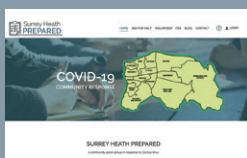


# HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™

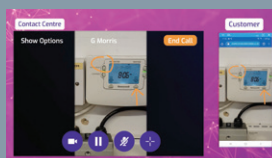
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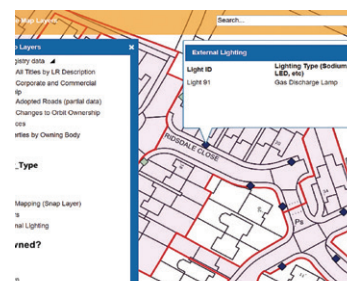


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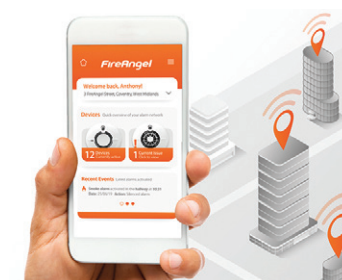
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# Aareon QL Next Generation Coming Soon



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## Aiming for business as usual...

As we've reported throughout this issue of Housing Technology, our impression is that most housing providers, IT suppliers and their staff are coping admirably well with the impact of coronavirus on their operations.

Housing providers' widespread adoption over the past few years of web-based business applications and cloud/hosted IT services has meant that they have largely been well-positioned to offer uninterrupted services to their tenants (as well as supporting vulnerable/at risk households).

As well as having been able to seamlessly migrate their operations to support home working during the lockdown, some housing providers and their technology partners have even been able to continue with their implementations of large-scale technology projects without too much interruption via diligent combinations of remote working and online collaboration. As well as the coronavirus-themed stories

and articles in this issue, you can read other news and advice from housing providers and IT suppliers in our blog at [housing-technology.com/blog](http://housing-technology.com/blog).

## Housing Technology's Guide to Digital Transformation 2020

We are delighted to announce that we have just published the first of our series of Housing Technology Guides, starting with the Housing Technology Guide to Digital Transformation 2020.



There are full details of the guide on page 21, and you can order your free copy via [housing-technology.com/report/digital-transformation-guide-2020](http://housing-technology.com/report/digital-transformation-guide-2020).

## Last call for IT finance and procurement...

We're in the final stages of gathering data for Housing Technology's forthcoming 'IT Finance and Procurement 2020' report.

If you're involved in any aspect of IT procurement, we'd love it if you could spare a few minutes to share your views and experiences via our online survey: [housing-technology.com/2020report](http://housing-technology.com/2020report).

In return for completing the survey, we will send you a copy of the final report, comprising our detailed analysis of IT procurement data from hundreds of housing providers.

Our IT Finance & Procurement 2020 report will cover procurement strategies, budgeting processes, RFP/tendering options, selection processes, procurement reviews/monitoring and VfM/RoI assessments as well as benchmark the IT spending plans of hundreds of housing providers. All survey data will be 100 per cent confidential and no organisations will be identified or identifiable in the final report.

If you've not already done so, please share your knowledge and experience at [housing-technology.com/2020report](http://housing-technology.com/2020report).

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

### HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2021 CONFERENCE & EXECUTIVE FORUM

03-04 March 2021 | Location TBC

[www.housing-technology.com/event/housing-technology-2021-conference](http://www.housing-technology.com/event/housing-technology-2021-conference)

**HOUSING TECHNOLOGY**  
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### EDITOR

Alastair Tweedie  
[alastair@housing-technology.com](mailto:alastair@housing-technology.com)  
Twitter: @housingtech

### PUBLISHER

George Grant  
[george.grant@housing-technology.com](mailto:george.grant@housing-technology.com)  
LinkedIn: housing-technology

### DESIGN & PRODUCTION

Jo Euston-Moore  
[design@housing-technology.com](mailto:design@housing-technology.com)

### EDITORIAL AND NEWS

[news@housing-technology.com](mailto:news@housing-technology.com)

### RECRUITMENT

[recruitment@housing-technology.com](mailto:recruitment@housing-technology.com)  
[jobs.housing-technology.com](mailto:jobs.housing-technology.com)  
Twitter: @housingtechjobs

### SUBSCRIPTIONS

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# MRI acquires Orchard and Castleton Technology

*In a flurry of activity in late March and early April 2020, US-based MRI Software has bought two of the UK social housing sector's leading software providers, Orchard and Castleton Technology, the latter pending shareholder approval.*

MRI Software bought Orchard Information Systems at the end of March 2020 in order to extend its reach in the UK social housing sector.

Patrick Ghilani, chief executive officer, MRI Software, said, "By uniting Orchard's expertise in social housing with MRI's solutions for managing residential, build-to-rent, leasehold block management and mixed-use properties, we are now very well equipped to address the varying needs and evolving business models of the UK residential market with a comprehensive and flexible product portfolio."

Orchard is a long-standing provider of software and services to the UK housing sector. As a result of the acquisition, MRI Software said that Orchard's customers

can now benefit from MRI's additional cloud software offerings, resident portal and component accounting capabilities. Orchard said that it will continue to serve its customers without interruption.

Pat Clarke, chief executive officer, Orchard Information Systems, said, "As part of MRI Software, Orchard will gain access to additional resources, technology and expertise to strengthen our support for social housing. The acquisition brings together two companies with a shared commitment to innovation and a strong alignment of culture and values, paving the way for us to better serve the changing needs of the UK social housing sector."

## MRI Software agrees to acquire Castleton Technology

MRI Software has entered into an agreement to acquire Castleton Technology. The acquisition has been unanimously approved by the boards of MRI Software and Castleton Technology and is pending shareholder approval.

Commenting on how the Castleton acquisition will fit in with the company's recent Orchard purchase, an MRI Software spokesperson said, "A combination of Castleton, together with our recent Orchard

acquisition, gives MRI the right platform to meet the increasing needs of the social housing industry which will require housing providers to develop fully cloud-based offerings that integrate across the housing IT ecosystem, best-in-class product user interfaces and digital transformation capabilities across both software and managed services."

Ghilani said, "The acquisition of Castleton is a significant development for our business, delivering us scale in the UK real estate market and social housing sector in particular, providing a platform to further accelerate our growth globally. A combined MRI and Castleton will be extremely well equipped to address the varying needs and evolving business models of the UK and Australian social housing sectors."

David Payne, non-executive chairman, Castleton Technology, said, "Castleton has performed well since embarking on its strategy in 2013 to build a public sector-focused software and managed service business, growing organically as well as through a series of acquisitions. The competitive landscape is changing and as such I welcome the opportunity for Castleton shareholders to realise their investments."

# Lincolnshire Housing moves to Aareon



*Lincolnshire Housing Partnership has chosen Aareon as*

*its new housing management and digital solutions provider. It will be implementing Aareon QL Next Generation ERP, 1st Touch Mobile and 360 Customer Portal, all delivered as Aareon-hosted services.*

Suzanne Wicks, executive director of business transformation, Lincolnshire Housing Partnership, said, "Our key stakeholders in the business invested a huge amount of time reviewing the possibilities and they were really impressed with Aareon's solutions."



## Remote go-live for Fife Housing

Despite Covid-19, Fife Housing has gone live remotely with the first phase of its implementation of Aareon QL Housing

Management and Aareon 1st Touch Mobile.

Nicki Donaldson, chief executive, Fife Housing, said, "We are delighted to have been able to deliver the first phase of our digital transformation in spite of the challenges of the pandemic. Our project team has done a fantastic job in difficult circumstances."







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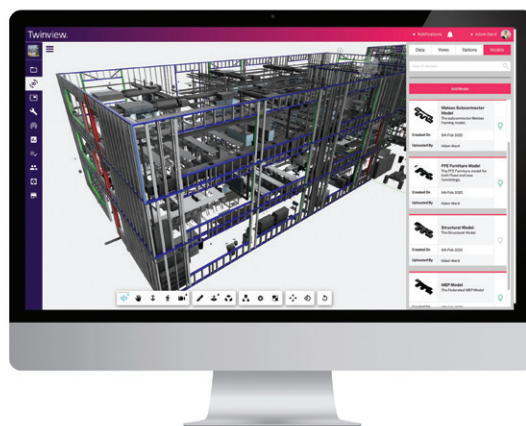
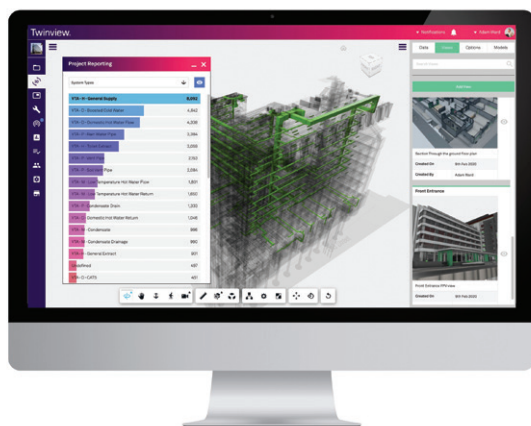
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## Twinview launches 'digital twins' for housing

*Twinview has been launched to change the way buildings are managed and perform, helping to make them safer and more efficient.*

Twinview is powered by cloud-based, 3D digital twins (digital replicas of physical buildings) which connect the paired virtual and the physical buildings with real-time analytical data. This allows housing providers to manage, monitor and maintain critical construction and operational information.

Rob Charlton, CEO, Twinview, said, "The original concept for Twinview was that while complex building models are developed during a building's design and construction process, this information can't be viewed or maintained after handover due to the need for proprietary software, training, and hardware. In contrast, Twinview is browser-based, requires no capital investment and is intuitive and easy to use.

"We've worked with real estate investment trusts as well as digital specialists in the sector to make sure Twinview will help address a number of issues that have been discussed for some time. While we started work on the platform before the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, it does respond to the recommendations made in the Hackitt report; Twinview will provide a 'golden thread' of information which is easily accessible by anyone, anywhere.

"Twinview removes the need for specialist and expensive hardware, software and training. Not only can users view models online using just a web browser, they'll also be able to update their models and view and access live data right down to individual asset levels in milliseconds."

## Capita's £5.9m cloud deal with Bolton at Home



*Capita has won a £5.9m four-year contract with Bolton at Home. The contract includes migrating the housing provider's current system to a hybrid cloud model using a combination of Microsoft Azure and Capita's virtual private cloud. Microsoft Office 365 will also be implemented for 1,100 users across four sites.*

The new system will feature a personalised tool for employees to open and resolve service desk tickets and provide data-rich reports into all aspects of services.






The contract includes a new managed print service for Bolton at Home to improve information security and reduce 'per page' costs. Capita will also provide a dedicated telephony platform hosted in Capita's private virtual cloud.

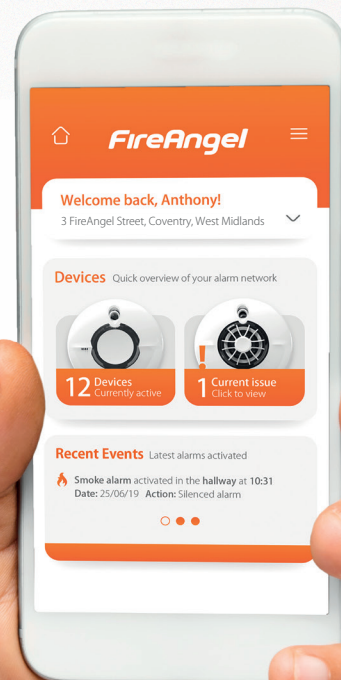


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\* Calculations based on smoke and heat alarms



# The future of fire safety in social housing

FireAngel

Nick Rutter, Chief Product Officer, FireAngel

*Nick Rutter, chief product officer at FireAngel, explores the latest fire safety innovations available to housing providers to not only help achieve full compliance while minimising running costs but also provide intelligent, connected solutions that can be adapted for the future.*

From struggling to gain access to properties, to overcoming issues regarding the adequate measurement and management of property risk, housing providers are facing increasing pressures regarding fire safety.

There are a number of complications associated with missed tenant appointments and the difficulty engineers experience when trying to gain access to properties to conduct maintenance and repairs. This is resulting in not only a reduction of the level of protection provided, but also expensive consequences, particularly regarding the cost of repairs after a fire.

However, by taking a proactive approach and implementing preventative fire safety measures and using connected technologies removes the physical barriers many providers face. Housing providers can instead ensure full compliance across their entire housing stock while understanding and meeting fire safety requirements of the future.

Following the Hackitt Review, the housing sector wants to adopt its principles to ensure the long-term efficiency of their properties with regard to fire safety. While specifying smoke and heat alarms that quickly and effectively respond to all types of fires is essential, providers can go above and beyond legal requirements by choosing advanced solutions that react in real time to potential fire events.

Although ionisation-sensing technology was traditionally a popular choice because of its low cost and outstanding ability to detect fast-flaming fires, concerns regarding its potential radioactivity and

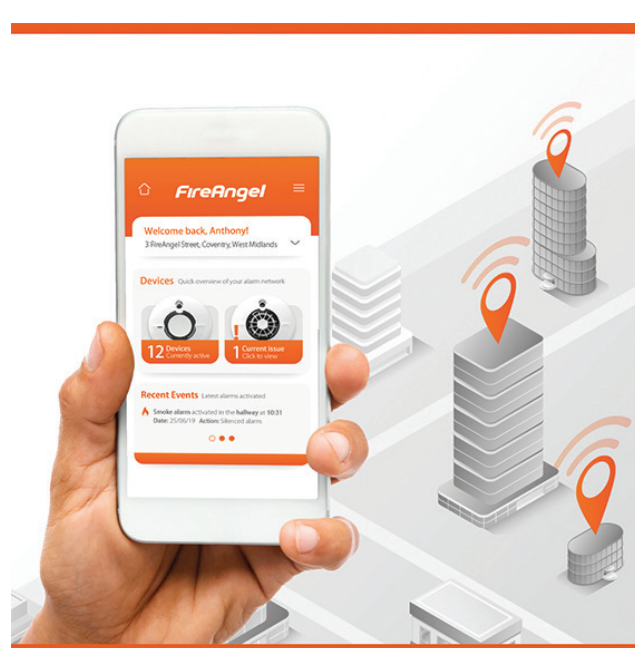
sensitivity now outweigh its benefits.

To ensure the fastest response times for all types of fires and maintain compliance with standards and regulations, multi-sensing or optical alarms should be specified throughout circulation areas, including landings and hallways. This provides a basis for ensuring compliance with all minimum fire safety requirements at the same time as following the guidance of the UK fire and rescue services.

However, there are a wide range of connected technologies currently available to aid professionals in taking this compliance one step further, supporting them in adopting a proactive approach that ensures the long-term safety and suitability of their properties, while complying to an LD1 specification, often for the cost of an LD2 specification.

While Scotland is taking significant steps in improving the energy efficiency of its housing stock through EESSH2, providers in other areas of the UK also want solutions that offer the highest levels of protection as well as actively improve the long-term sustainability of their operations.

A smoke alarm typically spends 99.9 per cent of its time in standby mode, dissipating the unused energy through heat. Once an alarm is activated, a



significant increase in power is used, which is commonly provided by 'dropping' the voltage from the mains power supply.

The latest developments have led to the creation of mains-powered, low-carbon ranges that are Smart RF compatible and feature an intelligent 'step down' circuit that monitors the state of the alarm to manage the power available. This ensures the alarm uses just 10 per cent of the energy compared to an average AC alarm, significantly improving the efficiency of the alarm throughout its 10-year lifespan.

For housing providers, the potential to have a running cost as little as 6p per alarm over 10 years can lead to significant reductions in energy usage and subsequent operational cost savings.





Because the range is Smart RF compatible, it also provides housing providers with the adaptability to futureproof their properties to meet the needs of future residents and comply with future legislation. Offering the benefits of both Thermoptek and Thermistek sensing technologies to respond to all fire types, it supports the adoption of a mixed system that interlinks hardwired and wireless mains- and battery-powered alarms.

A mixed system not only provides the opportunity to have both 230v mains and DC battery alarms, but also the ability to include Smart RF-ready alarms. This provides more flexibility because additional smoke, heat, carbon-monoxide and specialised assisted-living products (such as a wireless alarm control unit, strobe and pad), can be wirelessly added or removed to/from a network, depending on the needs of a particular tenant and their level of risk.

This enables housing providers to achieve a higher standard of fire protection throughout an entire property where a hardwired interlink may not have been possible previously. Smoke, heat and carbon-monoxide alarms can be wirelessly meshed together on a private network so when one alarm sounds, they all sound to immediately notify all individuals of a potential event, leading to a safer and quicker exit and minimising the potential fire damage.

And again, because the alarms are Smart RF-compatible, housing providers can upgrade the system by fitting a Smart RF radio module into the alarm. This allows

the wireless interlinking of up to 50 alarms in one network so that vital information, such as current status, alarm history, replacement dates and network health, can be monitored via a cloud-based connect gateway.

By using a connect gateway, which uses a unique algorithm and features patented Predict technology to identify and highlight high-risk patterns of behaviour regarding fire safety, it bridges the gap in communication by instantly notifying relevant individuals in the event of an alarm activation. For example, high risk or vulnerable individuals can be remotely overseen in real time as the connect gateway sends live updates to designated individuals regarding the status of the smoke, heat and carbon-monoxide alarms installed throughout the property.



By adopting a proactive and connected approach to the fire and carbon-monoxide protection systems installed throughout their portfolio, housing providers can ensure compliance with all current legislations, safeguard their



tenants and properties, and future proof against any changes to building regulations.

The adaptable technology also lets housing providers easily upgrade the fire protection systems installed throughout their entire housing stock at a later date, reducing the potential asset management challenges and associated costs they may have previously experienced. The remote monitoring capability that connected technologies offer also provides a revolutionary approach to preventative fire safety that delivers the highest standards of protection in the most cost-effective way.

**Nick Rutter is chief product officer at FireAngel.**



# Digital transformation amid the pandemic

*How digital transformation projects have better prepared Grand Union Housing and Honeycomb Group for the impact of coronavirus.*

Jimmy Rogers, Sales & Marketing Director, Castleton Technology

*You may have been sceptical about investing in a business transformation project prior to the coronavirus outbreak, with the perception that they are expensive, long and need substantial resources to deliver. You may also feel that the benefits of digital transformation don't materialise fast enough.*

However, given the huge transition all organisations have had to make in order to continue to operate through this uncertain time, there has been little choice but to change the way you work, with many organisations putting in temporary or quick-fix technology solutions.

Now more than ever, our customers are seeing the benefits of their already established transformation projects. Customers such as Grand Union Housing and Honeycomb Group have managed to keep their business operating and systems running with the technology they had put in place.

At the Housing Technology 2020 conference in March, I hosted a panel discussion with Simon Penaluna, director of IT at Grand Union Housing, and Darren Penny, ICT service delivery manager at Honeycomb Group, discussing business transformation from their perspectives.

Now is a good time to reflect on the technology you already have, from the security of your data to the ability to facilitate home working. I have summarised the key points from our panel discussion to help you to understand how and why they carried out their projects and where you may be able to start in order to take your organisation on a similar journey.

## Grand Union Housing

The start of Grand Union's transformation project was due to a merger of four companies in October 2018, with 320 staff working from different locations, using various systems and being unable to communicate and share data properly with each other. The IT strategy was part of the housing provider's larger 'customer 2020' project, based around a complete organisational re-design.

The objectives of the project included creating an agile workforce, facilitating home working and updating ageing hardware. This coincided with moving all staff to a central head office and improving their performance through reliable systems based on an infrastructure that could be expanded as needed.

The project started with a detailed technical specification. Grand Union Housing used a framework agreement to avoid a lengthy tender process and this enabled the project to be ready to launch in May 2019, with the aim of project completion by October 2019.

During the project, the one of the key lessons learnt was to avoid underestimating how long it takes to sort out contracts and legalities in this type of project; Grand Union Housing found that procurement took 50 per cent of the 12-month project! Not everything goes to plan and how responsive the supplier is to resolving issues is key to the success of the project when striving to meet deadlines.

Some of the benefits that Grand Union has experienced include:

- Investing in its staff by providing up-to-date equipment and allowing them to work in an agile way;
- More structure and a tidier server architecture that allows its IT operations team to be more proactive to issues;
- Reducing the risks to the business around out-of-date operating systems, inefficient backups and uncertain resilience;

- Providing it with the right foundations for the next steps for in its ambitious technology strategy.

The next stages of technology development for Grand Union Housing include AI for automating processes and better MI and machine learning (but not using robots to take over staff roles!). It plans to make the most of Office 365, such as introducing Teams, SharePoint and Power Platform, and further development of an omni-channel strategy by integrating Teams into its new contact centre and a complete rollout of Teams by the end of 2020.

Given current circumstances, Grand Union Housing's ambitions may have changed, but nevertheless the solutions it has installed have made it far more resilient and secure during these unusual times and being prepared for 100 per cent home working was a huge bonus.

## Honeycomb Group

Honeycomb started its project due to inconsistent information across teams because various customer data sets were being held across different locations. Customer feedback also highlighted a fragmented customer journey that needed improving.

The objectives were to get customer information into a central system accessible to everyone, linking key documentation to people and properties and developing consistent processes and procedures. In turn, this would increase customer satisfaction and improve Honeycomb's capability for mobile workers to capture information digitally.

A detailed process plan was used to break down the overall project into sizable milestones. This included project leads, assigning clear roles and responsibilities, process mapping and, most importantly, keeping communications clear and simple across all parties involved.

During the project, Honeycomb developed a culture whereby it was okay to fail



## Digital transformation amid the pandemic

*Continued from previous page*

and try a different approach, and to not underestimate other team members' commitments to their usual workloads. A vital learning was that data is key; it was essential to get data cleansed before starting the project.

The benefits seen by Honeycomb include the ability to provide consistent, accurate information on customers across all staff, allowing teams to work better together, and staff are now more engaged with technology and are challenging the organisation to make it better.

The next phase of the project includes increasing Honeycomb's digital channels to provide customers with 24/7 access to information and services, including

developing a customer portal to address its customers' two biggest bugbears: repairs and payments. The Honeycomb portal, developed alongside Castleton Technology, has a repairs function that will feature easy-to-use icons for raising repairs. This will then automatically log a repair to Honeycomb's contractor system (Novus, based on Castleton's Maintain solution), and once logged into the system, appointment availability can then be selected. After the customer portal rollout, Honeycomb is planning to develop an application for a housing portal in line with its existing lettings processes.

### Different approaches

While Grand Union and Honeycomb have each taken different approaches to their

business transformation projects, they have both already seen the benefits and have been better prepared to cope with the pandemic.

I've seen from several of our customers that having digital solutions in place for out-of-hours contact is invaluable, reducing the pressure on contact centres and helping to maintain a good level of customer satisfaction. It has never been more essential to maintain frequent, reassuring contact with customers and to support their needs.

**Jimmy Rogers is the sales and marketing director at Castleton Technology.**

## Arches Housing tests predictive web service from MIS-AMS

*Arches Housing, a longstanding MIS Active Management Systems customer, has been the first to trial the company's ActiveH Web, a web-based, hosted version of the company's ActiveH Desktop product with added AI-powered predictive capabilities.*

Seamus Harkins, data services manager, Arches Housing, said, "To support our growth while continuing to provide the best service to our tenants, we were very keen to trial this new product from

MIS-AMS. As a long-standing and very happy user of their current system, we were more than happy to be a guinea pig during the trial.

"We're always looking for ways to enrich our customers' journeys and we've discovered that this new system gives us a very clear picture of our customers' accounts as well as pre-empting their enquiries using AI – it's just brilliant."

Chris McLaughlin, managing director, MIS-AMS, said, "One of the aims of ActiveH Web is to create predictive

assistance so that when a call comes in, the system identifies what that person may be calling about and offers quick answers or solutions.

"For example, if a repair appointment is booked and the operative hasn't yet arrived at the property, then when a member of that household calls in, they're probably chasing information about when the operative will arrive. The system can anticipate this and offer quick actions which will complete the call with minimal input from the operative."

## Squared embraces Castleton Community



*Squared, formerly Luton Community Housing, has signed a five-year contract with Castleton Technology for a complete migration of its existing systems to a fully hosted, integrated set of solutions based around Castleton Community.*

Launched last year, Castleton said that Community is designed for smaller housing providers who often struggle to find software that caters to their size and budgets. Community is a cloud-based, 'out of the box' system suitable for housing providers with up to 1,000 properties, comprising Castleton Housing Management with full reporting capabilities, Castleton Agile for mobile working and Castleton EDRM.

Rob Robinson, commercial and IT manager, Squared, "When looking at the total cost of all our existing standalone packages against Castleton's offering, including the project delivery cost and time-savings we can expect to achieve, this investment makes a lot of sense."

Squared's implementation of Castleton Community will be run in parallel with a data-cleansing project with support from Sagacity Solutions to ensure that only up-to-date and accurate data is being migrated onto the new system.

