The Future for Housing IT Services

Contents

Foreward

The Disruptive Innovators Network commissioned this report to answer some fundamental questions about how evolving business needs and the introduction of new technologies would change housing IT services, many of which have increasing relevance due to the impact of the coronavirus.

The report covers:

▶ How housing IT services are seen within the wider organisational structure

▶ How they are involved in driving strategic change

▶ How evolving requirements and the challenges related to coronavirus disruption have created opportunities for IT

▶ What roles will change or disappear and which new ones will emerge

▶ How IT can play a critical role in meeting the changing needs of customers

This research involved qualitative interviews with a range of leaders working in senior roles within the sector as well as technologists, advisors and thought leaders to give a number of different perspectives to help services:

▶ Understand what is driving the change

▶ How to achieve this change

▶ And what some future options may look like

We'd like to say a big thank you to all those who contributed to this research and hope that it helps inform the debate and future development of this vital service within housing organisations.

Ian Wright, Managing Director, Disruptive Innovators Network

Introduction

Whatever your business, the role and scope of your IT team will have undergone truly radical change in recent years. Customers expect greater digitalisation of services while workforces have become ever more technology literate, leading to a broadening of what is required from what was originally little more than a support function for the wider business.

The traditional image of an IT service desk waiting to respond to call outs when computers break down is no longer fit for purpose in today's world. Frankly, it hasn't been for some time.

Today, IT services are an integral and integrated part of the businesses they serve: essential to planning and implementing major transformations; managing sudden and unwelcome business change; mergers and acquisitions; as well as the maintenance and upgrading of vital infrastructure.

What's more, the pace of change for IT services is only set to increase, bringing with it a range of challenges: How will they adapt to the threats and opportunities presented by automation and AI? How will they serve a more dynamic workforce and customer base? Can they guarantee the security of their companies' data? And perhaps most importantly of all, do they have, or can they get and keep, the skills and resources to keep up with this changing and competitive environment?

These questions apply just as much to IT services at housing providers as to anyone else.

"What is revealed is an existential threat to the IT services"

What emerges from this report is that, in a number of areas, the sector lags behind others in terms of how its IT services are valued and utilised. There is therefore an urgent need for housing to take a fresh look at its IT function to make it fit for purpose in the 21st century.

This report aims to outline what the current state of play is for IT teams in the sector, in what areas there is room for improvement, and what the future might look like.

What is revealed is an existential threat to the IT services – and the professionals within them – at housing providers. The IT team as we know it today won't exist at most major organisations in five years time; but what might replace it is still up for grabs.

A dysfunctional relationship?

One of the loudest messages from our research was that housing IT functions must emerge from being support functions and become truly accepted as a primary strategic component of the businesses they serve.

What does that mean in practice? For starters it means that IT professionals and business leaders need to start talking the same language.

Colin Sales is managing director at consultancy 3C, which has worked with more than 100 housing providers over the last five years, helping many of them through their business transformation journeys.

He says: "One of the most dysfunctional relationships in social housing is the relationship between the IT team and the directorial function.

"Too often IT staff have specialist skills that no one else in the business has or properly understands and therefore there is no one to properly direct or mentor them. They become a bit of an island. It shouldn't be a surprise

therefore that many years later, someone like 3C independently reviews the service against the needs of the business and finds it lacking in many areas. That's not usually the IT team's fault, instead it is often driven by a lack of understanding of IT requirements and capability at a senior level. IT teams are not being properly exposed, developed and consulted on the challenges that organisations face."

A common conundrum within the sector is that many IT services report into the finance director. Sales says this is particularly true at "smaller to medium housing providers" of less than 10,000 properties – ie the vast majority of the sector.

But things could be changing at some of the largest HAs. In 2018, Clarion Housing Group appointed its first Chief Information Officer in the shape of Ian Woosey. Not only did this appointment come from outside the sector, but Woosey also immediately joined the group's executive team.

"Technology is very high on the agenda"

"The appointment at executive level was recognition that technology is very high on the agenda," he says. "There's very little you do that isn't enabled by technology but traditionally, the IT director reported to the finance director."

