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- **Housing management**
- **Finance management**
- **Repairs & mobile working**
- **New Research** - *Housing IT start-ups*
- **Feature** - *Women in IT in housing*
- **Customer management**
- **Infrastructure**
- **General news**

SPECIAL FEATURE
Women in housing IT

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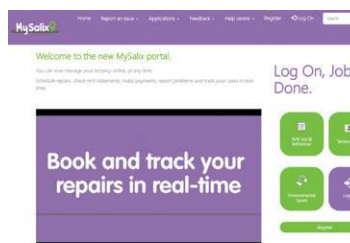
SPECIAL FEATURE
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///steepest.gains.master
Snowdonia, Wales

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With Housing Technology 2020 just six weeks away (04-05 March, Oxford), it's interesting to highlight a few of the housing speakers' presentations because they demonstrate not only the range of IT/business talks at the conference but also the scope of housing providers' use of IT across their operations.

Kingdom Housing: Chrome killed my desktop – Kingdom Housing has been running its business on Chrome OS, removing the desktop, internal networks, static licence agreements and deploying new services in GCP, with the result that it has cut costs with G-Suite, zero-cost BYOD, procurement-in-a-day, reduced risk, increased performance and provides the best user experience for staff.

Coastal Housing: Can I speak to someone in IT? – How does diversity help IT departments? Why are women leaving technical roles? What can the housing sector do to get ahead of the recruitment curve and leave the dark ages of IT behind?

L&Q: Connected places – L&Q's award-winning Connected Places programme is a great example of the intelligent use of technology to solve business challenges; it has delivered at-scale IoT solutions, enabling L&Q to predict and prevent maintenance issues and actively monitor and optimise housing conditions.

Adra: Developing low-code solutions – Our journey towards in-house software development using low-code will be presented (warts & all!); avoid the pitfalls and learn how we embraced failure to implement an agile, low-code development methodology.

Sanctuary Group: 90-days for technology change – How a new head of IT designed the vision for IT change, the blueprint to enable it and innovations to support a modern workplace and customer experience.

Some of the other presentations include: **Housing Plus -** Unleashing our IT with a 'cloud first' approach to empower our people & customers; **Sovereign Housing -** Unlocking digital transformation; **Paradigm Housing -** Getting the 'data basics' right; **Silva Homes -** Would you like a receipt for that? The importance of customer service; **Valleys to Coast Housing -** Enabling the modern workplace by unpicking legacy systems & 'fixing the plumbing'; **London Borough of Waltham Forest -** The low-code chatbot challenge; **Watford Community Housing -** Transforming & future-proofing IT by moving IT back in-house; and **Regenda Group -** A connected data landscape: BI, data management, IoT, AI, cognitive learning & predictive analytics.

Please see **www.housing-technology.com/2020conference** for further details.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2020

4-5 MARCH 2020

The Doubletree by Hilton Oxford Belfry
www.housing-technology.com/events/htc20

SEE PAGE 08

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CONTENTS

COMPANIES IN THIS ISSUE

Business intelligence with Excel and Power BI

Gary Pliskin, Finance Director, Islington & Shoreditch Housing

Power Pivot in Excel and Power BI are amazing tools that can deliver substantial efficiency savings and provide an awesome level of analysis and insight; working with data has never been easier.

Our story

Five years ago we realised, like most housing organisations, that we had lots of data in a variety of different databases and spreadsheets. A huge amount of staff time was being wasted every day, manually extracting data, manipulating it and then putting the results into reports for circulation. The output usually consisted of PDFs circulated by email.

We started the search for a tool that could simultaneously extract data from a variety of databases and spreadsheets. A tool that could cope with data that was in different formats, cope with missing data and cope with errors in the data. A tool that could automatically clean, transform and then produce amazing insights from that data. After a lot of research, we realised we already owned one of the best tools for the job; it was called Microsoft Excel and we just needed to use Power Query and the Power Pivot add-in. We embraced the technology and started to produce a variety of automated reports.

Four years ago, Power BI was released and this took our journey of automation and reporting analysis to a much higher level. Interactive reports with hierarchies, drill-down, cross-filtering, custom tool-tips and drill-through have transformed the end-user experience.

We now have a bunch of fully automated reports churning out incredible analysis every hour and day of the year. A summary of our reports is as follows:

REPORT	PURPOSE	DATA SOURCES	TIME SAVING* (DAYS P.A.)
Weekly arrears report	Rent arrears analysis	SQL db	104
Weekly flexi-time report	Staff flexi-time analysis	Cloud HR system	52
Monthly development analysis	Detailed 5-year development programme analysis	SQL db	12
Quarterly development reconciliation	Automatic reconciliation of Brixx forecast to development db	SQL db & Brixx spreadsheet report	4
Annual SDR	Statistical data return for the regulator	SQL db and spreadsheets	15
KPI analysis	KPI's for board and leadership teams	Sharepoint list	6
Interest accrual	Calculation of interest accrual	Spreadsheets	2
Management accounts	Interactive management accounts	SQL db and spreadsheets	4
Annual repairs analysis	Insights into repairs	Spreadsheets	1
Miscellaneous	Various other finance reports	Spreadsheets	12

*Compared with manual report production

Business intelligence with Excel and Power BI
Continued from previous page
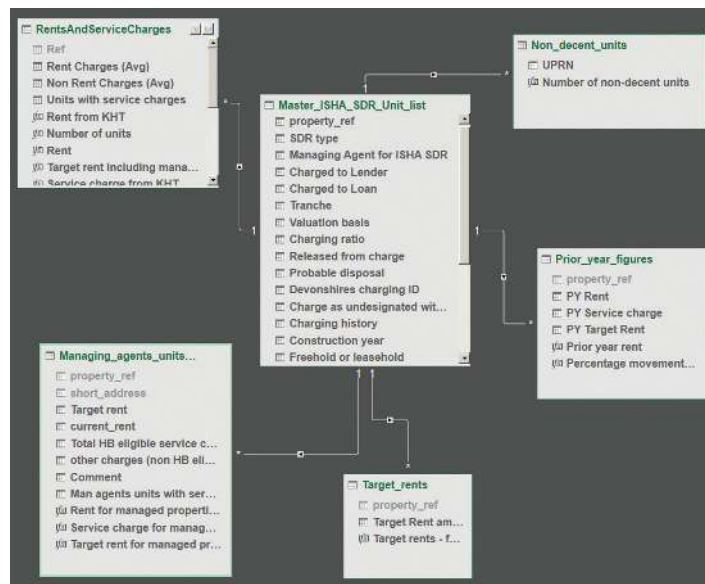
How to get started

Here's what you need to know to start your own Power Pivot and Power BI adventure.

In Office 365, the Power Pivot add-in is now built into Excel, you just need to activate it (to activate it, go to File, Options, Add-ins then click 'Go'; next, go to Manage Excel Add-ins and then tick 'PowerPivot utilities'). For Power BI, simply download the free desktop app.

The same powerful data modelling engine is built into Excel and Power BI, so the knowledge you gain working with data in Excel is directly transferrable to Power BI and vice versa.

To create a report, you need to connect to your data, create a data model and then create your pivot tables or visualisations.

You use the 'Get data' button to connect to your data. Once you've connected to your data, you can manipulate and transform it using Power Query. This automates the time-consuming process of manipulating the raw data your systems produce into a usable format. It's also very user-friendly and simple to use.

Data connections can be made to multiple data sources in a single model so, for example, a model can get its data from both a single SQL database and multiple Excel spreadsheets.

You only need to hit the 'refresh' button for fresh data to be pulled from the sources, automatically cleaned/transformed by Power Query and then loaded into your model.

Once you've connected to your data, you can create a data model. Beginners often learn the basics by working on a single table of data. However, as you progress you will learn how to include multiple tables of data within a single data model. So, a table containing details of your properties can be connected to numerous other tables of data if all the tables contain a Unique Property Reference Number (UPRN) field.

For example, in the model below, data from different sources on rents, service charges, target rents, prior year data, managing agent data and Decent Homes data was put into a single model as each table contains a property reference field.

This ability to effortlessly pull data together from multiple sources is of particular benefit for housing organisations, where data is often held in many separate systems, databases and spreadsheets. We are working with HouseMark on a pilot project to develop a mechanism to access benchmarking data directly from PowerBI which will allow us to integrate this gold mine of information into our own reports, thereby enriching the organisational data we already hold.

A formula language called Dax enables you to do calculations with your data. It's very similar to Excel's normal language for formulae; the main difference is that it works on tables and columns of data rather than individual cells.

Once the model has been built, you can build Power Pivot tables in Excel or visualisations in Power BI and create a report.

Sharing your work

You can publish Power BI reports and share them through the online Power BI service. Published datasets can use a scheduled refresh to automatically keep them up to date. Users throughout your organisation can then access these 'golden data models' to build their own reports in Power BI and Excel (through a Power BI add-in for Excel).

The gateway

You can install a gateway to link your online data models to on-premise data sources, such as your housing database.

The report server

You can publish to a report server on your internal network if you don't want to use the online service.

Publishing reports for the general public

You can publish reports on the internet for the general public; for example here's a link to our interactive housing stock analysis: bit.ly/37lC1lR.
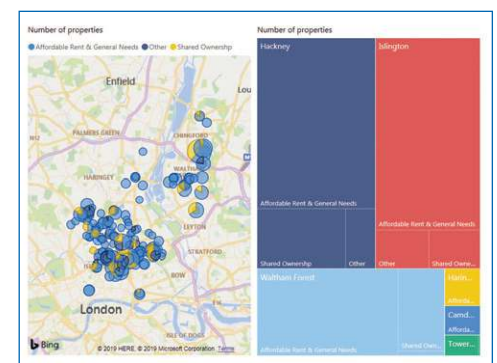
Start your own journey now

Download and open the free Power BI desktop app. A welcome screen is displayed that has links to various training resources and videos. There is also a great free dataset you can connect to for learning purposes. It's an oData connection and the link is: services.odata.org/northwind/northwind.svc.

Good luck, and please feel free to get in touch via **news@housing-technology.com** if you have any questions.

Gary Pliskin is the finance director at Islington & Shoreditch Housing.

GDPR – Empowering the 'consumer citizen' in housing

Simon Godfrey, Senior Executive for Housing, M-Files

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into force in May 2018; it's arrival harmonised data privacy laws across Europe as well as boosting rights for individuals, giving them greater control over their information and how it is handled by organisations. It has also given citizens a stronger sense of ownership over their personal data.

Various scandals, such as Cambridge Analytica, played out in the public domain have shown the realities of data misuse. Consumers now expect any organisation they interact with to handle their information responsibly, to only store what is necessary and be transparent with what they are holding.

Data sits at the heart of everything housing providers do. To continue delivering first-rate support and services to communities up and down the country, access to information is vital.

Holding personal information

Housing providers are required to hold and share a huge amount of personal identifiable information (PII) relating to tenants including name and date of birth information, home address, dependents, ethnic origin, health conditions and gender, and often on behalf of vulnerable people.

High-profile incidents relating to misplaced or lost information mean consumers are more in tune then ever when it comes to understanding what information is held on them and how that information relates to their personal circumstances.

In housing, this might relate to a tenant wanting transparency over the safety of their property, such as gas and fire safety certificates. It could also extend to information about refurbishments carried out on the property or wanting access to their tenancy agreement. Additionally, if a tenant feels that certain information held on them might inhibit their personal circumstances, they can ask for it to be removed, under GDPR, if they feel that information is no longer required.

Information responsibility

Housing providers are responsible for vast amounts of information. Data is often spread across multiple physical filing systems and digital networks and information repositories. These disparate data sources can make it very difficult for housing providers' staff to collate information, while lost information or data which hasn't been disposed of correctly can put housing providers at risk of hefty fines. In 2018, a housing provider launched an internal investigation after accidentally emailing 300 staff a spreadsheet understood to contain details of employees' sexuality, ethnicity and disability status, prompting an investigation into the incident by the ICO.

With so much at stake and so much information to manage, how can housing providers successfully take on the task of remaining compliant with GDPR and also meeting the needs of their tenants? Well, it comes down to using an intelligent approach to information management.

A 360-degree view

The use of intelligent information management (IIM) systems, layered on top of existing data storage systems, gives housing staff a complete 360-degree view of all information stored across their networks, files and repositories. This makes identifying and managing PII significantly easier.

Metadata tagging enables staff to search for information according to what it is rather than where it's stored. Staff are finding and managing information more easily and faster, allowing them to give more back to tenant care. It also provides tenants with complete transparency over the data which matters most to them. This heightened transparency can also be used to enhance other areas associated with information handling.

As mentioned above, tenants want greater visibility relating to the safety of their property, such as ensuring that gas safety and electrical certificates are up to date. An information management system allows workflows to be set for safety checks, meaning alerts can be created 30, 60 or 90 days before a certificate is due to expire. This gives staff a much more holistic view over renewal dates, reducing the risk of financial penalties and also provides piece of mind for tenants knowing that the property they live in is safe and regulatory compliant.

Finally, having a considered approach to information handling also ensures that housing providers remain compliant with GDPR. By having complete transparency over the information they hold on tenants, housing providers can ensure they're not holding data that should not be in their possession. Doing so aids organisations when it comes to auditing processes, demonstrating that they're not in breach of regulations. Most importantly it gives citizens clarity when it comes to understanding how their data is being held and managed.

Simon Godfrey is a senior executive for housing at M-Files.

Beyond the office – The customer-centric IT team

Vawns Murphy, Lead IT Partner for Service Delivery, Silva Homes

Silva Homes has been undergoing a major transformation over the last 18 months and the way we use technology is at the heart of this change. This is a major change for a business that had been pretty sceptical about the importance and role of IT.

When I joined Silva, I soon realised that my role was about more than just managing technology; it's about managing the relationship that my colleagues have with technology and helping them understand how it can make their lives easier.

One of the core principles for our transformation is about creating a genuine business partnering model whereby people in support services such as IT recognise that their role is to help the business deliver front-line services to customers. That's why I've worked hard to build relationships with colleagues at all levels.

I have regular catchups and discovery sessions to make sure we understand and respond to what the business wants and needs. I also think it's important to make it as easy as possible for people to access IT and our support. We've introduced new working practices and replaced some of the more antiquated systems and processes. I also regularly visit customers in our independent living schemes as well as colleagues who aren't office-based to ensure that everyone has good access to technology and give them help with any particular issues.

Working for a customer-focused housing provider is a new experience for me; I'm enjoying working for a business that recognises the importance of technology, not for the sake of it, but as a tool to drive change.

Of course, there are things that we need to improve and areas in which I want to see more change. Being a woman in IT also has its challenges and, although there are two other women in our team, we are still a minority within the sector as a whole.

My philosophy has always been to inspire others and I'm passionate about encouraging more women to seek a career in IT. For example, I actively support the IT Service Management Forum by speaking at conferences and writing articles and books. I also provide practical advice on common IT issues, such as de-escalating a tricky situation and how to allocate IT resources for the benefit of our customers. I am also providing mentoring to a young woman who has joined Silva's new graduate scheme, and I work closely with the two other women in my team to help develop their careers.

Housing providers are finally grasping the importance of technology, but I'm not sure that those of us working in IT have always communicated with our businesses as well as we could. That's what I love about my role; it's about inspiring people to get the most out of technology and if in doing so, I can help get more women into IT, then that would be brilliant.

Vawns Murphy is the lead IT partner for service delivery at Silva Homes.

Notify signs up Bournville Village Trust

Bournville Village Trust has deployed Notify's incident management software for audits, inspections and checklists.

Via Notify's mobile app linked to a central management portal, the housing provider is using the software to report safety near-misses and incidents as well as safeguarding issues. Following its adoption of Notify, Bournville Village Trust has since seen a 300 per cent increase in the reporting of near misses and incidents as a result of improved engagement across its workforce.

Dave Snell, health and safety compliance manager, Bournville Village Trust, said, "I could see how simple, flexible technology tools could help BVT do a better job of reporting and managing safety. I really liked the Notify approach around developing software in collaboration with clients, where they bring the technology expertise and we bring the health and safety knowledge.

"Notify's Audit module is simple to use and allows us to create any number of templates to help ensure that we have the right checks for the diverse activities that we carry out. In particular, the ability to allocate and track audit actions to completion has been a big step forward for us, helping to make sure we're on top of things in every department."

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- BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE
- IT STRATEGY
- COMMUNITY NETWORKING

By the time you're reading this, it'll be just under six weeks until the Housing Technology 2020 conference and executive forum at the DoubleTree Oxford Belfry on Wednesday 04 and Thursday 05 March.

Running every year for over a decade, the Housing Technology annual conference is the longest-running and arguably the most important public forum for anyone involved directly or indirectly in technology within the UK social housing sector.

