

# HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™

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# Housing software vs. generic software

## Housing management

Development data, HMS alternatives, AI & machine learning, building information modelling & data quality

## Finance management

Procurement pitfalls, golden threads of information & reduced arrears

## Infrastructure

Data breaches, cloud computing, IoT connections & asset management

## Customer management

Chatbots, augmented reality, customer data integration, unified communications & tenant matchmaking

## General news

IT apprenticeships, data revolutions, compliance, start-ups & IT 'dream teams'

# Editor's Notes

May 2021

**“A horse never runs so fast as when it has other horses to catch up and outpace.”**

Ovid

One of the important characteristics of the UK social housing sector, distinguishing it from most other business sectors, is the lack of direct competition between the sector's participants. Unlike, say, Waitrose and Marks & Spencer or Expedia and Kayak, the majority of housing providers are not competing with each other for tenants (i.e. customers) and are generally good at sharing and pooling their respective experiences and knowledge.

**“Whether it's Google or Apple or free software, we have some fantastic competitors and they keep us on our toes.”**

Bill Gates

However, this lack of competition between housing providers and the scarcity of choice for existing and potential tenants (compared with, say, the private rented sector) is almost the direct opposite of the business, financial and cultural environment needed to foster innovation. In short, competition keeps you on your toes and makes you strive to do things better, cheaper and faster than your competitors.

Without any strong external competitive stimulus, housing providers arguably need to look more closely at their underlying principles and *raison d'être* and use those as their catalysts for innovation (as distinct from, say, growth or regulatory compliance). At the same time, housing providers should make the very best use of their peers' knowledge and experience. After all, based around a model of 'co-opetition', there is an absolutely incredible amount of accumulated expertise among our sector's business and technology teams.

**“Ideas are like rabbits; you get a couple and learn how to handle them, and pretty soon you have a dozen.”**

John Steinbeck

And in the absence of direct competitors biting at your ankles, return to first principles and ask yourself: what are we fundamentally trying to do and why are we doing it?

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PRINTED IN THE UK BY  
The Magazine Printing Company  
magprint.co.uk





# Forthcoming events

## Housing Technology 2022

Annual conference & executive forum  
In-person & digital broadcast

02-03 March 2022  
The Oxford Belfry

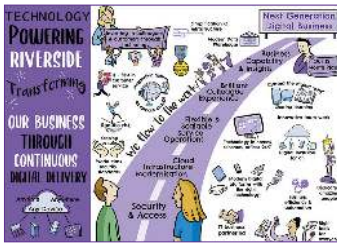
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2022 CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

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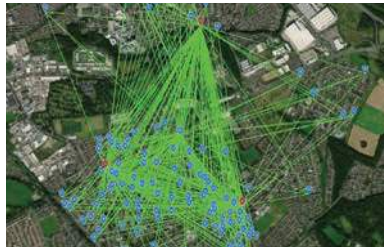
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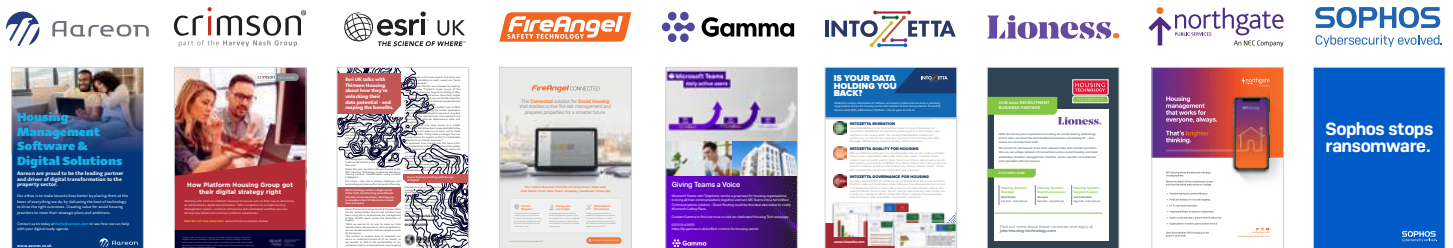


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# Housing Management Software & Digital Solutions

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## Falkirk Council signs with Northgate

*Falkirk Council has replaced its previous housing management system with a new HMS from Northgate Public Services in order to create a one-stop shop where tenants can apply for accommodation, pay rent and book repairs online.*

NPS Housing is also intended to give the council's staff a single view of all tenant and property data instead of having to rely on multiple applications.

Kenny Gillespie, head of housing and communities, Falkirk Council, said, "With NPS Housing, the new technology opens many more opportunities to explore innovations such as robotic process automation and the internet of things."

NPS Housing will enable the council's housing staff to access and update information on tenants and properties

from any device, whether they are in the office processing housing applications, working from home or visiting tenants.

With a single login, tasks such as managing housing stock, processing payments and arranging repairs can be carried out more easily, with all data stored securely in one place, eliminating the need for separate housing systems.

## Stockport Homes' £1.2m deal with Civica



Stockport Homes has signed a five-year contract with Civica worth £1.2 million. Civica will supply its cloud-based Cx Housing, Asset Management, Contractor Workforce and Abris software to streamline tenant services, increase automation and improve mobile services.

Civica's software will support Stockport Homes' plan to consolidate all online processes and move to a more tenant-centric model. It will enable a single view of tenants, properties and assets on one mobile-enabled system as well as providing the foundations for the housing provider to expand its commercial activities alongside its housing operations.

With Stockport Homes aiming to move 70 per cent of all transactions online by the end of 2023, Cx will simplify all tenant transactions through a configurable customer portal where tenants can apply for housing, bid for properties, log repairs and make rent enquiries.

Cx will offer simplified access for the housing provider's staff, with all tenant information available in one place rather than spread across multiple applications as it is at the moment. Improved workflow and automation alongside integration with Office 365 and SharePoint is expected to improve internal communications, boosted by mobile-enabled access via any device.

John Chambers, group head of IT, Stockport Homes, said, "Civica's Cx platform will improve our tenants' experience and simplify processes for our staff, with the added benefit that Civica Cx is flexible enough to support our growing commercial objectives."

# Stonewater transforms its housing development data

*Stonewater has completed one of the first full integrations of MIS-AMS's ActiveH software with the Pamwin software commonly used for housing developments, with project management and technical support from 3C Consultants.*

Data about Stonewater's housing developments is managed by Pamwin and then transferred to Stonewater's ActiveH housing system once the scheme has been completed. Until now, the data transfer has been done using spreadsheets and manual inputs from Stonewater's development team, making it a tedious, error-prone and time-consuming task.

Stonewater has now successfully transformed the process and launched a data integration with ActiveH. Stonewater's systems automatically transfer the property details from Pamwin to ActiveH.

Joe DeMeyer, business systems developer, Stonewater, said, "This project hit so many buttons. Because it allows the seamless transfer of data, we can operate much more efficiently. Until now we've had to input data via CSV files and manual processes. This new direct-integration approach means there is one single source of data."



In addition to automating the data transfer, the system now also distributes information about any new housing developments to all relevant Stonewater staff. For example, the finance team receive information on social rent calculations, revenue audit reports and financial services reports.

Meanwhile, for staff involved in housing and asset management, the integration means the automation of asset attributes should reduce the chances of any incorrect asset details being assigned to properties.

Holly Edwards, head of lettings, Stonewater, said, "Data is vital to everything that we do, especially when it comes to lettings. It's



important that when homes come up for let, all the information is immediately there at our fingertips. The ActiveH/Pamwin integration provides assurance that our data is timely and accurate, enabling faster re-letting of our properties in future."

Charles Brooks, programme director, 3C Consultants, said, "This was a complex project involving three different parties and one of the first real-time integrations of Pamwin and ActiveH. Thanks to Stonewater's commitment to dedicated project resources and strong project governance, the project was successfully delivered in a timely manner."

## North Star locks down with Exponential-e

*North Star Housing's decision to migrate its entire legacy infrastructure to a virtual datacentre with Exponential-e paid dividends during the various lockdowns in the UK. The main migration was accompanied by full replication at a second UK datacentre and a WAN interlink between multiple sites used as the backbone for a move to Office 365 for the entire organisation.*

The housing provider's virtual infrastructure from Exponential-e quickly demonstrated its value during the pandemic by enabling North Star's staff to seamlessly work from home, without any interruption to tenants' preferred communication channels.

Sean Lawless, head of ICT and digital, North Star Housing Group, said, "At its core, housing is all about people and it's important that we don't lose sight of that when we explore the various opportunities offered by digital transformation,

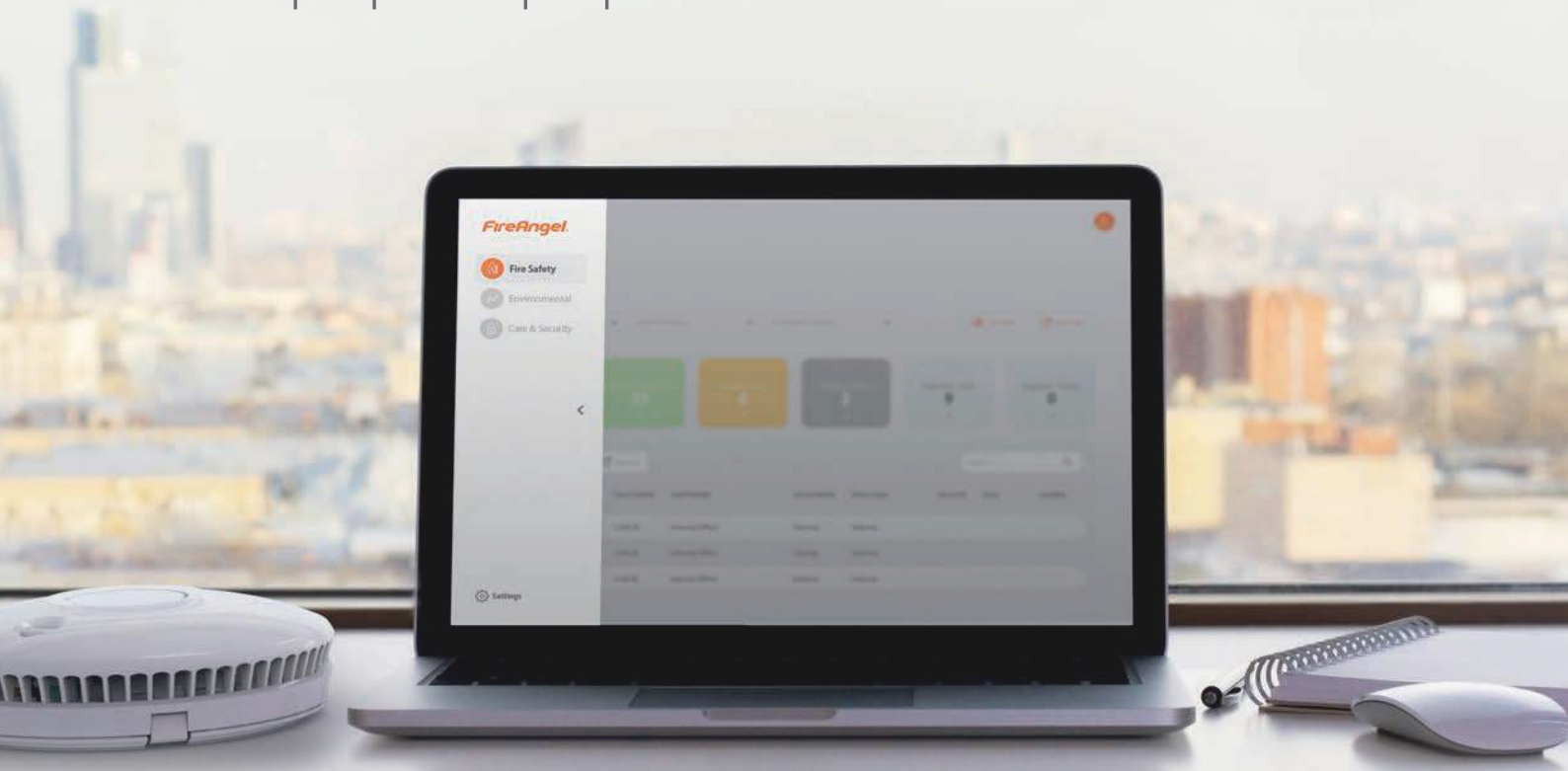
whether it's maximising cost control or optimising our communication channels.

"This has been the focus of all our digital transformation efforts, particularly during 2020 when it was more important than ever that our tenants could contact us whenever they needed to. The partnership with Exponential-e has been a key part of our success, providing our staff with everything they've needed to focus on our tenants' wellbeing."



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# Life after housing management systems

Rob Fletcher, Housing Solutions Lead, TSG

*Housing providers have a wide range of options available to them when considering their existing housing management system. I've worked for housing providers in ICT leadership roles for over 20 years and have recently joined TSG, a Microsoft partner specialising in building advanced digital solutions for housing customers.*

## Build

Going alone is rarely an attractive option for most people owing to the upfront costs and the ongoing maintenance and development costs. Although, once built, you can bespoke your custom-built housing software very quickly to meet your needs, for most people the rewards are outweighed by the associated costs and risks; consequently, there are very few examples of this being done successfully.

## Buy housing-specific

The established vendors of housing software include Aareon, Capita, Civica, MRI Software (Orchard Systems and Castleon Technology), MIS Active Management Systems and Northgate Public Services. These companies have developed purpose-built systems specifically for housing associations to run their core processes. They are regarded as best-of-breed and have been tried and tested over many years. These vendors have also continued to invest in the development of their systems and are increasingly working to deliver pure SaaS solutions delivered via a browser on any device.

Interestingly, there is some disruption going on and some new entrants arriving in the form of Rubix and Techlabs' iProperty Cloud.

In some circles, there is a sense of disillusionment regarding the traditional systems across the sector. This sentiment is driven by the perceived slow pace of change, a move to the cloud vs. on-premise, the demand for open systems and the cost of ownership. Housing customers

are looking for innovative options to modernise their software platforms while building in the potential for faster change at a lower cost.

## Generic universal appeal

So what is 'generic' software? I think it's worth defining this term for complete clarity. Generic software is software that isn't purpose-built for housing. The idea of generic software is that it's generically applicable across multiple market sectors and industries and is not exclusively designed for one specific sector. The argument here is that all businesses have a common set of core business processes (although the terminology may vary), such as goods-in, logistics, goods-out, invoicing, HR, payroll and finance.

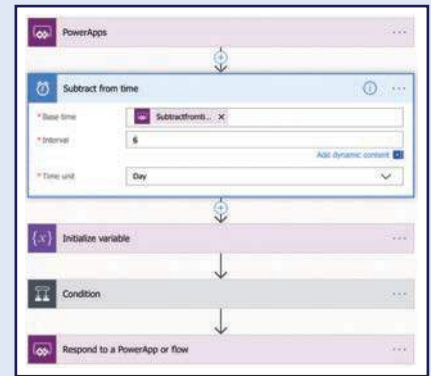
While there is a recognition that there are variances between organisations, the argument runs that these variances can be accommodated through configuration or through a partner-enabled integrated ecosystem that extends the core generic software, tailoring it to specific industries, sectors or vertical requirements.

Leading examples of this approach include vendors such as SAP, Oracle, Salesforce and Microsoft. SAP's largest deployment in housing is at Sanctuary, Oracle at Home Group, Salesforce at Riverside and Microsoft Dynamics 365 at Clarion and Bromford.

## Empower your people

At this point, it's definitely worth mentioning the considerable and widespread adoption of low-code/no-code solutions. According to Gartner intelligence, leading providers offering low-code/no-code solutions are





Microsoft, Outsystems, Salesforce and Mendix. Netcall is also an interesting supplier to the housing sector offering low-code capabilities within its Netcall Liberty platform.

The idea of low-code/no-code is to democratise software development by enabling empowered 'power' users to rapidly develop sophisticated software. This is done by dragging and dropping graphical components onto a black canvas within an integrated development environment (IDE).

Having created the core components, using drag and drop, you then simply connect those components to connectors in order to trigger actions, integrations and if/then/else conditional logic. TSG has a large number of housing customers who have worked with us (using Microsoft Power Platform) to develop modern digital solutions that extend the features in their legacy housing systems across the modern SaaS Microsoft cloud.

### Middleware

Whichever strategy you explore, you will sadly never avoid the need for integration and interfaces between systems. The reality in housing is that you will never get away with one system for everything. Middleware or interfaces are therefore needed to 'glue' it all together.

### Different directions

As of 2021, it's likely that most housing providers will continue to buy or retain a traditional purpose-built HMS from one of the 'usual suspects' for the time being. However, this will be accompanied by a degree of soul-searching and chin-scratching.

A number of organisations are opting to work with Microsoft's Gold partners in an attempt run their entire housing organisation on a consolidated Dynamics 365 platform. However, more often than not, these same organisations decide that Dynamics doesn't provide the entire solution and they need to retain a traditional housing system to some extent, particularly in the areas of rents, income management and asset management.

Other organisations accept that they will need to retain a nucleus of traditional housing system functionality but 'wrap' generic software around it to achieve an integrated, multi-vendor, best-of-breed approach, blending their existing system(s) with new technologies.

Despite these three primary strategic options, housing providers are increasingly discovering the delights of low-code/no-code automation solutions and Microsoft's Power Platform (comprising Power Automate, Power Apps, Power BI and Power Virtual Assistants).

### AI and machine learning

TSG was one of the sponsors of the Housing Technology 2021 conference/digicast in March and our presentation at this year's event centred on using AI and machine learning integrated with Power Platform. Our demonstrations illustrated how it's possible to extract metadata from documents such as gas and electrical certificates using Microsoft Syntex and process that extracted data automatically using Power Automate to drive compliance with the 'big six' health and safety requirements.

At Housing Technology's 2021 conference, we were also very excited to be able to talk about Microsoft Viva and Dataverse. Following the success of Dynamics 365 and Teams, Syntex, Viva and Dataverse represent the next generation of advanced technologies available within the Microsoft cloud. We have a series of webinars and 'lunch and learn' sessions coming up shortly to show you what these innovations can do for you, so please get in touch if you would like an invitation.

### Taking a Microsoft-first approach

If you haven't considered how a Microsoft-first approach to modernising and extending your HMS might transform your strategic choices, then you might want to take a look. Microsoft Power Platform, Syntex, Viva and Dataverse provide the tools that enable you to rapidly develop software that extends and complements your existing HMS. These will provide you with the modern cloud tools that enable you to add more value to your business by accelerating software development timescales and reducing costs.

The collaborative nature of Microsoft's products as well as its commitment to streamlining productivity might make Microsoft an essential part of your digital strategy.

*Rob Fletcher is housing solutions lead for TSG.*

# Building information modelling – A marathon, not a sprint



Roy Danon, Co-Founder & CEO, Buildots

*The house building sector's digital transformation is underway, yet while some parts of the sector are fluent in building information modelling (BIM), common data environments (CDE) and the internet of things (IoT) and more (with 3D modelling being one of the main methodologies and processes that's changing the landscape), others are resistant to change. Buildots' co-founder and CEO, Roy Danon, offers some insights into why BIM is the single enabler for many modern technologies that are being developed for the sector and explains how critical it is for companies to adopt this technology.*

The construction industry's digital journey encompasses many aspects including apps, AI, IoT and other bespoke software. They are becoming increasingly important across construction projects because businesses are realising that complex processes are made easier with the aid of technology. With digital solutions, risks are being mitigated and what were once arduous programmes of work are now far more efficient and seamless.

