenday, Chief Digital Officer, Surrey County Council

The social housing sector has embraced the internet's ability to deliver efficiencies and enhance the experience of tenants. Web 1.0 saw housing groups establish websites that made details conveniently accessible to tenants online. Web 2.0 brought social media and applications to housing, along with interactive forms allowing tenants to carry out tasks such as making payments or reporting repairs online. The application of the internet (1.0) and its developments (2.0) to housing has enabled two-way communications between housing providers and their tenants, improving services, boosting productivity and reducing transactional costs. Thanks to Web 3.0 and the internet of things (IoT), these benefits for both housing providers and tenants are expected to multiply.

The IoT: smart housing

The IoT has already begun to transform the way we live and work, as everyday objects from smart lightbulbs and appliances to intelligent central-heating systems can now operate within a connected network. This enables data to be sent and received instantly, meaning assets can now be understood in a way never seen before.

Of course, sensors have been around for decades, but the fact that these sensors are now wirelessly transmitting information in real time from objects to a data store in the cloud where results can then be accessed and analysed instantaneously, transforms the usefulness of both the appliance and the data.

Furthermore, by accessing the data's results within the cloud, vast quantities of information can be reviewed in real time, and based on a series of predefined rules, strategic business decisions can be made. For example, smart heating systems can reduce fuel bills, smart locks can enhance property security and connected water sensors and instrumented boilers can provide

insights that lead to faster and cheaper maintenance as issues are resolved before they turn into more costly problems.

As an example of the benefit of this information, the Housing Association Charitable Trust (HACT) is working with boiler manufacturer Worcester Bosch to use the data that the sensors inside its boiler units generate. These sensors can let the landlord know when a minor fault happens so they can fix it before it requires a full boiler replacement. The sensors can also identify a drop in water pressure due to a tap being turned on or toilet being flushed, information that could trigger an alert for when this does or does not happen.

This smart housing revolution can even be taken one step further, as noise and movement sensors provide extraordinary data insights that can take efficient tenant and asset management to a new level.

Data that delivers

A pilot study is being carried out by Surrey County Council, in partnership with IT Lab, to look at the use of wireless sensors in our properties. We have placed motion sensors in extra-care apartments for six weeks and provided seven of the tenants with wearable technology. This will provide us with insights into how people move around their environment and establish correlations between those movements and their vital signs, such as heart rates. It will also allow best practice to be established in terms of how to capture data and analyse it for patterns.

It is these patterns that deliver business-changing and potentially life-changing value from the IoT in housing. From the abundance of data, the patterns help the housing provider to not only understand when a tenant's needs may have changed, but more importantly, gain insight into how those needs may be about to change. This information can also be combined with other bits of data/

intelligence to allow assistance to be provided earlier. In the case of our pilot study within our extra care apartments, it is these insights that may enable us to bring tenants back to stability sooner, and this may ultimately delay the need for care homes or hospital admissions.

These sensors can also be extremely useful outside a care setting. For example, when placed within kitchens and bathrooms, the information gathered can let the housing provider know how heavily used those areas are with a view to model when to replace appliances and shower units based on usage, rather than by age or a crude estimation.

Threshold sensors could also be used to indicate the number of people regularly using the house or apartment as a home, delivering a number of useful insights that at the very least would indicate when someone is home in order to contact them, resulting in significant savings in the call centre. These incremental insights and gains may seem small when considered in terms of a single appliance or object, but when extrapolated across a portfolio of 500 homes or more, the savings as well as the insights gained will be significant.

As mentioned above, we have been working with IT Lab to develop our IoT plans. IT Lab understands that the use of this technology alongside an effective channel-shift strategy could transform the way housing providers manage and understand usage patterns across their asset bases. Because of this, IT Lab has established a dedicated 'insight and innovation' function within its business that connects its housing partners to the IoT in a meaningful way that delivers these valuable patterns from data.

Lucie Glenday is the chief digital officer at Surrey County Council.



BUILDING THE CONNECTED SOCIAL HOME

Jay Saggar, Connected Home Consortium Coordinator

Intelligent heating systems like Google's Nest have launched the internet of things into the mainstream but how can this technology be harnessed to transform service delivery for housing providers and how can we build the connected social home?

Back in June 2015, the Connected Home Consortium (a partnership of 15 housing providers interested in IoT technologies, led by Nick Atkin from Halton Housing and Matt Leach from HACT) evaluated the market's leading smart heating products for their applicability and relevance to social landlords.

The resulting 'Smart Thermostats: Market Analysis for Social Landlords' report was based on extensive engagement with technology providers. The report recommended that although smart thermostat systems do an impressive job of saving tenants money on their energy bills, the market is not yet mature enough for a housing provider who hopes to achieve additional value from their investment in these systems.

Using these systems to detect instances of fuel poverty, identify abandoned tenancies and to support vulnerable people are just some of the many additional functionalities which could drive the business case for landlords to invest in connected heating products. However, none of the devices on the market offers this level of wider business integration.

CHC, not satisfied with the state of affairs, set out to demonstrate how the sensors in a smart heating system might talk to housing providers' existing data systems to enhance their insight into the state of their assets and the needs of their tenants.

Underestimating the market

At first, many of the larger technology providers seemed reluctant to move

away from their primary B2C strategy (which has proved extremely successful for the likes of Hive) but CHC believes that the technology providers have underestimated the huge market that social housing offers to the right product.

Our latest pilot will link smart thermostat newcomers 'Switcher' to an Orchard housing management system. The interface and analytics platform will be provided by Intent Technologies, a French company that already links sensors, lift monitors and HVAC systems for housing providers in Europe.



We hope to prove that real value can be derived from augmenting existing housing data with live asset data feeds. We will be focusing in the first instance on providing data that will allow housing providers to schedule their maintenance jobs more effectively and identify abandoned tenancies. Neither of these requires a high level of data analytics and are very much achievable with the technology available now.

The pilots are going live this winter and we hope to report the first findings in early 2016.

Building the connected social home

As more and more devices in the home become connected, the challenge will be to use what is fairly uniform sensor technology to provide business benefits to housing providers. Whether it's smart thermostats or washing machines, the environmental sensors are similar and can be used for multiple applications. Using an API-based platform like Intent Technologies is one of the ways that a variety of devices can be tied into one system, preventing the noise of multiple dashboards and siloed data. This is a space we predict will become extremely competitive with the big telecommunications companies eager to stake their claim in the middleware and connectivity environment.

The bigger picture is big data

Once we have lots of devices talking to us, we open up the potential for using big data and machine learning to automate processes and deliver insights not previously available. Learning how assets perform relative to the whole housing stock can alter refresh cycles and modify NPVs, while big data on vulnerable people will allow us to design better evidenced interventions.

In the long run we see homes raising their own maintenance tickets with issues resolved before they become a problem for the resident. Likewise, early social care interventions will begin to prevent more serious harm occurring to older people.

Jay Saggar is the Connected Home Consortium's coordinator.

The full 'Smart Thermostats: Market Analysis for Social Landlords' report is available for download from www.connectedhome.io.

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Aspire's 'digital by design' strategy

Aspire Group has reported on the progress of its 'digital by design' strategy that it began in 2014 and expects to complete by 2016, with the aim of 'better business as usual' for its tenants through the use of technology.

By March 2016, Aspire expects that digital by design will have cemented a new approach to the way in which the group engages with its tenants and how technology is used, focusing mainly on delivering better services for tenants, achieving greater efficiencies and returns on investment for the group, and providing staff with the right tools to do their jobs more easily and effectively.

Tracey Johnson, director of business transformation, Aspire Group, said, "It's no secret that all housing associations will have to cut their social housing rents by 1 per cent each year from April 2016, reaching an average reduction of 12 per cent by 2020/21.

"This is an unprecedented financial challenge for us, but through the development and implementation of digital by design, we are driving forward significant business efficiencies and standards of customer service.

"I am pleased to confirm that the first phase, which focused solely on building the foundations of robust and bespoke systems, has been completed and we are now entering phase two. This will focus on seven key streams, with the main three being modern ways of working, data management and information, and opportunities to connect."

All seven streams are currently being piloted, and once testing has been

completed, all technology changes will be introduced in 2016.

Tracey Johnson
Director of Business
Transformation
Aspire Group



Aspire said that the data management and information stream focuses on moving all tenant details to a new digital platform, while opportunities to connect focuses on improving customer service through technology. These two projects are intended to work hand-in-hand to make Aspire's business smarter, slicker, and simpler, allowing its staff to have the information at their fingers tips, with the added bonus of creating a more agile and flexible workforce. The modern ways of working stream underpins the creation of a culture for Aspire staff to work in a more digitally-enabled environment.

Johnson said, "As part of the data management and information stream, a new over-arching CRM system will be implemented, generating a personal timeline for every contact with each individual tenant. This will ensure that our customer services staff will have the data they need to provide accurate information at any time.

"By March 2016, customer-facing staff will all benefit from the use of a new digital app running on their tablets. At a click of a button, they will be able to see a full profile of every tenant when they are visiting them in their homes or when they are out in our neighbourhoods.

"Opportunities to connect works perfectly in conjunction with this. Our technical team is working hard to implement an improved online self-service portal with increased flexibility for tenants to make contact in a way that best suits their circumstances."

An important part of Aspire's digital by design project is that it will continue to communicate with tenants through a variety of channels, giving them the choice to opt for their preferred method of communication.

Johnson said, "In the social housing sector, many tenants struggle with, and don't have access to, digital platforms such as online portals. Therefore, by focusing on the importance of ensuring that they all receive the right information through their preferred channel, this will help to maintain a high standard of customer service.

"Including this multi-channel approach within our digital by design strategy effectively highlights that while internal digital solutions will enhance customer services, we are well aware that external digital portals aren't likely to have the same effect. As a result, we will ensure that alternatives to digital communications will remain as an option for tenants with limited online access."

As a result of digital by design strategy so far, 8,500 house files have been digitally stored, more than 150 members of staff involved in the project, 9,000 gas documents have been scanned, and 'first-time fixes' predicted to increase to 85 per cent.

HAVERING COUNCIL'S £380K HMS DEAL WITH CAPITA

Capita's software services business has been awarded a five-year contract worth £380,000 to provide Havering Council with its housing management software suite, OpenHousing.

The contract is part of the council's business transformation programme, designed to improve the delivery of services to tenants and to increase the efficiency of the housing department. The OpenHousing software is intended to

complement the programme by improving tenant communications through self-service tools such as a new web portal to log queries and make payments.

Once implemented, OpenHousing will give council staff access to data on all of its housing in one central location, streamlining a process that previously used multiple systems to access data. Capita will also supply its device-neutral mobile working platform to enable flexible working

options such as remote working and the freedom of cross-departmental working.

Damian White, deputy leader and cabinet member for housing, Havering Council, said, "We are pleased to announce our contract with Capita on the delivery of OpenHousing. This new software will help us deliver an integrated housing service, improve our record keeping regarding properties, and deliver an improved service to our customers."



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Footprint steps forward to cut Golden Gates' voids

Golden Gates Housing Trust has completed its main implementation of voids and repairs management software from Footprint Solutions.

Footprint's Works Connect solution was initially implemented within the housing provider's voids team, on the basis that if it could be made to work amid the complexity of voids, typically involving multiple tradespeople working at the same time, it could then be easily rolled out to other areas.

Works Connect is a service, project and asset management solution designed to keep projects and costs on track from start to finish. The software can be used to generate fast, accurate estimates to maximise remote worker productivity and efficiency.

Golden Gates will initially use Works Connect to plan jobs, provide tradespeople with information on current workloads and allow them to upload data sent by the mobile operatives working on the jobs. The software can also be used to order supplies and manage the costing and accounting of work carried out.

The housing provider typically has 30-40 voids at any one time; these need to be repaired where necessary and turned around as quickly as possible. With Works

Connect, Golden Gates has been able to speed up the process by removing much of the paperwork and reduced unnecessary trips to its head office.

Zoe Wrench, customer service advisor, Golden Gates Housing Trust, said "The voids team was a good test to stretch the capabilities of Works Connect which easily handled the complex work carried out by our operatives. Historically, the voids team worked solely on paper which was time consuming because they had to return to the office to file information on the system; this sometimes meant they were making multiple return visits per day.



"We also have the ability to monitor a job from start to finish and when the work is complete, the system will automatically cost the job. From a voids perspective, it's given us a lot more information than we had before."

Golden Gates' operatives have embraced Works Connect due to its simplicity and seamless integration with existing back office systems. Other benefits have included reduced fuel costs, shorter completion times and less wastage.

Shaun McDermott, empty homes

manager, Golden Gates, said, "In the past, if we had a tradesperson that encountered a problem which meant they couldn't complete the job, they would have had to have brought the paperwork back before it could be resolved. Now we can take that work and allocate it elsewhere without causing significant delays."

Prior to the use of Works Connect, Golden Gates completed 285 voids in an average 18 days (June-October 2014). Since June 2015, it has managed to complete 356 voids in an average 16 days.

Golden Gates has now begun to roll out Works Connect to its programmed works team, with the responsive repairs team to follow afterwards.

John Sant, CEO, Footprint Solutions, said, "Works Connect is a feature-rich business management tool designed from the ground up for the trade and service industry. Because we understand the way trade companies operate, we've covered every aspect, from estimating budgets and project management to service delivery."

Peter Fitzhenry, director of housing, Golden Gates, said, "Void repairs require a significant degree of preparation to ensure tradespeople are carrying out tasks in a timely and cost-effective manner. Having implemented Works Connect for voids management, we intend to extend its use to all planned works and responsive repairs.

"Furthermore, due to the framework agreement we have with Footprint, we've been able to bypass our usual procurement processes and purchase Works Connect at a fixed price with minimal hassle or delay."

