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Housing Technology Guide to IoT

Deployment in Housing 2022

Timescales & readiness, drivers & barriers, metrics, supplier choice, data analysis & reporting, and integration, maintenance & support

Mobile working Housing management

IT partnerships, IoT deployment, innovation challenges and housing data

Finance management

Procurement models, opex vs. capex, SaaS, arrears and universal credit

Customer management

Chat bots, tenant hoarding, apps, digital engagement and self-service

Field management software, GIS & mapping, first-time fixes and tenant satisfaction

Infrastructure

Low code, housing clouds, connected fire safety, supply chain attacks and digital transformation

Editor's Notes

May 2022

Ready for the internet of housing?

When we published the UK social housing sector's first report on the internet of things (IoT) in 2017, IoT was still in its infancy in our sector.

In our 2017 survey, the majority of housing providers reported to us that IoT was unimportant to their future plans, had no IoT strategies and that the technology was too new and/or unproven, with those views generally strongest among housing providers with the largest property portfolios.

Housing providers also told us in 2017 that there was little board-level understanding of IoT, widespread concerns about security, privacy and liability, only minority involvement of tenants in IoT projects, and most had no plans for any IoT deployments within the next two years (at the time).

Five years later, and how things have changed. As our **Housing Technology Guide to IoT Deployment in Housing 2022 (see page 50)** shows, our sector's attitude to the deployment of IoT devices in its tenants' homes and subsequent data collection, analysis and reporting is overwhelmingly positive, and our research suggests strong growth in the widespread installation of IoT devices (for example, many types of IoT device are expected to see increases of 300-600 per cent within the next two years).

Aside from IoT now being a proven technology, as evidenced (for example) by the widespread consumer-level adoption of 'smart' home devices, Housing Technology's view is that housing providers have now recognised that the role of IoT devices isn't as isolated, standalone 'endpoints' in tenants' homes, but almost the reverse. IoT and smart-home devices are now seen as vital data collection tools that provide the real-time fuel to power housing providers' short- and long-term decisions around their properties, assets and tenants.

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Forthcoming events



Housing Technology 2023

Annual conference & executive forum In-person & digital broadcast

01-02 March 2023

NEW VENUE

East Midlands Conference Centre, Nottingham



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Looking for the right IT partner



All 'a hoard' at Yorkshire Housing



Housing finance in the 14



Caledonia Housing's future 26 of great customer service



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SOPHOS

3



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You may have noticed that there are endless articles, white papers and products that have some relationship to innovation. Yet 'innovation' can be difficult to define and exploiting its potential advantages can be equally problematic and can leave you wondering, "what is innovation within my organisation?"

Fundamentally, we're talking about change. That is to say, change in the way things are done and the tools needed to do those things. And nobody likes change, even when that change is for the better.

Evolutionary and breakthrough innovations

It's probably unsurprising that one of the areas within Link that already embraces change is our digital services team. Our team understands that within Link, we see two types of innovation:

- Evolutionary innovation the continuing changes and improvements in the tools needed for the business;
- Breakthrough innovation new tools being brought into the business to do work that was previously done in a different and less efficient manner.

There are a number of concepts and methodologies around innovation and change such as ADKAR (awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement). Or Lewin's Change Model of unfreezing, changing and then refreezing. Or Kotter's Theory or Nudge Theory. They are all about generating energy and delivering results – about moving from a state of inertia to one of dynamics.

What is and isn't innovation?

And although we may be able to describe what innovation means within Link, it's also important for us to understand what innovation isn't.

We have a well-defined digital services team, from helpdesk functions to project managers, and from field

engineers to business analysts. But we aren't developers in the sense of developing products; we don't have a room full of coders so we rely on software vendors to provide solutions for us.

Therefore, Link's innovation isn't about building robots, it's about using other people's robots. It really isn't about invention, it's about inspiration – it is about seeing a process or a way of doing something and having an idea about how that can be done better.

If Link understands how innovation sits within its organisation and already has an experienced digital services team with the varied abilities needed to make technological advancements in the business, then where is the problem?

The problem is that these changes, or innovations, come from the top. They rarely, if ever, come from the very people who are busy doing their jobs, without the opportunity to initiate innovation.

So how did Link go about getting innovation onto everyone's agenda? We launched our first Link-wide Innovation Challenge.

The idea of the Innovation Challenge was to turn what had been done in the past on its head, and to drive innovation upwards from the bottom. And to do that we just had to ask everyone a (seemingly) simple question: how would you change things?

On the surface, it's a simple concept but we needed a model to help guide us through the process, and that model was CivTech. This is a highly successful Scottish Government programme which seeks to solve problems experienced by public sector organisations, using a six-stage model to take the process from an initial challenge being set to a minimum viable product (MVP) being produced.

Six-stage process

We adapted this model for our first Innovation Challenge:

- Stage one Invite challenges from the business via internal promotion over a two-week period.
- Stage two Further define the challenges to see if there was already a solution that our digital services team knew about and/or to ask for more detail to understand what the challenges were.
- Stage three Invite solutions for the challenges. The submitted challenges were published on our intranet and all of our staff were invited to devise potential solutions.
- Stage four Explore those solutions to see what would be needed in each instance.
- Stage five Demonstration days, including external suppliers to demonstrate their solutions.
- Stage six Adoption of a solution and changes made through our 'business as usual' (BAU) mechanisms.

We had a wide range of subjects and areas where challenges were being raised. These covered streamlining our complaints procedure, reducing waste from void properties, automating workflows, changing customers' online forms and many more.

Although all the changes haven't been implemented, we've estimated that the changes that have been made will result in cost savings of at least £25,000 per year. For those challenges which haven't yet been met, we've kept them and we will revisit them later this year.

However, we didn't get it all right first time and we had a number of challenges of our own.

Staff engagement

One area where we expected there would be difficulties was staff engagement. Although we had a reasonable response for a first-time attempt at the Innovation Challenge, there were some areas of the business which were more engaged in the process than others.

One of the reasons for this may have been because the challenge wasn't focused; we had left it open to include any possible subject, but in practice, this didn't give a clear vision for what we were hoping to achieve.

From idea to implementation

And then there was the process of actually putting the Innovation Challenge's solutions into practice. We overestimated the ability of our BAU change processes to accommodate the implementation of changes being requested by individual members of staff, particularly where they had identified challenges in areas where they weren't based themselves.

That was last year; this year we are launching Innovation Challenge 2. Considering what we learned from our first Innovation Challenge, we made some improvements when we launched our second challenge.

We focused on sustainability and have improved our communications around why we need to make changes and the benefits these changes are expected to bring. We also now have a dedicated SharePoint site for innovation where we can publish information in a better and more engaging way.

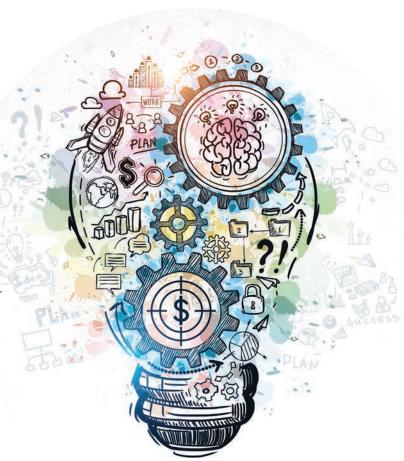
A simpler process in future

We also realised that we needed a simpler, four-step process for our second challenge, and to help deal with the overall process, all changes will be logged as requests through our helpdesk.

What's our own assessment of Link's Innovation Challenge? What we wanted was to give those people who often feel they don't have a voice, yet can often see where improvements can be made, a way of bringing those improvements to the attention of the business. This has been successful; as well as the actual submissions to the Innovation Challenge, there was a general buzz around it across the organisation.

And in the spirit of evolutionary innovation, the Innovation Challenge initiative itself will naturally change as our requirements change.

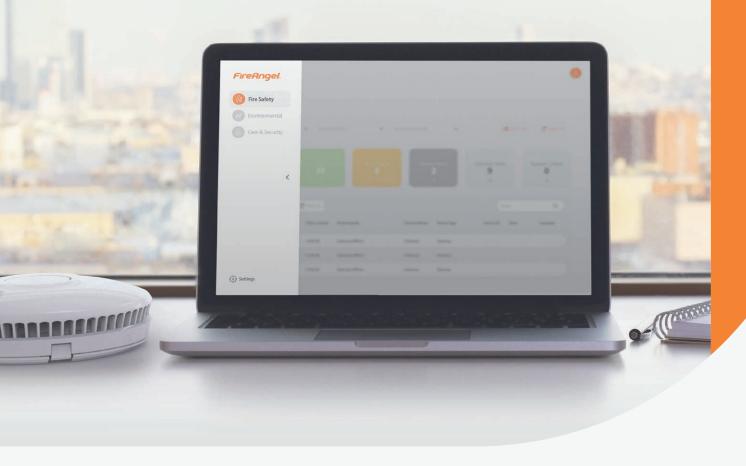
Craig Stephenson is the digital participation and innovation officer at Link Group.



IoT powered resident protection

Enabling active risk management

A network of FireAngel's discreet devices provides visibility of previously hidden trends within a property. Temperature and humidity levels, fire and carbon monoxide incidents, and data from endless compatible sensors enable prioritised interventions to take place, offering a level of protection never before seen in social housing.



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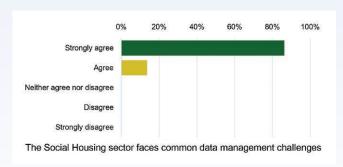
IntoZetta's data in housing annual survey

Dan Yarnold, Director, IntoZetta

During early 2022, IntoZetta contacted a number of its existing software and services clients and organisations from the wider social housing sector, asking them to complete a survey regarding the use of data in social housing. The survey was designed to gather opinions and stimulate debate on the current use of data within housing providers, the common issues faced when managing that data, and the specific challenges for our sector.

22 organisations responded to our questions, providing an interesting perspective on data issues where common challenges exist, as well as those where respondents had radically different opinions. Over the coming months, IntoZetta will use insights from this first survey to create relevant content, which we will publish in Housing Technology and make available to our contacts in the housing sector through email and social media.

1. The social housing sector faces common data management challenges

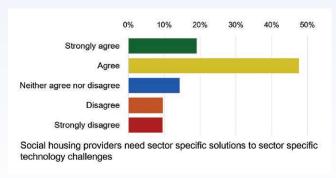


100 per cent of respondents agreed that the social housing sector faces common data management challenges, with 86 per cent strongly agreeing. This result was not surprising and reflects common themes and issues that IntoZetta consultants identify through their work across the sector. Similar asset profiles, business

processes, system landscapes and a history of mergers and acquisitions within the sector have resulted in common, sector-wide data issues, including fragmented and inconsistent asset data.

Creating a 'golden thread' for asset data is a challenge that's being undertaken by the majority of the sector now, and it makes sense to collaborate and share best practice wherever possible, to elevate standards across social housing.

2. Housing providers need sector-specific solutions to sector-specific technology challenges

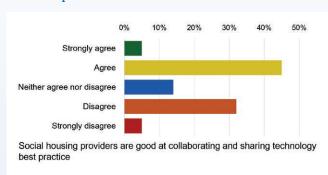


When asked about the need for housing-specific technology solutions, 64 per cent agreed that this was

needed while 18 per cent disagreed and felt it wasn't necessary. As one respondent put it, sector-specific solutions are desirable "...only in some specific areas of the business. A housing management system has a very specific purpose, whereas finance and HR systems might not need the same level of sector-specific capabilities."

Several IntoZetta clients have selected housing management solutions based on software which is not specifically designed for the sector. These solutions have been tailored and configured across a number of separate transformation programmes, supported by a variety of partners and systems integrators, to address the specific requirements and key processes that a housing provider needs.

3. Housing providers are good at collaborating and sharing technology best practice

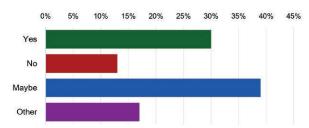


As a technology provider that focuses heavily on social housing, it was surprising to the IntoZetta data consultants that only 45 per cent of respondents felt that the sector was good at collaborating and sharing technology best practice. Of all the sectors that IntoZetta serves, social housing is the most collaborative in our experience, and we regularly connect data professionals and senior leaders to share their experiences and best practice.