Squared also plans to implement Castleton Financials to overhaul its back-office operations, alongside Castleton. Digital for a self-service tenant portal and Communications Manager for real-time tenant communications.

Commenting on Squared's disparate portfolio of software from different suppliers, Paul McCalvey, head of new business, Castleton Technology, said, "We've come across this situation a number of times, particularly among smaller housing providers – separate systems being bought by different departmental heads over time and therefore operating in silos.

"It is often hard to walk away from these systems because of the investment and sometimes a reluctance to change. Talking to the team at Squared, there is a strong sense of commitment from all areas of the business to use better technology solutions to drive improvements, and that's half the battle."



# Data-driven insights & fire safety

Mark Holdsworth, Director, Civica

A recent fire at a student residence in Bolton provided a stark reminder on the need for action for better fire safety standards. It's been over two years since the tragedy of Grenfell Tower and hundreds of blocks are still covered in flammable ACM cladding. In June 2019, the Independent Review of Building Regulation and Fire Safety led by Dame Judith Hackett found that there are issues in the way some high-rise residential buildings are built, managed and looked after. Her review set out how we can ensure that buildings are safe throughout their lifecycle; from when it's designed and built, to when people are living in it, someone will be responsible for managing and minimising fire and structural risks.

As part of this, Dame Hackett described how housing providers must empower residents by giving them the right safety information about their building and making sure that their views or concerns about the safety of their building are heard and not ignored. Therefore, it's imperative that housing providers adopt the latest technologies to ensure residents are safe, and feel safe, in their homes and to make sure this remains the case for future generations. Through the power of data insights, housing providers can go a long way towards meeting the suggestions from the review.

## Assessing the risk in a building

The government outlines a five-step checklist during a fire safety risk assessment that employers and housing providers should follow. The list includes identifying fire hazards, pinpointing which people are at risk, evaluating, removing or reducing these risks, recording findings and preparing an emergency plan and finally reviewing and updating the fire risk assessment regularly.

However, this checklist doesn't highlight the magnitude of checks that are required in some buildings. The Local Government Association's guide to fire safety in

purpose-built blocks of flats comprises over 190 pages of checks. The findings from these assessments generate masses of data that needs to be managed and acted on quickly and efficiently, and mistakes can be made if this data isn't stored and managed appropriately.

New technologies can help by collecting and providing insights on the data while storing it safely to ensure compliance. Asset management solutions contain risk management tools that allow social landlords to take control of their risk assessments processes, managing both assessments and the associated actions. Each building is different, so an effective risk management tool provides housing providers with unlimited user-defined assessment types, such as fire risk, legionella, user-defined risk scoring, recording and management of remedial actions and clear tracking of responsible parties.

## Safety throughout a building's lifecycle

And this shouldn't just be done at the start of a building's lifecycle; new fire risks develop during the lifespan of a building. Ongoing asset management, planned maintenance and servicing and inspections are all needed to ensure the continued safety of people living in a building. Without advanced technologies, this would have to be done manually. Each assessment typically results in ten actions, each of which needs to be individually prioritised, allocated, planned for remediation and when remediated, closed. For a large housing provider, this could mean tens of thousands of actions that need to be manually shared with contractors and sub-contractors.

The volume of actions for any organisation is very time consuming and leaves a housing provider susceptible to mistakes. It's vital to make sure that fire risk actions are scheduled and actioned on time and housing providers have on-demand access to up-to-date data for internal and external inspections.

By automating the administrative tasks, housing providers can reduce manual administration by up to 90 per cent. This frees up time for housing providers for any issues or risks that need to be acted on quickly, and data analytics can be used to prioritise which actions need attention first. The risk of errors in data from manual processing is reduced so housing providers can deliver faster, responsive services, ensuring compliance and keeping residents safe.

## Engaging the residents

No one knows their own home better than the resident themselves so listening to their concerns over fire safety and providing advice on their concerns is vital. Housing providers need to capture and manage all interactions with customers, from preferred language to their optimum communication channel, whether online, post, email, text or social media. Once again, this data needs to be stored and managed effectively to provide valuable insights. Being able to segment your resident audience into groups with different needs allows you to profile the different audiences. This data can be analysed to drive the topics of resident involvement sessions and for further advice on fire safety best practices.

Moving forward, data insights will drive decisions through the design, construction and maintenance of social housing. Post the Hackett review, tools such as building information management (BIM) software are likely to be mandated in the public sector.

Housing associations need to become insight-driven decision-makers and embrace tools that analyse data and provide them with the most valuable insights to act on fire risks while empowering residents by giving them the correct, up-to-date safety information at all times.

Mark Holdsworth is a director at Civica.





**“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together”**  
(African Proverb)

**If you believe this to be true for our sector then please read our article in this edition of Housing Technology.**

And if you feel inspired by it, please respond to our closing call to action.

Many thanks!

For more information, please contact **Neville Brown** on +44 (0) 7771 810 621 or email [neville.brown@itica.com](mailto:neville.brown@itica.com)

[www.itica.com](http://www.itica.com)





# Learning from coronavirus – Sector-wide IT collaboration?

*“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”*

Neville Brown, Managing Director, Itica

*As we all grapple with the impact of coronavirus, it's obvious that we are 'stronger together'. The crisis has illustrated that the housing sector and its various ecosystems are mutually interdependent and must collaborate. The absolute need for this is being driven home in ways that only adversity can expose, with much of that mutual interdependence normally taken for granted in our busy lives.*



The crisis has exposed that as individuals, organisations and countries alike, we were ill-prepared in one way or another. To paraphrase Drucker's adage, the greatest risk in times of turbulence is not the turbulence itself, the risk is to continue to act using yesterday's thinking. I'm sure we have all witnessed how our thinking and actions have had to change in response to the scale and speed of recent events. We should take comfort that we all address change successfully in our everyday lives, so that means we are good at it even though we may not recognise it.

In an article in the September 2019 edition of Housing Technology, Itica explored the structures and mechanisms for sector collaboration. Our recent survey, 'The Future of ICT in Social Housing' (to be

published in full once we are in calmer waters), identified collaboration as a major theme for many housing providers. One survey respondent expressed it perfectly, stating, "There needs to be a fundamental step-change in how housing providers engage with prospective IT suppliers. As a housing provider, we should be standardising the delivery of systems (and change in general) across the whole sector. There needs to be greater collaboration and economies of scale." The above quote refers to IT, but why stop there? Coronavirus has raised many questions across all aspects of business operations and forced many people to work in unfamiliar ways and gain benefit from their investments in previously little-used technologies.

## Here and now

The question is whether these tactical actions can be made part of housing providers' strategic operational fabric. Mark Henderson, CEO of Home Group, told us, **"We mustn't be like the average conference goer who sits in exactly the same seat on consecutive days. If we don't plan to go back to a different way of working then we will revert to tradition very quickly. Learning what went really well and which technologies really worked during lockdown and then making sure those good practices continue on day one of any phased return to work is the 'right now' essential planning."**

How many of you have been logging those issues and successes for later review or inclusion in your planning processes to define and implement the 'new normal'? If not, why not start it today while it is still fresh in your mind; be totally honest in reviewing it because the opportunity is there to learn and make lasting changes. Consider using your IT team's own incident-logging system if you have one – it's far better than a spreadsheet for tracking owners and progress!

## Technology

The first area for review, and the most

relevant for this magazine, is technology. Myriad stories exist of Herculean efforts to get laptops and collaboration tools rolled out to hundreds of staff within a few days and operational teams finding new and creative ways to use those tools, including real-time status updates of coronavirus response plans.

Home Group's Henderson said, "I think the most interesting feature hasn't been the 'fancy-dan' technology stuff, but more it's a far better understanding and use of what we already have. For example, when we are forced to use videoconferencing, it suddenly becomes easy and normal instead of an irritant that nobody can use properly."

A private WhatsApp group was set up for housing CEOs by Campbell Tickell to share ideas and good practice. Many housing providers are also using technology for holding meetings and to speed up approvals, such as the immediate release of funds to accelerate the implementation of the required technologies for mass remote working and collaboration.

There are lots of positives to come from the sector's response, but how many of you also found that your previous technology choices hindered a rapid change to your operational models? Are there examples of where staff intervention or local knowledge was needed to provide data and process integrity across best-of-breed systems from different vendors? Will that lack of integration help or hinder general plans for automation? Also, what automation could help to provide a more efficient response to disruptive events in the future?

Our survey found that housing providers and technology suppliers are aligned in the view that current core systems won't meet providers' business needs over the next three years. Many will have found that coronavirus has thrown the consequences of those gaps and inefficiencies into sharper relief which makes solving them a higher priority.



## Learning from coronavirus – Sector-wide IT collaboration?

*Continued from previous page*

The survey also revealed that some of the newer entrants to the market are now seen as viable alternatives to existing housing management systems. MRI Software's recent acquisition of both Orchard and Castleton Technology illustrates the potential level of change in the sector. If there is going to be further disruption in the IT supplier base, how does the sector have its say on the direction of product roadmaps and the choice of underlying technologies?

For those with cloud-based solutions, outsourced infrastructure or managed services partners, was operational performance maintained and how well did they respond to additional requests, given that there would have been competing demands for their resources? How did the suppliers of your critical applications respond? How did these responses impact your business? Similarly, consider what positive and negative impacts resulted from operating on-premise systems and in-house IT teams.

### Process

Processes and technology are tightly bound in many operational areas. A robust and thorough review of these will establish how well they worked in maintaining your services. For example, how many of you needed your staff to react urgently to a repair or circumvent a badly designed or broken process? Did workflows and interfaces across functions, whether internal or external, form part of your existing business continuity plans? Also, are all services defined, understood and documented so that they continue to work when relationships and specialist staff aren't available?

Dick Elsy, CEO of the High Value Manufacturing Catapult, was interviewed on BBC Radio 4 about the UK's 'super-scaling' of ventilator production. Under his leadership, the objectives were to increase production from 50 to 1,500 per week, build seven new production facilities and source 11 million components. To paraphrase Elsy, "Get the experts together, create a collaborative 'can-do' environment, put total focus on the mission and strip out all the 'noise'."

Meetings were limited to 15 minutes and decisions were made quickly by those with the expertise to make them, with minimal red tape and bureaucracy. Another example of that can-do attitude rippling out to other functions was complex legal

agreements taking just hours to complete.

### Organisation

On the question of organisational structures, Elsy's view was that the teams worked best when they were trusted and empowered to be self-organised based on their capabilities, rather than traditional command and control structures.

Coronavirus has highlighted mismatches between operational delivery and functional accountabilities. Remote team working has become and will continue to be the norm, so a culture of trust will be needed, as will finding and fixing those gaps in capability and organisational design.

### Information

Another area for review now is information. When moving to remote working or changing circumstances, did everyone have access to the information they needed to do what was required? Information isn't just data or management reports, it's also access to vital knowledge, whether that is documented or in someone's head. And, how much of that information and knowledge is still paper-based and thus unavailable? Furthermore, how will you capture and share the vital knowledge within your organisation to lessen the impact of people or buildings being out of action in future?

### Business continuity planning

The response needed to deal with coronavirus will have asked many questions of existing business continuity plans. What was the balance between well-understood and practised arrangements versus defining and testing in the heat of the moment?

The aforementioned WhatsApp CEO group issued a digest of critical areas at the end of March and suggested that it should form part of a review of BCP. The knock-on effects of coronavirus and the lockdown have affected the full span of normal operations as well as areas such as PPE, mental health and the need to collaborate simultaneously with multiple external agencies.

Many of those impacts will shape future thinking on how technology can help, as well as process, organisation and information improvements.

On the theme of 'stronger together', perhaps a sector-wide BCP with shared common elements can be developed

because most, if not all, housing providers would have experienced the same issues and required the same response?

### The strategic imperative...

Responding in the 'here and now' rightly addresses the many issues raised by coronavirus, and individual responses are fine. However, there is a bigger, more strategic question: will the sector allow itself to stand back and lift its collective eyes above the horizon?

To return to the opening paragraph, the current crisis has illustrated that the sector and its various ecosystems are mutually interdependent and must collaborate.

Collaboration can take many forms; the premise of this section is that even without the impetus of coronavirus, and cognisant of existing efforts, the sector could and should be exploring and benefiting from deeper and wider collaboration.

On technology, one of the respondents to our survey said, "We need to be more collaborative in our thinking – after all, between us we control very substantial budgets. Why is that not all used as leverage with our IT suppliers to generate a working solution? We all have the same needs, we're all on the same journey, so why aren't we working together?"

Add to this that over 80 per cent of respondents to our survey believe that significant change to the sector's technology will happen within the next 3-5 years. That's an enormous burden on every part of the sector as technological change isn't just an IT issue. The question is whether that level of change can be facilitated and better managed through collaboration with each other and with our suppliers?

Can we envisage a time when technology providers work together? This will be needed to address the well-understood issues such as process integration and workflows across multi-vendor architectures, standardisation of data taxonomies and the adoption of emerging technologies, to mention just a few examples. In any market, a divided customer base will never have enough leverage to 'encourage' suppliers to do this.

This thinking isn't restricted to IT. Home Group's Henderson recently said, "If there's

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## Learning from coronavirus – Sector-wide IT collaboration?

*Continued from previous page*

one lesson the sector must take from the coronavirus crisis, it's that the collaborative approach needs to continue beyond the duration of the pandemic."

For IT and the wider business, sector-wide collaboration will involve creating an arrangement that enables the sharing of risk and reward, with power residing equally across all parties. True partnerships could deliver economies of scale, new engagement models, interoperability and standardisation. It is also about everyone doing the right thing for those that matter most.

Today's collaboration technologies are sufficiently mature to facilitate information sharing, discussions and agreements without the need for onerous bureaucracy. Remember that in IT and other functional areas, 'communities of interest' already exist and taking those to the next stage will require little effort. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to success will be hanging on to a misplaced 'masters of our own destiny' mentality; after all, coronavirus has already shown us that this isn't sustainable.

We have a common cause and we aren't competitors, so why wouldn't we do this as a matter of course, with IT leading the way?

If you feel inspired and want to help transform housing, please contact me via [news@housing-technology.com](mailto:news@housing-technology.com) with your thoughts.

What is IT's appetite for this brave new world – do you want to go fast or do you want to go far?

**Neville Brown is the managing director of Itica.**



## What is GIS and why use it?

Fergus Craig, Business Development Manager for Housing, Cadcorp

*At the Housing Technology 2020 conference at the beginning of March, delegates learnt more about GIS and how one housing provider, Orbit, was using this technology to make huge savings of £11 million. This article is an abridged version of Cadcorp and Orbit's presentation at Housing Technology 2020.*

### What is GIS?

Any data with a location associated with it, such as an address, can be visualised and analysed in a geographical information system (GIS). The value of visualising data spatially is that it provides housing providers with knowledge of what is happening within their estates. Trends often occur geographically so being able to picture what is happening within a group of properties in relation to one another reveals what was previously unseen.

The relevant data already exists within the organisation and GIS technology connects to these data sources, adds location information, and then delivers insights to aid decision-making processes. GIS is more than simply seeing addresses as

points on a map; it is a corporate solution that integrates dynamically with data from asset and housing management systems to provide an understanding of properties, land ownership, responsibilities and opportunities.

### Why housing providers use GIS

Housing providers use GIS to understand the location of properties because location often has a bearing on the cost of managing properties; as a first approximation, a densely located portfolio of properties will have to be managed differently to one that is geographically dispersed.

Location is pertinent when making strategic decisions for investment programmes. One approach is to import and analyse licensed HM Land Registry data to clarify responsibilities for grounds maintenance and to pinpoint development opportunities. Another is visualising asset performance data geographically to reveal trends in specific regions or areas, or overlaying the map with other data, such as deprivation statistics, so that housing providers can predict tenants' support needs more accurately – there are masses of examples of how GIS is helping housing providers meet their responsibilities and achieve their objectives.

### Orbit's GIS journey

Orbit is the seventh largest house builder in the UK's social housing sector. It

started using GIS in 2010 when it invested in Cadcorp Desktop GIS to manage its grounds maintenance contracts. The management of the schemes was digitally recorded using Ordnance Survey mapping data, which enabled Orbit to fully understand the extent of the work involved. This allowed it to retain control of costs by ensuring that only land belonging to Orbit and not a local authority or other organisation was serviced by its contractors.

The use of GIS grew as Orbit's housing team made use of HM Land Registry data, which shows ownership, to aid them in making more accurate decisions. The production of sales plans by Orbit's commercial team was brought in-house. This reduced the cost of outsourcing and eliminated the duplication of licensed map data. The property management team requested maps to identify above-average responses to repairs and to identify poor stock performance. This resulted in better property management where 76 per cent of Orbit homes achieve an EPC rating of C or above.

GIS was adopted readily throughout the organisation, with Orbit's staff requesting specific geographic information, maps and analysis from the GIS team. However, this was becoming unsustainable as the business grew. Orbit decided on a solution where all staff could use the system so

## What is GIS and why use it?

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the GIS team could concentrate on more strategic projects.

Steve Litchfield, senior GIS analyst, Orbit, said, "It was clear that the benefits of GIS were applicable to the entire organisation. It was providing staff with the tools they needed to deal with customer queries faster and more effectively, which in turn was improving our overall customer satisfaction levels."



Steve Litchfield,  
Senior GIS Analyst,  
Orbit

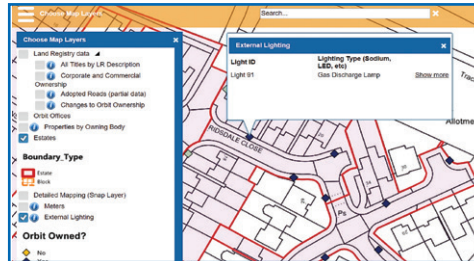
In 2014, Orbit acquired a web-based GIS application from Cadcorp. Staff helped shape the platform and it was branded myM@ps. It offers eight customised views for development, maintenance, lettings and management, grounds maintenance and service charges, sales and sales planning, and other business activities. Staff with little or no GIS experience can access information quickly and on the go, and answer queries quickly with current data to hand, using a bespoke view specific to their area.

Litchfield said, "Together with Cadcorp, we have evolved the system to meet the needs of the business. It has enabled Orbit staff to self-serve and it has improved communication and information sharing. The feedback and usage from staff have been excellent."



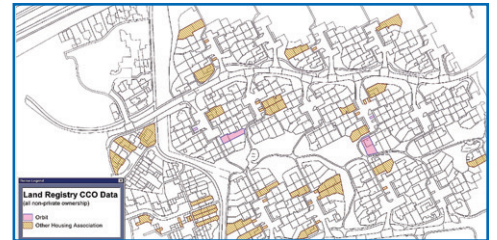
### Key uses & successes

myM@ps incorporated all of the data that was already deployed within the desktop GIS. Scaling out the GIS brought many projects to fruition and significant savings quickly became apparent. Grounds maintenance data, with the additional functionality to report when mapped data was incorrect or missing, helped Orbit's estates services team make grounds maintenance contractor savings of over £1 million per year.



The service charge team completed a project to collate highway adoption data in neighbourhoods where Orbit owned property. This helped them to locate where tenants were being charged for areas that were actually the responsibility of a local authority. The savings are huge, with a predicted lifetime cost-avoidance of £11 million.

Commercial and corporate ownership data supplied by HM Land Registry and then processed into relevant geographical data has been used for strategic asset management. It shows Orbit where properties owned by other housing providers fall within or close to Orbit estates and vice versa. This has enabled stock swaps, which has consequently reduced costs in the management of these assets.



### Delivering real value

Orbit is planning numerous projects for the organisation to benefit further from web mapping and GIS. Understanding numbers and values in geographical areas is helping the business to increase productivity. Mapping territories and seeing the resulting information is helping staff be more productive, reducing management costs and ultimately, helping them to provide a better service to tenants.

**Fergus Craig is the business development manager for housing at Cadcorp, and Steve Litchfield is a senior GIS analyst at Orbit Group.**

# Metropolitan Thames Valley's Semarchy data management

*Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing is now using Semarchy's xDM platform for intelligent master data management to offer better services to its tenants and meet government regulations.*

MTVH used a proof-of-concept for the first phase of its Semarchy implementation. The PoC addressed the housing provider's need to have a definitive view of its contractual obligations in terms of fire risk assessments to meet government regulations, using data from across its various operations.

After the success of Semarchy's PoC, MTVH now plans to use xDM for out-of-hours property services, estate management (such as tree surgery) and supplier oversight of statutory repairs.





# Testing Coastal's payment plan

(L-R) Rhian Waygood, Business Systems Manager, Nicky Fisher, Community Housing Manager, Coastal Housing, and Joanne Handyside, Qlikview Consultant, Kick ICT



*Coastal's head of community housing had an idea to help our community housing officers (CHOs) with arrears and came to me to help find that solution. We had some demos of current systems and we visited a few other HAs, yet we didn't find anything that suited how we wanted to work. We sat down and asked, "What would 'good' look like?" and Coastal Housing's payment plan project was born.*

Our head of community housing said, "We want the CHOs to have meaningful conversations with residents in a timely manner, not having to check accounts, and the system would allow us to direct our efforts to where they can be most useful in adding value to both residents and the organisation. We don't want a system that would just generate a rent arrears letter."

## A payment plan for all

We decided that every single resident would have a payment plan, regardless of whether they were in arrears or not, paid by direct debit or not, or if they were or weren't in receipt of housing benefit or universal credit.

We wanted to see if anything changed in how and what was paid, such as: do they usually pay by cash but this week it was a card; do they usually pay on the 5th of the month but they'd paid on the 12th this month; or do they usually pay £100 per week but this week they've paid £600? These are important questions. These help us speak to residents as soon as something is different; it means we can help or point them in the direction of specialised help as early as possible. It could be that they were visiting relatives and weren't in the area so they paid late (that's fine, we don't mind) but perhaps if it was because they needed to borrow money to pay the rent and other bills then we need to work with them to put them into a better financial position.

I worked on this project with our community housing manager, Nicky Fisher. We've worked on this project for so long that we've both had two

promotions in the time it's taken us to get here! He started in our rents team so he was a perfect fit for this project; he scoped how we wanted the plans and analysis to work, then he tested, tested and tested. Even though he had come from the rents team, we still wanted to check in with them during monthly meetings, particularly because we knew a lot had changed with the move from direct payments of housing benefit to universal credit.

## Three simple questions

The CHOs at Coastal are generic; they can spend their days on anything from community events and ASB cases to arrears and lettings, and everything else in between. Giving them a tool that would help them manage their arrears more easily would give them more time to concentrate on value-adding work; there would be no more need for them to trawl through lists of over 300 properties to see who had paid and who hadn't paid. We therefore asked the CHOs to contact each of their residents who weren't on full housing benefit or direct debit to ask them the same three questions:

1. When do they want to pay their rent?
2. How do they want to pay their rent?
3. How much do they want to pay?

Their answers to these simple questions allowed us to create the payment schedule from which to run our analysis.

We use Qlikview as a reporting tool so we felt that it was the perfect place to build the analysis of the plans. Another bonus was that we have Qlikview's nPrinting software so that the reports can be

emailed to each CHO every day so they don't even need to go into Qlikview itself.

We're very lucky to have the wonderful Joanne Handyside from Kick ICT (Castle Computer Services) as our Qlikview consultant – her knowledge of the system is second to none. Every time she visits us and I hand her a new project, her eyes widen a little then she sets about getting the work completed.

When we explained our payment plan and all of its associated complications (such as some residents are on weekly tenancies but pay monthly, some pay fortnightly, some pay every four weeks and so on), her eyes widened a little more than normal. Nicky, Joanne and I set about building and testing each part of the analysis. We started with the weekly and monthly payers who are easiest because they fit into the calendars that Qlikview comprises, whereas the fortnightly and four-weekly calendars had to be built from scratch by Joanne.

When we had done as much testing as possible on our own, we asked five CHOs to be part of our testing team. They were from different geographical areas in the hope that we would capture as many differences as possible.

## Predicted vs. actual income

The report looks at how much rent we expect to come in and compares it to what actually comes in. Our initial worry was that the daily list of residents emailed to the CHOs would be too long and that the CHOs' days would be solely taken up with chasing payments, so it was a great surprise when each of

## Testing Coastal's payment plan

*Continued from previous page*

their daily reports only had around 15 residents on them.

Nicky said, "When we started this project, I was in a CHO role myself and rents was (and still is) a fundamental part of the job. Due to the time it took to go through the reports, we were simply carrying out rent arrears management rather than rent account management, focusing time and effort on those with large amounts of arrears.

"Missed payments are usually an indicator of a change of circumstances and it shouldn't matter whether the account is in £500 credit or £500 arrears; we know we need to make contact with them at the earliest point. The time

saved from manual checking, which the payment plan system can do for us, can be spent on more value-adding work such as contacting residents to provide support and assistance."

We've learnt a lot during this process – we've learnt that the business is willing to prioritise one project above all else and that when different departments work together, you can create something really great and meaningful.