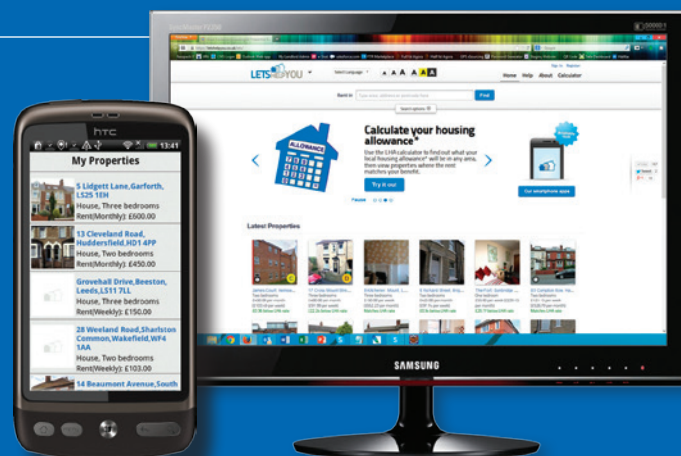
LOOKINGLOCAL HELPS WEST YORKSHIRE

West Yorkshire County Council is using the LetsHelpYou service from LookingLocal to encourage better engagement with the private rented sector and to make the affordable housing market more accessible.

LetsHelpYou is a free service for both landlords and tenants, created by Kirklees Council-owned developers

LookingLocal with funding help from DWP.

The service offers landlords a fast and efficient approach to advertising properties. With the ability for tenants and landlords to communicate directly, the local authorities and housing associations are removed from the equation, creating greater liquidity in the market.





22ND CENTURY REPAIRS – A PERSONAL VIEW

Chris Potter, Uniclass Director, ROCC

What will housing providers' repairs service look like in the future? This article (the second of two; see September 2015 edition of Housing Technology for the first article) from Chris Potter, ROCC's Uniclass director, is his personal view of some very probable scenarios and others a little bit more fanciful, looking at what a 22nd-century repairs service would look like and covering different aspects such as housing stock, transportation and scheduling. In this article, he looks at the housing environment.

Social housing is already becoming part-state/part-private. Free housing is unlikely to last long into the future, in much the same way as free education hasn't and more part-funded properties will appear. This will make residents more discerning and have more ownership, not just of the house but of the repairs to the property itself.

It has been clear for some time that housing supply is not keeping up with demand. The reasons for rising demand include improved life-expectancy rates and a growing number of one-person households and, to a lesser extent, increased net immigration.



There are almost 1.8 million households on English local authority housing registers and significant levels of overcrowding in the private and social housing stock. Poor housing has long been proved to impact directly on residents' health and educational attainment, while difficulties in accessing affordable housing can also limit the ability of people to move to find work. The need to increase the supply of

housing and tackle affordability issues is a key housing policy issue. Yet despite the critical social and economic role that housing plays, it has tended not to have the same political profile as other areas such as health and education.

Recent government frustration with housing associations and the new opposition agenda may well be changing this as we speak; housing is sure to be an increasingly prominent battle-ground.

Home ownership in the future will be the preserve of the rich; most people, as in many European countries, will rent as the norm. A quick browse of the RightMove website shows parking spaces for sale in London for £65,000; people will soon be priced out of city living without intervention by the government.

This will generate massive competition in the social housing sector. In much the same way as flat sharing in the private sector happens, this will be duplicated in the social sector, with many families and extended families sharing single multi-purpose housing units.

The resultant pressure on the availability of social housing is likely to result in the development of more single person, utilitarian dwellings like housing pods (above) or more innovative ideas such as houses made from shipping containers or the new Airstream mobile home communities springing up in aluminium caravans.

The UK has an ageing population, with lower birth rates and people living longer. It is projected that the proportion of people in England in the 65+ bracket will be 10.6 million or almost 20 per cent of the population by 2021; an increase of approximately 13 per cent since 2005. This, coupled with the trend that as people grow older their housing needs



change (with older people spending 70-90 per cent of their time in their home), increases the need to supply a warm and secure environment which is properly maintained.

As the pressure increases for the ageing population to remain in their own homes and receive any social care in-situ, this also opens up a whole new set of adaptations which must be put in place and serviced.

To provide solutions to the ageing population's requirements, schemes such as 'co-housing' and 'homeshare' are starting to gain popularity. Co-housing has the concept of specific communities created and run by their residents. It consists of private dwellings with shared facilities, such as communal washing areas, and the residents offering mutual support to each other. Homeshare balances elderly and less-able people with younger people and students who are willing to offer them living assistance in exchange for cheaper accommodation, co-habiting in the older person's home.

The emphasis on reducing void times to a few days will become a key factor in increasing occupancy yields from existing housing stock. Once refurbished, the re-letting process will be sleek and achieved in a few hours.

In the next article, we will look at the repairs operative of the future.

Chris Potter is the Uniclass director for ROCC.

PAPER CUTS AT HILLCREST HOUSING WITH DOCUMENT LOGISTIX

Hillcrest Housing has reduced its reliance on paper records, improved document retrieval and accelerated invoice approvals using document management and workflow software from Document Logistix.

The move to the new Document Manager EDM software was primarily prompted by the housing provider's move to new headquarters. Other factors included the difficulties staff had when trying to find documentation held throughout Hillcrest's various offices and the slowness of a paper- and post-based system for budget and invoice approvals.

Following a tender process with six potential document management suppliers, Document Logistix was chosen, based on the ease with which

documents could be automatically indexed using barcodes, the simplicity of integrating Document Manager with other business applications and also a recommendation from its Platinum Partner Konica Minolta.

Ken Birse, IT manager, Hillcrest Housing, said, "The fact that it was a UK-based company who were willing to modify the package in line with our requests, the friendliness and professionalism of the Document Logistix staff, and the fact that the software was based on Microsoft SQL Server and offered close integration with our existing Aareon QL housing management system all helped us choose Document Manager."

The most immediate cost savings delivered by Document Manager have

been a dramatic reduction in document printing, copying and storage costs. The time-saving benefits have been mainly related to accelerating various authorisation processes that previously relied on external paper mail services.

The Document Manager software has also enhanced staff productivity by providing instant access to relevant information on-screen, without having to retrieve the information from other offices. For example, when viewing a tenant's record on-screen, Hillcrest staff can now easily call up all the correspondence from and to the tenant, including letters, tenancy agreements and original application forms.

FINANCE MANAGEMENT

SHROPSHIRE RURAL HOUSING HITS FRS 102 WITH REAL ASSET MANAGEMENT

Real Asset Management has recently helped Shropshire Rural Housing Association with its transition to the FRS 102 auditing and reporting requirement. The housing provider had originally been using RAM's component accounting software since the introduction of component accounting under SORP 2010.

Rachael Fullwood, financial accountant, Shropshire Rural Housing Association, said, "The time saved by appointing RAM to complete the conversion was extremely valuable. It would have taken several weeks for me to personally model the conversion in Excel and enter the data manually into the system.



the move to FRS 102, we can now report both before and after results. Most importantly, we can clearly identify the impact on our accounts, enabling us to show our lenders the direct effect on the covenants applied to loan facilities."

RAM began by reconciling the data and produced reports proving that the figures before and after the conversion had remained unchanged for SRHA's existing assets. Supporting reports were also provided to demonstrate that no change

had taken place when the new FRS 102 Property Grant was excluded from the database, as well as confirmation that the grant was written out successfully as part of the conversion.

RAM took SRHA through the entire reconciliation process, showing that the Net Book Values (NBV) generated by the system were correct and that they met with SRHA's expectations. It also reconciled the Gross Book Value (GBV) back to SRHA's opening position for December 2012 for non-grant components and produced the GBV closing position for December 2014, deducting acquisitions and disposals between January 2013 and December 2014.



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OMNILEDGER JOINS EXPERIAN RENTAL EXCHANGE

OmniLedger has developed a new Pyramid interface for Experian's Rental Exchange portal. This will help tenants to strengthen their credit ratings using rent payments, in the same way that mortgage payments help homeowners with their credit ratings.

By building up their credit rating, lenders and service providers are more likely to approve or provide better rates to tenants when applying for loans, opening bank accounts or purchasing goods on credit.

Dave Bull, head of tenancy services at Bristol Community Housing Foundation and United Housing Association (the

United Communities partnership), said, "This partnership should help tenants build up a good credit history and improve their financial situation. We strongly believe that tenants' rent payment history should be used in the same way as homeowners who have an advantage of using their mortgage payment history to count towards their credit score. OmniLedger's involvement has been critical to the development of the reporting tools."

Joanna Leckie, housing services team manager, Rockingham Forest Housing Association, said, "We are excited about the opportunities provided by our



partnership with Experian. We strongly believe that Rental Exchange levels the playing field for our tenants by treating rent payments as contributing to a credit history. Sharing our data in this way opens the door to mainstream borrowing and discounted services that would otherwise have been closed to a large proportion of our tenants."

ALLPAY CHOICE AT ORIGIN HOUSING

Origin Housing's tenants can now pay their rent using the widest range of online and mobile payment options following the award of a three-year contract to Allpay. The contract allows Origin's tenants to pay bills in cash at any PayPoint or Post Office or with their debit/credit card via Allpay's mobile payment app, text, automated phone or online payments.

It will also allow Origin to continue to offer paperless Direct Debit collections on any day of the month, allowing residents the choice of a convenient collection date and frequency.

Tina Mercer, head of income management, Origin Housing, said "Allpay was the only bidder that could provide SMS and mobile app payments. Furthermore, housing providers need a wide range of payment options to support tenants through universal credit."

Mobile payments now represent more than 1.5 per cent of the value of payments that Allpay processes for Origin, indicating that more and more residents are getting used to paying their bills via their smartphones.

First Ark prepares for universal credit with Allpay

Using Allpay's direct debit service, First Ark Group said that it is now prepared for welfare reform and the rollout of universal credit, thanks to Allpay's 'any day' collections facility, which enables tenants to quickly and easily set up direct debits straight after their benefits are paid.

First Ark has rolled out Allpay's direct debit service to its contact centre, which means advisors can now set up paperless direct debits for tenants over the telephone, freeing up time within the rents and finance team.

Following the rollout of universal credit, tenants will benefit from 'any day' collections, giving them the ability to set up direct debits on the day they receive their income. This will not only ensure that tenants' rent is paid first and on time, but also enables them to budget their outgoings under welfare reform.

Kerry Ward, finance associate, First Ark Group, said, "Tenants are now getting high quality service immediately. Rather than having to fill in a paper mandate, wait for it to come up to us and wait for confirmation, they're getting it all fed back to them straight away over the telephone. Since using Allpay, the take up of direct debits has definitely increased."

Family Housing Wales goes paperless with Allpay

Family Housing Wales has switched to Allpay's paperless direct debit system, after initially processing them internally through its Capita housing management system.

A financial accountant at Family Housing Wales said, "The previous process was very time-consuming. Our housing team had to post out paper mandates which, after they were returned, were passed to our finance team who added the details

to the housing management system. We then had to extract a file from the housing management system and submit this to BACS.

"With the Allpay system, there is no need to issue paper mandates and the process is more streamlined because it's paperless and online. Not only can we set up new mandates over the phone with tenants and input the details straight into Allpay's system, but it has also cut down the number of steps in the process because Allpay automatically sends the files to BACS."

Allpay joins Procurement for Housing framework

Allpay has secured a place on the national Procurement for Housing (PfH) framework, replacing the Co-operative Bank as the sole multi-payment network provider to UK housing associations and local authorities.

As a result of gaining a place on PfH, Allpay is now present on all three of the UK's main bill payment frameworks, having already secured a place on the South East Consortium framework earlier this year and renewed its place on the Northern Housing Consortium procurement body.

Each framework provides an OJEU-compliant route for housing providers and local authorities to access payment services across cash, card and direct debit without the need to tender.



BIG DATA IN HOUSING

Ed Bartlett, CEO, Kykloud

Not so long ago, the biggest challenge for asset managers was capturing data. Obtaining a clear up-to-date picture of the condition of an estate, particularly gaining access into homes, was a hugely difficult task and lifecycle planning, as I well know from my days managing multi-million pound PFI budgets, often relied on good judgement and guesstimations.

However, over the past couple of years, advances in mobile technology have brought about a monumental shift in the way in which data is captured and used to better manage property portfolios.



Products such as Kykloud have allowed surveyors in the field to capture real-time data more quickly and efficiently which is then automatically fed in to sophisticated

asset management platforms to allow data-driven decisions to be made about repair and maintenance budgets. This has been instrumental in better managing lifecycle and repair budgets which is undoubtedly why more and more housing associations and ALMOs are using such mobile technology and software.

However, the internet of things, once considered as merely a 'Tomorrow's World' domain, looks set to explode within the housing sector. While its primary focus is to improve the life experience for tenants, a secondary by-product will be the value it can bring to asset managers; with the right software platform, asset managers could end up with the most valuable data at their fingertips.

We are in talks with an energy monitoring specialist who is introducing the IoT into housing providers to help tenants out of fuel poverty. Understanding how and when energy is being consumed is not only a vital part of helping tenants to better manage their energy supply but it also provides asset managers with valuable data. Rather than changing a



boiler because it has reached its average shelf life, these data-driven insights into usage would allow asset managers to determine the real life-span of the boiler.

But big data could also provide such a detailed level of information that we could end up with information overload. Without a sophisticated asset management platform to aggregate the data and extract its full value, the data could render itself useless.

Ed Bartlett is CEO of Kykloud.

