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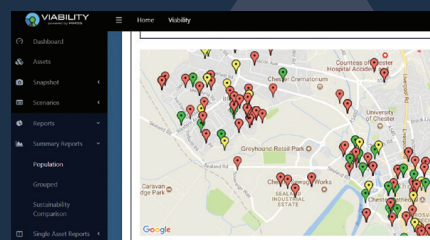
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IT PROJECTS IN HOUSING

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EDITOR'S NOTES

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When housing IT projects go wrong

We hope you enjoy our special feature (pages 21-29) on IT projects in housing, with a particular emphasis on why they sometimes go wrong (to varying degrees) and what can be done to avoid it.

Despite housing providers' in-depth RFI exercises and lengthy and complex tender processes to find the right IT products or services in the first place, it's very apparent that the actual choice of software is, arguably, less important than how that software is implemented and the reasons for its implementation clearly communicated to relevant stakeholders, including senior executives, staff and external contractors.

Your staff, in particular, need to understand why and how the latest new technologies will help them in their day-to-day jobs and also address their possible concerns about their roles being superseded by IT. Without the necessary clear communications and empathy, there is a risk that new technologies will be either shunned and/or staff devise 'shadow' work-arounds (such as spreadsheets) that undermine the original intention of the new business applications or IT services.

Post-GDPR 'data outliers'

Like us, you've each no doubt received hundreds of emails

from long-forgotten websites, giving you endless 'last chances' to remain opted-in to their post-GDPR mailing lists, and by the time you're reading this issue of Housing Technology, the GDPR deadline will be just a few hours away.

Assuming you've taken care of the necessary pre-GDPR communications activities and set up a GDPR-compliant data infrastructure, we believe that it's vitally important to ensure that your ongoing GDPR strategy protects you from the effects of 'data outliers'; that is, tenant or other personal data being added to your housing management or CRM system (for example) without going through some sort of 'GDPR data gateway' to ensure the data's GDPR status is suitably tagged.

This same process also applies to the 'shadow' work-arounds mentioned above; staff creating and maintaining their own spreadsheets of contact data are unlikely to apply the same rigorous GDPR controls as the designated data controllers responsible for your main CRM system, for example.

We suspect that although the likely number of these 'data outliers' will be only a very small proportion of your overall dataset, they will be the ones where you're more likely to fall foul of GDPR compliance, so keep your data front and centre, and out of the shadows.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY BREAKFAST BRIEFINGS 2018

In association with Aareon

Dates & locations to be
confirmed

[www.housing-technology.com/
events/breakfast2018](http://www.housing-technology.com/events/breakfast2018)

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY | IN-DEPTH 2018

11 September 2018,
BT Tower, London

[www.housing-technology.com/
events/id2018](http://www.housing-technology.com/events/id2018)

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2019

6-7 March 2019, Q Hotels'
Oxford Belfry, Oxford

[www.housing-technology.com/
events/ht19](http://www.housing-technology.com/events/ht19)



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NEW CHARTER SAVES 125K ON VOIDS WITH AAREON

New Charter Group has saved over £125,000 across its voids operation by using Aareon 1st Touch's mobile software.

The Aareon 1st Touch mobile voids process has enabled New Charter to produce a number of new electronic forms, moving away from a paper-based process. Voids are an important part of the housing provider's 'keys-to-keys' process, an area of the business which has been streamlined resulting in considerable savings across its operations.

With the Aareon 1st Touch software, operatives can now access and record information relating to void properties on their mobile devices. This instantaneous response means any repair work is completed quickly and efficiently. By eliminating paper forms and streamlining the processes involved, the new voids system has saved a total of £125,000.

Robert Porter, director of asset management, New Charter Group, said, "The new Aareon 1st Touch voids process has significantly streamlined our voids pre-assessment process. We have reduced the time surveyors spent on voids, experienced fewer human errors and cut down the overall processing time – all resulting in an improved void re-let time and higher levels of job satisfaction for the surveyors."

Chris Brown, senior developer, New Charter Group, added, "Developing the form for the voids process was crucial to how the procedure works and introduced a new way of working, not only for the team but the business as a whole. The Aareon 1st Touch mobile voids software gives me the flexibility to adapt the form when needed, further improving the process for end users and ultimately adding to our cost savings."

Orchard welcomes new CEO

Housing software provider Orchard has appointed Pat Clarke as its new CEO following the retirement of Ian Shard earlier this year.

Clarke has over 20 years' experience in senior technology leadership roles, including CEO of Tandberg Data and VP of EMEA and Asia at Arcserve.

Pat Clarke, CEO, Orchard, said, "I am proud to join Orchard at such an exciting point in its history and

we have ambitious plans for the future. Working closely with our board and executive team, we will continue to grow the business by investing in our team and solutions that enhance Orchard's offer to our customers.

"Through the leadership, skills and the sense of community that Ian Shard instilled in Orchard, we have an incredible foundation on which to build and I look forward to driving Orchard forward to an exciting new era."



Pat Clarke, CEO, Orchard

ANCHOR'S £1.5M NORTHGATE CLOUD DEAL

Anchor Housing is moving all of its housing support services to Northgate Public Services' cloud platform as part of a wider 'cloud first' strategy. The contract is worth £1.5 million over five years, and is a continuation of Anchor and Northgate's current 12-year commercial relationship.

John Paul, IT director, Anchor Housing, said, "Moving to the cloud with Northgate Housing means we can make the most of agile working and self-service capabilities. The latest version of Northgate Housing is available anywhere on any device and a cloud deployment fully supports that strategy.

"Accessing housing software through the cloud will enable us to increase efficient working, allowing our staff to access

all the information they need when on site, on the phone with customers or when maintaining a property. This will improve service and deliver cost savings by reducing capital investments. Other benefits include having the latest software updates from Northgate as soon as they are live."

Roger Birkinshaw, housing director, Northgate Public Services said, "Northgate Housing will give Anchor staff secure access to all the details that exist on their customers in one place, reducing the time spent on gathering and processing information. Working in a sector as important as housing, it's essential that the system is up-to-date, consistent and secure. The cloud makes that possible."





HOUSING TECHNOLOGY RECRUITMENT

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SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED – ENTRY-LEVEL HOUSING MANAGEMENT

Chris McLaughlin, Managing Director, MIS AMS

The managing director of software provider MIS AMS, Chris McLaughlin, talks about entry-level housing management systems and why laying the foundations for growth for smaller housing providers will help in the long term.

There are over 1,000 housing providers in England alone that have less than 1,000 properties in their portfolios. These organisations are relatively small but they're growing. You might think that their size would preclude them from implementing the kind of large-scale housing management technologies that a provider with 50,000+ properties might have. And historically you'd be right, up to a point, but that's changing with the availability of entry-level 'lite' systems. Regardless of the number of staff or the size of their portfolio, smaller housing providers can and are implementing technology to drive the efficiencies they need now to grow and that they know is needed in the future to sustain that growth.

These smaller housing providers typically work within their local area, have close relationships with their tenants and offer an above-average personalised service. It's what their tenants want from them – the ability to interact personally face-to-face on the doorstep or in a nearby office where they can drop in, but also via email, text or a self-service portal. They typically have between one and 25 employees and their staff usually live in the same area, know their tenants personally and work in a number of different roles within the organisation. They know the local geography like the back of their hands, understand the issues they face and the drivers for change, as well as also having good connections with the relevant local authorities. However, from a digital point of view, it can be difficult to balance the cost of technology against the likely efficiencies to be gained.

Data and workflow

From a technology point of view, these smaller organisations have relatively little data in comparison to their larger peers. The data is often held in multiple

spreadsheets or in applications that are unable to scale with their growth. They're 'making do' on a daily basis, compromising and using the systems they have due to pressures of cost and fears of the unknown. The perception is often that a housing management system is expensive to implement, sustain and support. That it can only deal with complicated workflows and therefore, from their perspective, it's rather a case of using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. And from an implementation point of view, they think that it takes months of consultancy time to implement, which equates to more expense.

Not so! In reality, an entry-level system is affordable, is mostly out-of-the-box, can take as few as 11 days to implement (due to the much smaller amount of data and simpler workflows), and has the ability to scale-up to 'sledgehammer' status when needed. In many cases, smaller housing providers have no plans to scale to thousands of properties, but they do still want the efficiencies of a housing management system, including the facility for mobile working. The stripped-down version of enterprise software has predefined restrictions within it that are much better suited to smaller housing providers but with the functionality that a smaller organisation needs to run an efficient and compliant business and maintain their housing stock.

Spring Housing

Spring Housing has around 500 units of accommodation in the West Midlands. In 2016, it installed the entry-level version, ActiveH Lite, of MIS AMS's main enterprise housing management system and hasn't looked back. As a relatively new charity working with people affected by homelessness, Spring Housing didn't have masses of data to migrate to a new system, so the 'lighter' system can scale and grow with the organisation from the start. It has provided a hub of knowledge for its 25 employees as well as ensuring there is an audit trail to show that it's operating within the terms of its contracted suppliers. Previously, it had been using

spreadsheets to manage its properties, rents, repairs and tenant services but knew that spreadsheets weren't a sustainable solution in the longer term.

As a growing organisation, Spring Housing needed a housing management system that could grow with it, although it has no plans to become enormous, so it didn't feel that it needed the full functionality of some of the more expensive housing management systems. The entry-level system fits its requirements – it's flexible, provides scalability and delivers a complete package encompassing CRM, rent accounting, reporting, repairs and in future, mobile working.

Efficiencies, not cost

For smaller housing providers looking for an entry-level system, the cost of the system is balanced against the efficiencies it creates. As any organisation grows, there are many more added complications that must be better managed. The turning point is usually when they realise that the daily compromises they are having to make from using tools such as spreadsheets are significantly compromising their operations. That's when it's time to think about implementing an entry-level housing management system to adjust the underlying workflows so that you can dynamically change what you need to do and how you do it.

Bringing together disparate systems across the organisation also provides a holistic view; no more cobbling together the data needed to better understand numbers or trends. The availability of real-time information not only delivers the data needed to better manage the organisation but also removes the administrative time and helps redeploy staff back to where they can add most value.

After all, with the right technology, the personalised service that smaller housing providers have always been able to deliver is even more personalised with the right information to hand.

Chris McLaughlin is managing director of MIS AMS.



EPIC HOUSING TAKES CIVICA'S CX HOUSING

Epic Housing is using Civica's Cx Housing and Financials software to streamline core processes and offer a new portal for tenants, as well as introduce mobile working for the first time.

The web-based Cx Housing platform is set to improve the tenants' experience by extending online services and reducing manual data entry for staff. The new online tenant portal will make it much easier for tenants to report issues such as repairs, check their rent balance and make rent payments.

Cx Housing will also transform operations for Epic's staff, bringing in mobile working for the first time. Accessible from any device at any time, it will help housing officers work smarter, with access to real-time data when visiting tenants as well as uploading any new tenant and property information on the spot. A centralised CRM database will also help EPIC's office-based staff to respond faster to tenant queries.

As part of the roll-out, Epic will implement Civica's Contractor Access Portal, enabling tenants to book appointments

themselves and check the status of repairs, and enable all contractors and third parties to update and create a visible audit trail of work.

By adopting Civica Financials alongside Housing Cx, Epic will have access to an integrated, web-based financial management system to gather real-time views on rent payments and arrears.

Chris Smith, project manager, Epic Housing, said, "Civica's Cx Housing and Financials software stood out as it was inherently mobile and very easy to use. As a small, rapidly-growing organisation, we need to be able to adapt quickly to change without being hindered by large costs or a reliance on specialist, external support."

Civica also reported that Epic Housing is just one of three customers to go-live with Cx Housing in the past two months, alongside Orwell Housing and Central and Cecil Housing Trust.

Care Housing's new mobile HMS with MIS AMS



Care Housing Association has chosen MIS AMS's ActiveH Lite as the basis for its new housing management system, including mobile working.

Matthew Eddisford, chief executive, Care Housing Association, said, "As a relatively small housing association with just three full-time housing officers, the mobile facility really

appealed to us because it means that we can be out in the field, rather than shackled to a desk.

"The software delivers big functionality for a small but growing organisation like us and will help us manage our existing portfolio of tenants while expanding over the next 18 months; scalability was an important factor in our choice.

"Knowing that MIS AMS has experience with very large housing providers was a big plus when buying ActiveH Lite."

Riverside chooses Capita's One HMS

Riverside has selected Capita's One housing management system to support its house-building programme.

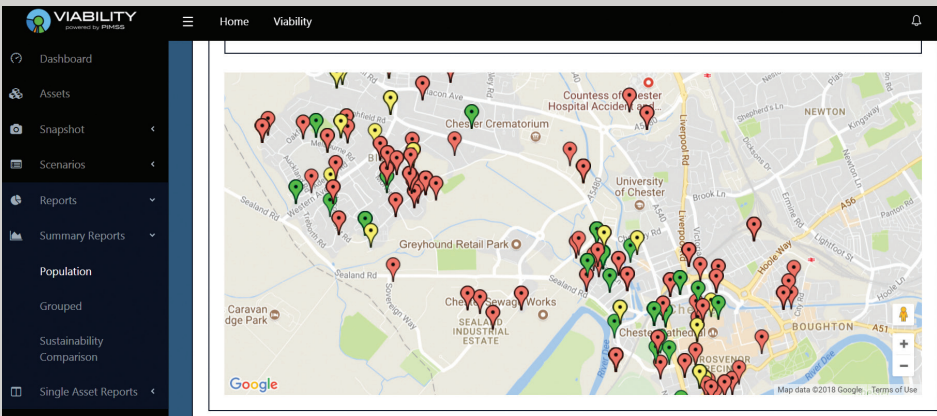
Capita One will enable a 360-degree view of Riverside tenants and properties and support the automation of many of the housing provider's day-to-

day processes. The new housing management system also includes full asset management capabilities for Riverside's property development strategy.

Carol Matthews, chief executive, Riverside, said, "We're increasing

the number of homes available, and therefore maximising our income is key. With Capita's One housing management system, we have a robust and efficient solution which will help us reduce costs and deliver increased returns on investment."

PIMSS LAUNCHES STOCK EVALUATION TOOL



PIMSS Data Systems has launched Viability, a stock assessment tool for analysing housing and associated stock performance. The cloud-hosted tool enables housing providers to evaluate stock against both financial (NPV) and strategic sustainability criteria and then examine the effects of changes to these from a property, street, postcode area, block, estate or town level.

Financial data can be incorporated to facilitate accurate performance assessment and sustainability criteria can be assessed in conjunction with financial performance and within the context of organisational objectives.

Comprehensive reports, including mapping functions, downloadable graphs and tables, can be produced and options appraisals undertaken to support disposal or investment decisions.

As a cloud hosted solution, PIMSS said that Viability is highly secure, and with a flexible licence and no additional IT resources needed, investment is low risk and can be met from housing providers' operating budgets.

Martin McDonnell, managing director, PIMSS Data Systems, said, "Viability fully integrates with PIMSS Asset Management and in doing so offers housing providers a real-time view of housing assets to support enhanced evidence-based decision-making. With the launch of Viability, we are enabling housing providers to make informed decisions that will allow them to take a strategic and long-term approach to capital investments in their housing stock."

