

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2024

'Ask the CIO' discussions

Interactive workshops

Best-practice presentations

Peer-to-peer networking

Social events

HOUSING
TECHNOLOGY
2024 CONFERENCE AND
EXECUTIVE FORUM



2024



HOUSING MANAGEMENT

Asset management, standards, RPA, AI-powered compliance and data quality

FINANCE MANAGEMENT

Payments, arrears prevention and mergers & acquisitions

CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT

UC automation, self-service, tenant complaints, TSMs and apps & bots

REPAIRS & MOBILE WORKING

Application integration, damp & mould, real-time scheduling and planned maintenance

INFRASTRUCTURE

Generative AI, Microsoft-first strategies, digital adoption and ISP access



HOUSING TECHNOLOGY AWARDS 2024

FINALISTS ANNOUNCED

SEE PAGE 39

Variety, imagination, rigour & determination

We've just completed the first round of judging the inaugural Housing Technology Awards 2024 (details on page 39) before the entries are reviewed by our external panel of judges.

Without going into the details of individual entries, the awards' entries are a true showcase of both the breadth and depth of technology-based innovation and development in our sector.

The awards' categories span customer/tenant services, cyber-security, digital transformation, innovation and IT team of the year (categories chosen from a poll of the Housing Technology community), with so many entries from housing providers of all sizes, some with 100+ staff in their IT department, others with just a handful.

And despite all housing providers having broadly identical objectives around their tenants, properties and assets, finance, staff and external agencies (incl. regulators), the award entries clearly demonstrate the variety, imagination, rigour and determination that goes into using technology to achieve (and in many instances, exceed) those objectives. We'll therefore be showcasing the award winners' stories over the next few editions of Housing Technology in order to share their expertise.

Counting down to Housing Technology 2024

As you have hopefully noticed, our annual Housing Technology conference is just around the corner and as ever, it's set to be a brilliant melting pot of thought-provoking presentations (many based, coincidentally, on the award entries), technology demonstrations and, of course, informal mingling with masses of your peers.

For 2024, as well as the familiar packed schedule of activities during the conference, we've introduced two exciting new elements – 'Any Answers?' workshops and 'Ask the CIO' discussions.

Taking place during the afternoon of the day before the main conference begins, the 'Any Answers?' workshops will be moderated by senior IT/business experts from different housing providers, covering digital transformation, data management, culture change, AI, cyber security and tenant services. Please note – the workshops aren't presentations, so please come along and expect to engage in the discussions!

Our two 'Ask the CIO' discussions will give the audience the opportunity to quiz leading housing CIOs on customer-facing operations, communications and services (day one) and better internal business operations (day two), so please come along with your questions for the CIOs.

Full details of the conference are available at conference.housing-technology.com – we look forward to seeing you there.

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EDITOR
Alastair Tweedie
alastair@housing-technology.com
✉ @housingtech

PUBLISHER
George Grant
george.grant@housing-technology.com
in housing-technology

DESIGN & PRODUCTION
Jo Euston-Moore
design@housing-technology.com

EDITORIAL AND NEWS
news@housing-technology.com

DIGITAL MANAGER
Sebastian Emerson
sebastian.emerson@housing-technology.com

RECRUITMENT
recruitment@housing-technology.com
jobs.housing-technology.com
✉ @housingtech

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Subscribe at: housing-technology.com or
email: subs@housing-technology.com

THE INTELLIGENT BUSINESS COMPANY LTD
Hoppingwood Farm
Robin Hood Way
London, SW20 0AB, UK
Head Office: 0208 336 2293

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Forthcoming events



HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2024

05-07 MARCH 2024

East Midlands Conference Centre, Nottingham

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2024 CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

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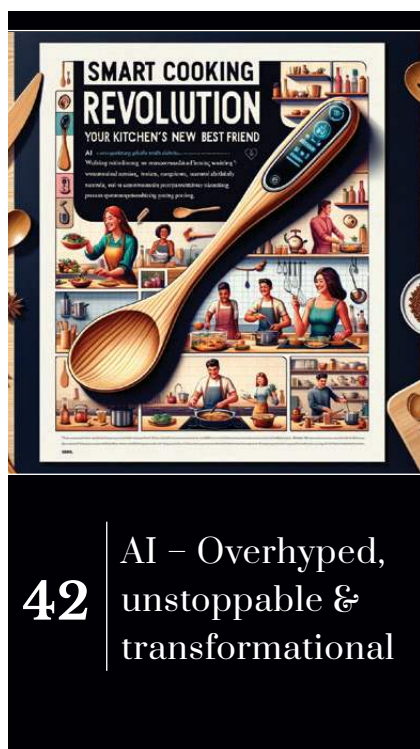


HOUSING TECHNOLOGY AWARDS 2024

Winners will be announced live at Housing Technology 2024 on **Wednesday 06 March**

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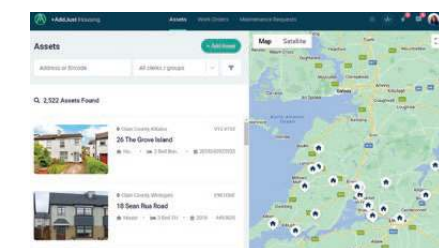


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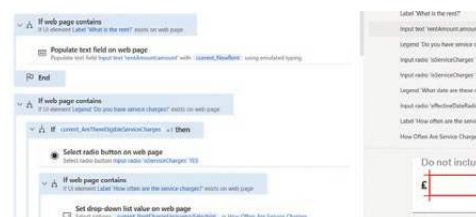
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TECHNOLOGY SHOWCASE

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

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NEW FOR HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2024

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EXECUTIVE FORUM

WITH OVER 36 PRESENTATIONS THROUGHOUT THE CONFERENCE, WE HAVE ALSO INTRODUCED SOME **NEW ADDITIONS** TO THE AGENDA THIS YEAR.

ANY ANSWERS? WORKSHOPS TUESDAY 05 MARCH

Our topic-specific workshop sessions will be moderated by senior IT leaders from different housing providers. The six topics include; **digital transformation**, **data management**, **culture change**, **IoT**, **cyber security** and **tenant satisfaction**. Share experiences and pick each other's brains on the challenges you and your team are facing.



HOUSING TECHNOLOGY AWARDS 2024 WEDNESDAY 06 MARCH



Celebrating our sector's most **innovative** and **ambitious individuals, teams** and **organisations** in our first **Housing Technology Awards 2024**, short-listed entries have been judged by an external panel of senior housing professionals with our award winners will be **announced live at Housing Technology 2024 on 06 March**.

ASK THE CIO PANEL DISCUSSIONS

WEDNESDAY 06 MARCH

CUSTOMER-FACING OPERATIONS, COMMS & SERVICES

In the first of two 'Ask the CIO' **interactive discussions**, this is your chance to put your questions to our panellists about all and any aspects of housing providers' **customer-facing activities** and their **IT-based enablement**.

THURSDAY 07 MARCH

BETTER INTERNAL BUSINESS OPERATIONS

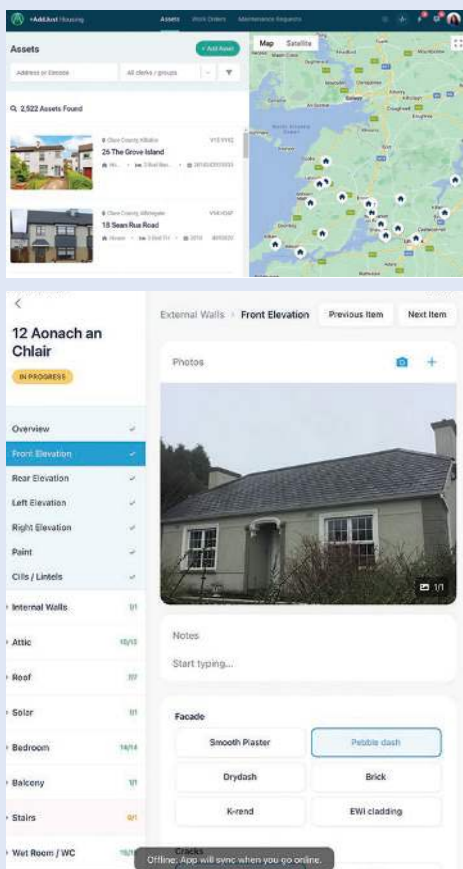
In our second 'Ask the CIO' **interactive discussion**, the focus turns to how, where and why technology leaders can use **IT to achieve better, faster and more compliant internal business operations**.



TO SEE OUR FULL AGENDA, PLEASE VISIT [CONFERENCE.HOUSING-TECHNOLOGY.COM](https://conference.housing-technology.com)

+AddJust wins £4m national asset management contract

+AddJust, a specialist housing and asset management software company based in the West of Ireland, has won a 10-year contract worth around £4 million from the Republic of Ireland's Department of Housing via its Local Government Management Agency.



Spanning over 150,000 properties, +AddJust is providing a fully-digital asset management system for housing to all of the 31 local authorities across the Republic of Ireland. Six months after the award of the contract, four local authorities are already live on +AddJust's system.

Padraig Neylon, CEO, +AddJust, said, "Our solution

Suzanne McDermott, project leader, Local Government Management Agency, said, "One of our objectives is to create a national approach to housing maintenance, rental standards, stock-condition surveys, document management, procurement, payments and contract delivery."



The +AddJust team (L-R): Michael Kelly (CTO), Roisin Murphy (Head of Client Services & Compliance), Joe Neylon (Director of Business Development) and Padraig Neylon (CEO)

Joe Neylon, head of business development, +AddJust, said, "This is a very significant project, not only for us as a company but also in a national context. Delivery of this asset management system is a key part of the Irish government's 'Housing for All' programme and the onus is on us and the LGMA to ensure that there is a high level of adoption early on. So far, it has been excellently received by users."

As well as the core asset management software, the project scope also included the delivery of a mobile app for stock-condition surveys.

Neylon said, "Our stock-condition app is available on all mobile devices and is a far cry from the spreadsheets and manual documents traditionally used for surveys. Our target is that every surveyor will have completed their survey of an average house within 50 minutes. With our app, there's no need to go back to the office to edit or modify the data; our system syncs the data to the digital asset register automatically and works brilliantly offline."

has been developed in conjunction with a variety of stakeholders and has been built entirely from the ground up. We've focused on a way to ensure that the data on each component within a property is kept 'live' throughout every interaction with that component, whether via a survey, maintenance call, retrofit project or ad-hoc property visit."

The massive scale of the project being undertaken by LGMA & +AddJust will result in 150,000 properties sharing a central cloud-based asset management platform operated by each of the 31 local authorities. Furthermore, +AddJust's system will give the Department of Housing instant reporting on the housing performance of all local authorities across the Republic of Ireland.



Platform Housing – Automating UC verifications with RPA

Steven Waite, Cloud Developer, Platform Housing Group

During 2023, we had an opportunity to remove a large portion of manual processing and keying from our universal credit (UC) application process. In order to streamline our claim response process, we built a solution using Microsoft Power Automate RPA to imitate the behaviours of our users. The resulting benefits included improved application response rates, greater accuracy and cost savings by significantly reducing the time needed to process our massive flow of UC claims.

RPA (robotic process automation) has proven to be a valuable solution for streamlining repetitive manual tasks. One particularly compelling use-case is managing the influx of UC applications that housing providers receive each year.

These applications demand multiple rounds of manual review, logging and response via the DWP's web form, making it a tedious and time-consuming process. A single application might only take a few minutes but when you're dealing with approximately 4,500 applications at the end of the financial year, it translates to weeks of work.

Imitating human actions

To address this challenge, we embarked on a large RPA project with two primary goals: to alleviate the workloads of our rent and income teams; and to avoid creating additional tasks for them. Since an API wasn't available, our only option was to create a process that could imitate human actions, including logging in, managing a to-do list of claims, associating them with our customers, and completing each claim.

This endeavour presented an exciting challenge due to the variability of customers' data. Without a unique identifier such as a 'tenancy reference' on the UC portal, we relied on matching customer names, which often differed significantly. By refining our matching criteria,

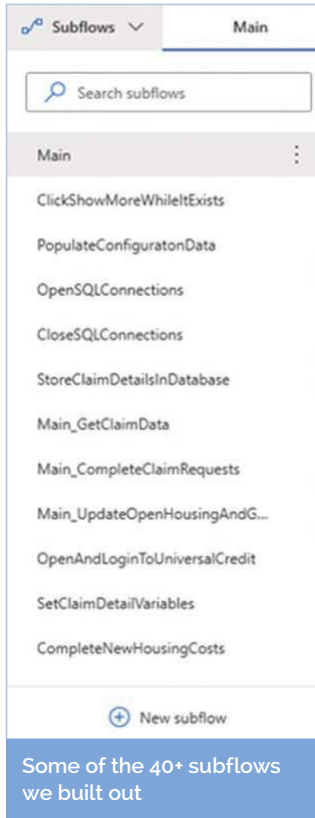


including postcode and date of birth, we achieved an 80 per cent match-rate for claims, an impressive result considering the inconsistent data provided by UC applicants.