## **Cross-sector involvement**

But the technology that's making the greatest difference is BIM, which is at the core of the industry's digital offering. BIM is the first time that the industry has an agreed end-product that it's aiming to create through its delivery

process; it's the first time the different pieces of the puzzle are properly coordinated. It is therefore creating (well, in most cases) an agreed goal for the first few years of construction's process.

For example, Hilti recently announced its Jaibot, a robot aimed at replacing some of the repetitive and dangerous works conducted on site. It requires good and final plans to operate, otherwise it will not be able to drill holes properly. Other technologies, such as AI-based programme generation and optimisation, need BIM to fully grasp the complexity of the project it is planning and provide the best course of action.

## **At the centre of operations**

In the case of us, Buildots puts BIM at the centre of a site's day-to-day operations. It leverages the capacity of off-the-shelf 360-degree cameras to inject as-built data into BIM models, creating a perfect view of the status of works. On top of the live model, an advanced dashboard system creates the construction control centre, showing progress reports, monthly valuations and flags any divergences from designs or programme.

Once the model becomes live, other participants can tap into the model to receive real-time progress information, to trigger shipments, streamline payments or generate better execution plans for the following week.

Construction companies that invest in creating workflows around BIM are well positioned to quickly leverage new products that can directly affect their bottom lines.

## **Growing BIM adoption**

The NBS's National BIM Report 2019 highlights a 60 per cent increase in BIM adoption from 2011 to 2019. The government's Construction 2025 targets will further help BIM to raise its profile. To fulfil the government's targets, many contractors and asset owners are turning to smarter and greener methodologies and processes. BIM's enabling value plays an important role in this case because these parties will want to be able to predict their footprint prior to construction and measure it once an asset is in use.



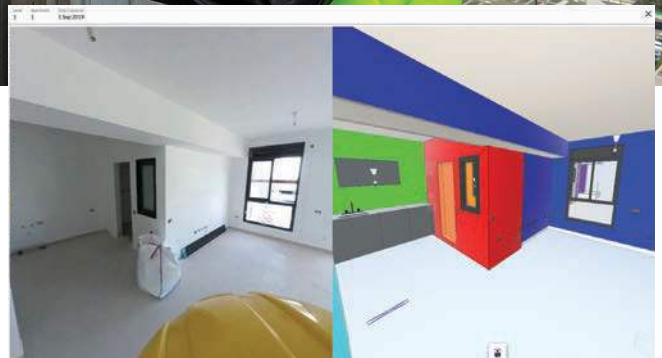


BIM's value will become further recognised as the industry strides towards greater quality and traceability. Dame Judith Hackitt's golden thread of information has been lauded as one of the most prominent methods the industry should adhere to in order to ensure best practice across the board. To align with this process, there will be greater demand from companies to know and understand the role of visible data within an asset or project. Having a clear audit trail of what has been done, who did it and how it was installed will create this all-important golden thread of information. It will also highlight the value of data. Instead of gathering dust in a filing cabinet or stowed away on a server, data will be essential to informing the decision-making process regarding a building's performance.

### Connected data

This is where the concept of connected data comes in. Historic data stored across multiple, disparate silos could theoretically be of use to the asset owner, yet the way in which it is held often renders the information inaccessible and inefficient. At the same time, neither can this data help to craft a reliable like-for-like image of how a building is performing; old data is a reference of what occurred and not necessarily a tool that confidently reports on how an asset is currently operating.

In the case of the data created using Builddots, in addition to the immediate value for the construction project team, the collected historical data of multiple projects can be combined to create even greater value. A construction company could use that to benchmark its projects and activities, decide how to better plan its next projects or focus on construction methods that are more suitable for its particular workflows and expertise. It creates opportunities to identify repeated problems or common bottlenecks throughout the company's entire portfolio of projects and then develop new workflows and processes to avoid those in the future.



Although many housing and construction businesses are resistant to change, BIM should turn the heads of many sceptics because it offers so many benefits, particularly because we expect many of the new construction technologies to only work on BIM-enabled projects. This will inevitably widen the productivity gap between companies which have adopted change versus those that stayed behind.

*Roy Danon is the co-founder and CEO of Builddots.*



# Where to start with data quality

David Bamford, Head of Deployment, IntoZetta

*When it comes to physical assets such as homes and offices, ensuring they are known, well-maintained and fit for purpose is at the core of every housing provider's operations, so why do so many not treat data in the same way?*

Whether they realise it or not, data is the lifeblood of any housing provider. It drives their efficiency, their income and their customer experience, yet it's often considered more of a necessary evil than a valuable asset.

The best housing providers leverage their assets to fuel decision-making at all levels and to better understand the people they serve. By treating data strategically, forward-thinking organisations can give both themselves and their tenants better outcomes.

For housing providers which haven't yet reached that level, now is the time to plan the journey from being data-rich yet information-poor to being wholly data-driven. Data-quality management is a specialism but one that's rooted in common sense. The goal is to get accurate and reliable information to the right people at the right time, no more, no less.

This could be providing potential customers with an up-to-date view of the available stock, recognising and accommodating a customer's vulnerability, providing a maintenance engineer with the correct address and job details or providing the senior leadership team with accurate financial information. At every level, in every operation, better quality data adds tangible value.

## Step one – Get the right team

Many housing providers choose to operate with a chief data/information officer, others opt for a head of data role and some manage change from the COO's office. Whichever the case, having senior sponsorship of transformational data activity is vital.

From there, experts from both the technical and operational sides of the organisation need to be brought together. Data-quality transformation should be a business-led activity, supported by technologists along

the way. By bringing together both sides early in the initiative, buy-in can be assured and this is essential to success.

Tackling complex data-quality issues can be as much about building a consensus among peers as it is about technical investigation, so the leader of any data-quality activity should have strong negotiation and communication skills. Resources for root-cause analysis and data cleansing will need a solid understanding of the business operations and good technical competence to ensure they can see issues from all sides, leading to more robust fixes.

## Step two – Think about potential data-quality partners

The right partner will act as an accelerator and provide the specialist (albeit temporary) skills needed to get a data-quality initiative started. From planning and design through to execution, an experienced partner with knowledge of the housing sector should provide best-practice advice and help avoid the common pitfalls.

They can also provide expertise on the software available to support data-quality management and how that software can be leveraged to maximise its value. Finally, where resources are scarce, many partners will be able to deliver 'turnkey' solutions to get the ball-rolling while the internal resources are being established.

## Step three – Decide your strategy

One of the secrets to a successful data-quality exercise is focusing on where invention is truly necessary. While the idea of measuring the quality of all data sources may sound appealing, the reality is starkly different. Identify key business processes and regulatory requirements (such as NROSH) and start with the data items that feed



those. In most instances, this will reduce the project scope to something that is manageable and (usually) well understood.

Another key piece of advice is to take the lead from software development processes and deliver 'little and often'. Choose one area to make a start and work it through before starting on the next key area. This will build momentum, allow lessons to be learned and spread the load on all stakeholders over a longer period, allowing parallel activities to continue unaffected while still providing value and confidence in the data-quality project's potential.

#### **Step four – Build momentum & prove the concept**

That word 'momentum' is hugely important in data-quality projects. Build momentum by quickly choosing and implementing a software package to support data-quality measurement and starting to prove the value in doing the work. Here is where a partner will add the most value, in terms of getting rule-sets developed quickly and accurately.

Bring people on the journey by starting a regular data-quality forum with representation from all key areas, even those not initially directly involved. This will encourage people to contribute to how data quality could be improved in their area, and quickly highlight any overlaps which might increase the priority of certain issues.

#### **Step five – Prioritise the results**

Prioritising the issues found is so important. Many data-quality projects fail because teams become over-faced with the volume of issues and lose sight of the value of issues. Low-volume issues in critical data-fields almost always represent more valuable cleanses than high-volume issues in less critical areas. For example, do you really need a four-line address for your processes to

be successful or will just the first line and postcode be enough for them to work?

#### **Step six – Cleanse and fix**

Cleansing data could be a whole article on its own! However, as a starting point it's important to create stretching yet achievable data-quality targets. Aim for 97-98 per cent quality in key fields; 100 per cent is neither likely nor cost-effective. Use a prioritisation matrix to identify the short-, medium- and long-term wins. Disregard any which cost more to fix than work around but do look at their root causes to prevent more being created.

Root-cause analysis is also a vital facet of these projects; this is what prevents cleansing becoming 'regret spend'. Many organisations overlook this part and enjoy clean data only for a short time after investing in cleansing. Prevention is preferable to the cure so look at your end-to-end processes from all angles, from technology issues to training, incentivisation, resource levels and process efficiency; you will find gains to be made.

#### **Step seven – Expand and repeat**

Once a successful pilot has been completed, expand its coverage to more key areas and processes. Keep the quality forum alive, keep communicating your progress and results and encourage people to highlight any work-arounds that could be removed or any other persistent issues which are harming your customer experience.

Finally, enjoy the benefits of high-quality data. Better decisions made faster; better customer experience, consistently; and a more efficient business, delivering real value.

*David Bamford is head of deployment at IntoZetta.*





## Cadline's 'golden thread' platform

Cadline's DynamicAIM asset management software now supports the 'golden thread' outlined in the Hackitt report.

DynamicAIM is an all-in-one solution for digitising building details including all BIM, survey and asset information, enabling property owners and managers to securely preserve and access vital information when needed. Wolverhampton Council and Peabody Group are two early adopters of the Cadline software.

A spokesperson for Peabody Group said, "As our main 3D survey and BIM supplier, Cadline's DynamicAIM helps us to digitise our stock and centralise data while working towards conforming to the Hackitt report's recommendations and new guidelines from the government."

In contrast with the traditional manual and often geographically-dispersed storage of property details, the ability to digitally store and view all details on a single digital platform means asset managers can maintain buildings and facilities more effectively and safely. Furthermore, DynamicAIM is enabling organisations to comply with the Building Safety Bill, which is likely to require a digital version of any residential buildings above 18 metres high.

Matt Lees, head of engineering, Cadline, said, "It's a building owner's responsibility to preserve asset information in order to have the means to appropriately maintain the building and its contents. The failings in this regard were well documented throughout the Grenfell Tower inquiry.

"Now, all asset details, from specific measurements through to large-scale plans, can be shared among architects, fire engineers, safety managers and other stakeholders on one platform. This is so important for those people responsible for addressing immediate safety requirements and to provide better transparency for tenants and staff."

DynamicAIM is built on Cadline's existing DynamicMaps software. DynamicAIM handles big data and enables asset owners to view any element of a building virtually via 3D models or 360-degree virtual tours. The software can also obtain measurements, making future adjustments, repairs or maintenance easier and faster.

# IS YOUR DATA HOLDING YOU BACK?



IntoZetta's unique combination of software and expert professional services is providing organisations across the housing sector with solutions to their data problems. Trusted by Clarion, L&Q, NHG, A2Dominion, Platform – the list goes on and on.



## INTOZETTA MIGRATION

Failed Data Migration is the most common reason for programme delay and cancellation. IntoZetta has delivered many of the largest and most complex data migrations in the housing sector. Our Housing Data Migration software and experienced consultants have supported migrations to and from Dynamics 365, Northgate, OPENHousing, Universal Housing, Orchard and more.



## INTOZETTA QUALITY FOR HOUSING

With over 1000 pre-configured housing data quality rules, we can create a complete picture of your organisations data quality within a few weeks. The Rules Library contains housing specific rules for Asset, Tenant, and Finance data as well as specific data reporting requirements for NROSH. The software allows rules to be grouped into business processes so that you can measure your ability to Maintain Assets, Collect Rent, Communicate with Tenants, and all other key processes.



## INTOZETTA GOVERNANCE FOR HOUSING

Pre-configured with 100's of common housing data definitions that you can Accept or Modify to create your organisations Data Catalogue. The software allows you to build a comprehensive picture of where data exists, how it moves between systems, and where the Master source is held. You can manage data ownership, data policies, and provide your employees with an intuitive Data Search capability that democratises data and drives a wider appreciation of good data governance.





# New software module equals new procurement?

Andrew Millross, Partner, & Alex Lawrence, Senior Associate, Anthony Collins Solicitors

There are many reasons why a housing provider may want to vary a software contract, including to:

- Add user licences;
- Extend support and maintenance arrangements;
- Install upgrades, potentially to a new/replacement product; and
- Add new modules to an existing system.

Before doing any of these, a provider should assess the public procurement implications. It's a breach of the regulatory framework (registered providers) or statutory duties (local authorities) for a provider deliberately to breach the public procurement rules, so some justification for the purchase is needed. This needs to be considered alongside the operational need/risk of not going ahead with a purchase, and other procurement options (such as through a framework) that may be available.

In this article we look at the public procurement issues through the lens of purchasing additional software modules.

## Preliminary investigations

Before you can answer the question of whether the purchase is permitted, you will need to consider:

1. Do you have a copy of the original contract and procurement documents including the OJEU or Find a Tender Service (FaTS) contract and award notices?
2. Was the original procurement under the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (PCR 2015) or preceding legislation (including through a framework call-off)?
3. What will the new module do, why do you need it and how does it relate to the existing software?
4. How long will the new module be in place for?
5. How much will the new module cost, covering both one-off costs and ongoing additional support and

maintenance? How will that compare with what you would have paid for support and maintenance without the new module?

6. Will taking on the new module lead to a need to change any other terms of your existing contract?
7. Have you varied this particular contract before? If so, how, when and how much did the change alter the original price?

## The law

Regulation 72, PCR 2015 sets out the extent to which a contract valued above the applicable tendering threshold can be varied by a provider without triggering the need for a new procurement process. It applies whether your original contract was procured under PCR 2015 or earlier procurement legislation and whether this was done before or after the end of the Brexit transitional period (at least for now).

## Authorisations

Regulation 72 authorises changes to contracts in the following circumstances:

**Contract term:** If the original contract includes an option to purchase the new module, this can be exercised in line with its terms. This must be more than just a standard variation clause. What is needed is a "clear, precise and unequivocal" provision that sets out the scope and nature of the option and objective conditions governing when it will be exercised. The change must not alter the overall nature of your contract. This authorisation will apply only where the potential purchase has been foreseen and planned for.

**New circumstances:** A contract can be changed where the value of the change does not exceed 50 per cent of the original contract value (plus inflation, where payable under the contract) and either:





- The additional module has become necessary since the original procurement (i.e. it was not necessary then, but circumstances have since changed which mean it is needed now), a change of supplier cannot be made for economic or technical reasons and it would cause significant inconvenience or substantial duplication of costs for the provider to change supplier. The likely focus here will be on technical reasons around the interchangeability or interoperability of the current system and other third-party systems that might arise if the new module was procured separately; or
- The need for the module has been brought about by unforeseeable circumstances (such as technological changes or new service delivery responsibilities) and the modification does not alter the overall nature of the contract.

A provider relying on either of these authorisations must publish a notice in FaTS, so providers will want a robust justification before relying on them.

**Low-value changes:** The module can be purchased where this does not alter the overall nature of the contract and the change to the contract price is below both:

- The PCR 2015 threshold for tendering services/supplies contracts (currently £189,330); and
- 10 per cent of the original contract value (plus inflation, where applicable). This 10 per cent figure is cumulative, so the provider must consider all previous minor changes under this provision.

No notices are needed with this provision. However, it is better not to rely on it where another authorisation also applies, so as not to 'use up' the 10 per cent threshold.

**Insubstantial changes:** The module can be purchased where this is not a "substantial change" to the original contract; i.e. it does not:

- Make the changed contract materially different in character to the original contract;
- Alter the original procurement conditions such that the tenderers for or result of the original procurement process would have been different;
- Change the economic balance in favour of the supplier in a way not provided for in the contract; or
- Extend the scope of the contract considerably.

This is often the route of last resort but may still be useful sometimes.

The information given from the preliminary investigations above is essential when considering whether any of these authorisations can be relied on. In very limited circumstances, it may also be possible to procure the module under a new procurement procedure which allows the provider to negotiate directly with a single supplier.

### **Purchasing the module**

Regulation 72 gives several potential authorisations providers may be able to rely on to purchase additional modules for their software products. In some cases, the Regulation 72 analysis will provide a clear-cut route. In other cases, there will be no definite answer and providers will need to undertake a risk assessment of proceeding with or without the module and consider mitigations. In most cases, this will require early legal and procurement input.

*Andrew Millross is a partner and Alex Lawrence is a senior associate at Anthony Collins Solicitors.*

## East Suffolk Council cuts arrears by £250k with Mobysoft

*East Suffolk Council has reduced its arrears by over £250,000 during the past 15 months after its implementation of Mobysoft's RentSense software.*

Samantha Shimmon, head of tenant services, East Suffolk Council, said, "As soon as we'd completed the deployment of RentSense, our income team was able to get through its weekly caseload; this has not only reduced our arrears but also improved team morale because RentSense's reporting capability means that our income officers can now immediately see how they're performing."

The council found that RentSense flags cases sooner than its previous methods and helps its income team to intervene at the earliest stages, even before arrears have been accrued.

Shimmon said, "Our team loves the early intervention cases where, for example, accounts are in credit but housing benefit has stopped or been reduced. They can be proactive and prevent the tenants from falling into arrears and get remedies in before it's too late."

"Our arrears have been consistently reduced since the introduction of RentSense, even with the financial pressures of lockdown that some of our tenants have had to contend with. We have also seen fewer court actions and evictions because RentSense enables us to contact tenants sooner, thereby preventing arrears."

### | CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT



## Orbit's augmented reality tours

*Orbit Group has launched a new augmented reality digital safety tour, providing tenants with the very latest fire safety advice.*

The augmented reality software has been sponsored by Orbit and developed by Firemark Education. The result is an interactive digital safety tour which takes the viewer through a virtual home, identifying the potential hazards and highlighting the fire safety features.

Paul Richards, group customer and communities director, Orbit Group, said, "Quite simply, this augmented reality safety tool has

been designed to save lives. The software has been made to be user-friendly, easy to understand and incorporates lots of helpful tips on how to stay safe and when to let us know there may be a problem. The feedback we have received from customers has been extremely positive."

The tour starts by introducing you to the tour guide (actually an Orbit employee) who presents each

room in the property and provides useful fire safety information. Taking a room at a time, the viewer sees icons that highlight fire hazards, safety features and links to videos. Each icon is provided either as a voiceover or as written content.

The software has already been accessed by over 29,000 tenants; the tour can be viewed at [firemark-education.co.uk/fireaware-3](https://firemark-education.co.uk/fireaware-3).

**Sophos stops  
ransomware.**

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Cybersecurity evolved.