ISHA retains PIMSS with asbestos module

Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association has signed a three-year contract with PIMSS Data Systems to retain its asset management software and add an asbestos module to manage its portfolio of properties.

The decision to extend its use of the PIMSS software was based on the housing provider's review of comparable asset management software and wholesale staff changes. Since the start of 2018, the asbestos module has been implemented and all data cleansed and uploaded to the system.

PIMSS has also given the housing provider's staff additional training on the asset management system and made updates to its stock condition survey form.

Dawn Harrison, head of customer homes, Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association, said, "We have identified our asset management strategy as far as 2020, with the aim of delivering capital investments, planned and cyclical maintenance, repairs to empty properties and responsive repair programmes in a structured and sustainable way. The PIMSS system will play a vital role in helping us to achieve this vision."

PIMSS takes on new asset management consultant

Ruth Dent, an asset manager with 10 years' experience in housing, has joined PIMSS Data Systems as a consultant, with specialist expertise in programmed renewal business planning, component accounting, stock assessments, NPV rationalisation and budget setting.

PIMSS said that an important part of Dent's role will be in helping housing providers to implement the company's new Viability software (see above) and evaluate stock against financial (NPV) and strategic sustainability criteria. Martin McDonnell, managing director, PIMSS Data Systems, said, "We have worked with Ruth for some time now as a client so we know her capabilities and skills well. She brings so much valuable client-side knowledge and insight to the company and will help us take a significant step forward in respect of our own development and growth."

Before joining PIMSS, Dent was closely involved in establishing the new Maros Housing Association in London. She began her career at North Star Housing, working on the production and delivery of planned programmes and the implementation of the PIMSS Asset Management software, followed by Watford Community Housing and Wandle Housing.

Ruth Dent,
Asset management
consultant,
PIMSS Data Systems



Ruth Dent, asset management consultant, PIMSS Data Systems, said, "With first-hand experience of the challenges faced by housing providers, I will use this experience to help them achieve maximum benefit and understanding from their data analysis to ensure they make informed decisions with regards to their asset stock.

"With regards to our Viability software, I have a good perspective into what data housing providers should include, or indeed exclude, from their analysis, based on their unique circumstances, so I hope that I am well placed to guide them through the process to ensure they achieve the best possible results."



HOW HOUSING PROVIDERS CAN SAVE ON IT COSTS

Tony Spruyt, Software Asset Management Services Manager, Comparex

Technology can undoubtedly deliver cost and efficiency benefits, but insufficient management of IT means these savings can quickly be eroded. Software in particular is one area in which spending can easily spiral out of control, both in terms of procurement and managing assets. To deliver the maximum benefits for the minimum cost, IT teams in housing providers must manage these assets, freeing up money to focus stretched budgets on more pressing areas. Here are four practical suggestions for housing providers looking to reduce IT costs through software asset management (SAM).

Revisit existing software licenses

One way for housing providers to reduce costs is by having a full overview of existing software licenses for services and applications currently installed and in use throughout the organisation. By creating a software portfolio, staff can compare the list against existing contracts and licenses to identify any unnecessary expenditure, or whether additional licenses are needed. If more licenses are required, companies should also assess how critical the software is to the business in order to avoid any unnecessary investment.

Assess software need

While having a comprehensive view of the software in use is a key factor in reducing IT costs, understanding the need for a particular piece of software and assessing if it is a business essential is also extremely important. IT staff must be certain they understand who is using which software and how it impacts their ability to do their

job. This knowledge and understanding is especially important considering that staff changes – with employees swapping roles or leaving the company – can lead to situations where applications are no longer required but maintenance and payments for that technology needlessly continue. If only 500 people are using Microsoft Office, why should an organisation pay for 1,000 licenses?

Having a comprehensive understanding of the organisation's specific technology needs enables IT departments to make more targeted software procurement and management decisions. That way, employees always have the necessary tools to do their job effectively, with the organisation procuring this technology in the most efficient and cost-effective way possible.

Consolidate similar applications

The number and type of required licenses can often be trimmed back through effective software asset management and the consolidation of software that performs a similar function. For example, it's common for businesses to have several versions of different business tools all performing similar functions and adding little extra value to the company. This unchecked software usage not only gives those tasked with managing software an unnecessary workload, but also wastes money. Consolidating applications can lead to instant savings, without sacrificing functionality.

Managing the cloud

Cloud computing not only increases operational flexibility, it also offers the benefit of lowering expenditure. However, the cloud

complicates software asset management as there are no longer fixed numbers of users, workloads or devices, making it harder to ascertain levels of usage and preferred applications. As a result, one way to combat this and better control software in the cloud is through a 'dashboard' which provides visibility into how applications are being used and which ones are being accessed most frequently.

This is important because software that may have previously been sitting on a single on-premise server may now exist on virtual machines spread across multiple locations, which in turn affects licensing considerations. For example, many end-user licensing agreements forbid the usage of software in a cloud environment, which could mean an organisation becomes non-compliant and will require additional licenses.

A small investment could go a long way

Each of the above methods outlined above can deliver significant cost reductions for housing providers' IT teams. However, to maximise the benefits these four practices can bring to a business, they all need to be executed frequently and effectively. If software use goes unchecked for an extended period of time, costs will not only spiral, but future efforts to digitally transform your organisation will be made that much more difficult – just a small investment in software asset management goes a long way.

Tony Spruyt is responsible for software asset management services at Comparex.

HOUSING IT STANDARD FROM HACT

HACT has launched version 1.0 of its free data standard for housing IT. Created in conjunction with 17 housing providers, the data standard focuses on core tenant data, and the voids and allocations process. It includes a reference data model, data exchange standards, supporting documentation, and implementation business cases.

Andrew van Doorn, chief executive, HACT, said, "The launch of the data standard is a watershed moment for how the social housing sector goes digital. It demonstrates the willingness of our sector to fully embrace a digital future, and to drive greater insight through the data we collect and use."

The first version of the data standard has been developed with the help of OSCRE,

a real estate standards development organisation. This free version is available to social housing providers and their partners, with training, tools and technical expertise offered where required.

The full version of HACT's housing data standard is expected to eventually cover repairs, care and support, complaints, development handovers and income collection.

Livin automates asset recording with Orchard



Livin has been using Orchard's Fixed Assets software for its property and asset portfolio alongside general ledger integration for component accounting and FRS102 compliance, saving at least £600,000 in the process.

Livin was originally using spreadsheets to manage its property portfolio, but with so many spreadsheets in use, the process had become very time-consuming and meant it was difficult to find specific information.

As a result, added pressure was then placed on Livin's finance team because contractual agreements meant that invoices had to be paid within three weeks. The delay in reviewing improvement scheme information sometimes led to the finance team making a certified payment without a supporting detailed list of information. Although payments were certified by Livin's surveyors, the detailed information wasn't always available for finance to review.

Livin decided to automate this process with Orchard's Fixed Assets solution. This supports the recording of all assets, including components if needed. Fixed Assets is integrated to Livin's general ledger for depreciation posting and to accounts payable and receivable for the addition and disposal of assets.

Despite buying Fixed Assets in 2009 at the same time as Livin bought OpenAccounts, their use wasn't considered until 2012 when the finance team challenged the payments to contractors without adequate detailed information.

Livin found that assets could be depreciated regularly and disposals dealt with on a day-to-day basis, while

component capitalisation and other additions could be done when a scheme was completed. It was decided that this would work well for new development schemes but improvement schemes would continue to be analysed into their components and added to the asset register at year end.

Upon reconciliation, the finance team found it difficult to accurately depreciate, dispose and add asset information. External auditors had also suggested that Livin was 'too reliant on complex spreadsheets'.

Matthew Wilson, management accountant, Livin, said, "The implementation was a challenge because the previous three years' worth of spreadsheets needed to be added into the system. We also had to create and implement the coding structure for each type of fixed asset journal."

"As part of the implementation, we undertook an exercise to compare the old process to the new one and found that the new process using Fixed Assets had both time- and money-saving benefits."

In order to design and implement the coding structure within the Fixed Asset module, Livin used the module's test system as a 'sandbox' to create, depreciate, revalue, impair and dispose of assets to observe their behaviour and understand the background processes.

As part of the stock transfer agreement with Durham County Council, Livin entered into a 'VAT shelter' agreement. A percentage of recovered VAT goes to the council, but Livin still makes significant savings from this with help from the Fixed Assets module. Through accurate component lifecycle analysis and with capitalising component replacements excluded from the improvement schemes, Livin calculated that between 2009 and 2017, a total of around £600,000 has been saved in VAT alone.

The new process also coincided with Livin's implementation of component

accounting, meaning that depreciation and other property maintenance elements are now tracked efficiently and accurately. Information can be consolidated when necessary, but can also be analysed separately in smaller segments.

Wilson estimates that it now only takes him around the equivalent of one working day per month to manage and reconcile Livin's fixed assets, and the annual capitalisation process, although taking a week or two, is now smooth and efficient, saving resources during a very pressured period, while also returning very accurate reporting data.

When FRS102 was introduced, Livin had to remove all grants from its asset base and recognise them as a separate liability. This led to not only an increase in the asset base but also a new liability to recognise and amortise them at the effective rate. However, because Livin had already implemented the Fixed Asset solution, these components were set up as a liability within the solution and amortised along with the depreciation of fixed assets.

Wilson said, "We are delighted that the Orchard software has made such savings over the nine years since our stock transfer. We will continue using all that the solution has to offer to ensure accurate and efficient management of our financial information. I can see that after investing in the right solution originally, it has paid considerable dividends."

SCOTTISH RSLs INVEST IN RENTSSENSE

Six Scottish housing providers and local authorities have signed up for Mobysoft's predictive analytics Rentsense software within the first three months of 2018, primarily to mitigate the effects of the introduction of full-service universal credit.

Gregor Booth, operations director, Waverley Housing Association, said, "We wanted to plan for the full-service roll out of universal credit in order to ensure our housing teams can work as effectively as possible in dealing with the forecasted impact."

Before selecting RentSense, each housing provider took part in one of Mobysoft's 'discovery days' which evaluated their existing income collection systems and processes and made recommendations about where they could create efficiencies.

Louise Smith, director of neighbourhood services, Queens Cross Housing, said, "Our housing officers were impressed with the way RentSense prioritises caseloads and this should help them focus their attention where it is needed.

"It also helps that the software can be installed and operational within three months, so we should start seeing a positive impact on performance quickly. As universal credit will go to full service in October 2018, we wanted to get RentSense installed for this pilot period to put us in a stronger position in future."

Ishbel Wright, team leader in housing operations, East Dunbartonshire Council, said, "RentSense lets us prioritise arrears cases more effectively, thereby making better use of our income officers' time because they are only addressing the cases they need to, which means we can catch them as early as possible."



Mobysoft's UC research – extra £7bn to be collected

Housing providers are likely to have to collect an extra £7 billion in rent each year following the introduction of universal credit, according to research from Mobysoft.

The study, which covered around one third of the UK's social housing stock found that rents being collected direct from tenants by housing officers will increase by 63 per cent on average.

The study found that housing providers in Wales are likely to be the worst affected, proportionally, by the increase in rent collections, with the managed rental income per officer (MIPRO) increasing by almost 75 per cent. The largest increase by income will occur in London, with the post-UC MIPRO expected to reach £4.46 billion each year.

Early reports have shown that up to 75 per cent of tenants in receipt of universal credit are already in arrears.

CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT

Accent delivers omni-channel contacts with MIS AMS

Accent Group has gone live with MIS AMS's ActiveH CRM system in its omni-channel 'Accent Connect' contact centre.

Accent Connect, based on Contact Expert software linked to ActiveH, is already resulting in measurable benefits for staff and the housing provider's 37,000 tenants through a single 360-degree view of Accent's properties and tenants.

Danielle Mould, call centre manager, Accent Group, said, "Going live with Accent Connect has seen many more benefits than we predicted. Not only

Danielle Mould, Call Centre Manager, Accent Group



has it made processes much slicker and more sophisticated, it has created better connectivity between all parts of our business.

"We receive over 500,000 calls a year and we're inundated with emails, but both can now be better distributed to our agents for them deal with. We can also

see when there is a shift in channel and which channel is used the most, making our processes much more sophisticated, efficient and allowing us to be more helpful to tenants.

"Accent Connect delivers better management of work streams across our different communication channels, and has improved reporting and transparency within the organisation enormously. It also helps plan outbound work much more efficiently around particular days and times of the week."

ENGHOUSE COMMS AT HASTOE HOUSING



Hastoe Housing is now using software from Enghouse Interactive for its contact centre's operations.

Amanda Harris, head of customer services, Hastoe Housing, said, "We offer a wide range of services to our local communities, and these are managed through a small contact centre of just eight advisors and a portal for online self-service. But our main interactions are by phone so it's vital to have the right system to ensure calls are handled effectively.

"Also, because our call rate is very dependent on events such as bad weather where we have marked peaks and troughs, we needed a system that could handle a sudden surge of calls. Our previous call-routing system was causing some dissatisfaction and wasn't robust enough, plus we needed to improve our reporting capabilities."

Hastoe Housing began looking for a solution that could handle these variations in call numbers, provided clearer statistics for reporting, had a good wallboard so that everyone could see the current situation at a glance and a call-recording system for quality monitoring, coaching and complaint disputes.

Harris said, "We knew that we didn't want a cloud-only approach because when we tried that in the past, it didn't work out particularly well. What we were looking for was a solution that was easy-to-manage and run, and that delivered clear and concise updates and reporting."

Hastoe Housing particularly liked the look and feel of the Enghouse Interactive Communications Centre and this has now been implemented by G3 Comms, alongside the Enghouse Quality Management Suite (QMS).

Harris said, "We had call recording on the previous system, but it was so difficult to access calls, replay them and assess their quality. With QMS, call monitoring has improved dramatically, saving us a day each month.

"In terms of call volumes, we've had to try to manage the load across a small team and this has been a challenge, but our customers know this and are usually prepared, within reason, to wait if they know where they are in a queue. That said, our customers are now getting a much better experience; in surveys, they are showing around 96 per cent satisfaction."

SALIX HOMES PIONEERS AI TELECARE



Salix Homes is working with Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust, The University of Manchester and The University of Salford on a groundbreaking artificial intelligence (AI) research project.

MiiHome uses sensors such as Microsoft Kinect technology (most commonly associated with the Xbox) fitted into people's homes, with the aim of helping elderly people who are frail and may have problems with their memory maintain their independence. Kinect sensors have already been fitted into a number of properties at Salix Homes' sheltered living schemes.

Jonathan Drake, service director for business development, Salix Homes, said, "Salix Homes is very proud to be involved in this pioneering research project, which we hope will help elderly

people live safely in their homes for longer and reduce the pressure on the NHS and other care services.

"Salix Homes is rethinking the way housing services are delivered, and MiiHome is a perfect example of that. By using a mainstream technology such as Kinect, we hope this will provide a realistic and affordable solution to tackling critical health and social care issues."