We've also learnt that just when we thought we'd finally finished, something new would crop up which sent us back into testing again. Our new mantra has become: if you think you've tested too much, keep testing!

**Rhian Waygood is the business systems manager and Nicky Fisher is the community housing manager at Coastal Housing, and Joanne Handyside is a Qlikview consultant at Kick ICT (Castle Computer Services).**



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## Kick ICT's remote finance deployment at Viewpoint Housing

Source: Kick ICT

As a 'cloud-first' mobile business, we can operate all our systems remotely which has been important to ensure the continuity of our services to customers. One example of this is at Viewpoint Housing in Scotland where, during the first week of lockdown, we agreed a project with them to upgrade their finance applications and move them into our datacentre.

Despite the lockdown and its associated restrictions, we're delighted to report that this project is progressing well and remains on track. The first phase was to build the necessary server environment in our datacentre, giving Viewpoint



Paul Sutherland,  
Head of Infor  
Sales, Kick ICT

a safe, secure and managed hosting solution. The second phase incorporated the deployment and onboarding of the software into the datacentre.

*At Kick ICT (formerly Castle Computer Services), we have been delivering business solutions, network infrastructure and IT support to organisations for almost 40 years.*

Paul Sutherland, head of Infor sales, Kick ICT, said, "We realised the importance of delivering our project with Viewpoint Housing within the committed timescales and were determined not to let the pandemic affect it. Using our housing expertise, we identified the right solution and combined this with our managed IT services expertise to deploy Viewpoint's finance applications in our datacentre environment, ensuring Viewpoint's staff can work safely and securely from any location.

"Remote collaboration hasn't been a problem; our respective teams have both embraced remote working tools to the extent that the lockdown hasn't slowed us down at all."

Mike Gibson, head of finance, Viewpoint Housing, said, "We're delighted to have made excellent progress in the upgrade our hosted finance systems. Kick ICT has been in continual contact since the start of the lockdown and we look forward to working with them remotely or otherwise in the weeks to come."

## Allpay launches real-time analytics

*Payment specialist Allpay has launched Event Driven Payment Analytics to provide real-time updates on card acceptance and payment transactions.*



Teejay Townsend, card acceptance product manager, Allpay, said, "We are now offering this new feature to update organisations instantly on payments made over the internet, via our mobile app or over the phone.

"Previously, a payment information file (PIF) would be sent to the receiving organisation within 24 hours but for urgent, time-sensitive payments such as court fines or eviction notices, this may

be too slow or even too late. Real-time notifications could also stop tenants being charged for rent arrears if they have already paid, and it is also helpful when paying deposits, as finance systems and customer balances can be kept up to date as bills are paid. PIF files will still be available as usual the next working day.

"Real-time payment notifications cover successful payments, declined payments and refunds. In addition to providing

a better service to customers, the implementation of Event Driven Payment Analytics can cut the resources needed to recover late payments because housing staff are acting on the most up-to-date information."

Allpay said that Event Driven Payment Analytics is now available to customers for a small one-off fee and low monthly cost.





## Denbighshire Council gets RentSense for universal credit

*Denbighshire Housing is about to implement Mobysoft's RentSense package with a view to arranging early interventions to support tenants moving to universal credit and reducing arrears.*

The housing provider had been struggling to correctly identify which households needed support about their rent, with income officers often working on cases that didn't actually require any action.

Geoff Davies, lead officer of community housing, Denbighshire Council, said, "The way we manage our income has been changing due to universal credit. We want more emphasis on early intervention and support, rather than enforcement which puts more pressure on households and often results in debts being written off.

"We looked at other systems but Mobysoft seemed to be the only product that ticked all the boxes. We spoke to

other housing providers that are already using RentSense and they all said that they were seeing the results they expected in terms of their income work being more targeted and efficient as well as cash improvements.

"Furthermore, Mobysoft supports remote integrations which is just what we need in the current environment."

### **Sandwell Council selects RentSense to mitigate welfare reform & arrears**

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council has implemented Mobysoft's RentSense software to help support its tenants' transition to universal credit and mitigate growing arrears.

Manjit Rai, business manager of income and money advice services, Sandwell Council, said, "We decided to implement RentSense because we're seeing an increase in rent arrears due to the impact of welfare reform, with more and more tenants moving to universal credit and falling into arrears as a result.

"Furthermore, RentSense will be crucial in identifying our most vulnerable tenants who are adversely impacted by the current situation brought on by Covid-19. This will enable our income and housing officers to provide the correct levels of support and help without delay."

The RentSense software will provide the council's housing officers with more accurate arrears' caseloads. It will also help to identify tenants at the earliest stages of debt so that the council can take a supportive approach and minimise the deleterious effects of long-term debt at the same time as protecting the council's housing revenues.

Rai said, "As a result of welfare reform, our officers are experiencing increases in their workloads so it's becoming more of a challenge to provide preventative support to those tenants who need it. The system provides accurate and prioritised caseloads so we can identify tenants who are vulnerable or struggling financially earlier on, reducing the impact debt has on tenants' health and wellbeing."

## Housing Technology Guide to Digital Transformation 2020

### ORDER YOUR FREE COPY NOW

We have just published the Housing Technology Guide to Digital Transformation 2020, with support from Aareon UK alongside Adra Housing, Cheltenham Borough Homes, Curo Group, Golden Marzipan, Salix Homes, Southside Housing and Vivid Homes.

The contents of Housing Technology's first free guide (more topics planned) include:

- The digital future of housing – Trends, innovations & technologies
- Could artificial intelligence have all the answers?
- The Famous Five go digital
- The digital agency – Connecting the dots
- Curo's Aareon-powered self-service portal
- Achieving digital transformation at a fraction of the normal cost
- Cheltenham Borough Homes completes large-scale digital transformation
- Business transformation vs. continuous improvement
- Delivering digital transformation – What needs to be considered

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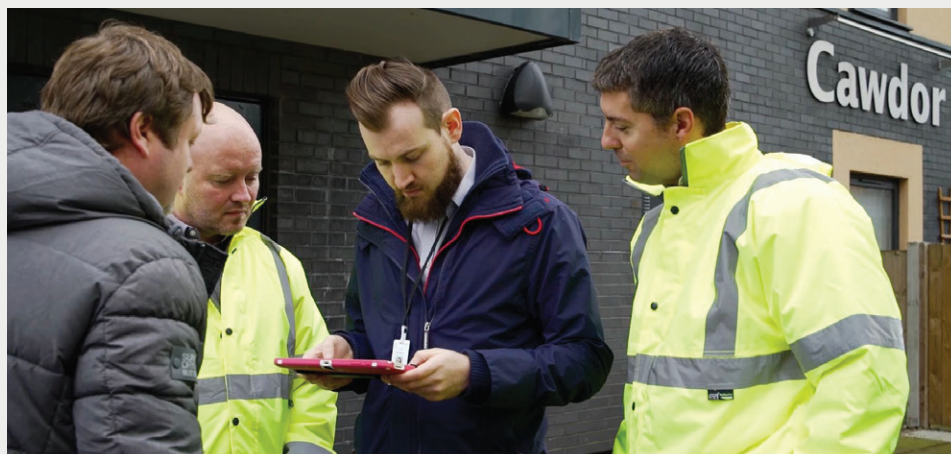


# Cutting the cost of missed repairs & maintenance appointments

Colin Judd, Head of Bids & Pre-Sales, Orchard



*The impact of a missed maintenance appointment due to no-access incidents can be huge; our housing customers tell us that each incident can cost a minimum of £100, and with an average of 67 appointments missed per day, the costs add up quickly.*



Not only are costs incurred through the wasted time and mileage of the repair and maintenance operatives, but also through the administration involved in booking appointments and rescheduling them, and with one of our clients using over 160 operatives per day, each with a list of 8-10 jobs to complete, the costs that no-access incidents can incur can be considerable.

Implementing a repairs and maintenance management system into your operations can provide the answer to reducing the costs due to missed appointments as well as improve your repair and maintenance service and streamline your operations. Some of the ways in which this can be achieved include:

## SMS reminders

A simple yet surprisingly effective method, sending SMS reminders to tenants about their upcoming appointments has a significant impact on reducing the number of no-access incidents and therefore minimising the cost of missed appointments. With a digital management system, tenants receive an automated text message when the appointment has been confirmed, one the evening before the day of the appointment, and another when the engineer is on their way to the property. This reminder helps to minimise

the number of appointments missed due to the tenant forgetting, and the information on when the tradesperson is on their way to the property means that tenants are able to ensure someone is at the property to allow access.

At Orchard, we're currently working on enhancing this concept further by providing a live map view of where the driver is on the day of the appointment as well as an accurate estimation of when they will reach the property. This will allow tenants to plan their day around the appointment and the inconvenience of having to wait in for the tradesperson is eliminated, reducing further the number of missed appointments.

## Appointment booking

Repairs and maintenance management software offers a digital self-service option, through which tenants can book their own repairs and maintenance appointments and choose an appointment slot that works best for them. Using Orchard's Digital Self-Service solution, customers are directed through a diagnostic system to identify the tradesperson required and are offered a series of appointment slots direct from Orchard AccuServ Repairs and Maintenance. Tenants can choose and book the appointment that works best for

them as well as receive confirmation via email and SMS.

This system also helps to reduce the time spent managing appointments by your internal team, so that they can concentrate their efforts on dealing with more complex cases or providing personalised support to vulnerable tenants.

## Mobile working

A repairs and maintenance management system also provides the opportunity for mobile working. Providing operatives with access to the system via a mobile device means that a large portion of administrative work can be completed immediately. Operatives can work with the tenant to book in further appointments where necessary, either for a return visit or for another tradesperson to attend, and can order parts that are not contained in their van stock and have them delivered to the property. Not only does this mean that administrative duties are completed quickly and accurately, it also provides excellent levels of customer satisfaction because tenants will know exactly what the next step is after each appointment, and have confirmation of their next appointment and what actions have been taken.



## Cutting the cost of missed repairs & maintenance appointments

*Continued from previous page*

This also gives your internal teams, planners and schedulers an accurate view of exactly what your operatives are doing throughout the day and provides strong tools for planners to schedule emergency jobs and other appointments as they arise, which in turn can be instantly communicated to operatives out on jobs.

It also further relieves your internal staff of administrative duties such as booking future appointments and processing orders for parts.

### Automated scheduling

As part of the Orchard AccuServ Repairs and Maintenance solution, you can automatically assign jobs to operatives, using the most efficient

routes and minimising total mileage using integration with Google Maps. Google Maps is also used to 'bulk assign' tomorrow's appointments and takes each operative's home address into account to assign jobs according to the most cost- and time-efficient plan. This is all done at the touch of a button and helps to maximise the efficiency of your operatives and reduce overall costs.

The system also integrates with your operatives' mobile devices and using Google Navigation shows the most efficient route to their next job with real-time accounting for traffic conditions.

### Benefits across the board

By implementing a repairs and maintenance management system into

your organisation's operations, you have cost-saving and service-enhancing tools at your fingertips. By using technology such as automated SMS reminders, self-service appointment booking, mobile working and automated scheduling as part of your repair and maintenance output, you can not only reduce the number of missed appointments but also improve your customer service, streamline your operations and cut costs.

**Colin Judd is head of bids and pre-sales at Orchard.**

## Smartline wins £4m EU funding

*Smartline has been awarded £4 million in funding to continue with its research project covering technology, housing and health in Cornwall.*



Smartline is funded by the European Union and is a collaborative research and innovation project exploring the relationship between technology and the way people live in their homes and communities. It has been running since 2017 in Camborne, Illogan, Pool and Redruth. The Smartline partnership is led by the University of Exeter with Coastline Housing, Volunteer Cornwall, Cornwall Council and the South West Academic Health Science Network.

New funding has been granted from the European Regional Development Fund to expand Smartline's work; with matched funding from its partners and an additional contribution from Cornwall Council of £200,000, the total value of the project tops £4 million.

Prof Karyn Morrissey, associate professor, University of Exeter, said, "We've been gathering data and insights from people and sensors in their homes for three years and I'm excited to translate that information into new ways of improving

residents' lives. This extension for a further three years means we can start to give back to the community after they have so generously participated in the research."

Smartline also works with SMEs across Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly to develop innovative, technology-based products and services to meet the health and wellbeing needs of communities. During the first phase, over 170 enterprises were involved, with more expected to be involved up until January 2023.



# Standardised IT integration for M&A success

Jan Joubert, CEO, Rainmaker Solutions

*Political and economic uncertainty has contributed to the UK social housing sector undergoing significant consolidation during recent years. A large number of mergers and acquisitions have taken place in an attempt to save costs and create efficiencies.*

A great deal has already been written about the role that IT plays in housing M&As. The main driver for sector consolidation is cost, and digital transformation is a key enabler of the organisational change needed to realise the benefits. So much cost is locked into archaic and complex technology that doesn't serve the needs of organisations. Housing providers that manage to capitalise on the opportunity that a great technology infrastructure can provide are likely to be able to demonstrate real added value and excellent user experiences in the enlarged organisation, as well as much greater operational efficiency.

However, the real opportunity is going about transformation in a way that unlocks the power of your people. Technology can be the catalyst for that, but not in its current guise. So if an organisation embarks on a roll-up strategy, unlocking this in their own organisation first is vital and then of course it's an opportunity to set this as the objective for each subsequent integration.

## Get your own house in order

Furthermore, while social housing has its own challenges, I believe the general principles for M&A IT optimisation apply. Managing disparate technologies is hard and a failure to integrate and optimise IT

presents a risk to the success of current and future M&A deals. In short, one needs one's own house in order before adding further complexity and risk to it!

It is vital to develop a highly effective and repeatable technology approach which integrates acquisitions efficiently and innovatively. Plans must also help accelerate and deliver insight-led business growth and be focused and collaborative throughout. An inspirational vision that galvanises the organisation into action is essential. The critical steps and deliverables are:

- Clarity of purpose – what is the joined organisation trying to achieve;
- Discovery of current technologies and processes;
- Lifecycle/mapping of pain points;
- Combined process and solution design;
- Programme resource planning;
- IT integration toolkit.

Stakeholders from the IT department should be involved from the pre-deal stage onwards and become a permanent part of a multi-disciplinary M&A team, providing insight and advice as well as the capability to implement the IT integration toolkit.

## Involve IT early...

In cases where IT isn't included in the initial M&A conversations and a standardised approach isn't available or adhered to, integration plans are often rushed, badly implemented and/or mean functioning as two organisations under the same logo, never achieving the intended economies of scale. Furthermore, the complexity, time and cost involved in the IT integration activities are likely to be underestimated, resulting in delays, budget overruns and SLAs not being met.

A merger or acquisition presents an ideal opportunity to look at the housing provider's overall IT strategy and health;

one of our clients, Housing Plus Group, decided to disaggregate to an agile multi-vendor delivery model in order to improve tenant services and be better prepared for future growth. Other improvements that help enhance user experiences and drive economies of scale in an enlarged organisation include automation, self-service and strong data management solutions.

M&A teams must continually improve IT integration capabilities by establishing consistent, repeatable processes that can reduce setup time, assist with capacity planning and reduce ongoing operational costs, while capturing best practice and incorporating the lessons learned from each acquisition.

## A standardised approach

Using a standardised approach or blueprint brings a multitude of benefits:

- Ability to realise full acquisition value;
- Faster, less disruptive integration of the acquired housing providers;
- Higher levels of staff retention;
- Coordinated and efficient central and local integration activity;
- Confidence to pursue more diverse acquisition opportunities;
- Continuous development of integration expertise;
- A consistently high level of service for end-users.

Crucially, in order to fully realise the synergies of the M&A activity, IT integration plans have to be aligned with the enlarged association's unique goals and shared vision.

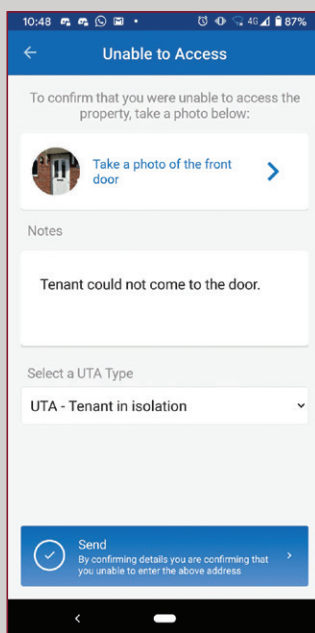
**Jan Joubert is the CEO of Rainmaker Solutions.**



# Free Gas Tag tool to manage access attempts



*Housing providers and contractors who are facing new challenges to access properties during the pandemic can now use Gas Tag's 'unable to access' (UTA) software free of charge. Gas Tag's software makes it easier for housing providers and contractors to report and evidence UTA incidents due to self-isolation.*



Originally developed to support the company's current clients with gas compliance and fire safety, Gas Tag has opened up the functionality so that it can be used to cover all areas where access attempts are being made.

John Roche, chief operating officer, Gas Tag, said, "Our data shows that it is becoming harder and harder for housing providers and contractors to access properties to carry out their work. With many organisations also facing staff shortages, repeated failed access attempts are expensive and time-consuming.

"Through our 'Isolation UTA' feature, operatives can easily mark incidents where residents are self-isolating, allowing them to manage their resources effectively and ensure they can access homes when it is safe to do so."

Users of Gas Tag's free functionality will be able to take geotagged, time-stamped photographs of a property when they are unable to access and mark the incident as due to self-isolation.

Stephen Collins, executive director of property, Housing Plus Group, said, "The data we are pulling from the Gas Tag system is allowing us to proactively manage our gas compliance in the face of the pandemic.

"Before Gas Tag introduced the new functionality, the granular data enabled us to easily identify a rise in UTAs and ensure we had real-time evidence of engineers being at a property. However, we can now pinpoint individual incidents where a resident is self-isolating and ensure we are taking appropriate steps to gain access while keeping everyone safe.

"The system also allows us to mark self-isolation via the Gas Tag portal. This means we can prevent engineers from turning up at properties where we already know they can't gain access and instead redirect our resources elsewhere."

## Regenda takes Housing Insight's PanConnect

*Regenda Group has implemented Housing Insight's PanConnect Mobile software so that its staff can integrate fully with Regenda's Orchard housing management system and conduct day-to-day activities in the field without needing to access multiple systems.*



Jade McNally,  
Application &  
Project Support  
Officer, Regenda  
Group

The first project will see Regenda's housing team accessing and updating back-office data in real time using PanConnect Forms.

Jade McNally, application and project support officer, Regenda Group, said, "Our staff have been able to work in an agile way for a while but it hasn't been efficient.

"Our previous solution was disjointed across several software platforms and the supplier support was poor.

"Implementing PanConnect will give us one software application and allow us to standardise our devices. Users will have a simple view of data and forms, and integration to our back-office systems will be consistent and easy to manage. What has pleased us most is that we have found Housing Insight to be a very competent supplier and an excellent partner."

# Accelerating remote working in exceptional circumstances

Michael Barber, Digital Director, CHP



*In late February 2020, things began to change very quickly for us due to the onset of coronavirus. CHP already had plans to implement remote working for some of its customer-facing teams, but not for at least six months – that all changed in the space of a week!*

After appraising the situation, we sought approval to accelerate our remote working strategy to prepare us for a large percentage of our 330 employees working from home, although at that stage I am not sure that we envisaged 100 per cent of employees being the ultimate outcome! We got our approval and went on a rapid journey to build a whole new business operating model in a matter of weeks.

## **Week one (9-15 March)**

With new IT hardware starting to arrive, the IT team rapidly built a Microsoft-based server infrastructure capable of handling over 200 employees working remotely. Alongside this, they configured over 50 new laptops and set about training groups of employees on how to connect securely from home. The employees set off with their new kit and tested access from home, ensuring that within one week we had 50 per cent of our target employees ready to go.

In week one, we also commissioned security consultants to design and implement a remote working security model that ensured we did not expose our systems and data in any way. This not only secured our corporate devices but also enabled employees to securely connect their own devices to access CHP's main business applications.

Alongside this, the business invoked our business continuity plan and set about planning how we would change

a predominately office-bound team, culturally and procedurally, to a remote team in a very short timeframe. This was a massive undertaking but one that CHP's leadership team fully embraced and delivered on. It was perhaps the best team-bonding exercise ever invented but this one was actually for real. Given that most of the planning was conducted remotely from people's living rooms, kitchens and even bedrooms, the successful execution of this was even more remarkable.

## **Week two (16-22 March)**

On Monday 16 March came the government directive for all people to work from home where possible. This meant our scenario testing had now become the new reality. Against the odds, we urgently acquired a further stock of laptops, given that national supplies were depleting rapidly. The same week we also repurposed a set of decommissioned laptops that were found in all sorts of cupboards and subsequently brought back to life. By the end of week two, one day before we had to close the office to protect our employees, our initial objective was completed. All devices were deployed and all employees were now working remotely within two weeks.

During this period our employees were fantastic. They accepted their new reality very quickly and were wonderfully supportive in adopting their new working practices. Who said that change management was difficult?

Overall, the employees were grateful that CHP put their safety at the top of the list, enabling them to work effectively from home, protecting both them and their families. By enabling this, we put CHP in a position to continue delivering services to our 10,000 customers, albeit with some restrictions in the interests of safety.

## **Week three (23-29 March)**

This week brought the real test of all our hard work. We now had a business depending on a new, rapidly-deployed

IT model and a completely new set of business operating procedures, and it worked! We had a few tweaks to make on IT server capacity and our operating processes, but otherwise it was very much 'business as usual', given the circumstances.

The new technical challenge became the rapid unbolting of mounted monitors and the deployment of these along with keyboards, mice and various cables to our employees' homes to enrich their working environments. This was no longer a two-week business continuity event and a longer-term solution was now needed.

Week three saw the rapid deployment of Microsoft Teams for collaboration. We started training this in classroom sessions during weeks one and two, but a new challenge now existed – we had nobody left in the office to train. The obvious solution was to use Teams to train our employees after providing some basic instructions on how to join an event – problem solved! By the end of week three, most employees were set up and trained.

## **Week four onwards**

Even in early April, the journey continued as we strove to continuously improve how we operated as a business in a new model. It seemed that each day brought with it a new need to help both our employees and customers. We rapidly adopted new development techniques to prototype and develop solutions to solve challenges, including:

- Developing new capture tools and dashboards to track employees' current status;
- Bringing in new video technology to enable the remote diagnosis of repairs and to check in on our more vulnerable customers;
- Building apps to securely schedule and track contact with vulnerable residents to check in on them to ensure their safety and wellbeing.



## Accelerating remote working in exceptional circumstances

*Continued from previous page*

By this stage, we could move away from daily planning meetings back into a relatively normal operating state. The new focus was now on how to operate more effectively in the longer term in an evolving business model, one that continues to bring unknown new challenges. The one thing that we do know is that we as a

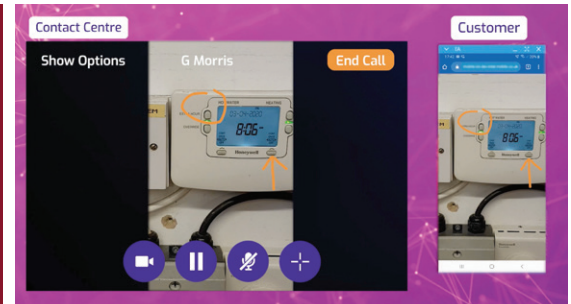
business are ready to take on any new challenges presented to us!

Our employees have all 'stepped up to the plate' and delivered in all areas. No task was too complicated, and we jointly delivered projects in days that would have taken months before the current crisis.

We need to learn from this to enable us to operate in new and more creative ways in future, adopting the good practices that will undoubtedly develop further throughout this difficult period.

**Michael Barber is the digital director at CHP.**

## Rapid augmented video for repairs from Totalmobile



*East Lothian Housing and MCP Property Services are the first in the UK to use Totalmobile's augmented video solution to reduce face-to-face contact during the pandemic.*

The new Remote Assistance Capability developed by Totalmobile enables the two organisations' housing maintenance and repair specialists to create a live video stream which can be accessed by both the technical support officer and the resident.

The two individuals can then remotely collaborate to identify and discuss maintenance requirements, and in the case of simple issues, the officer can give live instructions so the resident can resolve it themselves. Officers can also

augment the video feed by pausing, capturing images and annotating instructions.

Totalmobile has estimated that its new system will enable the two organisations to resolve 10 per cent of issues remotely, avoid the need for 80 per cent of scheduled inspection visits and increase first-time fixes by 50 per cent.

Duncan Mackay, managing director of R3 Repairs at East Lothian Housing, said, "We've been working hard with Totalmobile to deploy this major innovation as fast as possible. The ability to

deliver virtual technical support directly to the customer or to operatives on site will drive real savings and let us help remote residents much more effectively."

