HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™

HOUSING | IT | TELECOMS | BUSINESS | ECOLOGY

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2021

Digital conference

See page 60

CELEBRATING
12
CONSECUTIVE YEARS - 2009 - 2021

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY
2021 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

Low-code software in housing

Striking the right balance between in-house development and off-the-shelf software

Proptech & IT start-ups

A round-up of some of 2021's new proptech companies and IT start-ups in housing

Housing management
Data literacy, digital events & open APIs

Finance management
Finance planning & asset management, multi-channel payments & digital procurement

Mobile working
Dynamic scheduling, remote working & mobile savings

Customer management
Faster repairs, self-service, virtual concierges and smart homes

Infrastructure
Unified communications, IoT programmes, cloud & fire safety technology

General news
Building resilience, video interviews & homelessness

Editor's welcome

January 2021

Fire safety technology – Coming to a server near you...

This issue of Housing Technology has several articles and interviews (see pages 33 and 42) on how technology is being used to improve fire safety.

While fire safety and its associated technologies have historically been more of an area for housing providers' facilities managers than their IT staff, Housing Technology expects that IT departments will soon be more involved in supporting their respective organisations' fire safety measures.

The aftermath of the Grenfell Tower disaster and the subsequent Hackitt report will rightly lead to greater scrutiny of housing providers and local authorities' fire safety infrastructures.

The days of fire alarms and other associated safety devices being treated as standalone monitoring systems are over; the latest generation of alarms and devices are all IoT-enabled and as such will become another series of endpoints on housing providers' IT infrastructures. This isn't to suggest that housing providers' IT teams will consequently become responsible for fire safety, but it is a good illustration of the increasing pervasiveness of IoT devices... see pages 33 and 42.

How low can you go?

As we cover in our feature article (page 45) in this issue, low-code (or even no-code) software promises to bridge the gap between housing providers' business users' desire to develop new tools for, say, tenant services, mobile working or straight-through operational processes, and the time and resource limitations of their IT departments.

There is much to commend the adoption of low-code software in terms of speed from initial idea to live implementation, direct execution by those people closest to a proposed project and, in most instances, lower upfront costs and project risk.

At the same time, IT teams should be understandably cautious about the adoption of what was sometimes known as 'shadow IT' and its impact on corporate policies around, for example, security and data protection, as well as the roadmap for integrating low-code projects with their wider business applications – after all, nobody wants yet more isolated data silos... see page 45 for more on low-code development.

Forthcoming events

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™ 2021 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

DIGITAL CONFERENCE
3-4 MARCH 2021

Gain insights and strategies to transform your organisation

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE   IT STRATEGY   COMMUNITY NETWORKING

housing-technology.com

Market intelligence

Housing Technology Guide to Business Intelligence & Analytics 2020

housing-technology.com/research

DOWNLOAD TODAY
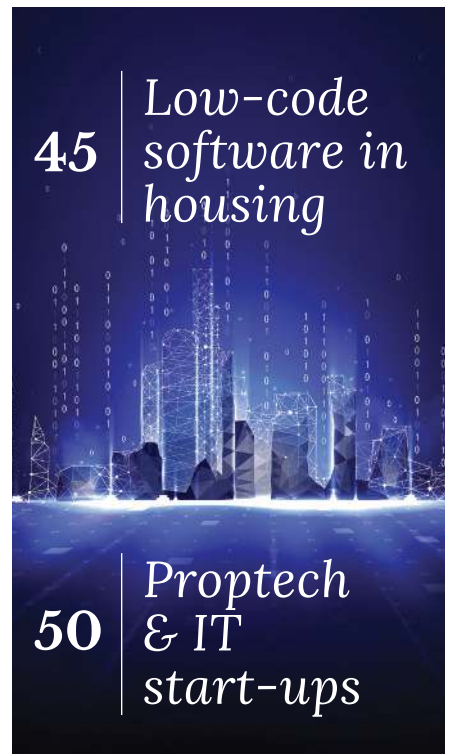
TECHNOLOGY SHOWCASE

Please see housing-technology.com/showcase for more information

Hi, my name is **Neela,**
Aareon's Virtual Assistant.

I can't wait to meet you...

Want to find out more about me?

Well, I'm flattered!
My colleagues would love a chat,
then we will meet soon!

www.aareon.co.uk

Aareon

Aareon acquires Arthur

Aareon continues its planned growth after buying Arthur, a UK-based proptech company in December 2020.

According to Aareon, Arthur offers a best-in-class SaaS property management solution which brings together property managers, property owners, tenants and contractors on a single technology platform. Via its suite of integrations, Arthur streamlines its customers' property management processes from start to finish. Launched in 2015, Arthur has over 1,000 customers managing around 90,000 properties in total.

Dr. Manfred Alflen, CEO, Aareon AG, said, "By acquiring Arthur, we have taken another step in our profitable growth strategy and are entering the market of small and medium-sized property managers in the UK. Arthur will continue to support its customers as an independent brand and help Aareon move forward with its expansion."

Marc Trup, CEO, Arthur, said, "Our acquisition by Aareon presents a massive opportunity for us to further improve our service offering to property professionals across various attractive growth markets."

Bolton at Home & Harrow Council on board with Civica

Bolton at Home and Harrow Council have both recently signed up for Civica's Cx housing and Keystone asset management systems.

Bolton at Home's five-year contract for Civica Cx covers a single platform encompassing CRM, portals, housing and asset management, and contractor and workforce scheduling.

Mark Fosh, programme manager, Harrow Council, said, "Our new housing management system needed to provide better data insights – Civica's cloud-enabled Cx Housing and Keystone Asset Management software will help us achieve those insights as well as satisfy our cloud ambitions."

Michelle Tyler, managing director, Civica, said, "Back in 2015, we invested £14 million on designing a new housing management system from the ground up, focusing on digitisation, self-service, mobile, cloud and customer-centric services.

"The resulting Civica Cx web-based platform offered housing providers the flexibility to manage all of their housing, assets and contractors on one platform. The benefits of Cx are clear, with Civica having won 75 per cent of the contracts we bid on during FY20, and welcoming 15 new customers."

Johnnie Johnson Housing partners with Huume for CBL transformation

Johnnie Johnson Housing has chosen a new cloud-based system from Huume for its choice-based lettings.

The implementation of Huume Allocate upgrades the housing provider's direct lettings system, via an old-style waiting-list approach, to a dedicated, flexible and modern platform.

Natalie Kaprielian, operations expert, Johnnie Johnson Housing, said, "We are delighted to have appointed Huume as a trusted partner to transform our allocations. Implementing Huume's Allocate means that we can put tenants at the heart of our lettings process by enabling potential new residents to be actively involved in choosing their own home, on their own initiative, rather than being a passive recipient of an offer from us, while also streamlining the process from an internal operational perspective."

Allocate provides an intuitive online application form, an informative tenant dashboard, visibility of queue location, real-time eligibility and the capacity to set up alerts and upload documents to support an application.

Provided as a SaaS-based platform, Allocate removes the need for Johnnie Johnson Housing to take care of expensive and time-consuming upgrades, service patches and new functionalities, all of which are automatically rolled out to all users at the same time.

Kaprielian said, "Unlike many other CBL models, Huume allows properties to be allocated using either a CBL approach or by generating a shortlist directly from the housing register, giving us complete flexibility over our lettings process. Furthermore, Allocate can be customised and configured by us in-house, giving us the flexibility to accommodate new policies or future growth without having to rely on an outside supplier and their associated costs."

Origin Housing signs up for TechLabs' iProperty Cloud

TechLabs London has signed a two-year deal with Origin Housing for its iProperty Cloud CRM software, starting with the sales, resales and shared ownership module and apps.

As part of Origin's ongoing digital transformation programme, iProperty Cloud will be deployed to all areas within sales and shared ownership for the housing provider's commercial team to run their operations.

The iProperty Cloud sales app built on Microsoft's Dynamics 365 CRM platform comes with pre-built integrations to Rightmove, Zoopla, Facebook, Twitter, Google Maps and includes a property and applicants matching engine, embedded local area information, market intelligence and historic sales prices for each property and postcode area.

James Berger, technology solutions manager, Origin Housing, said, "We chose TechLabs London to build our sales processes into Microsoft Dynamics 365 because of their iProperty Cloud product, collaborative approach, housing expertise, their ambition for innovation and their unrivalled access to new product development at Microsoft as a member of the software giant's partner advisory council."

Squared away with MRI Software

Carrying out an IT transformation project during lockdown

Despite the first coronavirus lockdown, Squared Housing has embarked on a transformation project to overcome back-office inefficiencies across its operations.

In February 2020, after a review of the market and their current systems, Squared Housing's IT and finance director, Steve Behan, decided to move to a cloud-based software suite and implement solutions more suited to their size and capacity as a smaller housing provider. He received board approval to partner with MRI Software (formerly Castleton Technology) to provide the various cloud-based housing solutions they needed to fulfil their ambitions.

Squared felt that MRI Software's integrated Housing Management Community solution was the right choice to improve their back-office inefficiencies, streamline their processes, enable remote working and reduce the pressure on their small IT team. They found the Community solution to be great value for money, offering the same level of functionality as a larger housing management system but at a more affordable price.

Rob Robinson, IT Manager, Squared

Squared Housing's project began in earnest at the same time as the imposition of the first national lockdown. With its staff working from home, the housing provider had to find alternative ways of supporting their tenants when face-to-face interactions were no longer feasible.

Rob Robinson, IT manager, Squared Housing, said, "The challenges for us during lockdown included still needing to provide support and advice to our tenants, while day-to-day contact within our single-person accommodations had to continue despite shielding and self-isolation, though we were able to provide support remotely using IT. This extended to advice and help with arrears for our tenants who were furloughed or had lost their income. We also continued to provide emergency maintenance cover through our own staff and contractors."

Squared had already made a conscious decision to encourage flexible and agile working and all relevant staff had been provided with laptop and mobile, with the 'remote desktop' option also adopted. Most staff already had the ability to work from any location which meant they had an easier transition to home working than others. However, their main housing software wasn't cloud based and updating, editing and obtaining data was laborious.

Robinson said, "By contrast, MRI Software's Housing Management Community solution is cloud based and fully remote, both key drivers for changing our previous systems."

Despite the impact of coronavirus, Squared Housing and MRI Software have continued with the project together and have already gone live with their housing and finance solutions.

The Housing Management Community solution is cloud based, so the implementation was simple and was successfully carried out during lockdown over a relatively short period – another factor in Squared's decision to opt for MRI Software's suite.

Robinson said, "The team from MRI Software has been extremely supportive. They have provided us with regular progress updates, given us templates for the required data, including building in easy-to-use formulae, and the project has remained on track throughout, including remote training on the new system for all of our relevant staff.

"Importantly, MRI Software have been willing to admit when things haven't gone well, have never tried to pass the cost or blame on in these instances, and have resolved issues by bringing in subject-matter experts where necessary."

Data literacy and data analytics

Derek Hufton, Business Development Manager, Catalyst-BI

Housing providers collect a wealth of data about assets, customers, operations and, increasingly, smart devices. It's well documented that data is proliferating at an alarming rate and no longer sits just on premise but in the cloud as well. Using point solutions to manage and unlock the hidden value in your data only solves part of a bigger problem, and often leads to expensive integration challenges. An end-to-end platform approach is needed to ensure that data is efficiently and accurately ingested into the organisation and consumed to an optimum level, supported by a robust governance framework.

It's no longer just about business intelligence or analytics. For some organisations, just having some decent analytics is a huge step forward, but in taking those initial steps, try to keep the bigger picture in mind to avoid 'throw away' investments down the line.

As shown on the left of the diagram overleaf, capturing, assembling, transforming and validating relevant data sources to ensure completeness, integrity and analytics-ready data are a crucial requirement. The automatic creation of a data warehouse, data lakes and organisation-wide data catalogues are valuable features now offered by some vendors.

More than just visuals
Don't be satisfied with simple visual analytics either. They might give you some quick wins at first, but you'll soon hit the buffers when you try to address more sophisticated problems. The ability to draw data from multiple sources from both inside and outside your organisation is essential in order to see the whole story in your data.

You need to be able to dynamically recalculate analytics to the current context and highlight data relationships, including associated and unrelated values across your entire data set. Sometimes even waiting just a few minutes for an answer is not good enough. At the same time, your end-users mustn't be limited to predefined hierarchies or preconceived notions of how data should be related, otherwise key relationships and insights could be missed.

Not all analytics software is equal…
It's fair to say that not all analytical tools are created equal, and your end-users should be demanding true insights beyond simple analytics. While there is a certain usefulness in knowing 'what' has happened, it's often more important to be able to ascertain 'why' things have happened, and ultimately to be able to predict 'what will' happen with appropriate degrees of confidence. Thus, the ability to be able to integrate sophisticated predictive tools, such as 'R' and 'Python' is an increasing requirement. Augmented intelligence capabilities and conversational analytics make the technologies more accessible to end-users rather than being limited to the data scientists.

It is also important how data and information are delivered to the organisation. Any solution must be able to support the full spectrum of use cases, including self-service visualisation, centrally deployed guided analytics applications and dashboards, embedded analytics, mash-ups through self-service portals (both internal and external) and standard reporting, all within a governed framework that is scalable and offers trust for IT.

How data literate are you?
A key piece in the jigsaw, often overlooked in devising data strategies, is that of data literacy – i.e. the ability of end-users to properly understand what the data is telling them and how to apply that knowledge to their roles. Different end-users may each interpret the same bar chart

or other data visualisation in different ways, resulting in completely the wrong action or decision being taken. Low data literacy is holding many organisations and teams back, resulting in stalled digital transformation initiatives.

MIT defines data literacy as the ability to read, work with, analyse and argue with data – it's a skill like any other, and a skill that empowers all levels of workers to ask the right questions of data, build knowledge, make decisions, and communicate meaning to others.

There are a number of factors preventing data from being infused throughout an organisation. That's why it's important to consider the following when building a data-driven culture:

- **Tackling resistance from the workforce:** Organisations and cultures are built on tradition. Change typically sees resistance because some people are simply stuck in their ways. They want to work the way they've always worked and make decisions based on gut feel. Raising awareness among this group that the business is moving to a data-driven culture will be critical to success.
- **Finding a data champion:** Resistance may also come from the top. That's why data champions must have a seat at the top table. That person would typically not be someone from within IT (which might seem like the easy default) but from an operational part of the business and conferred with appropriate seniority. They can help business executives better see the importance of data and offer guidance.
- **Opening new data sets and the role of governance:** Employees are likely to be using new datasets to uncover new ideas and new insights that help drive better decisions. Good data governance becomes absolutely essential. When organisations promote the democratisation of data and self-service analytics, leadership must be responsible for governance. It's vital to ensure that answers and insight are properly vetted and accurate.

What does a data literate workforce mean for organisations?

- Gain quicker insights because you don't have to rely on just a few data scientists who can only fulfil so many requests and may not have a good understanding of the business questions you need them to answer; instead, everyone is empowered to get insights on their own.
- Make better decisions because your workforce has been trained to ask the right questions with their data and also feels comfortable bringing data to management to support important decisions, plus the ability to question data with an intelligent data scepticism.
- Be on the front foot because you can quickly make sense of your data in order to adapt to what's coming and stay ahead of demands.
- Foster employee engagement where your staff feel empowered in the decision-making process and benefit from a work environment that encourages collaboration.

You can't just assume that your end-users are data literate. A data-literacy education programme needs to be a key component of your data strategy.

Derek Hufton is the business development manager at Catalyst-BI.

New public-sector APIs from Ordnance survey

As part of the Geospatial Commission's Public Sector Geospatial Agreement, over 5,500 public sector organisations now have direct and immediate access to Ordnance Survey's most detailed and trusted location data via a suite of APIs which will transform how geospatial data is used to support government policy and underpin public services.

Free at the point of use, the APIs are available via the OS Data Hub and provide a new way to access the most up-to-date OS data. The APIs will make it quicker and easier for users to work with OS data by connecting direct to a range of datasets as well as supplying the latest product updates on demand.

Chris Chambers, head of the public sector geospatial agreement, Ordnance Survey, said, "Over the last 10 months, we've seen location data play an important role in supporting the public sector's response to coronavirus. The pandemic has highlighted how vital it is that high-quality geospatial data is easily and quickly accessible to all users.

"The APIs let users access the data they need when they need it. They deliver quick and easy access to detailed OS data and have been designed to save users time. By using the APIs, it means that OS is handling the complexities of spatial data management, allowing users to focus on creating even greater value from the data."

The APIs provide access to a range of OS datasets including OS MasterMap, road network data, addressing information and 1:25 000 leisure mapping as well as unlimited free access to OS OpenData products.

Chambers said, "The OS Places API, for example, is a great tool to help users improve the accuracy of their address searches. It's ideal for use in geocoding, automated form-filling and local area investigations. In addition, the APIs allow multiple geospatial data sets to be explored and linked together."

FireAngel CONNECTED

Remotely Monitor Fire and CO Alarms

Maximum Fire and CO protection
for Tenants and Properties.

Real time status updates and instant diagnostics
without requiring access to properties

Unlimited property profiles stored within
FireAngel's secure cloud system

Unique 'FireAngel Predict' algorithm monitors
and detects the risk of future fire events to
allow earlier intervention

Cost-effective solution with running costs as
little as 60p over 10 years per alarm*

Future-proof properties with a hybrid system
that can be upgraded at any time

FireAngel Specification leading the way in Connected Fire and CO Safety.

Our Specification Managers are the experts in fire & CO protection - get in touch to find out more:

📞 **Call** 0247 771 7700   🌐 fireangel.co.uk/connect

50M Over 50 million alarms sold worldwide   **100+** Registered technology patents   **UK** based Research and Development team

* Calculations based on smoke and heat alarms

Tackling growing arrears at PA Housing

Dino Kyprianou, ICT Applications Manager, PA Housing

Dino Kyprianou, ICT applications manager at PA Housing, discusses how technology is helping its income officers support tenants and reduce the risk of rental debt.

According to a recent report, the number of people falling into arrears could triple during the next 12 months as a result of the fallout from coronavirus.

The suspension of evictions at the height of the pandemic helped to ease the pressure on tenants struggling to balance their finances in the short term. But as the economic and social impact of the crisis continues to bite, it's becoming increasingly important for housing providers to put longer term strategies in place to flag issues early and prevent families falling into a downward spiral of rent arrears. This is something we've been focusing on at PA Housing.

Time for change

Imagine a family of four who, up until lockdown, had always paid their rent on time. An unexpected bereavement could put the household finances under huge strain and the tenants could quickly find themselves falling into rental arrears.

Trying to predict which households are most likely to fall into debt isn't easy for any housing provider because you just don't know when people's circumstances might change.

However, we've recently made some alterations within our housing management system, Northgate's NPS Housing, to help us spot the early indicators so we can gain a much clearer understanding of the impact the pandemic is having on our tenants.

Gaining clarity

The changes we've made have enabled us to better analyse the payment information we have access to, so we're alerted much earlier if payments start to slide, giving us the time to work with tenants to get clarity on what help they need.

So, if the rental payments of a couple who have always settled their bill on the first Monday of the month suddenly begin to come in two weeks later, the income officer can flag this. They can then take steps to identify potential reasons for the change. For example, it might be because someone in the household has recently had to cut their working hours to look after a vulnerable family member who is shielding. In this situation, a little extra breathing space on the rental payment date could make all the difference.

We can now delve deeper into our rental accounts and differentiate between a short-term late payment issue and a more serious situation where there's a significant risk of long-term rental arrears. This means we can take cases that require no further action off the priority list and focus on helping those who need more support.

Digging deeper

The ability to analyse payment details opens the door for housing providers to take more nuanced and tailored measures to support tenants in getting through the often-temporary difficulties they experience.

The enhancements we have made to our housing management system allow our staff to rank properties in terms of the risk of rental arrears and monitor their movements up and down this list over time.