Salix Homes' residents taking part in the first study are being monitored for three months by researchers at The University of Manchester, after which the data will be analysed to identify patterns and changes in behaviour that could be linked to changes in health.

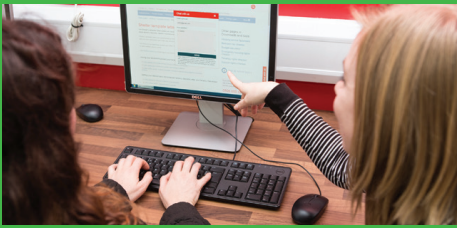
Caroline Gardner, research associate, The University of Manchester, said: "We are very grateful to the residents at Salix

Homes who have agreed to help us with this first study. I will be making regular visits to see how everyone is getting on and how the Kinect technology is performing. It's really important for us to know if it is practical to install this type of equipment and to learn from their experiences."

Dr Anthony Hodgson, dementia clinical research development and delivery lead, Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust, said, "The long-term vision of these studies is to test the idea that we might install a digital 'guardian angel' in the home, particularly of those who live alone.

"We want to develop a system where we can detect significant deterioration in a person's health. This would mean we could react appropriately and avoid the more serious problems that could result when things continue to deteriorate, perhaps unnoticed."

GCI implements Skype contact centre for Shelter



GCI has won a Skype for Business contract with Shelter. The housing and homelessness charity will use the latest

cloud technology to run a more flexible contact centre to help the 60,000 people that call every year for help with their housing needs.

Stuart Moore from Shelter said, "Staffed by just 30 housing advisers, we spent an average of 25 minutes talking to each of the 60,000 people that we helped last year. Additionally, we assisted 27,000 people via web chats and saw almost six

million people face-to-face. In order to improve our service still further, we want to integrate our operations more closely across different channels while having the ability to scale up when we need to."

Delivered in conjunction with Enghouse Interactive, GCI will implement a Skype for Business Contact Centre solution across all of Shelter's 44 sites.



EMBRACING THE DIGITAL SWITCHOVER

Tony Tench, Chief Operating Officer, Housing & Care 21

By 2025, analogue telephony services will be switched off completely in the UK. While this may sound alarm bells for housing providers who offer telecare systems (such as pendant alarms and pull cords) to their older residents, we believe it represents an opportunity rather than a threat.

While we see this date as a deadline for upgrading our systems, for us it was never the main driver for digital transformation. There are challenges in any transformation project, particularly when there's a hard deadline, but the potential to harness digital technology to improve the lives of residents and drive efficiencies in the housing sector is too great not to act now.

Our digital journey began in 2016, initially born out of our frustration at increasing call connection failures and a declining quality of service as more and more of the analogue infrastructure transitioned to an all-IP network. Given that our residents rely on these telecare services in an emergency, the increased risks were simply not acceptable to us. We needed a modern and reliable solution that aligned to our reputation and values.

We knew that continuing to service, maintain or replace failing analogue systems with like-for-like technology just wasn't economically viable. However, when we began to look at what was

available we found that while there were a few suppliers offering modern end-user devices, there was a lack of providers delivering a complete digital package (i.e. a digital monitoring centre capable of connecting those digital devices).

Given today's incompatibilities between analogue and digital technologies, whether that's analogue devices installed in residents' homes trying to connect to a digital network or vice versa, there seemed to be little point in investing in anything other than an end-to-end solution.

We first engaged Appello as our monitoring provider in April 2014, before the digital switchover was even on the horizon. As the UK's first provider to make the transition to digital telecare systems, Appello was a natural partner to drive our own digital transformation agenda.

By embracing digital, we've reduced call connection times from 90 seconds to just three seconds and enabled multiple calls to be made from the same development simultaneously – crucial in an emergency situation. But, beyond improving the functionality associated with traditional monitoring, it was the potential of digital and what it would mean for the future delivery

of care that we found really compelling.

We worked in collaboration with Appello to develop a wall-mounted tablet to be used instead of traditional analogue systems. This device is now installed in around 100 of our developments, with further plans to install them in all of our 430 sites over the next few years.



We're now looking at introducing and integrating new technologies such as smart home devices to further enhance the living experience of our residents.

Only when the housing sector views the digital switchover as an opportunity will we unlock its full potential in providing proactive care in an increasingly challenging market.

Tony Tench is the chief operating officer of Housing & Care 21.

ALCOVE PIONEERS 'ALEXA SKILLS' IN HOUSING

Assistive technology company Alcove, who has been helping older and disabled adults in housing schemes across the UK remain safe for the last three years using its IoT-based digital care ecosystem, has reported that it is the only company of its kind in the UK to have built a care 'skill' on Amazon's Alexa devices and integrated the devices fully into its platform.

Who is Alexa?

For those who have been living under a rock for the last two years, Amazon's voice assistant Alexa has become a mainstay in consumer homes across the globe and is now being recognised as a game changer in providing assistance to vulnerable individuals in need of specialist accommodation.

Identifying the potential of Alexa to transform its system and provide a more accessible interface for older and disabled adults, Alcove first deployed Alexa into a London and Quadrant extra care scheme (see Housing Technology, March 2018) just two months after the official UK release of Amazon Echo in order to see what all the fuss was about and work out what the 'use case' could be for older adults in housing.

"Alexa, bark like a dog"

In 2017, Alcove supplied Wigan Council with its first 100 Alexa devices, 30 of which were deployed in sheltered housing. The 'Ask Alexa' project sought to determine how Alexa could enhance the lives of vulnerable individuals, as well as gathering suggestions from residents and their loved ones for any specially-designed skills that could support their needs and aspirations.

From the participants, which included both the tech-savvy and the technologically disenfranchised, Alcove found that 95 per cent of users used Alexa daily for a variety of uses, from checking the weather forecast and playing music to setting reminders and adding items to a shopping list. Some more adventurous participants found particularly creative uses for Alexa, with one discovering that she could enable the device to play dog barking and growling sounds to deter burglars and bogus callers.



Alexa also proved effective in combatting social isolation; one participant mentioned that as well as being "very good with day-to-day living skills", Alexa was "also really good company".

Alexa skill for carers

As a result of the trial, a number of ideas were put forward by participants for a specially-designed skill. One suggestion, in particular, sought to combat a common issue that residents and their loved ones face, that of keeping track of the many care professionals coming and going from the home on a daily basis.

In the following months, Alcove built "Alexa Check-In", a skill that allows carers, maintenance staff, friends and family members to check-in to residents' properties without the need for apps, swipe cards or landlines. Visitors simply ask Alexa to "open check-in" when entering the property before relaying their unique pin code when prompted.

Each check-in is recorded in the Alcove system, where all attendance data is stored and can be monitored in the Alcove app by family members and care staff, or exported to Excel for payroll purposes. Custom alerts can then be created to notify key individuals when staff fail to attend at the scheduled time.

This not only gives family members peace of mind that their loved ones are receiving the care they require but also provides housing providers with valuable real-time data that allows them to identify labour efficiencies and potential safeguarding issues.

Alexa as part of BAU

An Amazon Echo equipped with the check-in skill and all the standard

functionality of Alexa is now included as part of every Alcove installation in new social housing builds.

With hundreds of Echo Dots deployed nationally, Alcove is also offering Show and Spot, the latest generation of the Amazon Echo, to its clients to add further lifestyle capabilities as well as the essential care skills to digitally empower residents. Thanks to the inbuilt screen, they can access cooking demonstrations, watch home videos, get help with crossword spellings and more, all done by asking Alexa.

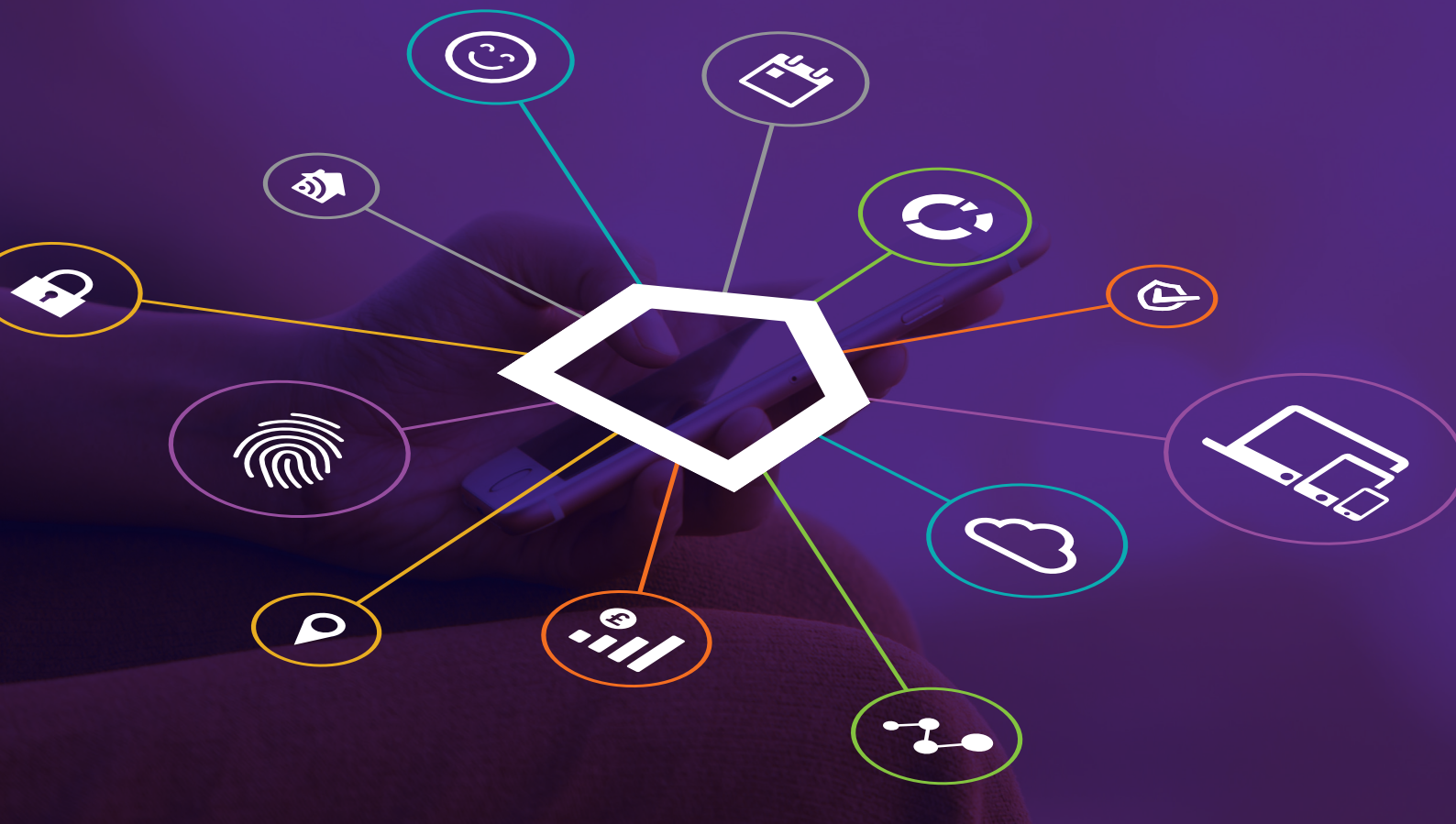
Alcove also gives clients the option to integrate other Alexa-compatible devices into their installations, including smart blinds, lights, kettles and doorbells, to allow older and disabled adults to harness the power of voice-controlled interfaces for independent living.

Hellen Bowey, CEO, Alcove, said, "We created Alcove because the so-called 'technology' sector to support older and disabled adults was so very poorly served by mostly hardwired, stigmatising equipment, with little data collection or intelligence.

"Within housing, we are making great strides, particularly with our new build scheme offer to fully replace the traditional warden call and door entry systems and provide the infrastructure services, as well as ensuring the in-residence technology includes an Alcove-integrated Alexa as standard.

"To put it another way, our loved ones and those in care and support services deserve an awful lot better than a big red button and a pull cord."

Brighter Thinking for Housing



The housing sector is calling out for a fresh approach to managing their customers, processes and people.

That's why we've drawn a new blueprint for the technology that's shaping the future.

A new open technology for housing.

Shaping the future of housing

NPS Housing is a proven and adaptable solution that is just about to become truly available anywhere. Our growing customer base includes some of the largest and smallest housing providers in the world.



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MY HOUSING CAREER...

20 YEARS OF REVOLUTIONISING REPAIRS

Nicola Brown, Sales Director, ROCC



I find talking to housing providers about revolutionising the repairs service with ROCC exciting; I've been in the social housing sector for the last 20 years and I still start each day with enthusiasm at the prospect of discussing innovations and new ways of working with clients.

I enjoy working in the housing sector; more and more work, post-Grenfell, is about the detail of regulations. ROCC does detail and data incredibly well. We keep the details of every job, transaction line detail, as well as stock records and job costings, which can be really powerful in terms of compliance.

The significant savings we make with clients, which we have seen reinvested into communities, is really heart-warming. Core to ROCC's philosophy is putting something back into our local and wider communities. We support various projects including Brighton Housing Trust in their 'First Base' initiative, which offers support to the homeless community; we support this by giving time, fundraising and work experience.

Career beginnings

I completed my law degree at Durham in 1996. I then went through what was a unique scheme with Pareto Law in Altrincham, which focused on sales recruitment, bringing recruitment and in-work training together in a package for their clients.

I then joined Raven Computers in Bradford in 1997. Raven are a 'Microsoft house'. I learnt so much about hardware; I could build a computer and I also learnt about software, licensing, financial management systems, the internet and web-hosting services. First and foremost, my strengths were sales. I made my first 'solution' sale, when someone gave me a problem and I had to fix it; a mobile working solution in a refrigerated, operational environment, which was a challenge back in 1997!

Starting at ROCC

In 1998, I saw an advert for pre-sales support with ROCC at its Rochdale office. I got the job and was out doing software demos with the now managing director of ROCC, Chris Potter.

My skills were more commercially focused than the technical side. I became national accounts manager for clients ROCC continues to work with today. I became senior account manager and was later promoted to Sales Director.

Career highlights

The changes in the housing sector over the past few years have been enormous; it's hardly recognisable to the old industry 20 years ago. Everyone is more tech savvy, not least with the internet of things and greater commercialisation of IT.

Winning large-scale contracts which bring real benefits to our customers has been a highlight. I have learnt a lot about bringing existing systems together, as well as fulfilling tenders from the start to completion of the process.

I really enjoy networking, meeting new people and discussing their challenges and developing new ideas and ways of working. It's really satisfying to see a solution introduced into an organisation which improves the way people view their jobs and allows them to focus on different aspects of the role.

Outside work

I juggle full-time working with family life and wouldn't be able to do it without the support of family and friends. I have two energetic children, aged ten and six, who keep both my husband Lloyd and I incredibly busy. When I do get time to myself, I enjoy reading and am loving the current gin-bar culture!

I have always volunteered; aged 23, I was the youngest member of the board of visitors at HMP Leeds. My legal background made me passionate about social injustice and I am proud to have volunteered for eight years. Since then, my volunteering roles have revolved largely around family life with the NCT and, of course, the PTA, with the odd spot of fundraising with clients such as the firewalk with First Choice Homes Oldham for TOG Mind. Life is certainly not routine or dull!