Most of the guests and speakers come back year after year in the secure knowledge that spending one or two days out of the office with their peers from other housing providers is the most efficient, cost-effective, productive and enjoyable way of keeping their fingers on the pulse of housing IT. A frequent comment from guests is just how much they learn and how much ground they can cover in just a couple of days.

- **Intelligence gathering:** covering everything from legacy IT migration and core business applications through to the very latest technology innovations in housing, Housing Technology 2020 is an unparalleled opportunity to gain a holistic view of the current state of housing IT and to benchmark your ideas and strategies with your peers.

- **Use your time wisely:** Housing Technology 2020 is a brilliant use of your time – where else can you see under one roof and in such a short space of time such a wide range of cutting-edge and thought-provoking IT/business talks, meet all of the key housing IT suppliers and mingle with other senior-level peers from other housing providers.

- **Informal networking & peer discussions:** alongside the 40+ business/IT presentations and the showcase of IT suppliers, a central part of Housing Technology 2020 is the chance for you to mingle and network with your peers, compare notes and learn from others' experience, either over lunch or breakfast or during the three informal evening events.

KEYNOTE:
SABRINA COHEN-HATTON

KEYNOTE:
DR KEVIN FONG, OBE

"Mind blowing – we've had such a positive response!"
Coastline Housing

"Very relevant and the best opportunity to network with our peers."
Prima Group

"Inspiring, eye opening and reassuring."
Midland Heart

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Social Telecoms · SOVEREIGN BUSINESS INTEGRATION GROUP · Totalmobile · TSG · UNIT4 · HOUSING TECHNOLOGY

Full details of all the keynote talks, IT/business presentations, sponsors and exhibitors are now online, including the final running order over the two days of Housing Technology 2020 – please see www.housing-technology.com/2020conference.

South Yorkshire Housing goes Microsoft-first with TSG

Award-winning Microsoft partner TSG is supporting South Yorkshire Housing in its plans to go 'Microsoft first' throughout its operations.

Taking a Microsoft-first approach, the housing provider is using numerous modules from the Microsoft Office 365 suite including OneDrive, Teams, Power Apps, Power Automate (previously Flow) and a new enterprise-wide SharePoint EDRM platform. Office 365 and its associated modules will be integrated with South Yorkshire Housing's existing Civica CX and Keystone Asset Management systems. Sonya Payne, project coordinator and Office 365 product owner, South Yorkshire Housing, said, "I first saw the scale of features Office 365 offered and how they could be used in the housing sector during TSG's presentation at the Housing Technology 2017 conference and I was impressed by how the platform could be used in social housing."

Fast-forward to 2019, and TSG and South Yorkshire Housing are now planning to embed Office 365 throughout the organisation, and the deployment of an EDRM solution linking to its core Civica and Keystone business applications is underway.

Like many housing providers, South Yorkshire Housing had previously bought its Microsoft licences simply because they were due for renewal and was unclear of Office 365's potential.

Payne said, "Our team is always asking if its strategic goals can be achieved with Office 365 before implementing any additional systems; the answer is usually yes."

South Yorkshire Housing also wanted a modern, compliant and user-friendly EDRM system. TSG's solution embraces the security, retention and compliance features of Office 365; this provides peace of mind and quality assurance for documentation relating to the five main areas of electrical, gas, fire, water and asbestos compliance.

Payne said, "The TSG team has a fantastic understanding of Office 365, its capabilities and how we can maximise our use of it. What we like about working with TSG is that they work with us at our pace while taking account of our other 'big-ticket' priorities.

"The TSG team will constantly share their knowledge, such as Office 365's integration with other systems – they really know their stuff. Overall, TSG has already added so much value as a vital 'critical friend', not forgetting all of TSG's Microsoft Gold accreditations."

FINANCE MANAGEMENT

Southside Housing chooses Orchard for ERP

Southside Housing has chosen Orchard as the ERP partner for its digital transformation programme, with the deployment of Orchard's housing, asset and finance software packages.

Southside Housing's digital strategy is intended to be underpinned by a suite of technology that's customer accessible, produces dynamic information, supports efficiency and creates mobile flexibility.

Chris Milborrow, business improvement manager, Southside Housing, said, "Businesses can often get bogged down as a result of inefficient processes and data-quality issues. This project will enable us to overcome those challenges and focus to a greater extent on giving our staff more time to support our tenants and communities.

"One of the main reasons we chose Orchard was because their team seemed to really grasp and could articulate our key challenges. They built a good rapport with our assessment panel and users from across the business could see us working well together as a result of their open and consultative approach."

By implementing the three core Orchard solutions across housing, asset and finance management and integrating as many areas of its systems as possible, Southside Housing aims to build a much more consistent approach to IT, including the removal of as many sources of siloed information as possible.

Mobysoft helps to cut Shepherds Bush Housing's arrears by £300k

Shepherds Bush Housing has reduced its rent arrears by £291,000 within a year of implementing Mobysoft's RentSense software.

The decision to choose Mobysoft's RentSense followed the housing provider's review at the end of 2018 of its income collection processes, with the combined aims of optimising rent collections, mitigating the effects of universal credit and welfare reform and using IT to improve internal productivity. The initial impact of RentSense was to reduce rent officers' caseloads of arrears by around 50 per cent.

Justine Hart, income manager, Shepherds Bush Housing, said, "RentSense has proven to be incredibly effective and excellent value for money. RentSense has freed up more time for staff, enabling them to adopt smarter, more holistic working practices and engage with external agencies better to get great outcomes for our tenants.

"Now that they have much more accurate and relevant caseloads, our rent officers know that every contact is important. The team can now complete their weekly caseload and our arrears are the lowest in the past decade. Our arrears have reduced from 4.4 per cent in the week RentSense went live to a current low of just 3.5 per cent.

"The reports coming out of RentSense let us quickly highlight cases which have had no action as well as see weekly case-completion metrics. It also tracks individual workloads so we can redistribute cases as needed, while the new dashboard provides really good insights into the number of universal credit cases and ongoing levels of arrears."

Fife Council on board with RentSense

Fife Council has implemented Mobysoft's RentSense package to reduce the effects of universal credit and protect its housing revenue account (HRA) in order to keep its development plans on track.

Vania Kennedy, service manager for income, Fife Council, said, "Since the introduction of universal credit and before our use of RentSense, the council's arrears had risen to just under £7 million – we originally expected our arrears to increase to £5.6 million.

"We opted for RentSense because we think it will help us mitigate the effects of universal credit. It will help to identify the right arrears cases at the right time so that we can spot problems at the earliest stages as well as highlight the 'can pay, won't pay tenants'."

RentSense was deployed across the council's eight locations during a two-day period, with support and training delivered on-site.

Kennedy said, "We spent time on user acceptance testing before going live which helped make the deployment a success, along with all the preparations made by Mobysoft and our technical staff. It was great to have Mobysoft on-site supporting different groups of staff when they started to use the new system, and overall our income officers have found RentSense easy to use."

4th & 5th March 2020

DOUBLETREE BY HILTON
OXFORD BELFRY, OXFORD

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LATEST DETAILS ON **PAGE 08**

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Simplified service charge management

How to save time and reduce risk

Giles Horwood, Managing Director, Simpson Associates

Studies have shown that up to two hours per day can be saved by eliminating paperwork and streamlining workflows, along with cutting out unproductive travel. It's therefore no surprise that many housing providers are trying to automate the traditionally spreadsheet-intensive task of service charge processing. Typically, monitoring payment cycles, updating tenants and collecting charges are all managed via multiple Excel documents used right across the business.

Complex variables

Most housing providers have complex property portfolios, comprising diverse property types and different ownership models. For each property, multiple different service charges need to be apportioned, from roof repairs and garden maintenance to structural work and gutter clearing. In addition, tenant payment cycles vary, with some paying annually, others quarterly and some spreading out their payments monthly.

There may then be further complexities introduced through mergers and acquisitions. Historical legal decisions can define how service charges can be managed and charged for, demanding different approaches for differing parts of the portfolio.

As a result, the manual management of service charges is prone to inaccuracies and human error, not to mention being hugely time-consuming, inflexible and draining on resources.

For example, with a portfolio of over 42,000 properties and over £16 million in service charge costs to collect, Orbit was struggling to cope. Its service charge process was done using Excel spreadsheets, which was hugely resource-intensive, as well as the spreadsheets themselves taking ages to load, save changes or liable to simply crash altogether.

Solutions too confined to customise

In a bid to solve this problem, some housing providers buy 'specialist' or 'off the shelf' software that claim to make life easier by automating the process. However, these systems are often too rigid to cope with the large number of above-mentioned variables. The result? An expensive investment confined to its programming and difficult to customise, so customers are unable to save time, money or achieve their expected business benefits.

Increase efficiency and reduce risk

Orbit chose a bespoke service charge solution that was hosted on Microsoft Azure and built from the ground up based on its own exact requirements. With a dramatic improvement in reliability, it gave Orbit greater confidence in its business decision-making, aided by its rapid adoption by Orbit's staff through its intuitive interfaces and integration with Excel.

A bespoke service charge solution such as this, which is based on your exact requirements, can help housing providers prepare for the next wave of technology and future-proof their systems.

Giles Horwood is the managing director of Simpson Associates.

Inquilab moves to Dynamics 365 with Xpedition

Inquilab has updated the automation of its financial processes, including repairs, rents and cash collections, using Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central with help from Xpedition.

Xpedition integrated and customised Business Central with Inquilab's existing instance of Dynamics 365, including the development of specific functionality to check and record appropriate requirements within procurement, such as gas installers having up-to-date Gas Safe certification and IT providers having valid indemnity insurance.

The Business Central solution also includes a custom feature so that Inquilab can identify and charge fees for income from other streams, separating rent payments from rechargeable repairs and other services, so they can comply with regulations while maximising new revenues.

To further streamline Inquilab's procurement processes, Xpedition used an app to deliver an extra approval step to automatically request manual authorisation for any expenditure over pre-set thresholds.

Rob Sproule, programme manager, Inquilab, said, "We've had excellent support from Xpedition and as promised, they delivered on time and within budget. A consultancy is only as good as its people, and Xpedition's team has superb knowledge of the Business Central product.

"Xpedition quickly got up to speed with the idiosyncrasies of the housing sector and knew how to modify the Business Central tools accordingly. For example, Xpedition built bespoke functionality to accommodate the HMRC Construction Industry Scheme (CIS) that some of our contractors use."

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share their expertise
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Castleton's Splink instant payment platform

Castleton Technology has partnered with payment specialists Splink to deliver an instant payment platform for tenants to pay their rent, chargeable repairs and set up payment plans.

Castleton Collect is a simple, frictionless and instant payment management solution which removes much of the hassle associated with making one-off and recurring payments and can be integrated into housing providers' existing omni-channel strategies. The payment links can be embedded into various tenant 'touch-points' such as traditional back-office systems, apps used by mobile workers and self-service portals and apps used by tenants themselves.
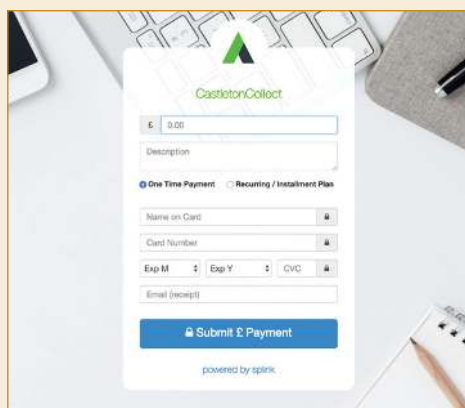
Ian Niblock, director of development and product strategy, Castleton Technology, said, "Whether you're engaging with your tenants directly in their homes, receiving or making telephone calls regarding payments or encouraging your tenants to move towards digital self-service options, this payment platform can be used by both housing providers and their tenants to make payments quickly and easily.

"Our partnership with Splink is based on the ability of its payment platform to integrate with so many of our existing solutions. At every single resident interaction, be that by phone, face-to-face, text message or portal, you can now encourage positive payment behaviours by going beyond just a payment reminder and providing a secure link to make payments instantly possible."

John Quinn, chairman, Splink, said, "There is no denying that universal credit is causing major revenue deficits in housing. We can help combat rent arrears – Splink's platform is already being used widely across different sectors where 92 per cent of our customers get paid on the same day that they send a payment request."

Vericon launches intelligent IoT boiler monitoring

Vericon Systems has launched BCM:Connect, an intelligent universal device which monitors a boiler's health and status in real time and predicts when it might fail to allow preventative maintenance.

Targeted at housing providers and those with responsibility for tenants' welfare, the device records and sends intelligent performance data to the cloud or an internal management system, such as Vericon's VS:Connect portal, where it can be interrogated and analysed to predict and identify common failures such as low pressure, loss of gas and even a frozen condensate pipe. Through integration with external sensors, the device can also report environmental concerns such as damp and mould.

Utilising a sophisticated, anonymised community learning system, as the amount of data collected and interrogated increases, for example from multiple clients, the machine learning algorithms within VS:Connect highlight correlations between boiler sensor fluctuations and potential faults. These correlations can then be flagged by the system, allowing resources to be proactively scheduled or in the event of a failure, a far greater likelihood of a first-time fix being achieved.

BCM:Connect enables the boiler to be tested and managed remotely, without the cost of an engineer attending on-site. Boilers can also be deactivated and reset remotely, and there is also the ability to remotely alter the heating temperature and domestic hot water temperature.

The cellular device can be fitted within 10 minutes and is simply mounted adjacent to the boiler so not affecting any boiler warranties or safety qualifications. It connects in the same way as a traditional smart thermostat, without any dependence on an occupant's wi-fi network.

Bernard Cook, managing director, Vericon Systems, said, "Making sure boilers are working efficiently and at optimum capacity, along with predicting when they may fail, can be a real challenge.

"Interfacing directly with the boiler's control bus allows our devices to perform a range of actions not possible with a read-only smart thermostat. Preventative maintenance programmes can be put in place that not only save money in the long term, but also ensure that legal and regulatory compliance is consistently maintained."

Bernicia signs up for Aareon's Contractor Portal

Bernicia Group is now using Aareon's 360 Contractor Portal to streamline its repairs operation, enforce compliance with contracts and policies and improve cost management.

The portal supports Bernicia's full repair and maintenance procurement cycle, including real-time order transfer, updates, variations, job completion and invoice management.

Gary Hind, director of business transformation, Bernicia, said, "The 360 Contractor Portal was part of the delivery requirements for when we originally went live with Aareon QL, in order to align with our 'digital by default' objective.

"We had already developed a contractor management system in-house which we needed to replace with the 360 Contractor Portal. We had a good relationship with Aareon's development team so we worked with them to share our experience of our in-house system to help develop the best user experience for our staff and our contractors using the portal.

"Our contractors can now only submit invoices to the value of authorised SORs – this has been a huge advantage. The approval of variations is now performed in a more timely manner because all of our orders and variations are now issued via the portal, so there's no delay or ambiguity. And because 360 Contractor Portal updates in real time, the communication process is also much better.

"We have around 40 contractors using the portal right now, and we've received great feedback that there is now much more transparency regarding the status of orders and that invoices are processed much faster for payment.

"The 360 Contractor Portal has already given us significant cost savings through more streamlined invoice processes, fewer queries about contractors' invoices and time savings from contractors being only able to submit invoices on completion of the order in the portal."

Unboxed unwraps faster housing repairs for Hackney Council

Hackney Council has streamlined the reporting and fixing of its 15,000 annual housing-related leaks by 35 per cent through a new microservices architecture and revamped user interface from Unboxed.

The housing repairs service at Hackney Council had built up an infrastructure of legacy software platforms, including Civica's Universal Housing, Servitor and Kirona's DRS, all resulting in unnecessarily complex processes and unstable linkages between different IT systems.

Unboxed, a service design and digital product development consultancy, worked with the council's repairs team to identify a development opportunity around leaks, based around the council's 15,000 leak-related repairs each year, each often requiring coordination across different properties. Unboxed formed an integrated team with the council's interim head of repairs, case management officers as advisors, and Hackney's IT staff for software development.

The combined team worked closely with the council's repairs staff to test and design an efficient user interface based on Gov.uk front-end design guidelines, allowing staff to quickly filter repair jobs by trade and to identify any related repairs orders.

With Civica's Universal Housing in the process of being phased out, the new Repairs Hub app was built around a microservices architecture and the repairs API was extended with new endpoints, enabling Hackney to develop interfaces for different teams that seamlessly interact with a variety of sources of housing data.

In side-by-side usability testing with Universal Housing, the new system allows repairs staff to complete their tasks 35 per cent faster, using 75 per cent fewer clicks. Since launching, the live system now logs around 5,000 new repairs per month, with over 18,000 repairs raised to date.