It means that we can see if a tenant moves from the top 50 to the top 10 for arrears and review the situation on
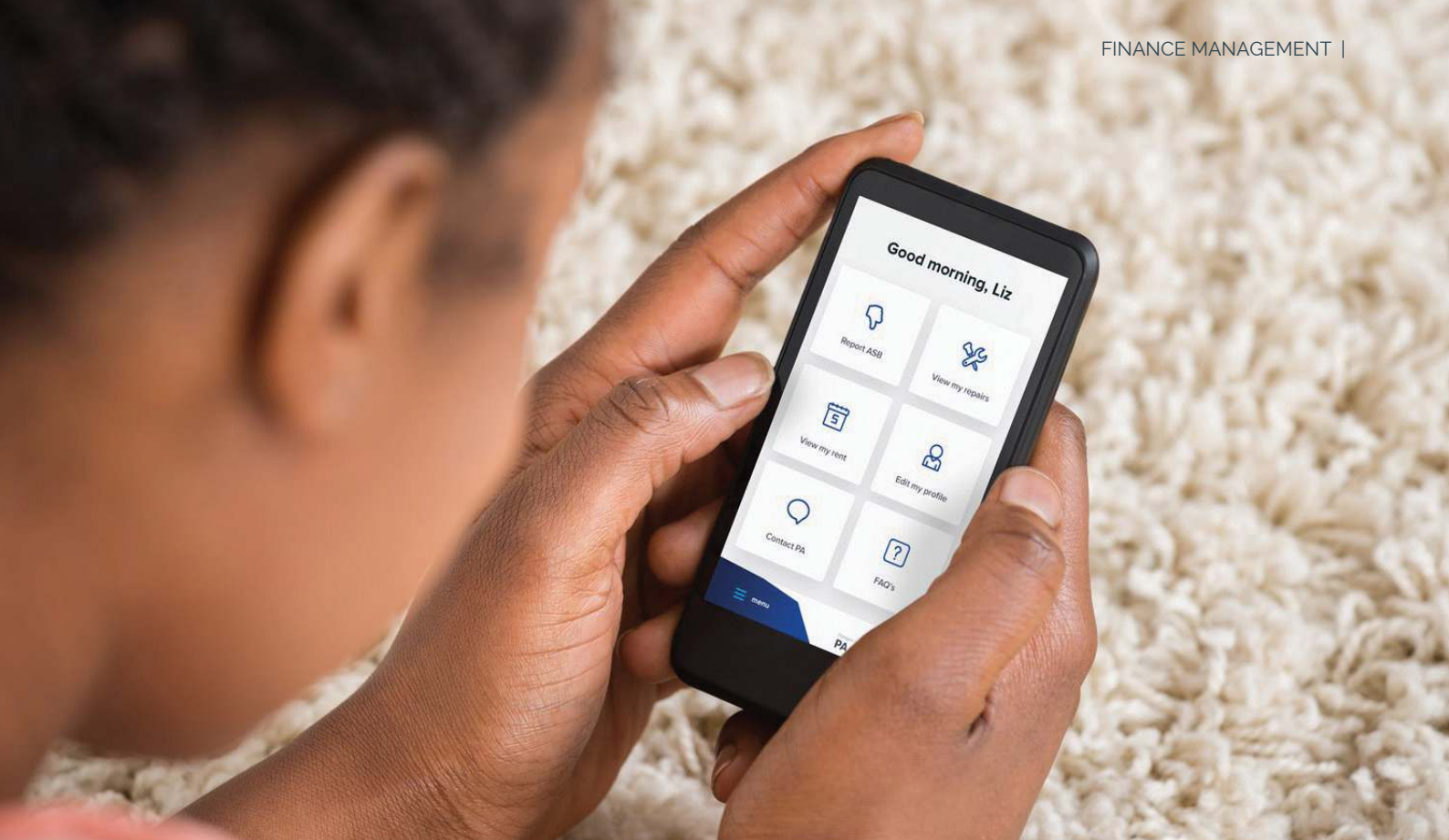
a weekly basis to identify those households we need to work with more closely to understand what help they need.

We can spot patterns and trends in rental payments too, such as a tenant who falls into arrears after applying for universal credit. In a case like this, we would expect to see the debt reduce as universal credit payments catch up; if this doesn't happen, it's an indicator that the household might be in financial difficulties or facing extra challenges, again enabling us to offer the right support at the right time.

Targeting support

Sometimes, all that's needed is some budgeting advice or we'll create a repayment plan to help a tenant manage their arrears. We can then track the success of the intervention through the system and adjust a plan if necessary.

However, we also have a hardship fund which can be allocated to specific tenants to help prevent them from sliding into more significant debt, with no requirement for the funds to be paid back. For example, we might identify that a family's rental payments always dip over Christmas, or perhaps a tenant tends to fall into arrears over the summer because they have the extra cost of buying school uniforms or equipment for children in the run up to the start of the new academic year.

With a more complete picture of the financial pinch points for individual tenants, we can be more proactive in supporting vulnerable residents and provide some extra help in challenging times from the hardship fund.

A fresh approach

Now more than ever, housing providers need to have the right tools and information to be able to identify tenants who are getting into financial difficulties before they reach the point where they are accumulating unmanageable levels of debt.

With more insight into tenants' changing circumstances, informed decisions can be made to better support families as they navigate their way through the current crisis and in the years to come.

Dino Kyprianou is the ICT applications manager at PA Housing.

BPHA's experience with Mobysoft

As Mobysoft's 100th customer for its RentSense software, BPHA has reported on its experience of managing its caseloads and level of arrears.

Helena Pountney, regional housing manager, BPHA, said, "The main driver for buying RentSense wasn't about reducing arrears per se, but about creating more capacity within our housing team. Our officers are generic in terms of their responsibilities and before RentSense, they were reviewing their caseload in our housing management systems, and the problem was their caseloads, not accuracy.

"RentSense is intelligent and highlights only the cases we need to action, so our housing officers can spend time addressing the right cases. At first, the big surprise was the number of missed cases that RentSense found, and this really helped to focus the team. And for us, it was originally a question of investing in additional staff resources or investing in RentSense, but it's far more efficient to focus on the right cases and give officers more time, and that's what RentSense enables us to do.

"For example, since our deployment of RentSense, the number of properties we manage has increased by 1,000 yet we've only needed to hire one extra housing officer to manage this growth. With the right cases, our team has been able to focus on the right tenants and offer the right support. As a result, arrears have fallen from 2.9 per cent to 2.5 per cent in the past two years. And when universal credit was first introduced, we used RentSense to create separate UC patches for officers, but we now see UC as business as usual and our team simply has their UC and non-UC cases amalgamated.

"RentSense helps by providing an accurate, pre-prioritised workload. This really helps free up time for the officers so they can focus on other aspects of their roles. The intelligence of the system also means that when they have their arrears action days, they can highlight specific types of cases to work through.

"RentSense has not only helped to create around 2.4 FTE of capacity within the housing team, but also lower our arrears, despite having added an extra 1,000 homes to our housing portfolio."

GCH *reduces arrears by £66,000 since lockdown*

Gloucester City Homes has reduced its arrears by £66,000 since lockdown, following a change in approach and using Mobysoft's RentSense.

Becky Hayward, income collection and tenancy sustainment manager, Gloucester City Homes, said, "We stopped all enforcement at the start of the first lockdown. We wanted to speak to every tenant first to understand what they needed and what we could do to help with their situation."

Within the housing provider's income department, all standard enforcement and escalation letters have been suspended for the moment, with only personalised letters sent to specific tenants relating to their own circumstances.

Hayward said, "The personal approach has been critical. Our tenants have responded really well – whereas before they might have avoided us or ignored their financial situation, many have got in touch and spoken to us.

"Mobysoft's RentSense software has enabled our income team to do preventative work as well as manage their arrears cases, particularly with those tenants at risk of going into arrears or transferring from housing benefit to universal credit. As a result, our arrears have fallen from 2.4 per cent in March 2019 to 1.9 per cent in March 2020."

Worthing Homes cuts arrears with RentSense

Worthing Homes has reduced its arrears by £25,000 with the help of Mobysoft's RentSense.

Before the pandemic, the housing provider's approach to income collection was based around being active in the community and visiting tenants.

Simon Anderson, head of customer services, Worthing Homes, said, "As a result of not being able to visit tenants in their homes, our housing officers have instead been able to speak to and support more tenants than before, and they are now completing all their cases every week in RentSense.

"RentSense helped us reduce our arrears since the start of the pandemic by £25,000. There has also been a 12 per cent reduction in tenants who owe more than three months of rent, despite the pandemic and during a time when the rollout of universal credit was gathering pace among our tenants.

"There's no doubt we wouldn't be where we are today if we didn't have RentSense; our arrears, processes and income team would all look very different. Without it, we would undoubtedly need a bigger team, and without the early interventions, we wouldn't be able to support those tenants who fall into arrears or miss payments so we can maintain more tenancies."

Team Netsol's housing benefit checker

Team Netsol has extended its BECS revenue and benefit systems with the launch of its Housing Benefit Award Accuracy Checker.

HBAAC is designed to help local councils manage the mandatory full case reviews of their housing benefit caseloads, highlighting claims that have a high risk of undeclared changes or housing fraud. It also transforms the speed with which validations and information gathering can be done.

The DWP's housing benefit accuracy initiative requires councils to set a number of full housing benefit case reviews, with the referrals broken down into different risk groups, with the interventions and changes recorded in their housing benefit systems. A significant challenge around this requirement is to keep up with the numbers needed and to identify the most efficient method of delivering this information back to the DWP, identifying undeclared changes in circumstances which may result in greater or lower awards. It also needs to flag up potential areas of individual or organised fraud.

Having alerted housing staff of a potential problem, HBAAC provides everything needed to contact claimants to check that their housing benefit claims are accurate and up-to-date.

Available for use on any device, Team Netsol's system comes complete with intelligent forms and the facility to securely upload evidential documents. Team Netsol said that HBAAC substantially reduces processing time; for every 100 case reviews carried out per month, the company estimates that a council would save over 12 working days.

While housing providers aren't directly responsible for the same DWP-mandated exercise, HBAAC can be used by housing providers to ensure that claimants' details are accurate and don't result in a sudden drop of income as a result of overpaid housing benefit or council tax reduction.

Jake Elliott, product manager, Team Netsol, said, "Any discrepancies in a tenant's qualifying details for housing benefit or council tax reduction can have a direct impact on rent collection and arrears. This is significant both for the local council completing the data for the DWP and the housing provider seeking to minimise disruptions to its rent collections."

Finance's role in housing IT

Shendi Keshet, Director of Finance & Resources, Manningham Housing

Manningham Housing is a small and dynamic housing provider and we like to think that we punch above our weight – from an IT perspective, we want to be in the vanguard of embracing technologies not often used in the housing sector.

Much of my focus during 2020 was negotiating a new financial facility for us, and its successful completion has underlined how ambitious and confident we feel about the future. The additional funding will enable us to increase our current housing stock by more than 10 per cent over the next five years and to improve our IT capabilities.

My next major challenge is to deliver several major IT transformation projects with support from international IT market leaders. As a small housing provider with a full-time team of around 40 people, this will be quite a feat but I'm confident that we will get there.

I am approaching the task with a series of guiding principles in mind, gained over my long and sometimes unconventional career in finance and IT.

Leave your comfort zone
Top of my list is that housing leaders must step out of their technology comfort zones if performance levels are to truly go up a league. This requires them to look beyond the norms and, indeed, the geographical boundaries in which they operate. By waking up to the unbridled potential of software packages not widely used in UK housing, leaders can access additional functionality, cut process time and enhance data analysis. Progress demands short-term investment but delivers long-term benefits.

Even before the pandemic, my finance colleagues already knew that the administrative burden on us can be as unproductive as it is frustrating. This is not helped by the reality that there are now fewer people in most finance teams, placing an added requirement for finance directors to be more creative in how data is analysed and used within their operations – in short, better data leads to greater efficiency, which is especially important when you have fewer resources available.

To comply with the requirements laid down by the housing regulator, we need to report how much we spend and from where we accessed the cash. However, being able to include more qualitative data to explain why we are spending the money allows us to understand if those decisions are enabling us to meet our strategic objectives.

Understanding IT
While I have a career history of delivering digital transformation projects, I don't think of myself as an IT expert. I've worked with some really excellent IT colleagues who have been incredibly well-informed about the latest technological developments, but that hasn't always been the case.

I've often found myself working with individuals possessing an underwhelming appreciation of the core software they are employed to use and promote. It can seem like their mantra is, "I deliver it, but I don't know what it does."

Focus on your end game
In relation to IT procurement, it should always be about the 'end game'. IT and finance leaders must ask themselves what else they can extract from the IT packages at their fingertips. Standard software is no longer what workplace IT should be about; leaders should instead be exploring how they can enable greater functionality and deliver more value.

It should be their professional duty to push the boundaries, try new ideas and, yes, be much more innovative. Finance teams all around the country spend endless hours creating Excel models (and I DO love them), but there is software out there that can do the same thing but better and much more besides.

So through the pages of Housing Technology, I am happy to throw down the gauntlet to IT and finance professionals; push the boundaries, challenge the norms and show the UK housing sector what is truly possible.

We must never feel comfortable with what has gone before. It's much better to think about what comes next and how the future can deliver better results, increase efficiency and encourage employees at all levels to embrace innovation.

Shendi Keshet is the director of finance and resources at Manningham Housing.

Curo integrates payments with PayPoint

Curo Group has selected PayPoint's MultiPay platform to make it faster and easier for its tenants to pay their rent and related housing costs.

With MultiPay, tenants can choose the most convenient payment option for them, including via smartphone app, web, direct debit, phone, cash or card in a local shop or via an SMS link sent to their phone.

MultiPay removes the need for capital investment in multiple in-house payment solutions; customer-branded payment sites and app payments are hosted by PayPoint or embedded into a customer's existing systems via APIs.

Peter Harris, business analyst, Curo, said, "Paying rent and other housing fees should be quick and simple, and

offering flexible payment options is an important part of that, particularly during these difficult times.

"Both our tenants and our customer contact team found the MultiPay platform very easy to use from the start, which has meant that we have avoided any increases in our arrears. Furthermore, MultiPay's reporting dashboard has been a revelation in terms of viewing real-time data and then using that intelligence to support our daily management decisions."

Aareon's Arthur launches live bank feed for housing

Hot on the heels of its recent acquisition by Aareon (see page 05), Arthur has launched a fully-integrated live bank feed to make it easier for housing providers to streamline payments and accounting across their entire housing portfolios.

Arthur has also gained its FCA Licence which means tenants and property managers are authorised to safely make payments through the Arthur platform with the click of a button.

Arthur's live bank feed will provide much-needed flexibility from its direct integration with its core software for full visibility of housing providers' state of accounts, anytime, anywhere. With all data stored in one simple and secure system, the live bank feed will also give housing providers the ability to make faster decisions

and reduce the risk of errors caused by outdated processes and cross-checking multiple sources.

Marc Trup, co-founder and CEO, Arthur, said, "We are proud to announce the launch of the live bank feed as the latest innovation to our platform. This new feature ultimately prevents housing providers from wasting valuable time and money that could instead be reinvested in housing, internal operations or tenant services, all from one simple integrated suite of software."

![active housing By Hallnet logo]

Introducing Active Portal

Active Portal is a self-service customer portal brimming with features and integration options, designed to help tenants manage vital aspects of their tenancy.

Options galore

- Zero touch registration and login
- Multiple tenancy information
- Alerts and two way messaging
- Account information and statements
- Rent payments and Direct Debits

- Repair diagnostics and appointment selection
- Tenancy documents
- ASB reporting
- Tenancy applications
- And much more
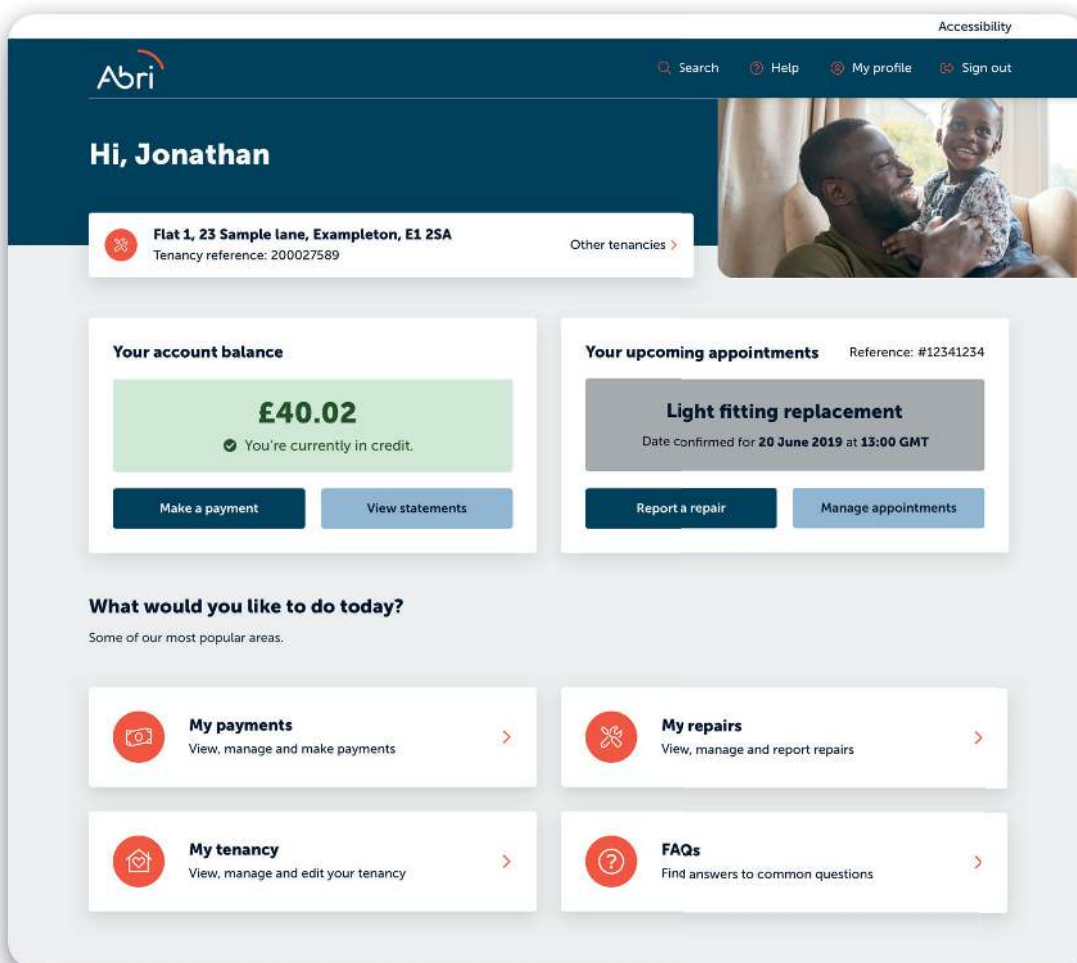
Implemented in as little as 67 days

400% increase in tenant logins

EMH Homes saves £1 million with Totalmobile

EMH Homes has saved over £1 million in 2020 following its transition from paper-based scheduling to digital scheduling using software from Totalmobile.

Before the introduction of digital scheduling, EMH's group companies were each using different direct labour organisations, making it impossible to monitor and manage KPIs across the group due to a lack of connectivity between siloed datasets.

Dave Shaw, commercial head of maintenance, EMH Homes, said, "All of the different EMH organisations used their own systems to process work orders. This led to multiple workstreams and a lack of integration between processes and systems. Historically, most of the organisation was paper-based so most of the costing and scheduling was done on paper; often these documents would go missing, creating significant issues.

"We had no visibility of work being undertaken or completed. Also, depending on which sub-organisation's employees did the work, customers would receive varying levels of service, even though they were being presented as one business. We

needed to find a system that would pull everything together so we could have consistent service delivery across the business."

EMH turned to Totalmobile and since the start of 2020, its Connect scheduling software has enabled EMH to become more automated and digitally driven, with Connect providing complete job and scheduling transparency on a single system.

Since adopting Totalmobile's Connect as a single solution across its subsidiary companies, EMH has saved over £1 million by finding efficiencies in the scheduling of work and from improved visibility of job assignments. Jobs are now completed much faster through an approval process which previously took days and every job is now checked and approved through Connect in a timely manner ensuring that the right costs are on each invoice and EMH is not being inadvertently over-charged.

