



Chartered
Institute of
Housing

Going digital

gearing up for the future

JUNE 2018



Whether it's to cut costs, deliver better services or respond to customers' needs, organisations in every sector are doing more and more online. But how are social landlords keeping pace with this digital transformation? We teamed up with digital front runners, Incommunities and Halton Housing to explore what landlords across the sector are doing - and why - and examine what lessons we can learn for the future.

We wanted to explore the following questions:

- **What is driving landlords' use of digital technology?**

We wanted to understand why landlords are developing digital services and 'shifting' more of their tenants and customers towards digital channels.

- **Where are landlords trying to get to and how have they determined their starting point?**

We were keen to understand landlords' plans to increase digital transactions and how they are informing a baseline on which to build a digital offer and measure success from.

- **How are social landlords approaching channel shift?**

We asked what action is being taken by landlords to encourage customers and tenants to access or interact with services via channels they do not normally use. We also asked what action is being taken to discourage people from using the non-digital channels they are most familiar with.

- **To what extent have landlords achieved true end-to-end services?**

We wanted to gauge landlords' understanding of what a fully automated system is and how often this is misunderstood.

- **How can data be used proactively?**

We were interested in how landlords are using the collection and analysis of data to predict the potential impacts of policy change and to target resources and drive efficiency.

- **What is the role of organisational leadership and culture?**

We wanted to understand the importance of strategic direction and organisational culture to support the changes required for successful digital transformation and innovation.

We explored these questions in several stages. First, we explored what is already known about the use of digital technology in the housing sector. We then surveyed 56 social landlords to gauge where they are with digital rollout and finally, we conducted ten in-depth telephone interviews with survey respondents to explore our initial findings in more detail.



Summary of findings

- There are several and often overlapping factors driving organisations' digital innovation but the most common factor driving organisations' development of digital technology is realising efficiency through better use of resources – 79 per cent of the landlords we surveyed told us this was a driver for them.
- Increasing use of digital technology can be a good way to cut costs, drive efficiencies and improve services for tenants.
- Tenants need to have confidence in the systems landlords are using to roll out their digital services. Getting digital transactions 'right first time' will be crucial to any organisation's plans for digital roll out.
- Almost all landlord organisations are looking to develop their digital offer in some way. 71 per cent of those we surveyed said they plan to increase the percentage of customer transactions involving some form of digital technology in the next two years and 77 per cent plan to increase the proportion of services available for their customers via self-serve in the same period.
- Landlords' approaches to channel shift can be characterised across a spectrum:
 - Channel of choice – introducing digital options as part of a range of channels for tenants and customers to access services and communicate with landlords;
 - Nudge – taking a more phased approach to channel shift; or
 - Hard shift – removing certain channels of communication and forcing people towards digital platforms.
- Having some form of strategic plan can help guide ideas and clarify aims for developing a digital offer. Organisational change such as a merger, leadership change or a restructure can provide an ideal opportunity to incorporate digital development as part of a business transformation exercise.
- Landlords do not always fully understand what a true end-to-end system looks like. They should be prepared to invest in technology to maximise the potential of digital innovation because legacy systems are unlikely to be ready for the new world of digital platforms.
- Many social landlords are using the data they hold to understand their tenants better, to help them provide services more effectively and to reduce their costs and risks. Good quality data can enhance landlords' understanding of tenants and can increase satisfaction by enabling them to provide services tailored to their needs.
- An organisation's culture and its leadership role have a strong influence on how plans for digital development are agreed and acted upon. Leaders (at executive, director and board levels) who support strategic or corporate aims for digital development can pave the way for further investment in IT, new posts, projects or entire teams. It can also provide the right environment for culture shift.
- Training is the most effective way to engage staff as part of achieving the right culture for channel shift. The way change is communicated and how much staff members are involved in making changes can also help with achieving the required culture for channel shift. It is important that this is seen as a positive mechanism for freeing up resources rather than cutting them.
- Many landlords are keen to promote more flexible working arrangements for staff and they see digital technology as offering a good opportunity to do this. The idea that 'work isn't where you go, it's what you do' is becoming a more accepted approach to managing people.



