

# HOUSING TECHNOLOGY



HOUSING | IT | TELECOMS | BUSINESS | ECOLOGY



## DATA MATTERS 2022

13 September 2022

THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

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# *IT & Business Recruitment*

Specialist recruitment services,  
housing knowledge & technology  
choices, internal processes and  
cultural ethos



### Housing management

Golden threads, SaaS, data management, asset management & unified platforms

### Finance management

Arrears, universal credit, income management & debt recovery

### Customer management

CX-centric IT, online defects & repairs, fuel poverty & residents' voices

### Infrastructure

Ransomware, decarbonisation & disrepair, IoT, energy management & IT service desks

### General

GIS & mapping, real-time tracking & greener housing



### The E-State of Housing 2022/23

After a hiatus of a couple of years, Housing Technology's '**E-State of Housing 2022/23' market intelligence report** is back, with the aim of giving all social housing providers wide-ranging insights into their peers' business and technology plans over the next 2-5 years.

Across all sizes of housing providers, our forthcoming report will cover:

- *Future business plans and the technologies used to underpin them;*
- *Trends in business applications and IT infrastructure usage*
- *Barriers to better application integration;*
- *Changing IT delivery models;*
- *Obstacles to improved data management;*
- *Dealing with regulatory compliance;*
- *Changing IT spending patterns;*
- *Property, tenant and staffing (incl. IT) metrics.*

The report will be a collaborative, sector-wide effort; in order to compile the underlying data for the report, we need as many of you as possible to complete our online survey at [housingtech.typeform.com/housingreport22](https://housingtech.typeform.com/housingreport22). We reckon it shouldn't take you longer than 10 minutes to do so, and every response will add to the accuracy and richness of the final report (all data will be anonymised).

In return for completing the survey, all respondents will be sent a copy of the final report as soon as it is published in September. Please visit [housingtech.typeform.com/housingreport22](https://housingtech.typeform.com/housingreport22) as soon as you can and take this opportunity to add your input to the definitive report on you and your peers' technology plans for the next 2-5 years.

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# Forthcoming events

**HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™**

**DATA MATTERS 2022**

**Housing Technology Data Matters 2022**

**13 September**  
The British Museum, London

housing-technology.com

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**Housing Technology 2023**

Annual conference & executive forum  
In-person & digital broadcast

**08-09 March 2023**

NEW VENUE

East Midlands Conference Centre, Nottingham

**HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™ 2023** CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

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Specialist recruitment services, housing knowledge & technology choices, internal processes and cultural ethos

**TECHNOLOGY SHOWCASE** Please see [housing-technology.com/showcase](https://housing-technology.com/showcase) for more information



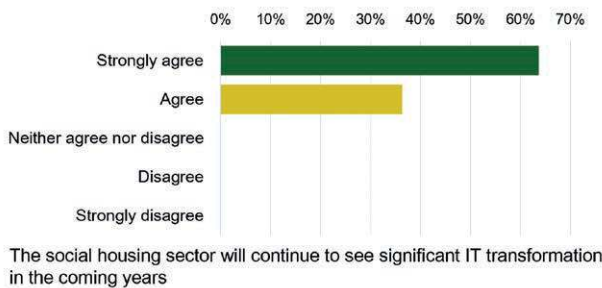


# IntoZetta's data in housing annual survey results – Part two

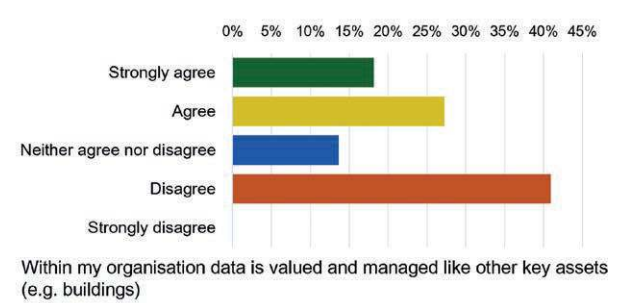
Dan Yarnold, Director, IntoZetta

*During February and March 2022, IntoZetta contacted its existing software and services clients, and organisations from the broader social housing sector, and asked them to complete our annual housing data survey. The survey was designed to gather opinions and stimulate debate on the current use of data within housing providers, the common issues faced managing that data, and the specific challenges that those create.*

We published the results from the first four questions in our survey in the previous (May 2022) edition of Housing Technology; as promised, we are now publishing our findings from the next four questions. The results provide an interesting perspective on data challenges across the sector, highlighting the areas where a common perspective exists, and those where differing opinions have been shared.



The respondents all agreed or strongly agreed that IT transformation would continue on a significant scale within the social housing sector for years to come. This result was unsurprising given the industry wide factors that are fuelling transformation. The Social Housing sector is continuing the journey towards a smaller number of larger housing providers, which on the one hand promises economies of scale, but on the other makes transformation and rationalisation of the system landscape necessary.



More specifically, data transformation is being driven by the need for better insights and more accurate data sources. The Building Safety Bill and other legislation will drive the need for asset data that is complete, accurate, and available – an outcome which will require significant effort and investments for the majority of social housing providers.

This question split the respondents almost down the middle, with nearly the same number agreeing (45 per cent) as disagreeing (41 per cent) with the statement. This question relates to the management of data within the respondents' organisations, so the responses might indicate differences in the value that organisations attach to data, and it may also indicate that different types of data are managed differently within the same organisation.

If the social housing sector wants to manage its data assets in the same way as its built assets, it needs to understand where all data assets exist, what they are used

Together. Today. Tomorrow.

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## Process driven

Processes are handled in a more efficient and accurate way



## Analysis

Actionable insights



## Integration

Seamless integration: both with our own solutions and externally



## Automation

Making core processes simple through automation

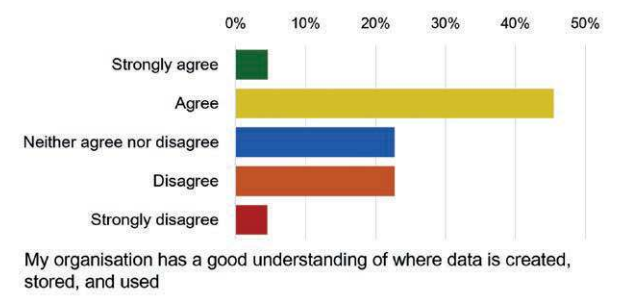
# Aareon QL Yuneo™

our next generation SaaS housing management system

for, how and when they were created, and the investment that is needed to maintain acceptable quality. While some organisations that IntoZetta works with may be already travelling down this road, others are only just beginning to plan their journeys.

Half of the respondents felt that their organisation had a good understanding of where data is created, stored and used, but a similar percentage of respondents weren't so confident.

The creation and storage of data is accelerating across all sectors, and this leads to challenges for IT departments which are usually trying to avoid the duplication of data, the storage of unnecessary data, and data held beyond their core applications.

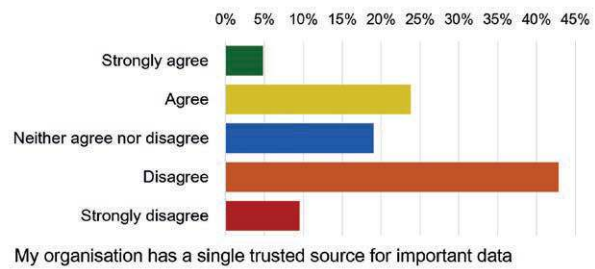


Understanding and documenting 'data lineage' across an organisation can be a time consuming and difficult task, but tools do exist that can accelerate this process, and allow this often-complex map to be documented in a consumable format to support activities such as planning and change-impact analysis.

Understanding the use of data can be a little more challenging than it first appears. IntoZetta consultants often work with housing clients to create a 'data fingerprint' for key processes across the organisation. Understanding the data that fuels each process can be an important step in understanding which data is used most widely, supports the greatest volume of key activities and teams, and therefore has the most value to the organisation. It can also help to identify how long data should be retained, and which data has little usage and/or utility and can therefore be archived or deleted.

Half of respondents felt that their organisation didn't have a single trusted source of important data.

Having supported many data migration projects in the housing sector, IntoZetta consultants have first-hand experience of the fragmentation and proliferation of data within housing providers' core business applications, as well as large volumes of local databases, spreadsheets and other documents.



The creation of a single trusted 'golden asset record' from fragmented data sources of varying quality is often the most technically-complex part of any data migration project. Identifying accurate data and trusted sources can be a laborious process which needs technical expertise as well as the specialist knowledge that may only exist in the heads of a very small number of employees.

Several of IntoZetta's housing clients are undertaking transformation programmes where the creation of a single trusted data source is an important outcome.

Resolving historic data management issues is only part of the solution, and a key step in the design and implementation of the new system should be a thorough analysis of the things that were wrong with its predecessor.

Why has data quality degraded across certain data entities? Why has data become fragmented across several sources? And why have so many teams and employees felt the need to create their own solutions outside the core system landscape? These are just some of the questions that should be asked to help avoid data management history repeating itself.

In the September 2022 edition of Housing Technology, IntoZetta will be discussing the responses to questions about the management of data held in documents and shared drives, and the challenges of managing data quality.

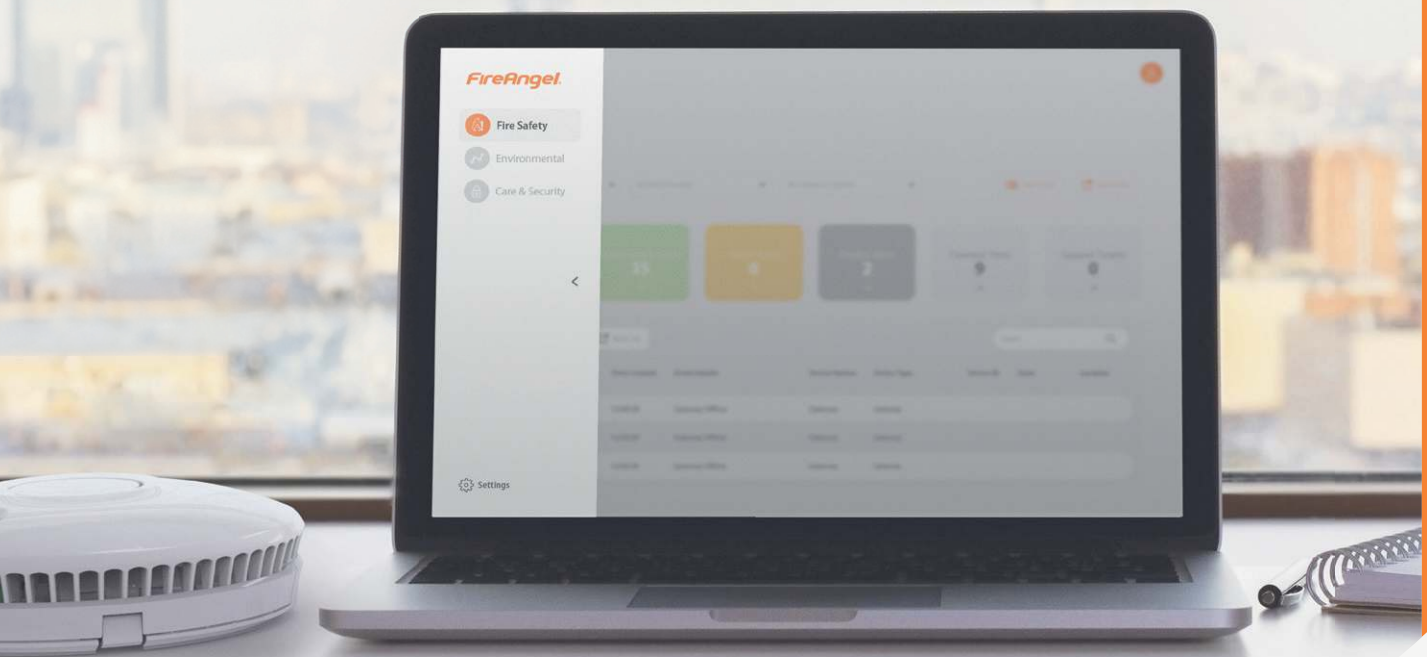
*Dan Yarnold is a director of IntoZetta.*



IoT powered resident protection

# Enabling active risk management

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



○ Security

○ Environmental

○ Safety

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# Smarter SaaS – Connecting the dots

Tina Kennedy, Head of Digital, Aareon UK

*We've been busy gathering the collective knowledge and experience from ourselves and, more importantly, our customers and distilling it into how we do things. Not just to chase the latest technology advancements or hit the next product release, but to fundamentally think about how and what we create in future.*

## Going back to basics

We've been busy going back to basics, primarily asking our customers the all-important question: what should the solutions that we create actually provide at an elementary level?