## AUTOMATED CUSTOMER CONTACT



# – The first six months at Believe Housing

Simon Bartlett, Customer Experience Business Leader, Believe Housing

*In September 2020, Believe Housing launched its first AI-powered chatbot. Six months later, Simon Bartlett, Believe Housing's customer experience business leader, explains the realities of automated customer contact and how it's helping the housing provider to achieve 'a life without barriers'.*

Sometimes it's better to start with a clean slate and a fresh outlook rather than carry the burdens or expectations of the past, and I certainly think that's true in our case. Since we rebranded in 2019, we still feel an adolescent energy and optimism that has fed into our approach to technology and digital transformation. This has resulted in some very generous plaudits over recent months, praising the business for the various ways we've adapted to the challenges presented by the pandemic.

But in my opinion, the seeds of our adaptability and resilience were sown in our foundations in 2015 where, under our previous guise as County Durham Housing Group, agile working and digital transformation became part of our DNA.

### **A life without barriers**

Our chief executive Bill Fullen was clear from the outset, instilling a belief in "a life without barriers", both for the way we work and how we serve our customers. This gave us a licence to be brave, try new things and take calculated risks in order to quickly prove what works and, just as importantly, what doesn't work.

It was this approach that led us to the potential benefits of automated customer messaging, and March 2021 marked the six-month point of launching our new chatbot service.

We took the decision to work with Futr, who at the time had limited experience in housing but did

have considerable experience of working with civic organisations with a similar audience profile, such as local authorities and the police.

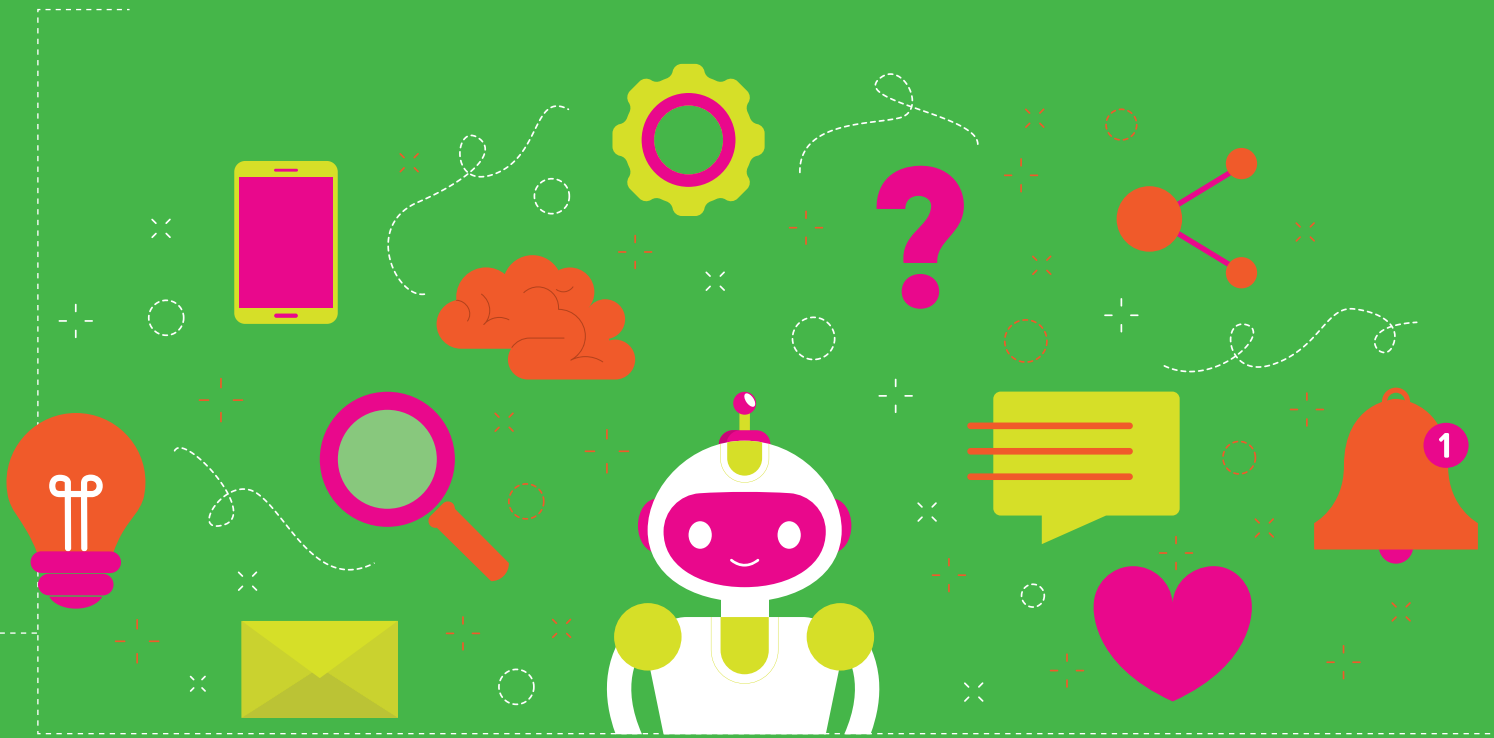
We decided to soft launch the service initially, deploying it only on our website so that we could measure its performance. We asked ourselves, "Could an automated messaging service be seen as denying our customers the opportunity to talk to a 'real person' who can answer all their questions?"

To understand this, you first have to understand the nature of housing customer contact and the needs of our tenants.

### **What customers want**

More often than not, the customer isn't seeking a conversation, but the right information at a time of their choosing. We had a good understanding of this based on feedback from our customer contact team, who would regularly be signposting people to the right information via our app, rather than untangling more complex situations.

This is supported by our six-month numbers for the chatbot service; the 5,000 questions received by the chatbot generated only two hours of automated conversation time. This equates to 0.67 seconds of conversation per message. That sounds like an awful lot of very quick chats, right?



In reality, most messages are answered by the chatbot supplying a link to more information rather than an ongoing automated conversation.

The content and accuracy of the chatbot's response is determined by 'confidence scoring'; this uses intuitive AI to measure content against an existing and ever-expanding library of data. A high level of confidence or accuracy means the answer to the question is given instantly, accounting for zero seconds of conversation.

### Around-the-clock service

Another telling piece of data is when customers choose to use the service, with 31 per cent of enquiries being made outside normal business hours, which is increasingly becoming the norm in the private sector.

Automated contact also removes many of the language barriers, and so far our chatbot has responded to customers using seven languages as well as English.

We have had to make changes to optimise performance and learn some lessons along the way, but that's only to be expected from any new solution. For example, we initially didn't set a limit to the length of an inbound question, which meant some enquiries became too lengthy for the system to decipher.

We've also had to make significant changes to our coronavirus customer safety policies, particularly around repairs and maintenance visits, but the system is very easy to update and intelligently link to new content.

The chatbot also helps us to proactively shape the information and content we produce and publish by highlighting trends in customers' questions.



On reflection, automated messaging has been a positive step for us, meshing well with our values and helping us to promote digital transfer and customer self-service during a difficult time for us all. And most importantly, our customers are finding it an increasingly useful source of information as and when they need it.

*Simon Bartlett is the customer experience business leader at Believe Housing.*

# Better visibility with contact data integration



Jordan Wheat, New Business Consultant, Crimson

*There is a government-led drive for social housing providers to build more homes as a way to provide housing for those in need and for those taking the first step on the ladder towards home ownership. But with private rentals having a better reputation for customer service, housing providers must improve the quality and safety of their homes and handle complaints and problems better.*

One way that housing providers can improve communications is to create a single, joined-up view of their tenants which is accessible to all relevant members of staff and the tenants themselves. Not only will this improve efficiency, it will also improve tenant satisfaction by speeding up repairs and complaints. Housing providers will also be able to offer better services and advice by compiling data from several sources; by connecting different departments and then connecting that data with each tenant, it ensures transparency and accountability, and improves the overall quality of communications.

For most housing providers, their various departments tend to work separately and each have their own view of the tenants. While tenants can often access their personal details, payments, repair reports and complaint records via a self-service portal, other internal roles don't have access to all of this information. For example, responsive repair engineers have access to repair reports, tenant contact details/location and personal alerts while contact centre agents can view inbound enquiries, vulnerable tenant information, and complaints records. These separate views can lead to confusion, delays and unhappy tenants, but how can they all be connected to involve the customer?

## Bringing the data together

While tenant data could be stored in Dynamics 365, Microsoft's Power Platform is the key to truly transforming the data to create a single view of each tenant.

Power Automate's workflows are a low-code/no-code way of automating processes to save time and effort. With

the opportunity to integrate into hundreds of connectors, time-consuming tasks are streamlined. These workflows can be used to automatically bring tenant data from various sources into one place without having to manually input data. This acts as a back-end workflow engine, allowing teams in any area to automate their processes using robotic process automation (RPA).

Power Automate's RPA capability brings tenant data together from legacy systems by using low-code automation. By saving time that would be otherwise spent on time-consuming, mundane tasks, housing providers have more time to support tenants.

Data is stored in Microsoft's Common Data Service, which can be accessed through the Power Platform product range and Dynamics 365. The tenant data can be loaded into the accessible data layer and extracted through various channels. In short, Common Data Service is a database system to store and retrieve information, which is easy to use and free for those already paying for Power Apps.

Alongside Power Automate and RPA, Azure Logic Apps also helps to schedule, automate and streamline tasks and processes. Logic Apps also connects disparate systems (on-premise and cloud) to centralise data. While Power Automate provides a similar outcome from its automating processes, Microsoft recommends that a combination of solutions results in optimum data integration.

Now you have Power Automate, RPA and Logic Apps to consolidate data, by connecting to hundreds of Microsoft and non-Microsoft services, custom connectors can be used to link to alternative services that aren't pre-built. Custom solutions can be built and shared, each with its own triggers and actions. This ensures all tenant data can be merged and streamlined, so nothing is missed out.

A single view of the customer is essential to providing optimum customer service. Microsoft provides several solutions to reach this goal, which can be used together for complete integration or separately to take a step towards combined tenant data.

*Jordan Wheat is a new business consultant at Crimson.*





## How Platform Housing Group got their digital strategy right

Working with Crimson, Platform Housing Group are well on their way to delivering an extraordinary digital transformation. With a migration to a single housing management system, customer self-service and automated workflow are now driving new efficiencies and new customer experiences.

**Read the full case study here:** [www.crimson.co.uk/case-studies](http://www.crimson.co.uk/case-studies)

Crimson helps clients unite its people, processes and technology to solve their toughest business challenges. We are famous for building intelligent customer experiences, business process optimisation and enabling actionable data insights. Outcomes our housing association clients enjoy help to drive new home sales and deliver superior customer experiences.

Microsoft  
Partner

Gold Cloud Business Applications  
Gold Cloud Productivity  
Gold DevOps  
Silver Cloud Platform



# Better matchmaking

Liza Handley, Customer Relationship Manager, Civica

*Civica's customer relationship manager, Liza Handley, discusses how capturing the right property data, alongside tenants' specific requirements, allows housing providers and local authorities to offer quality and sustainable homes that better meet tenants' needs.*

By engaging with your tenants, it's quite easy to find out about what's important to them. They'll tell you about their needs and accommodation requirements, from the size of property to where they would like to live. And those customers with particular needs will include specific requirements such as adaptations and support.

When housing providers and local authorities use that data as part of their allocations process, it helps to provide the best match when offering tenants suitable properties. Here are four helpful tips:

## Know your property

If a property has adaptations, record them in your system and let your tenants know about these special features. This enables them to make informed decisions before they are offered a property, in turn reducing your allocation costs.

## Single view of your data

Where data is held across multiple systems, make sure they talk to each other. Data communications across systems enables you to assess current needs faster and plan for future needs more effectively.

## Matchmaking

Identify tenants with specific requirements and match them to the right property, with the appropriate adaptations. Prioritising those who need adaptations makes the best use of your properties and saves useful resources and money.

## Communicate

Learn to market your properties better. Tell your tenants about your new-build developments or if you're relaunching a scheme. It will help you achieve a quicker turn-around on allocations.

*Liza Handley is the customer relationship manager at Civica.*



# Esri UK talks with Thirteen Housing about how they're unlocking their data potential - and reaping the benefits.

As the digital age has evolved, industries have undergone a monumental transformation in their ways of working. Paper spreadsheets have gone onscreen, and physical processes have become automated.

The way we interpret data has also changed. We use data to monitor current business performance, influence next moves, and predict results, meaning much more accuracy and, therefore, less risk when making daily decisions.

With digital continuing to evolve, we no longer have to translate a multitude of spreadsheets into discernible patterns to get the information we want.

GIS (Geographic Information System) technology makes understanding and utilising data simpler than ever.

Earlier this year, we at Esri UK were hosted at the 2021 Housing Technology conference discussing housing services' transformation using location intelligence.

Put simply - how GIS is solving challenges and automating processes within the world of housing.

**GIS technology creates a single source of the truth, transforming spreadsheets into data-driven decisions, allowing you to visualise a host of information in real-time and space.**

Head of Technical Strategic Assets at Thirteen, Mark Arnold, demonstrated how he and his team have been using GIS to revolutionise the management of their 34,000 assets across the North-East of England.

"What we wanted to do was to make our data spatially aware. We wanted no more spreadsheets, and we wanted tools that created a simple process for the layman.

"We wanted to analyse data to maximise our return on investment across all of our assets, so we needed to look at the sustainability of our properties, both on a business level, as an ongoing

financial asset, and to see impacts that there may be on their suitability to meet current and future customer demands."

Mark explains that this was achieved by layering data to create Thirteen's single source of the truth, which shows the long-term viability of their assets through different lenses. Some fairly simple analysis has led to some very worthwhile results for Thirteen, not only from a financial perspective but also in terms of time-saving.

GIS is much more than a 'back office' tool, as Mark explains when discussing the mobile application he and his team developed to input and view data in the field. This app has been instrumental in the efficiencies of Grounds Maintenance tasks and management.

"All of our staff now have access to a mobile application that allows them to see what plants they have, where and when to cut them, and to make edits in the field. If they make a change, they can update that on the system so that it's immediately reflected in our master document."

He explained how changes like this have direct cost implications to the business due to the upkeep levels required for different plant types within the grounds.

As 'working smarter, not harder' has become the new normal for many of us, the same should apply to how we communicate with our data. Spatial analysis can empower your business, as it has with Thirteen, to put over-complicated, time-consuming spreadsheets in the bin for good.

## Is your business evolving with the age of digital?

Discover how you can streamline asset management, analyse performance, identify brand new opportunities, and so much more from one single source of truth.

Head to [esriuk.com/housing](https://esriuk.com/housing) for customer success stories, Webinars and more examples of how we're helping drive innovation.

Or get in touch to find out how GIS can benefit your business:

**[housing@esriuk.com](mailto:housing@esriuk.com)**

**[esriuk.com/housing](https://esriuk.com/housing)**

**01296 745599**



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## East Suffolk launches MRI's tenant portal

East Suffolk Council has introduced MRI Software's Digital Tenants Portal to enable its tenants to manage their tenancies digitally, in line with the government's 'Charter for social housing residents' guidance.



The council chose MRI Software's portal because of its existing use of MRI's Housing Enterprise (formerly Orchard Housing) HMS.

The portal enables tenants to access their tenancy agreements, repairs history, payment information and account balance. It also allows them to send messages direct to the council's customer service team on their own terms, without the need to find time within work hours.

With the new portal, called 'myhome East Suffolk', East Suffolk Council is now working on increasing registrations from existing tenants, while new tenants are automatically signed up to the service at the start of their tenancies.

Lynne Thomas-Mead, housing transformation programme manager, East Suffolk Council, said, "We wanted to achieve transparency for our tenants, including

full visibility of their rent account balances. This is their data so we wanted them to be able to own their data."

Tenants now have more control over their tenancies, including managing their own accounts and spotting any discrepancies; one tenant identified overpayments of £400 on their account and received a refund. Giving tenants control over their own information not only means that they're more engaged in their tenancies but also call volumes to the council's customer service centre have been reduced because answers to common questions can be accessed through the portal.

The council reported that its previous telephone-led repair reporting process was cumbersome for tenants; in common with many other housing providers and councils, multiple repairs were often called in at once, suggesting that tenants found the process difficult and preferred to wait until it was absolutely unavoidable.

## ForHousing's conversational AI with Amillan & Converse360

*After seeing an increase in the number of tenants' calls and interactions over the past few years, ForHousing wanted to find a way to make its existing call-centre staff more productive while offering its tenants a wider choice of channels at the same time as reducing its costs.*

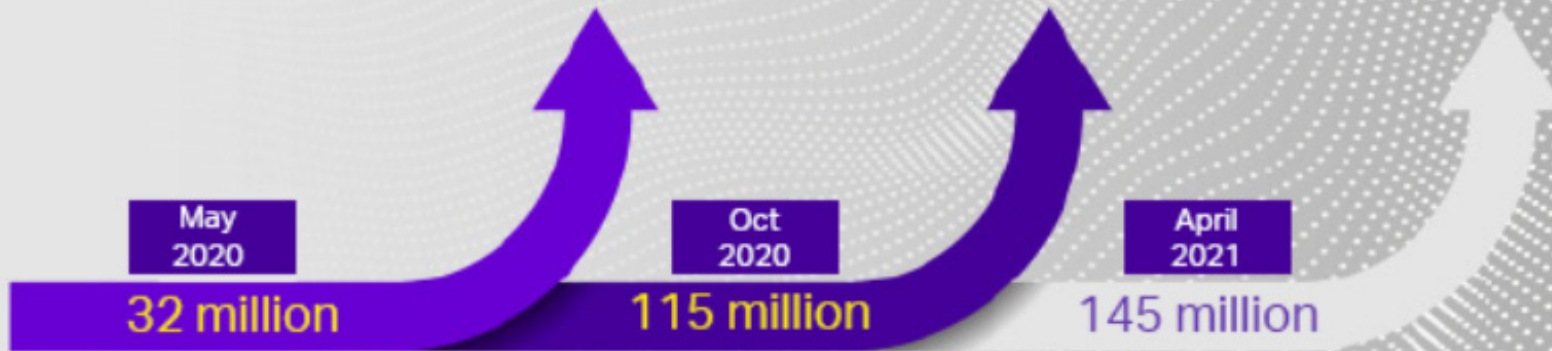
ForHousing engaged with Amillan who implemented Converse360's Service Automation Platform, comprising virtual assistants (WebBot), speech assistants (SpeechBot) and digital humans/avatars, all integrated via an orchestration portal. ForHousing then used its internal development team to customise the platform based around Converse360's conversational AI system.

The Amillan/Converse360 solution has been integrated with the housing provider's existing Enghouse Interactive call-centre software so that any calls unable to be answered by the virtual assistant are automatically transferred to a human agent, complete with full conversational transcripts.

Within three months of ForHousing's deployment of the combined Amillan and Converse360 solution, there has been a 26 per cent increase in web traffic, with the virtual assistant answering over 40 per cent of the 3,500 web sessions so far, thereby reducing the number of contact-centre sessions by the same amount.

Based on the average session time before the deployment, the introduction of the virtual assistant has reduced the time ForHousing's agents are spending on webchats by an average of 390 hours per month, representing a workload saving of around three FTEs per month.

# Microsoft Teams daily active users



## Giving Teams a Voice

Microsoft Teams with Telephony can be a great way for housing organisations to bring all their communications together and turn MS Teams into a full Unified Communications solution - Direct Routing could be the ideal alternative to costly Microsoft Calling Plans.