///steepest.gains.master
Snowdonia, Wales
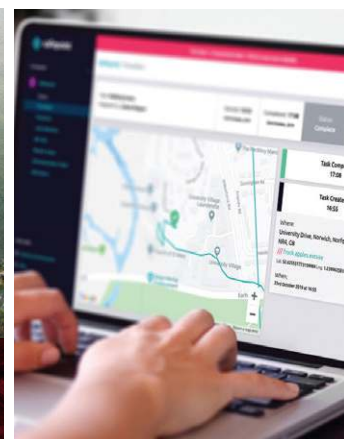
Safepoint launches lone worker app

East Anglian technology start-up Safepoint has just launched a new web and mobile platform to safeguard lone workers and help businesses ensure the safety of their staff.

Safepoint began in November 2017 after it won first prize at Norwich's 'Sync the City' hackathon. Safepoint was inspired by the story of Robert Geach, an engineer at a water treatment plant who died while servicing a filtration system. Geach slipped and knocked himself unconscious before drowning in a shallow pool of water. It was over four hours before his colleagues realised he was missing. Safepoint decided to

harness the power of the cloud and modern mobile technology to create a product that could save the lives of lone workers like Robert.

Callum Coombes, CEO and co-founder, Safepoint said, "We've come a long way since the first prototype was developed at Sync the City in 2017 – I remember we stayed up until 3am each night during the 54-hour competition!

"In Spring 2019, the University of East Anglia invested in Safepoint to help us scale, which has allowed part of the Safepoint team to go full-time and for us to really invest in the growth of the platform."

Safepoint is built on two pillars: a mobile application available on both Android and iOS devices, and a web portal that can be accessed through any web browser. Lone workers use the mobile app to log tasks, signal for help in emergencies and share

their safety information, such as their GPS location. The web portal can then be used to monitor lone workers, respond to emergencies and make informed safety decisions with real-time data.

What3words for Safepoint

Safepoint has partnered with What3Words to add the company's brilliantly simple way to denote locations to its lone-worker app.

What3words has divided up the world into a grid of 3m squares that can each be identified by three simple words. For example, Housing Technology's headquarters is *///decent.salad.faster*, while Safepoint's offices can be found at *///calm.gives.comet*.

Callum Coombes, CEO and co-founder, Safepoint said, "When we heard about What3words, we knew it could be an invaluable tool in keeping lone workers safe."

Stock Right Now at Great Places Housing

Great Places Housing is using Stock Right Now software to manage the imprest van stock of its mobile operatives.

The housing provider originally asked Stock Right Now to perform an audit on its then poorly performing repairs service. Materials supply was highlighted as the key driver for positive change because it was taking multiple visits to complete tenants' repairs due to a lack of parts' availability on its vans.

Only 50 per cent of the frequently used parts were available from Great Places' national supplier and there was no visibility of what was on the vans, or what should be. GPHA decided to
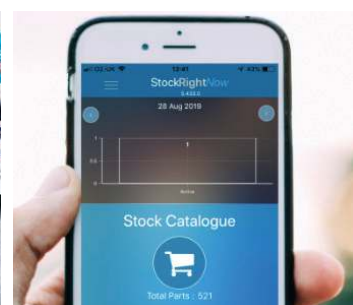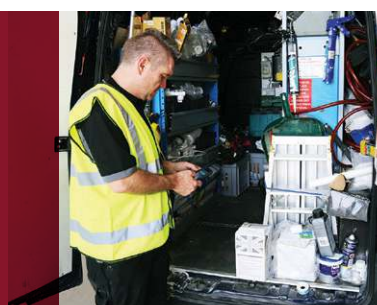
take control of its materials supply and bring it in house, using Stock Right Now's stock measurement software.

Great Places' operatives use Stock Right Now's mobile app to record their parts' usage and to order replenishments, alongside intelligent management reporting identifying what should be on their vans for improving first-time fixes.

During the first year of using its new software, Great Places reduced its spending on materials by 25 per cent, completed 25 per cent more daily repairs, improved its end-to-end time (from initial tenant notification to the final completed job) by 58 per cent and reduced the amount of stock needing to be carried in its operatives' vans by 66 per cent.

Stick or Twist?

It's your turn now!

Making the right housing technology decisions is difficult regardless of whether it's IT infrastructure, telecoms, AV, CRM, housing, repairs, asset management, digital, mobile, finance, HR, Payroll, analytics or BI.

At itica pretty much all of our current work is helping housing organisations and local authorities to make these difficult decisions by guiding them through a structured thinking process.

Why not get in touch to hear about our work, or come and see our presentation and visit our stand at Housing Technology 2020, for the latest insights and perspectives on the biggest challenge facing the sector.

For more information, please contact **Neville Brown** on
+44 (0) 7771 810 621 or email neville.brown@itica.com

itica

www.itica.com

The next generation of housing applications

Housing Technology has compiled profiles of some of the next-generation technology companies focusing on the social housing sector, and our thanks to our readers who took the time to tell us about the new IT companies they've been investigating and, in some cases, whose software they've started to use.

Housing Technology will be repeating this feature on housing IT start-ups in future issues of the magazine. If you know of any interesting start-ups, we would appreciate it if you could get in touch with us (news@houising-technology.com) with the start-up's name and website details (the same applies if you're an IT start-up yourself).

221 GROUP

Holmes is a cloud-based asset intelligence system created by 221 Group. Holmes is used in some of the country's largest organisations and helps to maximise the value and potential of assets from finance, social and operational perspectives. Currently providing critical insights for over 150,000 assets nationwide, Holmes is being used by customers to make better, more informed decisions allowing for greater customer focus.

www.221group.co.uk

A4S CLOUD SOLUTIONS

A4S Cloud Solutions is focused on enabling public sector clients to leverage the best of hybrid cloud solutions such as infrastructure-as-a-service, disaster recovery, development and testing, Office 365, Windows 10 and cloud bursting.
We are a growing Microsoft Silver Partner and Cloud Solutions Provider with a demonstrable track record of success in public sector organisations delivering housing and council services where we provide consultancy and support services.

www.a4scloud.solutions

ALCURIS

Alcuris's vision is to prolong independence for users, provide positive reassurance for families and actionable insights for providers and commissioners. We do this by providing next-generation telecare services using our MemoHub and we increase the opportunities to ensure a minor event does not become a crisis. By focusing on prevention, we aim to reduce the demand for formal care and support.

www.memohub.co.uk

ARIGN

Arign (derived from ARchitecture, desIGN) is an IT architecture and design consultancy. We help clients to achieve their strategic objectives by providing digital transformation solutions via IT architecture, solutions and information security services. Nestclo, our software-as-a-service platform, provides a suite of applications to digitally manage business operations for the housing, real estate and food & beverage sectors.

www.nestclo.com

BUTTONKIT

Buttonkit is a 'clean-slate' platform to support rapid innovation in managed housing. The platform allows non-coders to easily design 'buttons' that run in an app and provide access to highly customised services, whether to residents, staff or management. The start-up is also developing IoT hardware that integrates with the platform and helps reduce the reliance on on-site staff. We are open to partnerships with innovative managing agents and housing providers.
www.buttonkit.com

CHAMELEON DIGITIZATION

Chameleon Digitization develops cutting-edge technology that reduces risk and improves efficiency within social housing. We bring together consultancy, hardware, software and connectivity into one quick, easy and cost-effective internet of things platform. Our technology can monitor issues such as legionella, lift failures, heating systems, cold water pump sets, life safety alarms, pest control, flood and water levels, temperature and humidity.
www.mcdermottgroup.co.uk

COADJUTE

Coadjute is a cloud-based software company head-quartered in London. It developed the world's first decentralised workflow platform and hosts a set of enterprise applications that have been designed to create more efficient digital workflows for businesses and residents. Coadjute recently partnered with several UK housing providers to improve construction safety and transparency. It is also working with NatWest to build an end-to-end mobile conveyancing solution. www.coadjute.com

CODELESS PLATFORMS

Codeless Platforms' software enables housing providers to improve the management of costly administration tasks and enhance services. Its BPA Platform can integrate any software and automate: management of cashflows, debits, rent arrears and universal credit; management of anti-social behaviour, complaints, repairs and waiting lists; distribution of appointment reminders, letters, SMS and surveys. Its Applications Platform provides the ability to create on-demand services such as apps and tenant portals.
www.codelessplatforms.com

COSTRATIFY

Our experience shows that housing providers struggle to understand the cost of IT and the value IT brings. We form strong evidence for change with actionable insights. We perform forensic analysis using an evidence-based discovery approach, providing transparency by showing the value IT offers. We create a future IT roadmap aligned to business needs. Our services are independent and generate enterprise graphical views of the IT with detailed total cost of ownership.
www.costratify.com

DE GRAFT MANAGEMENT

We are property and asset management software specialists and have developed the cloud-based DGM property and asset management system to manage maintenance and track physical assets using RFID technology. We work with private and social housing providers in the UK and abroad to improve efficiencies, enhance decision-making and reduce costs. We replace outdated and inefficient systems used by our clients who have traditionally been resistant to change.
www.de-graft.co.uk

EXACTLY+

Exactly+ is a specialist IT consultancy that operates within social housing. We have a unique blend of experience and customers on both the RSL and contractor sides of asset management partnerships. We cover everything from managing large repair mobilisations to transforming customer service applications, chatbots and even VR meetings.
www.exactly.tech

FRONTIER TECHNOLOGY

Frontier Technology focuses on infrastructure solutions for medium-sized organisations, especially those operating in regulated industries. This includes both on-premise and public/private cloud platforms, with an emphasis on data security, data management, solution design and migration services. A complementary portfolio of managed services including applications, backup, continuity, patching and monitoring 'as a service' is also available via a predictable monthly subscription model. www.frontiertechnology.co.uk

FUZZLAB

Fuzzlab specialises in providing virtual agent chatbots for social housing. With built-in business processes and integrations to the major housing management systems as standard, we enable customer self-service across multiple channels. Tenants who want to manage their repairs, housing, ASB and rent queries online can do so, freeing up phone lines so contact centres can spend time with the tenants that need them most.
www.fuzzlab.co.uk

HOMELYNC

Homelync provides an IoT integration platform, data analytics suite and independent internet gateway for social homes. Homelync integrate data from IoT technologies, housing management systems and advanced machine-learning techniques to help housing providers reduce costs and improve services. Homelync's technology has been deployed to address the challenges associated with fire safety, fuel poverty, investment optimisation, proactive maintenance, carbon emissions, air quality, health and social care, and damp and mould. www.homelync.io

HOUSING TOOLKIT

Housing Toolkit is a mobile app development service which offers bespoke mobile solutions to the housing sector to help manage properties from the front line and allows customers to look after their accounts remotely. The solution can cover the diagnostic and raising of all repairs and full CRM/HMS integration. Housing Toolkit specialise in enabling the realisation of key digital transformation goals through rapid deployment and delivering end-user UX.
www.housingtoolkit.co.uk

HUUME

Huume was founded as a result of 15 years' experience of developing, delivering and supporting homeless and social housing systems. The Huume Homeless solution is a new, intuitive way to manage homeless cases and personalise housing needs. The solution leverages the latest technologies to improve flexibility, automation and efficiency, and is delivered as a SaaS model providing ease of scalability and compatibility, with no significant upfront costs.
www.huume.co.uk

INCLINE-IT

Incline-IT is an IT managed services provider focusing on the provision of highly resilient services and the enablement of flexible working and business continuity in conjunction with our sister company MIS Active Management. We focus on innovative cloud solutions, offering enterprise-grade services through public cloud for all customers.

www.incline-it.com

INFORMATION DATAHUB

Information DataHub provides data-centric applications for enhanced decision-making. Its flagship application DataHub and its DataVerify app provide users with the ability to manage structured and unstructured data through: data discovery and matching; OCR; machine learning; structured and unstructured data extraction; and data validation.

www.information-datahub.com

INTEGY

Integy is taking its experience in government and defence to other exciting sectors including housing. After being approached by a housing provider struggling with its legacy Citrix environment, we were more than happy to rise to the challenge by implementing a full refresh alongside in-house engineers, which provided a modern Windows 10 hosted desktop environment and a much better user experience.

www.integy.co.uk

IOPT

iOpt is the leading internet of things service provider specialising in the housing sector. Established in 2016, iOpt has gone from strength to strength, with customers globally reaping the benefits of its asset monitoring expertise. The iOpt platform uses sensor data to allow iOpt to deploy its unique algorithms and expertise to tackle a variety of issues including preventative maintenance and social issues such as fuel poverty and disrepair claims.

www.ioptassets.com

LETTSPAY

LettsPay is a platform which helps tenants manage their funds efficiently, using the power of open banking. We provide tenants with the means to improve their credit score and budget, while housing providers benefit from the knock-on benefits of reduced risks of arrears and improved cashflow.

www.lettspay.co.uk

LINK-AGES

Link-Ages has developed a platform that enables older people to communicate easily and securely with their families and friends. Our system aims to reduce loneliness and social isolation by making messaging, video-calling and photo-sharing simple and safe. We plan to integrate assistive technology such as fall detection to provide a holistic smart solution, enabling older people to live independently, safely and connected to their family and communities.

www.link-ages.com

M2M CLOUD

M2M Cloud provides organisations with asset intelligence using sensors, low-cost connectivity and cloud-based software. Based in Dundee, it has decades of experience developing connected-sensor solutions, recently winning a major public sector contract to supply Highlands and Islands Council with its new water-monitoring solution. It has developed award-winning indoor and outdoor asset tracking solutions and offers IoT consultancy.

www.m2mcloud.com

MINIBEMS

Minibems delivers heat network performance, saving energy, carbon and money. We connect all our devices online for real-time flow-rate control. The internet of things gives us unparalleled access to data and underpins our managed service for heat network owners and residents. Our business model is based on a recurring service contract for each site which means that we have an ongoing commitment to customer satisfaction, reliability and energy efficiency.

www.minibems.com

NETMORE IOT SOLUTIONS

Netmore IoT Solutions As one of the world's first specialised IoT operators, Netmore delivers smart building solutions from an ecosystem of 40+ specialist firms including leak detection & energy management. We operate 50 municipal LoRa networks and have landlord customers with >100k housing units connected.

www.netmoregroup.com

NOTIFY TECHNOLOGY

Notify Technology's mission is to help make people safer, healthier and more productive wherever they are in the world, through simple, smart and secure technology. Notify started in 2017 in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne and supports a wide range of clients including Bournville Village Trust. Notify's co-founders have backgrounds in machine learning and the internet of things, and plan to use their expertise to help housing providers gather and analyse data to help their staff, residents and visitors reduce risk.

www.notifytechnology.com

PARADPO

ParaDPO was created out of the direct experience of two data protection practitioners (Cliff Barton and Neil Topping). There are many organisations using half-finished products, spreadsheets or a DIY approach to data protection – while these do offer some sort of answer, they are very limited. We have brought all of our experience into making our MyrIAD data protection software, which is from an information asset perspective but also incorporating process management of natural person requests (SARs, etc).

www.paradpo.co.uk

Q-BOT

Q-Bot provides cutting-edge robotic solutions for the construction, maintenance and upgrade of buildings. The company has developed an innovative system for reducing heat loss from suspended floors using a robot to remotely apply insulation. Q-Bot's solution makes homes warmer while increasing energy efficiency without the hassle or expense of alternative methods. Q-Bot's installation process is accredited by the BBA, ensures quality and provides validated energy savings to secure ECO funding.

www.q-bot.co

RAPID INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Rapid is a low-code toolkit that is helping housing providers with digital transformation, lowering operating costs, improving front-line services and addressing risk and compliance using their existing and often outdated systems. Gartner says that 65 per cent of innovation and application development will be done on low code by 2024; 25 per cent of London's housing departments with local authorities are doing that now at little cost, resource and time.

www.rapid-is.co.uk

REDKITE CRM

Our housing management solution was launched this year to disrupt the status quo of existing HMS providers. Based on Microsoft Dynamics 365 (CRM), our product can be deployed on any existing or new Dynamics environment. Its features include a rent engine, arrears management (forecasting, payment plans and technical arrears), and a service charge and direct debit module. We worked in close collaboration with our customers to develop a solution designed by housing providers for housing providers.

www.redkitecrm.co.uk

RENT-HUB

Rent-Hub is an advanced SaaS-based tenancy management and communication platform that secures every event and communication throughout the lifecycle of a tenancy. Rent-Hub provides a comprehensive range of tools for use by both housing providers and tenants and is the forerunner to the 'Together with Tenants' initiative. Rent-Hub unites social, private and student housing, enabling housing stock and landlords to move fluidly between sectors without cost or loss of data.