Our customers consistently told us the same thing; they wanted Aareon to focus on the processes of what they do, not what buttons they needed to press. They didn't care what bits of software were used for 'process A'; they just wanted 'process A' to run smoothly from end-to-end with as little hassle as possible. They helped us identify seven common threads that are uniformly applicable:

- **Data** – Having all the information that you need when and where you need it.
- **Integration** – Making all the tools that you use in a given process just slot into place, whether we provide them or not.
- **Insight** – If data is the things that you know, then insight is the ability to put that knowledge to use.
- **Automation** – Control is important, but you shouldn't have to do everything yourself.
- **Mobility and agility** – Only people who haven't been paying attention for the last couple of years don't understand the importance of being able to access processes wherever they need to.
- **Omni-channel** – Whether that's different devices or platforms, a choice of access point is vital.
- **Differentiation** – Customers are at the heart of your organisation and the ability to service their differing

needs in the best possible way is still paramount. It seems simple when you lay it out like that, but it requires a lot of work to deliver it.

We started with QL Yuneo, our new software-as-a-service (SaaS) housing management solution. This was obviously an important and exciting step for us. You probably already know why SaaS solutions are the way forward – a fully-managed service that's hosted in the cloud adds value from a support perspective, from a security perspective, and from a cost perspective. In short, SaaS is by far the best way forward for any organisation, but that's not the only reason we created QL Yuneo.

One of main reasons we created QL Yuneo is because it provides the infrastructure, flexibility and agility for us to remain focused on those seven threads and retain the freedom to innovate for the future. QL Yuneo has been a long time in the making, but we wanted to make sure we did it right.

## Avoiding the integration pitfall

And by doing it right, we mean avoiding the big pitfall when it comes to a SaaS solution – integration. Signing up to a sparkling new SaaS system in a state-of-the-art cloud environment is great, but it's probably not the only solution you have. And what if you need those other solutions? You'll still need them to talk to that solution in the cloud and to each other. This is where people start to talk about web services and APIs solving that problem, and they're right as long as you have the expertise on how to manage those web services and APIs. Because if you





don't, then it's like having a new stereo installed in your car but without having any idea about how to set up the Bluetooth connectivity; it's usable and valuable but it's not using all the additional elements you want and therefore isn't solving the full problem.

The alternative is putting everything into one solution or with one provider and sacrificing your ability to choose a better-fitting option. Most providers will support most of your processes but ticking the box to say they can do it doesn't necessarily mean they can do it well. Every solution provider has their own strengths and weaknesses and you should have the ability to choose the option that works best for you.

That's where iPaaS comes in as a cloud-based integration platform, delivering system connectivity as a cloud computing service. We know housing management systems can't do everything on their own and other solutions need to be integrated into them.

You may be surprised to hear that sometimes those other solutions aren't always provided by us – a shocker, I know! But just because they aren't provided by us, it doesn't mean that integration should be difficult, bespoke or expensive.

### Dot-to-dot integration

iPaaS starts with the process already configured; you just join the dots with the data sources you want connected with it. It can be as hands-on or as hands-off as you like. If you want the freedom to write your own processes,

integrations and services, that's fine with us. On the other hand, if you just want to slot in a new tool to streamline a process, then that can also be done without hassle.

We hope that there's an Aareon Smart World solution that supports your end-to-end processes in the way that you need them to, but if there isn't then you have the freedom and flexibility to look at the wider market or even build your own tools without worrying if it will plug into QL Yuneo.

We've started to share this vision and these solutions with our customers, one of which is South Kesteven District Council. Cllr Robert Reid, cabinet member for housing and property at the council, said, "By choosing Aareon, we expect to reap the benefits of a fully integrated system, enabling our colleagues to deliver excellent omni-channel services to our customers via traditional and digital channels, meeting current and future needs.

"As a landlord, we've shifted to exploit the opportunities that digital channels provide to enhance our service delivery, helping us to achieve our priority of delivering housing that meets the needs of all residents."

We've been busy listening for a long time, and now we're ready to talk about it.

*Tina Kennedy is head of digital at Aareon UK.*





# Extending the golden thread

Maintaining the financial profile of your assets in real time

Nick Hill, CEO, Esuasive

*While the golden thread is at the forefront of most housing compliance managers' minds, housing providers' strategic plans often underestimate the effort required to maintain an accurate financial profile of assets.*

Perhaps this is inevitable in most organisations, where asset, housing and finance teams chug along in parallel, relying on poorly-connected systems and custom-built interfaces, with spreadsheets required to keep the data (sort of) in synch.

Imagine how different this would be on a unified platform that bridges the gap between operations and finance, especially in the critical areas of rents, repairs and asset accounting.

## The case for change

In recent years, Esuasive has worked with several housing providers which were looking for a solution to help them to keep their accounting records aligned with operational processes and physical assets. Integrations and interfaces can help but, much like painting the Forth Bridge, keeping operations and finance data in synch can seem like a never-ending task.

We have been wondering why this so often seems to be the case. Our conclusion is that this is as much about operations and finance generally being seen as separate business functions as it is about systems and data.

Energised by this insight, and in collaboration with one of our customers (an innovative housing provider in South Wales), we embarked on a finance transformation programme last year with the goal of eliminating the mind-numbing reconciliations, data transfers and re-keying of data which punctuate so many accounting processes.

The programme's ambition is to respond to normal business activities, such as additions and disposals, planned maintenance and repairs, voids, rents and service charges, by triggering and automating the accounting processes for revenue recognition, purchase orders, payables, receivables, VAT, depreciation and fixed assets.

By moving to a set of integrated business processes, our aim is to deliver real-time accounting, enhanced

budgeting, faster accounts production and better financial planning.

## Extending the golden thread

The government defines the golden thread as something that requires "information that allows someone to understand", plus "the information management to ensure the information is accurate, easily understandable, can be accessed by those who need it and is up to date".

*Golden thread = information that is easily understood + information that is well managed*

The guidance goes on to lay out a set of information management principles outlining how organisations will need to operate in the future:

- Accurate and trusted;
- Culture change;
- Single point of truth;
- Accountable;
- Understandable, simple to access and consistent;
- Longevity and durability of information;
- Relevant and proportionate.

Of course, the original focus and genesis of the 'golden thread' was on building safety, but after discussions with our customer's finance director, the idea crystallised that these same principles could be more universally applied to bring asset management, housing management and finance closer together, with particular emphasis on the finance function not getting left behind.

Easily said, of course, but in reality that means systems integration, master data management and process change will be necessary, as foreshadowed in the culture change principle which states that organisations "will require increased competence and capability, different working practices, updated processes and a focus on information management and control. The golden thread

should be considered an enabler for better and more collaborative working". The challenge is exacerbated when finance is, at best, only partially connected to asset management and other operational functions.

### Putting theory into practice

Although the challenge appeared daunting to begin with, we had a dawning realisation that it wouldn't need to be complex and difficult if approached patiently and methodically.

A high-level review of the systems used in our customer's basic accounting processes revealed several different systems, with bolt-ons, extensions, integrations, interfaces and offline spreadsheets further complicating the picture, leading to:

- Master and reference data being stored in more than one place;
- Systems with a narrow, specialised purpose;
- Few people who knew in detail how the systems worked;
- Poor or non-existent documentation;
- Someone in finance holding things together with spreadsheets.

It quickly became apparent that adopting the golden thread principles to transform our customer's finance processes would be a monumental challenge without first addressing the systems fragmentation. To address this, because our customer already ran its housing operations on Microsoft Dynamics, a strategic decision was made to replace its existing accounting systems with Dynamics 365 Business Central.

Given the complexity of the finance systems' landscape, the customer's mantra throughout project initiation was, "keep it simple!" The good news is, systems fragmentation comes with a silver lining: an accounting platform comprised of many different components meant that the core ledgers could be rapidly swapped without the need for huge changes to their satellites. This has indeed allowed us to keep things simple by using an incremental approach to process change.

The overall focus for the project is the elimination of unnecessary data transfers, file uploads, re-keying of data and tedious reconciliations. Taking responsive repairs as an example of one of the main 'asset events' which needs to trigger specific accounting processes, this works in practice as follows:

#### 1. Data simplification

We have eliminated data duplication and ambiguity by formalising the responsibility for maintaining supplier accounts, SoRs, prices, property reference numbers (UPRNs), project and location codes and so on.

The majority of these are now wholly managed in the housing system, with finance-only elements (such as suppliers' bank accounts and payment terms) controlled by finance. By implementing the principle that data is

held once, stored once and managed once, we've been able to support and streamline our customer's repairs processes as they move through the relevant business functions.

#### 2. Finance process automation

Building on this data rationalisation, operational activity is no longer passed to the finance team to be manually recorded in an accounting system. Instead, repairs case data is now fluidly exchanged between operational and accounting teams. Instead of re-keying the data, we've built the financial profile of the transaction into the operational process so that repairs accounting is fully automated.

#### 3. Accounting

When a job is first issued to a contractor, a financial purchase order (PO) is automatically created and the financial commitment established. When the job is completed, the PO is available for matching, a liability is crystallised and control passes fully over to finance, the operational side having been completed.

Changes and updates to the repair order are automatically reflected in the PO. Thanks to the powerful data and process integration, accounting is smooth and accurate, period-end accruals and provisions are straightforward, and the cost allocation makes for simplified service-charge analysis and recharging.

#### Summary

By capturing 'asset events' (periodic rent and service charges, acquisitions, disposals, planned maintenance, repairs, voids and so on) to trigger the relevant accounting processes, such as revenue recognition, PO processing, contractor management, payables, VAT and asset depreciation processes, we're ensuring that the financial profile of assets always reflects the physical, automatically and in real time.

Our customer's finance team is also discovering a raft of other benefits from operating on a single Microsoft platform, including the advanced capabilities of Business Central and Power BI which are helping them to deliver the transformation and become true business partners.

*Nick Hill is the CEO of Esuasive.*

## Esuasive





# Becoming lean and scalable in 2022

Satpal Biant, Head of Public Sector (UKI), SAP

*It's no secret that the UK's housing providers are under strain. Despite the fact that they're responsible for approximately 10 per cent of the UK's total rental stock, they've fallen victim to a series of budget cuts, while the increasing cost of living and the pandemic have placed ever-greater demands on their services. The need to run lean and efficient core business services while delivering for tenants is now the choice for housing providers between long-term survival or falling behind targets.*

In short, housing providers need to pivot their operations and look again at their efficiency; in this article, I'll therefore be looking at the benefits of adopting a 'unified platform' technology to achieve this goal.

## **Legacy IT & technical debt**

Unlike other sectors which have been able to move faster with the digital curve, many housing providers are still beset with legacy IT and technical debt. Having adopted a disaggregated approach to onboarding new solutions, their business applications, such as housing, repairs, scheduling and tenant communications, are often siloed from each other and are unable to communicate and share data.

It's vital that housing providers recognise the value of moving their business processes onto one unified platform in the cloud and understand how this can unlock real-time data analytics. For example, with increased access to data from different business operations, they can switch from a reactive to a proactive approach to property management, addressing common issues before they arise and mitigate against expensive and unexpected problems.

## **Pandemic aftershocks**

In the wake of the pandemic, many housing providers have been left with empty properties and rising costs – a situation that will only be exacerbated with the ongoing rise in the cost of living.

A recent study by accountants RSM reported that almost two-thirds of housing providers have seen an increase in arrears and a rise in the number of void properties in their housing portfolios due to the pandemic. The same survey also highlighted how residents feel that the services provided by housing providers are getting worse, with maintenance and repairs taking longer to fix and difficulties getting through to housing providers' customer support teams. These factors all indicate a worrying downward trend across the sector.

But there is a way this can be overcome. Housing providers have often been behind the curve when it comes to implementing new technologies due to either limited funds or the sheer size of their operations. The impact of the past two years has highlighted the need for greater efficiency and better communication; this can easily be achieved by deploying the right technologies – it's not always the case of burning through budgets.

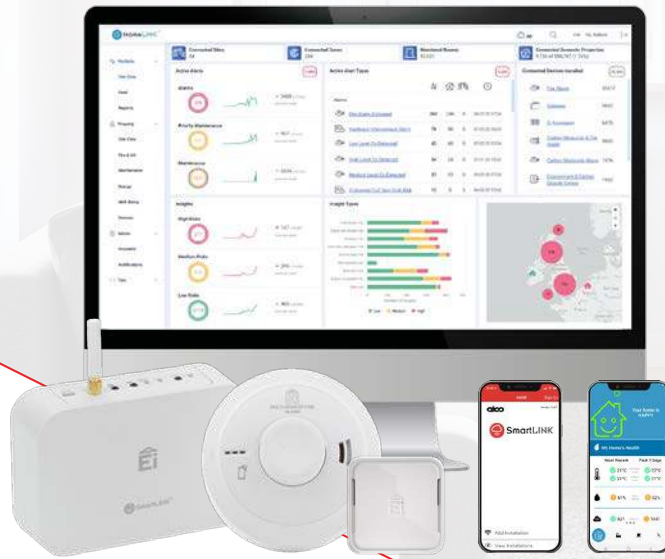
## **Instant insights**

The right technologies can give housing providers almost-instant insights into their entire collection of properties and tenants. By using real-time data analytics in the cloud, they'll be able to make operational predictions and be proactive before something goes wrong, such as identifying when a boiler is likely to break or when a tenant is likely to go into arrears.



