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HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2024

05-07 March 2024
Nottingham

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™
2024 CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

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SELF-SERVICE APPS AND PORTALS – WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU?

Pros & cons for housing providers, tenants and contractors, good design & implementation, post-live adoption, integration with core systems, problems to avoid and best-practice examples

Housing management

Audit prep, contractor marketplaces, real-time invoicing and digital-aided design

Mobile working

Arrears & analytics, social impact and field-service integration

Customer management

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Infrastructure

Cybersecurity, damp & mould, fire safety, full-fibre connections and smart devices

General news

IT operating models, GIS, data quality, grant allocations and shared AI services

Introducing the Housing Technology Awards...

After almost 16 years of writing and publishing Housing Technology magazine, we are now introducing the Housing Technology Awards beginning with four categories for 2023/24; CxO of the year; technology team of the year; business project of the year; and IT project of the year.

The purpose of the awards is twofold; the first is to celebrate the achievements of our sector's most innovative and ambitious individuals, teams and organisations; the second is to share those achievements with the rest of the social housing sector so that everyone can share and benefit from their knowledge.

Further details are on page 05. If you would like to know more about the awards (as an entrant or a judge) and to be alerted when online submissions for the awards open, please email awards@housing-technology.com.



Housing Technology 2024 – Registration now open

You can now book tickets for you and your colleagues (group bookings available for the first time) for the long-running and 'must attend' Housing Technology 2024

conference in Nottingham during **05-07 March** next year; please see conference.housing-technology.com.

As well as our annual conference's two days of brilliant and varied presentations, panel discussions, technology showcase and informal networking with peers, we've introduced some new 'Any answers?' topic-specific workshops during the afternoon before the main conference sessions begin, giving our guests off-the-record opportunities to discuss what they're doing, share their experiences and pick others' brains for answers to their problems within the different workshop topics.

For further information about all aspects of Housing Technology 2024 (including speaking and sponsorship opportunities), please see conference.housing-technology.com.

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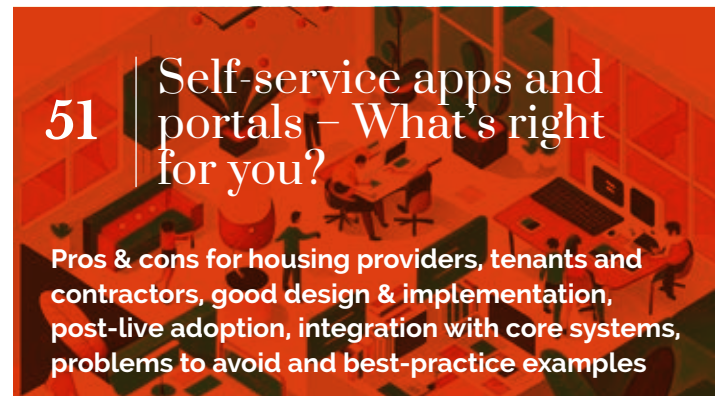
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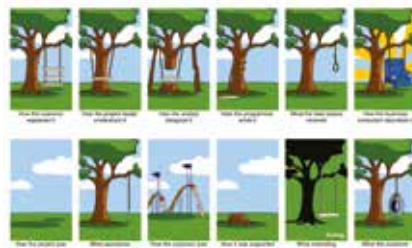
Pros & cons for housing providers, tenants and contractors, good design & implementation, post-live adoption, integration with core systems, problems to avoid and best-practice examples

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AWARDS

Introducing the Housing Technology Awards

Pleased with your work, proud of your last project or keen to share your experiences with the wider housing sector? If any of those apply to you and your team, we'd love to hear from you for the inaugural Housing Technology Awards 2023/24.

For the 2023/24 awards, we have four categories: CxO of the year; technology team of the year; business project of the year; and IT project of the year. The awards will be open to all housing providers, local authorities and other 'end user' organisations, and all entries are free for 2023/24.

The Housing Technology Awards will open in mid-October 2023, with the closing date for entries expected to be the end of November 2023.

All award submissions will be judged and marked by a panel of senior housing professionals alongside the Housing Technology editorial and research team. The award winners will be announced live at the Housing Technology 2024 conference next March.

If you would like to know more about the awards (as an entrant or a judge) and to be alerted when online submissions for the awards open, please email awards@housing-technology.com.



From contract to go-live – Key success factors

Scott Crowley, Director, Scott Crowley Consulting

For a housing provider who has awarded a contract to a new supplier, embarking on a new project is like a perfect honeymoon where everything seems wonderfully rosy. But so many projects end up not delivering the goods, being late and/or going over budget, leaving users irate and the project team needing therapy. How can projects stay on track and deliver, as promised? Here are nine key success factors that in my experience as a consultant help customers and suppliers get their projects over the line.

Senior sponsorship

Obtaining commitment from senior management is crucial for successful projects, whether it's a five-user system or a large digital transformation. Without their recognition of the project's priority, securing necessary resources and timely decisions may be difficult and, if another priority comes along, your project could be demoted.

This commitment ideally starts from when the idea for the project is given the green light and as project manager, you may come on the scene later than this, but do all you can to ensure your executives are on board.

Agile or waterfall?

For smaller projects with a well-defined scope, known solutions and short timescales, you may choose to follow the 'waterfall' approach; plan, build, test and implement in sequence.

With a more complicated project, it's often better to opt for 'agile' delivery to avoid investing too much time and money to deliver something that turns out to be not quite what was needed (see diagram on next page).

In its truest form, agile means no overall defined scope, just a series of broad objectives, delivered in short sprints, with continuous user feedback. This is a significant cultural change to the old waterfall approach and may be too much for some organisations, but even if the scope is more fixed, you can choose to pilot small elements first to see if you're on the right track, and change tack as required.

Realistic project plan

Suppliers should propose a realistic project plan based on their previous experience, and as a customer it's your job to ensure you have enough internal resources to deliver, such as a project manager, data consultant and module

leads, and experienced staff who are then backfilled. Seek advice from people who have implemented the system before, and make sure you include contingencies as well as taking account of pinch-points such as year-ends and school holidays.

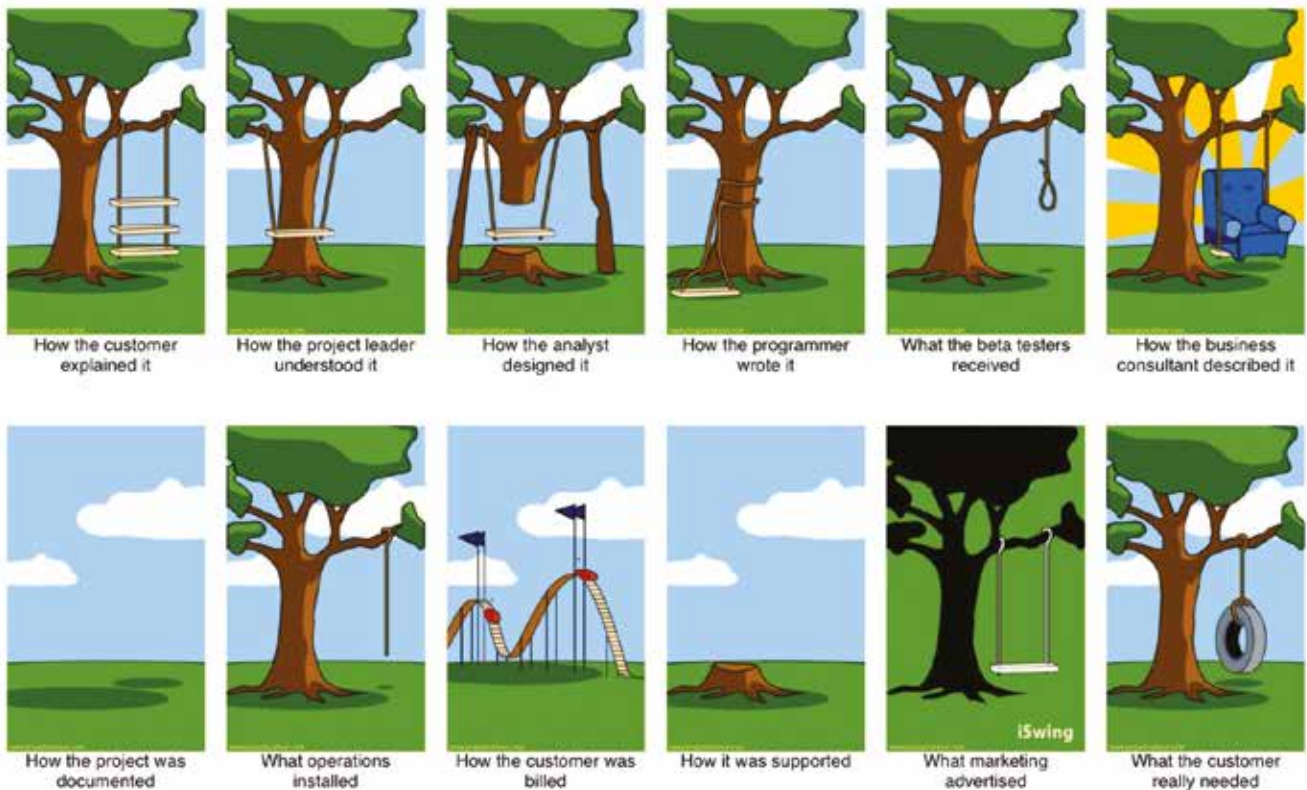
Project governance

Establish a structured project governance framework, including a project board for decision-making, a project initiation document (defining scope, objectives, approach, constraints and assumptions, business case, roles, approach to managing risks, project controls and so on), and a competent project team. Suppliers should send someone senior to project board-meetings and appoint a competent project manager on their side, and ensure that the project manager is available and flexible when the customer needs them.

Good advice and critical friends

Tackling a new project alone will be easier and cheaper if you seek advice from those who have done this before, throughout the project. This can be informal through contacting colleagues in similar organisations who have been through the same process and survived. Some suppliers have web-based forums for sharing advice or you can hire an expert for advice on an ad-hoc basis.

From the supplier's side, it's important to offer tailored advice on the solution's capabilities and how to set it up, especially if the customer is doing some or all of the build and configuration. Don't paralyse them with choice by telling them it can be set up in five different ways; listen to them describe their business processes and give them a steer on which way might suit them best, explaining with pros and cons clearly.



The potential problem with the waterfall approach if applied to complex projects

Clear scope

Clearly define the project objectives, whether it's a straightforward replacement of part of a system or a broader digital transformation. If it's a replacement, focus on ensuring that the core functionality works in the new system, according to your business processes.

If taking advantage of new functionalities or delivering services differently, think about how staff and customers will handle change and get the balance right between ambition and realism. You may want to replace 'like for like' first, let it bed in, then move on to adding value, such as improved mobile working or customer self-service.

Suppliers should transparently communicate the maturity of their solutions and the potential risks of adopting newer elements, and encourage other customers on similar journeys to talk openly to each other.

Test and test again

Any new system requires thorough testing. You can't totally eliminate risks to the business when you go live, but do all you can to minimise them. Acknowledge that young or continuously-improved solutions may have more bugs compared with more mature products.

You might take one version, test it, identify the bugs that are 'showstopper' issues for you in particular (because other customers might have different priorities), and then agree on taking an upgrade to fix those issues, with full re-testing. Your planning should reflect this.

Be pragmatic about which issues really are showstoppers versus ones you can live with; if you want to go live with no

problems at all, you'll never go live at all. Suppliers should work with you to deliver a prompt turn-around on any problems that need fixing.

Benefits realisation

Define what benefits you can realistically expect to achieve and make a plan for realising them. You should have baseline measures so you'll know if you've succeeded. For example, how do you double the number of online transactions if you don't know how many were being done before? It's important to define owners for those benefits so they can ensure the best chance of success, especially because many will not be realised at go-live but after the project itself is finished.

Communication

Finally, don't forget to create a communications plan that lays out how, when and to whom you'll communicate. Keep stakeholders consulted, involved or informed as appropriate. Provide concise and relevant updates, even if there's no significant news; if you haven't communicated for, say, six months, it may be time for a brief message to say the project is still on track and to remind people when it's going live or when training will be done.

I have found that, by paying attention to all the factors outlined above, you can stay on track to deliver projects that all stakeholders will deem a success.

Scott Crowley is a director of Scott Crowley Consulting.



Link Group – How to do digital-aided design

Link Group (Ken Fox, Maarten Westerduin, Kasia Walker & Craig Stephenson) and International Data Flows (Fergus Cloughley)

Like many housing providers, Link Group’s IT and digital estate has evolved over a long period of time. Decades of investment in a multitude of software, hardware and communications technologies has built-in layers of complexity and sophistication, plus moving to the cloud has also created new opportunities and challenges.

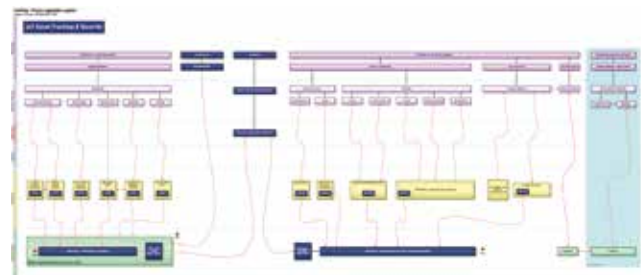
We have an extensive array of national partners and suppliers and over 800 staff, with the majority providing and/or consuming data using general or bespoke processes and being supported by all shapes and sizes of technology.

As with many organisations, Link was looking for a holistic way of understanding data and information flows to promote better decision-making and process optimisation. Link wanted to facilitate effective communication and collaboration between business and IT stakeholders, enabling them to work together towards common objectives. We needed a system or methodology that supported risk management, compliance and system design; ensuring data security, operational resilience, and IT efficiency.

Digital simulations

Digital-aided design (DAD) came out of the energy and utilities sector in the early 2000s. It is a method and process of digitally creating, modelling and designing simulations of how people, processes and technologies relate and depend on each other.

The model is created using a combination of the Obashi methodology and Obashi software which enables the objective and structured analysis of stakeholder hierarchies; the connectivity between assets, the flow of



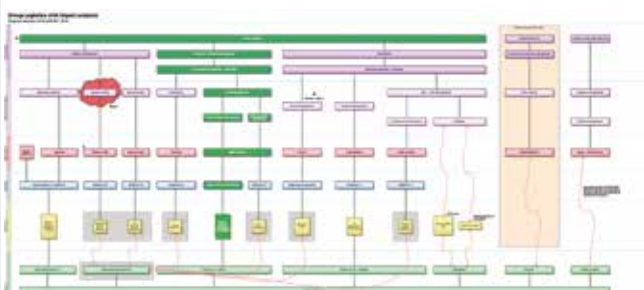
data and attributed data, and information to be visualised and analysed, often in a collaborative manner.

A DAD approach is intrinsically dynamic – API functionalities and procedures allow access to the model data, software features and integration functions. Moreover, Obashi provides a valuable tool for managing IT projects and transformations. It allows organisations to assess the impact of proposed changes, evaluate different scenarios and estimate the resources required for implementation. Obashi’s visual models can guide project planning, risk assessment and resource allocation, ensuring that IT initiatives are aligned with business goals and objectives.

Visual information flows

Obashi’s emphasis on visualising information flows also supports effective system design and architecture. It

helps organisations identify redundant or unnecessary data flows, leading to more streamlined and efficient IT systems. With Obashi, organisations can optimise their technology infrastructure, improve data quality and integrity, and reduce complexity. This can result in cost savings, increased productivity and enhanced customer satisfaction.



Another key benefit of Obashi is its ability to facilitate risk management and compliance. By visualising the flow of data, organisations can identify potential vulnerabilities and points of failure in their systems. This allows them to proactively address security risks, data breaches and compliance issues. Obashi also enables organisations to assess the impact of changes or disruptions in their processes or systems, helping them develop robust contingency plans and ensure business continuity.

A common language for collaboration

Obashi promotes effective communication and collaboration between different departments and teams. The visual models created in Obashi act as a common language that bridges the gap between business and IT stakeholders. It allows for clear and concise communication of complex concepts and dependencies. With Obashi, stakeholders can work together to identify and resolve issues, align their objectives and make strategic decisions based on a shared understanding of the organisation's data and information flow.



Link has developed an 'insight strategy' to understand what the balance between data governance and its overhead means, what gains might be had and what capabilities are needed to make it practicable, leverage the benefits and justify the investment.

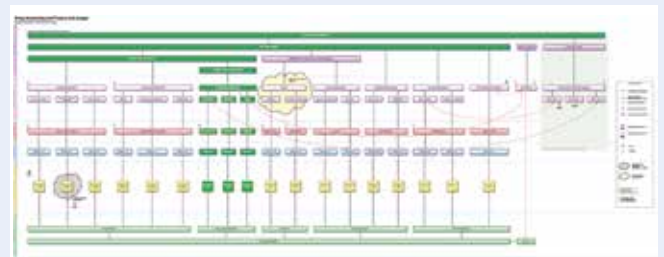
To turn this insight strategy into operations and therefore realise the expected benefits, a number of capabilities are needed. For Link, many of these are already in place and operating effectively, but some are yet to be further defined or developed. The capabilities which have been

identified as essential to the delivery of our insight strategy are governance, management, technologies, design and data, standards, ethics, skills and innovation.

In recent years, Link has taken considerable steps forward in response to GDPR and other data regulations. We have established robust policies, processes, and controls in both the governance and management of data. We have also defined information asset owners who have an important part to play in terms of data management, accountability and risk.

Tactical vs. strategic

Link is working hard to move away from disconnected systems, spreadsheets, on-premise servers and poor-quality data. There is a significant difference between how Link will use data in a tactical manner (i.e. to run the business) and the ways we will use data in a strategic manner (i.e. to improve the business). The ability to make better decisions based on our data that can be easily accessed and connected will provide a wide range of benefits. Over time, our understanding of the best way to represent our perceived data model will change to reflect the ways we understand information, along with the ways that we want to process that information.