"That traditional model in other sectors is much less common than it used to be. In housing, the CIO being on the executive team is still rare."

For forward thinking associations like Clarion, the days of the IT team being kept at arms length from the business could soon be a thing of the past, but not everyone is as far down the road.

Colin Sales

Ian Woosey

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David Mann is managing director at DXW, a consultancy that has helped dozens of public sector organisations develop and transform their digital strategies. He believes that poor organisational design and a lack of technical expertise among leadership groups is holding some housing providers back.

"All too often, whoever heads up IT is reporting to someone further up the management chain and technology rarely has a seat at the senior table," he says. "In many organisations, IT reports to finance, where rigid procurement approaches mean rigorous specification of products and services up front."

And in turn, that rigid approach means that IT teams cannot respond to the fast pace of technological change. This might sound like something of an abstract problem, but Mann insists it can easily affect the level of service an organisation provides.

"When technology decisions are largely driven by price, you end up locked into a small number of vendors who often lack internet era capability themselves. This approach usually relies on traditional project management techniques that hamper attempts to introduce more agile ways of working. This adversely impacts the quality of the service you deliver if you are unable to respond to change."

Like Clarion, Great Places Housing Group also looked outside the housing sector when it recruited a Director of Technology Services, in the shape of Sharon Hayes. She sits on the Directors Group at Great Places, so is close to the centre of decision making. But she has also encountered a sector that is behind the times when it comes to the role and input of IT in top level decision making.

"More important... is having IT representation at the top."

"I'd want it to look a bit more like the private sector," she says, "One of the things that doesn't feel right to me is that IT still sits under finance which other sectors have moved away from. I've heard this remark from several IT directors in the sector. However, more important than that is having IT representation at the top. While getting the right return from investments in technology is critical and requires proper financial governance, the impact of technology is now so broad to how a business operates that it seems crazy not to have that open discussion and insight at all top-level meetings.

"What I also believe is of value is IT representation in different departmental team meetings where feasible. Even if just a 'fly on the wall' approach, by listening to the challenges and issues being faced by the business, the IT team will become more business savvy and can proactively consider how technology can be leveraged to support the business, for efficiencies in operations and innovation opportunities."

David Mann

Do we need more burning platforms?

One possible barrier to IT earning its seat at the top table is that housing leaders don't actually see themselves as behind the times when it comes to their adoption of technology.

In a survey conducted by 3C and Altair in 2018 (published in 2019), nearly 40% of housing association directors, executives and board members surveyed said they considered themselves to be either 'innovators' or 'early adopters' in terms of their approach to transformation and innovation. A further 41% put themselves in the 'early majority' category, meaning they would adopt innovative ways of working once they began picking up momentum.

But despite this belief in their openness to new technology and the transformation agenda, when asked about specific innovations they were more reticent.

"You only change when there's a burning platform."

Nearly half said they did not expect to be using AI for call handling by 2025, for example. And more than a quarter did not believe they would use data to manage tenancies and arrears by 2025.

Predicting the future is never easy, but it's likely that these technologies will be playing some role at least for most organisations – not least housing providers – five years from now. Likely to be even less post covid.

Asked about the results of the survey he helped run, 3C's Sales pulls no punches: "A landlord may feel they are ahead of the curve compared to other landlords, but compared to some other sectors they are in the dark ages."

And why is this? It all comes down to risk.

"The sector is generally risk averse," says Sales. "There is of course the argument why take risks when there are so many horror stories of how new technology has cost a fortune and not achieved its desired objectives once implemented, disrupting the organisation for what feels like little gain.

In many other sectors, if organisations don't stay at the forefront of technology, it could mean business failure, retail currently being a good example. That has not been the case in the social housing sector."

40%
either 'innovators' or 'early adopters

41%
'early majority'

Nick Atkin, chief executive of Yorkshire Housing, agrees that this 'safety first' approach has hindered housing's ability to change its technology compared to other sectors.