Onward Homes deploys Aareon 1st Touch

Onward Homes has implemented Aareon's 1st Touch mobile working software, integrated with its other business systems from MRI Software.

Andrew Kidds, customer experience director, Onward Homes, said, "We're excited to have implemented the 1st Touch mobile working software in partnership with Aareon and our business system supplier MRI Software. We've successfully integrated the two systems, enabling a range of business processes to help our staff respond to tenants and work efficiently while out and about in our neighbourhoods.

"Onward's mobile staff can now create tenancies, inspect assets, update rent accounts, appoint repairs and record customer contacts, all via real-time interactions with and updates to our back-office systems.

"The early feedback from our teams using the 1st Touch software has been really positive. They have found it intuitive to use and convenient to record information; without the need to return to offices or log on to their laptops, everything is captured and actioned there and then."

Tina Kennedy, head of digital, Aareon UK said "We are delighted that Onward is continuing its digital transformation with Aareon and we look forward to continuing to support Onward's strategic plans and ambitions."

Your Housing's dynamic scheduling with Fast Lean Smart

Fast Lean Smart's Visitour dynamic scheduling software has been chosen by Your Housing Group for its field-based operations.

The new software will be first used by Fix360, Your Housing's dedicated property maintenance division before being rolled out for the housing provider's other functions such as surveyors and housing officers.

Visitour will be integrated with Your Housing's Microsoft Dynamics 365 platform and existing Orchard AccuServ repairs management system.

Darren Halliwell, IT director, Your Housing Group, said, "We did our research and were determined to find a technology and partner that aligned to our five-year business plan and could flex and adapt as we develop and implement our wider technology roadmap.

"Fast Lean Smart has multi-sector experience and a stamp of approval from Microsoft which gave us great confidence. We were impressed by its delivery approach and speed to implementation alongside other key factors such as ease of configuration, functional capabilities, customer communication and in-day progress."

Once a customer's need is qualified by Fix360's callcentre or via online self-service, Visitour will provide the optimal

Darren Halliwell, IT Director, Your Housing Group

appointment choices according to the available operatives and existing commitments. This will use real-time optimisation, not just finding white-space to fill in the diary, with the accuracy of time-of-day traffic speeds for each journey.

Guy Bebbington, managing director, Fix360, said, "The Fix360 board has set itself challenging customer satisfaction and value for money targets and so investment in our technology stack to achieve those targets is vital. As a real differentiator in the market, we believe Fast Lean Smart is absolutely the right partner for us."

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY 2021 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

JUST ANNOUNCED KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

DIGITAL CONFERENCE 3-4 MARCH 2021
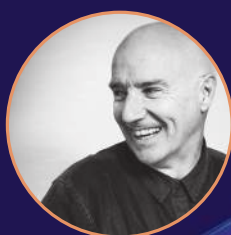
Midge Ure OBE   **Andrew Grill**

SEE PAGE 60

Arches Housing mobilises after 20 years with MIS-AMS

After 20 years of partnership, Arches Housing and MIS-AMS continue to innovative, with the housing provider updating its housing management system to support remote and mobile working.
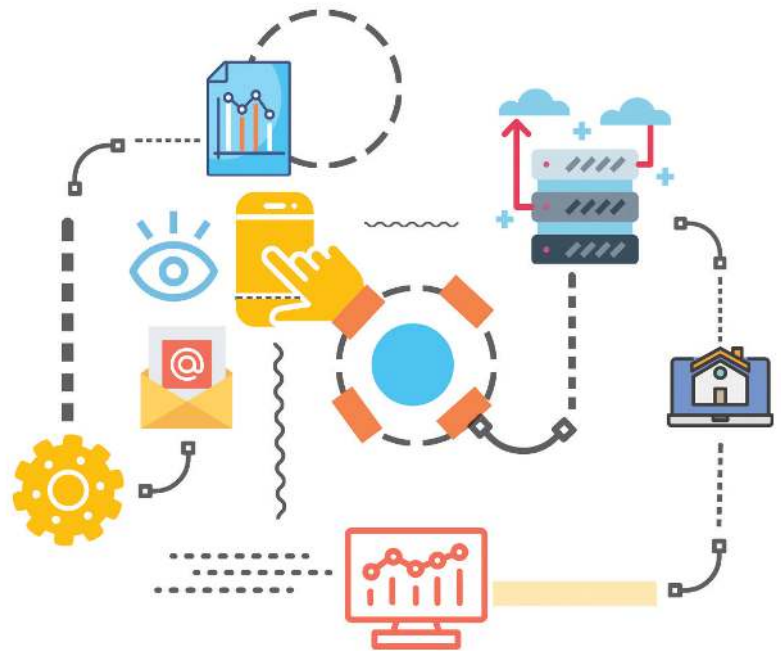
The updates include the introduction of ActiveH Mobile CRM, Mobile Inspector, Mobile Surveyor and Mobile Tasking modules from MIS-AMS, integrated with its existing ActiveH housing management system. All of the MIS-AMS products work from a single database, giving end-users a single version of the truth and a 360-degree view of all tenants, assets and stakeholders.

Seamus Harkins, data services manager, Arches Housing, said, "Arches has used ActiveH for ten years, including the CRM, rents, repairs and maintenance, resident communications SMS and automated tasking modules. Before that, we used ActiveH's predecessor.

"Over this period, we've benefited hugely from these products. They've helped us optimise many manual processes, while remaining low cost and retaining a lean staffing structure – we manage 1,200 properties with a team of only 30 people in total.

"Having a single source of data has produced so many benefits, from enhancing our tenant communications and services we deliver to them to improving our reporting and decision-making capabilities. We recently decided to implement flexible remote working so that our team can work productively from anywhere, without compromising our data integrity, so naturally we looked into the mobile options that MIS-AMS provides."

The new mobile modules have enabled Arches to successfully facilitate home and remote working across the organisation, including its office-based staff and maintenance and repairs contractors. All data relating to

tenants, assets and stakeholders can be updated on the go from any location so that the data is always updated in real time. This was particularly useful at the start of the first lockdown because it allowed all of the housing provider's staff to work efficiently from home immediately without having to completely rethink any technical or data-handling processes.

Harkins said, "MIS-AMS are great. They really understand us and feel like an extension of our team. While we're tiny in terms of size, and probably budget, compared with many of their other customers, we never feel unimportant or disregarded, and MIS-AMS have always been able to help us find solutions when our ambitions have run ahead of our modest size!

"From a personal point of view, I've loved working with ActiveH. With a bit of understanding and a little bit of wider technical knowledge, ActiveH is flexible enough to allow you to tweak its functionality quickly and relatively easily. As someone who looks after IT, that's great because a lot of the time we can quickly make changes ourselves that can make a huge difference to our end-users and customers."

Ei1000G **SmartLINK**® Gateway

The smarter way to check every tenant's safety. At any time.

- Actively monitors a property's RadioLINK+ or SmartLINK enabled alarms

- Minimises the requirement of property access causing less disruption

- Utilises the best available mobile connection for reliable connection

- Collates data and provides real-time notifications

- Accessible intelligence that can be actioned, reported on and documented

- Enables solution focused asset management

| Ei3028 | Ei3024 | Ei3016 | Ei3014 | Ei3018 | Ei3000MRF |
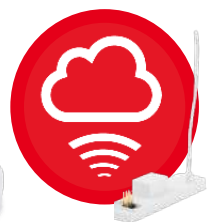
SmartLINK®
A Revolution In Tenant Safety

Livin's 45% faster repairs with Meritec

Roslyn Littledyke, Head of CX & Service Improvement, Livin

Following the introduction of a new customer experience (CX) platform from Meritec, Livin Housing is now processing its tenants' repairs requests 45 per cent faster.

Livin chose a solution from Meritec via the government's G Cloud framework to transform its CRM processes using a flexible digital CX platform. It enabled the mobilisation and increased visibility of more data-driven customer journeys, combined with a bespoke 360-degree view screen and CRM service menu.

Livin's Meritec CX platform went live in August 2020, followed by widespread positive feedback from the housing provider's customer-facing teams.

Roslyn Littledyke, head of CX and service improvement, Livin, said, "We recognised the importance of partnering with a supplier such as Meritec who shares our customer-centric values and uses technology to push the boundaries, creating digital experiences not typical of a housing provider.

"We are delighted with the outcomes of the project so far and the platform's capabilities which will enable better mobile working, provide case management functionality and allow easy integration with our other systems, making our services and information much simpler to access."

Adam Wilkinson, managing director, Meritec, said, "We aim to exceed our customers' expectations and share their responsibility to achieve tangible benefits. Working with Livin and its very professional team has been a joy and rewarding from all sides – great people, great technology and great results."
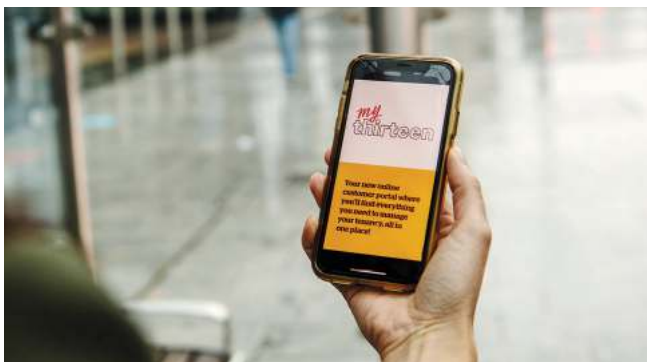
Thirteen launches self-service portal

Thirteen Group has launched a self-service portal for its tenants based on its original Touchpoint programme and reaped a tenfold increase in regular usage.

With My Thirteen, tenants can search and apply for properties, check their balance or pay their rent, book a repair, update account details and find a home, at any time from any web-enabled device. The system has also been designed so that Thirteen's customer advisors can share the same online view of tenants' accounts, making the resolution of any inbound queries easier and faster.

Michelle Younger, director of experience, Thirteen Group, said, "My Thirteen has been designed to provide another way for tenants to engage with us at a time that suits them. We can see tenants are actively logged in, checking their accounts, searching for properties, raising repairs and much more throughout the day, evenings and at weekends."

7,500 Thirteen tenants have already activated their accounts and the platform is being used

Michelle Younger, Director of Experience, Thirteen Group

regularly by around 1,000 tenants per day, a massive improvement on the housing provider's previous portal which had just a few hundred active users.

L&Q's virtual concierges from Alcove

An L&Q extracare scheme in Essex has been fitted with a virtual concierge service from Alcove. L&Q's Cornell Court is the first social housing scheme in the UK to include this technology as standard and to use the internet of things to connect several devices within each property to create a wraparound service for residents.

Charlie Culshaw, director of L&Q Living, L&Q's care and support arm, said, "We know that some of our residents won't have had the Christmas they were expecting, but we hope at least that this technology has allowed our vulnerable residents, who are limiting their contact with others during the pandemic, to connect with their loved ones in ways they were unable to before.

"Encouraging elderly residents to adopt new technologies isn't always easy, but Alcove's video carephones have been a great success because they are so easy to use and provide human interaction at the touch of a button."

The Alcove system, which includes video carephones, voice-activated assistant Alexa and video-based door entry, means that residents can simply touch an icon on a screen to talk to a real concierge who takes charge of any requests and deals with them on their behalf. The system also makes it easy for residents to communicate with support staff and other residents in the building, as well as order supermarket deliveries.

Culshaw said, "While the pandemic has highlighted the need for this type of technology, the benefits go far beyond residents being able to see and speak to their families and organise the vast majority of tasks from home.

"We have seen how the Alcove system allows residents to live more independently in their day-to-day lives. One resident who previously needed 2:1 care is now monitored remotely and is much happier being able to spend time on his own rather than with two staff constantly present. We have also used the system to pick up falls when residents are alone in their homes.

"While this kind of technology will never replace the personal aspect of care, it can enhance residents' lives by allowing them a safe level of independence for when they would prefer to do things on their own."

I'M ON-PREMISE
Get Me Out Of Here!

Operating on legacy business applications, constantly maintaining servers and manually installing software, can feel like a never-ending bushtucker trial...

Allow us to help you overcome the trials and tribulations of the wild world of on-premise solutions to move on to the freedom of the cloud. Let TSG give you the power to lead your camp to success, using Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven document management, Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and Power Apps solutions to drive productivity and transform collaboration. We're proud to have worked with housing associations across the UK to provide robust, comprehensive and adaptable solutions that empower and help you achieve more.

See you at the Housing Technology Conference 2021

TSG
TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GROUP

Hybrid communications' transformation

Paul Francis, Document Automation Specialist, Datagraphic

When you hear the term 'hybrid', you probably don't associate it with customer communications, but it could be key to your digital transformation success with communications in 2021.

Delivering the best possible customer experience and going 100 per cent digital is the holy grail for many housing providers, but it can often feel like an impossible task.

Switching legacy software for new technologies is often the first hurdle. Where do you find the time, skills and people to support your plans? And how do you gain your board's confidence that your sizeable investment will actually deliver value? Then there are your tenants – are they ready to be 100 per cent digital?

Not just 'digital first'
The pandemic resulted in a rapid shift to online communications but it also created a greater digital divide. For 'digital natives', their customer experience was more positive, but less technically-minded tenants received fewer communications as housing providers' communications teams struggled to access their usual systems and equipment to send post while working from home.

What has become evident is that a multi-channel approach to communications is vital. Yes, it's important to think 'digital first', but not 'digital only'; flexible technologies and services that automate physical document production as well as digital outputs are key.

And there's definitely a need for user-friendly, cloud-based systems that teams can use for service delivery wherever they need to work.

Time for low-code and SaaS options?
With pressure mounting to achieve digital transformation, many housing providers are now considering a hybrid model for their digital aims. It's about mixing legacy business applications and data with modern low-code or software-as-a-service (SaaS) solutions. It uses in-house resources with external open-source or third-party SaaS technology to automate communications via multiple channels.

This isn't a new idea and has been a quick fix in the past to alleviate some IT pressures, but with clear objectives and the right technology partners, it can be a flexible, scalable and cost-effective way to keep pace with new technologies and tenant expectations.

The value of a hybrid approach
Being able to build or bolt on services to deliver multi-channel communications is a low-risk approach that has many advantages.

On the one hand, tenants quickly get the seamless experience they need, combining online services with physical post, as per their individual preferences. And on the other hand, using APIs to connect data from legacy business applications with SaaS technology is transformational and is less disruptive than replacing software while still being able to flex and scale as needed.

St Mungo's is an example of a housing provider taking this hybrid approach, having made the switch to Datagraphic's Aceni Hybrid Mail SaaS option. It now transfers data from its legacy applications direct to a secure cloud-based communications platform which automatically prints and mails documents to tenants, all without any coding or capital expenditure from St Mungo's.

Cutting homelessness at St Mungo's
Dydy Sodeinde, head of rental income services, St Mungo's, said, "Aceni Hybrid Mail was a no-brainer for

us. You can print and post a statement for around two-thirds of a stamp price. Datagraphic does all the printing, envelope stuffing and postage in that price, so it's worth using Aceni for that reason alone, plus you get a great reaction from colleagues when you tell them that they no longer need to stuff envelopes!

"Busy people have many distractions, and it was often hard to find out if they had sent statements out. You need accountability with documents that must arrive by a certain date, and Aceni's reporting screen gives me the reassurance of an audit trail of production and posted-out dates.

"Buying enough stamps was another problem for us. At statement time, we had to ask our office services team in advance to buy stamps in bulk, but we no longer need to think about that – Aceni is 'pay-as-you-use', so we just upload and send mail when we need to and pay for what goes out.

"During the pandemic, we've been able to adapt quickly. We can now build different mailing packs on screen which Datagraphic then assembles and posts without any further involvement from us. It's very easy to use, especially when you need to work from home."

A win-win with very measurable results
Overall, taking a hybrid approach to digital transformation is about setting clear goals and looking at your workflows to see which areas can gain the most from digitisation. You can then match your needs with proven cloud-based

technology (digitalmarketplace.service.gov.uk is a good place to find accredited suppliers) to deliver scalable and agile projects.

I work with many housing customers on digital transformation and it's rewarding to see the success they achieve when rolling out hybrid solutions. When you get the balance right of strategic thinking and agile technology, it's a win-win.

Paul Francis is a document automation specialist at Datagraphic.

The role of housing providers in tackling domestic abuse

Greg Andrews, Head of Customer Experience, MRI Software

Domestic abuse is not a fringe issue; it ruins families, permeates communities and is happening on many of our streets up and down the country. Since the lockdown, the number of domestic abuse cases has rocketed, and teams across the housing sector are having to learn and adapt quickly.

In 2017/18, two million adults across England and Wales experienced domestic abuse, and in the UK today, two women each week are killed by an abusive partner or ex-partner. The criminal aspect of incidents can make it easy to view as a matter for the criminal justice system to solve in partnership with specialist responders, but that is exactly where survivors of domestic abuse can fall through the cracks.

The role of technology

Housing providers are uniquely placed to intervene in suspected cases of domestic abuse by establishing relationships with victims and ensuring their safety. 85 per cent of domestic abuse victims will seek help an average of five times during the year leading up to when they finally receive effective support to stop the abuse; having clear records of these interactions is key to protecting those involved. Technology has a role to play in addressing suspected cases, being used by housing providers to show a clear trail of evidence, disseminate information and report on incidents.

Dr Kelly Henderson, co-founder of Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) and co-author of 'Domestic Abuse – Policy into Practice', identified one of the main hurdles that housing providers need to overcome in order to tackle domestic abuse in their homes as the reporting and strategy implementation of the issue. Her research found that 65 per cent of housing providers didn't treat domestic abuse as an issue in its own right. It often sits within the same remit as antisocial behaviour (ASB), opening it up to be viewed as a nuisance, in which the victim and perpetrator are effectively treated as equals.

Case management software

Establishing patterns of behaviour and ensuring a clear trail of evidence are essential for housing officers and safeguarding teams. Case management software is a key tool for recording incidents and building up a fuller picture of an individual or household; information that can then be delivered to third-party organisations such as the police.

Poplar HARCA has adopted a proactive and victim-led approach to domestic abuse, which prioritises removing perpetrators of abuse from their homes and their estates by seeking injunctions in partnership with the police.

Chelsea Kelly, head of community safeguarding, Poplar HARCA, said, "We know that survivors are often faced with the option of leaving their own home and seeking emergency accommodation which can be highly disruptive to their lives. We feel that there should be a better alternative.

"By working with survivors of domestic abuse, we help them to obtain legal orders to remove the perpetrators from their home. These could be a non-molestation order or an occupation order, allowing the survivor to remain in their home and meaning the perpetrator has to find alternative accommodation."

Spotting behavioural patterns

To evidence its decisions, Poplar HARCA uses complaints from neighbours, criminal damage reports and community impact statements, as well as its own records to ensure that the abuser is removed, but the victim doesn't need to go through the trauma of giving evidence unless they choose to. The MRI Streetwise system gives housing officers the tools they need to join the dots in patterns of behaviour and keep in contact with the victims regarding how their cases are progressing. By centralising 'isolated' incidents and flagging up repeat disturbances, officers have the tools at their disposal to create safer communities and homes.

Lesley Westwood, director of finance, MRI Software, said, "One of the many negative impacts of coronavirus has been the increase in domestic abuse. Lockdown has and will continue to intensify tensions within homes; one of our customers told us that domestic abuse cases have nearly tripled since the start of the first lockdown.

"Our Streetwise solution supports housing providers by keeping records and enabling them to evidence when interventions need to be made. Domestic abuse risk is not static, and Streetwise offers a chronological record of incidents, enabling housing officers to adopt a personalised approach to support."

From April 2021, there will be new legislative obligations for local authorities to support victims of domestic abuse. For housing providers, the time to act is now in order to stamp out this toxic behaviour which has lasting ramifications for those who experience it and reverberates through entire communities.

Greg Andrews is the head of customer experience at MRI Software.

Sophos stops ransomware.

SOPHOS
Cybersecurity evolved.

