HOUSING TECHNOLOGY™
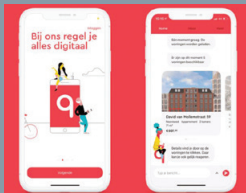
HOUSING | IT | TELECOMS | BUSINESS | ECOLOGY

- Housing management
- Feature - *IT finance & procurement*
- Finance management
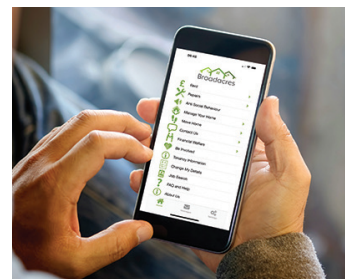- Customer management
- Repairs & mobile working
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SPECIAL FEATURE
IT finance & procurement in housing

Wates on track with Castleton & Localz

NIHE opts for Orchard's managed service

Broadacres' Aareon portal & app

Data as a strategic asset

SPECIAL FEATURE
Housing Technology 2020 in pictures
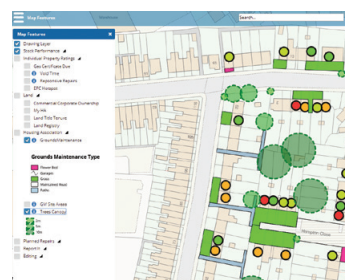
Cadcorp streamlines mapping for Citizen Housing

Curing grounds maintenance headaches

Aareon QL Next Generation
Coming Soon

Get More Done

Cloud Ready Open System

Implement Quickly

Future Proof

For further information on QL Next Generation, please contact our team:

📞 0247 6323 723   ✉️ hello@aareon.com   in @Aareon UK   🐦 @AareonUKLtd

Tough times & sharing your experiences
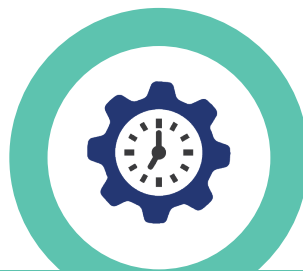These are incredibly difficult times, and both our personal and working lives are set to be extraordinarily different for at least the next few months. There will be many challenges ahead, but together we can help to build resilience and support each other in our respective endeavours.

We saw the strength that housing providers can draw from each other just last month at our Housing Technology Conference 2020; it was a very busy event, with some great feedback, especially about the importance of peer-to-peer meetings.

Our 2020 conference was just days before government's announcements regarding social distancing, travel and working from home so we have since set up a free-to-all blogging service: **www.housing-technology.com/news**. This is **your** space where you can share your tips, best practices, ideas, recommendations and so on of using technology to mitigate the effects of the outbreak on your staff and tenants.
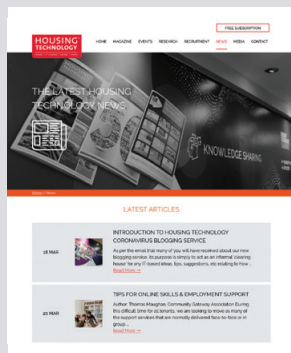
We'd really welcome any advice or experiences you'd like to share to help your peers (and vice versa) in the Housing Technology community; if you've done or are doing something technology-related (big or small, simple or complex – it's all useful) as a direct response to the coronavirus and think that your peers would benefit from your experience or knowledge then we'd like to help you share it via the blog.

There will be a lot to cope with over the next few months, not least trying to find a balance between working conditions, reaching out to colleagues, tenants and suppliers, and establishing new routines at home. The Housing Technology team will be posting ideas and articles on the blog from time to time to reflect the times we are in. Keeping in touch digitally will become more vital than ever so please share your tips and idea on the blog: **www.housing-technology.com/news**.

So along with supporting each other through this crisis, we recommend the following tips: maintain a routine; keep your distance from others; stay connected digitally; prioritise your health; eat a balanced diet; and keep moving.

Please stay in touch and take care.
George Grant, CEO, Founder & Publisher
Housing Technology

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

HOUSING TECHNOLOGY 2021 CONFERENCE & EXECUTIVE FORUM

03-04 March 2021 | Location TBC

www.housing-technology.com
/event/housing-technology-2021-conference

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY 2021 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

CONTENTS

COMPANIES IN THIS ISSUE

Would you like to get engaged?

Ian Lockwood, Head of Business Development, Aareon UK

Suppliers of housing management systems have often been criticised for not delivering functionality in line with trends seen in other sectors or applications, and for not actively listening to or engaging with customers enough when working on new developments.

Aareon has taken this feedback on board and fundamentally changed our development methodology for QL Next Generation (QLNG), the latest iteration of our housing management system.

The traditional approach of developing a new product is to look at existing solutions, identify any gaps, evaluate new trends in system design and then build the system using a dedicated team of developers until the new solution emerges after several months or even years.

A trumpet fanfare
At this point, the new arrival is pushed out to customers with a fanfare of trumpets heralding how great it is going to be and how it is so much better than its predecessor or anything else in the market. All well and good, but where is the customer validation? Have customer expectations truly been met? Does it deliver improvements over their current system?

QLNG builds on the solid foundations of the proven, tried and trusted business logic of the existing Aareon QL solution and presents users with a new browser-based view of their day-to-day work to deliver enhanced functionality and a better user experience. And backwards compatibility provides existing customers with a seamless transition path without the need to reconfigure business processes and workflows or embark on a time-consuming and expensive reimplementation.

The user experience
Adrian Taylor, Aareon UK's research & development manager, said, "The new system is focused on the user experience and improves business processes by allowing users to complete their tasks as efficiently as possible in QLNG. Many housing systems have an emphasis on being 'data focused'; QLNG is 'user focused' and is designed in conjunction with our customers to streamline those important processes and enable them to deliver outstanding services."

The development of QLNG has been guided throughout by a group of our customers including Torus, Believe Housing and Bernicia, all of whom played active roles in shaping both the functionality and the user experience. A number of customers have made a commitment to the engagement programme which involves taking part in regular workshops focusing on specific processes, forming the requirements for improvements to the system, having regular feedback sessions which demonstrate new features and finally having access to pre-release versions of the software.

Iterative enhancements
In addition to receiving a license for QLNG, the customers get to shape the product through their influence on the engagement programme in conjunction with Aareon's own technical expertise. This shared approach throughout the development lifecycle encompasses selection and identification of iterative enhancements as well as scheduling of the content for each release cycle to ensure priority functionality is delivered faster. The collaborative nature of the programme also leads to improved quality and user satisfaction.

Our engagement partners are relishing this approach. Dan McGrane from Halton Housing said, "I'm really impressed by how Aareon is approaching this from a development point of view; involving customers and their end-users in the whole process bodes really well for a great end-result."

The full release of QLNG doesn't mean the end of the engagement programme. Ongoing involvement in the evolution of the product allows customers on the engagement programme to get the future features they want in the product and in doing so, break the cycle of 5-10 year procurements because the system no longer matches their needs.

Ian Lockwood is the head of business development at Aareon UK.
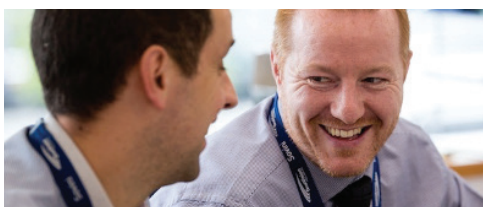
One Vision's new HMS from MIS-AMS

One Vision Housing has chosen MIS Active Management Systems to supply its new housing management system.

One Vision Housing said that this upgrade will create significant operational efficiencies in how it manages its properties, tenancies, revenues and tenant relationships. The new system is part of a wider ongoing service improvement programme to update, improve and simplify its legacy business applications. Ian Mitchell, managing director, One Vision Housing, said, "In order to support our future growth while simultaneously continuing to provide the best service to our customers, we needed a robust, 'future-ready' system. MIS will work with us to deliver a bespoke housing management system, which will increase efficiency and further enrich our customer journey."

Overcoming IT challenges and change at Housing Plus

Andrew Dale, Assistant Director of IT, Housing Plus Group

Agreeing & implementing major IT change

Getting all levels of an organisation on board with technology change is a challenge, especially when the forecast will result in increased costs. Even when the benefits of change are numerous and evidenced, the increasing of costs through one-off or on-going expenditure can be difficult and time-consuming to justify.

The way to approach this from a budget and then a procurement perspective is to be clear on the outputs and returns. Board engagement is fundamental to get change approved, as is their on-going awareness of outcome delivery to build confidence in IT services enabling and supporting the business. This approach does mean a high level of business awareness is needed because the actual expected or planned returns are often not made in the IT department, but elsewhere in the business.

When engaging with the market, there are numerous ways to buy a solution, whether for consultancy, software, hardware or a complete managed service, giving you the opportunity to engage with the market to get your potential suppliers to do some of the hard work for you. This doesn't mean that selecting the right supplier is ever simple, but there are ways that suppliers can be made to bring ideas and solutions to the table so that you don't have to over-think and over-engineer a tender process.

For example, if you have complete clarity regarding your desired outputs, state these to the suppliers and get them to tell you how they will achieve the outputs using their solutions and services. This can be done pre-tender so that informal dialogue can take place to gauge feedback, ensure you are clear on what is being asked for and to ensure that when you formally approach the market you will have a viable solution offered from interested suppliers.

Depending on the value of a contract, procurement could have been a lengthy and formal process using OJEU standards. Now though, if you haven't considered using a procurement framework then do so; there are many routes to market that formalise a process and the resulting contracts while reducing the overall procurement time.

For example, Housing Plus has used early market engagement with G-Cloud 11 and Tech Services 2 frameworks to buy new services that are transforming how IT is delivered and consumed within the group, all achieved within limited timeframes to enable business change.

Challenges & doing things differently

When Housing Plus embarked on a change programme for our IT services, there was a vision of what the future should look like and how this should be delivered. Realising the changes and the numerous benefits that can be delivered has been a major programme built around IT as a service.

Rather than taking the constituent parts of IT such as applications, networking, hosting, devices and service desk and formulating a plan for each, we constructed a change programme for IT that could be effectively procured, delivered and managed.

We are working with Littlefish, Incline-IT and Rainmaker to deliver IT services while enabling a business environment that can accommodate merger integration, on-going group expansion and service transformation.

Why have we decided to work the way we have and what are the changes being made within the programme?

- Alignment of IT to the needs of the business, resulting in IT sometimes not delivering what the business expected of it due to a lack of understanding or a lack of investment.
- Ageing on-premise infrastructure resulting in lower grades of service or a lack of resilience to incidents.
- Ageing devices in circulation among staff, resulting in poor connectivity and potentially unsecured or out-of-date security profiles.
- Difficulty covering the support hours needed by the business and addressing out-of-hours incidents.
- Difficulty in getting the right IT resources due to geographical location and/or IT in housing not being as attractive as other sectors.
- The inconsistent application of processes for change management, problem management and patch management resulting in delays to the delivery of support or change.

The objectives and deliverables that have been realised through a series of changes are:

- Improved staff engagement and support experience through a specialist 24/7 service desk.
- Renewed device rollout enabling agile ways of working with full device management.
- In-progress transition of hosting to public cloud to improve performance and availability.
- In-progress migration to SDWAN for all sites to improve connectivity and support for remote workers while significantly reducing network costs.
- Closer engagement of IT with the business to understand its needs and translate these into future service or application deliverables.
- Standardised processes with all partners to manage change better.

The delivery of service and technical solutions has been procured with one thing in mind; how best to deliver the services to Housing Plus. If there's a specialist who can provide a service better

Overcoming IT challenges and change at Housing Plus
Continued from previous page

than we could deliver it ourselves, then we have taken that service. When setting up such a service, we have ensured we maintain control of the strategic direction of IT and govern how the services are delivered.

Two specific examples of technical change and why they've been adopted:

• Migration of on-premise hosting to AWS hosting. In the first instance, this has been a 'lift and shift' approach to be followed by rationalisation to overcome availability and performance issues. This move to AWS was taken instead of investing heavily in new on-premise hardware and setups that would require on-going management. We have also selected AWS due to the maturity of its platform, cost-effectiveness and to ensure a service split between Microsoft and AWS cloud services. There are many stories of a migration being complicated, of applications not being supported in

a cloud environment, but a key point to remember is, if a machine is virtual on-premise then it can in all likelihood run happily as a virtual machine in AWS or Azure!

• Implementation of Intune and Autopilot from within our Office365 setup to enable a zero-touch device deployment to staff from standard configuration profiles. This is now being rolled out following a trial period and is going to rationalise how we consume and support devices.

For all of the changes being implemented across our IT services, it's Housing Plus that's governing those services, defining what's required and, for the most part, empowering our partners to deliver the technical outcomes. In the above two examples, Incline-IT is delivering and managing the AWS services and Littlefish is delivering and managing our device rollout and support alongside their service desk delivery to us.

Our main reason for using partners to deliver our services is to get the right skills at the right time. The rate of change within IT is phenomenal and keeping on top of the changes is a challenge for the best of teams and the best of staff. We now have expanded capabilities coupled with an increased rate of change that would have been difficult to match internally without significantly increasing the size of the team.

When considering changes to services, consider how these are delivered and how they can be managed and whether enabling partner delivery can bring benefits; our experience is that the benefits can be significant while the associated delivery costs aren't hugely different.

Andrew Dale is the assistant director of IT at Housing Plus Group.

Broadacres Housing's Aareon portal & app

Broadacres Housing has relaunched its tenant portal and app based on a new platform from Aareon, with 200 of the housing provider's tenants directly involved in the development and testing of the pilot version of the new service.
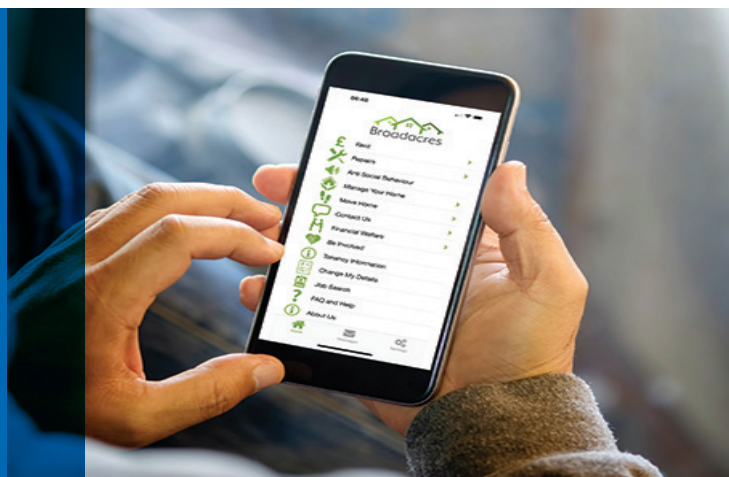
After registering, tenants can view and manage information about their account and tenancy agreement, make payments, and diagnose, book and track repair appointments and orders. The system is fully responsive to mobile devices.

Broadacres' My Account portal is integrated with its Aareon QL housing management system and 1st Touch mobile software which the housing provider's repairs service has used for the past eight years. This link with 1st Touch allows in-house development and form changes without the need to go back to Aareon.

Broadacres chose not to go down the 'out of a box' route, so the system has many bespoke features such as customer confirmations sent by email after an interaction with the app, an FAQ section and the ability to 'pass through' a payment

reference number from the app direct to AllPay, so the customer experience is frictionless.

Link Group live with Aareon Hosted
Aareon has announced that Link Group has now gone live with its Aareon Hosted service.

Ken Fox, head of ICT and digital Services, Link Group, said, "Link is delighted with the professional support given by the Aareon team during our move to hosted services. The level of teamwork, high standard of communications and desire to get the job done was simply outstanding. I have no hesitation in recommending Aareon to other housing providers that are considering hosted services."

Digital transformation needs digital inclusion

Chris Milborrow, Business Improvement Manager, Southside Housing

This article aims to offer some practical insights into how housing providers can benefit from embedding digital inclusion as a core part of their overall digital transformation efforts.

Building the case for digital inclusion

In 2018, research conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggested that eight per cent of people in the UK were estimated to have zero basic digital skills, lacking the ability to manage information, communicate, transact, problem solve or create via digital channels. A further 12 per cent had only limited skills.

The impact of addressing digital skills gaps is well-documented and includes the following:

- The acquisition of basic digital skills improves earnings by around seven per cent and improves employability;
- People with basic digital skills can save up to 13 per cent by shopping online;
- People using digital platforms communicate with friends and family 14 per cent more often;
- Those using online/digital banking and government services online save an average of 30 minutes per transaction.

As a result, there's a strong argument that supporting digital inclusion goes to the heart of the social purpose of housing providers. It can have a marked impact on the lives of tenants and benefit the communities that we serve.

If this isn't sufficient incentive alone, there are also clear business benefits for housing providers. Customers with higher earnings, better employment prospects, greater ability to manage their finances and benefits, and a stronger support network of friends and family are more likely to be more resilient, less vulnerable to financial pressures and less socially isolated. All of this has the potential to translate to real benefits for housing providers, including reduced arrears, more independent customers, and stronger communities and local economies.

Taking an integrated approach

There's a clear need for improving tenants' digital skills, and a huge range of benefits of doing so. Digital inclusion needs to balance skills and training initiatives with providing the right access to technology, and with infrastructure which make it possible for them to implement digital skills and knowledge regularly until it becomes normal and 'every day'.

The trade-off between the impact, scale and permanence of these different aspects creates a tricky balancing act for housing providers and means that short-term digital inclusion initiatives can often provide a 'quick fix' compared with providing more value and lasting impact as a long-term strategic commitment with sustained investment.

Finding the hook…

While the percentage of people with few or no digital skills has reduced steadily over recent years, it's important to understand and address the reasons why there are still those who haven't engaged.