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SAFER HOMES.**



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[www.aico.co.uk/smart-home](http://www.aico.co.uk/smart-home)



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Our 3000 Series offers full circle Fire and CO protection, wirelessly connecting to the SmartLINK Gateway via Radio Frequency for remote whole-system data monitoring.



**HomeLINK Environmental Sensors**

Monitor temperature, humidity and Carbon Dioxide to gain insights into indoor environmental conditions to create better maintained, healthier, energy efficient homes.



**SmartLINK Gateway and App**

The SmartLINK App enables quick and easy installation of alarms and sensors with SmartLINK technology, while the Gateway is the central hub for data, extracting information from connected devices.



**The HomeLINK Dashboard**

Data is extracted from all connected alarms and sensors with actionable insights presented on the dashboard, segmented by high, medium and low risk.



**The Resident App**

With the HomeLINK Resident App, residents are provided with a healthy home rating, handy advice on how to improve the quality of their home, and Fire and CO alarm testing reminders.



Innovative technologies help housing providers' staff as well. By being up-to-speed with the latest technologies, they will increase staff retention, attract new workers into the business and ensure better wellbeing. These developments will also create a more sustainable supply chain, helping housing providers to build more properties, support more of the public, and leverage the benefits of collaboration with third-party organisations.

**Learning from others**

Learning from others should be a priority. If we can't look at how others are doing things, what they've done right and where they've gone wrong, we can't build a successful operation.

One of the UK's largest housing providers is currently managing more than 100,000 properties across the country. As part of its modernisation, their executive team decided to consolidate its business applications and put data at the heart of its operations.

The housing provider is a great example of how to grow by learning from another. The organisation identified the value of having readily accessible, readable and constantly updated data from the experiences of others who have already made this change and are seeing results, and in turn has experienced its own growth.

The housing provider is using a unified cloud platform, which includes custom applications and sector-specific solutions, to drive innovation across its entire portfolio. Being located in the cloud, the housing provider can quickly and easily make changes across its business, giving its staff immediate access to the relevant data and information while removing the risk of any of this being lost because of on-premise server outages or problems with paper-based storage.

**Final thoughts**

As financial difficulties and uncertainty continue, and people become more reliant on the services of housing providers, embracing and embedding new innovative technologies will be paramount to ensure efficiency and success.

Without adopting all-encompassing solutions that meet industry standards, are accessible to all and clearly display usable data insights, housing providers risk falling behind the curve, which could have serious implications for vulnerable citizens.

*Satpal Biant is head of public sector (UKI) for SAP.*

## FSI joins MRI Software

*Facilities management software provider FSI is now part of MRI Software. FSI's widely-used Concept Evolution software will now be marketed as MRI Evolution.*

James Massey, managing director of facilities management, MRI Software, said, "Integrating FSI with MRI Software strengthens both organisations' ability to support facilities management teams by delivering an enhanced technology platform to maintain facilities effectively. The combined offerings further improve our ability to serve housing providers, contractors and tenants."

The addition of FSI to MRI Software's portfolio of housing- and property-related software is expected to increase customers' end-to-end data visibility and IoT connectivity, add FM-specific mobile working tools and better monitor energy consumption for longer equipment life-expectancy and greater sustainability.

# Esuasive

**SERVICE INNOVATION**  
**DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION**  
**AGILE DELIVERY**

## Microsoft Cloud for Housing



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- ✓ Asset Management
- ✓ Rent and Service Charges
- ✓ CRM
- ✓ Repairs
- ✓ Finance

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*Nuneaton & Bedworth Council has chosen Mobysoft's RentSense software to enable earlier arrears interventions and achieve greater caseload efficiencies.*

Greg Osborne, senior transformation manager, Nuneaton & Bedworth Council, said, "Despite having just installed a new housing management system, the information derived from it doesn't enable our team to focus on early interventions and it lacks the predictive insights of RentSense."

"We bought RentSense via the government's G-Cloud procurement framework – this made the process easier and significantly faster."

"Before opting for RentSense, we also spoke to another local authority as a long-time user of the software. They demonstrated its advantages from an impartial perspective and reported financial improvements that actually exceeded the expectations we'd been given by Mobysoft."

### **CGA's lower arrears with Mobysoft**

In order to mitigate the effect of rises in the cost of living and the consequent impact on its arrears, Community Gateway Association (CGA) has implemented Mobysoft's RentSense software.

Julie Lee, head of income management, CGA, said, "Our 'person-centric' approach to arrears has enabled us to connect with our tenants in a more timely manner and provide services to improve their wellbeing. This approach has resulted in our 2021 year-end arrears being the lowest on record at 0.35 per cent."

"We believe there will be an increase in tenants needing some level of support. With this in mind, we considered how we could create extra capacity in our housing and income teams to accommodate the expected increase in demand, hence our decision to deploy RentSense."

### **Rooftop gets 400 tenants out of debt with RentSense**

Rooftop Housing's income team has reduced its arrears by £400,000 and helped almost 400 tenants out of debt after using RentSense for a year.

The housing provider implemented the software as part of its three-year strategy to maximise income collection and focus on prevention, early interventions and support.

Rachael Robinson, head of income collection and tenancy sustainment, Rooftop Housing, said, "RentSense is vital to us to ensure that our income team can spend their time on the right cases and ultimately sustain more tenancies for longer."

"Over the last 12 months, during a full year of using RentSense, we had 382 fewer tenants in arrears – that's a great achievement during a very difficult year."

"RentSense has completely exceeded our expectations; our arrears target was four per cent and we actually reached 3.3 per cent."



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# The evolution of customer-centric IT at United Welsh

Karen Jones, Systems Development Manager, and Emma Brute, Business Improvement Lead, United Welsh

*United Welsh discusses how its partnership with Housing Insight has evolved over time in response to an emerging digital society and the needs of its growing organisation.*

When we first began our digital journey with Housing Insight over six years ago, we were IT-driven not business-driven. Specifically, we wanted to find a tenant app that our customers could access through either a portal or an app – as a small team, we didn't have the capacity to update each platform separately and we wanted a solution that would update both platforms at the same time.

Housing Insight originally developed a solution that met our needs after asking a raft of questions in order to understand what we wanted to achieve and where we wanted to go next. Keen to help us get ahead of the game, Housing Insight delivered a product that gave us exactly what we needed.

## Connecting neighbourhoods

For a while that was sufficient but, two years later, we realised that the mobile solution we were using for our staff was no longer suitable because it couldn't keep pace with the speed at which our business was developing. We spoke to Housing Insight and decided to adopt a version of its staff app within PanConnect and it has been fantastic.

## Incorporating care and support

One of the benefits of working with Housing Insight is that it has standard offerings for different modules, which has allowed us to get up and running very quickly. It then tweaked its modules to suit our own situation. For example, we made a bid for a supported housing tender, which required the contract to be up and running within six weeks. We knew we could be confident that Housing Insight would adapt its technology to deliver an efficient IT solution for us within that timeframe.

## An agile, personalised approach

We're also working to a very tight deadline for implementation of the Renting Homes (Wales) Act at the moment. Although the government hasn't yet provided all the information we need to fulfil our obligations, Housing Insight is already working on IT developments

that will allow us to complete the task. It has assigned us dedicated resources to be used as and when required, and we work closely with our account and project managers from Housing Insight, developing project plans for all our business needs, which are then prioritised and organised.

We find Housing Insight really easy to work with, especially in comparison with larger technology companies where, in our experience, it's much more difficult to get things changed quickly and efficiently. This is partly because Housing Insight doesn't try to reinvent the wheel; for our purposes, one of Housing Insight's major strengths is in interfacing between systems and applications.

It also offers a more personalised service than the larger IT providers. Our account manager is always on hand to discuss tight deadlines and comes up with some great suggestions for improving functionality. Within our bespoke developments, we get time with Housing Insight's developers who will take a basic idea and move it to the next level and turn it into something amazing!

## Planning ahead

We've realised that our IT systems are only as good as their ability to meet our users' needs. In short, usability is vital. We want our technology to make life easier for our customers and for our staff, particularly when the latter are out and about.

The pandemic changed customer expectations and we're still working out what that means in practice. We also have over 200 employees, each with individual requirements and their own preferred ways of working. Housing Insight is open to listening to that, conducting periodic focus groups for our users in order to gain useful feedback to inform future developments.

We particularly want to develop our IT in direct response to what our customers are asking for; this is a key part of

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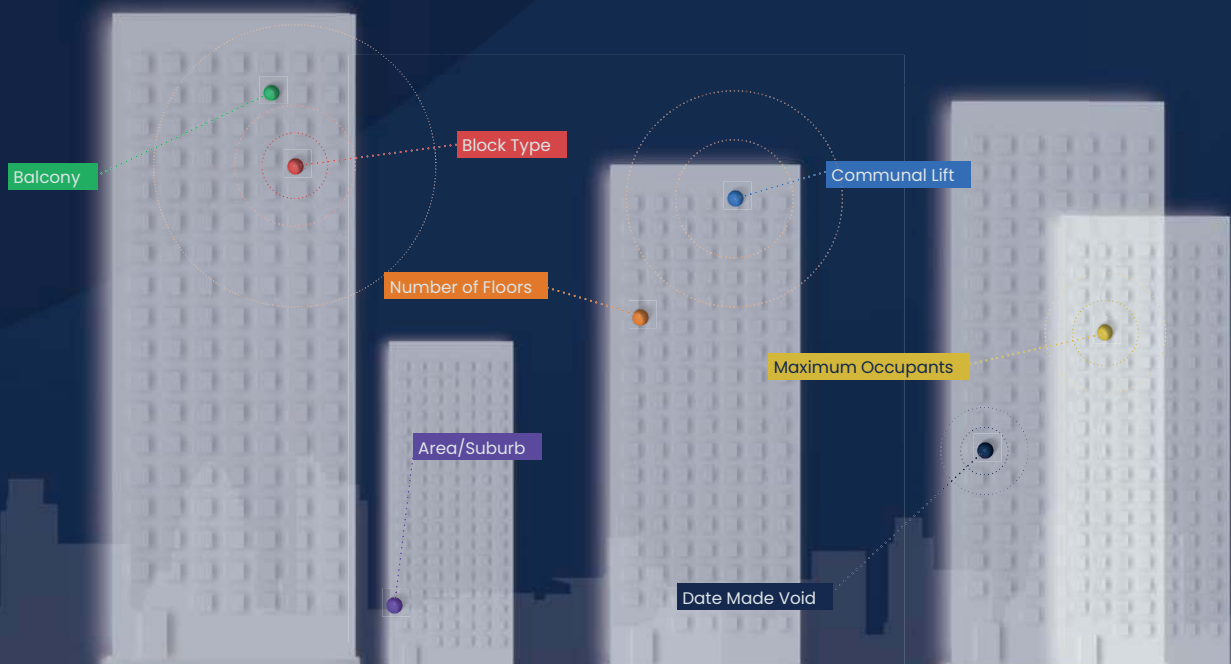


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## INTOZETTA GOVERNANCE FOR HOUSING

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our CX strategy, and especially important in light of the cost-of-living crisis. Our customers will need to access advice about money, jobs and training as well as home-related content such as booking repairs. We've started with a minimum viable product (MVP) that we will develop over time.

We value the ongoing dialogue that we have with the team at Housing Insight, who always want to hear how our business is developing so that they can provide effective support. We are now trying to plan 12-24 months ahead, which provides plenty of scope for IT development. We are developing a project framework and journey map – this is business-driven and lets us use the stats we receive from the Housing Insight apps to benchmark what we're doing and provide continuous feedback to inform future planning.

We're currently testing a managing agents module in our self-service app interfaced with a staff app module, in addition to a new self-service solution for housing applicants, and we've reached the test phase of an integrated solution with an external partner for housing and support for young people.

### An evolving digital context

We know the digital landscape is very different now to how it was when we first started working with Housing Insight. We are continually adding new functionalities and tools, improving communication and accessibility, and ensuring our customers' data is secure.

Not everyone has digital access, so we need to be able to deliver the same service to those who aren't digitally-enabled. We actively promote inclusivity in design, and we're also encouraging our tenants to embrace a digital approach where possible. Finally, we're pleased to report that we have reached our initial sign-up targets a full year ahead of schedule.

*Karen Jones is the systems development manager and Emma Brute is the business improvement lead at United Welsh.*



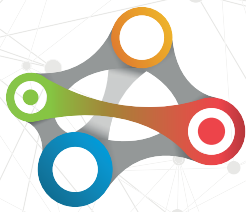
## Lincoln Council levels up its repairs with Made Tech

*City of Lincoln Council, in collaboration with a number of other local authorities, has launched an online repair reporting service for its tenants. The new service has been developed in partnership with public-sector technology provider Made Tech.*

The council's digital service has been funded through a local digital fund from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). City of Lincoln Council received £350,000 for the project and is the first council in the UK to implement the service, which will now be available for other local authorities to use.

Tenants can now book non-emergency repairs online rather than telephoning the council. There are also plans to add more features to the service, including the ability to amend or cancel a booking, report communal repairs and offer repair options to leaseholders.

Donald Nannestad, portfolio holder for quality housing, City of Lincoln Council, said, "Thanks to the council and the Made Tech team, we've developed a new service that improves our tenants' lives. We've put user research at the heart of the service, and we're proud of the work the teams have done to make this accessible to those who need it."