With governance in place keeping the management of the data processes compliant and the analytical requirements understood, we can determine the conditions and expectations in which business insights can be delivered to the organisation, the people who it will affect and the culture within which it will operate.

The development of business insights within Link will provide unprecedented opportunities to deliver better outcomes for our customers. It will create conditions which allows Link to openly share challenges and ideas and to co-develop and co-produce innovative solutions to old problems.

Using DAD to help deliver the insight strategy, we began with focusing on bringing clarity and understanding to Link's current organisational state, concentrating on the top three layers of Obashi (ownership, business process and application).

Immediate value & understanding

We first developed a stakeholder matrix (in the 'ownership' layer) which mapped out the organisational hierarchy as well as the relationships and dependencies with national partners and suppliers. This is bringing immediate value and understanding as we began to visualise the extent of the relationships and information flows that need to be



constantly maintained to allow the business to operate effectively.

Some business processes were then added directly underneath their corresponding owners which highlighted the manual and digital workflows and dependencies between and across departments and third-party resources. Following that, the simple drag and drop functionality of Obashi enabled the 'application' layer to be populated with the apps and tooling information that's used to support our day-to-day processes.

We now have the beginnings of a dynamic, contextual model for our insight strategy, one that is scalable and easy to share among members of staff. We're still at an early stage of modelling, although even without filling in all the layers it's proving to be useful. The model will only get richer and more valuable as more people, process and

technology information are added. The better and more accurate the information, the more valuable and useful the model will become.

Conclusion

'Digital' (incl. legacy IT assets and systems) has been in dire need of a standard engineering design approach for many years now; digital-aided design is a tool with the capability to fill that gap.

We're already gaining benefits and insights using this tool. It will contextualise our data privacy, cyber security and digital transformation aspirations while also underpinning the eight capabilities of our digital insights strategy. In short, we commend a digital-aided design approach to you all!

This article was jointly written by Link Group (Ken Fox, director of digital services, Maarten Westerduin, digital delivery & transformation manager, Kasia Walker, business analyst, and Craig Stephenson, digital participation & innovation officer) and International Data Flows (Fergus Cloughley, CEO).

MRI Software partners with Aareon

MRI Software is now partnering with Aareon UK to make selected MRI applications available to housing providers using Aareon's core platform, starting with MRI Allocations for managing tenant application processes.




Lee Burke, chief revenue officer, Aareon UK, said, "The partnership with MRI Software underlines our customer commitment by identifying best-in-class solutions that are the right fit for our customers. As part of the Aareon Ecosystem, we are looking for partners who can strengthen our solution offerings to the UK housing sector."

Deborah Matthews, managing director, MRI Living for Social Housing, said, "This partnership with Aareon fits with our mission to provide the most flexible, open and connected 'proptech' offerings for the social housing sector. At the same time, it delivers value to Aareon's customers, enabling them to improve the residents' experience by enhancing their core housing management system – starting with MRI Allocations."



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IntoZetta's annual 'data in housing' survey results... part three



David Bamford, Delivery Director, IntoZetta

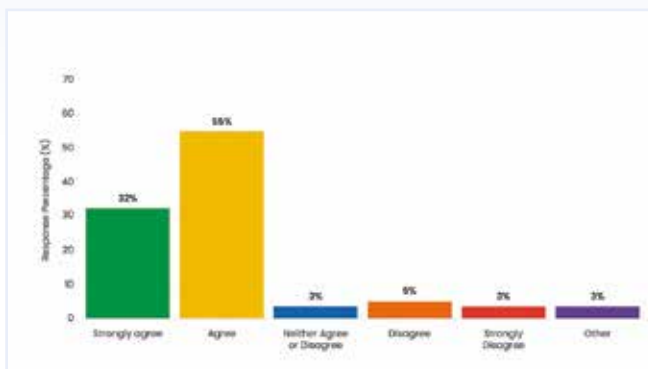
Welcome back to the third part of the IntoZetta 'Data in Housing Survey 2023'. If you missed parts one or two, please check out the May 2023 and July 2023 editions of *Housing Technology*.

In part two, we explored the potential barriers to implementing better data management. The answers in that section revealed an interesting split in respondents, with roughly half having the technology and resources needed to improve their data management, and half not.

Perhaps most interesting was that most respondents felt it was the culture of their organisation that was the biggest barrier to progress in this area. Cultural changes are often the hardest to implement, and while tighter regulation is driving behavioural changes, it's preferable to lead with a carrot rather than a stick. Getting buy-in from your teams for improving data management is all about showing how it will benefit them and how they can help.

This leads us nicely into part three; are housing providers investing in data change, and how far away are they from best practice?

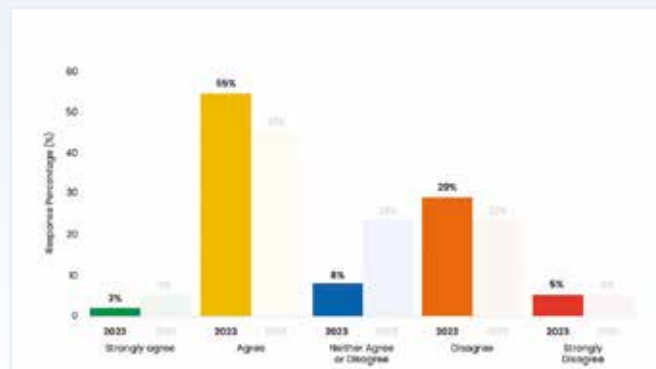
Within my organisation investment in data management is increasing



The good news here is, for 87 per cent of respondents at least, budget doesn't seem to be a barrier; in fact, investment in data projects across the housing sector has never been higher. However, expectations on the delivery of value from those investments are also very high.

As organisations try to mitigate inflationary pressures by increasing their efficiency, how well they manage the quality and understanding of their data is under greater scrutiny.

My organisation has a good understanding of where data is created, stored and used



The decrease in ambivalence to this question highlights an increased understanding across the sector of what good looks like, with respondents more confident to assess their own situation.

While the majority feel that they understand their data's journey across their operational landscape, a significant minority doesn't. We also shouldn't assume that 'good

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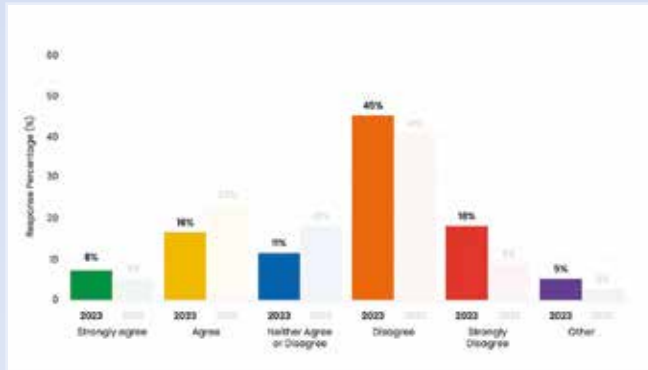
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understanding' means 'complete understanding'. For example, when considering data journeys, the 'grey IT' sources, such as spreadsheets, are often overlooked.

My organisation has a single trusted source for important information

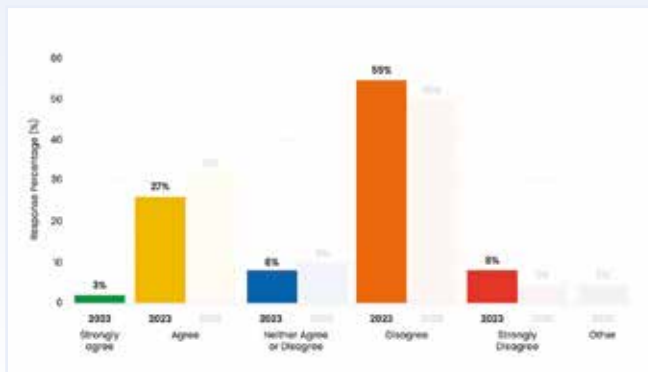


This is the crux of the problem for most housing providers. I'm always surprised that the majority of housing providers I talk to can't confidently say exactly how many homes or tenants they actually have, let alone which of their stock are in sub-standard condition or in need of urgent repairs.

Rarely does a week go by without a story in the press about a tenant living in poor conditions somewhere in the country. How do we change that? Well, having a single source of truth for data would be transformational for most housing providers, particularly those which are the result of mergers and stock transfers.

Several options exist, such as system rationalisation, warehousing and data streaming, so the question for most housing providers should be how, not if.

My organisation only stores and uses the data that it needs



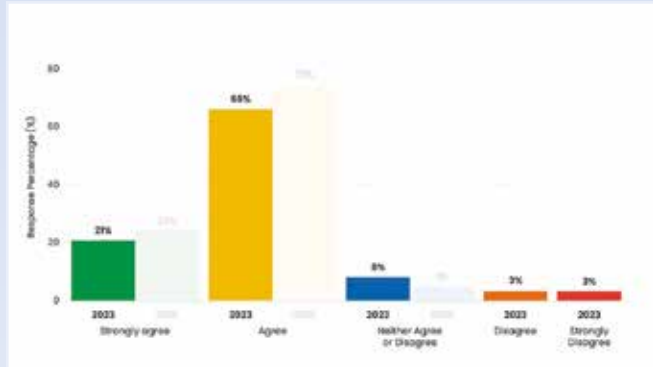
Half the battle of being on the 'right' side of this question is first understanding which data is needed. Many data points are collected simply because they always have been.

A very worthwhile exercise is to map out all of your business processes to understand which data they consume, and then assessing which data not included in any of those

processes can be disposed of. Not only does this reduce GDPR risk, but simply by holding less data, you can also reduce your costs and environmental impact by using less server time and space.

There's still a lot of work to do here, especially given the year-on-year decline in respondents feeling their organisation has things under control.

My organisation has important information stored in documents and shared drives



This question shows a flicker of progress year-on-year. We can see the preliminary impact of various rationalisation projects currently in-flight in the sector, with six per cent now not storing important information off-system versus none last year.

While there will always be a place for documents and shared drives, the rise in collaboration software (and accelerated during the pandemic) means there is less need for multiple copies of documents and less need for taking data outside housing providers' core systems.

Reductions in this type of information also reduces risk, particularly from subject access requests under GDPR, and costs from additional storage.

If you are part of the 87 per cent who still have a proliferation of documents and drives like these, consider putting together a migration strategy to pull that information into properly governed and controlled sources.

Join us in the next edition of Housing Technology when we dive further into the findings from our Data in Housing Survey 2023.

And as always, if you'd like to take part in our 2024 survey or share your experience of working with data in housing, please contact us at participate@housingdatasurvey.com.

David Bamford is the delivery director at IntoZetta.





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Regulatory compliance vs. complexity, poor data & resources

Lee Burke, Chief Revenue Officer, Aareon UK

Tenant safety and housing quality are always in focus, but with the new Social Housing Regulation Act (SHRA) that was passed in July 2023, it's clear that much still needs to be done. The changes are designed to strengthen the proactive abilities of the Regulator of Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman to inspect housing providers and ensure that they meet expected housing quality standards.

While consultation with the housing sector continues, the changes include a remit for the regulator to inspect housing providers with much less notice, set strict time limits for them to resolve problems (incl. addressing hazards such as damp and mould) and new qualification requirements for housing managers. The Housing Ombudsman will also be able to issue best-practice guidance to housing providers following investigations into their tenants' complaints.

The act brings a renewed focus on quality service delivery and communication between housing providers and their tenants. Let's look at some of the ways housing providers can leverage technology and data to support quality service delivery and better relationships.

Self-service to empower tenants

Strained resources and conflicting priorities make things tough for housing providers and bring challenges to the provision of quality service and faster problem resolution for tenants. The key challenges I hear frequently from my discussions with housing providers include complex business processes, poor data and the lack of skilled resources.

While technology alone can't completely fix these issues, the right technology can complement processes and vastly improve service. A tenant self-service platform is just one way to improve resolution of problems. Housing providers that can answer to tenants' queries quickly

and easily and offer alternative methods of contact through digital platforms are at an immediate advantage, resulting in faster resolution of problems and improved communication at scale.

With self-service platforms such as Aareon's customer portal, tenants have 24/7 access to key information about their tenancies, such as rents and transactions, community initiatives and scheduled appointments. Importantly, for the SHRA, digital solutions can also provide tenants with the ability to initiate contact online and raise further actions from housing providers in a structured manner so that diagnosis and resolution is faster and the process auditable.

Implementing data audits

From April 2025, the Regulator of Social Housing is planning a new programme of regulatory inspections. Housing providers must be able to demonstrate how they are providing good quality homes and services for tenants. Although details of the inspections are still to be confirmed, having the data to evidence housing management processes will be key.

Now is a good time to start reviewing your data collection and ask some fundamental questions. Are we getting the value from our data? Are there any gaps? Can we accurately report on our data and KPIs with confidence? If there are gaps in our technology and the data we collect, how can they be filled?

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Tracy Thompson
Manager
Housing Direct

Allowing social housing organisations to embrace Artificial Intelligence (AI) to address critical challenges and improve the tenant experience. AI has the ability to revolutionise property management, streamline tenant communication and enhance decision-making processes, making the lives of both tenants and housing associations easier and more efficient.



Reduced IT faults

annually from 12,000 to three



Improved productivity

and collaboration



Reduced training time

for agents, from four weeks to days



Ability to innovate

and improve services



Often the relationship between housing providers and their technology suppliers can be beneficial here. Creating and maintaining effective technology is what their suppliers do, so it makes sense for housing providers to leverage their suppliers' experience.

At Aareon, we've been consulting with our clients to develop new Power BI dashboards so they can report on key areas of housing management, see the status of service delivery and ensure that the relevant data is readily available and can be demonstrated to the regulator.

Making the right connections

Most organisations employ a digital ecosystem of solutions to deliver tenant services and manage housing, but not all IT systems work together seamlessly. One of the main challenges is the integration and interoperability of solutions within an IT ecosystem; this can have a significant impact on housing providers' ability to deliver the best service to their tenants.

Let's use the example of the new regulation, whereby time limits can be set to address hazards such as damp and mould. Digital solutions enable housing providers to effectively meet such requirements. A housing officer in the field can digitally record the details of a problem, instantly transfer key information and action a qualified professional to fix the problem and provide the tenant with a record of the work that has taken place, and all within the allocated time limits. For this to be a smooth process, there may be integration and interoperability between

systems required, and the transfer of data between various key stakeholders is essential to get right.

The process of reporting and resolving damp and mould is just one example of processes where housing providers will find that a well-integrated technology stack can automate manual processes and remove complexity. In the majority of cases, housing providers aren't lacking data; the problems are how they leverage that data and whether their technology stack enables them to transfer knowledge and communicate in the most efficient and effective way.

Summary

During the many years that I've worked in housing, I've witnessed many changes, so I expect that the regulators' scrutiny of service delivery will only grow with advances in technology and data. To meet new standards and improve service quality, housing providers must embrace new technologies and become agile enough to adapt to them.

Cross-sector collaboration is the catalyst for raising standards; leverage the expertise and capabilities of others across the sector, whether it's process knowledge or technological capability.

Lee Burke is the CRO of Aareon UK.



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Step-by-step audit preparations

Andy Wilson, UK Country Manager & Director for Business Assurance, DNV

Preparing for an audit can be daunting but it doesn't need to be. This article provides real-life examples and best practices for preparing for an audit. In particular, we'll focus on a scenario where you've just finished your last scheduled ISO 27001 audit (the following tips can also be applied to many other standards) and there are now 12 months to prepare for your next one.

I know that social housing is a highly regulated sector so, by undertaking external audits, you're already demonstrating your organisation's commitment to compliance and data security as well as financial wellbeing and reputational standing.

12 months before your audit

When working with an accredited certification body, you will have received feedback from your organisation's last audit. This offers a springboard to look at the roadmap for the year ahead before your next audit takes place. A good starting point would be to carry out a post-audit review (from your audit report and list of findings) which will explore the independent findings and recommendations that the auditor has given you.

After you've managed the associated corrective actions, use the original findings to help define the scope and set the objectives for your next internal audit. And look ahead to the next year – are there any trends or key changes in the social housing or IT landscapes that could have knock-on effects for you? If so, take those into account when defining your scope and objectives.

After that, it's a great opportunity to review the composition of your current audit team (e.g. new people in your organisation who should be included). Make sure your team comprises a good mix of IT staff, health and safety experts, compliance and regulatory specialists as well as senior leadership. We'd also recommend including someone from your marketing team so they can communicate relevant information to the whole organisation.

Ten months to go

Now you've taken those first steps, it's time to ensure all systems and tools are up to date. This would include your IT policies, disaster recovery plans, any legal and/or housing regulatory requirements and network diagrams.

Being aware of your third-party partners' policies is also important. From your repairs contractors to your architects, it's important to know what their procedures are and that they don't undermine your information security.

It's also a good time to establish your most current risks and mitigating controls relating to your ICT processes and systems.

Eight months to go

With the compliance officer, extend your view of emerging industry standards, regulations and laws that affect you and the wider housing sector (such as GDPR and ISO-27001). Alongside this, with 'smart home' technologies constantly evolving, make sure you're staying on top of the latest data-sharing and security policies.

Six months to go

Being able to demonstrate effective procurement processes is something that is very important in an audit. Make sure that you're working with your relevant colleagues to ensure your procurement programmes are as strong as possible and can be clearly communicated to your auditor.



At this halfway mark, it's also a good time to undertake your latest gap analysis to spot any gaps that might need further exploration before the audit. Prioritise analysing the efficiency of your management system in general as well as the processes and sub-site activities. This will ease the process of finding these gaps by comparing your current ICT controls and practices against best practice for compliance.

Now is also the time to carry out pre-audit assessments. This could be in the form of undertaking a mock audit to replicate what the processes might look like or carrying out more straightforward internal assessments. Both of these will help you find any weaknesses in your processes and give you the opportunity to rectify them.