"You only change when there's a burning platform." he says. "Why have councils got really good at self-serve? It's because they've had a massive burning platform. They've had a 40% reduction in their budgets, so they haven't got the people to deal with all of that [service desk] stuff. They realise they can deal with it on a digital platform and reduce cost. That means less people in a call centre, or a walk in centre. Housing, health and education haven't had that burning platform."

Or not until now, anyway. Coronavirus has created a burning platform of sorts – and this report will turn to that later.

But Atkin also recognises another burning platform in the shape of Yorkshire Housing's ambitious growth plans. With the help of Homes England funding, the association intends to increase its stock size by 40% over the next decade, from 20,000 homes to 28,000 homes. And, crucially, to do this without increasing its cost base.

But that's not all. Atkin estimates that the roll out of Universal Credit puts 63% of income that was previously guaranteed at risk. "How many more people will I have to employ to collect the same amount of income?" he asks. "Well, I won't actually employ any more but I'll use them differently. By switching more non-value adding transactions to self serve, that frees up people to support income collection."

For Yorkshire Housing, these 'burning platforms' have forced it to rethink how it operates. And there's one thing that underpins all of the changes it needs to put into place: Data.

"You only change when there's a burning platform."

Nick Atkin

Yorkshire Housing's ambitious growth plans

3,120	3,000	1,110	638	312	249
More homes by 2021	More new homes by 2026	Completed to date (from April 2016)	Homes currently being built	Additional units starting between April 2019 and September 2019	Section 106 units in-contract

The data challenge

Data analytics is arguably the biggest technological challenge facing housing providers today. Social landlords have a treasure trove of useful data about their customers and their properties, but by their own admission, they have been unable to make use of it.

"It's the classic data rich, information poor situation," says Great Places' Hayes. "We've got loads of data but not really using it effectively. Data challenges are considerable. We do have lots of data but ensuring it is compliant to legislation, secure from compromise, and properly used to add value to decision making requires significant effort, funding and skill. We definitely could be doing a better job."

Where responsibility for data collection and analysis lies can be a difficult question. But Colin Sales thinks it's an opportunity for IT teams to realign their role.

"It is widely acknowledged in a digital age that data is the new oil," he explains. "Those that harness its power to provide a better service to customers are in a far better position to flourish than others.

"I think the vast majority of housing providers accept that their data is a mess and needs to be reviewed. As far as the IT service is concerned, this provides an opportunity. IT stands for 'information technology'. Traditionally the focus has been on the technology, but the emphasis is changing towards information. Technology is simply an enabler for providing information. IT services should be morphing to focus far more on the provision and management of information rather than the technology?"

As Ian Woosey at Clarion points out, what needs to happen for housing providers to harness the data to produce either savings or better quality service – or indeed both – is for them to develop new skills, not just input new technology.

"There's plenty of data but it has no value on its own," he says. "You need the skills and tools to create actionable insight from that. It's all very well having the data but if you don't get insight then it's a missed opportunity."

> **"It is widely acknowledged in a digital age that data is the new oil"**

Sharon Hayes

The Internet of Things and the prevalence of connected devices being installed in homes provides a real opportunity for associations to start harnessing and using data in a more targeted way; and it's an opportunity that needs to be grasped by the business as a whole, not just by IT services.

"What is the real opportunity with connected homes?" asks Woosey. "They are prime examples of something that will generate tonnes and tonnes of data but then you need to analyse that and get insight from it.

"There's no point in having sensors in people's homes if you don't do anything with that data. There's recognition there's value in analysing the data. However, if we were going to do an implementation of IoT (Internet of Things) sensors for heat, light, moisture, whatever, then it would have to have a business case behind it. I'm not interested in technology for technology's sake."

For Atkin at Yorkshire Housing, data should be used primarily to improve services. But this is where a data-savvy IT team comes in.

"The prize is to fundamentally shift the customer offer," he says. "If you look at how it works now, it is based on failure; we wait for an event to happen: somebody falling into arrears; a repair needed; tenancy ended; we can't let properties in an area. That's all reactive. It's unplanned, unstructured and really inefficient and ineffective.