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# How do we end fuel poverty?

Glenn Allan, Head of Product (Housing), Capita One

*Fuel poverty is fast becoming a major problem across the UK. With global wholesale energy prices soaring, leading to April's 54 per cent (£693) rise in the energy price cap, those on lower incomes are finding it increasingly hard to cope.*

According to the BEIS' 2022 annual fuel poverty statistics report, around 13 per cent of households in England (over three million) in 2020 were classed as living in fuel poverty, meaning they have been pushed into poverty because of the costs of meeting their basic need to keep warm.

## Decreasing affordability

Though the government has announced further help with energy bills via a windfall tax on energy companies (at the time of writing), this only serves to mitigate a further rise in the price cap this October, with many people still struggling to afford power and heat in the immediate term. One of the more vulnerable groups facing this problem is social housing tenants, a significant proportion of whom are low-income households.

Housing providers are giving as much support as they can, including increasing their crisis support funding, offering fuel vouchers, and advice for those who are finding it hard to cope, but as the cost of living crisis deepens, the challenges will become more acute.

With housing providers wanting to go much further in helping their residents, many are looking at how they can improve the capabilities of their operations and ensure their IT systems are optimal, meaning they can ramp up support before we head into the colder weather of the autumn and winter.

## Better use of data

One way of maximising limited resources is the efficient collation and use of data, which is why Capita has developed a housing management system which brings the relevant datasets into a single clear and simple dashboard.

Often, information about tenants and the composition of their homes is held in silos but collating these different datasets and analysing them together can bring multiple benefits to housing providers, such as improving their ability to tackle fuel poverty.

## Energy insights

By combining a tenant's energy consumption data with the energy performance data of their home (something our system can do via third-party smart meter data), housing providers can gain valuable insights into that home. It might, for example, show that a tenant has high energy bills yet is living in a house categorised with an EPC rating of 'C' or above, making it energy efficient.

By delving deeper into the data, our software can look at the reasons behind the energy usage vs. EPC rating disparity to see whether the property is being heated properly or whether there is anything wrong structurally with the building, for example. The housing provider can then give targeted support to those tenants most at risk of fuel poverty.

Data on energy improvements to the building can also be analysed (this will become increasingly important as retrofitting scales up), right down to the light bulbs, insulation, windows and heating systems.

## A more detailed picture

By bringing all this information together into one dashboard, this system can draw a much more detailed picture than before, again giving housing providers the tools to safeguard the welfare and safety of their tenants so that no one slips through the cracks.

The energy crisis is not going away and price inflation looks ever more serious. This is why we believe the power of data, coupled with the system to back it up, will give housing providers a fast, affordable and effective solution that can help them reduce the risk of fuel poverty among their tenants.

*Glenn Allan is the head of product (housing) at Capita One.*



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# Surviving but not living – MRI Software’s Resident Voice Index



Doug Sarney, Project Lead for Resident Voice Index, MRI Software



*The latest Resident Voice Index report from MRI Software shines a light on the sentiments of UK social housing residents in the face of the cost-of-living crisis.*



The responses of over 5,200 UK social housing residents show that households are having to make tough choices. Over half (53 per cent) of respondents reported having turned to using credit or unregulated buy-now-pay-later (BNPL) services to pay for essential household costs. With a further 20 per cent having considered doing so, there is a ticking time-bomb for households which are on the edge of coping.

The use of these services is more prevalent in younger residents, with the under 35s being 2.5 times more likely to be using credit or BNPL often. Additionally, the more financial dependants a respondent had, the more likely they were to be using these services. Consequently, households with children or other financial dependants are likely to need extra support over the coming months.

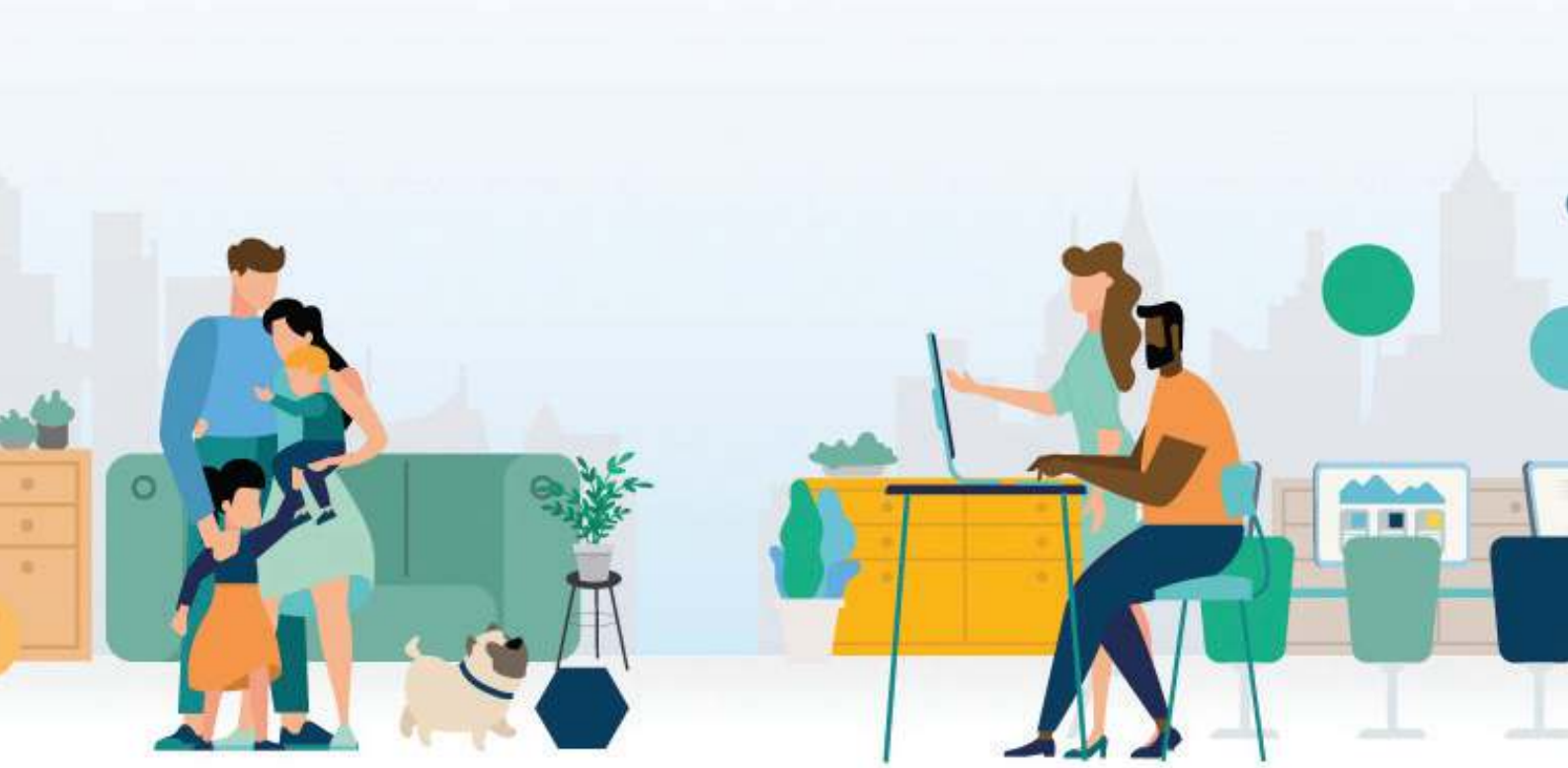
One of the biggest indicators of the challenges being faced was the frequent use of the word 'food' in the free-text input from latest Resident Voice Index survey. Analysis of these responses revealed numerous examples of parents skipping meals to feed their children, increased use of food banks and people eating only cold food to avoid using domestic energy.

The key findings from the report are:

- Over half (53 per cent) have used credit or a BNPL service to cover an essential household cost in the past 12 months; a further 20 per cent had considered using those services.
- Almost 90 per cent of people under 35 said they were already using or considering using buy-now-pay-later or credit to pay for essential household costs.
- 68 per cent of all respondents reported being worried all or most of the time about meeting their normal monthly expenses (82 per cent for people under 35).
- Only four per cent of respondents said they rarely worried about money.
- 56 per cent of respondents didn't know that help or support would be available to them if they faced a financial struggle.
- Almost 6 in 10 (58 per cent) respondents didn't think that they had the power to influence their future financial situation.

## **Bare bones living**

Another core theme that emerged was that residents felt there was nothing more to cut. Many indicated that they were already living on shoestring budgets. This isn't just an



*“I can’t cut back on anything because I already don’t overspend on anything; I can’t possibly cut back on anything because I already don’t have money to spend on anything.”*

### Resident Voice Index respondent

example of forgoing holidays, trips out with the family or self-proclaimed ‘luxuries’. Instead, for a proportion of those who answered, it’s applying increased pressure to already ‘bare bones’ living.

This bare bones living is especially important to advocate against for those who cannot increase their income. For those of pension age and those who are unable to work (e.g. because of disability or raising children), earning more money is simply not an option.

#### High levels of desperation

**While we expected the results of this year’s Resident Voice Index survey to be hard hitting, we were truly not prepared for the high levels of desperation, extreme worry and hopelessness in the responses; references to catastrophic mental health slides and suicide were common. In sharing these accounts, we urge anyone with the ability to enact change, however small, to do so.**

Developed by MRI Software, the Resident Voice Index project is a long-term independent initiative that asks questions of a broad spectrum of social housing residents. Previous reports have covered diverse topics such as residents’ sense of community and belonging, safety and

loneliness. Striving for a ‘residents first’ approach, the project incorporates the residents’ views at every stage of the process, with a commitment to publish the reports to residents first.

This research project is designed to give something back to the social housing sector beyond MRI Software’s conventional CSR activities, one of the reasons why the report is available as a free resource for anyone in our sector.

For the full report and its actionable insights, visit [residentvoiceindex.com](https://residentvoiceindex.com); to get involved in future surveys, please contact [info.residentvoice@mrisoftware.com](mailto:info.residentvoice@mrisoftware.com).

*Doug Sarney is the project lead of the Resident Voice Index at MRI Software.*



## Housing providers sign up for Clixifix defects and repairs platform

*Clixifix has announced that Believe Housing, Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing and Trafford Housing Trust are now using its defects and repairs digital platform to fix tenants' problems faster and more efficiently through seamless communications between tenants, housing providers and contractors.*

Maureen Haley, development project support, Believe Housing, said, "Before we started working with Clixifix, queries and defect issues from customers were coming to our team via email, causing delays in raising tickets for our contractors.

"Communication with our tenants and contractors has now vastly improved which in turn has helped with our KPIs. Contractors respond much more efficiently to the tickets raised and jobs are done faster. We run a weekly report of outstanding tickets and pass it to the contractors for them to deal with, plus the Clixifix dashboard gives us a clear view of how our contractors are performing."

Michelle Mansfield, head of new homes' services, Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing, said, "Clixifix has undoubtedly saved us time. It's freed us to explore the more complex defect-management problems, and the rich data from Clixifix lets us make more data-driven decisions."



Jo Spate, customer care manager, Laurus Homes (part of Trafford Housing Trust), said, "Using Clixifix has had a huge impact on how we communicate with customers and contractors, plus it has improved our efficiency and visibility. Using a system like this has brought us in line with other housing providers and developers, giving us clear and concise reporting and analysis.

"As we expand, Clixifix will become an integral part of how we organise and communicate with our customers. Even though we haven't fully used the reporting on contractor performance and defect trends analysis yet, we will definitely use everything that Clixifix has to offer."

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*"Littlefish demonstrated that they were really focused on the end-users and treated themselves as part of our team. They empathise and care about what it was that people needed, making the transition to the new service really smooth.*

*They delivered training to our team, so we had a deep understanding of what they do as an organisation, making them feel like an extension of our team"*



Mark Sutton, Chief Digital Officer  
Care Quality Commission



# Ransomware in 2022

Jonathan Lee, Director of Public Sector Relations, Sophos

*In my articles in previous editions of Housing Technology, I focused on the issue of ransomware for housing providers' IT teams, and with good reason. Sophos' latest 'State of Ransomware 2022' report demonstrates why ransomware continues to be an ever-increasing threat and investing in anti-ransomware technology is preferable to dealing with the consequences of an attack, however good your cyber insurance might be!*

The survey, carried out by independent research company Vanson Bourne at the start of 2022, involved over 5,000 respondents from 31 countries and across all sectors. All were mid-sized organisations, with 100 to 5,000 employees.

## Increase in ransomware attacks

IT professionals were asked to reflect on their experience of ransomware during 2021; the responses revealed that compared with 2020, the number of attacks had increased by a staggering 78 per cent, ranging from impacts on single devices to more significant breaches. The UK fared better than some countries, with 57 per cent saying that they had been compromised vs. a global 66 per cent, but it still shows there is no room for complacency. We can't drill down to the national figures for different business sectors, but if we look at the worldwide responses from 'property and construction', 63 per cent had reported being hit by ransomware.