Matt Clark, managing director, MCP Property Services, said, "We can now be certain that a call-out is essential before sending someone on site. It also ensures quick fixes such as boiler re-sets can be completed by the residents themselves with close, real-time supervision from our expert team. I really think this software will permanently

transform the way we support customers."

Nick Jeffreys, managing director for housing, property and facilities management, Totalmobile, said, "We looked at how best to minimise risk and recognised that an augmented video system would quickly provide organisations with a high-performing remote support function. It drastically reduces face-to-face contact in line with Covid-19 restrictions without downgrading safety or service levels."

## Oneserve's free job planning software

*Oneserve is offering its new job planning software free during the pandemic to organisations that manage teams of key workers. Oneserve Community is a quick start, pre-configured solution that allows users to create and schedule jobs via an easy to use mobile application.*

The new solution is intended to help teams of key workers, whether providing emergency repairs within housing, in the care sector or a voluntary group delivering essential supplies to the vulnerable. This solution is suitable for any team that needs a process to run in the background to schedule and track the jobs needing to be carried out.

The Oneserve software is accessible on any device and acts as a tool to keep everyone

involved in the process of setting up and completing a job connected with each other, all without the need to exchange paperwork, emails or telephone calls. Users can check daily schedules and access specific job information with just one click. Everyone can see what is expected of them and by when. The work they carry out is then recorded to create an automatic audit trail.



# Community + Collaboration > Crisis

Matthew Hedges, Senior Business Consultant, TechLabs London

*Back in early March, it took a team of Microsoft developers just 48 hours to create the Microsoft Crisis Communications app. This was (and still is) a completely free app, bringing together elements of Power Apps, Power Automate, Microsoft Teams and SharePoint, to allow businesses and their employees to rapidly and effectively communicate as the emerging crisis developed. Their standard app allows employees to report whether they are working from home or having to attend the office to monitor staff safety, as well as using notifications and RSS feeds from the World Health Organisation or local government to stay up to date.*

Together with one of our housing clients, we could see how this could be enhanced, so in similarly quick fashion, we worked together to add to the standard Microsoft app in a matter of days. The aim was simple – to protect employees from being furloughed or laid off due to the current crisis.

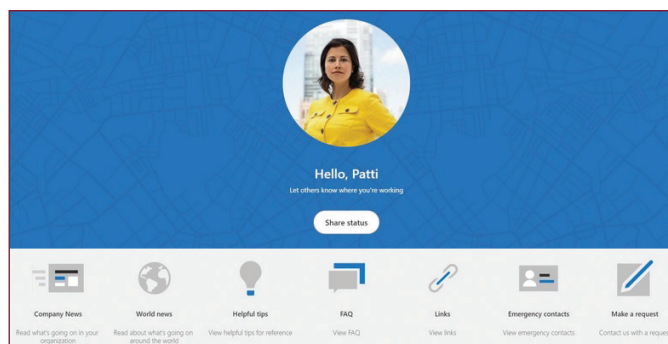
As a team, what we developed was the ability for both employees and the employer to capture availability as well as open opportunities or projects that staff could be matched to. Projects included data cleansing or document migration, but in future could be extended to include community projects or volunteering initiatives.

Each staff member can set their available hours per day, per week or for the foreseeable future in a few clicks. They can also indicate their skillsets and pick from up to three preferred projects that match their skills. Employer administrators can search for available resources to add to their projects based on their availability, their skills and/or their preferences.

Our client had a personal passion not to furlough staff or let anyone go if it could otherwise be avoided. Equally, we loved the community spirit shown by Microsoft to provide a free app during this crisis so it was a simple decision for us to do the same. As a result of this collaboration, not only will the organisation now be able to re-deploy its staff to relevant projects, but those existing projects that were moving slowly due to lack of resources can now progress much faster by embracing the skills already within the business.

Another example was a social housing provider in Buckinghamshire who wanted to build a new business process within their Dynamics solution, focused around 'wellbeing'. This new process would require any member of their staff, on any device, to be able to quickly and easily capture the details of customers that were presenting signs of coronavirus, link to their core systems to show an alert icon and inform other processes where things might need to be done differently.

They also wanted staff to be taken through some questions to identify if the household had any new emerging needs such as loneliness, a death in the household or simply that they could no longer get to the chemist, buy food or pay their rent. From here, support staff would be able to define remedial tasks related to these issues, filtering them out to departments and staff with the right skills,



to provide a proactive support package to each of those households.

The solution? Together we worked through a rapid one-week project, from initial idea through to testing, feedback and going live. Now that it's in place, the business can better understand the needs of its community and meet those needs with its continued positivity and selfless efforts.

One other client decided that they wanted to open up a hardship fund for their customers, to allocate money to residents who might be struggling to pay late bills, buy food or had lost their job as a result of the crisis. Within 48 hours, we had worked together to get a Power App created, allowing them to allocate, approve, monitor and report on their fund and to get money into the hands of those most in need, in a controlled way.

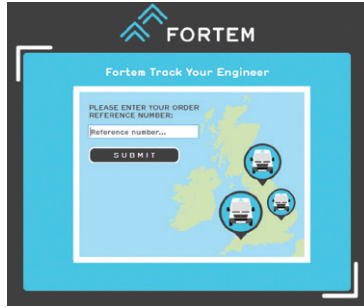
People sometimes ask us why we work in the housing sector and not in a more profit-driven sector. Well, because it's in times like these and having clients like these, that we take total inspiration – it's one of our greatest motivators.

Whether any of that is innovation, ingenuity or something else, you can decide. But one thing is for sure – during these difficult times, our clients and the Microsoft community continue to inspire us and remind us that there is always a creative way to overcome even the most challenging situations.

**Matthew Hedges is a senior business consultant at TechLabs London.**



# Fortem offers On My Way tracking



*Fortem's On My Way system, developed in-house, allows residents to track their tradespeople right to their door and give them better indications of when they will be arriving.*

On My Way combines real-time data received through Fortem's Castleton Maintain software, Totalmobile and Juce vehicle tracking software. The system also gives housing providers' call centres another means to track jobs to help with queries from residents.

As part of improving the customer experience, residents receive a text message the day before with a link to their specific appointment. The link then becomes active on the day of the appointment and once the tradesperson has selected that they are on their way, tracking is enabled, giving a real-time ETA with a map showing the tradesperson's route.

Repairs and maintenance provider Fortem began a pilot of the system in March 2020 for repairs and maintenance jobs at the properties it maintains on behalf of Great Places Housing. Plans are now underway to use On My Way for all of Fortem's customers.

Chris Hone, systems director, Fortem, said, "Keeping residents informed of when tradespeople will arrive in the appointment window helps them plan their time better and means more 'first-time-fixes'. Harnessing our internal development expertise to use real-time data from across our various systems to create On My Way is great for our clients, their customers and our operational teams."

Fortem went live with its original 10-year deal with Great Places Housing and Johnnie Johnson Housing in June 2019, amounting to £2.7 million in its first year and £12 million per year for the following nine years. Alongside On My Way, Fortem is also developing a customer portal to allow residents to book repairs jobs online.

# Itica's IT survey raises £2,000 for The Big Issue



*During March, Itica ran a survey on 'The future of ICT*

*in social housing', donating £10 for each fully completed submission plus a further donation to bring the total to £2,000 for The Big Issue Foundation.*

Stephen Robertson, CEO, The Big Issue Foundation, said, "We would like to thank Itica for a very generous donation and hope that the ICT survey really helps to build a better future for social housing."

Andy Macleod from Itica said, "The Big Issue has done a fantastic job, helping more than 100,000 people over the last 29 years. We are very pleased to help, with special emphasis towards The Big Issue's vendors and how difficult it is for them at the moment.

"We would strongly urge everyone to go online and support their amazing work by subscribing to The Big Issue magazine at [bigissue.com/subscribe](https://bigissue.com/subscribe)."

Itica said that it has decided to slightly delay the publication of the final report while everyone focuses on tackling coronavirus.



# Business continuity and mobile working

Chris McLaughlin, Managing Director, MIS Active Management Systems

*Mobile working has been in the consciousness of most housing providers for some time but has often taken a back seat to grass roots, community initiatives instead. In the past few weeks, these priorities have been turned on their heads as our physical world has given way to a digital one almost overnight.*

The necessity for housing providers to shut offices and move employees to their home immediately has shone a spotlight on mobile working and the role it plays in business continuity. Whether you already had the ability, an out-of-date policy or you hadn't given it a thought until now, it's the number-one priority. The silver lining of our post-coronavirus world will be that more of us will be able to work from places other than our offices, easily and securely and our organisations will be more resilient in the face of adversity.

Many housing providers, particularly those with more resources at their disposal, have already been able to consider how housing management technology can help mobilise a workforce, increase collaboration, help manage estates, facilitate security issues and aid tenant communications. However, there are many more who are keen to spend their IT budget wisely, to sort through the myriad of functions that may deliver best practice in a world that for now, has been turned on a different axis. There are three main functionalities within housing management systems that have stepped into the limelight in terms of the benefits they bring during this exceptional time of mobile working.

## 1. Cloud computing

The benefits derived from moving systems to the cloud are well publicised, but at a time when circumstances predict that everyone must work remotely, they really come into their own. Reduced IT costs in terms of maintenance, scalability, business continuity, collaborative efficiencies, flexibility of work practices and automatic updates make operations more effective, cost efficient and less of a worry for the IT department,

leaving them free to refocus on other tasks that support the organisation. If you haven't thought about moving to a 'housing as a service' model, perhaps now is the time.

## 2. Mobile CRM

For many housing providers, the ability to update and access tenant information on the move in real-time is at the heart of their housing management systems. Mobile CRM is also entirely customisable, such that in the current situation of needing to know which tenants may be self-isolating or be vulnerable and require help, the system can flag that up.

In the past couple of weeks, we've been approached by housing customers who want to create a visual notification for users by adding codes to their HMS set-up which push that information out across all relevant locations in the solution; for example, this can result in pop-ups within the CRM or rent modules which identify households or individuals as vulnerable or self-isolating. These codes can also be displayed within the dashboards and on job tickets so that mobile operatives or external contractors are aware of local situations.

Those working remotely can be alerted too, with icons placed on mobile devices. This means that staff and contractors can identify those needing extra support, such as deliveries of food parcels. And where residents need help and support requiring face-to-face contact, such as an emergency repair, staff and contractors can put recommended health and safety and infection-control measures in place.

## 3. Tenant portals

Tenant portals put residents back in the

driving seat of their own affairs, with the ability to self-serve when it comes to checking rental accounts or to request repairs to their properties. This eliminates the volume of calls to call centres for tasks that could easily be completed online, and at a time when call centre staff have been reduced to a minimum and are home-working, this takes the pressure off both tenants and customer services. Those housing providers with the ability to move requests online or push those requests down a text-based route via email and SMS will alleviate the pressure of telephone exchanges via customer-service agents working from home.

Adapting to change can often bring about a paralysis in decision making through a fear of getting things wrong, but the unforeseen consequences of an ongoing event on the scale of a global pandemic instigates far-reaching, rapid change.

It feels uncomfortable while we adjust, but looking months ahead, it focuses the mind on what organisations need to deliver true mobility to their workforce and perhaps pushes us further and faster than normal.

Being removed now from our mobile working comfort zones will have added benefits in the months ahead when things return to some degree of normality, such that we may not remember the old way of doing things and have a much more stable, secure and operationally mobile workforce.

**Chris McLaughlin is the managing director of MIS Active Management Systems.**





## Kingdom Housing's new reality with DtL Creative & XMReality

*Kingdom Housing is the first to use new augmented reality (AR) technology to help fix tenants' routine repairs without needing to set foot in their homes, through a partnership between DtL Creative and Swedish-based XMReality.*

The technology allows the housing provider's operatives to be virtually present in a tenant's home, to see the issue in real time using video technology on a mobile phone or tablet, and to offer support and advice by having their hand superimposed on the scene in the tenant's home.

Many simple repairs and problems can be fixed remotely in this way, from fixing a door to connecting a washing

machine, while maintaining public social distancing.

Gary Haldane, interim digital director, Kingdom Housing, said, "This technology has the potential to be a game-changer. I knew when I first saw it that it would be very useful but I hadn't realised how useful until we went into lockdown and our operatives couldn't attend routine repairs because of isolation.

"Our tenants have been amazed at how simple it is to use and we've already had really positive feedback from tenants who have used the service. Using augmented reality, we can not only deliver the level of service our customers expect in a highly efficient manner, but we're also able to do our best to minimise the transmission of the virus."

Dave Loudon, founder, DtL Creative, said, "When the coronavirus hit, we

decided to help housing providers as much as we could. We're working with several technology companies to offer free support to help them manage. The remote guidance from XMReality is amazing and is just one of many innovations we're offering to housing providers during the pandemic."

Jörgen Remmelg, CEO, XMReality, said, "We are thrilled to see our technology being used for this novel application. The historical and typical application has been in industrial field servicing. We decided early on to make our product easy to use and with maximum compatibility with commercially available hardware.

"This is a perfect fit with helping tenants remotely. In these strange and chaotic times, we need to be creative and innovative to bring some kind of normality to life."



### CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT

## Agile planning pays off for LFHA

Source: Leeds Federated Housing

*Leeds Federated Housing made the decision to work in a more agile way nearly two years ago. The aim was to make the business work smarter for customers and staff. Staff have been given the opportunity to work remotely and provided with a number of technological solutions so that they aren't tied to a single office location.*

Because the company has been encouraging staff to work in this way for some time, we feel that staff are better prepared for the restrictions lockdown has placed on us and that the quality of our customer service has not been compromised.

We introduced a new VPN which has allowed our staff to work remotely as well as improved our cyber security. We also introduced Via telephony so that customer-facing colleagues can accept and deal with customer calls from a location that suits them and aren't reliant on a single office location.

Our staff all have access to mobile and laptop versions of Skype, OneDrive and Outlook. They are all cloud based, removing our dependency on a local server and making our systems more robust. Our finance team have also been using Sun software to process payments remotely. Although some staff have experienced connectivity issues, solutions for these problems are being worked on.

Finally, Leeds Federated Housing's leadership team has found Microsoft Teams to be such an invaluable tool for collaboration that we will be rolling out Teams across the entire organisation in the coming months.

# Social housing, IT and Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018

John Buckland, General Manager of Asset, Orchard



*The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 came into effect in March 2019 and from March 2020 will apply to all periodic tenancies. While the act doesn't impose any new obligations on landlords, it does strengthen tenants' means of redress. What does the act mean for social housing providers and what actions should be taken?*

## What does the act mean?

The act widens the types of tenancies under which tenants can seek action or compensation through the courts for issues with their properties which make them unfit for human habitation. The act applies to the following tenancies:

- Tenancies shorter than seven years that are granted on or after 20 March 2019 (tenancies longer than seven years that can be terminated by the landlord before the expiry of seven years shall be treated as if the tenancy was for less than seven years).
- New secure, assured and introductory tenancies (on or after 20 March 2019).
- Tenancies renewed for a fixed term (on or after 20 March 2019).
- From 20 March 2020, the act applies to all periodic tenancies. This is all tenancies that started before 20 March 2019; in this instance landlords will have 12 months from the commencement date of the act before the requirement comes into force.

If a tenant reports an issue to their landlord and it is one which falls under the act then the landlord has a reasonable time to put the issue right before the tenant can take legal action. However, any hazard located in common parts of a block of flats or a house in multiple occupation (HMO) would make the landlord immediately liable.

If a tenant takes action, the court can require the landlord to undertake remedial work and also to pay compensation to the tenant. The compensation amount is at the discretion of the judge, with no limit.

## What's changing for housing providers?

The new act increases pressure on landlords to monitor and demonstrate the fitness of their properties, as the potential consequences of not addressing fitness issues promptly are now more severe.

Social housing providers already have robust practices for monitoring their stock condition and ensuring that repairs and preventative maintenance are carried out on any failing properties. However now the stakes are higher so it's worthwhile reviewing your existing processes and seeing where these might be strengthened.

## How is fitness for habitation measured?

There are two main measurement standards applicable to the new act. The first applicable standard relates to Section 10 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, specifying nine fitness standards which indicate that a property is not fit for human habitation:

- The building has been neglected and is in a bad condition;
- The building is unstable;
- There's a serious problem with damp;
- It has an unsafe layout;
- There's not enough natural light;
- There's not enough ventilation;
- There is a problem with the supply of hot and cold water;
- There are problems with the drainage or the lavatories;
- It's difficult to prepare and cook food or wash up.

Each of these items is measured as a pass/fail, and any failure renders a property unfit, and if not addressed could potentially allow the tenant to take action under the act.

The second set of applicable standards are the Housing Health and Safety

(England) Regulations 2005 which specify 29 hazards, assessed on the basis of a risk assessment which results in a points score and places each risk into a hazard band from A to J. Bands A to C are 'category one' scores (1,000+ points) and represent a serious and immediate risk to a person's health and safety. Although there is no published guidance or case law on this yet, it is reasonable to think that category one scores are the ones which might trigger action under the 2018 act.

For landlords, the two standards above should already be very familiar.

The fitness standards previously formed part of Decent Homes, and these questions typically formed part of the stock condition survey template at that time. However, they were generally removed when HHSRS took their place in the Decent Homes calculation. Landlords should consider reintroducing these to ensure there's a clear pass/fail measurement during a stock condition survey.

The Housing Health & Safety Rating System (HHSRS) should already be in use by landlords in England and Wales as a component of Decent Homes/WHQS. Many landlords undertake a simple indicative assessment as part of their stock condition survey programme, rating each hazard into categories (such as none, typical, slight, moderate or severe) and treating the severe ones as category one failures. Our Orchard Asset system provides, as alternatives, both the full risk calculation and indicative assessment methodologies.

## Frequency of stock condition monitoring

While housing providers already have established methods of identifying failing properties, they may need to consider the frequency with which assessments are carried out. Surveys and assessments are generally not more frequent than every five years, and issues can arise in the intervening years. The increased scope for tenants to take action means that it's



## Social housing, IT and Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018

*Continued from previous page*

important for landlords to review their procedures to ensure that:

1. Staff visiting properties for any reason have an awareness of the requirements and can easily instigate repair action if necessary.
2. Responsive repairs are prioritised so that timely action is taken if a repair relates to fitness or HHSRS.
3. Voids processes should include fitness/HHSRS checks to ensure no failures remain.
4. Record-keeping is complete with a full history of assessments and repair actions for each property in case this is required for evidence in court.
5. Regular fitness/HHSRS assessments are undertaken (this would usually be included in a stock condition survey programme).

Orchard's Housing and Asset modules can, of course, help landlords to effectively monitor their stock condition and keep on top of the requirements.

### The implications for social housing

Rather than requiring a significant change in the methods housing providers use to report on their stock condition, the new act makes it more important than ever that these standards are rigorously monitored and that repairs relating to fitness/HHSRS standards are prioritised.

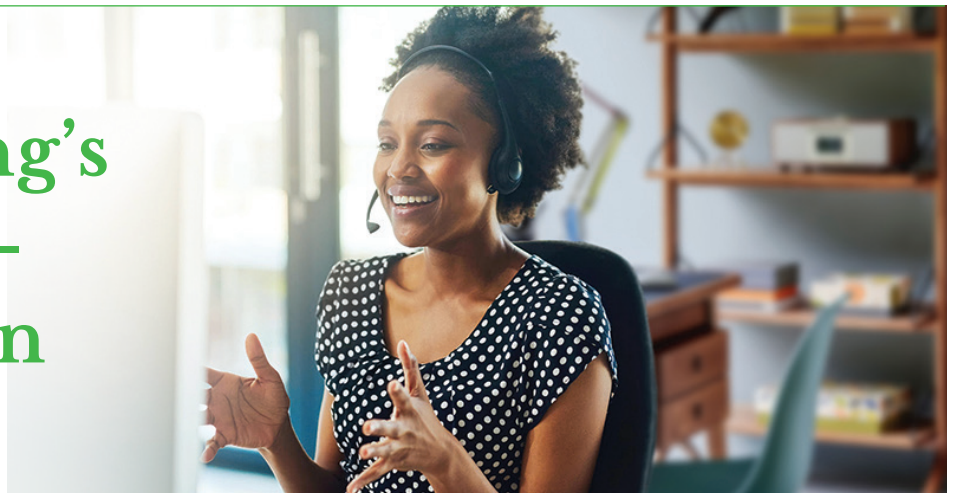
Good data is at the heart of maintaining compliance with fitness standards. Ensuring that team members are all fully briefed on the potential implications of repairs which relate to fitness/HHSRS is vital, as is ensuring that all staff visiting properties have a simple method of

reporting issues and instigating repair actions.

The issue isn't that most social housing organisations need to do anything differently, but that the potential consequences of failures in their existing processes are much higher than they were before. With increased power for tenants to take action, it's never been more important for landlords to be able to identify potential fitness issues in their properties quickly and respond to them in a timely manner.

**John Buckland is the general manager of asset at Orchard.**

## Aspire Housing's two-week call-centre solution



*Aspire Housing has implemented a remote contact centre solution in just two weeks in order to allow its staff to work from home during the pandemic. Aspire worked with Social Telecoms, Alysium Consulting and 8x8 to design and deliver the system.*

Grant Sharman, group director of ICT, Aspire Housing, said, "We've undertaken a large-scale change programme over the last 12 months to enable our workforce to be agile and to migrate all our services to the cloud. The telephony platform from 8x8 was the final piece in the jigsaw to support this.

"This was originally planned to start in April and run through to the end of June, but when the pandemic hit, we were still left with some staff having to commute to the office to provide essential services to our customers.

"Through remote collaborative working between Aspire, Alysium Consulting, Social Telecoms and 8x8, we managed to complete the implementation in an unbelievably short period

of time. We can now provide the same excellent service while knowing that our contact centre colleagues are safe and well working from home."

Alysium Consulting helped Aspire with the specification, procurement and selection of a new cloud telephony and contact centre solution. This led to the partnership with Social Telecoms, the top-ranked supplier on Procurement for Housing's telecommunications framework, and 8x8, a leading cloud communications provider.

John Clarke, director, Social Telecoms, said, "Aspire had to adapt quickly to reach a solution so the project was refocussed to deliver a flexible cloud solution so that Aspire's contact centre services can be delivered from anywhere with internet connectivity, resulting in 100 per cent of Aspire's contact centre advisors now working from home."

Stephen Repton, lead consultant, Alysium Consulting, said, "The way that Aspire and its partners have worked together and responded to the pandemic has been nothing short of remarkable."

# Supporting tenants through Covid-19 lockdown

Trevor Hampton, Director of Housing Solutions, Northgate Public Services



*The housing sector has seen a boom in the use of mobile apps and online portals in recent years, allowing tenants to update their personal details, report changes in their circumstances, manage rental payments and book property repairs themselves from a PC, phone or tablet.*

But as the Covid-19 lockdown continues to bite, is it time for housing providers to think differently about how they use their existing technologies to help them better understand the challenges tenants are coming up against?

## Fast pace of change

The current crisis is having a major impact on many people's lives, bringing significant uncertainty as well as issues such as unemployment, debt and health problems to the doors of those who may not have experienced them before.

Most housing providers already know who their vulnerable residents are, such as the elderly, disabled or those at risk of domestic abuse. But the circumstances of some individuals and families is changing rapidly due to coronavirus and housing providers need to be able to capture the most up-to-date information to help them get the right support in place for residents as quickly as possible.

One way to do this could be to use a self-service portal to send a digital survey directly to residents' phones or mobile devices. This could provide a regular snapshot of how residents are being affected and housing officers could follow up by other means to reach those who

did not or could not respond to the online survey.

By extending surveys beyond housing customers to include households across the local area, it would be possible to identify a healthcare worker in isolation with Covid-19 who needs help with a grocery or prescription delivery or a family that requires support arranging free school meals for their children. This could help to provide a clear and timely picture of the needs of the population so that housing providers can work with other agencies and community groups to ensure appropriate support is available where it is needed.

## Predicting need

AI and machine learning technologies are being used by some housing providers to predict geographical population growth over time or forecast when appliances such as boilers or white goods might need replacing, allowing them to plan their budgets accordingly. But the time is right for a fresh look at how these tools could be used.

With the information from the residents' survey mentioned earlier and a few adjustments to the data-analysis criteria, AI technology can be used to identify the short-term needs of residents, based on their current circumstances. This can help ensure effective measures are put in place to prevent housing officers from being overwhelmed by demands for support.

AI tools can be used to analyse the survey data in conjunction with tenancy information already in the system to identify residents who are most likely to be in distress. Providers can then launch outreach initiatives, where staff make proactive calls to tenants in order of priority to check what support is needed, where, and reduce the number of incoming enquiries.

And rather than flagging which households will need a replacement boiler in the next six months, a housing provider could use the up-to-date survey information matched with financial data already stored in their systems to spot a resident who is likely to need help and advice in relation to rental payments in the next six weeks or even six days.

With the right information at their fingertips, housing officers can ensure residents who are struggling to cope receive the help they might desperately need and trigger anti-poverty measures, where appropriate.