The best way to achieve this can often be through the little things. For example, Sarah Neary, digital participation officer at West of Scotland Housing Association (WoSHA) and a colleague from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations' 'digital champions in housing' programme spoke recently at a WoSHA conference about a digital participation visit to a sheltered housing complex.

Faced with initial scepticism about whether digital could add value to their lives, Sarah asked about one lady's interests and found that she and several others in the room were very passionate about knitting. After showing them how to find thousands of free knitting patterns online, Sarah managed to create engagement and open the door to have conversations about how digital could have an impact on other areas of their lives. Working with customers to find 'the hook' that motivates, interests and inspires them to see digital differently is a vital starting point and is often the catalyst to achieve engagement over time.

Creating engagement in practice

One of the greatest benefits of creating engagement is when developing and launching digital services. If tenants don't have the skills, equipment and connectivity, and digital isn't made an integral part of key processes from day one, these initiatives risk not reaching their full potential.

At Southside Housing, we're currently underway with a full housing management and finance system implementation. As part of this, we'll be working with Orchard to launch our own digital self-service platform for customers. While the software aspect of achieving this is relatively straightforward (we're certainly not the first in the sector to do it), we recognise that, without first engaging our user base and equipping them wherever possible with the skills to take advantage of these benefits, we'd be limiting our chances of success and our potential return on investment.

Rather than focusing our launch plan on the time needed for the actual platform development, we'll be embedding digital inclusion within our digital strategy, marketing strategy and project roadmap. In practice, this will include engaging customers via survey research and focus groups at the very beginning of the project to understand their needs, potential barriers to adoption and identify opportunities to increase the likelihood of engagement.

Digital transformation needs digital inclusion
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This will help to ensure that when we do launch our digital solutions, we will have taken our customers along with us. In doing so, we hope that our customers will use and, most importantly, benefit from solutions that they've helped co-design.

Digital inclusion as a catalyst
Taking an integrated approach to digital is vital for housing providers who want to transform digitally. By improving our own processes and our customers' digital abilities at the same time, we can achieve real digital transformation.

Most importantly, digital inclusion has the potential to provide a wealth of social benefits. By first encouraging customers to engage with our own platforms, we also increase their chances of benefiting from digital skills elsewhere and in turn, improve their lives both financially and socially and help to create more vibrant and sustainable communities.

Chris Milborrow is a business improvement manager at Southside Housing.

Power Platform – More than just numbers

Michael Parsons & Philip Thompson, Senior Business Intelligence Analysts, South Liverpool Homes

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An obvious starting point
What happens when you have 30-something reports across multiple departments, all predicated on differing interpretations of the same performance measure? Aside from the obvious problems, such as misrepresentations, lack of clarity, a reduced impact on decision making and a whole mess-of-work for a BI team, you get an obvious starting point for a Power BI project.

Here at South Liverpool Homes, that project focused on arrears management and a journey into how Microsoft's Power Platform could relieve the burden of arduous tasks in the income team. Ultimately, the primary goal was to create a homogenous reporting solution for our arrears' performance. Simple? Apparently not. Even at a managerial level, what constituted 'arrears' wasn't necessarily what an income officer gleaned from the policy. Or, adding to the mix, a member of finance. Worryingly, each one of these entities reported back to our executive management team with different numbers as a result.

Why Power BI?
Our key objective was to provide a single consistent view of our arrears' performance. In order to achieve this, it was essential that we combined the key elements from the multiple reports that staff had become so reliant on over the years and condensed them into one multi-functional, visual dashboard.

Consistency and visibility were two of the key drivers behind creating a single view of arrears. If we were ever going to make sure a single dashboard was going to be wholeheartedly adopted and used to its full potential, we needed to ensure that it met the needs of the teams and catered for everyone.

Our ideas and scope for this implementation were far more than just a percentage and cash value of arrears. With the array of graphical tools, the ability to view data on so many levels and being able to connect to a multitude of data sources within Power BI, it was the perfect fit to give us the platform to put these ideas into practice.

Challenges
First of all, we needed a firm answer on what constituted 'arrears', and how the performance indicators should be measured. We engaged the relevant members of staff across the organisation and thrashed this out during a number of workshops. One of the bigger challenges was how we used completely different models to report on current tenant arrears (CTA), former tenant arrears (FTA), total arrears and other arrears. The idea of amalgamating these types of arrears into a single dashboard became the foundation of the build.

The policy was rubberstamped and coding could begin. Depending on the department, this was a process met with some rebuke. Inevitably, performance in some areas was about to suffer due to a change in policy. More accurately though, the performance was now clearer. It was properly defined regardless of the output. It was analytical and predictive, and apportioning resource was immediately more possible.

Power BI had been mobilised at SLH, but with slow buy-in from departments across the organisation, or rather, without a true purpose for managers to fully engage, it was never fully used. This was an opportunity to demonstrate what the tool could offer, how it could increase collaboration, clarity and the speed with which strategic decisions could be made. And because of Power BI's position within Microsoft's Power Platform, we could seamlessly integrate with SharePoint, Power Automate and Power App capabilities and integrate with our housing management system (Orchard) where needed. This was all easy to sell.

Highlights
The main overview screen provides everything you would expect from an arrears report, arrears total by patch, by income officer and how this was fluctuating. However, with the introduction of and changes to universal credit, it was

Power Platform - More than just numbers
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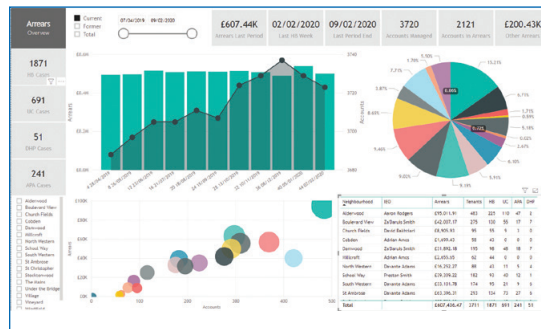
fundamental to the design that we not only provided a picture of our arrears' performance but also encompassed some cause and effect into how the changes in our tenants' individual circumstances were affecting our performance as a whole. By being able to see at a glance the number of housing benefit claimants and how many UC, DHP and APA cases the team are managing provides some rationale to how these external factors are affecting our performance over time.

One of the demands on us while scoping the dashboard was that our staff craved a 360-degree view of an account and all of the related interactions with customers. A common frustration for teams was notes which were held in isolation in different areas of the housing management system. With this in mind, we set about creating an individual tenancy view which pulled together the tenant's unique profile with a unified chronology of notes.

Staff can now view key data about each customer regarding their arrears history and the work that has gone into managing their account since their tenancy started. It highlights if they're currently involved in any ASB or complaints cases, if they are currently being offered any support through SLH services and a repairs history for the previous 12 months.

This information has always been available but was disjointed and required running multiple SSRS reports and endless VLOOKUPs. However, by piecing it together and aligning it with how the account is performing, it provides insights on any potential triggers that could have caused an increase in arrears and allows early interventions. Any notes needing to be added into the customer's account in Orchard or the sending of a follow-up SMS message can be done through the dashboard if required.

An additional analytical approach naturally grew when we started to work with the data – this is where our tenancy rating system originated from. Another overall indicator develops over time depending on the activity on an individual's rent account – taking into consideration account balances, missed payments and cancelled direct debits among others, they all contribute to potential risks or behaviours that can be used to manage accounts more proactively.

This golden thread and the ability to go from the top-level service area performance through to an individual account is easily adaptable into all future dashboards, providing insights that go into more than just numbers.

Technologies at the core of the solution
The data for the solution was built in SQL. To speed up processing on the frontline, rather than processing years of arrears data with every dashboard interaction, we created stored procedures that constructed live tables that could be queried more efficiently. This concept was used across the board, with specialist elements, such as with TRS calculations, executing at specific relevant dates and times, for example, a tenant's balance in line with their payment frequency or when a payment switched from direct debit to credit card.

Then, there was Power BI itself. Once you've connected to the tables we built, it was a simple case of placing the required visuals into the dashboard, building the drill-throughs and applying the relevant data aggregations and filters to said visuals. The interface is simple to use, so responding to ideas, making changes and building on our progress was simple to do following the many user acceptance sessions.

For writing notes back into our Orchard housing management system, we used SharePoint and Power Automate to push the data into SQL via SSIS. From there, we output data to the Orchard API. The process was similar for processing text messages, where we pointed the output to a messaging solution.

Data cross-pollination
Even working within the confines of arrears, we knew we could widen the analytical scope. Could we forecast arrears, how does the level of arrears vary relative to the payment history of a tenant over previous years, has the tenant missed a payment, and so on.

However, it quickly became apparent that with the massive array of data at our fingertips, we needn't limit our reasoning to rent-related data. For example, we started to look at how repairs (i.e. a property in a bad state of repair) affected a tenant's propensity to pay their rent, or whether the addition of new household members resulted in a sharp downwards turn in account credit, plus what about universal credit?

Because Power BI allows you to cross-pollinate data from what would appear to be disparate sources in the simple to use 'relationship view', you can create dynamic visuals that allow greater understanding of how external factors affect other areas of the business.

More than just numbers
Power BI is inherently visual, which is perfect for high-level analytics and for detailed explorations of the underlying data. However, through usage, the scope of the product's potential becomes more visible. A forecasting model has been implemented, our ability to respond more effectively to 'outliers' has been streamlined, and our overarching performance is realised clearer than ever before. Arrears are falling and tenancies being managed more proactively.

For us as a BI team, the possibilities are endless and the investment in development worthwhile.

Power Platform - More than just numbers
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We've already begun to explore consolidated compliance solutions, asset profitability models, ASB case analysis, voids and lettings management. All of the dashboards use various integrations throughout Power Platform, cutting down multi-system usage and additional administration. The dashboards are also reducing the number of SSRS reports requiring ad-hoc maintenance and specific understanding that differs from strategic direction. Most importantly, there's a resounding reception from users, from our executive management team through to our 'feet on the ground' staff.

If you would like to see more of what we have touched on above, feel free to contact us at michael.parsons@southliverpoolhomes.co.uk and philip.thompson@southliverpoolhomes.co.uk.

Michael Parsons & Philip Thompson are senior business intelligence analysts at South Liverpool Homes.

Digital transformation... More than just plumbing

Alex Yedigaroff, Transformation Manager, DXW Digital

When it comes to digital transformation, the term 'fixing the plumbing' gets used a lot to reinforce the need for housing providers to improve their systems. What it doesn't capture, however, is the need to go further to effect change today in the housing sector.

Fixing the plumbing is a lengthy and complex task. While that continues, there's some structural work that needs to be fixed now too. We need to expand our focus from fixing the plumbing to creating sustainable change through an improved digital culture, with services to match.

Signal intent
The local digital declaration was introduced over a year ago. It sets out clear ambitions for how local government needs to improve services to meet the needs of today's residents.

At first glance, it might seem that not a huge amount has changed since then. We can, however, see that the intent is there, with over 200 signatories. The Government Digital Service had spending controls to direct digital service transformation in central government; there are no equivalent levers to make councils act on their intent, with challenges in the housing sector hard to quantify and real change difficult to spot.

That's where incentives such as the local digital fund come in. Announced in July 2018, the fund helps local authorities put their plans into motion, from making residents' lives easier with more efficient online services for making payments or reporting repairs, to adopting technology to support vulnerable people. The aim is to make a reality of the ideas set out in the declaration by offering funding for transformation projects and digital skills training. So far, only a small number of projects have received funding. But there's been an enormous positive impact for those that have.

For example, Greenwich, Southwark, Lincoln and South Kesteven councils are working together on an 'alpha' project exploring approaches for the design of a common pattern for the reporting, diagnosing and scheduling of housing repairs.

While the intent is there and we are seeing good progress in some areas, the declaration on its own is limited beyond starting to build a like-minded community. Councils are vast and complex organisations. It is usual to see small pockets of change but less so to see a culture of sustained action based on openness and true collaboration.

Get leadership buy-in
Signalling intent and engaging with the funding are a key part of transforming local housing services, and that starts at the top. General attitudes towards digital transformation have changed for the better over the past year. But what happens if the leadership team isn't convinced?

And even with leadership buy-in, understanding of transformation can sometimes fall short. This leads to the vulnerability of housing projects. A new breed of leader is needed; leaders with intent, and the understanding and willingness to reimagine how their local area can work.

Leaders in councils need not only to embrace the idea of transforming housing services, they must also familiarise themselves with digital ways of working and the changes they require from traditional structures and ways of managing work. They need to 'get digital' and make sure that knowledge is spread across the organisation.

Finance & housing transformation together
Another challenge which has become more overwhelming is budget. Finding ways to save money on housing services and provision often has to be a priority. The temptation to buy into cheaper solutions can be, in the short-term, financially beneficial, but it won't lead to successful long-term benefits for the local area or its residents.

Digital transformation... More than just plumbing
Continued from previous page

It's easier to make the case for larger organisations to put up bigger amounts of money in the early stages of a project. But for cash-strapped local councils, it's often a difficult argument to win. We don't know what people's needs and priorities will be in the future, so any new systems need to be able to easily adapt to these changing needs. This requires a bolder approach to budgets and decision making.

For service suppliers, there's plenty we can do, and it begins with changing our perceptions. 'Lack of understanding' within councils is not synonymous with 'unwilling to try'. We know from the local digital declaration that the willingness to transform services such as housing is there. A lack of resources and knowledge about digital ways of working are often the real barriers. We need to work with the knowledge and resources councils have, and to trust their team to commit. They, in turn, need to trust us to commit.

Build the right team
All local authorities face similar issues, such as housing provision, services to those in social housing and access to support. The idea of collaborating to tackle these should be pretty obvious at first glance, but working collaboratively with other councils is hard and there's little evidence that this approach has brought real benefits so far. This was a clear finding from our work with the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to learn more about how councils can work together to affect change. There's even some evidence that collaboration can slow the process down.

However, collaboration can be really successful when one organisation can use the assets or resources that another one has already produced, such as user research or software code. This way they can keep a small focused team working on a discrete problem, but benefit from the groundwork done elsewhere. We're starting to see some examples of councils working together on code sharing and developing approaches to common issues. This requires clear focus and a high level of trust.

Ambitions for the housing sector
Councils can, and should, set higher housing ambitions. Focusing solely on 'fixing the plumbing' risks ignoring the systemic and cultural transformation that needs to happen to respond to a changing local environment and residents' needs. With leadership commitment, talented digital teams and bravery in adapting new funding models, real transformation can happen.

Alex Yedigaroff is the transformation manager at DXW Digital.

How to be the AirBnB of social housing

Peter Lunio, Director, Golden Marzipan

It was good to see in the previous edition of Housing Technology (January 2020) profiles of 40 of the next-generation technology companies focusing on the social housing sector. Several of the sector's most influential people have also been writing about digital in the trade press this month.

Like most people, James Tickell, a partner at Campbell Tickell, sees technology as the driver for change. It most definitely is an enabler but is it the disrupting influence we think it is? Tickell said, "The technologies needed for housing's automation will exist by 2030, for sure, and will be widely used by the Ubers and Easyjets of the day. But a safe prediction is that many landlords will still be using the same IT systems as now, with a few fancy add-on bells and whistles, and some smarter backroom trend analysis."

With that in mind, what are the lessons from other sectors for social housing?

Let's take Airbnb as an example. In the world of hotels, the historic convention is that you own buildings. Another is that you have someone to greet guests or have a reception to check them in. There may be others until Airbnb decided to break them. They asked: what if you didn't have any buildings? What if someone didn't help you with check-in? They wouldn't have been able to compete with brands like Marriott and Hilton without turning conventional thinking upside-down.

My point is that while we often focus on new and disruptive technologies, sometimes rethinking a business model is the best way of delivering value and excellent service to customers.

What would Google do?
Qlinker (Dutch for brick) is a new housing provider in Utrecht. Qlinker is completely digital and approached the change by thinking like Google. With a small budget, it started looking at "making everything about renting a house as easy, fast, user-friendly and efficient as possible".

How to be the AirBnB of social housing

The Qlinker ambition is to achieve higher customer satisfaction with lower operating costs. It works directly with a small group of tenants and the result is a fully digital onboarding process which cuts down the application time from six days to six hours; in fact, the fastest approval and sign-up so far is only 10 minutes.

Customers use an app to do everything, from finding their new home, signing their tenancy agreement and paying their first month's rent to logging a maintenance call. A chatbot named Q is currently resolving 40 per cent of contacts directly, with 60 per cent being passed to a 'real person' to be progressed further. The relationship between Qlinker and its tenants is based on trust, and as it stands, satisfaction levels are currently high.
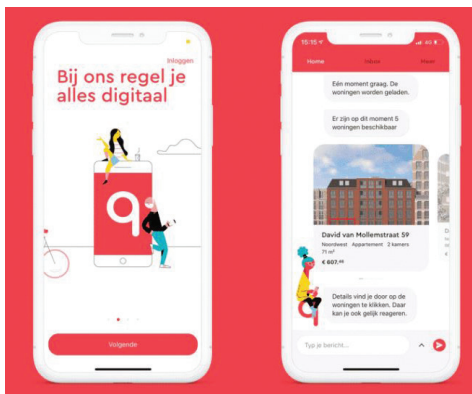
Uber social housing
So why is James Tickell so sure that progress will not be quick in the sector. It is a very different environment for many of the organisations we have highlighted.

We can still be challenging ourselves about everything we assume we know and asking what would happen if we changed the convention. If we want greater value for money at the same or lower cost, then doing things differently is the only way to go and technology is just one way.

One of our challenges is that in a people-centric sector, the use of technology is challenging our people-based values. So why not start with buildings and see if we can make them more agile.

For example, I visited Halton Housing recently. The long-standing convention is that you have a head-office building with allocated desks for all your staff, offices for managers, fully-equipped meeting rooms, a front-desk receptionist and a car park. In 2010, 80 per cent of the corporate workforce was based in an office but by 2016 this was down to 60 per cent. Halton Housing has designed a head office that has desks for only a small proportion of its staff and that simple equation is saving money, changing the culture, embedding mobile working and increasing agility.

