

# Perspectives on Digital in Housing



# Perspectives on Digital in Housing

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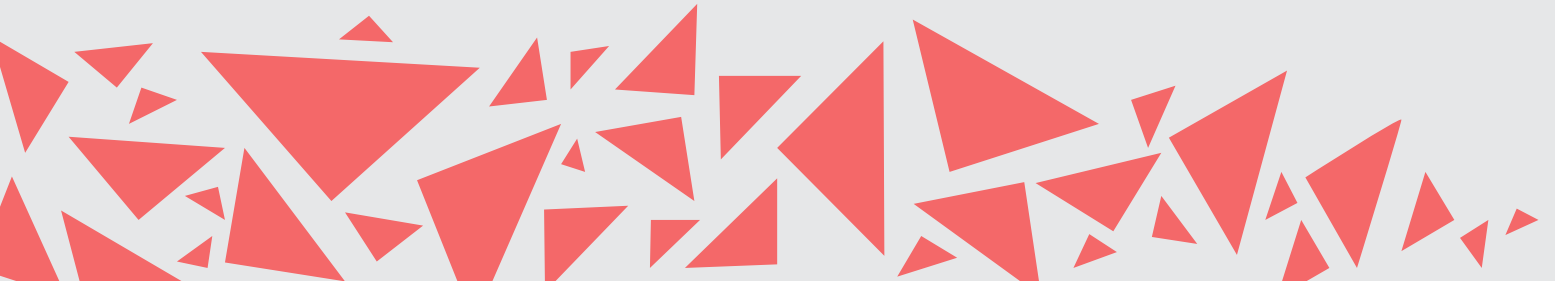
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# Perspectives on Digital in Housing

## Foreword



**Tony Summers**  
CEO, Socitm Advisory

Housing is, fundamentally, a digital and data enabled business, with a reliance on systems, process and technology to get things done. Yet the sector often lags behind others in terms of delivering slick, digitally enabled services to tenants, making best use of data to drive decisions and exploiting technology to deliver services in the most efficient way.

While great strides have been made by some housing providers, particularly during the pandemic, across the sector as a whole not much has really changed from my time as a Chief Executive in it more than ten years ago:

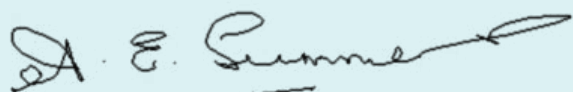
- The same four or five software providers dominate the system landscape with little competition.
- There's limited significant investment in new technologies.
- There's an inherent aversion to risk, with many landlords 'following the herd' in terms of tech and how it's designed and delivered – even when they know there's a better way.

Don't get me wrong, providers do a fantastic job and are working hard to do their best for tenants, but against a backdrop of on-demand services in other areas of life, rising customer expectation, an increasing data and cyber risk profile and the financial pressures that will come with retrofitting and stock investment, is the sector innovative enough or moving quickly enough in the digital space?

Created by Socitm Advisory, in partnership with HQN, *Perspectives on Digital in Housing* shares insights from leaders across the sector, including best practice, ideas for the future and lessons learned when things go wrong.

At Socitm Advisory we're keen to get your feedback and really listen to your needs. I'm always open to a coffee and a chat to share ideas or to talk about how we might help and support you with your aims – please just reach out.

Happy reading.





# Perspectives on Digital in Housing

## Foreword



Alistair McIntosh  
CEO, HQN

### Welcome to Perspectives on Digital in Housing.

It's time for us to take back the leading role in this sphere. After all, you know where the computer was first invented, don't you? Let me jog your memory. For years in the building where Southwark housing department was based, there was a blue plaque up to tell all and sundry that this was the very place where Charles Babbage set to work!

Many thanks to everyone that has contributed to this volume. You're standing on the shoulders of a giant. But we face challenges Babbage could never have imagined. On one side we have Amazon, amongst others, setting new standards for responsiveness.

Our customers will want us to follow suit. It's time for quicker and more flexible services built around individual choices. That's the new normal in a nutshell. Yes, we did harness new technology to work in smarter ways than ever before during lockdown. But the essays in this volume shine the spotlight on our frustrations, too.

Time and again the writers talk about data. And they're right to do so. We don't know enough about our buildings and we don't know enough about the people who live there. That's at the core of so many of the problems we're trying to solve. Unless and until we fix this, we will be chasing our tail.

After Grenfell we must be monitoring the performance of safety critical components in all of our homes. Can we do this digitally? It's a huge task, so the answer must be yes.

And the world moves on. Criminal geniuses from anywhere in the world can hold our services to ransom whenever they please. How do we protect ourselves from this threat?

Piracy had largely died out by the time Babbage set to work. Now, in effect, it's back stronger than ever thanks in no small way to his invention.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

# Digital leadership

# Digital leadership



**Nick Atkin**  
CEO, Yorkshire Housing

## The rise of the technocrats

If we're serious about improving customer experience then we need more people who are willing to take us outside of our comfort zone and lead the transformation we need both in our mindsets and our services.

We can't stick to tried and trusted approaches and somehow expect radically different results.

A digital awakening, led by more sophisticated use of data, will mean we can provide services when, where and how customers want to receive them. But only if we embrace the opportunities that lie ahead.

### Time to change

My own digital journey began back in 2013. I was listening to Lord Freud talking about the introduction of Universal Credit.

It got me thinking about how much of our rent we received through housing benefit - it was about 65% - and how many people were currently employed to collect the final third from those not receiving housing benefit.

I started working out how many extra people we'd need to hire once Universal Credit kicked in to collect all of our rent from all of our tenants.

It was clear that by doing things the same way as we've always done them, we'd have to employ more staff to collect the same amount of income.

That didn't feel like a strong proposition to take to Board.

**"We are living through a workplace revolution. Like most revolutions you don't realise you are in one until you come out of the other side."**

I started looking outside of the sector for what the solution might be, specifically in the banking and retail sectors who were miles ahead on customer experience.

Digitally-led self-service was already the norm for dealing with the majority of transactional services. This freed up more staff time to focus more intense support where it was needed.

Customers got to do things on their terms. Staff did work that made the biggest difference. It felt like an approach that was both sensible and sustainable.





## Digital leadership

At the time we worked out that around 70% of tenants would make the transition to self-service with no problem as they were already interacting digitally with other industries. Around 20% would need a bit of support to help them on the journey and the final 10% would need really intensive support, or would not be able to make that journey at all.

That good tenant insight meant we could be smart about where we placed our tenancy support and staff resources.

Since those early days of Universal Credit, housing has come to embrace digital. Most landlords offer a hybrid model that includes some kind of digital self-service.

### Data is our friend

We've still got a long way to go when it comes to how we use our data. This will be the real catalyst for housing understanding the full potential of digital.

Smart tech is here, yet the way we fit out our homes has been pretty much the same since the 1950s.

There are opportunities that lie ahead, such as the remote monitoring of component failures in our homes. But these will only work if we have the data to support them.

### Digital journeys take time

At Yorkshire Housing we've set an aim to transform our housing service offer. To do that we know we need three elements:

- Real time and accurate data
- Connected technology
- Real time customer insight

There is no magical switch we can pull to make these things happen. They take time. We're still working towards them and have carried out a root and branch review of our data quality.

### A genuine revolution

At the moment we are living through a workplace revolution. Like most revolutions you don't realise you are in one until you come out of the other side.

The pandemic has fundamentally changed how we all work. This is the single biggest opportunity we have to reform service.

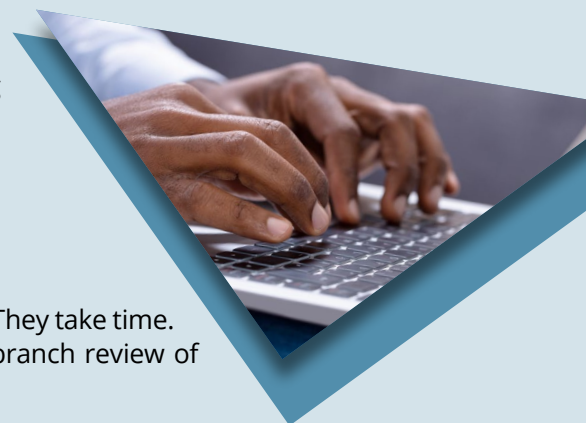
We can finally get away from the Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 mentality and focus on delivering services when and where customers want them.

It will change our recruitment and allow us to get and retain the best staff.

Leaders will have to think differently about how they communicate – digital will enable that. Traditional leadership structures will break down and the power balance will change.

Leadership will be based on how authentic you are and what you deliver, not your job title or status.

Ultimately, digital will help us achieve more for our staff and customers, but only if we embrace the risks.



## Digital leadership



**Emma Richman**  
Director of Operations,  
Peaks and Plains

### You're only as good as your data

How you hold and use valuable data can make or break you - a fact we learned the hard way at Peaks and Plains.

A breach of compliance data on electrical testing led to a downgrade from the Regulator of Social Housing before I joined the Trust. It was painful, but in truth it was the wake-up call we needed.

It led to a cultural awakening and recognition of how vital data is to our business. We are well on the road to recovery now and I believe many in housing can learn from our journey.

#### What happened?

Peaks and Plains was downgraded by the Regulator of Social Housing in 2020 for compliance issues. Actions arising from fire risk assessments had not been carried out, and some of our homes had not had electrical safety checks completed.

There was also a smaller breach concerning a loan covenant.

The effects were huge. The downgrade was not just about specific mistakes.

Working with the Regulator we knew the culture, the environment, and how things were done needed to change. It showed that we were not storing or using our data correctly.

We wanted more transparency, more ability to hold people to account. We wanted an environment of high support but also high challenge.

Our whole approach to managing data had to change, and it has done.

We have taken a systematic approach and have adopted a mantra of 'don't just tell us about it, show us.'

#### Data drives good decision making

We wanted rid of clunky systems and to create one version of the truth for all of our data on properties and customers.

We brought in Compliance Manager which is a brilliant new system.

This allowed us to validate and house our data in one system and is now allowing us to access daily reports, providing plenty of assurance.





# Digital leadership

This is so important because good data drives good decision making.

We've had to start with the basics. There is no quick fix. We've undertaken a huge exercise in data gathering on our customers and our stock.

For customers that started with surveys, but to make sure we capture everyone, each staff member has been allocated 40 customers each to contact on the phone and validate their data.

We will be going out to visit the people that we haven't been able to talk to. It's been a good exercise for people to speak to our customers as lockdown eases.

It's not been easy, but we now know we have accurate data we can trust and have the ability to access and use that information in meaningful ways.

That will provide a strong foundation for the future.

**"A downgrade from the regulator was painful, but in truth it was the wake-up call we needed."**

## Don't be an ostrich

A lot of people are burying their heads in the sand with their data storage and capture. Often it's an incident that happens which catches people out.

A fire when there's no validated data certification or a Legionnaires case where you've not had the water hygiene tested. These are the kind of things the keep Boards and Executive teams awake at night.

Good data addresses that overnight.