## At the heart of the community

During the lockdown and beyond, individuals and families will face new challenges, and circumstances can change in a heartbeat.

Both housing providers and local authorities' housing departments are in a strong position to be able to work together, in partnership with healthcare, third sector and community groups, to meet the needs of an enormous number of citizens.

The housing sector is at the heart of the community and could provide the fresh thinking and technology needed to support the most vulnerable through these unprecedented times.

**Trevor Hampton is the director of housing solutions at Northgate Public Services.**



# Silva Homes – Refocused digital transformation during lockdown

Rob Smyth, Executive Director for People, Digital & Change, Silva Homes



*Over the last two years, we've been trying to fundamentally transform the way Silva Homes works and technology is at the heart of this change. We have launched a new website and digital platform and replaced and upgraded several core systems. We have also redesigned our IT team and introduced a dedicated transformation team including end-user and customer experience designers.*

It's fair to say that we've made significant progress but coronavirus has shone a spotlight on the scale, scope and speed of our plans. There are three key points of our digital transformation plans that this crisis has helped us to reconsider: our customers, staff and culture.

## Virtual services for customers

Our primary responsibility is to protect our customers and staff. We have naturally been guided by the government's advice relating to social distancing and working from home, but we still need to keep providing essential services for our customers, including health and safety, emergency repairs, financial advice and ASB support. The technology introduced under our digital transformation has provided a strong platform to build on during this crisis.

Wherever possible, face-to-face contact has been replaced with digital communications. Our customers could already pay their rent, schedule repairs, report hazards, change their details and end their tenancies by logging into My Silva, our online customer portal.

However, in response to the pandemic, we have rapidly digitised a number of other processes and activities.

Our independent living teams now carry out welfare checks for elderly customers virtually and our tenancy team has introduced a new app, ReMOTE, to help customers report issues digitally. We have also redesigned our lettings process so that key workers and vulnerable customers can digitally complete the let of their new home. This has accelerated the already-planned development of a digital lettings portal, which seamlessly transfers applicants to My Silva.

We also know that coronavirus is having an impact on mental health. That's why we have set up a new programme to encourage Silva staff to have regular calls with our elderly and vulnerable customers. This 'phone pals' scheme has helped to reduce isolation and it has enabled us to identify those customers who need additional support and can be referred to our new food delivery scheme.

## Working from home

As part of our digital transformation, we have created an environment to enable everyone at Silva to operate remotely. Windows 10 laptops and Office 365 licences are issued as standard and DirectAccess is implemented to provide easy access to our network.

Our call centre, known as the customer hub, was originally restricted to office working because of some software requiring direct IPv4 access to a server on our network. This was an outstanding issue that had never been resolved, but with the likelihood of lockdown on the horizon, our IT team configured an additional VPN client on the hub team's laptops so that they could start working remotely. This was installed just before the lockdown was introduced, which helped the hub team iron out any potential issues in advance.

## Culture

In the last year, we have completely restructured the business so that over

50 per cent of our staff are new to the business. We have also established a new culture, underpinned by key beliefs and behaviours. Therefore, it is crucial that we do everything we can to keep our staff engaged throughout the lockdown.

We adopted GoToMeeting to supplement our existing Microsoft online meeting technology. This has helped our staff keep in touch and it has also given them the ability to organise virtual activities such as quizzes and competitions. Use of Microsoft Teams has increased significantly and our SharePoint intranet provides a source of up-to-date information on Covid-19 and wellbeing support for our staff and it's also the channel for company-wide video briefings.

Surprisingly, this technology has also enabled us to keep recruiting, despite the pandemic. For example, we have recently recruited a new commercial manager to oversee our 3,500 garages. They are being inducted via Silva's new learning management system and meeting and working with team members via video calls.

## After the lockdown

This is an extremely challenging and difficult time for everyone, and our focus is on what we can do now to protect and support customers and our staff. However, I have no doubt that we will emerge stronger than before and any changes now will bring lasting benefits to our customers and staff alike.

Technology has a vital role to play in the way we deliver services during a crisis, but if there is one lesson we have learned, it's to make sure that we create and retain a positive legacy for the times when we are not in crisis.

**Rob Smyth is the executive director for people, digital and change at Silva Homes.**



# Lessons in digital inclusion from our own social isolation

Tom Robins, Chief Strategy Officer, Switchchee

The prospect of up to six months of social isolation has immediately drawn attention to connectivity in people's homes. That attention has been largely focused on the high bandwidth needs of entertainment, social engagement and working from home. The communication networks have all come out to share their network loading data and explain to us that there is plenty of bandwidth for watching movies, sales presentations and group video-chat simultaneously. We needn't worry that those at the top of the digital inclusion curve will continue to do what they've always done and many of us will pick up new digital skills during this challenging time.

## What about people who are digitally excluded?

At a time when we are leaning on digital connectivity as our only connection with the outside world, how do we learn lessons from the challenges that social isolation has posed us? We can look at the problem from two perspectives, first the barriers to digital inclusion and then secondly the digital connectivity which we most urgently need during the isolation period.

The Good Things Foundation in their research into those who are digitally excluded discovered that as of 2018, a disproportionate 63 per cent of people who identified as digitally isolated were residents in social housing. In their research, they identified four key groups whose reason for digital isolation could be easily categorised and grouped:

- "It's not for me" – this is a group that does not see any personal benefit to being online.
- "I don't have the right support" – this group could be online but they currently lack the support or a device to get online.
- "It's too complicated" – this group is primarily driven by a concern that they don't have the skills to stay safe while online.



- "It's too expensive" – This final group is concerned with the affordability of connection costs.

## How are we trying to improve the situation?

Much of the focus in recent years has been on driving awareness of the personal benefits of digital connectivity as well as demonstrating the availability of training. However, it has been difficult in many cases to justify to those who are currently digitally excluded the benefits of learning and investing in equipment to access the internet.

Having personally seen the operation of a well-run, free training programme, I don't believe those who previously didn't place any value in on-demand television shows or video calls with grandchildren would now do so. The training programme found low attendance rates but, more concerningly, low retention rates. This shows that our approach to digital inclusion has to fundamentally change; even people who considered themselves digitally excluded yet had seen the potential benefits of digital enablement still found that those benefits were not sufficiently attractive to change their minds.



I think that more thought and effort need to be put into reducing the perception of difficulty when getting online – hopefully beginning to form habits that day-to-day lead to better outcomes. With the advent of smart technologies, familiar devices and digital experiences can be integrated easily without triggering feelings of unease at the prospect of 'going online'.

For example, in our recent engagement testing, Switchchee has found a significant response rate (92 per cent) to messages sent via our thermostat screen. These non-traditional digital messages are reaching residents who don't engage with other digital communication methods.

## Digital inclusion is a huge problem that can easily be forgotten

In an emergency, we look to ensure that both ourselves and our loved ones are safe and we start with the very basic physiological needs - shelter, warmth, food and water. We want to know these basic needs are covered.



## Lessons in digital inclusion from our own social isolation

*Continued from previous page*



However, when the whole world is in isolation, checking that those needs are actually being serviced becomes a question of technology. Without an ability to communicate with tenants, housing providers are forced to leave them to their own devices. Digital inclusivity means the use of technology so that residents are connected to somebody who knows when (or if) their most basic and most

important needs are being met and can do something about it.

Those of us who have been relying on digital media and communication during this period can easily forget the challenge the elderly and most vulnerable face in this time. This isn't the first crisis that isolates our most vulnerable and it won't be the last. We should be using this time to plan how we can improve digital inclusion strategies across the country to ensure that even during our most dire moments, the most vulnerable are not suffering needlessly.

### What does all this mean?

This period of social isolation has forced us all to go back to basics and there are lessons here as we look to our future

strategies for digital inclusion. To reach those who need it most, digital inclusion needs to be seamlessly incorporated into familiar day-to-day processes and devices to make them simply smarter without worrying vulnerable populations about the dangers of 'online'. Connectivity needs to focus on their basic needs and to ensure that support is always available.

At Switchchee, we believe this difficult time has been a rallying call for 'back-to-basics' IoT platforms and we are working as hard as we can to improve the quality of life for those who have our devices installed in their homes.

**Tom Robins is the chief strategy officer at Switchchee.**



## Rapid IT deployment at One Manchester

John Cafferty, Head of IT, One Manchester

*Across One Manchester, different teams have been coming together to ensure that we can continue to provide key services to our customers and to support our colleagues through any challenges.*

Our contact centre is now working from home and is fully operational, and in less than three days we completed a proof of concept for softphone deployment, and procured and configured laptops, headsets and monitors.

We also deployed a further 70 softphones to establish an emergency service for vulnerable customers and have provided training for colleagues beyond the contact centre so they're able to help with calling customers.

To further support our customers, within just 24 hours we re-designed

and configured our housing system's classification and workflow processes to identify, support and manage Covid-19 contact activities.

All of our colleagues who can work from home are now doing so in a fully operational way. Before lockdown, we had deployed Microsoft Teams on a pilot basis. However, the lockdown forced us to accelerate the roll out of Teams. We have now fully rolled the programme out to the entire at-home workforce on multiple platforms including Chromebooks, laptops, Surface Pros, mobiles and tablets.

We procured, tested and provisioned around 60 Chromebooks to convert colleagues into home workers within the first week of lockdown by adapting our remote desktop and application publishing infrastructure.

Throughout these challenging times, the One Manchester IT team has been supporting colleagues. We have established an ongoing logistical operation to equip colleagues to work

from home safely, including remote new-starter inductions, and the direct delivery of equipment from suppliers.

We've also been using technology to support our colleagues' health and wellbeing, using Teams, our intranet, our wellbeing challenges which incorporate fitness trackers and electronic surveys to check on welfare, share activities for children and even start a new fitness challenge.

As with many housing providers, the technology, processes and programmes now in place were on our roadmap, but the lockdown has forced us to deploy and implement things much sooner than anticipated.

In terms of what lies ahead, One Manchester is looking at our future state and designing our programme to deliver more agile ways of working. Although we're all currently working in uncertain situation, we see this as an opportunity to work smarter and embed innovation into our 'new normal'.

**John Cafferty is the head of IT at One Manchester.**



# The secrets to successful remote teams

Richard Buxton, Director, N4Engage

*Through our experience of setting up customers for remote working and managing our own remote teams, we've found that there is one critical ingredient to success.*

Most organisations have embraced software-as-a-service (SaaS) platforms, so accessing systems remotely isn't usually the biggest issue. No, the biggest issue is maintaining communication, particularly non-verbal communication, between team members. This is essential for good working relationships, trust and rapport, all of which boost teamwork, productivity and success.

Whether your team members are handling queries on your customer contact platform or delivering services to tenants remotely, they need to feel connected. They need to be supporting one another and, depending on their role, working closely with tenants and partners to get their jobs done.

How do you promote collaboration across your organisation and guarantee success from your teams during these challenging times? Here are some of the ways we've achieved this and maintained business as usual:

## 1. Providing the right tools

It's difficult for people to feel connected when using text-based or voice mediums only. The latest collaboration tools vastly improve this situation, so we've been encouraging teams to use them – internally and externally with customers, partners and tenants.

Now, remote teams can make high-quality audio and video calls, share content and chat in virtual meeting rooms, all within a single app. This is seamless and easy to use.

## 2. Leading by example

We've been encouraging our managers to lead the way and stay in touch with their teams. If you're a manager, you need to be monitoring your team's performance to ensure success, and the best way to do this is through regular communications.

Bear in mind though, that while monitoring your team is important, you also need to



trust them to get their jobs done. Over-monitoring and micromanaging will only damage relationships and productivity.

## 3. Coordinating work with apps

When you can't just turn to a team member in the office and allocate a task, the next best thing is to use a workforce task management system (such as Asana) to log, allocate and progress tasks. Sometimes, more discussion is needed around tasks, which is where virtual meeting rooms come in useful.

Here at N4Engage, we use 'Spaces' in Cisco Webex Teams to discuss projects or issues with the relevant people. Documents can be shared and co-edited, messages can be sent and commented on and audio/video calls set up with a single click. When necessary, we can bring external stakeholders such as customers, partners and tenants into Spaces so they're kept in the loop.

## 4. Removing legacy technologies

Several of our customers have taken the mass move to remote working as an opportunity to review their collaboration

systems. We've helped them 'spring clean' away some of the legacy technology that is holding them back from business as usual.

Often, legacy collaboration technology won't easily (or economically) integrate with other business systems, which makes it frustrating for staff to use and reduces productivity.

Fortunately, almost all of the latest collaboration systems include APIs or bots which make integration easier and richer. Why not consider a 'spring clean', removing the technology that's costing you extra time, money and limiting your success?

We know that managing remote teams is a huge challenge in the current climate. But there are collaboration tools out there to help you, and coupled with effective leadership, they can make all the difference.

**Richard Buxton is a director of N4Engage.**



# Smart technology can help tenants through challenging times

Roger Birkinshaw, Housing Director, Northgate Public Services



*Coronavirus has turned everything we take for granted upside down. Time-travellers from a year ago would take one look at the headlines and believe they had landed in the middle of a dystopian novel.*

For the most vulnerable people in society who already had more than their fair share of problems such as health conditions, financial hardship and loneliness, these difficulties have multiplied in the face of the global crisis. To keep people safe in their homes, housing staff have had to go above and beyond to deliver vital emergency services.

Technology had already started to play a vital role in helping housing providers tackle the challenges of a pre-pandemic world, and organisations have witnessed the positive impact of emerging innovations that can bolster the safety and wellbeing of residents.

## Predicting areas of need

The housing sector is increasingly plugging the gap in support services as residents find themselves battling poverty and getting used to large scale welfare reform.

In the current climate, the challenges have become even more deeply entrenched. Before Covid-19 cast its long shadow over the nation, technology had started to offer the housing sector a means to support residents and communities more effectively.

For example, predictive analytics can provide better intelligence and enhance the understanding of customers' needs as Neil Pollitt, assistant director of business intelligence and insight, First Choice Homes Oldham, explained, "We're aiming to create a 360-degree



view of the customer which enables us to identify difficulties they may be facing. We can spot the signs of financial stress, for instance, through arrears data, cash collections and cancelled direct debits."

Knowing more about their customers will enable housing providers to step in with practical support, whether that's advice on financial planning to manage rent payments or helping people to get their CV up to speed so they can find work.

Housing organisations with good quality customer data will also be better placed to anticipate which people are most likely to need a helping hand during times of crisis.

## Engaging residents & communities

We have seen IT emerge as a force for good in these extraordinary times. Video conferencing and social platforms have helped us to stay in touch with loved ones, kept our children's education on track and enabled us to work from home.

Our lockdown experience has shown that maintaining a dialogue has never been so important. Before Covid-19 changed our outlook on the world, housing organisations were already using digital communication channels to strengthen links with individuals and communities.

Shaun Aldis, chief executive at Wolverhampton Homes has been

harnessing the power of social channels to engage with people on a wider scale. He said, "We held 'get together' events three times a year for members of the local community, which draw up to a hundred people or so. We broadcast these events live via Facebook; those watching at home are invited to post comments and questions, and I will repeat their question to the audience in the room and give them instant answers.

"It is incredibly interactive, and we have found that thousands of people will engage with us through Facebook, helping us to reach a wider audience."

The important thing to remember here is that successful customer engagement is achieved with the right blend of interactive technology and the human touch.

John Paul, director of IT, Anchor Hanover said, "You can achieve positive community engagement through Facebook, for example, but there still has to be a person at the end of the social media channel."

## Keeping people safe in their homes

Technology is also instrumental in enabling the housing sector to support the UK's ageing population, and there's an urgent need for providers to help keep

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## Smart technology can help tenants through challenging times

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elderly people in their homes for longer, where they can manage their health conditions and live independent lives. Artificial intelligence has the potential to transform the way housing providers monitor the health, safety and wellbeing of their oldest residents. For example, AI built into the fabric of a property can help to prevent accidents from happening and reduce the need to move people away from their homes and neighbourhoods.

Joe Logan, chief executive, Tai Calon Community Housing, said, "Elderly people live happier lives in familiar surroundings so if we can develop homes which can be fitted with pressure pads, movement sensors and alarms, people can stay in their homes for longer.

"We're starting to see examples of this, such as intelligent showers which regulate the temperature of water so people can't scald themselves."

The need to ensure a safe living environment has taken on an even greater degree of urgency in recent months. Elderly citizens have been hit particularly hard by Covid-19, and social distancing has prevented relatives and friends from

visiting. In this example, the use of AI could be stepped up to keep injuries and accidents at bay.

### Early warning system

Similarly, smart devices around the home can provide a lifeline for elderly and vulnerable tenants. For instance, housing providers are increasingly calling on IoT to monitor how a resident is using their household appliances to identify any changes in their daily routine. Providers can then spot unusual patterns, such as a resident not boiling their kettle for 12 hours when they usually have five cups of tea a day.

Paddy Gray OBE, professor of housing at Ulster University and non-executive director of Wheatley Group, recognises the importance of equipping properties with IoT-enabled devices. He said, "Sensors can already reveal how many times the fridge door has been opened today and draw attention to any unusual behaviour which might indicate all is not well. Appropriate action can then be taken to address any issues."

In our times of social distancing and restricted movement, it has become all the

more important to be able to keep a virtual eye on people who are at risk and ensure that they are safe and well.

There is enormous potential for technologies such as digital communications, AI and IoT to transform the way housing providers support their most vulnerable residents and relieve some of the pressures the housing sector faces.

The experiences of recent months serve to confirm that for the housing sector, technology should be at the core of an organisation's strategy, helping to address critical short-term needs and turning the longer-term vision of smarter, safer homes into a reality.

For more information, please have a look at Northgate Public Services' white paper, 'A smart, safe and sustainable future' ([northgateps.com/housingwhitepaper](http://northgateps.com/housingwhitepaper)) which explores the views of housing providers and thought-leaders on emerging technology in housing.

**Roger Birkinshaw is the housing director at Northgate Public Services.**

## INFRASTRUCTURE



# Britannic Technologies launches free digital service

*Britannic Technologies is offering its SaaS-based Inbox solution free to housing providers during the pandemic.*

Inbox acts as a triaging service, processing large volumes of digital interactions such as email, web chat, social messaging and WhatsApp messages, presenting housing providers' call-centre agents with a single screen of all digital communications. Inbox enables organisations to only allocate human agents to deal with real-time, urgent enquiries, handing over the other

requests to Inbox where it automatically reads content, context and sentiment and automatically responds using set bespoke answers from templates. It can also prioritise, categorise and create queues and tickets for fulfilment.

Jonathan Sharp, director, Britannic Technologies, said, "Many housing providers and public-sector organisations are experiencing high volumes of enquiries that are difficult to manage and respond to with distributed and reduced workforces. We're therefore offering Inbox for free to help manage digital interactions so that businesses can operate as close to normal as possible."

Britannic's Inbox is a SaaS application that is hosted in Google Cloud to meet data sovereignty and security requirements and enables rapid deployment and limitless scaling.

Neil Whitaker, head of IT, Sunspot Tours & Mercury Holidays, said, "In the most challenging business climate we've ever seen, our biggest gain from implementing Inbox is efficiency. We've automated our workloads during this hectic time and now have the ability to implement self-service for our customers."

# Can robots help housing providers through the coronavirus crisis?

Oliver Gwynne, Global Marketing Manager, Proservartner



*Coronavirus is forcing housing providers to consider how they interact with tenants virtually and exposing holes in their current technology infrastructures. While this may prompt a greater urgency for digital transformation, RPA (robotic process automation) could solve some of today's issues and be implemented today, even while offices are closed.*

## What is RPA?

Robotic process automation is software with a very specific task – think of RPA and bots as being a more advanced version of functions or macros within Excel, except that RPA sits on top of other applications and so can link them together.

Some of today's key issues include:

### Disparate functions coming together

One of the oldest but still ongoing issues for those in the housing sector is the management of different departments and disparate systems. Housing combines different areas of expertise, different issues and different personnel. The management and tracking of services such as finance, HR, tenant services, estate services, maintenance, tenancy, social services and external service providers has meant that many organisations today struggle to find an effective CRM/ERP that works for everyone and so it is very likely that important data is sitting in different silos, making collaboration between departments very difficult.

One of the key benefits of RPA is that it can gather information from different servers, systems and spreadsheets as well as from online sources and

aggregate it into a single location. This would mean that all of the disparate services relating to one property could easily be assembled into one place.

### Lack of standardised processes

In order to serve these customers better, you must have consistent standards and procedures. The problem is that wherever humans are involved, there will always be errors, and this is especially true of monotonous tasks carried out in bulk.

Low-level tasks that are high in volume are much better suited to a robot. Not only does this ensure standardisation of process and remove human error but the ultimate aim is to give your team more time to focus on the customer as a person and improve the quality and personalisation of service.

### Backlog currently building

During this pandemic, most housing providers will have prioritised certain types of work which can be carried out virtually. This has left a large number of small (but no less important) tasks to build up for return. Backlogs can quickly get in the way of day-to-day priorities and traditionally the only way to deal with them was to allocate extra time or resources, but RPA represents an alternative.

With remote access to your systems, an RPA bot can be created in a matter of days to suit your specific backlog and the backlog quickly cleared. For short-term solutions like this, you can even 'rent-a-bot' as opposed to buying licences, arranging hosting and so on.

## Conclusion

RPA is a technology which can be implemented in weeks instead of months and can have an immediate impact on your business:

- The automation of high-volume, low-value tasks;
- Gathering, copying and collating data from different sources;
- Clearing processing backlogs, especially for 'non virtual' tasks;
- Tying together disparate systems for closer collaboration and better data integrity.

The cost of RPA is not as much as you might think, with an attended bot (a bot enacted by a human to do its task) costing £2,000-£5,000, depending on complexity.

**Oliver Gwynne is the global marketing manager at Proservartner.**



# Interview – adam in housing



Lee Dutton, Managing Director – Procurement Division, adam

## What does adam's housing solution do?

Through adam's digital commissioning solution, we streamline and automate commissioning activities so we can source the most appropriate dwellings for tenants. Local authorities use our solution because they know that they can source accommodation for people in an effective and compliant manner while keeping their costs under control.

We facilitate the procurement and ongoing management of rooms and properties to meet the rising demand for temporary accommodation. Using a simple workflow, we streamline and systemise letting processes for our customers, agents and landlords, offering a better choice of properties that are fit for purpose. The following activities are digitised and managed through adam:

- Creating a compliant supply base;
- Viewing real-time property availability;
- Managing supplier bookings;
- Procurement and contracting;
- Compliance monitoring;
- Electronic invoicing and payments.

## How does adam challenge the status quo?

There are other solutions on the market which address social housing but there is nothing specific for temporary accommodation. Many authorities don't manage TA from within their housing departments and aren't using bespoke tools. Moreover, we see many struggling with spreadsheets, procuring accommodation wherever they can find it without formal contracts in place, and predominantly on expensive nightly rates. Oversight in terms of ongoing management and regulatory compliance are both very difficult to manage without an effective system.

The adam solution has been developed specifically for temporary accommodation and our bespoke digital platform was designed with input from authorities and housing providers, providing an efficient tool to

identify, book, and manage properties from an approved supply base. Our platform supports the end-to-end process, including provider registration, commissioning, payments, contract management, compliance management and reporting.

## Why do authorities use adam?

From talking to our customers, the main reasons authorities use the adam platform are to:

- Gain more control over the housing market and prevent it being so supplier-led.
- Standardise rates and reduce net-loss lists (i.e. any property for which they were paying more than the agreed rates).
- Enforce a set of compliance and standards in instances where no proper regulation or contracts are in place.
- Find properties faster than they could manually and to reduce pressure on housing teams.
- Grow their market by finding new landlords and agents with available properties.

## How does adam streamline interactions with third-party suppliers?

For third-party suppliers and contractors, the adam platform greatly simplifies and improves their experience of working with their authority. The system allows landlords and agents to effectively manage their housing stock, upload contracts and other documents, issue invoices, receive payments and communicate with the authority. This reduces the administrative burden of dealing with the LA, which in turn produces cost savings. Overall, the system is very intuitive, easy to use and streamlines the commercial process of engaging with authorities.

## What about integration with IT infrastructures & business applications?

adam's technology platform for housing is hosted in the cloud so it is not dependent on any of an LA's existing

## HOW DOES ADAM HELP LOCAL AUTHORITIES?

- **Financial Control** – Regain control of spiralling costs, establish standardised contracts across providers, reduce reliance on costly per-night accommodation, enforce commissioning policies and rebalance the relationship between providers and the LA.
- **Booking Efficiencies** – A single system to engage with suppliers from registration through to payment – view supplier availability in real time and quickly filter to find the most appropriate properties.
- **Invoicing Efficiencies** – Automated invoicing processes deliver FTE savings, preventing the need to manually receive and upload invoices, benefitting both LAs and their suppliers.
- **Compliance** – Full transparency and auditing, as well as improved monitoring of document compliance. 100 per cent of new bookings to contain valid documentation and automated expiry alerts trigger improved supplier behaviours.
- **Insight** – Easily create custom reports then schedule them, share with colleagues for effective decision-making.
- **Management** – A single tool for contract management. Track open complaints and repairs, flag issues and share intelligence internally and with other LAs.
- **Suppliers** – Whether you need a DPS or a framework agreement, adam's market engagement services will help with onboarding your suppliers, including first vetting 100 per cent of applications.