"For a customer, if you have a service model based on failure, it's not a positive process. Our aim is for our data to be accurate and with the aid of clever analytics, coupled with smart-tech and IoT, shift from being reactive to proactive. We want to fix things and deal with things before they actually happen."

"At the moment many organisations have disparate systems that don't talk to each other, and many organisations don't see the value in the data they've got and haven't access to data analysts or data scientists working for them, so it's a case of 'you don't know what you don't know'."

"We want to fix things and deal with things before they actually happen."
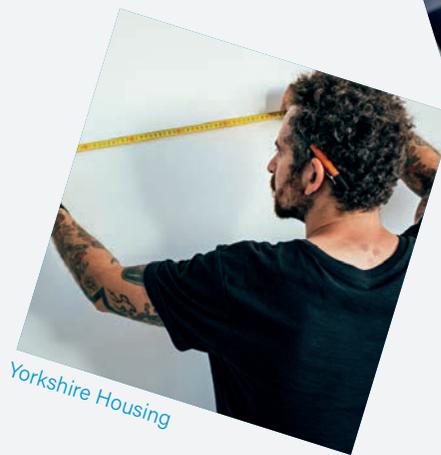
Yorkshire Housing

The skills are alive

If data is the new oil, then there needs to be a new cohort of prospectors to go out and get it – and to make use of it.

Housing providers' IT services are going to have to undergo a radical transformation if they are to reskill to help deliver data-enhanced performance for their organisations.

That doesn't just mean the sector should go on a recruit drive for data scientists and data analysts; it also means there will need to be more business-minded managers who can marry digital skills with the ability to sell their new data-enriched insights to decision makers to deliver better, more efficient performance.

However, as it stands, David Mann at DXW is not impressed with the landscape. "Right now, there is a chronic shortage of digital skills," he says. "Housing is just one sector in the throes of transformation and is competing for skilled people with sectors like banking, government, retail and entertainment."

Kevin Ives, the first ever chief information officer at Sovereign and another outside-the-sector appointment when he joined in May 2019, believes that development and recruitment should focus on the people who can bridge the gap between technology and business.

"A much deeper understanding of business logic and business impact is key," he explains. "We need much better vendor skills and partnering skills. The projects we run are much more around co-creation of the business: third parties and tech teams coming together to get stuff done quickly - and that does require a different mindset.

"The people who gravitate towards those environments do enjoy it, but they're different from people who have lived in IT functions and that can create a tension.

"Also, business facing data scientists are hard to come across, and the sector isn't the easiest to attract people to."

Government statistics back up the assertion that these skills are in high demand. A June 2019 report from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) found that some level of digital skills were required by 82% of all online jobs advertised in the UK, across sector, region and entry level.

"Digital skills were required by 82% of all online jobs"

It's a dauntingly competitive market but there is a reason to be optimistic though, according to Mann: "Housing does hold one competitive advantage in the recruitment game over other sectors and that is purpose. We are in the midst of a housing crisis with a chronic lack of social and affordable housing. If you are a technologist who cares about solving the housing crisis, where better to work than in housing?

"Housing needs to tap into new recruitment markets and the easiest way to do this is get better at telling stories. Teams that are open about their work will look more attractive to those very people they are trying to attract."

That is yet another reason that the old image of the purely responsive, service-based IT team must be consigned to history. To attract a dynamic work force, housing must show it is ready to welcome that dynamism.

Game over for the IT crowd?

So, what will the housing IT team of the future actually look like?

With such a fundamental change in both skillset and mindset on the horizon, there are some in the tech community who predict the death of the IT service altogether.

While few in the housing sector give such a stark prognosis for their teams, there are still many who think the days are numbered for some of its functions.

"I don't understand why anyone still has an IT service desk," says David Biden, chief executive at Human+, a consultancy that advises housing providers and others on automation and digitisation.