www.rent-hub.co.uk

SAFECILITY

Building compliance concierge Safecility automates emergency lighting and other legally required testing to quickly and effortlessly simplify compliance. Life is made easier for asset owners as the pain of testing and reporting is managed locally by Safecility's IoT sensors. This means resources can be freed up saving money, reducing carbon emissions and, most importantly, making buildings safer and more compliant.

www.safecility.com

SAFEPOINT

Imagine you're working alone. Something goes wrong. Who knows you're in trouble? Who knows where you are? Who's coming to help? The alarming fact is that for most businesses, the answer is nobody. Safepoint solves this problem. With automated safety alerts and real-time data, businesses can ensure the safety of their staff while easily staying compliant with today's health and safety regulations.

www.safepointapp.com

SEMARCHY

Semarchy is the intelligent data hub company. Its xDM platform solves enterprise-level master data management, application data management and collaborative data governance challenges at some of the most well-known global brands. This agile platform leverages smart algorithms, material design and an iterative approach to simplify data stewardship, quality, enrichment, and workflows. xDM delivers value almost immediately; over 80% of Semarchy clients have a fully working solution within 10 weeks.

www.semarchy.com

STOCK RIGHT NOW

We help give visibility and control of what's in your operatives' vans – see the stock they're carrying, what stock's been used, by who and on what job. We help you improve, with data that advises what should be in your vans to get your 'first-time fix' rate consistently above 99.5 per cent. Our customers typically save over £400 per year per operative in fuel costs alone because operatives spend less time driving and 'shopping' for parts and more time fixing.

www.stockrightnow.com

TAP INTO IT

Tap into IT Where You Are helps people (particularly post-retirement) to access the benefits of the internet and IT. We do this in their own homes or as part of a group in sheltered housing and other accessible locations, encouraging interaction and 'community', thus tackling loneliness and social isolation.

www.tapintoit.org.uk

TELLJO

TellJo's TrustTech platform acts as a digital intermediary between housing providers and their vulnerable tenants. TellJo enables housing providers to understand why tenants get into difficulties such as rent arrears, so they can provide bespoke support, creating a prevention-based digital approach.

www.telljo.org

THE COMPLIANCE WORKBOOK

The Compliance Workbook is helping clients simplify safety, compliance and budgetary tasks. With millions of documents analysed to date, TCW is passionate and dedicated to creating innovative technology with positive impacts, elevating standards of safety and sustainability within multiple sectors.

www.thecomplianceworkbook.com

TRACKMYRISKS

TrackMyRisks helps housing providers structure and evidence their property compliance within a digital system of record for high-risk properties in their portfolios. TrackMyRisks is secure, cloud-based, shareable and scalable, making it the most effective way to get organised and ready for the new Building Safety Regulator.

www.trackmyrisks.com

TRUE COMPLIANCE

True Compliance is a cloud-based information management system which makes it easy for landlords to manage property assurance. It enables providers to manage, monitor and control organisational risk while reducing the need for admin-heavy tasks. The system uses state-of-the-art technology to load, audit and store compliance records and curates the information back to the user. The system then highlights tasks essential to obtaining True Compliance.

www.truecompliance.co.uk

From technophobe to IT trainer – My journey to becoming a digital devotee

Molly Gilbert, Digital Customer Engagement Officer, PA Housing

When I started working in PA Housing's customer contact centre in Leicester three years ago, I was a complete technophobe – I didn't even know how to use Excel.

I've now helped on organisation-wide CRM projects and am helping to build a chatbot. I'm also the person who liaises between residents, staff members and the technical team to iron out any problems with My PA, our customer service app.

Until recently, I wouldn't have even considered that an IT position in housing could be for me, but everything about my transition between customer services and digital services has felt right.

Lots of opportunities

I joined PA Housing with GCCEs as my only qualifications. My role in the contact centre was an entry-level job, starting off by answering the phones. I was soon given more responsibility, helping to oversee the quality of the services being provided. After just over a year, I was asked to train over 650 colleagues to use the new CRM system in preparation for its roll-out.

I wasn't a system-based person so when my managers asked me to help on the project, which needed to be completed in a couple of months, I laughed out loud. However, I soon realised they hadn't asked me because they thought I had IT skills – it was because they knew I'd be able to work with people and communicate the human side of the CRM project.

The team here at PA Housing is great at supporting people to progress so my lack of qualifications was never going to hold me back. Those around me recognised my work ethic and my passion for learning, and they were happy to provide me with the training I needed.

Project management skills

I completed the Prince2 Foundation course to improve my project management skills but I've found that I learn most when teaching myself. For example, once I'd committed to training others to use our CRM system, I wanted to know everything about the system. It was that time spent learning something completely new, inside and out, that really kickstarted my love of digital projects.

My first major leap into project management was after the roll out of My PA in February 2019. A few months after this, my role changed to 'digital customer engagement officer', and it's now my job to engage with staff and customers when they start using our digital services.

So far, 45 per cent of our tenants have registered to use our app, with 30 per cent being classed as active users. At the moment, just under 10 per cent of repairs are raised online – this can be done in just four clicks and under two minutes.

Realistic channel shift

While we know that a 100 per cent channel shift is not realistic, there's nothing to stop us aiming for 70-80 per cent of residents to start using the app as their day-to-day point of contact with us. We're not going to turn our phones off but if more people choose digital, it means those who do still want to call should get through faster.

We're continually striving to improve our services, so when a customer reports an issue with My PA, I work between them and the app's developers to ensure problems are fixed and it operates as it should, and when changes are made to the portal as a result of customer feedback, it's my job help to test them before they go live.

Women in IT

I don't think I've encountered any internal barriers as a result of being a young woman working in IT. As an organisation, we have a good mixture of men and women working in IT and systems-based roles so it doesn't feel unusual, and the developers we work with are used to getting on with everybody.

The only time it has been a problem is when I've been supporting a small minority of older male residents who don't seem to like having a young woman telling them how to deal with their technology. Intending to compliment me, I remember one man said, "You exceeded my expectations as a woman in the tech team", but that's really just a generational thing.

Now I'm heading down this career-path, I don't want to stop learning. You can frequently find me glued to an e-book, finding out exactly what I need to know in order to manage our various systems, including Microsoft Power BI and our Umbraco content management system.

I'm currently helping our developers to build a chatbot for our website. This includes inputting lots of data and painstaking testing to ensure that the system is as user-friendly as possible. The plan is to introduce the chatbot in phases, with the aim that it will eventually be able to deal with at least a third of all web enquiries.

In a relatively short space of time, technology has gone from something that scared me a little bit to something that really excites me, and from what I've seen, I think the housing sector as a whole is going through a similar transition!

Molly Gilbert is a digital customer engagement officer at PA Housing.

Encouraging women into housing IT

Helen Harrison, Operations Director, Integrator Housing Solutions

Is it right that we are still discussing women in IT as a standalone topic in 2020? The dawn of a new decade demands a hard look at why this subject continues to require special attention.

According to the training and job website Women in Tech, "Only one in six tech specialists in the UK are women, only one in ten leaders and, worse still, despite significant growth in the number of women working in IT roles, female representation in the technology sector has stalled over the last ten years."

This is quite startling. Are women struggling to find these opportunities or are employers not making them attractive to women? And why later on, are women not reaching their full potential?

Well, the problem could derive from much earlier in life. The STEM Women campaign group quotes the most recent university entrance UCAS statistics on its website, showing that 35 per cent of STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) students in higher education in the UK are women. But when you look further into the statistics, you find that the two subjects suffering the most from a lack of women are engineering and technology & computer sciences. Both subjects comprise just 19 per cent female students.

STEM Women says, "The computer science and engineering & technology fields show the largest gender imbalances, from current students to graduates and the workforce figures, and we're on a mission to address this gender imbalance." And they're doing so by using this UCAS data to specifically attract female STEM students and invite them to networking and graduate careers events.

But there are more positives the younger one goes. In 2019, the number of girls choosing to take computing at GCSE level increased for the second consecutive year. The number of female candidates rose from 15,046 in 2018 to 17,158 in 2019, with girls now comprising 21 per cent of GCSE computing entries, so perhaps our schools are where we need to make the greatest impact?

Women in Tech also quotes a report from Nominet, the registry for UK domain names, which said that the core benefits most likely to come from hiring more women into IT were "improved communications skills, innovative ideas and boosted morale." That said, those aren't necessarily solely female traits and we may not want to paint that picture – women can tire of constantly being associated with these softer and more emotional skills and equally men can also tire of being thought of as lacking those skills. But they can be life changing for a company, bringing team solidarity, positive can-do attitudes and a sense of belonging.

I've just joined Integrator Housing Solutions as their new operations director. I come from an organisational background as executive assistant to the chief executive of Oxfam GB where I was liaising with government departments, managing and reconciling budgets, coordinating internal logistics and office management with an overview of data analysis.

Although we are a small company, over 40 per cent of our staff are now female. Our accounts coordinator, Susan Edge, has worked for the company for around three years. She's not directly working in IT but she is our link between our IT team and our clients. She said, "I come from a communications background so coming into IT has been a challenge. I have learnt so much from our IT team because they've spent time explaining what they do and how they do it."

More recently, we were joined by Claire Gough as our new web applications developer and she is a very good example of women working directly in IT. She completed a computer science degree before specialising in software development and agrees that Integrator is attractive to women in the housing IT sector because they are progressive in their working practices and attitudes. She said, "I really enjoy programming and here I can get my teeth into software which is constantly developing, and refining. IT in housing is an exciting sector to be in at the moment – we're seeing a lot of change as the world becomes ever more digitally reliant, and our focus on mobile anytime, anywhere access is also having a huge effect on the way we're creating and providing software.

"Personally, I have never experienced any problems being female in this sector and am certainly enjoying the role and responsibilities I am gaining here – long may it continue!"

The IT sector has traditionally been a male-dominated arena but I believe that Integrator is one company that's helping to lead the way by welcoming, attracting, and retaining people, whether female or male. We champion a flexible approach to working, including working from home; our mentality isn't about when you get the job done, it's about how you get the job done.

Helen Harrison is the operations director of Integrator Housing Solutions.
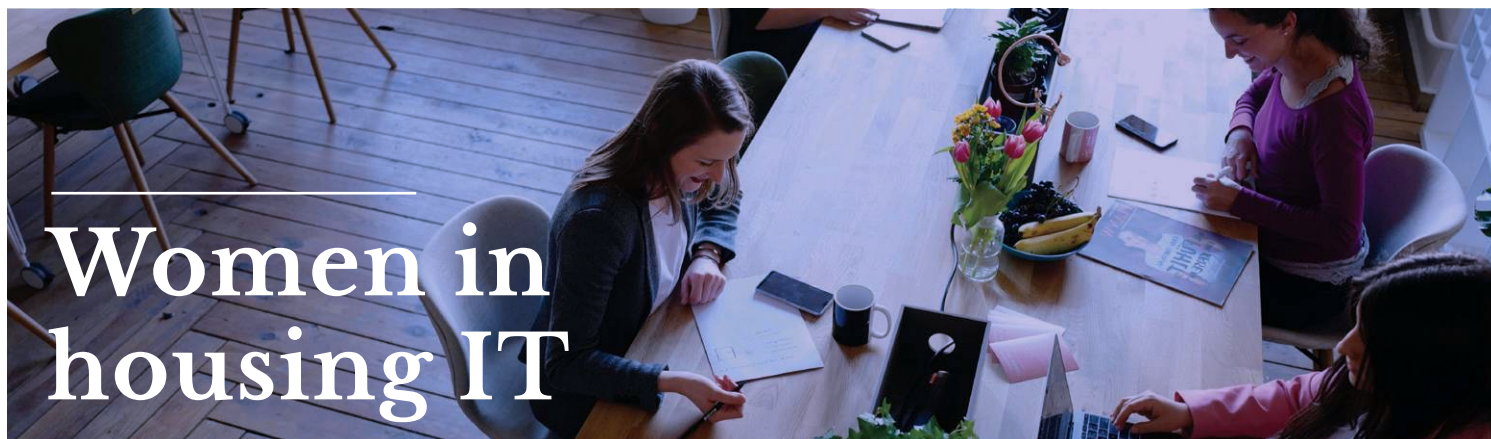
Women in housing IT

Housing Technology interviewed a group of women involved in housing IT from Adra, Civica, Community Housing, Northgate Public Services, PIMSS Data Systems, Prodo Digital and Rochdale Boroughwide Housing about their various roles in IT, any challenges they've faced as women in a traditionally fairly male-dominated sector and how more women can be encouraged to consider a career in housing IT.

What attracted you to a career in housing IT?

PIMSS Data Systems' head of asset management, Ruth Dent, said, "Like a lot of people, I didn't set out to have a career in housing IT – it just kind of happened! It's a fascinating and fast-moving sector and I love the fact that it's problem-based – what's your issue, where are your difficulties, and how can we help you to fix them? We do some amazing work and I love being part of a team that works collaboratively to shape the way housing may look in the future."

Civica's director of social housing, Michelle Tyler, said, "I've always worked in IT but in a different field to housing. It was a real opportunity when I moved into housing, allowing me to further my career in a more complex sector, providing digital solutions for our customers and their tenants. It has definitely met my expectations, giving me the knowledge and experience to take my career further in this field while working in a fast-paced environment, both internally and externally."

Adra Housing's technical lead of its new core business system implementation, Sarah Louise Griffith, said, "My role in IT at Adra is attractive because it's an opportunity to work in a field that's continuously developing. There's a misconception that housing is very traditional but the reality is very different; there are always interesting technologies emerging and new skills to learn."

What gender-specific challenges have you had to overcome?

PIMSS's Dent said, "I've gone to some meetings where I have to spend the first 20 minutes just proving that I know what I'm talking about before we even get onto the purpose of the meeting itself. I often conduct meetings alongside a business development manager (who is male) and on numerous occasions, despite me answering the client's questions, the next question will still be directed to my colleague.

> "I think the term 'IT' puts people off, particularly women. It's not about the techy nuts and bolts, it's about understanding the business, being analytical, approachable and developing solutions to the problems."
>
> Sarah Louise Griffith, Technical Lead for New Core Business System Implementation, Adra Housing

"Being younger also means that I've had to deal with questions over how I've ended up in my role and whether I got here through my skills, knowledge or even sexual favours! These comments have been made 'off the cuff' but nevertheless, they were still said.

"For less experienced women, there is a strong need to 'fit in' – when I was younger, I would even look up the football results on a Sunday night so I could join in conversations at the office the next morning. I was grateful of the praise of my colleagues for 'making the best tea' – I now realise how stupid I was and, though those experiences have made me stronger, it wasn't a path I should have gone down.

"The challenges go beyond the workplace. I have a three-year old daughter and I'm the main breadwinner in the family – I was recently asked by a neighbour when trying to arrange a play date if "I worked full time as well?" As well as what, please?"

Community Housing's transformation team comprises a group of women from across the business brought together to implement new housing and asset management systems for the group and to drive business-wide transformation.

Community Housing's transformation team said, "Things have moved on from the male-dominated world of IT. The previous experience of the more technical members of our team has been that due to other people's perceptions, they've felt that they've had to prove their abilities more than their male counterparts in order to progress. However, there has been a behavioural shift over the past few years as more women progress in IT, bringing with them broader perspectives to the roles."
Northgate Public Services' housing

software development manager, Karen Scott, said, "From the very start of my career, I've been surrounded by strong female managers and directors – this has really helped me to see that I can move up the ladder. Women are represented at top levels within Northgate and their visibility in key positions engenders a real 'I believe I can do it' attitude.

"While IT does tend to be male dominated, within my own team we are all very much equals. Northgate's philosophy is, whoever is right for the job gets the job regardless of gender and I haven't experienced any barriers to moving on and upwards. Flexible, part-time and home working options are available to everyone which has meant that I've retained the skills and expertise of two of my female developers who needed that flexibility."

> "Women are represented at top levels within Northgate and their visibility in key positions engenders a real 'I believe I can do it' attitude."
>
> Karen Scott, Housing Software Development Manager, Northgate Public Services

Prodo Digital's CEO, Pippa Adams, said, "When it comes to gender-specific challenges, one of the best things I've found about housing is that it is incredibly inclusive. In particular, IT departments in housing tend to be very diverse, inclusive and positive environments.

"Through working with hundreds of housing organisations of all shapes and sizes over the years, we've seen at first-hand how many women are in pivotal roles. I've watched the sector evolve to the point where I don't believe gender is an issue to female success and that by talking about gender, we're actually creating a barrier that doesn't exist."

Rochdale Boroughwide Housing's head of transformation, Jan Heath, said, "In terms of gender-specific challenges, I have only

THE TRANSFORMATION TEAM, COMMUNITY HOUSING GROUP
Back (L-R): Di Carter, Cat Winter, Georgina Jackson, Helen Zinzan
Front (L-R): Mel Bailey, Helen Kennedy, Kate Lloyd-Perks

ever found the sector to be supportive and empowering for women and I've never seen gender as an issue. There are more women than men in our IT department and I'm surrounded by a strong female-led team, with plenty of opportunities to learn and develop. Our gender pay gap figures show that women at Rochdale Housing are paid on average five per cent more than men across the society."