A key to our turnaround has been instilling a no blame culture that encouraged openness and got people to be honest about where we were at. That really worked for us. It enabled things to come out of the woodwork.

Then you can apply resources, make the changes you need and start to stress test parts of the business.

For organisations who know that their data isn't where it needs to be my advice is to start addressing it today. You can't be complacent and eventually it will catch you out.



# Digital leadership



**Hasani Jess**  
NED at Settle Group

## Wellbeing for your tech

The pandemic and resultant lockdowns have highlighted the need for us to focus on our wellbeing more than ever. Taking time out to invest in ourselves is important to avoid burnout, illness and reduced performance amongst other things. Clearly it is something worth the investment. I, like many, often struggle with this investment. Why?

"I have too much to get through. Taking time out will only make that worse."

"Other people are depending on me. If I cause a delay, I will be affecting their wellbeing!"

"Taking time out won't make a difference. I can't go anywhere!"

These are all reasons I have given myself. I am sure you have similar and more. The struggle is between the important and the urgent. Preventative maintenance is not easy to prioritise because there is always something competing with it that has more visibility, perceived urgency and higher return. Although we know there is going to be some payback at some point, it is easy to kick the can down the road to a later time, where its priority will be higher.

Whilst having some downtime to protect my own wellbeing, my family and I were walking alongside a beautiful beach in Bournemouth. The sea was still, the sand was fluffy and the scene beautifully serene. Unfortunately, it was pretty cold, so there was no sandcastle building and sunbathing on this occasion, but it was so relaxing to enjoy this wonderful environment. The beach goes on for miles, from one pier to another interspersed with doughnut sellers and beach huts. As we enjoyed the scene, we came across a sign which talked about beach nourishment.

This was a term I was not familiar with, but it is effectively an environment management programme to ensure that the coastal areas are continuously protected against erosion. This particular project was budgeted at £7.5M and due to take a few months. What struck me was that the project was not about aesthetics, it was not even about tourism. It was a maintenance project and an expensive one at that. This renourishment was the beach's wellbeing being prioritised. In my day job, I'm the CTO of an insuretech company and it got me thinking about the parallels with my world of tech.



## Digital leadership

Within the tech industry we have a concept called technical debt. It describes the accumulation of maintenance or remediation costs that we accrue as we make decisions. Every short cut we take in a system build accrues a bit more debt. Every test we risk not building, every customer requirement we choose to delay, every tactical 'fix' accumulates a cost that will be required to be paid in the future. A technical debt. Ultimately this means that at some point that system will require its own renourishment project. Often just like the beach, that project doesn't provide features, capabilities and revenue generating changes, but is required simply to remain functional.

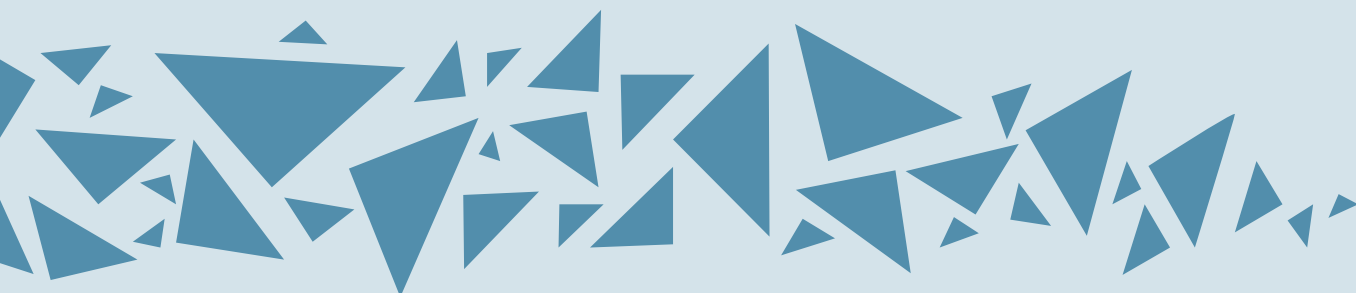
**"Every short cut we take in a system build accrues a technical debt."**

In the grand scheme of things, the £7.5M is probably a drop in the ocean of the overall cost of creating and maintaining the beach I visited, and this is the same in the case of technical debt. If the level of cost of paying back that debt gets out of control you have probably hit Tech Bankruptcy, and a migration project for your now legacy system is on the horizon.

Many companies are now recognising the impact of technical debt on the customer experience and on the bottom line. Continual iteration is increasingly becoming the norm – spreading the investment you'd make in a large scale 'one off' project over a period of time, making incremental improvements and developing product and service roadmaps to enable that journey.

This won't be possible in every case. However, just like investment in our own wellbeing, it is time we thought more about renourishment projects for our tech that are periodical, rather than sporadic.

You can read more articles by Hasani on his [LinkedIn page](#):





**It starts with data**

# It starts with data



**Simon Kaffel**  
Data and Analysis Director,  
Sovereign Housing

## The Power of Data: Unlocking actionable insight

Data. It's everywhere we turn.

From seeing how many steps you have walked today, to your phone knowing when you need to leave the house to make it to your train on time, we are surrounded by numbers and calculations.

But how do we make best use of all this information? And how do we take raw data and turn it into great stories that our organisations can use in meaningful ways?

A lot of businesses are obsessed with capturing data, but they are far too focused on the amount they gather. What gets missed is the 'so what?'

What are we going to do with all this data? And how can we use it to affect change in the business and for customers?

These are the questions leaders in organisations should be asking of their data teams.

I was brought into Sovereign last year to embed data into the heart of the business. It may sound daunting, but data is an opportunity and not a burden – for all landlords.

It is the lifeblood of any business.

The human body will not grow and flourish if there isn't healthy blood flowing through it. It's a similar scenario with organisations and data.

That is the intersection of leadership and data. Leadership is needed to get the right data flowing to the right bits of the business.

When there is clarity of what we are trying to achieve, we can manipulate data to highlight problems, create detailed insight into what is happening and then offer up solutions.

Then investments in data assets, technology and people start to make sense. Even for those who don't consider themselves tech-savvy.

Left to their own devices data analysts can build you amazing solutions using AI and machine learning. But do you really need them?



## It starts with data

You can spend a fortune buying into the latest tech trend to solve problems you never really had.

That is why it is so important that data experts have a good understanding of an organisation's purpose.

Understanding wider business aims and objectives, along with specific KPIs that teams are trying to hit, means teams can use data and technology to address the challenges that will have the biggest impact.

Teams can use the data at their disposal to empower colleagues – ensuring they have all the information they need to carry out their roles at their fingertips – and setting in motion a journey that will see services and customer experience continuously improve.

How we present that data is key to achieving this. Data works best when it tells a compelling story.

The business needs to be able to access information in a way that is engaging and not via complex spreadsheets or bits of code.

People understand pictures and dashboards. We need to visualise the story we want the business to know about and make everyone want to see it in action.

That's how we put data at the heart of the business.

**“When there is clarity of what we are trying to achieve, we can manipulate data to highlight problems, create detailed insight into what is happening and then offer up solutions.”**

### The role of data in our Covid response

When the pandemic hit Sovereign went from operating across multiple office sites to the whole business working remotely.

It was incredibly important that we continued to have the oversight of what was going on in our communities and in the organisation itself.

We needed accurate management information in order to make decisions in real time.

The data and analysis team developed a suite of dashboards that gave an overview of each of the directorates in the business.

We served that information up in a timely and accurate way that was intuitive and digestible, allowing the business and individual teams to become agile and make informed decisions on where investment and resources needed to be deployed in a rapidly changing environment.





## It starts with data



**Mark Humphries**  
UK Chairman, Data Management  
Association (DAMA)

### Good data starts with good governance

Like most businesses in today's digital world, housing providers want to be more data driven.

Too often that is misinterpreted as 'we need to invest in AI,' or some other shiny technology.

Landlords have a wealth of information at their fingertips. It is knowing when and how to use that information that is the difference between success, failure and frustration.

The solutions to many of our challenges start with doing the basics right. By that, I mean gathering the right data and organising it in ways that are useful and accessible.

#### What do we need?

Using data better starts with being clear about what you want to achieve. What most landlords really want to do is to serve their customers better.

Better customer service doesn't start with developing an app or a loyalty scheme.

It starts with being clear who the people are who live in your homes or use your services.

That's names, addresses, how many people live in a home, phone numbers, preferred communications channels.

Gathering and organising this information is not sexy. But it is smart.

It won't win you any awards. But it will provide you with the foundations to access more complex systems and technologies and use them in ways that make services better.

It'll also save you a fortune.

Good data is perhaps the most important and underappreciated area of business. It provides the ability to first identify and then understand solutions to the majority of business problems.

It tells you where you are, and where you are heading.

Yet, it's often overlooked as a strategic tool because to many leaders it's – well – a bit boring.

We have become convinced that the answers to so many challenges lie in technology. We invest thousands of pounds in kit hoping for a quick fix.

In reality, the solution can be found in tightening up processes so we capture better data in a more timely manner – and then training people to interpret and use that data wisely.



## It starts with data

### Where to start?

When it comes to better data governance, it almost doesn't matter where you start. As long as you start somewhere.

My advice is to think big, but start small.

Data has the ability to transform your organisation, but if you gather too much at once you'll become overwhelmed.

You might look at tenant data – and start by getting all of your addresses up to date. Or you might want to accurately catalogue your compliance data.

You'll have to be patient and set realistic timescales. Wherever you chose you'll need a small but focused team that can look at data quality and data architecture.

Put some measures in place to identify a problem – how many customers do we have where we don't have an email address for?

Then ask what the impact is of not having accurate data in this area. Be clear how 'good' you need the data to be.

If you're gathering emails to send marketing materials then a 20% bounce back might be acceptable.

If it's for sending rent payment letters then 99% accuracy isn't enough.

### Customer satisfaction

**"Gathering and organising data is not sexy.  
But it is smart."**

If you are looking at feedback and are not scoring well for customer service, what analysis can we do to understand why that is?

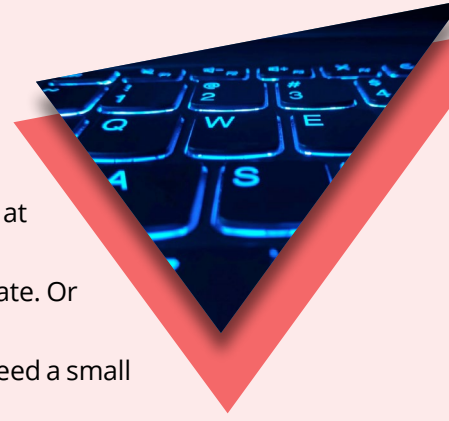
Once we are clear about the true drivers of customer satisfaction in our organisations we can target investment and resource in a better way.

During some work with a train company recently we spent time understanding that what really mattered to passengers was the cleanliness of trains, whether they ran on time, and if they were late then communication was clear.

Once we had this insight it transformed the way they operated. They use data to constantly look at ways to improve their performance in these three core areas.

When they did, satisfaction went up.