Stonewater's virtual properties with Active Housing

As part of its digital transformation, Stonewater has launched a new virtual 'property shop' with Active Housing. Stonewater originally chose Active Housing to help with the full digital transformation of its services, including a new tenant portal, followed by a tenant onboarding application.

Stonewater's property shop showcases its properties available to buy or let, allowing prospective customers to apply for a property online. The project's intention was to provide one centralised place for all of Stonewater's rental and sale properties; Stonewater had previously listed these on separate websites with a paper application form.

As well as implementing a virtual storefront, the property shop enables customers to complete their tenancy applications online. The digital applications were delivered using Active Housing's Active Onboarding solution, with some degree of customisation based on Stonewater's own processes and business rules.

The applications process is prompted when a prospective customer registers their interest for a property on the storefront. When this happens, the Stonewater admins are notified, sending the customer to a digital application portal. The application process is split into six manageable sections which the customer can complete at their leisure.

The project was managed via an Agile style of project management. Bi-weekly meetings were held via Microsoft Teams, and the Stonewater and Active Housing teams used project management tools Asana and Jira to log and track problems.

Integration with Stonewater's MIS ActiveH housing management system was completed using standard APIs from MIS Group. When an application form is completed by a prospective customer, the application details are written back into ActiveH for Stonewater's staff to access.

One of the biggest challenges to the project was the testing process which was complex due to the different tenure types relating to the tenancy applications. This was dealt with by the two teams having regular calls to discuss their findings from the testing and ensure that nothing was missed.

Although the project is still awaiting a full rollout, both organisations are pleased with the results so far, making Stonewater one of the few social housing providers to have launched their own property storefront.

Thrive's Active Housing portal

Thrive Homes has partnered with Active Housing to develop a new self-service tenant portal, enabling tenants to manage their tenancies and perform a variety of transactions, including reporting repairs and paying their rents.

Before working with Active Housing, Thrive had developed a tenant app which had received mixed reviews, so the housing provider's goal with its new portal was to create something that its customers would love and use. This meant creating a portal that was user friendly with a vast range of functionalities to ensure it could deliver true self-service that was easy to use and enabled its customers to have the flexibility to manage their tenancies at any time.
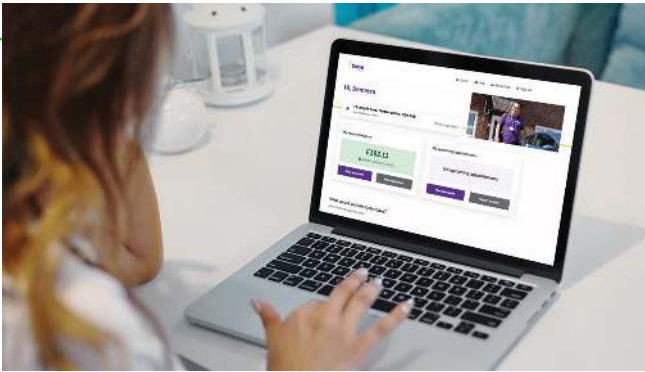
Thrive implemented multiple products from the Active Housing suite, including:

- **Active Portal –** designed to help residents manage all aspects of their tenancies;
- **Active Diagnostics –** Active Housing's award-winning SaaS product range enables Thrive staff and residents to report property problems and manage repair and maintenance appointments;
- **Active Requests –** An easy-to-use tool enabling residents to request permissions, perform eligibility checks and to ask for information about their tenancies.

Thrive's main goal was to create a digital offering that was user-friendly. This meant user testing was a priority. Thrive invited a diverse group of its residents with varying digital skills to test the product prototypes and give feedback early in the implementation, which informed changes to the portal designs before the start of development.

An Agile style of project management was used to manage the launch. Regular stand-ups took place via Skype, where Active Housing and Thrive's project teams discussed their tasks and the project's progress, as well as keeping in contact via email. During the project's pre-launch phase, stand-ups were more frequent and took place over Microsoft Teams.

Active Housing was integrated with Thrive's Aareon housing management system to provide real-time, end-to-end transactional services for residents. Active Housing created the workflow definitions to meet Thrive's requirements for the project, which Aareon then used to develop the necessary APIs.

The lockdown mid-way through the project was a significant challenge. Until the lockdown, important meetings between Thrive, Aareon and Active Housing took place on site. However, during lockdown, this had to shift to using Skype and Microsoft Teams, just as all three businesses were adapting to remote working. Although this was an adjustment, the teams adapted quickly and still managed to deliver the project successfully.

A week before Thrive launched its portal, it invited a group of tenants to beta-test the site. Their comments were very positive, including, "A great portal, I think most tenants will find it easy to use", "Really helpful, easy to use and a very simple sign-up process" and "So easy to use, better than the Thrive app!".

Leeds Council's IoT plan with HomeLink

HomeLink has been awarded a 12-month project with Leeds City Council to improve the safety and wellbeing of its residents through an IoT programme.

A £500,000 investment from GovTech Catalyst will cover the deployment of IoT-based sensors in 1,000 of the council's homes. Approximately 50 of these properties will also include further smart technology, such as Aico's SmartLink Gateway for the remote monitoring and management of fire and carbon-monoxide alarm systems.

Luke Loveridge, CEO, HomeLink, said, "We're thrilled to be working in partnership with Leeds City Council, the University of York and the University of Leeds on the next phase of this GovTech challenge. With a deployment of up to 1,000 smart homes, we will be testing and developing new maintenance and wellbeing services for the council's residents."

The project follows an earlier pilot project with Leeds City Council involving six properties and around 100 people from the wider community, with the original project highlighting the need for a dedicated app to provide residents with their own IoT device data to reduce the risk of condensation, damp and mould.

Stephen Blackburn, data and innovation manager, Leeds City Council said, "It's great to be able to continue working with HomeLink on the second phase of this government-funded GovTech Catalyst project. We're keen to promote Leeds as an innovative city where new technology can be tested and trialled. This project offers us a great opportunity to better understand how new technology and data insight can help us further improve the service we deliver our tenants."

PROMOTE YOUR JOB VACANCIES AND REACH HIGH-CALIBRE CANDIDATES WITH HOUSING TECHNOLOGY

- Dedicated job board for the housing sector

- 100% free for housing providers

- Post your vacancies on our easy-to-use website in a matter of minutes

- Receive applications directly from our large audience

- Housing providers feature in our monthly jobs email which is sent to 1000+ key professionals in the sector

POST YOUR VACANCIES TODAY

VISIT
jobs.housing-technology.com

EMAIL
recruitment@housing-technology.com

TELEPHONE
0208 336 2293

OUR 2021 RECRUITMENT BUSINESS PARTNER

Lioness.

With almost 20 years' experience recruiting for social housing technology and IT roles, we know the kind of talent businesses are looking for – and where we can help them look.

We recruit for permanent, fixed-term salaried roles and contract positions. We use our unique network of connections across social housing and local authorities, facilities management, charities, sector-specific consultancies and specialist software houses.

FEATURED JOBS

Finance Business Partner

Remote Working
£45,000 - £50,000 pa
Closing date: 12 February

Housing Systems Data Analyst

Birmingham
£35,000 - £38,000 pa
Closing date: 15 February

Product Owner

Tyne & Wear
£35,000 - £39,000 pa
Closing date: 13 February

Find out more about these vacancies and apply at
jobs.housing-technology.com

Using Microsoft Teams for unified communications

Sam Winterbottom, Public Sector Director, Gamma

Prior to coronavirus, many housing providers were already rethinking their communications and telephony services to increase efficiency, promote 'cloud first', offer flexible working arrangements, save costs, and reduce complexity. The question that I constantly heard was, "Why do we need these large office-based telephony systems that cost a fortune to manage and maintain?"

Unified communications as a service (UCaaS) is the answer to that question, blurring the boundaries of telephony and merging it with instant messaging, video conferencing and a plethora of different applications, such as CRM systems, contact centres and reporting.

Since its release in 2017, Microsoft Teams has significantly impacted this UCaaS market thanks to its ease of use, free inclusion in most Microsoft business licences and slick desktop integration. In the past months, mostly owing to the impact of coronavirus and the subsequent uptake in remote working, daily users of Teams have skyrocketed to over 115 million people (October 2020).

As an integral part of Microsoft 365 E3 and E5 business licences, many organisations have chosen Teams as their preferred collaboration solution. With its free instant messaging, meeting and video features, Teams is a no-brainer for many housing providers wanting to simplify their internal communications.

How important is voice to your organisation?
The housing sector's communications ecosystem is broad and complex. While instant messaging, content sharing and virtual meetings are becoming increasingly popular among employees, voice is still the key to wider business operations. According to Zendesk, 68 per cent of customers prefer to communicate via the phone, with only 34 per cent choosing chat as their preferred channel. In the housing sector, choosing the right UCaaS solution is vital to ensure the best possible service to tenants while also increasing the efficiency of your business operations.
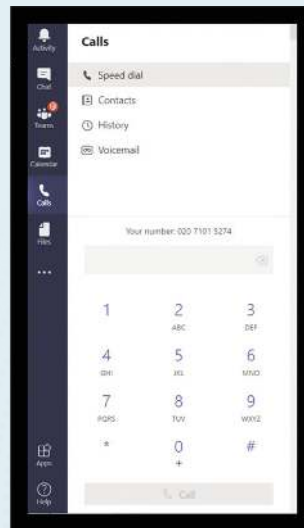
When considering the best UCaaS solution for you, it's important to first understand your requirements and how these compare to potential solutions' capabilities.

Out of the box, Teams supports voice-over-IP (VoIP) calls to any other member of the organisation using the applications, but it doesn't connect to your external telephone network. This means that in its most basic form, Teams can only be used as an internal collaboration tool so you'd still need a separate telephony solution for external calling. For organisations struggling to cope with too many ineffective internal communications tools, Teams offers the perfect single platform to enable collaboration across the board.

Can we use Teams as our external telephony system?
Teams offers a telephone system replacement and to fully unlock Teams' external telephony capabilities, organisations must either adopt Microsoft Calling Plans or Microsoft Direct Routing. At the time of writing, both options require a phone system licence for every user who wants external voice calls. While Microsoft Phone System is included in E5 licences, E3 and E1 versions will require

additional licences and professional service support, which can make it more expensive than comparable solutions in certain circumstances. When we take a closer look at Microsoft Calling Plans and Direct Routing, it's important to note and evaluate some operational and commercial differences.

Microsoft Calling Plans is a fully cloud-deployed solution provided entirely by Microsoft. Calling Plans comes in different sizes depending upon the number of minutes needed. While this might seem an ideal solution for smaller organisations, Microsoft's 'minutes bundles' are inflexible and expensive when compared to a telco carrier's direct-routing offering or a fully-integrated UCaaS solution. Moreover, minutes bundles can't be shared nor carried over, and your organisation will need communications credits if you run out of minutes in your calling plans or if you receive toll-free calls. In this example, an empty communications credit balance would stop you from making calls altogether. To overcome this issue, Microsoft suggests setting up an auto-recharge amount with a minimum balance that will trigger a purchase for that recharge amount – a recommendation that could easily promote 'bill shock' if you're not keeping track of the additional expenditure.

Microsoft Direct Routing is a more flexible, accessible and cost-effective alternative to Microsoft Calling Plans, enabling users to make and receive calls using your existing telecom provider (it's currently our fastest-growing product ever). This option is particularly beneficial to leverage existing contracts with service providers and to ensure interoperability with on-premise telephony equipment and desk phones. Moreover, while Direct Routing's costs depend largely on the carrier rates, it's fair to say that it will almost always cost less per user than Calling Plans, with many providers offering unlimited and flexible minutes bundles to landlines and mobiles.

Are you looking for a complete integrated solution?
Any organisation debating whether Microsoft Teams is the answer to its external telephony needs will also need to consider how important it is for their operations to have a single, cost-effective supplier.

As we've discussed, Direct Routing generally overcomes the worry of bill shock and inflexible minutes but does come at the cost of working with two different suppliers. On the other hand, Calling Plans has the benefit of being deployed entirely by Microsoft, but the downfalls of additional licence costs, complex number porting (to keep your existing telephone numbers) and limited minute bundles make it less desirable for some organisations. Also, organisations will need to bear in mind that Microsoft is a software company, not a UK telco (at the risk of stating the obvious!); it is a very complex environment and sometimes choosing telco specialists is the answer to de-risk any telephony transformation projects.

Of course, if neither option is exactly what your organisation requires, it's worth considering a fully-integrated UCaaS solution from a different service provider. Depending on your structure, this sometimes makes sense.

A fully-integrated UCaaS solution, such as Gamma's Horizon Collaborate, encompasses the power of voice, video, conferencing, instant messaging and presence from a single supplier, combined with a robust support structure.

Having a single supplier can help overcome those inevitable operational issues quickly and smoothly, without having to jump through hoops and to pass through different departments or organisations. You should also consider the importance of having an end-to-end SLA, not just on the core cloud platform but also to the user. Choosing a service provider who owns the network means issues are not pushed around but have single ownership, critical for your important UCaaS services.

Having a single supplier will also reduce additional challenges and costs related to deployment and support; while integrating the basic version of Microsoft Teams might be easy, enabling external calls will require additional professional support. Simple things such as buying, configuring and deploying end-user devices can be an additional overhead your organisation can do without, and that can be avoided with a single service provider. Reviewing priorities and how the solution will be managed and supported is vital to match the right UCaaS tool to your requirements.

Conclusion
At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, many organisations adopted Teams as the easiest option for their sudden remote working requirements. However, many are now re-evaluating their long-term communications strategies to understand which solution is best for business continuity and permanent remote or flexible working.

While Teams is integrated into most Microsoft business licences as an internal collaboration platform, enabling external calls requires additional costs, including Microsoft Phone System licence and minute bundles. Microsoft Calling Plans and Direct Routing differentiate in terms of cost-effectiveness, number of suppliers and flexibility of bundles. Alternatively, organisations might also want to consider adopting a fully-integrated UCaaS solution from a different single supplier.

Ultimately, any solution you choose primarily depends on your organisation's current and future needs, such as whether want to retain your current telephony supplier, whether Teams has all the features that you need, how important an end-to-end SLA is to your business, and how cost-effective each option is for your mode of operation.

Sam Winterbottom is the public sector director at Gamma.

Interview
FireAngel & NFCC – The future of fire safety for 2021 and beyond

James King, Connected Home Director, FireAngel and Dan Daly, National Fire Chiefs' Council Lead

FireAngel's connected home director, James King, discusses the role digital technologies will play in the future of fire safety with Dan Daly, the National Fire Chiefs' Council lead and former assistant commissioner for fire safety for the London Fire Brigade.

James King: The National Fire Chiefs' Council is working with every fire and rescue service in the UK to drive changes that will stop events such as the Grenfell Tower fire from happening again. What is the NFCC doing to change the way that buildings, including high-rise homes, are constructed, refurbished and managed?

Dan Daly: In the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, the NFCC worked alongside the government and other partners, carrying out some initial reviews of high-rise residential buildings where there were concerns about their external wall systems. This has led to a more comprehensive review of all high-rise residential buildings in a building risk review process that will be completed at the end of 2021, with NFCC coordinating and supporting the fire and rescue services across the UK.

We contributed to the Hackitt review of the building safety regime, providing the knowledge and experience of all services in carrying out their regulatory role to help inform the necessary improvements needed right across that regime. Allied to this work has been the development of the Fire Safety Bill (FSB), the Building Safety Bill (BSB) and the associated guidance. The FSB seeks to clarify the scope and application of the Fire Safety Order. The BSB will enable some of the recommendations from the Hackitt review and the Grenfell Tower inquiry, but also provide transparent accountability for safety throughout the lifecycle of a building.

NFCC has throughout been represented on the government's independent expert panel and now chairs the Fire Protection Board, looking not only at high-rise buildings, but also developing advice to support the remediation of buildings with unsafe cladding systems and a mandate to look at other higher risk property types.

A major challenge post-Grenfell has been the availability and reliability of information about the built environment. While this has improved, there is still some way to go to ensure that if large swathes of the current building stock need to be reviewed in future, there is accurate information about the occupancy of buildings, the materials used in their construction, their safety systems, how they are being maintained and so on, to inform necessary interventions and actions. This is why the Hackitt report's recommendations for a 'golden thread' of information are so important.

The draft Building Safety Bill was released in 2020, following the recommendations outlined in the Hackitt report. What opportunities and challenges does the NFCC feel the provisions in the bill present?

The draft bill is a really important milestone towards change, with much to be welcomed. However, it's the case that a lot of the detail for the secondary legislation has yet to be seen, and there are some areas where we think the bill should go further.

We believe the scope of the Gateways regime for new builds could reasonably be wider from the outset. The impact assessment identifies that the bill will capture around 400 new high-rise residential buildings per year. This is a small number proportionately, and we would like to see consideration given to including more premise types where vulnerable people live, from day one.

To create the right incentives in the system, the ability for clients to choose their own regulator should also be removed for all buildings, not just a subset. In that regard, we have welcomed the recent report from the housing, communities and local government select committee following its pre-legislative scrutiny.

In terms of new and emerging technologies, having better information about construction products, along with test and performance data, is going to be key to support the regulation of fire safety. Moreover, the bill would benefit from further clarification to improve confidence in the product testing regime to ensure that safe products are being used.

The regulation of construction products should also scrutinise modern methods of construction (MMC) better, an area where an understanding of materials and construction technique performance is vital for those specifying their use. Consistency in this area would better enable building control bodies to focus on checking that products that have been approved are being installed correctly. A shared platform will be essential for all regulators in the area to share data and report deficiencies or instances of materials and products being used incorrectly or beyond their tested limits.

NFCC's submission on the draft bill is available from: **committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/11931/pdf**.

To successfully achieve this, how important is the transition from a paper-based approach to a digitalised methodology that uses connected systems to support remote monitoring?
From a firefighting perspective, it's imperative that we understand what the risk posed by any situation really looks like, and digital technologies can provide an understanding in real time of where people are in a building, what support may be needed in an emergency, what risk the building may present due to ongoing maintenance or failures in mechanisms to support firefighting and what actions must be taken to mitigate against those risks. The real-time availability of this information is crucial, not only regarding the time-critical stages of an emergency but also to inform pre-planning and general awareness for fire crews.

In protection and prevention terms, the successful implementation of technologies that support the capture and evaluation of relevant building information will provide an approach that is extremely efficient, especially when compared to traditional paper-based methods. It will help fire and rescue services target our prevention activities, such as home fire-safety checks, towards the most vulnerable in our communities, informing our risk-based inspection programmes for protection activities and alerting us to changed circumstances in the occupancy or condition of the building to update what we know.

There is a real opportunity at relatively low cost to install fire suppressions systems, common fire alarms and monitoring systems during the build phase of buildings to improve their accessibility and suitability for all residents, regardless of vulnerabilities to futureproof the building for changes over time. Equally, this would give developers the opportunity to market their properties using safety and accessibility as significant benefits. However, the challenge is to ensure we don't forget about the existing housing stock and work with those responsible for them to consider how these systems can be retrofitted to support improved safety, and for the sector to continue to develop less intrusive and cost-effective ways this can be introduced.

In response to the recent release of the Charter for Social Housing Residents' Social Housing White Paper, which aims to ensure greater landlord accountability and enhanced tenant safety, what opportunities does the digitalisation of data present for individuals living in these buildings?
NFCC welcomes the paper and in particular the strengthening of the 'resident's voice'. Public safety goes beyond being physically safe – it includes feeling safe and secure, and the paper aims to ensure that it's easier for residents to raise concerns and be kept informed

about safety where they live and understand their role in supporting their safety.

The consultation on smoke, carbon-monoxide alarms and electrical safety is also welcomed, and we would support the intent to introduce the same legal responsibilities in social housing as those that already exist for the private sector.

The proposals will have implications for landlords and building owners, and these are similar to what we discussed earlier about building safety information. This is an opportunity to consider how digital technologies can connect residents with information about where they live, intelligent systems that support life-safety systems in buildings and information to responders so that the building safety requirements and the intent of this paper are met in a cohesive, joined-up way.