Nicola Brown is the sales director at ROCC.

WARWICKSHIRE COUNCIL DEVELOPS NDL MOBILE APPS

Warwickshire County Council is using NDL Software's MX toolkit to develop a range of bespoke mobile apps for the remote collection of fire safety data and risk assessments. The council is also using the NDL software for the digital recording of thousands of other inspections, including building condition surveys, mechanical and electrical surveys, and fire alarm testing.

Owen David, ICT programme delivery manager, Warwickshire County Council, said, "MX from NDL was the best solution for us

to be able to easily and securely develop, deploy, manage and modify an unlimited number of inspection apps.

"MX lets us create apps for any device, and then record, store and transmit data securely regardless of signal connectivity, with access to device functions such as camera, GPS, alerts, barcodes and email. The toolkit also features the ability to manage unlimited apps and users, as well as remotely remove apps and their data."

WM HOUSING'S MOBILE SURVEYING WITH PROMASTER



WM Housing Group has recently implemented Orchard's Promaster Mobile software as an extension of its existing Promaster asset management system.

Prior to the introduction of Promaster Mobile, stock condition data was collected in a variety of ways, with different surveyors each using different paper forms, and the resulting data having to be manually processed at least twice before it became useful. Opportunities to collect additional stock condition data were also being missed.

WM Housing's move to Promaster Mobile has ensured that the same data collection processes are used across the group as well as improving the productivity of its surveyors.

Neil Warne,
Stock Condition
Systems Manager,
WM Housing Group



Since adopting Promaster Mobile, WM Housing has reduced the likelihood of data errors by removing the need to re-key data, added the ability to verify and validate existing stock data (including verifying and amending asbestos data remotely) and accelerated the availability of new data for reporting.

Neil Warne, stock condition systems manager, WM Housing Group, said, "For

many years, Promaster has provided us with the tools needed to manage assets, collect data and administer projects. The implementation of Promaster Mobile has helped us add greater credibility to the data we hold. It means that our surveyors can spend more time on site and there is no requirement to handle information more than once.

"All of our surveyors have commented on how user-friendly, logical and uncluttered Promaster Mobile is, and if our users are confident with Promaster Mobile then we have much more confidence in the data collected."

MCDOUGALL'S BIGCHANGE PRODUCTIVITY GAINS



As part of its provision of reactive repair services to social housing providers, McDougall Group has boosted the productivity of its mobile workforce with the introduction of mobile working software from BigChange.

McDougall's entire mobile operations in central Scotland are managed using BigChange, with the cloud-based system handling all work planning, CRM, scheduling and reporting via Samsung tablets and phones. Integrated vehicle tracking and navigation provides live information for customer service with recorded data for billing, timesheets and driver duty of care.

David Robbie, managing director, McDougall Group, said, "We chose BigChange because we were looking for a fully-integrated system between vehicle management and job scheduling, with the ability to invoice and track orders from start to finish. With previous systems there was always paper involved somewhere so we wanted one system that was completely paperless.

"The introduction of BigChange has had a huge impact on how we operate. By automating job scheduling, vehicle routing and

cutting paperwork, we have increased the number of jobs we can do with the same resources. Productivity has been boosted by almost 20 per cent and mileage has been cut."

Using BigChange, McDougall's tradesmen no longer need to come in to get their jobs and are now on site an hour earlier, and gas and electrical certificates are delivered to customers electronically as soon as each job is finished. Tenants receive an appointment for every repair and text updates at every stage of the process.

Robbie said, "BigChange provides valuable management information for tighter control over operations. Introducing new technology to manage our operations is a one-off opportunity to re-engineer the business.

"It basically puts the onus on our tradesmen to adhere to good working practices and proper procedures and that ultimately means a more professional, more efficient and better organised business, and taking a mandatory photograph of completed jobs introduces an element of self-auditing, ensuring the standard of work is always high."

Ashford Borough Council on the go with Housing Support Pro

Ashford Borough Council has adopted mobile working for its housing officers with Housing Support Pro's Client 360 software integrated with its existing Orchard housing management system.

By introducing the tablet-based Client 360, which instantly provides tenant details and raises service forms in real-time, the council's tenancy management and housing officers can now access tenancy and property data across its entire portfolio, including contact details, repair and payment history.

Tenant data is collected faster and instantly transmitted to Ashford Borough Council's management team, while housing officers have the ability to manage their own workloads using apps on their mobile devices as well as removing the need

for them to waste time returning to the office to complete paperwork between visits. The council can also respond to issues such as fly tipping due to real-time alerts from on-site housing officers.

John Young, housing property and technology manager, Ashford Borough Council, said, "With Client 360, our day-to-day operations are much more efficient and, most importantly, we get to see more tenants that need our help faster.

"Other solutions require a lot of internal support, which isn't the case with Client 360 because it's all hosted and managed by Housing Support Pro. Furthermore, Client 360 has pre-designed digital forms for new tenant sign-ups and arrears management. Void, tenant and property surveys are also available via mobile apps."

L&Q'S PERFORMANCE BOOST WITH KIRONA

London & Quadrant Housing Trust is now using Kirona's Dynamic Resource Scheduler across its mobile workforce.

L&Q set up its direct maintenance business in 2015 as a pilot project involving just 10 operatives, but this has since grown to a team of 300 covering 50,000 of its properties.

The housing provider originally used a slot-based scheduling system from Total. The system assigned a single slot for each repair or maintenance task, with an operative allocated to it through to completion. While this worked well when the repair and maintenance business was small, it couldn't cope as the number of jobs and workers increased.

Given the volume and variety of work needing to be carried out by its growing team, Kirona Dynamic Resource Scheduler was chosen by L&Q to enable a more efficient and streamlined approach to assigning and managing maintenance tasks.

Kirona's DRS software moved L&Q from slot-based scheduling to dynamic scheduling. From the moment that tenants make initial contact, DRS automatically allocates and manages repairs and maintenance appointments, and allows for the immediate and efficient distribution of operatives

according to where they are at the time and their current tasks.

Since implementing Kirona's software across its workforce, L&Q has improved the performance of its repairs and maintenance business by at least 20 per cent. This is due to travel times between appointments being reduced, operatives carrying out more jobs each day, and appointments being scheduled at the most appropriate time for both tenants and the housing provider itself.

Grand Union on track with Kirona

Since moving to the latest version of Kirona's Dynamic Resource Scheduler (DRS v5), Grand Union Housing Group has increased its scheduled jobs by 46 per cent.

Having used an earlier version of DRS since 2014 for its maintenance and repairs teams, Grand Union invited Kirona to review its use of the software following its upgrade in 2017. Kirona found inconsistencies in the housing provider's planners' diaries, with jobs that had been forced in or assigned to appointment slots that weren't the most efficient option for the organisation. These instances resulted in reduced productivity, allied to inflexibility in the software creating general cautiousness from planners to trust the process.

Having identified areas for improvement based on the data analysis, Kirona ran a series of coaching sessions to re-educate Grand Union's planners on how to effectively schedule appointments using DRS to ensure they were comfortable with the system and reduce the likelihood of forced appointments.

After the coaching sessions, Grand Union's diaries showed significant increases and an overall improvement in planner performance. The number of scheduled visits in the planners' diaries has increased by 46 per cent, forced entries fallen from eight per cent to around three per cent, 'best slot' usage has grown from 67 per cent to 94 per cent, and the number of completed jobs has risen from 62 to 90 jobs per day.

Andy Garnham, project manager, Grand Union Housing Group, said, "We found working with Kirona to be a positive experience, underpinned by their approach to a collaborative partnership. Rather than leaving us to navigate the software on our own, they have made great efforts to arrange regular checks to ensure we were using DRS to its full capacity."



Vivid's new CDW hosted infrastructure

CDW has completed the implementation of a completely new IT infrastructure, storage and DR platform for newly-created Vivid Housing.

The formation of Vivid involved bringing together two Hampshire-based housing providers, First Wessex Housing and Sentinel Housing, each with similar aims but different systems and processes. First Wessex and Sentinel both had IT infrastructures that were showing signs of ageing, and their respective IT infrastructures were spread across four data centres, delivered by several different providers. Furthermore, neither housing providers' existing IT arrangements were sufficiently scalable on their own to match Vivid's ambitions.

A key objective for Vivid's new IT infrastructure was therefore to enable a complete refresh and overcome the complexity of dealing with disparate suppliers, as well as introducing mobile technology for Vivid's 250 field-based workers.

CDW was selected for its innovative approach and proven track record, having been one of First Wessex's suppliers for the previous 18 months. CDW presented a solution that minimised Vivid's risks and maximised the value of the available budget. It created an end-to-end solution around the implementation of new architecture, working with Dell EMC to equip Vivid's primary data centre with Dell EMC R630 servers and Unity Storage. This was underpinned by ServiceWorks Back-Up

and ServiceWorks Assure for disaster recovery.

Duncan Brown, director of finance and technology, Vivid Housing, said, "We had our own view of what we wanted but CDW's solutions architects were very honest in their assessment of our ideas and, rather than simply going along with it, they encouraged us to consider a more economical and efficient solution."

By moving Vivid's primary data centre from one of its own offices to CDW's co-location facility in Surrey, the housing provider benefited from a professionally-managed service, delivered by a single supplier, while freeing up space within its own offices. The development of a single managed infrastructure was aimed at reducing pressure on internal IT resources, while reducing costs by moving to a more efficient 'op-ex' model, based on the number of virtual machines in use per month.

Having considered the option of on-premise infrastructure, Vivid chose a co-located solution offering the best of both worlds. Brown said, "We needed infrastructure capacity with high availability, taking advantage of cloud capabilities and including an element of managed services to reduce the burden on internal teams. This took away any worries about loss of data in the event of a power loss and reassured us of the continuity we need to operate successfully."

The 're-platforming' process was handled with CDW's ServiceWorks Assure as the migration model, providing Hypervisor-based replication from the source environment to the new target platform, plus non-disruptive testing of failovers to ensure a smooth transition.

Duncan Brown,
Director of Finance &
Technology,
Vivid Housing



Brown said, "The transition was extremely smooth, particularly when relocating our hardware to the new data centre and rerouting our phone system over the weekend, both of which we thought would be problematic.

"We described the project as being the equivalent of rewiring a jumbo jet while it is in flight. You have to keep everything running while you are simultaneously changing everything."

PINNACLE IN THE CLOUD WITH RACKSPACE

Pinnacle Group has moved its communications and IT infrastructure to Rackspace's cloud-based services.

Pinnacle began using Rackspace's services in 2015, with a private cloud covering 80 per cent of its core business applications. By last year, Pinnacle needed to revise its cloud strategy in line with changing business drivers.

The service provider firstly wanted to expand and develop its on-premise storage to cope with much greater data volumes and consolidate its siloed IT infrastructure.

Secondly, because Pinnacle often handles calls on behalf of housing customers, it needed to evolve its communications infrastructure to

accommodate new channels such as web chat and SMS as well as traditional phone calls.

The final reason for its technology changes was Pinnacle's 2017 management buy-out from its parent company, with the resulting need for separate IT environments instead of its previous shared private cloud platform.

For the outgoing former owner, Rackspace produced an entirely new and separate environment. Highly resource-intensive and motivated by the potential for scalability, the business opted for a multi-tenant, scalable environment which would let it cope with increased demand and business growth. Pinnacle, meanwhile, expanded into the original environment that had been vacated.

Tony Brown, head of IT, Pinnacle Group, said, "Rackspace offered us the commercial flexibility to adapt in a way that we wanted. With our partnership, we were able to shortcut the whole process and Pinnacle is now more agile. And by no longer needing to worry about the state of our IT infrastructure, we have the capacity to focus on adding value to the business.

"Rackspace's expertise has been invaluable. Its managed service has levelled out the peaks and troughs to give us the flexibility and agility to act quickly to changing business needs and to focus on customer service. Without Rackspace's support, the timescale and cost for this move would have been much greater."

CNT'S 'ZERO TOUCH' FUJITSU STORAGE AT ONGO



Ongo has deployed a Fujitsu all-flash storage solution from Central Networks and Technologies to support 70 applications, 450 users and 15,000 tenants, leading to a 20-fold increase in performance.

Ongo Homes was previously using a combination of three storage platforms to support its business operations and Citrix desktops. However, the lack of capacity across these solutions had led to a pronounced decrease in application performance.

Ryan Heseltine, solutions architect, Ongo, said, "The storage dropped off a cliff in terms of performance, with significant latency issues on our virtual machines. At the same time, the lack of capacity meant that we had to be very conservative with provisioning. Clearing out old files and troubleshooting the issues caused by high disk latencies was taking up a lot of our time and causing performance issues."

Working with CNT, Ongo deployed a Fujitsu all-flash Eternus storage solution with 10Gb iSCSI for network convergence. Over the course of just one week, 70 virtual machines were migrated, covering Ongo's entire infrastructure including core business functions such as document management, mobile applications and a tenant self-service portal.

Heseltine said, "The migration process was relatively straightforward because we have a virtual environment. We began with a couple of test VMs to prove stability and then rolled it out company-wide. In total, it took one week to

transition to the new storage platform with no downtime along the way.

"Our entire infrastructure relies on this storage capacity, so to have such a seamless transition without disrupting our users or tenants was a great result. As a result of this success, we are now looking at adding our Citrix VDI infrastructure of 60 virtual machines to the Fujitsu storage platform."

Ongo reported that its IT infrastructure was now at least 20 times faster than before, citing as an example the read latency on its virtual machines decreasing from 200ms to less than 1ms so reports that once took over five minutes to produce are now available almost immediately.

Heseltine said, "The performance has markedly improved with instant responsiveness, which makes our users more effective. Furthermore, back-ups are far quicker and less prone to failure. That makes my team's life easier.

"It is essentially a zero-touch management platform, which has made us realise just how much time we had been spending on administration. We are saving 40 man-hours per week through not having to firefight incidents.

"It is a storage solution that simply works – I haven't needed to log into the management console once except for a training handover."

MANAGED SERVICES

AAREON BRANCHES OUT INTO MANAGED IT SERVICES

Aareon UK has launched a range of managed service options to help its customers boost value for money and reduce the time taken for services to become fully operational. The new services remove the need for housing providers to tie up vital internal systems management and staff resources.

Well-established in the housing sector with its range of on-premise Aareon QL housing software, the company's new managed services include Aareon QL ERP administration, system reviews and in-depth IT health checks, report creation and letter writing, 1st Touch forms' creation, detailed workflow configuration,

integration assistance and app management.

Paul O'Reilly, head of account management, Aareon UK, said, "Many of our housing customers want to ensure that they are using their technology estate to the very best for their tenants, while pursuing optimal VFM and the best possible use of resources.

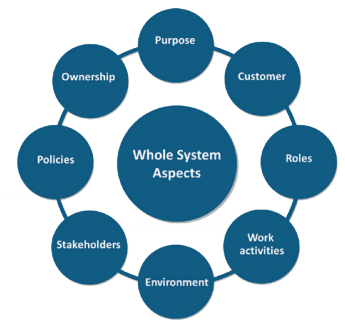
"With our new managed service options, they can access high-performance, cost-effective services much faster than deploying them themselves internally. In addition, users can be confident that those services use only the very latest versions of Aareon's software and are being properly managed."