To finish off this stage in your audit preparation, make sure you've kept detailed documentation of all the changes and updates that you've made off the back of the gap analysis and assessments you've carried out because your certification body will probably want to review your internal audit reports.

Three months to go

You should now be in a solid position to connect with your relevant stakeholders and start the detailed planning for your audit. Make your stakeholders (incl. your executive groups and leadership teams) aware of any significant system and/or process changes since your last audit.

It's also a good time to coordinate access to relevant systems, resources and key documentation that all stakeholders might need. When carrying out these specific conversations, it also gives you a good opportunity to share your finalised scope and objectives with the external auditor. These critical interactions between you and the certification body help ensure a smooth audit experience as well as maximising the derived value.

One month to go

As the audit gets close, attention moves to internal communication. Now is the time to prepare your key colleagues/stakeholders and ensure they're ready to answer questions related to their areas of the business. It's also a good idea to create a communication plan around this point to ensure all teams are aware of what's most relevant for them in terms of the audit.

One week to go

You've almost made it to the finish line! On the day of the audit, confirm that all necessary documentation and resources are readily available. Make sure your team is well prepared to address questions and provide explanations to the auditors. Remember, there is no such thing as a bad set of audit findings because they will always help identify focus areas and drive continual improvement.

Post-audit

We're now back to where we started because the best way to close the loop is by carrying out a post-audit review; look at the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats that have arisen from the review.

For any readers who might be carrying out their first audit, then many of the above recommendations will hold true; we'd recommend taking a pragmatic view when applying them to best suit your current circumstance.

Whether you're facing your first audit or your 21st audit, I wish you luck and hope this information proves useful.

Andy Wilson is the UK country manager and director for business assurance at DNV.

Housing Technology's Data Management 2024 report



George Grant, Publisher & Co-Founder, Housing Technology

After the success of our second Data Matters event earlier this month at The British Museum in central London, we are starting the research for our brand-new Data Matters 2024 market intelligence report, focused exclusively on data management in social housing.

With almost all housing providers now recognising that data management is truly fundamental to the smooth running of all their 'downstream' IT and business operations, tenant communications, financial performance and regulatory compliance, we are confident that the Data Matters 2024 will be essential reading for everyone in our sector, regardless of where they are on their respective data management journeys.

Please stay tuned for email updates in October when we launch our online questionnaire for Data Matters 2024, the results of which will underpin the final report.



If you would like to be involved in Housing Technology's Data Matters 2024 report, please email datamatters@housing-technology.com regarding editorial, research and commercial aspects of the report.

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

Plentific takes on new customers & 157,000 properties

Plentific has signed seven new housing customers for its real-time software – Change Housing, Hyde Group, Longhurst Group, Midland Heart, Platform Housing, Phoenix Community Housing and SW9.



Hyde Group approached Plentific in order to achieve year-round utilisation of its internal workforce alongside ad-hoc demand for specialist external contractors through the Plentific marketplace. Plentific is providing an online contractor marketplace for Hyde Group and implementing automated workflows for better service delivery.

Steve Austin, head of maintenance, Hyde Group, said, "There is a lot of specialised trade in the market, from individual contractors to SMEs, many of which may not be used to working with large organisations. Through Plentific, we can tap into this resource, with the confidence that each contractor has already been vetted so we can focus on getting the works completed."

By gaining access to the Plentific platform and its contractor marketplace, Platform Housing now has a more convenient and efficient means of completing its repairs and maintenance.

Louie Nesbitt, quantity surveyor, Platform Housing, said, "We went live with Plentific in December 2022. Our first batch of 500 jobs went live on the Plentific platform on a Tuesday evening, and within 24 hours all of those jobs had been quoted on, with the first job completed on site by the Thursday."



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Transitioning to digital housing services

Kevin McSorley, Head of Radius Connect 24, Radius Housing

Kevin McSorley, head of Radius Connect 24 at Radius Housing, tells us about approaching technology within housing services to support tenants and his hopes for the digital future.

Radius Housing, in association with Tunstall Healthcare, provides housing, care and support to over 33,000 homes and manages 12,500 properties across Northern Ireland. We employ over 1,000 people and our response centre, Radius Connect24, provides reassurance to around 20,000 customers.

One of the core principles of housing provision and other related services is supporting independent living and driving investment in communities. Radius is no exception and we provide both general and sheltered housing with telecare alarm services. It's always been important that our service provision is ethical, sustainable and has our tenants' welfare at its heart.

24-hour support services

Connect24 is an essential part of our model of care, providing 24-hour support as the name suggests. Technology is central to the way we deliver our services. We engage with thousands of people; around 10,000 living in sheltered housing, around 5,000 people pay for the service privately and over 3,000 have enhanced telecare funded by the local Health & Social Care Board because their care needs mean they require more than a basic telecare system.

Connect24 is often the first line of support for people who need help. This kind of low-level support can be invaluable in helping people to remain in their own homes. We'll provide help in an emergency but also often signpost to other services, such as support for falls, dementia or frailty. We also try to help unpaid carers, using technology to give them some respite and reduce burnout. It's just as important for them that they know they have 24-hour support too, and a source of advice.

Becoming proactive

We're trying to move to a more proactive and preventative model, and we're transforming our service model from inbound to outbound calling. Something as simple as a wellness check call can identify any problems at an early stage, and enhance the service user's feeling of wellbeing. During the pandemic, our proactive calling service was invaluable, but even now this kind of regular contact really informs our engagement with clients and helps us to meet their needs better.

In my view, this approach should become accepted as mainstream, and its value more widely recognised by commissioners. The phrase 'health and social care' is often used but it's sometimes forgotten that housing providers, and indeed technology, can play a key role in working across all of these services to provide more integrated support and upstream interventions, which can mitigate the effects of acute events and help to support wellness as much as responding to emergencies.

Working together

The importance of co-production shouldn't be forgotten. The move to digital is a big change, and to get it right we need to involve tenants and genuinely listen to their views to help us all navigate the cultural shift. For example, many tenants have been used to the traditional concept of scheme coordinators being onsite.

Changing the service model to become more agile by enabling some calls to be handled offsite can initially cause some apprehension, but our experience is that the tenants are more than happy with this in practice because there's no reduction in human interaction. We've found if you present the options and explore the potential of



different approaches, our tenants and colleagues are very willing to embrace change.

The future

I think we'll see an increasing number of people choosing to pay for their own technology support. It gives them more choice and control, and we're now all so much more familiar with having technologies such as smart speakers in our homes.

I often hear from our residents that the most important point for them is that the technology is simple to use and reliable. As families move further away from each other, technology can help to connect us all. And although we have an ageing demographic, we shouldn't forget that the next generation of 'older' people will be 'digital natives'.

The UK's move from an analogue communications network to a digital one is also influential. It's given us an opportunity to audit our technology estate and how it's used to help us create a comprehensive upgrade strategy that keeps robustness and reliability at the heart of what we do, but also recognises the potential for digital technology to allow us to tailor our services for individuals.

We're in the process of upgrading our Connect24 monitoring centre platform to PNC IP to enable us to receive calls over the new digital network, and over the



next three to four years we aim to have replaced all of our analogue Lifeline home hub devices with digital ones.

Kevin McSorley is head of Radius Connect 24 at Radius Housing.

A mobile-first approach to resident fire safety



Jaison Mathai, Software Product Manager, FireAngel

FireAngel's software product manager, Jaison Mathai, explores why housing providers should consider adopting a mobile-first approach to not only increase productivity for alarm installers but to also empower residents to take control of their fire risks.



Adopting a mobile-first approach in housing through the use of apps can give tenants a more convenient and engaging way to be aware of their safety risks at home, such as fire, carbon-monoxide or the presence of damp and mould.

Insight collected and shared through these apps can also support housing providers in working more efficiently by using real-time data to pinpoint properties or residents at risk and enabling proactive intervention.

With mobiles now ubiquitous, alarm installers and contractors working for housing providers can now experience a mobile-first approach with FireAngel's range of apps.

Installer-ready app

Using FireAngel's free Installer mobile app, installers can fit and deploy a network of smoke, heat and carbon-

monoxide (CO) alarms and even Zigbee sensors with a FireAngel gateway in just a matter of minutes.

Once in a property, an installer can add the gateway details and register it to the FireAngel Connected platform. Using Smart RF technology, which enables wireless communication through intelligent radio frequency (RF) technology, the alarms are ready to pair within minutes and will become visible on the Installer app.

Zigbee is an open standard, supported by a wide range of devices, applications and manufacturers, which makes it easy to add new devices to a Zigbee network and to integrate with the FireAngel platform. This scalability can support housing providers in future-proofing their properties and adapting to residents' changing needs as part of a long-term digital transformation.

Zigbee sensors can be easily onboarded through the Installer app, due to the built-in Zigbee capability of FireAngel's Home Environment gateway, specifically designed for the social housing sector. After installation, the app can then be used to support and maintain a resident's network with remote access and device monitoring.

Photographs of installed alarms can be uploaded in the app, with the ability to add locations and labels for future reference or audits, supporting compliance with Hackitt's 'golden thread' of building information.

And in a sector-first approach, the Installer app uses NFC Sync-It technology to quickly and quietly extract diagnostics from FireAngel's FA3328-EUT CO alarm. NFC



(near-field communication) is a short-range wireless technology used to transfer information between devices through wireless communication by holding a phone against a device; it's the same trusted technology used during mobile payments.

Empowering end-users

FireAngel's new app Connected helps end-users such as residents in managing their fire risk through Predict integration while offering features that support independent living. Using the free app, residents can remotely test all interlinked alarms without the need to climb stepladders (or find a broom), ideal for more vulnerable residents.

With interlinking alarms, when one sounds, all the alarms sound, to give a resident time to take immediate action and reduce the risk. In such an event, when using the Connected app, residents will receive a notification and can silence alarms from their phone to leave only the initiating device sounding.

The app also supports the creation of multiple-credential access for family members so that Predict fire-risk visibility, along with the ability to monitor the 'risk stratification' of a property, is available to all.

A step-change in the fire industry, FireAngel Predict protects residents, properties and communities from preventable fire risks using unrivalled insights. Predict is the only tool of its kind on the market that uses AI to identify high-risk behaviours behind closed doors, providing housing teams with the opportunity to stage earlier interventions and reduce the probability of future fires.

A mobile-first approach to risk

FireAngel's Connected app supports the provision to multiple properties, such as for vulnerable family members or neighbours, so that residents' Predict risk



levels can be monitored in real-time with a 'safe and well' visit from the local fire and rescue services arranged if needed.

The app engages residents with easy access to damp and mould risk in their property, displaying the same information housing providers can view on the Connected dashboard, before its likely onset to support proactive prevention. This is enabled using the data from built-in temperature and humidity sensors in the Home Environment gateway.

Details of recent events, such as low-level carbon-monoxide, missing internet connections, alarm initiations or devices being off the base, are also available on the homepage of the Connected app to ensure key safety aspects aren't missed.

Jaison Mathai is a software product manager at FireAngel.

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Aberdeenshire Council cuts arrears with Mobysoft

Aberdeenshire Council has implemented Mobysoft's RentSense software in order to reduce its arrears and maintain sustainable tenancies.

RentSense uses AI and data science to analyse trends and payment patterns from across two million social tenancies to enable housing providers to make ultra-early interventions, so that the council can identify potential problems with rent payments as early as possible.

Andrew Mackie, tenancy services housing manager, Aberdeenshire Council, said, "After extensive research, we found that RentSense offered the right solution to our requirements, and the comprehensive support and best-practice advice given by Mobysoft were invaluable."

Mobysoft's AI-powered repairs for BDHT



Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT) is set to implement Mobysoft's RepairSense software alongside its existing deployment of the software provider's RentSense income collection software.

RepairSense is an AI-powered predictive analytics tool designed to help housing providers optimise the management of their repairs through greater productivity of the repairs operatives, cutting down on multiple visits to tenants' homes and focusing on the longevity of the completed jobs.

Jeanette Matthews, head of customer delivery, BDHT, said, "One of the main objectives of implementing RepairSense is to let us identify jobs that might need multiple visits from our repairs team. By identifying those properties in real-time, RepairSense enables our planners and front-line operatives to be proactive and focus on the sustainability of the repair, reducing the number of repeat visits needed."

Mobysoft's social impact with Beam

Mobysoft has partnered with Beam, a social impact 'tech for good' operation that matches homeless people with jobs and homes via its technology-led platform.

Mobysoft is supporting Beam through an initial financial donation and then throughout the year to support its homeless beneficiaries into jobs and homes. 100 per cent of donations will fund job training, travel costs, work tools, rental deposits and other items that typically present a barrier to Beam's beneficiaries.

Paul Evans, chief executive officer, Mobysoft, said, "Mobysoft will share its housing-sector knowledge as well as support Beam's mission of matching homeless people with jobs and homes.

"Our proprietary data analytics is the largest income dataset in social housing, comprising data on around two million tenants. Our insights can therefore help prevent vulnerable tenants from falling into arrears and risking homelessness. Furthermore, our tech-for-good ethos and the social values that underpin our products are closely aligned with those of Beam."

Alex Stephany, founder and CEO, Beam, said, "Solving homelessness demands a multi-stakeholder approach, spanning government, commercial organisations, housing providers and civic society. We're excited to welcome Mobysoft as a corporate partner and work collaboratively on innovative solutions to homelessness."

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EXCELLENT AND POWERFUL REPORTING TOOLS HELP ME ANALYSE DATA AND MAKE MY DECISIONS EASY
WE'RE NOT ROBOTS ON THE PHONE BECAUSE INFORMATION IS IN ONE PLACE

SINGLE VIEW
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Totalmobile & WorkPal team up for field-service 'powerhouse'

Totalmobile and WorkPal, both field-service software specialists based in Belfast, are combining their respective technological and commercial strengths to offer customers across the UK and Ireland a wider range of field-service management (FSM) solutions.

Totalmobile offers a comprehensive and integrated FSM platform for enterprise businesses, including job management, mobile working, lone-worker protection, rostering and field-service intelligence. WorkPal's FSM technology enhances the operations of the SME market, including scheduling, tracking and reporting.

Employing over 500 people between them, Totalmobile and WorkPal will collaborate to provide FSM solutions to a broader range of customers. At the moment, WorkPal targets customers with up to around 100 employees, while Totalmobile focuses on enterprise-scale customers.

Gary Adams, chief strategy officer, Totalmobile, said, "Totalmobile and WorkPal have been in the same market for many years, each focusing on solving similar challenges for customers, just on different scales.

"This partnership means that smaller organisations can benefit from Totalmobile's technology backed by WorkPal's expertise. WorkPal is well established at working with customers that have previously been outside our capabilities, so working together is mutually beneficial."

CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT

Derby's AI-powered phone handlers with ICS.AI

Derby Homes and Derby City Council are using two AI-powered virtual assistants from ICS.AI, 'Ali' and 'Darcie', to handle almost half of all inbound calls.

The new AI assistants, Ali covering Derby Homes and Darcie covering Derby City Homes, are answering over 1,000 questions per day, directly handling around 45 per cent of all inbound calls. Beyond answering queries, they can also direct calls to over 40 different departments.

Andy Brammall, director of digital and physical infrastructure and customer engagement, Derby City Council, said, "We started with an AI-powered website assistant, followed by supplementing our

main switchboard with phone-based AI using ICS.AI's Smart AI platform.

"Trained in over 1,000 council services, it has exceeded our deflection [of calls to human operators] target of 21 per cent, handling over 62,000 calls and achieving an incredible 43 per cent deflection.

"One of the reasons we chose the Smart AI platform from ICS.AI was because it offered a 'human parity' AI language model trained in over 1,000 housing- and council-related topics."



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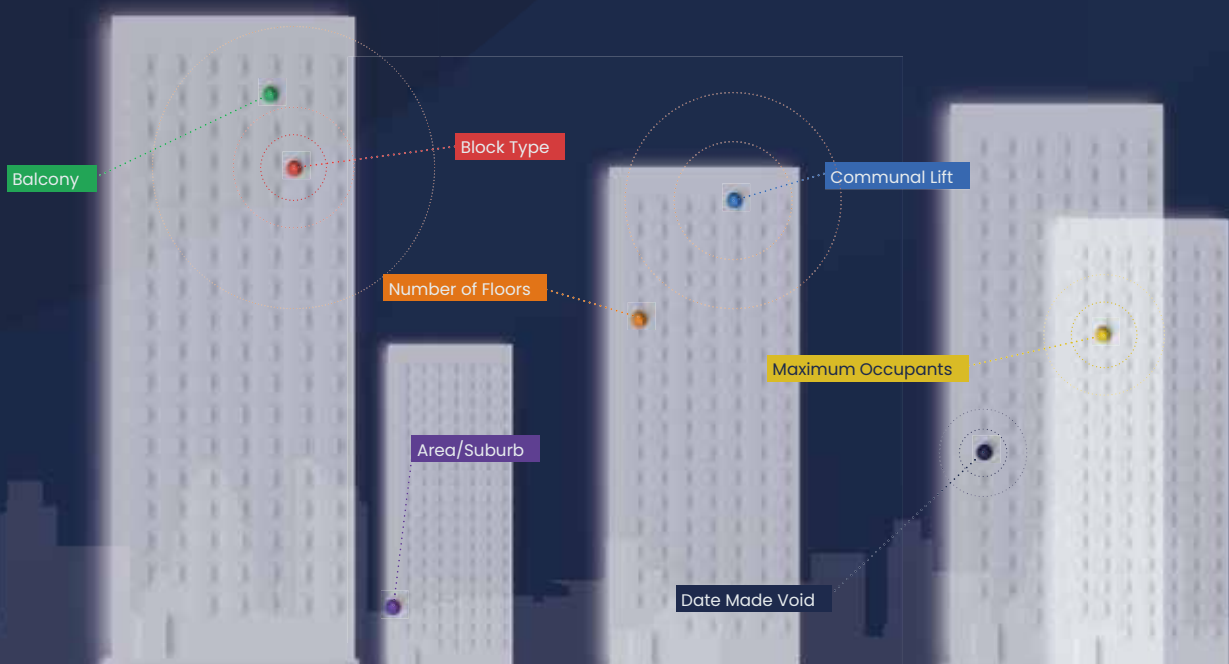


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Pre-configured with 100s of common housing data definitions that you can Accept or Modify to create your organisation's Data Catalogue. The software allows you to build a comprehensive picture of where data exists, how it moves between systems, and 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.