Finally, coronavirus has had a significant impact on the sector during 2020. How has the sector adapted to the challenges of the pandemic, particularly inability to gain physical access to properties and increased requirements for remote monitoring?
Fire services have adapted the way we conduct our prevention and protection activities, working with partners to continue to support our most vulnerable and target

those premises that present the highest risk through virtual delivery and desktop approaches, among other activities.

Connected technologies have and continue to play an essential role in how businesses have adapted, presenting an intelligence-led way for service delivery by using remote monitoring of residents, systems and facilities to reduce physical checks and only responding to issues that are identified.

It's important that we evolve to the challenges presented during 2020 and that we take the opportunity to evaluate what worked well, not only so we are better placed to meet this sort of challenge in the future but also to improve the reach and coverage of vital services to vulnerable persons and targeting of risk for essential services.

James King is the connected home director at FireAngel. Dan Daly is the lead for the National Fire Chiefs' Council and a former assistant commissioner for fire safety for the London Fire Brigade.

South Yorkshire Housing moves to Node4's cloud

South Yorkshire Housing is updating its entire IT infrastructure by swapping its traditional on-premise systems for a single set of cloud and co-location services from Node4.

The housing provider's replacement of multiple legacy providers with a single range of integrated systems from Node4 is part of SYH's ongoing digital transformation programme and is intended to improve its tenants' online experience at the same time as minimising downtime and service outages.

After SYH recently deployed a new core housing management system, it wanted to adopt more cloud-based services. The housing provider now has Node4's Services Gateway, which provides access to a powerful suite of technology solutions such as cloud, co-location, SD-WAN, backup and disaster recovery

solutions, underpinned by Node4's tier-three, always-on datacentre.

Claire Sockett, head of IT, South Yorkshire Housing, said, "As our organisation continues to grow, we needed a provider who would ensure our digital transformation continued on an upward trajectory. Node4 stood out as an obvious choice for our upgrade due to its flexibility and breadth of capability to drive our digitalisation forward and benefit our users, as well as the reassurance of a future-proofed IT infrastructure that we can scale as we go."

Software tools for planned asset replacements

Paul Harrison, Director of Surveying, Integrator Housing Solutions

A flurry of confusion over gas boilers followed the government's autumn statement in November 2020. Had the government just brought a ban on gas boilers in new-build homes forward by two years? It emerged that an early version of the 10-point green recovery plan, seen by The Times newspaper, was correct. The government will move the ban to 2023 or, failing that, implement it, "in the shortest possible timeline."

Is 2035 now the end-date for all gas boilers?
Surprise at the move diverted attention from another major pledge in the 10-point plan: "to set a clear path that sees the gradual move away from fossil fuel boilers over the next 15 years as individuals replace their appliances." Natural gas boiler replacements could be history as early as 2035, which would align with the plan's goal to fit 600,000 heat pumps every year by 2028; that would theoretically see the UK's last surviving domestic gas boilers scrapped by around 2050.

No more low-hanging fruit
As new heat pumps cost 6-10 times more than gas boilers, the goal will add billions to future energy installation costs. Moreover, providers have already picked nearly all of the low-hanging fruit of lower-cost energy improvements, such as insulation and condensing boilers. Islington Council, for example, has only needed to find a paltry £39,000 for insulation work in recent years; by comparison, it spent five times more on domestic LED lights and 400 times more (over £16 million) on a plant to heat 1,000 homes using waste heat from the London Underground.

Unclear energy
Providers now have to assume that boiler renewals in 15 years' time may not use natural gas units, although what they will use instead is by no means clear. While heat pumps and decarbonised grid electricity currently appear from SAP10 to be the government's first preference, the gas industry is pinning its hopes on converting existing pipelines and boilers to hydrogen. However, hydrogen is far from the easy 'magic bullet' option some claim it to be. But since the government has already pledged £500 million to hydrogen research, it's possible that a clear energy winner won't emerge much before a complete ban on fossil fuel-based domestic heating comes into effect.

For housing providers, delivering cost-effective energy improvements in this uncertain environment will

be challenging, especially against the backdrop of constrained central funding and changeable deadlines. Comprehensive energy performance data, at both bulk and per-unit level, will be crucial to effective planning and execution.

New asset management tools
Fortunately, as the November 2020 issue of Housing Technology commented, housing providers' "IT infrastructures, business applications and corporate processes are now fully geared towards extracting that data and proactively using it for business intelligence."

And on the execution side, soon-to-be-available software tools will allow housing providers to 'plug in' their entire housing stock's energy profile for broader strategic evaluations or quickly drill down to subsets or individual units for accurate and specific retrofit modelling and planning. The next 15 years of climate change-driven asset management promise to be very interesting!

Paul Harrison is director of surveying at Integrator Housing Solutions.

Interview
Ealing Council's FireAngel IoT programme

**Paul Cook, Interim Health & Safety Manager for Assets & Property
(Regeneration & Housing), London Borough of Ealing**

Housing Technology interviewed the London Borough of Ealing's health and safety manager for assets and property within its regeneration and housing division about his experiences of selecting and deploying IoT-based fire safety devices and monitoring software from FireAngel.

What is your background at Ealing Council and previous organisations?

After a period in the electrical contracting industry, I moved into facilities management for a local authority, managing their corporate estate. As is often the case in the public sector, through the perpetual cycle of efficiency savings, outsourcing and service reviews, my role expanded over the years to pick up health and safety management and, later, emergency planning.

My last interim assignment was with the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, where I had the privilege of working as part of the management team, transforming the housing repairs service following the Grenfell Tower disaster. This was an incredibly humbling experience where I was fortunate to work with residents who showed their unwavering resilience, engaging at every opportunity to help shape their services and leading the long road to improvement and recovery.

At Ealing, my role includes health and safety management within the housing service as well as technical and operational support to our mechanical and electrical, asset investment and DLO teams.

What was your experience of IoT before the adoption of FireAngel Connected?

Connected stuff isn't a new idea; the IoT label always seems a bit 'Emperor's new clothes' because engineers have been connecting remote devices to other places for a very long time now. After all, traffic lights, railway signals and weather monitoring kit has been 'connected' and sharing status information long before the internet was invented.

Like my peers in the commercial and industrial sectors, I've installed lots of remotely-connected, IP-based systems over the last 15 years. These have ranged from access control and security systems in remote library buildings through to climate control, fire detection and lighting controls across large office campuses.

Why did you consider an IoT solution?

Why wouldn't we? Smoke detectors are a fairly long-term investment and whatever we fit now will be there for another decade.

The technology in the FireAngel kit we're deploying has already been used widely across Europe for the last five years which in technology terms probably gives it 'veteran' status already!

Why and how did you choose FireAngel, and what impact has that choice had on Ealing Council and its tenants?

Being a council project, it's hardly a surprise that our starting point was cost!

We had started a small programme of installing LD2/D1 alarms across our void and specialised housing stock back in 2017 using devices from another manufacturer. When we looked retrospectively at the cost of doing this (including those hidden in the supply chain), it quickly became apparent that rolling out the programme across our entire stock of 17,000 homes would be unaffordable.

We engaged with a number of manufacturers and spent a lot of time 'unpicking' various commercial

arrangements and gaining a better understanding of the various technologies. At the same time, we worked with our procurement colleagues to streamline our total construction materials purchasing across the council. Using a national framework, we entered into contracts with a small number of suppliers enabling Ealing to not only purchase at very competitive rates but also give our residents the highest levels of transparency about our spending.

FireAngel was open and honest throughout our dialogue and this has helped us to develop a trusting relationship which has now expanded to include CEF.

Our 'simplified' supply chain generated significant savings which led us to review our own internal specification against BS5839-6 and our newly-acquired knowledge of domestic connected alarms. After much internal discussion, regulation quoting, theorising, risk assessing and testing (lots and lots of testing…), we adopted an approach whereby we will retrofit a connected category LD1 system into each of our 17,000 council homes in Ealing using grade F1 (battery-powered) devices. This solution provides the highest possible levels of protection for each of our residents, in every room of their homes, all of the time, regardless of their age, their vulnerability status or their mobility.

Working with FireAngel and others, we've developed an approach that allows devices to be mechanically fixed but avoids the need for our installer to drill the 250,000 holes that we would have done previously (and the associated issues with ACMs). The battery-powered devices avoid the need for any surface wiring and containment and has resulted in a hardware saving in excess of £1 million compared with the equivalent product from our previous supplier.

The simplified installation methodology and pre-commissioning of the devices by FireAngel has reduced time on-site to less than one hour per property and means that installation can be undertaken by competent trained staff without the need for wider electrical competencies.

Overall, the cost savings associated with the product purchase and installation easily run into many millions of pounds.

With fire-safety and other related regulations subject to constant revision, how does FireAngel help Ealing with compliance?

In recent years 'compliance' has become a whole industry in itself, a collective often focused solely on the administration, processing and hoarding of paperwork demonstrating adherence to standards and regulations.

"Alexa, ask FireAngel to test my alarms"

We're doing it the other way around. We've sourced the best system available on the market, we're training our contractors to risk assess every property where a system is being installed (we've worked with FireAngel to build individual installer validation into the system).

The system is connected to a gateway which we're securely locating in the communal areas of the block, the network infrastructure is built around Cisco PoE switches, with each network communicating through two independent 4G routers, each with roaming sims. The networks are remotely managed, every device is remotely monitored, the competence of every installing engineer is checked, every installation is assessed to ensure that the maximum levels of detection are provided and the system automatically produces a BS 5839-6 certificate on completion.

We're not complying, we're exceeding, and we still think we can do better.

What are the council's next plans for FireAngel Connected and any other IoT-based solutions?

The approach that we've adopted with our network infrastructure installation has been a bit like the reintroduction of electricity for us; all of a sudden, we have options to install and connect more stuff that we hadn't necessarily imagined.

We allowed 50 per cent capacity on our switches, with the intention of rolling out IP-based video-entry systems and access control when our older systems needed replacing, and we've just placed the order for the first 50 of these systems.

We're in the final stages of validating our smart thermostat and remote boiler diagnostics solution and are currently building our heating servicing contract around the availability of data from our systems. From a contractor's

perspective, this will enable failing parts to be replaced proactively during a single annual visit, thereby reducing financial risk.

From a tenant's perspective, we'll provide more comfortable, controllable homes with less inconvenience and lost income from multiple service calls, and for Ealing, we'll be able to redirect our budgets to where they'll have a greater impact on the lives of our residents.

The technology also starts to give meaningful pre-emptive data about resident vulnerability because of their health or limited mobility. Combine behavioural data with tenancy information and we can potentially replace our clunky paper-based 'premises information box' with a mobile device that's never out of date.

What are your suggestions and recommendations to other councils and housing providers considering IoT projects?

Think long term and get advice from more than one source; standards for IoT are still emerging, particularly in the non-mainstream devices and systems that have been developed for the social housing sector.

In general, the housing sector has become lazy and relationships have developed which don't always benefit our residents. Not only does this approach perpetuate a

kind of 'technology premium' for IoT (usually with the idea of it being the panacea of all things compliance-related), but it also means we're not always buying the best product.

Finally, and most importantly, IoT, connected stuff, dashboards and a datacentre full of AI bots don't excuse you for not getting the basics right.

If the accommodation you provide is fit for purpose and well maintained, your colleagues and contractors are competent and you already listen and respond to feedback from your residents (after all, they're your single largest connected network of finely-tuned sensors), then deploying IoT devices will almost certainly save money, reduce carbon emissions, and help to enhance the lives of residents, closing the technology divide in social housing.

Paul Cook is the interim health and safety manager for assets and property (regeneration & housing) at the London Borough of Ealing.

Thrive Homes and CCHA go 'digital first' with Conosco

London-based IT service provider Conosco has been appointed by Croydon Churches Housing Association (CCHA) and Thrive Homes to introduce a 'digital first' approach as part of their respective digital transformation strategies.

John Stenton, Head of IT, Thrive Homes

Conosco has revamped CCHA's IT infrastructure and migrated its environment away from hosted servers to scalable cloud-based virtual machines, saving considerable IT maintenance and support time each month, with the new cost savings allocated to the housing provider's tenant-facing services.

For Thrive Homes, Conosco will provide ongoing IT and security support as well as consultancy around new technologies.

John Stenton, head of IT, Thrive Homes, said, "Thrive and Conosco both share the belief that people matter more than anything else, and this will resonate with our end-users. We also have cyber-security ambitions in common, such as automated responses to cyber incidents that further improve our security. I think this will be a great partnership; Conosco will offer our end-users a fantastic service and manage our infrastructure, providing a solid foundation for us to build our future IT strategy on."

Low-code software in housing

Housing Technology interviewed low-code experts from Civica, Meritec, Mohara, Northgate Public Services and Rapid Information Systems on why and how housing providers should consider low code (or even 'no code') as a useful addition to their software development plans.

What is 'low code' software?

Benji Fisher, Mohara's engagement lead, said, "Low-code tools are pieces of software which allow non-technical people to build solutions. As the name suggested, they need little or no code to implement and use. With drag-and-drop functionality, an intuitive user experience and easy visual guidance, anyone can take ownership and build out applications for their internal and external customers."

Gareth Edwards, managing director of Rapid Information Systems, said, "We talk about low code as being akin to a Lego set of pre-built parts that allows you to quickly assemble exactly the software you want. If you think about hard-carving a model ship out of wood or snapping one together with Lego, that's the difference between traditional software development and low-code."

Meritec's director of digital solutions, Phil Baron, said, "Low-code platforms allow trained users to build and evolve their own workflows and applications without the need for developers. With some understanding of Boolean logic or, for example, the ability to create Excel macros, any user in any service area can 'programme and configure' some new business processes."

Northgate Public Services' housing product director, Trevor Hampton, said, "Low code is a way to build bespoke applications quickly and cost effectively. With a low-code development platform, you remove the need to code line by line. This is a far more visual approach because the user can drag and drop data input fields, dialogue boxes and design screens, with the code automatically generated in the background."

What are the advantages of low code?

Civica's product director, Helen Rogers, said, "Low code empowers housing providers to configure the software to fit with their working culture and processes. It enables agile and innovative ways of working so that the software can be reconfigured when business processes or working practices change from time to time.

"For example, our Cx Housing customers have achieved efficiencies and cost savings from using low code because they can configure, tweak and improve their workflows and business processes as needed. Of course, 'no code' is even more useful to businesses and promotes agile working and innovation in even more intuitive and cost-effective ways than low code."

> *Keep in mind that not all software has extensive APIs so when a complex integration is needed to another piece of software, some coding would still be required.*
>
> Helen Rogers, Product Director, Civica

Meritec's Baron said, "Housing providers can remove the need for business users to rely on IT development resources to build the workflows and processes that they need for their digital services. A good low-code digital platform should enable the configurator to build a process once and then 'surface' that process to multiple channels, such as self-service, back office and mobile."

Rapid Information Systems' Edwards said, "If you think about those Lego blocks again, they've each been designed and tested to work together in stable and secure ways. They can be quickly arranged and re-arranged in less time with less skill, and since fewer new lines of code (typically none) are introduced, there are fewer bugs and vulnerabilities. A good low-code toolkit will support solutions across the desktop, offline mobile, forms, portals, dashboards, and APIs, allowing completely joined-up and integrated solutions, all on the same platform."

And the disadvantages?

Meritec's Baron said, "Although the advantages of low code generally far outweigh its disadvantages, there are certain scenarios where a more experienced developer would be needed, such as for complex integrations with third-party systems. Also bear in mind that there is naturally a learning curve for configurators when adopting low-code platforms."

Civica's Rogers said, "Exactly – keep in mind that not all software has extensive APIs so when a complex integration is needed to another piece of software, some coding would still be needed."

> *A good low-code digital platform should enable the configurator to build a process once and then 'surface' that process to multiple channels.*
>
> Phil Baron, Director of Digital Solutions, Meritec

Northgate Public Services' Hampton said, "One concern in a housing context is the increased regulations around transparency to citizens; there's more pressure than ever to deliver a single view of customers and assets. Organisations using low code run the risk of no longer having a single view of a person or asset because these types of tools don't always integrate into the bigger IT landscape so compliance can become an issue and there could be a risk of not knowing where all the data is.

"GDPR is also a concern. An IT department has all its security policies and digital protection impact assessments (DPIA) in place but if lots of new applications are being created beyond the main IT structure, it may undermine GDPR compliance, so housing providers need to have strict guidelines on how low-code applications fit within their overall IT strategies."

Low code vs. off-the-shelf software?

Mohara's Fisher said, "Off-the-shelf software is never really as simple as it sounds, as if it can be bought and used straight away. In reality, off-the-shelf software often requires integration experts and extra lines of code to be written. While some low-code software requires a little upskilling, it's still far easier than off-the-shelf software to set up, integrate and build – after all, many people make a living out of being integration consultants for Salesforce, Oracle or SAP products, for example."

Civica's Rogers said, "The flexibility of low-code software such as Cx Housing's 'cases and tasks' engine means you gain the benefits of a framework approach and can tailor from a drag-and-drop interface. Some off-the-shelf-software restricts functionality so you have to adapt your processes to how the software functions, which can be very limiting."

Northgate Public Services' Hampton said, "It's not a case of choosing either low-code or off-the-shelf software. Off-the-shelf software provides the specialist things that housing providers need for strategic areas such as compliance, gas safety and rent collection, whereas low code is a good option when there is an immediate, short-term need or if a housing provider wants to test something first.

"For example, a housing provider might want a simple system to log FoI requests but they don't want to build this into their CRM system without trialling it first. Low code lets you build a solution quickly, test the design and prove that it works first before it's added to the CRM system.

Many commercial off-the-shelf providers, including us, use low code to deliver solutions to customers quicker for exactly that reason."

What IT skills are needed for low-code projects?

Mohara's Fisher said, "There are no technical skills needed for low-code projects; that's the beauty of low code, because it's accessible to everyone from all backgrounds and starting points. Of course, there are a plethora of soft skills that might be useful because sometimes it might take a few hours of Googling or watching YouTube tutorials to get your head around the way low-code software works, so the soft skills that you should build are patience, dedication and a tenacity to make your solution work."

Rapid Information Systems' Edwards said, "You don't need that many IT skills; the right low-code software is easy to set up and has a gentle learning curve, significantly reducing the skills required for development. Low code goes really well with Agile and rapid prototyping, where good project management helps solutions stay on track. Since development takes place much closer to the users (or even by the users), it all happens much faster and with fewer people so less management is needed."

Northgate Public Services' Hampton said, "Aside from the skills aspect of low code, it's really important that your IT department approves the chosen low-code platform: how will it integrate; is it secure; and what will the new application be used for?

"For example, if it's a cloud service, it needs to be given the appropriate permissions so it can connect through any firewalls or security systems, then IT can step back and it's just about good project management skills to manage the scope and make sure the application is simple and focused on the outcomes and objectives throughout its development cycle."

> *While some low-code software requires a little upskilling, it's still far easier than off-the-shelf software to set up, integrate and build.*
>
> Benji Fisher, Engagement Lead, Mohara

Low-code barriers

Rapid Information Systems' Edwards said, "Low code offers flexibility and freedom for housing providers who know exactly how they want to improve their operations but haven't been able to find the exact fit – it doesn't help those who just want to remain middle-of-the-road.

"Some low-code solutions are expensive and complicated so the benefits are outweighed by the cost and steep learning curve. My advice would be to start with something small and innovative and then measure the benefits."

Mohara's Fisher said, "Having a team that's willing to try something new could be a barrier, not just for housing providers but for any business considering the low-

> *It's really important that your IT department approves the chosen low-code platform: how will it integrate; is it secure; and what will the new application be used for?*
>
> Trevor Hampton, Housing Product Director, Northgate Public Services

code route. You need someone in the team to dedicate themselves to learning more about the low-code solution and thinking about the product vision in more detail."

Meritec's Baron said, "Housing providers usually have numerous back-office systems so there can be resistance to change. We would therefore always recommend setting up a project team that's focused on taking the end-users on a journey with them, rather than applying low code-based digital transformation 'to them'."

What are the risks of low code?

Civica's Rogers said, "Low code often enables non-technical teams to configure software, since no development or coding skills are required. However, this can introduce its own risks around business continuity and security when rolling out new software without training or qualified expertise."