IT PROJECTS IN HOUSING



T FOR TECHNOLOGY OR TEAM?

Gill Newsome, Business Development Manager,
Capita IT professional Services



Many of you will have seen the headlines on the increasing rise in IT project failures, how project costs overrun by 45 per cent on average and deliver only 56 per cent of the intended benefits. So, what is IT project success?*

The fundamentals of project management are time, cost and quality to deliver an output. When you combine multiple projects into a programme then you focus on the outcome – making the outcome greater than the sum of the parts. Typically, two out of the three will deliver the results, but it is only in a few cases that all three parts are delivered. In our experience, the main reason for failure is not having agreement up front as to what each part means and a clear understanding of what success is. A clear benefits case, broken down by the number of parts, needs to be agreed; without this there isn't a valid reason to spend the time or money on it.

The elements of success

This proven approach to achieving IT project success is based on going back to basics and looking at the set-up of

the team. Based on over 50 years' research that has evolved over time using the combined learning from multiple sectors, our latest iteration of 'whole systems thinking' places equal importance on the eight elements below. These must be optimised and embedded for any team, process or service to operate anywhere near its best.

Experience and learning tells us that the time invested at the beginning to get all the key people aligned with a shared and agreed purpose is critical. By involving the whole team, covering each of the eight elements, ensures that whatever approach is agreed, it will be fit for purpose because it will have been adjusted to suit the priorities, needs and values of the situation.

Where is the technology?

Whereas some organisations may let technology lead the project, we believe it is the team and not the technology that is purposefully at the centre of success. Based on our experience, we have deliberately ensured technology is not called out as a specific element

on its own because what is needed will not be clarified until all of the parts are assembled.

What are the results?

Whatever the scale of the project, the basics of the approach are the same. We worked with one client to improve processes to meet regulatory requirements which if they weren't met would have had an adverse financial and reputational impact. The output of the programme resulted in a more efficient management of property records, which in turn resulted in many fundamental benefits to the business in terms of cost and time savings. By focusing on people and processes first, it drives and resolves what is needed from IT and addresses the data quality and management issues, because their importance has been embedded into the whole systems approach.

Gill Newsome is the business development manager at Capita IT Professional Services.

** Research undertaken by McKinsey-Oxford University.*



WHEN HOUSING IT PROJECTS GO WRONG

HOW HAVE IT PROJECTS CHANGED IN THE ERA OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION?

Ian Golding, Interim CIO, Southern Housing Group

Housing providers' IT projects now support a rapidly changing, increasingly mobile workforce that provide services to increasingly tech-savvy and demanding tenants. In a world where customers are used to placing orders via smartphone for next-day delivery, the bar is now set high for repairs and maintenance service levels and innovation including IoT; and residents can now interact routinely with housing providers via the web and their apps. In the digital era, housing providers are now creating joined-up digital strategies and housing IT projects must support that strategy.

As context, more than five years ago, the government called for services to be 'digital by default' (Housing Technology's 'Digital By Default 2016' report provides a lot of great insight into the benefit of promoting digital skills, access to online services for all and opportunity for easier interaction with housing providers). The demand is now coming through thick and fast and technology is rapidly maturing. This demand extends beyond just operating and maintaining properties to providing other optional premium solutions as differentiators, such as internet access, security, social, and health/welfare-related services.

IT projects relating to infrastructure have changed substantially. Data centres and business-continuity sites are no longer (or, at least, shouldn't be!) based on-premise or in expensive real estate. Solutions now rely on more cost-effective cloud solutions provided by trusted providers and it isn't as simple as saying services are 'inside' or 'outside' the network any more. End-user computing is no longer about deciding the best type of laptop, tablet or mobile for housing providers' staff; the new digital landscape demands a connected ecosystem of properties, tenants, services and devices.

Housing providers' IT projects will often involve complex options that are configurable for the provider and long-established processes can often be re-mapped for efficiency; this is a substantial opportunity for IT to step up and deliver 'business' projects.

You mention the complexities of IT projects – what new elements now need to be included in IT projects to ensure they don't fail?

As the new fuel critical to all digital solutions, data now needs to be understood as an end-to-end resource. Whether it's CRM data for the customer contact centre to support tenants, HCA regulatory or internal reporting, document management, data flows or the business applications in daily use, data needs to be valued and managed as an asset.

A wider data governance programme can be very beneficial to reveal if, for example, housing stock is being managed efficiently, measure the total cost-per-build, ensure cost-effective maintenance and repairs, smart scheduling of appointments, secure API-based data access for authorised contractors, and mobile apps and portals for tenants.

It is no longer viable to designate projects simply as 'IT', 'digital' or 'data' or to roll out individual applications. Strategic programmes focused on delivering outcomes and new capabilities are replacing former 'tactical IT' projects, and consequently responsibility no longer resides with just one department.

What is and what isn't a project?

'Business as usual' (BAU) incremental improvements can take place as discrete team projects rather than as formal 'projects' where possible, subject to scaled-down project methods,

thresholds that the housing provider finds acceptable and the capability of the team. Otherwise, there is a risk of project bureaucracy which can stifle BAU improvements and make each change unnecessarily expensive. This doesn't mean a free-for-all; a clear strategy that is cascaded down to all levels of the organisation will help to ensure that teams keep each other honest about doing the right thing. Leaders must maintain good communications and ensure plans do not trip up another team or duplicate their efforts. In short, it should be possible to define smaller, less bureaucratic projects, rather than larger, more formal ones, and agree consistent definitions.

For more futuristic projects, a small, dedicated in-house innovation team can help housing providers to envisage their long-term future state, incorporating technology and new approaches with bold thinking, and testing this thinking through 'minimum viable products' (MVP) as the precursor for larger, more formal future project investments.

Innovation teams are not yet common in the housing sector but I expect them to become widespread within the next five years. To be effective, innovation teams will need the ability to work with agility and with ring-fenced resources and funding. The innovation team will also require some autonomy across the organisation, with clear terms of engagement, much in the way that a start-up business operates.

What changes are needed to IT leadership in the digital era?

The new digital era of housing projects has driven a transition from traditional IT directors managing IT services and infrastructure to a new 'digital CIO' role that understands and delivers the value of data, IT and digital experience across

WHEN HOUSING IT PROJECTS GO WRONG

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the entire organisation. Digital CIOs work with their executive leadership team to transform organisations by introducing innovation and changing their business models. There is a lot to be learned from insurance, engineering and construction firms, particularly in how to interact differently with customers and the use of data, IoT and smart sensors.

The new digital CIO as IT leader will spend time to understand how the new highly-mobile housing workforce operates. For example, how are property surveys and safety inspections carried out on the move – this is vital information as technology is now a great enabler, therefore time spent in the field with these teams will be invaluable to provide thought leadership and to understand where projects and technology will deliver the most value.

Platforms now exist to simplify and avoid the confusion of maintaining different devices and applications' use in the field. A good example is UK-based firm TAAP that provides housing providers with a single seamless platform for a range of mobile activities such as secure online payments, tenancy agreements and other document signing, property surveys (with photo capture, GPS location and timestamping) and tracking of high-risk safety issues. This is great news at a time when the best-known asset and property management solutions commonly in use are lacking competition and are not evolving fast enough to work well with modern devices.

Can you give any examples of particularly bad IT projects?

I prefer to remain positive as we are in a new digital era with great potential for success! Having said that, as a crucial step to ensuring project success in the past, I have had to 'pause' some high-cost capital projects involving organisation-wide IT upgrades that would have failed to deliver value in the new digital ecosystem. I have a few examples.

Telephony 'one-size-fits-all' upgrade projects fail when they don't match the requirements of a mobile workforce because many staff don't need a 'desk phone'. The very specific defined needs

for a CRM-based, data-integrated customer contact centre also are very different from the needs of mainstream 'corporate' telephony users. A better starting point would be to first assess the complex customer contact centre requirements that put the customer at the centre of the experience, including taking payments and being able to quickly reference details about the property, rent payments and the tenant's personal details.

The acquisition of properties (if we can describe these as projects) and the set-up/acquisition of new businesses can sometimes be rushed, and poor due diligence or consideration around technology needs or strategic fit often leads to a rushed retrofit of IT needs, missed opportunities and needless catching-up after the fact.

ERP implementations are rarely as smooth as hoped and at times go badly wrong. This is especially worrying given their high costs, typically being millions of pounds. ERP failures usually result from a failure of the housing provider's leadership to connect the programme and teams with common goals and a wider strategy, a lack of readiness to change, a limited knowledge of current processes, data and apps, and poor project management. ERP project outcomes are often not clearly defined and sometimes the wrong IT supplier is chosen – an integrated suite of 'best of breed' solutions may be a better option than a single ERP package that might be unsuited to meeting the needs of all functional areas. An army of consultants is rarely likely to fix major ERP challenges; this is a complex and critical area and ERP preparation starts far ahead of the definition of requirements to select a vendor.

What can you do before IT projects start to mitigate risks and avoid mistakes?

An effective project management office (or an enterprise view of projects) and clearly-defined project management methods are crucial. Housing providers must be clear about what is being spent, to deliver what and for what purpose and how it ties in with the delivery of the wider strategy. A balance

is needed to ensure that the PMO is not too controlling, yet not too distant from projects. A sense of community across all the project managers and a common purpose for the projects they are managing will really help. The PMO is, just like IT, a part of the business and not separate from it. Clarify who the (one) executive sponsor is at the start, to be the champion for success. A small, cross-functional steering team (i.e. up to five major stakeholders) may also help to guide the project from the outset to the end delivery of its defined outcomes.

How do you get projects back on course?

Don't wait, ask for help – an independent outsider or a colleague removed from the detail can help to identify the root cause of a failing project. The warning signs are usually seen early – low confidence, lack of enthusiasm or mis-placed optimism despite missed deadlines and budget overspend. An experienced digital CIO as a non-executive advisor can provide independent assessment on an ongoing basis or help to commission a project review. Provide a clear brief for any project review, ensure project goals are clear (they may not be written down in the case of a failing project!) and ensure the reviewer has a mandate to look at all aspects of the project.

Be completely open and expect that a project assurance review is likely to identify other connected issues and will cover all stakeholder groups. Pause, change and restart, or stop if necessary; it may be the least worst option!

How often should projects be reviewed?

A project manager's reputation should live or die based on the success of their projects. The PM role is responsible for delivering the project, with authority and responsibility from the project board, and hence must ensure that relevant skills of suitable quality and experience are engaged as needed. A week is a long time in a complex project, so this is an active ongoing process to be informed by work on project tasks and consolidated reasonably often, for example on a weekly basis.

WHEN HOUSING IT PROJECTS GO WRONG

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It is important to provide the executive team with regular project updates, although probably no more frequently than monthly. The executive sponsor will need to be aware of all significant updates within a week, not longer.

External stakeholders, such as service providers, tenant user groups or other relevant third parties should not be forgotten either; it is best to keep them involved throughout and not only when you need them or when they are identified at the start!

It is fundamental to set clear thresholds for reporting to the executive team as well as the project board, based on the days or weeks delayed, milestones missed or percentage over budget, irrespective of any other scheduled updates.

'Lessons learned' sessions at the end of projects can be incredibly valuable to help build trust and confidence for future projects; there needs to be a sense of community for the open sharing of experiences rather than treating it as a witch hunt.

It has been said that a good plan can help with risk analysis, but it will never guarantee the smooth running of the project. To paraphrase the famous military aphorism, 'amateurs talk strategy, professionals talk logistics'.

Ian Golding is the interim CIO at Southern Housing Group.



L-R, Peter Fitzhenry, Managing Director, Housing Support Pro, Steve Lamb, Housing Consultant, Housing Support Pro

BREAKING THE CIRCLE... A PERSONAL VIEW

It's now two years since Steve Lamb and I left the 'client side' of the housing sector to work in a technology business which specialises in supplying IT solutions to the housing sector. These two years at Housing Support Pro have flown by, bringing new challenges, opportunities and inspiring new ideas. Our business continues to prosper, but not necessarily in the way that we envisaged.

As gamekeepers turned poachers, so to speak, Steve and I have been struck by the conservatism of those looking for IT solutions in the housing sector. Sometimes there is a drive for a solution, it's a priority for growth and yet 10 months down the line, we are still awaiting the green light to install this supposedly business-critical system. On the flipside, as a demonstration of our team's speed and agility, from an initial kick-off meeting with Mint Commercial and Healthcare in Cheshire, all parties came together and we helped to introduce a new Sage payroll system for 300 staff within five days.

Our cross-sector work and commercial partnerships across the globe have thrown up an interesting check list of positive and negative observations, with respect to the social housing sector:

Positive observations

- There is a lot of cross-sector sharing and joint working, but it comes with a price.
- There is a mixed response when it comes to innovation and taking risk.
- Procurement in the private sector has a basis in trust, relationships and proven track records.
- There's a lot of technology going on across the world in other sectors that can readily transfer into the UK housing sector.
- No matter which sector you work in, good project management and getting employees on board is critical.

Negative observations

- Other sectors are not as rule-bound when it comes to IT suppliers and products.
- Smaller housing providers often have other priorities that get in the way of the innovation that produces financial savings.
- GDPR will come as a big shock to many housing providers.
- Public-sector procurement is a mystery to lots of small business owners.
- Decision makers are not always best placed to understand the benefits of new ideas and innovations.

Peter Fitzhenry is managing director of Housing Support Pro.



DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION SUCCESS – ICEBERGS AND HOTHOUSES

Philip Brunkard, CIO for Regional Government, BT Business

Getting started

There's a humorous little Irish story about a man on a journey in Ireland. As he sets off for his destination, he comes to a T-junction but doesn't know which way to turn. He stops and asks a local farmer who happens to be standing by the side of the road for directions. But the response confused him – "Ah now, sir, if I was going there, I wouldn't be starting from here".

Quite often when organisations set out on their digital transformation path, they struggle to make the right start, lack inspiring vision and struggle managing change with their staff. Transformation typically ends up as a series of tactical projects, sometimes aligned, sometimes delivering in silos and sometimes without the buy-in of their people who are trying to adapt to change while doing their day jobs. They either fail or don't really deliver the business benefits or outcomes anticipated. Most of us are familiar with the 101 (or however many) reasons why projects fail and when it comes to digital transformation, the impact is no different. If it is driven from the top down, with an all-singing, all-dancing five-year plan without any context for your people's roles or any understanding that new systems and new technologies might be overwhelming or seem forced upon them, then you may as well expect the transformation to bomb.

As a recent Gartner article on creating powerful organisational change management said, "Change happens one step at a time, and the first step is the most critical". The article goes on to make the analogy of a DIY home make-over show with driving organisational change. People need to be part of the journey; the DIY shows are engaging because viewers become part of that 'before and after' change story. Employees are engaged at the start if they know what they need to do to prepare for tomorrow's change and can help shape it – DIY essentially.

What's happening?