Variable customer-provided data

For example, a customer named John Smith in OpenHousing might have provided their name as J. Smith, John M. Smith, Jon Smith or even spelled their name wrong with a slip of the keyboard (the latter case being very difficult to write an algorithm to account for).

We were immensely lucky to speak to another housing provider who had successfully tackled a similar challenge; our heartfelt thanks to Phil Nichols and Hassan Bahrani from Thirteen Group who gave us their time to look at their solution, giving us inspiration for our own.



Data extraction, pairing & matching

Our approach involved using web-scraping tools in Microsoft Power Automate Desktop to login and extract the data from the to-do list which we articulated into claim records in SQL. Using the details from the claim such as the customer-provided name and postcode, we paired the claim with the customer data from OpenHousing and calculated the fields we would need for any given UC claim (such as rent, service charges, number of bedrooms, number of tenants and so on).

We now had a complete 'claim detail' record for each claim we were able to match on. At this point,

we relied heavily on our income and rent team (thanks to Ayshea Wall, Siama Aslam and Natasha Morris) to check that this data was correct and matched the calculations that they themselves would output; this was crucial to our aims because we wanted to replicate the day-to-day user process.

To navigate the UC portal, we developed a solution in Power Automate Desktop using the URLs from the matched claims and the field data we stored in SQL to populate the pages of forms using Microsoft's tools to identify form fields relying on attributes such as ID and label.

40-second claim processing...

After two weeks of adjustments and data validation we conducted micro-testing, where our developers worked closely with our income team to process claims one-by-one. Once we had accommodated for elements such as web pages timing out, cases that had been closed by another team member or situations where the customer wasn't fully set up in our housing system, we escalated our testing. Rapid testing began, where the 'robot' autonomously processed claims every 40 seconds and we would only confirm the final numbers before submission.

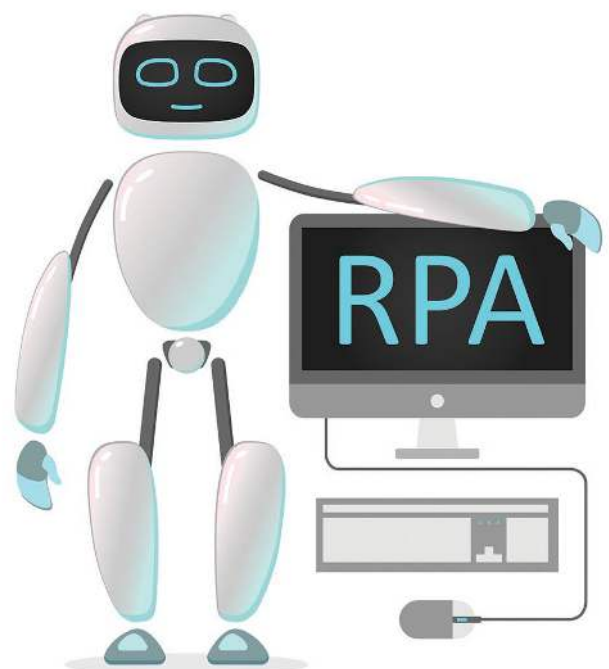
This was a huge confidence boost not only for our development team but also for our income team whom we were building it for, because we experienced an error rate of around only one per cent among the initial cases we tested, all of which were easily resolved, usually due to a missed service-charge mapping.

Removing human frailty

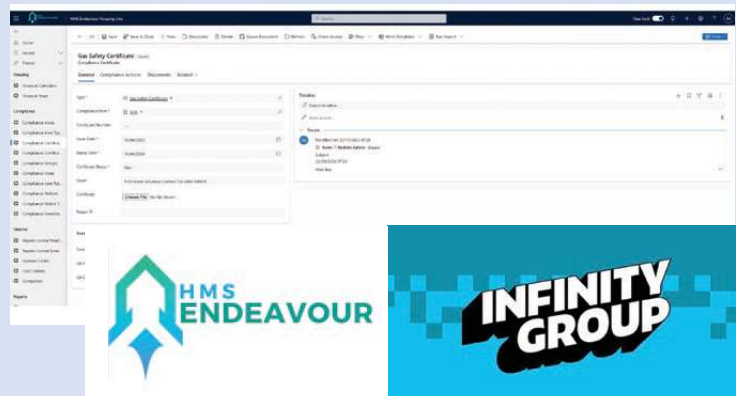
The benefits of this RPA solution include the ability to operate outside normal business hours and it doesn't get tired or bored! It eliminates the risk of human error over extended periods and it articulates its session results via email. Additionally, it's also capable of updating OpenHousing via APIs to log the session in customers' diary notes. Decoupling the data from the 'robot' enables us to analyse data and generate reports, and make changes without affecting multiple steps in Microsoft Power Automate, giving us a high level of agility.

At the moment, our solution runs three times a week to manage backlogs while we refine it further in preparation for the expected surge in claims at the end of Q1 2024. So far, we've successfully processed nearly 4,500 claims entirely through RPA, saving our internal teams over 400 hours and counting.

Steven Waite is a cloud developer at Platform Housing Group. This article was written in conjunction with Rob Fletcher (director of data and applications) and Peter Thomas (cloud developer) from Platform Housing Group.



North Star streamlines gas compliance with AI



North Star Housing has deployed a streamlined AI-powered compliance module for its gas safety certifications, developed in collaboration with RedkiteCRM (now part of Infinity Group) and based on Microsoft's AI platform. The deployment is part of the housing provider's wider move from Capita OpenHousing to Microsoft Dynamics as its main housing management system.

North Star Housing has grappled in the past with time-consuming compliance processes, especially around gas safety certifications. The manual verification of gas safety certifications through a third-party assurance system and subsequent data entry into its housing management system was a labour-intensive task, involving checks on completion dates, contractor details and compliance cycle resets.

The revamped compliance workflow simplifies the process. North Star Housing's contractors now submit certifications through a third-party assurance system,

with documents dropping into SharePoint. Microsoft's AI then takes over, conducting key checks such as date validation, signature verification and property reference confirmation.

Certificates passing all checks are automatically updated in Microsoft Dynamics, with the service cycle reset. Successfully-certified documents seamlessly integrate into the housing provider's monthly payment run, triggering automatic payments. Certificates failing assurance checks are redirected to a 'failed' folder for manual review by a compliance coordinator.

MRI Software adopts OSCRE data standard

MRI Software has announced that its MRI Agora platform will now use a standardised data model from OSCRE International to make application integration and data sharing easier, faster and less expensive for its customers and partners.

Patrick Ghilani, CEO, MRI Software, said, "MRI and OSCRE have a shared aim of improving data quality and consistency and easing the burden of integration – that's what our open and connected philosophy is all about."

OSCRE said that its Industry Data Model can improve data consistency, transparency and accuracy and provide a solid base for data governance. The OSCRE IDM enables software developers and data management teams to 'develop once' and achieve significant savings for future integrations.

Lisa Stanley, CEO, OSCRE International, said, "MRI Software's decision to incorporate OSCRE's data standards into an open software platform like MRI Agora demonstrates the value it sees in a standards-based data strategy."

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Craig Manley,
Head of IT & Digital Transformation

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Are you getting the most from your software?

Ian Rutherford, Implementations Team Leader, Aareon

Social housing can be a difficult and cumbersome sector in which to make technological change. If you're a local authority, you're bound by lengthy and strict processes for obtaining software. And once you've chosen your technology, it's easy to find that you've focused so much time and effort just on obtaining and implementing a solution that what happens next has been pushed to the wayside.

Inefficiencies can creep in, and you may not be seeing the same value from your solutions as you did on day one. Housing management systems can deliver numerous organisational benefits, but simply having one is just one part of the journey to finding success with it. It's time to take a step back, consider your processes, and ask some basic questions about your organisation, users and customers.

Is your solution empowering users?

This entails understanding how your users interact with your software on a daily basis. Don't just guess or assume how things would go in a perfect world; if you want to really know if your technology is delivering, talk to the housing staff that use it and ask them how they feel about how it affects them in their jobs.

Process mapping can be useful here to identify any inefficiencies; some could be caused by non-software-related factors but others could be the result of the technology inadvertently making processes more complicated than they need to be. It pays to dig deep and learn what's really going on behind the scenes.

By talking to your users, you'll be able to draw up a list of pain points to address. You can then decide which are caused by policies or processes, what the priorities should be, and the best courses of action to tackle them.

Is it providing value for your customers?

It's all very well if your technology is making it easier for your teams to do their jobs. But is this creating value for your tenants? There is little value in improving your internal processes if your tenants still receive sub-standard services.

The internal workings of your organisation are invisible to them; all tenants can see is whether their messages are responded to promptly, how long it takes for problems to be fixed, and if their homes are comfortable and safe. If your solutions are not adding value in this way, then this can be a signal for improvement or change.

Does it still fit your vision?

Business imperatives change, so the original goals you had when you first started the procurement process may no longer make sense. Consider what you were trying to achieve with your solution, and compare this to where your business is now. Does it still fit? It could be a simple case of adjusting how you use the solution or it could require additional software that integrates with your main system to unlock new capabilities or strengthen areas of weakness.

How are you managing training?

Training is your staff's first introduction to new technology so it's worth paying close attention to. There are a number of things to consider when designing effective training



programmes that will resonate with your staff. What's their knowledge level? Training that's too basic or too advanced can reduce interest in learning, so start with short surveys or quizzes to gauge their levels of knowledge. Everyone learns differently — visuals can work better for some, others prefer text so a multi-disciplinary approach is useful. Consider who your audience is and how they use the systems; one size doesn't fit all, and teaching them about features they won't use can decrease engagement as well as waste time.

And remember, whether it's training a new team member or upskilling existing staff, the learning process never stops. Have a structure in place to check your systems are being used as efficiently as possible. Take feedback and learn from it. Housing Management Systems can be vast and powerful but they can also take time to unlock and understand fully. So don't be afraid to get things wrong the first time; as long as you learn from the process, failures can still be valuable lessons.

Enlist expert help

There's only so much you can do in-house. If you truly want a holistic view of how your organisation uses technology, consider enlisting expert consultants. Bring in professionals to review and audit how your technology, processes and policies are working to deliver value for your organisation and its customers. They can make recommendations on what you can do to get more from your resources, work more efficiently and deliver better outcomes for your customers.

Audits can be an initial one-off discovery piece, but we recommend them as a recurring part of maintaining healthy operations and service. After all, you have your car serviced regularly to prevent problems, so why wouldn't you do the same for your software investments?

Our professional services team offers various levels of 'efficiency audits' and has helped customers maximise the value they get from their software.

Ian Rutherford is the implementations team leader at Aareon UK.

Aareon





Artificial intelligence – The dawn of a new era in UK social housing

George Grant, CEO, Broadcaster & Publisher, Housing Technology

Artificial intelligence (AI), once a subject of speculation, has become a transformative force in various industries, including the UK's social housing sector. As the CEO of Housing Technology, I've been fascinated by the development of AI, from a theoretical concept to a mainstream tool. In this editorial, I want to explore the impact AI is likely to have on our sector, and in particular the relationship between AI and data analytics.

Transforming social housing

The role of AI in reshaping the social housing sector is immense. At Housing Technology, our observations and reports have underscored a variety of AI applications that are revolutionising our sector:

1. **Smart asset management** – AI's role in asset management is groundbreaking. Predictive technologies are enabling proactive maintenance, effectively predicting problems such as damp and mould.
2. **Revolutionising field-service management** – Advanced AI-powered scheduling and predictive analysis tools are improving service delivery and tenant satisfaction by reducing maintenance backlogs and speeding repair times.
3. **Enhancing cyber security and data protection** – AI tools have become vital in securing IT estates against cyber threats and preventing data losses.
4. **Elevating customer service** – AI software is being used to provide faster and more accurate responses to tenant inquiries, streamlining customer service and enhancing the tenant experience.
5. **Predictive analytics for sustainable housing** – AI's predictive analytics are playing a key role in the development of sustainable housing.

AI and data analytics

Understanding the intrinsic link between AI and data analytics is crucial in grasping AI's full potential. Data analytics provide the necessary insights for AI algorithms to learn and make informed predictions, enhancing decision-making and operational efficiency.

Tangible benefits of AI

AI's power lies in its ability to enable:

- **Operational efficiencies and cost reductions** – AI-driven solutions for predicting and preventing problems translates into resource conservation and operational cost reductions.