Which aspects of your role are more suited to women?

Civica's Tyler said, "As a senior leader, I don't believe there are aspects of the role that are better suited to women, although the way in which I approach an issue might be different. Encouraging conversation allows me to make the most of my team's combined knowledge and skills. The ability to multi-task, empathise, value relationships and, vitally, listen and make your team feel they are valued and making a contribution are all crucial."

Community Housing's transformation team said, "To successfully deliver a project of this size and complexity, there are some key skills the team demonstrate every day, such as patience, sensitivity, innovation and communication. Because our project is as much about transformation as it is about IT implementation, the team needs to constantly challenge the status quo – this requires excellent listening skills, tact, diplomacy and a huge amount of emotional intelligence to reassure colleagues about the changes and giving them the confidence to be accountable for the design and testing of the new systems."

Northgate's Scott said, "I don't know if you can necessarily attribute this as a 'female skill', but I love to draw out who people are and match them to the best project for them. I'm a big believer in looking at personality types – are they are talker or not, do they think outside the box or take a literal view? I must be doing something right because we have a very strong development team here at Northgate that has worked together for a number of years, so we all know our individual strengths and weaknesses."

Are there enough opportunities for women in housing IT?

Adra's Griffith said, "I think the term 'IT' puts people off, particularly women. It's not about the techy nuts and bolts, it's about understanding the business, being analytical, approachable and developing solutions to the problems. We need a huge variety of skills, such as data analysis, and there are opportunities for a much wider skillset than women realise.

"From a wider perspective, we're very lucky in Wales because there are a number of women in prominent IT roles and this can only be good to encourage more women to become involved."

Community Housing's transformation team said, "At a practical level, the housing sector is moving to a much more flexible and agile approach to service delivery which enables both men and women to achieve a positive work-life balance.

"In addition, the generational change to non-gender specific education and the growing use of technology in our daily lives means that the mysteries and technicalities

Women in housing IT
Continued from previous page

surrounding IT are less of a challenge and women have more confidence to contribute and make an impact."

Northgate's Scott said, "Flexible working has been a game changer for women, who in my experience, tend to be the ones juggling home and work responsibilities. The key is to find a company that recognises the need to invest in and retain their staff.

"A member of my team recently considered leaving because she was finding it hard to combine full-time work with caring for a young family and an elderly relative. I was able to offer her part-time working, which meant she could continue to work and we didn't lose her skills and experience.

"For women to pursue opportunities in IT, it's crucial for them to see other women in senior leadership roles that they can aspire to and which show a clear career path. At Northgate, we've women represented at every level, which is hugely encouraging to other women. Across housing IT as a whole, I think the opportunities are there but visibility is a key issue."

Rochdale Housing's Heath said, "Gender diversity is essential in any organisation, and an inclusive workplace helps us to make sure that we recruit the right people with the right values. If you have the technical knowledge and skills combined with empathy and insight, there are plenty of opportunities within housing IT and you can make a real difference. At Rochdale Housing, we make sure that we put our values around equality, diversity and inclusion into practice, from internal workshops on dealing with the menopause to supporting 'Rochdale in Rainbows'."

What are the most important factors in recruiting more women into housing IT?
Community Housing's transformation team said, "Make it pink? Clichés aside, as with any role in housing, to encourage more female employees there are some basics that an employer should offer – flexible working, equal pay, assurance of equalities and offering 'learn as you earn' opportunities.

"We do a lot to encourage women to take up roles in areas of the business that are historically male-dominated, offering apprentice opportunities, working closely

"I've watched the sector evolve to the point where I don't believe gender is an issue to female success and that by talking about gender, we're actually creating a barrier that doesn't exist."

Pippa Adams, CEO, Prodo Digital

with the local schools and an increase in female role models in senior positions. Over the past two years, we have recruited our first two female IT specialists, created the transformation team to design and build our new business systems and recently become members of 'Women into Construction' to reduce the skills gap and create a more gender-equal work force."

Adra's Griffith said, "I strongly believe that flexible working is the way forward! Companies should offer flexible working where you can choose when and where to work. I'm lucky that Adra offers exactly that – working hours that suit my family life, helping me to find the right work-life balance. Flexible working results in happier staff and greater productivity, and it would help to attract more women into housing IT and, equally importantly, retain them."

Civica's Tyler said, "Employers now realise that mixed gender teams improve communication, collaboration and innovation so it's important to attract the best talent. Any woman pursuing a job in IT should actively seek out employers who encourage and promote diversity such as Civica (a Financial Times Diversity Leader). Additionally, customers appreciate partnering with organisations whose employees represent a workforce as diverse and inclusive as their own."

PIMSS's Dent said, "Awareness of the size and scope of IT in the housing sector and making opportunities accessible are both vital. If more women were aware of the possibility of roles, then more would do the necessary training to get the right skills. I have been lucky, but the sector is almost hidden and still seen as a male career."

What are the benefits of gender diversity in housing IT?

Northgate's Scott said, "Gender diversity in technology is a hot topic right now, and rightly so. For me, the difference between a good product development team and an excellent one is how closely it reflects its varied customer base. It's important for the team to be able to represent a range of viewpoints and perspectives.

"I lead a team of seven men and five women and for me, it's the mix of personality types which fosters the creativity we need to make successful products. We have strong female product leads who work very closely with the customers to understand and translate their needs and then input them into the development of the design. Working as a team, we balance out each other's views to create products that are both functionally strong and pleasing to the eye."

PIMSS's Dent said, "All diversity brings about new ideas. A group of white 'gen-X' men are likely to have the same ideals, training and backgrounds, so bring in people from a different path and new ideas can spark. It prevents organisations getting stuck in a rut and creates innovation in a way that might not be possible otherwise."

"I've gone to some meetings where I have to spend the first 20 minutes just proving that I know what I'm talking about before we even get onto the purpose of the meeting itself."

Ruth Dent, Head of Asset Management, PIMSS Data Systems

Should more to be done to encourage girls to study STEM subjects?
Civica's Tyler said, "Absolutely – more women in STEM would provide a larger pool of resources. With the resulting different views and wider perspectives, we would see increased creativity, innovation and a positive impact on all organisations. For example, that's why Civica partners with schools via our Coding for Schools programme, runs hackathons and supports Young Enterprise and the Tech Talent Charter."

Women in housing IT
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Northgate's Scott said, "I would love more girls to study STEM subjects and to consider jobs in technology and engineering. I see some of my friends' children in primary school writing computer programmes and I am blown away – it's really encouraging to see this starting from an early age. In my day, the emphasis was on home economics and childcare!"

> "If you have the technical knowledge and skills combined with empathy and insight, there are plenty of opportunities within housing IT and you can make a real difference."
>
> Jan Heath, Head of Transformation, Rochdale Boroughwide Housing

Adra's Griffith said, "Introducing more STEM subjects through workshops and practical learning in primary education would ignite a spark in more young girls and show them that STEM subjects aren't boring! STEM learning such as coding workshops will help to nurture talent at a young age and set them on a STEM-related career path."

PIMSS's Dent said, "For me, this is all about understanding where STEM subjects can lead you. If girls don't know about the careers available, they probably won't understand why they could study those

> "More women in STEM would provide a larger pool of resources, so we would see increased creativity, innovation and a positive impact on all organisations."
>
> Michelle Tyler, Director of Social Housing, Civica

subjects in the first place. I went back to university at 30 to do a degree in a subject related to what I then knew I wanted my career to be. I'd also like to see more apprenticeships and hands-on learning opportunities in STEM subject areas."

How can women mentor and support other women to encourage them to pursue housing IT careers?
Civica's Tyler said, "As a woman in technology, I've enjoyed many different experiences and opportunities. It's really important for me to share those experiences to allow other women to grow and further their careers as I have. I always aim to lead by example and mentor those through real-life examples and providing opportunities to grow in a role."

Community Housing's transformation team said, "As a business, we encourage positive female role models, both young and old, with women who can dispel any myths of working in a particular area or at a particular level through sharing their experiences, such as progressing with their career after having children or taking on caring responsibilities, and providing buddying opportunities and raising awareness of some of the issues women experience.

"For example, Community Housing has just had a menopause awareness campaign, not only offering direct support for women but also raising awareness for managers and our male colleagues on how they can support female co-workers – the campaign was a really positive step in encouraging an equal and diverse workforce."

Prodo's Adams said, "To promote and encourage new female talent to join the sector, I think it's all about actively showcasing just how many women are in great roles across IT already. I'm a firm believer in role models and the phrase 'if you can see it, then you can be it' – there are plenty of opportunities out there and raising the profile of those in IT is a great way to encourage others.

"Here at Prodo, we have plenty of women applying for roles across the business, from software engineers to web developers and digital consultants, and women comprise most of our leadership team. This visible presence of women just reinforces the fact that gender isn't holding anyone back."
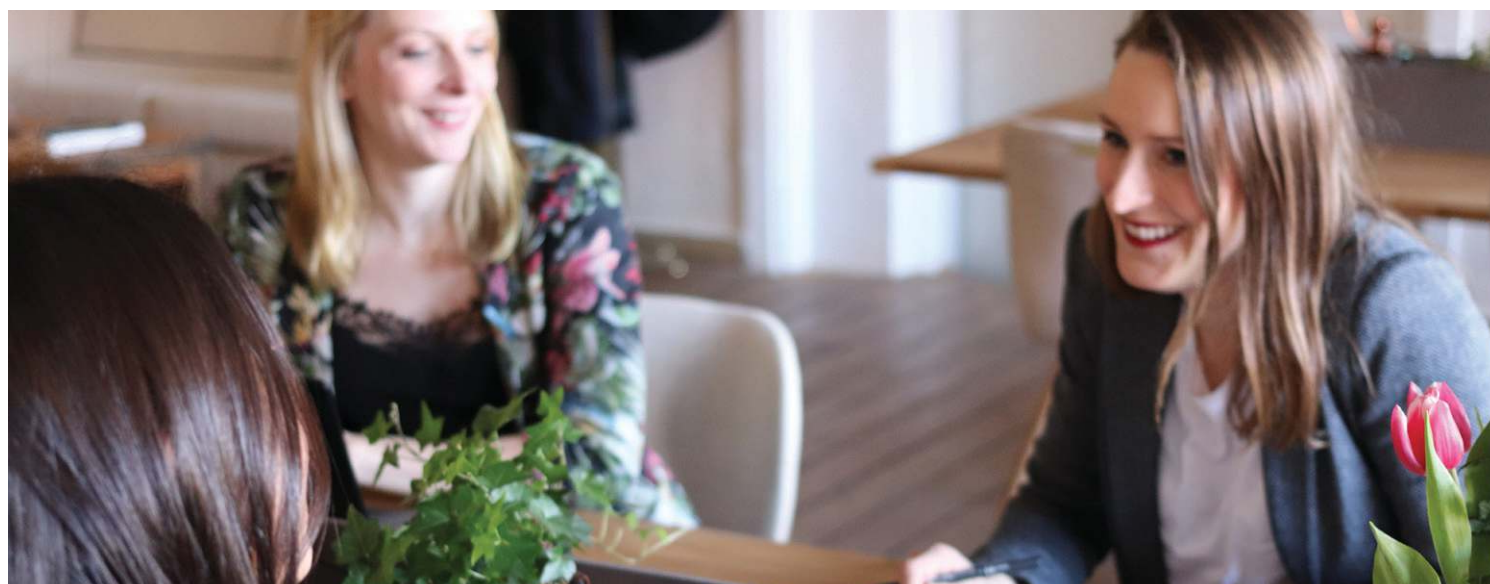
Ready for the digital switchover?

Alyson Scurfield, Chief Executive, TSA

The trouble with long deadlines is they lure you into a false sense of security. When BT first announced in 2015 that analogue telephony would be phased out from 2020 and switched off completely by 2025, it probably seemed like an age away.

Almost five years on, how prepared are we for what will be a fundamental technological shift and one that will affect the 1.7 million vulnerable people who rely on telecare in the UK? In particular, are we building and adapting social housing in a way that will fully utilise digital technology-enabled care (TEC)?

For many people, telecare is accessed via pendant alarms connected by traditional phone lines to a monitoring centre. Over the next five years, some of these alarms will stop working or be less resilient to power and network failures. It's vital that before this happens, alarms are tested and any systems that aren't compatible with digital connectivity are replaced.

There is no scope for delay or disruption when people's lives are at stake. Paul Burstow, president of TSA (the national body for TEC services), wrote in a report setting out a roadmap to a digital future for TEC that, "This report is not about a 'nice to have', it is about a 'must do'."

However, while it's important to stress the urgency of the situation and the dangers of inaction, it's equally crucial to spell out the huge opportunities presented by the switchover. For social landlords and other providers, it shouldn't be about merely swapping one system for another but realising the full benefits of digital technology by using it as the basis for service transformation.

We're already seeing the myriad ways in which TEC can enable housing providers to provide proactive rather than reactive services. Digitally connected homes allow people to use everything from everyday apps to tailored software to support long-term conditions and maintain independence. In turn, this creates a rich vein of data that housing providers can analyse to improve the way they support their tenants and reduce their costs.

Building for the future

One of our biggest concerns is that despite greater awareness of the benefits of digital TEC, when it comes to building new social housing, such technology is either overlooked or ends up being an expensive afterthought. It puts both the wellbeing of tenants and the future sustainability of social housing stock at risk.

The crux of the problem often comes down to an organisation's approach to TEC more generally and the degree to which digital technology is integral to their future plans. Housing providers must insist on TEC being part of the specification for new developments from the outset so that it's ingrained into the brief for all parties involved, from the architects to the engineers and the building contractors. That means stipulating that new properties must be 'digital ready' and designed to incorporate the latest digital technology.

There are a few trailblazers in the sector who are reaping the benefits of such an approach. One example is Herefordshire Housing which made TEC a key part of the build specification for a new development of apartments and a reablement unit in Hereford city centre. Care and support are tailored to each individual in a way that makes the most of digital technology and is less intrusive.

As a result of making TEC part of the specification, the development has an advanced communications system embedded in it that provides real-time information, bespoke management reporting and a flexible platform to offer needs-based telecare solutions for residents, all of which can be accessed via a tablet.

Another example is Community Housing which plans to make all of its properties and residents digitally connected over the next three years. This includes creating a digital portal within each tenant's home so they can view and pay rent online, access services and interact with their landlord in a more effective way. It also means installing a range of technologies, such as boiler sensors, in every new and existing home to help with the proactive maintenance and management of the properties.

Community Housing's own TEC service, Amica24 (formerly Worcestershire Telecare) will lead this transformation work, applying its experience to the dozens of other social landlords, healthcare providers and local authorities that it also supports.

What these and other housing providers are demonstrating is the way in which TEC can be a powerful tool to integrate housing, health and social care and contribute to the national movement towards early intervention and prevention.

Gearing up for the switch

In some areas, the digital switchover could happen as early as 2023 and so organisations that have yet to take action must begin preparing for the change as a matter of urgency. That could start with an assessment of where you currently stand; for example, if analogue services ended tomorrow, which aspects of your telecare would still work in a digital environment?

Think about the implications for procuring and operating technology in this new world in terms of developing procurement specifications that include reliability, availability, performance and interoperability. How will your suppliers be expected to demonstrate their compliance with this new set of standards?

It's important to remember that the success of traditional analogue telecare over the course of many years has been built on the fact that it is trusted and reliable. Its processes and structures are governed by established industry standards and service expectations.

The digital shift brings with it greater opportunities and complexity. Digital technology is constantly evolving and regulations and standards need to be reframed to focus on what service capabilities they should enable rather than how systems should be constructed. But digital TEC's success will ultimately be built on the same foundations as analogue telecare – trust and reliability. So just as organisations providing care must demonstrate quality in line with Care Quality Commission requirements, it is crucial that landlords engage with TEC services and solutions that can equally demonstrate quality and safety.

One way that can be achieved is through audited compliance to the Quality Standards Framework, which is independently delivered by TEC Quality.

Those who prepare for and embrace the digital agenda will not only be safeguarding the health and wellbeing of their customers but also opening the door to a world of technological possibilities that can transform lives.