IT infrastructure and is secure, scalable and resilient. Hosted exclusively in the UK across dual tier-three data centres, data sovereignty and availability are guaranteed across the suite of adam products. Data is synchronously replicated between the primary and secondary sites to ensure your data is safe with us.

Our products are developed and maintained by our in-house technical team, supported by our dedicated UX and business analysis teams who ensure every technology solution is delivered with the user in mind. The solution has open API functionality to allow integration with third-party applications as required.

#### What are the present market conditions?

According to a Home Office report, the most recent quarterly statistics recorded 86,130 households in temporary accommodation at the end of June 2019. This is a 79 per cent increase since December 2010 when the use of temporary accommodation hit its lowest point since 2004. The quarterly statistics for June 2019 mark the 31st time that the number of households in temporary accommodation is higher than in the same quarter of the previous year (source: UK Home Office).

The amount of money being paid to private accommodation providers has almost doubled in the last five years from £490 million in 2013/14 to £939 million in 2018/19. During the same period, the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation has risen by almost 50 per cent, suggesting that the charge to LAs has risen disproportionately.

The way authorities are paying private providers has also changed dramatically, with a 120 per cent increase in the use of expensive 'per night' private temporary accommodation, including the use of emergency B&Bs (source: The Independent).

In our recent research discussions with authorities regarding temporary accommodation, the biggest obstacles they face are:

- Regaining financial control of the spiralling cost of temporary accommodation;
- Establishing standardised contracts across all providers;
- Having visibility of commissioned spend to understand profile of accommodation types – i.e. reducing their reliance on costly per-night accommodation and moving to more cost-effective units;
- Enforcing commissioning policies and re-balancing the relationship between providers and the authority.

The problems associated with homelessness are most acute in London, and London boroughs have been struggling with the provision of temporary accommodation for years. However, we are increasingly seeing these issues spreading across the country, with demand and costs rising quickly and councils ill-equipped to deal with the problems.

Therefore we believe adam's new solution is coming to market at the right time, allowing councils to gain financial control over their processes and ensuring that individuals and families are placed in safe and appropriate accommodation.

#### How can adam also support housing repairs and maintenance?

The adam solution is solely for the commissioning and management of temporary accommodation but it can interact with our procurement solution which is used by authorities for the commissioning of repairs and maintenance.

Repairs and maintenance is an area that has particularly felt the pinch, with spending on the repair and maintenance of public housing hitting an all-time low in 2018 of £7.1 billion, in contrast to 1997 when £9.3 billion was spent on repairs and maintenance work on 5.5 million social homes.

#### Which authorities are using adam?

At the moment, Waltham Forest, Newham, Enfield, Redbridge and Haringey local authorities and councils are using adam for temporary accommodation. Over 11,000 unique properties have been offered to our customers through the platform, more than 26,000 bookings have been created so far, and over £340 million of spending has been processed through adam's payment gateways.

All of our customers have seen an increase in their housing supply base, and on average their net-loss lists have been reduced by 25 per cent. In general, those customers have been able to streamline their processes, regain financial control over procurement and enforce a stronger set of compliance and standards.

**Lee Dutton is the managing director for procurement at adam.**

#### MARKET DRIVERS FOR TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

- Lack of affordable social housing, rising rents and a freeze on LHA rates;
- The 2017 Housing Reduction Act increased LAs' statutory requirements;
- Anyone homeless or at risk now has access to help, irrespective of their priority/need status;
- 80 per cent of LAs have seen an increase in homelessness presentations since the introduction of the Act;
- £1.1 billion spending on temporary accommodation (up by 78 per cent in the past five years), one of third of which is spent on B&Bs (despite concerns), and including £280 million from LAs' own budgets (overspend vs Dept of Work & Pensions funds);
- 85,000 families in temporary accommodation (57,000 of which are in London) – an increase of 45 per cent in the past five years;
- 35,000 households in either nightly paid (22,000), B&Bs (7,000) or hostels (5,000);
- 28,000 households in the private rented sector and 22,000 in council-owned stock;
- A shortage of local housing supply, with 23,000 families placed 'out of area';
- 5,000 families with no accommodation secured;
- Standards of accommodation are poor and don't offer value for money.

# Ethical IoT for housing

Sam Collier, Research Associate, University of Bristol



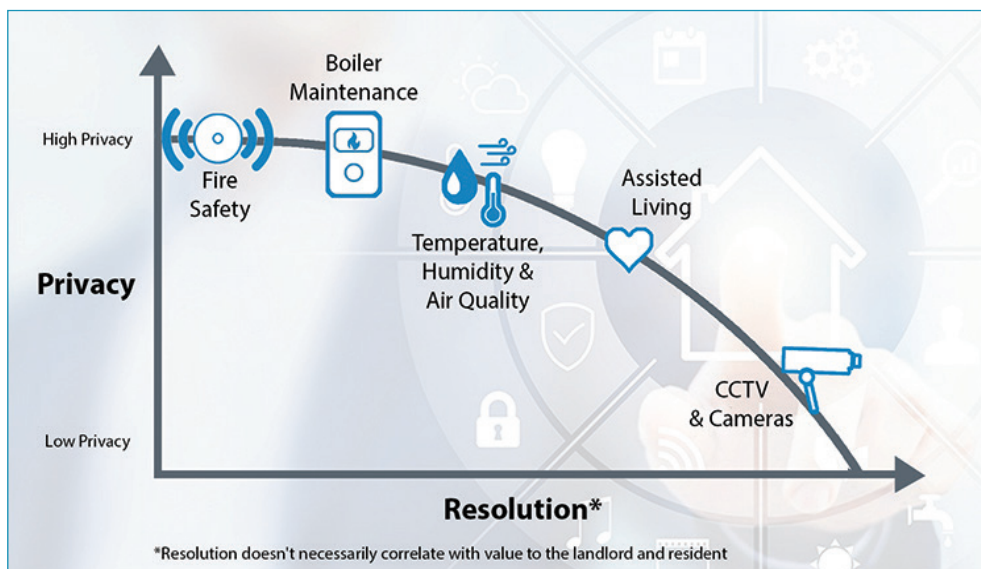
*The internet of things offers significant opportunities for improving the lives of those in social housing and for service provision. The University of Bristol, Royal Borough of Greenwich, Believe Housing, Bromford Labs, Homelync and Bristol City Council's City Innovation Team are conducting research to ensure our work is ethically sound and leads to beneficial outcomes for all.*

## The benefits of IoT

Connected devices are delivering innovative pathways for overcoming housing issues across the board. In homes, sensors and environment monitoring are combined with artificial intelligence and machine learning to improve living conditions and ease safety concerns. Insights can shift maintenance from a reactive process to the proactive prediction of service faults and indoor environment degradation, preventing the escalation of potential issues. At a service level, the integration of data platforms improves the quality of insights, enabling housing providers to provide better services, ensure compliance and reduce costs.

Collectively, such insights are already contributing to the identification of fuel poverty in the UK and raising awareness of the detrimental health impacts of poor indoor air quality.

These insights are dependent on the monitoring and analysis of data, some of which are likely to be regarded as personal. Without understanding existing privacy perspectives and integrating them



into their design, these innovations could be received with apprehension and limit the potential benefits.

## Ethics in focus

Trust in technology has been impacted in recent years. Global corporations have endured scandals including Facebook's Cambridge Analytica data breach and Google's 'antitrust' investigations. Animosity towards 'big tech' has even entered the public lexicon: the term 'techlash' was included on the Oxford English Dictionary's 2018 word of the year shortlist.

Further evidence of this erosion of trust is indicated by Edelman's UK Trust Barometer 2020. It found that 60 per cent of respondents think technology is evolving too fast, 67 per cent worry technology is obscuring reality, and 72 per cent believe the government's knowledge gap on new technology is a barrier to effective regulation.

Legitimate concerns exist over 'data monetisation' and what has been coined 'surveillance capitalism'. Combined with the measurement of an increasingly wide set of social, cultural, behavioural and environmental indicators, alongside vast swathes of metadata, this may facilitate the use of seemingly ethically-

benign information for unintended and unacceptable means. Further questions surround the elasticity of acceptability in exceptional circumstances, such as the tracking of Covid-19 or, more generally, where human welfare might be at severe risk.

## A broader ethics for housing IT

The failure to develop broader, meaningful regulation for data commoditisation presents an opportunity to address fundamental issues while developing and designing emerging technologies. In housing IT, ethics have been addressed in customer experience and the integration of chatbots for customer service but there are many other aspects of social housing innovation that need consideration through this ethical lens.

These range from all aspects of system design, concerns related to privacy, data ownership and decision-making to more philosophical debates such as the meaning of home. Those with the relevant knowledge and expertise have a responsibility to address these concerns, not only from an ethical standpoint but also as good business practice.

## Decisions, decisions...

How do we maximise the benefits without causing harm and then ensure those

## Ethical IoT for housing

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benefits are distributed fairly? Diffusion of technology is carried out on an uneven footing; imbalances exist in knowledge, experience and power. In social housing, these scales are tipped further still. Given the infancy of IoT in housing, an opportunity exists to define the principles and values by which it operates.

How do we do this and who decides? And who decides who decides? What tools, knowledge and experience are needed? By definition, innovation lacks precedent, so where do we look for guidance?

### What do people want?

New technologies are often viewed with scepticism and resistance, particularly when they benefit the few but affect the many, or seemingly challenge human utility. Understanding the needs and expectations of those affected will be necessary. These will vary between and within groups, and across technologies and use cases.

For example, consider the example of temperature and humidity monitoring. Many may find insights for damp and

mould extremely valuable, both for health and improving living conditions, while others could look upon such information as intrusive to their home lives.

Another key finding from Edelman shows that those who distrust innovations are more likely to think they are under-regulated, whereas those more informed are more convinced of their positive impact. The effective communication of any risks and benefits will be key in ensuring a constructive dialogue between relevant stakeholders.

Preliminary research with tenants in Leeds and York suggests that housing providers must strike a delicate balance when implementing IoT. From the earliest stage of our projects, we have engaged tenants to ensure they are well-informed and that any concerns are addressed, fostering positive relationships and a frictionless route to scaling up IoT.

### Call to action

Issues with new technologies are not a modern phenomenon, an oft-cited example being the motor car. It enabled

humans to travel much greater distances in shorter times but brought with it challenges such as pollution and safety. Concerns over ethics should not deter us from designing innovative IoT systems. Steps need to be taken to understand how ethics can be integrated.

To this end, Homelync is engaging in wider research with dozens of social landlords, technology suppliers and tenants. This work seeks to address just some of the questions posed above.

Our goal is to ascertain levels of acceptability to ensure ethical concerns are addressed and benefits are inclusive. The project will inform the development of an ethical framework for our work which we hope to extend throughout the sector.

As such, we would like to engage with the widest possible group of stakeholders. If your organisation is interested and would like to contribute to this research, in the first instance please contact [news@housing-technology.com](mailto:news@housing-technology.com).

**Sam Collier is a research associate at the University of Bristol.**



## Good suppliers and bad suppliers at Trivallis

Neil Jones, Corporate Director IT & Business Improvement, Trivallis

*Our decision to remove Citrix and our thin-clients and replace them with laptops was completed just a few months ago. That decision, along with our implementation of Microsoft Teams has seen staff being able to work from home with the minimum of fuss and very few problems. The recent replacement of our firewall to give unlimited remote access has also paid dividends.*

Since lockdown, we've seen a 300 per cent increase in the use of Teams, and so far Teams and indeed the full Microsoft stack has worked faultlessly.

What this situation has demonstrated to me is the importance of the attitude and actions of your key IT suppliers. On a positive note, Microsoft (through its account specialists) keeps in regular contact with me and my team and couldn't be more helpful, and Astro Communications who have recently taken over the management of our network and firewall have provided top-notch support.

However, it's such a shame that the suppliers of our housing management and housing repairs systems have only been in touch with invoices. These proprietary suppliers could learn a lot

about keeping customers happy, or indeed about even keeping customers!

The greatest negative IT aspect for us has been the postponement of our Microsoft Dynamics go-live. We were planning to replace both housing management and housing repairs functions early in April with our eSuasive-developed Microsoft Dynamics solution but we're now looking at alternative ways of an implementation while still in lockdown.

The lessons for me are synchronise your business continuity plans with your network, architecture and critical systems, foster meaningful relationships with IT suppliers who actually can and are willing to help you and, on a personal note, try to embrace the new ways of working.

**Neil Jones is the corporate director for IT & business improvement at Trivallis.**





# Cyber security during a crisis

David Morris, Technology Assurance Director, RSM Risk Assurance Services

All organisations, including housing providers and their partners, have had to rush into greatly expanded remote working arrangements because of the Covid-19 lockdown. For some, this has meant expanding existing well-controlled processes. For others, it has meant a panic trajectory where they have had difficulty acquiring equipment and have faced staff resistance. Some staff have struggled to cope with their new circumstances at home and still seek the comfort blanket of familiarity such as access to key systems and printing facilities. This is on top of the non-IT issues such as the health and mental wellbeing of staff and what staff can claim for when working at home.

For most organisations, the focus has been on getting new infrastructures set up, with the emphasis on system performance rather than security concerns and staff training. Tools and processes such as video conferencing that would normally be tested and developed over time so they can be implemented as stable solutions have been rushed into service, sometimes without a proper assessment of the risks and security requirements.

Cyber criminals are very good at reacting to events; the pandemic has become another platform for them to use in scamming people and organisations out of their money, data and privacy. Specific phishing and whaling emails (emails that appear to come from an official source but are in fact not legitimate) have been surfacing, maliciously leveraging the increased global panic as a way to trick people.

Specific examples are as follows:

- Cyber criminals have been masquerading as the World Health Organisation and sending emails designed to acquire personal data.
- The European Central Bank recently issued a formal warning to financial institutions about increases in phishing

and other related cyber crimes on the back of Covid-19.

- Researchers at Israeli security firm Check Point reported that the number of registered domains related to Covid-19 had increased since January 2020 with over 4,000 coronavirus-related domains registered globally. Check Point found that over three per cent were malicious, with an additional five per cent being classed as suspicious.

Attention has also been drawn to the massive increase in the use of video calls and collaboration software. The risks associated with these include eavesdropping, hijacking where outsiders 'invade' meetings and illegal recordings of calls. Some larger companies and governments have started banning the use of some of the more popular tools, citing concerns about encryption, data harvesting and the national origin of the software.

For most organisations, other IT projects have gone on hold as IT departments struggle with their new workloads. This might include projects to enhance network security or introduce security tools. Their cyber-risk exposure is increased as a result.

## Impact on the housing sector

For the social housing sector, Covid-19 has highlighted good practice as well as raising some specific problems. The main challenge is dealing with tenants that may not have IT facilities at home when offices are shut to face-to-face meetings. In theory, existing digital engagement with those tenants that have access to IT should be able to continue but only if the performance of systems isn't degraded.

Another issue is maintaining the accuracy and security of tenants' data. If staff are dealing with tenants while at home, care needs to be taken to ensure that their personal data isn't compromised. An example would be holding tenant

data on a potentially unsecure personal laptop. Another very specific issue is the requirement to keep tenant records up to date when they die; bad publicity will surely arise if this is not handled in a timely and sensitive manner.

In terms of cyber risk, it would be catastrophic if housing benefit sent from local authorities to housing providers (notwithstanding universal credit), which could be around 65 per cent of monthly income for some, was intercepted and diverted. Similar concerns have been raised about the interception of links between registered providers and their emergency repairers.

On the plus side, the sector already makes a lot of use of meeting and document collaboration software solutions. This means that registered providers are in a better position to manage their operations than many other sectors.

## Risks

What are the cyber risks that housing providers might experience in lockdown? These are typically a mix of technology- and people-related risks:

- Unsecured remote working practices have been established because of the speed of their introduction. The rapid addition of remote connections to company's endpoints means that there is a potential risk that the IT team doesn't spot untrusted connections. Authentication is a particular concern; how easy is it to confirm who is actually logging in?
- New video tools have been introduced without a full understanding of their risks. For example, it is good to remember that people might record video calls.
- Staff are working in a new environment where they may get complacent about cyber risk. They could easily forget that confidential information is still confidential at home and it should be treated as it would in the office. For

## Cyber security during a crisis

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example, they might use uncontrolled data sticks or personal cloud storage to store and then access their work. Alternatively, they could print documents which are then left lying around or disposed of incorrectly.

- Because of the difficulty in sourcing company equipment, staff might be using their own devices. Home PCs are rarely as well protected as corporate devices; they are sometimes months out of date in terms of security patches and might not even have AV software on them. They may also fail to back it up.
- The risk of GDPR breaches increases drastically as personal data spreads out and away from the main network.
- Where third parties provide IT services to a registered provider, the provider needs to continue to get assurances about the controls they operate on their behalf. The provider might use the lockdown as an excuse to stop sending assurance reports or cease active monitoring of IT activity.

### Controls

There are some sensible steps that any housing provider can take to reduce the risk of cyber attacks during the lockdown. As ever, the trick is achieving the right balance of restrictions on users' behaviour through security hygiene while not crushing their ability to work productively.

Housing staff need to take responsibility for safeguarding data and systems and should therefore do the following:

- Always use company laptops and devices where these are provided; personal devices could be unprotected.
- If they have no choice, they should check that home PCs have up-to-date virus protection installed; a cut-down, free package is better than none at all.
- Whoever owns the equipment, all security updates should be accepted immediately; they are sent for valid reasons, normally in response to specific threats.
- Staff should check their wifi security; a strong password should be in place and this should be changed every now and then.
- Care should be taken to ensure that data is not stored on sites beyond UK GDPR jurisdiction.
- Staff should be careful with emails. Just as in the office environment, they should not follow directions or links from

unsolicited emails and should report any suspicious emails to the IT department.

- If printing at home is unavoidable, print-outs should be shredded or otherwise destroyed.

Housing providers need to ensure that they have implemented appropriate technical and process-based controls that are commensurate with the level of perceived risk. Key among these will be staff training and education.

Technical issues for consideration include:

- A good mobile device management (MDM) system is vital in protecting company equipment against compromise and loss. Devices can be monitored, locked and wiped remotely if there is an issue. Similarly, some organisations will allow staff to use personal devices as long as they are registered and subject to a similar set of rules.
- The current situation highlights the advantages of using multi-factor authentication (MFA) to identify and approve connections by staff. Any organisation that doesn't already use this in some form should surely be looking at it now.
- Email protection features should be enabled if they haven't already been turned on. Products such as Exchange online protection and Office365 Advanced Threat Protection can provide an extra level of security against potentially malicious emails.
- It is a good idea to review the established arrangements on a regular basis. Housing providers need to ensure that their IT security infrastructure is updated to respond to the latest threats. An example might be known risks and developments in relation to the video tools that are being used. Another example would be firewall settings.
- The performance of the IT infrastructure should be continuously monitored and assessed to ensure it can continue to support the increase in staff numbers working from home. As part of this, data back-up policies and arrangements should be checked to ensure that work is not lost.

The messages given to staff will be absolutely key in helping reduce the cyber-security risk to the organisation. The following are sensible and proven actions that can be

taken to engage and protect staff:

- Staff must be reminded of the need to maintain data-quality standards for tenant data, particularly for any more sensitive or time-critical updates.
- Staff must be given the latest home-working policy and demonstrate that they have accepted it, even if a policy has to be written! These should be constantly reviewed to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.
- Staff must be told from whom they should expect advice on Covid-19 and the lockdown – they should be reminded that no message from senior management will require them to enter any personal or company information into previously unknown third-party sites.
- Cyber-security training should be refreshed to make sure that staff know what to do if a problem arises. A 'hotline' for staff and clients to escalate concerns and IT issues arising from working at home should be established, and staff need an emergency contact to call if they fall foul of things such as malware and ransomware.
- On the back of this, a robust, tested breach reporting and incident management process is required in order to contain any attacks quickly to minimise operational disruption and reputation damage.
- Communication with staff about new security concerns and good practice on a regular basis is vital.
- C-suite and senior leadership should be specifically trained to look out for phishing and whaling attempts; these threats are often targeted at senior people.

### Conclusion

The lockdown has created a unique set of circumstance that cyber attackers will seek to exploit. Organisations have had to react quickly and security may still be playing catch-up as a result.

Just as it would be in a more normal working environment, the human firewall remains both a critical line of defence but also the weakest point of security. Staff-awareness training now assumes an even more important place in the control environment. It is important to keep in touch with staff and make sure they are up to date on the latest threats.

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## Cyber security during a crisis

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One very important consideration – when things go back to normal, the 'remote working genie' isn't going back into the bottle. One legacy of this lockdown will be that staff will expect to enjoy the flexibility and convenience of remote working when offices reopen. Given this, the sooner the remote-working environment is reviewed and secured, the sooner it can be

established as part of the normal working environment. While the overall IT control environment might have been over-ridden in the short term, it's very important that this isn't the case in the longer term.

If approached properly, the short-term pain experienced in setting up new processes and technologies can become long-term gain as they are embedded and

refined. However, the risk of cyber attacks will always remain and will always need to be addressed.

**David Morris is the technology assurance director at RSM Risk Assurance Services.**



## The power of SaaS in uncertain times

Denis Kaminskiy, Co-Founder, Arcus Global

*First things first – I don't think anyone could have done anything to prevent the level of disruption we are currently facing.*

No amount of preparation could give adequate protection from a 'once in a hundred years' event. No amount of planning, stocking or preparing was going to cut it. Saying "we're not prepared" applies to almost every country and every business. The answer is that it costs too much to be prepared for something so rare and so extreme as this.

So, I am not going to join the chorus of voices lamenting the 'lack of preparation'. Instead, let's focus on the need for businesses to have more flexibility in general. The ability to move locations, recover quickly from disruption or have multi-skilled people able to work remotely is always a good idea and should actually cost an organisation less than normal operations.

The theory of evolution by natural selection is sometimes called survival of the fittest. Fittest is sometimes mistaken for strength or physical/mental fitness but that's misleading. Fittest here simply

means ability to adapt and reproduce or grow in a business context. As in, roll with the punches.

Without sounding self-serving, Arcus has been able to react relatively well during this time. We started the company in 2009 and were one of the early 'born in the cloud' businesses.

We have only ever used software as a service (SaaS) internally on any major system – Google Apps, Xero, Atlassian stuff, later joined by Salesforce.com (not forgetting Zoho in the early years), XCDHR, Slack and a few others on the project management side. So for us, the move from office to home was smooth and uneventful, apart from ordering a few extra handsets and laptops and provisioning a few more AWS Workspaces for people.

Yes, we did invoke our business continuity plan (BCP) to provide device access for 10 people or so but we normally work 2-3 days from home per week so it seems

pretty much business as usual for most of us. As a result, we've been able to authorise and encourage our staff to volunteer for the national support effort or spend more time informally helping at home or locally.

There have been increased efforts from our social activity and culture team. They have been trying to improve our organisational cohesion by creating virtual quiz teams, MMO gaming, virtual poker and a virtual pub (The Director's Head...) – all bringing us together, irrespective of location.

As our customers have come under massive strain, we have had to also make sure that we supported them as much as possible, with flexibility, sensitivity to their challenges, and a very soft commercial approach. In turn, our customers have responded by being more understanding of priorities.

**Denis Kaminskiy is the co-founder of Arcus Global.**



# Making the most of a bad situation

Source: Clear Safety

*Clear Safety has recently expanded from mainly providing health and safety consultancy in the education sector to supporting housing providers with key compliance stream such as asbestos, fire and gas safety, legionella management, electrical safety, maintenance of lifts and door entry systems.*

Clear Safety's IT systems had already undergone a recent upgrade to accommodate the new business needs. This included migrating to Office 365, introducing a VoIP phone system accessible from users' desktops via a mobile app and using a number of on-site tools such as iAuditor and Google Forms so that engineers could capture data while on the go; the main goal was to enable staff to be able to work from anywhere. The result is that any member of staff can access anything that they need to get the job done, on any device, with data is stored securely in the cloud.

Consequently, when faced with the lockdown, Clear Safety was already in a better position than many and could continue more or less as normal, without undue disruption. Despite this, it was quickly recognised that what we had taken for granted was how integral the social element of work is to the delivery of an effective service. Systems and data alone can only provide so much; the personal touch is still paramount. In order to compensate for being unable to visit clients, the travel-time savings were viewed as an opportunity to improve how we communicate with our clients, colleagues and contractors. The first step was to migrate away from email as much as possible because mailboxes were becoming harder to track. For example, there can be multiple threads about the same piece of work and sometimes all the stakeholders are copied into messages that are relevant to them, and sometimes not.