The emergence of 'housing flavoured' generic ERP solutions, including Microsoft Dynamics 365, is a great example of the sector collaborating to ensure that it gets the solutions that it needs rather than simply accepting those that are offered.

During the past six years, IntoZetta has supported the migration of data for several transformation programmes, and with every new programme it's apparent that both suppliers and clients are learning the lessons of the past and starting to create well-trodden paths.

4. It is suggested that the pandemic has advanced businesses' digital transformation by eight years in just two years; has the housing sector advanced similarly?



It is suggested that Covid has advanced businesses' digital transformation by 8 years in just 2 years. Do you feel the housing sector has advanced similarly?

The rate at which digital transformation has taken place during the last two years, against a backdrop of the pandemic, split the responses. While 32 per cent agreed with the statement (above), more (41 per cent) were unsure. One respondent commented that progress has been swifter in areas where change was not a choice, "IT departments could not resist against home working; necessity is the mother of invention or transformation in practice."

Homeworking and the use of collaborative technologies were essential during the pandemic. It will be interesting to see which of the many changes that were driven by necessity become the new enduring normal and which are abandoned in favour of the habits of the past.

Overall, the survey covers sixteen data topics and a number of key themes emerged. It's clear that housing providers are conscious of the need to tackle data management failures of the past and ensure that their data is managed as a key asset in the future. Only through effective data management will process efficiencies be achieved and tenant experiences be improved.

In the next issue of Housing Technology, we will share the answers to questions exploring data management practices within the sector, and the value that housing providers place on their data assets, such as, "within your organisation is data valued and managed like other key assets (e.g. buildings)?"

If you would like to be included in our next survey, and share your experience of working in the sector, please contact jackie.green@intozetta.com.

Dan Yarnold is a director of IntoZetta.





Great partnerships for even greater results

Seeking a good IT partner

Kirsty Marsden, Housing Service Design Lead, TSG

Finding the right Microsoft partner for your housing organisation is just like trying to find a real-life partner; there will be challenges you'll face that you hope your partner can support you with and searching for 'the one' can take time. After all, there's a certain degree of trust necessary for a good relationship and one of the pivotal questions you need to ask is: does this partner not only understand the challenges I face but do they genuinely care about them?

Let's talk first about the common challenges you face as a housing provider and why we feel that a 'Microsoft-first' approach works best.

At the Housing Technology 2022 conference in March, TSG and Grand Union Housing took a light-hearted look at why partnerships are like relationships; this gave us licence to add in a few dating puns which we hope will translate as well in the written word as they did to the live audience...

Common challenges

Legacy housing management systems might have worked in the past, but you might be facing these common struggles today:

- An expensive legacy system that lacks modern functionality;
- Slow to change;
- · Closed APIs;
- · Lack of mobile working;
- Replicating data between silos and fixing data synchronisation errors;
- Complaints handling;
- · Improving stock condition;
- · Regulatory compliance;
- Tenant/customer satisfaction.

Many of these issues rely on accurate data which legacy housing management systems might be struggling to give you. This becomes a problem when trying to gain better insights and it becomes a battle to communicate with your legacy system for the right information.

This is why, at TSG, we have a dedicated housing team that specialises in supporting you with adopting a Microsoft-first approach; an all-in-one solution that can

support your challenges with the help of our specialist team. This is what you should expect from the right IT partner.

The benefits of a Microsoft-first approach

A Microsoft-first approach can bring better collaboration, communication, data, and insights into one place on the Microsoft Cloud. Microsoft has a wide variety of solutions that can be customised to your needs. Among those solutions are:

- Azure (SQL and App Services);
- · Dynamics 365;
- Power Platform (Dataverse, Power Apps, Power Automate, Power Virtual Agents & Power BI);
- TSG EDRM for housing (TSG's flagship electronic document management solution for housing, built on Microsoft 365 & SharePoint).

Although this may seem like a great toolbox of strong applications, you can't open it up and expect to know exactly what you need and how to use it. Taking advantage of Microsoft's mix and match of products is why we suggest adopting Microsoft solutions to replace your legacy systems. This is where we come in; providing the support of a partner that genuinely understands and cares about your needs. You can get a tailor-made solution which works for your specific requirements.

This brings us to why finding the right IT partner is a lot like starting a new relationship.

How is a partnership like a relationship?

Every great partnership starts with a strong foundation. Consider what you need to know before you get into a relationship; you need to know who you're about to commit to, whether they understand what's important to you and if they have your best interests at heart. This is the same for any partnership you start with an IT supplier or external contractor.

Starting a relationship with TSG means you have access to:

- Microsoft resources, including the knowledge and expertise of a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner;
- Technology evaluation and POC;
- · Innovation and best practice;
- Training and knowledge transfer;
- Guidance and willingness to work with incumbent suppliers;
- Support of a multi-Gold Competency Microsoft Partner;
- A provider that can back up customer satisfaction with an NPS score of 84+.

The signs of a toxic partnership

Sometimes it isn't all blissful; relationships can become difficult and toxic if your partner begins to exhibit certain behaviours that demonstrate they don't actually care for you or your needs. Similar to partnerships with IT suppliers, you should be wary if they begin to display certain behaviours that suggest their intentions may hurt your organisation.

There are several signs that you're working with an IT supplier that isn't the right fit for you. Some of the signs to look out for include:

- Gaslighting if the supplier is working with, or compares your organisation to, other companies and offers you the same work, it's likely that they are cutting corners and not giving you the attention and quality of service you deserve.
- Promiscuous behaviour your partner doesn't value your organisation if they're already moving onto a customer with a bigger wallet.
- You're not the only one your partner is saying the same thing to all of their other customers.

A true partnership with the right partner means that you both have each other's best interests at heart. It's that simple, yet we understand that you may get 'catfished' by low quality service after the first few dates.

However, here's what a good partnership looks like.

Nurturing the relationship: TSG & Grand Union Housing's 'baby'

After getting to know and understand Grand Union Housing, we were able to come up with a plan that would transition them from outdated legacy systems to a platform that would enable them to grow and collaborate better. Our relationship and commitment to each other became more solid once we knew we were on the same journey and had a shared vision of our future together.

In a sense, this was almost like raising a child together (the next step of the relationship), which in this case was SharePoint. Let's break it down in the context of what we did to help Grand Union Housing:



- The baby SharePoint is the face of the new system

 customising it and helping it to grow is essential to its development.
- Training tailoring the training for SharePoint and other Microsoft tools was necessary; a normal training provider might give you the same as other companies, but the right IT partner will fully tailor this to your organisation only.
- The pram your data is likely to be spread out over multiple applications. Dataverse is a one-stop shop where everything lives; essentially, it's the hero behind the scenes.
- New toys this was introducing Power Apps; bringing together custom applications designed specifically for Grand Union Housing.
- Keeping an eye on baby weekly workshops, encouraging IT staff and other members of Grand Union Housing to get more out of Microsoft.
- Baby-proofing TSG helped to safeguard the housing provider by ensuring everything it was using was compliant with government regulations.
- Getting enough sleep working while sleeping; RPA and workflows ensured that things were still coming through without needing to be 'on it', such as EPC certificates and housing deeds.

A lasting partnership: TSG & Grand Union Housing

The reason TSG's partnership with Grand Union Housing works is because we understand exactly who Grand Union Housing Group is; this enables us to support the organisation, its goals, and objectives. You can read more about our partnership with Grand Union Housing on tsg.com and to start your relationship with TSG, get in touch with kirsty.marsden@tsg.com.

Kirsty Marsden is the housing service design lead at TSG.



Andrew McLaughlin, Managing Director, Incline-IT

What does it mean to be innovative?

Innovation is sometimes described as a kind of 'big bang' conceptual beast which can scare a lot of people. In reality, innovation is actually about getting the right people, processes and technologies and merging them together. Unless you get the right balance of all three, you will have a failing ecosystem within your organisation.

In many ways, innovation can sometimes just be minor tweaks because at its heart, innovation is about creating more effective and efficient processes. It's about revisiting things, looking at things a bit differently and taking a step back. Sometimes you can over-engineer a solution; there are often times when the best solution is to just create an MVP version of a service. It is difficult to get things right first time, so enhancements can be made with the users' experience feeding into later versions of the MVP.

One of the most important factors in achieving successful innovation is fostering the right corporate culture; you need to remove any fears of failure because you can't get things right every single time.

It's a bit like a car journey. If you are going to the shops, you might have a predetermined path, but it doesn't mean that you won't meet some roadworks or a traffic jam, so you then need to refine your path – that is effectively the same thing for innovation.

How can data improve a customer experience?

Data is becoming increasingly valuable, although data in isolation has limited value. The value comes in when you combine many different data sources, enabling you to contextualise what you're actually dealing with. It's how you use the data and how you apply it to your circumstances that brings value.

Once you start to combine all this together, you can spot trends that you weren't expecting and solve problems that you didn't even know you had.

How do you achieve worthwhile data?

Achieving worthwhile data involves a great deal of data cleansing; you must accept that not all of your data is going to be great.

There will always be anomalies, outliers and noise in some of your data. That's why when you're joining up your data sources, you can start to contextualise that data and work out what is relevant.

What innovations will be beneficial in the future?

More than ever, we are living in a sensor-driven world, with each sensor generating a stream of data points, all of which can be aggregated and analysed to create different alerts, outlooks and insights.

Alongside sensors, you can add robotic process automation (RPA) to streamline relatively standardised processes. While some people worry that RPA can cause reductions in workforces, studies have found that it can result in an upskilling of the workforce, who can then become more engaged in other business processes. The business outcomes of RPA then evolve into more efficient processes further down the food chain because automation provides the time and the capacity to adapt and improve elsewhere.

What's the future for digital transformation?

Digital transformation will mean different things for different people. Some use the term in relation to their journey to the cloud, some for channel shift, and others are even going as far as effectively eliminating the ability to handle a phone call. Overall, digital transformation will depend on the ethos of the business, how the business wants to apply its social values and how it wants to interact with the people who will really dictate its future.

Andrew McLaughlin is the managing director of Incline-IT.



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:





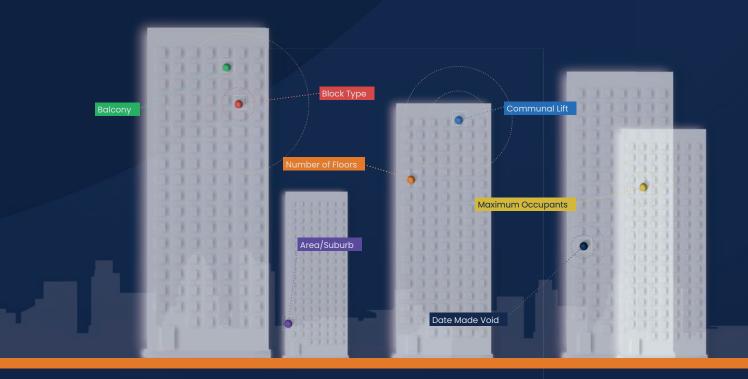


INTOZETTA QUALITY FOR HOUSING

With over 1000 pre-configured housing data quality rules, we can create a complete picture of your organisation's 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 100s of common housing data definitions that you can Accept or Modify to create your organisation's 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.



Finance in the cloud

Ivan Blythe, Senior Solutions Architect, MRI Software



The shift to home working, which began as a temporary measure during the height of the pandemic, has now been permanently adopted by many employers, alongside a hybrid home/office working balance now expected from a large percentage of employees.

More than three-quarters (77 per cent) of respondents to the Advanced Annual Trends Survey said that one of the legacies of the pandemic will be for organisations to shift to a digital-first mindset, with this figure increasing to 90 per cent for 'digital natives' (18-24 year-olds).