For housing providers, understanding the core drivers of tenant satisfaction and then having the ability to use quality data to focus the right investment in these areas will be very useful ahead of some of governance reforms planned for the coming years.



## It starts with data



**Kate Lindley**  
Service Lead Digital and Data,  
Socitm Advisory

### Doing data right: How do you know?

Data is the building block of responsive, reliable and cost-effective service delivery.

At its most basic, you need to know how many homes you've got, the profile of the asset components you need to manage, the make-up and needs of your customers, the money you've got coming in – and the expenditure you've got going out.

Obviously, there's more to housing than that, but having a single view of the truth for asset, people and financial data is critical for success.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? Yet with so much data in so many places, it's often hard to reconcile - and the way data is held differently in different systems creates unhelpful complexity.

I've sat in many a meeting with more than one 'version of the truth' being presented - and without accurate and trusted data, as well as risking poor service delivery, you also risk non-compliance.

Data integrity is quite rightly a risk on the sector risk profile and a clear indicator of a poor control framework. Recent regulatory reviews and downgrades because of breaches of the consumer standard and rent setting inaccuracies all point to greater regulatory attention on data quality – and serious consequences for those who get it wrong.

So how do you know if your data is trustworthy – and what are the signs that it's not?

Despite what software vendors might tell you, no amount of whizzy software will make up for poor data governance, poorly designed data inputs and poor handoff processes.

In the same way that we invest in planned maintenance to keep our stock well looked after, so too should we invest in keeping our data updated, including getting it periodically sampled and assured, particularly in the areas of highest risk.

Poor data quality undermines board oversight and leads to ineffective decision-making. It follows that accurate up to date data is a critical first step for all organisations.

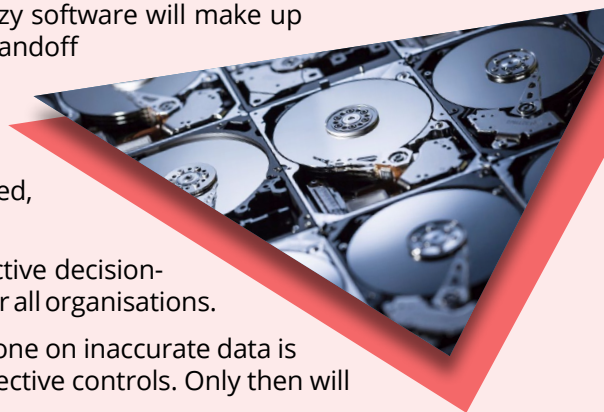
Forget AI, machine learning and the latest buzz words – analytics done on inaccurate data is worthless. The effort needs to be in validation, data quality and effective controls. Only then will what's layered over that deliver any value.

So how do you know where you are on the maturity spectrum? And what are the 'dig here' signs to look out for?

The signs are often there – data being downloaded from systems and manipulated on spreadsheets, a view that data is 'IT's job', a lack of named and active data owners, data being something that is 'squeezed in' rather than a core part of people's roles, or evidence of having to 'fix' data before reports can be completed.

All of these things scream 'there's an issue' – and all too often it's only when things go wrong that anything is done. While getting it right takes investment, it's less costly than getting it wrong!

Positively, data literacy at Board and Executive level is improving sector-wide. Given how data underpins key risks like health and safety, loan covenant compliance and even risk profiling itself, at the top of the organisation, data needs to be taken seriously. Boards needs to be seeking assurance that what they are seeing is derived from trusted source.

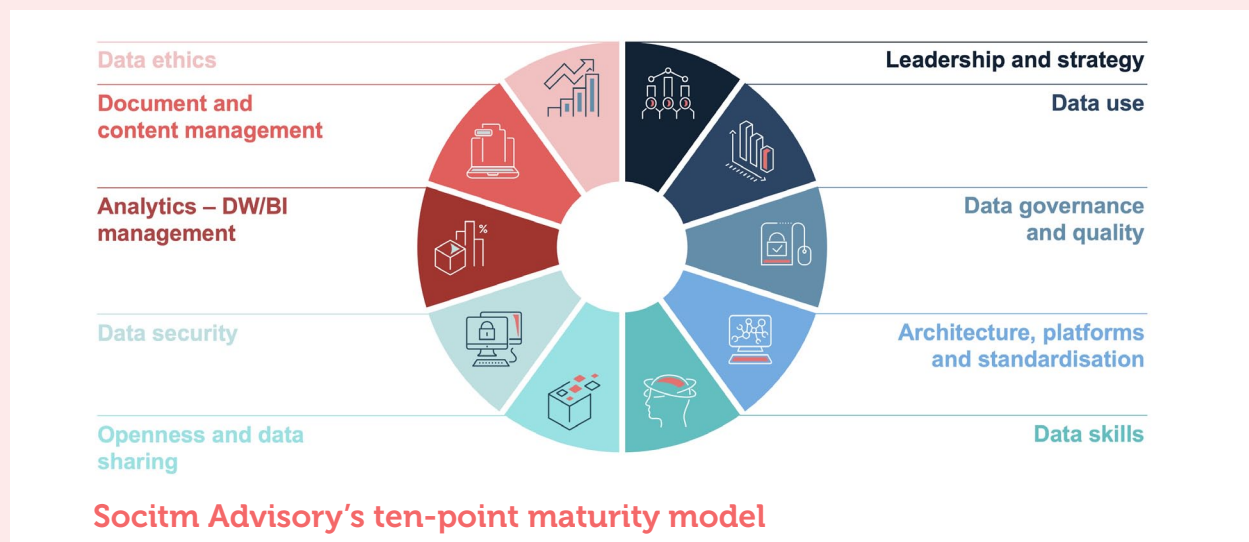




## It starts with data

Outside of my 'day job', I sit on the boards of a couple of housing associations and I regularly see compliance, performance and financial reports - what I'm most interested in is where the data has come from, so I know what it's telling me is accurate. You can only find that out by getting someone to independently assure the data end to end. Key to this is focusing on the most critical data - there's so much you could do, it's important not to 'boil the ocean' - start small in the highest risk areas and scale.

Diagnostic tools such as low-cost data maturity assessments are also useful and can provide a useful starting point to assess key areas of focus. Socitm Advisory's own ten-point maturity model looks at data management holistically and is often used as a starting point to craft data strategy, to build organisational maturity and to identify key areas of focus to inform the roadmap for change.



Maturity varies greatly across the sector, with some providers reliant solely on traditional line of business systems and mashing up spreadsheets to pull together data from them, others using data visualisation tools to present insight in a more digestible format - and those a bit further along making good use of cloud platform components to ingest data from multiple sources and present it to answer key organisational questions.

**“Without accurate and trusted data, as well as risking poor service delivery, you also risk non-compliance.”**

Wherever you are on your journey, being data smart starts with the basics - and the foundations first.

As trusted advisors across the public sector, we're always happy to chat and provide insight and advice without obligation. To find out more about our data services, please get in touch via [www.advisory.socitm.net/housing](http://www.advisory.socitm.net/housing)

## It starts with data



**Jacqui Bateson**  
Managing Director, HACT

### There is nothing new about data.

Pre-historic man marked notches into sticks or bones to record trading activity. In more modern times, the first recorded statistical data analysis experiment took place in 1663 in London. And in 1865 the term business intelligence was used by Richard Millar Devens in his Encyclopedia of Commercial and Business Anecdotes.

Five years ago, HACT embarked on a project with Microsoft to test how housing associations could make best use of big data techniques. The project became unstuck fairly quickly, because of the inconsistency of the data held by organisations, leaving true analysis and insight impossible to achieve.

It was clear that just as data was becoming more important to the business of social housing, there was work to do to ensure the sector was equipped to make best use of it. Our task was simple: how could we help the sector make data more consistent, more reliable and, as a consequence, more useful.

For inspiration, we looked abroad, first at the Dutch data standard CORA, which was launched in 2008 and to OSCRE, a Florida-based data organisation which had developed its own set of real estate data standards. In partnership with OSCRE, HACT has worked with the industry to create the UK Housing Data Standard.

In 2017, we brought together the first group of 17 pioneering social housing organisations to develop a UK Housing Data Standard use case. They chose three use cases for proof of concept: tenancy application, void repairs and customer data.

The project partners participated in regular workshops, engaging internal SMEs and project sponsors, with support from HACT and OSCRE. Each data standard use case is developed by the sector for the sector, with participants sharing and agreeing on process maps, data models and standardised descriptions of different data entities.

This approach has been used to develop each of the four further use cases that comprise the UK Housing Data Standards: reactive and planned maintenance, income collection, care and support, and development handovers. Participants benefit from working collaboratively on each of the use cases, sharing ideas and concerns about processes, as well as ensuring the data standards work for every participating organisation and the industry as a whole.



## It starts with data

As the UK Housing Data Standards have evolved, so we've engaged with more housing associations and software suppliers. To date over 70 organisations have participated in the development process.

In December 2020, we launched the third iteration of the UK Housing Data Standards, which included the development handover use case. This was exceptionally timely and resulted in our being involved in discussions with Dame Judith Hackitt, as well as the Government, about the future role of the UK Housing Data Standards in the Building Safety Act.

Following HACT's appearance at an Industry Safety Steering Group meeting, Dame Judith Hackitt wrote to us stating: "We see real value and importance in the UK Housing Data Standards (UKHDS) you are developing. They will enable organisations to keep information about the way homes are constructed and how they meet the compliance regime in an accessible way that can be shared with residents and contractors alike."

Last year, we started work on our latest use case - resident feedback and customer complaints. This was timely, bearing in mind the Government's White Paper emphasis on resident voice. To ensure we captured as many perspectives as possible, we actively encouraged small and medium sized housing associations to take part and over 30 organisations are involved as a result.