As an alternative, communication on projects is initiated within Airtable, a cloud-based application that can be used to manage almost any stream of work. It's somewhere between a database and a spreadsheet, with added bells and whistles. One of its most powerful functions is its ability

to message other collaborators from inside a record, so that all communications about a task can be tracked and seen by all, while still being able to direct the comment towards the relevant person. Our clients quickly saw the benefit of working this way, with Airtable now our primary mechanism to manage projects and workstreams.

The second focus was to make information as easy to access as possible for clients and contractors. To help streamline and simplify the process, Google Sites were created to present documentation and links in one user-friendly web page. Google Sites also allow Airtable views to be embedded into the page, reducing the need to swap between systems and different tables. When combined with Zapier, multiple manual processes can be automated and then Data Studio can be used to present analytics as a dashboard. The result is a 'one-stop shop' that lets everyone work in the same space, with simple systems that remove mundane, repetitive tasks, plus key information and performance can be viewed in real time.

What has become apparent during the lockdown is the importance of staff knowing the capabilities of the systems available to them and how they are expected to use them. It's great having systems and processes that improve ways of working, but if staff are not fully conversant with them, they will

quickly return to the long-winded manual processes that they are familiar with. This is especially true when staff aren't all in the same place and can't simply ask for a spot of help across the desk.

It is Clear Safety's view that any changes and improvements that can be made now, while everyone is working in unusual and uncertain times, will bring benefits when we finally emerge from lockdown and return to more familiar ways of working.



# Cyber security beyond Covid-19: 206 days & counting...

Luke Kiely, Cyber Security Operations Manager, IT Lab



*Depending on which reports you read, the average time it takes to detect an intruder in your network after a compromise is 206 days...*

Getting a sense of the overall threat landscape is rarely straightforward. The nature of cyber crime is dynamic; tactics and techniques fall in and out of vogue as criminals choose the path of least resistance.

In the wake of Covid-19, cyber criminals have latched onto the global emergency, seeking to exploit individuals and businesses through coronavirus-themed phishing campaigns, malicious apps and fraudulent outbreak map websites, to name just a few.

It's well-reported that the cyber security industry is facing significant global shortages, both in numbers and skills. This shortage doesn't only stretch cyber personnel, but IT professionals lumbered with security responsibilities on top of their existing workloads. They're often in a continual state of deficiency, in numbers, expertise or both, with a multitude of security technologies to manage.

The wave of remote working across the UK due to Covid-19 is compounding these challenges. Traditional security perimeters are now decentralised, with no way to fully control what happens in the home-working environment. This expanding footprint can be likened to in-house IT and security personnel playing zone defence on a significantly larger pitch, but with far fewer players than its opponents, who have multiplied.

Cyber criminals are unlikely to be complaining as they look to exploit vulnerabilities wherever they exist and leverage whatever they can. They're taking full advantage of understaffed businesses with limited abilities to prevent, detect and respond to attacks.

The primary trends observed by the IT Lab Cyber Security Operations Centre (CSOC) during the Covid-19 emergency have



been the systematic targeting of users via phishing and their remote workplaces.

The blended home and workplace works in favour of cyber criminals. As remote workers cope with additional stresses and distractions, this arguably makes them more vulnerable to a phishing attack than before. Unsurprisingly, phishing has spiked in response to the emergency, which proves time and again to be an extremely effective method of defeating security defences.

Typically, a hacker must circumvent enterprise technology to compromise a network endpoint such as a laptop, mobile or tablet. But if not managed effectively, security controls are weakened by remote working because existing layers of security haven't or can't be applied or enforced.

Active attempts underway across the UK include:

- Attacks on unprotected and unpatched devices to exploit existing vulnerabilities.
- The installation of malware on users' endpoints to intercept traffic and steal login credentials and other sensitive information.
- Attacks on network domain name servers to redirect user requests to malicious websites.

It's worth highlighting that cyber criminals are also targeting the commercial tools used to facilitate remote working, such as the Zoom remote conferencing platform.



It's unlikely that either remote workers or businesses could have anticipated that Zoom would bring the data loss and privacy dangers to the workplace that it has.

Most modern businesses have networks of third parties including outsourcing partners and vendors, with some representing a dependency for your own business. It's vital that businesses look beyond their own realm and assess the information security and business continuity of third parties to determine how they are or could be affected by the crisis, and consequently what that risk could mean to them.

When the dust finally settles around Covid-19 and normality returns, businesses should take the opportunity to reflect on what did and didn't go well. They should identify improvements to equip themselves for better business continuity. Don't see a 'lessons learned' exercise as optional; it's an opportunity to build on the approaches that worked and avoid repeating mistakes.

Businesses should:

- Consider additional protection for their corporate networks, applications and data, with the expectation that cyber criminals can penetrate remotely-connected devices.
- Protect the devices of their remote employees in the same way as they do for the systems on their corporate network.

## Cyber security beyond Covid-19: 206 days & counting...

*Continued from previous page*

- Continue to educate employees on security practices, from the basics of avoiding opening unknown links to the protection of their remote workplace and home network. The shortage of cyber security skills and IT resources to protect remote workloads means some protection burden will fall on employees. It's therefore vital to have a user-friendly cyber protection solution that doesn't need excessive training to provide an adequate level of protection for home devices.

The reality is that while Covid-19 will eventually subside, the risk of a cyber attack won't. Depending on which reports you read, the average time it takes to detect an intruder in your network after a compromise is an estimated 206 days. What will this look like in a post-Covid-19 world? It's reasonable to expect that just when businesses regain stability, they will face another, equally merciless experience by way of a data breach.

Although the pandemic has been a global disaster, it presents a unique opportunity

to improve your approach to cyber security and bring security awareness to all users.

As the shift towards remote working continues to grow, we can expect to see more managed security service providers (MSSPs) shouldering the cyber security burden. They'll play a crucial role in deploying extra cyber protection capabilities for businesses and corporate infrastructures with remote working and the protection of homeworkers in mind.

**Luke Kiely is the cyber security operations manager at IT Lab.**

# The life of an IT service provider amid Covid-19

John Blackburn, Operations Director, Central Network & Technologies



*When undertaking disaster recovery tests, I would sometimes shock clients by suggesting that we would like to respond to a real-life disaster in order to really demonstrate our team's ability to quickly and efficiently overcome this type of situation. In reality, I didn't expect that such an opportunity would arise and when the global pandemic struck, it wasn't quite what I had expected...*

It is a truism to say that Covid-19 has turned the world upside down. It is something that none of us could have predicted and many are still trying to adapt and get to grips with reality. Rather than just dealing with one organisation that needed IT support, we had many organisations requiring help with capacity and availability issues, all with varying degrees of severity, all at the same time.

Central had a business continuity plan that would accommodate remote working and enable the team to continue operations. Before the official government lockdown, we had two technical teams that had spent the previous weeks taking it in turns to work from home; this allowed us to see if any technical issues might cause problems.

However, most issues in the testing period were not technology-related, but rather adjusting to family life and working from home. This included learning how to prevent our young children from disturbing us during the day, as well as ensuring that we took breaks in order to avoid getting too jaded with our home-working routines.

When the lockdown hit the UK, the housing providers that Central supports were in many different states of preparedness. Some were 100 per cent prepared and immediately ready for home working, others were not. We noticed that many customers had the capacity for only a fixed number of remote users working from home at once.

The days that immediately followed the lockdown were dominated by capacity issues. We had to increase VPN and two-factor authentication licences, enhance

our Citrix and Horizon server farms and flex up internet bandwidth.

In all my years working at Central, I've never experienced such a frenetic few days. However, it was great to see our team, customers and suppliers all pulling together and being understanding of one another. Some of the main IT suppliers were temporarily giving away licensing and allowing previously disallowed configurations to run in production. Many engineers were working evenings and weekends – all hours possible to address capacity issues. The most important thing was that everyone was able to work through these unprecedented circumstances.

Dealing with a disaster of this kind wasn't what I had expected. It has been tough and I'm very much looking forward to returning to 'normal work'. However, I am proud of our response and also really pleased at the 'can do' positivity from everyone involved to get through this crisis together and see ourselves out at the other side – stronger and more prepared. Definitely Britain at its best!

**John Blackburn is the operations director at Central Network and Technologies.**



# IT risk management – Tracking, monitoring and mitigating



*Housing Technology interviewed IT risk experts from Incline-IT, Northgate Public Services, Riskhub and Waterstons on what IT risks housing providers should be keeping a close eye on and how they can plan for and mitigate those risks.*

## What are the IT risks specific to social housing?

Trevor Hampton, director of housing solutions, Northgate Public Services, said, "Poor data quality is a ticking time bomb for housing providers – in our view, it's the number one risk. Housing providers operating with a patchwork of systems are now dealing with incomplete, inaccurate and duplicated data. This lack of joined-up systems makes it almost impossible for housing providers to gain the necessary 360-degree view of tenants and properties."

David Mason, technical director, Incline-IT, said, "As digital transformation becomes a daily reality in housing, there are two main new risk factors emerging: the risk of misaligning IT with an organisation's wider business strategies; and the dangers of ineffective risk management."

"With the technology market becoming increasingly competitive, there is more hype around new solutions. This can lead to unrealistic expectations of IT within the wider organisation, and a subsequent misalignment of business and IT strategies when planning for digital transformation, leading to increased costs, reduced agility and impaired decision-making."

Sarah Herbison, CEO, Riskhub, said, "In the area of compliance, the biggest risk is housing providers losing control of the data that comes out of compliance assessments. For example, archaic spreadsheet systems are easily corrupted



IT risk should be a specific area of focus for housing providers, but the key is to ensure that it's part of a much broader enterprise risk management strategy.

Helen McMillen, Executive Business Consultant, Waterstons

when accessed by multiple users, making it hard to keep track of the constantly evolving datasets.

"Two things can happen if compliance data isn't stored properly. Firstly, the actions of the checks might be lost or incorrectly marked as complete, with the possible result that vital safety work isn't carried out. Secondly, compliance actions might not be correctly marked as actually having been completed, meaning works could be inadvertently requested, completed and paid for more than once."

## Measuring, triaging and mitigating IT risks

Helen McMillen, executive business consultant, Waterstons, said, "Housing providers need to take a holistic approach to mitigating IT risk; this means ensuring that the domains of people, processes, technology and leadership are all considered together. In practice, this means not simply relying on an annual penetration test or DR rehearsal but instead ensuring that risks are appropriately captured not only within

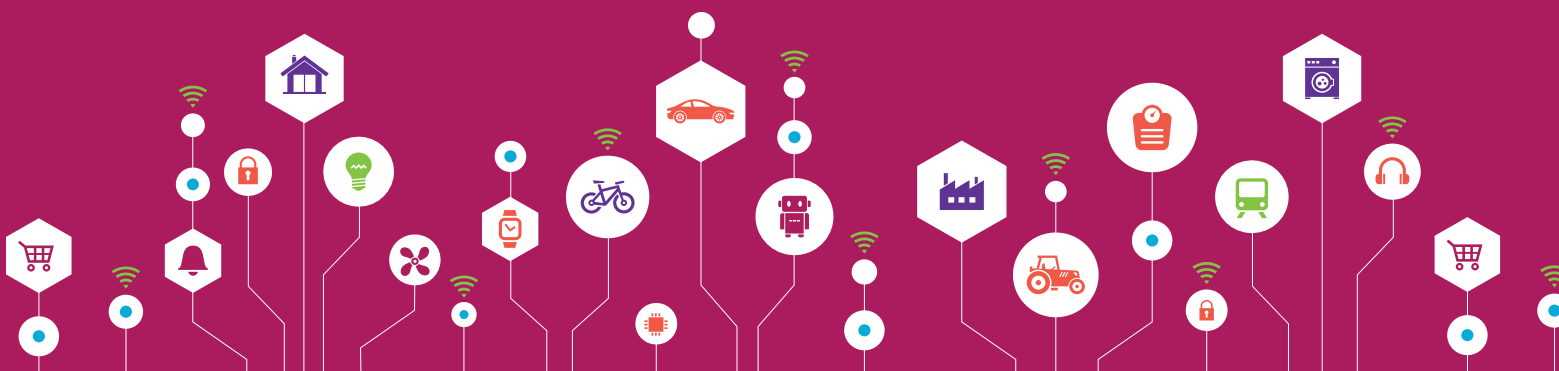
your infrastructure but also as well as throughout your digital supply chain.

"As well as focusing on testing, scenario planning for your critical risks is important. This lets you understand where the riskiest parts of your operations are and ensures you have the right controls to reduce those risks to within parameters you're comfortable with."

Northgate's Hampton said, "Interrogating the data you hold is a good place to start. This helps measure your risk around data quality by establishing how 'healthy' it is, and whether it gives a complete view of your tenants. Carrying out regular data audits will identify gaps and flag what information needs to be captured. Obtaining that data can then be planned into routine correspondence or maintenance visits.

"To take another area, an increase in calls to contact centres or a rise in customer complaints are indicators of whether digital services are functioning correctly. Housing providers worried about their digital capabilities need to take care of their back office; processes must be joined up and workflows fully automated for customer journeys to be completed."

Incline-IT's Mason said, "When designing a digital transformation, IT teams must change their approach to risk management. Where previously the majority of IT risks were internal, they are transferred to external parties when



working with SaaS providers. External risks can't always be fully managed, so organisations must focus on mitigation by understanding their risk profile, where they put core services and how to properly separate services to ensure that if one provider has problems, the entire business isn't affected.

"Where IT services are outsourced, ongoing risk management requires a contract management approach which may be new to some IT teams. Traditionally, service providers report their performance against pre-agreed SLAs but this doesn't provide true visibility because there are no means to validate the figures. The key to effective service delivery and risk management is transparency; having access to the systems that providers use themselves to monitor services enables much better risk management."



**I suspect that a worrying number of housing providers still reliant on legacy IT systems will have been caught out by the sudden shift to offsite operations, with important data proving difficult to access.**

Sarah Herbison, CEO, Riskhub

### Do housing providers focus on risk management?

Northgate's Hampton said, "IT is always on the agenda when housing providers' risk committees meet so it's already an area of focus for them. However, it's not enough to just commission an IT report; you need to execute the action plans outlined in them. There is often a gap between identifying IT risk and the actual follow-through. "To use a current example, housing providers who considered IT risk management to be a core element of their overall organisational strategy are probably

responding better to the coronavirus crisis than others."

Waterstons' McMillan said, "IT risk should be a specific area of focus for housing providers, but the key is to ensure that it is part of a much broader enterprise risk management strategy. A robust risk management approach needs to be forward-looking because this allows us to forecast what the next areas of focus might need to be. We can then apply wider insights and intelligence from ever-changing political, regulatory and operational spheres, and understand where our critical risks lie across people, processes, and technology."

### How important is the 'human factor' in IT risk?

McMillan said, "When we look at the trends in recent data breaches, the vast majority were caused by people, and in most cases by accident. This means that securing the 'human factor' is just as important as technical security, although this area of IT risk management is frequently overlooked.

"It is all too easy to tick the training box, but will it actually have any lasting effects? In contrast, we've found that live hacking demos, the gamification of cyber security challenges and business-wide security formats are the strongest links when it comes to managing risk.

"It's also important to realise that despite everyone's best efforts, sometimes things will go wrong and data will accidentally be sent to the wrong place or information mishandled. In those cases, it's important to ensure that there is a culture of openness where staff feel able to report incidents quickly without fear of reprisals and are empowered to suggest ways of making operational processes more secure."

Incline-IT's Mason said, "Human error is a common and well-known risk factor within an IT setting, and SaaS providers introduce human risks at another level, with a number of SaaS services having had significant outages caused by human error.



**Poor data quality is a ticking time bomb for housing providers. In our view, it's the number one risk.**

Trevor Hampton, Director of Housing Solutions, Northgate Public Services

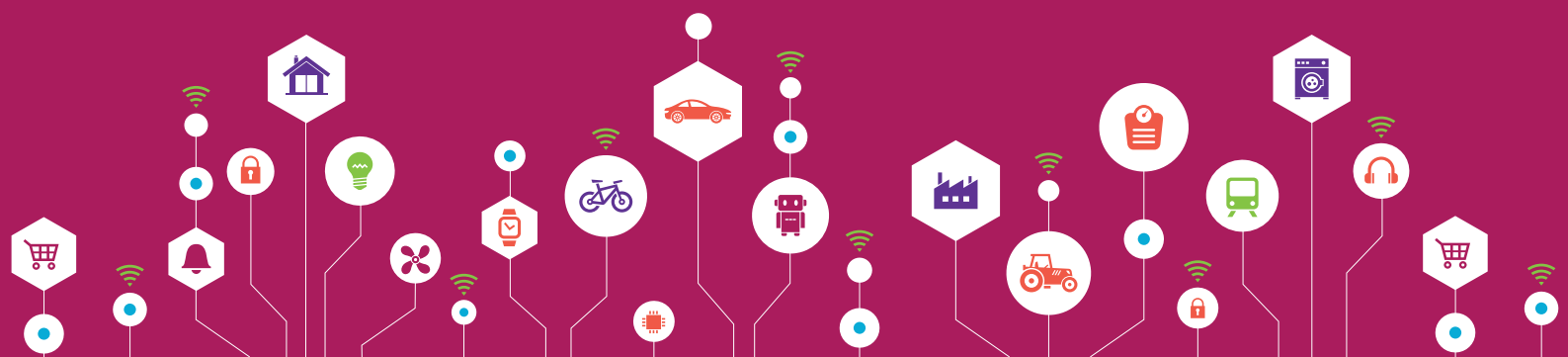
"This risk can't be totally managed so the key for an organisation is to understand their risk profile, where they place core services and how to properly compartmentalise their services to ensure that, as mentioned earlier, if one provider has issues, the entire business is not affected. This is why we rarely recommend single provider solutions and ensure our customers understand that putting all their eggs in one basket isn't a sensible solution to manage and mitigate their risk exposures."

### How can IT help with non-IT areas of risk?

Riskhub's Herbison said, "Using data management and compliance tools that have the capability to link with a housing provider's other systems can help with reconciliation, time management and data integrity. For example, a considerable financial risk of not keeping robust compliance data is that a housing provider might unwittingly duplicate its planned maintenance or repairs."

Northgate's Hampton said, "IT underpins every area of social housing, from maximising rental collections to maintaining assets.

*Continued on next page*



## IT risk management – Tracking, monitoring and mitigating

*Continued from previous page*

"For example, automating payments and collections helps housing providers keep on top of their income streams, while AI can spot patterns and help predict problems before they become an issue, thereby helping with areas such as compliance and maintenance planning.

"Technology enables housing providers to see the bigger picture in ways that, say, busy housing officers might not be able to do, by flagging all the indicators. For example, take a tenant repeatedly denying access to a property for a gas safety inspection; technology would flag not only the risk to the asset and the lack of compliance, but also other indicators, such as tenant vulnerability, which would help the housing provider to have the right safeguards."

### What has coronavirus taught us about attitudes to IT risk?

Riskhub's Herbison said, "It'll be interesting to see how housing providers evaluate how prepared they were for this crisis. It's not about seeing something of this magnitude coming but having a sufficiently versatile and robust IT system will get you part of the way towards adapting to the current situation.

"That said, I suspect that a worrying number of housing providers who are still reliant on legacy IT systems will have been caught out by the sudden shift to offsite operations, with important data proving difficult to access."

Waterstons' McMillan said, "We believe that one of the core learnings from the current pandemic is that organisations must invest in their business resilience measures. These go beyond typical risk management approaches and reframe the practice in several ways. It's not just



**IT in some organisations is a bit like a prodigal son; it's been allowed to drift away from the business and it now needs to be welcomed back with open arms and sit alongside other key areas of the business.**

David Mason, Technical Director, Incline-IT

about ensuring that you can weather the storm of an unforeseen event or the loss of a critical system; it's also about ensuring that your organisation has the pre-emptive capabilities to respond to change and seize the opportunities presented to you.

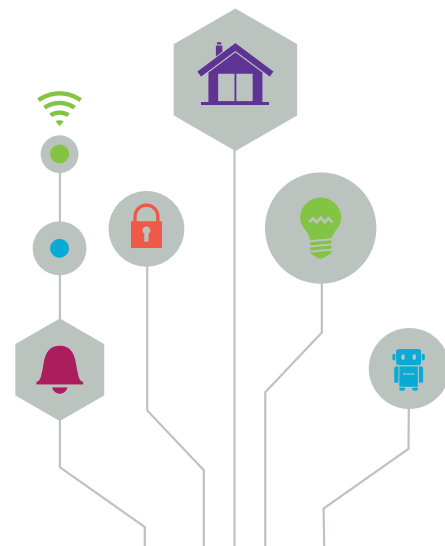
"In practical terms, this will mean organisations standing in the shoes of their customers to make sure that they can provide value in both the short and long terms. It will mean maturing business processes and ensuring that they support and fit within this new way of working; for example, legacy processes which rely on close physical contact or cohabitation of an office space will have to change. For housing providers, this will mean understanding what is critical to their tenants and which processes need to be the focus to improve risk responses."

Incline-IT's Mason said, "Before the advent of coronavirus, we were already preparing to migrate two customers into the cloud, with risk management and business continuity being the key motivators for their transformations. It really was a lucky coincidence that we were prepared to do this before lockdown was enforced. For the smaller of the two housing providers, we managed to migrate all of their systems within a fortnight and scale up their remote

working capabilities from 10 to 30 staff. "In our experience, housing providers of all sizes were already looking at cloud and SaaS for their risk management and DR capabilities, albeit as more theoretical remote working policies for their wider business continuity plans. However, with most housing providers having been forced into putting these policies into practice, many are now asking how they can maintain the flexibility for their staff to work from home.

"IT in some organisations is a bit like a prodigal son; it's been allowed to drift away from the business and it now needs to be welcomed back with open arms and sit alongside other key areas of the business."

**Housing Technology would like to thank Trevor Hampton (Northgate Public Services), Sarah Herbison (Riskhub), David Mason (Incline-IT) and Helen McMillan (Waterstons) for their editorial contributions to this article.**





# Holistic risk management

Sarah Herbison, CEO, Riskhub



*With sector-wide shifts in the way housing providers manage risk, integrated and innovative technology will be vital in helping them to adapt to new demands, keep track of data and prevent duplication or errors.*

For large-scale projects, organisations can struggle to manage large quantities of data. A surprising number of organisations are still reliant on spreadsheets, some of which can contain over 40,000 actions to manage. Unsurprisingly, these spreadsheets can become corrupt, making the information they contain unreliable.

These out-dated processes can also mean that a huge amount of the information provided by risk assessments is lost due to the limited functionality of housing providers' existing systems. Social housing has always been slow to embrace and support new technologies, yet what is really needed is a reliable way of managing large quantities of information so that there is a clear digital audit trail that can evidence what work has been completed and what is outstanding. If actions haven't been completed from a previous assessment, a second action could be raised on a subsequent assessment. Without a clear system to consolidate these into a single action, work can easily be missed, delayed or duplicated.

One of the recommendations of the Hackitt Review is the creation of a Joint Competent Authority (JCA) tasked with overseeing building safety in residential buildings. Regular case safety reports would be submitted to the JCA by the relevant duty holder and would require comprehensive information on the evolution of the building since its construction as well as information about the construction itself.

This evolution of buildings is particularly important with older housing stock. A



building built in the 1960s might have had a new alarm system or gas heating fitted in the subsequent decades (both factors that are very relevant when considering risk), but all of that information could be lost if there isn't a robust system to record all of the data electronically.

With many organisations already struggling to manage their information assets, there is a clear need for an easy-to-use system that can not only keep track of their health and safety compliance checks, but can also collate the necessary information to provide these safety case reviews to the JCA quickly.

Another crucial step is linking the two main systems that most housing providers have, one that manages tenants and the other that manages the buildings themselves. Without a modern, effective solution, larger portfolios are almost impossible to manage, which leaves organisations without a clear idea of the properties they manage. As developments or demolitions occur, those tenant and asset lists can quickly get out of sync and what you're left with is two property lists

that don't reconcile. However, with the right software, reports can be run against housing portfolios to detect and resolve any anomalies.

The demand for an effective, user-friendly solution to large-scale portfolio management is not going away. It is now up to key stakeholders and industry leaders to modernise and embrace technological innovations to ensure that they have the systems in place to reduce risk to the lowest possible levels.