Contact Gamma to find out more or visit our dedicated Housing Tech webpage.

0333 014 0555

<https://lp.gamma.co.uk/unified-comms-for-housing-sector>

# How to make your chatbot sing



Scott Summers, Co-founder, Fuzzlab

*The social housing sector is second to none in its aspirations, but competing priorities require creative solutions when it comes to delivering great customer service. There's always a need for human-to-human contact but a well-trained chatbot can go a long way towards providing the 24/7, immediate service desired by both tenants and housing providers.*

After creating and implementing chatbots for housing providers over the past five years, I've learned the three most important things to get right are:

## 1. Ensure the accuracy of the chatbot's responses

Customers get annoyed when a chatbot doesn't recognise what they're asking. It's worse when the chatbot recognises their intent but provides a response that's not very helpful. When this happens, customers return to traditional contact methods but having now wasted time, are more frustrated than they would otherwise have been.

- Train your chatbot to understand the customers' intent: Training the AI so it recognises the range of questions and language your chatbot's likely to encounter is critical to success. I've learned customers will ask for things in ways I could never imagine and that it's sometimes necessary to clarify the customer's query. A chatbot should be familiar with different types of housing stock, repair problems and ASB complaints to name but a few things needed to be helpful to tenants.
- Provide a breadth of responses: A housing chatbot must

have a broad set of responses. For example, it's no good answering the myriad possible rent questions with a few generic responses. Your chatbot needs a specific response for everything from rent holidays to rent increases and must be able to provide tenants with rent statements if you want to reduce call volumes.

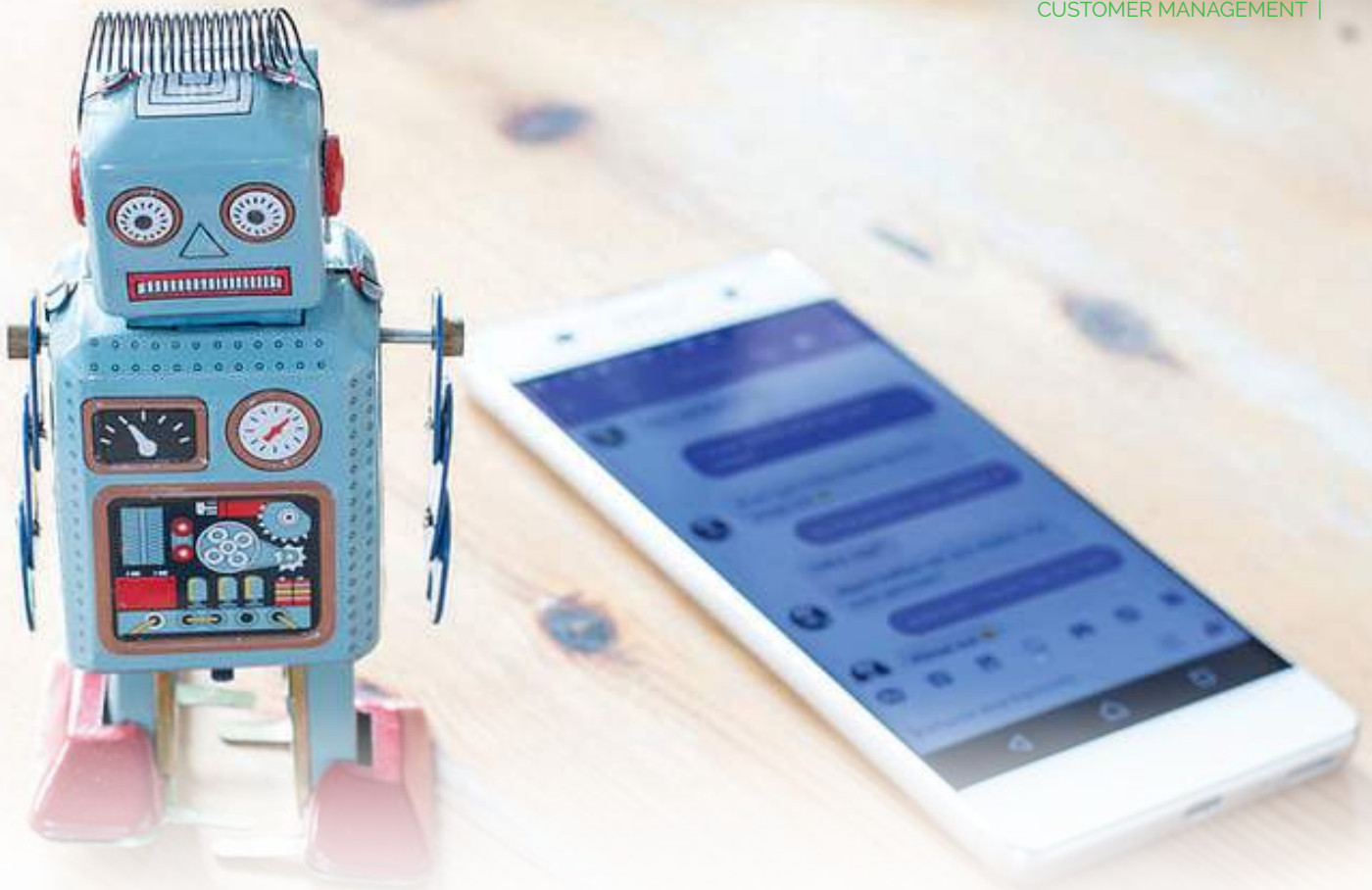
- Provide well-crafted responses: To give customers the information they need, a chatbot's response must be detailed. A word of caution here though ... chat windows are small, so responses need to be concise and well edited. If you want your chatbot available on voice devices such as Alexa, it's even more important to make sure the responses are well crafted and straight to the point.

## 2. Create a self-service channel

From a customer's perspective, it's never ideal to be left on hold, told "I'm sorry, I can't help with that", or sent elsewhere to get a problem addressed. This is equally true for chatbots; customers prefer to have their issue resolved without being redirected to a portal, website or telephone.

- Train your chatbot to handle more than FAQs: Using a chatbot to display FAQs is a sure way to frustrate your customers. While it's true that there's an 80/20 distribution of problems, that 20 per cent is a long list when you're talking about social housing. It's very different to banking or retail which have a relatively narrow field and consequently small number of questions customers might ask.
- Automate business processes: If a tenant asks, "how do I book a repair?", the likelihood is they want to book a repair, not merely understand the process. A chatbot that directs them to the contact centre or portal to book a repair doesn't add much value. On the other hand, a chatbot that can help identify the fault, raise a work order in your HMS and book the repair with your scheduling system would be helpful and impressive.
- Replace application forms: It's commonly accepted that whenever we ask for anything these days, a form must be filled in. This is an odd way for an advanced





civilisation to behave. A chatbot can provide a more natural experience for customers and is a way to reach those who might be digitally excluded by more complex user interfaces. It can remove the confusion caused by complicated forms by using its intelligence to skip irrelevant questions and options.

A good chatbot should offer the conversational experience of gathering information while keeping the efficiency and cost benefits of forms. Things such as housing applications, home swaps and adaptation requests can all be managed one question at a time through a conversational interface.

### 3. Manage escalations well

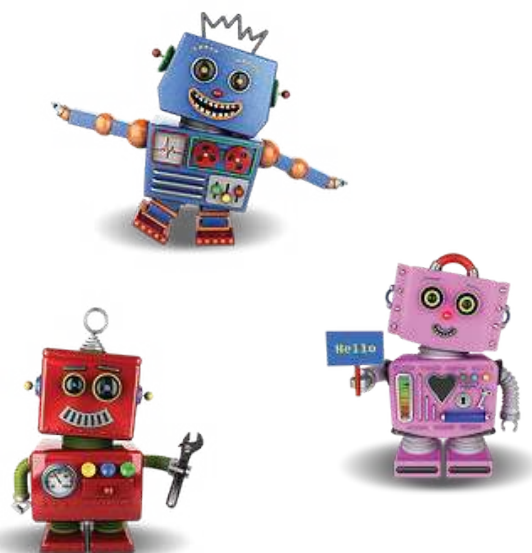
It's unlikely any chatbot will be capable of answering every question it's asked and the ability to escalate to a real person is therefore important for good customer service. Some customers need to talk and where appropriate, it's good practice for a chatbot to offer them the path of least resistance to an advisor.

- Handover to live chat: If your chatbot can't resolve a customer's problem, passing them to a live agent is the best possible outcome. A transcript of the chatbot's conversation should be available to the agent so that customers don't have to repeat themselves. If they do, they'll (rightly) perceive their engagement with the chatbot as a waste of time.
- Offer call-back requests: If handover to an advisor is necessary but the contact centre is closed, it's best for your chatbot to collect the customer's details and arrange a call-back.

- Monitor how your chatbot performs: The last point I'd like to make is that it's important to monitor those questions which require handover. There might be a reason why these questions aren't being handled by the chatbot – maybe the response isn't detailed enough or it's missing the point. If you can identify these and continuously improve the product, your chatbot will naturally get better over time.

A chatbot represents your organisation and is often your customers' first point of contact. It's an extremely important job. A good chatbot that's designed specifically for social housing will not only reduce call volumes, it'll also create happy customers – and that's what everyone wants.

*Scott Summers is the co-founder of Fuzzlab.*



# Knowing the unknown – Using familiarity to improve customer service



Sam Winterbottom, Public Sector Director, Gamma

*When it comes to customer engagement, housing providers benefit from a relatively informed position compared with others within and beyond the public sector.*

At a time when every agent is busy and there's still a growing queue of tenants waiting to speak to someone, there may not be much comfort to take from being just informed, yet we truly believe that when it comes to service-user engagement, social housing providers are looked at with envy from afar.

For many contact centres across other sectors, they have no real control over who is contacting them, when they are contacting them or why they are calling. It is a world of unknowns that creates a highly unpredictable environment in which to operate or optimise for better service efficiency.

However, within our sector, many of these typical unknowns are actually known. You know who will be contacting you – the residents in the homes that you manage. You know the main reasons why they call you – for rent payments, housing repairs, complaints or to chase progress on a case. You can even predict when they'll be calling you – when a rent payment is due, when they're waiting for a repair or when cold weather hits, thereby generating an influx of calls about broken boilers.

The somewhat predictable nature of the engagement that exists in social housing is a great advantage and an opportunity to improve efficiency, increase accessibility and deliver the best customer experience matched by great value-for-money.

## **Why is service-user engagement so critical?**

There is still a housing crisis in the UK, compounded by the economic uncertainty of the pandemic. At the same time, housing providers remain under pressure to

demonstrate value for money within the communities they serve and be accountable to their tenants.

We believe this can be achieved by taking the unique advantage of the fact that you already know your service-users and applying smart omni-channel customer engagement technologies to transform accessibility, efficiency and experience.

## **What are the challenges in driving this engagement efficiency?**

There's lots of talk about digital transformation within our sector and although many organisations are embarking on digital journeys, there are many factors that are slowing down progress, especially in the area of customer engagement.

We see three main blockers to progress, all of which can be easily overcome.

### **1. The need to be inclusive**

Our sector's customers span a broad spectrum, from the young to the old, from the independent to the vulnerable. This is leading to an overly-cautious approach to channel shift, with the fear of its detrimental impact on inclusion; different thinking is needed here, moving from viewing it as 'channel shift' towards thinking of it as 'channel choice'.

### **2. The silo legacy**

Housing providers typically have a plethora of systems, including housing management, CRM, case management, repairs and finance. This not only makes it difficult to gain a single view of customers, but also affects front-line staff. Housing providers therefore need a solution that bridges





# Sovereign's UC platform with FourNet & Enghouse



*FourNet has completed the implementation of a unified communications platform from Enghouse Interactive at Sovereign Housing.*

Following the amalgamation of Spectrum Housing into Sovereign Housing, the newly-expanded organisation wanted to migrate all of its customer-service staff to one unified communication and contact centre environment, including the integration of all business-critical applications across housing, HR and repairs.

Working with its technology partner, FourNet, Sovereign Housing chose to standardise on Enghouse Interactive's Communications Center for its contact centre, linked with its Microsoft Dynamics 365 and Skype for Business

environments, giving contact-centre staff a 360-degree view of each customer. Sovereign Housing is also using Communications Center in conjunction with Teleopti workforce management software for better planning and agent self-service.

Sam Dart, head of digital technology services, Sovereign Housing, said, "Enghouse's Communications Center is proving to be a robust solution when it comes to handling call volumes and its close integration with Dynamics is a major benefit."

## Lincolnshire Housing goes digital with FourNet

*Lincolnshire Housing has awarded a four-year contract to FourNet, a cloud, communication and contact-centre specialist, to support its plans for digital transformation.*

Following a competitive tendering process via a Crown Commercial Services procurement framework, the contract will focus on providing some of the foundations for Lincolnshire Housing's cloud-first strategy and agile working across its operations.

For the initial project, FourNet will implement omni-channel contact

centre software from Enghouse Interactive, integrated with the housing provider's core business applications from Aareon and Tunstall and optimised for Microsoft Teams Telephony.

Carole Galsworthy, head of ICT and digital services, Lincolnshire Housing Partnership, said, "We wanted a trusted partner with a

demonstrable pedigree in housing. We also wanted a solution that would use best practice principles from the chosen supplier's experience in other sectors to help ensure we continue to deliver a personalised approach to our tenants."

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# Digital approaches to mould and damp

James King, Connected Homes Director, FireAngel

*According to recent research, mould and damp are a growing problem in social housing – with all the associated health and legal risks. FireAngel’s director of connected homes, James King, discusses how, with new digital technologies, housing providers can minimise those risks and respond to problems quickly and proactively.*

## Condensation, damp & mould

Over the past few years, issues with condensation, damp and mould have affected more than 27 per cent of all households in the UK, with the issue posing a particular problem for housing providers. Over a third of social housing and council tenants have reported problems, with local authorities across the UK receiving around 60,000 complaints relating to mould, damp or condensation between 2012 and 2018.

Combined with the recent winter lockdown, these problems are likely to have worsened in 2020 and 2021. Most of us were stuck indoors (often with windows closed to keep in the warmth) and with facilities such as laundrettes shut, more people were forced to dry washing inside, further increasing humidity in homes.

The health implications of mouldy or damp living conditions can be serious. Asthma sufferers are especially at risk, with mould spores known to trigger symptoms. So too are the elderly, the very young and anyone who

is immuno-compromised – and many people from these vulnerable groups live in social housing.

However, there are new solutions that can help housing providers adopt a proactive approach to maintenance checks and ongoing monitoring. With real-time data insights into humidity and temperature levels, housing providers can tackle the root cause of the problem and protect their tenants from the health complications caused by damp and mould.

But this requires an entirely new way to monitor moisture in homes.

## Treating damp

With the guidelines outlined in the Charter for Social Housing white paper putting more pressure on housing providers to offer high quality, safe homes in good repair, there's less room for error, and that means tackling the problem of damp fast and efficiently. But there are a number of reasons why these issues can be difficult to fix.

Current methods for dealing with damp, condensation and mould are usually expensive, time-consuming or even ineffective. Anti-mould wall coatings and regular roof and gutter maintenance only go so far, and even installing cavity or external wall insulation (often necessary to meet energy efficiency regulations) isn't always effective in reducing damp. Indeed, recent research suggests a correlation between incorrectly-fitted insulation and increased damp and mould problems.

And with waiting lists and placement times getting longer by the day, there's intense pressure on housing providers to fix problems quickly and move new tenants in. This, along with poor advice and limited access to specialist knowledge, can lead to only surface issues being treated. Mould and damp are then likely to reoccur, leaving housing providers at risk of targeted 'no win, no fee' claims from personal injury lawyers.





Successful remediation work requires in-depth investigation to find the root cause, fix it, and protect against future issues, but it's a lengthy process that can leave properties empty for long periods, costing housing providers considerable sums of money in lost rent.

### A smart approach to monitoring

Thankfully, this is where new technology can help. By introducing internet of things (IoT) sensors, housing providers can access real-time data on the humidity and temperature levels in their properties, thereby enabling early interventions to pre-empt the problem.

Unobtrusive temperature and humidity sensors create a holistic view of the environment. Available as independent sensors, as well as being included in the cellular gateway, the devices capture humidity and temperature data and provide real-time information for housing providers to actively review and spot any environments where mould or damp could easily develop.

Installing a sensor in every room allows housing providers to adopt a proactive strategy, with a view to prevent any damp spots from growing. Based on repeated patterns and/or data-driven insights, housing providers can then deliver tailored advice to relevant tenants and provide accurate information about where they need to adopt better ventilation or heating practices.

By acting early, housing providers can also stop costs escalating. Damp is less likely to become an expensive headache to fix, and with better living conditions, tenants are less likely to make expensive legal claims. Sensors also provide a simple solution for understanding and proactively meeting residents' complaints.

Smart sensors can also provide a clear audit trail, recording accurate and regular environmental readings specific to each property and room. And because the data can be analysed remotely, there's less need for intrusive on-site investigations.

### Preparing for the future

Data collected from IoT sensors will also play a role in future regeneration projects. Analysing the data for trends and patterns can show housing providers which regions or properties are particularly prone to damp (such as those in coastal areas) and ensure those properties have the right insulation and ventilation installed.

All this requires the right technology. With FireAngel Connected, housing providers can create a tailored network of sensors and devices to detect everything from fire and carbon monoxide to water leaks and room occupancy.

IoT devices and sensors are wirelessly connected to the platform through our recently launched New Generation Cellular Gateway using Smart RF and Zigbee technology. Housing providers can then access each device's data using our intuitive dashboard, allowing them to easily identify environments that could lead to damp and mould. And as we've designed our gateway to use cellular signals alongside a wi-fi back-up, housing providers can be confident that it's always on and always connected.

Furthermore, humidity and temperature data can be integrated into housing providers' existing asset management systems, enabling them to easily spot trends and allocate resources more efficiently.

**To learn more about how FireAngel Connected can prepare your properties for a smarter, safer future, please visit [fireangel.co.uk/connected](https://fireangel.co.uk/connected).**

*James King is the connected homes director for FireAngel.*

# To err is human; to forewarn, divine

Mark Elias, Infrastructure Manager, Coastal Housing Group  
and Ed Bishop, Co-Founder & Chief Technology Officer,  
Tessian

*We all know that we should protect our email systems against the onslaught of spam, malware and sophisticated spear-phishing attacks. It's practically a career in itself to stay abreast of the latest trends in email compromise techniques, vulnerabilities and zero-day exploits. But what about the threats that outgoing messages pose to our companies' security?*

In a matter of seconds, an employee could expose company-sensitive information just by entering the wrong name into the 'to' field of an email. This information could end up in the hands of the wrong client or even a journalist (Housing Technology: heaven forbid!). Leavers, too, could be exfiltrating commercially-sensitive data to their personal accounts with the intention of taking it to a competitor.

Several studies by Tessian, a human-layer security platform that automatically protects people from threats on email, reveal that the majority (58 per cent) of employees in organisations have sent an email to the wrong person, either internally or externally.