What caused this surge in the number of attacks during 2021? A significant factor is likely to be the growth of the 'ransomware as a service' (RaaS) business model. Professional ransomware operators hire out their services and code to enable their affiliates (who often lack the necessary skills) to attack others. It's unsettling to think that these tools can be bought like other legitimate services (and easily, too), except mainly through the 'dark web'.

Not only are adversaries getting better at delivering ransomware, but they are also encrypting more data – 65 per cent of attacks resulted in data encryption in 2021 vs. 54 per cent in 2020, and nearly 60 per cent said that the complexity of attacks had increased.

## Data retrieval

The findings weren't all negative; the percentage of respondents that got some of their data back after a breach had increased by three per cent since the previous year. Organisations used various methods to do this, including back-ups and ransom payments, with the average UK ransom payment being around £127,000. However, a large caveat here – of those organisations who paid up, only four per cent got all their data back, and there are ethical considerations involved in this choice.

Even if your organisation does manage to retrieve a large proportion of its data, the consequences of a significant breach still have far-reaching effects. In the survey, 90 per cent of respondents said that the attack had affected their ability to operate – the average time to recover from a breach was one month and the average remediation cost was just over a million pounds.

Cyber insurance can mitigate some of these costs, and over three-quarters of UK respondents did have some form of insurance policy, yet it's not perfect. The cost of the premiums is rising, and 94 per cent found it harder to secure over the last year. In addition, there are exclusions and limits as with any insurance policy (reading the fine print is essential) and some policies don't even cover ransomware.



### Cyber insurance

It's wise to have cyber insurance but taking a proactive rather than reactive stance against ransomware pays dividends. Purchasing effective anti-ransomware security products and services will not only help you secure the best and most cost-effective cyber insurance cover (64 per cent of respondents had implemented new technologies/services to improve their insurance position), but this will protect against losses that insurance policies can't mitigate against.

In addition, when you handle sensitive personal data within your housing organisation, it feels ethical to provide the maximum protection to your tenants to prevent their data from being published on the dark web. For example, in March 2022, the 'Conti' ransomware group stole data that compromised eight housing providers in the Netherlands, and approximately eight gigabytes of data was published online. Data included copies of tenants' driving licences and passports as well as bank details, addresses and phone numbers, all of which are like gold dust for identity thieves.

### Address the root causes

Although it's understandable, organisations shouldn't just focus on fixing the immediate problem – of getting their data back and business continuity. Using an analogy from the natural world, you can see an invasive weed in your garden, but you can't usually see its root system. Even if you remove the visible part of the weed, the root system may remain underground for the plant to re-emerge, triumphant because it had never really gone away. Similarly, you can remove the ransomware and restore your services, but if you don't spend time looking at the root cause of the attack, it leaves the door open for cybercriminals to return.

So how can you ensure that you have the optimal protection across your housing operations? Here are my eight tips:

- Make sure you have the best quality defences across your whole network, including firewalls, servers,
- endpoints and mobile devices, then continually assess whether they meet your needs.
- In today's threat landscape, you must proactively hunt for threats to help stop the cybercriminals before they can execute their attack. You can no longer be passive, and if you don't have the time or skills in-house to do this yourself, consider outsourcing to a managed detection and response (MDR) specialist. Sophos' Managed Threat Response (MTR) is one such service.
- Concentrate on hardening your environment by identifying and eliminating gaps in your security, such as unpatched devices, unprotected machines and open RDP ports. Extended Detection and Response (XDR) helps with this.
- It is wise to prepare for how your organisation would respond to a cyber incident, so having a well-rehearsed incident response plan is crucial.
- Make regular backups and practice restoring from them, including offline copies. In the event of an attack, your aim is to get up and running quickly, with minimal disruption.
- Use multi-factor authentication (MFA).
- Use complex passwords managed through a password manager.
- Limit access rights – give end-users and administrators only the access rights they need and nothing more.

If you'd like more information, we've a plethora of resources about ransomware and how to protect against it at [sophos.com/ransomware](https://sophos.com/ransomware).

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

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# IT service desks & operational efficiency

Matt Baker, Services Consultant, Littlefish

*From PCs and laptops to cloud computing and smart devices in everyone's pocket, it's impossible to imagine any successful organisation running smoothly without technology.*

Unfortunately, without a strong, reliable IT service desk, you're likely to consume a lot of vital resources just to maintain your IT operations at their current level (let alone improve efficiency in this respect). However, when run effectively and with clear objectives in mind, IT support desks can help budget-conscious organisations such as housing providers make huge cost savings by improving productivity, scaling and managing IT costs, and streamlining processes.

## The role of the service desk

The IT service desk helps end-users with technical problems and other service requests. It is the customer-facing arm of the company's IT department, designed to keep things running smoothly.

Service desks usually handle individual technical problems, providing at least first- and second-line support to end-users:

- First-line support refers to everyday support issues. These are common difficulties most employees encounter when they're working. Such issues are generally time sensitive (it can be frustrating to wait in line to resolve simple IT queries and FAQs) and so first-line support aims to solve problems fast, at the first point of contact.
- Second-line support is for end-user problems that are too time-consuming, uncommon or technical for first-line support and, as such, second-line agents usually have more specialised, in-depth knowledge. Some service-desk providers also offer second-line support at the first point of contact to increase 'first-time fix' rates, user productivity and the user experience.
- Third-line support personnel will typically work beyond the service desk as expert technicians. They will be able to understand the cause of complex problems or issues that second-line support can't address (e.g. a certified

network specialist or server engineer). If third-line support can't fix the issue remotely, they may visit onsite or send a representative to examine further.

More than technical support, though, the IT service desk is a strategic and meaningful window into your employees' world. It allows organisational leaders to see, through the eyes of their end-users, how their systems perform and how they measure up against the organisation's long-term goals – one of which is likely to be cost control.

Below are five ways an efficient service desk can help add value to housing providers and reduce costs.

## Training and expertise

Often overlooked, one huge benefit of a strong IT service desk is the user education and awareness training on offer. Service-desk engineers are used to coaching end-users, helping them become proficient in certain applications (and therefore more knowledgeable and productive), and they will also reinforce the importance of reporting errors or security concerns.

Remember, a single report from an employee could save your organisation a lot of money and operational upheaval. So, the training employees receive from IT support is, in fact, incredibly valuable when it comes to the longevity and regulatory responsibility of housing providers. For example, reporting security concerns to the service desk will allow them to log the incident with the right team to investigate and resolve, mitigating further risk and potential breaches.

It's also an advantage that most outsourced IT service-desk engineers provide support across multiple business sectors, not just housing providers, so they can bring extensive shared knowledge about IT best practices to the table. Furthermore, outsourced IT service-desks often assign individuals to an organisation who are well-



NEW REPORT

'Surviving but not living'  
The experience of the cost of living crisis  
for social housing residents



Over 5,200 social housing residents share their experiences of dealing with the rising cost of living. This report highlights the acute requirement for our society to attempt everything possible to ease the burden at what is a very difficult time for many people in the UK.

versed in its sector-specific challenges, meaning they can draw from their experiences with other clients and offer solutions that work best in certain situations.

### Boosted productivity

Inefficient service desks that provide poor responsiveness can hold up crucial processes, resulting in a lack of user productivity, lost revenues and customers left in need. Slow resolution speeds can also damage your organisation's reputation, leaving customers dissatisfied with their service and causing employees to feel frustrated and demoralised.

Conversely, an effective service desk will be able to implement many automated features that work invisibly and proactively in the background to streamline processes and integrate different systems, ultimately reducing costs. Naturally, this means that employees can get their jobs done faster and with greater ease, boosting productivity as well as morale (which can also mean less employee churn and reduced recruitment costs).

It also stands to reason that, when end-users can do their work without running into recurring IT issues and snags such as freezing, crashing or losing their work, then productivity increases and the workforce feels more satisfied overall.

### Anywhere & anytime support

Ever since the lockdowns in 2020, we've seen the benefits that technology can deliver for the new, hybrid and/or remote workforces. However, the pandemic also highlighted the need to provide technical support to home workers in all aspects of their computing and communication systems.

Remote working relies heavily on technology and requires additional cyber-security measures. If the IT service desk isn't easily accessible to remote workers or is slow to respond to any connectivity issues, this can spell bad news for the organisation's overall output and information security.

On the other hand, an efficient service desk can enable remote workers to work and communicate very effectively, meaning end-users can be agile with their time and continue to be productive for the organisation even from a distance (which makes recruitment much easier).

Additionally, being able to seamlessly access cloud-based software, collaboration tools and video conferencing software is as much a cultural necessity as it is a productivity one, and a strong service desk will provide many communication methods (such as phone, live chat and self-service portals) and be available for employees 24/7/365.

### Quality improvement

Service desks can contribute hugely to the quality of service that housing providers give their customers.

The service desk is, after all, working at the heart of all operations – often in close collaboration with employees.

Indeed, consistent monitoring and proactive detection of issues can help an efficient service desk to keep housing providers ahead of the curve by responding to events and irregularities before they become too problematic or expensive. IT teams also keep historical logs of various issues that affect the organisation, providing reports to show recurring problems and the consequent financial and operational effect on the company.

The service desk will also work in collaboration with infrastructure support teams to identify problems within the organisation's IT infrastructure and suggest appropriate solutions that funnel resources where they will be best spent or most utilised. Introducing scalability and cost management is one of the best benefits of an efficient service desk, ensuring money isn't wasted on unused resources by appropriately forecasting future needs.

### Improved process efficiency

It's the goal of every housing provider to operate smoothly and efficiently, with every component doing its part well. The good news is that an efficient service desk enhances an organisation's ability to operate efficiently because a strong service desk is built on consistent processes, proven solutions and accurate prioritisation of issues.

Serving as a central location for all end-users, the IT service desk helps housing providers to pinpoint issues, standardise processes and instil coherence between different departments (such as software versions, security tools and other infrastructure components). Indeed, many service desks can create automated rules that trigger certain actions if a specific event happens (e.g. notifying a suitable resolution team in the event of a particular issue), and consistency across the board allows service-desk agents to constantly refine and improve their overall service.

Using integrated software will simplify and lower the cost of support, once all employees are using the same tools collaboration is also improved.

Littlefish is an award-winning managed IT and cyber services provider working with many housing providers and public-sector clients to deliver collaborative IT solutions, enhanced user experiences and improved customer satisfaction.

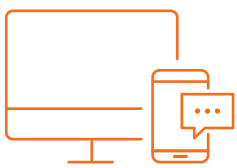
*Matt Baker is the service consultant at Littlefish.*

**littlefish**  
managed IT services

NEC Housing

# CUTTING EDGE RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

Meet VAIA, NEC Housing's new Virtual AI Assistant. Simplify digital engagement and streamline enquiries so your residents have instant support at the touch of a button.



**A variety of interfaces**  
Including your website,  
Facebook or SMS



**Content mining**  
Stores previous interactions  
and can use that data to  
form intelligent prompts



**Ability to learn**  
Update and amend  
automatic responses  
in real-time



**Easy escalation**  
Tenants can be passed  
to a live agent, with a full  
transcript of the interaction



# IoT for safer, healthier homes

Nick Rutter, Co-Founder & Chief Product Officer, FireAngel

*As fuel poverty and the cladding crisis leave home safety on shaky foundations, FireAngel's co-founder and chief product officer Nick Rutter explores smarter ways to protect residents and properties.*

Millions of UK households are expected to be hauled into fuel poverty for the first time as energy bills soar, leaving low-income households vulnerable to cold, damp and mould. In Wales alone, up to 45 per cent of all households could be in fuel poverty following the price cap increase in April 2022.

Simultaneously, residents who have had dangerous cladding stripped from their buildings post-Grenfell may find that their homes are less energy efficient for months or even years. There has also never been more intense focus on improving home safety for social housing residents.

### Adapting to an evolving legislative landscape

As it becomes evident that fundamental change is needed to ensure that people feel safe in their homes, legislation is being overhauled at an unprecedented rate. The Fire Safety Act 2021 was introduced to clarify who is accountable for reducing the risk of fires in England and Wales, and the Building Safety Act 2022 ensures a golden thread of information exists for a building with residents

given 'comprehensible and relevant information about fire safety matters'.

The Welsh government is also undertaking the biggest change to its housing law in decades. The Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 will come into force this December to ensure that both private- and social-rented properties in Wales are fit for human habitation. This includes regulations on fire and carbon monoxide safety, condensation, damp and mould.

However, there are concerns that traditional solutions for addressing damp and mould are often ineffective, time-consuming and strain already-squeezed budgets. Anti-mould wall coatings and regular roof and gutter maintenance only go so far, and cavity or external wall insulation can increase problems if installed incorrectly. This is particularly problematic for housing providers.

As waiting lists and placement times get longer by the day, there's intense pressure on housing providers to fix problems quickly and move new tenants in. This,

along with poor advice and limited access to specialist knowledge, can lead to only superficial issues being treated, leaving housing providers and their residents at risk of mould and damp reoccurring.

### Holistic resident safety

The internet of things (IoT) can offer an alternative solution to help housing providers monitor humidity and temperature levels in a property. Carefully-placed IoT sensors can provide specific data in real-time, allowing a much earlier opportunity to investigate and remedy potential problems.