- **Greater tenant satisfaction** – AI-enhanced tenant interactions through chatbots and other tools improve engagement and satisfaction.
- **Empowered housing staff** – AI complements human effort, helping housing staff with decision-making and workload management, thereby enhancing service delivery.

The future vision

As we look ahead, the potential of AI spans intelligent asset management, predictive maintenance, customer service enhancements and sustainable development, with AI augmenting (not replacing) human capabilities.

The journey of AI in our sector is just beginning; as a sector, embracing AI, understanding its implications and leveraging it for sector-wide improvements is crucial.

At Housing Technology, we are dedicated to keeping you informed about AI's transformative impact on our sector (as evidenced by a number of great AI-themed presentations at our Housing Technology 2024 conference in March).

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





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Data quality software – *Build or buy?*

Catherine McHugh, Account Manager, IntoZetta

You've decided you want to take a more proactive approach to managing your data quality, but what now? There are two primary routes you can take – buy a ready-made data-quality tool or build your own.

Each option has advantages and disadvantages that need to be considered, but before you do that, it's essential to first establish your requirements. If you take the time to define what you need a data-quality tool to do, and how it will support your goals, it will pay off in the long run.

Be as specific as possible by asking questions such as:

- What problem are we trying to solve?
- What is the ideal solution to that problem?
- Who will be involved in fixing the problem?
- How technically skilled are those people?
- How will the business benefit from the problem being solved?

Once you have the answers to those questions and have a clear vision in mind, it's time to start weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of buying a pre-built data-quality tool versus building your own solution; here are five things to consider when making your decision.

Costs

While buying a data-quality tool is usually more expensive up-front, building your own demands a longer investment of time and resources, which could cost more in the long run. It's useful to therefore consider the total cost of ownership, encompassing the cost of developing, testing, supporting and maintaining your own solution.

There is also the 'opportunity cost' that must be considered. The time your developers spend on building a custom solution is time they could be using to generate value elsewhere, working on different projects.

Overall, the odds are normally stacked in favour of buying a ready-made solution. For an IT supplier, selling the same software to multiple customers means that the associated costs are spread across multiple parties. Furthermore, some ready-made solutions, including those specifically designed for the housing sector, cost less than you expect. While the big names cost hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of pounds each year, there are lesser-known solutions that offer similar features and functionalities for a fraction of that.

Budget availability

One of the most compelling reasons for building a solution in-house is a lack of budget for buying an off-the-shelf product. Sometimes budgets are allocated for internal IT development but not for external capital investment, so if you have a team of developers with little to do, then it makes sense to keep them busy building a solution. However, don't forget that they might not be quiet for long so if you go down this route, make sure you have considered the ongoing commitment required.

Pre-built data-quality solutions are often more comprehensive and far-reaching, so they can often be used across several teams for a variety of initiatives. If a tool can be used by multiple teams, such as customer services, assets, repairs and development, this might mean the tool's funding and investment can be spread across multiple departmental budgets.



Timelines

Alongside cost and budget, the other crucial resource to consider is time. If a specific event has triggered the need for a data-quality tool, whether that's a regulatory breach, a digital transformation programme or simply a senior executive realising that data quality is essential, then that could dictate the timeline.

A pre-built tool can be deployed much faster than an internally-developed solution. No matter what expertise you have available, building a solution from scratch requires a significant amount of time to build, test and deploy.

Functionality

When considering functionality, it's important to question whether your challenges are actually unique. Building your own data-quality tool might be necessary if they are, but there's a very high probability that your problems are shared by many other housing providers; you certainly won't be the first to struggle with, say, regulatory requirements or keeping tenants' contact details up to date, so there's no need to start from scratch.

Pre-built tools often offer more advanced features, such as user-friendly search capabilities and automatic monitoring of data-quality problems. In addition, because the tool has already been built and tested, these features are very likely to be more reliable than a custom-built alternative.

Relationships

The housing provider and IT supplier relationship is relatively simple in comparison to working with your internal development team because buying a tool puts a helpful distance between you and the team providing the solution.

When no other tasks overlap and fewer personal connections exist, it's easier to be upfront about your needs and hold the IT supplier accountable. Having this distance ensures a more streamlined and efficient approach to resolving any problems.

Decision time

Do you build or buy? If you have limited budget or need very specific functionality, then developing your own tool might be the only option. However, buying a ready-made solution tends to have many more benefits; lower costs in the long run, faster implementation, better functionality and easier management of relationships.

After all, most people prefer to buy a ready-made house or ready-made car, rather than building their own from scratch.

Catherine McHugh is an account manager at IntoZetta.

Raven Housing completes three-year project with TechLabs London



TechLabs London has successfully completed Raven Housing Trust's 'Better Connected' programme, a three-year digital transformation project with TechLabs London's iProperty Cloud housing platform at its core.

The Better Connected programme brought together multiple workstreams, bringing together customer excellence, property management of new and existing homes, digital and data, commercial staff and business improvements under one umbrella.

The partnership between TechLabs London and Raven began with a focus on housing and tenancy management in the first release, emphasising early buy-in from end-users and establishing a 'golden thread' of data through tactical integrations with Raven Housing's legacy systems. Subsequent releases saw the phased delivery of critical modules, including compliance, repairs, voids, asset management and portals.

Julia Mixter, director of transformation, Raven Housing Trust, said, "We're absolutely delighted to have gone live with our rent, income and service charge modules in November 2023, which we developed with TechLabs London using its iProperty Cloud housing platform, with this release marking the end of our Better Connected transformation programme.



Julia Mixter
Director of Transformation
Raven Housing Trust

"We're enormously proud of what we have delivered with TechLabs London. To have all of our housing services, processes and data in one place on a Dynamics 365 platform is an outstanding accomplishment and a testament to the hard work and dedication of all the teams involved at both Raven Housing and TechLabs London."

Raven Housing is now live with all of iProperty Cloud's modules, including CRM, housing and tenancy management, repairs, voids, compliance, asset management as well as arrears and income management.

The programme involved four releases across three phases to meet Raven Housing's goals. These phases included customers, properties and income, covering various aspects of their respective operations and services.



Mohamed Mostafa
Managing Director
TechLabs London

Mohamed Mostafa, managing director, TechLabs London, said, "As a Microsoft Specialist Gold Partner, TechLabs London has long-held the view that the social housing sector has been crying out for disruption and new technologies. Raven Housing started with an ambitious vision for its future, and we've seen at first-hand its collaborative culture and desire to see through on that vision."

Matthew Hedges, products director, TechLabs London, said, "From the start of our project with Raven Housing, there's been a truly collaborative approach. We've challenged each other during the process, as all good partnerships should. We've delivered change through agile workshops, reviewed existing processes, discovered new ways of working and implemented new operating models, while infusing innovation and automation at every turn."



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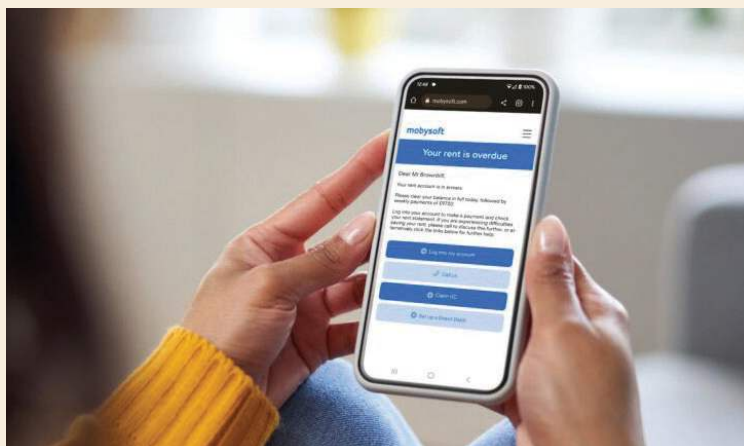
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Mobysoft's automated arrears prevention



Mobysoft has launched its new AI-powered Automated Arrears Prevention (AAP) platform which predicts which tenants will fall into arrears within the next three months and automates contact to help prevent this.

AAP uses machine learning underpinned by Mobysoft's data repository of over two million tenancies to 'nudge' tenants to take action to avoid going into arrears.

AAP helps housing providers to identify tenants who are currently in credit but have a high risk of falling into arrears, allowing for early interventions. Mobysoft's platform automates contact with tenants, eliminating the need for manual intervention by housing and income officers.

Importantly, Mobysoft said that its AAP platform eliminates unconscious bias and ensures fairness by not profiling tenants, relying on transactional insights only for decision-making.

The council's caseload has fallen by 20 per cent and 22 per cent of workloads are now automated, resulting in a 13 per cent reduction in universal credit-related arrears and a 10 per cent reduction in temporary accommodation arrears.

Chris Flynn, assistant director of housing, Lambeth Borough Council, said, "Mobysoft's automation and AI solutions, along with its income maximisation consultancy, have helped to enhance efficiency, reduce administration and allowed our team to concentrate on high-priority cases. Automation has streamlined our caseloads and improved completion rates, resulting in greater tenant satisfaction and better outcomes."

Mobysoft's free damp & mould module

Mobysoft's RepairSense damp and mould module is now available to its customers free of charge.

The damp and mould module was developed to help housing providers to accurately predict, identify and assess properties affected by damp and mould.

For most housing providers, the critical data used to identify problems such as damp and mould can be held in multiple internal systems in disparate formats, as well as by external contractors using their own systems.

Collaboratively developed with Mobysoft's RepairSense customers and using AI models trained on data from over seven million repair jobs, Mobysoft said that its damp and mould module offers unrivalled accuracy.

The AI-driven module provides over 99 per cent precision in recommendations, preventing cases from being overlooked. Additionally, thanks to its extensive dataset, the module can predict and identify unreported damp and mould problems by analysing similar properties.



Lambeth sustains tenancies via intelligent automation

Lambeth Borough Council reported that it has reduced its arrears and staff workloads by using Mobysoft's RentSense platform and automation solutions alongside Mobysoft's income-maximisation services.



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Digital transformation

The role of payments to reduce financial exclusion



Wayne Campbell, Head of Pre-Sales, Access PaySuite Pay360



The benefits of digital transformation are increasingly recognised across the housing sector, but how can housing providers ensure tenants aren't left behind and what steps can be taken to prevent financial exclusion?

There's no doubt that more housing providers are doubling down on their digital transformation strategies. Amid rising costs and increasing demand for services, more public-sector organisations are looking for savings and increasing efficiency while improving service delivery.

Research shows that financial constraints are having the greatest impact on procurement directors and supply-chain officers at housing providers, and this squeeze on budgets is driving the move towards new approaches which can free up cash to support communities and future investments.

Rising arrears

Growing numbers of tenants in arrears, combined with ongoing economic pressures, mean that any attempts to increase revenue through rent increases or higher service charges could risk creating additional challenges. Creating more efficient digital systems to deliver more streamlined and cost-effective services are therefore vital.

Payment systems are a key area for attention; collecting more payments on time can have a huge impact on cashflow. Making it easier for tenants to pay their rent by offering greater choice and convenience about how and when payments can be made has huge potential to reduce the likelihood of missed or late payments.

At the same time, it's important that this development isn't at the expense of people who may be financially or digitally excluded.

The rise of digital payments

The good news for housing providers considering the implementation of digital payment systems is that the majority of tenants are accustomed to using similar technologies in their daily lives.

The 2023 Payment Markets Report (source: UK Finance, September 2023) found that almost 90 per cent of adults used at least one form of online or mobile banking in 2022, rising to 95 per cent for those aged 25-34 compared with 80 per cent of those aged 65 and over.

Other technologies such as Open Banking and mobile wallets are providing tenants with a greater level of convenience. Data from Open Banking UK showed that one in nine UK consumers are now active Open Banking users, with an 88 per cent increase in payments via Open Banking in June 2023 compared with the same month in 2022.

Addressing financial & digital inclusion

While this data points to more people becoming familiar and comfortable with digital payments, it's important that housing providers don't leave any tenants behind in their digital transformation strategies.

The UK government's Future of Payments review in November 2023 highlighted the impact of digital and financial exclusion. Estimates published in the report suggest that around eight million people are dependent on cash and three million 'pay for everything or most things in cash'. This is backed by research by the British



Retail Consortium which pointed towards cash usage rising as more households used cash to help budget during the cost-of-living crisis.

Digital exclusion, poor IT skills and a lack of trust in online banking services are among the reasons that could lead to someone being digitally excluded, and data shows that these factors are more likely to impact housing providers' tenants more acutely.

Overcoming exclusion challenges

While much of the attention around tackling financial exclusion is on the preservation of cash, there's no doubt that digital solutions have a vital role to play in providing agile and flexible solutions which work for all members of the community.