And the consequences go far beyond just red-faced embarrassment. Emails being sent to the wrong person is one of the leading causes of data breaches reported to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) every year. As well as reporting these breaches to regulators, businesses must report such data-loss incidents to customers, causing significant damage to the trust and relationship that had been built. In fact, one in five companies told Tessian that they've lost customers as a result of this simple error, while one in ten workers said they'd lost their job.

What's more, Tessian found that incidents of data exfiltration are happening in businesses almost 40 times more often than the IT leaders think.

## Meet 'Dave'

The other day, I saw an excellent illustration which explained this very well. It's a boxing ring: in one corner there are your 'firewalls, encryption, anti-virus software'; in the other corner, a smiling 'Dave' with 'human error' written on his shirt. It depicts the problem that IT teams face every day; human error can obliterate any technology-based security approach you implement, especially if said technology doesn't take account of how humans think or, more importantly, how sometimes they don't think.

Since the introduction of GDPR, organisations have become acutely aware of how expensive and reputationally damaging an email breach can be. Protecting against outgoing breaches usually involves a mixed bag of DLP, message rules, mail tips, disabling recipient suggestion lists and so on. Each are separate, hand-made solutions, acting together as a manually-constructed, rigid, clunky obstacle course.

But that wasn't going to work for Coastal Housing. We wanted a solution that was automated, adaptable and elegant. We wanted something that would help us protect against the very real risk of emails, and the sensitive information they might contain, inadvertently ending up in the wrong mailboxes, and we wanted the experience to be seamless for our employees.

After scoping the market, we found what we were looking for in Tessian.

Tessian understands when Dave is about to send an extremely sensitive message to the wrong recipient, or when he has added the wrong attachment to a legitimately-addressed message because he's having a busy day, or when Dave forgets corporate policies and sends work to a personal account so that he can work on it outside the work environment. And Tessian intervenes, using real-time alerts, to prevent these 'mistakes' from turning into serious breaches.





Yes, Tessian understands what Dave meant to do rather than what he did do and, as such, we quickly moved away from thinking about 'human error', to instead thinking about 'human-layer security'.

Tessian's co-founder and chief technology officer, Ed Bishop, said, "In every digital interaction people make, there's always the possibility that they'll make a mistake, break the rules or be deceived. And as people handle and control more data than ever before, businesses have to think about securing the human layer of their organisation, not just the machines and the networks."

Automated, adaptable and elegant... remember the three words I used earlier as the criteria for what we were looking for? I'll now describe how Tessian met each of them with ease.

### Automated

Tessian offers four modules to stop data breaches and security threats caused by human error such as data exfiltration, accidental data loss, business email compromise and phishing attacks.

You'd think with this much on offer, onboarding would be a challenge but it's extremely straightforward and, yes, automated. Within hours, Tessian's advanced machine-learning algorithms were analysing the historical and real-time email communications of each user to understand the 'typical' behaviours and relationships for that individual, with no rules or interventions required.

### Adaptable

Tessian continually learns about everyone's messaging habits, and the intelligence behind the scenes is astonishing. To give an extreme example, consider that Dave (as a housing officer) knows two people called Jane Smith; one is a tenant and the other is a business contact at a partner organisation.

By understanding the language Dave typically uses with each of these contacts, Tessian can detect when Dave is about to send an email containing confidential information to Tenant Jane that was actually intended for Business

Jane and alert him to remedy the error before the email is sent. A potentially embarrassing situation prevented, especially if Dave was corresponding with Business Jane about Tenant Jane! A potentially expensive situation prevented too, should that email expose tenants' personal information.

Tessian also performs the same checks with attachments. Housing providers send an abundance of property-related correspondence to an array of recipients, most typically contractors. Using attachment scanning, deep content inspection and natural language processing, Tessian's algorithm can determine in real-time whether someone is about to make an attachment error.

For example, imagine a development officer is inadvertently attempting to send commercially-sensitive data to a contractor who is actually a competitor of the contractor he's using for a development. Tessian warns the development officer of the error, thereby avoiding both professional embarrassment and potential legal implications.

I should also add that Tessian's ability to detect advanced phishing attacks is equally astonishing. It not only protects against the usual spoofing attempts but by truly understanding a person's typical behaviours and relationships on email, Tessian can automatically detect the advanced and hard-to-spot impersonation attacks that bypass secure email gateways – the phishing attempts that sit at the top of the bad-actor's phishing pyramid (or phishamid, if you will). When a suspicious email is detected, the employee is alerted to the threat; you have to see it yourself to believe it.

### Elegant

Lastly, the rigid, clunky interceptions of DLP, mail tips and message rules are transcended by Tessian's human-centred language that is designed to educate the end-user and improve their security behaviours over time.

When a human-layer risk is detected, employees are not only gently prompted to consider the action they're about to take but Tessian also explains why it has intervened,



inviting the employee to make the right security decision. This could be to either correct the error, discard the whole message or instruct Tessian that the action they are about to take is in fact correct. Tessian will then take account of this new behaviour in the picture it builds of them.

**Security – our biggest business advantage**

With Tessian, our administrators are empowered to understand how people in the organisation are interacting with the software. For the first time, they have visibility into the threats that were previously undetectable. They can see the decisions people make when Tessian prompts them, surfacing opportunities to improve behavioural, corporate and cultural activities within the business, such as policy improvements, security training and awareness campaigns.

For example, here at Coastal Housing we see the data in Tessian's 'human-layer risk hub' align with the expectations we have around our most technically-adept staff and also our least adept. Having data instead of anecdotes really helps us approach training constructively. With insight into data exfiltration incidents, for example, we can understand what is driving certain people to send work to a personal email account and, consequently, deliver bespoke training sessions to those individuals about the use of business tools while reinforcing company policies around data sharing.

Tessian's Bishop said, "It's clear that the most forward-thinking IT leaders not only want visibility of the human-layer risks in their organisation but they also want to know how they can continuously lower that risk over time. With greater visibility of these risks at an individual, departmental and organisational level, teams like Mark's can quickly and easily identify employees or groups who require a refresh of security policies, extra training or tighter access controls."

Businesses can't run without people. And because people will always make mistakes, we need to make sure we have the technology to help stop those mistakes from turning into serious security threats that could compromise the future of the business.

To now have technology embedded in Coastal's environment that understands this and helps prevent such errors through forewarning truly is divine.

*Mark Elias is the infrastructure manager at Coastal Housing Group and Ed Bishop is the co-founder and chief technology officer of Tessian.*

## GCH heads for the cloud with Fordway

*Fordway has completed the implementation of a managed cloud service for Gloucester City Homes' legacy IT applications, resulting in greater flexibility and scalability combined with reduced costs.*

GCH had become dissatisfied with its previous IT supplier's services because they were constraining development and growth, impacting everything from efficiency and decision-making to customer service, and were considered poor value for money.

Paul Haines, head of IT, Gloucester City Homes, said, "We weren't happy with the level of service we'd been receiving, and reliability and flexibility were poor, so we wanted to take back control. At first, we moved our services into a public cloud where possible, using Microsoft Office 365 and Azure, but

our old legacy applications didn't play well with others in the cloud."

After issuing a tender via the Crown Commercial Services technology framework, the housing provider chose Fordway's managed cloud solution.

Fordway transferred Gloucester City Homes' legacy applications, such as its bespoke HMS, to its own tier-4 UK datacentres. The legacy applications are now fully managed and secured as private cloud services, with daily back-ups and disaster recovery ready to go.

For end-user computing, Fordway has implemented desktop as a service (DaaS), streaming

applications to users on native desktops for remote-working capability, enabling end-users to log in whenever and from wherever they want, with consistent security controls across all devices. Patching and updates are handled centrally, and Fordway has incorporated multi-factor authentication for additional security.

One of Gloucester City Homes' concerns with its previous IT supplier had been reporting; Fordway defined some key reporting parameters and now provides focused service reports every month.



## iOpt's 2,400-home IoT trial in Scotland

*iOpt is monitoring 2,400 social homes on behalf of Renfrewshire Council over the next four years for temperature, humidity and carbon-dioxide levels.*

The council and iOpt have already achieved a positive RoI in terms of repairs and maintenance costs, but the project's aim is to demonstrate a much wider RoI across the whole of the portfolio management side of the council's operations.

The first step is to install sensors in each of the 2,400 properties. The sensors' data is then transferred to the cloud and generates alerts and reports for the remote monitoring of the council's properties' environmental conditions, with an emphasis on pre-emptive actions.

In line with the global drive towards 'net zero' emissions, the iOpt service also monitors energy consumption so that the council can track the effect of its energy efficiency measures.

The iOpt infrastructure and devices use LoRaWAN-based gateways from Multi-Tech Systems for its underlying network architecture, enabling communications between the sensors and the central server.

Dane Ralston, managing director, iOpt, said, "We have tried many gateways, but ultimately we chose Multi-Tech because it was compatible with LoRaWAN, had the widest range of sensor compatibility and overall is just the most reliable for what we've done to date."

The project was initially delayed due to the various lockdowns but is now in full deployment, with sensors fitted into selected empty properties being prepared for new tenants.

Ralston said, "The RoI goes well beyond direct cost-savings. Having real-time, accurate visibility of asset conditions means Renfrewshire Council is in control, resulting in predictive and proactive maintenance interventions; in our experience, proactive actions are usually five times cheaper than reactive ones."

## 20,000 Flagship properties in Switchee IoT deal



*Following a two-year pilot project in 500 homes, Flagship Group is installing Switchee smart thermostats in 20,000 of its properties from April 2021 onwards, with the aim of moving closer to a proactive and predictive maintenance strategy.*

As well as cutting tenants' fuel bills, data is sent from the Switchee devices via the mobile phone network to the cloud. The data can then be shared by Flagship's maintenance teams in real time.

Matt Brazier, director of IT and services, Flagship Group, said, "The data we receive from Switchee has allowed us to rethink how we will run our services in the future. Switchee helps us to understand which properties need attention in real time.

"We chose Switchee as our partner because it has the most comprehensive offering in the market and is willing to work with us on new features. This is the first major step towards connecting all of our 31,000 properties."

David Armstrong, CFO, Flagship Group, said, "Data from our 500-home pilot project showed us that for every £1 we spend on this technology, we generate £2 of value through savings to tenants and improved efficiency."



# Are you ready for a breach?

Jonathan Lee, Public Sector Director, Sophos

*Cybercriminals no longer simply target multinational companies, the NHS or governments with ransomware; they increasingly have smaller organisations, such as housing providers, in their sights.*

Before the pandemic, digital transformation was already underway, with housing providers adopting smart home solutions, introducing tenant portals and generally taking a 'digital first' approach. However, the pandemic accelerated technological change to a lightning-fast pace across the sector. Housing staff also had to switch practically overnight to remote working, with IT teams working overtime.

This rapid change, while necessary, needed to be matched by an increased focus on robust cybersecurity. However, in some cases, cybercriminals took this change as an opportunity to exploit IT vulnerabilities by deploying ransomware to encrypt files and exfiltrate sensitive data.

Safeguarding issues come to the fore here; some tenants are vulnerable, and housing providers' records include those of individuals who have suffered domestic violence, modern slavery and child abuse. The consequence of such data falling into the wrong hands is very damaging.

Over the years, housing providers' IT estates have suffered from chronic underinvestment, with a handful of staff (often IT generalists) being responsible for everything, including the increasingly complex world of cybersecurity. The inheritance of legacy IT from mergers and

acquisitions and the security risks presented by managing third-party suppliers have added to their burden.

By contrast, the organisations carrying out the ransomware attacks have become increasingly sophisticated, with well-organised company-style structures. Contrary to what you might think, many organisations resort to paying up because service interruption doesn't seem a viable option.

Yet it is possible to mount an effective defence against ransomware, even with a stretched IT team. A top-down approach is needed, with cybersecurity no longer being the IT team's sole responsibility. Cyber governance needs to be introduced at a board level because the massive cost of remediating a breach, combined with the loss of sensitive data, can have long-lasting repercussions for any organisation.

Preparation is critical – housing providers need to plan on the basis that a ransomware attack is inevitable. Some of this activity comes with little cost attached, such as patching, regular staff cybersecurity awareness training, and creating incident management and business continuity plans. The National Cybersecurity Centre (NCSC) has a trove of useful documents on its website outlining the measures that it recommends organisations take to secure their data. Also, the NCSC's invaluable 'exercise in a box' simulation can help to identify security gaps.

Even with all these bases covered and, crucially, the right security software in place, a ransomware attack can still happen.

David Armstrong, chief financial officer, Flagship Group, said, "This isn't a case of if you're going to be attacked, it's a case of when. The reality is that your organisation



is constantly under attack, your security systems are repelling thousands of attacks every single day. Some will get through; it's only a matter of time."

When it does happen, small IT teams can feel overwhelmed quickly and panic spreads throughout an organisation, especially if the attack occurs outside normal working hours. Even making backups is no guarantee of safety against the loss of files because cybercriminals can now easily identify online backups.

Endpoint detection and response (EDR) tools are often bought to monitor the network for suspicious behaviours and mitigate against them. However, it takes real expertise and time to use them properly. In these circumstances, buying in a managed threat response (MTR) service is a solution. At Sophos, a human-led threat hunting team works in parallel with AI technology to hunt, detect and respond to suspicious activity 24/7, maintaining an

ongoing dialogue with IT staff. More than just a notification service, they can take targeted actions on your behalf, with the level of involvement from your IT team being entirely within your control. Because these teams are so familiar with malicious behaviour, once detected the issue is often resolved within the hour.

It's clear that the increasing frequency, complexity and cost of ransomware attacks should make planning for these events one of the top priorities for housing providers. Having cybersecurity experts in your corner at all times ultimately gives you peace of mind from knowing that you're doing all you can to keep your core services running for your tenants.

*Jonathan Lee is the director of the public sector for Sophos.*

## Sophos whitepaper on cyber-security in housing

Sophos has just published a whitepaper, 'Housing-sector cybersecurity: How to build strong security foundations & respond to cyber incidents in 2021'.

The whitepaper profiles three housing providers, Action Housing & Support, Futures Housing and Williamsburgh Housing, and looks at how they have developed their own solutions to the problems of cybersecurity risk, limited budgets and complex technological constraints.

The Sophos whitepaper says, "Severe cyberattacks were something organisations in the housing sector didn't think they needed to worry about. At the time, this seemed reasonable; publicly-reported incidents usually affected large, private companies filled with valuable resources such as intellectual property, sensitive documents, and payments data. Most likely, if a cyberattack did occur in a sector such as housing, it would be limited in scope and generic in design, an example of 'the devil takes the hindmost'.

"Predatory cybercrime has now spread to affect every organisation, including every type and size of housing provider. Being of a certain size, in a certain sector or operating as a non-profit or charity, is no longer a defence. What matters to cybercriminals is that an organisation has a mission to accomplish which they attempt to disrupt, steal from, and monetize at almost zero risk to themselves. Now everyone's head has a price on it."

**The Sophos whitepaper is available now from [sophos.com/ukhousing](https://sophos.com/ukhousing).**





# Data integration and today's IoT-connected world

Trevor Hampton, Director of Housing Solutions, Northgate Public Services

*Northgate Public Services' director of housing solutions, Trevor Hampton, explains why meaningful data integration requires a shift in the cultural mindset from the board down.*

The pandemic has, arguably, forever changed the way we interact; by limiting our interactions in the real world, it has fast-forwarded us into an altered reality where digital dominates.

We now operate in a world where digital channels have become the primary mechanism to engage with customers, automated processes have maintained 'business as usual' and agile working has become the norm. As a result, it's highlighted that not having a data integration strategy will increase the likelihood of an organisation being caught in the twilight zone.

Some organisations will have already found out the hard way that thinking digital goes beyond just upgrading their website to provide services online. Goals and objectives need to have been agreed from the outset if digital transformation is to be achieved. If not, there is a danger that the right data won't be captured and integrated, preventing the organisation from offering seamless end-to-end delivery. The reason why the banking and healthcare sectors have fared better than most in responding to customers' needs during the pandemic is because both already had much of the architecture in place to adapt at pace.

If the same meaningful data integration is to happen in the housing sector, there still needs to be a shift in the cultural mindset from the board down.

## Adjusting the mindset

When it comes to digital transformation, the housing sector is something of a mixed bag because IT has traditionally been seen as more of a fixer than an enabler.

Those organisations that have created a workplace culture that's fully up to speed on how data can be used to improve outcomes and, by extension, customer service, will be in a better position to navigate today's digital landscape.

Understanding the data landscape and the importance of mapping out the customer journey needs to happen at every level of an organisation.

It's now a given that housing providers need to be able to harness insights in order to make better decisions. But if no one has recorded the repair, logged the call or scanned the letter then they simply can't be as responsive as they would like to be. This will greatly affect their ability to interact with tenants and will be detrimental to customer service. This is why staff need to be informed and fully engaged with data's pivotal role in their organisation.

## Striking gold

People want solutions to problems and answers to queries and they want them fast.

Data might be the new gold but if it's held in filing cabinets, disparate systems or someone's head then it can't be easily mined. This means its value as a currency to fuel business transformation opportunities will be limited.

Every organisation is chasing that 'golden thread' of data, from police services to insurance companies, and housing providers need to adopt the same approach. The technology is there, but what can sometimes be missing in the housing sector is the data-led vision; this should



be shared and embraced by everyone from the chief executive downwards.

One reason why data integration can be hard to achieve is because departmental working and siloed business applications remain as barriers. One way to break them down would be to champion data integration from the top; having an IT director at board level could be a good way forward because it would be easier to secure the buy-in needed from internal stakeholders to break down the departmental/siloed barriers and achieve integration.

### 24/7 service demand

Given that the processing power of the average smartphone is thousands of times more powerful than the computers that landed man on the moon, it's little wonder that so much of our daily activity takes place online and 'in hand'.

As a result, customers expect 24/7 services that are personalised to their needs. In order to deliver the same level of service to tenants, housing providers need to have a single view of their tenants and assets to enable accurate and informed decision-making and solutions.

Housing providers need to reimagine their customers' journeys, particularly because these have radically changed in the past decade as tenants want more control over, for example, booking repairs, maintaining healthy homes and paying their rent. To achieve these things, new digital connections need to be identified and data integration points mapped out.

Organisations that haven't taken the steps to do so run the risk of being left out in the cold in a fully connected, transparent and integrated IoT world.

### Reducing organisational risk

Being able to offer full-service delivery can only happen if the right foundations are in place. It's as much about people as processes, so investing in the right in-house IT skills is a key enabler.

There's no doubt about the high-level skills that are needed to achieve data integration because it requires an extensive knowledge of cloud computing and networks. Securing and retaining staff (or buying in the right skills from outside) to ensure they have the right level of knowledge and expertise is vital to the success of any data integration strategy.

Either option will mean an upfront commitment but without it, 'thinking digital' will remain just that – all thought and little action.

### A cultural and technological lens

Data integration is mission-critical in today's IoT connected world. Siloed working inhibits collaboration and the agility to respond in the way tenants have come to expect because it is only when all the quality data is collected that customers, stakeholders and contractors' expectations can be met.

