TACKLING HOUSING CHALLENGES WITH DIGITAL TELECARE

During a series of events held by Appello in partnership with BT and the Northern Housing Consortium, over 50 housing providers came together to discuss how outcomes can be improved through introducing technology and where the greatest impact will be for housing organisations and their customers. The introduction of technology and new services will reap significant rewards but all those present identified challenges that will need to be tackled along the way.

Through this report we call upon our experience as the UK's leading digital telecare provider to explore the common themes expressed by our housing sector.

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CHALLENGES FACING HOUSING PROVIDERS

Our whitepaper produced in partnership with the HousingLIN in 2018, 'Meeting Expectations with Digital Care', highlighted that in general it was not budgets that were holding housing providers back but a need for further education on digital telecare and associated technologies. This again appeared to be a common theme during our workshop. Our research has shown that awareness of the switch off of analogue telephony services has gathered pace significantly, however there appears to still be a need for wider acknowledgement on the benefits and possibilities of technology across all stakeholders within a housing organisation.

The key challenges housing providers presented:

Our customer demographics are changing and expectations are leading to technology.

We see this as a time of great opportunity. We have installed digital services into over 170 developments across the UK already, and thousands of residents are feeling the benefits. We have seen residents of all ages, backgrounds and abilities embrace digital services. However, we believe that it is a blend of technology and people that really creates the best outcomes for housing organisations and their customers.

Digital technology provides access to quicker, clearer and more reliable help; it enables vastly improved communication; it creates life-changing improvements to wellbeing and provides far greater resident insight through data. However, the greatest outcomes are realised, when technology works in tandem with the great people in housing developments, monitoring centres, healthcare and the emergency services.

Ensuring all our properties have digital equipment will take a significant capital investment.

The purchasing landscape for telecare equipment has been very traditional, with an initial investment and then ongoing maintenance costs. However, we have not only been reinvigorating technology but also the purchasing models as we realise not one model fits all.

Monthly payment models that significantly reduce the initial outlay are available and can help housing providers keep pace with changing technology.

Housing providers need to ensure all areas of their organisation have an appropriate understanding of technology and the potential outcomes that can be achieved through investment.

Our experience has shown that large scale technology projects touch many areas of an organisation and require the support of many key stakeholders.

It is important to try to identify these individuals at an early stage and involve them in initial project meetings and supplier engagements. This will create business wide commitment and highlight the requirements of all areas of the business, reducing barriers as the project evolves.

We need to ensure the equipment can be monitored, and that we are not constrained by telecare monitoring in the future.

It's often taken for granted that the existing offsite monitoring solution will be capable of monitoring new digital equipment. Often, this isn't the case though. To get over this, housing providers need to consider splitting the procurement into two lots – one for hardware, one for monitoring.

It is important though not to be restricted by your current telecare monitoring solution, and if you are unable to tender these services, there are options to work with technology providers to identify alternative solutions, but these need to be considered prior to procurement, through consultation with technology providers.

Technology has changed since we last commissioned telecare equipment, we need guidance on how to budget appropriately.

We really can't recommend enough that housing providers engage with suppliers and the market before procurement. Suppliers can provide the expertise to advise on the possibilities and costs and can look at the housing estate to identify potential challenges and complexities – before they arise.

It's important that you start by identifying the outcomes you are looking to achieve both for the organisation and your customers. Work with suppliers to push the boundaries.

We then recommend you obtain a few quotes prior to procurement to make informed decisions when budgeting. Our advice would be to find your average property based on size and building layout and get a quote from a few suppliers.

Once the specification is clear, your supplier will be able to work with you to develop an annual upgrade programme with flexibility for any unknowns.

WHERE TECHNOLOGY CAN SUPPORT

There was an overwhelming feeling across all our events that having the right technology in place can improve the experience housing providers deliver, reduce the cost of providing homes and services, and deliver the kind of digital offering residents now expect. But where do housing providers see technology having the greatest impact?

Opportunities presented by housing providers:

Resident expectations are changing, demographics are shifting, and technology is becoming more influential in residents' lives. Expectations around telecare are increasing due to the influence of other services around.

Analogue telecare technology has changed little in 30 years, as many other industries turned to digital. Slow connectivity, poor clarity and limited functionality become accepted.

Digital telecare has created a revolution in supporting housing providers to improve standards and meet contempoary expectations. The connection time to a monitoring centre is now now just a few seconds, speech is crystal clear and call queuing is a thing of the past.

There is a need to create a connected environment. More and more services are online and we need to make them available to residents.

Access and connection to the internet is becoming not only a basic expectation but also fundamental to providing a holistic approach to housing. Digital services from Universal Credit to repairs portals all require access to the internet, and more services are going online all the time.

Providing internet access across a development can be a challenge for housing providers. The Appello LivingHub is able to act as a WiFi hotspot in each resident's home providing access to online services delivered by the housing provider.

Technology can support in creating a community within our developments, helping to tackle loneliness and social isolation and improve the wellbeing of our vulnerable residents.

Social isolation and loneliness are big national issues. While loneliness affects people of all ages, it is particularly prevalent amongst older people as it is this age group that is most likely to be physically challenged and therefore less able to leave their homes or socialise freely.

An Appello study in 2018 with Good Things Foundation revealed that 7% of people aged over 75 don't see a single person in an average week; and 7% don't speak to anyone in an average week. More than a quarter see two or less people in a week; and 45% speak to two or less people in a week.

Video can help bridge the physical gap, enabling residents to have face to face contact with other residents, staff and loved ones.

The introduction of technology will support in the creation of a holistic view.