Are you there?

Regulatory scrutiny & tenant data

Kay Aston, Head of Product, NEC Housing



As the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023 becomes law, the way housing providers understand, communicate with and listen to tenants is under the spotlight. Six years after the Grenfell tragedy and three years after the Social Housing Whitepaper, housing providers must demonstrate to the regulator that tenants' voices are heard and acted on.

What can housing providers do to ensure they fully understand their customers' needs, are treating them fairly and with respect, and are maximising every opportunity to engage with them to improve the quality of their services?

A key requirement in the proposed new consumer standards is that housing providers act to ensure that all tenants can access their services fairly and equally.

The importance of data

Collecting as much good quality and accurate information about customers will underpin this. It will help inform what information and messages are relevant to them and which channels are more likely to be effective.

In the past, housing providers tended to be smaller and it was easier for housing officers to walk around an estate

and speak to people about any worries they had or if they needed support. To pop in for a chat and a cup of tea with an elderly resident, for example, and because they could do this, they knew at first-hand that the resident walked with the aid of a Zimmer frame or lived alone and so there was less need to record this in a database (a notebook would do). But as housing providers have merged and become larger, it's become very difficult to get to know tenants' individual circumstances and maintain those personal connections.

Understanding who the customers are, including everyone in the household and not just the lead tenant, will be even more essential under the new legislation. For example, knowing what their first language is, if they have disabilities or health concerns, will help housing providers

make sure their customers have access to the right housing services, as well as keeping their communications appropriate, relevant and inclusive.

A single view

If information about both the tenant and the property can be viewed together within one housing management system then you can use that to understand and segment the customer base better to make sure communication is focused and personal; for example, sending information on how to access care services to a young couple would be inappropriate and risks them disengaging.

The regulator wants housing providers to work with their tenants to collect the information they need and clearly explain how it will be used to improve their homes and services. This is why it's vital to have a data strategy, setting out where the data will be held, why it's being captured and who will have access to it.

Tenants want to know their data is held securely and that the information will be used to treat them fairly and equally. Protocols should be agreed as part of the overall data strategy to ensure the right people have access to the right data, at the right time. This will not only help to target resources to improve support for residents but will also avoid erroneous information inadvertently being used to disadvantage a tenant.

Strengthening engagement

From April next year, housing providers will need to demonstrate that they take tenants' views into account when they make key decisions about their services.

The new consumer regulations are all about communicating with customers in the right way so it's about recognising when and for whom digital works too.

Although most will be happy to use digital channels and welcome 24/7 access to services, there will always be some tenants who don't or who can't engage in that way and housing providers need to know when the focus should be on offering an alternative, such as a phone call or face-to-face visit.

Tenants' voices

But it's not just about talking to residents, it's also about giving them a voice and listening to it. Tenants need to see that what they say really does matter, is acted on and can make a difference.

Discussion forums, polls and surveys are all ways to actively seek out and collaborate with tenants so their input can be considered when shaping services.

We've co-designed and are implementing with two housing providers an app that goes beyond just enabling tenants to log repairs and manage their rent accounts. Through their housing app, residents can talk to one another or create different groups to share, say, tips on coping with rising heating bills.

The app can also dynamically signpost customers to support. For example, if their rent balance is rising and

they're regularly checking their statement, they can be directed to help and advice. And their housing provider can communicate with them via the app using polls and surveys to get a temperature check and find out what matters to tenants and act. This helps to create more of a partnership approach and sense of community.

Once residents have submitted their thoughts, it's critical to act on them. Capturing customer feedback is one thing, but tenants need to know they are being listened to and concerns or requests for support aren't ignored. Capturing and managing actions and tasks and ensuring they're addressed through to completion demonstrates to tenants their voice matters. It's more straightforward to manage the process within one platform because it provides a holistic picture and is easier to manage and keep secure.

Transparency & accountability

Under the Social Housing Regulation Act, there is a renewed emphasis on reporting and complaint handling. People need to know and understand how to get hold of key information to show their homes are being managed safely and efficiently. And what they can do about it if they aren't happy or feel they are being treated unfairly.

It's essential to have an effective complaints mechanism to record what action the housing provider has taken to handle the complaint promptly so customers will know they are being listened to. It will help housing providers show how customers are kept informed of what's being done to put things right, or how expectations are being managed if the complaint can't be resolved quickly.

To gauge how housing providers are meeting these requirements, they need to be recording tenants' satisfaction levels. Using tenant perception surveys and monitoring key performance measures, providers must track and report on satisfaction rates. It can be hard to manage this process and pull information together into one report if the data sits within disparate systems.

Keeping tenants at the heart

The new consumer regulations are proposing to strengthen the standards expected of housing providers. It must be made easier for tenants to report repairs and to be kept updated about progress, to access support and to find out how well their provider is delivering their housing services.

The reforms are the most significant to take place in social housing for decades and housing providers will need to continue to build their understanding of residents to make sure they are talking, listening and engaging in the most appropriate and relevant ways to get the best out of those relationships.

Kay Aston is head of product at NEC Housing.

NEC



Tenant satisfaction measures – Get more compliments & fewer complaints

Andrew Marshall, Business Development Manager, Housing Insight

A housing provider in Glasgow recently spent an entire morning fielding phone calls from residents who wanted to let them know about a burst water main in the neighbourhood. The first call was extremely helpful in bringing the problem to their attention, but all subsequent calls simply repeated what the housing team already knew. Nevertheless, three members of staff each spent around three hours taking calls instead of getting on with other work that day.

Experience orchestration

What does that have to do with tenant satisfaction scores? Well, we believe that effective two-way communications between housing providers and their residents is a good way to optimise their tenant satisfaction measures. Engaged residents are more likely to submit higher satisfaction scores and, by pursuing engagement on a regular rather than ad-hoc basis, housing providers are more likely to enjoy good relationships with their residents as well as catching any problems early on.

The water main example shows how important two-way communication can be in building strong landlord-resident relationships. While it's great that so many residents were sufficiently engaged to let their housing provider know about the problem, it's less good that housing officers effectively lost an entire morning of work because they couldn't communicate to all of their residents that they were aware of the problem. Had they been able to put out a message via a self-service platform, such as Housing Insight's PanConnect, everyone would have benefitted.

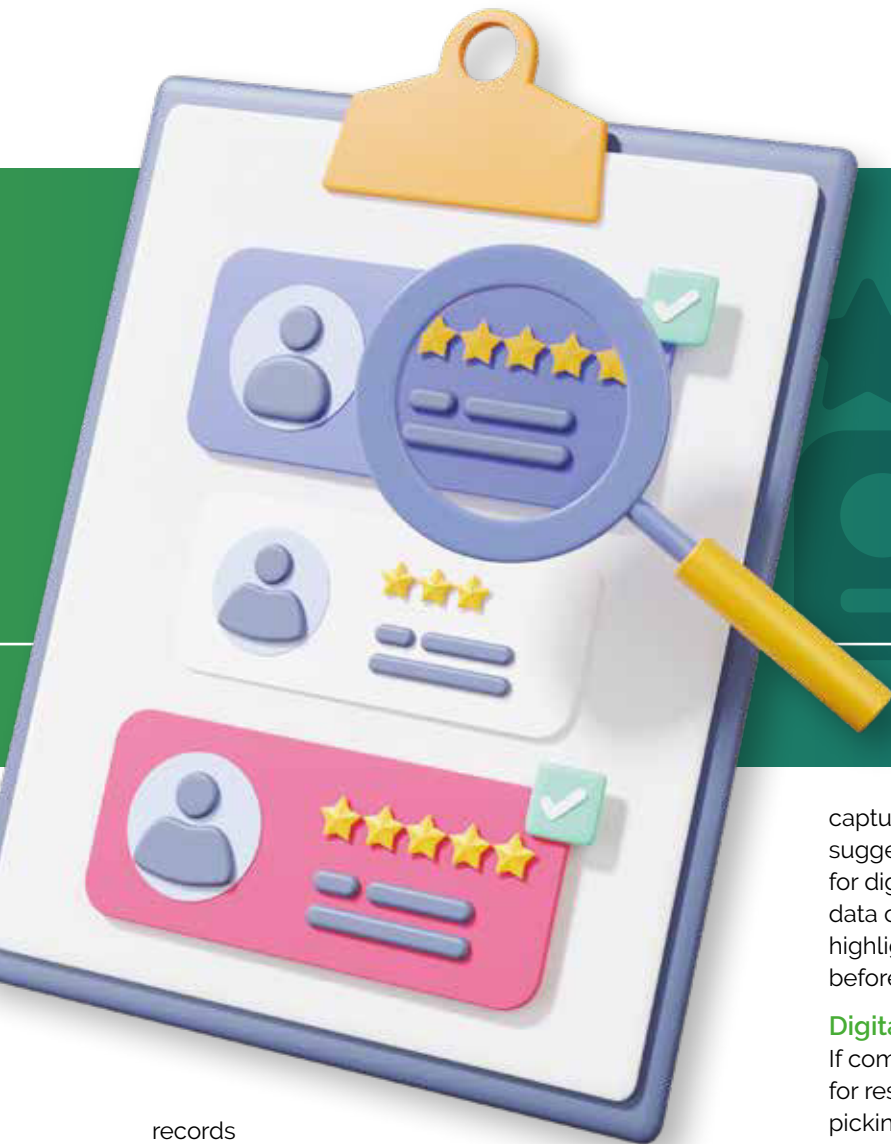
Reporting repairs

Let's consider the value of two-way communication in everyday household repairs. Tenant perception surveys are now required to quantify satisfaction with repairs (TP02), time taken to complete the most recent repair (TP03) and satisfaction that the home is well maintained (TP04). Housing providers with robust systems for

reporting and tracking repairs will undoubtedly see higher tenant satisfaction scores than those with a more ad-hoc 'email or phone us' approach.

Two-way communication offers an additional benefit in this context. Systems such as the self-service app in our PanConnect suite allow both the resident and the housing provider to track the progress of the repair. The resident can report the problem at any time of day or night and choose a convenient time for the maintenance officer to arrive, in turn making them less likely to miss the appointment. Both parties can monitor the app to see whether or not repairs are being completed in a timely manner. Given that 'right to repair' guidelines now give residents the right to request that a different company steps in to complete any outstanding repair work, while also claiming £100 compensation, an efficient tracking process is important for both parties.

Our app also ensures that the response to a repair request is appropriate. For example, a resident who requests help with a broken light bulb may instead be given advice on how to change the bulb themselves, but if someone has been tagged on the system as being disabled, a maintenance officer could be sent to change the bulb on their behalf. And if the maintenance officer notices that a particular household has very little food in the kitchen cupboards, they can use the PanConnect staff app to refer this to the housing team, who can then follow up with a food hamper or other support. Similarly, if the system



records that this is the fifth time a front-door repair has been requested in as many months, it's more likely that housing officers will spot the pattern and investigate any potential vulnerabilities.

A nuanced approach

As the above examples demonstrate, it's important to remember that every resident is an individual. So, when considering how best to communicate, we'd recommend thinking about how to make sure that residents only receive messages relevant to them. For example, our self-service app can send messages to just one individual or to a specific geographic area (such as two villages). It can be used to promote a local event relevant to a small community or a message can go out to remind all residents that the housing office will be closed for an extra day due to the King's Coronation.

As soon as residents log in to their app, relevant messages will appear. And in case of complaints, housing officers can see at a glance which messages have been communicated and to whom.

Frequency of surveys

Messaging should be relevant to help residents stay engaged, but frequency of communication is also important. It's a truism that people are more likely to tell others about poor customer service than they are to praise a good experience, so how can a housing provider

capture as much positive feedback as possible? We'd suggest building in regular online surveys or opportunities for digital feedback to help 'systematise' this type of data collection. In turn, this regular feedback will help to highlight any problem areas which can then be tackled before they develop further.

Digital exclusion

If communication is to be digital, then what's the incentive for residents to start communicating digitally rather than picking up the phone? How can those who are currently digitally excluded be helped to engage with technology that will benefit them? Promoting digital transformation as a means to help optimise tenant satisfaction scores will only work when there is a clear training plan for residents.

The actual solution will look different for each housing provider, but the need for planning is consistent across all. Those who can engage digitally, will. For those who find it harder, having an easy-to-use system is vital. And for those who won't engage, we would encourage housing providers to find out why. Is there a fear factor? Is a phone call with the housing officer the only conversation that the resident has from one week to the next?

Impact on housing providers

Housing providers with more than 1,000 homes have until mid-2024 to submit their tenant satisfaction data to the regulator for the first time. With the likelihood that these scores will play an increasingly important role in future funding decisions, we would encourage housing providers to prioritise and systematise two-way digital communications with their residents as a means of reducing complaints and increasing compliments.

Andrew Marshall is the business development manager at Housing Insight.





Picking up the pieces – The changing role of housing providers

Gavin Short, Customer Experience Manager,
United Welsh

The world of social housing is changing. The cost-of-living crisis, shortage of affordable housing, worsening mental health and overstretched public services have all contributed to a shift in the role of housing providers' customer service teams.

With one in five people in the UK in poverty, according to the Government's 2021/2022 'Households below average income' report, and a disconnect between how fast the cost of properties is going up versus wage increases, people are struggling to afford their own homes. The costs of the private rental sector have also risen and many landlords are pulling out of the rental market, leaving a significant shortage of affordable homes, with many turning to social housing as their best option.

The Commons Library Research Briefing on mental health statistics in England reported in March 2023 that depression has increased to 27 per cent among people who are renting, and that rates of depression were particularly high among those with lower incomes. These are the people who comprise our client base and we are trying to help every day.

Distressed callers

All these factors have resulted in a noticeable increase in the number of calls to our customer services team from customers who are very distressed and sometimes suicidal – this is something that until recently we've never had to deal with before. On average, we now might have three or four calls per month where one of our advisors needs to 'talk down' a customer before we can alert the emergency services.

It would be unthinkable for someone to ring their private landlord to discuss a mental health crisis, but in social

housing it is becoming more common for a customer service team to become like a fourth emergency service.

One of our call handlers recently spoke to a customer who explained he was in financial difficulty and struggling to make ends meet. He communicated feelings of hopelessness, extreme anxiety and not having anyone to turn to for help and support and said his only option was to 'make it all go away'. While on the call, he informed our call handler that he'd been saving up his medication and was going to take an overdose while on the phone. Thankfully, our customer advisor handled the call exceptionally well and the police and ambulance service responded in time to help him at his property.

Some police forces will respond in these situations but others won't, even with the same given criteria. One of the biggest challenges our team is facing is trying to help these desperate people in need who call our customer services line.

Addressing new challenges

These new challenges have led us to put certain measures in place to protect and support our staff when dealing with these difficult calls. These involve:

- Accurately recording the right information about a case;
- Working with the police to understand their thresholds and criteria so that questions can be planned in advance;
- Ensuring safeguarding referrals are prompted to specialists;



- Continuing to foster cross-organisational partnerships and shared good practice with other housing providers;
- Listening and supporting our team with a duty-of-care process.

Team duty of care

Understandably, the pandemic had a negative effect on the types of interactions that the customer services team dealt with, as they became more serious and emotional, with customers losing their jobs, being furloughed or isolated in their homes. We implemented duty-of-care measures for our staff to ensure their wellbeing is looked after when dealing with more complex and emotional cases. These include having a debrief immediately after a difficult call, mandatory breaks, a routine 'touch base' two or three days later and access to a well-being service officer.

We also introduced a social media management platform (from Orlo) that helps us respond faster to common enquiries and FAQs, taking some of the call volume away from our call handlers, who then have more time to deal

with more complex and/or sensitive enquiries. We've also found that many of our customers like communicating with us on social media because it lets them contact us out of work hours or on the go. It gives our customers flexibility in communicating with us and provides our team members with a break from dealing with the 'emotionally heavy' calls in the day by splitting their time between call-handling and answering live-chat enquiries in a digi-comms role.

Our customer services team has a huge role to play in helping people with their housing enquiries and coping with today's pressures. We are still learning how we can help fill the gaps left by other public services, but with the right procedures and technology, we can support our customers' lives better and the well-being of our team.

Gavin Short is the customer experience manager at United Welsh.



Cybersecurity – Why your CEO should be worried

Ian Lever, Director of Digital & Technology, Altair

I am sure we all remember when public-sector organisations like housing providers held the view that they would never be subject to a cybersecurity attack, with us all assuming that those risks were reserved for financial and private-sector organisations with billion-pound turnovers. After all, of what value was the information held by public-sector organisations; it wasn't as if you could resell it like you could with company secrets, designs or financial details.

Fast forward to the 21st century and notice how the rhetoric has changed; we now live in a world where cybersecurity attacks are prevalent, and no industry or sector is safe. A simple internet search provides headlines such as:

- A London-based housing provider, with 125,000 homes, was hit by a cyber-attack, with reports on the BBC website that it was "implausible" that a company of its size was still unable to answer its phones 10 weeks after the incident.
- A housing provider in East Anglia took several weeks to recover from a cyber-attack and warned that despite its "quick action", "some personal customer and staff data had been compromised".
- A NW-based housing group was a victim of a ransomware attack and a "small amount" of data was compromised, resulting in its systems being offline for several weeks.
- A housing provider in the Midlands was forced to shut down its systems after a "malicious attempt".
- Some social tenants in London were sent phishing emails by scammers posing as their housing provider's repairs contractor.
- A local council faced a "catastrophic" attack with a ransomware demand of several million pounds, with the cost of resolution reaching almost £10 million.