Organisations that haven't embraced a more cohesive and integrated model of working could find themselves unable to match the accelerated change of pace. Data needs to be in the DNA of the organisation and should be viewed through both a cultural and a technological lens if it is to become the fuel that drives the engine.

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





# Riverside's 'digital business'



Alison Stock, Director of IT & Digital Business, Riverside Group

*Riverside Group is a group of complementary businesses driven by a clear social purpose, with a charitable housing provider at its core. It's critical that our income goes as far as it can; we need to deliver more and better services with the same money, so gaining value for money from our technology spending is key.*

Like many in our sector, Riverside is strongly focused on improving services for customers, by simplifying interactions and limiting waste through the implementation of digital business, and becoming more agile, for the benefit of both our customers and our staff. Speaking at the recent Housing Technology 2021 conference in March, I outlined how my role as director of IT and digital business is about enabling all of us to ultimately achieve more for our customers using technology, both now and in the future.

## Bringing order to chaos

I would describe the past few years at Riverside as 'bringing order to chaos' in terms of our IT. We ran an 'IT foundations' programme to upgrade our systems where needed and validate appropriate levels of resilience and ensure appropriate DR provision with our second datacentre. Some of the strategic decisions along the way included selecting Salesforce for our CRM, which we are rolling out as we optimise and improve our customer journeys across all areas, such as repairs and lettings. Strengthening our key IT management areas was also a priority, including security, architecture, risk, contract management and supplier relationships.

## Digital business – our cloud journey

In the midst of the pandemic, we began our 'digital business' cloud journey to roll out Microsoft 365 and shape the rest of our strategy for the next few years.

We focused on customers and the availability of online services. We want to always be easy to do business with, looking to analytics to provide insights into what our customers value the most, what they really need from us and what Riverside needs to do more of. Most of us are online for many things (shopping, banking, etc), and for Riverside that means Salesforce to complement our other channels, with customers and colleagues using the same system to book repairs, pay rent, view balances, manage cases and much more.

## Smart working

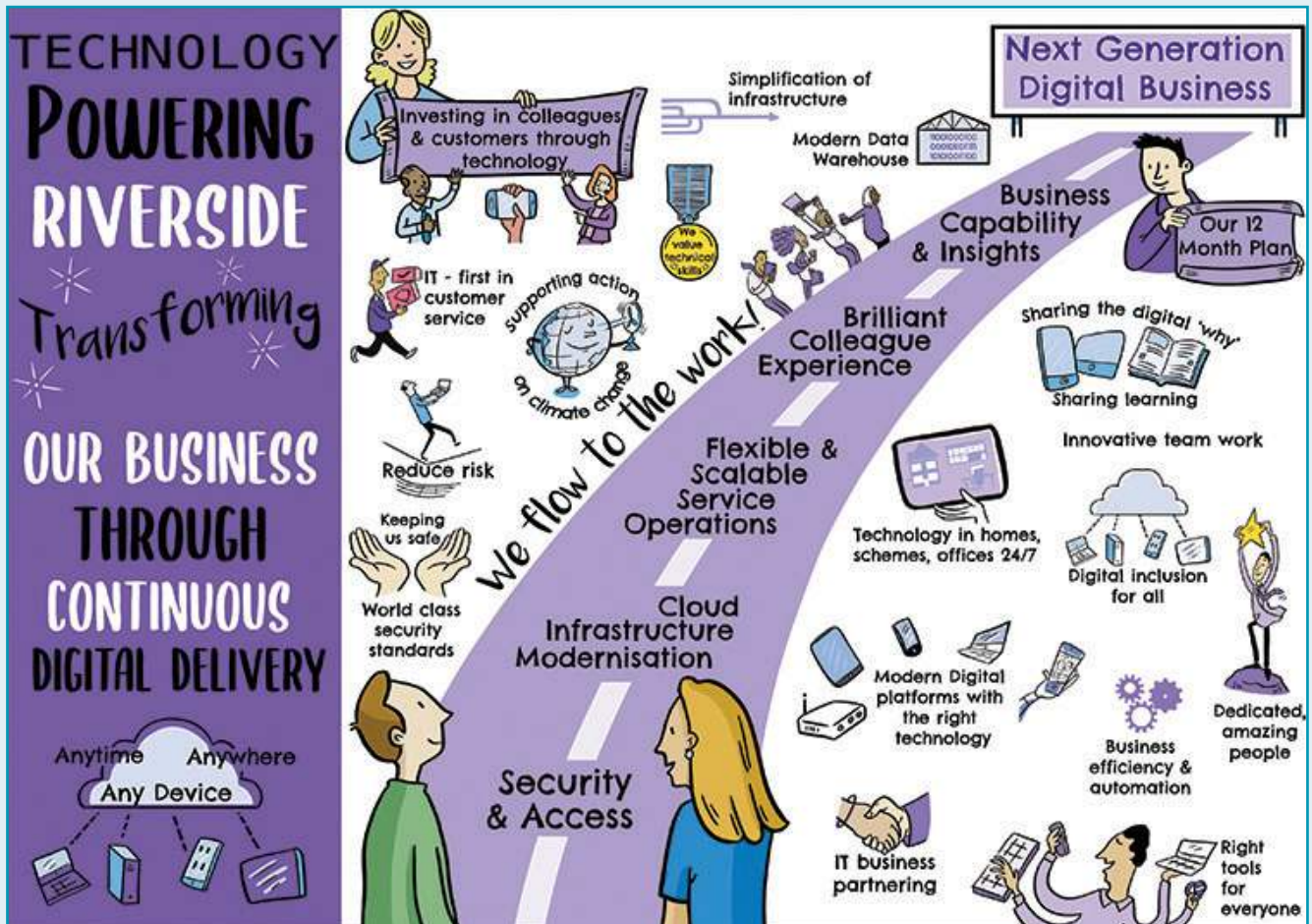
We also concentrated on increasing our colleagues' capabilities and productivity; from an IT perspective, that translates into 'smart working' with Microsoft 365, Oracle for People Services and Intune Mobile Device Management.

During the pandemic, our first step was to move the majority of our 3,000 colleagues from the office to working from home pretty much overnight with some cloud/SaaS collaboration tools. We provided remote call-centre capability, laptops for all and rapid, robust video-conferencing capabilities.

We immediately then started with a tactical deployment of BlueJeans and then fast-tracked the roll-out of Microsoft 365; after starting around March 2020, it only took a few months to complete our deployment of Yammer, Exchange Online and Teams, closely followed by SharePoint and OneDrive.

## A single source of truth

We also looked at data, insights and analytics; timely, accurate and pertinent data to ensure our customers and colleagues have the right information at the right time and



in the right format. To accelerate this, we're rolling out an enhanced data warehouse underpinned by Snowflake to give us a 'single source of truth', with dashboard reporting via Tableau.

And finally, we focused on our technology. Technology changes constantly and we are sighted on agility, capability, scalability, efficient operations and lower TCO; for us, that means the cloud.

#### Not finished yet...

We will never be finished – 2021/22 will see a continuing focus on cloud as well as DevOps. For us, the latter is all about a culture of collaborative working, empowerment and accountability to facilitate process improvements.

Our 'technology powering Riverside' image encapsulates our journey and key priorities for the next 12+ months to what we're calling 'next-generation digital business'.

Focusing on the cloud, we started with SaaS products from Microsoft, Salesforce and Oracle, guided by the strategic principles of: cloud first, with new services deployed as SaaS/PaaS before IaaS; and software client access, to securely access applications at anytime, anywhere and on any device.

Our cloud discovery phase initially considered all of our 200+ applications as cloud candidates, indicating applications and platforms which were 'cloud ready' and others which would need more work (including their impacts on operating costs and risk), all while ensuring we do the right thing for the planet through sustainable IT, plus aiming to rationalise and/or decommission applications as we go to further simplify our IT estate. We're also aiming to minimise the deployment of any new on-premise infrastructure.

So, a busy 12 months ahead and for the next few years, with more to come!

*Alison Stock is the director of IT and digital business at Riverside Group.*



## Cobalt Housing: IoT for healthy homes & healthy residents

Chris Jones, Chief Operating Officer, HomeLink (Aico) and Chris Fray, Technology & Transformation Manager, Cobalt Housing

*Halfway through 2020, Cobalt Homes approached HomeLink with the objective of carrying out an ambitious multi-sensor IoT project across 100 properties.*

Cobalt Housing's technology and transformation manager, Chris Fray, said, "The internet of things should be a central part of every housing provider's sustainability, environmental, and repair and maintenance (R&M) strategies. Annual R&M is an organisation's biggest spend, while disrepair has the potential to have one of the greatest impacts – IoT can address both of these areas."

Cobalt has been exploring new ways of working through innovative technologies and was recently successful in bidding for a knowledge transfer partnership (KTP) through Innovate UK around the concept of 'healthy homes, healthy tenants and healthy communities'. Part of the work outlined in the KTP was the introduction of home-based sensor technologies to improve indoor environments.

### Combining maintenance with good health

IoT has matured as a preventative maintenance technology in social housing but it's also now emerging as an important tool in keeping residents safe and healthy. As a result, Cobalt approached HomeLink with three aims:

1. Identify additional opportunities to improve its residents' health and safety;
2. Provide evidence of the health benefits and maintenance savings at scale via a 100-home initial deployment;
3. Examine the IoT ethics, behavioural psychology and acceptability by interviewing the 100 residents throughout the project.

Fray said, "We can clearly see the benefits of IoT for our assets by making them a living organism that we can monitor, maintain and modify more effectively. However, we are also keen to explore what IoT means for our residents, how they feel about the sensors, will IoT make them more empowered, and will they treat their properties any differently?"

### The finer details

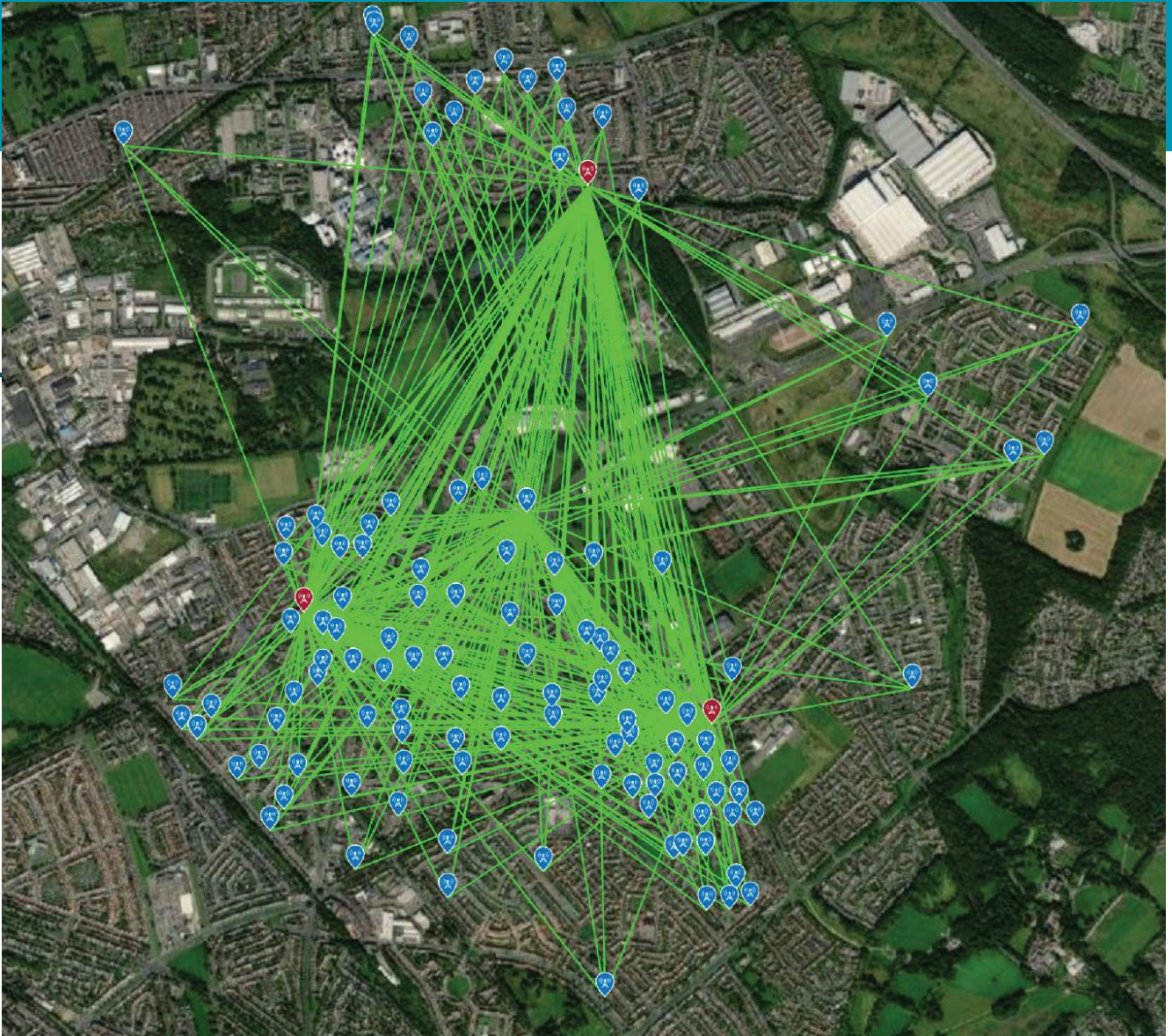
Cobalt knew that in order to understand its return on investment, tenant acceptability and operational feasibility at scale, an ambitious 100-home deployment would be needed. Cobalt was confident that IoT would work from a technical perspective but it was keen to see it working in its housing stock with its residents and with its operational processes.

To help address Cobalt's objectives, the deployment is now being split into two parts:

- 90 homes with environmental (temperature, humidity & carbon dioxide) and electricity sensors;
- 10 'advanced' homes with additional devices, including Aico's connected smoke and carbon-monoxide alarms and window and door sensors.

Each tenant involved in the project will give consent from a GDPR perspective and need to download a mobile app in order to interact with their property's data environment from a health, safety and maintenance perspective.





The IoT deployment is due to be completed by the end of April 2021. After this, data will be collected and analysed over the next 12 months before the results are published and a decision made about any further roll-out of the project. We will be sharing our findings with Housing Technology in due course.

#### What does the future hold?

Fray said, "The intention is to expand both the scope and volume of IoT sensors across more of our properties; 100 properties is a good start but we have 6,000 properties and so there is some way to go yet! However, if the RoI is satisfactory then we will have solid grounds for expanding the project's scope."

*Chris Jones is the chief operating officer at HomeLink (Aico) and Chris Fray is the technology and transformation manager at Cobalt Housing.*



## Vericon's connected boiler trial in Cambridge

*South Cambridgeshire District Council has installed Vericon Systems' BCM devices in tenants' homes as part of a 'connected boiler' pilot project to remotely monitor the condition of boilers and predict when failures are likely.*

The devices are monitored and managed via Vericon's online portal, with performance data that can be recorded and analysed to predict and identify common failures such as low pressure, electrical or mechanical parts failures or frozen condensate pipes.

Chris Brown, senior heating surveyor, South Cambridgeshire District Council, said, "We're particularly interested in new, smart technologies that make diagnosing and fixing boilers more efficient for us and effortless for our tenants.

"For example, with one tenant's boiler, we were receiving numerous alerts each day but when our maintenance workers visited the home, they couldn't find any problems with the boiler.

"During a video call with Vericon, I called the tenant to see if they could help to diagnose the problem. They

explained that the boiler had been going off for several weeks and unbeknown to her, each time she pushed a button to try and resolve the problem, she was actually pressing the reset button. By using the Vericon portal during the call, I could see the boiler come back to life when she pushed the button, proving the system was working correctly. We were then able to arrange for our team to visit the tenant and make the repair in under 10 minutes, and the boiler hasn't failed since."

Bernard Cook, managing director, Vericon Systems, said, "Interfacing directly with the boiler's control bus allows our BCM device to perform a range of actions not possible with a read-only 'smart' thermostat. Preventative maintenance programmes can be set up that not only save money in the long term, but also ensure that regulatory compliance is consistently maintained."



## CNT's IT donation to Women in Social Housing

*Women in Social Housing has upgraded its IT infrastructure thanks to its partnership with IT services provider, Central Networks and Technologies.*

CNT has donated implementation and project time to the not-for-profit organisation to deploy Microsoft Office 365 for WISH's geographically-dispersed workforce and team of volunteers.

WISH is a membership-based network for women across every discipline of the UK housing sector. Each of its regions is run by volunteers who organise networking and professional development events to help women share their knowledge and experiences.

Helen Greig, managing director, Women in Social Housing, said, "We're really excited to be working with

Central Networks and Technologies on our digital transformation programme. As a community interest company, we have a very limited amount to spend on IT. Receiving this project time free of charge is a massive help because it means we can get the upgraded systems we need and use our budget to run our events and activities as cost-effectively as possible for our members."

Nicola Brown, sales director, Central Networks and Technologies, said, "As the co-chair of WISH North West, I've seen how amazing these events are for bringing women across the sector together and building meaningful relationships with other like-minded women."



# Housing software vs. generic software



*Housing Technology interviewed senior executives from Aareon UK, Fast Lean Smart, Illumar and IntoZetta about the respective advantages and disadvantages of housing-specific software (best-of-breed) and generic software, encompassing all facets of decision-making, from procurement, implementation and integration, through cost and functionality comparisons, and ongoing support, management and maintenance.*

## Do you need housing-specific software?

Aareon UK's senior business development manager, Ian Lockwood, said, "Housing providers need to deliver a very wide range of disparate but linked services in an environment that is heavily legislated and subject to frequent change. The software they use therefore needs to keep up with those changes and, even when deployed within a given service area, needs to be cognisant of the wider picture.

"In contrast, where generic software is used, the housing provider often has to have in-house development resources to tailor it to their particular requirements and keep pace with change. While there are examples of this working well for reasonable periods of time, there are many cases where this in-house know-how exits the business and the housing provider is then left with an unsupported solution."

Illumar's commercial director, Peter Luke, said, "Housing providers don't necessarily need housing-specific software but if they do opt for a generic solution, it should come with domain knowledge and housing expertise. Tenants' expectations will be driven by service standards in other areas (c.f. Amazon or Uber), and the software, whether specific or generic, used by housing providers needs to match best practice elsewhere in tenants' lives.

"While the balance between generic and best-of-breed software might change, in the medium term a mix of software types will remain so we need an approach to housing-specific enterprise master data management or middleware to enable the benefits of both approaches to be harnessed."

IntoZetta's co-founder and director, Graeme Cox, said, "Housing providers carry out very particular activities that are common in housing but are very different from almost every other sector. It therefore makes sense for the sector to gravitate around a small number of software solutions to address these particular operational requirements. With housing-specific solutions, there is also the added advantage of sharing knowledge and experiences through the various user groups and communities."

## Horses for courses...

Aareon's Lockwood said, "Some requirements are well met by generic applications; no one would suggest that housing providers need housing-specific email solutions, desktop software or HR applications. Equally, other housing-centric requirements are better met from an IT provider that genuinely understands the services to be delivered and can focus wholly on keeping the solution in line with customers' needs and relevant housing legislation. There are also the benefits of working with like-minded customers alongside user groups and development roadmaps that are wholly focused on the needs of the housing sector."