While many digital transformation programmes claim to put the customer first, sometimes bringing in external consultants to map out their customer experience journeys, organisations often forget about another important set of stakeholders – their internal customers, i.e. their staff. Your people are the real experts when it comes to understanding your business and your customers. Without them, you're only touching the tip of the digital transformation success iceberg – this leads to the 'iceberg of ignorance'. In his acclaimed study "The Iceberg of Ignorance", consultant Sidney Yoshida concluded, "Only four per cent of an organisation's front-line problems are known by top management, nine per cent by middle management, 74 per cent by supervisors and 100 per cent by employees."

What about me?

In its 2018 CIO Agenda, Gartner said that culture was the biggest barrier to organisational change, with certain behaviours in the workforce scuppering the chance of digital progression. When it comes to digital transformation, employees often wonder, "what's in it for me".

They are fearful of what new technology might mean for their jobs and fearful of losing control, often with the best interests of their customers at heart. Within the housing sector, this mind-set challenge has shifted from the impact of channel shift on customer services staff to a worry that robots are coming and going to take over our jobs.

CIOs are often challenged with keeping pace with the rate of digital change and the excitement of new disruptive technologies but fear they will be unable to get their employees to adopt them.

Innovation needs to be a component part of the organisation's culture, with staff motivated, encouraged and rewarded for coming up with creative ideas for solving

business challenges. They need to be in the driving seat, not merely passengers on the road to somewhere (or nowhere).

They need to be inspired that while technology can change their jobs, it opens up new, creative and rewarding opportunities for new ways of working. Regular awareness and education on how emerging technologies are enhancing, not threatening, their lives should form a key part of staff training and development.

Burning energy and hothouses

Now we've recognised that we need to make the right start, include our people and learn from their expertise, we must inspire them, not scare them with new technologies. How do we make this happen?

That's where the hothouse comes in. A hothouse can be the perfect start that your programme needs. It can bring your people on board and introduce the possibilities for how innovative technology can solve your very own real-world business problems.

A BT hothouse is an intense, multi-day collaborative event that brings together our customers with experts from across our business in areas such as research, innovation, technology and business change and project management. The aim is to produce clearly-defined innovative solutions to a specific business problem; anything from solving a particular business challenge to setting a future organisational vision and strategic plan. The hothouse is hosted in a dedicated facility set up to encourage team-working, collaboration and healthy competition to come up with winning ideas.

That's the text-book description, but it's more than that – it is about inspiring creativity; it is about hard work but fun; and about bringing together a diverse range of people. We often include some of the entrepreneurial start-ups we

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION SUCCESS – ICEBERGS AND HOTHOUSES

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incubate or other parties from outside the sector to stimulate different ways of thinking and problem-solving. The more diversity, the greater the opportunity for innovation.

We have hosted many hothouses for our customers where new ideas have been bred, brought to life and then taken back into their business as the catalyst for driving and implementing major change. Hothouse events usually last for three days and customers usually say they achieve so much more in those three days than they could have achieved in three months back in their office environments.

In November 2017, Optivo took part in a hothouse with us, bringing together diverse teams from across its recently-merged AmicusHorizon and Viridian businesses, with the objective of setting their 2020 vision. The high-level business problem was, "how do we create the capacity to build more homes". But Jane Porter, Optivo's COO, and Jeanette Alfano, Optivo's director of technology, both also wanted to test how disruptive technologies such as IoT, AI and robotics could change Optivo's future business model as part of that vision. The important factor was to also achieve this in a way that staff could embrace.

Jane Porter, COO, Optivo, said, "It was great to get everyone away from the normal office environment and working together in a different way. This has resulted in lots of amazing ideas from our staff that I don't think we would have achieved if they were tasked in the same way while doing their day jobs. It would've taken months, even years."

We brought in our research experts to talk about IoT, AI and other emerging technology disruptors to stimulate creative thinking. But not only that, our experts continued to work alongside Optivo staff over the three days to help them with the challenge. Three teams, with a mix of Optivo staff, BT experts and other invited participants, competed to come up with the winning solution, high-level plan and business case which led to some fantastic ideas.

Optivo's customer services director, John Barr, said, "It's been great to have so many different people from different departments and the people from BT working together in such a challenging but energising environment. There were some long days, a lot of effort, but a lot of creativity for what we think are fantastic ideas."

One of the key benefits of the hothouse has been the feedback from many

Optivo people who said they will now be looking at technology in a different way and they can now see practical ways for how technology can be incorporated into their homes to the benefit of both tenants and staff. Taking staff out of the normal environment and allowing them to see and experience new technology as an opportunity and not a threat is critical for successful and visionary digital transformation. Jane Porter said, "The added value in working with BT is the huge amount of knowledge and expertise about future innovation and things we might not be aware of to not only trigger ideas for the future but for those ideas to be created by our teams."

And at the end of the hothouse, Jeanette Alfano was keen that those ideas would be taken back into the business and put into practice. She said, "We need to get down and make the ideas happen as our teams have put so much effort into creating our future." Optivo has kept their hothouse team together and followed through on its commitment, not just with the winning solution but all the ideas put forward – they were all that great!

Philip Brunkard is CIO for regional government at BT Business.



KEEPING HOUSING IT PROJECTS ON TRACK

Chris Deery, Head of Housing IT, Solihull Community Housing

I should like to start off by saying that I don't think there is anything special about housing IT projects. I don't believe that IT projects in the housing sector fail any more frequently than they do in any other sector.

I would also like to state that I don't think that IT projects fail any more often in the public sector than they do in the

private sector. We do tend to hear about IT projects failing more in the public sector than we do in the private sector, and I have heard people conclude from this that "the public sector just isn't very good at running IT projects". But I don't think that's true; it's merely that the public sector is more open and transparent than the private sector.

Housing providers and local councils don't have to worry about share prices and need to respond to freedom of information requests from academics and journalists, and as a result there are simply more case studies and articles available about IT project failures in the public sector. For example, the European Services Strategy Unit produced a

KEEPING HOUSING IT PROJECTS ON TRACK

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report* called 'Cost Overruns, Delays and Terminations'. It contained the findings of a survey of outsourced, public-sector IT projects that suffered from some form of failure or delay. If any of you are currently in the middle of an IT project that isn't going so well, I recommend reading this report – I found it quite cathartic!

If IT projects in all sectors have their challenges, why do IT projects go wrong? A professor at Duke University's School of Business argues that this has significantly more to do with strategy than with the actual technology itself or the people who deliver it.

Duke University's Professor Jeremy Petranka said, "While it's really easy to place the blame on chief information officers, eventually we have to acknowledge the fact that there seems to be a fundamental weakness throughout the industry. If we look more into why projects tend to fail, it's fairly obvious that the real issue at play isn't a lack of IT ability. Instead, it seems to be a lack of deep understanding of what makes up strategy in general, what makes up IT strategy specifically, and how these two connect within an organisation."

In housing IT, words like mobile working, cloud computing and big data get thrown around a lot.

With reference to the types of problems that we as housing professionals are trying to solve, Petranka said, "These aren't strategies, these are tactics. The fact is, there are a huge amount of IT skills that we could bring into an organisation; the ones we should bring in are the ones that will make us good. Everything else is a waste of resources."

For example, an investment bank focused on high-speed trading needs the ability to develop high-speed applications and cutting-edge architecture, but beautiful presentation is less important, Petranka said. Conversely, for a large healthcare organisation seeking to improve operational efficiency, being able to visualise operational data for doctors, nurses and administrators is significantly more valuable.

What often prevents organisations from focusing correctly, Petranka said, is a

failure of IT strategy to be driven by the broader business strategy.

He said, "Remember, IT is just a tool to solve specific business problems. If those problems aren't clear, then there's no chance of the IT department having a coherent strategy."

Often in the housing sector there is a lack of clarity concerning the exact nature of the problem trying to be solved. For example, we might say that we need a new homelessness system because new legislation is coming into force, but is that really the problem we are trying to solve? Or we introduce technology to reduce staff costs in response to rent reductions, but then we are too worried about the effects on staff morale to actually admit to anyone why the technology is being introduced. When we do this, our staff are then free to make up their own reasons for why the technology was introduced and what benefits it is supposed to achieve. When this happens, those same staff are often left with a feeling that the IT project failed to deliver the outcomes they thought it would.

The Project Management Institute's 2017 'Pulse of the Profession' report found that 28 per cent of strategic initiatives were deemed to be outright failures. Some 37 per cent of the more than 3,000 project management professionals who took part in the PMI's research cited their senior management's inability to clearly specify achievable milestones or objectives as a cause of failure. Other causes of failure included poor communication (19 per cent), lack of communication by senior management (18 per cent), employee resistance (14 per cent) and insufficient funding (9 per cent).

And speaking of money, the same report found that due to poor project performance, organisations waste an average of \$97 million for every \$1 billion invested. That's better than 2016's \$122 million in waste, but still a significant loss.

But this isn't the only recent research that seems to be attempting to identify reasons why IT projects go wrong. PwC's 2017 'Global Digital IQ Survey' polled 2,216 business and IT leaders from 53 countries and asked them what hinders digital transformation. Some 64 per cent of respondents said a lack of

collaboration between IT and business is usually to blame, 58 per cent cited inflexible or slow processes, 41 per cent listed lack of integration between new and existing technologies, 38 per cent named outdated technologies and 37 per cent put down lack of properly skilled teams.

But listing the reasons why IT projects go wrong isn't in itself very helpful. We also need to think about how we remedy these problems.

The same PwC study identified organisations with 80 per cent or more of their projects being completed on time and within budget while also meeting original goals and business intent. The study classified these organisations as "champions". The report also highlighted the fact that these champions had invested in several common areas, including the leadership skills of project professionals, benefits realisation management, project management offices and actively engaged executives.

Over the past few years all RSLs have been trying to save money in response to the one per cent reduction in rent. In many organisations, training budgets have been squeezed and investments in developing these sorts of skills might not have been given the priority that they should have been.

The reasons for housing IT projects going wrong are varied and complex. But in the words of the Baz Luhrmann song 'Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)', "If I could offer you only one tip for the future", I would say invest time and money in training senior managers, housing professionals and IT staff in project management. Any other advice I might offer would, I am afraid, have "no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience".

Chris Deery is head of housing IT at Solihull Community Housing.

** Please see: www.researchgate.net/publication/292379344_cost_overruns_delays_and_terminations_in_105_outsourced_public_sector_ict_contracts.*



IF NOTHING GOES WRONG, YOU'RE NOT INNOVATING

Mike Eckersley, Business Architect, CloudThing

'Digital transformation' has existed as a mainstream term in the IT sector for a long time, and before that, the phrase used was 'channel shift'. Both are terms for a project or strategy taken on by an organisation to change the way either it provides services to customers or how the staff interact into a new more efficient medium using technology. That has taken many iterations over the years including moving paperwork into CRM systems, mobile working, encouraging customers to use web chat instead of phone calls, and more.

I've worked in the housing sector for over 12 years and have seen IT make big a difference to the quality of service delivered to tenants through numerous new approaches. However, this has not always been the outcome with every project and I have seen at first-hand projects that have gone awry despite the best intentions

Sometimes, a project just does not land with the users. It is either too complicated, too steep a learning curve or such a big change that it becomes a white elephant and users end up working around the solution using 'shadow IT' or simply going back to how they always did it. In a modern world, where people use technology in new ways all the time in their personal lives, this simply should not be happening with enterprise-level investments in transformational technology.

In my opinion, a lot of it comes down to mindset and approach. By labelling strategies and projects with 'transformation' or 'channel shift' it is easy to view it as an end goal or a destination that we will reach like any other milestone in a project. Within housing, we must pick and choose where we spend budgets and we simply don't have the resources to go after 'transformation' as an end goal in itself, and nor should we.

Transformation implies a total reimagining of an organisation, from top to bottom, with new ways of working throughout – something that risks "throwing the baby out with bathwater". We want to continue to support our tenants to live in well-

maintained, safe properties and ensure the organisation is paid on time, through universal credit or otherwise. While what we deliver may look totally different in ten years' time, it is through continuous improvement and incremental changes that will lead to this transformation – not pursuing it through one project alone.

Since moving from the housing sector to software development and Microsoft Dynamics 365 partner cloudThing, I've seen IT projects delivered through truly agile methodologies. I believe this approach is still not something mastered in the housing sector, and while individual projects may be labelled as 'agile', the true benefits of the approach come from the entire organisation adopting agile to achieve quick wins and incremental steps towards overall transformation.

I have been lucky enough to be involved with customers across multiple sectors and seen at first-hand how a different approach to transformation and IT projects in general can make a dramatic difference to success. Our work with the Chartered Institute of Accountants in England and Wales, as well as the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants are big transformational deals lasting multiple years, but these are split into project phases, each with measurable success factors. This granular approach to the big picture as well as the small means that every feature of each solution must be delivering today, while building for tomorrow. This means that if priorities or resources change, we can shift what will be delivered when, while still moving towards the organisation's overall goals.

Treating transformation like a project managed with a 'waterfall' approach is simply never going to achieve the required result. Waterfall relies on agreed and locked-down success factors from top to bottom, and working back from there, which can work with software development but not when applied to a business strategy involving technologies which can change in as little as 12 months. Proclaiming that to transform, an organisation must have 90 per cent of customers interacting with the organisation

through digital makes sense as an overall goal, but digital can take so many forms it is in the steps to achieving it that we achieve genuine business value.

With the advent of chatbots, voice assistants, AI and more, technology has never been more accessible to everybody. Siloed projects that deliver these expensive new technologies or services which do not integrate with existing infrastructure often lead to simpler, more cost effective solutions being missed all together. Through modular, incremental improvements, creative SMEs can really help housing providers. Instead of committing budget to a huge, transformational project, starting small and building on each success will ensure user buy-in and a transition to digital that is manageable and built on processes familiar to staff.

What I have seen in my experience in housing is that the success of any project is dependent on an ability to quickly prove its business value to the wider organisation. By taking the approach of building incrementally on existing infrastructure through various pieces of software and integration means that the sector can shift away from a reliance on large, inflexible outsourcing agreements and software to instead deliver fixed-cost, manageable investments with clear goals and minimal risks on the journey to transformation.

By lowering the risk of innovation through smaller ongoing investments means that housing providers are free to test what works and what doesn't quickly without the worry that jobs are on the line if something fails. Through cloud technology, we are free to spin up and test solutions which were in the realms of science fiction only a decade ago. These projects need no added hardware investment, only some integration work to build into our existing systems, meaning there is no added screens for users, no skills gap for supporting the new hardware – just room to test and see what makes an impact to improving services.

IF NOTHING GOES WRONG, YOU'RE NOT INNOVATING

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I see this approach as the best way to deal with IT projects going wrong. We must accept that when trying new services, sometimes they will fail. Lowering the risk, and pushing forward searching for

the projects that work, is how we will truly transform the sector over time. Working with innovative SMEs to take the best creativity from the SME space, combined with familiar off-the-shelf solutions, is how

each housing provider can build an IT Infrastructure that suits their unique needs with minimal risk and investment.

Mike Eckersley is a business architect at CloudThing.