Best of all, this sets the tone for new ideas and innovation. Once flexible working is embraced, the demand for collaboration tools, better document management and conference-sharing facilities quickly follows, adding to the virtuous circle of technology adoption.

If you'd like to challenge your existing conventions, our 'Battenburg' model could be for you. Drop me a line at peter@goldenmarzipan.co.uk to book a chat.

Peter Lunio is a director of Golden Marzipan.

Wandsworth & Richmond Council moves to Northgate Housing

Wandsworth and Richmond upon Thames Council has gone live with NPS Housing, Northgate Public Services' housing management system.

Using NPS Housing, tenants can apply for housing, request property repairs or pay rent online via any web-enabled device.

Housing staff will have access to real-time information on their tenants and leaseholders whether they are out with their residents or in the office, allowing them to search for information, update information and log repair requests regardless of their location.

William Middleton, implementation project manager, Wandsworth & Richmond Councils, said, "To future-proof our service, it's vital that we let customers do more for themselves via self-service and enable our staff to work remotely on a modern housing management system.

"Giving our officers a complete picture of any tenant's circumstances will transform our service; it will allow us to offer the best possible support for our residents whether we are in a tenant's home or literally anywhere in the borough."

Stick or Twist?

60% of you think there is a viable alternative to Housing Management systems...so what is it and will you be sticking or twisting?

Great to see so many of you at HT 2020 and a massive thank you for over 100 responses to our Housing Sector 2020 ICT Survey Report.

The survey is revealing some very interesting insights, so we've decided to extend the closing date to the 31st of March. Please contribute your thoughts - it's anonymous and will take you less than 5 minutes to complete. All participants will get a full summary report and be entered into the prize draw for Amazon vouchers (£250, £150 and £75) and we will give £10 for every submission to The Big Issue.

Here's the URL and QR code for the survey

https://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/5443501/the-future-of-ICT-in-social-housing

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

www.itica.com

Housing Technology 2020
in pictures

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY
2020 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

Housing Technology's annual conference and executive forum took place at the beginning of March 2020 at The Belfry on the outskirts of Oxford. With almost 500 guests, speakers, sponsors and exhibitors over the two days of the event, it was our largest and most successful event so far!

"Very positive – lots of food for thought and learning."
COASTAL HOUSING

"Brilliant to catch up with other HAs and IT suppliers."
SOUTH LAKES HOUSING

"VAn inspiring conference that opened my mind to options I never knew existed!"
WREKIN HOUSING

"Very valuable and interesting, plus very enjoyable networking."
ADRA

"One of the best social housing events of the year – innovative talks and inspiring keynote speakers, plus great opportunities to meet our peers and make new connections."
AAREON

"A great place to network and learn what others are doing."
FRACTIONAL IT

"Free of waffling talks, it's the key date for learning about the practical opportunities for technology in the housing sector."
FLEKTION

"Very informative and a very good opportunity to meet both old partners and to network with new ones."
WINCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

"The one event that's a 'must-do' in my annual schedule."
FUTURES HOUSING

"Excellent speakers, and it was very useful to catch up with the IT suppliers as well as seeing what our peers are doing."
VALE OF AYLESBURY HOUSING

"I really enjoyed the networking and the keynote speakers excellent."
GREAT PLACES HOUSING

"An excellent event!."
HOUSING SOLUTIONS

"Well worth visiting to understand what others are doing and what's available to us."
HOUSING PLUS

"The IoT and power BI sessions were excellent."
HORTON HOUSING

"Very interesting, with lots of thought-provoking discussions."
HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM COUNCIL

"Thought provoking!."
VIEWPOINT HOUSING

Aareon · nestclo · aws · britannic technologies · Cadcorp SPATIAL INFORMATION SYSTEM · CAPITA | one · CASTLETON · CDW · civica Transforming the way you work

crimson · Esuasive · FAST LEAN SMART fls · FUZZLAB · iOpt. · itica · minibems · mis active management systems · mobileiron The center of enterprise security

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"Informative, engaging and very relevant."

LIVIN

"A good range of IT suppliers and the talks were very informative."

NORTH DEVON HOMES

"A great event, and very useful for networking and meeting sector-specific suppliers."

THRIVE HOMES

"We look forward to Housing Technology every year – it's a fantastic event and a great way to collaborate with existing clients, meet new clients and share sector knowledge."

TSG

"Another great conference – the mix of speakers and exhibitors was of the usual high standard."

MAGNA HOUSING

"This was my first time – it was an excellent experience with a relaxed atmosphere and good for networking."

PROSPECT COMMUNITY HOUSING

"Best one yet in terms of the quality of speakers, presentations and exhibitors, plus excellent lunches!"

ONE HOUSING

"An invaluable networking opportunity."

TWO SAINTS HOUSING

"An excellent event with lots of information sharing."

PLYMOUTH COMMUNITY HOMES

"A brilliant experience and very well organised as always."

WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING

"BAs a 'first timer', I really enjoyed it – an excellent opportunity to discuss what's happening in IT with other housing providers."

WEST KENT HOUSING

"The keynote presentations and workshops were all excellent. Very useful to discuss other people's concerns – it's nice to know that your problems are not in isolation!"

RED KITE COMMUNITY HOUSING

"A great opportunity to engage with leading IT suppliers and our peers."

REDDITCH BOROUGH COUNCIL

"Ideal for networking but also useful for looking at emerging technologies."

SOUTHWAY HOUSING TRUST

"A great conference with relevant speakers and topics. The selection of exhibitors was extremely useful."

RISKHUB

"A great event! It was excellent not only for networking but also for meeting peers and understanding other organisations' future plans."

ROSEBERY HOUSING

HOUSING™ TECHNOLOGY
2021 | CONFERENCE AND EXECUTIVE FORUM

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2021…
Housing Technology 2021 is already confirmed for 03-04 March 2021, with the location to be confirmed shortly. Please see www.housing-technology.com/event/housing-technology-2021-conference for advance details of the event.

Technology finance and procurement in housing

Housing Technology interviewed finance and procurement experts from Blacklight Software, CJC Procurement, Exponential-e, Northgate Public Services and ROCC about how housing providers should go about procurement and financing new IT products and services.

Buying intentions and motivations

Chris Cliffe, director of CJC Procurement, said, "Start by understanding what's wrong with your current products and services. Too often, the procurement trigger is based on a poor relationship with the current vendor and misplaced assumptions that the product isn't fit for purpose without actually exploring the current product roadmap or investing time to understand and develop a productive supplier relationship.

> "It is very helpful to include the desired RoI in the procurement documents because it really helps to outline the fundamental aim of the solution. By providing the RoI, suppliers like us can then tailor the solution to ensure that it is met."
>
> Chris Hampson, Account Manager, Blacklight Software

"If a new system really is required, make sure you spend enough time focusing on your end game, defining the outcomes and describing the purpose of the new system in detail. Clarity regarding your objectives, directly linked to your business strategy sounds obvious, but is rarely fully explored. Include senior business stakeholders in your analysis and keep asking 'why' until your business case is absolutely rock solid."

Roger Birkinshaw, housing director at Northgate Public Services, said, "First of all, get the data you need to understand who your customers are, what's important to them, what support they need and how they want to communicate with you. You also need detailed information on your housing portfolio – what condition it is in, whether properties meet the latest regulatory requirements, what investment will be needed to ensure compliance. These insights are vital for making informed IT procurement decisions.

"Although procurement can be a tricky path to navigate, when housing providers build strong relationships with their potential IT suppliers early in the process, they will have a much clearer understanding of the technologies available and what they can help them to achieve."

Dedicated procurement staff

Regarding the question of whether housing providers need a dedicated IT procurement function, Shasa Colson, enterprise account manager at Exponential-e, said, "Not necessarily, although it does help to have a clear view of buying criteria and routes to market, such as RFP or the G-Cloud framework. The key thing is to have a firm understanding of the various methods of procurement, either via OJEU, CCS Frameworks or G-Cloud, and choosing the path the best suits your needs."

CJC Procurement's Cliffe said, "Why do you use an accountant to prepare your accounts? Probably because your accounts are important and you want someone who knows what they're doing to prepare them. Procurement is a profession, and unless organisations

> "Don't make hasty decisions. A two-hour overview of a shiny new solution will only really provide an aesthetic first impression. After all, would you buy a car without first having a test drive?"
>
> Roger Birkinshaw, Housing Director, Northgate Public Services

engage with professional resources, they can't expect professional outcomes. Whether an IT procurement professional is recruited or brought in on a temporary basis for a specific project, the value from professional support shouldn't be undervalued."

Northgate's Birkinshaw said, "What's most important is for the procurement and operational people in the business to work closely together throughout the process. The staff involved need to ensure that the right questions are asked at the right time and that the housing provider has confidence in the supplier's understanding of what the solution needs to deliver. However, you don't necessarily need a dedicated IT procurement team to achieve that."

Generating the requirements' specification

Chris Hampson, account manager at Blacklight Software, said, "We find it most useful when the requirements are provided as a functional and non-functional split. This allows us to consider the two sets of requirements separately and then map the solution to bring the

requirements together in a single solution. Technical information is also very helpful, especially details of the APIs the customer has access to via their third-party systems that would require integration with the new solution."

CJC Procurement's Cliffe said, "The best way of generating the requirements' specification is via a robust process combining engagement with the customer, their end-users and the wider market, usually supported by a good business analyst and experienced project manager. It's important even at this early stage that your procurement staff (assuming you have them, either in-house or external), are involved particularly in relation to the market engagement to facilitate conversations and cut through any perceived bureaucracy."

Exponential-e's Colson said, "An overview of the business requirements along with an understanding of what is important to the buyer is vital. This can encompass cost, security and flexibility, all of which need to be confirmed before outlining the technical requirements. Detailing a clear business strategy allows potential suppliers to best accommodate the customer's needs."

Improving budgetary reviews and approvals

Northgate's Birkinshaw said, "As we all know, technology evolves incredibly fast so there are many advantages to looking further ahead, with a budgetary strategy spanning three to five years, plus staying ahead of the curve in terms of the latest developments can bring economies of scale.

"However, keep some flexibility in your budgetary planning. As new innovations come along, you need to be able to change direction and adapt without starting the whole procurement process from scratch or going through lots of red tape to get a fresh budget approved."

Exponential-e's Colson said, "Budgets are usually submitted well in advance of a housing provider's financial year, but this approach risks being a little short-sighted. Many longer-term projects could tie neatly together, but these need to be thought about in advance, taking the form of a three- to five-year plan; budgeting should be considered a marathon, not a sprint."

Avoiding rigid tendering processes

Peter Luck, director of operations for Uniclass at ROCC, said, "Although the tendering procedures are relatively rigid, there is nothing stopping housing providers from running more face-to-face or telephone-based sessions. More time spent sitting and talking to potential suppliers will quickly highlight who can deliver what's needed, who you will be happy working with and who you trust.

"As a housing provider, you are going to be stuck with your chosen supplier for years to come. It's critical to not just tick boxes that confirm a system can do X or Y and check off that the price looks good. Speak to the project manager, talk to the person who runs the business, have a chat with one of the technical experts and get under their skin to really confirm they are an expert."

"Why do you use an accountant for your accounts? Probably because they're important and you want someone who knows what they're doing. Procurement is a profession, and unless organisations engage with professional resources, they can't expect professional outcomes."

Chris Cliffe, Director, CJC Procurement

CJC Procurement's Cliffe said, "The best way is to not do a rigid RFI/RFP/tendering process in the first place!

"Many longer-term projects could tie neatly together, but these need to be thought about in advance; budgeting should be considered a marathon, not a sprint."

Shasa Colson, Enterprise Account Manager, Exponential-e

"If time is taken to understand the critical nature of the system required, the market conditions and relationship aspirations with the eventual supplier, then the procurement process should be designed to allow for those outcomes to be the focus and that shouldn't feel rigid. Although, quid pro quo, the clearer you can be in articulating the problem and the genuine pressures, the more responsive procurement can be."

Exponential-e's Colson said, "Exploring the market is key; research what is out there before realising the tender. Open days with suppliers can also be useful. This way, housing providers can meet all the suppliers and be transparent regarding their plans. It's also a chance for suppliers to question the housing provider on their strategy. Ultimately, the aim of these is for suppliers to understand the customer, and for the customer to understand what is required from them for the tender."

Northgate's Birkinshaw said, "Housing providers should get in contact with others who have implemented the technology that they're considering. This will give them a chance to ask what systems were delivered, in what timeframe and what challenges had to be overcome. This could

Technology finance and procurement in housing
Continued from previous page

> "There is always the threat of promising too much when completing tenders. Yes, suppliers want the work and want to do it well, but over-promising on contracts is unsustainable and can leave both parties dissatisfied."
>
> Peter Luck, Director of Operations for Uniclass, ROCC

make the difference between an IT project that continuously hits snags, costing time and/or money, and one that is delivered smoothly."

Best practice and pitfalls
CJC Procurement's Cliffe said, "Best practice is to design the selection process appropriately and not roll out a template-focused process followed across other categories. Too often, the same templates and processes are used for repairs and maintenance as they are for marketing, consultancy, legal and IT contracts. The process needs to fit the market and the need. That said, the more time spent on defining the evaluation criteria, the greater the chance of driving better offers from the market."

Northgate's Birkinshaw said, "It can be tempting to spend many hours scoping out a long list of requirements for a new IT solution that are unachievable for any supplier. Add to this an unrealistic timescale and the project will result in stress and disappointment. Give careful consideration to the priorities and agree time frames for delivery, then work closely with the supplier to ensure these will be met.

"Don't make hasty decisions. A two-hour overview of a shiny new solution for, say, tracking tenant communications across your business will only really provide an aesthetic first impression. After all, would you buy a car without first having a test drive?

"The best way to ensure you buy the right solutions is to take the time to get to know the supplier, develop a deep understanding of what their systems are capable of, what their investment plans

are and their track record of delivering new functionality, on time."

Measuring value for money
Blacklight's Hampson said, "The desired return on investment (RoI) is helpful to be included in procurement documents. This really helps to outline the fundamental aim of the solution, whether that's an increase in customer service scores or customer satisfaction, or a tangible increase in efficiency, such as faster completions of mutual exchanges or complaints being resolved quicker. By providing the desired RoI, suppliers like us can then tailor the solution to ensure that it is met."

Exponential-e's Colson said, "Clearly-defined KPIs should be non-negotiable, along with solid success criteria at the start of the procurement process. This needs to be monitored throughout the lifetime of any contract, so regular service reviews are needed."

Northgate's Birkinshaw said, "A business case is critical for ensuring value for money. For example, if you're introducing a digital hub, your business case may specify that the key objective for doing so is for 70 per cent of communications with tenants to be moved online within the first 12 months; you can then monitor progress towards this figure."

What to be aware of…
ROCC's Luck said, "There is always the threat of promising too much when completing tenders. This goes back to the honest conversations which providers and suppliers must have. Yes, suppliers want the work and want to do it well, surpassing expectations. But over-promising on contracts is often unsustainable and can leave both parties dissatisfied."

Northgate's Birkinshaw said, "One of the most important steps a housing provider can take before embarking on any IT procurement journey is to make sure their existing systems are being used to their full capabilities. There's little point tendering for, say, a new piece of mapping software or online portal if your existing housing management solution already offers that functionality but it hasn't yet been fully explored or utilised."

CJC Procurement's Cliffe said, "The biggest pitfall is not considering finance as a result

of setting a vague budget, crunching a process, taking supplier bids and doing your best. It's so much better to work with your procurement and finance colleagues to take a more structured approach and explore the financial aspects and opportunities in detail, not just during the due diligence process when exploring the financial viability of the supplier and their solution, but also during the deal itself."

OJEU or not OJEU?
Referring to the post-Brexit landscape in terms of OJEU compliance, Exponential-e's Colson said, "As things stand, without a deal on leaving the EU, public procurement regulations will remain broadly unchanged after Brexit. At present, UK law states that tenders over £10,000 must be published domestically within the UK. This is significantly lower than the current OJEU threshold but after leaving the EU, this could be assessed and changed by the UK government.

"Should the UK get a deal in the Brexit negotiations, no changes will take effect until the end of 2020. And let's not forget that other procurement frameworks, such as CCS and G-Cloud, are readily available."

CJC Procurement's Cliffe said, "There are likely to be some technical adjustments, but I don't expect the overall regime to significantly change. After all, don't forget that most EU procurement policy was driven by the UK.

"For example, Framework Agreements are a UK concept which the EU tried to abolish ahead of the 2004 EU Consolidated Procurement Directive, but the UK successfully lobbied to ensure they were included, hence the Public Contract Regulations 2006. The principles of fair, open, transparent and proportionate procurement aren't going away."

We are here to help ensure
your Business Continues

Our priorities during this time
Staying Connected with Tenants
Getting you Remote-ready
Hosting & Managed Services
App and Technical Support
IT Infrastructure
Security
Upgrades & Licenses
IT Support and Advice

Mitigating the impact of COVID-19
Our commitment to our customers

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Enfield Council gains £1m in rents with Mobysoft

Since its introduction of Mobysoft's RentSense software, Enfield Council has improved rent collections for its properties by over £1 million and reduced its arrears and evictions.

Enfield Council, with around 10,000 properties in North London, had been affected by the introduction of universal credit, with its arrears increasing over the past four years as Housing Benefit fell by around £4 million during that time. This was compounded by income officers receiving several thousand weekly arrears alerts from the council's housing management system.

Zhensheng Chen, income manager, Enfield Council, said, "The system would create several thousand alerts each week, many of which did not need contact. For our staff, it's demotivating spending time on alerts that require no action."

