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Article

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Go digital or go home

The digital switchover is an opportunity to reframe not replicate what you already do.

By 2025, all Housing Associations will need to be fully digital*. That's a bold statement to make but one that makes you sit up and think.

Close your eyes and imagine the clock has turned back a few years. Not that long ago, losing a laptop meant losing your data. In a few short years, cloud infrastructure has allowed us to complete our working day from any device and location. Cloud storage means that your data is accessible, secure, and safe, regardless of where you might have left your laptop.

Many things that seemed like a pipe dream five years ago are now a reality, and emerging technology has changed our lives in lots of ways. When Amazon introduced Alexa to the world in 2014, it brought the Internet of Things (IoT) into our homes. This technology gave us immediate access to information without us even having to lift a finger. But it brought so much more than that. It's given us seamless communication between people, processes, and places. And that is giving housing providers a promising future, with real transformation opportunities.

Take the Dutch social housing association, Qlinker, for example. A fully digitalised operation that has cut housing applications from 6 days to 6 hours, with the all-time fastest approval being just 10 minutes. And how have they done this? They reshaped the traditional social housing business model. They challenged established ways of operating and legacy social housing conventions. They thought like their residents and worked in partnership with them. But they did it by embracing technology to deliver what they need rather than being led by it.

Digital investment is not just about designing a strategy

Delivering fully digitally enabled housing associations by 2025 sounds like hard work – and it will be. But if we don't start now, there could be serious consequences for us. Old analogue connections are phasing out as we speak and will cease to exist over the next four years. For social landlords who still use telecare devices that need an analogue connection, this is a reality check. Social housing communities have complex needs, with an aging population making it more complicated. Many vulnerable people need to know they have a link to the outside world and that someone will respond right away during an emergency. Digital channels mean that connection can be immediate.

Qlinker were fortunate that they could start from scratch and build a new digitally focused business model. But what if that's not an option and you need to work with what you've got? Embracing digital is not just about defining a strategy. And it's not just about putting in some tech and hoping people use it. Nearly two-thirds of housing providers believe their digital strategy is already defined. Yet this can be misaligned if it focuses too much on implementing the technology without delivering tangible value for leaseholders or making operations more effective. It can be a delicate balance to get this right.

Tenant portals are already popular amongst providers but take up from residents has been sporadic. Investing in the tech is all well and good, but if no one uses it the way you expect, it points to something not right in the process. 63% of residents still contact their landlords via traditional channels of engagement, such as call centres. So, we need to take stock of this and ask, why we're not always getting it right? If you want people to embrace technology, give them the skills they need to use it. Our population is getting older, and this generation not only needs to be educated in technology, but they also need to feel safe when using it.

Balancing the digital focus

We know that we need to get better at listening to tenant voices. Developing a meaningful way to understand their needs is vital, but it's just lip service if the insight does not underpin our digital strategy. Digitally transforming a housing association needs investment in all the right places. There are many parts of the puzzle that need to fit together. Technology is just the final piece.

The Social Housing White Paper in late 2020 highlighted a need to increase the supply of affordable homes, but it also talked about a focus on a new shared ownership model to help residents afford a stake in their own homes in the years to come. This sense of partnership and thinking about how people want to live in the future is perhaps the key to ensuring the digital journey does not derail.

Getting this right means putting the groundwork in to understand your tenants and to assess your internal capabilities and skills. So, before you decide which piece of tech to buy, you need to focus on the tenant journey. You need to think about investing in digital skills for people. You need to look at your business processes as strategic assets. You need to understand where critical risks and potential supply chain failures might be. You need to use all the data you have at your fingertips. And you need to assess how existing systems talk to each other. There are so many factors to consider in a digital world that it can be overwhelming.

A third of housing associations class themselves as digital 'beginners' and know there is work to do. We work with many housing associations across the breadth of the UK, and we understand the challenges across the sector in general but more specifically, within the digital space. We facilitate a social housing forum to review emerging digital issues, look for root causes, and develop pragmatic solutions. If you're interested in joining your peers in the discussion, we'd love to welcome you to the forum. Regardless of where you are on the digital journey, get in touch if you'd like to chat about taking the first step or want help to pick up speed: socialhousing@waterstons.com.

We'd love to hear from you.

*Research from Altair & 3C consultants