PIMSS Data Systems launches subscription-based asset management

PIMSS Data Systems has launched a new cloud-based software-as-a-service asset management system which gives housing providers, ALMOs and local authorities all the essential information they need to hit building compliance and budgeting targets in a simple, easy to use package.

PIMSS' Sapphire collates all relevant property information (including address, property type, maintenance details and photography) in a single central asset register and allows asset managers to capture surveys against them to predict costs and manage decency.

Survey data can be input directly into the system using the mobile-friendly user interface on a tablet or PC. Drop-downs,

navigation short-cuts and options to change the order of survey content are flexible to suit each organisation, saving time and improving productivity.



Sapphire will also highlight when issues need attention via green, orange and red screen alerts and users can create customisable dashboards for at-a-glance

management information.

Rachel Patterson, managing director, PIMSS Data Systems, said, "Not every asset management team needs the level of sophisticated functionality which we provide with our Pimss4Communities product. We therefore wanted to create a product which is specifically designed to be simple but still offers essential planning tools like top-level views of energy performance and asbestos risk scores, all in a very easy to use package.

"Sapphire is totally intuitive; users can be up and running within a day. The fact that there is no upfront capital investment in licences or servers makes it a very affordable option too."



HOW TO HELP FINANCE HOUSE BUILDING AND FIGHT THE HOUSING CRISIS

Phil Shelton, CEO, SDS

The Prime Minister may have committed to building one million new homes by 2020, but how will these be funded? The Welfare Reform Act announced in the summer forces deflation into business plans barely a year after the government 'guaranteed' 10 years' worth of inflation.

Over the last five years, politicians have been less concerned about the appalling deficit in roofs over heads than the budget deficit. Phil Shelton, CEO of housing experts SDS, offers an eight-point plan to redress this:

1. Tax incentives as in the film industry

Help the house-building programme with tax incentives. We have a far greater need for housing than home-grown Hollywood movies and stars. These incentives will encourage construction and help simplify and speed up the process of gaining planning permission.

For years, the film industry has enjoyed tax incentives that are worth up to £5m on £20m budgets and £5m on the first £20m for bigger-budget movies. And the government is planning to improve this package.

2. Light-touch regulations and clear timetables

Introduce clear timetables and light-touch regulation to make it easy for housing providers and local authorities to bid for the grants. Sadly, the timetable falls way short of what we need to solve the housing crisis, and the government is still just nibbling around the edges.

3. Scrap the £50bn HS2 and divert the funds to a high-speed housing programme

Think the unthinkable or obvious,

whichever way you see it, and immediately scrap the HS2 folly, which, according to the latest government figures, will cost over £50bn. Replace this vanity project, which is totally speculative, and re-direct at least some of the millions into public housing projects. This would be a 'double whammy': more roofs over heads and a huge boost to the construction sector and its allied industries.

The huge HS2 'white elephant', with the final stretch to Glasgow removed and which the SNP will probably now have to fund, will release a few billion of the total £50bn cost of the whole project; use those savings for new housing.

4. Throw out the bedroom tax

Forget the bedroom tax and focus on identifying the types of homes actually needed in a specific area. Micro planning should oust social engineering and a mean tax. In other words, the £470 million expected to accrue from the bedroom tax will help, but it's not huge in terms of the task at hand.

5. Provide clarity and certainty on the future of housing

This has been woefully lacking and a new clarity would be a welcome change. The Prime Minister has committed to one million new homes by 2020, but how exactly will these be funded and how many will be affordable? Where's the clarity in how that will happen? What certainty is there for the five million people on waiting lists for housing?

6. Encourage local authorities to build council houses

But be sure to seek expert advice from industry veterans who know the pitfalls.

The local authority and private sector initiatives, where LAs set up separate companies to build houses, is the right route to take. Already we have successful examples; think of Manchester City Council's partnership with the Greater Manchester Pension Fund.

7. Embrace overseas partnerships

Embrace overseas partnerships and investment such as the partnership between Sydney and London Properties and the USA's highly experienced and cash-rich Related Companies which developed the successful Hudson Yards project in New York. Here in the UK, Incommunities Housing is finalising plans to build six pre-assembled homes in Manningham, in a partnership with construction specialists from the Netherlands, in an example of international working.

8. Throw out the IMS system

Throw out the IMS system because the Homes and Communities Agency's (HCA) approach is putting off housing providers from bidding for grants. Instead, move towards continuous market engagement, and forget the current lengthy programmes. These invariably start slowly and end in a frantic scramble to deliver. This has proved clumsy, time-consuming and hide-bound by red tape. There are reportedly five million people on waiting lists for housing (according to BBC Radio 4) and we need 250,000 new houses per year. Where is the massive cash injection from the public purse? Or from the private sector?

Phil Shelton is the CEO of SDS.

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1st Touch puts Together Housing on the move



Together Housing Group is deploying mobile workforce software from 1st Touch across its seven operating companies in order to boost its value for money strategy.

At the start of its selection process, Together Housing decided that it wanted a single mobile solution so that it could harmonise policies and procedures across its multi-company structure. Having chosen an Aareon housing management system, Together Housing then chose 1st Touch as it already had close integration with Aareon.

The housing provider's responsive repairs team was the first to go live with over 200 operatives. The 1st Touch system has since been rolled out across the group, including the asset and income teams along with a pilot project within the voids and planning teams. Together Housing will eventually have 500 people using 1st Touch's mobile technology.

Shane Hollingdrake, systems co-ordinator, Together Housing Group said, "By introducing the technology across the business, we will drive value for money and derive some major benefits. For example, with our responsive repairs operation, workers don't have to return to base for job sheets or information because all the details can be sent to their device

each morning so they can fit in more jobs per day. The whole process is much more transparent because we know when operatives are on their way or have finished a job. We also have an interface with Wolseley, the builders' merchants, who can receive orders from the operative's device and have the stock sent directly to a job.

"Similarly with voids if, for example, an inspector thinks that there needs to be a new bathroom suite in a property, then this can be ordered from their device and despatched direct to the relevant address. Our incomes team benefits as well because 1st Touch sends through all the rent and payment information they need to their mobile device."

Greg Johns, CEO, 1st Touch, said, "Together Housing has taken a very professional approach to the introduction of mobile technology. Rather than instigating a piecemeal programme of fitting mobile solutions in different departments as the opportunities arise, it has adopted a planned process aimed at optimising value for money."

CAPITA MOBILISES GRAND UNION HOUSING



Grand Union Housing Group has recently deployed Capita's enterprise mobile platform for housing. The choice of Capita TotalMobile is an extension of the housing provider's existing use of Capita's OpenHousing and OpenContractor software.

Grand Union Housing said that the implementation of TotalMobile would mean that it could expand its predominantly repairs-based mobile

capabilities across a broader range of roles, including mobilising housing officers, and developing user-customisable mobile forms.

Mike Parsons, head of IT, Grand Union Housing Group, said, "We expect that Capita's mobile solution will greatly improve our operations. A wide range of officers accessing comprehensive information via mobile devices means they

can spend less time in the office and more in the field, allowing them greater flexibility and a smarter way of working."

Other housing providers recently going live with Capita's mobile solutions include Clyde Valley Housing, Flintshire County Council, Cartrefi Conwy, Helena Housing, Newark and Sherwood Homes, Severnside Housing and Two Castles Housing.

MEARS WINS 10-YEAR REPAIRS CONTRACT WITH CROYDON CHURCHES HOUSING

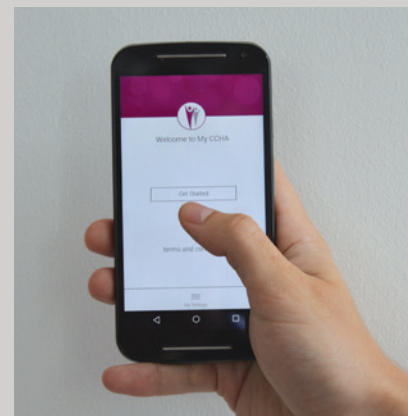


Croydon Churches Housing Association awarded Mears a 10-year contract for its repairs and maintenance services in July 2015. The contract includes the provision of a new free app for tenants to report and track repairs.

Using a smartphone or tablet device, the app enables CCHA tenants to diagnose and report repairs, capture and upload pictures of the problem, and be notified of repairs appointments. The app runs on both iOS and Android devices and is available free

from Apple iTunes and Google Play Store. Over 130 repairs have already been reported using the app, amounting to around 10 per cent of all repairs reported over the past three months since the app became available.

One CCHA resident said, "The app is so easy to use, with a photo-capture option which ensures that the correct engineer and parts are there during the visit. I'll be using the app to report all repairs in future because it saves so much time."

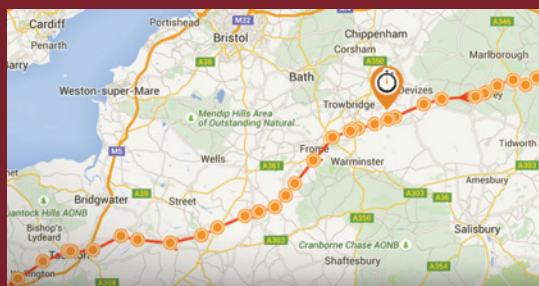


StaySafe forms partnership with SPS Doorguard

Lone worker security expert StaySafe has announced a partnership with SPS Doorguard, specialists in providing property- and tenant-related services for housing providers. SPS will now be adding the StaySafe lone worker app to its range of response centre services for 24/7 emergency responses.

StaySafe Business is a BS8484-accredited lone worker service consisting of an app and a cloudbased hub, which tracks a lone worker's location via GPS and alerts their employer if they do not check-in within a specified time.

The app, which runs on iOS, Android and BlackBerry devices, includes a panic



button, working session expiry and low battery warnings. GPS tracking, inactivity and duress alerts. User monitoring can be done inhouse via the online hub or outsourced to SPS.

Shirley Duffus, managing director, SPS Doorguard, said, "We monitor many of our



housing customers' lone workers and we were keen to add a cutting-edge solution to our services. The StaySafe app is an independently-verified solution which we believe will prove very popular with our customers and their staff."

INTERCITY ENABLES REMOTE WORKING FOR BLACK COUNTRY HOUSING

Black Country Housing Group has adopted remote working with help from Intercity Technology.

Intercity has created a bespoke package for Black Country Housing's users, involving unlimited voice and texts as well as mobile device management (MDM) software to secure their devices and monitor their usage.

Steve Kesterton, ICT & MIS manager, Black Country Housing Group, said, "MDM means that we can review usage, roll out new applications and locate where devices are at any time, all through a single screen."

Nayer Sultana, senior business development manager, Intercity Technology, said, "Technologies that enable 'presence' will

continue to evolve onto mobile and wearable tech and that could lead to field workers being able to engage with more information than is possible today.

"For example, rather than calling for urgent assistance and having to wait for an expert to arrive, a first-line support worker could video conference the expert via a mobile device to diagnose any issues remotely and guide the people on the ground to resolve issues rather than having to travel there themselves."





HOW EVOLVING TECHNOLOGIES ARE DRIVING GREATER VALUE FOR MONEY

Greg Johns, CEO, 1st Touch

If there's one thing that characterises the social housing technology market, it's the impact that new technologies have been able to make in driving greater efficiencies and value for money. Given the current economic and political climate, this impact has come at just the right time, as budgets are now progressively tighter. What is particularly interesting to me is that the evolution of technology itself seems still to promise even greater support for cost savings and value.

As technologies have evolved, the areas of the business they impact along with the type of impact made have changed significantly. Originally, of course, the technology market for social housing was primarily centred on mobile systems. These were introduced to support the responsive repairs function and the software was accessed through ruggedised hand-held devices. Then as tablet and smartphone usage spread through the housing world, the technology followed suit and supported each function in turn. From housing officers to income managers and from care providers to estate managers, all these roles became increasingly mobile, each seeking to use the most relevant data on their device when visiting tenants.

Since then though, with the evolution of technology moving apace, there are ever-more exciting opportunities. From the smart housing technologies driven by developments in the Internet of Things world, to a range of new payment systems, there are many new innovations now available across the sector. And following the impact of the recent budget, the adoption of these technologies is, in part, being driven by the same value for money requirements.

One of the most significant changes is that the technology being used has now grown far beyond 'just mobile'. For example, we have noticed a significant growth in tenant self-service options and portals. These are spreading rapidly as they can provide a superior level of service that's incredibly convenient to tenants. They can access the system

24/7 using their own device at a time that suits them. The other major benefit is the cost savings; while a typical personal visit might cost around £15 and a phone call £6, the cost of resolving something through a self-service system is usually less than £1. This again satisfies even the most stringent value for money criteria.

And as more and more tenant-facing functions become mobilised and more staff can access more and more information from their mobile devices, the most important thing has become the data itself. How data is accessed or used to deliver better tenant support and drive greater value for money is now a paramount consideration, regardless of the technology needed to achieve it.

Right across the enterprise, different roles now have broader requirements for access to shared data. As a result, we have seen a significant demand for a 360-degree view of key data. At my own company, 1st Touch, we have always seen this as a dashboard solution that could streamline processes and deliver all the key information in an easily accessible on-screen format.

To us, this 360-degree system should provide an all-round view of all key metrics, KPIs and tenant data access points. This ensures that all the information needed to conduct any tenant visit is collated in a single, central and easily-navigable location. With such cross-functional visibility, tasks that would previously have required numerous tenant visits by different role-specific teams can now be resolved in one visit from a staff member operating in a multi-functional role. This can greatly reduce the number of tenant visits required. And by significantly reducing the number of visits, the resources that are freed up can be redirected to areas of greater need. Tenants benefit here too, as outstanding issues can now be resolved far faster and more effectively than before.