Since deploying RentSense, the council's arrears alerts have fallen by 60 per cent, giving its income officers more time for each case alongside alerts being flagged much earlier.

Geoff Waterton, head of income and debt, Enfield Council, said, "Early intervention is the key to preventing arrears increasing and stopping avoidable evictions. That intervention is fundamental to managing our arrears when cases are becoming incredibly complex. That's why RentSense is so effective.

"Since we started using RentSense, our collection figures have improved by

over £1 million year-on-year, rising from 100.2 per cent to 101.9 per cent, plus our arrears are falling for the first time in four years and evictions are down."

Northwards takes on RentSense for universal credit

Northwards Housing is now using Mobysoft's RentSense software to mitigate the effects of universal credit on its arrears performance and to give the housing provider more time to offer extra support to tenants.

Tracy Langton, head of income management, Northwards Housing, said, "We looked at the likely impact of universal credit on the way we work and our arrears, and some of our projections indicated that to cope with the extra volume of arrears cases, we might need 11 extra staff, which just wasn't feasible.

"In contrast, RentSense will provide the Northwards income team with a manageable caseload, giving our income officers more time for the tenants who really need our support."

With additional time for officers and the ability to prioritise caseloads Langton believes that RentSense will also help Northwards, "to maximise the rent we collect."

Octavia cuts arrears by £220k with Mobysoft

Octavia Housing has reduced its arrears by over £220,000 by using Mobysoft's RentSense software to improve the efficiency of its income collection process and prioritise arrears cases.

Dan Thwaites, income manager, Octavia Housing, said, "RentSense enables us to better manage and keep on top of the status of our rent payments. Alongside this, we have improved our procedures to prioritise specific cases and communicate with our tenants. This has helped us to achieve our best performance in the past 20 years.

"Our first priority is always to do what we can to support tenants to sustain their tenancy but we also encourage them to understand that meeting their rent payment is a priority."

In the 18 months to March 2019, Octavia's arrears fell from 4.7 per cent to 3.9 per cent, and by December 2019, arrears had fallen further to 3.6 per cent with no impact on evictions, representing a reduction of over £220,000.

Enfield Council gains £1m in rent with Mobysoft
Continued from previous page

Mobysoft appoints new CEO

Mobysoft has appointed Alex Karle as its new CEO, while Derek Steele, the company's founder and long-time CEO takes up a new role of chief innovation officer.

Alex Karle,
CEO, Mobysoft

Over the last four years Mobysoft has more than trebled in size. Its flagship RentSense product now manages arrears for more than 140 housing providers managing 1.5 million properties.

Karle has 20 years' experience in the information and data analytics sector and joins from Evaluate, a company he led to treble in size from a position similar to where Mobysoft is now.

Alex Karle, CEO, Mobysoft, said, "I'm excited about joining an IT company that makes a material difference to society, and I'm looking forward to working with the Mobysoft team to realise our vision to unlock the power of our customers' data to help social landlords deliver great service and transform lives."

Riskhub launches housing compliance & data management portal

(L-R) Dearbhail McParland (finance director), Kate Thain (software support manager), Sarah Herbison (strategic director), Zoe Brown (business development manager) & Ben Gritz (CTO)

Riskhub has announced the launch of its cloud-based solution for housing providers to handle their statutory compliance and risk assessment requirements.

Set to revolutionise the way organisations assess, manage and action compliance requirements, Riskhub is used by some of the UK's largest housing providers to oversee more than 100,000 properties at the moment.

The centralised system eradicates the fragmented, archaic management of offline data processes and minimises the potential for mistakes and duplication. Intuitive and easy to use, the online hub creates a validated audit trail of every action generated from risk assessments. Users can view the status of actions via a dashboard to immediately highlight and assign tasks, so that the most pressing are seen and prioritised.

Sarah Herbison, strategic director, Riskhub, said, "We've developed a best-in-class product that has a unique selling point; it's effective, easy to use and handles all the data management needs of housing providers with both large and small property portfolios.

"Compliance checks can be incredibly complex, and with some organisations requiring thousands of regulatory actions across their portfolios, it can be impossible to prioritise which are the most pressing. We have experts on hand to help housing providers to refine their risk assessment templates and workflows."

Riskhub interfaces with third-party software and bespoke modules, enabling data sharing across multiple business applications. The company said that it will soon be adding other key compliance checks to the system, covering electrical, gas, asbestos, legionella and stock condition.

Monmouthshire Housing integrates electronic payments with PfH & Allpay

Time-consuming billing processes have been replaced with a more efficient system at Monmouthshire Housing now that it's using Procurement for Housing's electronic payment services agreement via Allpay.

Monmouthshire Housing had previously used a paper-based system, with its staff posting direct debit mandates to tenants and manually submitting payments to the bank. Every year, the housing provider would manually input payment profiles for all 2,500 tenants into its housing management system, which took three members of staff up to three weeks to complete and resulted in some rent payments being delayed.

With an above-average proportion (55 per cent) of tenants paying their rent via direct debit, Monmouthshire Housing wanted a more efficient way to manage these payments. Helped by PfH and their account manager at Allpay, Monmouthshire Housing quickly switched to a cloud-based system that lets staff create and amend direct debits online or over the phone with tenants. Monmouthshire Housing estimates that it will save over £30,000 in staff time, postage, printing and processing over the next four years.

Tenants who don't pay by direct debit or standing order have been sent an Allpay card which they can use to pay their rent via an automated phone line, Allpay mobile app or text message.

Mark Winstanley, database manager, Monmouthshire Housing, said, "We want to make it as easy as possible for people to pay their rent, and the Allpay solution offers great flexibility and a wide range of payment options. Although universal credit hasn't hit us fully yet, it does mean that we have the facilities ready for when it does come in."

Impact Reporting joins Procurement Hub

Procurement Hub, part of Places for People, has signed Impact Reporting to its growing procurement consortium.

Places for People invested in Impact Reporting in 2019 after working together for the past two years on social value monitoring and reporting. Procurement Hub plans to work with Impact Reporting to help customers and suppliers in the public sector maximise the amount of social value they generate through social and environmental endeavours.

Chris Farrell, managing director, Impact Reporting, said, "We signed this deal with Procurement Hub to share resources, engage with their suppliers and co-create content. We'll be working together to help educate Procurement Hub's customers about the value of social and environmental initiatives."

Procurement Hub says that it is a 'disruptor' in the purchasing sector, with over 500 public sector customers across healthcare, education, charities and local authorities, and 850 suppliers on its various frameworks and dynamic purchasing systems.

Alan Heron, director of procurement, Procurement Hub, said, "Social value is an increasing area of focus for all kinds of suppliers and clients across our procurement solutions. A large part of public contracts is now demonstrating social impact, not just in terms of financials but the benefit to society and the environment."

Minibems fits the bill

Complementing their heat network technology and services, Minibems has announced that it also offers metering and billing solutions that are designed for easy integration into existing or new build developments alongside their heat network performance system.

Minibems' credit and pre-payment billing options can be switched remotely depending on building requirements and residents' circumstances. The system can be set so that vulnerable residents are never left without heating or hot water. Minibems also make it easy for residents to make payments and keep their heating on, meaning customer satisfaction is high and ongoing management is hassle-free for housing providers.

Minibems operates a real-time payment system where credits made are applied to the controller instantly and these can be made via the Pingit app, EPay cash or card payments, direct debit or standing order. Credit billing customers receive bills on a monthly or quarterly basis, and these are based on actual meter readings, as per the requirements of the Heat Network (Metering & Billing) Regulations 2014. All billing customers can view their current balance online or via the in-home Minibems touch screen display.

An amount of emergency credit can be applied to prepayment tariffs so that resident aren't shut off at zero balance, allowing them time to make a payment. The friendly credit feature can be applied so that residents aren't shut off during weekends or out of office hours when they are unable to top-up or get support and advice.

Minibems appoints IoT specialist Nigel Pugh as CTO

IoT-based building performance specialist Minibems has appointed Nigel Pugh as its new chief technology officer.

Nigel Pugh, CTO, Minibems

Pugh's previous experience includes his involvement in the development of the Hive home platform and 20+ years' experience in software development at UBS, Betfair, Canonical and Alertme.com (Hive's underlying platform).

Minibems applies advanced IoT technology to building performance to deliver a comprehensive heat network management service which enables clients to save energy, reduce carbon emissions and alleviate fuel poverty.

Ocean Housing's new app

Ocean Housing has joined the multitude of housing providers with their own tenancy app for smartphones.

Mark Gardner, chief executive, Ocean Housing, said, "Many of our tenants are busy working families, or juggle shifts, so having an app makes it easier for them to get in touch at a time that suits them. We've been working on the app for about a year, so it's exciting to see it in use and our residents starting to enjoy the benefits of the app."

Key features can be accessed on the home screen of the app while more specific functions, such as organising an estate inspection or finding a home to buy or rent, can be found on a side menu. There is also a LiveChat button, which allows tenants to speak to a member of the Ocean Housing team during office hours, in a chatroom format. They can send images to help illustrate their query, and make it easier to ascertain what support they might need.

Ocean Housing tenant, Graham Hancock from St Austell, said, "I really like the simplicity of it. It's so easy to use and fulfils all the requirements of running my home and my Ocean tenancy account.

"You don't have to be computer savvy to use it either – everything is at the tap of a button. Instead of having to scroll through pages on my laptop or calling up and being on the phone for ages, I save a lot of time using the app by quickly finding what I need within just a few clicks. The LiveChat option is reassuring too – it's nice to still be able to connect to a real person, and it's very responsive."

Technology-led tenant engagement

Michelle Tyler, Director for Social Housing, Civica

Tenants expect more than ever before from their housing providers - speedier service, easier rent management, always-on assistance and improved communication channels. This is against a backdrop of tightening budgets and a multitude of channels to manage. So how can technology help housing providers streamline ways of working and enhance this experience? And what should we expect to see in 2020 and beyond when it comes to emerging technologies within the housing sector?

Empowering tenants with self-service
We're seeing more and more housing organisations offering digital self-service options to customers via mobile apps or online. While housing providers will always need people to respond to the most complex or urgent queries, a self-service portal allows front-line employees to spend less time answering simple questions and dealing with repetitive requests. Likewise, it simplifies processes for end-users by empowering them to find information, make transactions and update their personal details with one click of a button.

Devon-based Teign Housing has rolled out a customer self-service portal as part of Civica's Cx housing management system. The digital platform is also used by employees to access real-time tenant information.

Customers are already using several functions within Cx's customer portal, including paying rent, logging repairs, viewing rent statements and amending personal details. The aim for 2020 is for us to work with Teign Housing to further improve the user-experience, navigation and functionality. This will enable a marketing campaign to get all customers up and running on the portal, with the aim of at least 60 per cent actively using it.

Chatbots bring 24/7 communication
In 2020, we'll also see an uptake in chatbots in housing. Today's tenants demand instant access to everything, and while humans aren't programmed to work 24/7, AI-powered chatbots can be. One organisation getting a head-start is Havebury Housing. By adopting the 'Luis' chatbot, which seamlessly integrates with the Azure Bot Service, Luis enables real-time data analysis and always-on customer communication.

One very successful application for Havebury Housing's chatbot has been in repairs diagnostics. By inputting 100,000 repair descriptions and outcomes into the AI (and testing and refining it over a six-month period) Havebury Housing can now accurately establish the issue, predict the type of repair needed, the urgency of the repair and therefore what action to take next.

Improving the employee experience
Teign Housing is also running a new mobile working pilot, enabled by Civica's Cx cloud software. The team plans to empower employees with more mobile devices and create digital drop-in 'hubs' across their estates. The wi-fi enabled hubs will support mobile working for employees so they can quickly connect to Cx to update rent accounts, log information following an inspection and respond to 'on-the-spot' queries.

There's no doubt this will help housing authorities save both time and money and improve the speed and accuracy of customer service. Teign Housing's head of corporate services, Karen Johnson, said, "We've never had this remote working and 'hub' facility before and we can't wait to see the difference in our speed and efficiency. We're going to save so much time on processing and reporting through the increased automation in the new system."

In 2020, housing providers must ensure they start using technology to meet the growing volume and complexity of customers' needs. With consumers today able to order their morning coffee, taxi or even a new outfit through the swipe of an app, they'll soon start expecting similar levels of customer service from their housing provider.

When it comes to implementing technology, it's important to understand what outcomes you want to achieve and set a clear strategy. To meet the challenges of 2020 and beyond, a digital transformation vision that starts with the cloud will be key. The cloud represents the foundations from which you can design and build new technology use cases, such as apps, AI chatbots or predictive maintenance, to stay relevant, deliver the best service and ultimately provide safe, secure homes and better outcomes for tenants and the wider community.

Michelle Tyler is the director of social housing at Civica.

How to tackle fuel poverty with IT

Dane Ralston, Founder & Managing Director, iOpt

With Spring in sight, over 600,000 households will be breathing a sigh of relief as they survive yet another winter in fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is officially defined as a household which spends more than 10 per cent of its net income, after all housing costs are taken out, on heating the home and other fuel costs.

A recent report from the Scottish Government using information released by the Scottish House Condition Survey (SHCS) shows the number of households experiencing fuel poverty in Scotland has risen for the first time in five years, with new figures showing 619,000 households are impacted, an increase of 36,000 households during 2018. Although levels of extreme fuel poverty have been decreasing since 2013, the most recent data shows one in four households are still struggling with energy costs.

Wider poverty issues, rising energy prices and increased fuel debt are thought to be the main reasons behind the increase in fuel poverty, and it seems that social housing tenants are taking matters into their own hands. A survey by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA) found that increasing numbers of tenants have been self-disconnecting their own power or heating due to fuel poverty, with 61 per cent of housing providers reporting incidences of this.

It's heartening to hear that the Scottish government is due to publish a strategy later this year setting out actions to tackle all drivers of fuel poverty. The Scottish Fuel Poverty Bill seeks to achieve a target of no more than five per cent of households in Scotland in fuel poverty by 2040. However, while this is a noble and ambitious target and will make a long-term difference in tackling fuel poverty, it's likely to take a while to implement.

In the meantime, what can asset managers of social housing be doing now to help tenants who suffer from fuel poverty?
Fuel efficiency

While little can be done to influence fuel prices or incomes, efforts can be targeted towards supporting tenants to improve the energy efficiency of their homes and to find cheaper energy tariffs. Given that it's estimated that poor insulation results in £1 out of every £3 spent heating UK homes being wasted, increasing fuel efficiency should be a significant focus.

Some forward-thinking and innovative organisations are leading the way. For example, Renfrewshire Council has recently confirmed its intention to become carbon neutral by 2030. In order to achieve this, the council will be focusing heavily on improving the energy efficiency of the homes within its portfolio. Recently awarded £18 million by the UK government, 75 properties will be turned into low energy or EnerPHit homes which are low energy buildings that require very little energy to heat or cool and could see annual energy bills reduced to £150 for residents. Likewise, Edinburgh City Council has pledged to spend £2.5 billion building 10,000 new affordable, energy efficient homes over the next decade, with an ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030.

How can technology help?
For those wanting to increase fuel efficiency in their properties, our ground-breaking technology can help. We use data analytics, high-tech sensors and IoT technology which enable us to help managers of large property portfolios to monitor the environment of their assets remotely. This includes monitoring the temperature, enabling property owners to help identify and support vulnerable tenants who may be struggling with fuel poverty.

The IoT technology also gives tenants the opportunity to take responsibility for the condition of their properties by providing them with advice and understanding of how their homes are performing. This in turn provides peace of mind for tenants knowing properties are being monitored effectively and any potential problems, including those which may affect their health, will be picked up before they become significant issues. It also highlights the risks to their own health by taking such drastic measures as disconnecting their own power or heating.

Dane Ralston is the founder and managing director of iOpt.

The rise of senior CX roles in social housing

Paul Young, Solutions Marketing Manager, Orchard

No two people are the same, so it stands to reason that no two tenants are the same either.

Within social housing, you have tenants with a wide range of opinions, income levels, religions, political views, education levels and awareness of technology (more on this later). Due to these differences, it means a one-size-fits-all approach regarding how customers are treated is no longer good enough.

Better customer service?
In a recent government report, Conservative MP James Brokenshire commented that the current levels of customer experience weren't up to scratch; he said, "We have to improve people's experience of living in social housing by encouraging greater professionalisation and more of a customer service culture in housing management."

Coming up with approaches which will help improve customer satisfaction isn't going to be easy, especially with such a wide range of customers with varied needs and in different property types. Fortunately the social housing sector is making moves in the right direction.

The rise of 'director of customer experience' and 'head of customer experience' jobs is an indication of the commitment that housing providers are showing to improving standards. These are senior roles, some of which are at board level, and they're coming with (up to) six-figure salaries. Again another indicator of how seriously companies are taking the goal of improving the welfare and experience of their customers.

I looked through a range of 'customer experience' job descriptions currently around in the social housing sector and here are just a few deliverables they're looking from these roles:

- "Modernising contact methods for tenants"
- "Develop strategies to ensure that customers enjoy exceptional tailored services and choice"
- "Build a strong customer-service culture"
- "Lead our strategy to ensure we attain the highest levels of member satisfaction"
- "Listening to our customers' views and acting on them"

It's great to see this is the direction that companies want to move in. For me, the last point really stood out because in order for these newly created roles to be successful, they need to easily gather feedback and really show that they are acting on it.

Customer feedback
The gathering of feedback is an area where technology can really help, especially when resources won't allow the gathering of feedback via telephone calls. As mentioned earlier, you'll have some customers who embrace technology and those that can't stand it.

For those that love technology it makes sense to introduce solutions which allow them to provide their feedback this way. If they like living on their smartphone and tablet, you should adapt to this rather than forcing them to use less-preferred methods. For example, allowing another avenue to provide feedback that doesn't involve calling up, waiting on hold and so on immediately starts to improve their customer experience (as well as saving your staff time taking these calls).