Installing IoT sensors in properties enables housing providers to create a tailored network of sensors and devices to detect everything from fire and carbon monoxide to temperature and humidity to monitor the onset of condensation, damp and mould. It also allows housing providers to deliver tailored advice to relevant tenants and provide accurate information about where they might need to adopt different ventilation or heating practices.

Smart sensors can provide a clear audit trail, recording accurate and regular environmental readings specific to each property and room. Since the data captured can be analysed remotely, there is less need for intrusive onsite investigations.

And as the laws on home safety continue to tighten, data collected from IoT sensors may also play a role in future regeneration projects. Analysing data for trends and patterns can show housing providers which regions

or properties are particularly prone to damp and ensure those properties have the right insulation and ventilation installed.

### Proactive prevention for residents

At FireAngel, our New Generation Cellular Gateway delivers a holistic resident safety solution, encompassing fire safety, AI-driven risk stratification and background environmental monitoring.

Through additional Zigbee sensors, the solution takes resident safety and wellbeing to previously unachievable levels, enabling housing providers to prioritise condensation, damp and mould interventions and increase fire prevention measures for residents who need it most.

By tapping into IoT, we can create smarter, healthier homes that protect residents today, tomorrow and in the future.

For more information on FireAngel's New Generation Cellular Gateway, get in touch with our team of specialists by visiting [fireangel.co.uk/connected-contact](https://fireangel.co.uk/connected-contact).

*Nick Rutter is the co-founder and chief product officer at FireAngel.*

**FireAngel**



## Riverside rolls out 1,500 Switchchee IoT devices

*Riverside Group is installing 1,500 Switchchee smart thermostats in its tenants' homes following a successful pilot of the IoT technology.*

Data from the Switchchee devices, sent via the mobile phone network to the cloud, enabled Riverside to remotely assess its properties' performance and triage any problems.

By sending surveys to customers through Switchchee's built-in communications screen to assess the urgency of any reported problems, Riverside could then prioritise which houses needed attention first. The reported engagement from tenants was high; almost 90 per cent responded via the Switchchee devices, with 65 per cent doing so within 24 hours.

Appointment scheduling was also fulfilled through the Switchchee devices; this resulted in an 86 per cent first-time access rate for the housing provider's surveyors and engineers, compared with previous access rates of only 60 per cent before the pilot.

Ian Gregg, executive director for asset services, Riverside Group, said, "The data on property performance we received from the Switchchee devices in the pilot meant we could identify houses and customers with problems quickly and easily and then prioritise their remediation."



# Navigating the energy crisis

Gareth Copland, Group Operations Director, Insite Energy

*As energy prices soar, one of the biggest worries for directors of housing schemes running heat networks is heat debt. Many are absorbing the spiralling cost of unpaid bills, as chasing debt appears futile.*

Nowhere is this truer than in the social housing sector, where households have a higher percentage of vulnerable tenants and have felt the impact of furloughing and job losses during the pandemic, making them more susceptible to falling into debt and less able to recover from it.

A comparison of two similar heat networks (for a social housing provider and a privately-owned housing scheme) for which Insite Energy provides metering and billing shows alarming differences in the scale and character of residents' debt. The social housing scheme currently has almost four times as much debt as the private development. Furthermore, the private scheme's figure is consistent year-on-year and is largely down to residents forgetting to organise payment; one chase and the debt is settled. The social housing residents, meanwhile, simply can't afford to pay.

Sadly, things are set to get even tougher. Housing providers have generally been the last to increase residents' fuel tariffs in the face of the huge price rises. Some used their buying power to secure three-year fixed rates but many of these are now up for renewal. Others have already been heavily subsidising residents' energy bills since the pandemic, leaving them little room for manoeuvre when faced with additional price hikes.

## How to help

Where do residents connected to heat networks turn for help? Often, it's us, even though as a metering and billing service provider we have no control over energy prices.



The number of tariff-related queries we're receiving is the highest ever; our figures for 2022 are between five- and six-times higher than last year.

We're doing all we can to provide a sympathetic, well-informed and accessible ear for residents, hopefully taking a little pressure off housing providers, but they know their residents best and they tell us that mental health is an increasingly prominent issue as financial struggles worsen.

While strategies such as open communication, emergency credit and collaboration with debt advisory services such as Citizens Advice can all help, proactive preventative action is vital.

One approach is to switch to pay-as-you-go (PAYG) metering. Despite being historically viewed with caution by housing providers, PAYG is now more widely accepted and adopted because, as well as preventing debt, it offers residents real-time energy consumption data.



### Changing behaviour through data

It's well-known that access to real-time energy usage data stimulates behavioural changes that reduce personal consumption. For example, at a development of 89 properties in South London, PAYG energy usage over four months last year was around 40 per cent lower each month compared to a similar 84-unit, credit-billed property in North London.

It's also notable that the largest proportion (35 per cent) of page views on a digital smart-metering PAYG app for heat networks called Kurve are from residents reviewing their energy consumption, compared to 24 per cent viewing their balance or just six per cent topping up. This clearly indicates people's interest in their energy use.

While smart-metering solutions are still viewed by some people as best suited to private build-to-rent developments with 'tech savvy' tenants, social housing tenants respond positively to the technology as well; a customer experience survey earlier this year (comprising 60 per cent social tenants) showed that 95 per cent of users make payments online.

### Reducing expenditure

When prices are rising on all fronts, using an app minimises capital expenditure as well by avoiding the need to install in-home display units. Cutting the amount of equipment installed also significantly reduces any replacement expenditure simply because there is less equipment to replace or repair.

Good maintenance is also key to keeping costs down. Smart metering systems enable housing providers to monitor the efficiency of their heat networks in real time.

This means issues can be identified remotely and targeted maintenance applied, rather than a broad-brush approach to maintenance, thereby minimising costs, disruption to residents, underperformance and wastage. Meters must also be properly maintained to ensure their accuracy; errors will inevitably drive up costs.

Poor maintenance can also increase debt. If meters are faulty, residents may not be charged for their heat. Following a repair, any unbilled usage would be added on to the individual's account and recovered which can cause a financial impact. This can lead to increased risks of bad debt which on occasion is applied to future tariffs for recovery, an uplift typically seen of around 10 per cent. This is often unmanageable for households already struggling to pay big bills.

There are no simple answers to the energy and cost-of-living crisis. Subsidising bills while losses mount up is not a long-term solution, given that no one really knows what will happen to energy prices. What is clear is that a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be the answer and inaction isn't an option either.

Don't sit back – lean into the problem. Taking the right steps now could stand your housing developments in good stead for months and years ahead.

*Gareth Copland is the group operations director at Insite Energy.*



# The technology foundations for decarbonisation & disrepair

Chris Jones, Chief Executive Officer, HomeLink (Aico)

*Tackling decarbonisation and disrepair are rightly at the top of the agenda for the majority of housing providers in the UK.*

The housing sector carries an enormous responsibility when it comes to the UK's 'net zero' agenda. According to the government, heating our homes accounted for 17 per cent of all UK carbon emissions in 2019; this figure is likely to be higher in 2022 due to more people working from home.

### The second tranche of the Social Housing

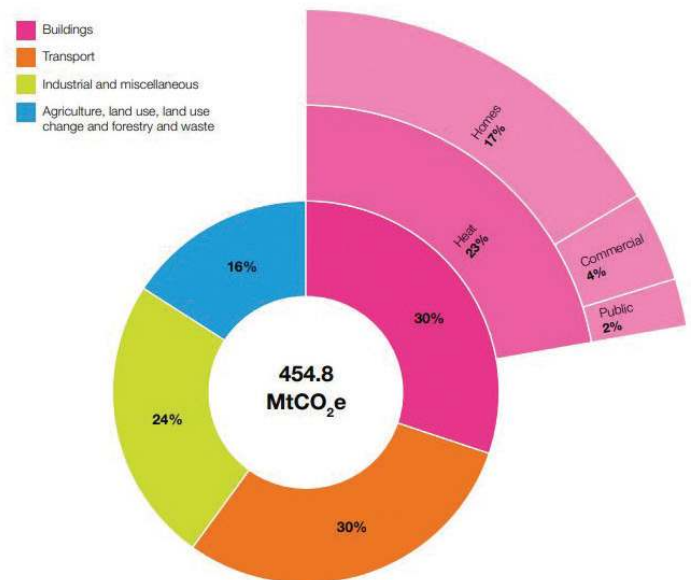
Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) opens in September 2022 and is offering £800m to tackle this problem, while in the UK all rented homes must reach EPC-C certification by 2030 (with the exception of Scotland where EESSH2 mandates EPC-B by 2032).

If this wasn't a big enough challenge, recent research by housing charity Shelter also indicated that 26 per cent of renters reported significant problems with damp and mould, and 46 per cent of those reported at least one physical or mental health issue associated with this – unhealthy and unsafe homes annually cost the NHS billions of pounds. Unsurprisingly there are multiple pressures acting on landlords to address this seemingly impossible challenge; some of the most recent include:

1. The recent announcement that the Regulator of Social Housing will gain stronger powers, such as issuing unlimited fines, entering properties with only 48-hours' notice and making emergency repairs.
2. The Housing Ombudsman's 'Spotlight on Damp & Mould' report called for landlords to take more responsibility for tackling mould and damp.
3. The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 clearly indicates landlords' liability if issues such as mould, ventilation, fire, CO, excess heat/cold are structural in nature.
4. Regular media coverage of negligent landlords.
5. The growth of no-win-no-fee solicitors seeking out complaints from residents through advertising campaigns.

### More stock-condition surveys

Inside Housing recently published an article on how



UK government breakdown of carbon emissions

housing providers are now increasing their stock-condition surveys due to disrepair and decarbonisation, with challenges such as low accuracy of stock data, prioritising decarbonisation work and tackling disrepair (specifically damp and mould).

For example, proactive housing providers such as Aster, Notting Hill Genesis and GreenSquareAccord are taking action with ambitious stock-condition survey programmes around decarbonisation and disrepair.

These proactive housing providers should be commended because, despite huge demands to tackle these problems, some housing providers still say privately that they don't want to know the scale of their problems because they're worried they won't be able to tackle them; this fear of the unknown is only making the problem worse.

### The internet of things

A full stock survey is no doubt important, but internet of things (IoT) technologies such as Aico's HomeLink

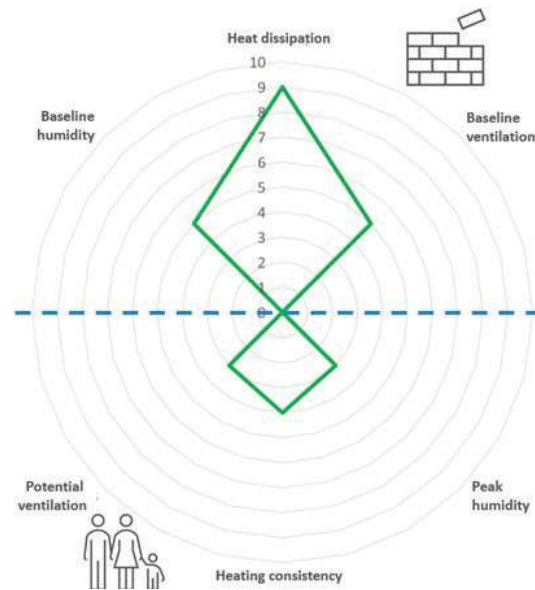


### Structural

- Baseline humidity – potential leak or damp
- Heat dissipation – inadequate insulation
- Baseline ventilation – inadequate ventilation

### Environmental

- Potential ventilation – underutilised ventilation
- Heating consistency – underheated room
- Peak humidity – excessive water vapour



Aico's HomeLink insights - Analysis of mould issues

environmental sensors can save money while painting a much more detailed picture of stock conditions over time.

1. IoT sensors can identify the root cause of a mould problem. For example, is there inadequate ventilation or is the ventilation not used? Is the home poorly insulated or is it not being heated? Is high humidity caused by a leak or due to other environmental factors?
2. Sensors can identify if the 'fix' applied to the mould problem is working; did cleaning the ventilation filters or intervening in a potential fuel poverty case make a difference?
3. Accurate heat loss, fuel poverty, energy use and ventilation data can help prioritise those retrofits that will have the greatest real-world impact, not just in terms of decarbonisation but also in health and wellbeing.
4. Once the retrofit is complete, sensors are required to quantify positive outcomes (impact of insulation on heat loss, reduced energy usage, improved ventilation, etc) that can be used for future decisions.
5. There are often negative consequences, such as poorer ventilation, increased mould risk and colder homes, which can unintentionally result from retrofitting homes. Without data, housing providers are blind to this and, having spent vast sums of money, could actually increase the prevalence of future disrepair or fuel poverty issues.

It's no surprise that sensors are already required for the PAS2035 retrofit standard and are rapidly emerging as one of the most cost-effective and thorough ways of achieving Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 compliance. They are also detailed in EESH2 and are part of the likely policy for the SHDF.