Alyson Scurfield is the chief executive of TSA, the national body for technology enabled care (TEC) services.
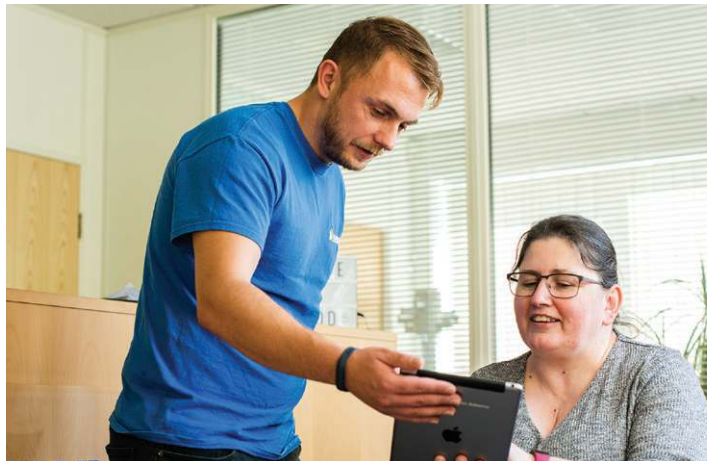
Newydd Housing's award-winning Orchard self-service platform

Newydd Housing has partnered with Orchard to deliver a digital self-service platform for its tenants.

With Orchard's Digital Self Service Platform at its core, the housing provider has improved its tenants' online experience, streamlined internal processes and enabled its customer services team to work smarter, as well as picking up a TPAS Cymru award along the way.

As a relatively small housing provider, with around 3,000 properties, Newydd Housing was aware that changing tenant preferences and the widespread shift towards digital services meant it was at risk of being left behind. Having worked with Orchard for 20 years, it decided to introduce Orchard's Digital Self Service Platform to replace its outdated and little-used tenant portal.

Eleanor Chard, head of customer services, Newydd Housing, said, "We have to acknowledge that tenants want to contact us in different ways and digital self-service is in demand. The uptake by our tenants has completely surpassed what we expected – it's definitely worth doing!"

To maximise uptake among tenants, Newydd Housing ran an extensive awareness campaign integrated with its community regeneration work, with tenants who weren't digitally confident offered one-to-one training as well as devices on loan or for purchase through recycling schemes.
After the launch of the My Newydd app, the housing provider set a target of 1,000 sign-ups between March and December 2019. This was achieved in just five months, meaning over a third of tenants were registered to use the new service.

Tenant feedback since the launch has been very positive; 75 per cent rated the app as very easy to use and only 22 per cent said that they'd prefer to communicate with Newydd Housing by telephone in future. The project also led to Newydd Housing winning a Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) Cymru award for Digital Services.

One of Newydd Housing's tenants said, "I'd tell any tenant to sign up to the app. It's easy to use, it's friendly, you'll find the information you need ever so quickly, and it will make your life so much easier as a tenant."

Michael Morgan, IT application engineer, Newydd Housing, said, "We're now looking at Orchard's entire portfolio to see where there's a natural fit for our future IT strategy – we feel that Orchard could be a 'one-stop shop' for all our needs."

Salix Homes launches Exactly+ self-diagnostic portal

*Salix Homes has introduced a new portal so that its 8,000+ tenants can manage their own tenancies digitally.*

Developed in conjunction with Exactly+, MySalix features innovative diagnostic and chatbot-based technology so that tenants can diagnose, book and schedule repairs themselves, and then track their repair right up until there is a knock at their door. Sue Sutton, executive director of operations, Salix Homes, said, "The

housing sector has been one step behind for too long when it comes to technology, so a few years ago we set out to 'rethink housing' in order to provide services that would meet the expectations of our tenants' changing demographics.

"MySalix is not only a great way for our tenants to report and schedule repairs, but unlike other portals in the housing sector, the technology also completely removes any manual intervention from our teams to raise the repair – it all happens in real-time for our tenants."

Rob Chantler, director, Exactly+, said, "Salix Homes' 'rethink housing' initiative made it possible for us to challenge the traditional ideas behind a property services solution and introduce innovative technologies such as the 'repairs bot'."
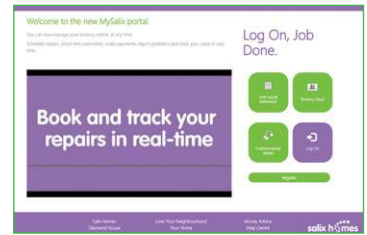
Leveraging the power of IT at Riverside

Alison Stock, Riverside, Director of IT & Change

Like many housing providers, Riverside is investing significant time, effort and money to harness the power of digital technology and become more agile as a business. This requires us to both look forward to the future as well as deal with the IT legacy of the past so that we can drive improvements for customers.

Step-by-step, we are getting technology right so that it really works for our 100,000 residents and 2,700 colleagues. And the time is right… in 2012, 50 per cent of Riverside's customers had no access to the internet but by 2018 this had halved to 25 per cent and is continuing to fall.

Riverside's mission is to transform communities and create opportunities for our residents by maximising the numbers of households accessing online services, enabling them to live more independent lives with digital choice 24/7.

We have strengthened our IT team and

assessed which of our 250 different business applications needed improving or consolidating. Historically, our focus has been on customers and growth but not on exploiting technology; only 25 per cent of our technology was where it needed to be, so we've had lots of work to do.

IT consolidation

We established our 'IT foundations programme' to deliver a resilient, secure and cost-effective IT capability, laying the foundations for the future. This encompassed bringing new skills and ways of working into our IT operating model, driving standardisation and simplification, and increasingly enabling agility and control.

Riverside has also created a digital plan for our customers, which is in progress with a key output being our new online portal My Riverside, making processes available online as a choice for our customers, so that they can easily view and update some of their personal details, self-serve for repairs, pay rent and view balances.

Working with customers, we scrutinised the customer contact journey and are looking at what we need to improve further. We started with online repairs for our customers and are currently in the middle of this process, integrating fully into

our back-office systems. We're working our way through our processes and prioritising around complexity and benefit overlaid across our different business areas.

As a leading national housing and care provider, Riverside works with 156 local authorities across the country. This creates massive challenges in terms of integrating technology. In 2019, we installed internet and wi-fi across 200 of our care and support schemes and we have helped hundreds of customers to become digitally included.

We are now close to completing our IT foundations programme which has enhanced our systems so that nearly 90 per cent of them are fit-for-the-future in terms of resilience and performance.

Looking ahead

Our journey continues as we aim to harness the power of future technology beyond our immediate priorities and agreed roadmap. Where next? Beyond the internet of things and chatbots, we can see a future where, for example, our buildings will be able to report their own repairs… exciting times ahead, building on the great foundations we are laying now.

Alison Stock is the director of IT & Change at Riverside Housing.

HTG orchestrates Clarion Housing migration

HTG GLOBAL IT SOLUTIONS

CLARION HOUSING GROUP

HTG has been supporting Clarion Housing's massive ongoing migration of around 4,200 users to its new technology infrastructure.

Following a merger between Circle Housing and Affinity Sutton, Clarion Housing was formed, resulting in the UK's largest housing provider with around 125,000 homes. Clarion's objective is now to build 50,000 homes over the next decade.

Clarion approached technology specialists HTG in March 2019 when it wanted to embark on a major IT migration. The project was split into two phases; the first phase was to migrate all users whose Active Directory (AD) presence was currently on the legacy domain over to Clarion's new strategic domain and provide them with up to date,

secure hardware. The second phase was to configure the remaining accounts that were already on the strategic domain and provide them with the relevant hardware aligned to their different roles.

HTG was initially tasked with tailoring the solution to ensure users could access the relevant parts of the system (mainly Windows 10-based CRM and ERP applications) while minimising effort and risk, in advance of the second phase.

Phase one of 'Project Unity' involved HTG carrying out a Clarion build and deployment across multiple Clarion sites, comprising 480 laptops, 500 thin clients and 230 iPads while minimising any compromises in the users' experience.

Out of almost 4,200 users in total, the first phase of Clarion's six-month project involved migrating around 1,900 users. The remaining 2,300 users will be migrated as part of Clarion's wider infrastructure integration during phase two.

HTG's services for Clarion's Project Unity include the provision of standard processes (such as joiner, leaver and mover scenarios), training, plus early adopter and post-migration support. Since the migration, HTG has halved users' log-on times from 30 seconds to 13 seconds, and the average session latency has fallen from 108ms to 54ms.

Sam Brown, head of IT operations and infrastructure, Clarion Housing, said, "HTG has proven to be a valuable and trusted partner on this large project. HTG was engaged relatively late in the day but quickly embedded themselves in our teams and brought the focus and structure needed to deliver on time. Key to this was the way HTG quickly understood the organisation and culture they were working within – this ultimately led to a very successful delivery in the eyes of our wider business."

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iOpt expands senior team
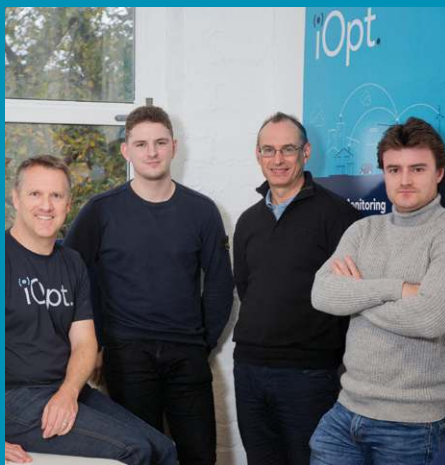
iOpt has strengthened its senior team with the appointment of Stewart Carruth as its operations director and Jack Slater as the company's head of technology. iOpt's former summer intern Lewis Forster has also joined the company as a data scientist following his graduation from Glasgow University with a degree in maths and statistics.

Stewart Carruth, who has a postgraduate diploma in housing and over ten years' experience working in the public sector, was previously chief executive of Stirling Council and director of corporate governance at Aberdeen City Council. At iOpt, Carruth will be responsible for the day-to-day running of the company and helping to facilitate its future growth.

Jack Slater will be responsible for developing the technical aspect of iOpt's business, including the data analytics and algorithmic developments. He is currently completing a PhD in data science and condition monitoring at Glasgow Caledonian University where he was also instrumental in developing an IoT system to enable predictive maintenance in electricity power stations for Doble Engineering.

Established in 2016, iOpt uses data analytics, high-tech sensors and IoT technology to allow housing providers to monitor the internal environment of their assets from afar. iOpt's algorithms and machine learning techniques predict when and where issues such as mould growth will arise, allowing preventative interventions before repair costs or tenant health issues escalate.

Interview with Central Networks and Technologies

John Blackburn, Operations Director, Central Networks and Technologies

Modern IT is evolving at a faster rate than ever before, and new technologies are transforming services and customer expectations. Almost every organisation is focusing time on digital transformation; whether it's improved customer communication channels or process automation, everyone is developing new ways of working. This added pressure on IT departments detracts from the management of 'business as usual', creating technical debt, unsupported systems and performance problems.

Here at Central, we have recently expanded our products and services with new capabilities to help housing providers through these turbulent, yet exciting times. For over 28 years, we've been managing IT on behalf of our customers and have responded to fundamental market changes to meet new IT demands and challenges.

How would you define digital transformation in housing, and what are its benefits?

Digital transformation is primarily about customers; how you can improve services and communications to them and better understand their needs. This creates a drive for new communication channels, more efficient ways of working and a need for increased data and process automation. However, there's also a growing requirement for employers to create flexible working options for employees and digital strategies need to include toolsets for agile working. Customers benefit from having more communication choices and better service levels; organisations benefit from improved efficiency and customer understanding, all with a happier workforce.

Underlying this need for new technology and rapid change is the requirement for effective information security management, IT asset control and a strong technology foundation. Cloud strategies play a key part in enabling this, as do standards such as Cyber Essentials, ISO 27001 and ITIL which help guide organisations through the minefield of risk when adopting new technologies and ways of working.

What new technologies should housing providers be looking at in the short, medium and long terms?

In the short to medium term, providers can look at technology which supplements their legacy housing and CRM systems; tools which they can bolt on to create new communication channels or improve efficiency, but they also need to ensure that their foundations are stable.

First, consider your cloud strategy and move away from 'traditional' hosted technology environments. The most obvious move is to Microsoft Office 365, leveraging the power of Microsoft's latest Office incarnation, while removing the legacy debt of old office systems. If managed correctly, this can provide staff agility and remote working, as well as the latest Microsoft end-user tools such as SharePoint, Teams and PowerApps. These allow organisations to create new workflows and automations and collaborate online without the need for expensive legacy software development or the risk of using email and spreadsheets for business processes.

Look at further removing legacy debt by migrating transactional platforms into cloud environments. Organisations always need to consider the total cost of ownership for their IT when deciding on this approach; cloud-based services remove a distraction for IT departments, allowing them to focus on digital transformation.

Over the medium term, housing providers should consider unified communications; customers expect to communicate by more than just telephone and email. Most retailers or large utilities now offer chatbots, online chat, social media and two-way messaging, setting the benchmark for other service providers. These interactions don't just benefit the customer; they create added back-office efficiencies, with operators being able to serve multiple customers simultaneously and chatbots automating the answering of basic queries.

In the long term, the use of workflow automation technology and low-code development platforms will transform how back-end software operates for housing providers; 'strangulation strategies' enable a low risk, gradual movement away from older, inflexible platforms while increasing efficiency and putting agility into the hands of internal teams. Beyond this, movement away from simple customer records-based CRM to using big data analytics platforms, linked to customer experience management (CX) software and AI will transform how housing providers interact with customers.

Where are the 'quick wins' in terms of IT in housing?

Housing providers can quickly gain benefits from Office 365; reduced costs,

Interview with Central Networks and Technologies
Continued from previous page

improved security and gain powerful tools such as Microsoft Teams.

Another way to accelerate digital transformation is to move foundation services such as server and network management, together with internal user support, to a third party. This removes the pain of business as usual and allows you to concentrate on adding value. It also allows for important information security and GDPR considerations to be better managed by dedicated experts.

Utilities such as chatbots don't require significant integration work and can quickly transform how a customer is serviced while improving internal efficiency at the same time.

It's also worth looking at your end-to-end processes, asking why you do things and what could you do differently with the technology that's on offer.

Finally, organisations can begin their cloud journey by migrating non-live services, such as backup and DR replication environments, to AWS or Microsoft Azure.

What has Central achieved for its social housing customers?

Central has a loyal customer base with many long-term partnerships spanning over 10 years. We're proud to be the technology provider of choice to more than 100 housing providers across the UK and as an independent business, we work with selected partners to offer the very best solutions to our customers.

Examples of this include our recent work with Bromsgrove District Housing,

where we successfully migrated its legacy Exchange 2010 system onto the 365 platform. Performing an end-to-end implementation, we took care of all stages including mailbox migration, training, and final decommissioning of the on-premise services. Adopting this approach ensures our customers can have the greatest confidence that their migration will be successful, and they can leverage the full advantages of the platform.

We have also accelerated our public and hybrid cloud offerings. One Manchester uses Veeam Cloud Connect replication to one of our trusted datacentres and Howard Cottage Housing is using full DaaS and IaaS deployments through VMware Horizon Cloud, using our all-flash storage and Fujitsu hosts. This provides the fastest and most resilient deployments, offering instant scalability with no on-premise infrastructure.

How can Central help housing providers?

Central focuses on using its housing knowledge to create the foundations for digital transformation, with an end-to-end strategy: implementation and support services for IT operations, information security, unified communications, cloud, networking and low-code development applications.

We evolve with changes in technology and have developed experience in the following services:

- Cloud strategy design and implementation (from basic Office 365 migration to large-scale Azure migration);
- An end-to-end information security and

risk management service;
- New and improved IT support and monitoring services;
- Support for roadmap and IT strategy development;
- Unified communications solutions;
- Consulting to leverage the power of Microsoft collaboration tools such as SharePoint, Teams and PowerApps.

How does Central differ from other housing IT suppliers?

Above all, it's our people – we consider ourselves to be an extension of our customers' businesses. We only employ the best people and are dedicated to their continuous development. We gain an in-depth understanding of our clients' needs, their business and where they are on their digital journeys before creating the solutions needed to support them.

We offer total flexibility; we're not restricted by a need to support legacy platforms and aren't tied to a set of specific technology providers. This allows us to develop a set of solutions, no matter how big or small, that are 100 per cent tailored to each organisation.

From implementing basic helpdesk cover to creating a step-change in IT strategy, we offer a transparent, people-first service to match the expectations of our customers.

John Blackburn is the operations director of Central Networks and Technologies.

Community Fibre upgrades social housing broadband

Community Fibre, a social housing-specific broadband provider, has announced an upgrade of its full-fibre packages available to housing providers, primarily in London.

The new packages range from 1Gb/s (£50/month) to 50Mb/s (£20/month), which the company says are the most affordable and competitive rates in London.

Graeme Oxby, CEO, Community Fibre, said, "Broadband has become an essential utility and should be at the forefront of efforts to promote social progress and decent housing. We are breaking the mould with these packages to ensure that everyone can achieve the speed and connectivity they need at affordable prices. Moreover, our contracts are always straightforward, consistent and don't contain any hidden surprises."