To help achieve this, Orchard has introduced a new feature into our digital self-service solution. Customers can already pay their rent online, set up new direct debits and self-book repairs with this service but we've added in Intelligent Custom Forms too.

Interactive forms and surveys
Intelligent Custom Forms let you create bespoke interactive forms and surveys which make it easy for customers to submit their feedback (ideal for digital tenant surveys or for tenants to submit permission requests). They can be set up in minutes, are totally customisable (with a wide range of question and response types available) and all responses are easily monitored within Orchard Housing. They've also been built with smart conditional logic that allows you to guide tenants through a journey, only answering questions that apply to them, making the process of providing feedback intuitive and quick for customers.

As for ensuring that the feedback you collect is acted on – well, that's up to your director of customer experience, I guess.

Paul Young is the solutions marketing manager for Orchard.

Appello's digital telecare at Guinness Partnership
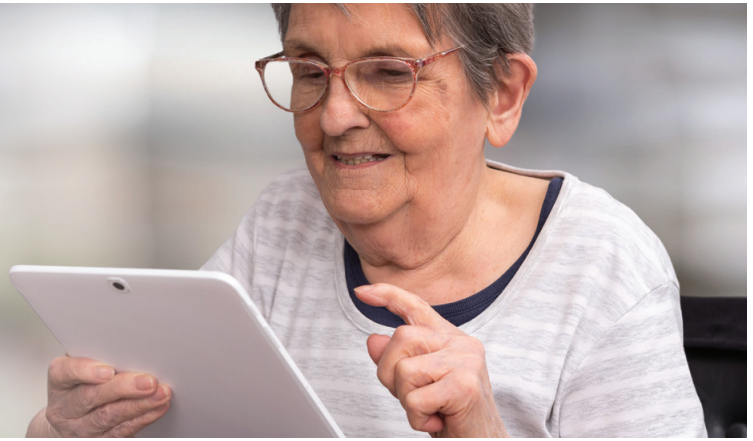
Guinness Partnership is transforming its housing for older people with Appello's digital telecare suite.

As part of its new technology service offering, Guinness is introducing Appello's Smart Living Solutions to 30 of its developments across England. Residents will benefit from flat-to-flat and resident-to-manager video calls and video door-entry for individual homes and communal areas.

Appello's system also integrates with the 'Go Guinness' self-service portal and app, designed to give residents greater independence and freedom to report issues, view bills, pay rent, schedule repairs and keep their details up to date from a user-friendly tablet.

The housing provider's independent living managers are supported with the new digital telecare solution, with the option of an 'I'm OK' dashboard in its management platform so that managers can see if anyone hasn't pressed their button in the morning, helping them to plan their home checks more efficiently and improve their time management. The digital alarm system also reduces connection times to Appello's monitoring centre from minutes to just a few seconds.

Wendy Wells, head of policy and business implementation, Guinness Care, said, "We want to give our residents digital telecare technology that enables them to live as independently as possible. While benefiting from the many advantages of digital solutions, we're also ready for the current phased digital switchover of the analogue to digital telephone network by 2025."

Housing Solutions and Prodo develop chatbot for tenants

Digital agency Prodo has been working with Housing Solutions to implement an automated chatbot to help with tenants' queries.
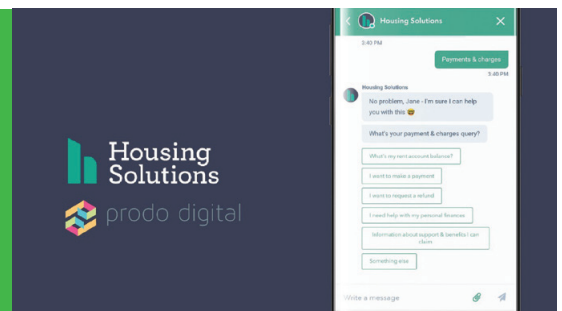
Prodo and Housing Solutions have worked together for a number of years, launching various projects to drive digital transformation and give tenants more control over day-to-day tenancy tasks, from self-serve repairs appointments via the portal to the latest addition, the chatbot.

Richard Harvey, head of digital and information services, Housing Solutions, said, "For us, choosing a chatbot was the option that we felt would help ease our customers into using our digital services in a simple and user-friendly way.

"With more and more customers starting to use our customer portal, having a chatbot to methodically walk our customers through any queries while providing access to information quickly and efficiently made perfect sense."

The chatbot has replaced Housing Solutions' previous live-chat function. The chatbot can handle routine, day-to-day enquiries and therefore free up time from the contact centre to be better used elsewhere. Tenants can triage and solve enquiries online, with the bot designed to find a web-based solution wherever possible before handing over to a live agent or leaving a message if no one is available.

The chatbot's conversation is human-like and friendly, with logical triggers in place and key automation paths built-in to make the process as quick and easy as possible for the end-user. It has been deployed across all areas of the website and on mobile, giving tenants the power to resolve common queries such as paying rent and reporting a repair themselves without the need to phone the contact centre.

Stephen Brennan, digital platform specialist, Prodo, said, "The bot has been carefully developed to work cooperatively with Housing Solutions' in-house team by qualifying queries and handing off to live agents when required. The goal of the bot is to deliver relevant and timely information where possible and lower the demands on staff."

What's the point of customer feedback?

Paul Swannell, Sales Director, Localz

For many years, the measurement of customer satisfaction (CSAT) has played an important and high-profile role in the housing sector. Most RSLs publish annual CSAT targets, for both repairs and 'overall satisfaction', and they publish their attainment against those targets. There's a regulatory imperative behind this and, of course, CSAT provides a useful barometer of ongoing performance and quality, but what else could be, or should be, derived from gathering feedback? And what can be done to ensure feedback is representative and actionable, rather than just an annual statistic?

Why ask for feedback?

The high profile of CSAT in social housing is interesting, especially given the contrasts with the commercial sector. You can read reviews of almost any product or service these days, and we know that CSAT in many walks of life has a direct impact on sales, reputation, retention, referrals and so on. But given that most housing providers have more demand than they can cope with, rents are largely regulated, and the concepts of upsell/x-sell/repeat-purchase don't really apply, it raises the question, "In housing, what are we actually trying to achieve by gathering feedback?"

Of course, most RSLs are genuinely committed to providing a great service and want to measure their CSAT for all sorts of good reasons. We also know that happy customers cost less to serve, that long tenures are cost-effective and that advocacy and reputation have tangible values. So how can you make sure your customers' voices are heard?

Feedback mechanisms

Putting aside the (sometimes controversial) variations in the way CSAT is calculated from the available data, there are also variations in the mechanisms by which feedback is collected. In many cases, it involves monthly surveys of randomly selected customers using phone, email or even post. Apart from the significant cost of this approach, the response rates are low and as time passes, we know that negative experiences are recalled more readily than positive ones. It's also largely unactionable feedback, certainly on a case-by-case basis for repairs, because the experience happened days or weeks ago, and the comments are seldom linked directly to a job ID or a specific colleague.

In some cases, repairs operatives are asked to hand their tablet to the customer before they leave, asking them to complete a questionnaire – effectively asking "how did I do?". For obvious reasons, this approach is unlikely to be particularly accurate when the operative is still in the room.

What's in it for the customer?

When you think about the objectives behind gathering feedback, the interests and motivations of the customer really should be paramount. If customers become conditioned to their feedback being listened to and acted on, they are more likely to take the trouble to provide it, and their perception of their landlord will be dramatically improved – "These people are actually listening to me!" If they think that their feedback simply ends up lost in an annual statistic, why should they bother in the first place?

What makes for good feedback?

- **Timing –** ask for feedback immediately after the experience (repair, housing officer visit, lettings appointment, etc), but not while the colleague is still at the property. Prompt feedback requests get more responses, better reflect the moment and, importantly, mean that actions can be taken quickly and efficiently in the case of problems.
- **Keep it simple and convenient –** ask for a rating out of five, plus what was good and what needs improvement; just three questions. The more questions you ask, the fewer the responses. Make the process easy and use a channel that's convenient for the customer to use.
- **Make it actionable –** perhaps the most important aspect of all. If customers don't think you're listening, they won't bother. If you use automated back-office alerts for poor feedback, you can act promptly and therefore at a lower cost, and your customers will be delighted (and amazed). This also avoids survey fatigue.
- **Make it personal –** ensure feedback is linked to individual colleagues so you can identify training needs and spot trends, either good or bad.
- **Assess frequently –** look at your feedback ratings, by function, team and individual, all the time so you can make changes quickly; an annual 'ta-da!' moment for the past year's stats will not support dynamic change.

What's the point of customer feedback?
Continued from previous page

- **Ask everyone, always** – don't just ask a random sample; by definition, you'll leave gaps and will dilute validity.
- **Use technology to make it affordable** – you can't phone all of your customers all of the time; it's too expensive as well as being invasive and ineffective. Make feedback an automated part of a digital communications process linked to every appointment.

In summary: timely, simple and actionable mass feedback will provide a real-time guiding light for your operations and, above all, will support an amazing customer experience. After a problematic experience, if you react quickly to make amends then you'll turn a disgruntled customer into a long-term advocate.

Paul Swannell is the sales director at Localz.

REPAIRS & MOBILE WORKING

DW Support's last-mile service from Localz

Responsive repairs provider DW Support Services is using Localz' last-mile location and messaging technology to 'Uberise' its real-time customer communications in line with consumers' service expectations and experience from other sectors.

By incorporating Localz' real-time tracking and two-way communication for end-customers, DW Support services expects to enhance customer service and gain a competitive edge in the repairs contractor market.

Following the introduction of Localz, DW Support Services, its clients and end-customers will benefit from accurate 'on my way' ETA notifications for customers, real-time operative tracking for customers' added convenience and reassurance, two-way communication via SMS (including the ability for customers to pass important last-mile details direct to their assigned operative), automated post-job customer feedback requests, and real-time dashboards to show back-office teams the live location of each operative, their daily job progress and ETA at their next destination.

Alan Elliott, head of responsive repairs, DW Support Services, said, "We are expecting to see some fantastic benefits from Localz for our clients, their tenants and also for our own staff.

"Implementing Localz will make our end-customers' lives easier, reduce call wait times and increase first-time access rates, all the while improving the overall customer experience for tenants. We will now also be able to give customers a real-time view of progress for the repairs at their property, a service that is already common across many other sectors."

BigChange appoints David Todd to lead housing transformation

BigChange has appointed long-time housing IT specialist David Todd to spearhead its expansion in the UK social housing and local government sectors.

Todd spent 16 years as a director of Xmbrace, later part of Kirona, the provider of mobile scheduling software bought by Advanced in 2019. He is also on the board of Sovereign Property Services and managing director of the UK subsidiary of cloud specialist Luminis.

Formed in 2013, Leeds-based BigChange has over 40,000 mobile workers and back-office personnel using its all-in-one mobile workforce and job management solution for housing repair and maintenance operations.

Martin Port, founder and CEO, BigChange, said, "David has extensive experience in social housing but crucially he brings his unrivalled knowledge of using IT solutions to manage mobile field services in housing and local government."

David Todd, BigChange

David Todd said, "Until now, BigChange has very much been a hidden secret in the social housing sector. However, with an all-in-one cloud system combining CRM, job scheduling, vehicle tracking and a mobile workforce app, it's a solution that I'm sure will be welcomed by many.

"In particular, BigChange offers a completely paperless way of working, with total 24/7 visibility of all mobile repair and maintenance work and that will completely revolutionise social housing services."

Wates Living Space on track with Castleton and Localz

Wates Living Space, the affordable housing maintenance provider, has introduced a new repairs and maintenance tracking system from Castleton Technology and Localz for its residents.

The 'Find my Engineer' tool lets residents track their operative's estimated time of arrival in real-time and follow their approach using a live map. The tool was developed by Localz and integrated through Wates' current repairs and maintenance software, Castleton Maintain.

The technology enables residents to receive automated SMS messages notifying them when their engineer is due, plus view a real-time tracking map of the operative's location. Residents can manage bookings via the new system, minimising missed appointments and improving communication around repairs and maintenance jobs.

'Find my Engineer' uses geofencing technology to pick up the operative's location to within a few metres while enabling Wates to strictly control the location data that is shared in order to protect both the operative's and the resident's privacy; once the operative arrives, the tracking map instantly disappears.

The service is being piloted at a number of homes in Birmingham as part of Wates Living Space's repairs and maintenance contract with Birmingham City Council.

David Morgan, managing director, Wates Property Services, said, "The introduction of 'Find my Engineer' has been designed to improve the customer journey for residents and overall customer satisfaction, and we are very proud to be one of the first service providers within the repairs and maintenance sector to have implemented this new technology."

Telford and Wrekin workers never alone with StaySafe

Telford and Wrekin Council is using StaySafe's app and cloud-based monitoring service to protect its lone workers.

The StaySafe Android- and iOS-compatible app allows workers to notify managers of their whereabouts by simply pressing a button. The check-in feature encourages workers to start a session at the beginning of their day and end the session once their work is complete. This gives managers an overview of where their employees are during the day and if help is needed, they can immediately send it to their exact location.

Before its adoption of StaySafe, the council had a personal safety policy that outlined different steps that employees should take to help minimise risk. This included safety training, employees regularly checking in with managers and manually recording their working hours. However, managers felt that this wasn't enough and wanted to investigate other options that could give them more visibility of their employees while they were at work.

After a trial period and following the implementation of StaySafe, Telford and Wrekin created a lone working procedure to set out the council's rules regarding working alone and provide lone workers with practical instructions on how to safely work alone using the StaySafe app.

Tracy Guy, lead health and safety advisor, Telford and Wrekin Council, said, "The app has been a huge help for both managers and staff. The set up was fast and the StaySafe team made sure that the onboarding process was simple. We had access to guides and user videos to make the process as smooth as possible and any questions we had were answered promptly. Our employees feel much safer knowing they have access to help when working away from the office."

Are your spreadsheets beyond repair?

Nick Jeffreys, Managing Director for Housing, Property & FM, Totalmobile

Why does the housing sector continue to expose itself to unnecessary risk and inefficiencies by using spreadsheets to manage planned work? While there is widespread adoption of new technologies to support housing maintenance and repairs, it's staggering to see that Excel is still being used to manage and monitor complex planned, cyclical and programmed works.

It makes sense to leverage the power of cloud-based field service software to reduce the administrative burden and compliance risks of managing employees, resources, subcontractors, client reporting and citizen engagement using a patchwork quilt of homegrown spreadsheets.

That's why we have partnered with leading construction, development and property services companies to create an innovative SaaS solution that goes beyond repairs to optimise the management of planned and programmed maintenance.

A single view
Compliance is the principal concern when faced with a fragmented maintenance system. Spreadsheets are not secure, often out of date and prone to undetected errors, and when it comes to the safety and wellbeing of your tenants and employees, this simply isn't good enough. Organisations need a reliable and secure 'single source of truth' to maintain compliance – providing a real-time view over all proactive maintenance information sits at the heart of our solution.

- **Information accuracy –** a central live database of all property maintenance and adaptation history, records and evidence means you can track progress, maintain compliance and identify and resolve potential issues quickly.
- **Locked-in compliance –** mandatory workflows and task-level prompts reduce the risk of individual or subcontractor errors, provide a clear audit trail and ensure new regulatory requirements are more easily embedded in your day-to-day processes.

- **Enhanced decision making –** maintaining a consistent, centralised view enables all aspects of individual, team and organisation-wide planned maintenance performance to be tracked, meaning managers can identify required actions, spot patterns and look for opportunities to improve productivity and service levels.

Improved processes
Housing repairs have already been transformed by technology that streamlines processes, drastically reduces repetitive tasks and makes information sharing and communications much easier. It makes sense then to unlock these same benefits in planned and programmed works such as preventative maintenance and capital improvement.

Our new system delivers significant benefits across:

- **Information capture –** highly usable mobile case management tools eliminate the risk and frustration of recording stock status and other data in the field and can feed consistent information back to a single unified system spanning planned and responsive work.
- **Back- and front-office administration –** automated processes, simple capture forms, case management tools and machine learning all help to streamline the administration associated with booking appointments, time recording, material usage, stock management, invoicing, processing building supply merchant orders and managing sub-contractors.

- **Pan-stakeholder management –** shared visibility, consistent reporting and communication and collaboration tools help to break down team silos, manage sub-contractors and engage with clients and tenants via user-friendly, self-service portals.

What now?
The introduction of cloud-based field service software for planned work should be somewhere near the top of your transformation agenda. Those who continue to 'get by' delivering major works using an inadequate mixture of systems, spreadsheets and paper will soon find themselves at a significant disadvantage. For those willing to make the move now, they'll find our cloud-based technology will quickly deliver a step-change in productivity, efficiency, service levels and compliance.

Nick Jeffreys is the managing director for housing, property and facilities management at Totalmobile.

Curing grounds maintenance headaches

Jason Petsch, CEO, GritIt

When you scale things up, even the simplest tasks can start to become complex. It's a truth that is immediately recognised by any successful property manager, and especially apparent in grounds maintenance.

With multiple sites to manage, everyday tasks such as keeping lawns cut, hedges trimmed or trees regularly inspected to ensure safety cascade into a substantial management challenge. As a result, this is an area where the traditional craft of caring for landscapes is now benefiting from some of the most modern business disciplines and even the application of data-driven technologies.

There's a tipping point very early on when property managers realise that the task of grounds maintenance starts to exceed their in-house ability to manage it. Although maintenance teams can usually take care of basics such as work orders and regular site management services, many essential grounds services usually require operators with specialist equipment, materials, training and skills. For most individual sites, it's simply uneconomical to budget for this in-house, and hence the focus is usually on the procurement of external contractors.