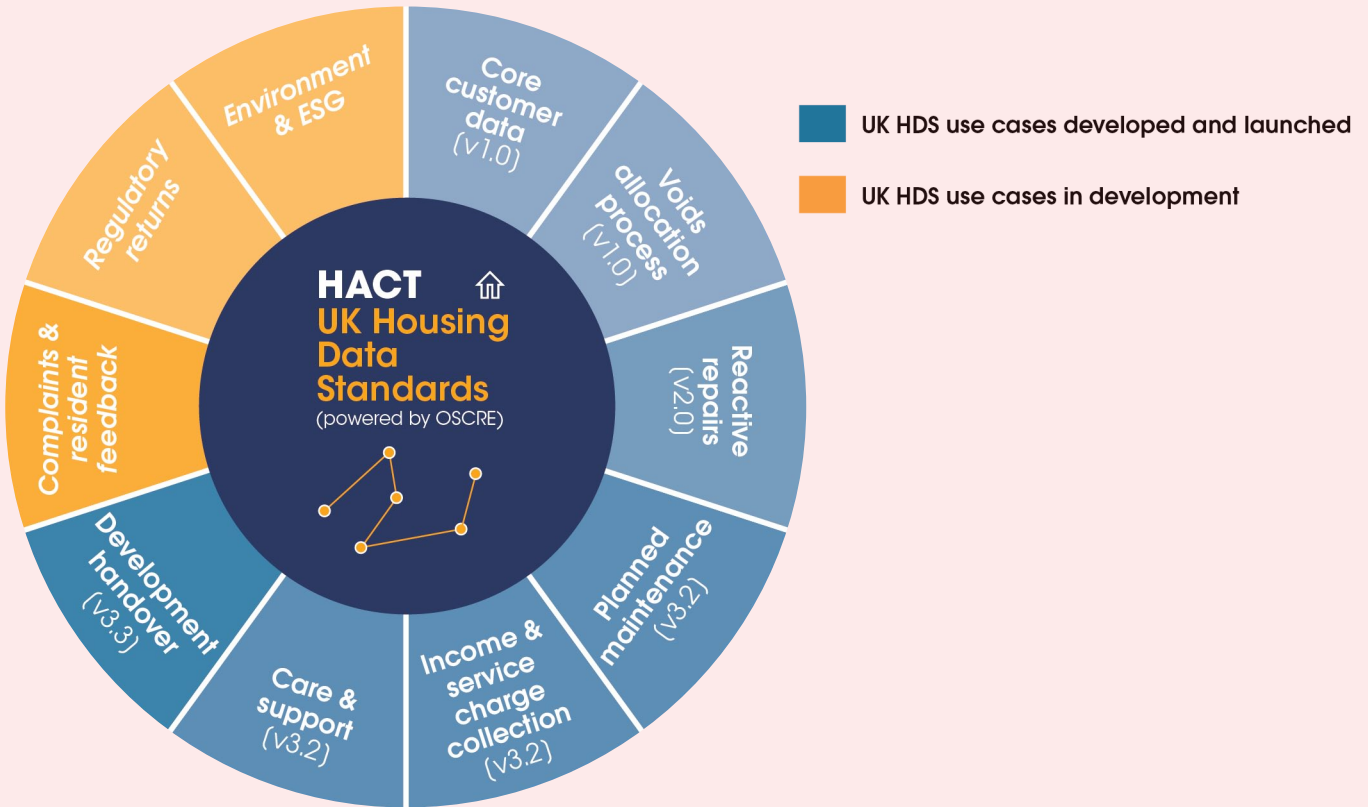
Looking to the future, we will develop further use cases this year, including regulatory reporting and another on environment and ESG reporting. Our model will remain the same on regulatory returns: working with 20-30 organisations to ensure it reflects the reality of day-to-day working practices within the social housing sector. With regards to the environment and ESG reporting standard, we will adapt our process to take account of the more immature knowledge in this area around the sector and will seek to engage a broader spectrum of collaborators whilst maintaining a majority from social housing.

The purpose of the standards was to enable the sector to make better use of data and create governance frameworks which are culturally embedded within organisations. We've taken the major step in the process, one that has been recognised by software suppliers, national data specialists and government advisors.

It is important that the data standards continue to be a living, breathing thing which adapt over time to the changing world we are in. Later this year, as we move towards the completion of these standards, we will again look to work with the housing sector on a roadmap to securing the future of the UK Housing Data Standard.



## It starts with data



### The UK Housing Data Standards and the Golden Thread

The Golden Thread Initiative (GTI) was developed by the Government's Building Regulations Advisory Committee (BRAC) in response to the Grenfell disaster.

We were asked to take part in the GTI, bringing our expertise in data standards and advising how the UK Housing Data Standards can underpin the golden thread. The golden thread is both the information that allows you to understand a building and the steps needed to keep both the building and people safe, now and in the future.

With the Government's Building Safety Bill included in the Queen's speech, social housing organisations should note that the information you hold in each building's digital passport should include all the information necessary to understand and manage risks to prevent or reduce the severity of the consequences of fire spread or structural collapse in a building.

This golden thread information should be stored as structured digital information. It should be stored, managed, maintained and retained in line with the golden thread principles. The Government's Building Safety Bill is expected to specify digital standards which will provide guidance on how these principles can be met.



# Re-thinking tenant experience

## Re-thinking tenant experience



**Kamran Mahmood**  
CEO, Gridizen

### Residents, regulation and innovation should drive new technology for housing

When Gridizen first started to look at the housing sector's relationship with technology, we identified a number of barriers getting in the way of service improvement and innovation.

One of the starkest findings from our research was that the majority of core housing management software suites were over 10 years old.

In the scheme of things, a decade may not seem that long, but in terms of the ever-changing landscape of technology, this is a lifetime (or at least a product lifecycle!).

To put this into perspective, the average smart phone is thousands of times more powerful and faster than NASA's computers at the time of the Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969.

The systems landlords are using must be fit to match the expectations of modern tenants.

Great technological innovation sits at the cross-section of hardware and software capability, regulatory and business need, and the desires of consumers.

Residents are often the final piece of the jigsaw that are missed out.

At Gridizen, we have approached the development of our housing management and engagement platform with a single mantra of 'putting the resident at the heart'.

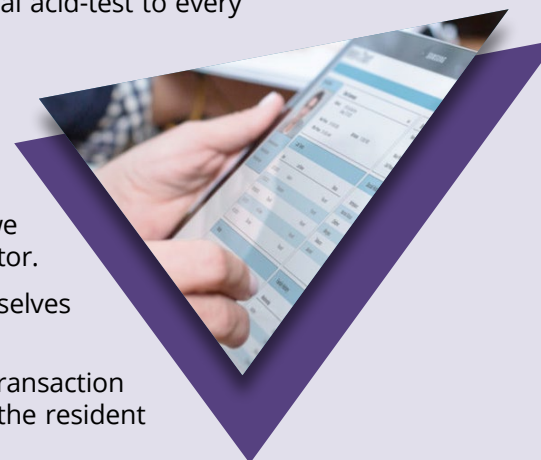
This may sound like a trite soundbite, but it is in fact used as an internal acid-test to every piece of functionality that we engineer.

We have been running a series of sessions with HQN over recent months to bring together tenants and staff to discuss the current tech solutions housing providers are offering.

The sessions where we have more tenants participating than landlords are often the ones where we glean the greatest insight into both how we can develop our own offers and the tech currently being used in the sector.

This process ensures that, whenever we develop concepts, we satisfy ourselves that the new feature will help to provide a better service to residents.

This may come in the form of providing a more efficient and transparent transaction between the organisation and the resident, or it may be that it allows the resident easier access to services, or simply to engage with their landlord.



## Re-thinking tenant experience

There are a number of ways that new technology can be used to drive innovation and service improvement. The ability to access and analyse data from across an organisation, avoiding the common pitfall of relevant information being “stuck” in an internal silo, can have huge implications for the wellbeing of residents by indicating where support might be required.

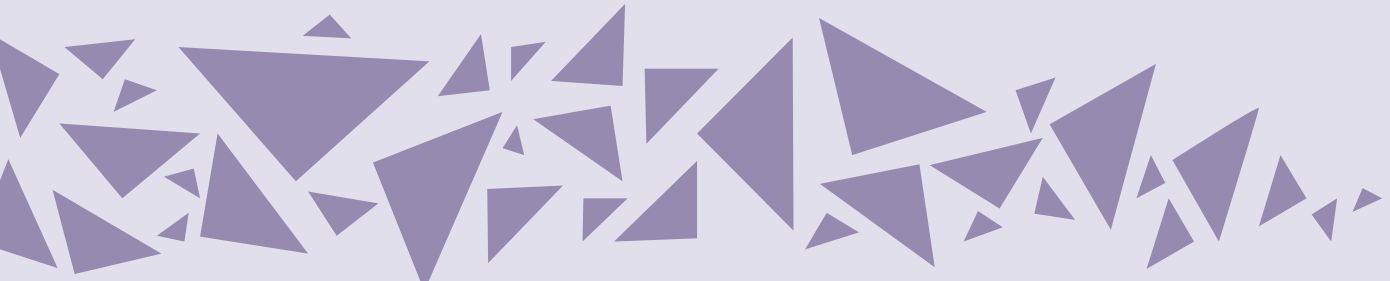
A real-world example of this is a repairs system that can spot patterns that may indicate potential ASB or domestic violence issues which could then be investigated by an appropriate officer. The use of smart home technology can provide manifold benefits to the resident and the organisation.

For example, fitting smart thermostats into properties allows a resident to have more control over how they use their heating, potentially saving money. It would also allow the organisation to know if someone is in fuel-poverty and direct appropriate support to the resident much more quickly. Similarly, placing leak detectors in homes can save very expensive, distressing and inconvenient flooding issues long before a human would be aware of the issue.

When we look at the costs of new technology, we need to start understanding the benefits in terms of wellbeing that could result, as well as the real-time savings in terms of time and money that could be garnered.

New technology itself shouldn't be the ultimate goal for organisations. Providing a better service for residents should be, and any new technology needs to support this or it isn't fit for purpose.

**“Great technological innovation sits at the cross-section of hardware and software capability, regulatory and business need, and the desires of consumers.”**





## Re-thinking tenant experience



**Matthew Wallbridge**  
DDaT Director  
at Socitm Advisory

### Re-framing the tenant experience together

In a sector where it's easy to talk about assets, the White Paper has, quite rightly, put people squarely at the heart of the housing agenda.

For many housing providers this isn't new – improving lives has always been a core part of the mission, but the 'how' is often overlooked and as a result, opportunities to involve customers in the design of the services they consume are often missed.

Following the White Paper, we've talked to lots of providers about what they're doing that involves customers in a meaningful way. As you'd expect it's quite a spectrum, but there are some consistent themes, including using Engagement and Challenge panels to encourage feedback on new policies and solutions. What's less prevalent is the involvement of customers in service design – and yet this is where some of the greatest gains can be had.

Amazon, Facebook, retail businesses and (increasingly) councils, all seek to actively involve customers in designing their services. As a result digital services are slicker, uptake is typically higher, costs are lower, and both satisfaction and brand loyalty often increase.

Done well, it's a small investment of time and effort for a significant pay off. Central Government's Digital Service endorses the concept of user involvement from the start of any new service design rather than as a tag on to 'test' services at the end. In our day-to-day work we see the benefits first-hand. While service managers might think they know what customers want, often ideas are based on assumptions, preferred ways of working, or, in some cases vested interest resistance to change.

Having customers co-design services with you breaks these barriers and gets to the heart of how they really behave and what works best for them. While service managers might think they know what customers want, often ideas are based on assumptions, preferred ways of working, or, in some cases vested interest resistance to change.

So if you've never done co-design before how do you go about it?

The first thing to understand is that it's not rocket science! Buzz words and acronyms like 'ideation', 'prototyping' and 'UX' can create an air of mystery around what is really both a logical, and a creative, co-design process.





## Re-thinking tenant experience

We support organisations of all shapes and sizes to start on their service design journey, so here are some pragmatic tips to help:

### 1. Start with the data

You'll already have a good amount of data on how people are using your services, even if you don't make use of it. Web analytics, demand data, satisfaction data, costs and system metrics are all useful starting points to give you a holistic view of your starting point. This can point to areas of opportunity or 'pain points'.