GENERAL NEWS



Women in IT at Flagship Group

Flagship Group is proud to be above the UK national average for the number of female employees working in IT; the seven roles vary from GIS development and infrastructure specialists to business partners. Housing Technology interviewed some of Flagship's IT team about their roles and women in IT.

Starting out in IT

Rachael Leeder, an IT business partner at Flagship, said, "I never set out to have a career in IT. I was originally part of a design group, working on a new piece of software to manage our tenancies. I applied for my current business partner position because I loved what we had designed and wanted to be a part of building it."

Julie Hulse, Flagship's IT infrastructure specialist, said, "IT network management was a role that I gained during my career in the Royal Air Force a few years ago and something I thoroughly enjoyed, so much so that I left in order to continue and enhance this particular IT path."

Abi Tassie, a GIS developer at Flagship, said, "While reading geography at university, I saw the effects that analysing geographical data could have in the real world. This is something that I knew I wanted to do in my career and something I have been able to do at Flagship, allowing me to run with projects that I think could be greatly improved using GIS."

Working in housing IT

Hulse added, "I've been lucky enough to have worked with some really great men who are extremely skilled and amazing to work with, but the most inspirational and influential person I've worked with so far has been a female IT manager and I think that this is probably the case for some of my male colleagues too."

Angela Sheridan, a Flagship IT business partner, said, "Working in IT has meant that I've been able to interact with different departments and people that I wouldn't normally have come across and as such have gained a far deeper understanding of Flagship's business."

Team skills

Claire Howe, one of Flagship's IT business partners, said, "I've always been a bit of a problem solver and my role lets me use that skill across everything I am working on. I've also worked with various departments across the business which allows me to understand individual requirements."

Sheridan added, "I believe the skills I bring are those from my previous roles which include a variety of customer-facing roles. As an IT business partner it's important that we can communicate well with everybody, not just those in IT."

Perceptions of IT

Howe said, "Unfortunately, in television and films, IT people are often depicted as socially awkward. This is certainly not

the case and Flagship certainly proves that! I think people tend to think of IT as predominantly a male environment but I don't believe women are stereotyped as extensively as the men who work within IT."

Tassie said, "When I first started working for Flagship, there was a very traditional view of what IT did – if only I had a penny for every time someone asked me to reset their password! It was originally a very male-orientated team and, dare I say it, quite geeky. However, in recent years our colleagues have seen the positive results of the business intelligence team analysing data and using the results of that to improve our services."

Leeder said, "I think the common misconception of IT is created mostly from what people see on television, such as the IT Crowd and Big Bang Theory, that it's predominantly a male environment and you must have a certain personality to be a part of it. I still think people are surprised that a woman would choose a career in IT because it is seen as a male-dominated sector."

Hulse concluded, "The perception of women working in IT is changing. I've worked in IT for 15 years and, compared with the earlier years, there are definitely more women in the industry, so it's becoming far more accepted."

Housing Technology would like to thank the team at Flagship Group for their contributions to this article.



SPOTLIGHT ON GENDER IN HOUSING IT

L-R, Kathryn Banfield, IT Infrastructure Analyst, Amy Kelly, IT Support Analyst, Rhian Waygood, IT Systems Support Partner, Coastal Housing and Joanna Sedley-Burke, Managing Director, Sovereign Business Integration Group

Coastal Housing Group and Sovereign Business Integration Group look at how gender diversity in housing IT is changing in a traditionally male-dominated sector.

Has the role of women in society ever been so hotly debated? From women's suffrage to the recent gender pay gap headlines, the debate rages on. Recent reports have gone on to reveal that, largely, women's remuneration still trails men's by quite a margin.

UK companies' obligation to report pay has also shone the spotlight on the ratio of men to women in the workforce in senior roles. Not surprisingly, less than a quarter of boards are made up of women. In 2017, 16 per cent of boards had no female members at all, but this is an improvement on the 33 per cent in 2013.

Having said that, we mustn't lose sight of how in the past decade gender equality has improved significantly, even if men are still more prevalent in science and technology jobs, especially in more senior roles.

Women in social housing

In social housing however, the outlook is healthier than in other sectors. In a 2017 report from Inside Housing, women made up 39 per cent of executives and 36 per cent of board members. 42 out of the 64 housing providers sampled were led by male chief executives, but 36 per cent had executive teams made up of half or more women. And when you look at the current G15 group of London's largest housing providers, 33 per cent of the leading CEO members are women.

Rhian Waygood, IT systems support partner, and Amy Kelly, IT support analyst, from Coastal Housing Group said that Coastal took a decision to promote from within to build its IT team.

The organisation looked to its customer contact centre and engaged with skilled customer-focused individuals who were interested in building their IT careers. The contact centre is predominantly female, so this recruitment drive naturally increased the number of women in the IT team, which now has a 50:50 split of men and women.

However, Coastal Housing's IT infrastructure analyst, Kathryn Banfield, believes that the reason it has taken women so long to join IT departments is due to a lack of role models and when talking to the women in the IT team, it is clear that, while we are in changing times, outdated perceptions persist.

Some perceptions that remain include the assumption that a woman won't know as much as a male colleague and that literature, aimed at attracting women to IT education, usually only includes men. So too, women in these roles are often pioneers, so few have family or friends in similar roles. One maintenance project even saw female IT team members being asked by male colleagues if they needed help when they saw the women using screwdrivers!

Diversity makes good business sense

A recent report from Grant Thornton on 'The value of diversity' looked at diverse boards in India, UK and the US and found that diverse boards significantly out-performed male-only boards and found that an organisation's profitability increased when at least one woman is on the board. Of course, people who are alike think similarly and tend to generate similar ideas. This can lead to a less innovative, questioning environment, as there is no challenge being made among the decision-makers.

Recognising Coastal Housing's strong position, Banfield concluded that reducing the 50:50 split would be a backward

step as this had helped enormously with innovation, perspective, empowerment, diversity, equality and growth.

The importance of encouragement

Joanna Sedley-Burke, managing director, Sovereign Business Integration Group, said, "As a female director working in technology, where only 17 per cent are female, I have always encouraged other women into the sector and to build their careers. I know change takes time but I am keen to see some indication that more women are coming into the IT market and are seeing their careers flourish."

It isn't all just down to giving women a helping hand or being open about how companies remunerate staff.

Change needs to happen earlier on. Confirmation bias starts early and is said to play a pivotal role in stalling gender equality. It is a societal tendency to fixate and associate success and innovation with male role models. A perception that hiring processes are still based on historical profiles rather than the actual ability and skills of the applicant remains a problem too.

Business owners and leaders would do well to engage with schools and communities to capture interest when pupils are deciding on their careers and educational direction, work with apprenticeship schemes as well as implement policies to encourage non-discriminatory hiring and ensure that expectations of equality are met in the workplace.

Looking ahead to more women in IT

Sovereign's Sedley-Burke knows that, as the number of women working in technology increases, these roles will naturally appeal to a wider demographic, helping to encourage more women into the sector.

SPOTLIGHT ON GENDER IN HOUSING IT

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It's not just about pay, it's also about capitalising on the skills and talents that are readily available and exploiting them. Sedley-Burke cites the example of Sonal, recruited to Sovereign's developer team, which is also 50:50 male to female, and who is proving a great addition on web development projects. Sonal explained, "I enjoy developing code and the work is

different every day. I really love the new challenges I'm given to solve. I'm glad I chose web development as a career and hope to see more women joining me!" Interviewing both genders for roles contributes a lot to our learning and development. This is why reviewing numbers of women applying for IT roles, plus success rates will help us to ask,

what more we can do to improve these rates?

Housing Technology would like to thank Kathryn Banfield, Amy Kelly and Rhian Waygood (Coastal Housing Group) and Joanna Sedley-Burke (Sovereign Business Integration Group) for contributing to this article.



A DAY IN THE LIFE... AT COASTAL HOUSING

Mark Elias, IT Infrastructure Manager, Coastal Housing

If I'm feeling lazy, my day will start around 8am with black coffee and a mailbox of backup and maintenance notifications. If I'm not feeling lazy, I'll slope in around 9am after being good and going to the gym, by which time the notifications will have been attended to by our lead support analyst, Mat Giles, who will also have changed the tapes in our LTO rack. Yes, tapes. Mercifully, we are in the process of moving to cloud backup as part of our transition to becoming fully-hosted with a managed service provider (which if you came to my talk at the Housing Technology 2018, you will have heard all about...).

Once we're both happy with the overnight tasks, Mat and I usually discuss any interesting Freshservice support tickets. Although this helpdesk application is ITIL-aligned, Coastal is a 'systems thinking' organisation, therefore we have a duty to look at the demand on our service through Vanguard's revealing spectacles, and this drives us to handle tickets in a specific way (if you want to hear more about this, please get in touch).

By now, the rest of the team will be in, and what a team it is. I feel very lucky to share my day with such dedicated

and talented people (cringe-worthy but true). Amy Kelly works with Mat as a support analyst, Kathryn Banfield as an infrastructure analyst and Rhian Waygood as a business analyst, and joining her in the business analysts' circle are Kevin Hedges and Pete Warren, and then Shane Griffiths works alongside us all as the head of IT; note the absence of hierarchical phrasing: we do genuinely work alongside one another.

Being a pretentious sort, I love to write aphorisms and when I coined 'a team ascends to excellence through democratic influence', I felt truly moved to think of our team and how we evidence democratic influence every day: listening to each other in gatherings, allowing everyone to suggest, to feedback, to question and to challenge in safety. It really works.

With my review of Freshservice over and until any tickets come my way, I'll chat with whoever might need a conversation before starting their day proper, and then move on to Asana, the application in which we manage and collaborate on all IT strategy projects and tasks, picking up on where I left things the day before.

Asana helps us achieve complete visibility of all aspects of strategic delivery, from current progress on known work, through to future potential evolutions and (how to phrase it?) diversions! It's key for an IT team to have both oversight and evidence of existing workloads at their fingertips. Everything must be visible and reportable. We strive to pour as much data and thinking as we can into the application: pipeline work, knowledge sharing, live-meeting captures, conference blogging, professional development reflections, interesting technology articles and so on. Both Freshservice and Asana have transformed how we work, and how the business engages with us, especially as demand on our 'ability to implement' increases. More and more, we are seeing the potential for decisions on products to be made outside the IT team, often with a quick meeting and a credit card, only then for the real work of integration to fall to IT afterwards. By being transparent about our availability, we help the business achieve what matters in a realistic and timely manner.

If I haven't emailed or spoken to our MSP project manager yet, it's very likely I will

A DAY IN THE LIFE... AT COASTAL HOUSING

Continued from previous page

have a question or update to provide by now. We have a conference call every Monday morning and while this sets us up nicely for the week's tasks, other things will often happen or priorities rotate, so keeping on top of fluctuating obstacles and objectives is both important and fun. By the time this article is in print, we should have migrated our Hyper-V server estate to VMware using Zerto and have a substantial number of staff using Horizon View on laptops full-time, which coincides nicely with Coastal's ambitious office re-design project, enabling staff to work anywhere while disruptive works are carried out.

Several coffees later (I'm trying to cut down, again), I'll dip into HipChat, an instant-messaging app implemented by Rhian. We try hard not to email each other, so IM allows us to waffle, gossip, ask and help without saturating Exchange. When we aren't having private conversations, we'll chat in specific shared rooms, keeping subjects tightly organised.

At this point, readers might be thinking 'Why not use Teams or Skype?'. We don't have Office 365 on our horizon just yet because it's very attractive to us to look beyond the behemoths to help us achieve our objectives, and HipChat fits perfectly with that philosophy. Maybe it's something to do with having Techhub on our doorstep; the prospect of working with start-ups and off-radar innovators to help realise Coastal-tailored aims, versus settling for generic, cookie-cutter

platforms, has great appeal. I met with Techhub's manager for lunch recently and we discussed the importance of looking to blockchain as an enabler of trustless transactions and of individuals owning their own data – very exciting areas to consider.

By now it'll be lunchtime and if I haven't been pulled into or arranged a gathering myself in the morning (which is rare), I'll probably be in one at some point during the afternoon, so as I walk around Swansea city centre I'll be thinking in advance of what clever things I can say. Or if I don't go out, I'll hop onto one of the kitchen benches and browse LinkedIn or post poems to Twitter while munching on something unhealthy. If I have time, I'll reread passages from the excellent and highly-recommended book 'What Poetry Brings to Business'.

When I have time I arrange one-to-one meetings with colleagues across the business, especially those I either don't know very well or perform some esoteric housing role I should know more about. If I have one arranged, I'll revisit my hoard of coaching materials and pick out an exercise or conversation strategy to explore in the session. It's extremely important for IT people to have healthy interpersonal skills; being able to communicate, listen, process and perceive without being dependent on prompt closure, or unambiguous apprehension of a situation, can allow, in time, for a true unearthing of

what is really going on. Simply having conversations, while being alert to what is happening beyond the exchange of words, helps develop that capability.

I will most likely have had technical conversations with team members throughout the day, as I pull in their expertise and they pull in mine. Everyone has their own projects and it's great to get involved a little in each. Kathryn, to pick one project for example, is busy deploying Aerohive wi-fi across our schemes and drop-ins; Mat and Amy are busy deploying 2FA-protected VDI desktops across a range of mobile devices while simultaneously managing Freshservice; Rhian is busy implementing PanConnect and maintaining QlikView, and has recently completed another phenomenally successful rent increases/year-end procedure; Kevin is busy embedding systems thinking; Pete is busy interrogating and reporting on our data; and Shane is busy managing budgets, strategies, contracts and us. Being part of all this great work is brilliant.

Towards the end of the day, I'll re-read any important emails I've sent and updates I've made to any projects, drink more coffee and think about what's happening tomorrow.

Mark Elias is the IT infrastructure manager at Coastal Housing.



WEAVER APPOINTS NEW TECHNOLOGY DIRECTOR

Andrew Rafferty, Director of Technology & Business Improvement, Weaver Vale Housing Trust

Weaver Vale Housing Trust has appointed Andrew Rafferty as its new director of technology and business improvement.

Rafferty previously held several IT-based, board-level positions at northern supermarket chain Booths, including director of IT and e-commerce.

Wayne Gales, chief executive, Weaver Vale Housing Trust, said, "We are delighted to welcome Andrew. I believe he will make a significant contribution to our new corporate plan, which places tenants at the heart of everything we do. "Andrew has joined us at an exciting time and his extensive skills and experience

will help us realise our ambition to grow, build much needed new homes and ensure that our services are fit for the future."



IT APPRENTICES – WHERE IS YOUR FUTURE TALENT COMING FROM? COMING FROM?

Lawrence Gardner, Head of ICT, Wrekin Housing Trust

We benefit from a fantastic core of solid talent with excellent retention, but finding good ICT staff to replace leavers was increasingly fraught; half the problem was connecting with those potentially interested and the other half avoiding the pretenders, and the IT skills gap doesn't help either.

I usually try to avoid my children's groans by not starting a line with "when I was a lad", but here goes anyway. When I was a lad... Thursday night was job night in the local rag, with the jobs section running for pages. It was the same across the country, different paper, a different day perhaps, but the same game and anyone who was anyone, whether prospecting or seeking, was playing. People got multiple paper cuts posting all those application forms.