For example, housing officers can now record and request reactive repairs, update tenant profiling information

or liaise with the housing provider's Supporting People team. Similarly, responsive repairs operatives could request a gas check, take a rent payment or report related issues such as anti-social behaviour and vandalism. Senior management would also have far superior information to base key decisions on, through in-depth insights into service efficiency and monitoring KPIs such as productivity and costs more effectively. In my view, all normal mobile functions should be incorporated, from estate management, care services, incomes and payment history to social and technical inclusion status, planned maintenance and more. An innovative real-time GPS function should also be included to ensure lone worker safety and to enable operatives to call for further help while on site.

Social media can play a major part here too. I've always felt that there's a role for other social technologies to be part of this 360-degree revolution and there has to be room for a collaborative and social toolkit in any such approach. This would allow different workplace colleagues to message, update and post to others on the system and even to identify and communicate with approved suppliers in real time.

By exploiting the advantages of technology, such 360-degree solutions can positively change the interface between housing providers and their tenants and raise service levels significantly. Our own 360-degree dashboard helps to achieve all these aims, streamlining tenant-facing processes by enabling housing staff to become multi-functional.

When you add in the impact of 360-degree systems to the other positive changes that technology has brought recently, then there are many clear ways in which housing providers can benefit. Whether, in the longer term, future technology developments will continue to be just as useful is a subject of conjecture; however the chances are that they just might.

Greg Johns is CEO of 1st Touch.



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SWAPANDMOVE APP FROM ABRITAS

Abritas's SwapandMove online service is now available as a free app, with the same functionality as the original website. Tenants can easily register using the new app, view property matches, browse and view detailed information of properties and manage account settings, all from the palm of their hand.

When tenants search for a potential mutual exchange, gaining an in-depth knowledge of the other property, locality and rents is vital. The app provides detailed information

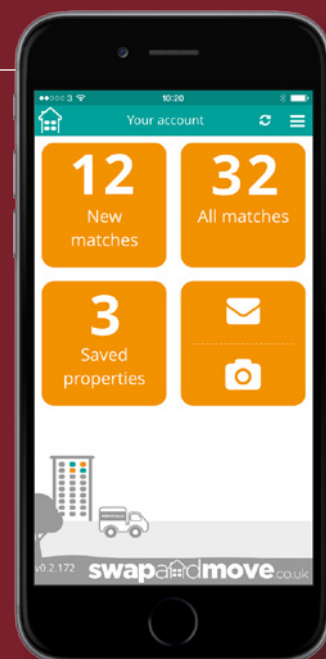
about each property, from the location of childcare services to local housing allowances rates.

The advanced mapping tool has proved to be a key feature for tenants on the SwapandMove website and this has been replicated in the app. This allows locations to be easily specified using interactive maps and can be restricted down to a quarter-mile radius. Tenants can see the approximate area of the property and use Google Streetview to browse the location and neighbourhood,

local transport, schools and healthcare facilities.

Stephen Oliver, director, SwapandMove, said, "Creating an app for tenants has been planned since the launch of the service. The new app will increase tenant accessibility, provide access to a fast one-touch home-swap service and conveniently connect on-the-go users."

The SwapandMove app is available free for iOS and Android devices from the Apple App Store and Google Play.



CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT

CAPITA SUPPORTS NEW SINGLE ACCESS ROUTE TO HOUSING IN WALES



SARTH (Single Access Route to Housing) is a partnership project between three local authorities and five housing providers across North Wales, a Welsh Government-supported initiative designed to streamline and simplify the

process of allocating suitable housing. United by a single allocations policy, SARTH is striving to improve both customer experience and efficiencies with its new housing applications triage and banding process.

In order to achieve these aims, the SARTH partnership has implemented a triage system, prioritising and signposting customers to their most suitable housing provision across all three authority areas. This speeds up the application process, offering an improved customer experience and helping the organisations involved be much more efficient with their resources.

The SARTH member organisations approached Capita's software services housing business to create the solution they needed, with a view to achieving full integration with their existing Capita OpenHousing system.

Jane Parry-Evans, head of ICT, Cartrefi Conwy, said, "We felt an integrated solution developed from software we already

understood with a supplier we knew, rather than the alternative interface-only options offered by any new supplier, would help us to achieve greater efficiencies during the transfer to a new allocations policy and better reporting on the combined processing of our housing applications."



Previously, each partner kept its own list of housing applicants, meaning each applicant needed to register with multiple agencies. They could then suffer delays as information was either shared between each agency or needed to be recaptured and processes repeated.

Paul Seymour, corporate director resident services, Clwyd Alyn Housing Association, said, "It makes sense for local authorities and housing providers to take

an integrated approach which provides a better service for housing applicants."

Sam Parry, housing services manager, Conwy County Borough Council, said, "Centralised information about each applicant allows the best housing option to be automatically signposted, recognising those with the highest priority. We are confident this will help us achieve a greater success rate for applicants in finding the housing they need, and frees our staff's time for support elsewhere."

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RHP'S SATISFACTION SYSTEM

Emily Ward, Sundown Team Manager, RHP

RHP'S 'Sundown' team manager, Emily Ward, reports on how overseeing the development of a bespoke CRM system has benefited the housing provider's aim to resolve the majority of customer cases by the end of each day.

When the Sundown team was assembled in April 2015, we aimed to transform our speed of service while retaining the quality we knew our customers already loved. We knew that to achieve this, we had to have a CRM system that was able to meet our unique demands. We also needed visibility so that we could review our performance in real-time instead of waiting for a report at the end of the week. Being able to see live results has empowered the team to drive their own performance and continually do better.

We can now see the headline picture, drill down easily into the detail, and use the in-the-moment information to shift resources when and where we need to.

RHP launched its new CRM system last year, with the aim of capturing information from across all the services customers receive from us. It offers us a single view of the customer so we can see everything in one place.

A year later, we used it to inform a brave step-change in our services. We analysed what customers were asking and how quickly and well we were handling their queries. We found that, on average, it took 35 days to respond to certain types of issues, such as a decision made about a repair that hadn't been fixed first time.

To get a true reflection of where we were, we cleansed the data in the first week and resolved over 400 historic issues. We then moved forward with a clean slate and some consistent ideas about how we should manage the system in future.

There were new functions we wanted from our CRM system which our ICT team refined. We wanted the performance dashboards to be accessible to all of the team, not just the managers who, historically, had been the only people able to view them. We also wanted to be able to click-through on specific tabs within the dashboards so that all of us could drill down and be able to produce performance reports.



100% of queries solved daily

One of RHP's system developers, Yogesh Patel, said that he was initially cautious when this new approach was presented. He said, "It was a challenge for our team as it meant we had to change several workflows within the CRM system. However, because we use Microsoft Dynamics, the CRM system was able to be updated and refined quickly.

"It's fantastic to see how well the new CRM system is performing for the Sundown team and rising to their needs. They're able to see every customer query that comes in through every available channel and can then prioritise the query until they eventually close the case. It's been a brilliant project to work on."

As a direct effect of our CRM, we've been able to take our service to new levels, especially around our speed of response. In March 2015, we were resolving 33 per cent of queries within

the same day. With the CRM system and a commitment from staff across RHP to use it, we've transformed our speed and resolved 87 per cent on the same day, every day of every week over the last six months. We're proud to say this is a sector-leading result and in September 2015, we won a UK Customer Experience Award recognising our success. It's down to the combination of intelligent systems, harnessed by amazing people!

We're not stopping there. The system has even more scope for improving the customer experience. We'd like to have a 'word cloud' function so that we can pick up on trends and identify patterns of issues we can get ahead of. The Sundown team is now beginning to manage this process, capturing customer information and reporting it with greater levels of detail. The sun hasn't set yet!

Emily Ward is the Sundown team manager at RHP.

PROGRESS ON DIGITAL BY DEFAULT 2016 REPORT

Published in conjunction with Go ON UK, Housing Technology's Digital by Default 2016 report will be the first significant technology report on digital inclusion in the UK social housing sector since our original 2012 report (published with RaceOnline 2012).

We are pleased to announce that the online survey (the results of which will form a key part of the report) is scheduled to begin at the end of November.

The survey structure and questions have now been critiqued and reviewed by our steering committee of IT directors from Cairn Housing Association, Golden Gates Housing, Helena Partnerships, Home Group, Midland Heart, Origin Housing, RCT Homes, Red Kite Community Housing, Severnside Housing, Solihull Community Housing, Trafford Housing Trust, Trident Social Investment Group and Viridian Housing.

The Digital by Default 2016 report will:

- Cover how leading social housing providers have successfully adopted digital inclusion into their overall business strategies;
- Provide guidance for best practice around digital inclusion strategies in housing, and;
- Show the results of an online survey of all UK social housing providers and their views on digital inclusion and their strategies to support it.

The original 2012 report was very successful and widely read across the housing sector; indeed, the report is still very popular, frequently downloaded and regularly cited by housing providers in their various digital inclusion plans.

If you are interested in being involved in the report, please contact alastair@housing-technology.com or visit: www.housing-technology.com/events/dbd16.



STAYING ONLINE WITH THE HYDE GROUP

An evaluation of The Hyde Group's Getting Online programme has found that 80 per cent of learners remained online after training and went on to become regular internet users.



Sarah Thurman, director, Hyde Plus, said, "The Getting Online programme has had a real impact on the lives of participants and is reaching residents who stand to lose the most, both socially and financially, if they are not confident online. It's great to

see that the impact of the training goes beyond the sessions provided."

The majority (70 per cent) of tenants who received tutoring were under 65, challenging the perception that it is generally older people who aren't online.

The report provided some insights in relation to universal credit and completing forms online. More participants felt confident filling in forms as a result of training (from 26 per cent of learners to 76 per cent) but only a third of the learners felt they would

be able to complete online benefit applications.

Follow-up interviews with nearly 100 learners revealed that the cost of buying IT equipment and connectivity at home were the remaining barriers.

SELF-SERVICE HOUSING AT THURROCK COUNCIL

Thurrock Council is in the middle of implementing a new housing management system to enable tenants to self-serve online as well as supporting mobile working for its housing staff. Northgate Public Services' set of web portal applications will enable Thurrock residents to access services via the internet such as querying rent accounts, making payments, reporting repairs and seeking housing advice.

The council's previous system was 15 years old and no longer suitable for its requirements. The council was also keen to confront stereotypes around older tenants and technology.

Dermot Moloney, strategic lead for housing, Thurrock Council, said, "We are regularly told that older residents may struggle to make the leap to online self-service. However, with user friendly technology,

supported by assisted self-serve, and working with our partners and volunteer base, applicants have made that transition.

"Around 10 per cent of our property base is sheltered housing. People are bidding on these properties online; it's a 100 per cent digital platform and people have made the transition. We have residents of all ages using the service, and now well over 50 per cent of our bids are from mobile devices."

SPELTHORNE CUTS CALLS BY A THIRD WITH LIQUID VOICE

Liquid Voice has been working with Spelthorne Borough Council as part of a project to reduce call volumes, increase the responsiveness of contact centre staff and cut costs through better staff utilisation and fewer expensive third-party contracts.

For the first phase of the project, Spelthorne brought in Liquid Voice to deliver an IP-based call recording and automatic call distribution system. This included new features such as call shadowing, along with better visibility of call durations, completions and other trends to help with staff allocation and training.

For the next phase, Liquid Voice delivered a seamless integration with Spelthorne's Civica CRM system along with enhanced CTI to automatically route calls based on callers' preferences while giving staff faster access to relevant information.

For the final phase, Liquid Voice enabled automated call routing based on CTI to better direct calls, such as

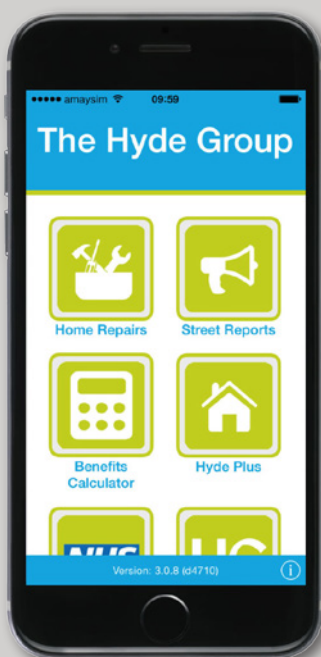


customers with outstanding debts being automatically directed to specially-trained debt recovery staff.

Linda Norman, head of customer services, Spelthorne Borough Council, said, "In our work with Liquid Voice over the last two years, the improvements to the telephony system have been instrumental in transforming customer services while reducing our costs.

"Call volumes have fallen by 30 per cent, our abandonment rate has been halved to less than seven per cent and 80 per cent of calls are now answered within five rings. In addition, improvements in the system means that we no longer have to use third party 'out of hours' and 'queue buster' services or replace staff lost through retirement which combined equal savings of over £30,000 each year."

LOOKINGLOCAL PARTNERS WITH ENTITLEDTO FOR WELFARE REFORM



LookingLocal has now added a responsive benefits calculator from EntitledTo to its MyCouncil and MyLandlord apps in order to help tenants understand the effects of the government's welfare reforms on their benefits.

The LookingLocal apps offer a digital platform for both landlords and local authorities to communicate directly with tenants and the local public on issues such as repairs, maintenance and litter.

The online benefits calculator from EntitledTo helps people determine which benefits they can claim. The calculators have unrivalled coverage including means-tested and contribution-based benefits such as universal credit and council tax support. By using the benefits calculator within the app, users can determine whether they are receiving the right amount of benefits claims, whether they

are eligible for other types of benefits, as well as understand what their position will be as government welfare reforms take effect.