### 2. Involve the right people

It sounds obvious, but you need to involve a representative sample of your tenants so that you get enough feedback from a wide enough group of people to be valuable, but without creating 'analysis paralysis' or becoming inefficient. The make-up of those you involve should broadly cover the demographic make up of your customer base – and you should consider how you ensure your services meet the needs of people with disabilities and language needs in particular. Attracting customers to take part in research doesn't have to be difficult. Companies that mainstream this make it a routine part of every contact, so they don't need to 'call out' for involved tenants. Think carefully about who you field from your organisation too – service design is not about rubber-stamping or seeking feedback on your own ideas, it's about listening deeply and carefully to tenant need and working with them to shape services. Collaboration is key!

### 3. Incentivise involvement

If people are good enough to give up their time to help co-design services with you, make sure there's something in it for them – some organisations incentivise involvement with vouchers or payments, while others simply seek to make it so enjoyable people actively want to take part. You may want to link this to the local skills agenda, or to incentivise with a points system – so the more involved tenants gain reward points to 'spend' on skills training or other things that are useful to them.

### 4. Think about the 'how'

Don't expect people to come to you. Go to them. If there are local community spaces available for workshops, use them. Or if you're at prototyping stage, you could install a 'pop up' research facility in a local shop, school or similar to gain feedback on a more ad hoc basis providing the footfall is your target demographic. Covid has given organisations an opportunity to reflect on how they involve people in design activities, with many more service design activities now taking place online – tools like Teams are useful, but make sure you consider digital inclusion – and how services will work for people without digital access.



## Re-thinking tenant experience

### 5. Design end to end

One of the biggest mistakes we see organisations make when they start to design services is to only look at part of the customer journey – so the ‘contact centre bit’ or the ‘repairs delivery bit’. Only by designing services end-to-end do you understand the whole customer experience. For example, there’s no point having a highly responsive contact centre only for it to take three weeks to get a repair done, with no updates in between! Looking at the entire journey is key – and can avoid expensive re-work later too!

### 6. Be upfront about the constraints

There will be some things that customers want you to do, or that you’d love to do, that simply aren’t possible - or aren’t possible right now. This might be because they’re too expensive to deliver, or because you’re tied into a system contract that doesn’t enable changes to be made in the way that you’d like. Where constraints are known, it’s best to be upfront about these. In many cases you can work around constraints and then keep the desired end state in your backlog to implement when new functionality allows.

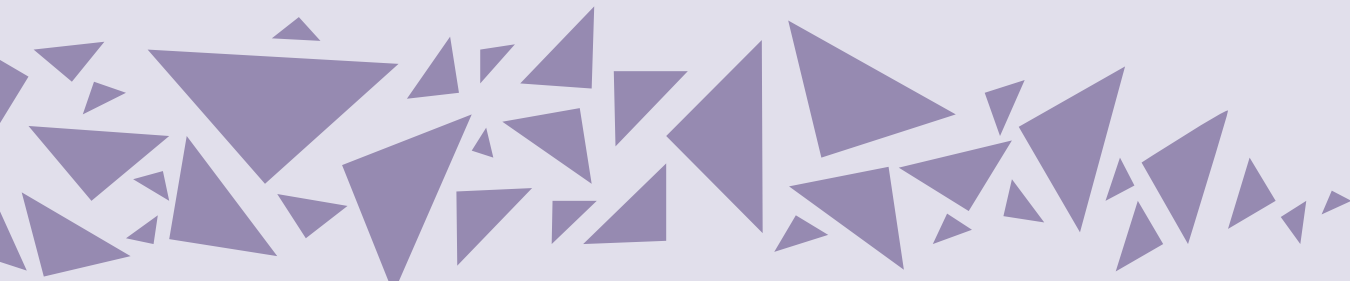
### 7. Listen hard to needs (more than ideas)

There are a lot of agencies out there that sell a romanticised ideal of service design. While idea generation has a place, I run a mile from those that focus in too heavily on ‘ideation’, ‘ideas labs’ and ‘inspiration days’ at the expense of getting the basics right.

Done well, co-design is energising and can be fun, but the hard work and successful implementation of service design is actually in the unglamorous bits – the grunt work of understanding user needs, and persistence needed to deliver changes to processes, systems and (in some cases) people to make the biggest difference. Co-creation with customers has huge value, but should be focused on researching underlying user needs, motivations and behaviours that can then support the generation of concepts of solutions rather than starting with ideas about the solutions themselves. Listening hard to needs before generating feasible, implementable interventions to meet them will make the biggest difference overall.

### And finally...

Don’t be afraid to ask for help getting started - we’re always here and happy to advise and to provide initial ideas without obligation. Our team has vast experience of user engagement, research and design, looking at everything from how to set up best practice involvement to how to involve customers in co-creating housing management and repairs processes, or deploying newer technologies like IOT. You can find out more about our work at [www.advisory.socitm.net/housing](http://www.advisory.socitm.net/housing)



## Re-thinking tenant experience



**Halisha Kaur**  
Senior Regeneration Officer,  
GreenSquareAccord

### Technology drives customer expectations and we need to keep up with the pace of change

Lockdown highlighted our appetite for instant access to everything, from online movies to same day delivery of goods. As technology drives customer expectations, our culture is changing and 'on demand' access to goods and services is becoming commonplace.

Good customer service is not just about exceeding expectations; it's about being available and accessible to our customers through their preferred channels of communication.

It is not just millennials embracing the digital culture. Data from the ONS shows 80% of ages 65 to 74 use the internet, and there has been a dramatic increase in internet usage in over 75s from 20% in 2011 to 44% in 2018. So how can housing associations use technology to adapt to this changing landscape?

Enter Ava the Chatbot, GreenSquareAccord's Virtual Assistant. Ava is accessible 24/7 on our website and Facebook Messenger, providing instant responses to customer queries based on data and analytics collected from our customer care team.

**"Investing in technology supports customers from a diverse range of backgrounds by making services more accessible to all."**

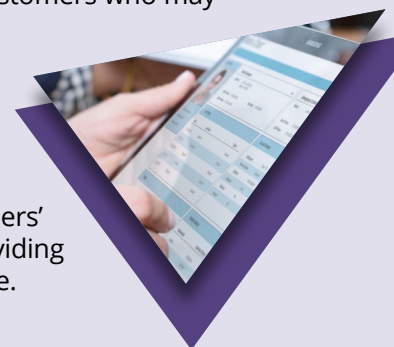
As many of us are familiar with communicating in an informal way through mobile messaging and Facebook, Ava supports customers to embrace a channel of technology they feel comfortable using.

Ava is a prime example of how simple technologies can provide customers with quick, easy access to information they require at the tip of their fingers. Although its early days, GreenSquareAccord are already seeing results, with customer interactions tripling via their online platform.

The use of a chatbot helps ease pressure off front-line staff through automating the more repetitive and straight forward enquiries; this allows more focus on detailed calls for those customers who may require it, improving overall customer service.

Of course, a chatbot is not the only solution to improving customer service; it is just one touch point within the wider customer journey. Investing in such technology supports customers from a diverse range of backgrounds by making services more accessible to all.

As technology continues to change, we must ensure we are meeting our customers' needs and improving customer service through a more inclusive approach, providing different ways for our customers to engage and making information easily accessible.



## Re-thinking tenant experience



**Steve Allcock**  
Executive Director of ICT,  
Data & Digital, Johnnie Johnson

### Tenants must lead digital service design

We can be guilty of spending so much time debating what we can do with our digital platforms that it can be easy to neglect just what our tenants actually want from them.

Tenants don't want great tech – they want a great service.

Over the last 18 months Johnnie Johnson has spoken candidly about our workplace reforms – which has seen us leave our office and commit to a remote based approach to working in the long term.

#### A quiet revolution

But we've also been experiencing a much quieter revolution in our customer experience. And digital has been at the heart of that revolution.

Designing services with tenants starts with giving people a voice – and then acting on what they say.

We are already actively engaged with tenants across our communities through scrutiny panels, tenant forums and our Facebook community group.

These forums are a chance to listen to tenants, but also a place for us to try out ideas and scrutinise and redesign services as we look to introduce them.

Back in the summer of 2020 we ran a five-day design sprint across our digital services.

Over a week we identified the problems for our digital services, sketched out a raft of potential solutions, decided which were best, developed prototypes and then tested them to see if they work.

#### A eureka moment

It let us look into the future to see what people might feel about our services as they evolve.

Tenants were involved throughout. That included both existing and prospective tenants, and their next of kin (including younger generations who want to make sure their loved ones are looked after).

This was a eureka moment. An eye-opening experience.

It was clear how much digital mattered.

Tenants want the security of one-touch access to our services. They want them to be simple and to be navigated in a seamless way.

Their next of kin wanted to be able to log in to an interface (with permission) and make sure their friend or family member was safe, with the ability to check that repairs were being done in the right timescales and services were being delivered how they should be.





## Re-thinking tenant experience

### Smart tech stigma

We looked at how new technology could be introduced and integrated – so if an elderly relative had a fall or if a loved one with dementia left a geographic location a family member would be alerted.

We also highlighted the need to break the stigma around wearable tech. Smart watches are common. Yet the pendants some tenants wear for alarm systems feel very out of touch. Our colleagues in Astraline are leading the way in TEC (Tech Enabled Care) and are developing a variety of new technologies with various Local Authorities, HAs and national initiatives.

There is a perception that older people don't want digital services.

We must be wary of statements like this. The reality is that a growing majority of older people have been on a digital journey and tell us they not only want but expect to receive services in this way.

**“Tenants don't want great tech – they want a great service.”**

### Internal challenges

As our digital offer changes so must our team.

Digital is opening up a whole new world when it comes to customer experience. To deliver it we have to take staff on the journey too.

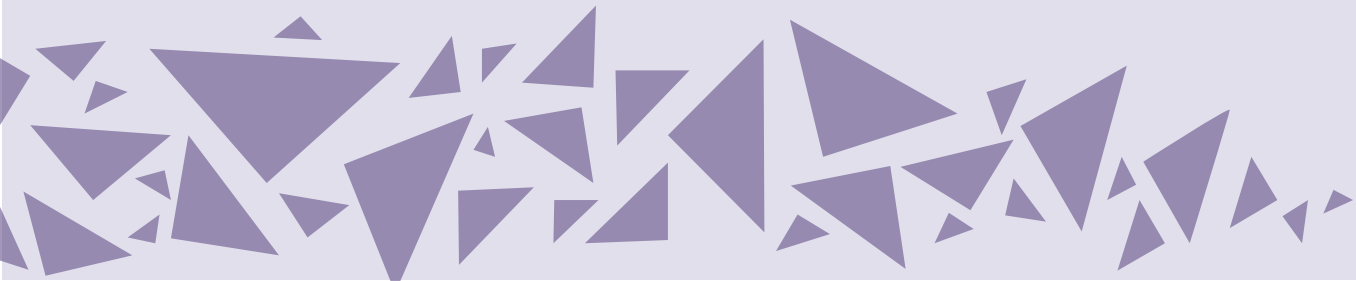
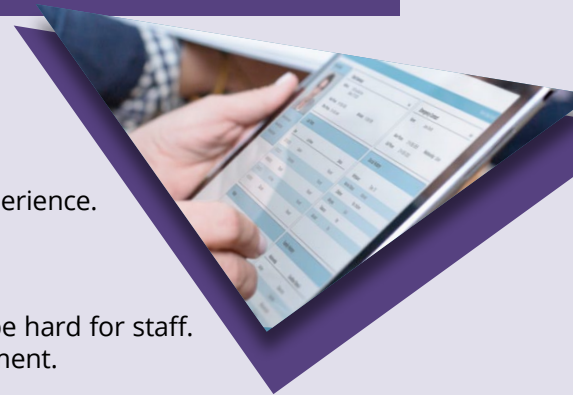
They are going to have to engage with tenants in new ways.