- A local authority in London was forced to spend over £12 million in a single year to help it recover from a devastating ransomware attack.

What has changed?

The short answer is – the world has changed!

Many organisations have their key services and systems provisioned in the cloud, including telephone and contact centres, email and calendar, document storage, housing management and finance.

Housing providers rely on these critical applications to conduct everyday business, communicate with customers and partners, and provide self-service digital transactions. But when was a review conducted regarding the security of these applications and how they are accessed?

Many organisations are good at protecting their applications and data when they are in on-premise data centres behind robust corporate firewalls, but have we adapted our security strategies and policies to reflect the demise of on-premise services and the consequent move to cloud services?

Simple precautions

Several simple precautions can be taken to significantly reduce the risk of misuse or malicious access, ranging from technical controls to user education. For instance,



one public-sector organisation put a cloud-based, self-service application live with tens of thousands of illegal access attempts; fortunately, none were successful, making it crucial that any vulnerabilities in cloud applications and data storage must be reviewed as part of any 'go live' acceptance testing and then regularly reviewed. Moving to the cloud doesn't mean housing providers can abdicate responsibility for data security.

The exposure to threats in cloud services is palpable, and the 'log4j' vulnerability in December 2021 meant that many organisations were without key solutions for several weeks; in many cases, these organisations had to resort to paper-based systems.

What happens if your cloud provider ceases trading? You should be aware that applications and data are in the cloud, which is not a mitigation for a business continuity plan (BCP) but rather something that needs a BCP built around it.

The pandemic accelerated the growth of home and hybrid working. Employees no longer sit in offices protected by the corporate firewall but access corporate systems from home using standard telco-provided routers. And if business devices are shared for family use, this poses yet more issues. Hybrid working is with us for the long term and we need to adapt our security systems to accommodate this with a programme of end-user education.

Artificial intelligence and the internet of things both also present a series of risks. IoT can include complex technologies such as Amazon Alexa, Google Home and Apple Siri, but also simple devices which monitor various aspects of the condition of a property.

These technologies provide massive benefits to housing providers and tenants, but it's vital to acknowledge that each device becomes an entry point onto your computer network and the threats presented must be mitigated.

First steps

Cyber-attacks on public-sector organisations are now much more common. Developed and operated by the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), 'Cyber Essentials' is considered to be the first step towards a more secure environment, protecting you from 80 per cent of basic cybersecurity breaches (a self-assessment process). 'Cyber Essentials Plus' is the highest level of certification and is a more rigorous test of your organisation's cybersecurity (an external audit is required).

We advise that every organisation handling customer data should have the Cyber Essentials accreditation as a minimum but aim to achieve the Cyber Essential Plus accreditation. Many insurers refuse cover against cyber-attacks if this accreditation hasn't been achieved.

Recognising the risks and impacts that cyber-attacks can have on housing providers, Altair has partnered with a leading cybersecurity business; between us, we can help you through these early first steps to get your accreditation faster.

The right approach

Once organisations have the basics in place, they need to establish their approach to safeguard their organisation and its customers. The simple three-step approach is protection, detection and response.

Research shows that public-sector organisations spend more money on detection and response than on protection, while many private-sector organisations spend more on protection than on detection and response combined. The reason for this appears to be that the payback on any spending for detection and response is more visible to the business than any spending on protection. And as a rough rule of thumb, housing providers should allocate around 15 per cent of their IT budget for IT security.



In a recent Altair-hosted roundtable, we asked several housing CEOs how confident they were about their IT security. Overwhelmingly, their responses were that their respective IT managers had assured them that they had the right tools to deal with a cyber-attack.

The problem is that the CEOs were asking their IT managers the wrong question. Asking instead, "What are our top-three outstanding security vulnerabilities?" would almost certainly result in very different replies.

What can you do?

There is growing evidence that in ransomware attacks, the perpetrators gain access to systems months in advance of their attack. In this way, they can corrupt backups, gaining assurance that any restore will simply re-introduce them back into the system.

We believe that cyber-attacks and hackers don't actually break into systems. They simply stroll through an open door that an employee has inadvertently left open; most attacks happen due to open-door vulnerabilities hence the need to invest primarily in protection and education.

Many organisations have introduced multi-factor authentication (MFA) before you can access your trusted systems. Banks and other financial institutions have

mandated this and it is a recommended and secure method of locking criminals out. We believe that MFA should be adopted universally across organisations managing personal and/or financial data – protection! Many more aspects of security need to be considered and invested in.

Finally, here's a quick checklist that you may find helpful:

- Do we have strong IT security policies that are publicised and understood by all employees?
- Do we have an identified data protection officer?
- Do we have an IT security training programme which is mandatory for all employees?
- Have we undertaken a recent penetration test and acted on the recommendations provided?
- Have we identified and documented all locations of personally identifiable information (PII) in our IT systems?
- Do we have a contract for regular external and independent cyber reviews?
- Do we have a cyber-security incident response retainer?

Ian Lever is the director of digital and technology at Altair.

NEC Housing & Switchee's damp & mould partnership

NEC Housing is partnering with Switchee to make it easier for housing providers to identify properties requiring attention and take proactive action, with a particular focus on damp and mould problems.



The collaboration will combine NEC's information management system with real-time data gathered from Switchee's IoT-based smart devices. The combined data can then be reviewed alongside NEC's wider dataset covering properties and residents, enabling potential problems to be spotted, analysed and acted on rapidly.

Trevor Hampton, director of housing solutions, NEC Software Solutions UK, said, "The potential of our partnership with Switchee is momentous. Being able to feed data directly into the housing management system enables housing providers to make earlier interventions, potentially transforming the lives of their tenants."



Switchee's devices can detect changes in air pressure, humidity and temperature via finely-tuned algorithms that interpret data and alert housing providers to properties at risk from issues such as damp, mould and fuel poverty. Data from the devices is fed back to a dashboard for analysis by the housing provider and Switchee's data teams.

Tom Robins, CEO, Switchee, said, "Giving housing providers the right data at the right time can improve residents' lives, and our collaboration with NEC Housing means we can do that more effectively.

"For example, if a property's heating is rarely or never turned on then you can quickly identify a resident who might be suffering from fuel poverty. Early interventions can then be made to access support and prevent longer-term debts and arrears."

Switchee nets three new wins

Citizen Housing, Haig Housing and Thirteen Group are deploying 2,000 Switchee smart-home devices between them. Thirteen's 1,000 devices are expected to be

followed by a second tranche for its entire stock of 35,000 properties, while Haig Housing's consignment of devices will immediately cover its full housing portfolio.

Data from Switchee's smart devices delivers real-time, actionable insights via its dashboard software, including mould risk, fuel poverty and heat loss.

Bridget Guilfoyle, director of assets, Citizen Housing, said, "Being able to monitor data and respond quickly means we can make well-informed decisions about how to support our customers and take preventative action at a customer's first point of contact."

Dan Gatenby, sustainability manager, Haig Housing, said, "We intend to start an ambitious deployment of smart monitors, installed and operated by Switchee. This will give us accurate, objective and real-time data about our residents' home environments for the first time."

Platform Housing's move to Azure with Simpson Associates

Platform Housing has selected Simpson Associates to design and deliver its new Microsoft Azure data platform.

Simpson Associates will be working with Platform Housing to deliver an Azure data platform and Power BI project, with the aim of consolidating data from multiple housing management systems and ensuring uninterrupted access to reporting and analytics for its day-to-day operations.

The first stage of the project comprises a series of data-discovery workshops, then moving on to the delivery of a data-landing zone, designed to provide a secure and scalable environment for hosting data and analytics workloads in Azure.

The whole project is expected to deliver greater business value through accelerated data-driven

innovation across data engineering, data science and analytics.

Rob Fletcher, director of data and applications, Platform Housing, said, "An important element of our supplier selection process was the capacity for skills and knowledge transfer. It was clear that Simpson Associates had the expertise and experience needed to deliver the data platform, but their approach to working in collaboration with our internal team to enable upskilling gave us confidence that they were the right partner."

Wirral Council opts for Simpson Associates' analytics & Microsoft Fabric

Simpson Associates has been chosen by Wirral Council to design and deliver a machine-learning and advanced data analytics solution based on Microsoft Fabric, an all-in-one suite of analytics software that spans data movement, data science, real-time analytics and business intelligence.

Simpson Associates will work with the council's in-house teams to develop a Microsoft Fabric data platform, with the early stages of the project covering the development of several proof-of-concepts using synthetic data and increasing the council's in-house skills.

The council's primary focus for the Simpson Associates and Fabric project is around enabling earlier interventions and forecasting future demand. The proofs-of concept are expected to include: envisaging whether performance risks can be used to predict when early interventions will be needed; machine learning will be used to identify the core drivers of negative outcomes and define potential mitigation strategies; and developing predictive models to forecast future service demands.



Midlothian Council installs 7,000 Aico IoT sensors

Midlothian Council has begun a rollout of over 7,000 Aico Ei1000G gateways across its housing portfolio to improve compliance, help with asset management and enhance residents' safety.

The council opted to install the Ei1000G gateway across its entire housing stock; Midlothian Council had already installed Aico's 3000 Series alarms in their properties which allowed for an easy expansion of the alarm system.

Because of Aico's Ei3000MRF modules installed in the council's existing alarms, the devices can integrate seamlessly with the gateway to enable remote data monitoring with insights accessible via the HomeLink portal through IoT technology.

Midlothian Council's building maintenance service (BMS) team has installed over 1,800 gateways in residents' homes, as well as environmental sensors. The gateway extracts information from the fire and carbon-monoxide alarms and sends it direct to the HomeLink portal.

Portal for real-time monitoring

Using various reporting tools, the HomeLink portal allows for the easy monitoring of fire and carbon-monoxide alarm system performance, allowing the BMS team to comply with legislation while creating safer homes. With easy access to this information, the team can forecast alarm replacement and make maintenance easier, with handy reporting tools helping them to stay compliant.

The discreet and secure Ei1020 environmental sensors can be placed throughout a property to monitor temperature and humidity. These sensors then connect to the gateway if there is a potential problem with humidity, excess cold or heat, or poor indoor air quality, meaning the BMS team has the insights to tackle these problems, maintain compliance and adopt preventative strategies for their housing stock.

Signature of mould

Aico's damp and mould insight indicates the risk of a room or property developing or already having visible mould. If a such room or property is identified, the 'super insight' known as the 'signature of mould' will include whether the cause of mould is environmental or structural.

Alan Ramage, planned maintenance manager, Midlothian Council, said, "What we've experienced since installing these units has provided us with a view into each property, gaining accurate information of the situation within a house which can help us decide on future plans of action.

"It enhances customer interaction regarding the way that they're heating and ventilating their homes and its implications. This live information gives us data based on several days and weeks rather than just the snapshot in time that we relied on in the past when our housing officers visited properties during their inspections."

Resident communications

Midlothian Council and Aico are planning to run a residents' engagement day in the near future. These encourage active dialogue between housing providers and their tenants, Aico's mobile units and the company's regional specification managers.

By using Aico's Connected Home solution, Midlothian Council has ensured that it remains compliant with current legislation as well as looking towards the future. The system has given them a platform that reduces the resources that they need to monitor their housing portfolio and provide the best service to residents.

The electricians carrying out the installation for Midlothian Council have also undertaken Aico's 'expert installer'



training on Aico's mobile training and demonstration unit at Midlothian House. With such a large-scale installation, it was vital that the BMS team ensured its electricians were trained on the correct installation of the gateway. Aico's expert installer training scheme is designed to ensure electricians have all the information they need to install domestic fire and carbon-monoxide alarm systems, as well as the integration of the gateway, environmental sensors and HomeLink portal.

HomeLink app for residents

The council plans to highlight the benefits of the HomeLink app for residents, which provides residents with helpful tips and advice on how to improve their living environment.

The HomeLink app is designed for residents to take the first step in their defence against housing problems. Residents will be warned when their homes' conditions are sub-optimal and covers risks such as mould, indoor air pollution and excess heat or cold. Tailored recommendations will be sent to residents to advise them on how to fix these issues or implement preventative maintenance to avoid problems in the first place. By using the HomeLink app, residents can take matters into their own hands and reduce the need for inspection visits.

Grand Union gets 12,500 smart homes with Aico

Grand Union Housing has introduced Aico's smart-home technologies across its portfolio of 12,500 properties to improve residents' safety, reduce damp and mould concerns, and ensure compliance with shifting regulations.

Aico's HomeLink Connected Home IoT sensors were chosen by the housing provider for the real-time monitoring of indoor environmental conditions such as humidity and temperature as well as fire and carbon-monoxide events.

Martyn Cheeseman, electrical delivery manager, Grand Union Housing, said, "Within days of using the HomeLink environmental sensors and gateway, we can already validate the effectiveness of the new ventilation systems we're installing to solve condensation, damp and mould problems.

"Real-time insights via the HomeLink portal make it very easy for us to make informed decisions on the future specifications of the fans we install to combat damp and humid living conditions."

Grand Union Housing wanted to deliver cost-effective, efficient and high-quality services to ensure its residents' safety and comfort, so it introduced Aico's advanced 3000 Series of smoke, heat and carbon-monoxide alarms. By implementing Aico's devices and associated software, the housing provider can quickly identify and implement building repairs and maintenance while also ensuring its properties remain compliant and fit for habitation.

Aico's HomeLink IoT sensors provide accurate automated data collection, eradicating human error, and generate actionable insights to strengthen residents' safety, health and wellbeing. Grand Union Housing has also developed a sustainability strategy focused on the thermal efficiency of its entire housing portfolio.

Grand Union Housing's data strategy from its use of HomeLink includes enhanced decision-making, across the business, making the shift from responsive to planned maintenance seamless. It also ensures data governance and security, an efficient data architecture including 'single version of the truth' data exchange insights and a real-time view of property compliance.





Manifest's speedy Universal Adapter integration for Clanmil Housing & CTS

Manifest Software Solutions is using its Universal Adapter to streamline invoicing processing for Clanmil Housing and its maintenance contractor Connect Transform Sustain (CTS) in Northern Ireland.

Prior to the implementation of Manifest's software, there was only limited integration between CTS and Clanmil's IT systems; CTS had Totalmobile's repair scheduling software and Clanmil used Civica Cx.

CTS invoices are submitted to Clanmil via email attachments, and this couldn't be changed. The challenge was therefore to convert the emails into electronic invoices. Further challenges included handling multiple VAT rates, such as the zero rate of VAT for disabled adaptations and the responsive repairs rate of 20 per cent, and each invoice had to be correctly addressed to the correct Clanmil Group company.

The entire integration needed to be completed within four months. To meet the tight timescale, Manifest built the bespoke integration using its Universal Adapter integration framework combined with its knowledge of housing repairs.

Alan Swift, managing director, Manifest Software Solutions, said, "We successfully delivered this project within the tight timescales because all of our technical implementation staff have extensive housing IT experience."

The project enabled job completions to be sent to Universal Adapter to process statements and to automatically produce invoices. Universal Adapter also updates Totalmobile with the latest status of the order which gives CTS the ability to view the status of orders such as 'awaiting authorisation' or 'rejection'.

On completion of each job in Totalmobile, Universal Adapter notifies Clanmil that the work is done (Totalmobile tells Universal Adapter that the job is complete which then updates the job status in Civica Cx), variation requests are sent to Clanmil, and variations are then claimed by the interfaces after the operative has finished the job.

Clanmil can now email a statement containing a unique reference and a list of all jobs which can be invoiced. Universal Adapter automatically produces a PDF invoice which is emailed to Clanmil.

Joel Caldwell, IT systems manager, CTS, said, "The integration has been successful, enabling faster processes and better data insights, helping to cut unnecessary costs and providing greater clarity and structure for us and Clanmil.

"Manifest is responsive and has worked rapidly to tight timeframes. Manifest is incredibly reasonable from a cost perspective and has been a pleasure to work with – nothing is outside its realms of possibility."

Lynsey Grant, programme and projects manager, Clanmil Housing, said, "The initial phase of the project automated the sending of repair orders to CTS and streamlined the invoicing process, saving time from an administrative perspective. Manifest has continued to work with us and CTS to make further improvements, including extending the integration into a more collaborative tool, providing automated triggers and alerts."



Combating mould – Linking 'feet on the ground' with IT

Deborah Matthews, Managing Director for MRI Living for Social Housing, MRI Software

Black mould is nothing new to housing providers and local authorities, but rises in the cost of living and high energy costs over the past year have seen its damage to homes and the accompanying health hazards skyrocket.

A UK government report, 'Damp and mould in social housing: initial findings', published earlier this year stated that 3-4 per cent of the four million social housing homes in the UK – as many as 160,000 – have at least some notable damp and mould, with 1-2 per cent facing a severe problem.

In addition, research commissioned by MRI Software in late 2022 revealed that nearly a quarter of social housing residents were in energy bills arrears. The fact that such a large proportion were struggling to adequately heat their homes during the winter exacerbated the problem.

Despite housing providers working hard to address the problem, there's no quick fix. And efforts to meet the challenge can be hampered by its sheer scale – some housing providers have over 100,000 properties that they're trying to simultaneously monitor and maintain, against a background of extensive repair and maintenance backlogs spread across ageing housing stock.

Early-warning signs

However, housing providers can create an 'early warning system' for black mould. By tapping into integrated repair and maintenance solutions and the expertise of the teams using them, housing providers can log, track and manage black mould outbreaks better before they get out of control, and even pre-empt them when serious damp problems are identified.

There are two main types of mould outbreak housing providers need to deal with. The first is an isolated occurrence resulting from residents' behaviour. For example, a resident could be regularly drying laundry in a poorly-ventilated room. The second is the more pervasive spread of mould due to a structural problem across multiple homes within an estate, such as poor built-in ventilation.