"We buy our own laptops off Amazon, so there's no reason that [the service desk] can't be fully automated. You could do a lot of IT support using a well configured chatbot as well, rather than have people on the end of a phone. I don't think that an IT repair element is needed anymore. It's becoming a lot more commodotised.

"I'd be looking to reduce the roles we've got in IT at the moment but not the people. You can take the people and get them to provide higher value services, such as R&D."

Others in the sector also see their IT teams becoming smaller and increasingly nimble.

"We'll have a smaller team that is much more highly skilled," predicts Andy Belton chief operating officer at Notting Hill Genesis. "They'll manage the supply and support of technology from a variety of suppliers. It will be coming through as subscription services or through buying other people's platforms, so the people we employ will be managing those relationships whilst also making sure what we are getting is good value, high quality and safe."

"I think it'll be more fluid. One challenge is how to deal with a more fluid delivery model; there's a challenge to build a FTE team that's there for the peaks of demand. As we become more competitive and we get squeezed, you can't just have big IT functions waiting for another project to come along, so out of necessity they will be smaller but able to ramp up quickly."

That means that IT teams in the future are likely to be a mix of in-house professionals with business – rather than just tech – expertise, and third-party suppliers to take on project-based work, when demand could spike.

Increased automation in the workplace – both within and outside the IT team – will also drive changes to the service, says Biden.

"I think the really interesting thing is that things like automation, or CRM (customer relationship management) are empowering businesses to do more things themselves. You don't need to phone IT. People are generally far more IT literate.

"The IT service of the future has got to be business facing as much as possible; it's strength will be empowering the business to do things rather than being a gatekeeper."

Chris Masey, account manager at Amazon Web Services, suggests that IT teams will still be a support function to the wider business but the processes and infrastructure they support will be different, and the skills required will be different too.

"In the long term, IT teams will need to manage the growing family of connected devices and support an operating model that starts with delivering services in the customers home," he adds. "The Internet of Things will become central to how housing providers manage everything from customer services to asset management and care and support."

Chris Masey

Head in the cloud

This shift in function for the IT team goes hand in hand with another change that has been taking place gradually over the last few years and has been accelerated by the challenges surrounding the coronavirus and remote working: the shift to cloud computing and 'Software as a Service' (SaaS).

This evolution entails both a shift in physical infrastructure - away from having to run large and often expensive servers or data centres - and a change in mindset from those running the services.

Housing providers have so far moved at different paces when it comes to embracing the cloud and take up of SaaS. But for the innovators, there is no turning back.

"The days of IT services looking after boxes of tin in buildings is a ridiculous waste of time," says Stephen Thorlby-Coy, head of ICT at

Yorkshire Housing. "We need to make that someone else's problem and pay them to sort it out. We don't want servers. Software as a Service is what we want to move towards."

At Yorkshire, Thorlby-Coy has been implementing a Microsoft Dynamics ERP (enterprise resource planning) system: "It makes it a bit more of a vanilla service but we can customise it to our own needs. It just works – we don't worry about configuring, installing or anything like that.

"That means we don't need to worry about the network connectivity between our offices and buildings. People just need an internet connection and a device capable of running the systems they need. We also don't need to worry as much about infrastructure support, backups, disaster recovery or upgrades. Things like that are done automatically by the vendor."

Biden says moving operations into the cloud would be "one of the few things I'd focus on" if he were a housing association CIO: "It makes financial sense; it's safe enough; and you're going to be able to free up some physical space. It's also the way in which industry is going, allowing you to control and manage systems and data much better. It also provides an opportunity to upskill your workforce, training them in the management of cloud environments such as Google Cloud, Microsoft Azure and AWS."