Change is happening quickly – not least because of Covid. That will be hard for staff. That is why we are placing a huge emphasis on training and development.

We're looking at ways to help people upskill and reskill.

For example, housing officers could be trained not only to be service providers but also educators on digital services.

Whatever the future holds, our priority will be matching the needs of the tenants, with the possibilities of technology.



## Re-thinking tenant experience



**Sophia Koopman**  
business development director,  
Community Fibre

### Poplar HARCA and Community Fibre partnership: supporting digital inclusion

The digital inclusion partnership between Poplar HARCA and Community Fibre started in June 2020 to address the digital needs of local residents during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Community Fibre and Poplar HARCA worked alongside the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, East End Community Foundation and LETTA Trust Schools to ensure that isolated families during the first COVID-19 lockdown were connected online.

This project provided 230 local families with free laptops and free full fibre broadband connection for 12 months installed by Community Fibre. It also came with a digital skills training package. The aim of this project was to ensure all pupils could attend their lessons online whilst homeschooling continued due to lockdown restrictions.

Digital connectivity is essential to learning and education. In Tower Hamlets, over 50% of students do not have a device to access online learning. National research shows that in the most deprived schools only 16% of pupils participate in online lessons daily. This widens the already significant attainment gap between the poorest and richest children. The partnership plays an important role in closing the digital divide. In addition to this, Community Fibre has been supporting Poplar HARCA through its Digital Ambassadors programme - which provides a qualification to members of the community so they can help anyone who needs it with all aspects of being online and becoming more digitally empowered.

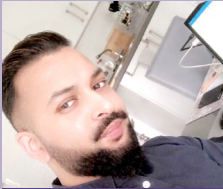
### Increasing digital inclusion and reducing the digital divide: What was the plan?

One of the key aspects of Poplar HARCA's digital transformation strategy is enabling and supporting residents with digital skills. It has been running a Digital Skills for Work – Power Up programme funded by the Good Things Foundation and JP Morgan. The programme has helped further embed digital inclusion in its employment and training provision as well as other resident-focussed services.

Power Up's Digital Skills Officer at Poplar HARCA, Riaz Ullah has worked closely with Community Fibre's Digital Ambassadors' Programme to provide training and support to Poplar HARCA's own Digital Champions. Together, they developed a peer-to-peer learning model, which has been a key way of achieving a sustainable digital transformation.



## Re-thinking tenant experience



**Riaz Ullah**  
Power Up Digital Skills  
Officer at Poplar HARCA

Poplar HARCA supports the Digital Ambassadors programme by providing our talented helpful volunteers, who have experience in running workshops and working closely with the community for digital skill needs. I identify those who can benefit from the Digital Ambassador programme by pairing them with the fantastic Molinda Buka, Community Investment Lead at Community Fibre, who has helped us to drive and extend the passion and love for technologies with our Digital Champions and trainees.

*Molinda helps to onboard Digital Ambassadors in partnership with Poplar HARCA. She is able to signpost the Digital Unite platform and resources to improve the digital champions skills to complete the courses.*

### The activities and the support provided to reduce the digital divide

Poplar HARCA has been running a variety of online platforms and workshops since the pandemic began. These included 'HARCA Centres Unlocked' where the community centres transferred their health and wellness programmes to run virtually with local residents.

Digital inclusion is embedded in Poplar HARCA's employment and training service which supports residents to gain accredited qualifications for work and get people into jobs.

Through the Power Up programme, it has trained nearly 400 local people, 96 of whom have gained a qualification in ICT Level 1 and Level 2. The Digital Ambassadors supported by Community Fibre have played a key role in motivating the learners to achieve their goals.

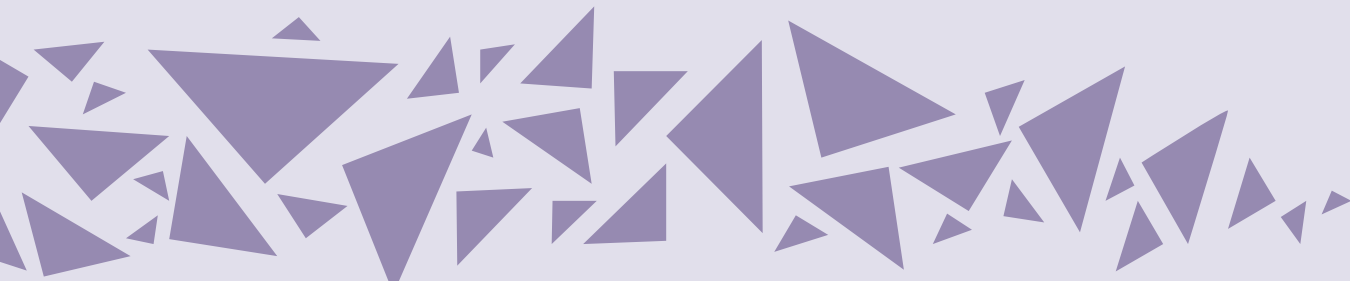
### Best moments from the Digital Ambassador programme?

Community Fibre and Poplar HARCA teams have developed training opportunities that have helped the Digital Ambassadors to grow more confidently in their roles. These included role-play to run group workshops better whether it's face-to-face or online.

Riaz explained: "A recent highlight with one of our Digital Ambassadors, Abhijeet, was after going through intensive training with us, he is now leading his workshops with a group of adults with learning disabilities from our local council. We were delighted at how Abhijeet was eager to lead and was able to demonstrate his abilities and skills learnt from his training and use it for the first time with a new group of special clients without any hesitation."

This highly successfully training programme between Community Fibre and Poplar HARCA is set to continue. At Community Fibre, we are always willing to onboard new Digital Ambassadors to the programme from within the local community and across all London Boroughs.

For more information on the project visit the [Community Connect](#) webpage.



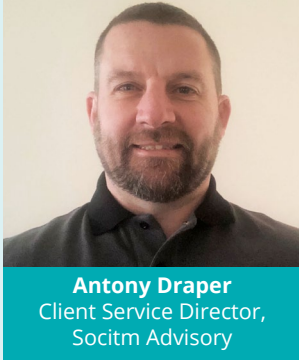




**Managing  
complexity,  
consolidation  
and change**



## Managing complexity, consolidation and change



### Making mergers a success – a guide to embedding change

Mergers are complex processes – with IT often proving one of the most complicated, costly and time-consuming areas to consider.

Cultural change is enabled and embedded by introducing common ways of doing things – and this is only possible by merging processes, systems and data. It's not a trivial undertaking and it requires specialist skills and adequate time. Yet the magnitude of the task is often underestimated.

Here's our guide to make mergers a success:

#### Due diligence

Most organisations bring in one of the 'Big 4' to work on the business case and target operating model. Post-merger it often becomes clear that IT considerations have not always taken into account the level of detail needed to ensure accurate projections. Ultimately, it costs more and takes longer than predicted – with new skills needed to be brought in to complete the work.

We are called to help unpick these challenges. Providing pragmatism and clarity on next steps.

It is always prudent to consider investing in specialist IT support at the outset of a merger. That way you can get a detailed picture of the true state of your systems, processes and data and a properly quantified and costed roadmap for change.

#### Enterprise Architecture

The first step on any new organisation's IT roadmap is to set out how you want the overall system to work.

How will processes work, how will systems knit together to enable this and what does it mean for structure?

Enterprise Architecture is a combination of all of these things.

Housing providers do this in different ways – some create 'Design Committees' and determine everything by consensus, bringing the best of each individual organisation's processes together. This takes more time, but can increase buy in for change.

Others create a focused team that works to deliver the most efficient model against a set of principles agreed by the Executive.

There's no 'right' way, but it's important to find a way that works within the culture you want to create.



## Managing complexity, consolidation and change

### Commercial

The legal agreements in place with your existing suppliers will also require novating across to the resulting legal entity.

Areas of change and cost are likely to be in numbers of users, costs of contracts, notice periods and renewal fees/dates and cancellation fees. There are also going to be systems that will be decommissioned over a period of time that result in contractual negotiations, in particular the movement of 3rd party integrations.

### Information

Information is key to running an effective organisation. Once you understand what your future architectural design looks like, you will be able to create an Information Management Strategy to support its success.

You will need to consider the information needs at all levels of the organisation as well as those you engage with outside. The Information Management Strategy will provide the framework that enables secure implementation of new ways of working.

### Data

Aside from the obvious need to ensure information is kept secure and only accessed by those that need to see it, the key challenges in merger situations are most likely to be the quality and differences in the existing data across the merging organisations.

Getting data right is an investment that isn't often talked about upfront and yet can be a significant area of cost as it needs to be cleansed, archived, transformed to new structures and migrated to new systems.

### Legacy systems

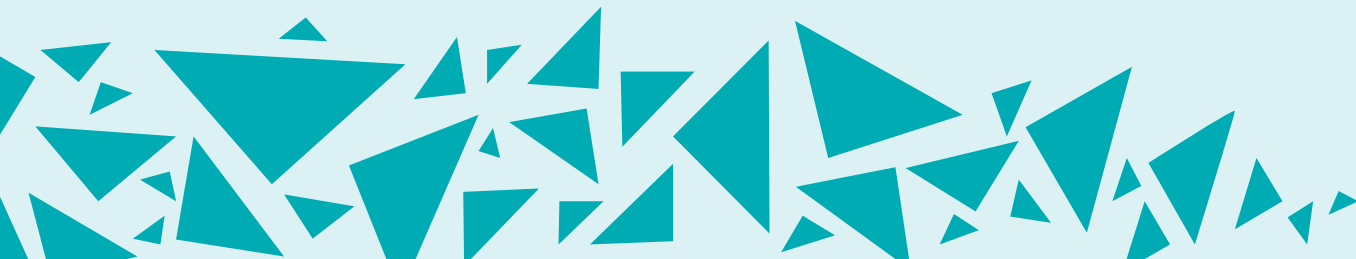
With the rationalisation of your architecture, there will be primary and legacy systems as well the need to create archiving solutions. You will need to produce a roadmap that covers the movement of data and decommissioning of systems as well the movement of 3rd party integrations.

The end goal will be to have a rationalised infrastructure that requires the minimum amount of support and has the ability to grow to meet future demands.