Technology within housing and health has seen significant progress over the last 10 years however most commonly these have been standalone services.

The Internet of Things (IoT), and a push towards common protocols re supporting the creation of integrated technology. Appello has taken a best of breed approach, whereby our technology is available for others to monitor and work with, and likewise we utilise technology from other leading manufacturers who specialise in certain areas. We believe this will offer housing and care providers far greater choice and flexibility, which enables tailoring of services to individual needs.

Our own insights platform AppelloSBR (Single Best Record) is an example of how an online platform can amalgamate data from many different technologies and devices, to provide a single view of an individual. This data can then be used to support staff in making informed decisions, through real-time data.

Providing residents with efficient, timely and clear communication can be challenging. Technology should be able to support us in reaching residents more easily.

Communicating accurately and quickly around a large development can be challenging. However, to create a community, communication is important. Residents value knowing the gardener is attending or that a club is starting slightly later.

Not all residents attend meetings, some don't look at the notice boards and visiting each home can be time consuming. Housing providers believe that the ability to send instant messages across the development will bring people together and ensure everyone receives communications.

Technology should support vulnerable individuals with self-management of their health, leading to proactive care and an improved healthcare experience.

There is increasing evidence that more individuals are starting to embrace self-care. Technology is supporting this however we believe a blend of technology and people are needed to deliver better outcomes .

The remote monitoring of the data provided through technology is vitally important to ensure that conditions are appropriately managed, and symptoms do not exacerbate.

Additionally, technology is providing greater access to medical professionals. Attending appointments can be difficult for those with mobility issues and telephone appointments may not be appropriate. Through Smart Living Solutions, we can offer video GP appointments, that are timely, convenient and don't require leaving the home. This can reduce transport costs, enable earlier intervention and create efficiencies in the primary care sector.

Technology will help housing providers to make efficiencies, ensuring the time of staff is focussed on customers.

Digital technology offers housing providers data that was never previously available through analogue equipment. Through this data we can gain significant insights into the needs of individuals and the staffing requirements across a whole development.

We have worked with our customers to analyse data that has identified more appropriate deployment of resources, which leads to better service for residents and improved use of employee time.

In addition, cloud-based infrastructures mean that housing providers can now monitor, control and maintain multiple properties from one location. With staff working from a central location. This can reduce unnecessary travel, and ensure employees are providing the right support, in the right place, at the right time.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

The opportunities for technology in the housing sector are exciting, and the benefits are already being seen. However, to fully maximise the potential, housing providers at our events identified changes that need to take place, within their organisations and the sector.

Key changes presented by housing providers:

Industry needs to standardise protocols to ensure digital equipment can be monitored by all monitoring centres.

We believe that it's important we unite as an industry to dispel any confusion over protocols, while working together to create new standards that will benefit both customers and manufacturers. Common standards will enable interoperability. This means each manufacturers technology will be able to communicate, and this will be key to widespread adoption of innovation within housing and healthcare.

We are currently working together with the TEC Service Association (TSA) and other telecare monitoring platform suppliers to develop a single protocol, or set of rules, for digital telecare alarm systems in 2019.

When we refer to protocols, we mean the language that the residents' telecare/alarm equipment sends over the telecoms network to a monitoring centre - it's this protocol translation that allows the monitoring centre to interpret who and what is calling them. At present there are several different languages being used in the industry, which has resulted in confusion and restrictions for housing providers looking to start on a digital journey.

As the market leader in digital telecare, we have been able to monitor digital equipment, including our own Smart Living Solutions suite for many years, but this is not the case for the whole industry. We work with other monitoring providers to enable them to monitor Smart Living Solutions for their clients.

Appello are working with the industry to develop a standardised protocol which will mean that when housing providers upgrade, the potential interoperability issue between the manufacturer of their telecare equipment and their monitoring provider will be greatly reduced. Housing providers will have far greater control and choice and will be able to select the best monitoring provider and the best telecare equipment for their residents.

Housing providers need to increase knowledge across all areas of the business – including how digital systems work and the possibilities of technology.

Technology continually impacts almost every area of our lives, resulting in significant changes in all areas of work and society.

The supported and retirement housing sectors are no exception. Due to our audience we may be behind the curve, but significant changes in demographics means that the sector must adapt to accommodate their expectations.

Many of those moving into a supported housing environment will have years of experience online, from banking to grocery shopping and will expect the same levels of convenience, service and technology in their housing environments as in their day-to-day lives.

Digital transformation isn't just about technology. It entails a willingness to introduce technology in new ways. It must be continual and evolutionary in order to enhance care and support, enhance business processes and deliver efficiency.

Service users need guidance, support and confidence in technology – in order to accelerate customer acceptance

The demographics of residents across a development will vary, as will their use of technology, however all residents will have been using technology for many years. From their TV to their telephone, residents will have been using technology without consideration.

Our experience has shown us that residents take these changes in their stride when the focus is on the significant benefits, and communication is clear and appropriate.

Communication is important, we work with customers to provide the right level of information to residents prior to installation, during and then post installation.

Our Smart Living Solutions are designed to be intuitive, the large majority find usability straightforward. For those that need extra support we provide this through training sessions, support guides and videos to ensure that everyone realises the benefits. We also work with site staff closely to ensure they are well equipped to support residents.

One of the great advantages of digital technology is the ability to meet individual needs. We offer all clients the option to customise functions and interfaces to meet the requirements of their customers. Meaning that those that only require limited functionality can have a simplified offering, with the option to change this at a later date.

To talk to us about how our range of products and services can help keep you safe, call us on **0333 321 6470** or email **sales@appello.co.uk**

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