Kim Caddy, member for housing and regeneration, Wandsworth Council, said, "Wandsworth has been leading the way in supporting the government's full-fibre rollout ambitions through our partnership with Community Fibre. Its full-fibre network is now available to most of our social housing tenants."

Peter Butler, business development manager, Origin Housing, said, "The importance of affordable and reliable broadband for social housing tenants is still underappreciated. Community Fibre's offering of ultrafast internet speeds at a competitive price should serve as an example that broadband can be affordable for all tenants."

A social snapshot of IoT

Nigel Ebdon, Market Development Manager, Secure Meters

20 years since physical devices were first commercially connected to the internet via sensors, the internet of things (IoT) is now a daily reality in most of our lives. Millions of web-connected 'things' can now be monitored remotely, with relentless data streams organised to aid or dictate machine or human decision-making.


The web connected home

This trend is set to accelerate further in 2020 with the advent of 5G connectivity, potentially allowing over ten times more connected devices per square kilometre than can be currently sustained by 4G networks.

Homes that are increasingly connected are also inevitable; a recent survey of 2,500 UK households by consultants EY found that 41 per cent are planning to install at least one connected device in the next five years, with 12 per cent already owning a smart heating device.

Social homes getting smarter

There has also been a steady evolution in the number of 'made for social housing' IoT solutions available on the market, as housing providers become increasingly aware of their potential value.

Housing providers experimented at first with early generations of 'consumer tech' and discovered that their own internal requirements as well as those of their tenants and their housing stock demanded bespoke solutions. For example, while most mass-market domestic IoT products
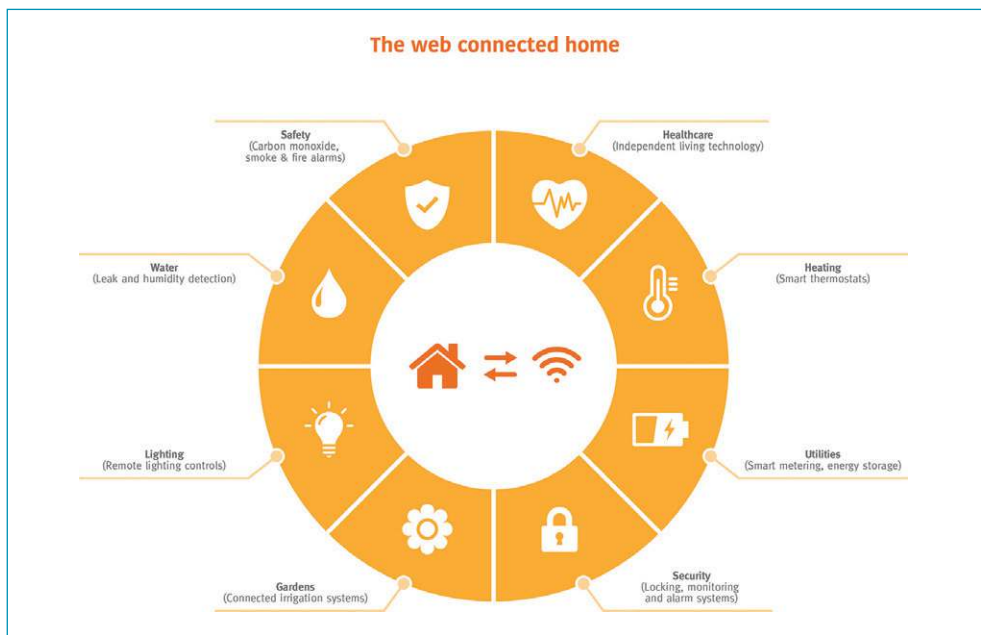
are designed to primarily benefit individual households, social housing IoT products also need to offer aggregated benefits to each housing provider.

In short, housing providers need the capability to access terabytes of granulated data across potentially thousands of homes and autonomously identify physical problems and prioritise interventions.

Physical in-home hardware must also be fit for purpose; i.e. it needs to be robust, tamper-proof and built for that function only. Too many early packages incorporating multi-purpose hardware such as tablets were prone to going missing.

IoT survey

Secure Meters contacted dozens of social landlords in 2019 to better understand their approaches to IoT home sensor solutions.

Awareness of IoT solutions among social housing asset managers appears to be high, despite 40 per cent of landlords still reporting not to have trialled or installed a device.

The two most popular technologies to date are related to heating and utilities, with over a third of respondents having

What IoT solutions have landlords installed vs what solutions are they considering
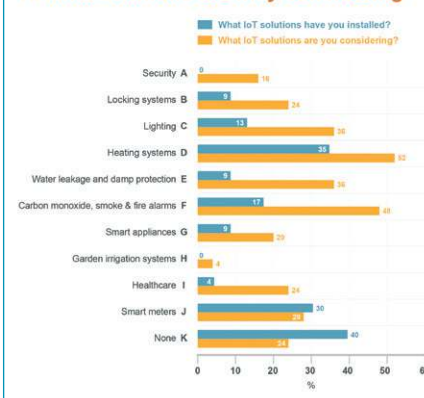
fitted smart heating and smart metering devices.

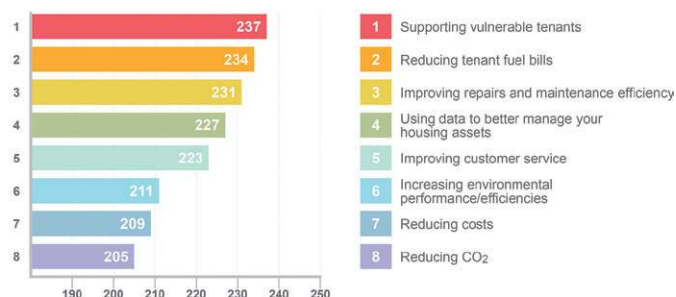Heat and electricity are domestic essentials, so it makes sense to start with something that every home uses, particularly as 2.5 million (around 10 per cent) of homes are still classified as 'fuel poor' by the government.

This was confirmed when we asked landlords why smarter heat and energy were prioritised. The top two reasons given were supporting tenant welfare and reducing tenants' fuel bills.

A social snapshot of IoT
Continued from previous page

Question eight: Can you rate the importance of the following benefits of smart heat controls?

Rank	Value	Benefit
1	237	Supporting vulnerable tenants
2	234	Reducing tenant fuel bills
3	231	Improving repairs and maintenance efficiency
4	227	Using data to better manage your housing assets
5	223	Improving customer service
6	211	Increasing environmental performance/efficiencies
7	209	Reducing costs
8	205	Reducing CO_2

However, digging further, we also discovered that the barriers to adoption of smart heat technologies are cost (high capital investment) and the need to trial/prove their viability.

Traditionally, thermostats were a low priority for landlords because their purchase was by third-party contractors. This has changed with the advent of smart devices, with the increase in cost making it necessary to 'test drive' products and prove their RoI.

'Have' vs.'want'
What's also interesting is the comparison between solutions that have been installed, versus those that are sought or desired by landlords.

As seen from the accompanying chart, little progress appears to have been made in areas such as smart smoke and fire detection systems, lighting sensors and security systems, yet all three have been prioritised as sought-after technologies.

New methods of fire safety are of course highly relevant in the post-Grenfell world, and technologies that alert landlords to potential fire safety hazards feel sensible.

For example, government statistics show that 25 per cent of social housing tenants in England have never tested their smoke alarms. How many fires could be prevented by remote sensors detecting alarms with flat batteries? So simple, yet potentially lifesaving.

Tactical or strategic?
Respondents were also asked whether their organisation was taking a tactical or strategic approach to IoT, with 80 per cent claiming to have an IoT strategy in place.

Based on my own experience with social landlords (and their motivations for new technologies), I was surprised by this, so I asked a few respondents what they perceived as an IoT strategy. What I discovered was that IoT was actually being deployed tactically in order to achieve strategic aims, such as reducing fuel poverty or improving repairs and maintenance service standards and efficiency.

If an organisation has a strategy then I'd argue that it should have a boardroom presence, and I'm not sure that's true of most social landlords and IoT just yet.

Where next?
Where next for IoT in housing? The market still has a long way to go, but high levels of awareness, 5G connectivity, new and improving technologies, and increasingly social housing-specific solutions, suggest that there's now a stronger argument for accelerated deployments of IoT in housing.

Nigel Ebdon is the market development manager at Secure Meters.

JRF moves to Azure with Phoenix

Joseph Rowntree Foundation has moved its IT infrastructure to Microsoft's Azure cloud platform with support from Phoenix.

JRF JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

After Phoenix's 'Surveyor 360' assessment to identify the right mixture of on-premise, hybrid and cloud services to replace JRF's ageing infrastructure, Phoenix was chosen as JRF's migration partner for its move to Microsoft Azure.

Andy Veale, director for technology and change, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, said, "Cost cutting wasn't the key driver but it has become one of the outcomes. There is a 50 per cent saving in certain areas of our IT expenditure by moving to the cloud, so for every £1,000 saved in IT, that's potentially two weeks' worth of people being in one of our care homes."

As well as the Azure migration, Phoenix used Microsoft's Business Value Programme to implement Microsoft 365, reviewed Microsoft Dynamics 365 as a replacement for JRF's housing management system, optimised their licensing models, enabled more mobile working, and explored advanced technologies such as IoT, AI and machine learning in the context of a proposed 'smart region' initiative.

Compliance at your core – Don't sleepwalk into security

Shasa Colson, Enterprise Account Manager, Exponential-e

Investing in a digital future means that housing providers can streamline costs, improve operational efficiency and concentrate on creating improved tenant experiences. But there is often an elephant in the room when discussing digitisation – cyber security, which comes with any data-driven, digital approach.

Stopping data security spills

Last year saw the personal information of tenants leaked, with thousands more contacted about potential data vulnerabilities within IT systems directly linked to them. Evidently, this is an issue that must be tackled head-on.

Across the housing sector, there are problems with organisations taking a reactive instead of proactive approach to data security. This is a dangerous mistake; by their very nature, housing providers hold vast quantities of confidential information relating to tenants, employees and contractors. With so much data to steal, housing providers can often become political or monetary targets for cyber criminals.

As such, considering the swathes of sensitive information that housing providers hold, the sector must adopt measures to mediate these security risks, with proactivity as the engine for driving meaningful change. To achieve this, it's vital for housing providers to fully understand the security challenges they face.

First up – the cloud conflict. At the moment, most IT investments for housing providers take the form of private clouds, due to the perceived security benefits. However, for the majority of IT managers within these organisations, the end goal is all about leveraging bespoke SaaS applications, for which a public cloud is needed. Here, a hybrid approach can offer the best of both without compromising on security. Pre-existing private clouds can be kept for safely storing particularly sensitive information, while a public cloud can be used to host publicly-available data and share sizable resources.

It's also important to highlight that, across the housing sector, it's a common misconception that cyber criminals only target high-profile, big businesses for hefty financial ransoms. Malicious hackers are often just opportunists who'll go hunting for any unsecured data that will have some value, whether monetary or reputational.

Coming to terms with compliance

Next on the agenda – the various compliance issues that housing providers need to worry about, because compliance is the axle around which good cyber security turns. Just think about how IT systems accrue in the first instance. For most housing providers, instead of purchasing sets of equipment in one fell swoop, their IT environment builds up over time. The result? Legacy systems find themselves sitting on top of each other in an impossible heap.

Also, as networks evolve, siloed security systems throughout the IT estate all come with their own user interface. This creates compliance headaches, rendering it nigh-on impossible to accurately monitor compliance across myriad devices. This distorts the picture of security and makes compliance arduous to achieve, leading to unsecured data being left online that IT managers simply can't see. Again, without compliance, there can be no cyber security.

Thankfully, flexible IT systems are solving this via continual compliance monitoring. By their very nature, networks produce an unfathomable abundance of data, so these types of systems filter out the data noise, ensuring that the parameters are clearly defined to optimise efficiency.

Of course, there's no one-size-fits-all scenario for such IT platforms, but they do address the common concerns of housing providers: secure, compliant and cost-effective protection through real-time monitoring for compliance to multiple standards. These can range from best practice through to PCI-DSS and ISO 27001.

Skilling up smartly

Finally, there are key cultural challenges and considerations to bear in mind. First of all, the cyber-security skills shortage bites as hard in the housing sector as anywhere else. The best way to address this is for housing providers to outsource their cyber-security concerns in order to gain access to dedicated security analysts.

Ultimately, housing providers must ensure they understand the rising threat of cybercrime and have the necessary people, technology and processes to mitigate risks.

Forget sleepwalking into security; with the right team and technology, the safeguarding power of housing providers can be achieved in full. In turn, tenants can rest safe in the knowledge that their personal data is protected while accessing the services they depend on.

Shasa Colson is an enterprise account manager for Exponential-e.

Digital transformation at a fraction of the normal cost?

Andrew Giles, Principal Consultant, Fractional IT

Most housing providers are underway with digital transformation projects in one shape or another and right across society our reliance on technology keeps increasing. So how do organisations keep up? Board directors might think that digital change is expensive to implement, but what they should really worry about is the cost of getting it wrong.

We're seeing technology and data threats escalating up to the top of corporate risk registers. As a result, boards are rightly looking for greater levels of assurance that their IT strategy and change roadmap are safe, secure and delivering the best value for money.

The value of an IT director

If the IT risks are so high and the cost of change is so large, it's alarming that fewer than 10 per cent of UK housing providers have a dedicated IT director. Positioned correctly, these roles can confidently plug the gap between the executive board and IT management. Even worse, we very rarely see non-executive directors with a technology background.

The good news is that this is starting to change as more boards are recognising the importance of making wise choices about technology investments. Many board members are concerned about how they can drive up assurance levels for technology projects in a function that is already complex and bewildering to most people. The result can be a swing between the IT team taking too many risks (maybe some unknown) or being overly risk averse and missing out on the benefits of

brilliant new technologies – either result is expensive in one way or another.

The list of things to pay close attention to is a long one, including things such as creating your IT digital strategies and technology roadmap, implementing governance models and project methodologies, portfolio and risk management, license audits, and cyber security and GDPR assessments. You'll also need to manage option appraisals, procurement, contract negotiations and carefully control budgets along with improving service and delivering project benefits. Then there's making sure you have the right target operating model, recruitment and leadership approaches.

As an IT professional, I'm delighted to see large organisations recruiting senior IT leaders onto their executive teams and boards, but the challenge is how can smaller businesses keep up, when they can't (and shouldn't) justify a full-time IT director?

The flexible solution

How can you get experienced, director-level IT leadership at a fraction of the cost of a (six-figure salary) CIO? The answer is to share them – the 'UberDirector' or 'Directoroo'!

More companies are turning to the professional 'gig' economy to increase efficiency and flexibility and achieve results in a cost-effective way; the demand for freelance, portfolio, or 'gig' careers continues to grow, with an estimated 32 per cent of professionals in the UK now being self-employed.

You can engage a very experienced IT leader on a part-time basis for a variable number of days per month to suit your business needs. They'll provide peer-level assurance to the executive team and lead the safe delivery of technology change.

Benefits to the board

The benefits to housing providers' boards of using a virtual IT director are huge. As well as only paying for what

you need, independent IT directors have a heavyweight portfolio of work to draw on and share with the team. These tested solutions from real-life, hands-on experience can be a fast track to avoiding problems and achieving the successful delivery of major IT-based projects.

An additional bonus is that this freelance approach means that there's no pressure from working for a large vendor with mixed levels of capability looking to 'land and expand'. They work on-demand and only continue while they are adding value – very often flexing the amount of time needed with contracts being easy to start and finish. This model is much more efficient than the traditional interim contract of high day-rates for fixed full-time periods.

A recent study by a transformation and technology recruitment firm reported, "Around 70 per cent of traditional contractors are seriously under-utilised for long stretches of their contracts." Put simply, your fractional IT support should focus on value-adding activities.

Support for the squad

When you're choosing the right fractional IT director, it needs to be about more than just executive assurance. There are benefits for the IT management team too – skills and knowledge transfer are a crucial part of the mixture, along with coaching from a 'critical friend'. They should bridge the gap between the executive strategy and practical delivery. On-demand IT directors should be willing to roll their sleeves up and lead by example, working closely with in-house teams to inject energy and enthusiasm.

If the IT and change team in your business is over-stretched and struggling to 'keep the lights on' or if they are about to embark on a new unfamiliar transformation journey due to a merger, divestment, organic growth or simply a new digital strategy, then a shared IT director may be the perfect solution.

Andrew Giles is the founder of Fractional IT.