### The people factor

None of this change is possible without people – first to do it, and then to sustain it. IT is no longer the preserve of techies sat in a basement somewhere. Organisations needs to carefully consider the detail of their supporting IT structure and the skills and experience needed to ensure successful day-to-day delivery and strategic risk mitigation.

To find out more about Socitm Advisory's support to the housing sector visit [www.advisory.socitm.net/housing](http://www.advisory.socitm.net/housing)



## Managing complexity, consolidation and change



**Suzanne Wicks**  
Executive Director of Business  
Transformation, Lincolnshire  
Housing Partnership

### Two become one: digital transformation after a merger

Lincolnshire Housing Partnership was born in 2018 from a merger between Boston Mayflower and Shoreline Housing Partnership.

We had 12,700 homes, but two of almost everything else.

We were two different organisations, with two different cultures using two different sets of systems to deliver services.

We also had two differing and conflicting digital strategies – both in terms of risk and investment.

The challenge I was tasked with was putting in place good governance around programme management to create one landlord with a single digital strategy working to a single mission.

#### Culture first

There were plenty of technical issues to address – the nuts and bolts of making sure services continued to be delivered and all our systems were secure and pointing in the same direction.

But it was defining and setting the right culture that was the priority.

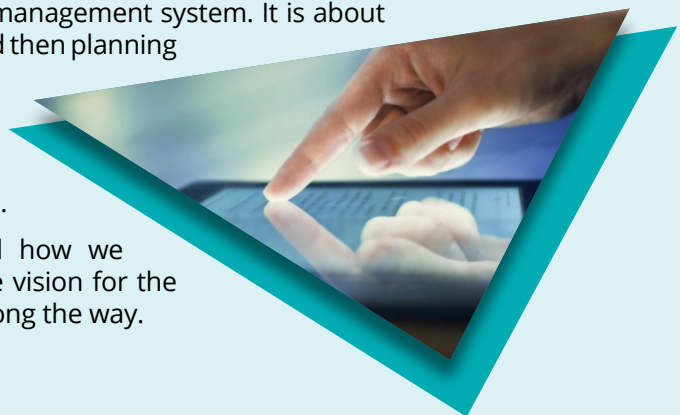
Culture is the seedbed from which you grow your transformation. It acts as a springboard into the future.

It is not just about moving everything on to one housing management system. It is about understanding what the purpose of your organisation is and then planning your digital capabilities around that.

An important part of our approach was to bring together IT, HR and communications under one remit.

These business areas are the holy trinity of transformation.

Having oversight of our digital offer, our people, and how we communicate with them helped us work towards a single vision for the organisation – ensuring that the message didn't get lost along the way.



## Managing complexity, consolidation and change

### Our approach to digital transformation

Our culture change programme involved a huge amount of input from colleagues and tenants.

We wanted a new digital strategy that was driven by what tenants wanted – not by creating a hybrid of the current systems we were using.

We took our time and spent around five months talking to staff in workshops to understand how they wanted to work in the future, the systems they liked to use and the ones they knew didn't give the best service to tenants.

We brought in a range of suppliers for show and tell sessions

All this gave us the foundations for a specification to use in a tender process as we looked to build a unified digital capability. We made sure staff who would be using different technologies were involved in the tender process.

It has taken almost three years to get here, but now staff can see they have, or will have very soon, the systems and processes in place that they have asked for and designed. It has proved to be very empowering.

### Covid

In February 2020, we launched our culture change programme. Then Covid hit.

We've still made big strides and in many ways the pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation we were already planning.

Within three weeks the IT team had done upgrades to systems, 250 laptops had been delivered and MS Teams was being used by more than 70% of the organisation.

We launched a SharePoint intranet system so colleagues could stay connected and access all the information they needed remotely.

It now means we're much more flexible and much more agile.

### There's no right or wrong

The cornerstone of our digital transformation strategy, a new housing management solution, is due to go live in July this year. Some mergers will decide to use one legacy system instead of starting from scratch.

There is never a right or wrong way to approach this kind of alignment. We wanted staff to be able to influence and own the decisions and have a high level of transparency in the selection of the solution.

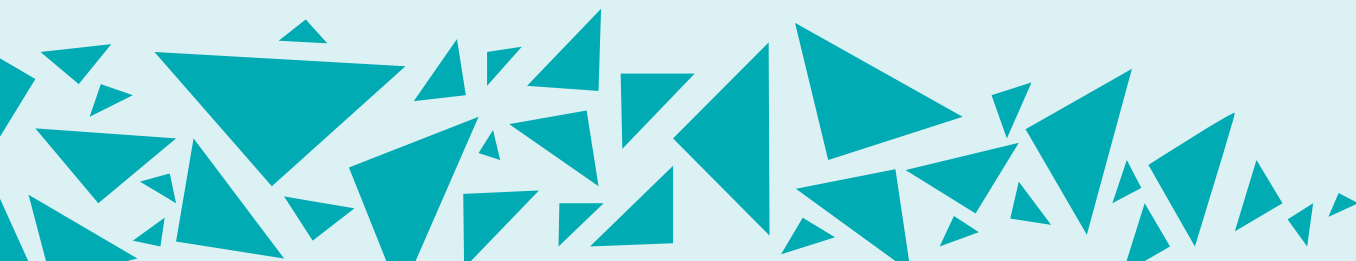
Our approach has been successful, but we knew the risk.

By breaking down our approach and rebuilding our digital offer from scratch our alignment of processes has taken longer.

We've had to work hard to deliver really good services in the interim.

Ultimately, these processes need to be a reflection of the values you want to set as an organisation.

And remember, if you are going to ask staff what they want, you've got to be willing to listen to what they have to say.





## Managing complexity, consolidation and change



**Dr Gaby Wolferink**  
Lead Consultant on  
Partnerships and  
Collaborations at DTL  
Creative and co-founder of  
[Socialhousingmatters.co.uk](http://Socialhousingmatters.co.uk)

### It is time to rethink our professional vocabulary

What we say and who we say it to can make all the difference in building relationships and establishing trust.

It can also contribute to the ever-entrenching stigma plaguing social housing tenants.

Language can construct power relationships by shaping narratives and imagery that depict a certain view of the world. It defines groups of people and sets the acceptable ways to approach or talk about them.

The way we talk about and to tenants is shaped by the language we are provided within our professional vocabulary.

This vocabulary is embedded in our strategies, mission statements and letters, but also in the systems and software we use.

So, I argue, it is time to rethink our professional vocabulary.

#### Who holds the power?

'Stigma', defined by the Oxford dictionary, is 'a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person'.

We may think stigmatising words always come with negative connotations.

Of course, words associated with social housing tenants, such as 'scroungers', 'lazy', and, 'weak', that are hugely stigmatising.

However, this isn't always the case. There are three core phrases that are part of housing's vocabulary that sound positive, but need to be addressed. They are:

- Giving tenants a voice
- Empowering tenants
- Vulnerable tenants



## Managing complexity, consolidation and change

Within these phrases there is a clear pattern relating to power and a lack of power.

'Giving tenants a voice', implies that they don't have one. And it is up to the landlord to grant them one.

In 'empowering tenants' we are saying that up until the moment that the landlord empowers them, they are powerless.

Vulnerable is more complicated, as the word is entrenched in a lot of legislation and regulatory frameworks. Nonetheless, the word vulnerable is very vague. It doesn't say anything specific about anyone yet implies there is 'something' that puts someone at risk of various misdoings. It implies this risk comes from some flaw in the person who is vulnerable, whether this is because of age, disability, race, sexuality or other characteristic.

### The role of systems and data in changing the narrative

Language like this is actively disempowering. It invites and strengthens further types of language that maintains stigma of social housing tenants.

Changing the narrative and recognising that language has a significant kind of power is everyone's responsibility.

Below I have outlined three changes that I suggest can be made in the language used in your systems and wider vocabulary to start breaking down stigma attached to social housing tenants.

#### 1. Ditch the word 'vulnerable' in all your systems, tools and strategies.

Perhaps the words that come closest to a suitable replacement are 'marginalised', or 'disadvantaged', as it at least implies that people are placed in a position of disadvantage by force of something outside of their control. Systems and strategies – including digital tools at our disposal – should be there to help your organisation recognise and challenge the (external) factors that put tenants in a disadvantaged or potentially dangerous position, not accept them and only do remedial work.

#### 2. Instead of using 'empowering' in strategies, mission statements, product demos and presentations...

...focus on providing digital solutions that offer flexible methods of communications across multiple channels. Allow people to report repairs on their terms. People have power, we just need to give them the space to use it.

#### 3. Instead of talking about 'giving tenants a voice' ...

...focus on using digital tools to listen better. Whenever tenants talk to their landlords, they are offering up reams of data that can be stored and used to improve services.

By getting better at capturing what tenants say in every interaction landlords can design better services. Tenants already have a voice. It is just too often it falls on deaf ears. Using digital tools and data in the right way gives landlords the chance to listen more intently.

## Managing complexity, consolidation and change



**Russ Charlesworth**  
Director of Health  
and Social Care, Socitm

### Housing, health and social care - solving the data conundrum



Poverty and health inequalities - housing providers are at the forefront of tackling the biggest challenges we face.

Addressing such deep-rooted issues needs a better system of information sharing between organisations and institutions in our communities. That much is clear.

These aren't new problems. But there is an increasing level of urgency to solve them.

We can no longer file data sharing under 'too complicated.' We can't hide behind governance or GDPR concerns.

We cannot continue with systems and process that are suboptimal and inefficient because organisations are blinkered. Operating without the full picture to the detriment of residents.

#### Bold leadership

Now, finally, we are beginning to see some positive signs that we are letting down the barriers and becoming more transparent about the data we hold and how we use it.

This is being driven by bold leadership built on social purpose.

Let's be frank. Getting people around the table to agree complex processes for data sharing isn't going to come about through strong business cases. It probably won't make your organisation any more surplus this year.

But better data sharing will make people healthier, happier and live longer. It will make our homes greener. It will mean better services for those who need them most.

The outcomes that we can deliver for people and communities has to be enough to make this happen.

#### So, how can we do better?

A sensible place to start might be for health, social care, housing and home care providers in different geographies to collaborate on what a minimum data set is for sharing between agencies.

If we can agree on what information partners need to get on with their jobs and develop a platform for quick access to that information we can make huge strides very quickly.

Whenever we talk to front-line workers, bureaucracy and paperwork are amongst their biggest headaches.

Housing officers being able to access instantaneous updates from GPs and social care workers about a tenant in the early stages of dementia, for example, could be transformative to their care.



## Managing complexity, consolidation and change

### Time savings

It could also lead to a massive time saving, cutting out the back and forth between services ringing up for information.

Conversations on data sharing can become geared to focus solely on looking after older people.

This is important.

But there are a raft of areas – ranging from anti-social behaviour to mental health – where quicker and better data sharing between agencies would lead to better services for individuals and communities.

### Housing's role

Housing's role in this partnership is critical. Health and social services often only become engaged with an individual when there is a pressing clinical or social problem.