David Morrissey, director of core operations, The Hyde Group, said, "We are very pleased to be working with LookingLocal to provide a simple-to-use free app that delivers excellent housing and local services. We know our residents' time is precious, so having all of this available at their fingertips makes it a far more convenient way to interact with us.

"Don't just take our word for it; for example, our residents in Hove are telling us that 'one of the best things Hyde has is the app', and 'we know that when we use the Hyde app, we can track the progress of our issue, which means we know it is being resolved'."

LFHA OFFERS NOISE REPORTING APP

Leeds Federated Housing Association is using a noise-reporting app from RH Environmental to make it easier for its tenants to record and report noise nuisances.

The app uses the standard microphone and recording functions found on iOS and Android smartphones. Tenants experiencing noise nuisance can download the noise app in minutes

and begin recording noise nuisance as evidence to help the housing provider decide whether to take further action.

Simon Williams, research and insight manager, Leeds Federated Housing Association, said, "For me, the best thing about the noise app is its ability to make service responses instantaneous and real time. By offering a tenant-led, self-service function, the noise app saves us a lot of

time. Our previous approach required individual members of staff trying to hear the noise nuisance for themselves or installing expensive specialist equipment.

"With noise being the predominant form of anti-social behaviour reported to housing providers, the ability to instantly have tenants collecting live evidence on behalf of us is empowering for all concerned."



SALIX HOMES GOES ONLINE TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS

Salix Homes has introduced a new online tool to advertise 'ready to let' social housing properties in Salford and Trafford in a bid to reduce homelessness in the region.

The tool enables home-seekers to move into a property immediately without having to wait to get to the top of the housing waiting list, which can often take years.

Mike Wright, head of housing choice, Salix Homes, said, "By introducing this new way

of working, it's a win-win situation for both tenants and housing providers. People who are considered to be of 'low housing need' can wait years for a home, but with this new system, there's no bidding process and properties are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

"Not only is it helping to reduce the number of empty homes in the area, but it's also helping to reduce homelessness, create social mobility and minimise costs to the public purse. And landlords

know that they can re-let their properties immediately to reduce the cost of voids."

The 'ready to let' properties include homes that might have previously been refused by potential home-seekers under the ordinary choice-based lettings system or homes that may have been recently vacated and the landlord is keen to ensure the property doesn't stand empty.

STAFFORD & RURAL HOMES GETS KEYCOM WI-FI

Keycom has completed the installation of a new wi-fi network for Stafford & Rural Homes' independent living schemes, removing the need for residents to pay for a fixed line.



Keycom won the tender to deliver a fully-managed service, with the flexibility to introduce wi-fi to additional properties on an ad-hoc basis. The project was been funded with money from the housing

provider's Customer Initiative scheme, which supports ideas put forward by residents to improve their communities.

Steve Adams, strategic director, Keycom, said, "We were delighted to win the

contract, and it is particularly satisfying to work with a company so close to home, as we both have head offices on the Staffordshire Technology Park.

"By using radio links, we can link to multiple properties

across the Stafford area, and there is also a fixed link between our office and Stafford & Rural Homes' nearby head office."



Paul O'Reilly, Senior Consultant, Aareon

A PREMIER APPROACH TO SERVICE DELIVERY?

There's nothing like a job that involves travel. As I wearily dropped my overnight bag onto the purple-trimmed hotel bed, I reflected that the hotelier hosting my night's stay was operating a rather slicker business model than most. Not more enjoyable or more customer-friendly, but the booking and check-in process were certainly more efficient.

Samuel Whitbread started his brewery in London in 1750. Those days are a far cry from where the Whitbread Company finds itself today. In 2001, the company disposed of its brewing operations and its pub business, focused on the hospitality sector, and is today celebrating an 11 per cent increase in total revenue for 2015/16 which places it well on the road to a £2bn turnover.

I mention this fact because Whitbread owns the establishment I found myself in as I ruminated on, and wrote, this piece. Premier Inn, as well as Costa Coffee and various other hospitality chains are all part of the Whitbread stable, and as chief executive Andy Harrison departs for pastures new, the company looks set to continue its impressive growth.

But back to my opening point – I believe that there are some interesting elements to the success of this company that are revealed whenever one checks into a Premier Inn. Not big things like bricks and mortar, but more the kind of thing that Dave Brailsford, as head of Team Sky Cycling called 'marginal gains'. And, so the theory goes, if you add enough of those marginal gains together, you end up with big changes.

So, I booked my stay at the Premier Inn online. That's pretty much the only way, apart from its mobile app, that you can

book a stay. You may already know this, but Premier Inn has pretty much done away with the traditional reception desk populated with welcoming staff (a major cost saving, and I'll come back to that later). Immediately I hit the 'purchase' button on the website, I received my confirmation email, plus a default option to receive a PDF copy of my invoice by email (so the customer pays for printer ink!). I also got a choice to check in online, and when I did this, I received a text message confirming my stay, and the option to reply with 'dine' to book a meal in the adjoining (Whitbread-owned, natch) restaurant.

Arriving at the hotel, I was presented with two self-service kiosk machines instead of a smiling receptionist and an obliging concierge. Having already checked in online, I simply inserted my credit card into the machine and was issued with a room key. And so, as I wearily arrived in my room, you may see why I felt that this was a pretty slick operating model. It is conceivable that during the process up to and including your arrival, you potentially don't deal with a human.

What does this have to do with the social housing sector? Well, it's a pretty good example of using technology not only to deliver self-service, but also to drive the channel shift toward self-service – and to make what I imagine are some pretty major cost savings along the way. It seems that what Whitbread's management has done is to ruthlessly examine the sales, booking and check-in processes and to reduce, refine and forensically remove all that is manual, redundant and costly. It even extends to the rooms; one large towel not two, and loo paper dispensers instead of wasteful paper rolls. Nothing you see, touch or lie on in a Premier Inn

has escaped the attention of the cost cutters.

It's what I always call the 'Ryanair' model, but it's being adopted increasingly by other companies, and you can see its spread through different sectors. Staff costs are the major expense for most businesses, and unproductive staff time is the worst kind of waste. If you want to cut costs and improve responsiveness, then it's time to get the magnifying glass out and look honestly at what you do now. Because if you don't then somebody else is already doing it.

That's all fine for the bottom line. But as a customer, I have to say I'm not delighted by this approach. I only stay in Premier Inns a small percentage of the time and they do exactly what you need them to do if you need a night's accommodation at a reasonable price. And I think that they have decided that people in my position will tolerate a rather cold, faceless experience if it gives them cheaper, quicker and more convenient travel. I'll use them when I have to, and I know what I'll get for my money every time.

So what happens if we superimpose the Premier Inn customer service model on social housing in the UK? There are already landlords who have declared an intent to travel down a 'digital by default' route. This means online access to services 'by default', with telephone access and office visits an exception (and subtly designed to be more difficult to achieve than online access – nudge, nudge).

In my experience of working in housing, I would say that for the majority of tenants, this is something that will be accepted

A PREMIER APPROACH TO SERVICE DELIVERY

Continued from previous page

quite quickly, given that paying rent ad-hoc and possibly reporting a repair or a nuisance issue will be about as far as most tenants will need to go, especially as landlords continue their drive to make direct debits their default payment method. Tenant portals, mobile tenant apps and telephony software will become key tools in the day-to-day service delivery model.

Many processes within the lifecycle of a tenancy are pretty standard and lend themselves to a self-service approach. A growing number of landlords are already making processes available via their web portals, repairs and rent payments being at the vanguard, but also now areas such as reporting issues and requesting services.

Considerable savings could be made by further automating processes (why does the repairs process require people to spend hours every week printing and enveloping works orders, and typing in completion slips and invoices, for example? I mean, how much money is being wasted every week on those manual, error-prone processes?). So, the benefits are there to be seen, and with a rather more forensic approach, I am sure that many more areas could be optimised and automated.

But what about the five per cent? My experience of managing a busy local housing office back in the 1990s was that probably 95 per cent of our tenants in the local area would simply get on with their lives. They paid their rent by

and large. They maintained their homes and gardens, generally got on with their neighbours, and to be honest we very rarely saw or heard from most of them. But most of our time was spent dealing with the 5 per cent of tenants who, for whatever reason, would not or could not, manage their tenancies, and in some cases their lives, themselves. This group comprises the kind of people who, convention dictates, would be failed by a channel shift toward online self-service. If they're failing with a traditional approach, how are they going to succeed with a new and more technical one?

Well, as with many things in the housing world, there is no simple, slick answer to that. And it's not just the housing market in which this group of people is being left behind.

Premier Inn operates in a market where people have a range of choices, of which they represent just one. If potential customers prefer the personal touch and a full English breakfast served home-made by the proprietor, then they can book a different hotel. However, tenants don't have that choice, and no matter what the economic arguments, some will just not be able to cope with a new service model. And while some new technologies might just resonate with people (for example, relatively few people these days find a smartphone to be an alien concept), we cannot expect total adoption.

In effect, do we admit to moving towards a 'two-tier' service model, where those

who will not play the game receive a poorer service (don't laugh, it has been discussed!), or do we perhaps redirect some of the resource savings we made elsewhere towards the harder-to-reach group, and using training, more intensive interventions based on data, and increased staff mobility to try and help this group to reap the benefits not only of online services, but also perhaps increased employment options through greater skills transfer?

I'd say that in the current climate, anything is possible. There are rumours that certain housing associations are considering the previously unthinkable – reducing their exposure to the 'social' sector – and a number already have divisions dedicated to servicing other, lower-risk markets. The degree of disruption to the income stream that welfare reform and the right to buy will engender means that radical approaches to cost cutting must be considered, and the traditional housing management approach is a hugely inefficient and costly one. Wherever the future takes the sector, I think it's fair to say that the kind of 'self-serve' experience we have with Premier Inn and other such innovators will become commonplace in the future.

Paul O'Reilly is a senior consultant at Aareon.

DISCOUNTED PORTABLE WI-FI HUBS FROM EE

Elite Business Systems and the Connected Housing Initiative, in conjunction with EE, are offering a 20 per cent discount off selected portable EE wi-fi hubs and SIM cards.

The offer is open to any not-for-profit organisation helping communities to get online. Not-for-profit organisations, including housing providers and registered charities, can order the

Osprey 2 mini 4GEE wi-fi with a 6GB pay-as-you-go SIM card from Elite Business Systems for £39.99 each instead of the retail price of £49.99.

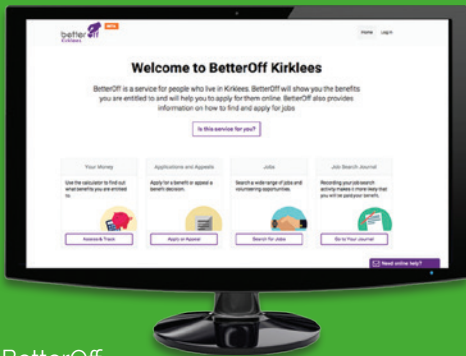
John Sawyer, manager for Age UK Warwickshire's Web Wise project, said, "Thanks to our 4G wi-fi, we can now provide training in village halls and other venues which don't have broadband connections. This has helped older



people in very small rural communities to learn about the web."

Kirklees introduces BetterOff universal benefits tool

A new approach to welfare advice and benefit applications has been launched by Kirklees Council in West Yorkshire. Not only digitising 'high-volume' benefit forms and embedding real-world advice, the BetterOff solution combines benefits with employment advice and thousands of job vacancies all within a single web portal.



BetterOff was designed in response to cuts in the council's welfare advice budget. Instead of seeing this as purely a funding-driven challenge, Kirklees took the opportunity to employ all the capabilities that technology can offer, including real-time benefit calculators, remote form co-production (think benefit forms meet Google Docs), web chat and personalised comparisons of benefits vs. employment, making the whole process quicker, easier to understand and personally relevant to each claimant.

BetterOff is now the default place for all benefit claimants in Kirklees, apart from

the most complex and vulnerable cases. On presentation, people are immediately directed to BetterOff either on their mobile, tablet, PC or the PCs supported by Kirklees customer service staff.

The site comprises four key areas: a benefits entitlement calculator provided by EntitledTo; applications and appeals; job search; and a job journal along with a range of supporting content around employment, interviews, CV writing, financial management and budgeting.

Once the claimant has completed the benefits calculator, they can see what benefits they are entitled to and are then presented with only the relevant forms for online completion. A range of 'high volume' forms have been deconstructed, digitised and made considerably easier to use. In consultation with experienced benefits advisors at the council, each process and its related form has been injected with advisors' 'real-life' guidance and knowledge. This is a key element of the design and to make the system relevant to everyone, the advice comes in a variety of formats from text, to audio and video.

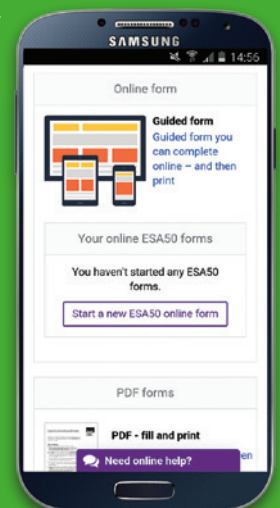
On the employment side of the platform, vacancies are brought in from Universal Jobmatch, a host of national job databases and local job sources. Claimants can search thousands of jobs; the resulting vacancies can then be compared with their entitlement

calculation and show them how much better off they would be in work.

This comparison of benefits and vacancies is reported to be a UK first and could transform the way in which claimants are positively incentivised to consider going back into work. BetterOff also automatically pre-populates this activity into the claimant's jobs journal in line with the government's Claimant Commitment, as well as providing them with tools that help them record their wider job-searching efforts.

That the solution has been designed in clear view of the DWP is a key advantage; it is not a solution developed by a private sector outfit in isolation, but one designed from real-life experience by a large metropolitan council at the frontline of benefit delivery.