With that in mind, 70 per cent of finance professionals said that their current technologies were holding them back when working remotely, alongside 59 per cent of them also saying that the most important attribute for a business leader today is ensuring that staff have the right tools to be productive.

There is still a place for on-premise solutions but all businesses, from SMEs through to enterprise-level organisations, are becoming more aware of the benefits of cloud solutions. Google says, "the promise of cloud computing represents more than just a faster, more efficient version of everything we did before – it's an entirely new way of thinking and working across any environment."

Finance leaders' focus

As well as overcoming technical limitations for efficient remote working, finance leaders are placing more emphasis on areas such as:

- Better reporting, with timely and comprehensive data provided as a single view of the truth;
- Using real-time data for strategic decisions;
- Smarter collaboration with non-finance people;
- · Security;

 Monitoring multiple entities across different currencies and regulatory frameworks.

A cloud finance system can provide a single-source solution to all of this (and more). However, although 32 per cent of business leaders say cloud is their biggest spending priority over the next 12 months, the perceived fears of cost and disruption are preventing them from moving to the cloud.

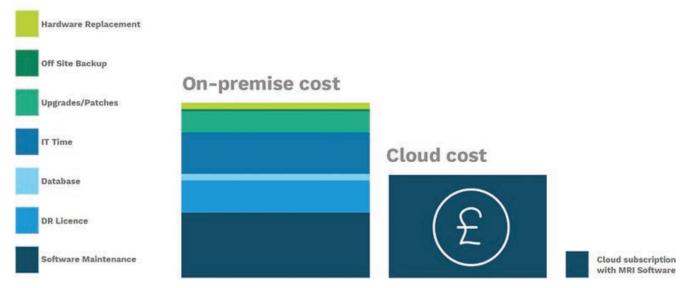
This fear is almost exacerbated by technology vendors themselves, with complex pricing models and lengthy implementation processes which can be incredibly disruptive to the working environment when downtime can't be afforded. This is where trust plays a major role; moving to the cloud isn't just a switch over, it requires the right motivations and commitments from both the housing provider and their chosen cloud provider.

Upfront vs. on-going costs

When thinking about changing systems, affordability is obviously a primary consideration. The up-front cost of an on-premise solution might seem to be the more cost-effective option, but taking into account total running costs, a cloud solution can offer better value for money because there is no heavy investment in IT infrastructure.

Cloud projects can be a financial shock, but our clients are seeing that the security, ongoing technical support and system stability of cloud solutions all make a big difference. Most finance leaders know that cloud is the way forward, but it comes back to trusting the right provider.





While a move to the cloud can alleviate access, technical and IT frustrations, finance leaders also need greater levels of reporting that are accurate and can be delivered at speed; a big frustration is inconsistencies in reporting, which can damage strategic decision-making and boards' confidence in 'the numbers'. Finance management systems that have all reports in one place enable easier reporting to boards and provide a single view of the truth.

Housing customers

MRI Software in partnership with Advanced already offers MRI Finance Enterprise (otherwise known as Open Accounts) to the housing sector, with a growing community of more than 20,000 users and a partnership spanning over 20 years.

Through this partnership, Cloud Financials is now the latest addition to our comprehensive suite of finance solutions. So whether you're an existing on-premise user or are thinking of upgrading your finance systems into the

cloud, MRI Software together with Advanced can provide the right options at your pace.

For more information on Cloud Financials or OpenAccounts, please contact **socialhousing@mrisoftware.com** to arrange an initial discussion or a demo.

Ivan Blythe is a senior solutions architect at MRI Software.



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Wokingham Borough Council has reduced its arrears by £156,000 since deploying Mobysoft's RentSense. The software's ability to provide accurate workloads for the council's rent officers has enabled earlier interventions and given the team more time to support tenants.

The implementation of RentSense is part of the council's target to reduce its arrears to below two per cent.

Harrison Wilks, rental income team leader, Wokingham Borough Council, said, "We want to focus on reducing arrears and sustaining tenancies. RentSense really helps with this because our rent officers' time is maximised, enabling them to deal with their caseloads as well as other rent accounting functions on a day-to-day basis."

Sandwell Halosowan

Sandwell Council saves £380k with Mobysoft

Sandwell Council has re-invested in Mobysoft's RentSense software with a multi-year contract, having used the system's efficiencies to create a tenancy support team from its existing resources.

Manjit Rai, business manager for income and money advice services, Sandwell Council, said, "We've reduced our cases by 7,800 per week by using RentSense, freeing up our staff to form our new 'tenancy smart team' to cover the early identification of customers at risk of tenancy failure."

The council has also been using Mobysoft's income maximisation service, with Mobysoft consultants working with the council's staff to help meet pre-agreed KPIs. Rai said, "Since we began our use of RentSense, its return on our investment has been clearly demonstrated in more manageable and more accurate caseloads, resulting in reduced arrears for two consecutive years, with a reduction of £380,000 for 2021/22."

Pinnacle gets RentSense for earlier interventions

Pinnacle Group has bought RentSense to support tenants at the earliest stages of debt and reduce arrears.

Pinnacle has seen a large rise in the number of tenants claiming universal credit combined with long periods of furlough, resulting in increased arrears.

Alison Wade, head of income and performance, Pinnacle Group, said, "Our income officers' workloads have increased substantially. We understand that early intervention is key, but it has been more difficult to manage accounts in this way.

"Pinnacle is continually taking on new housing contracts and it's important that we can assure our customers that we can deliver a first-class rent collection service. It isn't feasible to continually add staff resources so we decided to look at how technology could help us improve our processes, reduce arrears and increase rent collection.

"My team and I had all used RentSense before and seen its ability to have a positive effect on rent collection, plus it works seamlessly across multiple systems."



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Is SaaS the ultimate win/win solution for housing?



Andy Wilkins, Co-founder & CEO, Futr

Software-as-a-service (SaaS) could be a silver bullet for housing providers concerned about how to make digital transformation a reality. SaaS can pose a helpful solution by creating a leading IT service without the need for huge backend modernisation or large IT budgets. For example, many housing providers are opting for chatbots as a way of delivering the modern communications that their residents want without needing to spend huge chunks of cash on an IT solution.

Why is SaaS so appealing?

SaaS is one of the ultimate 'quick wins'; adopting SaaS usually takes just a few hours to implement, as opposed to developing, building and installing a bespoke system. This is very attractive because it helps improve perception and sentiment towards the organisation; you can be seen to be doing something constructive and immediately visible in a very short space of time.

Furthermore, the government has made it clear that housing providers need to empower their residents and embark on more interactive, two-way relationships. SaaS can help them achieve this by modernising the communications process, using AI chatbots as an example.

In the case of chatbots, like those Futr provides, we find that tenants respond incredibly well to being able to communicate with their housing provider around the clock and at the touch of a button. Everything from booking repairs to querying payments can be managed via SaaS, so only those enquiries needing human input are referred to call centres.

Younger tenants in particular are entirely comfortable with technology and generally prefer to communicate digitally rather than via traditional call centre-based conversations. Choosing a conversational SaaS solution that plugs into various platforms (WhatsApp, Messenger, Instagram, web, SMS, etc) allows tenants to use the platform of their choice while the housing provider needs to only have a single back-end system to monitor and coordinate its omni-channel communications.

Removing budgetary concerns

SaaS solutions are generally a more cost-effective and financially-appealing option than the traditional alternatives. When using plug-ins, housing providers don't need to hire or recruit a digital transformation expert or engineering team to manage an organisational change.

SaaS solutions can be implemented by most housing providers' existing IT teams without creating a huge drain on their time (a typical set-up can be completed in hours). SaaS solutions are also usually very intuitive; they are consequently easy to manage internally and simple for tenants to use.

Return on investment

Perhaps the most important aspect for housing providers is the return on investment. SaaS solutions will offer a proven Rol which can be monitored and measured on an ongoing basis using built-in tools.

Modern SaaS solutions are usually available on flexible contracts and offer total transparency. Using personalised dashboards, a housing provider can immediately see what impact the solution is having, make changes to support a better RoI if needed, and demonstrate to the board the SaaS solution's financial and reputational return.

For today's housing providers, the right SaaS solutions are more than simply a 'nice to have'. As governmental pressure increases and demands from tenants evolve, SaaS may represent the best way forwards for modern housing providers.

Andy Wilkins is the co-founder & CEO of Futr.



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Subscribing to the future – new SaaS, licensing and procurement models

Mark Holdsworth, Director, Civica

Opex- vs. capex-intensive procurement

Offering a subscription model for IT projects (i.e. monthly costs spread over the longer term rather than upfront costs) enables housing providers to invest in technology more frequently. Opex procurements also allow more flexibility and accurate annual budgeting around expenditure on IT projects.

Regularised IT spending means managers don't need to go 'cap in hand' to get a budget for new capabilities. At the same time, this subscription model gives IT suppliers more flexibility to incorporate new features and capabilities into their services and respond more nimbly to changes in customers' operational demands.

Fundamentally, you only pay for what you need, thereby removing or avoiding 'shelf-life software', so you can clearly demonstrate the value of what you've bought.

Innovative licensing and procurement models

Traditionally, most licensing models were based on the number of licensed 'seats' or named users needed, but many organisations have moved to volume-based licensing, such as size of organisation or amount of data usage, which gives more flexibility to the customer.

However, today some suppliers provide software-as-a-service (SaaS) – a subscription offer based on software bundles, with different service packages aligned to customers' needs and budgets. With SaaS being in the cloud, it allows housing providers to access and implement software much faster, with configuration tweaking for individual customer needs rather than wholesale implementation.

Opting for a subscription model allows housing providers to further invest in technology at a fixed annual or monthly fee, removing the need to find new budgets to buy additional features or modules.

On-premise vs. cloud/hosted implementations

The factors that determine the choice of on-premise vs. cloud/hosted implementations are often operational rather than technical, for example:

- The organisation has recently invested in on-premise data centres and hasn't yet received value or full depreciation on them;
- They've invested in skills and people to manage an onpremise operation;
- They may keep some particularly sensitive data systems on-premise to ringfence their security.

Other technical considerations might include existing software not being cloud-ready, integration limitations with third-party software, lack of network compatibility or having a hybrid model of on-premise back-ups from the cloud.

Better procurement and new financing models

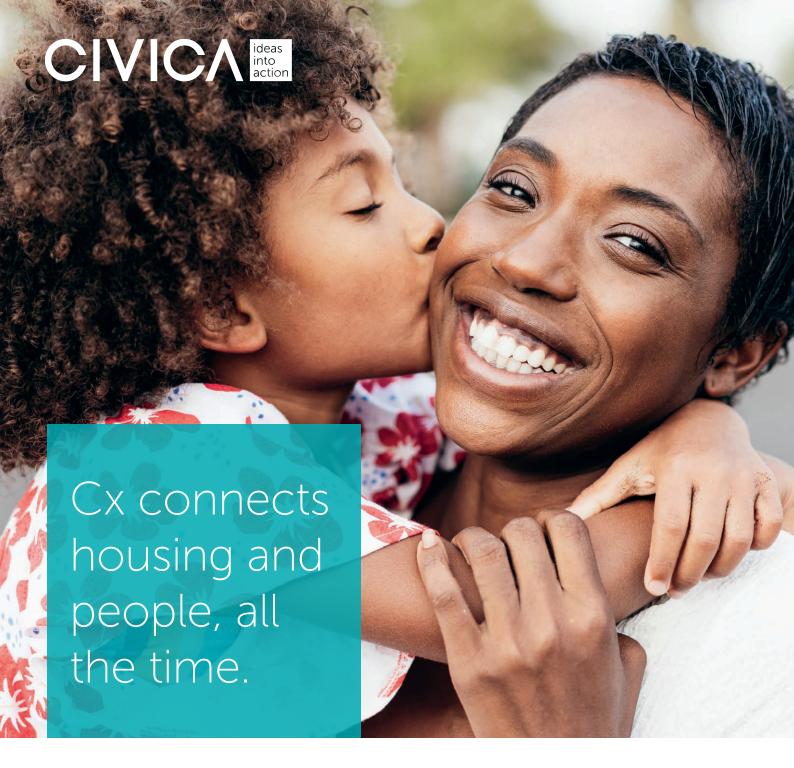
The growth of procurement frameworks offer housing providers a credible and efficient option because each supplier provides clear service descriptions and pricing options. The commercial nature of these frameworks allows organisations to readily change and flex their solutions and helps them to spend time on choosing the right solution for their needs rather than focusing on the technicalities of procurement.