Housing has the ability to get “up stream” and deal with issues at their inception. Better information from agencies can mean support is targeted at the right people in the right neighbourhoods.

That should lead to some direct saving to NHS and council services and foster a new sense of partnerships between health, local councils and housing providers.

The recent “About Me” health and social care standard is a good example of the information a person could share with many agencies.

In Lincolnshire County Council when data sharing was implemented with health partners and administrators could not keep up with demand from social workers wanting to access the system they'd developed.

At the moment housing is not consistently part of these data sharing groups. It needs to be.

**“Housing has the ability to get “up stream” and deal with issues at their inception. Better information from agencies can mean support is targeted at the right people in the right neighbourhoods.”**

### Collaboration

In reality, organisations have had the technical ability to share information on individuals successfully for over 20 years.

When we collaborate, services get better. Together we can save so much time and effort and make a real difference to those who matter.

We are always delighted to talk to you about how housing and health and social care can work better together. If you want to take part in the discussions we are having please visit [www.advisory.socitm.net/housing](http://www.advisory.socitm.net/housing)



# Smarter homes

## Smarter homes



**Casey Cole**  
CEO, Guru Systems

### The digitalisation of heat will be led by heat networks

In the UK, heat is responsible for 37% of carbon emissions, more than emissions from transport.

Low carbon heat networks are a fundamental part of the UK's decarbonisation strategy, with the Committee on Climate Change expecting the proportion of UK heating delivered over heat networks to rise from 2% to at least 20% by 2050.

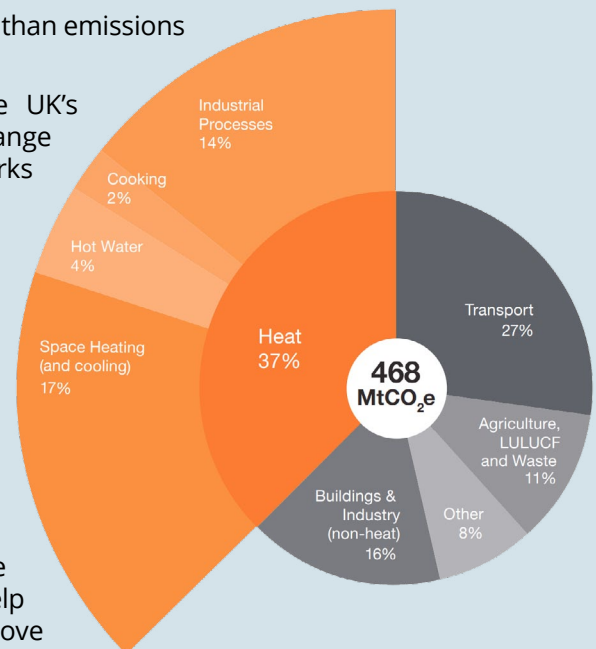
But decarbonisation isn't the only buzzword in heat. Digitalisation is also going to be key if we're to deliver this change in a way that is both fair for customers and cost effective.

To achieve the kind of carbon reductions required to help meet net zero, heat networks should be closely monitored so that maintenance and efficiency improvements can be made.

This kind of monitoring is what Guru Systems specialises in. Our technology captures performance data from every part of the heat network, from the energy centre or plant room, to the Heat Interface Unit in each individual home. We then provide software platforms that use machine learning algorithms to help network operators identify and resolve performance issues, improve the efficiency of the network, and manage operating costs.

For these heat network operators, access to detailed data for site-wide diagnostics allows problems or inefficiencies to be identified, reducing total energy costs. It can also point maintenance engineers in the right direction, reducing the time spent investigating problems on site. Efficient heat networks should also mean cheaper bills for residents.

Heat networks don't exist in isolation. One of the key steps that needs to be taken to decarbonise heat will be sector coupling, meaning integration with the power sector and, where possible, with the waste, agriculture, silviculture, transport and sewer sectors too. Sector integration will rely on smart energy management systems, which will in turn rely on real-time data, predictive algorithms, and machine learning.



## Smarter homes

### CASE STUDY: Stockwell Park Estate, London

Data collected by Guru uncovered network losses of 3,350 kWh per dwelling per year and helped to diagnose issues with the network's Heat Interface Units. The data also inspired site investigations which found missing insulation on pipework into dwellings. The housing association then replaced faulty valves, insulated pipework within dwellings, and recommissioned and insulated Heat Interface Units.

These changes resulted in:

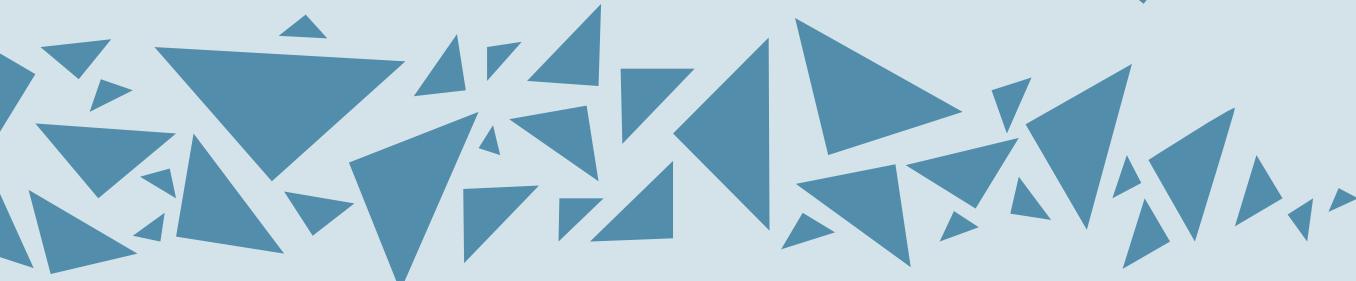
- 53% reduction in network heat losses
- 47% reduction in terminal run temperatures vs ambient for dwellings with interventions
- 60% reduction in terminal run losses for dwellings with interventions, saving more than 1,700kWh per annum across the site
- £140 saving per household per year after residents' heat consumption reduced by 20-30%



Guru's technology is multi-utility, because the digitalisation of heat will need to work alongside the digitalisation of electricity, water, cooling, vehicle charging and more if our energy systems are genuinely going to become more transparent, lower cost and lower carbon.

The Heat Network Industry Council (the industry group representing heat networks) is pushing for all city heat networks to be digital by 2030, including the digitalisation of existing networks.

**"The future of heat will be digital. We hope that other utilities will join us on this journey too."**





# Smarter workplaces



# Smarter workplaces



## Work is what you do, not where you go - the evolution of smart workplaces



How we work has changed seismically in the last year or so. Once again the office must adapt to keep up with the demands of staff and businesses.

The workplace has often been the place where the digital world meets the physical world. So as we prepare for the post-Covid life what tech should we invest in to create smarter workplaces?

The answer should very much depend on the culture you want to set.

Too often investment decisions and office innovations are driven by what's possible rather than what is needed.

Smart workplaces are about helping people to do their jobs in the best and most efficient way possible – but also supporting the wider cultural journey of the business.

### The Network journey

Our own digital journey started long before Covid.

Prior to 2016 we were six different landlords with different Boards and priorities, then we consolidated into Network and become one organisation with a common culture.

That process highlighted a big gap in our digital offer to staff. We were using ipads but they were not integrated. If you were not in the office you had to log in to a system that made applications look like Ceefax.

Initially the focus of investment was on our culture, but then we needed technology to catch up.

In 2019 we identified four different personas of colleagues based on their interactions with tenants and whether they were office or community based – and set out what kit and data they needed so that they could do their jobs any time, any place anywhere.

It provided staff with the technology they needed so they could fully embrace the culture we'd set. We fully integrated this into the design of the new office we were due to move into in Summer 2020.

With Covid on the horizon, in March 2020 we sent everyone to work at home for the day to test how our IT system would respond if we were locked down and we all had to go fully remote.

IT had to explain to us that this was a somewhat pointless exercise as the investments we'd made meant it made no difference at all where people worked, in retrospect we wonder why we robbed colleagues of one extra day of physical collaboration with each other.



## Smarter workplaces

### Cultural hub

Digital had meant that the office no longer needed to be the place where people came to 'do work.'

Our team had the ability to work anywhere.

It needed to be a place where people came to connect with the business and their colleagues. It would become our cultural, creative and collaboration hub.

We successfully completed the move to our fantastic new offices during the first lockdown. So far limited numbers of us have been able to enjoy spaces that foster our core culture of collaboration.

We have hot desks but also lots of different places you can work, talk and collaborate. . Lots of different room sizes, fully equipped for hybrid working and breakout areas. Areas to go away from your team and work on your own and areas to noisily brainstorm all together. Spaces with walls you can write on. A big graffiti wall with our strapline spraypainted onto it.

We have a business lounge where anyone can come and work – whether they be from Network or a trusted partner. This is to encourage more collaboration with people.

We invested in bean to cup coffee machines and wanted to the office to be a 'good experience.'

**“Digital had meant that the office no longer needed to be the place where people came to 'do work.' It would become our cultural hub.”**

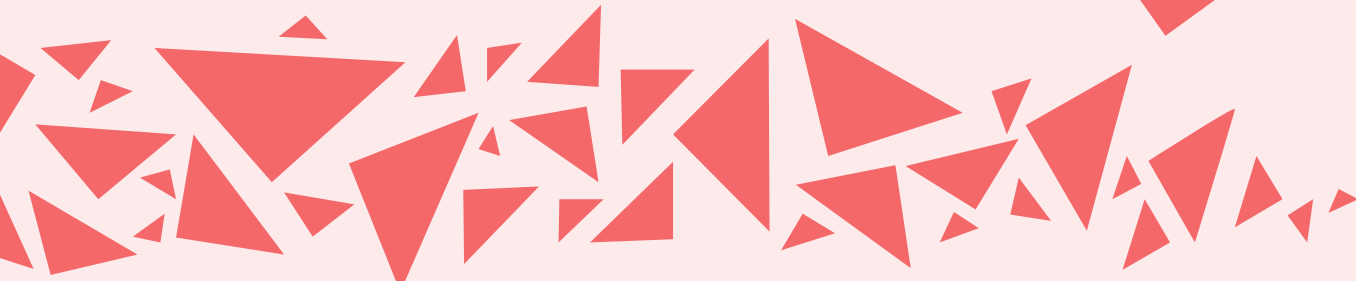
We don't use technology to monitor or check in on people and even throughout the lockdowns haven't made people book-in or ask for permission to attend the office – which we've made fully covid-secure. We've simply highlighted the ever-changing government guidance and told colleagues we trust them to apply it to themselves.

Our reforms have been about using digital to work smarter, not necessarily about having super smart places to work.

They will be a place of social contact and engagement – digital can take care of a lot, but not that. Social interaction is what makes us human

When some of our teams saw each other for the first time after lockdown they literally jumped up and down with joy.

There isn't a digital way of creating that energy and connection.



# Perspectives on Digital in Housing



To find out more about the work of  
Socitm Advisory  
visit: [www.advisory.socitm.net/housing](http://www.advisory.socitm.net/housing)