Rapid Information Systems' Edwards said, "There is perhaps a risk that because low code can 'glue' together many existing systems, a housing provider's software estate could become (and remain) too diverse. This isn't necessarily a bad thing per se as long as it's taken into consideration before embarking on any low-code projects – after all, each part of the business should be allowed the tools that are best for them, alongside the right degree of integration."

Could housing providers resell their low-code solutions?

Northgate Public Services' Hampton said, "It would be great for innovation if housing providers

could share their learnings, code, and experience, but the challenge would be around standardisation because each housing provider has their own service challenges based on aspects such as geography, size and demographic mix, plus support and maintenance would need to be carefully considered to ensure a solution remained legislatively compliant and secure."

Rapid Information Systems' Edwards said, "Yes, housing providers can export, transfer, rebrand, modify and extend any apps made with our low-code tools. They could also share them (and their expertise) with our community or collaborate with other housing providers on larger projects." Meritec's Baron said, "In theory, a housing provider could resell its own low-code solutions (subject to any licensing terms from their low-code provider) to its peers, but we believe that they are probably better off focusing on their own core deliverables and leaving any reselling activities to a specialist low-code supplier.

> *We talk about low code as being akin to a Lego set of pre-built parts that allows you to quickly assemble exactly the software you want.*
>
> Gareth Edwards, Managing Director, Rapid Information Systems

"That said, our platform does have the capability to export workflows and process templates which could then be imported into other housing providers' systems, thereby facilitating knowledge sharing and the rapid deployment of common housing-related processes. This is something that has been extremely popular among our local government customers who frequently share process templates among themselves and via our process library."

Housing Technology would like to thank Helen Rogers (Civica), Phil Baron (Meritec), Benji Fisher (Mohara), Trevor Hampton (Northgate Public Services) and Gareth Edwards (Rapid Information Systems) for their comments and editorial contributions to this article.
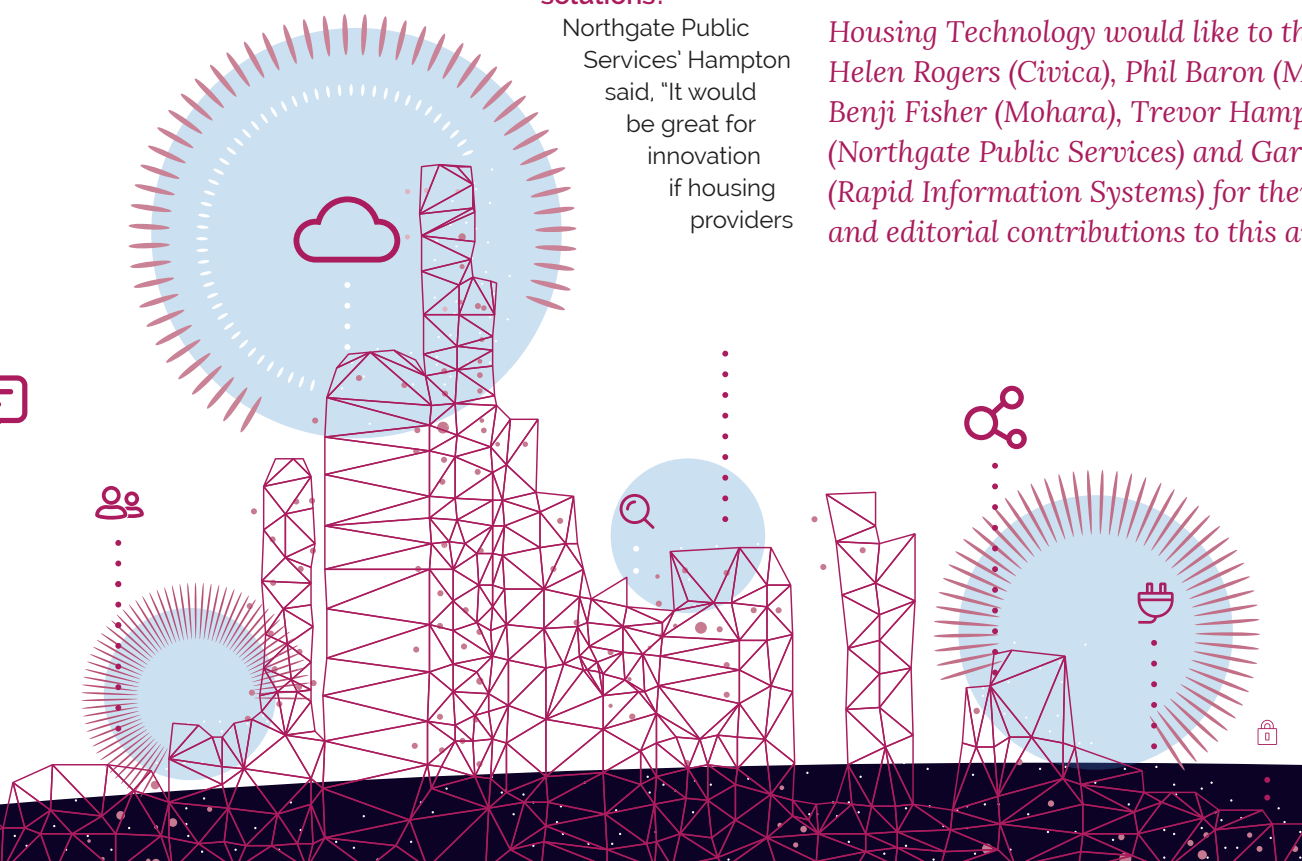
Low-code – Reaching that extra 20 per cent

Peter Luck, Director of Operations, ROCC

A recent survey from Gartner suggests that by 2024 low-code software development will be responsible for over 65 per cent of application activity across all sectors.

Low-code is a visual approach to developing software, which aims to automate every step of the application lifecycle, enabling the rapid delivery of a variety of solutions.

Our developers at ROCC have been telling me for some time now about the potential impact of low-code filtering through to the housing sector, and I've heard about digital transformation journeys using low-code at Hackney Council and Midland Heart, which have both been developing new tenant-facing apps to help move more transactions online.

Opportunities with low-code

The benefits of low-code development include the agility and speed with which new software can be rolled out, empowering housing providers to make faster decisions and respond to changing needs by accessing software development toolkits which have reusable elements.

Moreover, solutions can be built at scale using cloud-native architectures, cutting front-end costs and developing manageable and sustainable IT solutions.

The 20 per cent which low-code doesn't reach

There are undoubted capabilities offered by low-code platforms by using visual templates which software developers can use as their starting point.

Low-code has the capability to cover 80 per cent of a housing provider's IT department's needs, but it's that extra 20 per cent, the bespoke elements of software development, which makes a real difference and which low-code struggles to reach.

For example, interpreting data to maximise job costings for repairs by optimising the scheduling of maintenance operatives or assessing predictive analytics information for housing repairs, such as boiler servicing schedules, add real value for housing providers.

No-code solutions

Low-code enables a single platform to build multiple touch points in a tenant's online journey based on drag-and-drop components. There are also no-code solutions which exist in the back office but are hidden from view.

At their core, professional developers across housing are driven to build creative and innovative software solutions to solve complex problems facing social landlords in terms of delivering tenancy services.

Low-code provides developers with a toolbox but it only goes part of the way towards solving the potential disconnect between business needs and software delivery.

Peter Luck is the director of operations at ROCC.

Why go for low-code development?

Richard Corner, CEO, Alscient

Historically, software and computer programs by their very nature have tended to be complicated. In order to allow technology to be more accessible and available, low-code solutions have been built that hide the complex code, algorithms and instructions behind simple, easy-to-learn and intuitive interfaces.

Housing providers can now build, develop and deliver solutions that release value, reduce costs and provide greater opportunity using platforms that are a strong fit out of the box but can be adapted and customised with minimal technical expertise. Couple that with technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning and you have a platform that can deliver more relevant, personalised and consistent experiences and outcomes.

Rather than write a program in one of the many available programming languages, it's now a simple task to build a working solution by clicking and dragging simple building blocks on a screen or completing a series of online forms. In no time at all, you could customise the technology in your home to meet your needs and improve your living, comfort, and security. To give you a domestic example, consider the problem of a leaky washing machine flooding your utility room. Drop a flood sensor under the washing machine and get it to send you a notification on your phone if it happens again. With a few mouse-clicks, you can do the following:

Take that example and apply it to a business process such as onboarding a new tenant or changing a complaint process and you can start to see how simple it can be to adapt your platform to your specific needs.

The concept of low code is to build solutions without the need to understand or use complex programming languages and instead to use a graphical interface or configuration settings. This extends the reach to a much wider audience.

Housing providers can extend the reach of their platforms to their tenants and homes too. Homes can be integrated, monitored and managed centrally using disparate but standards-based technologies.

For example, in the context of the internet of things, low-code solutions can act as the glue which integrates everything together, giving housing providers the power and reach to build, manage and maintain solutions and scenarios themselves rather than relay on external suppliers.

One platform that has had much success in doing this is Salesforce. It delivers three core releases each year that cover the five core areas of innovation, platform, productivity, mobility and community. The focus on simplicity, agility and delivering solutions that allow you to focus on your organisational needs above all else are the keys to its success.

For organisations, vertically-aligned platforms coupled with low-code software are a key part of the democratisation of IT because it removes the dependency on your IT team. No longer do you need a team of dedicated IT experts to plan, develop, test and release code before the business teams can start using the system.

Low code has always been a fundamental objective, with the promise from the very beginning of solutions that contain 'no code', arguably one step better than low code!

Richard Corner is the CEO of Alscient.

Proptechs and IT start-ups in housing

Following our last overview of the start-up IT companies in our sector (see Housing Technology magazine, January 2020), we return again for 2021 with a selection of 'proptech' companies and IT start-ups that are devoting either all or most of their focus on developing exciting new technologies for social housing, based on the recommendations we received from housing providers at the end of 2020.

ASKPORTER

Askporter is an AI digital assistant and workflow automation platform for the property and housing sectors that enables you to deliver a better service and improved resident experience more efficiently. Our 'assistant' delivers impeccable customer service while leaving your teams free to focus on high-value tasks.

We are working with councils, housing providers and the private sector to deliver fantastic resident-focused results. We aim to give our social housing partners a unified journey for tenants to communicate directly with their own AI assistant rather than multiple departments.

Customer(s):
Lambeth Council

askporter.com

Contact:
Henna Mehta, investor relations manager
henna@askporter.com

BRAINNWAVE

Brainnwave combines the immediacy of traditional business intelligence with next-generation analytics to deliver an intelligence platform aimed at executives, strategists and business teams. Our platform does all of the difficult data preparation, and we use a modular architecture to quickly adjust the mix of analytics to your needs.

The housing sector's move towards self-service models creates an opportunity to open a world of data that was previously difficult to access or interpret and use that to improve the way business is done. We can move away from data silos and niche stand-alone systems to a more connected world, with real-time data integration that enables decisions based on analytics and trusted data – this is what our platform does.

Customer(s):
Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing and Wheatley Group

brainnwave.com

Contact:
Steve Coates, CEO
steve@brainnwave.com

BUILDING PASSPORT

Our vision is to make the worldwide built environment a safer place. Our mission is to not only protect the real estate we occupy, but also safeguard the lives of those inhabiting it. We want to do what we can to avoid disasters such as the Grenfell Tower fire and aid response to tragedies such as the Manchester Arena bombing so that people are safer and feel safer in their buildings.

Building Passport realises that social housing accounts for a large proportion of the 2,000 'high risk residential buildings' referred to in the Hackitt report. Building Passport helps housing providers, councils and 'responsible people' identify and collect accurate and up-to-date information on a building throughout its lifespan to help in the prevention of, and response to incidents.

buildingpassport.com

Contact:
Rupert Parker, founder & CEO
rupert@buildingpassport.com

CerTOn

Using QR code technology, CertOn is a paperless document management system that helps tradespeople, homeowners, housing providers, construction, landlords, compliance and maintenance teams. Anyone involved in property can upload and access documents instantly. Link to a unique QR code specific to your building, to help manage your documents.

Our goal is to save housing providers time, improve safety and help show compliance in all properties, for all users. CertOn centralises work outputs, enabling tradespeople and end-users to understand the maintenance history of a property quickly and conveniently. This ensures that people work more effectively and efficiently.

Customer(s):
Broadland Housing

certon.co.uk

Contact:
Boyd Goulden, managing director
boyd@certon.co.uk

CLOUD CONNECTED

Cloud Connected provides digital solutions for capital works, repairs and maintenance, and servicing in asset-intensive organisations. Our solutions come pre-configured on a market-leading platform with business processes that embed compliance, quality and efficiency.

Post-Grenfell, the sector needs to demonstrate a step change in how it delivers safe, high-quality, sustainable buildings for residents. Our solutions provide a digital 'golden thread' of information as called for in the Hackitt report, seamlessly capturing a chain of evidence from onsite teams through to contractors, landlords and residents. They deliver a complete picture for every stage of works, proving beyond doubt that quality standards have been met.

cloudconnecteduk.com

Contact:
Dinesh Kerai, professional services director
dinesh.kerai@cloudconnecteduk.com

CLOUDATA CONSULTING

In the world of spreadsheets, SaaS applications and power users, it's vital that your enterprise data is brought together to ensure everyone is speaking the same language and making data-driven decisions. Leverage our Cloudata methodology to gain clarity on your business vision, strategy and objectives which we will use to develop your data-driven roadmap with tactical and

strategic projects that deliver immediate RoI as well as long-term strategic value.

Cloudata Consulting is here to help the housing sector bring together fragmented data with the use of industry-leading tools and processes such as Informatica and Snowflake. We are specialists in data engineering and business optimisation.

Customer(s):
Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing

cloudataconsulting.com

Contact:
Taj Nota, founder & managing director
tajnota@cloudataconsulting.com

COMPLYTAG

Complytag has the vision of utilising IT to revolutionise the management of health and safety and compliance across the industrial, educational and commercial infrastructure and domestic housing of the UK. It has already made significant inroads in social housing and supply chain management, with a SaaS offering that brings peace of mind to end-users and managers alike.

ComplyTag brings all aspects of the management of property compliance into a single manageable database. Based on tags with a unique QR code, these tags are attached to the assets to be monitored. A single tag covers all aspects of a home's compliance, including electric, gas, smoke alarms, voids and water safety. In communal areas current usage includes fire doors, fire extinguishers, alarm panels, emergency lighting, legionella, cleaning, lifts and asbestos.

complytag.co.uk

Contact:
Mike Price, director
mike.price@complytag.co.uk

COVVERED

Covvered is an easy-to-use app that tracks your receipts, returns periods, warranties and insurances for any and every household item, both landlord-provided and personally-owned. It's easy to manage multiple properties, item protections and maintenance processes. We can automatically manage repair requests according to landlord preferences. Our real-time data and notifications empower better decisions, and by improving the lifecycles of

everything from toasters to freezers, we are building a more sustainable future.

We are working with Sanctuary Housing to develop solutions specifically for housing providers. This version of the app (available February 2021) simplifies managing assets across a portfolio and in individual properties, dealing with product recalls to enhance safety, and messaging tenants directly.

Customer(s):
Sanctuary Housing

covvered.com

Contact:
Shane Frith, COO
shane@covvered.com

DANIA SOFTWARE

Dania Software acts as a key enabler in the digitisation of both the local and central government throughout Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. Its software provides the public sector with smarter digital workflows in Microsoft 365 and business systems. With DynamicTemplate, you only need one template for all systems.

One template for all business systems – with DynamicTemplate, housing providers can write flawless letters and documents directly in Office and Microsoft 365 using a library of user-created text 'snippets'. You can auto-assemble documents based on user choices, such as responding to queries, sending out information, giving notice of planned renovations and much more.

daniasoftware.com

Contact:
Kim Erbo Christensen, UK country manager
kec@daniasoftware.com

ECCO SOLUTIONS

Ecco Solutions is based in Cheshire and is funded, owned and managed by its four directors. In its early years, the company was commissioned to design software to meet the needs of a charity providing homeless services to Warrington Borough Council. Four years ago, the company launched the current Ecco software, designed from the beginning for the web as a state-of-the-art system for use in the care and support sector.

Ecco provides housing providers with outcome-focused support recording tools, risk management plans and health and safety workflows in a user-friendly, mobile solution, tailored to their specific needs and practices. It is used in social housing to monitor and evidence their support and protection of vulnerable client groups, as well as offering social value reports that help in strategic management planning.

Customer(s):
Places for People, Rooftop Housing, Prospect Housing; Bolton at Home and Central Bedfordshire Borough Council

eccosolutions.co.uk

Contact:
Roy Kunar, managing director
roy@eccosolutions.co.uk

FIREANGEL SAFETY TECHNOLOGY

FireAngel is a leader in smoke and CO safety and has been at the forefront of using IoT to transform the safety product industry with its FireAngel Connect platform. Using its unique industry experience and over a decade of collaboration with UK's fire and rescue services, FireAngel has developed Predict, a cloud-based AI technology that has the potential of averting domestic fires before they even start.

Social housing providers are facing the challenge of providing higher standards of protection for their tenants within already stretched resources. FireAngel's Connect platform has been developed around the needs of social housing to ensure affordability, seamless compliance and the highest level of safety for tenants, all combined with the revolutionary ability to pinpoint properties at risk through its AI Predict technology.

Customer(s):
Ealing Council

fireangel.co.uk

Contact:
Nick Rutter, chief product officer
nrutter@fireangeltech.com

FIXXA

Fixxa was formed to revolutionise property maintenance in the same way that taxis and takeaway delivery companies have been transformed to meet consumer demand. Our mission is to fix the on-demand and emergency property repair market by making it simple, fast, efficient and transparent for the benefit of all. To do this, we harness technology to liberate tradespeople, housing providers and tenants from the inefficiency,

uncertainty and complexity traditionally associated with property maintenance. We guarantee professional, vetted tradespeople for our customers now or exactly when they want them.

Get high-quality tradespeople to your properties now or exactly when you want them. For housing providers, Fixxa is the fastest, easiest and most reliable online platform to book trades by the hour.

fixxa.com

Contact:
Johnny Dunford, co-founder
johnny@fixxa.com

FUZZLAB

Fuzzlab has taken the effort and risk out of implementing your chatbot. By pre-training our product to recognise thousands of housing questions, you can go live in weeks. We give your customers self-service capability for things that really reduce call volumes, all through an automated, simple to use chat window. Tenants can book repairs, register for housing, request a mutual exchange or raise complaints, plus much more.

Fuzzlab is focused solely on the housing sector, and we've designed our product specifically for the digital inclusion of social housing tenants. Processes such as ASB, rent statements, repair booking, housing registration and adaptation requests are all part of our product. Housing providers care more for their customers than any other business, and with our technology, we believe the social housing sector can lead the world in customer care.

Customer(s):
Accord Group, Flagship Housing, Walsall Housing, Wandle, Kingdom Housing and Saxon Weald

fuzzlab.co.uk

Contact:
Scott Summers, co-founder
scott@fuzzlab.co.uk

GRIDIZEN

Gridizen has developed an innovative property management platform. Our full solution uses smart home technology to transform the way housing providers manage their portfolios and interact with tenants. The software, which includes a web portal and mobile apps, offers property managers simple ways to increase tenant engagement, look after their properties and monitor ESG performance.

Gridizen has spent over three years working with the housing sector to create a suite of digital tools which centralise all communication and operational activity. This includes online rent collection, digital maintenance management, community/resident engagement, document library, dashboarding, ESG reporting, smart home integration and more. Gridizen has been developed to focus on what housing providers see as important to provide support to their tenants and staff.

Customer(s):
Oak Housing

gridizen.co.uk

Contact:
Kamran Mahmood, CEO
kmahmood@gridizen.co.uk

HELPTHEMOVE

Helpthemove is a free utility management service that saves property managers time and money. With Helpthemove: enjoy peace of mind that the energy, council and water supplier have been automatically notified of each change of tenancy; get access to fully-tracked property histories through your personalised account dashboard; reduce void periods and benefit from a zero void bill for energy; and deliver significant efficiencies.