For example, in the past if a tenant couldn't access a computer to pay their rent online, they might have needed to travel to make an in-person card or cash payment which could be challenging for those with mobility problems.

Digital solutions mean that housing staff can now use mobile applications to take rent payments on-the-go. This means that housing providers can authorise secure card payments quickly and easily without tenants needing to leave their homes.

Another key innovation has been the rise of real-time payments. Previously, tenants might have made payments online and then needed to wait up to five days for funds to clear; this delay could leave the tenant in arrears if their rent payment cleared late. The rise of real-time payments removes this delay and consequent effect on potential arrears.

These are just two examples where digital payments are helping housing providers to address obstacles which previously prevented them from successfully collecting rent payments, but the greatest benefit of digital payments could be around freeing up vital staff resources.

Empowering staff

Instead of spending valuable time confirming that payments have been made or chasing overdue rents, housing staff can focus their attention on the areas where it's most needed. This could be extra time to focus on complex or more vulnerable tenants, or on strategic projects which can strengthen services across their communities.

For example, flexible payment arrangements enable housing providers to secure commitments to pay based on choice, without the need to demand a direct debit. A commitment to pay can empower staff to have open conversations with their tenants, enabling affordable payment planning based on the individual's current and future circumstances.

With account affordability features available through Open Banking, providers can make better decisions to tackle debt avoidance while ensuring that tenants have flexibility and choice around how they approach payments.

Reducing arrears and creating additional cost savings can have a huge impact on how housing providers deliver their services. People increasingly expect flexibility and convenience about how and when they make payments and we see the impact this can have on fostering stronger, long-term relationships with tenants while helping to streamline operations.

As digital payments move from a being 'nice to have' option to becoming an essential element of public-sector service delivery, it's vital that housing providers don't miss out those people who may be digitally- or financially-excluded.

Wayne Campbell is head of pre-sales at Access PaySuite Pay360.



Digital lynchpins & successful housing M&As

Lauren Trevelyan, Principal Consultant, Altair

Embarking on a merger is like an expedition through uncharted territory; however, the digital age has ushered in a new era where IT stands as a lynchpin for success.

Let's explore how IT transforms a merger from a complex puzzle into a seamless operation, impacting everything from transitions to strategic goals.

This expedition delves beyond the intricate layers of the enterprise stack, venturing into the realms of data quality, digital skills and strategic investments. And it doesn't stop there – once the merger deal is set, the chosen technology becomes a formidable force, shaping the destiny of the newly-unified entity, significantly influencing:

- How smooth or disruptive the transition is;
- The speed at which operational effectiveness resumes;
- The speed at which improvements in KPIs are realised;
- The provision of a common and consistent view of the organisation to tenants;
- The ability to identify and remedy asset risk, appraise stock condition and manage assets;
- The introduction of efficient and consistent processes across the new organisation;
- The realisation of savings and further investment opportunities.

With the added time pressures of merger dates, here are a few essential activities IT functions should initiate as soon as a merger is confirmed.

Set up an independent and dedicated team

The merger should be classed as a strategic priority IT project, with a dedicated/ring-fenced team integrated with the broader M&A working group.

Perform a critical and independent evaluation of both technology estates

Even if both parties use the same system(s), they will be configured differently so assess their functionalities. Don't duplicate functionality or primary data, seek rationalisation opportunities based on usability, contract renewals, licencing, hosting, hardware life, TCO comparisons, cyber-risk and the ability to enable strategic goals. Establish comprehensive records of all technology components; these records will serve as the foundation for making strategic decisions and developing action plans.

IT programmes

Review all IT pipelines – look out the burning platforms, assess what needs to be on the critical path and prioritise accordingly. Consolidate duplicate programmes seeking the same outcomes and focus on getting the IT foundations right (applications and infrastructure) to manage accelerated growth.

Increase cyber resilience and awareness

Protecting resident and asset data across the merger lifecycle is essential and goes beyond the basics of penetration testing, application security and data-centre compliance.

It's crucial to ensure that disaster recovery and business continuity plans are up to date. In particular, undertake DR rehearsals because mergers can generate new system-access protocols, changes to finance controls and high volumes of data sharing, all of which increase cyber risk. Increase employee awareness of these threats through cyber-awareness training, cyber-attack exercises and updating data-sharing policies.










Data and integration

Regarding data management, what is the level of accuracy, where is it going, how is it calculated, and how is it going to get there? Understanding the challenge ahead and undertaking as much early preparation as possible is



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vital. Equally important is the quality of the data itself so ensure that data owners and data stewards are part of the project team. Set one common data standard, understand the gaps, take action and measure the improvements.

Data migration is high risk; don't underestimate how long it'll take and the complexities involved. Whether it is practice runs, sequencing, minimising dual-running or how to ensure efficient cutover, leveraging specialist data quality and migration partners will help to mitigate risk and increase the likelihood of success.

Staffing and skills assessment

As the technology estates merge, there will be opportunities to establish a new target operating model. However, this can't be to the detriment of the smooth running of the new organisation. Undertaking an IT skills assessment during the early phase of the merger will help shape the new IT operating model and provide flexibility on how and when.

Validation and strategy

In essence, a unified IT, digital and data strategy should be developed and supported with robust business cases. The strategy should prioritise the optimal interests of the newly-established organisation, free from undue influence by either party, with independent assistance at every stage of the technology planning to thoroughly assess business needs and make decisions aligned with the strategic goals of the new organisation.

Summary

To make mergers and acquisitions a tale of triumph, assemble a dedicated IT team early in the process. Delve into comprehensive assessments across the enterprise and beyond, where actions taken in the initial stages resonate throughout the process.

Lauren Trevelyan is the principal consultant at Altair.

NEC Housing

BRIGHTER THINKING FOR HOUSING

'Connecting the dots on Income Management', a guide for future-focused housing providers on maximising revenue.



The **Brighter Thinking for Housing Guide Series** provides future focused housing providers with practical guidance to meet challenges in housing through technology.

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Southwark Council boosts income & cuts arrears with NEC

Leo Stanislaus, Operations Manager for Income, Southwark Council

Inflation may be falling but people are still feeling the pinch. First the pandemic and now the cost of living crisis have put pressure on family finances and led to increased rent arrears. For Southwark Council, London's biggest landlord, late or non-payments are a big concern, not to mention a worry for our tenants. Thankfully, the transformation process we launched in 2017 has put us in a good place to offer the right support and weather the storm.

Solving the 'patches' problem

Our income officers traditionally work in specific geographic areas or 'patches', often managing hundreds of cases. It can be hard to spot the highest priorities, either in terms of tenants' need or arrears level. This leads to wasted effort and may even delay the support that's needed to keep someone in their home.

When I joined Southwark Council in 2017, I instigated a review of our income collection processes. Working with my team, we found staff having to use manual processes to try and prioritise cases. We saw arrears cases being managed inconsistently, and we realised we couldn't transfer resources from one patch to another because the data was hard to share.

It was clear we needed a better match between the action we were taking and the support each tenant required.

Moving to 'prevent, resolve & recover'

Our strategy was to develop new ways of working that would lead to cases being managed in three distinct workstreams – prevent, resolve and recover (PRR) – and to get clear sight of the priorities in each one. So we invested in new digital tools to enable us to move into 'patchless' case management and restructured the team to drive it forward.

In September 2023, we were ready to restructure our staff to work in PRR workstreams and by November 2023, just two months after completing the final stage of this transformation, we were delivering great results. We completed 42 per cent more home visits, increased the number of payment arrangements by 22 per cent and collected 33 per cent more cash.

Investing in the right tools for the change

To help us allocate arrears cases effectively, we first went live with RentSense in 2018. This initially supported our transition to a patchless collection model but we soon began developing our own analysis parameters to give us the level of detail we needed to further innovate into the PRR model of collection and income maximisation.

So in 2021, we switched to NEC Account Analytics. We now have access to more granular data and analysis; for example, we could choose to prioritise cases based on their payment percentage over the past three months. We can also make instant amendments to the parameters governing the workstreams, enabling us to respond to changing circumstances quickly.

We've also invested in a range of automation tools, such as enabling tenants to set up direct debits online, using Power BI to track performance, and using data in NEC



Account Analytics to drive omni-channel automated collection campaigns.

Supporting tenants and staff more effectively

Now, our tenants get fast, consistent responses. They might be newly in debt or waiting for a court date, but they'll receive a response within 24 hours, no matter who takes the call. Our income officers also benefit; they have access to prioritised case lists based on accurate data and enjoy supporting the workstream that best matches their skills.

Engaging our staff in the transformation process has been essential to success. Since 2017, we've been exploring the challenges they face around data and workloads and working with them to develop solutions, bringing them with us as things change. They can see the benefit for tenants too; one customer emailed to say that the short conversation they'd had with an income officer really lifted their spirits during a worrying time.

Feeling ready for the future

In recent years, tenants' incomes haven't kept up with inflation and rent increases, resulting in an increase in universal credit take-up to assist rent payments. Intervening earlier and faster is vital to diverting tenants from crises and sustaining their tenancies, therefore avoiding the cost of court action.

This is what our PRR workstream model enables us to do – backed up by accurate data, we can triage accounts based on payment history, allocating them into the correct workstream for income officers to provide the necessary support or to take prompt legal action.



We don't expect the difficulties around income collection to diminish any time soon and workloads will remain high, but we now have the right structure, data and system flexibility to support our tenants and our income collection as best we can.

Leo Stanislaus is the operations manager for income at Southwark Council.

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Taking complaints seriously

Helen Rogers, Director of Product Management, Civica



New volumes of complaints to the Housing Ombudsman show how vital it is to meet residents' expectations quickly.

The Housing Ombudsman recently published its latest statistics on complaints in 2022/23. These outlined a huge spike in maladministration findings compared with previous years; for the first time, over 5,000 complaints were escalated for formal investigation, representing a 27 per cent increase on the previous year.

Meanwhile, new research from Housemark, the first to delve into tenant satisfaction measure (TSM) scores, has found that around 40 per cent of tenants don't believe their housing provider listens to their comments or takes action to remedy problems.

Holding housing providers to account

TSMs are intended to make housing providers' performance more visible to tenants and help them to hold their housing providers to account. They cover five main areas: keeping properties in good repair, maintaining building safety, effective handling of complaints, respectful and helpful tenant engagement, and responsible neighbourhood management.

Housemark's research also found that only a third of tenants are happy with their housing provider's handling of complaints; there is obviously some way to go to improve these scores.

We all know it's vital to handle complaints effectively. It isn't just about the communications and the resolution, but also having the right training, the empathy to deal

with different types of customers and updating customers within a reasonable timeframe.

Turning to tech to minimise complaints

The focus on shifting to digital channels has enabled housing providers to share essential information faster and more easily, minimising the need to call or email for every interaction.

Better case-management automation contributes to updating customers regularly so they feel their problems are being heard and acted on. This leads to improved customer service and satisfaction and the prevention of such complaints in the first place; it's all about building trust with your customers.

'First-time fixes' in terms of available information has never been more important in a world where technologies such as repair diagnostics, smart-home sensors and monitoring solutions, building information management and digital twins help housing providers to proactively monitor and prevent problems from arising in the first place.

More focus on using this data to assess trends around fuel poverty and proactive monitoring to avoid rent arrears also support the need for smart-home technology and moving ahead with digital twins.

Forecasting stock condition

The return on investment, let alone the indirect cost-savings through improved service provision, can be



realised within months of implementation. The future of how stock condition can be forecasted, planned and delivered can also change by using proactive monitoring technologies, leading to improved satisfaction and, in turn, fewer complaints.

If we consider repairs, tailored help articles on tenant portals or Alexa/Siri devices can help avoid repairs. These can also improve tenant satisfaction because tenants might be able to resolve the problems before they lead to a necessary repair, all helping towards reducing the volume of potential complaints.

With many housing providers and local authorities citing fewer resources to deal with customer volumes, technology must be considered to help improve communication, visibility, insights and trend analysis, along with further proactive monitoring to help meet the requirements of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act.

Prevalence of damp and mould

One high-focus area of complaints concerns damp and mould. A 2023 report from the Regulator of Social Housing reviewed progress in this area and found around six per cent of social housing stock in England had some form of 'notable to severe' damp. At the same time, the best-performing housing providers were using a wide range of data sources to feed into the overall picture on stock condition, including responsive repairs requests and complaints. They also had accurate and up-to-

date information on their tenants, including potential vulnerabilities and language requirements.

It's evident there needs to be a shift in tenant satisfaction to avoid time-consuming and expensive administration. We need to ensure tenants are living in homes where they feel comfortable and safe, and where complaints are the exception rather than the rule when engaging with their housing providers. Although the number of complaints has risen, there are also many lessons around housing providers' good practice.