In general, using SaaS is more efficient than on-premise models. Having a monthly or annual subscription model allows IT expenditure to be accurately budgeted for. It enables customers to foresee organisational change and allow ongoing investment to be more readily planned. In addition, implementing cloud software is faster, which saves significant time and money.

100% 'per user per month' for core applications

Housing providers could theoretically move to a fully 'per user, per month' model for their core business applications, and some software is already provided on this basis. However, a solution with a monthly fee (tied to the organisation's business volume) that delivers new capabilities and continuous technology development offers greater long-term value.

Mark Holdsworth is a director at Civica.



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All 'a hoard'

Yorkshire Housing launches first hoarding app for housing

John Smart, Innovation Analyst, Yorkshire Housing

According to Hoarding Disorders UK, around four per cent of the UK population is affected by hoarding disorder.

The condition is recognised by the NHS and can have a significant impact on the hoarder themselves, neighbours, housing colleagues and housing providers. At Yorkshire Housing, we've found it's a growing problem, one that's been made worse by the pandemic. Last year we dealt with 16 cases, this year we've already seen 11 and we're only into May.

The risks of hoarding

Hoarding can pose a real risk to customers living in and around our homes. Getting in and out and moving around the home can become unsafe. There's an increased fire risk because of the number of items being stored, and portable heaters and extension cables that are being used nearby can also increase the risk of fires.

Hoarding can also cause damage to the home and contribute to pest control issues. This can overflow into communal areas and gardens posing health and safety risks for neighbours. If rooms are used for hoarding and not as intended, such as a bathtub used to store items, people can't wash, leading to self-neglect. Housing providers also face difficulties accessing homes for important visits such as repairs and gas safety checks.

Hard to report

Reporting hoarding is traditionally an expensive paperbased exercise. It's a lengthy process that involves taking notes while visiting a customer's home. Notes are then manually updated into a case management system or attached as a file to an existing case, all of which takes time and prevents customers accessing support and help quickly. It's this lack of efficiency and speed that led us to develop our sector's first hoarding app. Technology can almost always make processes more efficient, improving products and services and delivering a better experience for our customers. Our goal was to use the systems and technologies we already have at Yorkshire Housing to digitalise the hoarding reporting process; speeding up access to support, reducing health and safety risks, and encouraging more colleagues to speak up and raise their concerns.

Yorkshire Housing's hackathons

Thomas Edison famously said, "There's a better way

to do it, find it." Our innovation team is always looking at how technology can improve our services, with the team holding regular 'hackathons' to bring together innovation analysts, developers and other IT specialists to problemsolve and create cutting-edge solutions.

It was during one of these hackathons that our team came up with the idea of using Power Apps to streamline how our colleagues carry out inspections and report concerns. The team decided to create two options for reporting hoarding, a 'report a concern' function and a 'full assessment' tool.





The 'report a concern' function is a stripped-back version of the full assessment that focuses on five key areas around safety, specifically access to the customer's home and access to facilities such as gas and electricity. This new process allows colleagues on time-sensitive visits, such as engineers and contractors, to report concerns about hoarding quickly and easily, something that wasn't possible with the old system.

Prototype app

For both the 'report a concern' and 'full assessment' tools, the app uses a score-based system for each question to grade the risk. The app then automatically sends a



report to our customer independence team where the reports are triaged. If concerns have been reported, we can quickly arrange a visit to the customer's home to carry out a more indepth assessment.

The app also allows colleagues to view previous inspection reports and use these to show how cases are being progressed. Spotting an escalating situation quickly means we can intervene much earlier.

After we'd built a prototype app, we presented it to our safeguarding committee to get their feedback. Kayley Hymen from Holistic Hoarding, who has worked with mental health and housing providers for over ten years, was at our presentation and loved what we had created. It was important for us to use her expertise to help develop a great product that would make a real difference to our customers' lives. After some further development, the app was rolled out to a group of our colleagues.

Hoarding is massively under-reported in the UK. Doing nothing is not an option; hoarding shouldn't be treated as anti-social behaviour, instead we should treat it like any other mental health issue, with the appropriate levels of support.

It's in the interest of housing providers and our management teams to recognise that hoarding is happening among our tenant populations and spend time and effort into developing solutions that will reduce the risks to customers and our operations.

John Smart is an innovation analyst at Yorkshire Housing.

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Caledonia Housing's future of great customer service

Gill Donoghue, Strategy & Improvement Manager, Caledonia Housing



One of the few positives to come out of the pandemic has been a greater awareness of the value of technology in creating and nurturing a sense of connection between people. Used well, a digital approach to customer service in our sector will not only streamline operations but also improve the customer experience.

Pre-pandemic, the new strategy and improvement team at Caledonia Housing had already begun to consider our digital agenda. We realised that the majority of customers wanted the freedom to manage their tenancies for themselves and at a time to suit them, which didn't necessarily coincide with the working week when our staff were at the end of a phone line.

Self-service app for customer repairs

Before the pandemic, we had begun work with Housing Insight, customising a self-service app that would let our customers order standard day-to-day repairs any time of the day or night. Perhaps surprisingly, we found that older people were as likely to use this app as younger customers. So far, we've seen just under 1,000 repairs generated this way, representing around half of all our digital customer interactions over the past year.

A repair 'wizard' in the app allows users to select the problem area (e.g. bathroom > sink > tap), and reports go straight through to an approved contractor for follow-through. Customers can also choose the appointment time that suits them best, thus reducing the number of missed appointments, and can opt to address several issues during a single visit.

The result is greater efficiency, both for customers and for our own staff. We can spend our time managing non-standard repairs, such as damp patches that could have multiple causes, encouraging customers to book a home visit or give additional details by phone where more information is needed.

Rent and tenancy management

When the pandemic hit, social distancing meant that repairs had to be put on hold, and the whole housing sector had to adopt agile working practices in order to manage their tenancies remotely. At Caledonia Housing, we worked on extending our existing self-service app to give customers access to their rent account and tenancy management information.

We knew that furlough and job losses were making it difficult for some of our customers to pay their rent, so we made it easier for them to find support. Housing Insight had already developed an 'arrears repayment plan' that we were able to implement, which allowed our customers to propose a payment agreement without having to communicate with staff directly. We also added a budgeting tool so that customers could see how any drop in income would affect their situation. Finally, we incorporated advice buttons where customers could find detailed information on benefits and other sources of support.

The app empowered our customers to create their own solutions. A total of 70 households proposed new payment arrangements using the rent section of the app; for example, by suggesting that they would pay an extra £10 per week until they had cleared their arrears.

We also made it easier for customers to make standard tenancy management requests remotely. For example, if they wanted to request permission to get a dog or to put up a shed, they could submit a form virtually and read the relevant conditions, then refer back at the app to see if permission had been given, all without having to put their lives on hold and wait until the end of lockdown.

In addition, having end-of-tenancy functionality will help us to reduce the turn-around time on voids. Customers can click a button to let us know when they intend to move out and we can then plan accordingly.



MODULE SPOTLICHT Self-Service App & Portal



PanConnect's Self-Service App and Portal gives customers, applicants, staff, third parties and board members, etc., access to all relevant information based on their security role and login credentials. This includes tenancy information, rent account, key documents, local events and tasks that need to be carried out. The App and Portal are customisable to each client, from the navigation process to forms and environment branding.



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TO ARRANGE A DEMO





An evolving approach

We originally thought that customers would use our self-service technology in the form of a web portal, accessing it through their laptop or PC, and although some older customers still prefer this approach, we've since found that most people use their smartphones.

Helpfully, the solution from Housing Insight offers the same functionality and therefore a consistent user experience across both the app and the portal. Nevertheless, the move towards increased smartphone use has prompted us to reduce the amount of text we use to make it as easy as possible for people to find the information they need. The other advantage of mobile access is, of course, that you don't need wifi or broadband, just a mobile signal.

We're also trying to encourage our customers to engage with the self-service app on a semi-regular basis. Even if they don't need to report an ad-hoc repair, we still feel there is value in customers being able to check their account, access advice or use the budget tool. They seem to think so too, with around 400 customers now using the app each week, without necessarily submitting a form. We can monitor this usage data via a cloud-based reporting solution from Housing Insight.

Encouraging engagement

We recognise that customers are unlikely to sign up to new technology unless they understand that it will help them in some way. We now have more than 2,150 of our 5,500 households (almost 40 per cent) signed up to the self-service app.

We ran a competition in the run-up to Christmas, giving away £100 to our 2,000th customer, but some of the most successful sign-ups have been via personal campaigns from our housing officers who have emailed customers in arrears to let them know about the budgeting tool and the

payment plans available via the app. We've also found it helps to support customers face-to-face when they sign up for a tenancy at our new developments.

Looking ahead

We're talking to Housing Insight about how we can use notifications to reach out to customers who are worried about the latest cost of living increases and make sure they are aware of support measures such as our budgeting tool.

By planning a whole year of push-notification campaigns, we can help customers to stay engaged with the self-service app and therefore with us. In helping them, we also receive data that helps us to plan ahead in a way that will enable us to continue to meet customers' needs.

Double the benefits

Ultimately, we're investing in digital technology that not only creates operational efficiencies but also makes life easier and better for our customers. There's no compromise in either the customer or the business agenda; on the contrary, both sides gains clear benefits from this approach, so everybody wins.

Gill Donoghue is the strategy and improvement manager at Caledonia Housing.



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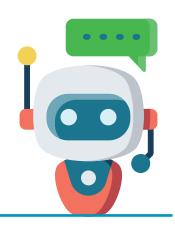
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How to get the best out of your bot



Paul Berry, Head of Product Management, Civica

Chatbots are having a positive impact on public services, from answering residents' questions to helping organisations monitor feedback and deal with larger and more complex queries. They're also good for us as citizens, providing the ability to engage quickly and conveniently, while also providing a safe environment and anonymity to discuss more sensitive matters.

How can we get the best value from this fast-growing technology? To help you on your bot journey, Civica has identified four key principles:

1. Identify where bots can be most helpful and cost-effective

Focus on what you want to achieve. For example, is it cost savings, offering 24/7 support, freeing up teams – or perhaps it's something else? In a traditional sense, answering customer emails can be an expensive start of a dialogue for humans. So, deploying bots to reduce the flood of email enquiries to a trickle makes it possible for us to do more, without adding more resources. People's freed-up time can then be diverted to higher-value tasks.

2. Start small but think big

There are many types of bots available, but the good news is that they are very different to other technology projects. They are cloud-based, technically 'light' and, in many cases, ready to use and adapt. This means your teams can get going quickly with a small investment and iterate as feedback comes in.

It's an agile, low-risk way to work, with no need for an expensive implementation. Once you've demonstrated a quick win, both your teams and your wider organisation will be more confident to look at bigger tasks to automate with bots.

3. Break down the barriers to adoption

Not everyone welcomes new technology when it first arrives. However, once people find it convenient and helpful, they worry less about how it works. And when users are happy with the service they're getting, there's no need to 'sell' the technology to them or to internal teams.

4. Learn from the analytics bots provide

With bots, every interaction can be recorded, quantified and analysed. This can show, for example, how closely answers match the questions that residents are asking, so the chatbot can be fine-tuned.

The data can also provide a valuable sense of what's on people's minds. The Department of Health in Northern Ireland used this feature during the pandemic, analysing questions answered by its chatbot to develop a triaging script that reduced demand on its '111' helpline service by 83 per cent.

Getting the best out of bots doesn't require a bottomless budget or limitless technological capability. They can provide real value, quickly and cost effectively - a value which is more than just time and cost savings. It's also about the insights they can provide, and how these can be used to continuously improve services.