Electronic submission of forms directly into DWP's internal processes is now also being planned and work is underway to deliver universal credit forms via BetterOff.



SCC WINS 10-YEAR CONTRACT WITH OXFORD CITY COUNCIL

The five-year agreement, with the option to extend it by a further five years, sees SCC awarded a single contract by Oxford City Council to deliver data centre hosting, servers and storage, server technical support, database administration, and network security infrastructure. The contract is expected to save the council £150,000 per year.

The contract is based around Sentinel by SCC, a cloud-based platform built specifically for the public sector. Sentinel by SCC protects data to Official and Official Sensitive (IL2 & IL3) security standards, and already supports a number of other public sector organisations including the Civil Aviation Authority, DWP, Highways England, HMRC, Yorkshire and Humber CSU and Mersey Care NHS Trust.

Helen Bishop, head of business improvement, Oxford City Council, said, "In the past two years, Sentinel by SCC has delivered 100 per cent availability. The references, site visit and stakeholder interviews confirmed that SCC's culture of customer service was a good fit for this contract and matches the culture and aspiration of Oxford City Council."





FORGING AHEAD IN THE FACE OF AUSTERITY

Steve Smith, CEO, Welbeing

With housing providers and local authorities' budgets across the UK being reduced, Steve Smith from Welbeing discusses whether this could be an opportunity to create a new model for community and telecare services that are person-centred and cost-effective.

Changing times

I've worked in the community alarm/telehealthcare sector for more than 30 years, but the last five years have been some of the most challenging and exciting I've experienced. We're seeing unprecedented change in the way housing providers and local authorities deliver services, with both good and bad results.

The reductions in funding from the government, along with the changes to the way Supporting People funds are administered, have had a significant impact on housing and social care. Last year, Staffordshire County Council halved its Supporting People budget, affecting thousands of alarm service users. The decision prompted a number of providers to either discontinue telecare or migrate to other services altogether.

How can we encourage more providers and service users to invest in a technology that is proven to improve independence and reduce hospital admissions? I believe the answer lies in a consolidated approach, with all parties working together to create unified and person-centred health and social care provision.

Consolidation nation

The impact of the government's austerity measures is also forcing other changes to the way we provide housing and social care. Traditionally in the UK, community alarms have been seen as an adaptation to the property, with the same system

remaining in place no matter what the needs are of the changing occupiers. In Europe, the model is based around people, not buildings, with a package of care and technology tailored to their needs which will flex as their needs change, and move with them. The advantages to this model are that the care is based around individual needs and not provided on a 'one size fits all' basis and tied to the property.

We're seeing a shift towards this approach in the UK, as funding moves from properties to people, and from housing to social care. This enables the delivery of tailored care according to assessed need, which in turn generates efficiencies.

Many housing providers are choosing to decommission hard-wired warden call systems and reduce the number of scheme managers, offering dispersed community alarm units and monitoring instead. We're also seeing local authorities increasingly turn to telecare as a way to safeguard people, manage risk and enable independence in a cost-effective, personalised way.

I believe we will continue to see the consolidation of monitoring centres in the UK for some time to come; the cost of providing 24-hour monitoring and associated services is simply not sustainable below a critical mass of connections. As funding is withdrawn and these centres are no longer financially viable, we will see a move to larger regional, and even national, centres.

Proven results

The biggest barrier to the uptake of telecare is a lack of public awareness; if you can overcome this, people may be willing to pay a small amount for

something that could change or even save their lives.

For example, when Aspire Housing had its funding cut, it decided to move away from the provision of telecare services. Despite having previously taken the decision to close its own control centre, it still wanted to deliver telecare services but in a different way.

As much of the funding used to pay for the service no longer existed, Aspire needed to provide a bridging service with Welbeing to allow service users time to consider whether they wished to have the service decommissioned or pay for the service out of their own funds.

By clearly communicating the benefits of community alarms and telecare to users and their families, an encouraging 60-70 per cent of people chose to continue with the service, proving its value. The benefit of this arrangement is that residents are safeguarded while the burden on the social care purse is reduced.

Working together

In the light of the current A&E crisis, I think it is vital that housing providers and local authorities do everything they can to ensure 'bed blocking' is kept to a minimum. Telecare is essential in providing hospital discharge teams with the confidence that a vulnerable patient can be discharged safely and while there are challenges associated with the current climate, it also presents a raft of opportunities.

Steve Smith is the CEO of Welbeing.

TOWN & COUNTRY HOUSING'S DEVELOPMENTS WITH OPTEVIA AND DYNAMICS CRM



Town & Country Housing Group has developed its own money support and service charge enquiries system using Optevia's Social Housing Essentials software and Microsoft Dynamics CRM 2015.

Following just two days of training and online learning sessions, Town & Country Housing was able to design, configure and deploy its new service charges system within days.

Jamie Barker, project manager, Town & Country Housing Group, said, "Like all housing providers, we have to send out service charge notices twice a year. Previously, we would send out a letter explaining what the service rate charge was with a breakdown of all costs. Our call-centre team would then be inundated with queries. Calls would be logged on disparate and siloed Excel spreadsheets, which were then difficult to query and also often tricky to locate.

"Using Social Housing Essentials and Dynamics CRM, we worked with the various teams involved and designed a full end-to-end process, with associated SLAs and intelligent workflows, to ensure any queries were routed to the right individual or department to deal with. By developing an

integrated view, we were able to rationalise the existing 42 service charge items to only the ones that were relevant to improve the user experience and the speed at which we can answer tenants' queries."

The second service launched and developed by Town & Country Housing's own team was a money support service. Tenants facing financial hardship often require support to consolidate debts and help in developing a debt repayment programme.

Barker said, "Last year, we managed over 500 money support cases and, in the two weeks since we have been live, we now have 40 cases logged. It's clear that with the pressures caused by welfare reform, this figure will increase further. Our new money support service lets us look at outstanding debts at the end of a repayment programme and determine whether tenants need additional support from our team."

Steve Lyon, business director for health and housing, Optevia, said, "Town & Country Housing has taken ownership of the system and entrusted its future development to Dynamics CRM so it is imperative that they understand it and are comfortable with it.

"Where it can, Town & Country Housing will take on development of the system itself using Social Housing Essentials but for more complex change requests or new development lines, we will work with them as their selected partner."

Barker said, "We can now set expectations internally about system delivery times and new service lines, with a 6-8 week release cycle for introducing new processes and functionality within the CRM system."

INFRASTRUCTURE

Futures Housing selects Amillan for unified communications



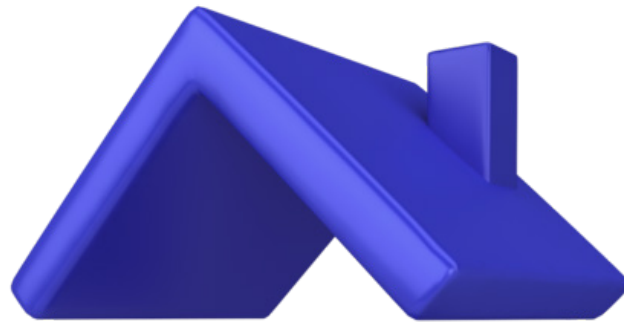
Futures Housing Group has selected Amillan to deliver an integrated unified communications and contact centre solution as part of its plan to better engage with tenants.

The chosen solution of Microsoft Skype for Business and Enghouse EICC contact centre software is expected to deliver communication and productivity improvements throughout the organisation via voice, email, IM, video and desktop sharing/collaboration.

Gavin Hitchcock, head of ICT, Futures Housing Group, said, "Providing effortless customer experiences is

important to us, so this project marks a major step forward in our ability to improve how we engage and interact with tenants. Amillan's understanding of our communication requirements within the broader context of the group's strategic plan gave us confidence in its ability to deliver a technology platform which will evolve how we provide our services in a more tenant-focused way."





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HOME GROUP INVESTS IN SECURE OFF SITE 'METROCLUSTER' WITH ITPS

From left: Paul Anderson, Operations Director, ITPS; David Redpath, Director of IS, Home Group; Mark Mason, Sales Director, ITPS

Home Group is reported to be the first housing provider to invest in an innovative 'metrocluster' high-security data storage system.

Home Group worked with data centre and IT infrastructure experts ITPS to create an off-site data storage network more commonly seen in international finance corporations and telecoms providers.

The metrocluster system sends sensitive data from Home Group along a private network of fibre-optic cabling to two separate off-site storage centres 15 miles apart.

The system uses continuous and synchronous replication of data, meaning that if either of the two sites become unavailable due to network issues or a disaster such as flooding or fire, the other one will continue to operate without any loss of data.

David Redpath, director of IS, Home Group, said, "As one of the UK's largest housing providers operating in more than 200 local authority areas, we need to have reliable ICT which allows us to provide a high level of service at all hours of the day or night.

"We now have a single unified and virtualised IT infrastructure, held securely offsite. That brings economies of scale and allows us to allocate computing resources where and when they are needed."

The system uses ITPS's ISO27001-certified data centres, ensuring that systems and data are always fully protected. The objective is to create an 'always on' solution that maximises the availability of the infrastructure to users. ITPS said that metroclusters are more often used by financial institutions, telecoms providers and other organisations for which downtime would be unthinkable.

Garry Sheriff, managing director, ITPS, said, "A metrocluster is a highly cost-effective, synchronous replication solution for combining high availability and disaster recovery in one package, protecting data by using two physically-separated, mirrored clusters. As well as having the systems and data synchronously available in two locations, it allows computing power to seamlessly load balance itself between the two sites.

"Home Group's metrocluster supports what we call a zero recovery point objective. This means that if a system component fails, no information is lost during the recovery process.

"Through our status as one of only 10 UK Virgin Media Business strategic partners, we were able to commission £1m-worth of fibre runs to underpin Home Group's solution. We believe that no other housing group has this level of sophisticated backup and security; it is a first for the sector."

Trent & Dove goes 95% virtual with EMC



Trent & Dove Housing Association has installed EMC Vspex in order to virtualise 95 per cent of its entire IT infrastructure, and saving 20 per cent from its electricity bills in the process.

It took just six weeks for EMC to deploy 20 servers, with the final result achieving 95 per cent of its entire business now being virtualised. This includes all of Trent & Dove's email, archiving, main telephone system, virtual log-in, as well as its housing management system.

In addition, the housing provider can now backup its data automatically offsite and has already proven that data can be recovered in minutes, not days, in the event of a disaster. With EMC's software, employees now have a trusted system that is available to them 24/7, and can rely on the IT infrastructure, without worrying about server failures.

Derek Eaton, head of IT, Trent & Dove Housing, said, "We have a small IT team so we need good suppliers behind us. Working with EMC has totally transformed our business; there's only one number to call, regardless of the type of query, and we have no concerns about delays or downtime.

"The impact of EMC's technology has been to dramatically improve business performance and free up employees' time to focus on new innovations. We've been able to deliver better customer service as a result and focus our efforts on new projects. For example, it freed up employees' time to focus on bringing our outsourced repairs business in-house and has also supported our staff in using mobile devices when working on projects on the move."

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VISUAL SURVEILLANCE EVOLVES BEYOND CCTV

James Wickes, CEO, Cloudview

The concepts of natural selection and survival of the fittest are not limited to the natural world. The same principles can be applied to technology and the way it succeeds or fails. Some technological advances fall by the wayside, some thrive, some adapt, and some are superseded by technology that is better adapted to its environment. In essence, technology evolves.

This is the situation that old-fashioned CCTV now finds itself in. On just about every level, it is being overtaken by new technology that exposes its failings. Next-generation CCTV is a new species of visual surveillance that has not only adapted to survive, but also possesses flexibility, ease of use and a built-in ability to evolve further. This means it has finally become a realistic and affordable option for housing providers looking to protect their tenants, their staff and their assets.

The beauty of technology when it evolves is that it can leverage other technological advances in a way the natural world can't. With visual surveillance, the internet and cloud computing combined with a modern focus on usability, have provided all the tools that pioneering companies need to create revolutionary new products.

Our Cloudview system is a case in point. It has many advantages over traditional CCTV, but two of the main issues it solves will be familiar to many housing providers - flexibility and ease of use.

To paint a clearer picture, many housing providers will have experience of using a variety of analogue CCTV systems

operating across different sites. These may be incompatible with each other, with different cameras running on different systems and formats. They could even be installed, maintained and serviced by different companies.

Despite these differences they will all have two things in common. They'll need a dedicated, specially-trained member of staff to manage their use and upkeep. And each system will have to be physically accessed, often by private contractors, to retrieve 'hard' copies of images when needed. When accessed (providing the system hasn't been tampered with or vandalised), this visual data may well be corrupted, of questionable quality or have vital time stamps showing incorrectly. The net effect is that these traditional CCTV systems are slow, expensive, cumbersome, resource-hungry and often unusable.

This technology is often not fit for purpose. And in keeping with the ethos of survival of the fittest, it is destined to become extinct, replaced by solutions such as Cloudview.

Here at Cloudview, we have been able to build a visual surveillance system from scratch designed to provide an affordable, effective answer to all these issues.

Our particular approach makes use of a unique Visual Network Adapter. This smart bit of hardware can be quickly connected to both old, legacy-style

analogue cameras and new digital ones to create an internet link that uploads and stores images securely in the cloud. Once uploaded, these images are made accessible to authorised users via a user-friendly dashboard. And because this is a cloud-based system, where all images are stored in the same format, they can be accessed from anywhere that has an internet connection on any device, be it desktop, laptop, tablet or mobile.