From a practical and economic point of view, bringing on board local gardeners and contractors can be an affordable and straightforward way to offload the burden of grounds maintenance responsibilities. Yet, this approach can prove problematic when scaled up. The larger the property portfolio becomes, the larger the administrative challenge of dealing with

multiple local contractors becomes. Inefficiency breeds cost, but more seriously it can also create blind spots in which risks can proliferate.

The risk management challenge

Property owners and managers have a legal duty of care to maintain a safe environment for all occupiers, visitors and employees. Neglected grounds present many risks to property and people, from costly damage to property resulting from invasive roots or species to potentially fatal incidents involving falling limbs or trees. In an increasingly litigious environment and with increasingly stringent (criminal) enforcement of Health and Safety Act breaches, these risks are not to be taken lightly. There are even security issues that can arise; site security is also compromised if overgrown shrubs, bushes and trees obstruct CCTV views and provide cover for intruders, while trees growing adjacent to fences could provide an easy way of scaling protective measures.

Hence, when managing multiple contractors the responsibilities still lie with you. With regards to ensuring the right professional standards and insurance, you'll still have the administrative overhead of supervising contractors and checking that services have been delivered properly. Even leaving aside the risk management dimension, it's always vital to consider the

impact on relationships with tenants of poorly maintained properties.

How to outsource it all without losing visibility

The challenges of managing multiple local contractors leads many property managers with larger portfolios to bring on board larger (often national) grounds maintenance providers who can deliver everything from grass cutting and tree surgery to car park cleaning, often within a single contract. This is the model we offer at GritIt, and we find that customers enjoy the budget certainty, economies of scale advantages and simplicity of an all-in grounds maintenance offering.

Outsourcing all your grounds maintenance and management to a single provider means that fewer internal resources are consumed by project management and administration. However, that's not to say that the 'outsource everything' approach is itself free of risk. Indeed, many of the larger facilities management providers often achieve this customer-facing simplicity by simply taking on the burden of managing a 'mish-mash' of grounds maintenance contractors. This extended chain of contractors and subcontractors can therefore be the cause of further challenges, particularly regarding visibility through that supply chain and accountability when things go wrong.

Technology is changing the game

While many of the tasks associated with grounds maintenance and landscaping remain steeped in traditional, age-old craftsmanship, technology is now starting to change the game. The ability to track, record and manage service delivery via mobile technology and enterprise-grade ERP and CRM systems is helping to close the visibility gaps, while retaining legally robust records that can be key in demonstrating that an organisation is fulfilling its duty of care.

Curing grounds maintenance headaches
Continued from previous page

On the face of it, having the teams cutting the grass connected via the cloud to a database could appear to be overkill. Indeed, that's why it's still rare for many traditional grounds maintenance contractors to have invested in technology at all. Yet as a company with roots in the high risk, high liability field of winter maintenance, GritIt has been able to import best practices from managing a fleet of gritting trucks to also manage our grounds maintenance teams.

Thanks to mobile technology, it's possible for teams to quickly create reports on every job – when it's due to be done, when operatives arrive on site and when the job is completed. With customer web portals and mobile apps, that same information can be immediately accessed by customers.

Hence, no matter how many sites you manage, you can still stay connected to what's happening on the ground and have a full audit trail. Should a tenant call up with queries, you also have exactly the information you need to engage more effectively and constructively.

Just like virtually every other field of modern business, even grounds maintenance is starting to become smarter and more data driven. Yet when delivered right, none of this should make the job of property management more complex. Indeed, thanks to technology, you can now scale up while increasing the simplicity of your business.

Jason Petsch is CEO of GritIt.

INFRASTRUCTURE

BCHA launches IoT programme with Daizy

Bournemouth-based BCHA is partnering with local technology business Daizy to install IoT sensors to monitor building systems and environmental conditions across its 1,700 properties, with the aim of identifying issues that could adversely affect residents' quality of life.

Martin Hancock, CEO, BCHA, said, "Many housing providers are discussing the potential benefits of the internet of things to monitor their properties, but few have the technical capability to do this easily.

"By working with Daizy, we saw an immediate opportunity to improve the living environment for our customers, while reducing our maintenance and repair costs. Furthermore, as this is such a new field, we're already getting interest from other housing providers to learn more about the work we're doing."

Jonathan Gulliver, property surveyor, BCHA, said, "Having access to better data means that we can be much more effective with our building maintenance. For example, we're installing heat and humidity sensors in areas likely to be at risk of damp and mould. By providing early warning of problems, we can proactively support our residents to ensure a healthy environment and avoid the need for costly repairs later."

David Ffoulkes-Jones, CEO, Daizy, said, "As a Bournemouth-based start-up, we're keen to support local organisations which deliver social benefit in our community.

"One of the challenges for a housing provider when installing large numbers of IoT sensors is keeping track of thousands of electronic devices and ensuring they continue to deliver useful information. Our platform allows BCHA to quickly and easily install devices and immediately gain insights from the data they provide."

Mobile-first to the cloud

Gerry Kelly, CEO, Optus Homes

Two of the most-discussed trends in social housing IT over the past few years have been:

• The migration of systems from on-premise to the cloud;
• Mobile-first approaches to tenant communications.

More housing providers are asking whether it's possible to scale their migration to the cloud, and to start with front-end services while back-end services remain on-premise for the time being.

Migrating to the cloud is rightly regarded as a major step, requiring considerable planning and a mindset change throughout an entire organisation. It's often viewed as a 'big bang' event, where the switch to cloud computing might be implemented for all or most of an organisation's existing on-premise services simultaneously. But does it have to be that way?

And for a mobile-first approach, early attempts were often simply web portals wrapped up as apps that failed to deliver the functionality and intuitive use demanded by end-users. But can a genuine mobile-first approach be the first step in migrating to the cloud? Some landlords are implementing powerful mobile apps which deliver the benefits of cloud computing for front-end services, but also offer full integration to their existing on-premise housing management systems, alleviating the need for an expensive and risky 'big bang' transition.

The mobile has won
There's no doubt that the mobile has won the battle as the most popular consumer device for information and entertainment access, communication and general web usage. Statista estimate that there will be over 200 billion app downloads globally in 2020. In the UK, smartphone penetration exceeds 85 per cent for the entire population and average smartphone usage now exceeds 2.5 hours per day. Not only is the mobile now the dominant device, in the UK only 17 per cent of

smartphone online access is directly to websites, while 83 per cent is via apps.

Consumers have become accustomed to using well-designed apps with intuitive menus which put key features within easy reach. The smartphone gives consumers 24/7 access and good quality apps make access easier. Now consumers are demanding that such access is available for as many services as possible.

The power is in the cloud
Cloud platforms such as Microsoft Azure, Google Cloud Platform and Amazon Web Services have been game changers in the way that they facilitate ubiquitous computing power for many market sectors.

Standard modules such as storage, processing and analytics are available on 'platform as a service' (PaaS) contracts and offer disruptive commercial models. And more advanced modules such as Cognitive Services and Chatbot Engines open new possibilities for consumer-centric applications. Machine learning capabilities will constantly improve the systems' performance and gradually provide a better and better service for both organisations and consumers. It's little wonder that housing providers have already started the migration away from legacy on-premise systems to the more powerful and cost effective cloud alternatives. But while the rewards can be significant, the transition can be daunting.

Front-end migration
For some, the answer to this dilemma is to put the tenant at the heart of their business and initially migrate only front-end services, such as tenant account management, to the cloud with a well-designed mobile app. If it's integrated to a platform such as Azure, the app offers a great combination of user convenience and ever-increasing cloud computing power. And via the cloud, the app is also fully integrated to existing on-premise systems, meaning that there's no need for the immediate migration of back-end services. Tenant management apps of

varying capability are readily available from many IT suppliers, eliminating the need for development programmes, and PaaS contracts mean that costs aren't prohibitive. Many of these apps can be a genuine enabler and the first step in a gradual migration to the cloud.

But what functionality might be incorporated into a specialist and advanced tenant app with cloud integration? In the social housing sector, the average cost per call-centre interaction is approximately £5, and landlords consistently say that repairs and appointments form the largest reason for such calls. So, a repairs module, along with rent payments and account queries should be the absolute minimum requirements for a self-serve app. But consider what additional community-centric functionality could be added:

• Cognitive computing to allow voice-to-text recognition for form filling;
• Automatic language translation for non-native English speakers;
• Open Banking services which would allow tenants, at the click of a button, to submit three months' bank statements in support of a rental application;
• And a two-way texting service to allow groups of tenants to communicate with one voice to their landlord, and the landlord to reply to that group with a single push response.

The feature list could continue to grow as the app harnesses more cloud computing capability, together with its integration to existing management systems, possibly even becoming a new revenue stream for landlords:

• Tenant feedback and reviews on any/all home visits for repairs;
• Tenant welcome packs for new build homes;
• In-app messaging or advertising;
• Supply of third-party services;
• Instant capture of abundant 'Uber-style' data, generating actionable insights and process efficiencies.

Mobile-first to the cloud
Continued from previous page
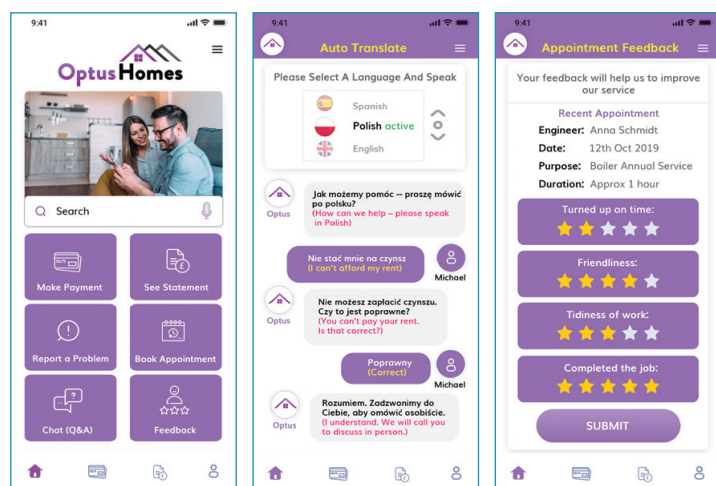
Tenants will judge us

Some housing providers have been disappointed with their conversion rates from traditional services to web portals. But web portals are typically designed for laptop use and the residential penetration of laptops in the UK has been falling since 2015 (65 per cent and decreasing). And when used on a mobile, portals can be frustrating and simply fail to offer what consumers expect in a modern and intuitive mobile environment.

In contrast, well-designed apps are built to be intuitive and minimise clicks for easy access to key tasks while delivering both personal and community benefits. It's what's expected in today's app ecosystem and it's what tenants will demand before very long. As the housing sector continues to change, tenants will use customer service as an area of judgement and the government will place more focus on value for money. Is 2020 therefore a year of change?

Gerry Kelly is the CEO of Optus Homes.

M-Files' EDRM at Newark & Sherwood Homes

Newark and Sherwood Homes is using M-Files to completely revamp how it stores, searches and retrieves all of its property and tenancy information.

By shifting away from traditional folder structures and using metadata instead, NSH's staff can now quickly and easily find, manage and share information across the organisation by simply describing what a document 'is' rather than needing to know where it is stored.

After years of relying on network drives and diverse electronic folders, NSH's file management system had become bloated and unworkable. With documents duplicated across multiple locations and a lack of version control, finding, managing and sharing information across the organisation was a huge challenge.

Kristin McIntosh, project research officer, Newark & Sherwood Homes, said, "Data sits at the heart of everything we do, yet it could take our staff half a day to simply locate a document so we needed a system that would help us source, access and control information across the whole organisation. It was a significant problem if our staff couldn't quickly find information needed by a tenant, a member of our board or one of our partners in a timely manner."

NSH's first priority was to find a solution that would give them visibility and control over their corporate documents including ISO processes, accreditations, grant applications and board reports. As a second priority, it needed a solution that could enable better management of tenant documents.

McIntosh said, "M-Files was identified as the perfect fit because it unifies content without disturbing existing systems or requiring data migration. We've seen so many benefits and made huge strides forward when it comes to being able to find and manage information.

"For example, if we're writing a letter to a tenant, we know we're using the right template with the correct information and it's all linked to the tenant record. If anyone needs it, they can quickly find it and that makes a big difference in our processing times.

"One of the next projects with M-Files is to streamline the process of monitoring the regulatory requirements for the properties we manage. M-Files will alert us to properties where certifications are due for renewal and manage the supporting documentation effectively, helping to ensure the safety of our tenants and meeting regulatory obligations.

"M-Files was fantastic to work with throughout the process and has saved us hours of time spent searching for documents and information, so that our staff can collaborate better and be more productive."

NIHE opts for Orchard Managed Service

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has chosen Orchard Managed Service to ensure high levels of uptime and support for their highly customised integration of Orchard Housing.

Orchard was appointed a year ago after ousting NIHE's incumbent managed services supplier; since then, NIHE has seen reduced levels of downtime and benefitted from increased levels of out-of-hours support. NIHE is now planning to add new Orchard products to allow their teams to work in a more agile manner and deliver new digital services to tenants.

NIHE's Orchard Housing integration delivers services to over 1,000 concurrent users across over 50 offices as well as to third-party contractors. As a result, maintaining high levels of uptime is a critical priority for NIHE's IT teams.

A key priority for NIHE when selecting a new managed service provider was the ability to provide out of hours support. NIHE offers a 24-hour emergency telephone service for tenants with urgent repair needs, so it was crucial that their systems could support this.

While their tender specified a need for support from 8am-8pm seven days per week, NIHE were pleased to find that the Orchard Managed Service offering exceeded these requirements, offering support from 7am-10pm on weekdays and 8am-8pm at weekends and on Bank Holidays.

Dominic Bogues, IT manager, NIHE, said, "The Orchard Managed Service offering exceeded our requirements and there has been no downtime since we started working together.

"I am effectively on call around the clock, and I have the confidence that Orchard is there for me when I need them. If I get a call, I can ring the Orchard out of hours number - I've yet to not get a response, and issues are dealt with in a very timely and friendly fashion."

As well as requiring high levels of system uptime to support 24-hour services to its tenants, NIHE needed support with out of hours batch processing of data. Through the week, tasks such as the application of payments to accounts were batch processed overnight, while larger interface processing jobs, for example of housing benefit information, were scheduled for the weekends. A key requirement of the tender was the ability to manage this batch processing and ensure that systems were up to date and ready to go when NIHE's 2,000 users logged into Orchard every weekday morning.

Orchard's Managed Service contract with NIHE includes the full management of batch processing tasks as well as ongoing monitoring to identify any issues and resolve them before they affect service delivery.

Bogues said, "We need to have confidence that batch jobs will be run; we can't open on Monday if the weekend's batch jobs aren't complete. Orchard worked with us to resolve previous problems and ensured that these were

ready on time. Orchard also carries out monitoring and I occasionally receive an email or a call to alert me to the fact that there's an issue with the system, but that Orchard are on it."

Differences in housing legislation compared with other areas of the UK mean that NIHE's Orchard housing management system is heavily customised to meet local requirements, and this can pose challenges when applying updates. As a result, NIHE needed a high level of expertise from their managed service providers to ensure that upgrades were applied successfully and to provide personalised application support based on their bespoke configuration. Orchard's product expertise was a key reason it was chosen by NIHE as its managed service provider.

Sean Nolan, head of IT, NIHE, said, "Orchard plays a vital part in making sure our service pack upgrades are applied, and in ongoing application support to ensure that the system is maintained and any new releases are installed in a timely manner. Orchard gives us confidence that when new releases are installed, the system will continue working as normal."

Orchard work closely with NIHE on every aspect of their product integration, with an Orchard team member based on site to provide hands-on support as well as regular telephone contact and meetings with the Orchard product team.

Ciaran Donaghy, head of income collection and business systems, NIHE, said, "We have an Orchard presence here in Belfast now, within the building, which means they can be more hands-on to help with issues or configuration support. This helps us foster a good working relationship and we've seen a reduction in the number of faults we raise as a result.

"I would be happy to recommend Orchard Managed Service to any other housing provider and that's based on my

NIHE opts for Orchard Managed Service
Continued from previous page

experience over the last year where the level of service has been excellent and Orchard has always been at the end of the phone, day or night."

As part of their ongoing partnership with Orchard, NIHE is adding new Orchard products to its existing implementation to support its longer-term business objectives.

The NIHE team is currently investigating a new solution to allow housing officers to access data from the Orchard HMS from anywhere via a tablet. By allowing their team to work more flexibly and spend more time away from their desks working directly with tenants, NIHE hope to make

significant progress towards their strategic goal of achieving more agile working.

The team is also collaborating on rollout of Orchard Digital Self-Service later this year to provide additional digital channels to tenants, which they believe could significantly reduce pressure on their call centres and radically transform their business.

Like many housing organisations, NIHE has an objective to manage arrears more effectively, particularly for tenants affected by universal credit, and it is exploring the potential of 'income maximisation' products including Orchard's Income Analytics.

Donaghy said, "These are exciting times for us, and these new digital channels should radically change our business. Welfare reform and universal credit are having an adverse impact on arrears, so we need technology to help us address those issues.

"Strategically, I think we need to move towards more agile working, with patch managers working on site with tenants rather than stuck in an office behind a PC. We're engaging closely with Orchard project managers on these challenges. Orchard gives us a significant say in the development of products, and this close working relationship is a win-win situation for both organisations."

Cadcorp's hosted mapping streamlines data sharing for Citizen Housing

Citizen Housing has sped up its procurement process by sourcing web mapping software from Cadcorp though the G-Cloud framework, avoiding a lengthy tender process.

Citizen selected Cadcorp SIS WebMap for presenting and interrogating spatial data. This is accessed via a browser and includes a mobile-tuned interface. It's cloud hosted on Microsoft Azure with the geospatial web services engine Cadcorp GeognoSIS. The solution includes the Edit, ReportIT, and Local Knowledge options for further functionality. Cadcorp SIS Desktop is installed on the local network.