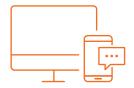
And don't forget, like their human team members, bots need to be onboarded, supervised and given training to improve. So, make yours feel part of the team and keep feeding it with more data to get the best outcomes.

We've seen bots already making life easier for many public-sector organisations and their residents. They could soon be doing the same for yours.

Paul Berry is head of product management at Civica.







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to a live agent, with a full
transcript of the interaction





The human face of technology in housing

Brendan Sarsfield, Strategic Advisor, NEC Software Solutions



Digital technology is constantly evolving to transform the way we live and work. It has become so simple to book a table at our favourite restaurant, transfer money instantly to the other side of the world or buy a car online with just a few swipes of a screen.

The online experience is often intentionally designed to be fast and straightforward with no requirement for human intervention.

However, social housing is a sector very much focused on people, not processes. While housing providers undoubtedly need to be able to operate efficiently to meet their tenants' needs, the digital technology they use must always be designed with a human touch.

Connect people

Online services that require countless forms to be filled in or seem to go round and round in circles before offering a plethora of different options for contacting a housing provider will do little to instil trust in people that their queries or issues will be dealt with properly.

Tenants need to feel they are being seen and heard. To achieve this, a much more empathetic and integrated approach is needed to ensure digital channels provide the information and support people need, and the reassurance that any concerns will be dealt with by a human being.

There are three key factors housing providers need to consider to ensure that the online services they provide are human-focused.

1. Build people-centred systems

A tenant who must navigate through endless mandatory fields of an online contact form to report an incident of anti-social behaviour or request financial support is unlikely to feel they are getting the appropriate emotional, physical and social response from their housing provider.

In social housing, a person's digital experience shouldn't look the same as the one they would get managing a bank account or buying goods online.

A housing provider's website needs to be centred around the human experience so that tenants don't end up feeling like they are just another number in the system.

Digital channels also need to be easy to use and fully accessible to encourage those who may not be confident using technology to trust that any issue they are concerned about will be dealt with, not simply lost in a digital black hole.

2. Provide staff with deeper insights

The details being recorded and stored in a housing provider's HMS should enable staff to gather all the information they need to understand their tenants' circumstances and respond efficiently and effectively to meet their needs.

From one screen, a housing officer should be able to see a tenant's individual personal challenges, whether that's caring for a vulnerable relative or a recent job loss. With the right blend of human and technological intervention, the help provided will be tailored to the specific circumstances of the tenant without them having to answer endless questions or repeat information they have already given.

Tools that are AI-enabled can save hours of time for housing officers and also help them anticipate problems before they become crises. They could help a staff member spot patterns in rental payments, for example, and allow them to take action in a timely way to offer debt management advice if required. This will go a long way towards helping a tenant to feel supported and valued by their housing provider.



3. Free up staff to focus on tenants

Digital technology should free staff from the burden of administration so they can engage more directly with the people they serve.

Automating many of the mundane or routine processes staff undertake allows them to dedicate more time to supporting tenants with complex needs or those who are not digitally confident.

Whether online or offline, people want to know that their housing officer understands their needs and expectations.

With a people-centric approach to digital services, a housing provider can avoid being regarded as a faceless organisation and build a relationship with their tenants which is valued and built on trust.

Brendan Sarsfield is a strategic advisor at NEC Software Solutions and former CEO of Peabody.



PayPoint invests in Optus Homes

Optus Homes has announced that PayPoint has taken a stake in the company via a £750,000 investment.

Unlike traditional tenant web portals, Optus Homes' native app takes advantage of all smartphone features including fingerprint and facial login, push notifications and geolocation for reporting ASB, among many other smartphone-ready features.

Gerry Kelly, CEO, Optus Homes, said, "PayPoint was a natural partner for us as we offer digital payments, convenience and peace of mind for tenants, as well as increased efficiency and reduced costs for housing providers."

The Optus Homes app is system agnostic and integrates with all established housing management, CRM and scheduling systems in the housing sector. The simple SaaS commercial model charges per tenant per month, with no development fees. The app is available for housing providers of all sizes with full maintenance and support included.

Danny
Vant, client
services
director,
PayPoint,
said, "Our
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builds



on our recent partnership to integrate our MultiPay digital payments solutions into Optus Homes' app. This will enable us to improve financial inclusion and convenience for tenants and removing complexity for housing providers."

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For Housing has completed the implementation of a 'single pane of glass' business intelligence and reporting system from Enghouse Interactive and Amillan. The combined system integrates the housing provider's core business applications and supports a range of digital channels.

Angela Worthington, group assistant director of customer experience, ForViva (ForHousing's parent company), said, "As well as our 'single pane of glass' system, we also wanted to support skills-based call routing and the ability to take PCI-compliant card payments."

Working with its technology partner Amillan, ForHousing chose Enghouse Interactive's Communications Center (CC) system to provide the necessary multi-channel capabilities. The housing provider also implemented Enghouse's Quality Management Suite (QMS) to cover call recording and scorecard functionality for monitoring agents' performance, and the Teleopti workforce management tool.

The initial implementation in ForHousing's customer service centre had around 40 users. With CC in place, Amillan has since helped the housing provider to add a further 100 users and extend the use of multimedia. By standardising on CC, ForHousing was also able to use other applications such as its web-based Wallboard to give agents full visibility of real-time performance data.

With ForHousing's previous contact centre solution, it had been difficult to onboard new users or support people working from home. With CC, the contact centre team could be mobilised with no disruption to service. The solution also offered greater flexibility during lockdown; some agents had to home school making it difficult for them to take calls, but by using CC, ForHousing let them focus on email-based activities instead.

Screen- and call-recording along with scorecard functionality enables ForHousing's team leaders to assess all agents in a fair and consistent fashion, helping to increase morale, reduce staff turnover, and improve the customer experience.

For Housing wanted to automate more of the contact centre's services and extend its hours to offer a 24/7 service. Working with Amillan, it chose Converse 360 to provide a service automation platform with web bots, speech bots and virtual assistants, all seamlessly integrated with CC.

Virtual assistants are now handling 60 per cent of the online chats from ForHousing's website. The average handling time for live chat has decreased by around 90 seconds per session as a result. Reporting and management has also been transformed. ForHousing now has full 'cradle to grave' reporting across all types of customer interactions.

Worthington said, "It's no longer just about tenants phoning up to pay their rent or report a repair. Calls are becoming much longer. Our average handling time has increased by around 20 per cent because tenants have more complex needs, but thanks to the virtual assistants and the Enghouse Interactive's Communications Center, our agents can spend more time with them and add greater value to each interaction."

Others stop at notification. We take action.

Sophos Managed Threat Response



Greatwell Homes' top tips for digital engagement

Farrukh Syed, Programme Manager, Greatwell Homes

With huge potential for improving the customer experience and streamlining operations, how can the housing sector encourage more customers to embrace a digital approach to their tenancies?

1. Involve end-users at the beginning

When we began the process to choose a new self-service portal in 2018, we asked some of our customers to be part of a focus group. We invited a shortlist of providers, including Housing Insight, to demonstrate their products to this focus group and we listened to the feedback. Customers wanted a portal that was clear, easy to use and would render effectively on any device without any loss of functionality. These were straightforward criteria on paper, but often the simplest solutions are the most complex to develop and deliver in practice.

We opted for the focus group's preferred product, a self-service portal from Housing Insight's PanConnect suite, which also offered an app with identical functionality and happened to be the most cost-effective solution. We knew that word of mouth would be the best way to get the portal and app embedded across our customer base so, with our focus group on board to help spread the word, nearly 50 per cent of our customers are now registered to the customer portal.

2. Drip-feed incremental changes

Once signed up, we wanted to make sure that we kept customers with us. Taking notes from companies such as Amazon and Facebook, we incorporated small, regular tweaks to the portal and app that would not be offputting to our customers. First, for example, we enabled customers to look at their rent account. Next, we added the option to make payments, then we made it possible for them to set up direct debits.

If we had implemented the portal and app then left them unchanged for six months, any subsequent alterations would have felt much more significant and might have scared off some of our customers. An agile approach worked well for everyone.

3. Make the entire process digital

Historically, our housing officers met prospective customers face-to-face, asking them to complete a lengthy 90-question form about eligibility and affordability that would then be scanned in when the officer returned to our offices. But, because we receive almost all of our applications for housing by email, we knew prospective customers had access to both an email address and the internet.

We therefore decided to expand our use of the self-service portal and app to include not just current but also prospective customers. We now send out an email inviting applicants to log into a portal where they can complete their pre-tenancy questionnaire. A housing officer then reviews their answers and, in 95 per cent of cases, approves the application.

We've also found the portal and app to be useful in making sure that new customers are fully aware of their responsibilities and our expectations. In the past, new customers would meet their lettings officer at the property, where the customer's primary focus would be, naturally enough, their new home rather than



the various forms we needed them to sign. Now, we can send links to the forms electronically so that customers can review them in advance. The lettings officer receives a notification if they haven't read the forms three days before they are due to take possession of their new home and can contact the customer to remind them to take action.

Our lettings officers also have touchscreens so that, once they have shown an applicant around a property, the applicant can sign there and then to accept or reject it. This information is uploaded directly to our back-office system, and the new customer gains access to the full customer portal and app, with the version tailored to general needs, rent-to-buy, shared ownership and so on.

4. Stay on top of the data

Last month 1,843 customers used our self-service solution. They generated 33,513 page views and spent an average of almost four minutes logged in – just long enough to make a transaction. By tracking and analysing the data on a regular basis, we can identify areas for development.

Data drives the change. True digital self-service must be constantly evolving if it is to keep customers engaged. By analysing the data provided by Housing Insight's cloud

reporting solution, we can see which areas of the portal and app are being used and identify others that may need some improvement.

5. Plan your marketing

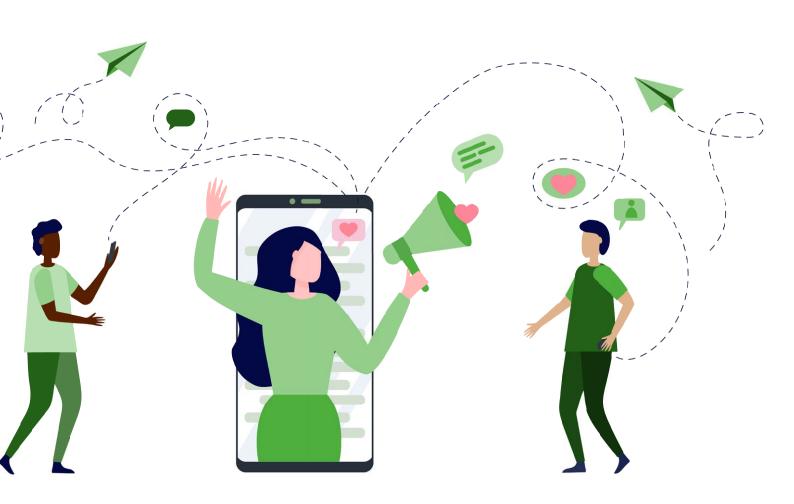
Looking ahead, we intend to use social media to grow awareness of and engagement with our self-service portal and app. We want to push our messages out more regularly, saying to customers, "Did you know you can do 'X' online now?"

We also want to involve all customer-facing staff in a more structured way. They have always said to customers informally, "Did you know there's an app for that?", but we'd now like to make this an integral part of their jobs.

An award-winning approach

Greatwell Homes was honoured to be placed 13th across the UK in the Housing Digital Awards 2020, which recognised those companies using a digital platform to improve services for customers. The judges praised our 'great progress on automation' and 'really strong ambition for the future'.

Farrukh Syed is a programme manager at Greatwell Homes.





Project CHAI's 'cybersecurity skills at home' co-design workshop

Project CHAI, an academic research collaboration between Univ. Greenwich, QMUL, UCL, Univ. Reading and Univ. Bristol and with support from Housing Technology, is developing a cybersecurity programme to help people with smart devices in their homes use them safely and securely, with a particular focus on social housing.