Aico has designed IoT sensors and software specifically to solve these problems. This technology isn't expensive and is already making a big difference for hundreds of housing providers. The HomeLink portal is optimised to help housing providers assess the carbon performance of their housing stock, be assured of compliance, analyse



retrofit performance and identify the causes of issues such as mould.

### Taking control

Data from the sensors can also easily be transferred to a housing provider's own storage infrastructure and/or business applications so that they can have full access and ownership of any data collected. Additionally, the recently-released third generation of the HomeLink resident app enables residents to gain better control of the health of their home and ultimately their family's health. This enables preventative maintenance at scale.

At the time of writing, Aico has 126,750 IoT devices connected in socially rented homes and we are adding several hundred more every day. So far this year, over a dozen housing providers have already committed to a full-stock rollout of our environmental sensors.

This technology isn't just about legislation and compliance; it's about making homes healthier, safer and more sustainable places to live. IoT is becoming an essential technology in solving these seemingly insurmountable challenges. Within a decade they may even be a legal requirement and in some cases they already are.

*Chris Jones is the chief executive officer at HomeLink (Aico).*



# IT & business recruitment in housing

*Housing Technology interviewed technology-specific housing recruiters from James Andrews Recruitment Solutions, Karbon Homes, Lioness Recruitment and StaffCircle about how to find and keep the right people for all levels of housing providers' IT- and business-focused roles.*

## Is social housing different?

Laura Bruford, director of Lioness Recruitment, said, "Recruitment in social housing is different to other sectors because our sector isn't just skills-driven but also values-driven. Companies' core values must therefore align with the values of the candidates they appoint because the services provided should ultimately always be with tenants in mind.

"Recruitment is also driven by value for money; permanent and fixed-term roles will be benchmarked and there is often little manoeuvrability further along in the process for this to be increased, although this benchmarking approach can sometimes cause problems for niche skillsets.

"Our sector also focuses more on employees' wellbeing and benefits than some private-sector businesses; as the quote goes, 'if you look after your staff, they'll look after your customers:'"

Nathaniel Ray, assistant director of ICT and digital transformation at Karbon Homes, said, "On paper, jobs in the housing sector can be the same as other sectors but salaries can often be a differentiator. At Karbon Homes, the salaries for all our roles are benchmarked against market rates so we know they are competitive, but the performance cultures and performance-related-pay models of private-sector businesses can mean candidates are often attracted elsewhere.

"As a sector, we should actually be celebrating and promoting our points of difference. With many housing providers being SMEs, their size and agility gives staff the chance to build a career, make strides in their professional growth, be more nimble and, most importantly, do work that has a high social value."

Adam Cragg, director of James Andrews Recruitment Solutions, said, "In many ways, recruitment in social

housing is no different to other business sectors, whether that's private sector, local government or not-for-profit organisations. The technology used generally remains the same – of course, there are housing-specific systems but, in general, supporting Microsoft applications is a uniform operation."

## Do you need housing-specific knowledge?

Lioness Recruitment's Bruford said, "The need for housing-specific knowledge depends on the role and the candidate. That said, we always find that it's very helpful for candidates to have some social housing experience so that the environment isn't a complete shock!

"If you're recruiting for an application- or business-systems analyst, it is almost always necessary to have some relevant experience with housing management systems. However, for other roles, such as infrastructure or managerial, where the technology skillsets are less specific, we've often found that there are excellent candidates within the wider 'third sector' better suited to those roles than some people with social housing experience."



*Why would anybody want to work somewhere that they feel miserable in their role because of a mismatched corporate culture and ethos?*

Laura Bruford, Director, Lioness Recruitment

Housing providers' wide variety of business applications Karbon Homes' Ray said, "We need to ensure we're creating and running high quality services, not becoming application developers and 'technology siloed' experts. Although technology is a significant business enabler, it's not our core purpose; we should be able to translate the service

needs of our business users into strategic and tactical (as applicable) solutions and make them available fast.

"This is where IT application specialists come in, mainly through moving towards PaaS or SaaS solutions with low- or no-code rapid development abilities. There is still a dependency in our sector on traditional IT application providers, so highly proficient, sometimes expert, skills are needed."

Lioness Recruitment's Bruford said, "Dealing with housing providers' wide variety of business applications is something that comes with experience; that's why it's so important that housing providers thoroughly vet their recruitment partners.

"We have over 22 years of hands-on experience in housing recruitment. It's therefore our business priority to ensure we remain completely up-to-date with all systems and new technologies, including housing management, asset management, repairs, scheduling, finance and HR.

"After so much time working in housing, we're confident that we know almost everybody who is about, as well as whether they're actively or passively looking for roles, and we can quickly connect the right person for the job."

### Variety of recruitment methods

What is the role of specialist recruitment consultancies, preferred supplier lists (PSLs), general recruiters and direct recruitment?

Lioness Recruitment's Bruford said, "Specialist recruitment agencies can quickly identify niche candidates and are generally much more thorough in their recruiting processes. They tend to provide shortlists of only the most suitable candidates, taking time and headaches out of the recruitment process for hiring managers, and they can completely manage the recruitment process from start to finish. However, one drawback of a specialist agency is that, by their very nature, they can't help with all of an organisation's recruitment across all departments.

"Preferred supplier lists are usually compiled by HR teams and will often be based on historic success in the form of numbers of roles filled and should theoretically provide the best agencies for each department. The problem with PSLs tends to be that sometimes these don't take into account a particular department's opinion when dealing with agencies, leading to agencies being on lists that aren't really delivering.

"We now come to general recruitment agencies; these are risky because they will say 'yes' to every role without having the knowledge and experience to deliver. They will often submit very long shortlists, so clients find themselves 'shortlisting a shortlist'. General recruitment



*Do attractive and interesting work and tell that story on social media; companies and people are the real attractions of our sector because salaries will never be a point of difference.*

Nathaniel Ray, Assistant Director of ICT & Digital Transformation, Karbon Homes

agencies often have poor attention to detail; this can be problematic at all stages of the recruitment process and wastes a lot of time. General recruiters are usually best for high volume recruitment and dealing with organisations who have a lot of patience!

"When it comes to direct recruitment (i.e. DIY), we have always encouraged organisations to try and recruit for themselves in the first instance, particularly in view of the financial savings. However, this isn't feasible for many businesses because of the time and resources needed, coupled with their likely lack of experience in identifying niche skillsets.

"That said, we do come across organisations who are adamant that they can resource every single role themselves and never, ever have a requirement to use external agencies. The likelihood of this being true in 90 per cent of cases is unlikely because we can't all be experts in everything all the time."

### Line-of-business managers and HR teams

James Andrews Recruitment's Cragg said, "In our experience, successful recruitment is always more likely if line managers are involved in the process. Being able to speak to a manager to understand any skill gaps in a department and the specific requirements on a job description vastly improves the chance of success and is something we always insist on."

Karbon Homes' Ray said, "Line-of-business managers should define all of the requirements and carry out the assessments. As long as the HR team provides the framework and underlying logistics, the line managers (whether business or IT) should do the rest."

Lioness Recruitment's Bruford said, "In technology departments, line managers tend to be heavily involved in their own recruitment activities because they need to define their key skillsets, propose those within a job description and then ensure that the right candidates are selected for interview, whereas HR teams tend to be mainly involved to oversee the general process and maintain the smooth running of the recruitment process, such as spotting and weeding out duplicate CVs from different recruitment agencies.



"There should be a healthy balance between the IT & HR teams during the recruitment process or it can cause all sorts of problems such as candidates being kept waiting too long for internal referencing processes and final paperwork, and then being lost to other organisations with more streamlined recruitment processes and internal teams that work harmoniously together."

**Housing's culture and ethos**

Mark Seemann, founder and CEO of StaffCircle, said, "Focusing on organisational culture is the key to recruiting high-performing and engaged employees. Culture, ethos and values are vital at all stages of the employee lifecycle, starting with recruitment.

"It's important that an organisation's core values and beliefs are clearly defined and communicated, then used as the basis for all hiring decisions. Employees with clear goals aligned to company objectives have a stronger sense of purpose and achieve more."

James Andrews Recruitment's Cragg said, "The majority of people in the social housing sector would agree that it is a unique culture, so look for candidates who not only have the right business and technology skills but also the soft skills to succeed. While becoming more commercial is frequently a goal for many housing providers, there is often the need for candidates to have some experience working in a public-sector environment."

Lioness Recruitment's Bruford said, "Why would anybody want to work somewhere that they feel miserable in their role because of a mismatched corporate culture and ethos?"



*Focusing on organisational culture is the key to recruiting high-performing and engaged employees. Employees with clear goals aligned to company objectives have greater purpose and achieve more.*

Mark Seemann, Founder and CEO, StaffCircle

right one for you and don't close your doors to agencies in case you need their help down the line. Check that whoever you partner with for your recruitment actually has the substance and experience that they claim to have; getting tied to the wrong agency can be a headache.

"Be quick – as mentioned earlier, we are currently very much in a candidate-driven market; candidates with niche skillsets are currently coming on and off the market within a matter of days. If candidates have been clear that they are interviewing elsewhere, it's understandable that they won't wait around for three weeks while you shortlist for a role they may or may not actually get.

"Be clear – it's really important that you've ironed out exactly what you are looking for before engaging an agency, as opposed to only doing so after receiving several batches of CVs because you've changed the required skillset(s) at each point."

Karbon Homes' Ray said, "First of all, make sure you are doing attractive and interesting work and tell that story on social media and online. After all, companies and their people are the real attractions of our sector because salaries will never be a point of difference that we can win with.

"Housing providers are obviously not technology companies, so someone else should be best at the highly technical skills; lowering the technical and proprietary skills needed for housing IT will therefore open up more of the market to us."

*Housing Technology would like to thank Adam Cragg (James Andrews Recruitment Solutions), Nathaniel Ray (Karbon Homes), Laura Bruford (Lioness Recruitment) and Mark Seemann (StaffCircle) for their comments and editorial contributions to this article.*



*Social housing has a unique culture, so look for candidates who not only have the right business and technology skills but also the soft skills to succeed.*

Adam Cragg, Director, James Andrews Recruitment Solutions

"We are in such a candidate-led market at the moment that many candidates are well aware that they don't need to put up with office gossip, shoddy management or a lack of employee wellbeing, to give just a few examples. In contrast, they could have been interviewed virtually and been offered and then accepted a new role with a great business within a matter of days."

**Recruitment tips**

Lioness Recruitment's Bruford said, "Do your due diligence. Make sure whatever recruitment approach you take is the

# Inside recruitment – Attracting & retaining the best staff

Jennifer Shorten, Director, Lioness Recruitment



*There can be no denying that the pandemic had lasting repercussions on many aspects of people's daily lives. This is especially true for those of us who work in offices where the landscape was forced through unparalleled change in a relatively short timeframe. In our niche housing IT market, remote-working roles were scarce and usually reserved for implementation or pre-sales consultants at software providers who also had a huge amount of weekly travel to do as well. Even 10-15 years ago, such roles were highly prized and very popular.*

Before the pandemic, the technology to enable remote working had been available for years and many organisations had moved fully or in part to cloud services, but this was mostly used as a replacement for traditional servers and hardware or in conjunction with out-of-hours working. From an IT recruitment point of view, when the pandemic hit, and we were all forced into new ways of working, the differences between how organisations adapted was striking.

Some of our clients stopped recruiting completely and even cancelled arranged interviews, whereas others altered their working practices immediately and moved to full remote-working within a couple of weeks and quickly started using video interviews to speak to candidates.

It was noticeable that small to medium organisations and those based from the Midlands upwards were (in general) faster and more receptive to change and mobilised with speed, whereas several of their southern counterparts almost floundered and two years later, some still don't know what their remote-working policies will look like.

### **More than just an employer...**

The pandemic caused a sea change in candidates' behaviour which shows no sign of abating. For some time now there has already been a distinct shift from traditional

employee thinking, with people expecting more from their employer than just being paid and being forced to go to a tired Christmas party every year.

Modern employees want a decent work-life balance, fair pay and relevant benefits along with a caring, respectful employer. Workplace wellbeing and respect for employees are massive draws for today's candidates, leaving any company even hinting at a lack of flexibility lagging behind with applications in today's candidate-driven market. Applicants are also voting with their feet by showing little or zero interest in a full-time return to an office. When speaking to our candidates applying for such roles, it often transpires that they have actually completely missed the '100 per cent office-based' aspect of a role and still expect some remote working.

### **Clear remote-working policies**

With our candidates, we've found that the most popular potential employers are those with robust, clear and 'official' agile-working policies. Usually, such companies are also the most organised when it comes to their employees, with wellbeing programmes and staff training, plus engaging careers and benefits pages on their websites. These potential employers' care for their employees' engagement is apparent and today's candidates expect this.



In contrast, the least popular roles are with companies who have no flexible working or only completely office-based roles, or those who haven't put any effort into thinking of an employee benefits package or gone to the trouble of writing a job description. Today's best candidates expect more, especially in a sector that is supposed to be about helping people.

In 2020, the UK's workforce was either furloughed or had to quickly adapt to remote working. Most organisations had never contemplated the entirety of their office-based staff working from home but most of us managed and the sky didn't fall in! The 'new normal' of a remote office seemed to be working for many organisations, with happier staff and some companies finding it so successful that they gave up their offices entirely, saving money on rent at the same time. This new way of thinking regarding the relevance of a physical office continued for quite a while after all the lockdowns ended.