Combining the latest technology with the desire to boost tenants' experience will no doubt see more improvements for the future.

Helen Rogers is the director of product management at Civica.

CIVICA



Actions speak louder than words

Soha Housing & Housing Insight

Katrina Heyworth, Head of Sales, Housing Insight & Nicola Hansen, Business Analyst, Soha Housing

Housing Insight wanted to make sure its standards of service matched up to the words in its marketing materials – so it asked a customer, Soha Housing, to evaluate its experience with Housing Insight's PanConnect self-service app.

Housing Insight marketing says: Our goal is to work closely with our customers...

Soha Housing's response: We were in a poor situation – we had no portal and we needed to change our previous provider's app quite fast when it became unsupported. Housing Insight was brilliant at planning weekly meetings to get us started with its self-service app. The company really listened to what we needed.

It's not just the project managers at Housing Insight who work closely with customers, it's also the developers. We had a situation where our own back-office system was creating a problem in writing back data from the app, but Housing Insight's developers worked out where the failure was happening and found a way to fix it for us.

Housing Insight: ...to provide innovative solutions

Soha: Although it was the speed of set-up that we found most useful, the self-service app does contain features that were innovative for us – our residents can now look at multiple tenancies in one place, for example, which is very useful if they rent both a home and garage from us. Previously this data was stored in two different places, which could be confusing.

During all my time in housing, residents have never been able to see documents such as their tenancy agreement or fire risk assessment without requesting hard copies. We're about to add the facility to view documents online and, for us, this digital access is a real innovation.

Housing Insight: ...that meet current and future needs

Soha: We knew that phase one would be about getting the self-service app out quickly in order to meet our residents' current needs. Now we've done this, our focus is on additions and improvements that will help to address future needs, such as full digital sign-ups to replace multiple letters and phone calls for new tenants.

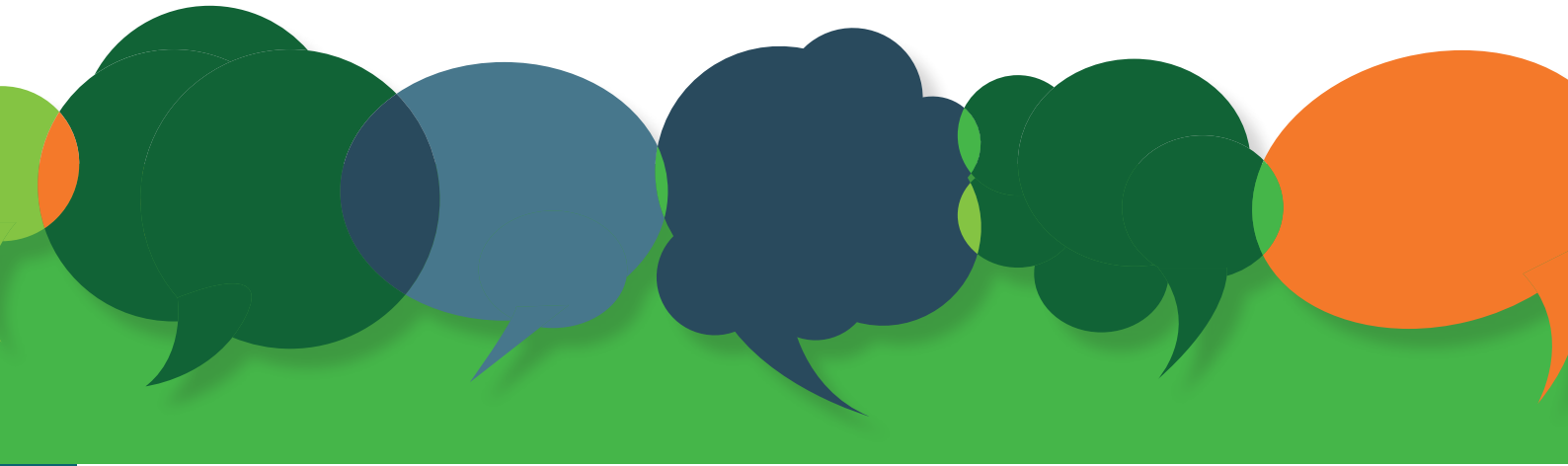
I don't think it's possible to completely future-proof a system because our needs will always be evolving and priorities change – there's a big focus on damp and mould at the moment, for instance, but a different problem will replace this in time. However, I do feel that I can always call our project manager at Housing Insight, knowing that she will listen then ask the tech team to deliver for us.

I've worked with lots of companies who seem to disappear when a project is finished, but the team at Housing Insight is always available if there's a problem. This is a massive plus, because it makes us want to continue to do projects with them.

Housing Insight: ...enhancing efficiency and productivity for our customers and their stakeholders.

Soha: The self-service app really has delivered efficiencies for us. We previously had both an app and a portal as separate entities, with two different logins for residents. This caused confusion and resulted in numerous phone calls to our office. Now the self-service app, which we've called MySoha, gives residents the same login, the same view, and access to the same information whether they log in via the portal or the app. It's made a massive difference.

In terms of productivity, functions such as being able to raise repairs or report instances of anti-social behaviour online also reduce the number of incoming calls, which gives our customer services team more time to do other tasks.



We're also running a project to collect equality, diversity and inclusion information at the moment. We can put a message request out via the app and, when residents complete the digital form, it will update our back-office system immediately, without any input from our housing team. Again, it's a real time-saver.

Housing Insight: Our self-service app is simple, modern and easy to use.

Soha: It's really easy to use! You can tell because we haven't had any negative feedback at all, either from our test users or other residents when we went live. It's an intuitive, tile-based system that isn't overloaded with information.

At the beginning, we had a specially-formatted 'date of birth' question that was causing registrations to fail because people were not inputting the data correctly. We went back to Housing Insight and were able to get this fixed straight away by adding a message that flags the format we need for our system.

Housing Insight: It promotes a 'digital first' approach.

Soha: I can't think why our residents wouldn't choose 'digital first' with the self-service app! We have 7,500 properties to manage so, regardless of how many customer service advisors we have, there will always be a queue on the phone. I'm pleased to say that we already have double the number of registered users for Housing Insight's self-service app compared with our previous app, and that's just in the nine months since we went live.

Housing Insight: The app and portal are customisable to each client.

Soha: Generally speaking, I'd say there's an unspoken problem with customisation in that the more bespoke anything gets, the harder it is to support. That said, although we started with Housing Insight's original 'plug and go' functionality, we have changed some of the tiles in the app, altered some wording and added a few extra drop-down menus.

As soon as we know what we'd like to change, we ask Housing Insight if it's feasible. Where possible the team gives us options, such as 'you can change these words for zero cost' or 'if you'd prefer to do X, it will cost Y'.

Most things are possible; it's just a balance of time and money. I've had meetings with other IT suppliers where it feels like they're always trying to sell me something. I appreciate the fact that Housing Insight don't do a hard sell.

Housing Insight: Our targeted, secure messaging enables two-way, online contact with residents.

Soha: We plan to use one-to-one messaging for our digital tenancy sign-ups. We would use it more widely if residents received a notification when we posted a message for them in the app, but we haven't yet implemented that option. Meanwhile, we have used the broadcast function to let everyone know our Christmas opening hours, for example.

Housing Insight: The app gives residents the ability to request a service, such as a repair.

Soha: We know that the self-service app can take residents through a step-by-step process that diagnoses repairs and allows residents to schedule maintenance appointments when it's convenient for them. At the moment Soha residents can report a repair and upload one photo (multiple photos are on our wish-list for the future), which is invaluable in saving our customer service team time on the phone.

These days, people just expect to be able to do things outside normal working hours. If our residents need to let us know about something, we know that it can be very annoying to have to wait until the office opens in the morning or after the weekend, so the app provides instant service.

Housing Insight: Instant savings can be made with our self-service app.

Soha: Without a doubt, the app has already saved money in terms of staff time. And from the initial procurement, I know that Housing Insight was very good value compared with the other companies we considered.

Katrina Heyworth is head of sales at Housing Insight, and Nicola Hansen is a business analyst at Soha Housing.



Latest TSM results from Housemark

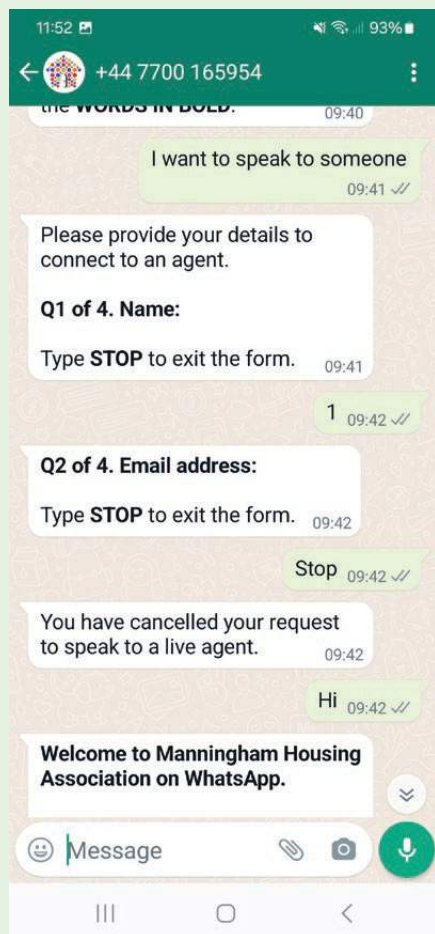
New research from Housemark shows the mid-year results of tenant satisfaction measures (TSMs) in England for 2023 encompassing the aggregated TSMs from around 200 housing providers.

Tenants' overall satisfaction has continued to fall, from 85 per cent (2018/19) to 76 per cent (2022/23) and further down to 72 per cent after six months of the 2023/24 reporting period.

The average TSMs for safety compliance were close to 100 per cent (across all five activities covered by the headline TSM), with tenants generally satisfied that their homes were safe and well-maintained.

In terms of housing providers listening to tenants and taking action, this area averaged one of the lowest TSM scores at only 61 per cent.

Housing providers' handling of tenants' complaints was the lowest scoring TSM, with only 34 per cent of tenants satisfied.



Manningham Housing's WhatsApp bot

Manningham Housing Association has launched a WhatsApp bot to boost around-the-clock assistance for its tenants.



The application is designed to answer common questions relating to MHA's services including rent payments, repair requests and other tenant support via a real-time automated conversational experience.

Carolina Padovezi de Oliveira, corporate project manager, Manningham Housing, said, "The launch of our WhatsApp bot is part of our ongoing efforts to improve our digital services and make it easier for tenants to interact with us."

Onward Homes self-serves with OptusApp

Onward Homes is launching OptusApp's self-service mobile app for its tenants. The native mobile app, with biometric login, will let tenants report repairs, view rent histories, pay rent and exchange two-way messages, with additional features scheduled to be rolled out by Onward later this year.

Andrew Kidds, director of customer experience and digital, Onward Homes, said, "We've gone live with a small group of tenants so we can refine key features before rolling out the tenant app more widely.

"There's no doubt that native mobile apps are the way to go for self-service, and the OptusApp team has been very supportive throughout the integration process."



OptusApp and its integration partner Manifest Software Solutions have worked with the housing provider over recent months to enable seamless integration with Onward's housing management system as well as its payment gateway.

Alan Swift, managing director, Manifest Software Solutions, said, "The beauty of OptusApp is that its API-driven solution is platform-neutral. As a result, via Manifest's Universal Adaptor, OptusApp can integrate with any housing management or CRM system in the wider social housing landscape."