Debbie Jupe, senior project manager, Citizen Housing, said, "Cadcorp had a simpler upgrade path and easier communication all round than the alternatives. It offered a licensing model we could understand, value for money and is just what we needed."

Cadcorp set up maps in SIS WebMap to display Citizen's stock, grounds maintenance and other data. The solution is managed by Cadcorp and

uses federated security to allow single sign on, making it as easy as possible for staff to access. Cadcorp updates all of the Ordnance Survey (OS) mapping data as and when it's released, reducing the administrative overhead for Citizen. A cloud-hosted PostGIS database on Microsoft Azure is now Citizen's corporate GIS data store.

Feedback from Citizen's users has been very positive; the setup has enabled the housing provider's teams, including asset management, development, service charges and business intelligence, to amalgamate and share data more easily.

Cadcorp's Power BI interactive visualisations
Cadcorp has developed a visualisation for Microsoft Power BI, allowing an interactive, user-defined map to be embedded into a Power BI report. The visualisation integrates corporate

mapping served by Cadcorp SIS WebMap. Users can include their own data overlays to provide additional context for their Power BI business data.

SIS WebMap for Power BI supports Ordnance Survey Great Britain (OSGB) and numerous coordinate reference systems, including those that use latitude and longitude. Data is held in the Power BI environment and linked between the visuals on the report.
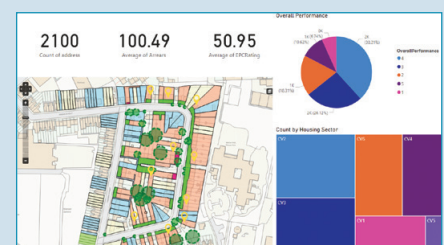
Gary Randle, sales director, Cadcorp, said, "More and more Cadcorp SIS users want to integrate their corporate base map and other overlays into Power BI. Cadcorp customers that use the OSGB coordinate reference system will for the first time be able to directly add their data into a Power BI visualisation and include an Ordnance Survey base map."

AI in housing – Five questions to ask first

Henry Jinman, Commercial Director, EBI.AI

Despite the theoretical power of artificial intelligence to transform the customer experience, many AI projects fail at the first hurdle. Henry Jinman from EBI.AI outlines the five most common mistakes and how to avoid them.

While AI promises a new dawn of efficiency, performing tasks better, faster, with fewer people, at lower cost and on a far larger scale, it also holds the key to transforming the customer experience (CX). Chatbots are already a common phenomenon in contact centres while millions of people interact daily with virtual assistants such as Google Home and Alexa.

For those organisations who haven't yet invested in AI, many are experiencing a fear of missing out. As a result, plenty of businesses are rushing in and too many AI projects are failing – what's going wrong?

Why do AI projects for CX fail?
AI technologies are transformational but they can be complex to scope out, build, deploy and operate. Here are the five most common mistakes organisations make:

1. **Unrealistic expectations –** It's common for users to have inflated expectations of new and emerging technologies. This could be because of marketing over-hype, lack of familiarity with the technology or the plain old hope that they have found a solution to some of their problems.
2. **Addressing the wrong challenges –** 'Trying to boil the ocean' is a familiar term to describe companies who try to fix everything with a single project or, at the other end of the scale, spend 18 months writing an AI strategy paper that delivers nothing.
3. **Lack of training data –** Many people say the more data you have the better. Yes, you do need data (ideally, lots of it) but it must be relevant.
4. **Lack of stakeholder engagement –** The people who will make or break the project are those responsible for deploying the technology and the leaders of that department. Remember to involve the budget holders from the very beginning.
5. **Misunderstand the technology –** Many AI projects fail for the simple reason that they are not really AI projects. AI technologies for customer contact need to be three things: digital, intelligent and automated.

What should I ask?
Don't rush in – here are the top five questions to ask before you begin:

1. **Where do I start?** Most organisations will want to achieve and demonstrate some quick wins but where do they begin? Should they be ambitious and try everything at once or run a mini-pilot to test the waters and find out what works and what doesn't before going live?
2. **How do I measure success?** Whether you are starting out big or small, the budget holders will want to monitor your progress and see that they are getting a return on their investment. Which goals should organisations focus on – should they look at their competitors, what customers want or what the business wants?
3. **How do we overcome our fear of the unknown?** If you are normally conservative and play safe, could you change this approach to become bold and experiment even if you fail? It's a great way to learn and there are even greater ways to share that learning before the all-important go-live.
4. **How do I test in a real-world environment and, crucially, while maintaining business as usual?** How do organisations ensure the new solution can integrate with the production environment, provide the required functionality, and deliver a return on investment?
5. **How do I ensure a successful roll-out?** There are various options to consider including the two most popular methods, known as 'incremental improvement' and 'applying the learning'. What are the benefits of each and which one is best for my organisation?

Henry Jinman is the commercial director of EBI.AI.

Community Fibre brings full-fibre broadband to London's social housing

Community Fibre has now enabled 100,000 premises with its full-fibre broadband network. The buildings are located across 16 of London's 33 boroughs, with 84 per cent of these premises being social housing.

Over 70 per cent of social housing in the London Borough of Wandsworth now have Community Fibre's full-fibre broadband, followed by 57 per cent in the London Borough of Southwark.

Graeme Oxby, CEO, Community Fibre, said, "Several of London's largest landlords now have more than a third of their properties connected to our full-fibre network. London's landlords can now, at no cost to themselves, increase this figure while supporting the UK's broadband ambition to reach its target of bringing fast, reliable and secure broadband to the UK as soon as possible."

"Our mission is to bring faster and cheaper broadband to Londoners, and especially to those that would benefit the most from it by working with housing providers and local councils. We believe in engaging with our local communities – we actively aim to recruit locally, we offer residents digital skills training and provide free wifi in local community centres to have a positive social impact."

CertOn's online portal for housing documents

New technology start-up CertOn is using a combination of QR codes, an app and online portal to safeguard and give immediate access to any important property-related documents.

At the Electrical Industry Awards in 2019, CertOn won awards for 'best electrical app' and 'commercial product of the year, as well as the 'top product award' from Professional Electrician magazine.

Boyd Goulden, creator of CertOn and a professional electrical contractor, said, "I thought there must be a simple way of finding property documents without someone needing to be there or having to wait until someone could find them for me. We found that most properties have the same problem with documents; why are they never there when you need them?

"I took the idea to Larry Rach at Twin Technology and Tom Sewel at Cyber UK. They helped build the concept into an award-winning business in our first year. We now already have CertOn installed in one housing association and a solid stream of interest from other housing providers."

Using CertOn, any finalised PDF document, such as certificate, manuals, plans and drawings, can be uploaded and viewed instantly. The web-based system works at any time, removing the need to wait for an office to open or maintenance staff to arrive.

Andrew Newman, a fire safety consultant and firefighter, said, "The fire industry could benefit from CertOn. We're finding that important documents are sometimes missing from the premises information box which should have been filled with information relevant to that property by the responsible person for that building.

"CertOn can hold all of this information, such as plan drawings, locations of dry risers, service intakes, firefighting lifts, hydrants, fire alarm panels and ventilation controls. This would be ideal for properties such as blocks of flats or sheltered housing schemes without staff present to help the fire service or to provide that information."

Gas Tag opens Fire Door

Following the original development of its compliance technology for gas servicing in social housing, Gas Tag has launched Fire Door to cover fire safety compliance.

Fire Door is an extension of Gas Tag's existing technology. A physical tag is placed in a property and tracks all of the fire door inspections and servicing work. This data is then fed into an online portal for landlords to monitor.

Evidence published in the first report of the Grenfell Enquiry revealed that ineffective fire doors allowed, "smoke and toxic gases to spread through the building more quickly than should have been possible." This has led to The Rt Hon Sir Martin Moore-Bick to recommend that managers should carry out inspections on fire doors at least every three months.

Peter Luke, commercial director, Gas Tag, said, "Gas Tag aims to standardise gas servicing workflows through our mobile app. We've replicated this approach with Fire Door, creating a process that will prompt inspectors to follow best practice, answer relevant inspection questions and take photographic evidence of the door.

"All of this information will be sent in real-time to the housing provider's portal and stored, giving them full visibility on the condition of their fire doors and the ability to carry out desktop audits."
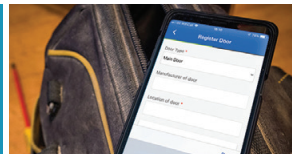
Dootrix joins forces with Optus Homes

Dootrix has partnered with housing app developer Optus Homes for Azure cloud architectural consultancy and app development services.

Optus Homes' app, currently in development and previewed at Housing Technology 2020 this month, allows social and private tenants to manage their tenancy accounts with ease. By integrating with housing providers' existing business applications, the app will also generate significant internal operational efficiencies and savings.

Gerry Kelly, CEO, Optus Homes, said, "As the rental market continues to change, customer service will be a key area of judgement. For housing providers who understand the need for a genuine 'mobile-first' approach but can't commit the time and resources to build one from scratch, Optus Homes is here to disrupt the service balance by allowing you to put the tenant at the centre of your offering.

"We're offering zero development costs for a powerful mobile app solution in your brand, built so that it easily integrates with your existing systems and available on a monthly PaaS contract."

Based on the Azure cloud platform, Optus Homes' app has the latest features and functionality to deliver the best experience to tenants; voice-to-text, real-time language translation and a suite of two-way community messaging features are on the roadmap for 2020.

Steve Leonard, app development specialist, Microsoft, said, "This is exactly the type of innovation that the latest developments in Azure can provide. I'm excited to see how the Optus Homes ecosystem evolves in 2020."

What's the point of customer feedback?

Tony Hughes, Microsoft Solution Strategist, and Kirsty Marsden, Microsoft Business Development Manager, Technology Services Group

Office 365 as a sector-specific solution

As the adoption of Microsoft Office 365 powers ahead in the housing sector and most social housing providers have completed their migrations of email to the cloud, many are now embarking on true digital transformation via the ground-breaking Office 365 Power Platform.

The Office 365 journey has been an exciting one. We've seen the suite evolve from the basic office applications of Word, Excel, PowerPoint et al. to the introduction of enterprise-level automation and app-building tools Power Apps and Power Automate (formerly Flow). Now we're seeing the platform offer true artificial intelligence (AI) to revolutionise the way social housing providers work.

From timesheets to neighbourhood and block inspections, the Power Platform provides a powerful form and workflow solution to which legacy or manual processes can be migrated. In conjunction with a SharePoint modern intranet, electronic document and record management (EDRM) platform and Teams as a collaboration suite, the Power Platform is driving high returns on Office 365 investments.

The move away from a total reliance on housing management systems (HMS) to provide full functionality right across the organisation is one that's been discussed in the sector for many years. Many housing providers require a similar solution to meet their needs and want to explore using SharePoint for EDRM, but they need the ability to integrate this into their core platforms.

That's why housing providers need to use Office 365 in a way which fits around their core business applications and integrates where necessary. This means your integral processes, such as voids management, allocations, human resources, health and safety and much more, can be migrated to Office 365.

New features in Office 365

We've seen some really exciting new features in Office 365 in recent months. We already know about the powerful robotic process automation (RPA) which allows you to automate a number of your key processes such as gas certifications, site audits and even tenant onboarding, complete with auto-generated documentation.

Another very exciting release is Power Virtual Agents. In a similar vein to Power Apps, Power Automate and Power BI, Microsoft is offering an enterprise-level tool to the masses at an affordable price. You can use Power Virtual Agents as chatbots on your website, streamlining the way you deal with customer queries and triaging common requests that come into your contact centres. Like automated processes, this can vastly increase your employees' productivity and save your organisation hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Project Cortex is an innovative feature defined as a 'knowledge network', intelligently applying AI to automatically organise your content and delivering pioneering experiences such as topic cards, topic pages and knowledge centres within your Office 365 environment. This is a supercharged version of the long-standing and successful SharePoint knowledge management solution TSG has deployed for organisations such as Home Group, which resulted in a £220,000 saving in the first year of implementation and a reduction of its repair call-out error rate to just three per cent. Imagine that, but with machine learning and artificial intelligence in-built.

Starting your Office 365 journey

When exploring what's possible in Office 365, one question that continues to come up is how to build a business plan for an Office 365 roll-out in the organisation. Once the base email, Word and Excel elements have been migrated, how do you position a full roll-out of its innovative features internally?

Many housing providers have a specific requirement which drives their first foray into Office 365; this could be a specific form or workflow they need to digitise with Power Apps and Power Automate to save time or improve a process. Sometimes, it's the replacement of a legacy EDRM system prior to support ending. Others often begin by looking at the modern workplace and rolling out OneDrive and Teams to support collaboration and mobile working, and with a full telephony solution now available as part of Teams, we anticipate this adoption will continue at an exponential rate.

With Microsoft's continued investment in Office 365 as a modern platform that's set to change the way we work forever, we know it will never become a legacy solution.

Tony Hughes is a Microsoft solution strategist and Kirsty Marsden is a Microsoft business development manager at Technology Services Group (TSG).

A code of ethics for chatbots

Scott Summers, Co-Founder, Fuzzlab

More and more of the housing providers and local authorities I talk to have recognised that their customers want self-service capability and that a chatbot is the best way to provide it. From providing automated customer service for rent queries to raising a repair, chatbots offer an opportunity to serve customers on multiple digital channels and free up contact centre staff to deal with more complex or sensitive customer problems.

Chatbots can help your contact centre deliver an immediate and responsive service 24/7. They respond to customers, engage them and answer their queries instantly. A good chatbot will automate business transactions and enable tenants to manage their own affairs without the delay and hassle of contacting the customer care team.

Most of us find engaging with a contact centre frustrating and expectations of our service providers seem to be increasing. 22 per cent of millennials say they would stop engaging with a brand after one bad interaction, while 67 per cent of respondents to a recent survey by desk.com expect the quickest response from using chat to engage with customer support.

Social housing should take pride in how highly it regards customer service and how it places customers at the heart of everything it does. As a sector, we need to take the issues concerning the ethics of AI and chatbots seriously. However, the ethics of chatbots are complex; they cover a range of topics including data ownership, privacy, transparency and abuse.

Rob High, the CTO of IBM Watson was recently featured in a Forbes article on the subject. The article – "Ethics and Artificial Intelligence with IBM Watson's Rob High" – reported how the only way for AI to be ethical is for it also to be transparent. High advised that when a person interacts with a chatbot, they need to know they are talking to a chatbot and not a live person.

Ethics should be at the foundation of how AI is used. This ranges from facial recognition to driverless cars to customer profiling and we should also apply it to how chatbots are built and how customer data is used in any machine learning algorithms. Your chatbot is an extension of your customer care team and how a chatbot behaves will almost certainly influence the perception your tenants have of their landlord. If the chatbot, and indeed the landlord, is unethical then it leads to distrust from residents and potential litigation problems. Ethical chatbots, on the other hand, promote brand loyalty and encourage a relationship built on trust.

Putting the customer first

When an organisation builds a chatbot, it must decide who the bot will serve; does it serve its own needs, or the needs of the customer? For social landlords, the aim tends to be to reduce contact centre call volumes and enable customer self-service across multiple digital channels. By reducing call volumes, contact centre agents can spend more time and respond faster to those tenants that need or prefer to talk. As such, it's clear that the chatbot is there to serve the needs of tenants. However, if on the other hand, the chatbot is there to act as a barrier to tenants getting the help they need or to simply reduce costs, then its design and purpose should be reconsidered.

In general, an ethical organisation must always put the needs of their customers before their own; specifically, I'd expect this to always be the case of a local authority or housing provider. That means providing a product that can automate business processes, such as checking a rent balance or making a payment, instead of one that can be implemented quickly merely as a box-ticking exercise, such as an FAQ bot with a handful of questions and automated responses. Users should have the option to provide feedback about the chatbot to better identify issues, maintain ethical behaviour, and improve overall customer satisfaction. Bots that use algorithms and machine learning to book repairs or make recommendations should be subjected to regular health checks to meet this need.

Are you talking to a human or a chatbot? Establishing trust between machines and humans works similarly to building trust between humans. A brand can build up trust by aligning their expectations to reality, learning from their mistakes and correcting them, listening to feedback from customers and being transparent.

Transparency is a critical consideration when designing a customer service chatbot. It all comes down to the simple question of whether it is obvious that users are talking to a human or a machine? Customers can usually tell the difference between the two, and they expect that brands will be honest about it. Customers hardly expect the chatbot to be perfect, but they would like to know what they are and aren't able to do.

When dealing with sensitive information such as moves, finance and ASB or when updating contact details, you must have security checks in place.

A tenant should have the option to speak to a real person if the bot is unable to give them the response or service they need, either by transferring to live chat or arranging a call-back.

How should a chatbot handle privacy?

The protection and privacy of user data is vital for the modern interconnected world. Laws that protect users' data, such as GDPR, are a prime example of how important user privacy has become.

When developing a chatbot, the ethics involved with user privacy must be considered. This helps to answer questions such as:

- Where is the data within the chat transcript stored?
- Can the conversations with a chatbot be studied to improve and optimise the user experience?
- How long should the chat transcript be kept?
- How are tenants authenticated?
- If a complaint is raised via the chatbot, who will see this?

A code of ethics for chatbots
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As with so many things, transparency is the best course of action here. The chatbot must ensure the privacy of users' information during interactions; in effect, an unspoken confidentiality agreement between the user and the bot. This means the bot should encrypt communications and delete transcripts of chats within a reasonable timeframe.

Ethics must be at the heart of every action a business takes. Given that chatbots are still relatively new, it's likely that more ethical concerns will become apparent over time. Housing providers must continue learning from the emerging cases and continue building their guiding principles and ethical standards.

When in doubt, side with the customer and offer transparency.