What is driving landlords' use of digital technology?

There is a general consensus that social landlords, on the whole, have some way to go to catch up with 21st century service delivery methods. Tenants' expectations for a more digital offer and the need to access services 24/7 are driving a lot of progress in this area. Almost half of the landlord organisations we surveyed told us that ensuring they are able to adapt to the external environment was one of the top three factors driving their development of digital technology.

From a digital inclusion perspective, landlords are determined to help their tenants get online for similar reasons – they want to ensure their tenants are not locked out of an increasingly digital world which has a lot to offer. For example, opportunities can include accessing money saving advice and price comparison websites; being part of an online community or simply staying in touch with people; accessing training and job opportunities; and developing the types of skills predominantly required in the present day job market.

Landlords will often strive to place tenants' needs at the heart of their digital transformation plans while achieving efficiency savings at the same time. Increasing the use of digital means of service delivery can reduce day-to-day running costs allowing landlords to use the resulting efficiency savings to enhance their services and respond better to what their tenants actually want.

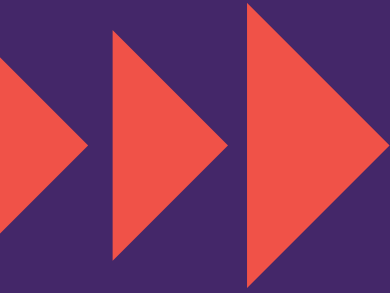
Better use of resources (efficiency) was the most common factor driving organisations' development of digital technology – 79 per cent of those we surveyed told us this was a driver for them. All of the landlords we interviewed said that driving efficiency and reducing overall costs are significant factors.

Several organisations we spoke to highlighted how increasing digital transactions allows more expensive methods of communication like telephone calls and face-to-face contacts to be limited.

Financial drivers were present for all landlords we interviewed, but some landlords appear to be prioritising these over customer service drivers. For examples of the former, there were references to universal credit as the main driver for developing their digital offer – helping affected tenants to maximise their income, so they will pay their rent, forms the basis of this approach. These organisations focused more on an organisational need to mitigate some of the financial risks associated with welfare policies in general. More customer service focused approaches were demonstrated by landlords who see efficiency and cost savings as opportunities to focus resources on more intensive cases or to invest in better services, new homes or IT. Where universal credit is a driver, the priority is to help tenants navigate digital accounts and adhere to their job commitment by searching and applying for work online.

Expanding on this, our research uncovered an interesting distinction between service-led (prioritising financial drivers for example) and tenant-led (prioritising customer service drivers) digital development on the whole. The former is evident in organisations that stress the importance of improving service efficiencies or where plans for developing digital technology are informed by the needs of services e.g. to maximise rental income or to mitigate impact of welfare policies like universal credit. Tenant-led digital development focuses on enhancing the services available, empowering customers or providing more flexibility in how customers can access services or communicate with their landlords.





73%
meeting
customer
needs

38%
Universal
credit

What is driving landlords' use of digital technology?

79%
better use
of resources
(efficiency)

46%
reducing
overall
costs

Top tip

Digital innovation can help cut costs and realise efficiency savings that can release valuable resources to enhance tenant services and improve your organisation's performance. Be careful not to prioritise financial drivers at the expense of your services and the needs of your tenants.



Where are landlords trying to get to and how have they determined their starting point?

Establishing a starting point

Some landlords are in the very early stages of trying to understand what their approach to digital is going to be. A minority are already notably progressive in their use of digital technology. Despite this varied picture, all landlords we interviewed had carried out some form of exercise (survey or doorstep consultation for example) to try to understand existing tenants' use of, and access to, the internet. A range of methods were used to inform this baseline from which to work.

Some considered a wide range of factors when determining if tenants have 'access to the internet' or are 'online', including for example; if tenants have an email address or have accessed a landlord's online portal or website, they are considered to have access to the internet. Use of Experian data can also be used as a way of finding out if tenants have internet access.