Helpthemove will support you to remove a significant administrative overhead and reduce void turnaround times by 20-50 per cent, plus experience first-class service when it comes to debt clearance and engineer appointments. We understand that the sooner you can complete works, the sooner you can welcome someone to their new home.

helpthemove.co.uk

Contact:
Rachael Braddick, head of business development
rachael@helpthemove.co.uk

HOMELINK

Formerly known as Homelync before its acquisition by Aico, HomeLink provides an IoT integration platform, data analytics suite and independent internet gateway for social homes. HomeLink integrates data from IoT technologies, housing management systems and advanced machine-learning techniques to help housing providers reduce costs and improve services. HomeLink's technology has been deployed to address the

challenges associated with fire safety, fuel poverty, investment optimisation, proactive maintenance, carbon emissions, air quality, health and social care, and damp and mould.

HomeLink specialises in social housing IoT integration and analytics. We have well-developed partnerships with key sensor providers to ensure we can provide housing providers with a web of valuable data that is relevant to their challenges.

Customer(s):
Believe, Stirling Council, Royal Borough of Greenwich, Leeds Council, York Council, Poplar HARCA, Bromford Group and Wolverhampton Homes

aico.co.uk/homelink

Contact:
Alex Garmston, marketing manager
alex.garmston@aico.co.uk

HUUME

Huume is the innovative SaaS housing solutions provider, providing housing professionals with intuitive and flexible cloud-based, integrated housing register, choice-based lettings and homelessness solutions that effectively manage and personalise 'housing needs' for UK housing providers.

Huume's ethos is to change the way that 'housing needs' software is delivered by providing customers with the power to configure and change the system themselves. Through regular collaboration with social housing professionals and leveraging new technologies, Huume provides valuable IT housing solutions that constantly adapt and evolve to help simplify housing needs management and offers local authorities and housing providers the control they require.

huume.co.uk

Contact:
Kevin Millard, product manager
kevin@huume.co.uk

ILLUMAR

Illumar is a collaboration between partners in health and housing that aims to solve data challenges in social housing by creating a data management solution specifically for social landlords. It automates the integration of data from all operational housing systems, without replacing the systems themselves.

Illumar aims to change the sector's approach to data management and help see their data as a business asset, not a liability. This approach will help social landlords solve common data problems with a solution that is agnostic to core housing systems, enabling organisations to take a standardised approach rather than developing expensive in-house, bespoke solutions.

illumar.co.uk

Contact:
Steve Malone, CEO
smalone@illumar.co.uk

INFOBOSS

Infoboss provides an automated data management and processing platform via our partner 3C Consultants. The software enables you to manage your data as an asset and leverage value from it.

The benefits of Infoboss include improvements to: data quality management; data compliance; retention management; data subject rights; minimisation; data democratisation and self-service analytics; automation of data related processes; cloud data migrations; and management of regulatory risks.

Customer(s):
Westward Housing

infoboss.co.uk

Contact:
Mark Hobart, managing director
mhobart@infoboss.co.uk

INTOZETTA

IntoZetta Quality provides unrivalled insight into the data health of any organisation. As well as its highly flexible and powerful data quality engine, the in-built reporting capabilities provide the understanding to transform process efficiency and reduce costs. Designed to work in any market sector with any structured data sources, IntoZetta Quality delivers value in a matter of days. The intuitive interface makes it accessible to all stakeholders, delivering insight across the organisation. IntoZetta Quality can revolutionise your understanding of your data.

Rather than focusing on the IT systems that support a housing provider, we focus on your strategy, your structure and the activities that your teams carry out every day to support tenants.

Customer(s):
A2Dominion, Clarion Housing, L&Q, Notting Hill Genesis, Platform Housing and Yorkshire Housing

intozetta.com

Contact:
Dan Yarnold, director
dan.yarnold@intozetta.com

IOPT

iOpt was set up to help housing providers tackle the ever-increasing problems of lack of access to properties, reduced resources and tenants' financial ability to help maintain their homes against conditions such as cold, damp and mould growth. We are combining our experience of working with technology to remotely monitor assets with in-house social housing experience and input from our customers to help drive real benefit in the sector.

iOpt allows the owners and managers of residential rental properties to remotely monitor their properties' environmental conditions and assets. Data that is transferred to the cloud generates alerts and reports that allow housing providers to maintain and operate their property portfolio more efficiently and safely.

Customer(s):
Places for People, Cairn Housing, Renfrewshire Council, Cornwall Council and Maryhill Housing

ioptassets.com

Contact:
Dane Ralston, managing director
dane@ioptassets.com

LETTSPAY

Lettspay, a client accounting platform, automates the rent collection process. Our UK-based team has vast experience in banking and payments. Using the power of the latest banking technology, we support letting agents in collecting and managing rent. Uniquely, each housing provider is assigned a designated digital bank account, with their own sort-code and account number.

We are currently working with a number of technology providers in the sector to build a comprehensive platform that will streamline rent management for housing providers. Our solution can make reconciliation and accounting amazingly simple. We are keen to work with a few social housing providers to help refine our thinking and build the perfect solution for them.

lettspay.co.uk

Contact:
Garrett Foxon, managing director
garrettfoxon@lettspay.co.uk

LOCALZ

Localz are leading experts in digital customer engagement, location and communications technology. Localz provides real-time customer communications and service tracking solutions for field services. Configurable workflows use existing job data and 'geofence' triggers to automate Uber-style tracking of mobile personnel, two-way customer communications and customer feedback.

With an ever-growing client list, Localz is becoming the go-to provider for housing providers looking to enhance customer communications and experiences. Localz is seeing a surge in demand since the start of the pandemic for help with communications around repair appointments.

Customer(s):
Clarion Housing, Wates Living Space, Watford Community Housing, United Living and Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust

localz.com

Contact:
Hazel Pace, PR manager
hazel.pace@localz.co

MATTERLAB

We are a product and innovation lab of technology experts, software developers, designers and entrepreneurs dedicated to improving the built environment. We offer products and services that enhance traditional AEC practices with new technologies and software.

We are specialists in advanced design and construction processes and work alongside modular and social housing developers, empowering them to adopt and embrace new ways of working. By developing customised tools and workflows, we enable clients to significantly reduce costs and improve productivity through design, construction and operations, while ultimately delivering higher quality products and services to their customers.

Customer(s):
Clarion Housing

matterlab.co

Contact:
Mark Thorley, co-founder
mark.thorley@matterlab.co

MGENIOUS SOLUTIONS

Mgenious is an IT services and solutions provider. We recommend solutions aligned to strategic objectives and operational requirements. We encourage new ways of working, inspire innovation and help deliver efficiency gains. Mgenious is primarily a Microsoft partner but we also work with other manufacturers. Our team of consultants are highly experienced and skilled with extensive public sector experience.

Mgenious consultants have worked with several housing organisations (including ALMOs and councils). This includes managing modern workplaces and smarter working programmes, delivering mobile solutions to support building inspections and working with repairs teams. To get full value of transformational change, we believe engagement and empowerment of the whole team is imperative; we help envision as well as deliver.

Customer(s):
L&Q, Tower Hamlet Homes, Hackney Homes and Bromford Housing

mgenious.co.uk

Contact:
Paul Kenyon, commercial director
paul.kenyon@mgenious.co.uk

OCCUBLY

Occubly is a master data management solution focused on housing providers. It enables housing providers to search all data across all systems from a single interface. For the less data savvy, it also offers a virtual CIO service.

Social housing providers usually have data stored in different systems, making it hard to get insights for effective decision-making. Occubly solves this issue without expensive data transformation costs or processes.

occubly.com

Contact:
Mark Mihajlovic, CTO
mm@occubly.com

ONE HUNDRED FEET

One Hundred Feet (OHF) is a last-mile optimisation company, changing the final leg of first response and delivery by creating geospatial data where it doesn't exist. With our Beans-Maps for Apartments app, we enable first responders, delivery drivers, home guests, property personnel, vendors, visitors and so on to find the exact location of parking, entrances, individual units and amenities in multi-family communities.

Navigation to multi-tenant housing is broken. As a result, first responders face longer response times to emergency calls, literally circumnavigating public housing buildings, multi-family apartment complexes, manufactured home communities, senior/ assisted living properties, addiction treatment facilities and dormitories.

beans.ai/real-estate

Contact:
Stephen Goldstein, SVP sales & business development
stephen@beans.aik

OPTUS HOMES

Optus Homes is a G-Cloud listed UK proptech company. We are a developer of innovative and disruptive digital technology solutions for the social housing sector, servicing housing providers of all sizes. Optus Homes has a 'mobile first' approach to tenant engagement but we also provide tenant web portals when required by housing providers.

At Optus Homes, we build tenant app solutions exclusively for social housing providers and local authorities. Our enterprise app is the most powerful solution in the social housing sector, offering bespoke branding with full integration to landlords' existing HMS, repairs and scheduling systems. For smaller housing providers, we also provide a standard plug-and-play app (Empient) requiring no integration or technical knowledge.

optus-homes.com

Contact:
Gerry Kelly, CEO
gerry@optus-homes.com

OXFORD DATA CONSULTANCY

Oxford Data Consultancy is an innovative company with 28 years' experience providing GIS consultancy and data capture to the public, social housing and private sectors. GIS is the most efficient way to keep spatial records of your assets, offering big savings through working practice efficiencies and real cost-savings, for example, by having your grounds maintenance data accurately captured; this alone can save around 15 per cent on your grounds maintenance contracts. ODC has over 60 housing providers as clients, offering each of them a bespoke service.

ODC's unique GI managed service gives access to a GIS officer every working day, providing support, maintaining data, running analyses on your data and much more.

Customer(s):
Cottsway Housing, Loreburn Housing, Trafford Housing, Thirteen Group, L&Q, Raven Housing, Grwp Cynefin, Your Housing and One Vision Housing

odc.co.uk

Contact:
Rick Thompson, director of operations
rick@odc.co.uk

PERIPOINT CONSULTING

Peripoint provides independent IT consultancy for housing repair organisations. Our services include requirements analysis for procurement, implementation activities, business process optimisation and operational health checks. We further specialise in building e-training courses, customisable from our standard course templates, providing a cost-effective approach for comprehensive and high-quality training solutions spanning all roles within the organisation. We also provide product review, design and specification services for software providers.

Our services focus on housing repair organisations, including DLOs and contractors, who are looking for experienced and practical support with procurement or implementation of new systems, improvement of their services or introducing new technologies.

peripoint.consulting

Contact:
Jeremy Riches, managing director
office@peripoint.consulting

PHOTOBOOK

Photobook is a mobile app and web platform that provides the social housing sector with an affordable solution to real-time, instant inspection reporting. Photobook allows you to complete any report, survey or inspection digitally, with instant PDF downloads. You can create your own digital forms or choose from an entire library of forms specifically designed by the Photobook community for the housing sector.

Photobook can work across multiple teams and functions in your organisation, including estate services inspections, tenancy audits and fire risk assessments. A unique feature of Photobook is the ability to rate estates against the standards you set. This approach improves consistency of reporting, increases the accuracy of the ratings and allows you to prioritise actions to improve the standard of a neighbourhood.

housemark.co.uk/photobook

Contact:
Emily Cullingham, communications manager
emily.cullingham@housemark.co.uk

PURRMETRIX

For housing providers who want to get the most from their energy efficiency strategies, we provide reliable measurements of which homes need improving and how. Unlike EPCs, our data is based on real measurements of a home's performance, with no assumptions or hidden defects to reduce reliability.

The result is data that you can rely on when forecasting savings, and a solution that can quantify the improvements made by any retrofit programme.

Our innovative solution is designed to fit with typical asset management practices and provide measurement and verification for upgrade projects including partial measures and whole-home retrofits. An easy-to-use toolset can be used by in-house teams or external providers.

purrmetrix.com

Contact:
Hermione Crease, founder
hermione.crease@purrmetrix.com

RAPID INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Rapid Information Systems provides exactly the software you're looking for, at incredible value on our purpose-built, low-code platform. We help specialised teams digitise, plug gaps between large systems, join up other systems and data into single view, provide offline mobile solutions, forms, casework, workflow, documents, and integration and automation.

We've produced a number of innovative firsts for the social housing sector. Many of our solutions include mobile working, property inspections, repairs, compliance, PKI collection, dashboards and specialised forms and case management for local authority housing, with integration into different housing and document management systems.

Customer(s):
Optivo, RHP, Wandle, Torus, various London boroughs and Westminster City Council

rapid-is.co.uk

Contact:
Gareth Edwards, founder
gareth.edwards@rapid-is.co.uk

REALYSE

REalyse is a technology company that helps real estate professionals stay ahead of the market. REalyse provides enterprise companies with smart technology, real estate expertise, and independently sourced data – prices, rents, yields, demographics, market activity, economics, debt and all things in between.

Liverpool City Council was the first UK local authority to gain 'big data' property insights with REalyse. The council is using the software to identify unlicensed landlords and HMOs and to help track buildings with potentially unrecognised fire risks, to gain a deeper understanding of how planned and ongoing regeneration and development benefits residents in their day-to-day lives.

Customer(s):
Liverpool City Council

realyse.com

Contact:
Gavriel Merkado, founder & CEO
gavriel@realyse.com

SAFECILITY

Building compliance concierge Safecility automates emergency lighting and other legally required testing to simplify compliance. Life is made easier for asset owners because the pain of testing and reporting is managed locally by Safecility's IoT sensors. This means company resources are freed up, saving money, reducing carbon emissions and, most importantly, making buildings safer and more compliant.

Safecility enables housing providers to create and maintain safer communities for tenants and lower the costs of compliance testing, inspection and reporting. Our end-to-end IoT system automates the testing of emergency lighting, streams data to the cloud and alerts for failures in real time. This eliminates significant costs associated with monthly inspections and enables a golden thread of safety reporting and management across estates.

Customer(s):
Vivid Homes, Halton Housing, Mid-Wales Housing

safecility.com

Contact:
Cian O'Flaherty, CEO
cian@safecility.com

SEMARCHY

Semarchy is the creator of the Intelligent Data Hub which empowers business users to become data champions. Its xDM platform can be used by organisations of any size and helps them quickly bring together the critical information scattered across applications into a single data hub, with a rapid time to value. Data can be discovered, mastered, governed, and centrally managed in a non-intrusive way.

We have helped a number of housing providers master their core data assets and leverage the inherent value held within them. We are focusing on helping housing providers improve their resident experience as well as providing a single view of their properties to enable better health and safety management, insight and meeting regulatory obligations.

Customer(s):
Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing

semarchy.com

Contact:
Tim Williams, business development manager
tim.williams@semarchy.com

SENSAT

Sensat is an award-winning geospatial start-up, with the mission to digitise the world through drone technology. Sensat is backed by investment from Round Hill Ventures.

Sensat can assist housing providers with new home developments. For example, property developer Berkeley Group and engineering firm WSP used Sensat to create a high-definition digital twin of a 900-acre site to support them in submitting a successful planning application.

sensat.co.uk

Contact:
James Dean, CEO
james.dean@sensat.co.uk

SWITCHEE

Switchee is an insight solution that combines a mobile network-connected IoT smart thermostat with an enterprise-grade analytics platform to deliver real-time property data insights and two-way digital communication. With a Switchee installed, housing providers can access live property sensor data as well as our proprietary property evaluations, including mould risk, fuel poverty and abandonment analysis and property fabric

surveying as well as communicate digitally through the device.

Switchee was designed specifically from the ground up to suit the needs of those in social housing and we have incorporated features and functionality specifically designed to help. Switchee is better for residents than anything available direct to consumers and it is the most powerful piece of technology ever retrofitted into social housing.

Customer(s):
Flagship, Dudley Council, Peabody and Vale of Aylesbury Housing

switchee.co

Contact:
Alex Brodholt, marketing manager
alex.brodholt@switchee.co

TCW

TCW's innovative technology has analysed and verified over 1.2 million social housing properties. As it stands today, we can see there are over half a million certificates that are non-compliant across the 20 per cent of the UK social housing asset portfolio within our system. TCW checks all certificates within minutes, providing an in-depth level of detail which helps with safety, lifecycle planning, resource efficiency and cost savings.

With the recent recommended regulations mentioned in the Building Safety Bill and White Paper, it's clear that we need to have a more transparent and streamlined approach to compliance checks and asset management. TCW software is the solution to these checks, having this granular level of detail provides actionable insights into operative and asset performance to elevate productivity and improve workflow. Ultimately, we provide the assurance over and above the compliance.

Customer(s):
South Liverpool Homes

tcwin.co.uk

Contact:
Ryan Dempsey, CEO
ryan@tcwin.co.uk

TECHLABS LONDON

TechLabs London is an innovative solutions provider focusing on Microsoft Dynamics 365 and Microsoft Power Platform. TechLabs London is the team behind iProperty Cloud, a full end-to-end modular HMS built on Microsoft Dynamics 365 Cloud. iProperty Cloud is the only Microsoft Premium Solution for the property and housing market globally and is currently being used by a growing number of housing providers of various sizes.

iProperty Cloud is built by housing providers and property professionals for the UK housing market. The solution is fully running on Microsoft Dynamics 365 Cloud with various apps and modules covering customer services, case management, social letting processes, arrears and income management, fire safety assessments, inspections, health and safety, private sales and lettings, marketing and many more apps and features.

Customer(s):
Sanctuary Housing, Notting Hill Genesis, Raven Housing, Red Kite Housing and Origin Housing

iproperty.cloud

Contact:
Matthew Hedges, product lead
mt@techlabs.london

THE SMS WORKS

The SMS Works provides a low cost and robust SMS API for developers. We are one of the very few SMS companies that refunds non-delivered texts, so there's zero wastage; after all, it's a fairer and more open way of working. The social housing sector spends millions of pounds communicating with tenants by text and as much as 18 per cent of that is wasted on texts that never arrive.

We're determined to help the social housing sector reduce its spend on SMS. Prices are typically too high and most are paying for non-delivered texts. There's a huge overspend that we want to help eliminate.

thesmsworks.co.uk

Contact:
Henry Cazalet, director & founder
henry@thesmsworks.co.uk

TOUCHRIGHT SOFTWARE

Our award-winning software helps property managers produce property reports with ease, saving time, paper and adding even more value. Create a host of bespoke custom property reports with a few simple clicks, using the web and mobile app with options to either complete a report at a property, over the phone in the office or use the remote self-service option with tenants.

TouchRight can digitally transform your property reporting for a smarter way of mobile working, helping to streamline your current labour-intensive concierge, block, build-to-rent and PRS inspection reporting. Further enhance your repairs process by tagging issues, sharing with contractors and more. Our open API integrates with a number of platforms for seamless sharing of data, plus the app includes lone-worker protection.

touchrightsoftware.com

Contact:
Terry Lightfoot, director
terry.lightfoot@touchrightsoftware.com

TRUE COMPLIANCE

True Compliance was built to digitise compliance in social housing. Our co-founders, Matt Rawlings and Graeme Kilkenny, have over 20 years' experience between them, having worked in social housing and IT respectively.

No two people within the same organisation work the same way; our focus is to provide a flexible platform that allows housing

providers to manage and organise the data within their compliance streams in a way never seen before.

We believe that with accurate data and simple, innovative and customisable tools, easily accessed on one cloud-based system, will help you obtain… True Compliance.

Customer(s):
Optivo, Octavia Housing, Hexagon Housing and Golding Homes

truecompliance.co.uk

Contact:
Matt Rawlings, COO
matt@truecompliance.co.uk

URBEST

Urbest helps housing and facility managers to communicate with tenants better about their ongoing jobs. Various jobs can be processed such as compliance checks, contract management or simply user requests. Urbest produces data analytics to alert property managers about urgent, critical, and frequent issues.

Urbest helps you to 'supercharge' your housing managers to easily connect your maintenance and repair operatives (incl. DLOs) with tenants and other stakeholders. With more communication among all stakeholders, Urbest guarantees that refurbishment programmes can progress smoothly without minor problems escalating into larger conflicts between tenants, repairs and/or maintenance workers, and housing providers.