Fast forward (a few years!), with the dailies having all but gone the way of the dinosaurs, a special commendation for anyone who spots someone actually reading one. No wonder we often see youths trudging around public spaces stuffing leaflets in the hands of reluctant shoppers and commuters, exhorting the latest 'buy one, get 20 free' offer for whatever. So now, if you have a need to put your message in someone's face it's either Facebook or this! One's the challenge of competing for attention against a million tales of what everyone had for supper, the other against everyone rushing home for supper.

We tried running our job adverts on Facebook and on our jobs portal, but both attracted scant attention. We even bought a contact database, though the money would have been better spent on the horses!

All this disappointment drove us back to the supposed safe haven of recruitment agencies but, like dating agencies, offering merely hot introductions, not the promise of a marriage made in heaven, even though their fees could fund several honeymoons.

We have long skills-tested candidates, always for programmers, but we

extended this as we came to distrust often exaggerated anecdotes of accomplishment. For our infrastructure roles, this wasn't dissimilar to an instalment of BBC Watchdog where a boiler is intentionally nobbled in order to test the mettle of a service engineer while the assessment panel observes – although we didn't conceal ourselves in an adjoining room, observing through a hidden camera. However, this narrows the field even more as many candidates won't play this sort of game.

So, to the point of this tale. Many moons ago I was introduced to the notion of 'management insanity'; the bull-headed insistence that a poor situation will naturally come good through persisting with the same tactics. I was asked to imagine the manager of a football team trapped in the doldrums but saying to himself "next season we're going to have that breakthrough" while playing the same squad with the same game plan. The point was if you want change then you have to change.

We have fundamentally changed our tactics and literally gone back to school, with an apprenticeship take-on programme for ICT.

It's a completely different game but also the same one. We still have to find our hot contacts; we have the annual godsend of the Telford Apprenticeship Show, a day out for imminent A-Level leavers, where the Trust takes a regular stand, which we have taken the fullest advantage of. We have visited the local Thomas Telford School, meeting students whose interest was piqued by a poster that their careers advisor had agreed to put on the sixth-form notice board. One of these students became our first development apprentice.

Bringing the lessons learnt from the past very much to the fore, we make a proper meal out of ensuring we pick the most deserving contenders. We start with novelty challenges at the Apprenticeship Show, such as 'see if you can fix the

PC' and 'can you can find the bug' (the latter shamelessly borrowed from 'I'm a Celebrity...' even down to the option to consume some desiccated locusts).

Those showing an aptitude and scoring highly are then encouraged to apply for 'boot camp', a three-day event to which the best eight will be invited, taught and tested. They have to trade part of their Easter holidays for the opportunity to learn if their dream job is right for them and if they are right for it. The best three make the cut and the opportunity of donating a further week, this time from their summer break, for work experience and even more scrutiny. The most accomplished survivor of that process gets offered a two-year apprenticeship – it's as simple as that!

They join us after their summer holidays and then the real work starts for them and us, with one of us becoming their tutor (while still having to perform to some degree in their day job). Over the next six months, the tutor gradually becomes more of a coach, and by the second year we hope to back off more to guide and mentor in the same way as we would with more conventional new staff members.

There can be an element of pastoral input, such as "are you getting enough sleep and good nutrition, young man?" Luckily, one of our coaches is an ex-teacher so that sort of stuff comes naturally.

Like many things in life, we've learnt to expect the unexpected. One apprentice was a natural, gifted and talented, he rocked that first year and we sat him down, ready to pile on our congratulations and the reward of elevated pay but he got in first with "my heart really lies in music, I'm going back to college to train to be a music producer!". He wanted to rock literally and we were back to square one. It's like the old plate-spinning trick. We know that we have to keep loading new plates onto the sticks to keep up with, or even anticipate, the ones that might fall off. But we've had successes too

IT APPRENTICES – WHERE IS YOUR FUTURE TALENT COMING FROM?

Continued from previous page

and it's very fulfilling work – few things can match the satisfaction of seeing the fantastic results of all that careful nurturing and knowing we helped to shape that person.

So could we sustain our whole operation through this approach? Training, nurturing and developing that latent

talent into something of value, and then should someone leave somewhere in the middle or higher, everyone shoves up one and the apprentice takes up the slack? Theoretically yes, but everyone in the hierarchy has to be fighting fit with the potential to succeed to the role above them. It certainly isn't cast-

iron insurance that we won't ever need to be back knocking on the door of a recruitment agency, but our reliance on them has been significantly reduced. And we feel pretty good about it too.

David Bly is the operations director at Cornerstone.



KEEPING COVERED – MONITORING TENANT ACTIVITIES

David Bly, Operations Director, Cornerstone

Smart home devices are predicted to represent a £347 billion market by 2019. But connected homes aren't all about smart phone-controlled TVs – they are already providing housing providers with new ways to maintain their properties and avoid tenant disputes.

It has never been more important for housing providers to be better aware of their responsibilities as well as their rights. For those with tenants living in shared buildings, a duty of care to ensure that fellow residents do not compromise each other's safety and security needs to be allied with a determination that tenants uphold their end of the bargain when it comes to being accountable for their own actions.

For example, take the case of suspected illegal activity. There are rarely instances when the monitoring of tenant activity by means of CCTV within a property would be justified; that would usually be confined to communal areas. Imposing Big Brother-style monitoring inside a property can constitute a criminal offence. If illegal activity was suspected inside a property, the conventional course of action would be to contact law enforcement agencies.

Then there are cases where a landlord is required to cover themselves, in the case of a potentially costly dispute. Consider a scenario where there has been a consistent build-up of damp or mould inside a property; this can result in claims from tenants that the landlord is not



maintaining a property sufficiently. But if the mould is a reoccurring problem, it could be the tenant who is at fault.

If a property is sufficiently well-ventilated, it's likely that it is tenant activity, or lack of action, which is causing the damp and mould. This could be due to erratic heating patterns inside the property, appliances being left on for long periods of time in a room without shutting the door, or a leak which has been left unreported.

With no way to monitor a property aside from periodical inspections, what can be done? One of the answers is a humidity sensor, which allows the exact cause to be pinpointed. This high tech but innocuous device can be placed in a property to extract data which can provide a graphical understanding of exactly where damp and resultant mould is originating from. Access to data such as dew-point temperature, specific humidity and vapour pressure can make all the difference when it comes to determining why a mould problem is happening.

The same principle can be applied to noise. There are now sensors which can be built into the wall which monitor noise levels. If a noise dispute is threatening to get out of hand, this can be a way for landlords to gather enough evidence to determine if noise levels are within reason. These decibel sensors can be connected to wi-fi, meaning landlords don't even need to enter the property in order to keep track.

There are also specific leak-detection systems which run via the cloud and can notify landlords instantly when a potentially damaging and expensive leak has occurred. Some systems go one step further and have the ability to proactively turn off a water system when a leak is occurring.

Today's monitoring devices are discreet, intelligently-designed and data-driven. Crucially, they have the ability to benefit tenants, as well as landlords, putting them a world apart from any part of a Big Brother-style monitoring system.

David Bly is the operations director at Cornerstone.



THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA-DRIVEN HOUSING

Tim Brooks, Senior Consultant, Data Futurists

“One necessary qualification for anyone in management is to stop asking people to explain the ups and downs (day to day, month to month, and year to year) that come from random variation.”

Dr Brian Joiner

The importance of data and especially its security has come to prominence of late, not just in the housing sector but also in high-profile cases in the media. The arrival of GDPR this month is also something to occupy all responsible organisations who handle personal information. But what about how we use data in understanding and improving business performance?

This is not related so much to personal information but to performance data – the kinds of data that populate senior management dashboards – and crucially the efficacy of this data is its use as alluded to by the quote above. This kind of data usage should have more prominence – it is the difference between running our businesses using the best available information on which to make decisions or poor, sometimes meaningless, data or in some cases little to no data at all. In order to be effective, efficient and to provide value for customers, housing providers need to have data at the centre of their improvement plans; indeed, improvement must be data driven.

This is actually using data to make the business better, reducing your bottom line and actually improving customer satisfaction. McKinsey's Global Institute indicates that data-driven organisations are 23 times more likely to acquire customers, six times as likely to retain those customers, and 19 times as likely to be profitable as a result. It will take an investment in time, energy and capital, but being data driven will provide excellent returns on the investment.

So what is it to be data driven? Effective business decisions rest on good data, well used. Without data, decisions can only be based on guesses, gut feelings, opinions or something even less scientific. By 'good data', we mean data that is effectively collected, using

appropriate methodologies, and properly governed. Data must be reliable in order to enable good decision making – that is the first step. But the main premise here is that it is what you do with the data to help you learn from it that is of paramount importance. Good data improperly handled and analysed is as bad as poor data.

First, data is only as good as its method of analysis. It was Chris Argyris who conceived of the 'ladder of inference'. Argyris recognised that the data we select from what we observe is influenced by our beliefs and assumptions. We therefore need a method of analysis that helps us to focus on and gain a knowledge and understanding of the right things in order to achieve our purpose. Data-driven improvement is first and foremost based on the underlying principle that the key to continuous improvement is learning, gained by studying service systems and performance data in the right way. Change should be based on evidence and the quality and use of the data on which this evidence is based is crucial to success.

Many organisations use data to create performance indicators presented in dashboards. The way data is presented is a major influence on any subsequent decisions. The example of the common use of binary comparisons is a case in point. This is something explored by Simon Guilfoyle in his book "Intelligent Policing", a forensic analysis of poor use of data within the Police Service. What Guilfoyle explained is that deriving any meaning from the comparison of two data points, which may be monthly or annual comparisons of averages, is unlikely to be useful in terms of making informed decisions.

For example, if we are measuring something that results in a number that we don't want to rise (such as void turnaround time, rent arrears or time taken to complete repairs), taking action based on a binary comparison would be foolish. If the number had increased, let's say, from 19 to 35 between months or years this tells us little about the pattern or variation in performance over a period of time.

The use of time-series data creates visibility of performance and its variation over time to enable a deeper understanding. Any decision made based on a monthly or annual binary comparison is likely to be unsuccessful at best, and possibly damaging.

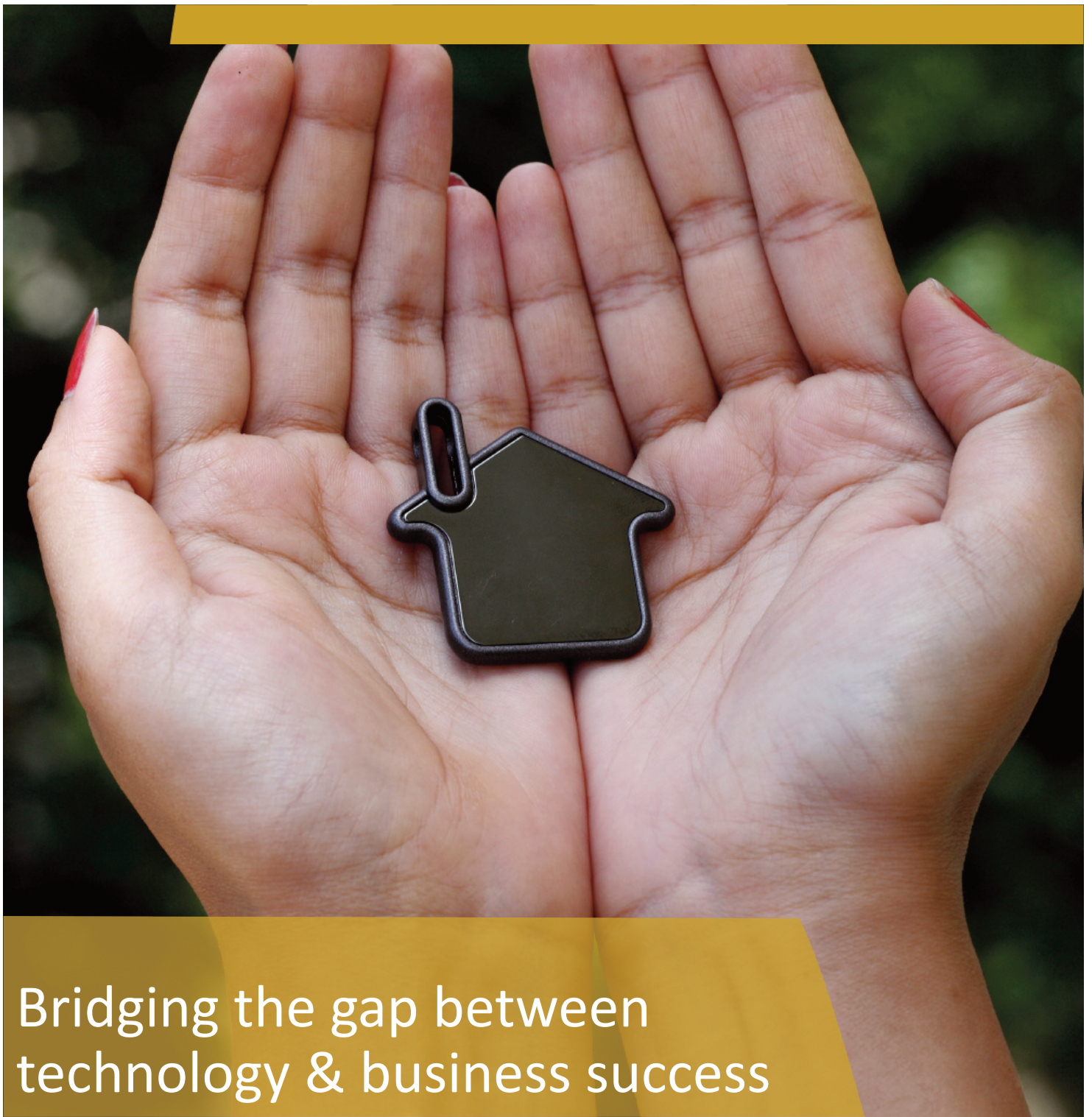
So to conclude, to be truly data driven, improvement must be based on the right measures. Many housing providers rely too heavily on data derived from poor measures, or measures that have limited ability to provide useful information. According to John Seddon, creator of the Vanguard Method for Service Improvement, the test of a good measure (i.e. its effectiveness) is that it:

- Relates to purpose;
- Demonstrates variation over time;
- Facilitates learning and understanding (i.e. leading to knowledge about the system);
- Is used by those doing the work to monitor, control and improve the work;
- Is used by managers to act on the system (i.e. predict, plan and make best use of resources).

Many of the measures in use within housing wouldn't pass this test. There are still many measures being used based around targets. For example in housing repairs, completion times for repairs are often measured against target, generating data which tells us the percentage of repairs completed within and out of target for urgent, routine and emergency repairs. This is very limited because it doesn't directly relate to purpose from a customer's point of view, nor does it demonstrate variations over time, nor facilitate understanding.

Having the right IT systems for data collection and storage and indeed good quality data are all important, but unless there is the know-how within the organisation to make good use of the data, they are less likely to translate into useful improvement actions and more likely to become meaningless numbers.

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