"Challenges surrounding the coronavirus and remote working"
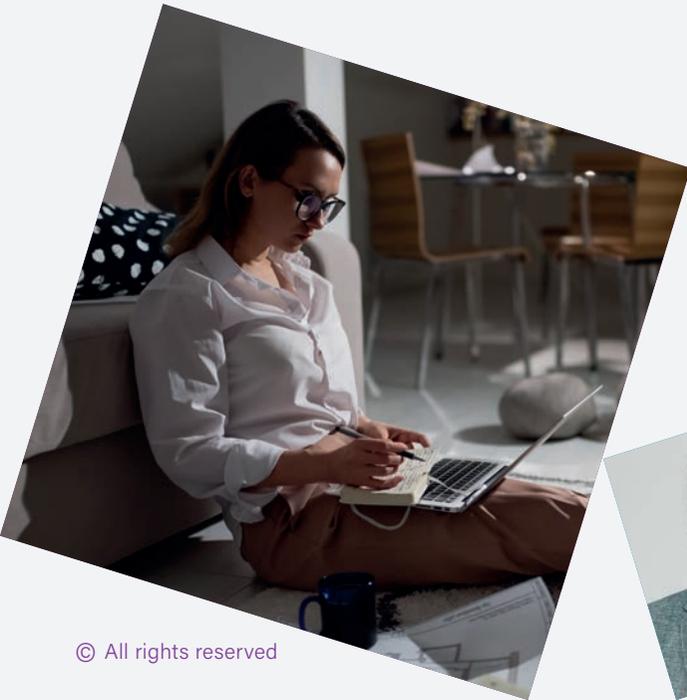
David Biden

Stephen Thorlby-Coy

For Masey, the trick for in-house IT teams is how to balance what is done internally and what is outsourced, so that they don't become overly dependent on suppliers.

"I believe housing providers need to work towards redressing the balance of 'building' and 'buying', because right now there is a huge dependency on third party suppliers and systems," he says.

Masey believes that there are two main groups of people in IT teams who "will become the trailblazers for cloud migration" and in turn grow their own skillset:

"Firstly, the traditional infrastructure teams who are still provisioning hardware on-premise. It is essential this group of people understands the importance of operations in a cloud-based environment and that their role remains vital in managing the underlying infrastructure of the organisation, even if the servers and network components are hosted in the cloud.

"Secondly, the data analysts and business intelligence developers, who right now are likely to be managing multiple data silos and possibly an on-premise data warehouse. This group of people have the capability to help their respective housing providers democratise the data and start to utilise this data as services for as many people in the organisation.

"They are the enabler to machine learning, AI and all the innovative technologies that are now accessible to all."

As it stands, many are still learning how to strike the balance when it comes to the cloud.

"What we think we'll get to is some hybrid operation: a smaller presence in a data centre and more and more stuff in the cloud," says Belton. "That's the way suppliers are going as well. There will be a time when what was an on premise solution will only be in the cloud. We'll be pushed in that direction, it's just a question of how quickly.

"There is a huge dependency on third party suppliers and systems"

Yorkshire Housing: Spen Lane

Transformations

Everything so far discussed in this report is predicated on the fact that many housing providers, large and small, either have begun or are about to embark on root and branch transformation programmes.

The 2018, 3C/Altair survey found that almost all respondents were somewhere in their transformation journey, with 59% saying they were currently implementing a programme at the time of the survey, and a further 39% saying they were "in the process of planning" their transformation.

For some of the bigger players, macro forces have pushed them towards huge changes in how their business – and their IT – operates. These include the prevalence of so-called 'mega-mergers' in recent years; the pressure to develop more and different tenures; and increased regulatory scrutiny.

"Housing association mergers will continue to create challenges in the medium term for IT teams," says Masey. "What it means pragmatically is that these teams are now supporting a broader range of disparate and disconnected applications.

"Many housing providers are already turning to cloud migration in an attempt to deliver the scalability and resilience the business requires. Being constrained by legacy applications and on-premise deployments adds a significant layer of complexity to these mergers and in most cases stifles the ability for housing providers to drive key innovations and deliver new services for a sustained period of time."

"Many housing providers are already turning to cloud migration"

Those that have gone through a merger cite it as a catalyst for change within their IT functions.

When Notting Hill and Genesis merged in 2018, they had two huge legacy IT systems that needed to be blended. Combining these was one of the biggest challenges, but the solution has in fact helped increase productivity throughout the organisation.