Fast Lean Smart's managing director, Jeremy Squire, said, "Consider best-of-breed scheduling solutions – these benefit all field-based operations, including repairs and maintenance teams, neighbourhood housing officers, surveyors and asset management teams, as well as health and care workers, whereas back-office finance and HR teams could use more generic software."

IntoZetta's Cox said, "In areas such as housing, tenant and repairs management, most housing providers have similar business models, operational processes and ongoing



challenges. It therefore makes sense that software which has been specifically designed or configured to meet those challenges will be more effective 'out of the box' than a generic solution designed for all sectors.

"This logic can also be applied to areas that might at first sight seem good candidates for generic software, such as data management. There are generic data management products that allow a housing provider to manage its data assets in ways that are consistent with best practice across all industry sectors, but there are also solutions that are pre-configured with data structures and data-quality rules specifically for housing, so needing less configuration and investment to provide a tailored solution.

"Where generic software is almost always the right answer is in the indisputably horizontal functions within an organisation where there is little or no difference between the needs of a housing provider and the needs of, say, a retailer or manufacturer. Email and collaboration tools fit into this bucket, as do HR software and general office applications."

**Procurement**

IntoZetta's Cox said, "Procuring a generic solution for a particular requirement creates a number of challenges. The software will probably 'do what it says on the tin' but is that what the organisation specifically requires? This path can lead to a heavily configured bespoke solution that can prove more expensive and difficult to support in the long term. Procuring a housing-specific solution might mean that the requirements can be more exacting but it's also likely to mean that there are fewer vendors able to provide a fully-supported, sector-specific solution."



*Generic software could be applied across broad procurement tenders, such as for finance solutions, but it's the nuances that are applicable to housing which set best-of-breed solutions apart.*

Jeremy Squire, Managing Director, Fast Lean Smart

FLS's Squire said, "Generic software could be applied across broad procurement tenders, such as for finance solutions, but it's the nuances that are applicable to housing which set best-of-breed solutions apart. Housing solutions have been developed with housing in mind, working harmoniously together, specialising in areas such as job costings for repairs, route optimisation and scheduling, across different aspects and integrating easily with other solutions, to provide the best possible and most cost-effective and complete technology solutions."



*No one would suggest that housing providers need housing-specific email, desktop or HR software. Equally, other housing requirements are better met from an IT provider that genuinely understands the services to be delivered.*

Ian Lockwood, Senior Business Development Manager, Aareon UK

**Implementation and integration**

Illumar's Luke said, "If the procurement exercise has been done diligently then it's unlikely to be the technology or effort required that's a barrier to implementation for either best-of-breed or generic solutions. Governance and the bringing together of people, systems and controls at critical junctures are the common challenges.

"Having people with housing experience will help solve this, pulling disparate parts of the organisation together to anticipate and plan the implementation. It's undoubtedly helpful to have been through the cycle before, as anyone who has built an Ikea wardrobe will testify!"

IntoZetta's Cox said, "Implementing and integrating a generic 'vanilla' solution is likely to mean that the skills and experience are readily available to achieve success. However, the further the solution is configured and adapted away from the 'vanilla' version, the more complexity will be added and some of the original benefits lost.

"Many housing-specific solutions are conceived around their implementation and integration with other popular housing solutions in mind, with the common operational requirements pre-configured. For this reason, buying one of these may be easier to implement and integrate, and cheaper and easier to support in the long term because there should be very little need to create a bespoke solution."

**Functionality**

Illumar's Luke said, "Functionality is the key question to ask and document ahead of any procurement exercise. It's important to know what business problems you currently have, those you predict in the future and why you want to do something about those problems. This should be documented in any contract so you don't end up with a long-term 'temporary minimum viable product'.

"There is an advantage to housing-specific software because you benefit from the accumulated knowledge of other users, although this shouldn't be used to lock you into a particular architecture. However, there might be more innovation from generic suppliers with a wider accrued knowledge of users undertaking similar processes in other sectors. It's also worthwhile thinking through the consequences of what happens when your needs change, and whether you can manage the changes in-house or if not, where and at what cost those change can be supported."

FLS's Squire said, "Housing-specific software goes further than generic software, enabling much more functionality, such as self-service. Typically, best-of-breed is geared towards one particular purpose and is much easier to update, with upgrades rolled out without affecting other systems. Generic software tends to have less 'usable' functionality because it has been designed with broader purposes in mind, only some of which are applicable to housing."

### Cost

Illumar's Luke said, "Generic solutions look like they square the circle of offering exactly what you want at a mass market price or at least a price that meets the financial case for making a change."

"However, to make like-for-like comparisons, you would need to consider the basis of the pricing at, for example, an enterprise level, property level and user level, and any such pricing would need to be risk-adjusted for the time to value, the cost of future changes and the accrued 'technical debt' embedded in such systems when the suppliers and internal champions have moved on. That said, because the underlying assets are likely to outlive the systems, the data about those assets is also likely to outlive those systems and the value to the organisation of accessing and interrogating that data may outweigh any concerns over the whole-life costs."



*Functionality is the key question to ask ahead of any procurement exercise. This should be documented so you don't end up with a long-term 'temporary minimum viable product'.*

Peter Luke, Commercial Director, Illumar



### Ongoing support, management & maintenance

FLS's Squire said, "Best-of-breed software can often be deployed within days because it will have been configured exactly for a specific business or software challenge, whereas the roll-out of generic software is usually slower and more expensive. Furthermore, best-of-breed solutions don't tend to require large upfront investments, whereas generic software can have large upfront license costs and then ongoing support and maintenance costs, with less flexibility for any upgrades to the system."

Illumar's Luke said, "Support and maintenance is one of those things that everybody wants but no one likes to pay for. The promptness and expertise of the response will, to some extent, shape perceptions of the system and here there should be an advantage with housing-specific systems."

"However, if this is the point at which you learn what the system actually does versus what you expected it to do, it can be a painful reality check, especially if resolving that necessitates paying for a consultant to diagnose the problem and then paying again to derive a solution. The advantage of a best-of-breed solution is that it should anticipate certain changes whereas a generic system will require the housing organisation to specify what is needed."



*Procuring a generic solution for a particular requirement creates a number of challenges. The software will probably 'do what it says on the tin' but is that what the organisation specifically requires?*

Graeme Cox, Co-Founder & Director, IntoZetta



### Dictating future technology plans


FLS's Squire said, "Focusing on best-of-breed solutions over generic software has a significant impact on housing providers' future plans; many are looking at cloud-based applications as a result of the pandemic and the need to work from home and/or remotely."

"The flexibility and huge array of configurable parameters within housing-specific software should be able to meet each customer's particular objectives and deliver cost efficiency, tenant satisfaction and employee wellbeing without affecting speed or performance. By contrast, generic software tends to work from a limited number of parameters or overlays them in ways that give suboptimal results."

IntoZetta's Cox said, "Housing providers ultimately want software that can support their operational requirements without needing to be heavily configured, built on a technology stack that is broadly accepted, and which has a long-term development roadmap."

"Many providers of housing-specific software develop their software using widely available technologies underpinned by the likes of Microsoft and Google. It is important to understand the underlying technology stack and development roadmap of any software to ensure that it complements the long-term technology strategy of the housing provider, regardless of whether the solution is generic or housing-specific."

*Housing Technology would like to thank Ian Lockwood (Aareon UK), Jeremy Squire (Fast Lean Smart), Peter Luke (Illumar) and Graeme Cox (IntoZetta) for their comments and editorial contributions to this article.*



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# The technologist's apprentice...



Mark Wilson, Head of IT,

*There was a time in my career when I had a 'downer' on apprenticeships, which was counter-intuitive because when I left school, I did a four-year Ministry of Defence apprenticeship. I'd become stuck in a rut, thinking that modern apprenticeships were not 'real' apprenticeships and they were more trouble than they were worth, so I never really got on board with the opportunities they offer... I definitely missed a trick.*

My apprenticeship was 'old style', among an annual intake of 24 newbies, with the first two years spent in a training centre followed by eight specialist placements. It was fabulous – it gave me wonderful opportunities and an outlook that has helped me in many ways ever since.

I sometimes wonder how I got to where I have and the dreaded 'imposter syndrome' sometimes gets the better of me. But I'm now certain that the things I learned, many of them subconsciously, gave me a confidence that I hadn't fully appreciated nor directly attributed to my apprenticeship until now.

When I joined Vivid Homes, we'd just taken on an apprentice. As I watched him progress, I became more interested in how the apprenticeship was structured, the college work he was doing and how things worked with his manager.

My scepticism began to wane as I watched his personal growth and I spotted that his manager was gaining from the experience as well. Of course, there were some trials and tribulations along the way for all concerned; it's not

always easy and there has to be commitment on all sides, so sometimes there needs to be a dogged determination to nurture people and go the extra mile to help make things successful. But with the right culture and support we reaped the benefits. He overcame adversity and completed his apprenticeship a year ago.

We offered him a trainee role and he is now about to become a fully-fledged member of our team. We've seen him grow from being a shy, introverted and anxious apprentice to a high-performing young IT professional with an amazing dedication and a strong and robust set of values and behaviours that will set him up for the rest of his life.

We now have two apprentices, one specialising in low-code software development and the other in business administration. They're doing very well and their managers are enjoying the challenges and experiences of nurturing our new talent. The apprentices are fully integrated into our team and do real work that adds value to our entire team; they aren't mere 'make-weights'.

I believe in creating an environment where everyone can do some of the best work of their lives – creating the opportunities within our team for apprentices and trainees benefits everyone. Other team members are directly involved in their training and professional development and that in itself is beneficial to both.

Take our low-code developer as an example – now in the second year of his apprenticeship, his line manager will be one of our senior developers, who in turn will progress and become a line manager. It's like a five-way accumulator – apprentice, manager, team member, department and entire organisation. Everyone's a winner.

This doesn't all happen by chance. It's the kind of thing that, to use a cliché, has to be driven from the top. As the leader of our IT team, my role is to champion apprenticeships and support everyone involved. I maintain regular contact with our managers and our apprentices and make sure that we're doing everything we can to help everyone achieve great things. There have been times when I've had to get involved although I'd have preferred

not to, but sometimes strong and clear leadership helps everyone focus on the important things and that has included the apprentice training providers.

Both strategically and tactically, apprentices and traineeships are a fantastic way to nurture the skills needed in your team. After all, why would any organisation support a successful apprentice and not keep them on?

And an apprentice is very good value; my experience is that the time, effort and energy it takes to support an apprentice easily pays off over the duration of the apprenticeship. The contributions they can make are, proportionally, no different to those of a new starter who needs time to learn the ropes in a new organisation and a new role.

As a measure of our successes, 20 per cent of our team comprises current or former apprentices or trainees and all of them have stayed with us. That's an impressive achievement for everyone involved and demonstrates our commitment to our people.

Vivid Homes is big on personal growth and I underestimated the opportunities apprenticeships bring for everyone. What I've seen in our managers is considerable pride in our apprentices' achievements and the determination I mentioned earlier coming to the fore; all of our managers who've looked after our apprentices are definitely better managers as a result.

We've had some challenges along the way, and at times our managers have needed some help too. Having used three different apprenticeship organisations, they've all 'talked the talk' but haven't always 'walked the walk'. We have an apprenticeships expert in our HR team and their help and advice has been invaluable. As a team, we've worked hard to ensure everyone is doing what they should, when they should and as well as they should.

Providing bright futures is something we're passionate about at Vivid Homes. We're a large company with lots of employees across the south of England, yet we've maintained strong connections with our local communities. We believe it's our responsibility to support our young people in gaining the fundamental skills and experience to help boost their prospects and chances in life; so far, we've offered apprenticeships across our various trade disciplines, finance, HR and IT.

For me, the most important thing in all of this is the opportunities we've given and are continuing to give our IT apprentices and trainees. I'm immensely proud of what they have achieved and look forward to watching their LinkedIn profiles long after I've retired.

*Mark Wilson is the head of IT at Vivid Homes.*

## Manifest & Propeller's compliance partnership

*Propeller Powered and Manifest Consulting have formed a partnership in order to provide a complete compliance service for housing providers.*



Propeller Powered provides cloud-based software covering planning, monitoring and reporting across property compliance, while Manifest Consulting specialises in providing business and IT consultancy in the housing sector.

David Carr, managing director, Propeller Powered, said, "Having already worked together on numerous projects, this partnership is the logical next step. We often work with the same clients and although what we provide is fundamentally different in that Propeller is product-based while Manifest offers consultancy, there's considerable overlap. What's become apparent

is that by joining forces, we can offer a far more holistic solution to support housing providers through the full compliance lifecycle."

Peter Salisbury, director of housing consultancy, Manifest Consulting, said, "We know that Propeller's software is a fantastic tool for customers to manage their compliance in a straightforward, fully-auditable way, but we've seen at first hand that there are some customers who need to look at the bigger picture in order to get the most out of it. We can therefore provide strategic advice and practical support to leverage the full power of Propeller to complete the compliance circle."





# Aareon's A-Team – Putting people & communities first

Genevieve Davey-Smith, Head of Human Resources, Aareon UK

*During times like these, putting your people and your community first is more important than ever. Social value, giving back, community involvement – these are all terms we hear but what does it mean in practice and how can we make these activities meaningful?*

At Aareon, our company ethos is fundamental to all that we do; it's always about the people. Our products and services are designed to help housing providers best serve their customers and our employee programmes are designed to look after the well-being of our people.

Our annual employee survey in 2020 found that our people wanted to do more to give back in their own communities and to our customers. We've been active in supporting initiatives with our housing customers regularly over the years and this gave us a new focus for employee-driven volunteering and giving back.

The result? We created the A-Team! The Aareon team of volunteers is where everyone in the company has a day each year during work time to dedicate to a project. This is in addition to having ad-hoc time for smaller projects that they want to support.

## Aareon's coronavirus response

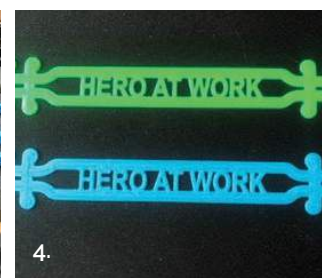
We transitioned 100 per cent of our people to being home-based at the start of the pandemic and they used the opportunity to help where they could. From 3D-printed visor headbands to crocheted mask-straps, delivering hot meals to vulnerable individuals, sending cards to care-home residents and hospital patients as well as being NHS Volunteer responders – it felt great to be able to help.

1. Crocheted mask adaptors by Cat Stratton
2. Mask adaptors by Helma Van Oosterum for local communities
3. NHS staff visors and the 3D printed visor headbands
4. 3D printed visor headbands, 'Hero at work', created by Kevin Nedin

## The A-Team

To create projects for our A-Team, we asked our employees and our customer community for ideas. Our social value manager, Sarah Matthews, manages the programme of giving back - sharing our skills, creating content, helping people to stay in touch, supporting and empowering those looking for new opportunities, and looking after our people. The examples here are just some of the magic that we've been able to create.

Sarah Matthews, social value manager, Aareon UK, said, "The A-Team has given me a fantastic opportunity to connect with our customers. Volunteering really does present our employees with a way to give something back. I love helping my colleagues to invest in communities and futures by giving a little of their time. We really are living our values while helping to change people's lives. That means the world to us at Aareon."



## Christmas Kindness 2020

We asked our customers to nominate their projects and held an employee vote to select the top four projects to donate 'Christmas Kindness' cash donations; Great Places, St Basil's, Curo and Halton Housing were chosen.



The vouchers we sent to Great Places helped Pomona Gardens provide a

buffet on New Year's Eve and a roast dinner on New Year's Day for 20 of its residents. Great Places' procurement officer, Stephanie Cameron, said that the residents were really happy to have full bellies, and most couldn't remember the last time they had had a hot roast. The communal kitchen is small, so residents used their own ovens to cook parts of the overall meal and the night staff peeled all the vegetables. Residents also got a gift bag each when they collected their meal.



© Great Places Housing Group

Dinner at Pomona Gardens with Great Places



St Basil's Housing's team leader, Vanessa Newey, said that they had supported young people at their youth hub with the Tesco vouchers donated by Aareon. She said,

"People were able to move into their new accommodation and buy essential food items to see them through until their benefit payments came through. Thanks so much – these have been really useful."



© St Basils Housing



For Curo, we donated to the Bath Food bank where Genesis Trust's food manager, Grainne Moher, said, "We provide emergency food to people in crisis, particularly since the pandemic. Our team, along with the generous support of people and companies like Aareon, has

provided 1,800 food parcels helping 3,400 people since the beginning of lockdown. Thank you once again for your support – we are so very grateful."



We sent vouchers to Widnes Food bank on behalf of Halton Housing, which was the equivalent of sufficient food for 10 people for three days. Halton Housing's social impact officer, Cheryl McCabe, said, "Halton Housing is all about improving lives and has worked continually to tackle food poverty, particularly during the pandemic. Aareon's donation to Widnes Foodbank will support children and families in need, at a time when foodbank services are in high demand."

## Befriending & upskilling



It was great to meet some of the residents at SeeAbility, Great Places and Octavia Foundation, and to buddy with individuals for skills development and befriending. Technical support to introduce people to the world of video conferencing is part of our digital inclusion activities, and it has been great to help residents stay connected with family and friends during the pandemic. Aareon also sends cards and occasional gifts to add cheer and variety to their days.





**Matthew Radmore,**  
ERP Support  
Manager,  
Aareon UK

### Coaching residents to get jobs

We've provided online IT career support for Great

Places and Octavia Foundation. Our ERP support manager, Matthew Radmore, helped one young apprentice at Octavia Housing with his interview and CV preparation; we were then delighted to hear that he had been successful with his application for a full-time IT analyst role at Octavia.

### Wellbeing toolkit

Working with One Housing, we developed a re-usable 'wellbeing toolkit' for its staff and residents. With a variety of styles designed to appeal to everyone, the toolkit covers getting active, connecting with others, learning a new skill and local information. We look forward to sharing it with other organisations as part of our A-Team activities.



### Mental Health Toolkit 'Cogs'

Linda Kelly, customer partnerships manager, One Housing, said, "I can't thank you enough for the brilliant toolkit that Aareon produced for our vulnerable customers. I marvel at your ingenuity and 'can do' attitude in producing so much from just a few lines on a summary. My colleagues are already praising it, asking to share it more widely and saying they will use it personally. Thank you for working with us; your generosity of spirit is awesome and we're so glad our vulnerable customers were the beneficiaries of that spirit."



**Ruth Mepham**  
with hair & live  
with her hair  
being shaved off

### Charity donations

Aareon is pleased to support dedicated fundraising initiatives for charities close to our heart. For example, Aareon UK's management accountant, Ruth Mepham, raised a fantastic £2,000 for Alzheimer's UK by shaving her head live on an Aareon Team call, with everyone cheering her on.

We already have charity fundraising underway for two special causes during 2022 – The Royal British Legion and Cash For Kids.