REPAIRS & MOBILE WORKING

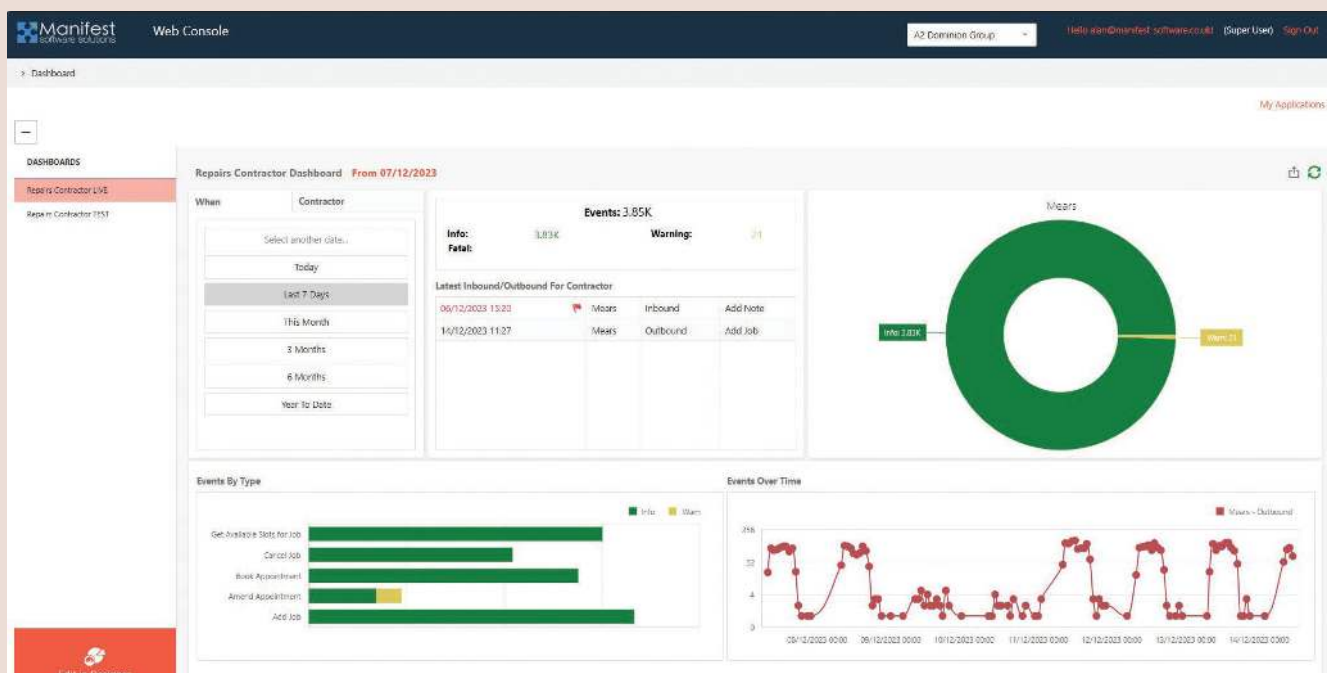
Plentific launches Planned Maintenance

Plentific has added a new Planned Maintenance solution to its existing property management platform, with the aim of enabling housing providers to become more proactive and responsive in their planned and cyclical maintenance activities.

Plentific said that users of its Planned Maintenance solution could expect to reduce the cost of a work order by 150 per cent when applied to the cost of a responsive repair against the cost of maintaining the same asset.

Plentific's new solution features work order schedule creation, work order dispatch automation, built-in inspections, and reporting and analytics.

Cem Savas, co-founder and CEO, Plentific, said, "The paramount priority is bringing the condition and safety of properties in line with regulations and meeting tenants' expectations. Our Planned Maintenance solution has the potential to reduce the volume of responsive repairs, help housing providers meet their regulatory requirements to safeguard residents, and enhance overall their operational resilience."



Manifest connects A2Dominion, Mears & RedkiteCRM

Following A2Dominion's recent appointment of Mears Group as its new repairs and maintenance contractor, Manifest Software Solutions has completed the integration of A2Dominion's Dynamics 365-based RedkiteCRM repairs management system and its associated processes with Mears' own systems within just eight weeks.

At the start of the project, A2Dominion identified key areas to focus on as part of its repairs improvement programme. These included: schedule of rates identification; making a booking and appointment tracking; rationalising repairs descriptions; enhancing customer communications; refining surveyors' reporting and inspections; variation approvals and rejections; and two-way repair notes.

Manifest's extensive experience of integrating all kinds of systems used by housing organisations combined with its use of its own pre-built, UK-hosted integration layer meant that it was able to rapidly integrate and connect all the systems involved between A2Dominion and Mears.

RedkiteCRM's repairs accelerator product for Dynamics 365 fast-tracks the logging and management of repairs and work orders. The overall solution required real-time, two-way communications between RedkiteCRM and Mears' own systems, all of which was delivered via the Manifest's cloud-hosted integration layer.

This enabled each system to communicate natively with each other, removing the usual delays associated with the development and testing of custom connectors. Because the Manifest integration layer orchestrates the exchange of data, secure logging and custom dashboards could be incorporated to provide A2Dominion with total visibility of the data passing between its systems.

James Berger, solutions architect, A2Dominion, said, "This has been an exciting journey, delivered by Manifest within a really tight timeframe. It has been pleasing to see our solution take shape and go live in parallel to the mobilisation of our new repairs service contract."

Sarah McRow, director, RedkiteCRM, said, "The speed of the integration was astonishing, given the size of the project. It's the quickest one we've been involved with at this scale – a normal timeframe for repairs projects can take up to a year, but everyone was motivated by the go-live date, achieved in no small part due to our really solid relationship with Manifest."

AzDominion's responsive repairs management system and processes have now been integrated with Mears' systems, all within eight weeks. Since going live with the new solution in October 2023, thousands of repairs and maintenance jobs have been processed.

AzDominion's Berger said, "The proactive nature of Manifest's team really helped with the success of this project, and we are very pleased with the result; we now have a reliable source of information which both our contractor and AzDominion can trust."

The housing provider reported that the results of the project have included: greatly improved operational efficiency; more streamlined scheduling; better customer communications; smarter reporting and job tracking; and more 'first-time fix' repairs.

RedkiteCRM's McRow said, "Manifest has the same ethos as us which is about delivering effective solutions as quickly as possible. When we work with our housing customers, and they mention Manifest, we breathe a sigh of relief because we 'get' each other."

Alan Swift, managing director, Manifest Software Solutions, said, "It's been a pleasure to work with such an excellent team, with everyone collaborating to make this happen in record time. The strength of the partnership between AzDominion, RedkiteCRM and Mears resulted in this incredible success story."



Split-second field-service with AI

Lee Hawkes, Housing Sector Lead, FLS – Fast Lean Smart



More and more housing providers are turning to enhanced AI to strengthen their operational performance, improve customer service and retain skilled staff.

Chatbots began to gain popularity in the mid-2010s. The technology and its applications have significantly improved, making it more accessible and useful now that it's moved from simple forms of automation to more complex queries.

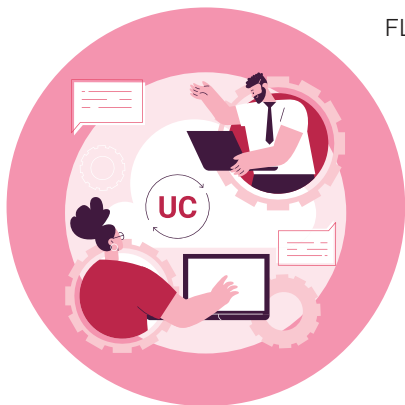
Chatbots are an example of AI working for both tenants and housing providers simultaneously; today's AI solutions are addressing a specific rebalancing, from 'pure play' customer service improvements to the transformation of operational performance.

For scheduling specialists like us, AI has the power to transform field-service management through our proprietary algorithm and machine-learning capability.

The underlying ideas behind it are 'how can housing providers achieve the optimal field-service plan?' and 'how can they solve scheduling and in-day control of routing in the most resource-efficient and SLA/KPI-oriented way, and without having to wait for the answer?'

Millions of solutions

This is a highly complex mathematical and logistical problem. If you analyse the optimal sequence of 10 field-service appointments for a single operative, there are 3.6 million solutions. Other factors to consider include time constraints, fixed appointments and breaks, order specifications (such as skills, tools and stock) and human factors (such as illness and cancellations).



FLS's solution, the PowerOpt algorithm, was developed and evolved over 25 years of specialist focus and has matured as the market has transformed. The algorithm is the core intelligence for optimised scheduling and dynamic route planning, taking into account all factors in seconds, scheduling appointments, employees and materials.

The PowerOpt algorithm makes it possible to control logistics and service processes in the field in a cost-optimised, sustainable and customer-oriented way, with complete transparency over the resulting outcomes. AI calculates in real time, including predictive traffic on each road segment for the time of day, through continual optimisation of planning and ongoing coordination without needing further intervention.

AI-supported field scheduling

AI-optimised field-service management offers a solution to many long-standing housing problems, including the reduction of 'no access' visits, planned maintenance backlogs and dealing with voids, with the resulting data supporting compliance and tenant-satisfaction reporting.

FLS's AI enhances scheduling accuracy through sophisticated predictive analysis. This enables intelligent predictions about appointment durations and arrival times. Thanks to this machine-learning approach, appointment accuracy is continuously improved. Its advantages include:

- 'What if' simulations for optimum capacity and resource scheduling;
- Increased up-to-the-minute appointment accuracy using geo-coding and predictive traffic for specific journey times;
- Improved scheduling accuracy for linked appointments and follow-up visits;
- Increased customer satisfaction through features such as enabling operatives to begin shifts from home locations and built-in depot visits.

FLS is Microsoft's scheduling partner for Dynamics 365, seamlessly integrating with Microsoft's customer engagement and field service software. Microsoft recognises FLS Visitour as the best-of-breed field scheduling software, extending beyond the capabilities provided by Microsoft's own resource scheduling optimisation (RSO) software. The FLS solution is also available as an upgrade with most of the leading housing management systems.

Risks and human oversight

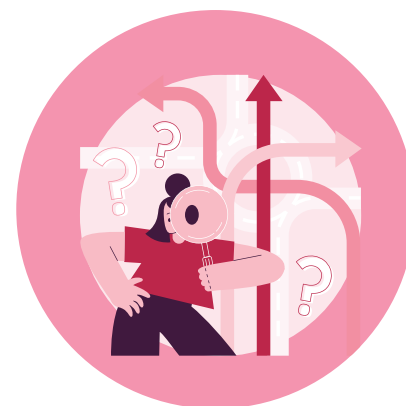
However, there are dangers when developing AI algorithms, including compounding human bias (should it exist) in collected data and modelling, so human oversight is needed to ensure compliance with regulation and overall fairness.

Intelligent field-service automation is used to reduce response times and provide more precise information for customer enquiries; there could be data-privacy risks for tenants here, and evolving AI regulations, such as those promoting transparency and the responsible use of machine-learning models, must be adopted before any blanket bans prevent AI's potential.

What's next?

Predictive analytics evaluates historical data using mathematical methods to discover trends and patterns and incorporate them into calculation models for future predictions. Housing providers are already using these to identify trends to counter damp and mould, optimise energy management and help with sustainable housing developments.

The best-known methods for these evaluations include decision trees, regression and neural networks. While decision trees and regression are relatively easy to model, neural networks require much more effort. They can be represented using AI and allow very precise recognition of patterns and trends in real-time. However, they can only be used effectively if a corresponding volume of intelligent data is available; intelligent data is created with clear objectives, diverse and representative sampling, testing and regular reviews.



Innovate today

Although some technology leaders have called for a pause in developing powerful generative AI models while potential threats are explored, the power of innovation from using AI is available today and should be embraced by the UK housing sector.

FLS uses AI to generate the best field-service results to match specific circumstances, typically achieving results in a split second. With an AI-powered scheduling and routing solution, more appointments are enabled and completed, benefitting both tenants and operatives.

Lee Hawkes is the housing sector lead at FLS – Fast Lean Smart.



HOUSING TECHNOLOGY AWARDS 2024

- FINALISTS ANNOUNCED

HOUSING
TECHNOLOGY

HOUSING
TECHNOLOGY
2024 CONFERENCE AND
EXECUTIVE FORUM

We are thrilled to announce the finalists of the inaugural Housing Technology Awards (2024) as well as the commended entries.

The standard of entries was incredibly high; all of the housing providers and local authorities mentioned below submitted excellent examples and case studies of their IT-related projects and teams spanning the awards' categories.

The finalists' entries will now be assessed and scored by our external panel of judges from UK housing providers, with the winners announced live at Housing Technology 2024 in March (conference.housing-technology.com). We will also be publishing many of the entrants' submissions in the next few editions of Housing Technology.

Housing Technology Awards 2024 – Finalists and Commended

Customer/Tenant Services finalists

Kingston Council: A proactive approach to improving tenants' wellbeing;

Milton Keynes City Council: Transforming tenants' financial health;

Platform Housing: Trying hard, failing fast, improving and delivering;

Poplar HARCA: A full-scale deployment of IoT sensors; Raven Housing Trust: An end-to-end 'Better Connected' programme;

Commended: Beyond Housing and BPHA.

Cyber-Security finalists

Adra (Tai) Cyf: Making cyber-security mainstream;

Kingdom Housing: Cyber-security using AI, automation and IT standards;

Link Group: A problem-solving approach to cyber-awareness;

Southern Housing: Cyber-assurance during a high-speed merger;

West Kent Housing: Cyber-security as an organisational culture;

Commended: Freebridge Community Housing, Newark & Sherwood District Council and Raven Housing Trust.