In the first instance, housing providers want to be able to respond fast to residents reporting mould. But, even

better, they want to be able to act before a mould problem is even reported, whether in a single home or across several similar or linked properties. Furthermore, being able to identify at-risk properties based on their construction type or repair history enables providers to set up a regime of pre-emptive inspections.

Vigilance and technology

When steps are taken to enable early warning, repairs and maintenance teams become, in effect, the eyes and ears of the organisation because they work in common areas within buildings and service individual properties. They are ideally placed to identify damp or mould outbreaks at first-hand and log them before they can grow into a severe problem that affects the residents.

Once the system is set up, each time there is a service or compliance task to be carried out, such as a boiler inspection or repair, these teams can capture information on mould and damp and act fast. For example, if they find mould that is only a couple of inches wide, they can treat it before it becomes a larger patch that's more complicated and expensive to deal with, or if they notice pre-mould damp, they can address the problem before mould even appears.

The key for repairs and maintenance teams is to be vigilant whenever they are at a property so they can be proactive. They also need the right tools and processes so that they take effective action when they do spot mould. In many cases, an integrated repairs and maintenance solution provides an effective first line of defence against damp and mould, equipping teams to create detailed follow-up actions, including identifying all at-risk properties, capturing data and setting up the next steps.

Wider structural outbreaks

Repairs and maintenance teams may also identify mould outbreaks across multiple homes in the same block (or same construction type), indicating that the problem

is fundamentally a result of how the homes were built. Having the right data-capture processes to track multiple instances of mould enables front-line staff to look beyond localised cases. This broader view is critical for dealing with widespread mould outbreaks.

Solving a widespread mould problem may involve steps such as installing extractor fans or insulation across a building or group of houses to address or prevent further mould problems. This type of solution becomes then a planned project rather than a one-off repair.

More than ever, technology can play a vital role in empowering onsite teams to proactively combat the spread of mould. In addition to leveraging the software used to maintain properties, many housing providers are increasingly deploying new solutions such as sensors and other IoT technology to automate aspects of damp and mould detection, further helping in the battle against this scourge.

Deborah Matthews is the managing director for MRI Living for Social Housing at MRI Software.

Full-fibre for data, regulations and housing quality

Kevin Monaghan, Chief Commercial Officer, Complete Technology Group



The ability to capture, analyse and make decisions based on ever-growing amounts of data can transform how housing providers manage their portfolios; that's why we've seen such a spike in demand for 'proptech' in recent years.

Take a common issue such as damp and mould; according to the charity Shelter, poor housing harms the health of 20 per cent of renters in England, with damp and mould being common triggers of sickness. Data is the key to enabling a proactive approach; harnessing the power of IoT devices allows real-time data to be collected on metrics such as temperature and humidity.

Overwhelmed by data

However, the proliferation of data, devices and proptech is becoming overwhelming. Housing providers recognise the value in making faster, data-based decisions, but managing multiple data-capture points and numerous products is creating a different challenge: how can they collect and aggregate building data in a meaningful and compliant way?

One of the greatest challenges for most housing providers is remaining compliant with ever-evolving regulations. To a greater or lesser extent, all of the regulations now place a greater onus on housing providers to know the status of their properties and the tenants within them. This means collecting more data, making sense of it, actioning appropriate changes



where problems arise, and maintaining accurate digital records of maintenance, repairs and interventions.

For housing providers to leverage the value of technology and data, remain compliant and keep people and buildings safe, they need to do two things. Firstly, they need to have the right digital infrastructure within their buildings to provide fast, reliable digital connectivity and, secondly, then leverage that infrastructure for both residents and asset management.

Full-fibre vs. 5G

Considering the substantial, real-time dataflows involved, this connectivity must come in the form of either full-fibre or 5G, but the actual structure of the buildings involved is a significant factor.

5G has been signalled as an important advance for IoT and data analytics, but 5G isn't a 'silver bullet'; coverage in many buildings can be patchy, particularly in the case of high-rise buildings or multi-dwelling units (MDUs).

Physical limitations

The challenges to good indoor mobile coverage are structural; it is difficult for wireless signals to penetrate large buildings. In commercial spaces, mobile operators will deploy distributed antenna systems (DAS) to ensure the signal is strong enough, but DAS is expensive and won't typically be found in a high-rise residential building.

For housing providers to embrace data connectivity, full-fibre is a more robust, reliable and cost-effective option. However, we know it also brings challenges, with regular, ad-hoc requests from telco providers, each wanting to install a full-fibre infrastructure in a housing provider's building(s).

This requires large-scale work on the structure of buildings and can compromise safety and standards, as well as causing disruption to residents. Plus, multiple full-fibre installations increase the carbon footprint of a building, creating additional environmental concerns.



Converging challenges

Here we see the convergence of two challenges: on the one hand, the need to have the right digital infrastructure to underpin a data-led, IoT-enabled technology strategy; and on the other hand, handling a high volume of requests from telcos to install that same digital infrastructure, which in turn triggers risks to a building, its structural integrity and safety, and the residents.

One answer is for a housing provider to install full-fibre into a building once, then allow multiple telcos to connect to that infrastructure. In doing so, they can mitigate many of the challenges regarding safety and quality at the same time as using full-fibre to support their original goals.

From our perspective, housing providers and telcos need to collaborate in order to succeed. No part of the UK, whether a region or a single MDU, should be left behind. Housing providers face enough challenges already so supporting them with world-class digital infrastructures is something telcos must strive to do.

Kevin Monaghan is the chief commercial officer of Complete Technology Group (CTG).


VerseOne launches DataSure

VerseOne has launched DataSure, an AI-driven system to help housing providers identify missing, dirty or incomplete data, and then automate the process of gathering accurate data.

DataSure probes housing providers' line-of-business applications, such as housing and asset management, workforce scheduling and finance systems, to spot gaps or anomalies in tenants' data. The subsequent

process of gathering and populating clean data is done via VerseOne's tenant portal through which tenants can update their data, as well as report problems and book repairs.

Alan Neilson, founder and executive chairman, VerseOne, said, "The main benefits of DataSure are speed and accuracy; not only does it automate data collection, it also uses AI and crowd-sourcing to enrich that data."



SELF-SERVICE APPS AND PORTALS – WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU?

Housing Technology interviewed customer experience, housing management and digital specialists from 8x8, Civica, Insite Energy, Made Tech, NEC Software Solutions, Plentific, Rapid IS and Tunstall Healthcare on how housing providers can develop self-service strategies in order to delight and empower tenants, improve contractors' productivity and streamline their own operational processes for greater efficiency.

What makes a good self-service app or portal?

Civica's product director, Helen Rogers, said, "A good self-service portal or app needs to be fast to deploy, simple to configure and easy to use. It also needs to be flexible to allow housing providers to add on extra services and must be closely linked to their back-office services."

NEC Software Solutions' director of housing, Trevor Hampton, said, "A good self-service app or portal is one that's been co-designed with customers or, if that's not possible, then at least there's been enough testing done to make sure it meets customers' needs and expectations."

"Sign-in should be simple and secure. People like sign-in credentials to include facial recognition or biometric options so they don't have to remember passwords;

offering these options can increase adoption and ongoing usage."

8x8's housing specialist, Sue Michaelwaite, said, "From a tenant's perspective, the app or portal should solve their problem fast. And from a housing provider's point of view, it should resolve and streamline problems without requiring a lot of technical or staff resources."

Made Tech's product manager, Chris Cottrell, said, "Self-service apps and portals need to be easy to find, highly accessible and inspire users' trust that their data will be secure. When using these services, tenants and contractors must be able to achieve their goals in as few steps as possible, encouraging them to self-serve as much as possible."

Insite Energy's head of digital solutions, Ellie Blacklock, said, "Clarity of presentation and usability is fundamental.

'Call to action' buttons and navigation pointers should be displayed clearly, and instructional phrasing should be consistent with what users are familiar with from well-known consumer self-service platforms."



"Portals and apps require a single version of the truth for each data source they use."

Sue Michaelwaite, Housing Specialist, 8x8

Integrating self-service with business applications

Rapid IS' rapid developer, Dagney Ellison, said, "The seamless integration of self-service apps and portals with housing providers' existing enterprise solutions, such as their housing or finance management systems, enables real-time synchronisation of data across platforms.

This prevents inconsistencies and allows tenants and contractors to view up-to-date information at all times. Behind the scenes, automated workflows can be set to trigger specific actions based on predefined events in order to enhance efficiency and responsiveness."

Made Tech's Cottrell said, "It's less about integration and more about creating an end-to-end journey that is shaped around users' needs and problems. Integration needs to have minimal friction for everyone involved and deliver just enough information in the right place and at the right time to enable users to make the best decisions. It should also require minimal upfront work and ongoing maintenance."

8x8's Michaelwaite said, "The massive benefit of self-service environments is that they can significantly reduce the amount of duplicated data-entry and manual processing. And to work properly, self-service portals and apps heavily rely on their successful integration with in-house data sources, such as CRM, service desk, scheduling and housing management systems.

"The critical elements are ensuring that, firstly the portal or app has a single source of truth for each data source it uses, and secondly that there is a two-way flow of information between the portal or app and the data source to keep it up-to-date."

App, portal or both?

Plentific's global head of resident experience, Stephen Hall, said, "In our experience, apps and portals work in tandem as part of a complete suite of real-time features dedicated to improving residents' experience and housing providers' operational efficiency.

"At a minimum, housing providers should create self-service portals that can be used on any smartphone, tablet, laptop or desktop PC; only having an app means that users can't use temporary devices or shared computers. If you need to only choose one, go for a web-based portal. Native mobile apps are 'nice to have' and can provide additional functionalities such as biometrics, push notifications and offline tools."

Civica's Rogers said, "Some business processes lend themselves well to the use of an app, such as high-volume, frequently-used and heavily-transactional services, but most other functions don't necessarily require an app."

Insite Energy's Blacklock said, "Before developing our pre-pay web portal, we took advice from our developer on the best route to take. They said it would be cheaper to build and run a portal because a native app typically requires you to build and maintain both the app as well as the website, adding to the overall work.

"We saw this happen during lockdown when Ocado turned off its native app and directed its customers to the Ocado website so the retailer only had one platform to maintain."

NEC's Hampton said, "Housing providers should ideally offer an app as well as a portal so they can appeal to as many residents as possible. Only offering an app could exclude tenants without a smartphone or who find it hard to use one.

"Conversely, only offering a portal could put off tenants who prefer the easier sign-in and convenience of an app. Both scenarios could reduce the chance of engagement, so in my view it's a no-brainer to offer both."

Ellison from Rapid IS said, "While the line between mobile apps and web-based portals is becoming increasingly blurred, each tends towards its own area of usefulness determined by the most appropriate location to display particular information.



"Tenant engagement means including them as a key part of your self-service development process."

Dagney Ellison, Rapid Developer, Rapid IS

"In practice, apps tend to find their place in instances of collecting significantly detailed information such as during estate inspections or when conducting fire-safety surveys. In contrast, portals are useful for looking up a lot of data and submitting simple transactions, such as reporting fly-tipping or paying rent. Portals also have the benefit of being accessed easily through a QR code for simple, discrete and targeted transactions."

Benefits to housing providers

Plentific's Hall said, "The most important reason is that residents demand it. In other sectors, users expect to be able to interact online for most things, and that should also be true for social housing."



"Good take-up boils down to ensuring your app & portal work well and meet customers' needs; if they don't, they won't be used."

Trevor Hampton Director of Housing Solutions,
NEC Software Solutions UK

"Due to the ease of using portals, we've found that over 90 per cent of repairs are now booked via online portals, reducing calls to the contact centre by well over 50 per cent and freeing up frontline staff. The uptake in self-service and reduction in calls produces a happier, more satisfied workforce who can focus on higher value tasks for residents."

8x8's Michaelwaite said, "The main benefits housing providers are looking for are the faster resolution of problems and enquiries, lower operational costs and, at a tangent, better staff experiences because they can be freed from handling routine issues. Through the integration of the data to provide self-service environments, repetitive tasks can be completed faster and with less human involvement, and reporting on KPIs is simplified."

Civica's Rogers said, "There are huge benefits of deploying self-service solutions to residents, including higher customer satisfaction, the provision of 24/7 services and having a single interface where customers can interact with their housing provider."

"The returns on investment in terms of lower support and staffing costs are also an advantage, particularly where workflow and case management software automate the processes between the self-service environment and housing providers' back-office functions."



"The biggest pitfall is thinking that you need to do everything."

Ellie Blacklock, Head of Digital Solutions,
Insite Energy

NEC's Hampton said, "The main benefit of apps and portals for housing providers is that they can take the pressure off their operational teams and contact centres

by allowing residents to self-serve. Because most residents will be able to do this, it frees up a lot of time and creates efficiencies for housing staff so they can have time to deal with more complicated cases. Another advantage is higher customer satisfaction because residents appreciate the flexibility an app or portal offers."

Tunstall Healthcare's UK managing director, Gavin Bashar, said, "Apps and portals provide new forms of connectivity, forming a 'glue' that enables greater service integration. The use of digital technologies and greater data sharing will help to form the foundation for more collaborative working practices. These solutions also come at a relatively low cost, meaning that residents can stay at home for longer with an increased quality of life."

More efficient contractors

Insite Energy's Blacklock said, "From our experience, the benefits to housing contractors encompass everything from having greater visibility of a site, such as being able to see all completed and scheduled engineers' jobs, to being able to manage outstanding tasks, such as requesting and cancelling jobs in real-time according to need and availability. These remove the need for the long email chains so often associated with these tasks, freeing up contractors' time to get on with the tasks in hand and prepare for whatever's on the horizon."



"Self-service apps and portals must be easy to find, highly accessible and inspire users' trust."

Chris Cottrell, Product Manager, Made Tech

Made Tech's Cottrell said, "Digital services are an opportunity to elicit the right information in the right way, which can be beneficial for housing contractors, such as asking for specific location data to help them locate a communal repair. Digital services can also connect housing providers, contractors and tenants better to improve communications about repairs and in doing so increase tenants' satisfaction and reduce unnecessary follow-up calls."

Ellison from Rapid IS said, "Contractors also benefit from self-service apps/portals. Electronic work orders reduce delays while comprehensive job information ensures accuracy. The ability to upload photos and update the status of jobs offers transparent documentation of progress, including evidence of completed jobs."

Satisfied & empowered tenants

Civica's Rogers said, "Not all tenants want to make phone calls, see their housing provider face-to-face or send

emails; they want to get answers or log problems as quickly as possible and at a time suited to them.

"Information regarding their property or account is available at any time, as well as the ability to book the service they need and track the status of any outstanding requests. Customers may also feel empowered by self-service, particularly because most services which we interact with in daily life are also available as a self-service option."

NEC's Hampton said, "For tenants, one of the main benefits of self-service environments is they can raise repairs, pay rent or inform about a change in circumstances at times to suit them. Self-service apps and portals also provide tenants with a record of historic contacts and actions for greater peace of mind and control.



"Native apps are 'nice to have' but if you need to only choose one, go for a web-based portal."

Stephen Hall, Global Head of Resident Experience, Plentific

access, how well does the system hold up, and is there a backup plan for redundancy? In addition to those technical and usability considerations, adoption should also be considered; what's being done to encourage the adoption and ongoing usage of the self-service environment?"

Made Tech's Cottrell said, "A pitfall to avoid is pursuing shiny trends such as IoT or AI without a clear user need. It's crucial to never forget about accessibility and responsiveness or unnecessarily locking services behind logins."

Plentific's Hall said, "Self-service mistakes can begin during procurement, especially if the project budget isn't shared, with potential suppliers bidding with the cheapest but not necessarily most suitable solution.

"Many housing providers have developed their own self-service solutions in-house. Compared with external solutions, these can result in higher costs, longer delivery times, less functionality and difficulties when mergers happen or staff leave. Once live with in-house projects, there can be a lack of ongoing project resources, with little or no marketing plan to customers and minimal resourcing for future enhancements."



"A good self-service portal or app needs to be fast to deploy, simple to configure and easy to use."

Helen Rogers, Product Director, Civica

What about digitally-excluded users?

Civica's Rogers said, "The provision of omni-channel solutions is important, but also allowing customers to engage without the need of a smartphone or laptop is just as important."

8x8's Michaelwaite said, "No-one should be left behind. Housing providers must accept that not everyone will want to use a portal or app. This means that while there should be regular encouragement towards using these services, there needs to be other forms of engagement, ranging from staffed phone lines to media engagement, posters, newsletters and whatever else a housing provider knows works for their local audiences."

Made Tech's Cottrell said, "By providing better designed digital services, more staff resources are available to help



"Apps and portals provide new forms of connectivity, forming a 'glue' that enables greater service integration."

Gavin Bashar, UK Managing Director, Tunstall Healthcare

"However, given the level of vulnerability and need in social housing, it's essential that a self-service app or portal isn't the only way for tenants to contact their housing provider; they should always have the option to speak to a housing officer if they need to."

Ellison from Rapid IS said, "Tenants gain numerous advantages from self-service. Convenience is elevated because they can easily submit maintenance requests, make rent payments and access essential documents online. Timely notifications and updates ensure they are always in the loop, and the ability to address problems promptly empowers them in their living environment."

Self-service pitfalls to avoid

Insite Energy's Blacklock said, "The biggest pitfall is thinking that you need to do everything. When we first scoped our customer portal, we wrote a long list of functionalities we'd like to have. However, after comparing our 'wants' with what was offered to customers of mainstream utility providers, we reset our expectations and focused on the 'must haves.' Any added extras were then used as USPs to demonstrate our commitment to improving customer experience."

8x8's Michaelwaite said, "There are multiple issues to consider. Is the app or portal in the correct languages for the end-users and does it cater for people with visual, audio or physical limitations? Equally, does it work across a wide range of devices and connections? Has the app or portal been stress-tested for peaks in demand and



vulnerable and digitally-excluded users via non-digital channels."