Aareon helping at Cash for Kids

Aareon UK's ERP support manager, Matthew Radmore is deep into his training program to do an Arctic survival challenge in northern Sweden for the Royal British Legion. Being an ex-serviceman, the charity is close to his heart because it helps serving armed forces personnel, veterans and their families and provides care homes and rehabilitation. He has raised over 60 per cent of his target so far.

To donate: [justgiving.com/fundraising/arcticsurvivalchallenge2022-matthewradmore](https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/arcticsurvivalchallenge2022-matthewradmore).



**Emma White,**  
Digital  
Implementation  
Consultant,  
Aareon UK

Our digital implementations consultant, Emma White, is doing a Himalayan trek for Cash For Kids. She said, "They do really great work

with children across the south of England, providing money for school shoes, shopping vouchers, Christmas presents, warm meals during the school holidays and their youth clubs give the children life-skills and structure. Some colleagues and I volunteered in one of Cash For Kids' warehouses, sorting out presents to go to children who would otherwise wake up to nothing on Christmas morning."

To donate: [cashforkidsgive.co.uk/campaign/himalayan-trek-with-mark-collins-2022/fundraisers/emma-white](https://www.cashforkidsgive.co.uk/campaign/himalayan-trek-with-mark-collins-2022/fundraisers/emma-white).



## Aareon mental health workshops

Aareon holds company-wide monthly wellbeing sessions, equipping our people with the skills to be resilient and thrive during lockdowns. The sessions' topics have included mindset management, burn bright, mental fitness and mindfulness.

'We Care' is one of our company values and the Aareon UK leadership team wanted to make sure our employees know they really do have support and commitment to their wellbeing. This is a top priority for us and making sure we do all we can as a business remains on our people agenda for the future.

We've received lots of positive feedback from our people: "Thank you for arranging the wellbeing sessions. Companies usually talk about values but place emphasis on the money-making aspects, while just paying lip-service to their employees' wellbeing. These sessions really show that Aareon genuinely cares about its colleagues."

## Social value for the public sector

Within public sector, focus on social value is seen in UK PPN 06/20 (Procurement Policy Note) and the recently released BS8950, but for us the heart and soul of any programme must be the benefits that can be realised by employees, customers and residents.

We can't wait to see what other great ideas and useful activities we can engage in with our customers and their residents during 2021 and beyond.

If you are an Aareon customer and have a project or initiative you would like us to get involved in, please contact us at [hello@aareon.com](mailto:hello@aareon.com) or on 02476 323 723.

# ADVANCE NOTICE – HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2022

*After the success of the digital broadcast of our Housing Technology 2021 conference in March, we are busy planning next year's event now that the lockdown restrictions are easing.*

The Housing Technology 2022 conference and executive forum will be a hybrid event, combining the very best elements from the well-established physical incarnation of our event with the digital broadcast aspects of this year's virtual event.

We're very pleased to announce that Housing Technology 2022 will take place on **02-03 March** next year at both The Oxford Belfry and online via our tried-and-tested digital broadcast platform.

Guests will have a choice of tickets for attending either in person or via the live broadcast.

If you are interested in speaking/presentation opportunities at Housing Technology 2022, please email [alastair@housing-technology.com](mailto:alastair@housing-technology.com). For sponsorship and exhibiting enquiries, please email [george.grant@housing-technology.com](mailto:george.grant@housing-technology.com).

To find out more, please visit [conference.housing-technology.com](https://conference.housing-technology.com).



**HOUSING™  
TECHNOLOGY**  
**2022** | CONFERENCE AND  
EXECUTIVE FORUM





# Introducing the data revolution

Doug Sarney, Solutions Principal, MRI Software

*MRI Software has been running a series of breakfast briefings over the past few months, hosted by me, Colin Sales (CEO, 3C Consultants), Michael McLaughlin (social insight lead, HACT) and Phil Brining (operations director, The Data Protection People).*

The first briefing covered the challenges in social housing with respect to data and the need for housing providers to adopt more data-driven decision-making.

In much the same way that the miners and drillers of natural resources in bygone eras held the key to fuelling society's progress, modern data miners and drillers find themselves in a similar position of influence. Consider that 90 per cent of all electronic data has been created in just the past two years and modern data pioneers are the people who can extract value from this data.



Colin Sales, CEO, 3C Consultants

The key to uncovering value from data is facilitating the conversion of data into actions via a data-value pathway. The

decisions taken at the end of this process then have an impact on individuals across all areas of life.

Social housing providers are no different to other organisations regarding the vast amounts of data collected, held and available to them on which decisions about their businesses and the well-being of tenants are based.

Smart housing providers are harnessing data correctly and efficiently and then using it to build and maintain robust

organisations and thriving communities. Conversely, from a service, regulatory and governance perspective, the repercussions of getting it wrong are high, such as reputational risk, operational inefficiency; cost, employment and even lives as the tragic events of June 2017 have shown.



Michael McLaughlin, Social Insight Lead, HACT

Put simply, badly-organised data hinders long-term business transformation and seemingly harmless errors can

have startling implications for forward planning. Michael McLaughlin from HACT said, "We came across a housing provider who found that 20 per cent of its tenants were 119 years old. This was in 2019 and what had happened was some people didn't provide their date of birth when they logged into the system so they were arbitrarily given a birthday of 1st January 1900."

This is an easily identifiable slip-up brought about by having no option for unavailable data. However, if it hadn't been spotted, the consequences of this unrealistic number of centenarians could have heavily influenced the planning of housing provision for an extraordinarily ageing population.

Other data anomalies can be harder to spot and these create doubt in the fundamental trustworthiness of the data; the shaky reliability of information garnered from data will result in hesitancy when making decisions or result in poor decisions.

Colin Sales from 3C Consultants said, "When it comes to good governance, the decision will be made based on your data, not on expert reassurances. We're reaching the stage where hearing the words 'prove it' will be a frequent challenge to management teams."



**Phil Brining,**  
Operations  
Director, The  
Data Protection  
People

The urgency felt by housing providers to enable their data to work for them was outlined by each

with organisations able to present how and why they collect data and what insights they gain from it, rather than purely implementing data practices as a reaction to new or changing regulations.

Phil Brining from The Data Protection People said, "The data revolution is not only here to stay, it's also gathering pace. You can collect all the data you want but if you can't derive any value or benefit from it, what's the point?"

of the speakers. Beyond risks, prescient leaders are looking forward to moving information from patchwork spreadsheets and legacy systems to integrated, responsive platforms that can model, test and facilitate long-term transformation.

On the horizon, the internet of things, AI and machine learning have the capacity to transform housing providers. These technologies will have major implications in terms of housing providers' competencies, understanding of data ethics and adherence to standards. One example of this lies in the trading of data and metadata derived from IOT devices.

Some of the recommendations discussed for housing providers to consider in their data revolution projects included: defining your mission; building a single version of the truth; mechanisms for cleaning up existing data; validating data at its point of entry; employing clear analytics and business intelligence and embedding residents' feedback. The goal for each action is to turn data into decisions to add value.

After all, data on its own is actually useless. Technically, data is just 1s and 0s, numbers held in databases. What we need to do is move it into an arena where we can derive some value from it. Once we have insights, we can make confident and valuable decisions.

Michael McLaughlin from HACT said, "It has to be a sector-led process. We have to be our own best advocates for how we handle our data."

To embed data-driven decision-making within the social housing sector, organisations will need a high level of comfort around handling and analysing data in order to instil confidence that the best decisions are being made.

Establishing high standards for good data usage will take some time to implement because careful and specific attention is needed for each facet of a housing provider's service provision. The approach needs to be proactive,

*Doug Sarney is the solutions principal at MRI Software.*

## Civica wins £1.3m deal with Paradigm Housing

*Paradigm Housing has agreed a five-year with Civica worth £1.3 million to support a major change programme.*

Paradigm chose Civica's cloud-based Cx Housing, Asset Management and Contractor Workforce software to improve its online services for tenants and support more responsive mobile services for staff and contractors. The Cx Asset Management software

will help to ensure Paradigm's properties are fit for purpose and sustainable in the future, with improved automated repairs workflows.

Vivienne Adams, head of portfolio and programme management, Paradigm Housing, said, "This new partnership with Civica is much more than just an IT implementation – we want to move forward as a forward-thinking organisation with the best digital services for our customers and staff."

Michelle Tyler, managing director for social housing, Civica, said, "Today's tenants expect quick responses and solutions to their housing needs, combined with easy access to online support. Our Cx Housing platform will give Paradigm a single view of its customer and property data, fully integrated with data from its external partners, helping the housing provider to reach tenants faster and streamline its business processes."





# HOUSING TECHNOLOGY LAUNCHES ON DEMAND STREAMING PLATFORM

*For over a decade, Housing Technology has been delivering information and knowledge through our various channels, including the Housing Technology conference, magazine, reports and events. Now, as part of our commitment to learning and knowledge-sharing in the sector, we are delighted to bring you more innovative insights and developments from leading technologists and strategists through a new medium.*



Housing Technology On Demand ([ondemand.housing-technology.com](http://ondemand.housing-technology.com)) is a dedicated hub for learning about the latest technologies in housing and features exclusive content carefully chosen by us, including demos, discussions, case studies, interviews and event replays.

George Grant, co-founder and CEO, Housing Technology, said, "We see On Demand as being a pivotal development, arising from both the pandemic and the digital broadcast approach we took for our 2021 annual conference in March. Our On Demand service is a revolutionary media platform capable of really driving progress for our sector."



To access the platform, all you need to do is sign up for one of our membership packages. Our standard On Demand membership package is free for housing providers and gives you unlimited access to all of our regular videos including demos, discussions, case studies, interviews and much more.

We also have packages where you can catch up on all of the recordings from our conferences. Once you've signed up for one of these packages, you'll be able to tune in to all the content on offer at your leisure.

Midge Ure OBE, one of the keynote speakers at Housing Technology 2021, said, "It is good to see how a genuinely new development such as streaming can benefit the housing sector. If you cast your mind back to LiveAid in 1985, much of what we did then, by broadcasting across two continents, was new – just look at how far technology has come since then."

Lord John Bird, founder, The Big Issue, said, "I've worked with Housing Technology for some years, with collaboration between housing providers on the one hand and software suppliers on the other. With the creation of On Demand, that sense of innovation through collaboration is stronger and more immediate, so that key developments can be communicated faster and the interests of 'big tech' and government can be held to account."



**Please visit [ondemand.housing-technology.com](http://ondemand.housing-technology.com) to find out more and sign up. Plus, there's also a handy On Demand app available from Apple's App Store.**



# TSG's housing team

*TSG has announced the creation of a dedicated housing team, including the latest addition of Rob Fletcher from GreenSquare Group.*



**Kirsty Marsden, Housing Service Design Lead, TSG**

Kirsty Marsden is TSG's housing service design lead. With 28 years working in our sector, she specialises in building strong partnerships with housing providers and ensuring positive engagement from initial conversations through to the delivery of successful projects for all Microsoft and managed service offerings. She will also be recognisable to many readers as one of the speakers at many of Housing Technology's conferences and as the host of TSG's regular housing-specific webinars.

Marsden said, "It's been an amazing year supporting housing providers to innovate at pace. We have significantly grown our customer base and this has led to an expansion of our team."

Tony Hughes, TSG's housing solution strategist, has worked in the IT sector for almost 30 years and now works exclusively in the housing sector, helping TSG's customers to identify the most suitable solutions that take advantage of the full Microsoft environment and enabling organisations to maximise their returns on investments.

Hughes said, "Right now, I'm very excited to talk to our housing customers about the latest developments in TSG's document management platform and Microsoft-based cloud services, including AI and machine learning."



**Tony Hughes, Housing Solution Strategist, TSG**

**Richard McGrath, Senior Customer Success Manager, TSG**

Richard McGrath is TSG's senior customer success manager. After a 20-year career involved in large-scale digital transformation and business change across blue-chip customers, McGrath is now working exclusively with many of TSG's housing customers to support their long-term success.

The latest addition to the TSG housing team is Rob Fletcher as the company's housing-sector solution lead. Joining TSG straight from GreenSquare Group where he was head of ICT, Rob has been closely involved in the housing sector for almost 25 years.



**Rob Fletcher, Housing Sector Solution Lead, TSG**



# Act like a start-up...

Jonathan Sharp, Director, Britannic Technologies

*After a year of lockdown, housing providers need to adopt the mindset of a start-up, being more open to change and doing things differently. The pandemic has accelerated digital transformation, customer experience and people working from home; these shifts were happening already but they are now essential to move forward in the modern world and life after lockdown.*

## **Start-ups leading the way**

Housing providers are often dictated by formal hierarchies, boundaries and processes. However, you need to recognise that if you don't press the 'reset' button to behave like a start-up then your organisation will suffer as a result. Now's the time to be agile and adapt your strategy and culture to respond to the changing environment.

## **Back to the drawing board**

A survey conducted by Futurum Research in Europe and North America found that 57 per cent of organisations said their entire business model needed to be reconsidered in the wake of coronavirus.

During the past year, much has changed in how we work, how we do business, deal with customers, partners and suppliers, and maybe even adapt the products and services we offer and internal and external processes. It's time to take stock and evaluate what has and hasn't worked.

## **Disrupt and innovate**

Housing providers have discovered that digital transformations don't have to be long, cumbersome processes; they can be designed and implemented at speed. Housing providers must continue to be agile and flexible and not return to a fixed mindset of being stuck in their ways in order to not only survive the aftermath of lockdown but to thrive.

## **The hybrid challenge**

A CIPD and YouGov survey in March 2021 found that 40 per cent of employers said they expected more than half of their workforces to regularly work from home after the pandemic has ended.

Housing providers therefore need to focus on how to optimise their remote workforces and confront the challenge of implementing and managing hybrid working, itself calling for new management skills.

## **IP all the way**

There will be a big digital shift in 2025 when businesses will have to transition from ISDN to IP. While the transition has been accelerated due to the pandemic, housing providers that still have legacy, on-premise PBX technology should be thinking about migrating to IP sooner rather than later in order to be prepared.

## **Hosted in the cloud**

By moving to cloud-based telephony, housing providers will be able to scale up and down, facilitate the management of communications, save money and gain the flexibility to add new technologies and business applications when required. Cloud solutions also deliver detailed analytics on data usage which can be used for better decision-making and adding value and intelligence to all of their interactions and communications with staff and customers alike.



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**britannic**  
technologies



### ***Seamless unified communications***

Housing providers then need to consider their unified communications (UC) plan. Is your current UC solution delivering exactly what you need to work from anywhere?

This is an important step up, moving from quickly implementing a remote working solution to transitioning to a comprehensive UC solution enabling employees to communicate and collaborate with each other while ensuring that it's integrated to your front- and back-office applications to deliver seamless communications, operational processes and customer experience.

### ***Data insights equal power***

Housing providers all have silos of data that are being collected constantly by different systems. To progress and improve, the data needs to be aggregated into a single platform and used to understand more about tenants and enabling processes to be redesigned. Data insight is becoming increasingly key to making important decisions and improving tenants' services.

### ***Improve with automation***

Automation solutions can be designed to handle a multitude of digital interactions, such as self-service, web chat and artificial intelligence for tenant enquiries, with the latter reducing the average 'cost to serve' from £4 per phone call to just 20p.

### ***A new world***

We hope and believe that when lockdown lifts, housing providers will embrace a new culture where creativity, innovation and shared ideas are welcome. Employers and employees will operate in a transparent environment where no one is scared to fail; after all, if we don't fail then how will we evolve?

Above all, the pandemic has taught us the importance of being agile and accepting change, and that we need to keep moving, not stand still.

*Jonathan Sharp is a director of Britannic Technologies.*



# What's your fantasy digital team?

Steve Dungworth, Digital Transformation Adviser, Golden Marzipan

*We've all heard of fantasy football teams, but who would you put in your digital dream team? Who do you need to achieve your digital strategy?*

Let's face it, in the housing sector it's unlikely that there will ever be enough people available to deliver at the pace of change required, especially if you're playing catch-up. Here at Golden Marzipan, we have an ongoing debate about how we would create the ultimate 'ICT super team'.

hours and keep people updated if any longer. Your ICT service should be measured through KPIs and satisfaction surveys and the results published through internal channels.



**ICT Director**

### Head of ICT

You're going to need a leader: captain, coach or coordinator. And depending on the size of your organisation, that could be a director, head or ICT manager. It's good to see more of the former being co-opted onto executive teams.



**Data Scientist**

### Data scientist

Well, this is a bit of a cheat – after all, you probably can't afford a fully qualified and experienced 'scientist' but your demands for data solutions are increasing and affecting performance, governance and risk.

Whether it's an analyst, architect, developer or manager – a data 'someone' along with a suitable BI platform is an essential to your team. And they might as well manage GDPR as well because that D is also data!

A suitable senior manager with responsibility for ICT should be appointed to manage IT resources, to manage and plan ICT, including policy and practice development, planning, budgeting, value for money, resourcing and training. Additionally, they should manage risks by setting up appropriate IT controls and planning for IT recovery from possible disasters.



**Service Manager**

### Service manager

Your ICT service desk is your shop window. It's where your users experience mega or mediocre service and where reputations are won and lost.

Your service manager is the person juggling a million issues and problems, directing others on a minute-by-minute basis. They need great organisation and communication skills. You should aim to resolve 80 per cent of users' requests within 24



**Programme Manager**

### Programme manager

A programme manager (or project/product manager or even a process owner) can lead your change agenda. They don't necessarily have to be part of the ICT team and many 'P' managers work with or for customer experience or digital transformation leads.

Programme management will improve the organisation and control of your different projects' interdependencies and support 'business as usual'. Projects deliver outcomes, whereas programmes deliver benefits. Ideally a collaborative group (change advisory board, programme management office) approach is taken.



**Andrew**



**Steve**



**Sean**



**Louise**



**Peter**



**Alex**



**Audit Member**

**Auditing & governance**

ICT governance is an emerging topic and is becoming more important because of the fusion between business and ICT. ICT is no longer just a matter of service provision or understanding ICT risks.

The audit (risk assurance) committee should be delegated to oversee detailed scrutiny and evaluation of ICT risks. We're surprised how many boards in social housing still haven't got at least one member with suitable professional experience and qualities. That person can also be a 'critical friend' or mentor to the ICT director/manager.



**Commercial Manager**

**Commercial manager**

Our last choice is a commercial manager (also known as a contract or procurement manager in our sector). This is another area of growing complexity and influence. And you need at least one person on the team who is comfortable talking to suppliers (including us!) and accessing opportunities for new technologies.

Account management relationships should be in place for your main housing, asset and finance management systems. Procurement exercises should be transparent in practice, process, policy and relationships with suppliers. So, there you have it. Yes, we know there isn't actually an IT technician among our team and most of our team are

managers (albeit not necessarily people managers) but we think this is currently the ultimate digital dream team for housing.

If you agree with us but you are missing one of the essential roles or your organisation just isn't big enough to resource this breadth of expertise, what can you do? Well, organisations such as Golden Marzipan are ideally positioned to give you that flexible yet experienced injection because they can curate the relevant skills to get you across the finish line.

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







**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.

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#### 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](https://jobs.housing-technology.com/wellbeing) or get in touch at [wellbeing@housing-technology.com](mailto:wellbeing@housing-technology.com).

Alternatively, call us on: 020 8336 2293