Digital Transformation finalists

Magenta Living: Damp and mould case management;

Notting Hill Genesis: A proof-of-concept for uniting people and data;

Places for People: Delivering an effortless customer experience;

Platform Housing: The future shape of finance;

Southwark Council: Digital improvements to KPIs for rent collection;

Commended: Beyond Housing, L&Q, Monmouthshire Housing, Newark & Sherwood District Council, Newport City Homes, Southwark Council, Stockport Homes, Tai Tarian and Wrekin Housing.

Innovation finalists

L&Q: BizApps' innovative technology portfolio management;

North Star Housing: Using AI for automated compliance;

Notting Hill Genesis: Migration to Microsoft omni-channels;

Platform Housing: Asking big questions of AI;

Thirteen Group: Innovating debt recovery;

Commended: Home Group, Housing Solutions, Lincolnshire Housing Partnership, Places for People, Raven Housing Trust, Southwark Council, Sovereign Network Group, Stockport Homes and Warwick District Council.

IT Team of the Year finalists

Home Group: Implementing integration middleware without risking service delivery;

L&Q: BizApps – Rebuilding IT's relationship with the business;

Lincolnshire Housing Partnership: A customer-first approach to all aspects of IT;

Southern Housing: Pure hard work – The engine of a merger;

Sovereign Network Group: Delivering excellence from SNG's data & analytics team;

Commended: Beyond Housing, Link Group and Newark & Sherwood District Council.

The final winners will be announced live during Housing Technology 2024 at the end of the first full day of the conference on Wednesday 06 March at the East Midlands Conference Centre in Nottingham.

Aico|HomeLink community awards 2024



After the success of its first community awards in 2022, Aico/HomeLink is bringing its spectacular event back for its second year, returning on Thursday 18 April 2024 at the International Convention Centre in Birmingham.

Hosted by Carl Jones, a presenter on Shropshire Business Live TV as well as working across print, radio and television, the awards ceremony is expected to welcome over 400 guests and finalists for an evening of celebration and recognition of excellence in social housing and Aico/HomeLink's local community. The company promised that the evening will also include a surprise guest appearance.

The Aico/HomeLink community awards comprise 13 categories, all of which are now open to enter at: aico.co.uk/news-and-events/aicohomelink-community-awards-2024.

- Apprentice of the year (new for 2024)
- CSR initiative
- Neighbourhood transformation
- Resident engagement
- Lifetime achievement
- Woman in fire safety
- College initiative of the year
- Rising star
- Electrical contractor of the year
- Inspirational colleague of the year
- Sustainability project of the year
- Best distributor community initiative
- Collaborative partnership

Aico/HomeLink's 'Apprentice of the year' award is new for 2024, created to honour the brightest talents in the electrical industry.



The community awards are open for nominations to the public and organisations across the UK. Entries will be accepted until the 16 February 2024. To enter an individual or organisation, please visit: aico.co.uk/news-and-events/aicohomelink-community-awards-2024.

Neal Hooper, managing director, Aico, said, "We're thrilled to be bringing back the community awards. These awards are a celebration of the inspirational people and organisations within social housing and our local communities.

"We believe it's about making a real difference in the lives of those around us; that's why it's so important to recognise the individuals and organisations who are going above and beyond to make their communities a better place. We look forward to celebrating the achievements of the nominees at the awards in April."

To find out more, please visit aico.co.uk/news-and-events/aicohomelink-community-awards-2024.





Microsoft-first for digital transformation

Steven Osprey, Partnerships & Alliances Director, TSG

Digital transformation has become a pivotal process for businesses aiming to stay competitive and relevant. But what does digital transformation entail, and why should you consider adopting a Microsoft-first approach for this journey?

We'll delve into the principles of digital transformation, explore how a Microsoft-centric ecosystem can foster efficiency, and discuss the benefits of this approach for housing providers.

The principles of digital transformation

Digital transformation is more than just a buzzword; it's a strategic initiative aimed at leveraging technology to fundamentally alter how an organisation operates and delivers value to its customers.

At its core, digital transformation encompasses rethinking processes, embracing innovation and harnessing data to make informed decisions. It's about evolving from traditional, often manual, methods to a more agile and automated approach.

Before & after – The transformation experience

To truly appreciate the significance of digital transformation, let's consider a scenario that we've encountered many times with our housing customers: a housing provider stuck in a pre-digital transformation era. In this outdated landscape, staff grapple with clunky, disjointed software applications. Communication is fragmented, data is siloed, and collaboration is cumbersome. Tenants, too, experience friction in their interactions, often encountering glitches and delays.

Now, fast forward to the post-digital transformation era after speaking with an IT partner like TSG. This time, the housing provider has embraced a Microsoft-first approach. The difference is night and day.

Microsoft's ecosystem seamlessly connects all aspects of the business, from communication and collaboration to data management and analytics. Employees effortlessly

collaborate on projects using Microsoft Teams, sharing documents and insights in real time. Tenant interactions are a breeze, thanks to streamlined processes powered by Dynamics 365. In addition, employees have access to TSG's training platform, TSG Academy, which helps employees to become certified in various Microsoft applications.

The result is a seamless experience for both tenants and employees.

Microsoft's comprehensive suite of apps

At the heart of the Microsoft-first approach lies the Microsoft ecosystem, a powerful suite of applications and services designed to empower organisations during their digital transformation journeys.

With a Microsoft-first approach, housing providers replace the headaches that result from having to buy different standalone and disconnected SaaS applications to augment their housing management system. Instead, when you have a Microsoft ecosystem at your hands, you can deploy natively-connected full solutions in a cloud and low/no code environment. This removes those headaches of worrying about security and trying to get all of your different applications talking to each other.

Adopting a Microsoft-first approach can transform your operations. It aligns with the core principles of transformation by providing the tools and ecosystem needed to modernise processes, enhance collaboration and deliver superior customer experiences.

Steven Osprey is the partnerships and alliances director at TSG.



AI – Overhyped, unstoppable & transformational

Aidan Dunphy, Chief Product Officer, Esuasive

The most over-used term in 2023 must have been 'AI'. It's magic dust sprinkled over mundane software, imbuing it with superpowers. Closest to topping out the 'peak of inflated expectations' in Gartner's 2023 'hype cycle for emerging technologies' are generative AI and AI-augmented software engineering.

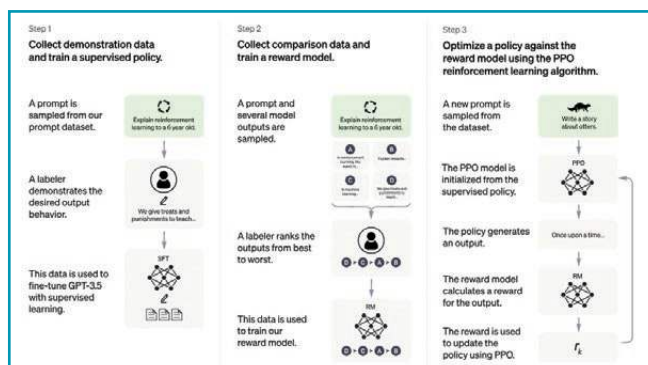
As Microsoft tech expert Mat Velloso said in 2018, "If it's written in Python, it's probably machine learning. If it's written in PowerPoint, it's probably AI." He was poking fun at the prevalence of the term in sales pitches by and to people with little technical understanding (see McKinsey: "What every CEO should know about generative AI"); make no mistake, AI is the new blockchain.

Self-built AI...

The term 'AI' itself isn't helpful, but as illustrated by one unattributed 'twittersverse' genius who defined it as "a poor choice of words in 1954", it's by no means a new thing. I myself attempted to build a natural language processor in BASIC and 6502 machine code on my Commodore 64 in 1984, inspired by a piece in Micro Live (or another of those great BBC programmes presented by Ian McNaught-Davis...). Suffice to say, I failed, lacking a sufficient knowledge of language processing and the computing resources to automate it.

I never lost my fascination with AI and I was very excited by the ChatGPT launch in November 2022. Sadly, in the intervening period I hadn't much deepened my technical skills in this area, and have only a cursory understanding of how it actually works. This diagram illustrates the iterative fine-tuning process using Proximal Policy Organisation (PPO). Note to self: must read up on that...

Notwithstanding my superficial tech chops, I've been all over the new breed of AI toys as they've arrived. A particular favourite is Fireflies.ai which I've used since early 2021 to record, transcribe and analyse video calls.



OpenAI's iterative fine-tuning using PPO to create ChatGPT

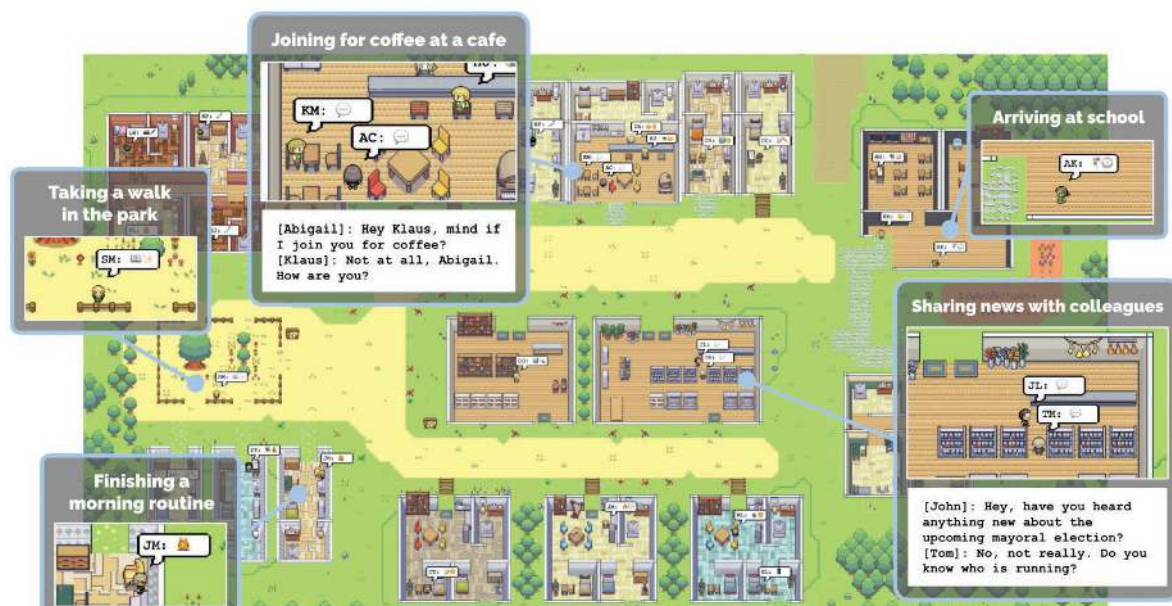
It's saved loads of time, and probably loads of trees. I got into Dall-E and ChatGPT early doors, and pushed them to their limits.

Dumbness of the crowd

I have to say, once I got past the breathless excitement of a thousand AI founders, things started to look samey – lots of generative text/image clumsily shoe-horned into an existing SaaS, the only benefit being saving you tabbing over to ChatGPT or yet another meeting recorder or diary organiser. I tried using generative tools for branding, and it was awful. I tried to develop novel ideas using ChatGPT, and found that you soon reach the 'last page of the internet'; I coined the term 'dumbness of the crowd' for this phenomenon, in which generative AI dutifully summarises the mediocrity typical of 99.9 per cent. As ever, average in, average out.

That said, one area in which AI has already made huge strides is the concept of 'copilots' for software engineering that can dramatically accelerate the process of cranking out code. I recently used it to generate a simple web app (HTML/CSS) and it turned something that I'd have muddled along with for several days into a two-hour job.

I also learned/remembered a lot along the way, as I altered its output to match more closely what I was looking for. This concept has inspired Microsoft to use the term Copilot for its own AI augmentations. So far, Microsoft's innovations seem to be focused mainly on generative text augmentations of their 365 applications,



Some autonomous AI agents hanging out; no culture war yet, AFAIK...

and that offers the promise of more rapid product evolution and faster delivery for social housing software vendors such as Esuasive, and consequently for our customers.

Conversational Power Apps

A really interesting Copilot project available now in the US uses AI to create Power Apps conversationally. That said, it remains to be seen how it will surpass previous attempts to put coders out of their jobs.

More, ahem, experienced practitioners will remember so-called 4th generation languages (4GLs) that were supposed to enable software to be created from natural language. Spoiler alert: they didn't work. There was just no way to easily bridge the gap between what you want the software to solve, and making it. More recently, I've eagerly waited for a conversation-to-code AI platform to emerge, but am yet to find anything that works end-to-end. Some links in the chain include Uizard's Autodesigner, Kombai.ai and Quest.ai. Maybe the new Power Apps Copilot is it!