Plentific's Hall said, "People shouldn't be forced to use a particular channel. They should instead be given the choice, and if your digital offering is good enough, most users will naturally choose this for most transactions."

Self-service adoption and usage

Ellison from Rapid IS said, "Driving tenant engagement necessitates having them as a key part of the development process. This includes consulting with them regularly and making their ideas a big part of any agile prototypes."

"As well as offering training sessions and tutorials to familiarise users with the self-service features, incentives such as rewards can motivate regular use, and incorporating users' comments into improvements creates a positive feedback loop."

NEC's Hampton said, "A good way to encourage the adoption and regular use of self-service environments is to promote them on all customer communications; aside from the obvious channels, these should include bills, rent reminders, text messages or when a customer makes contact via another channel and not the app or portal."

"Demonstrating how customers are benefitting from using an app or portal can also help gain trust and encourage regular use. Highlight how repairs can be approved faster and customers can then track the status of the repair, or how tenants are finding it easier to keep on top of rental payments."

"Good take-up boils down to ensuring the app and portal work well and meet customers' needs. If they don't, they won't be used or even given a second chance."

Housing Technology would like to thank Sue Michaelwaite (8x8), Helen Rogers (Civica), Ellie Blacklock (Insite Energy), Chris Cottrell (Made Tech), Trevor Hampton (NEC Software Solutions), Stephen Hall (Plentific), Dagny Ellison (Rapid IS) and Gavin Bashar (Tunstall Healthcare) for their comments and editorial contributions to this article.

Data quality and self-service portals



Campbell Williams, CMO, VerseOne

Customer portals are evolving to support the fact that social housing is on a trajectory of rapid change, driven by greater regulatory scrutiny and a desire to deliver better social value. The new breed of portals automates data-quality improvements, thus improving services, reducing inefficiencies, liberating staff and supporting compliance.

Housing providers are expected to not only meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS) but also self-report non-compliance. To do so, they need accurate and up-to-date knowledge of the state of their housing portfolios. That means a two-way flow of current and trusted data is essential.

Along similar lines, they must facilitate better reporting of any breaches of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) that contribute to failure to be DHS compliant. That means tenants need to be able to report potential hazards, and housing providers must be able to action these reports in a timely and cost-effective manner.

Data is everything

Ultimately, knowledge of the condition of their homes and the quality of data at their fingertips are the predetermining factors for the standard of service that housing providers offer and their compliance with new legislation and governance principles.

Bi-directional portals sit at the heart of a designed-for-purpose digital transformation solution aimed at solving the data dilemma. The first step is to bring tenants online via a mobile-first portal registration and login process. The more tenants with whom the housing provider can engage digitally, the better. In effect, they are crowd-sourcing data from the people best equipped to provide it – the residents themselves.

The tenants use the portals to update personal information, correct inaccurate data, report problems and schedule site visits. This also helps the housing provider because their staff can arrive at the home at a time when they know the resident is around, eliminating wasted visits.

The portal allows the housing provider to gather clean data about their homes and tenants, with back-office integration writing that data to their back-office applications. This will trigger workflows, flags, escalations and more, now that these systems have the data they need to do their jobs, automatically.

Housing providers can also introduce business process automation (BPA), with a portal being the key initial enabler. They can remove people and the manual handling of data from their processes, and speed up processes such as repairs and audits while taking costs out of the organisation.

One example of portal development is the work being done at Westwood Homes by VerseOne, utilising 3C Consultants' Data Logic solution to identify areas where data is missing, incomplete or possibly inaccurate. The portal automates the process of onboarding the tenant digitally and updating the records. AI and crowd-sourcing are combined to enable rapid data collection and process automation drives faster resolutions.

Greater automation

Automation is crucial for housing providers at a time when they all face reductions in their net income due to inflation increasing their costs and rent caps suppressing revenues; BPA and tenant self-service means they can do more with less.

Digital tenant engagement means that the residents can





serve themselves, freeing up customer-service teams to provide care and support to the tenants who truly need it. That way housing providers can focus their staff on working with residents while the portal and systems combine to automate the routine tasks. This also helps with TSM ratings and leads to happier employees. Finally, tenants feel that they have a greater sense of ownership of their home and its condition. They can interact with their housing provider and stay up-to-date with progress, at any time, without the hassle of being stuck in a call-centre queue.

It's a true win-win-win scenario. The tenant wins because they have the means to control their own destiny. The housing provider wins because they can provide a higher standard of service. And the regulator and ombudsman win because compliance is evident for all to see.

Wider use of portals

Tenants are only the first potential users of a portal. Housing staff, particularly those working in the field, can benefit from the same remote and centralised access to data. They can complete jobs, flag problems and recommend preventative maintenance or hardware replacements, helping the housing provider stay ahead of DHS obligations.

In the future, intelligent devices (as part of an IoT approach) will also be 'users' of digital portals. Connected devices and smart sensors, along with AI and process automation, will transform the way problems are reported, diagnosed and fixed.

We believe that the social housing sector should unite around the target of having 80 per cent of tenants digitally-enabled by 2026.

The ultimate journey is long and transformational, but the first step is a portal that helps you to improve data quality, thus improving services and compliance, while allowing those who want to self-serve to do so, freeing housing staff to look after those who really need help.

Campbell Williams is the CMO at VerseOne.



Empowering the tenant experience

Zaheer Gilani, Account Director, Public Sector UK&I, Genesys

Tenant experiences and engagements are of paramount importance. Our previous article (in the May edition of *Housing Technology*) highlighted how AI integration can enhance and streamline these experiences, signposting a transformative era of innovation. This narrative extends towards how contact centre as a service (CCaaS) platforms further empower tenant experiences through state-of-the-art applications (apps) and self-service portals.

The digital wave

Apps and self-service portals have surfaced as significant tools for enhancing tenant experiences. These tools resonate with the evolving demands for seamless communication, personalised experiences and effortless service access.

Apps and portals bridge the communication gap between tenants and housing providers by providing an easily-accessible platform to access services, report issues and engage with their communities. They allow housing providers to gain invaluable real-time data and feedback for proactive and personalised tenant management. Integrating these digital mediums with CCaaS platforms further enriches the experience by offering interactive features such as chat support, notifications and community forums.

These advances align with digital transformation, facilitating enhanced tenant empowerment and inclusivity. By accommodating different language preferences and accessibility needs, they ensure a comprehensive and empathetic approach to communication. Apps and portals can provide features such as multi-language support and options for visually-impaired or hard-of-hearing tenants to submit and track requests.

CCaaS integration

Integrating apps and portals with CCaaS platforms elevates the potential for predictive, proactive, and personalised tenant experiences. CCaaS platforms can decipher and predict behaviours using advanced AI-driven analytics, enabling empathetic engagement across channels while fostering continuous innovation.

- **Predictive experiences:** Analysing tenant interactions allows CCaaS platforms to provide targeted, pre-emptive solutions based on predicted needs. For example, if a tenant frequently raises heating complaints in winter, the platform can proactively notify them of preventive steps before the heating season begins.
- **Proactive engagement:** Leveraging automation and real-time analytics, CCaaS platforms can proactively notify and help tenants with solutions, updates or support. If a tenant misses a rent payment, the system can automatically send a reminder to avoid late fees.
- **Personalised communication:** CCaaS platforms facilitate the design of tailored messages and support for each tenant, fostering an empathetic association. Mass broadcast messages can be replaced by personalised notifications about community events or maintenance based on tenant history and preferences.
- **Continuous learning and innovation:** These platforms evolve by adapting to new data and insights to align with dynamic tenant needs. If the system notices an increase in parking complaints, it can prompt the creation of new parking policies or procedures.

Empowering front-line & back-office agents

Apps and portals empower front-line and back-office agents by equipping them with comprehensive tenant insights for highly empathetic responses. Integrating with CCaaS platforms streamlines workflows, reduces manual tasks and enables agents to focus on value-adding activities. This facilitates significant cost savings, enhances productivity and paves the way for resource efficiency.

With a complete view of tenant history and interactions, agents can provide personalised service, pre-empt



issues and fast-track request resolutions. Intuitive CRM integration further simplifies accessing tenant information. Automated creation of help tickets from app/portal submissions allows agents to work seamlessly across channels.

Security, compliance & sustainability

CCaaS platforms ensure stringent adherence to regulations and standards, protecting tenant data privacy. This includes compliance with laws such as GDPR for data protection and accessibility standards such as WCAG 2.1.

This digital shift also reflects a commitment to sustainability by reducing paper and promoting electronic communication. CCaaS platforms come with reporting capabilities to measure reductions in paper usage. Housing providers can also highlight these sustainability benefits when marketing their digital transformation initiatives.

Real-world examples

Many housing providers worldwide have adopted these technologies, yielding tangible engagement, maintenance and resource allocation improvements. Apps and portals have enabled community building and fostered belonging among tenants.

- In the UK, housing providers such as Sanctuary, Clarion Housing and Peabody have implemented apps and portals integrated with CCaaS platforms. These have reduced call volumes, improved first-call resolution and increased customer satisfaction.
- One housing provider's self-service portal provides 24/7 access to reporting repairs, making payments, booking appointments and more. This resulted in 50 per cent of repair reports being logged through the portal, freeing up contact centre agents. Online submissions are automatically created as tickets in the housing provider's CRM system for assignment.

- In the US, housing providers such as NYCHA, Home Forward and Chicago Housing Authority have adopted portals and mobile apps to improve communication, maintenance management, and rent collections.
- One housing provider's self-service portal allows tenants to request repairs, download forms, access payment history and subscribe for email updates. Integrated with CRM, it provides a unified workspace for agents while enabling 24/7 tenant access.
- Another housing provider's online tenant portal features two-way messaging for directly contacting housing managers. Over 75 per cent of its tenants have signed up, reducing calls, and enabling rapid resolution of problems.

Conclusion

Modern apps, portals and CCaaS platforms transform social housing by enabling predictive, proactive and personalised experiences through continuous innovation. By embracing these tools, housing providers can build more connected, empathetic and resilient communities, significantly impacting tenants' lives.

The future of social housing lies in these digital innovations that align with evolving tenant needs and expectations. Our next exploration delves deeper into the digital transformation shaping the social housing landscape, such as the internet of things, virtual/augmented reality and more... stay tuned!

Zaheer Gilani is an account director for UK&I sales at Genesys.

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Seamless, slick & fast self-service



Florian Hoven, Co-Founder, KeyNest

Technology is reshaping how housing providers engage with their tenants and contractors. Self-service apps and portals have emerged as dynamic tools to streamline processes and enhance communications; they are no longer considered 'nice to have' but a necessity for well-functioning housing operations.

Exceptional self-service apps & portals

User-centric design is paramount when creating self-service solutions. A good app or portal should be intuitive, accessible and comprehensive, ensuring tenants and contractors can effortlessly navigate its features; there's no point in adding flashy features just for the sake of appearance.

As a creator of a customer-centred portal and app myself, I believe in a seamless user experience that empowers users with information and tools, all at their fingertips. In 2023, there's no room for waiting, slow-loading information or hiding key information. The expectations from housing providers and their residents are around transparency and speed.

Just as brands are expected to offer a range of digital services, residents also expect their housing providers to be on the digital platforms they already use. According to a 2021 report from Peabody, the pandemic led to a surge in residents' online activity, including 30 per cent of households adopting broadband for the first time and almost 90 per cent of housing providers seeing an increase in residents' demand for digital services.

Bridging the gap

Integration is the backbone of a successful self-service ecosystem. Through open APIs, endpoints, and webhooks, self-service apps and portals can seamlessly connect with housing providers' existing core business applications to

enhance data flows and automation. The key is to ensure easy implementation; the tools and apps are meant to help, not to add more work for already-stretched housing staff and IT teams.

The abundant benefits of self-service

Streamlining operations lies at the core of self-service solutions. By enabling tenants to report issues, pay rent and access vital documents, housing providers save time, money and resources.

Why? Because waiting, whether online or in a housing office, is becoming obsolete. Research by HubSpot reveals that 90 per cent of consumers now expect an immediate response to a customer service question (with 'immediate' defined as 'within 10 minutes').

One significant factor in using apps and self-service portals is the shift in approach, from reactive to proactive. Today, being a good housing provider entails not only listening and responding but also predicting potential problems and acting pre-emptively. This is where technology comes into play, by enabling such predictions. They can automatically remind residents (and staff) of specific maintenance actions required to upkeep the property's condition, or proactively send texts or emails to residents, soliciting their thoughts and feelings.

Revitalising contractor workflows

Contractors play a pivotal role in housing management. Self-service solutions offer a direct channel for them



to receive tasks, track progress and communicate transparently. This results in faster response times, improved collaboration and enhanced service delivery.

Seamless implementation necessitates addressing user onboarding challenges, privacy concerns and technical glitches. Consequently, good support mechanisms, along with 24/7 chat and phone assistance are essential.

Sustainable usage

Driving adoption and usage requires a focus on design and engagement. Incorporating 'gamification' elements and continuous enhancements encourages users to make self-service a habit, transforming how they interact with their housing services.

User-feedback loops also play a pivotal role in driving sustained usage. In 2022, we surveyed KeyNest clients about their approach to incorporating user feedback into their online tools. The results showed that housing providers who actively sought and acted on tenants' feedback experienced a 50 per cent higher retention rate

among users of their self-service apps and portals. This underlines the importance of listening to users' input and continuously refining the self-service functionalities based on their preferences and needs.

Innovative housing providers

Real-world success stories are truly inspiring. For example, our KeyNest Points service offers secure key management solutions, helping housing providers during voids and emergencies. One of the first organisations to adopt it was a London-based housing provider (and a G15 member) which used KeyNest Points to enable the seamless transfer of keys between contractors and staff. After a successful pilot, the service was rolled out nationwide and continues to function perfectly several years later.

Florian Hoven is the co-founder of KeyNest.



Aspire Housing's faster grants with Charis Shop

Aspire Housing has moved the administration of its grants' funding to the Charis Shop platform, thereby cutting its costs by 70 per cent and allocating grants to tenants faster.



Prior to its adoption of Charis Shop, the housing provider was spending over £10 per BACS transaction for every request for funds it received from one of its

8,500 residents and taking several days to authorise payments to residents. After working with Charis, Aspire Housing has cut its costs to just £3.50 per transaction and reduced payment authorisations to around 15 minutes.

Christina Thwaite, senior money advisor, Aspire Housing, said, "We're now seeing more and more residents who are only just managing. These are households that we

probably wouldn't have needed to work with before because they have jobs and, until now, have been able to manage their budgets on a week-by-week basis. Unfortunately, due to the economic situation, even those who are working are reaching out for additional support.

"To illustrate how busy we are with funding requests, our annual target for grant applications is £6,000 but we've processed £14,000 of applications within just six months. Without the Charis Shop to run through the applications, we would be in a much more stressful situation and our tenants would be suffering as a result.

"We can also track the funds that have been distributed so we have reassurance that as many vouchers as possible are going to the right people and that we're not doubling up by giving vouchers out to the same people."

Plentific launches housing compliance software

Plentific has announced the launch of its compliance management software specifically for social housing providers, giving them a single platform on which to track all areas of their regulatory compliance.

Plentific's compliance management software enables housing providers to manage and minimise their risks through a real-time dashboard. From inspections, renewals and reporting to invoices and payments, housing providers can track and evidence their compliance. The solution provides real-time data on all aspects of building safety by converging vast amounts of data in one place.

Compliance is monitored using a percentage score to identify areas requiring action; housing providers can then log urgent compliance breaches, prioritised by risk, and mobilise pre-vetted, certified contractors.

Cem Savas, founder and CEO, Plentific, said, "Our compliance management solution puts safety first and ensures our customers have a complete overview of their inspections, required repairs and renewals.

"Having all of the data in one place is crucial to streamlining the process, and we're excited to see how housing providers use our software to automate complex processes and improve their regulatory compliance."



Havebury Housing has just introduced a geographic information system from Cadcorp to work in concert with its existing core business applications.

The housing provider wanted a browser-based GIS capable of sharing maps and business data across its existing technology platforms and able to cater to end-users with differing roles and varying degrees of GIS and mapping knowledge. Furthermore, integration with Havebury Housing's existing spatial database, IT infrastructure, and compliance with rigorous cybersecurity processes was essential.

Havebury Housing has licenced Cadcorp SIS WebMap, an off-the-shelf, customisable application for sharing map-based information and interrogating spatial data with communities of end-users. The contract includes Cadcorp SIS Desktop for the creation and preparation of geographic information, ongoing technical support and staff training.

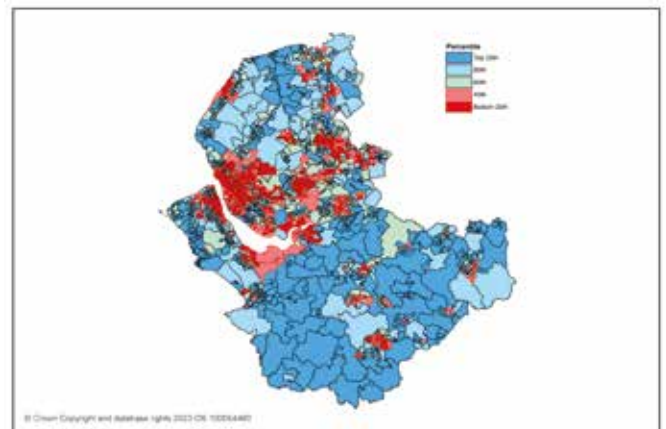
Phillip Walton, GIS specialist, Havebury Housing, said, "The process and technicalities of introducing GIS to an organisation can be complicated, but choosing Cadcorp wasn't a difficult decision."

Cadcorp's cloud mapping at Torus

Torus Group is using Cadcorp's cloud-based GIS and web-mapping tools to gain a better understanding of its neighbourhoods, housing patches and customer demographics as well as predictive analytics around its future stock improvements and property developments.