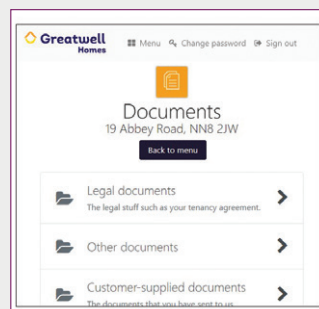
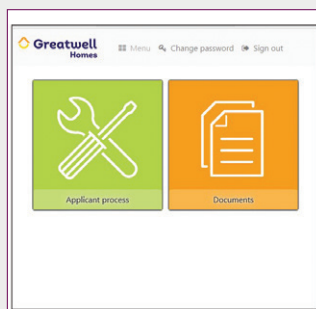
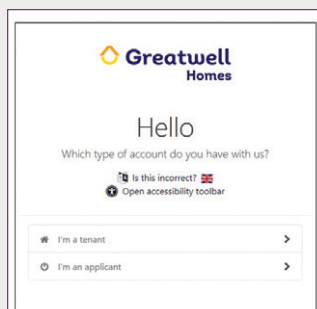
**Sarah Herbison is the CEO of Riskhub.**



# Remote working – A project manager's story

Shahina Ahmed, Project Manager, Housing Insight

*Millions now join me as a home-based worker during the lockdown. But could I have imagined providing board and shelter to another family at a time when housing providers have suspended new moves?*



In mid-March, I reconnected with a friend who had been made homeless after fleeing an abusive partner. She had then received an offer of a two-bedroom house through social housing. However, she just needed a place to stay with her daughter for five nights before moving into her new home. As a single parent myself, this was a small gesture of kindness and one which didn't require much pondering.

The next two weeks' stories of Covid-19 dominated our news, although I generally tend to avoid the news because I believe that unless I'm really going to be able help someone, my opinion on famine, civil unrest or politics is meaningless. So I blithely continued to reorganise furniture in my daughter's bedroom and added little touches such as cushions, throws and fairy lights in preparation for my guests who arrived on the weekend of the lockdown.

The next day, my friend received a video to accept the property, which she did and we're thrilled that her housing provider is using technology to continue to work and the move will still go ahead.

We're wrong... Less than 24 hours later, she receives an email saying that they can't continue the move until further notice. She is devastated and I am left with disbelief and uncertainty.

I work for a software provider that provides IT systems to housing providers and our prime focus is supplying the

software tools they need to run their day-to-day activities without the need for an office as well as tools for their tenants to ensure that they are not affected by situations such as Covid-19.

I log on to our systems while sipping my coffee at my now overcrowded dining-room table and I have a light-bulb moment. My work isn't affected and our company has the tools to enable our staff to work from home so we don't need to be furloughed. We are given flexible hours to work around our family life and also offer our customers more flexibility such as extended support hours and online training and meetings rather than onsite visits.

While providing one customer with their weekly update, we had a general catch up about family life and I told them about my new house guests. They said that if they'd had our software (Applicant Portal) six months ago, they could have been completing their sign-ups online and would have had the ability to move them in during the pandemic. They have now bought our Applicant Portal to sit alongside the self-service portal and mobile environment we already provide to them. This will let them fully digitalise their housing application process, right through to tenancy sign-up and managing their tenancies online.

The next few weeks are a blur: wake up, start a wash, make porridge, log onto my laptop in my bedroom rather than in the dining room because it's mayhem

with two teenagers and a two-year old. Prepare lunch, start a second wash, log back on, join a web call, tick through my to-do list, log off, prepare dinner, serve dinner, clean the kitchen, recycle, sweep floors, clean some more and so forth.

What have I learnt? I have a sense of fear for all essential workers and healthcare staff. My shopping trips are weighted with trepidation for staff and I thank them for their hard work as they serve the public, unprotected from the mass of shoppers passing through their shops each day. Taking off my mask and gloves in the car and disinfecting my hands provides some sense of security, with a change of clothes and washing of hands once I am home.

I am content with the chaos and the moments of panic while my appreciation of my children grows as they try to make sense of the situation while taking turns to help with my friend's small daughter.

I adore sitting in the garden, enjoying meals outside and doing things together as a family. It's a time to appreciate your health, think of others and give silently without hunger or thirst for praise or reward.

**Shahina Ahmed is a project manager at Housing Insight.**

# Using IT to tackle our biggest challenge

Peter Luck, Director of Operations, ROCC



*We began testing our strategies for full remote working several weeks before the government announced lockdown. With our systems in place, our entire team was encouraged to work remotely a week before the lockdown order.*

Business as usual monitoring was carried out over the first week to ensure everything we do could be done and done smoothly. We already had Teams, Slack and GoToMeeting in place but we were surprised by the take-up of Zoom and have now incorporated it across our operations.

At ROCC, we've scaled up our IT support teams for the housing providers we work alongside, recognising that during this crisis, IT teams need extra levels of cohesive support. As part of adapting our new levels of service to help our customers, we've completely integrated our relevant staff into customers' teams, thereby helping customers who've had to furlough their own staff with additional resources.

ROCC has been making face shields with 3D printers



We've also kept a close eye on the wellbeing of our own teams. We operate a flexible working policy anyway; we've found that one of the big benefits of flexible working is that colleagues are far more productive at home than they are in an office environment. With everyone, including our customers, being now home based, we quickly found that our teams were actually working much

longer hours than before, coupled with being much more productive. We have therefore had to ensure that our teams are taking regular breaks for their wellbeing!

I'm really proud of how our team at ROCC has stepped up to combat this crisis together; they've remained calm and determined to deliver results for our customers. We're going further, supporting people in the team to contribute to the Covid-19 fight. Colleagues are making a positive difference by volunteering to make washable scrubs bags for the NHS, building face shields with 3D printers and staffing food banks.

We've also adapted our marketing and sales as a result of the crisis; we recognise there are bigger challenges facing our customers right now, so we've shifted our marketing towards 'quiet support'; it's simply a case of letting people know that we're here to help if they need us, but not jamming our messages down their throats.

I've been very disappointed by how some IT suppliers have reacted to these challenges, seeing it as an opportunity to make more money from their clients. We've completely taken the opposite approach, maintaining our core values of being long-term strategic partners and critical friends to our clients and potential clients.

During the first week of lockdown, we contacted our customers to let them know that we would help them with their software or data challenges completely free of charge if they needed support, say, in pausing non-critical housing maintenance and repairs.



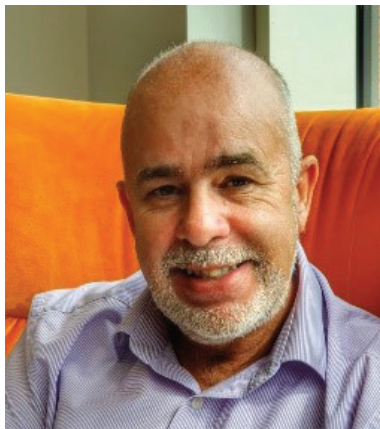
ROCC's marketing manager Meeta Patel making washable scrubs bags for the NHS

Within the first few weeks of lockdown, we were operating at such a level that our ISO quality team was able to pass our first ISO audit remotely, which was a good indicator for us that we have the right systems in place.

The next steps for us are to stay ahead of the government again. We didn't wait for them to tell us to take our operations to fully remote working and we won't wait again for them to tell us what the 'new normal' is. Our management teams are now putting together their visions for what our new normal should be and we will begin implementing this over the coming weeks.

**Peter Luck is the director of operations at ROCC.**





# Re-imagining digital

Steve Dungworth, Digital Transformation Adviser, Golden Marzipan

*By the time you read this, will we be back at work and heading towards normal? At the moment, none of us knows, but that doesn't mean we can't be more proactive and anticipate more disruption and consider how technology can help.*

An economic shock will follow; experts are arguing whether it is a V- or U-shaped recession or a full-on depression. There are possible big changes in social behaviour too, whether in work-based cultures and/or changing customer needs, especially among the more vulnerable. And given the lack of hardware and the ever-increasing cyber risks, we may end up full circle with another technology challenge!

Here are a few of my emerging thoughts around the technology opportunities and continuing risks.

We have started to reimagine the future and we think there will be three areas of rapid progress and one large reverse.

## Agile working

Well done to all of the ICT teams who responded at lightning pace to ensure that the majority of staff could work from home and collaborate with their colleagues using tools such as Teams, Slack, Zoom and G-Suite. Even more impressive were the organisations which managed to create virtual home-based contact centres.

Things may be still a bit clunky around the edges and there are plenty of amusing moments on video conferencing as we balance our mental health, children, pets and wi-fi settings with "getting on with work as normal".

Lots of people are predicting the end of the office building but the insights from Golden Marzipan's breakfast briefings with housing leaders is that people are keen to get back to the office for social reasons as much as anything else so I anticipate a much more mixed economy of home-hub-office-flexi working. This affects how people are managed and are empowered

by HR and mobile working policies.

But to quote one of our Zoomers, "The housing sector has achieved more in three weeks than has been achieved in the past 10 years in terms of adopting new technologies."

## Accelerated channel shift

If housing staff can adopt technology quickly then why can't tenants? The feedback from customer service and communications teams is that our mindset is eventually changing and people recognise the value of self-service portals, smartphone apps, chatbots, artificial intelligence and Alexa-style voice channels.

The barriers to adoption are falling away, the technology is improving and tenants are more willing and enthusiastic. With a little more simplification in terms of ways of removing forms, declarations and signatures, it's now easy to see a path for the rapid transformation of transactional services.

## Customer data and insights

Sadly, we all now know what the logarithmic curve of a chart looks like if we didn't before...

We have seen new apps which are using personal data in ways we've never seen before, and our concerns about privacy have been set aside (at least for the moment) in favour of more details about the virus and its impact.

The daily government briefings have also demonstrated the usefulness of leading



indicators relating to travel, hospital capacity and economic measures, so what are the housing sector's equivalents? This is an area where the lack of good data has exposed our inability to respond to tenants' needs. My questions to housing leaders about how their tenants are feeling about their services are responded to with anecdotes but very little empirical data is available yet.

## And the reverse... vulnerable residents

Let's be clear – all the talk of Alexa and IoT devices helping the vulnerable and elderly is not adding value. The primary objective is about care and whether that is social, hospital or residential care, that needs people. Perhaps people with good technology, but people first.

At the same time, I'm heartened to hear that some housing providers have started outbound telephone/video services and campaigns to check on their vulnerable tenants (assuming they had the correct data in the first place) and this I foresee as an expanding and richer service from housing providers going forward.

**Steve Dungworth is a digital transformation adviser at Golden Marzipan.**



# Desperate times but not desperate measures

Andy Bryan, Housing Solutions Consultant, Aareon UK

*They say desperate times call for desperate measures but I couldn't disagree more.*

Desperate times call for calm, they call for plans and positive action and looking across the housing sector, I'm inspired to see this type of approach coming to the fore. Housing providers and technology companies continue to provide quality services to their customers and have embraced new ways of working.

Never before has good communication, quality information and effective collaboration been more important.

## The Aareon reaction

At Aareon UK, we took decisive action early on, choosing to close all of our offices in Swansea, Southampton and Kenilworth and to take our consultants off the road almost a full week before the official lockdown. This gave us a tremendous head start in getting used to the entire organisation working from home.

When organisations across the country faced the same situation, we were already settled into this new service model and were able to focus on our customers' needs and didn't have to worry about our own situation.

## Heroes behind the scenes

Having worked in an ICT support role in the past, I know what a thankless task it can be and one great positive thing that has come from all this is that these hidden heroes have been pulled from the shadows in every business across the land and placed firmly in the spotlight.

They've been deploying hundreds of devices, changing network configurations, helping set up remote working for so many and still calmly and politely helping me out when I have forgotten my passwords yet again. The efforts of the support staff here at Aareon have not gone unnoticed, both internally and by our customers.

Regardless of who your IT supplier is, one thing I would urge you all to do is if you

are getting a good service, remember it is probably from someone who has never worked from home before, someone who has never spent so much of their working day alone before. A simple thank you, an email of appreciation, will mean the world to them and strengthen your working relationship for years to come.

## New skills & new opportunities

For me, the current crisis has forced me to quickly acquire some new skills when we had to create an informational video for our customers. We wanted to rapidly get advice to our customers about how they can best use their Aareon products to automate communication to their customers, to make the most of self-service during lockdown and to protect and inform staff about who is self-isolating.

**Andy Bryan is a housing solutions consultant at Aareon UK.**

# Keeping 100 per cent of the workforce operational

Source: Castleton Technology

*Housing organisations are faced with some difficult decisions regarding their staffing. Never has there been more pressure to provide vital support and services to tenants, but in other areas where staff can't be redeployed, staff are being faced with furlough and even redundancies.*

Castleton Technology has put its own measures in place to ensure the business can continue to thrive. Castleton's board of directors and senior management team have agreed to take a 20 per cent pay cut during the first financial quarter to protect the retention of their teams. Castleton staff have also been asked to take a short-term salary sacrifice to weather the pandemic; this has been

received favourably across the company.



Dean Dickinson, CEO, Castleton Technology, said, "We're taking an 'all in this

together' mentality to help us survive. In the interests of the entire workforce,

everyone is being asked to make adjustments and I am immensely proud of the way we have all pulled together.

"By keeping everyone together in the business and staying true to our values, we can maintain the same level of service provision for our customers without increasing workloads or pressure on individuals."

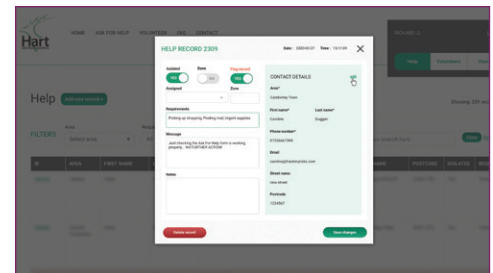
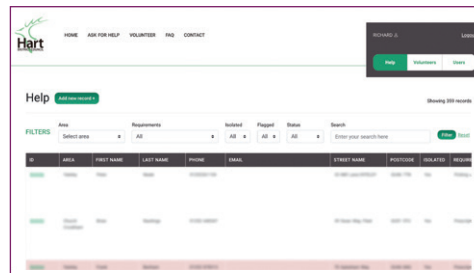
Castleton believes these short-term sacrifices will place the company in good stead when the sector begins to recover and shows signs of resuming normal operations. This approach doesn't leave anyone vulnerable to significant financial burdens and with a fully operational team, Castleton's ongoing commitment to its customers can be maintained.



# Community Response – A positive legacy of coronavirus

*How the concept of 'neighbours helping neighbours', underpinned by scalable technology, has helped over 5,000 vulnerable residents.*

Matt Hodges-Long, Co-Founder, TrackMyRisks



In the middle of March this year, I received a call from a prominent local politician, asking if I could spare a few hours to attend a meeting. He wanted me to advise on how the local community should respond to the looming coronavirus crisis.

As a crisis and risk management expert, I was very happy to drop everything to help. Admittedly at this point, I knew nothing about community response and volunteering organisations; all of my clients are businesses, schools and housing providers.

Previously, I supported clients through Hurricane Sandy, but those were businesses and this was residents in a local community. Furthermore, I was not emotionally or physically involved in any previous incident I had worked on.

Arriving at one of the local churches for the meeting, I was introduced to my new colleagues. The penny dropped that this was not a two-hour brain dump – we had serious work to do! Looking around the room, I could see the recently-retired CEO of the Brigade of Gurkhas, James Robinson CBE, Reverend Mike Thomason (local vicar and military veteran) and Dr Alasdair Pinkerton (world-renowned geopolitics lecturer and parliamentary candidate in the 2019 election). With this team, I knew straight away that we could do great things.

Later that day, we met the CEO of Surrey Heath Borough Council and agreed to create a new organisation to support 88,000 local residents. All we needed from them was a few thousand pounds to get mobilised and an assurance that they wouldn't interfere.

We immediately received the green light and 'Surrey Heath Prepared' was born.

Five short weeks later, this organisation has recruited 2,841 volunteers and fulfilled 3,220 requests for help.

Surrey Heath Prepared has even been described by our local MP and Cabinet Minister, Michael Gove as "the gold standard for community response."

This article has been written for a technology magazine. So here is the tech piece...

As we sat down to discuss the new organisation, we quickly realised that we would need to scale quickly to deliver the work and achieve resilience for the weeks and months ahead. We also knew the new organisation would be processing a lot of sensitive data, both for volunteers and those needing help. The 'lick it and stick it' Google form and Google spreadsheets we inherited were simply not going to last the distance.

As I already ran the SaaS-based TrackMyRisks platform for governance, risk and compliance management, I had a software development team on the payroll so I immediately adopted the role of 'the tech guy' and enlisted my team to make some magic happen.

## Step one

We modified the Google Sheets environment to create 18 area-based spreadsheets that would synchronise with the master sheet. This was a nightmare but freed up two volunteers who were manually processing data and therefore cut the error rate. Most importantly, it bought some breathing space for my development team to work.

## Step two

Within one week, the development

team had built a WordPress-based database and mobile-responsive user interface that allowed us to turn off the spreadsheets and dramatically improve efficiency for our area coordinators. We also added some new features such as job reference numbers, data filtering and work assignments.

## Step three

Neighbouring local authorities heard about our system and asked if they could 'have a copy' of our platform. As SaaS people, we never fork code so instead we created the IsPrepared community response system which has been implemented by Hart, Spelthorne, Runnymede and Marlow councils and is available free of charge to any other councils and community groups that need it.

## Step four

We have now redeveloped and improved the platform to run on the AWS service stack (a huge thanks to AWS for its support). The migration of the live sites to the new stack starts this weekend (at the time of writing).

## Positive legacy

We don't know how long the pandemic will go on for but we do know that the concept of community response at scale, organised around local areas and low-cost technology, will be a positive legacy of this hideous virus.

I am proud that my team has played a part in helping to ease suffering and demonstrate to me that they can deliver an awesome product at lightning speed.

**Matt Hodges-Long is the co-founder of TrackMyRisks.**



# The new norm, for now...

Gareth Brace, Chief Information Officer, Catalyst Housing



*In the 18 months I've been with Catalyst, the organisation and technology have both undergone a huge amount of change. From having 240 hours of downtime on the telephony system in 12 months, to failing SANs four years behind patching cycles and non-redundant networking, we had to devise and deliver a major foundational change programme to address many ills.*

In fact, we had to change 'change management' itself because this was often the root cause of failed initiatives in the past. Combined with December 2019's merger with Aldwyck Housing and bringing these two teams together, this has been a year of phenomenal change in our organisation.

In the second week of March, we completed the roll-out of our 8x8 unified communications solution and installed new networks and a co-location facility in which to house the new infrastructure. In addition, we delivered a security operations service and an array of other security-related projects. In short, we have completed 30 projects which grew by 50 per cent in scope and an additional 11 per cent cost.

100 per cent of our contact centre staff have been able to work from home, handling an average of 900 calls a day and completing 98 per cent of them under coronavirus-operating circumstances. The way we work now is unrecognisable from a short few months ago. For example, we're seeing an average of 750 colleagues active on Teams daily compared to just 40 six months ago (and that was basically just the IT team).

Our chief executive, Ian McDermott, is leading from the top with the new technology by holding crisis and planning meetings with our executive team remotely via Microsoft Teams. He is connecting with colleagues through a regular vlog from his home and he's

bringing the board members on board with the new technologies. We even had our recent in-depth assessment completed remotely.

We'll soon be holding our first company-wide quarterly interactive colleague briefings through Teams, and we're looking at how we can use the new technology to remotely bring together our 1,200 colleagues for our annual conference.

For the first time in my career I've seen an IT-related statement alongside the core business statements; one of the five pillars of this strategy is to 'revolutionise our data and technology'.

This is a monumental vision from an executive team who see the benefit of technology as a value creator and the IT function as a thought leader. Whether we return to 'normal' next month or in six months, the revolution will continue and will last a few years. It will be a digitally 'rich' agenda centred around exploiting the value hidden in our data. The direction of travel will be along the lines of many in the sector, namely around Microsoft Dynamics allied with an uncompromising focus on data and 'sweating' its value.

We're keen to pursue the cool digital stuff such as IoT, process robotics and other exciting developments, and want to do this as part of becoming a 'knowledge business'. We sit on valuable data but often fail to turn this into information and then knowledge – we could become a 'wiser' organisation.

Without our recent technology changes, I really think we would have been paralysed, or at least significantly impaired, in our response to the pandemic. This crisis has showed us what's possible given the right mix of ICT at the right (or wrong) time. We have become a 'remote working' organisation overnight but got lucky with the timing.

We must take advantage of our good fortune and capitalise on the significant cultural change this has had on our organisation. We will not waste this crisis and we'll do what we can to help our colleagues to provide homes and support to our customers, in as optimal a way as possible.

**Gareth Brace is the chief information officer at Catalyst Housing.**

# We're in this together...

Keith Martin, Sales Director, Phoenix Software



*What a very strange world we are living in right now. As I type this, I am sitting opposite my son who is doing his school work online, I have a daughter upstairs who is now not sitting her GCSEs and is missing her friends and I have a wife who is a frontline medical professional in a GP surgery who is now having to deal with patients who may or may not have Covid-19.*

This seems a million miles away from where we were a few weeks ago and it really makes you realise that you just can't take things for granted.

As the outbreak started to get serious in the UK, our workforce at Phoenix was asked to work from home. For many of them, this was very different to what they were used to and it could have proved very challenging, but technology has been a real enabler.

Microsoft Teams has been a critical platform for us. I have never done so many video calls and it has allowed our various teams to interact and collaborate as if they were still in the office. I saw a stat last week which showed that in one week alone there were 12 million new active users of Teams; this highlights the extent to which Teams is becoming the platform of choice for organisations.

Within our household, it's not just me using Teams for business work. My son has Teams set up to check in with his teachers, my daughter has a channel to keep in touch with her transition to sixth form, and my wife is now using it to keep in touch with other members of her medical practice. We are really living and breathing a modern workplace every hour of the day.

It should go without saying that I have nothing but respect and admiration for those front-line workers who are risking everything to save others. It's also not lost on me that, here at Phoenix, the vast majority of our customers are providing critical services to citizens, patients, tenants and students across the UK.

As the front-line workers are facing incredibly challenging days trying to support the country, behind the scenes it has been remarkable to see local

councils changing the ways they work to keep critical services running, universities and schools moving to remote learning, and housing providers using technology to check in with tenants.

It has been truly fantastic to see the technology providers pulling together as well, with global technology giants making resources available to help customers and working with governments, and technology partners going above and beyond to provide the support and expertise required.

The next few weeks and months will be very challenging but just spare a thought for all of those front-line workers who really do prove that not all superheroes wear capes.

**Keith Martin is the sales director at Phoenix Software.**

## Colchester Borough Homes selects new HMS from Northgate Public Services

*Colchester Borough Council has chosen a new housing management system from Northgate Public Services for its subsidiary, Colchester Borough Homes, to give remote-working staff the tools to improve community support while on the move and to enable residents to self-serve online.*

The cloud-based NPS Housing software will bring all of CBH's housing services into one place, providing a single view of residents and automating many of its housing officers' routine administrative

tasks. The new solution is part of CBC's overall 'cloud first' IT strategy and will be fully integrated into its Microsoft 365 environment.

CBH staff will be able to focus on providing advice and services where the demand is, from any location on any device. This will create a fully mobile workforce, allowing housing officers to offer more support to residents. The new system will also encourage self-service for tenants, enabling them to access a range of CBH's services online and see updates and events in real time. Adam Fox, portfolio holder for housing, Colchester Borough Council, said, "The

excellent joint working between CBC and CBH will provide a range of benefits to tenants across the borough. By supporting staff to work remotely and engage further with tenants, staff can focus on tenants' wellbeing and help those who need it the most."

Gareth Mitchell, chief executive, Colchester Borough Homes, said, "This new system will bring many advantages to staff at CBH by simplifying everyday tasks within housing management and allowing quicker, streamlined access to residents' data."



# The launch of Housing Technology Wellbeing

Feeling on top of things changes everything  
– how we learn, how we communicate  
and how we behave.



Research commissioned by Mind found that work is the most stressful factor in people's lives. The study found that 79 per cent of employed adults in the UK commonly experience work-related stress, with office politics being the most common form of stress, followed by a lack of inter-departmental communications.

The coronavirus pandemic means that many of us are adapting to working in a new environment yet still having to deal with usual pressures of work.

## WELLBEING IN HOUSING

In order to help, Housing Technology has created a free community resource on our recruitment website to address these issues – please see [jobs.housing-technology.com/wellbeing](https://jobs.housing-technology.com/wellbeing).

Now more than ever, it's clear that UK employers need to identify the leading causes of stress and improve their methods of supporting their staff. Our new resource is an opportunity to share and learn how other organisations are approaching the creation of healthier work cultures.

## GET IN TOUCH

We are inviting everyone in the Housing Technology community to contribute and share their knowledge and experience.

We are looking for news, articles and ideas that focus on workplace wellbeing, including your experiences of implementing new measures and strategies for employee wellbeing, identifying and overcoming challenges, and tips and advice on best practices.



**HOUSING  
TECHNOLOGY**  
Wellbeing

Find out more at [jobs.housing-technology.com/wellbeing](https://jobs.housing-technology.com/wellbeing) or get in touch at [wellbeing@housing-technology.com](mailto:wellbeing@housing-technology.com).





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