How to tell a great story

Helen McLeod, Partner, Golden Marzipan

Many of the articles in this magazine are about exciting exhilarating, rewarding and even fun developments with new technologies. This usually involves a change for the business and its people and, as we all know, changing a business can be messy and difficult.

Our 'Battenburg cake' approach to change puts the people elements at the heart of things; they are the jam and marzipan that keep it all together. With that in mind, here are some of our essential ingredients to making change stick.

Tell a compelling story…
The first thing to do is to stop talking about 'change' and 'transformation' and start talking about what's actually happening. "We're going to give our customers an easy way to do the things they need to do" is much better than "We're planning a digital transformation to bring in new solutions", so create a story that your employees and customers will want to support.

We know how important stories are for humans. And we're pretty good at them, until we try to do it at work. It's so much easier to describe the practicality of a change, to think about training and rollout plans than it is to describe how a new fancy 'tech box' will make people feel.

Start by getting under the skin of what your change means for people. You need to set out crystal clear expectations of what they need to do and, most of all, why it's happening. What will happen to them? How would they describe it? What will they love? What will they hate? How exciting (or not) will it feel? What do they care about? What else is on their minds?

Take the time to build a story around the emotions you want people to feel, albeit grounded in reality.

It's worth spending time refining, challenging and improving your core story. It should be easy and natural to tell, memorable and authentic – above all, it needs to be compelling to the audiences you're telling it to. And once you've created your story, and everyone's bought into it, check that it hasn't been diluted along the way.

Include clear and realistic expectations and goals people can work towards, but be adaptable and set out things one step at a time because a big digital transformation isn't going to happen quickly.

And keep telling it…
Now you've a great story to tell, you need to keep telling it, and the trick is to tell their story, not your story.

Great communication is always all about the audience. Whether that's adverts explaining how products will enhance your life or social conversations people choose to join, no one will keep listening to someone who drones on about themselves.

It's even better if you can get the real, front-line teams to tell their stories to their peers as they experience a change, and create a comprehensive plan that tells the story from all angles so that you have an exciting and fresh way to repeat the core messages.

By making sure your plans and activities are joined up, you'll avoid doing too much at once. If you've asked people to do something, make sure they have the time to do it before you layer on something else.

Immerse your leaders
Your leaders are the trusted voice for your people. They hear from these leaders every day – they've seen them under pressure and will be able to 'read' if they believe something.

At the start of your change activity, spend time immersing your leaders in what's going to happen. Get them to challenge the plans, look at what you're planning to say and invite the questions their teams will ask so you help them to become confident with the story.

For me, a change strategy conversation goes like this: my own belief + proof points + action we need to take = conversation.

Everyone, from the CEO and executive team to the front-line managers, should be prepared to lead by example, to really show what they believe in, and talk about how they've personally changed too.
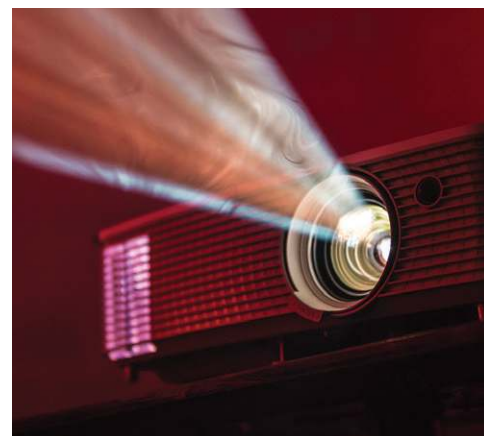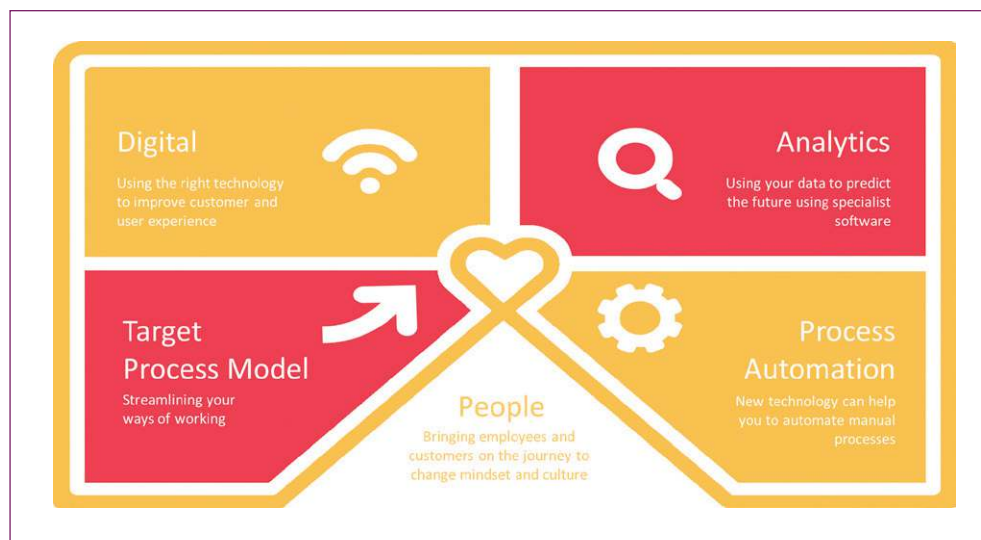
Involve your people
Shared experience is the fastest way to get people on board with something. If you're radically changing the culture of

How to tell a great story
Continued from previous page

your business, then you need to make lots of effort to shift the mindset of the people who work there.

Expecting people to feel excited if they've just sat and listened to something or read about it is a big challenge. Instead, give them an active part to play.

Create discussions, ask them to build on what's happening and invite them to challenge or even disrupt 'the way things are today'. When you involve people in deciding what else can be refreshed as part of a change, this can help them to weave the new practices into daily life. When people see their own ideas becoming a reality, they'll take pride and feel a direct connection. Keep listening with surveys and discussions to check in on how people are feeling and what they're doing.

Never give them the full and final 'script' and expect them to learn it and take it to heart; you're a long way towards making change stick when people are paraphrasing your key messages.

Confidence and culture
Include plenty of support and training to make sure people feel equipped and confident. This is the point when things can start to get a bit technical and practical so build in the emotion of your change.

A big transformation programme will also include plenty of symbolic changes to the main cultural drivers. For example, if you are shifting to be customer-led then check your performance criteria and rewards match this. Or if you need people to be more innovative then you should plan how you'll visibly reward failure as well as success.

Celebrate the wins
Make a big deal of the little things that have changed and the people who've helped. Name check the whole team, not just the leader, and ask your executive team to pay them attention too. When you recognise successes and the people who've taken the initiative, you'll be empowering more people to join in.

Celebrate failure too. If you're trying new things, it stands to reason that not everything will work straight away. By experimenting and listening to ideas, you can test solutions and keep people involved and engaged.

Above all, if you can spend as much time, effort and expertise on change engagement as you do on your technical and process plan, you'll set your programme up for success.

Helen McLeod is a partner at Golden Marzipan.

Raven Housing gets Better Connected

Better Connected

Julia Mixter, Director of Transformation, Raven Housing Trust

Raven Housing Trust has launched Better Connected, an ambitious two-year digital transformation programme to develop an organisation-wide technical architecture that harnesses the cloud to improve the efficiency and security of our operations. Better Connected will ensure that every tenant and staff member can remotely access the resilient and reliable data they need, anytime, anywhere and from any digital device.

This is one of the most significant and innovative steps in Raven's history, and our customers lie at its heart. We are designing it with them and for them to address what they value and need. Our aim is to harness technology to deliver consistently excellent services which provide equally good value for money as we know that affordability is the top priority for many customers.

We began in 2019 by asking 300 customers what was most important to them in their relationship with Raven. The most significant findings, not surprisingly, focused on affordability, having the space to live comfortably and having a safe and secure home. We are initially addressing the greatest priority, affordability, with an innovative project called Spark Lab where five members of staff work alongside customers to explore the issue in detail and design a product or service designed to tackle the problem.

Residents, not commodities

There was also a strong desire for tenants to feel they lived in 'a home' – i.e. more empowered and in control of their property. They told us that they didn't want to feel like a commodity living in a unit owned by an organisation. And this is where Better Connected will deliver, by putting customers in control of their home and their data, giving them access to tenancy agreements, fire and gas safety certificates, facts about communal repairs and other vital information.

Like many housing organisations, Raven's ICT was built on a series of legacy systems which didn't always talk to each other. Data was held in different areas, resulting in siloed working and creating delays and confusion.

New enterprise architecture

Better Connected will introduce a completely different enterprise architecture, creating a platform for scalability and agility. It's a comprehensive change programme which will include our CRM, customer portal, housing management system and back-office systems, including HR and finance. This change will drive improvements in efficiency and collaboration, speed and mobility of workflow and communication across the business.

For example, tenants want to know when work will be done on their homes and to track the progress of contractors; our new systems will enable this. And customers who can't travel to our offices to talk to staff will increasingly feel that we're always available for them through our responsive systems.

In a related and very important area, sensor technology and automation will be developed to enhance home safety, particularly fire, asbestos and damp testing. Sensors will capture real-time property performance that includes health and safety and compliance data.

Omni-channel services

Fundamentally, we want to make it as easy as possible for customers to interact with us to save them time, connect them to services they value and trust and give them choice. We will tailor the information so it's relevant to them and they can get answers quickly. We're expanding our reach beyond traditional tenants and want to use our digital platform to inform future home buyers and commercial customers about our products and services.

With our move to the cloud, we expect that our operational teams will be able to work faster and in more adaptable and agile ways. While our staff already benefit from flexible working, Better Connected will increase their opportunities to work where, when and how they want to achieve the right work-life balance.

We will be using and developing software which is at the cutting edge of innovation but is also tried and tested in the housing sector for reliability and ease of use. At the end of our two-year implementation period, we fully expect to be leading the way in social housing, helping and encouraging other providers to bring about digital connectivity.

Digital inclusion

However, we are very aware that we have vulnerable tenants who aren't digitally engaged so we will be working hard to bring these customers along with us, enhancing their opportunities and their lives. We have already developed an excellent approach to digital inclusion by helping customers with training, broadband issues and equipment loans.

In two years' time, we expect to have an organisation which looks very different. Customers will have more opportunities to be fully informed of their interests and needs; multiple channels will exist to engage with Raven staff through digital methods or face-to-face. Most queries and requests will be satisfied at the initial point of contact and customers will have the opportunity to influence what, when and how we deliver services through a 'co-design' approach.

Staff will have the right tools and information to quickly and easily deliver services. with less time spent on administration and more with customers. Our systems will support the whole business to manage commercial transactions and up-to-date data will deliver better insights to help decision-making. Ultimately, we will bring innovation and simplicity to what we do, providing homes and connecting customers to services they value and trust.

Julia Mixter is the director of transformation at Raven Housing Trust.

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2020 technology trends – Beyond the hype

Trevor Hampton, Director of Housing Product Solutions, Northgate Public Services

As we enter 2020, predictions of the hottest technologies are rapidly filling our inboxes. It's always interesting to read about the breakthroughs that are set to transform our lives, but are the most headline-grabbing innovations the ones we really need to watch?

The technologies that will make the biggest difference in the housing sector are those that will help organisations do their jobs better and/or faster and deliver better service to customers. In my view, 2020 will see some high-profile technological advances reaching a level of maturity such that they can actually improve day-to-day lives.

So, these are five of our top technology trends that will make waves in 2020.

1. Wearable technologies
We've become accustomed to the idea of fitness wristbands which monitor our heartrate, wearables we can use to make payments and watches that warn us when the noise levels around us could damage our hearing.

This technology also has real potential in the social housing sector. For example, wearables could measure the activity levels or temperature of a vulnerable tenant who lives alone so their health and wellbeing could be monitored remotely. Similarly, customers could log repairs, pay rent or make appointments through a smart watch with built-in security and IT authentication.

It's a great example of consumer technology that could be adapted to make lives easier.

2. Fraud and data protection
In the information age, there is a growing need for technology which can keep people safe from data breaches and fraud. It only takes one rogue member of staff in your organisation with the skills to hack into the company's system and access the financial history or health details of a vulnerable tenant.

Housing providers and local authorities will increasingly seek out systems that can provide a cast-iron audit trail of how data is stored, accessed and shared. This is particularly important for processes where AI is making decisions in place of humans because there needs to be transparency about how these decisions are made.

Customers need to be able to trust their housing providers to keep sensitive data secure.

3. The democratisation of data
There is greater ease of access to data than ever before. With such a range of tools, channels and devices at our fingertips, we can choose how we access information in the way that suits us best.

That can make things complicated for an organisation such as a housing provider when your customers want to interact with you in a multitude of different ways. One tenant follows you on Twitter but responds best to SMS messages, while their neighbour over the road only replies to emails.

Housing providers will increasingly benefit from machine learning that looks at user experience and identifies how best to interact with each customer, based on their individual preferences.

4. Edge computing
As more and more IoT sensors are built into the fabric of properties and the household appliances inside them, there is a risk of producing excessive IoT data. This can cause network clutter and useful insights can be lost.

Edge computing combats this by providing IoT devices with a level of intelligence so that the information processing takes place where the actual device is, in the property rather than back at a data centre.

The result is a much more accurate way to monitor data that comes from IoT devices because an intelligent edge device will work out which data is relevant and only send you that. For example, an IoT-enabled boiler produces vast swathes of temperature data, but edge technology will identify if the temperature is unusual and send you a message that the boiler is starting to overheat and needs a service.

Edge computing reduces data overload and keeps the information flowing, so housing providers can manage their assets and housing stock more effectively.

5. 5G data networks
It's early days for 5G, but 2020 should witness the real impact of faster download speeds and more reliable connections. Whether 5G will improve connectivity and tackle network blind spots remains to be seen, but this would certainly make a difference in helping more people access services online.

For housing providers, faster data networks will make it much easier for your maintenance teams to upload photos of a property onto the system, for instance, and customers could instantly download their tenancy contracts and any relevant documents.

5G could accelerate the pace of digital transformation in housing, getting information to and from customers, suppliers and agencies in a fraction of the time.

Looking to the future
Nothing stands still, and while some new tools and technologies will make their presence felt this year, others are waiting to shake up the housing sector in the years to come.

Virtual reality
Virtual reality (VR) is already disrupting the world of entertainment, sport and the arts. It may take a little longer for VR, augmented and extended reality

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to become a firm fixture in housing, but giving people the ability to view three-dimensional, life-sized images has huge potential in architecture and construction.

The ability to simulate the way an elderly person moves around their environment could be the key to achieving the vision of a home for life.

Blockchain
Much has already been written about blockchain, and many start-ups are adopting the technology for a range of uses, such as specialised customer loyalty programmes, managing medical records and tracing food items throughout the supply chain.

Some of the larger banks are now starting to invest in blockchain, bringing it into the mainstream. Blockchain makes it easier to ensure a transaction is authentic, and the technology could be used to eliminate error or fraud. It's certainly one to watch for the future because it could bring an increased level of certainty to the many financial transactions that take place in housing such as purchasing of properties, equipment and maintenance contracts.

As we embark on a new year, with its challenges and opportunities, the definite winners in the technology stakes will be those developments that support a more efficient, innovative and customer-facing housing business.

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

Orchard buys InterNETalia for repairs and maintenance

Orchard has bought InterNETalia and its well-known AccuServ software to strengthen its end-to-end repairs and maintenance solutions for housing providers and contractors.

The two companies described Orchard AccuServ Repairs & Maintenance as a single solution for recording, scheduling and managing repairs, emergency and planned work, voids and compliance jobs. It makes job and sub-contractor management easier, from raising the original works order through to final completion.

Pat Clarke, CEO, Orchard, said, "We are very pleased to have bought the best repairs and maintenance solution with full mobile capability and powerful scheduling because this is something our customers have been wanting for some time. This acquisition also accelerates Orchard's vision to become the market-leading, single supplier of choice by delivering greater value to our customers."

Repairs & Maintenance has been designed from the ground up to provide an end-to-end repair and maintenance solution, including a full suite of mobile capability, stock control and EDI integration. With repair workflows, responsive repairs, voids, sub-contractor management and more, it gives all the tools needed to ensure that repairs are dealt with in the most efficient way, including automated scheduling for

Pat Clarke, CEO, Orchard

housing providers' direct labour organisations (DLOs) and contractors.

Orchard AccuServ Repairs & Maintenance will be integrated with Orchard's housing and asset management solutions as well as being extended to link with other leading housing, finance and asset management systems. AccuServ will continue to be developed and marketed as an independent, standalone offering.

Alec Reid, CEO, InterNETalia, said, "Orchard and InterNETalia are a perfect match. This takes AccuServ to the next level, exposing it to a wider set of customers and markets. Orchard and InterNETalia are culturally aligned and share many core values, particularly around our joint focus on customer service and continuous innovation."

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