Installation of Cloudview is quick and easy. Trials can be carried out on just one or two cameras using 3G in a remote location. The results can then be used to build a financial case for the quick and effective rollout to a network of tens, hundreds or even thousands of cameras.

Dedicated staff are not needed to manage the system as anyone familiar with a modern internet browser will be able to use the intuitive dashboard, and time-stamped, verified images can be shared easily, and acted on quickly. In essence, the system ticks all the right boxes for flexibility, usability and value for money. It's little wonder that more and more housing providers are beginning to take advantage of systems such as Cloudview's.

Please take a look at our short video to see how the new generation of visual surveillance systems has evolved to become flexible and easy to use: www.housing-technology.com/videos.

James Wickes is the CEO of Cloudview.

Calibre Secured Networks' wi-fi for Eastlands Homes



Manchester's Eastlands Homes has invested in new wi-fi and related IT services from Calibre Secured Networks to improve services to its tenants living in thousands of properties across the north-west of England.

Iain Nelson, ICT officer, Eastlands Homes, said, "Our investment with Calibre will put fast and efficient digital services at the heart of our customer services, enabling front-line staff to have access to corporate resources wherever they are, whatever time of day."



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Housing Solutions converges telco and DI contracts through Social Telecoms



Housing Solutions has consolidated its fixed line telephony, mobile phone and lone-worker protection under a single contract with Social Telecoms, replacing a number of different suppliers, each with varying contract end-dates, while also generating cost savings.

Using an EU-compliant tendering process, Housing Solutions began by negotiating the terms of its fixed-line telecommunications contract by inviting responses from their incumbent supplier, other national telecoms providers and Social Telecoms.

Richard Harvey, ICT manager, Housing Solutions, said, "We immediately liked Social Telecoms because they were not like normal sales people. In particular, we were impressed by their price transparency. They are significantly cheaper, helping us to reduce costs by over 25 per cent. We also like the social aspect of what Social Telecoms does because it fits in with our own values."

Housing Solutions' lone worker protection contract was awarded to Social Telecoms using a service from Guardian 24, closely followed by another benchmarking exercise; this time for their mobile phone requirements.

The mobile phone airtime and hardware contract was secured by Social Telecoms

as part of a converged fixed-line, mobile voice and data package, renewing the terms of the original fixed line contract and bringing additional savings in the process.

Housing Solutions has 370 mobile connections which were previously on a tariff based on usage. Social Telecoms moved them over to a fixed-price contract with the option to upgrade to 4G at little extra cost.

The converged package came with a significant hardware 'fund' but Housing Solutions chose to retain its existing handsets and tablets because they

had already been recently upgraded so the hardware fund went straight to the housing provider in cash via Social Telecoms.

The final part of Housing Solutions' contract was Social Telecoms' wi-fi service for digital inclusion that offers affordable, flexible internet access to tenants without them being tied into a long-term contract or paying for more than they need. Social Telecoms designed the networks, provisioned the connectivity and installed the infrastructure for eight sheltered and supported housing schemes as well as a general needs new-build apartment block.

All of the wi-fi networks are completely autonomous to Housing Solutions' own network and are maintained by Social Telecoms on its behalf. Tenants have access to the wi-fi on pay-as-you-go terms for a nominal price of £2.10 per week for unlimited usage.



CREATING VALUE OUT OF VISION WITH CLOUDVIEW

Housing providers have a difficult juggling act when it comes to their responsibilities. Their first priority must always be to their tenants and residents. That means ensuring property, whether it's an individual's home or a communal area, is safe, secure and well maintained.

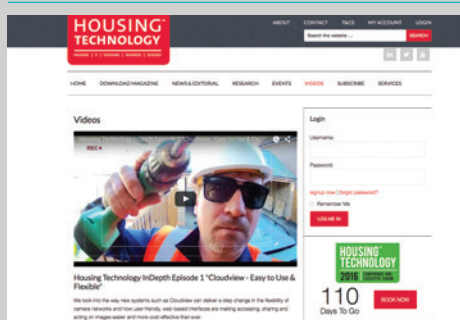
But housing providers also have a duty to ensure they deliver on their ethos of providing affordable, accessible housing to those most in need. That means they are under intense pressure to get the most from the rents and investments that comprise their income. And it's only with astute and careful financial management that they can continue to meet their original goals.

The bottom line, as anyone who works in this sector will know, is that housing providers have to squeeze as much from limited finances as they can. This naturally leads to a focus on value and efficiency that has a wide influence over a range of strategic and tactical decisions, from maintenance and repairs to safety and security.

A good case in point is traditional CCTV. While its deployment is often essential, and is considered part of the duty of care that housing providers owe their residents, it has generally been seen purely as an overhead. This is because it has never been effective or affordable enough to become a 'value-added' option that brings enhanced benefits for residents, staff and property. On the contrary, experience has shown that it is expensive to install and the hardware is

often unreliable, with disparate systems often deployed across multiple sites, all using incompatible equipment and operated by different CCTV companies.

This makes it difficult, costly and time consuming to find and access images from CCTV systems. What's more, when extracted, the picture quality is often so poor as to be inconclusive, or the time stamps are missing or incorrect, rendering any data unusable. Cameras and hard drives are also subject to vandalism, hacking and criminal damage. And because of the high costs,



damaged equipment is, in many cases, not replaced, leaving residents and staff vulnerable. To cap it all, someone within the housing provider Association, or even multiple people, have to be tasked with managing and maintaining all these systems, using up valuable time and resources.

Patently, traditional CCTV has not represented value for money for housing providers. But this doesn't sound the death knell for visual surveillance. Because, in response to the failings of

traditional CCTV, a new generation of cloud-based, internet-enabled systems are now entering the market, and providing practical, cost-effective and successful solutions to all the issues that blighted their predecessors.

In a series of videos (www.housing-technology.com/videos) and articles over the next few issues, Housing Technology and Cloudview will be taking a closer look at visual surveillance. We'll focus on how the latest innovations mean solutions like Cloudview can now deliver across a variety of criteria by 'utilising' visual imagery; in effect providing a ubiquitous, accessible, affordable and usable resource in the same way that energy, water and telecoms suppliers do.

This is a new era of cameras connected to a 'National Grid' of data, where images, like lights, can be securely switched on and off by authorised users as and when needed. It is a new age that will relegate traditional analogue CCTV to history, just as the lamplighters of the Victorian era were superseded by the introduction of electricity.

We're starting our series of features on visual surveillance by taking an in-depth view into the way revolutionary new systems such as Cloudview are delivering a step change in the flexibility of camera networks. And we'll be looking at how user-friendly, web-based interfaces are making accessing, sharing and acting on images easier and more cost-effective than ever.

GENERAL NEWS

DEATH OF SDS FOUNDER DAVID SHELTON



We are sad to report the death of David Shelton, the founder and chairman of Shelton Development Services (SDS), at the age of 66.

Shelton started SDS from a spare bedroom in 1994, helping property developers and housing providers with land acquisition,

financial viability, and legal and planning issues. He created the development appraisal software ProVal in 1998 which has since become one of the most widely-used appraisal models in the housing sector.

Phil Shelton, CEO, Shelton

Development Services, said, "My father was a kind and generous man with great integrity. He spent his life dedicated to the housing sector, influencing thousands of people through his work. His legacy will live on through the people he helped and the software systems he pioneered."



PREDICTING THE FUTURE CAN HELP HOUSING PROVIDERS

Derek Steele, CEO, Mobysoft

At the moment, housing providers and all other public bodies are on the cusp of a new era for the public and third sectors. This is being shaped by the government's political agenda of continuing with its cuts to balance the books. For housing providers, the changes in welfare reform are directly affecting their business plans and this is challenging the sector to drive efficiencies while maintaining and improving standards.

So how can they do this? David Orr, the chief executive of the National Housing Federation, in his recent speech at the NHF's annual conference, said that to overcome these organisational challenges, "we will seek to unlock the ingenuity of the sector". When speaking to those involved in social housing, this is precisely what many now seem to be doing. They are looking for new ideas and ways of doing things, and for many of them technology is central to this. One relatively new technology is predictive analytics and it will help with this search for ingenuity.

Historical data still forms the basis for the majority of organisations' decision-making and planning. Of course, making decisions on factual information is a good thing, but, and there is a big 'but' here, analysing past performance alone can

be misleading at times because it is only ever a snapshot in time. And often when organisations do try to predict the future, they simply extrapolate their figures. This can be highly misleading and is very different to predictive analytics.

Predictive analytical software applications have complex algorithms at their core that can analyse data in great detail and mine it for trends and predict future outcomes. According to research from Gartner, they estimate that by 2017, firms with predictive analytics in place will be 20 per cent more profitable than those without. These tools are highly useful in areas such as alerting enterprises to new opportunities and advising them on the best courses of action to exploit them.

Usually, where the private sector goes in technology, the public sector follows, but already there are housing providers using predictive analytics in various guises, such as Mobysoft's RentSense, to drive efficiencies through their organisations. However, it is vital that the public sector as a whole looks to embrace predictive analytics and other new technologies to help overcome the challenges of this new era.

Derek Steele is the CEO of Mobysoft.

Paul Evans
commercial director
Mobysoft



Mobysoft appoints new commercial director

Mobysoft has just appointed Paul Evans as its commercial director. He has over 20 years' experience of strategic sales at global and boutique software companies, including Sage.

Derek Steele, CEO, Mobysoft, said, "Paul has a wealth of experience in successfully growing software businesses, both globally and at a start-up level. Mobysoft's targets are aggressive as we look to gain over 60 per cent market share so his sales experience will help ensure that Mobysoft can meet that goal while successfully growing revenues and profits."

Paul Evans said, "Mobysoft is well placed for on-going growth as it continues to invest in its unique software solution which is delivering efficiency savings for housing providers. This was an important factor in my decision to leave a successful business that I co-founded to become part of the board at Mobysoft."

CYGNUS RESOURCING TARGETS HOUSING RECRUITMENT

WR Group has created a new division, Cygnus Resourcing, to offer recruitment services within the social housing sector.

Jay Cholewinski, managing director, WR Group, said, "Our solutions were originally designed for customers in the private sector, meeting their need for effective and efficient recruitment solutions that

targeted and found the best talent available. As the public sector faces ever-increasing cuts and demands to do more with less, we're seeing them compete to recruit staff from outside the not-for-profit sector."

Cygnus Resourcing provides a variety of recruitment tools and services based around its Fusion software. Fusion

enables housing providers to manage their own recruitment process, from vacancy posting and online application forms to screening, interviewing, selection and hiring.

Kevin Barnard, HR business partner, Spectrum Housing Group, said, "Of all the applicant tracking systems we reviewed, Cygnus Resourcing's Fusion came

the closest to being able to deliver our wish list of functionality and features. We saved time and money by not having to invest in a custom solution but still have the option to personalise many aspects of the system."

Housing Technology 2016 speakers announced

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The main tranche of speakers for the Housing Technology 2016 conference and executive forum (Oxford, 1-3 March 2015) have now been announced and registration for the event is open. The speakers and their outline presentation titles are:

- 1st Touch: Channel shift 2.0
- Aareon: Smart World - Connecting housing suppliers, their customers & other stakeholders in the digital world
- Adullam Homes: Mobile working
- BCHA: Customer portals, self-service and remote working
- Catalyst Housing: Information security in housing
- Circle: Driving value from relationships with IT suppliers
- Cloudview: CCTV in the cloud
- Go ON UK: Preview of the Digital by Default 2016 report
- Habinteg Housing: Reporting on its I-stay@home project
- Havebury Housing: Understanding your assets and preparing an asset register
- Home Group: Knowledge management to support a multi-channel strategy
- The Housing Contact Company: Tenant engagement - How and why?
- North Hertfordshire Homes: Channel shifting tenants
- Ongo: Mobile working, dynamic scheduling and real-time communications
- Orchard Information Systems: Generation spend - intelligent account management
- Red Kite Housing: The internet of things and Red Kite's SmartHome concept
- RHP: Revolutionising online services
- Seren Group: The implementation of a care and support management system, integrated with a single HR & payroll system
- Solihull Community Housing: The government's 'Pay to stay' scheme
- Southern Housing: Widespread IT infrastructure changes, including virtualisation, mobility and cloud

- Sovereign Business Integration Group: The art of the possible
- Thames Valley Housing: Delivering its digital vision for tenant-centric online services
- Town & Country Housing: Driving value from CRM and gaining business insights with Dynamics 2015
- uniTe Solutions (incl. Severnside Housing): A case study of living through a cyber attack
- Wakefield & District Housing: The death of the office and mobile working
- Wales & West Housing: Cloud computing - Where angels breathe?
- WM Housing: Implementing a new housing management system, integrated with its customer service centre
- Your Homes Newcastle: Taking dynamic scheduling beyond responsive repairs

Sponsored by 1st Touch, Aareon, Cloudview, The Housing Contact Company, Orchard Information Systems and Sovereign Business Integration Group (more to be confirmed), the annual Housing Technology conference brings together masses of senior IT and business people from all sizes of housing providers and always delivers an eclectic mixture of presentations and discussions over the two days of the event alongside a technology showcase in the exhibition area.

The conference is now in its seventh successful year and is widely-regarded as a 'must attend' event by hundreds of past guests, speakers and sponsors; there are several short videos from past conferences on the Housing Technology website.

If you would like to attend the conference as a speaker, guest, sponsor or exhibitor, please email alastair@housing-technology.com for further information or visit www.housing-technology.com/events/ht16.

DtL Creative makes new appointment

Nick Fraser from The Project Lead is joining DtL Creative as an associate consultant, with the aim of widening the company's engagements in social housing.

Fraser has spent many years working not only for housing IT suppliers but also for housing providers, often at a board level.