Andy Belton and his team developed WorkWise, a platform that sits above several underlying programmes to allow NHG's staff and customers to interact between themselves and with third parties. It is a front-end website but also connects to underlying business systems, such as Microsoft Dynamics and the association's housing management and finance systems.

WorkWise is an example of collaboration in both its development and its potential future use capacity. It was developed in the cloud alongside Amido, a third party software development company. But NHG want it to be developed and expanded so it can be used by other housing providers, delivering savings across the sector.

As for the IT team, building out WorkWise helped it develop new ways of working which it still applies today, such as 'Agile' development and using 'Scrum' teams.

Belton says NHG has "only just harmonised the operating model" but it has already been paying back some of its £11m cost.

"The crude measure is in productivity areas," he adds. "We've increased housing manager patches from 125 to about 180 [homes]. There are lots of other nuanced improvements.

"In terms of the IT department, WorkWise is a big piece of our business delivery model. They have to keep it running and they're constantly developing new features." Belton and NHG invested in developing new skills among existing staff.

"We've retrained some people; hired some people and are supplementing the team with day rate contractors because it's such a competitive market. The team is broadly the same size but people are doing work they wouldn't have done previously, and importantly are not doing work they would have done previously."

"Combining these was one of the biggest challenges"

Notting Hill Genesis

Andy Belton

Coronavirus: a challenge and an opportunity

Mergers aren't the only driver to change for housing providers, of course, as recent events have demonstrated.

The current Coronavirus crisis brings home the urgent need for all organisations to be more flexible in how they operate, with housing providers no exception.

As 3C's Sales says: "Coronavirus is an example of something exceptional that is changing the way in which we have to work."

Masey agrees: "The political and social climate is constantly evolving and there has never been a more important time to be agile and make the right technology choices. The current

COVID-19 pandemic has provided an unwelcome compelling event that has meant full agile working is now a core requirement for all housing providers to deliver services."

The pandemic is proving to be a game changer for every single sector and for the businesses within them. For housing IT, the crisis has reinforced some of the lessons our experts have already highlighted. Indeed, it could well be a catalyst for change.

"Until the coronavirus came along, there has for many not been a compelling 'burning platform'," adds Sales. "So they have chosen not to risk changing technology unless they know it's going to work

"Those organisations that were best placed to cope with the challenges presented by the Coronavirus were those with the right technology, so you can appreciate how essentially important a strategic understanding of technology at executive and board level can help to safeguard a business."

"The pandemic is proving to be a game changer for every single sector"

For Mark Lordon, chief information officer at Origin Housing, the current situation only serves to amplify the differences between those who were already working in an agile way and those that were not.

"For those that haven't got the ability to get agile fast it's going to be more challenging," he explains. "If you've got investment in true cloud based solutions, you are going to be more agile than if you are stuck with a legacy housing management system approach.

"Those that haven't got that ability to have an agile relationship with their supplier are going to have to review them."

He also sees an opportunity for the increasing uptake of 'low-code' development solutions, which provides another route to greater flexibility for associations and their IT function.

As for the shape and structure of IT teams, Lordon suggests that although in the short term there might need to be more service desk support offered – indeed, since the start of the crisis Origin has seen a 30% rise in tickets generated by end users – the longer term picture is one where most users self serve.

"There is the technical challenge people are having, adjusting to new technologies," he says. "But once people are out the other side there may be less need for people to remote onto their device or speak to them over the phone"

At Origin, they are preparing for 40 new starters over the coming months, but it has begun asking people to self serve their own IT and bring their own device when they start work. "That stuff is being really stepped up," says Lordon.

As with many things to come out of the Coronavirus crisis, it seems unlikely that associations like Origin will go back to the old ways of working. Nick Atkin at Yorkshire Housing also believes that it has changed for good the way that customers engage with businesses, and – again – housing providers need to understand that.

"The digital genie is out the bottle now and it won't go back in," he says. "It will change the way we offer services to customers and their expectations of us will change as well."

That has profound implications for housing providers' IT teams, and those that are adapting already are the ones that will thrive.