Scott Summers is the co-founder of Fuzzlab.

Gentoo turns to The Robot Exchange for RPA

Gentoo is now in its first phase of a programme to use robotic process automation (RPA) to minimise the need for human intervention in manual, repetitive and error-prone tasks, based on technology from The Robot Exchange.

Nigel Wilson, CEO, Gentoo Group, said, "The initial automation was a non-customer facing administration task. By trialling the technology on a relatively low-priority internal task, we've been able to take a low-risk approach while becoming comfortable with the technology. One of our constraints was to ensure the absolute security of customer

data, so we had to be sure this data didn't leave our network."

Andy Wallace, CEO, The Robot Exchange, said, "A classic application for our technology is to create a robot that can monitor inbound email attachments, open them and identify how to process them. Any attachments that have incorrect information are forwarded to a colleague to manage.

Nigel Wilson, CEO, Gentoo Group

"We can generally automate at least 90 per cent of the inbound manual work."

After the success of this first project, a longer-term plan is being developed to identify further human processes that are manual or repetitive. These types of processes can be easily automated using The Robot Exchange's technology.

Wilson said, "It's key that the automations are used to ensure that we can deliver the best possible service to our tenants and residents. For our next RPA development, we are planning to use machine learning and neural linguistic programming (NLP) to create an early warning system that identifies our households where energy poverty or potential rent arrears could start to become an issue."

GENERAL NEWS

Data as a strategic asset

Camilla Shrieve, Data Consultant, Data Futurists

The importance of data is easy to miss when we're under pressure and trying to get things done. Most people are guilty of putting something into a system just to get their specific task completed; we all know it's not the way to do things but it's really hard to communicate just how damaging this is. There are so many reasons why we should get data right and even more benefits that can be realised from doing so.

The criticism that Robert Jenrick had regarding the speed with which building owners have responded to the Grenfell tragedy isn't unfounded. From the perspective of the general public, it's not acceptable to take years to get proven dangerous materials taken off their homes. Working in housing, we all know that it's

not as easy as the public think it is; there is a minefield which I'm sure most local authorities and housing providers have spent months wading through.

New regulations
While I sincerely hope the tragedy never recurs, I'm sorry to say the effort we've all been through to get our residents feeling safe in their homes isn't a 'one and you're done' task. The world is ever-changing and with new technologies and advances

Data as a strategic asset
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coming into our homes all the time, the regulations that we need to adhere to will never be static, and rightly so. This has been made even more evident by the government's introduction of the Building Safety Regulator within the Health and Safety Executive, whom I'm sure will insist on new regulations.

We can't wrap our homes in bubble wrap so there'll always be risks and, as much as we don't like it, there'll always be another tragedy we can (sadly) learn from and protect our homes against. Ideally, we shouldn't wait until the regulations are changed before we learn from those tragedies and should strive to make proactive changes.

However, to be able to react quickly we need to have the information we need at our fingertips. We will need to delve deeper into how our properties are built and what materials are used, but are you ready for this or do you even know where to start?

Building on your current data
You're probably thinking, "We'll never know what information we'll need to look at next and it's too hard to get all of it at once." I get it, I do. If, every time you need to collect new data, you then have to confirm the data you already have, you're doing twice the amount of work. However, always maintaining high quality, accurate data means that all you need to do is use your current data and expand on it to meet your new requirements. Which sounds great, but how is this achieved?

It needs to be a long-term plan with commitment and permanence, where good data management and governance are instilled at every stage of the building and maintenance lifecycle. Your data needs to be treated like the asset it is, make it work for you and reap the benefits of really investing in it. The success of every piece of technological advancement, software, process and decision is based on the data that it uses. If that data is wrong or incomplete, the decisions you make or the outcome of the process will also be wrong. Without the ability to wave a magic wand and get your data in a state of perfection, you need to have a logical and manageable approach.

Get your data basics right
Let's start off with creating a good foundation, working from the basics up and knowing you can trust the very basic
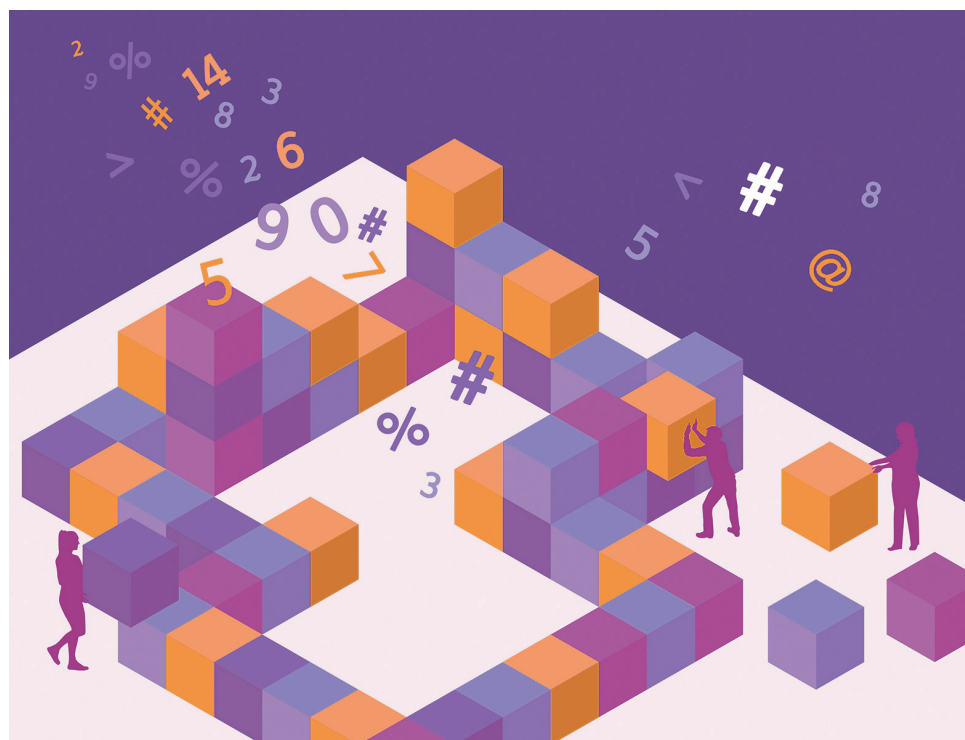
data you have. The database that you use to store the data is irrelevant; it doesn't need to be the most expensive or the most powerful as long as the data you have in it is correct. That said, it's prudent for your data to be on a database as opposed to a spreadsheet; this ensures that the data is structured and therefore easier to use and to maintain. Making sure that your data is accessible, understood and maintained appropriately is vital. All these things are covered by good data governance and making sure your teams understand the importance of your data as a strategic asset.

Unfortunately, you can't just rely on a system implementation to address your data issues, it takes effort. Getting your data in a good state of cleanliness can be a time consuming and expensive task, so rather than thinking about it as just being clean data, consider it as an investment in good evidence-led decision-making, a greater chance of getting things right first-time and investing into future advancements.

Data as an asset
Making sure the people who use the data really understand its importance helps the data stay clean. Every time you have confidence in a data set, make sure your processes are working to maintain it and that you have the right methodologies to ensure it stays accurate. In short, upskilling everyone in your business to a higher

level of data literacy is a truly worthwhile investment.

Getting the most from your data really does take a multifaceted approach because it can be complex and time consuming. Getting the right people involved to make sure your efforts are creating tangible benefits is vital. Making sure your colleagues understand the difference between including and excluding a basement in the storey count of a block actually has an impact on how other areas of the business function and the regulations that that building is required to adhere to, and therefore how we treat our customers. The data really is the foundation on which every part of the business is built and how we keep on top of the changing landscape.

Camilla Shrieve is a data consultant at Data Futurists.

Baby steps for sustainable technology in housing

Adam Rigg, Futurologist, Red Kite Community Housing

In the past, when people have discussed technology in the context of housing and certainly in the context of social housing, certain words are usually guaranteed to be used within 60 seconds of the conversation starting.

Speed. Cost. Effort. Improvement. Drive. Change. Innovation. Productivity. Solution. Automatic. Connected.

What do all of these words have in common? Well, let's have a look at the words you are less likely to hear in that conversation and you may see the pattern.

Slower. Expensive. Sustainable. Green. Reuse. Harder. Recycle. Upcycle. Healthy. Family. Community. Planet.

You may be nodding along as you read this, thinking, "Ah, but now that everyone is talking about sustainability, I can drop those words in now and again and it makes me sound like I have my finger on the pulse." Well, good – so those words are creeping into conversation but why and to what end?

Why?
I'd like to think that the 'why' is because innovative industry leaders such as Centrica, Apple, BMW, BT, Adidas and L'Oréal have got ahead of the game and started developing products that engender a change in the ethos of those companies.

Perhaps this then filters to others,

businesses and consumers. People start taking notice, saying, "Well, if Apple is using sustainable materials, then it must be the right way to go", and "Actually, I can do without everything being super cheap and easy if it's greener and more sustainable." And of course, in theory one should follow the other until we no longer need to make that choice.

The cynic in some of us may suspect it's because the housing sector loves a fad. I've heard it said that housing is a sector that literally waits for the next change in tide to come along and then jumps on it like a drunk surfer trying to look cool in front of a beach full of very unimpressed spectators.

The reality is that the housing sector is very good at providing housing. That's its main job. It's never been a leading sector in terms of technology or even sustainability. That's not to say it couldn't or shouldn't be. In fact, perhaps it's positioned very well to be just that.

To what end?
As housing providers, we can tap into expert resources and develop our own in-house skillsets and push the envelope, show the way, lead the charge and strike

other gung-ho attitudes. But because we're social housing providers, maybe there's always a voice at the back of our minds, saying, "Play it nice and cool, Trigger, nice and cool, you know what I mean."

Are housing providers ever likely to develop sites that are initially more expensive to build and offer lower profits? Are they likely to develop homes that may cost more but are better for the planet? New technologies are generally expensive in broad terms, so their adoption is often slow until costs reduce. Solar panels are a good example of a modern, green, energy-saving technology that was initially expensive and has now become more attainable for people.

It makes me wonder where the line of morality lies. At what point do we say, "OK, money is less important to us as a business than doing the right thing for our planet and for our children's future."

It's all too easy to use the latest buzzwords around sustainability and talk a good talk about how it's important but when it comes down to the bottom line, who is brave enough to put profit on the backburner and agree that some things are more important?

Baby steps for sustainable technology in housing
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- How about building homes entirely from recycled materials that use completely natural heating?
- How about developing areas, villages or sites that can be travelled to and from using completely green transport?
- How about donating profits to sustainable housing in countries that are not as fortunate as ours in terms of financial stability?
- How about funding research into biodegradable products inside the home?
- This list could go on and on…

Baby steps

It's unrealistic to suggest that businesses take a long term and less profitable stance on the way they innovate, create and develop. But baby steps eventually turn into athletic strides, given the right environment and encouragement.

Consider your own role in housing. How could you take more baby steps, or how could you cultivate the right environment to take athletic strides towards a more sustainable world?

We can all keep one eye on sustainability when developing initiatives. We can all try to suggest greener alternatives whenever possible.

Ultimately, we can choose to develop technological advances without forethought, as have many of our predecessors, and there is an argument that many of the world's greatest technological innovations paid little mind to sustainability but rather focused on a solution to a specific need. Or we can choose to think; there's no harm in at least thinking about sustainability.

Some would say that the very best technological inventions have perhaps inadvertently shown us ways to be more sustainable; computers have brought us to a place where paper is barely needed and digital music has done a decent job of removing physical waste (I still have a David Hasselhoff cassette if anybody wants it).

So perhaps sustainability and innovation go hand in hand and we shouldn't worry about it at all. But just to be on the safe side, why don't we all consider why and to what end sustainability is now merging with technology and innovation.

Housing already has the sandpit; we just need the creative minds to play in it and build a future that will last. And I really do have a David Hasselhoff tape you can have, just DM me.

Adam Rigg is a futurologist at Red Kite Community Housing.

Stonewater launches HR chatbot from MHR
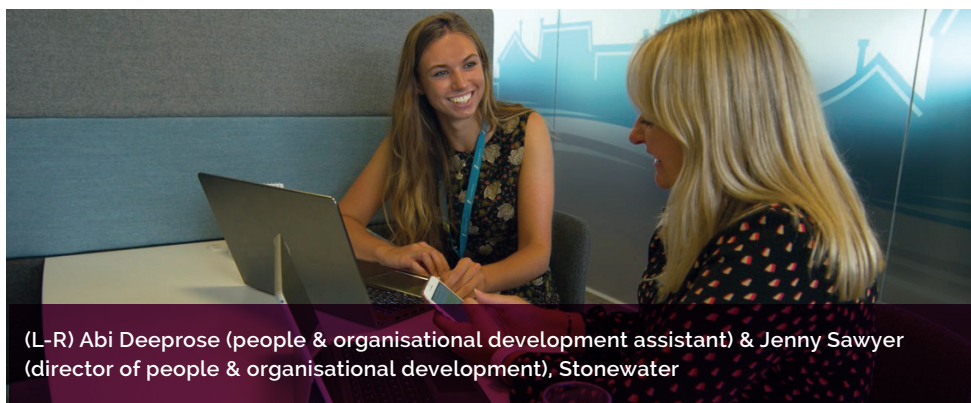
(L-R) Abi Deeprose (people & organisational development assistant) & Jenny Sawyer (director of people & organisational development), Stonewater

Stonewater has introduced a dedicated HR chatbot from MHR to drive employee engagement.

The chatbot enables Stonewater staff to carry out many routine transactions within iTrent, such as booking holidays, checking over/flexi-time balances, submitting expenses, viewing payslips, clocking hours and managing their diaries, all from their smartphones.

The pilot of MHR's iTrent chatbot is the latest phase of an extensive digitisation programme by Stonewater in partnership with MHR to improve its internal processes with new digital functionality and to enhance the work experience of its staff.

The chatbot is a recent addition to MHR's iTrent HR and payroll system which Stonewater has been using since 2016. Jenny Sawyer, director of people and organisational development, Stonewater, said, "Our aim has been to move towards a 'digital by default' model and establish an 'always on' culture. The chatbot will be a key part of this.

"Before we started trialling the iTrent chatbot, all employee transactions with HR had to be done via the desktop, which meant they had to be in the office. Now they have the flexibility and convenience to carry out tasks on the move, enabling them to strike a better balance between their home and work.

"The feedback from our employees has been very positive. They love the chatbot's functionality and how it replicates the user-friendliness of social media messaging apps such as Whatsapp."

XMReality & DtL's excellent AR adventure

Stewart Davison, Director of Innovation, DtL Creative

I recently took a trip to the Silicon Valley of Sweden, a city called Linkoping, which is about two hours south of Stockholm. The reason for this Nordic excursion came about when I spotted a post from a company specialising in augmented reality (AR). Now, if you hear the term AR, you may immediately jump to an image in your head of the film Iron Man.

How does this apply to social housing? For those of you who are unclear about AR, it's the technology that expands our physical world, adding layers of digital information onto it. AR uses a view of the physical real-world environment with superimposed computer-generated images, not merely as simple displays of data, but by making them integral elements of the surroundings which are perceived as natural extensions of that environment. There are some very interesting applications of this type of AR emerging in housing and property development.

For example, Cher Lewney, Flintshire County Council's digital strategy and community resilience programme manager, recently explained that she's been talking to a local authority who were looking at using AR in housing sales to model new types of housing. They are linking data to understand the local economic impact (employment, schools, GPs, transport and so on) of building new homes on Site A versus Site B.

AR in housing isn't particularly new. I remember doing a presentation at a housing conference in 2014 where I showed how the Halifax bank was using AR in its customer app for house buying and mortgages. I remember that this app sparked a lot of thoughts around how overlaying information via the camera of a smartphone could prove useful for social housing professionals.

I've been interested in AR and its applications in housing since doing my MSc degree a few years ago. At the time, I was looking at 'wearable tech' and the applications of AR around the same time that Google Glass was being introduced (for the first time).

Obviously, time has marched on and the dominant piece of technology in use today is still the smart phone. Therefore, when I spotted a post on LinkedIn from a company called XMReality based in Sweden talking about AR in field maintenance, my interest was immediately piqued.

I contacted them and after a lengthy Skype call and a small play with the software, both they and our company DtL Creative, felt it would be useful for us to visit them in Linkoping, Sweden. So it was after a very early start in the small hours of a chilly Wednesday that found DtL Creative flying out to an even snowier and chillier Sweden.

XMReality is based in a city called Linkoping, which our host told us is the 'Silicon Valley' of Sweden. It's a technology hub and centre of excellence for a wide range of industrial and military technologies, attracting the best and brightest of Sweden's tech geeks.

Dave Loudon and I spent a very interesting afternoon talking about social housing and how emerging tech is beginning to be embraced by innovative housing providers. It was then the turn of XMReality to show us what remote guidance could do.

I was initially struck by the simplicity of the application. Essentially, it allows you to see what your customers see through your mobile device and use your hand to point out, explain and solve any problems without you being there in person.

As the demonstration went on, I was furiously taking notes on how it could be used in social housing. I spotted its potential relevance to customer service and supported housing as well as the obvious uses for repairs, maintenance and asset management.

In its most basic form, its simple peer-to-peer use of a smartphone and its camera means that it can be picked up and used with very little set up and its user experience is familiar to all of us with current smartphones.

This type of AR has an exciting future. It's already being used by some household brands such as Siemens, GE and Electrolux. It's simple to use, powerful and it just works!

Over the coming months DtL Creative and XMReality will be working with social housing providers to explore this technology further. We have some ideas, but it's getting ideas from the everyday users in housing that will forge this technology into something that I think could radically transform how housing providers interact with their tenants.

We'd love to know your thoughts so look out for opportunities over the coming months to get involved.

Stewart Davison is the director of innovation at DtL Creative.

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