CASTLE'S QLIKVIEW REPORTING AT WALES & WEST HOUSING

Wales & West Housing is now using Qlikview reporting software from Castle Computer Services following a review of its ICT systems.

Richard Troote, head of ICT, Wales and West Housing, said, "Our aim was to create a single trusted data source that could produce powerful up-to-date reports in a consistent, easy-to-use format.

"We considered several options and in the end it came down to a choice between Castle's QlikView solution and one other. We set them both a challenge to create

a live report; Castle met the brief in just a couple of hours whereas the other party took three days.

"With QlikView, we now have a single reporting tool that is embedded into SharePoint so that our users don't notice any difference and can concentrate on the data and what it is telling them, which is an accurate up to date position that will better inform their decisions."

Gavin Jones, a senior data analyst at the housing provider, added, "Previously, it was difficult to bring together information from

various sources quickly. Reports had to be broken up into separate extracts, which was time consuming, but QlikView does all that very quickly.

"We can now create more bespoke reports and the information is updated daily, whereas before there was a cut-off for information as it took so long for reports to be created. That meant that other things could have happened by the time the report was produced."

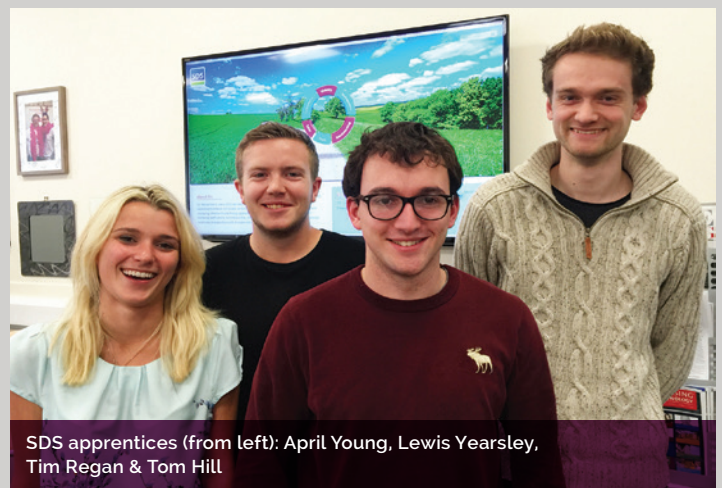
YOU'RE HIRED – SDS TAKES ON APPRENTICES

SDS is celebrating the success of its four apprentices after two years. SDS is a great supporter of the apprentices programme as well as finding it the ideal way to lower the average age of the office.

Thomas Hill is now fully employed as a junior developer, coding and testing software. He said, "Working in a small company like SDS, I had to learn on the job very quickly. I received lots of support when learning new skills, enabling me to excel here and to feel very motivated to improve. I wanted my apprenticeship to build the foundations for my career in coding, and SDS is perfect for this as it supports my external learning at QA."

The second technical apprentice is Lewis Yearsley, a junior .NET and web developer, who enjoys how the team involves him but also allows him to work independently. He said, "SDS has really helped me settle into my role and make progress here. I'd like to develop my role and I can see myself working here for many years to come."

April Young has joined SDS' sales and marketing team, helping with CRM, databases and social media. After doing a Business Studies BTec at a local college, she was particularly interested in marketing. She said, "SDS is a lively, fun place to work and it's the perfect place for an apprentice as everyone pushes me to



SDS apprentices (from left): April Young, Lewis Yearsley, Tim Regan & Tom Hill

do my best. I've really improved my reading and writing skills here, which is a huge benefit because I'm dyslexic."

The fourth apprentice, Tim Regan, is a junior software developer, who joined from Surrey University where he was studying CIT. He said, "I felt I was more suited to learning on the job and SDS is fun, lively and a really good working environment. I'm now working on developing our online Housing Development manual."



TWO CASTLES' IoT FUEL-POVERTY PROJECT WITH CAPITA

Helen Rogers, Head of Housing Products at Capita, and Rob Brittain, Property Services Director, Two Castles Housing Association

Two Castles Housing Association has formed a partnership with Capita to install smart sensor monitoring equipment to capture and analyse household data such as air quality, temperature and humidity. The project is said to be one of the first of its kind for the housing sector and will help tackle overheating and fuel poverty, as well as helping to provide services to vulnerable residents.

Rob Brittain, property services director, Two Castles Housing Association, said, "The cost of keeping homes warm is a real issue for too many families across the North of England. The problem is exacerbated in rural communities affected by rising energy prices, poor building stock and high fuel expenditure.

"Many of our tenants tell us how energy efficient their homes are, but once keys

are handed over we have no way of demonstrating the actual performance of a property or evaluating which elements are having the greatest impact.

"By using smart monitoring equipment, we can accurately test how well a home is performing from its internal energy usage to external building fabric. This will allow us to identify what features are working well, on top of areas for improvement."

Two Castles is also monitoring dampness in its properties. Humidity sensors can now report back when a property is becoming damp, allowing for timely intervention before the damp damages the fabric of the building.

Three types of remote sensor monitors were installed and are being tested at Anick View in Hexham, digitally sensing

the property's temperature, humidity, acoustics, carbon monoxide and smoke. Sensors have also been placed on lamp-posts in the street to measure outside air quality and Two Castles is also monitoring power consumption within the properties.

Using similar technology to a smartphone, alerts from the sensors are captured in Capita's OpenHousing platform where they may initiate a phone call, a visit or appointment. Household data will be collated in OpenHousing over a year-long pilot project; the data will provide Two Castles with an accurate picture of how well each household's key building features are performing, and will work by measuring the actual internal environment of each property, the power used to create this environment as well as external conditions.

BLUESKY MAPS THE SOLAR POTENTIAL OF 100,000 HOUSES

Working with resource efficiency company Sustain, Bluesky has mapped around 100,000 housing association properties across the UK, measuring their potential for energy generation from solar panels.

Using a combination of high-resolution aerial photography and detailed 3D models, Bluesky accurately predicts the potential for solar energy generation for individual houses based on a number of factors, including roof size and aspect as well as possible interference from neighbouring properties or trees. Sustain then uses this information to prepare detailed reports for housing providers containing cost/benefit analysis and, more recently, highlighting the potential to reduce fuel poverty.

Matthew Landick, associate, Sustain, said, "By using Bluesky's solar potential maps, we can assess more properties across wider areas than would otherwise be possible. We can then use this information to identify potential photo-voltaic installation programmes based on geography, cost, and benefit to housing providers. In recent projects, we have also used this data to assess the impact of a solar installation on fuel poverty avoidance.



"The geographical outputs from Bluesky allow us to create far more interactive and user-friendly reports for housing providers than simply providing figures and spreadsheets, and enable us to analyse and aggregate the results in a more useful way, supporting decision making when taking works forward."



HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE BIG DATA?

Casey Cole, Managing Director, Guru Systems

Big data is big news. Over recent years, the housing sector has fallen head over heels for data, citing its potential to help transform both organisations and communities.

If we are to believe the hype, then big data is the answer to a wide range of problems, from welfare reform to fuel poverty.

The birth of the internet of things has seen everything from self-learning thermostats to smartphones connecting tenants with their homes in new ways, while in the background massive datasets are generated for housing providers.

For some housing providers, their relationship with data is a new and exciting one, filled with endless possibilities. For others, the honeymoon period is over, as the realisation of the work needed to use this data in a meaningful way becomes apparent.

Many business leaders have lent their views on big data over the years, and all arrive at the same conclusion; large datasets on their own won't change anything.

Analyse

Big data needs to be mined. That's why machine learning algorithms are so important in helping to go from large datasets to meaningful results.

They can spot patterns and recognise behaviours in huge collections of data in a matter of minutes, which otherwise could take years to analyse. Done well, this analysis can give you clear outcomes and suggest meaningful actions. Done poorly, it results in confusion or false confidence about what to do next.

For housing providers, data comes in all shapes and sizes; for example, on building stock, heating, rent and sensitive personal information.

At Guru Systems, our technology constantly collects data on the efficiency of on-site energy systems, such as district heat networks. That means we can pass on accurate information to the housing providers running the networks,

allowing them to charge the correct tariff, while residents can see their energy use and costs in real time.

Over the last year, we've been taking our mining of data to the next level by developing algorithms that not only measure how effectively heat networks are working, but also identify any potential inefficiencies, which can carry a huge financial burden for housing providers, and suggest the most cost-effective improvements.

The ultimate outcome will be to minimise the risk for housing providers taking on the role of heat providers, bringing district heat into the 21st century through the gathering and analysis of data.

Set clear objectives

I have long been interested with the potential of machine learning. But to arrive at the best results, we must first be absolutely clear what we want to achieve from our data. Housing providers must ask themselves: what is the outcome I am looking for? How will this analysis better my organisation, improve a community or residents' lives?

Often housing providers will set complex objectives and try to get too much out of the data they have. The analysis should result in increased human understanding, not create impenetrable mystery.

I recently spoke at an event looking at smart thermostats in housing and many housing providers were keen to explore the additional potential of the data they might gather, such as spotting over occupancy through excess energy usage.

Our advice is always that data should be used to solve real-world problems and improve people's quality of life. If the algorithms used to analyse data become too complex and look for too many patterns then you run a greater risk of delivering misleading and ultimately meaningless results.

We believe that data should be generated and used in the same domain, meaning it should be used for the benefit

of those using the system that generates the dataset. For us, that means that data from district heat networks should be used to improve the way we heat homes on those networks.

The common mistakes

Big data is an unruly beast. It can become impossible to control its quality once it's been chopped up, reused then merged with other datasets; the resulting data then becomes impure.

Too often, the temptation is to try and use data from one domain to influence our actions in another area. That is how we end up with bizarre or unexpected Google or Facebook adverts on our web pages. In this instance, the consequences of using data in this way are relatively minimal, but when it comes to dealing with tenants or making crucial business decisions, there is far more at stake.

Medium data

In many instances, when we think of big data we think about the suggestions we get on Google after a purchase, watching a TV programme or posting on social media. In advertising, big data means that companies can sell you things; in social housing, the objectives are and should be different.

If we improve the lives of tenants or save housing providers money through the data collected, whether it is rent or heating related, then that's a success.

In many ways, we need to move away from big data and its connotations. Thankfully, big data has a younger cousin that's more human, more pleasant and much more promising: medium data, if you like.

By using big data first hand, in manageable portions to achieve pre-stated outcomes – medium data – we can ensure that it's both usable and, crucially, deletable if required.

Medium data allows us to take raw clean data, analyse it within its own domain, and learn from it.

Casey Cole is managing director of Guru Systems.

HÄFELE HELPS HEROES IN HOUSING PROJECT

Häfele UK has donated much-needed materials for a charity housing project for ex-service personnel in Manchester.

The storage solutions expert donated essential fixtures and fittings for a number of bespoke shelving units, which

featured in the BBC One programme 'DIY SOS: The Big Build Veterans' Special' in October.

This was part of a BBC project to help transform seven derelict houses into three new homes and a new training

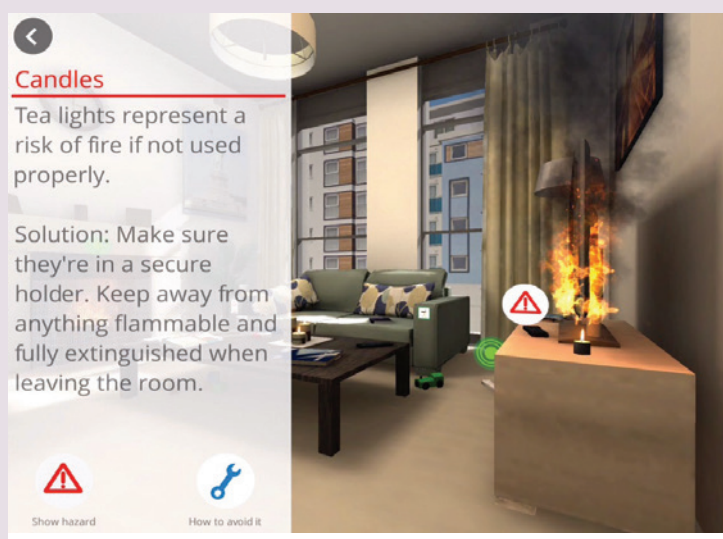
centre for Armed Forces veterans, as well as landscaping the East Manchester streets they belong to.

FIRE-SAFETY AWARENESS APP FROM FIREMARK EDUCATION & G2G3

Firemark Education and G2G3 have launched a new interactive app to increase housing providers and tenants' awareness of fire safety, risk mitigation options and fire detection.

G2G3, Capita's human-centred technology consultancy, has worked with Firemark to design and build the new tool. Each participant is taken through a basic risk assessment, which they complete by identifying hazards, understanding the consequences of fire risk and identifying the remedial action required.

Sir Ken Knight, technical and professional adviser, Firemark Education, said, "This new app will help to transform fire safety for housing providers and tenants. Working with G2G3, we've designed a tool for fire services all over the country to add to their education programmes and ensure that key fire-safety messaging is shared."



SOUTHERN IT FORUM GOES IN-DEPTH



The Southern IT Forum has recently formed a new sub-group of members who are interested in more in-depth technology reviews.

The inaugural 'technology day' was arranged by Rob Fletcher, head of ICT at Greensquare, and was hosted by Microsoft at its offices in Reading.

During the day, the group received presentations from Microsoft's James Thompson (cloud platform lead), Mike Gill (CRM), and Ben Watson (UK technical lead for hybrid clouds), as well as presentations from some of Microsoft's partners on Office 365, Dynamics CRM, Azure, Windows 10 and Windows mobile solutions.

Please contact jonathan.creaser@rhp.org.uk if you are interested in membership.



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