"It seems unlikely that associations... will go back to the old ways of working"

Conclusions & recommendations

Even without the seismic changes to the housing sector that are likely to come about because of the Coronavirus crisis, housing providers' IT teams were already undergoing a period of rapid – even unprecedented - change.

Some have been pioneers in adapting to it, but many believe the sector has some catching up to do.

If you are a housing leader, it is imperative not to be left behind. You must act, and act fast.

IT teams that continue to operate primarily as technical support will be increasingly redundant and could become a burden to their businesses as technology moves beyond them and into the hands of users.

Those that are able to adapt and bring in or develop new skills to take advantage of the huge amount of data generated by housing providers can become a real asset to their organisations.

But housing providers need to take decisive action now if they are not to be left behind. They are operating in a more competitive world than ever before, and understanding how to use their technological capabilities will be key to providing a better service to customers, bringing down costs and making themselves ready to respond to the next set of challenges.
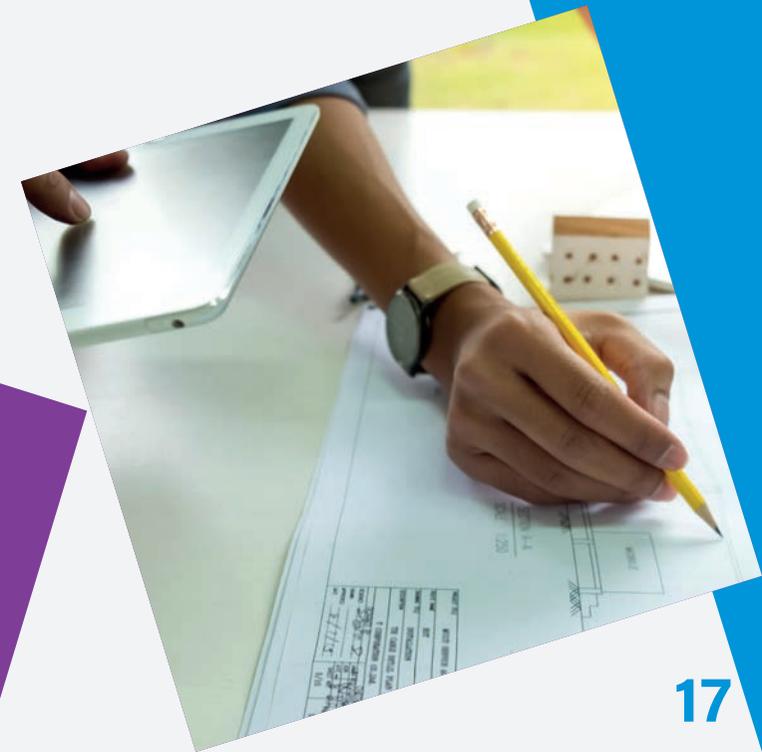
Key recommendations

▶ IT teams must make sure they have a voice at the highest level of their organisation's governance and leadership structures. Without this voice, there is a tangible weakness in governance and business leaders and IT professionals will lack the expertise needed to transform their organisations to a more effective business model fit for purpose in the modern world.

▶ Housing leaders should understand what skills need to be developed within their IT teams and retain, develop or recruit appropriately. We need a new cohort of data analysts and scientists to help us run our businesses better. There is a need for us to have IT teams with the business acumen to match their technical expertise.

▶ Associations need to get far better at collecting and understanding the data they have available on their customers, properties and staff in order to provide better services, maximise value and improve the working environment. In this digital world, data is now considered more valuable than oil, with data being the key to unlocking better performance – in essence, a housing association that fails to make use its data is letting down its customers.

▶ All housing organisations need to have a clear strategy for how they will move services to the cloud. IT systems that are still based on-site tend to be less agile and will in many cases become a burden to their organisations, as many have found to their cost in the current crisis. Those that have embraced cloud services are working effectively from anywhere that has an internet connection. If you don't have a strategy for increasingly embracing the cloud today, then one should be developed as a priority.

Acknowledgments

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