To avoid the need for expensive internal IT infrastructure, Torus chose cloud-based versions of Cadcorp SIS Desktop and Cadcorp SIS WebMap. The housing provider then created a GIS SharePoint page where its staff can access, for example, thematic maps showing the locations of embedded assets, growth potential and crime hotspots.

For the Torus property development team, these maps were combined into an overall 'index of vitality', with



Cadcorp Local Knowledge providing extra context by presenting breakdowns of age groups, bedrooms, tenure, crime rates, unemployment, and scores on how properties are performing.

David Gerwitz, asset planning and data manager, Torus, said, "GIS is fundamental to our operations. Delivering clear and accurate location intelligence is essential to our daily decision-making processes."

The housing provider's future GIS-powered projects include the understanding of 'place' before and during investment, the propensity for properties and tenants to fall into risk, customer segmentation, and the profiling of new neighbourhood patches.



IT operating models in housing

Tony Feeney, Director, The Integration Executive

The way that an organisation organises its technology function is commonly called an 'IT operating model'. It should be there to support an organisation's goals and be aligned to what the organisation wants from technology and data.

Gartner identifies five primary IT operating model patterns. Asset (as in IT stuff, not housing), process, service, value, invention and innovation. Each model moves away from the old concept of an internal, cost-managed IT department (c.f. 'The IT Crowd') toward an externally-focused, value-generating contributor to the business.

In the housing sector, we've often talked about the need to leverage technology more and how data should become an important asset. It's difficult to imagine that any housing provider today would say, "IT is just for the back office and to manage reporting and the accounts." At the same time, the way that organisations try to implement technology and new applications to support required processes takes many shapes, often avoiding the IT department or centring the need around a functional process, such as assets, rents or repairs, feeling that an IT department-centred approach will be slow, too complicated or 'not within their scope'.

IT department vs. technology services

This is where IT operating models are useful. IT is not about the IT department; IT is about how an organisation wants to use and leverage technology within, across and/or externally to its business as a whole. In some cases, as with Great Places Housing, it dropped the 'IT department' title some time ago in favour of 'technology services'.

Dan Hearn, Great Places Housing's director of technology services, said, "It's a lot easier to operate the full scope of the technology and data agenda in Great Places without the baggage of the 'IT' label. People are recognising the difference between IT as a capability for our services rather than as a departmental thing."

Great Places Housing has assessed its IT operating model across seven primary areas:

- IT leadership;
- Infrastructure and operations;
- Software applications;

- Programme and project management;
- Data and business intelligence;
- Digital (including IoT);
- Security.

It takes the view that while the strategy and portfolio is developed under the coordinating role of the technology services director, the responsibilities, roles and ways of working are distributed across the organisation. This enables Great Places Housing to take a holistic view of its priorities and opportunities for technology and remain connected across its business functions.

Barry Shields, head of digital and data, Great Places, said, "Breaking down the seven areas of our IT scope needed a structure and model where we could look at our major processes, skills and desired technology capabilities by area. We've worked with The Integration Executive for a few years and used its model for examining how we operated and where we wanted to be."

Evaluation and suitability

Each of the seven areas and the processes within them looks at nine points of evaluation and suitability. These are: financials; decision rights; performance; talent; sourcing and alliances; organisation structure; ways of working; where work takes place; and tooling.

Each will either be a good fit to the desired operating model pattern or are a poor or disconnected fit to the business operating model and the way that the IT should be organised to optimally align.

Furthermore, within the scope of each process to be delivered, the responsibilities and decisions that contribute toward the alignment must be considered, so a RACI (responsible, accountable, consulted and influenced by) framework is built to clarify the decision rights and responsibilities for each process. In reality, this may need to be done twice; first to identify the current operating model's clarity of process operation and ownership, and

then secondly to determine which changes need to be made to which aspects of the process (by operating model component) to achieve an optimum alignment.

Opening the black box

From an executive management perspective, the clarity this provides is transformational. From a 'black box' of things that IT does, each process and required investment and improvement area is suddenly brought into stark relief. It also highlights that IT is no longer the domain of the technical function but that each element of the organisation plays its part in how information and technology operate to the benefit of the stakeholders.

Alison Dean, executive director, Great Places, said, "We've operated a business transformation agenda for several years. Continuous improvement is a way of life for us, but we needed something to really understand where we were on our IT journey and what we needed to do over time to incrementally underpin our service ambitions and compliance responsibilities.

"Taking IT as an operating model on its own and understanding, process by process, how it touches and informs the organisation was an enlightening process in itself. We've also benefitted hugely from taking a structured approach because we can see at a glance which areas we still need to work on and how everything fits together to support our services."

The role of the IT operating model in the development of housing provision and management is crucial. Let's look at the specific benefits this work delivers, focusing on how it enhances asset maintenance and tenant services:

- 1. Integrated asset management:** A robust IT operating model underpins and facilitates the integration of digital tools and data-driven processes to effectively manage your housing assets. By centralising property data, maintenance histories and inspection schedules, developing tools to enhance timely and proactive maintenance becomes more sustainable, in turn reducing the risk of costly repairs and enhancing the overall quality of housing.
- 2. Predictive maintenance:** An intelligent IT operating model enables the implementation of predictive maintenance strategies. By leveraging connected IoT sensors and data analytics, you can anticipate maintenance needs before issues become critical. This approach helps minimise disruption to tenants, prolongs assets' lifespan and optimises field-service resource allocation.
- 3. Tenant engagement & satisfaction:** Appropriate digital developments sequenced with improvements in the IT operating model have the ability to really empower tenants with self-service portals, mobile apps and communication platforms. Tenants can easily report maintenance problems, provide and access relevant information and communicate across schemes, neighbourhoods and housing management. Continuous and connected services which deliver transparency and convenience will improve tenant satisfaction, confidence and strengthen landlord-tenant relationships.
- 4. Data-driven decision-making:** A well-structured IT operating model supports the ability to consistently capture and analyse trusted data related to asset performance, maintenance trends and tenant preferences. This data-driven approach means that strategic decisions across functions (such as budget allocation, resource planning and prioritising maintenance tasks) become faster and remain connected to the source data more often, reducing the risk of manual errors.
- 5. Compliance & regulatory adherence:** A strong and holistically-developed IT operating model aids in maintaining accurate records and adhering to regulatory requirements. Digitising documentation, certifications, transactions and inspections ensures compliance with housing regulations and minimises the risks associated with non-compliance.
- 6. Resource optimisation:** With continual pressure on funding, efficient resource allocation is paramount. Connecting the IT operating model enables improvements in optimised workforce deployment, materials procurement and maintenance scheduling at the same time leading to cost savings while maintaining service quality.
- 7. Risk mitigation:** By connecting secure data storage, access controls, data stewardship and data privacy measures through the IT operating model, it safeguards sensitive tenant information. This reduces the risk of data breaches and ensures compliance with data protection regulations.
- 8. Innovation & sustainability:** A forward-looking IT operating model facilitates the integration of innovative technologies such as smart-home devices and energy-efficient systems. This enhances housing sustainability, reduces utility costs and supports environmentally-conscious housing management.
- 9. Real-time insights:** Connecting the IT operating model, digital thinking and infrastructures enable real-time monitoring of assets and tenant interactions. This facilitates immediacy of response to emergencies such as safety concerns or urgent maintenance requests, improving independence cover for vulnerable tenants.
- 10. Long-term planning:** By aligning your IT operating model with your organisation's strategic goals, you create a foundation for long-term planning. This allows faster adaptation to changing tenant needs, regulatory changes and technological advancements, minimising the need for complicated change management across teams and processes and disruption to services.

By leveraging digital tools, data analytics and streamlined processes, housing providers can enhance asset quality, tenant satisfaction and operational efficiency, all while navigating the challenges of reduced funding and increased regulatory oversight.

Tony Feeney is a director of The Integration Executive.

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY ... Bigger than ever

2024



The Housing Technology 2024 conference returns to the East Midlands Conference Centre (Nottingham) on Tuesday 05 March with informal afternoon workshops (new for 2024) and a pre-conference evening reception. Our 15th annual conference then continues on Wednesday 06 and Thursday 07 March with expert panel discussions, business/IT presentations, a technology showcase in the exhibition hall and, of course, wall-to-wall networking throughout the event with your peers.

Registration for Housing Technology 2024 has just opened at conference.housing-technology.com

New for 2024 – ‘Any answers?’ workshops

As a new addition to the conference for 2024, we're holding a series of topic-specific 'Any answers?' workshops during the afternoon of Tuesday 05 March; access to and participation in the workshops is included with tickets to the main conference.

Each workshop will be moderated (no presentations) by a subject-matter expert from a different housing provider, giving conference attendees unrivalled off-the-record opportunities to discuss what they're doing, share their experiences and pick others' brains for answers to their problems within the different workshop topics (outline details below).

- **Are they being served?** – Faster repairs, better communications & happier tenants (mod. Housing Solutions);
- **Foster the people** – Cultural evolution alongside business/IT changes (mod. Choice Housing);
- **Rethinking your enterprise** – Digital transformation, rapid deployment & resilience (mod. Newark & Sherwood District Council);
- **Show me the data** – Building the strongest foundations with data management (mod. tbc);
- **Stay protected** – Cyber security in housing (mod. Sovini Group);
- **The rise of the machines** – Best practice & ethics for AI, machine learning & IoT (mod. tbc).

Summary of speakers

As ever, we've arranged a brilliant range of speakers and presentations for the two days of the Housing Technology conference, alongside two expert panel discussions to open each day of the event (details to be announced nearer the time). More presentations will be revealed later in 2023; the first tranche of confirmed presentations are below:

- **Choice Housing:** Cultural change alongside digital evolution... Failure leads to success at Choice Housing;
- **Coastline & Smartline:** Using IoT sensors to support independent living (incl. ethics, security and integration);
- **Freebridge Community Housing:** Calling for innovation... An honest appraisal around digital acceleration, data security & quality and technology adoption;
- **Home Group:** From ship-building & coal-mining to nail bars & Turkish hairdressers – A look at jobs, wealth, society, how technology impacts it and what that means for social housing;
- **Housing Solutions:** A new model for inspections – QR codes, real-time resident ratings and community involvement;
- **Lincolnshire Housing Partnership:** The halo effect – Transforming corporate support services;
- **London Borough of Barking & Dagenham:** Making the case for change – Standing still isn't an option, yet change brings risks (incl. moving from HMS to ERP);
- **Newark & Sherwood District Council:** The transformation triad – A reflection on the factors that can derail your transformation plans (incl. people, process development & system limitations);

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- **North Star Housing Group:** Best practice & ethics for AI, machine learning & IoT – The results of new research from North Star Housing, Waterstons, York University & Warwick University;
- **Orbit Group:** Creating and implementing a data management strategy;
- **Platform Housing Group:** What is AI best practice for housing?;
- **Riverside Group:** Building the strongest foundations with data management;
- **Selwood Housing:** Dynamics 365, data management and analytics;
- **Sovereign Housing:** Sovereign's data observability and governance journey – A case study around Selwood Housing's use of Microsoft Purview;
- **Sovini Group:** Cyber security for housing – Build your walls high, bolt your gates, dig your moat... then work out how that big wooden horse still got in...;
- **Wrekin Housing Group:** Waking up after a cyber attack – What we've learned.

Technology, business & services showcase

Housing Technology 2024 will feature a technology, business and services showcase in the exhibition hall at the centre of the East Midlands Conference Centre. At the time of going to press, the sponsors and exhibitors are confirmed (more to be added over the coming months) as Aico, Civica, Crimson, FLS – Fast Lean Smart, Housing Insight, Lioness Recruitment, Manifest Software Solutions, Mobysoft, Pay360, Social Telecoms and Voicescape.

Registration for Housing Technology 2024 has just opened at conference.housing-technology.com

FourNet launches shared AI service for housing

FourNet has launched a shared AI service to make it more affordable for individual housing providers to buy, install and use housing-specific AI tools.

The AI-powered service spans arrears, vulnerable customers, assisted living, property applications, voids, reporting and repairs.

Alan Linter, group consulting director, FourNet, said, "We know how AI can help housing providers and the problems it can solve. However, it can be expensive for individual organisations which is why we've launched our new AI-powered shared service."

FourNet's AI service enables housing providers to access AI-powered solutions shared across multiple housing

providers, reducing implementation costs, delivery times and ongoing management.

FourNet is building a housing-specific, multi-lingual large language model (LLM) which will be able to cope with regional dialects as well as different spoken languages, meaning all forms of conversation can be analysed for sentiment, offering real-time assistance for agents and tenants.

Linter said, "Advanced machine-learning models that can analyse sentiment in multiple languages and dialects are vital. The ability to analyse sentiment in real-time, integrated with chatbots, voice assistants and recommendation engines providing support to both agents and customers are what's required."

DQ for smarter decisions



Umesh Parekh, Head of Public Sector, Red Olive

Sort and structure your data, and patterns soon emerge. How you then choose to interpret those patterns can be the difference between profit and loss, taking or missing an opportunity or, on a more human scale, giving a vulnerable family somewhere safe and warm to live.

As the volume and variety of data generated by housing providers grows, the cost of dealing with poor quality data is becoming far more visible. Almost every housing provider operates core asset, housing and financial management systems and processes, but how good is the data and are there processes to ensure consistency in the collection, formatting and ongoing management of the data?

Seven pillars of data quality

We recommend starting with a data audit and employing the seven pillars of data quality (DQ) to help a wide range of housing providers cleanse and restructure their data, collaborating with them to look at timeliness, uniqueness, validity, accuracy, completeness, consistency and reasonability as part of a nimble and reliable data quality improvement process.

We encourage them to review the dimensions of data quality management, comprising control, assurance, improvement and planning, and breaking those down into more granular tasks and dashboards for the team so everyone understands what the data shows.

Housing providers aren't just about buildings, they are also about looking after their communities and being able to spot data patterns can help them to look out for their residents, including ESG reporting, complaints, 'golden threads' and disrepairs. However, it's important to look at the bigger picture. Rather than looking at the challenge facing one part of the business, share your business information and challenges so the organisation has a better understanding of its data-centred operations.

Joining disparate threads

For instance, in the area of complaints, we can aggregate data across all customer interactions and we might be able to see that over half relate to repairs. If we also review data on rents received, arrears, voids and outstanding repairs, we can link these common elements together within discrete datasets. This can quickly pay dividends, not just for the current situation but also for future improvement plans and maintenance programmes.

An example would be if a customer suffered a broken boiler, they would call their housing provider who would book an inspection, send an engineer and perform whatever repairs were needed. In the past, if that customer wasn't happy with the result, they could raise a complaint and might refuse to pay their rent, at which point they would fall into arrears. Now, housing providers can quickly see the cause and effect of a non-payment and, in the longer term, reduce the likelihood of needing to initiate legal proceedings or settle disrepair claims.



'What if' scenarios

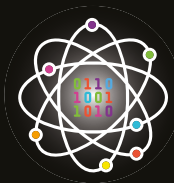
Using machine learning to automate processes and run hypothesis-based 'what if' scenarios produces incredibly useful results.

For example, by using IoT device-derived data and machine learning, when winter comes it's possible to see the properties where the internal temperature is still low and mapping this with weather data can give us yet more detail. Using tenancy information about how many people are living in a house and how old the boiler is tells us more. By combining these information streams, housing providers can identify their most at-risk customers and see if more support is needed to maintain a healthy living environment.

Managing, simplifying and streamlining the collection, aggregation and analysis of their data helps housing providers operate more efficiently, cost-effectively and responsively, but without a bedrock of clean, reliable and consistent data in the first place, they will still be making decisions with their eyes closed.

Umesh Parekh is head of public sector at Red Olive.

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DATA MATTERS 2023

Housing Technology's second successful Data Matters one-day event took place at The British Museum in central London earlier this month. Kindly sponsored by 3C Consultants, Aareon, IntoZetta, Social Telecoms and Switchee, Data Matters attracted a packed audience of over 120 data specialists from housing providers, with the event completely sold out beforehand.

With 11 presentations during the one-day agenda alongside peer-to-peer networking and lunch among the sponsors' technology showcases, Data Matters 2023 was certainly busy and gave the guests a lot to think about. To summarise the speakers' views on data management in housing:

- **Data must be considered a strategic asset, on a par with tenants and properties;**
- **'Dirty data' contaminates everything it touches;**
- **Data management needs to be ingrained into housing providers' organisational fabric, from top to bottom;**
- **'Dark data' (spreadsheets, 'shadow IT', etc) can best be described as a 'known unknown' and must be brought into the light.**

Riverside Housing (Chris Nove) opened the event with a talk on the importance of creating a data-ownership culture, followed by 3C Consultants (Nick Hawkins) and Your Homes Newcastle (Rachel Taylor) on the need to focus on data quality and turning off the 'dirty data tap', then Southern Housing (Amramanvari Singh) covered how it's concentrating on building data confidence to provide better customer service.

Aareon (Alek Legosteva) explained how housing providers need to use data to accelerate their tenant-facing

activities, with Stonewater (Paul Blaydes) then illustrating its use of Azure for highly-advanced, dynamic data management, followed by a joint talk by Social Telecoms (Rob Mottram) and 8x8 (Jordan Marshall) on data management in omni-channel environments.

After an excellent lunch, Halton Housing (Paul Croston) emphasised the need for transparent data practices and strong data governance, followed by a panel discussion from IntoZetta, with Sanctuary Housing (Priyanka Kakkar) and Platform Housing (Rob Fletcher), on its 'Data in Housing 2023' survey, then Sovini Group (Steve Monks) covered data literacy and 'real world' reporting.

The final sessions saw Switchee (Ben Morris) demonstrate how IoT-based data can unlock surprising insights, and Trident Housing & Tuntum Housing (Nick Murphy) closed the event with first-hand advice about how to get board-level support for data management programmes.

We are already making preliminary plans for Data Matters 2024 next September (date and location tbc); please email datamatters@housing-technology.com if you'd like to be alerted to speaking opportunities and sponsorship options.







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