Customer(s):
1001 Vies, 3F and Emmaus Habitat

urbest.io

Contact:
Hugo Gervais, CEO
hugo@urbest.io

VERICON SYSTEMS

Vericon Systems is a leading provider of innovative building management technologies. Our mission is to find smart ways of using technology to enable our customers to realise real efficiencies, cost savings and create preventative maintenance programmes, as well as meeting the many legal and regulatory challenges around compliance.

Vericon's suite of devices has been specifically designed for social housing providers, giving landlords a unique understanding of how their assets are being used, allowing risk management and greater operating efficiencies to be realised.

Customer(s):
Broadlands Housing and Platform Housing

vericonsystems.com

Contact:
Bernard Cook, managing director
bernard.cook@vericonsystems.com

WILSONCOOKE TECH INNOVATION

We use technology to create business tools that make a real difference to an organisation and their processes. Whether it be from efficiency gains through to profitability, our aim is to give people back time and allow them to focus on what they do best.

Customer(s):
Jigsaw Homes Group

wilsoncooke.agency

Contact:
Kevin Williams, head of innovation
kevin@wilson-cooke.co.uk

XMREALITY

XMReality Remote Guidance is an AR-enabled knowledge sharing tool that lets you communicate with gestures, speech, chat and pointers with someone at a completely different place. The tool is just as easy to use as a regular video call, but much more powerful for problem identification, assessment and resolution.

XMReality Remote Guidance enables housing providers to support tenants with issues in their home, without the need to send a technician. The tool can be used for troubleshooting and repairs to either solve issues directly or ensure correct resources and tools for each intervention. Use XMReality to easily connect with any tenant by sending a text message and then start a video session to support them directly in their home.

Customer(s):
Kingdom Housing, Aberdeenshire Council and Progress Housing

xmreality.com

Contact:
Johanna Edepil, head of sales
johanna.edepil@xmreality.se

RESERVE YOUR PLACE AT
HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2021

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY 2021 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

For 2021, our annual Housing Technology conference and executive forum will be 100 per cent digital, taking place on **03-04 March 2021** on our brilliant enterprise-grade digital event hub.

10 REASONS TO RESERVE YOUR PLACE AT HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2021 TODAY:

1. **TOPICAL PRESENTATIONS:** Tune in to a wide range of exclusive presentations from industry experts and your peers.

2. **WATCH PRODUCT DEMOS:** Efficiently gather business intelligence and ideas by visiting all the live demos in each supplier's booth.

3. **ACCESSIBLE AND FRESH EXPERIENCE:** Tune in from your home or on your mobile; this isn't just another Zoom webinar.

4. **MEET YOUR PEERS:** Multiple opportunities to connect with other guests and exchange ideas.

5. **JOIN NETWORKING SESSIONS:** Join exclusive and open networking sessions throughout the conference where you'll be live with your peers.

6. **BREAKOUT ROOMS:** Access specific breakout rooms where you can focus on discussing a key challenge with your peers.

7. **VISIT EXHIBITION BOOTHS:** Find out about the latest solutions by popping into the digital exhibition booths to chat with potential partners.

8. **LIVE Q&A:** Throughout all the sessions, you'll be able to pose questions, chat with your peers and ask questions.

9. **ON DEMAND INSIGHTS:** Attendees will receive exclusive access to the sessions to re-watch or catch up on the sessions you missed.

10. **GAIN BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE:** A unique opportunity to efficiently gather enormous amounts of business intelligence and validate your projects.

JUST ANNOUNCED: KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Midge Ure OBE
Synonymous with Band Aid, Live Aid, Ultravox and tireless charity work and , Midge Ure's commitment and campaigning to ensure better lives for those in poverty have earned him an OBE. In his candid and moving talks, he communicates details about his career and the story of how musicians came together to try and change the world.

Andrew Grill
Practical futurist and former IBM global managing partner, Andrew Grill is a sought-after speaker and trusted board-level technology advisor. Unlike traditional futurists who paint a picture of the future in 10, 20 or even 50 years' time, he delivers practical and immediately actionable insights in every session. As a '100 per cent digital' evangelist, Andrew believes that, "to get digital, you need to be digital", and his engaging keynote talks provide actionable insights on how to achieve corporate goals on a global and long-lasting scale.

PREMIUM SPONSORS

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2021'S BUSINESS & IT PRESENTATIONS

AAREON: Data & the acceleration of the 'digital ready' agenda

AICO (HOMELINK): How will the internet of things transform your customer relationships?

BPHA: In-house low-code development for Microsoft Dynamics and Power Platform

CIVICA: The future is bright with Smart Assets

FIREANGEL SAFETY TECHNOLOGY: The future of fire safety in social housing

GRAND UNION HOUSING: The road to driving change (incl. our in-car HMS!)

GUINNESS HOUSING: Transforming our business to cloud during the pandemic

HALTON HOUSING: Innovation in housing – What are the right ingredients?

HAVEBURY HOUSING: An appetite for construction – Havebury's in-house development

ISLINGTON & SHOREDITCH HOUSING: How to analyse repairs data using Power BI

JOHNNIE JOHNSON HOUSING: The positive digital shift as a result of coronavirus

LIONESS RECRUITMENT: The systems skills gap – Specialist recruiters vs. managed vendors

MANNINGHAM HOUSING: Technology innovation from beyond just housing…

MERITEC: Presentation title to be confirmed.

MHS HOMES: Connecting customers and modernising our business

MRI SOFTWARE: Turning data into decisions

PARADIGM HOUSING: Digital transformation – Before, during and after the pandemic

PEABODY GROUP: Introducing micro-service aggregation for business agility

PEAKS & PLAINS HOUSING TRUST: Building safety compliance data after a regulatory downgrade

PHOENIX SOFTWARE: Modernising and securing your workforce, everywhere

PLATFORM HOUSING: Avoiding data fatigue in an IoT world

ROOFTOP HOUSING: How not to implement an IT system – Lessons from the coal face…

ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON & CHELSEA: What does IT leadership look like?

SOPHOS: Cybersecurity incident response best practices for housing

SOUTHSIDE HOUSING: Making the case for digital inclusion

SOVEREIGN HOUSING: The power of a 360-degree view of business intelligence

TSG: "I'm on premise…Get me out of here!"

WREKIN GROUP: Grow your own… Balancing in-house development with best-of-breed 3rd-party software

YORKSHIRE HOUSING: Faster horses & bigger boats – Change in the housing sector

As safe as houses... Building resilience

George Grant, Publisher & CEO, Housing Technology

My earliest childhood memories comprise pictures in my head, randomly coming to mind. I remember being with my dad in his garage at Clapham North in south London and wondering where my mother had gone. It's all a bit vague, but I do remember a very kind social worker and a lovely nursery school in Surrey.

As a single parent building up his business, my dad was working all hours so from the age of about four, I lived in a series of nurseries and boarding schools. Looking back, I was lucky that my dad chose very caring places, and I always looked forward to weekends when he drove down to bring me home to London. Thus, it was in the mid-1970s that I started as a boarder at Colston's Collegiate School in Bristol. Again, it was a very happy experience and I made some very dear and lifelong friends. At that point, we admired and respected the school's founder and philanthropist, Edward Colston; he was seen as a great benefactor to Bristol who supported many charitable institutions, including building almshouses for the poor in Bristol in 1691.

George Peabody

More recently, Colston is remembered as man who made much of his money from the slave trade, and in June 2020, protesters pulled down the Grade II-listed statue of him before pushing it into Bristol harbour. Despite the ignoble source of his wealth, Colston was ahead of his time in his concern for the poor. Later came the golden age of Victorian philanthropists who laid the foundations of social housing. Among the most prominent of these was the social visionary George Peabody, with Peabody Group now housing over 70,000 people in affordable and sustainable housing.

How times have changed since then. At school, I didn't do particularly well academically but I excelled at sport; one thing I had in abundance was enthusiasm. That particular trait has seen me through many roles during my career, and as I feel the weight of the last issue of the magazine in my hand as I write this, I feel proud of the Housing Technology team who work so hard to provide up-to-date technology news, information and research for our sector.

Our editor and co-founder Alastair Tweedie and I set up Housing Technology in back in 2007. He and I had worked together for over a decade on a variety of IT marketing and sales programmes – specifically, Alastair is a skilled editor and talented wordsmith with over 25 years' experience as an editor, copywriter and strategist in the technology sector. Alastair brought with him our designer Jo Euston-Moore who produces elegant and exciting designs for the magazine, website and promotional material for our conferences.

Our last annual conference in March 2020 was the biggest yet, attracting over 600 guests. As many of you will know, we managed to put the conference on just before the country went into lockdown. At the time we were facing the unknown and people were nervous, not shaking hands and bumping elbows instead and remembering not to hug each other, but like everyone else, we had no idea what the rest of 2020 had in store for us.

The Housing Technology team has since worked incredibly hard to develop our digital platforms for conferences. Instead of our annual visit to the BT Tower

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY
Wellbeing

in London, we went digital for the first time. September's 'Resilient Innovation 2020' event focused on how housing providers could use technology to deliver inspiration, confidence and security in their longer-term strategic goals. The technology actually worked, despite a few behind-the-scenes human glitches – you can get a snapshot of the event at **youtube.com/ watch?v=C1dfnaxJkNc**.

To coincide with our Resilient Innovation event, we carried the resilience theme over to the Housing Technology Wellbeing channel. After all, 2020 has been a difficult year for all of us and, it has become increasingly evident that developing resilience is essential – have a look at jobs. **housing-technology.com/wellbeing**.

The psychological buzzword for 2020 must surely be 'resilience'. The conditions of living in a global pandemic are forcing us to adapt to challenging, complex and long-term circumstances, changing how we work and live. As a reaction to all this change, we set up our Wellbeing channel on our recruitment site. We are currently carrying out research in the sector to see what sort of health and mental wellbeing policies organisations have in place.

Resilience can be often misunderstood to mean bouncing back from troubling times, but it can also mean the ability to spring forward to a new phase of growth. Technology is at the heart of building resilience in business to safeguard organisations and plan for future growth. Many of the housing providers we've been talking to

during the pandemic were quick to adapt, such as rapidly provisioning their teams with the right IT kit so that they could provide business as usual for their tenants.

With Christmas and being with friends and families behind us again, we've been able to keep in touch by using technology. It's been tough but made easier by regular FaceTime calls and Zoom meetings. We will continue to look ahead and deliver the best service and information to our readers and report on new innovations and developments, and perhaps 2021 will see greater collaboration between housing associations and technology providers – that's certainly something I would wholeheartedly embrace and would enable the sector to flourish during these tricky times.

George Grant is the CEO and co-founder of Housing Technology.

Video killed the interview star...

Laura Bruford and Jennifer Shorten, directors, Lioness Recruitment

Video interviews have become commonplace since the start of the pandemic and will remain a popular hiring tool in the future. Preparing for a virtual interview is similar to getting ready for a face-to-face one because the questions you will be asked and the ways you should conduct yourself are the same. There are a few additional things to take into consideration when video interviewing, including checking your technology, looking your best on camera and how to maintain proper eye-contact.

Best location

Think carefully about the most suitable place to sit when you are being interviewed. It needs to be a quiet space with no interruptions and a reliable internet connection. Also think about the backdrop and surrounding areas; they need to be tidy and not divert the interviewer's attention or make you look slovenly. Make sure that you get rid of any potentially embarrassing or offensive belongings lying around in the background; your interviewer needs to concentrate on you and not be distracted by the background, especially by anything that could reflect badly on you.

The clothes

A video interview follows the same rules and format as a face-to-face interview, so it's a good idea to wear the same outfit you'd wear if you were going in person. Being professionally dressed will also make you feel more confident and put you in the right frame of mind.

Don't be tempted to skip the bottom half of your interview clothes just because you're only visible from the waist up. You won't feel as professional if you're wearing pyjama bottoms and if you forget and get up for some reason, it won't look good…

No interruptions

Embarrassing interruptions that interfere with the smooth running of your interview are best avoided as much as possible. You want an interviewer to see you're serious about their role so show you're prepared.

Apart from arranging childcare or putting dogs, cats or the iguana in another room, also make sure that you close all other programmes on your computer, switch off your phone and turn off any televisions, radios or music. Any background noise is distracting and will make you look disorganised.

Looking at the camera

Eye contact is important in any kind of interview, but video calls make it a lot harder to follow because you need to focus on looking directly at the camera. It might seem counter-intuitive, but if you look directly at the interviewer on the screen, it might feel like you're making good eye contact, but all they'll see is you looking down.

Body language

Although you're not in the same room as your interviewer physically, body language is still important. Sit up straight, look attentive, be enthusiastic and smile. Remember to not cover your mouth or wave your arms around too much. If you're prone to over-using hand gestures, it's best to hold a pen or sit on your hands.

Practice makes perfect

Having a video interview trial run is not only important for assessing the best body language and practicing your answers, but also to test your equipment; get used to your software as well as check the best angle for your webcam, the best height of your chair and the speed of your connection. If you get the chance, perhaps also do a trial run with a friend so that you can gain an impression of how you look and sound from the perspective of a potential interviewer.

Laura Bruford and Jennifer Shorten are directors of Lioness Recruitment.
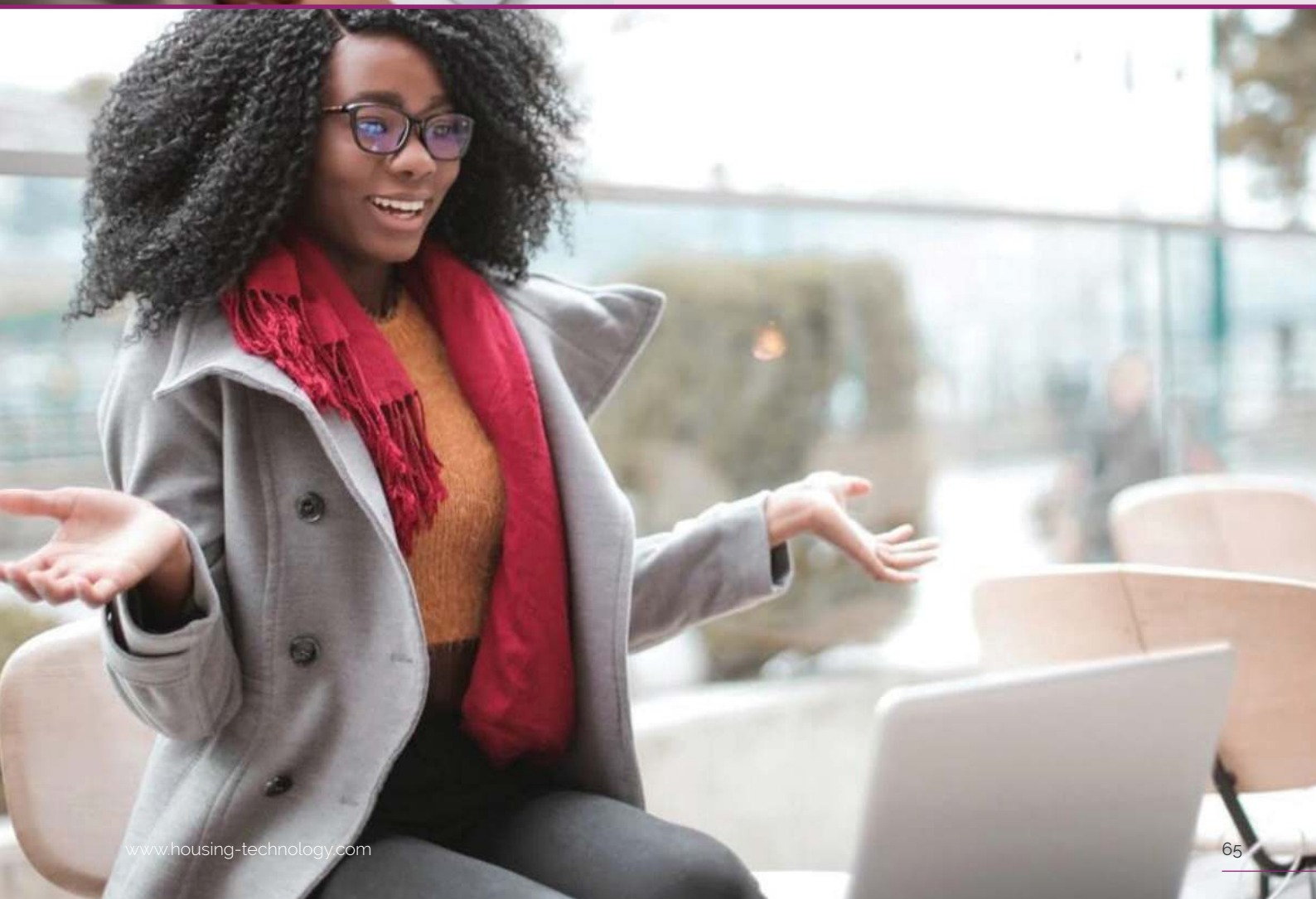
Shutting the door on homelessness

Trevor Hampton, Director of Housing, Northgate Public Services

Trevor Hampton, director of housing product solutions at Northgate Public Services explores how a more robust approach to 'predict and prevent' could help stave off a potential avalanche of evictions in the wake of coronavirus.

A poll at the start of 2020 found that we are all on average just two and a half pay cheques away from becoming homeless. A startling fact that for some people, in the wake of coronavirus, could fast become a reality.

A recent report from Shelter said that around 320,000 adults have fallen into rent arrears since the start of the pandemic. A situation that is likely to be exacerbated now that the government's extension to the emergency legislation preventing any new housing possession proceedings has ended (at the time of writing in early November).

But what if there was a scalable fix that could help housing providers predict which tenants in arrears would benefit most from high-impact crisis interventions? Not a future fix, but one that could easily be deployed now to quickly identify problems and signs of financial distress.

A balancing act
Housing providers have long grappled with the conundrum of keeping rental income coming in while staying true to their wider social purpose – not easy.

And now even less so, in a time of economic uncertainty and the worsening of profound social issues such as domestic abuse, mental health and income inequality.

A rise in missed rental payments in the wake of the pandemic means income managers are chasing more

debt than ever. Understanding why someone is missing rent payments and what support could be given might make all the difference between sustaining a tenancy and avoiding court action or having to rehome a family in temporary accommodation or worse.

Having a 360-degree view of tenants has never been more needed to help keep people in their homes. It has also never been more possible.

A rich picture
The importance of data in housing is now well established and much of the heavy lifting has been done by housing providers themselves to become 'data fit'. But this isn't enough on its own to provide the full picture.

The next step is predictive analytics, where patterns in data are identified and the risks highlighted. This is the brain behind data's brawn and will become a necessary tool in helping housing providers to take a more holistic and nuanced approach to decision-making.

This means the data already in housing management systems needs to be harnessed so that information such as historical rental payments can be enriched with other data to give a more rounded view of tenants and their needs.

Take the arrears list
An automated check can be run against the arrears data so tenants can be assessed and ranked into those most

likely to pay and those less likely to do so. But the list should then be further segmented. What about those on the list who are elderly and have missed payments? They could be behind because they're ill or perhaps unable to pay online.

Or if they are a single parent household with a good history of rent payments, could a sudden few missed payments be the result of a job loss or merely the consequence of their move to a new employer who pays on a different day of the month?

This cross-referencing of information will help the housing provider decide if more help and support is needed to keep someone in their home or a different approach is required.

Preventing eviction

Social housing has always been more than just a numbers game, but without all the information a tenant becomes just that, another number on the list.

Making better use of the available data creates the time and space for income managers to make the right decision for the tenant; it's about using the technology to provide a more human response.

Above all, it enables housing providers to place tenants at the heart of their operations while at the same time taking steps to balance the books.

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

HOUSING
TECHNOLOGY
Wellbeing

Housing Technology Wellbeing is a free community resource on our recruitment website where we will be posting regular insights into workplace wellbeing, careers and skills.

GET IN TOUCH
If you have any thoughts, experiences, news, case studies or advice on workplace wellbeing, we'd love to hear from you.

Find out more at jobs.housing-technology.com/ wellbeing or get in touch at wellbeing@housing-technology.com.

Alternatively, call us on: 020 8336 2293