The research team is hosting a 'Smart Cybersecurity Skills @ Home' co-design workshop on Wednesday 25 May at the Museum of the Home in London, to which housing providers, smart/IoT technology suppliers and cybersecurity experts are invited.

The collaborative design workshop will cover:

- Choosing and using secure smart devices in residents' homes;
- Assessing residents' cybersecurity needs:
- Identifying and responding to cybersecurity threats.

For more information, please visit project-chai.org or email Dr Laura Benton at: l.benton@ucl.ac.uk.



Improving tenant satisfaction with field management software

Jeremy Squire, UK Managing Director, FLS - Fast Lean Smart

Housing providers are facing increasing economic and consumer regulations, from governance and financial viability to home and tenancy standards. Housing providers and their residents and stakeholders have now been consulted by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) on proposals for new Tenant Satisfaction Measures, scheduled for release in April 2023.

In parallel with the RSH, the Housing Ombudsman has its own benchmarking review, with a particular focus on complaint handling procedures for residents. The Housing Ombudsman's first Service Annual Complaints Review has identified three key areas where there are common operational complaints. Whether you are a housing provider or a repairs and maintenance contractor to the housing sector, FLS has examined how the application of field workforce management software can improve scores to prevent complaints and explored technology best practice in these areas.

Centralising control & meeting expectations

Poor communication and a lack of follow-up is the primary factor affecting satisfaction scores for repairs and maintenance service providers. Workforce management software tracks field KPIs, centralising the control and the monitoring of field operations and their communications. This is already helping to meet or exceed expectations.

There are two central themes to achieve this. The first is a guarantee that all field operatives are working with industry-recognised criteria, such as tasks, tools or measures and that these results are of an acceptable quality. The software should help schedulers and dispatchers to manage their operational processes and respond dynamically to field requirements. Integrated call-centres, self-service ticket raising and emergency responses are standard 'always on' channels for residents to engage with workforce management systems.

The other is to safeguard physical locations from slow responses by removing geographical patches or hard borders when scheduling. Best-of-breed software, such as FLS Visitour, goes further by consulting not just street addresses but also geocodes, including time-of-day



driving data for trillions of journeys. With a minimal amount of human administration, the system will always reflect what is physically possible, while fairly balancing field operative skills and workloads. Scheduling and route planning with an overlapping service radius produces less travel and helps residents to feel they are not in a service desert.

Once the visit has been completed, the software can send an exit survey to the resident and transparent field scheduling answers with the opportunity to book a follow-up appointment in real time (for example, the same field operative is booked for a shorter visit, two weeks later). That binding appointment is added

to the schedule, with new route and cost-optimised appointments scheduled around it. The appointments are linked, meaning that should the repaired asset fail in the meantime, the already-booked appointment is considered in the schedules and the resident is notified with efficient options. On the day, they can check the progress of their ticket. All results from the exchange are written back into the CRM for auditing purposes.

Engaging the developer of field workforce management software means learning from their experiences to ensure resident repair workflows are future-ready. Sector knowledge, whether it's specific to housing or in the dozens of appointment types needed for regulated utilities or voids, is critical. While the new measure will work across the sector, each organisation and each resident population is unique.

Preventing 'no access' appointments

Scheduling optimised field appointments means making a calculation against cost parameters, SLAs and countless other data points. Even with a visit planned for the best outcome, some operators are damaging their tenant satisfaction scores with 'missed or unproductive appointments'. While at first glance, responsibility for 'no access' visits seems to lie with the tenants involved (i.e. neither the fault of the dispatch process nor the field operative), the Housing Ombudsman's report emphasises two fundamental factors contributing to this metric; these include a 'no show' from the field operative and/or 'incorrect skills or equipment' to provide a first-time fix.

Real-time workforce management software mitigates these risks through digitised instructions and continuous optimisation. It begins with a move towards high quality appointment data. This can be asset details, impact, the nature of the household, even the length of time from fault to the report being made. Continual refinement of the fields may see the questions change, but a 'real' real-time workforce management system will consider as many parameters as possible to determine the true requirement. It can then satisfy optimal engineer skills, parts, vehicle and time to fix within a very accurate, appropriate window.

To reduce the risk of 'no access', the choice of costoptimised appointments is then presented back to the resident, either over the phone, via a portal, by email or SMS. Residents can then schedule (and reschedule) via the FLS Portal (in our case) at their convenience. The system also produces reminders, increasing satisfaction and lowering cost risks at head office, such as unnecessary field operative down-time or driving and overstocks of supplies. New, transparent data is available to the business to analyse trends and empower customer service teams to action any fall in tenants' ratings.

Digital repair logs

The Housing Ombudsman's survey across tenants, field workforces and head offices highlighted 'inadequate records', in particular incomplete or missing repair



logs. This inefficiency directly links with the tools made available to field service operatives.

Field workforce management software digitises the workflow between housing assets (such as domestic heating or an estate's fire safety systems) and the appointments that technicians are allocated to service these. Asset management using a connected ERP provides a single source of truth to include the manufacturer's lifecycle and the recommended maintenance intervals. With this information, head offices can proactively schedule regular inspections and longer-term planned maintenance or replacement programmes.

When an asset fails, a visit is likely to be needed. Scheduling this appointment in real-time gives dispatchers an instant picture of technicians' availability and route planning for the best outcome. A mobile app, such as FLS Mobile, provides a live link to the mobile workforce and gives head office the tools to reschedule 'in-shift', with no delay through batch or overnight processing. An asset's repair logs can also be delivered to the field workforce as paperless, searchable data. Further digital logs, such as photos of completed work and electronic signatures, are written back into the CRM/ERP.

Head office can then use the appointment data to satisfy record-keeping requirements and to identify patterns to detect and prevent future failures. Appointment details can be shared with building managers and individual occupants to reinforce trust and create a cycle of continuous improvement.

Jeremy Squire is the UK managing director of FLS – Fast Lean Smart.

Transform Housing's cloud transformation with Lima

Transform Housing & Support has spent the past 18 months on an ambitious cloud transformation project with Lima.

In partnering with Lima, Transform Housing has upgraded its technology infrastructure from a fixed, capex-based model to a more agile, cloud-hosted, opex-based model.

Lima helped Transform Housing migrate to a new platform built on Microsoft Azure, enhanced with Microsoft 365, backup and disaster recovery, and SD-WAN connectivity. This platform is fully managed by Lima, freeing Transform Housing's in-house team to deliver service enhancements internally. Lima also acts as an extension to the in-house team when needed, providing expertise on everything from cyber-security to modern workplace technologies.

Jamie Allen, head of digital and information services, Transform Housing & Support, said, "Transform Housing is now in a great place. We're ahead of the curve, which allows us to now slow down and properly embed the technologies and tools that were rolled out very quickly during the pandemic.

"We now have the time to communicate the possibilities of our new apps at the same time as increasing people's comfort levels through demos and training."

As the confidence of Transform Housing's staff increases with Microsoft Teams, SharePoint, Forms, Exchange Online, OneDrive and other key tools, the

housing provider is making more widespread use of those tools to digitise Jamie Allen, Head of Digital & Information Services, Transform Housing & Support

countless processes to improve internal productivity and external tenant services.

Microsoft apps such as Power Automate and Forms will be central to the streamlining of processes, which in time will encompass everything from employee onboarding to holiday booking and multiple aspects of finance, alongside using Teams as a central part in the day-to-day workflows of Transform Housing's staff.

Following the pandemic, Transform is now operating a hybrid model, with most staff working from home for two or three days a week. This is enabled by Transform's Azure-based infrastructure, the M365 app suite (particularly SharePoint) and a fleet of new employee laptops and smartphones.

Allen said, "Our staff appreciate the flexibility of hybrid working. It has also expanded our recruitment options, with new joiners able to work from as far away as Devon."



Housing Technology & Sophos – Cybersecurity in Housing 2022

Housing Technology and Sophos are hosting a 'bite size' digital briefing on Tuesday 14 June (09.30-10.15) on cybersecurity in housing. The briefing is free of charge for housing providers.

Today, cybercrime has spread to affect every organisation including every type of housing provider.

Developing defences to protect against the biggest and most crippling threats facing the housing sector for 2022 is at the forefront of not just your IT team's mind, but now also your board's.

Join Sophos as it explains how your organisation can continue its digital transformation momentum while

staying protected using the latest solutions as well as getting a chance to ask the experts and your peers in a panel discussion any questions you may have.

For further information and free registration, please visit housing-technology.com/housing-technology-event



Supply chain attacks



Jonathan Lee, Director of Public Sector Relations, Sophos

Housing providers have long been enthusiastic adopters of digital transformation strategies. As the pandemic unfolded, third-party property management platforms became essential in ensuring service continuity and maintaining tenant engagement. However, interconnectedness with third parties increases cybersecurity risk; we may have an effective cybersecurity strategy within our own housing organisations, but do we know about the security of our suppliers with whom we interact daily?

Cybercriminals are always trying to identify a weakness in an organisation's security. Exploiting third-party suppliers' trusted access to your network or data can be an appealing way for attackers to infiltrate your organisation because their behaviour can often be mistaken for legitimate activity.

Third-party due diligence

Unfortunately, your organisation may be held responsible if you're breached via a third party. The government's Sector Risk Profile 2021 states that 'Boards must also understand the risks of processing personal data with third parties, including the need to undertake due diligence on third parties' security measures...'. Increasingly, legal firms are ready to act on behalf of tenants when their data is compromised.

The types of supply-chain attacks vary from the more common, such as suppliers being targeted with phishing emails, to the more sophisticated, such as compromised software updates where attackers insert malicious code into legitimate third-party programs that are distributed to clients.

Notable attacks

One of the most well-publicised supply-chain attacks in recent times was that of SolarWinds, a US-based IT management company that provides network and infrastructure monitoring services to customers worldwide. In December 2020, one of its cybersecurity clients revealed that it had been compromised via malicious code entered by hackers into a SolarWinds software update. The breach began many months before, giving the hackers the luxury of time to spread across many networks. Thought to have been downloaded by over 18,000 users, US government agencies were among the high-profile targets affected. This was an advanced attack, and the threat actors' ability to hijack legitimate software and remain undetected for months demonstrates how successful supply-chain attacks can be.

Closer to home, in the housing sector, two supply-chain cyberattacks gained third-party providers unwelcome publicity last year.

In July 2021, Liberty Group, which delivers property services to housing providers, was breached in a ransomware attack, resulting in the compromise of a "small amount" of data and systems being taken offline. Those affected were informed and it was reported to the Information Commissioner's Office. However, a threat analyst from a cybersecurity company claimed to have found exfiltrated data from parent company ForViva on the dark web.

Around a similar time, the property technology company Plentific, which runs a dynamic purchasing platform linking housing providers with repairs and maintenance contractors, was also breached in a supply-chain attack. In the UK, Plentific supplied services to four large housing providers – L&Q, Notting Hill Genesis, Peabody and PCHA,



all of whom had to inform their residents that they may have received phishing emails asking them to pay for repairs in cryptocurrency.

Protection vs. access

So how can you protect your organisation and tenants from supply-chain attacks while maintaining suppliers' access to your data and network?

First, assess the security posture of your existing suppliers and business partners by checking their certifications and how they are audited. If they have access to highly sensitive data, you should carry out a deeper examination of their security measures rather than relying on self-declaration through questionnaires. Second, weed out those weak links in the chain who continually fail to meet your standards but give others clear guidance and support on the measures they will need to implement to satisfy your requirements (proportionate to their level of access).

When thinking about future suppliers, ensure that you build security requirements into your contracts, such as Cyber Essentials Plus certification. The NCSC also recommends that you include the 'right to audit' and that this should apply to contracts that your suppliers have with others that impact your organisation too.

Good cyber hygiene

Finally, ensure that your organisation has good cyber hygiene by reviewing your own IT security. Review access and application privileges and enable multi-factor authentication where possible. Aim to build trust with your suppliers and continually work together to improve the security of your supply chain – for example, by proactively monitoring their security bulletins.

You cannot entirely insulate your organisation from supply-chain attacks even if you have implemented these measures, but by moving to a more proactive rather than reactive approach to cybersecurity, you can minimise the risk and impact caused.