In truth, I think AI hasn't really got started yet; it's artificial but not yet intelligent enough. However, I think we'll change our view of this over the next decade. An inkling of what's to come can be seen in a Stanford University experiment which created a sandbox for AI simulacra of autonomous humans inspired by the game The Sims, showing how it's perfectly conceivable for AI-powered agents to make decisions about how to accomplish tasks and then get on and do them. See above image.

You can try this yourself: AutoGPT (<https://news.agpt.co/>, watch out for impostors...) is an open-source project enabling the creation of autonomous agents that can learn how to accomplish a task by analysing and researching it on the internet, then performing it step-by-step without needing continuous human prompting.

You might not call this 'intelligent' behaviour, but for me it's certainly a game-changer that will revolutionise IT. Today, IT solutions are built by humans, based on an (often flawed) understanding of the needs of other humans,

and then are used by more humans who may not enjoy the experience or play the part expected of them. It's an expensive, time-consuming and notoriously fragile process with insufficient focus on validated outcomes.



Software-delivered outcomes

Esuasive sets itself apart from legacy vendors by focusing on outcomes, and we believe it won't be long before software-delivered outcomes can be created far more cheaply

and quickly using AI. Nik Sachdeva, a programme manager for Microsoft, recently suggested the use of AI agents to automate product development throughout. They would research and interpret needs, create designs, build and ship code, take feedback and continuously improve. All without taking any time off or introducing malicious code to get back at the boss (I'd hope).

Why should this AI-led approach work better than 4GLs? Because AutoGPT et al can be used as a specification tool with a far superior ability to understand and question what we're aiming for. Coupled with the ability to automate internet research, this could eliminate the "well, that's what I thought you wanted" phenomenon, and hugely speed up feedback cycles. I can't wait to see how this develops, and Esuasive will be investing heavily in this AI-augmented, outcome-driven delivery model in the coming year.

Aidan Dunphy is the chief product officer at Esuasive.

Esuasive



Digital assistance and digital adoption

Matthew Hedges, Products Director, TechLabs London

Wherever you are on your digital transformation journey, you've probably spent a lot of money on digital solutions across your housing organisation, or plan to do so; housing management, asset management, customer service, repairs and maintenance... the list goes on.

But how do you know you're getting the most from your investments, and are you confident that your staff are following your processes and using those systems as you intended? It can be a minefield and it only gets harder over time.

At TechLabs London we've recently been talking a lot about 'digital assistance' and how it can help in this area. But what is digital assistance and how could it help you?

There are already many forms of digital assistants in our personal lives, such as voice-enabled consumer products like Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri. But we're not talking about 'assistants' here, rather the principle of getting 'assistance' when and where you need it in the process of your work and within your existing software investments.

We're going to explore two key topics which are both readily available in the market – AI copilots and digital adoption solutions.

AI copilots

AI copilots are all about providing you and your teams with support, rather than taking over your role (think less Skynet and more the advent of the web). They're intended to make your life easier, more efficient and provide you with new ways to use your data and other information to add value. They are focused on changing the way we interact with technology, rather than trying to replace it (or us).

ChatGPT is an example of what's known as a 'large language model' (LLM) with a chat user interface on top of it to allow you to interact with it through natural language.

It's great if you want to write a nice poem or generate content from an enormous, pre-trained pool of information, but how does it help you in your day-to-day work life?



This is where I believe Microsoft has cornered the market. It has focused its attention on creating and launching 'AI copilots' which focus on tangible outcomes. Through well-worded 'prompts' to such AI copilots within your existing line-of-business applications, you can start to harness the power of those LLMs to generate useful insights, draft well-written emails, summarise transcripts of recorded calls and otherwise make your life easier.

As an example of where AI copilots can help you to leverage your existing investments, let's look at our websites, SharePoint libraries and knowledge bases. It used to take weeks to program a new customer or staff chatbot (what we in the Microsoft world used to call Power Virtual Agents). We needed to map out the various pathways a user might go down to avoid those horrible experiences of the product not knowing how to respond. Then you'd have to integrate it with your website, Sharepoint or other sites and spend a lot of time fine-tuning the experience.

Now, with ChatGPT-enabled AI copilots, you can 'prompt' a new AI copilot to look at your published website content, SharePoint library, knowledge base or other data source, and it can be up and running, providing accurate and grounded responses within minutes.

TechLabs London was involved in helping to shape the AI copilot functionality for Microsoft Dynamics Field Services to generate Work Orders, schedule them and confirm the outcome to customers, all within an existing Outlook or Teams experience.

These AI copilots are a way of fundamentally changing how you interact with your existing technology. They can be set up relatively easily and can break down the digital barriers many of your staff or customers may have when transacting with your existing technologies.

Making the most of your technology isn't just about embracing advancements in AI. The other topic we want to explore is digital adoption solutions, an area that we think is massively under-valued in the housing sector.

Digital adoption solutions

A digital adoption solution (DAS) empowers individuals and organisations to embrace and make the most out of their technology. It allows you to create in-app onboarding and training content, interactive walk-throughs, tool tips, task lists, embedded knowledge content and more, to improve the adoption of your digital applications and processes. In short, it's all about fostering a knowledge-sharing culture.

While you might embark on a transformation to change the type of software you use or look to consolidate your solutions into a platform-based approach, end-user adoption still won't happen if there are underlying problems with your training tactics and support once you've gone live with a new product.

This is where digital adoption solutions can help. They work by walking a user through necessary business processes across your technology, providing an interactive and contextual overlay on top of those applications.

This real-time training leads end-users through tasks and workflows at the exact time of their need. With ongoing support inside the product(s) your users are accessing every day, digital adoption solutions eliminate the need for those users to learn and remember individual functions for each programme on their own. Instead, they can use self-help tools to remind them of what to do, when they need it.

Digital adoption solutions can provide you with the digital assistance your teams need, when and where they need it most. With the right solution, you can massively help with the onboarding of new staff to understand how to use your products, provide them with real-time, in-app, task-based training and knowledge to reduce the need for support and ensure service consistency, not to mention helping to manage the release of new technologies within your business.

If these are areas of interest for your organisation, our iProperty Cloud housing platform could help. We've partnered with a world-class digital adoption solution provider that we'll be sharing more news about at the Housing Technology 2024 conference (05-07 March, Nottingham). We're also right at the heart of the latest AI copilot innovations, working closely with Microsoft's product engineering teams to influence their new offerings to work for the housing sector.

Matthew Hedges is the products director at TechLabs London.

CTG takes on A2Dominion's ISP access burden

A2Dominion turned to Complete Technology Group (CTG) to handle the ever-growing number of requests it was receiving from separate ISPs wanting to enter its properties to connect tenants to their own broadband services.

CTG takes over housing providers' burden of managing ISP access requests and overseeing the subsequent digital infrastructure works.

CTG handled all communications with the ISPs wanting to serve A2Dominion's tenants. CTG's services were free to A2Dominion; CTG is paid by the ISPs to cover any reasonable costs incurred. All work carried out by the ISPs was overseen by CTG, with audits completed for every installation.

For A2Dominion's multi-dwelling units (MDUs), CTG used its sister company, Complete Fibre, to manage the planning and installation of a single, open-access 'plug-and-play' digital infrastructure for each MDU.

This plug-and-play solution allows multiple ISPs to connect to the infrastructure, ensuring choice for residents without each ISP needing to enter the building to install its own fibre infrastructure.

Power Platform showdown – Dynamics 365 vs. Power Apps



Chris Roberts, Director, E&F Solutions

Many housing providers are grappling with the decision of whether to build their core processes using Microsoft Dynamics 365 or Power Apps. What's the difference, and how could the decisions made now affect the organisation in the future? Let's start by looking at the two contenders.

Power Apps

Power Apps are low-code apps that can be built by anyone to connect to various data sources and create custom solutions. They can be canvas, model-driven, or portal apps. Licences are (generally) cheaper and more flexible than Dynamics 365 but the apps themselves may need more maintenance and development.

Dynamics 365

Dynamics 365 is a cloud-based platform that combines CRM and ERP applications along with productivity and AI tools. It has a suite of apps that cover various business functions, such as sales, customer service and finance. It has more out-of-the-box functionality and updates than Power Apps but licencing costs often make it more expensive.

But did you know these contenders both sit within Microsoft's low-code Power Platform? The platform comprises:

- Power BI for creating and sharing interactive data visualisations and reports;
- Power Pages for creating web pages and portals without coding;
- Power Automate for automating workflows and processes across applications;
- Power Virtual Agents for creating chatbots that can handle natural-language conversations.

Power Platform is more than the sum of its parts. It allows you to integrate the different components with each other, often pulling from one data source (although they can link to other sources), known as the Microsoft Dataverse.

Microsoft Dataverse

The Dataverse is also part of the platform; think of it as one big pot of data that can be structured in a way that enables all the tools in Power Platform to sing from the same hymn sheet.

How does this help you choose between PowerApps and Dynamics 365? Well, with both Power Apps and Dynamics 365 able to push and pull information from the Dataverse, there is a third hybrid option.

Flex between both...

When working through a business case, housing providers often assume that they need to choose one or the other, leading to perfectly-justified questions about cost, timescales, maintenance and so on. But why not use both?

Let's walk through a scenario. A housing officer completes an estate inspection using a Power App on their mobile device – they take photos and make notes within the app while on site, with follow-up problems logged and triggering tasks to an office-based team.

The office-based team use Dynamics to look at the number of inspections completed, any follow-up actions needed and their due dates. They have a dashboard that surfaces the data and a business process flow to walk them through the rest of the required actions. Because they're using the 'full fat' Dynamics app, they'll be able to access additional functionalities such as Microsoft Copilot.

In this scenario, the housing officer(s) would have the cheaper Power App licence and an app-specific to a mobile device. However, the office-based team may be better off using the (more expensive) Dynamics licence so they can navigate through the rest of the process and manage larger pieces of data such as the total number of estate inspections completed and the outstanding actions.

By understanding the processes you want to improve, the staff involved and their various touch points, you'll be able to use the right tool for the job. To get you going, I suggest the following:

1. Understand the strategy you're trying to achieve/ business need you're trying to fulfil;
2. Identify the processes that support the strategy;
3. Sort out the data – it will sit in the Dataverse and be used with any part of the Power Platform you decide to run with;
4. Plan the best solution to manage those processes, but be prepared to switch between Dynamics and Power Apps as you move from one process to the next.

Chris Roberts is a director at E&F Solutions.



Minimising the risks of generative AI

Graham Hosking, Solutions Director for Data Security & AI, Quorum Cyber



Cyber security remains a major concern for most organisations and the rapid advancements we've seen in generative AI this year haven't made the ongoing challenge of protecting assets and data any easier.

The most common way that cybercriminals target housing providers is through phishing attacks. Generative AI makes it easier and faster to create convincing fake videos, voice messages and emails, and low-skilled criminals can now get their hands on advanced tools to help them trick housing staff and their third-party suppliers.

Accidental data loss

There's also the risk of accidental data loss from staff themselves. ChatGPT and its AI peers are a cause for concern because AI-generated chatbots present a significant security risk. Put simply, staff may be tempted to enter confidential data into a chatbot to help them complete their work faster. But they, and the organisation they work for, will have absolutely no idea what the chatbot will do with the data.

AI works by harvesting everything it is shown and using it for a later date. It becomes better informed, and therefore more useful, every time someone gives it data. So, if one of your employees puts sensitive data into a chatbot, it might resurface anywhere else in the world at a later date for another individual using that chatbot. AI doesn't respect confidentiality unless the rules are built into the system.

While this may at first cause a major headache, these tools simply add another risk. And as the old adage goes, necessity is the mother of invention. Many of the major technology players have been working on solutions to this problem; while AI has leapt forward, so have advances in tools to detect AI and protect users against it.

Business and reputational risks

As we see ever-more AI technologies being developed, launched and licensed, the problem will proliferate, and some of them will inevitably be controlled by powers who are less benign than OpenAI (the creators of ChatGPT) seem to be.

There are very significant business and reputational risks presented by the entire world of AI, and housing providers should act now to protect themselves against these risks.

Game-changing solutions

At Quorum Cyber, we believe that while developments in AI tools might aid adversaries in the short term, the newest wave of tools will actually help security professionals to level the playing field in the longer term.

Our current focus is on comprehensively evaluating a global technology leader's latest AI product to ensure that, once available, it will be optimally used by our customers.

Education is extremely important to help housing providers' staff to use AI tools internally to protect their IT estates and their data, reducing their dependence on public AI models such as ChatGPT or Claude. In the near future, an AI-empowered workforce will be a major asset in the fight against cybercrime and accidental data losses.

Graham Hosking is the solutions director for data security and AI at Quorum Cyber.

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