Our client base is diverse and includes everything from small/medium housing providers to G15 sites, innovative IT start-ups to award-winning multinational software companies, and local council to huge London boroughs. As a result, we've seen a range of different responses to post-pandemic working practices and candidates' subsequent reactions.

### Candidates' expectations

Many of the smaller IT companies are inherently disposed to take advantage of the latest technologies so were already fully remote pre-lockdown and really showed their strengths during periods of change. There has been a growing interest in such organisations over the past year because candidates are more receptive to smaller, personal organisations and are less bothered by change.

Some housing providers have also given up, or are in the process of giving up, their main office and are moving to office hubs instead. This works well with their agile-working policies, giving staff the best of both worlds via remote options alongside the ability to work or meet colleagues in smaller, more flexible spaces.

Such proactive thinking is proving popular with many potential and existing employees. We speak to dozens of candidates every day and over 99 per cent expect some form of remote working; some people are quite happy to

go into the office for a couple of days each week while others are only interested if they can work remotely for the majority of their time.

### The dark side of remote working

However, there is a dark side to remote working. Employees' attitudes towards personal rather than employer satisfaction, mixed with remote working, have created an alarming trend of a small number of unprincipled remote workers actually working for two or more companies without the other companies knowing.

Apparently, the thought process is, "why do one job well when two or three can be mediocre and get paid for all of them." We've encountered a full-time, fixed-term salaried employee who was also working on a couple of day-rate contracts (one full-time, one part-time). Only the part-time role appeared on their CV so they were covered for future employment.

Being nowhere near the actual office can also be disastrous for employees if their employer changes their working arrangements and they find themselves with, say, an extraordinarily-long daily commute. We heard recently from several candidates that they had been employed on a fully-remote basis only to find just a few months later that the company had gone back on its remote-working policy and wanted everybody back in the office every day.

### A candidate-driven market

Dissenting voices against remote working and for presenteeism argue that employees don't work properly from home and that productivity is down. Recruitment and staff retention go hand in hand so this is a moot point in a candidate-driven market because employees demand more and are looking elsewhere; it will stay that way until the market changes, irrespective of the opinions of politicians and business tycoons.

*Jennifer Shorten is a director of Lioness Recruitment.*

**Lioness.**



# Purposeful recruitment

Polly Barnes, Commercial Director, RiskHub

*Following the recent launch of the four-day week trial for UK employees, it's clear the recruitment landscape and candidates' expectations are changing following the pandemic.*

But what else can we do to attract top talent to our industry? Polly Barnes, commercial director at Riskhub, explores how having a clear purpose that improves people's lives can support business recruitment.

It's no secret that purpose-driven companies are rewarded with more loyalty from their customers and employees. People are more focused on being socially- and environmentally-conscious and are making better-informed decisions about who they work for, as well as where they spend their money.

We are in a buoyant job market and we want to keep our talented employees not just working for us, but also working with us. With candidates having high expectations when it comes to flexibility, salaries and benefits, we need to look at what else we, as employers, can offer. We expect companies to offer something distinctive and rewarding to retain top talent, and in turn, expect the talent to stay loyal to us because they not only feel valued but also have a sense of purpose.

## Purpose

What do we mean by purpose? We all need jobs, but why are we working in the housing sector when there are thousands of other avenues open?

I think it's because we're united by a desire to improve the lives of everyday people. That might seem a stretch when we're bogged down with day-to-day work, but if you scratch beneath the surface, it's not hard to see how important our work is to uphold some of the most fundamental values of our society and help make it a better place for others.

At Riskhub, we provide the UK's leading compliance data management platform to social housing providers, and this is something we are incredibly proud of. In the hopes of inspiring and attracting top talent, we talk about **why** we do **what** we do, not just what we do. We want to ensure candidates buy into our business for the right reasons, and

in turn, we aim to retain good people and allow them to grow with us.

Despite working with data and developing software, we also thrive on real-world connections. We ensure that we remain mindful that housing sector data is not just a set of numbers on a spreadsheet, but rather vital information about safety, structure and the homes people live in.

## Culture

We stand behind the software we've developed because it makes a real difference in people's lives. Our customer feedback indicates that we really simplify companies' compliance data, removing the risk of error and stress with how we handle risk assessment data. The work we do could save lives.

We hope the people that choose to work for us are proud of this purpose and ultimately want to help us reach our goals and ambitions. We try to weave that throughout our culture and will always be looking for ways to relate our everyday tasks and responsibilities back to why we are doing them.

Communication is the cornerstone of every business, and this means working hard to make sure it feels easy, no matter what life throws at us, whether people are in the office full-time or working more flexibly. We're mindful of celebrating the small successes, building relationships and reiterating our 'why', regardless of what form it takes – something that is more important now than ever. But we can always get better, and you can never rest when you're trying to cultivate a thriving, purpose-driven business.

## Retaining top talent

Working in a software-as-a-service (SaaS) business, from sales and marketing to product and support, everyone touches a part of every project. When we make even the smallest of updates which move a customer's business forward or make someone's life easier, the entire team knows about it. This makes the team feel valued, seen and

celebrated. They understand what we are doing and why it matters – it is essentially motivating.

And when we say everyone, we mean everyone; finance, HR, facilities, support, product development—it goes on. You can't release a successful update without every person doing their part, and it's surprising just how many companies forget the importance of that interconnection as they grow. And most of the time, it can be as simple as acknowledging the work and saying, "Thank you, great job."

So, whether you're hiring IT professionals within your housing organisation, finding technology partners to help you solve a problem or are a technology company in our sector, we all have a unifying, real-world purpose in common; our business is people's homes, and making their lives easier or safer.

We can and should be able to attract fresh new thinking and talent into our sector from diverse corners of the market and drive improvements for the future because this is 'technology for good', and there are some unbelievably talented people out there who I know will share that passion.

Because although not always directly, we are all working towards a better society through everything we do. That is our purpose, whether we realise it or not. We must get it right, and spread the word to bring the right people in. How motivating is that?

*Polly Barnes is the commercial director at RiskHub.*

GENERAL NEWS



## Geosphere launches EPC-C mapping

*Geosphere's Xmap geographic information system for local authorities now includes an EPC data layer to help housing providers and councils tackle climate change, improve housing standards and ensure regulatory compliance.*

One of the first users is Bath & North East Somerset Council, which is using the EPC data layer alongside its existing long-term Xmap installation in order to raise housing standards.

Martin Laker, GIS manager, Bath & North East Somerset Council, said, "We are integrating EPC ratings for our properties via Xmap and the EPC layer; this will help us identify potential improvements to our housing stock and make changes to reduce emissions from

heating and cooling. The EPC data will also help with the delivery of any future government-funded home improvement schemes."

Accessible from any web-enabled device, Xmap includes a suite of built-in GIS-referenced workflows to support the delivery of services such as housing and planning.



# Housing Technology 2023

## Would you like to be involved?

# HOUSING<sup>TM</sup> TECHNOLOGY

## 2023 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM



Having now confirmed the new venue for our 13th consecutive Housing Technology conference and executive forum (08-09 March 2023) at The East Midlands Conference Centre in Nottingham, we are pleased to announce the central themes for next year's 'must attend' event plus how potential speakers, sponsors and exhibitors can be involved.

The main themes for Housing Technology 2023 are:

- **Business as usual?** – The changing role of your core applications
- **Compliance** – Golden threads, regulations & adaptability
- **Agile infrastructures** – Cloud vs. on-premise, cyber security & enterprise integration
- **Data management** – Moving from information to knowledge & wisdom
- **Digital transformation** – From small ad-hoc projects to enterprise-wide restructuring
- **Finance & procurement** – Funding & finding the right IT foundations
- **Innovation & resilience** – Encouraging IT & business creativity alongside boosting your operational resilience
- **Tenants as consumers** – Meeting tenants' service & delivery expectations
- **The internet of housing** – The role of IoT for smarter operations
- **Looking ahead** – Which technology & business areas should be on your long-term agenda?

**We are still in the early stages of planning next year's event; if you are interested in speaking, sponsoring or exhibiting at Housing Technology 2023, please get in touch.**



For presentation and speaking enquiries from housing providers, local authorities and other 'end-user' organisations, please email Alastair Tweedie, editor and co-founder of Housing Technology, at [alastair@housing-technology.com](mailto:alastair@housing-technology.com).

For sponsorship and exhibitor enquiries from technology suppliers and IT/business consultancies, please email George Grant, CEO and co-founder of Housing Technology, at [george.grant@housing-technology.com](mailto:george.grant@housing-technology.com).

# A bigger, greener housing legacy



Michelle Tyler, Managing Director for Housing, Civica

*Civica's Michelle Tyler explains how the software provider's comprehensive survey of housing providers and residents reveals a clear priority for better value, safer and more sustainable housing.*



We recently carried out extensive research with social housing residents and housing leaders across the UK to get under the skin of the big issues affecting the sector. What we found and present in our new report, 'Greener Homes, Connected Communities' (civica.com), is that building more affordable homes is the number one priority for housing bodies. Addressing the current shortage of homes is a pressing focus, with an added imperative to meet net-zero targets through more sustainable building practices and greener homes.

## A complex housing picture

Of course, it's not surprising that we found a wide range of challenges and goals for both residents and leaders. For example, when asked what was most important to them over the next 10-15 years, residents answered with everything from 'more recycling' and 'safety of housing building materials' to 'mental health awareness'.

As we mark the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, it's clear that our sector is placing greater emphasis

than ever on the resident voice, encouraging people to develop a sense of ownership and contribute to the future of their housing organisation. This is proven by the rise in complaints to the Housing Ombudsman and legal disrepair claims, but also in our resident survey. We found that the vast majority were comfortable sharing 'home truths' and aiming to affect change through their voice.

New building safety legislation and the Decent Homes standard are ensuring that housing providers are held to account and will provide safe, suitable housing. Access to joined-up data and analytics platforms will prove crucial here by helping housing providers see the bigger picture of residents and homes to provide the best possible services.

## Net zero is non-negotiable

Across the UK, the housing leaders we surveyed confirmed that building more affordable homes was a top priority. But looking across the nations, there was a slightly different view, with meeting net-zero targets gaining much support; dealing with the climate crisis is a huge priority.

Around 14 per cent of UK carbon emissions are caused by energy use in homes. In fact, the Climate Change Committee has recommended that the target for all social housing to meet EPC-C level by 2030 should be brought forward to 2028.

But is this achievable? We uncovered a big difference in confidence in meeting this goal, between residents (44 per cent for the UK as a whole) and housing leaders (90 per cent for the UK as a whole and 94 per cent for own organisation). Perhaps this latter confidence comes from inside knowledge of the detailed and widespread work already underway to make the UK's social housing stock greener. Housing bodies would do well to communicate the great progress made to date to increase residents' confidence.



It may sound obvious but one of the biggest barriers is understanding what needs to be achieved. There's lots more to consider than 'just' meeting energy efficiency targets – it will require careful forecasting and budgeting. While we naturally turn our minds to what we could build in the future, a thorough evaluation of current stock with up-to-date asset databases will be invaluable.

### **An inclusive process**

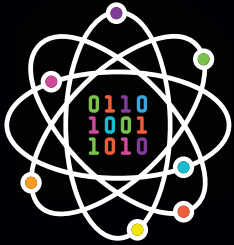
We also found that bringing everyone along on the journey is vital. Housing leaders confirmed that employee behaviour was the biggest barrier to becoming carbon neutral, more so than costs or system issues. So education programmes and sharing best practice from both inside your organisation and others will help foster this green spirit.

Crucially, residents must be at the heart of this journey. Our survey suggested they are ready and willing to help. When asked about who should take financial responsibility for sustainability, they are happy to share some of the costs in areas such as energy efficient appliances and

outdoor green spaces. They are also fully behind greener technologies such as smart thermostats and energy monitors and would like to see them used more widely.

The good news is that our current snapshot of the housing sector shows that both residents and leaders want the same thing; cheaper, safer and greener homes which are available now and scaled up to meet tomorrow's demand. Today's residents are keener than ever to interact digitally, which will make it easier to listen, respond and move forward as a sector for the future.

*Michelle Tyler is managing director for housing at Civica.*



# DATA MATTERS 2022

## HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™

HOUSING | IT | TELECOMS | BUSINESS | ECOLOGY

**13 September 2022**  
**THE BRITISH MUSEUM  
LONDON**



**KEYNOTE  
SPEAKER**

**Dr Sabrina Cohen-Hatton**  
Author, firefighter  
& psychologist

**Data matters...** Accurate, reliable and timely data is the single most important part of housing providers' activities around properties, tenants, assets and finance. Find out how to improve data management at **Data Matters 2022**, Housing Technology's one-day event on **13 September** at **The British Museum in London**, featuring IT and business-led presentations from leading housing providers and IT partners.



### BOOK NOW

For more details, please visit [housing-technology.com/event/datamatters22](https://housing-technology.com/event/datamatters22) to book your place, limited spaces available.