You should now look to proactively hunt for suspicious activity and potential threats in your network via tools such as Extended Detection and Response (XDR). XDR enables IT teams to identify that activity, prioritise threat indicators and quickly search for potential threats across your network.

Access to cybersecurity skills

However, the most damaging cyber-attacks, such as the SolarWinds hack, tend to be human-led. While XDR has a vital part to play, you still need the right people with the right skills in your organisation to respond to new and emerging threats around the clock. Unfortunately, most organisations don't have these skills available every minute of the day so they are increasingly turning to services such as Sophos's Managed Threat Response (MTR) which supplements your in-house team with expert threat hunters who monitor your environment 24/7/365. The service goes beyond simply notifying you of suspicious behaviour because the MTR team can take targeted actions on your behalf.

The NCSC has made it clear that supply-chain security weaknesses make organisations highly vulnerable to attack. Mitigate this risk by reviewing your existing suppliers' cybersecurity measures immediately and for future contracts, build in security requirements from the start. If your organisation lacks the time or expertise to carry out threat hunting, then consider using services such as Sophos's MTR to bolster your defences.

Jonathan Lee is the director of public sector relations at Sophos.



FireAngel's 'future of fire safety' roundtable

How is technology improving management of fire risk and empowering communities?



FireAngel recently hosted a roundtable discussion with delegates from the National Social Housing Fire Strategy Group, Ealing Council, and Hampshire & Isle of Wight Fire & Rescue Service to discuss how innovative technologies can raise fire-safety standards and empower communities.

Golden thread of information

Following the Grenfell tragedy, those responsible for fire safety were struck with a heart-rendering wake-up call; organisations didn't have the necessary 'golden thread' of information about their buildings or know enough about their residents. Today, connected technologies such as the internet of things (IoT) and artificial intelligence (AI) are driving a digitally-powered evolution for housing providers and strengthening the golden thread of building information.

Viewers (ondemand.housing-technology.com) can learn how applying technologies such as AI and IoT can move the housing sector from passive or responsive fire safety – using alarms to keep people alive, out of fire situations – to active or preventative fire safety.

Modern technologies can highlight trends and patterns of high-risk behaviour to pinpoint properties at risk, enabling housing providers to arrange successful interventions to help prevent fires. However, there is a general aversion to risk and a need for greater collaboration among stakeholders to accelerate progress, according to the experts at FireAngel's event.

New technologies & barriers to progress

Sarah Stevenson-Jones, vice chair, National Social Housing Fire Strategy Group, said, "Many new technologies are coming to the market, which will enable evolution. Furthermore, the Building Safety Act, which will hopefully be introduced by 2023, should drive further change.



Sarah Stevenson-Jones, vice chair, National Social Housing Fire Strategy Group "However, there are barriers to progress. For example, there are financial pressures in the social housing

sector. Housing providers also don't clearly understand what's available in the marketplace and how they can benefit."

Initiatives such as the Fire Industry Association's (FIA) IoT special interest group have been designed to accelerate sector-wide acceptance and increase understanding, so that more people can take advantage of enhanced fire safety. Fire and rescue services are still heavily reliant on upstream referrals from agencies, such as ambulance services and housing providers, but with more data and better collaboration, more fires can be prevented.



Jason Avery, assistant director for prevention and protection, Hampshire & Isle of Wight Fire & Rescue Service Jason Avery, assistant director for prevention and protection, Hampshire & Isle of Wight Fire & Rescue Service, said, "In private

dwellings, we have no legal precedent to cross the threshold unless there is an emergency, so the referral pathways need to be better established – for example, going out to meet the public, educating them and identifying those who are vulnerable."

Real-time data & alerts

Using connected technologies, housing providers and fire rescue services could identify a fire risk before it becomes a 999 call. Data monitored in real-time can alert housing providers if alarms are triggered or in need of maintenance. This information can then be combined with critical data on individuals' physical or mental status.

For example, a decline in cognitive abilities leading to memory loss and confusion about time and place can lead to electrical appliances overheating or food being left in the oven too long, increasing the risk of a fire. Having notifications of frequent alarm triggers or a delayed response to silencing alarms can prompt landlords to check in with tenants and ensure that everyone gets the help they need when they need it.



Paul Cook, Ealing Council and Nick Rutter, FireAngel

However, to access the potential of innovative technologies and identify vulnerable residents, key stakeholders need to adopt these solutions.

During the roundtable, Jason Avery and Sarah Stevenson-Jones were joined by Paul Cook, Ealing Council's then interim health and safety manager, and Nick Rutter, FireAngel's co-founder and chief product officer, to explore how innovative technology is enabling better risk management.

Viewers will gain insights into the current fire safety landscape for housing providers, what's driving change and innovation in the fire safety world and what can be expected in the near future.

Watch FireAngel's roundtable now at ondemand.housing-technology.com.

FireAngel



At home in the cloud

Helping housing providers gain value from cloud computing

Rich Hutchings, Chief Technology Officer, Littlefish

You read it everywhere – these days, cloud computing is the future! And it's true, there are many good reasons to move to a cloud-first technology strategy – faster data recovery, flexibility for remote working, practically limitless scalability and, of course, potential cost-savings, but it's important to remember that the cloud isn't an all-purpose, all-powerful 'fix'.

As more housing providers move to the cloud, how can they be sure they're getting the most out of their resources? And are their systems built in such a way as to promote cost savings where they're most needed?

A cloud solution may not necessarily address these challenges unless it has been designed to do so and your cloud solutions provider should be transparent about such expectations, working alongside you to deliver a personalised, optimised solution – and continuing to collaborate afterwards.

If you are considering or have already started a migration to the cloud, it's important to consider what benefits you want the cloud to deliver and how these are aligned and connected to your business strategy. Remember, the cloud should work for you, not the other way around.

Owning and managing servers

Having a traditional IT infrastructure with on-premise servers might not be the most cost-effective choice for housing providers when you take into account the time and resources involved in buying, maintaining and updating them.

Keeping hardware around not only takes up space but requires constant cooling to maintain a safe temperature. There are also HR costs to consider here, since owning servers means employing somebody who knows how to look after them.

Using a public cloud removes the burden of constant equipment upkeep, offering better affordability and elastic resources that can be scaled up or down depending on your data-processing demands. Furthermore, there are

opportunities for housing providers to share public cloud server space, necessitating less equipment, lower cooling needs and offering significant cost savings. Of course, this also means more efficient and powerful servers come within reach for organisations usually restrained by budget.

A hybrid cloud setup offers further flexibility, potentially including multiple cloud providers and making your infrastructure both hybrid and multi-cloud. Using one or more public clouds in addition to your existing on-premise servers can simplify the management of your applications and help you get much more from your cloud service.

It's also worth noting the ESG benefits of cloud because many big datacentres (e.g. Google, Microsoft and AWS) are carbon neutral and incredibly energy efficient; compare this to a typical on-premise server which sits idle during non-working hours while racking up energy usage and costs.

Staying up-to-date is more affordable

Like most organisations, housing providers want to increase their use of digital services and introduce new software and features to streamline processes and improve customer service.

Customer communication, for example, can be made much more efficient by using a cloud-based omni-channel setup. It's likely that many tenants, particularly younger ones, will prefer WhatsApp, social media and/or text messaging to stay in touch and a cloud-based system means all communications can be controlled via a single application from any location or device.



Of course, more digitisation usually means buying more software and installing updates more often – a practice that can get rather cumbersome and expensive using traditional onsite infrastructures, especially if you're waiting for providers to set up, upgrade and configure new systems.

By contrast, most public cloud providers, such as Azure and AWS, provide pay-as-you go software features (think of it as a subscription service for your business-critical IT needs) and are built to support the increasing velocity of software and security updates using timed deployment slots with none-to-minimal disruption.

The elasticity of cloud services means they can be increased/decreased alongside the size of your team, so any peaks or dips in demand become less challenging and software can be added or removed to suit. For organisations requiring responsiveness and dealing with budget restrictions, the flexibility of the cloud is a huge advantage.

Remote work and process balance

Taking advantage of the public cloud to streamline remote-working practices reduces the need for multiple offices and their consequent costs.

Furthermore, it's important to remember the latent costs associated with clunky and outdated legacy applications and the resulting inefficient or sprawling processes which waste both time and resources. Connecting to onsite servers using unreliable VPN technology or running low-performance virtual desktops for remote working isn't efficient and is likely to reduce productivity.

Cloud computing streamlines these issues through scalable software-as-a-service (SaaS), platform-as-a-service (PaaS), and infrastructure-as-a-service (laaS) technologies. Hosting and centralising your data and virtual machines in the cloud means you get all the additional processing power without the need to invest in new desktops or servers.

In fact, because public cloud hardware runs at much higher work-rates than onsite servers, it's likely to have a much shorter lifecycle, resulting in the hardware being refreshed more frequently. In other words, the latest kit is always available to public cloud users and tends to be much more powerful and efficient than would be otherwise be the case.

Reduced risk

Housing providers store, access and share a lot of sensitive personal data, so it's vital that systems meet the highest security and compliance standards and that they have robust DR. Not only can data breaches be very expensive, but onsite DR usually means a lot of downtime.

DR in the cloud is frequently associated with lower costs since cloud-based recovery plans are offered by both public and private cloud providers as a managed service, removing the burden of an upfront financial investment and providing extreme flexibility when it comes to automated backup and restore processes.

Your managed service provider should work with you to create cloud-based back-up plans, offering different packages to suit your budget, while preserving business continuity.

As a final note, it's worth remembering that compliance is built right into a cloud solution such as Microsoft Azure, which can help organisations meet most, if not all, of their regulatory requirements when it comes to data protection and cyber security; this can lift a huge burden from housing providers worried about meeting their regulatory demands.

Rich Hutchings is the chief technology officer at Littlefish.





Watford Community Housing has upgraded two of its 16-storey tower blocks to a Grade D, LD1 fire detection system from Aico.

WCH's high-rise blocks were recently chosen for mandated safety audits under Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue's supervision. After an initial review of its housing stock, the housing provider decided to upgrade the buildings' safety systems by working with Aico to install multi-sensor fire alarms to give them complete coverage.

The project began with WCH using Aico's free FIA-accredited 'expert installer' training for all of its installation team. Aico's mobile unit visited the site and WCH staff undertook training on alarm installation, maintenance, siting and standards. The mobile unit also allowed WCH's residents to receive fire safety advice and information on how to test and maintain their alarms.

WCH chose Aico technology partly because of its simple data extraction tools. The housing provider's newly-appointed building safety manager can now extract data from the multi-sensor alarms with ease using Aico's RadioLink technology. Each property has had up to four multi-sensor alarms installed which monitor heat and smoke levels giving more complete coverage. Heat alarms have also been installed in each kitchen to complete the project, with an Ei450 switch added for easy testing capabilities.

The housing provider also chose to add an Ei414 Alarm interface, enabling the Part 6 fire alarm systems in the living spaces to connect to the Part 1 system in the communal hallways, giving comprehensive, integrated fire protection.

David Wright, surveying manager, Watford Community Housing, said, "Due to the known risks around high-rise buildings, we decided that full fire detection would be appropriate. We believe Aico products deliver the best in safety for our residents. We are also aware of what is required from a maintenance point of view, helping us to minimise the time we spend in the properties."

Aico saves lives in Devon

Mid Devon Council has completed a project to install Aico's SmartLink Gateway, HomeLink Dashboard and IoT technologies into all of



its tower blocks to improve resident safety, particularly around fire and carbon monoxide (CO) protection.

The council almost immediately recognised the benefits of Aico's system when it received an alert of high levels of CO in a property via its SmartLink Gateway and HomeLink



Steve Bulley, South West Regional Specification Manager, Aico and Mike Lowman, Repairs and Adaption Supervisor, Mid Devon Council

Dashboard. A faulty cooker was found to be the cause of the carbon monoxide, resulting in the appliance being condemned. The residents were told not to use the appliance and advised on the symptoms for CO poisoning.

Throughout the incident, the council was able to monitor the CO levels in the property in real time via the HomeLink Dashboard.

Mike Lowman, repairs and adaption supervisor, Mid Devon Council, said, "The fact that the property had no CO alarm before the installation of the new system demonstrates the life-saving benefits of the Aico system because the residents could have suffered very serious health problems or worse if the alarm hadn't been installed and a notification not sent via the Aico system."

In the future, Mid Devon Council will be updating its procedures to further improve its response times to fireand CO-related incidents, with alerts from the SmartLink Gateway automatically notifying a dedicated phone team during working hours and to a call centre when out of hours.



Livin Housing's low-code Meritec platform

Livin Housing has been using Meritec's low-code platform to develop a series of minimum viable products (MVPs) to plug gaps in its digital services. The platform includes Meritec's CXM360 CRM module to integrate with a variety of Livin's existing back-office systems.

Roslyn Littledyke, head of transformation, Livin Housing, said, "We needed a flexible CX platform to handle and, where relevant, automate various customer touch points. In particular, we wanted to develop rapid prototypes that could be tested and deployed without relying on technical staff.

"The implementation of the Meritec platform has given us the ability to design and mobilise our services to customers, taking a digital-first approach."

Meritec worked with Livin Housing to deliver its MVPs, with the main aim of the MVP process being to reduce the number of systems that customer service agents had to go into in order to respond to tenants' queries.



Part of the MVP was to deliver a 'golden template' on the low-code platform which could then be used as the basis of all future processes. Meritec trained the Livin team on low-code configuration and helped with the build of the first 10 processes. The Livin team has since developed a further 50+ processes using the low-code features of the Meritec platform.

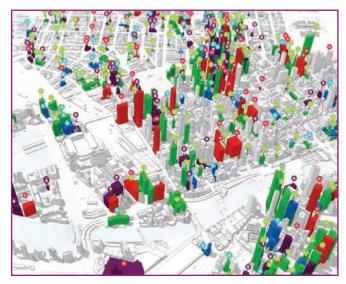
Livin has reported a 25 per cent reduction in high-volume contacts within the first three months of implementing the Meritec solution, further underpinned by a one-minute reduction in the average call-time for high-volume contacts.



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third-party providers (incl. device manufacturers) to deploy, maintain and support their

IoT devices in tenants' homes.





Esri's geospatial winners

Esri UK has announced Dacorum Borough Council, Nottingham City Council and South Ayrshire Council as the winners of its competition to find the best use of geospatial technology among local authorities.

The competition revealed several common planning challenges faced by local authorities: improving community engagement; maximising the use of 3D visualisations; and managing developer contributions more efficiently.

Stephen Croney, head of land, property and planning, Esri UK, said, "As the government reforms the planning system with greater use of digital technologies, we wanted to find innovative solutions to planning challenges and then collaborate with local authorities to bring them to life.

"By combining each council's expertise with our team of geospatial experts, the pilot projects will explore new approaches to common problems, all designed to help make the planning process easier for everyone."

Dacorum Borough Council wants to migrate the contents of many of its existing documents and spreadsheets into digital mapping resources to better manage and communicate infrastructure and developer contributions secured through planning obligations.

Alan Anderson, portfolio holder for planning and infrastructure, Dacorum Borough Council, said, "Our aim is to use digital mapping to help with not only decisions around the planning of new infrastructure and making the whole process more transparent but also to support community engagement.

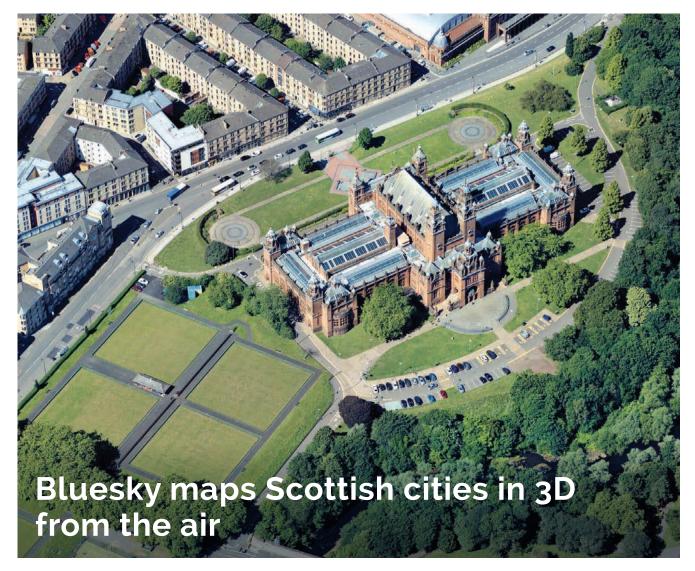
"Our current system's outputs are text- and spreadsheet-based – providing this information in a spatial format means that it can be more easily used by council officers for planning, decision making and monitoring and also by the public for better engagement."

Nottingham City Council's proposition will explore how geospatial technology can help increase the use of 3D visualisations within planning.

Mick Dunn, GIS service manager, Nottingham City Council, said, "If 3D assessments are conducted in a GIS environment, planning teams can conduct an assessment of various constraints on a site at the same time as a visual assessment of the impact of the site."

South Ayrshire Council's project will look at how an innovative community consultation platform with interactive methods of engagement can improve community involvement in local development plans.

Gordon Wilson, planning technician, South Ayrshire Council, said, "The objective is to create a space to keep our community engaged and informed to strengthen our relationship with our stakeholders in order to reach better planning outcomes."



Bluesky has added Edinburgh and Glasgow to its growing coverage of MetroVista 3D city models. Acquired using a state-of-the-art aerial sensor that simultaneously captures vertical and oblique imagery together with LiDAR, the 3D data is becoming increasingly popular for smart city applications.

Providing a geographically accurate and detailed 3D representation of the urban environment, MetroVista data has already been used for a range of applications including urban design and housing, defence and security modelling, insurance assessments and utility and telecom planning.

Ralph Coleman, director of sales, Bluesky, said, "We are becoming progressively more urbanised; in order to make informed and joined-up decisions, it's essential to not only visualise how our cityscapes look now but also measure, model and analyse the impact of new developments.

"Using MetroVista 3D models, we can visualise the present and simulate the future, enabling analysis of the impact and engaging communication of the results, all with a high degree of confidence and without leaving the office."

Bluesky captured the centres of Edinburgh and Glasgow in 2021 and the data is now available as ultra-high resolution 5-centimetre aerial photography together with 16 points per metre (ppm) LiDAR. The data is also being processed to create a fully-rendered mesh model suitable for use in a range of GIS, CAD and modelling packages.

The Leica CityMapper sensor, used to capture the MetroVista data, was the world's first hybrid airborne sensor. The first camera captures vertical (nadir) true-ortho aerial photography in both RGB and near infrared, while the remaining four cameras provide 360-degree oblique coverage. Combined with data from the integrated high-density LiDAR, this enables the production of detailed city-wide mesh models with minimal manual interaction.

Housing Technology 2023's new home...











After many years at The Oxford Belfry, we are pleased to announce that Housing Technology's 14th annual conference and executive forum now has a new home at the East Midlands Conference Centre in Nottingham.

Housing Technology 2023 will take place on **01-02 March** next year at the purpose-built conference venue set in 330 acres of the University of Nottingham's landscaped parkland, close to the M1 motorway and Nottingham national railway station.





We will be announcing further details about Housing Technology 2023 over the next few months; until then, please pencil 01-02 March 2023 into your diaries.

Havebury Housing's app & intranet with Oak Engage

Oak Engage has been chosen by Havebury Housing to connect its workforce and increase employee engagement.

Oak Engage enables businesses to connect with their staff through its mobile app and SaaS-based platform. Oak's software provides a variety of internal communications tools that integrate seamlessly with housing providers' existing business applications, with the aim of improving productivity through increased collaboration and workforce alignment.

Hayley Lambert, communications manager, Havebury Housing, said, "We were struggling with an outdated

intranet and Oak Engage's modern platform is flexible, intuitive and will really boost engagement with our teams."

Oak Engage is an adaptive intranet that connects people through better communication and engagement, and is used by leading companies such as Aldi, Boohoo, Five Guys and ITV.



What we learnt from the pandemic

Simon Evans, CTO, Amido

In 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, the UK housing sector was thrown a new challenge with the government's Charter for Social Housing Residents which laid out a bold new standard for housing providers. Combine this with ambitious climate-change targets as well as an irrefutable digital lag, and the housing sector was already on the back foot when it came to making any meaningful headway towards strategic change.

Skip forward two years and it appears that the pandemic may have been the most significant influence on the housing sector's strategic focus, with that focus appearing to have been on technology.

The need for efficiency

With resources increasingly strained just as the need for better tenant communications and support grew, the call for greater efficiency in property and facilities management was highlighted. Housing providers needed to service properties and look after their (often vulnerable) tenants across wide geographies and with complex sets of needs. The administrative load of dealing with repair booking, tracking and logging across such a network can be difficult and time-consuming, and with a lack of real-time data available, often more than half of all calls couldn't be resolved first time, requiring repeat visits.

Some housing providers deployed booking systems to capture data at the point of booking and deliver a frictionless experience for employees and tenants, significantly reducing internal costs and waiting times for residents. With the right technologies, these systems will be scalable and adaptable in order to track trends in demand, allowing those housing providers to plan proactive repairs and schedule resources with more accuracy than before.

People need people

The pandemic highlighted how social interaction is a basic human need; older people, already particularly vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation, were particularly affected. With over 55-year-olds comprising

over 40 per cent of tenants, housing providers needed to provide solutions to tackle the increased detachment felt by people who had to shield or were cut off due to fear or reduced social opportunities.



Technology played a vital role in connecting potentially isolated tenants with staff and landlords to provide support and maintain relationships. Many organisations were spurred by the pandemic to adopt a digital platform, such as Microsoft 365, to enable them to integrate their collaborative communications tools with their operation at a greater depth as well as offering video-based Zoom/ Teams calls where and when needed.



Data powers all

There has been widespread recognition of the need for housing providers to maintain and interrogate a greater depth of data across their organisations. This might range from tenant data helping to determine people's needs and the properties they occupy, to service, finance and technical data that provides the modelling needed to run efficient and proactive services.

Housing providers have been forced to recognise that delivering an effective digital service platform requires accurate and up-to-date data. Remotely monitoring appliance performance can give early indications of the need to service or to troubleshoot potential issues. Holding catalogues of data on common issues and how to resolve them can enable self-serve capabilities that empower tenants and free housing staff to tackle more complex issues.

Managing financial data in a sensitive and compliant manner will also enable housing providers to understand tenants' circumstances in greater depth. With the post-pandemic economy affecting most tenants' financial circumstances, being able to overlay income and lifestyle data onto housing and asset schedules will be an invaluable way to make strategic decisions on, for example, the development of existing properties or investment in new housing.

Technology has proved to be the pillar on which housing providers and their tenants can lean, with pockets of innovation springing up both during and after the pandemic. Now is the time for the housing sector to surge forward, using the creativity forged during the pandemic to take the sector into a new digital age.

Simon Evans is the CTO at Amido.

Ex-Notting Hill COO joins Plentific

Plentific has appointed Andy Belton, the former COO and digital transformation leader of Notting Hill Genesis, to its advisory board.



In his previous role, Belton led a digital transformation programme centred on automation and efficiency to support Notting Hill Genesis'

corporate strategy. Prior to that, he was the COO and deputy CEO for Notting Hill Housing.

Andy Belton, strategic board advisor, Plentific, said, "The myriad cloud-based services used by housing providers today might give you a good environment to work in, but they don't necessarily solve specific business problems.

"Plentific has shown that technology must serve the housing sector's needs for better data on repairs, better technology for inspections, improved compliance oversight and new ways to measure outcomes and customer satisfaction."

As a member of the board, Belton will bridge his in-depth understanding of the housing sector with Plentific's technology to further develop the company's digital transformation solutions, with an emphasis on service delivery, 'golden threads of data', tenant engagement, retrofitting properties and the future-proofing of supply chains.



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