How landlords define 'having access' to online services can make a difference to their starting points. Definitions can range from focusing solely on whether tenants have broadband at home - therefore not taking devices like smart phones into account

- to considering access via 'any device' at home or elsewhere. Halton Housing consider access via any device and anywhere. They found that 82 per cent of their customers have access to the internet themselves and a further 7 per cent have access elsewhere. One landlord we spoke to saw an increase in the overall proportion of tenants deemed to have online access once they broadened their question to cover 'any device' - it increased from 50 per cent to 70 per cent. Some did not clarify a definition at all and instead allowed tenants to interpret 'access to the internet'.

Two factors often referred to as potential barriers to increasing use of online services were age and support needs, but it is unclear to what extent these views are informed by feedback from tenants themselves. Several landlords have a significant number of older and supported tenants for whom fully digital services are assumed to be problematic. Fully considered consultation with tenants and partners would help landlords develop a better understanding of the expectations, hopes and challenges for older tenants and those with support needs in relation to using online services.

Learning from others - West Lancashire Borough Council

Understanding and then meeting the needs of older people will ensure that none of your tenants are excluded from digital means of communication purely because of their age. West Lancashire Borough Council embarked on a digital inclusion project across 12 local sheltered housing schemes, with the aim of creating a digital deal for older people. Plans were informed by survey responses that showed nearly half of the residents had never used the internet before either due to cost of access, confidence and ability or simply because they were unaware of what might be on offer.

West Lancashire then teamed up with Social Telecoms and rolled out free WiFi for 12 months to all 12 schemes and the county's education service Lancashire Adult Learning put together a range of bespoke services to be delivered in the communal lounges at each of the schemes. This activity was supported by the provision of tablet taster sessions where residents could explore the many benefits of having easy access to the internet.





22%

Didn't know the percentage of customers with current access to the internet



57%

Said that less than half of their current customer transactions involve some form of digital technology



29%

Said over half of their current customer transactions involve some form of digital technology and of these, 11% said that all or almost all current customer transactions involve some form of digital technology



71%

Said they plan to increase the percentage of customer transactions involving some form of digital technology in the next two years



Determining where you want to get to

Our research found that almost all landlord organisations are looking to develop their digital offer in some way. 71 per cent of those we surveyed said they plan to increase the percentage of customer transactions involving some form of digital technology in the next two years.

Halton Housing aims to have 90 per cent of customer led (including self-serve) transactions via digital services by December 2018 and we identified similar targets via our survey, including;

- Getting 50 per cent of all tenants using online services by 2020.
- Having 65 per cent of routine transactions by end of March 2021 using digital technology. Routine transactions include arranging repair appointments, making rent payments and updating customer information.
- Getting 75 per cent of tenants online in the next five years.

All of the landlords we interviewed are in the process of either developing or implementing a digital strategy or other formal programme of digital development. Having some form of strategic plan can help guide ideas and clarify aims for developing a digital offer. Taking this approach will make clear who is responsible for delivering on agreed aims and will also provide targets and measures for achieving success.

As part of their Digital First strategy, Halton Housing have achieved a range of digital developments including a customer app, website portal, community TV and games console channel and mobile working for staff. In addition, since 2014 they have shifted staffing numbers to support their strategy, seeing a 200 per cent increase in tenancy support and enforcement roles, a 60 per cent rise in roles focusing on access to welfare benefits, a 20 per cent increase in debt recovery, a 50 per cent drop in customer services and 100 per cent less housing officers.

No matter what your aspirations are, aiming to get digital transactions 'right first time' will be crucial to any organisation's plans for digital roll out and this is something landlords were keen to highlight when we spoke with them. It is vital that tenants have confidence in the systems because if they are not reliable or accessible, tenants are likely to revert to 'old style' methods and it can then be difficult to achieve any further channel shift.

Measuring success

How success is measured appeared to vary depending on whether a landlord's main driver is service or tenant led. The most prominent metric referred to in our research was tenant satisfaction. Using this measure assumes that as long as tenants remain satisfied, it would be reasonable to conclude that plans for channels shift are succeeding.

Some landlords consider the number of online transactions increasing over time as a reliable sign they are doing well, but for some the strongest indicator of success will be evidenced via total cost savings.

Some landlords have conducted a cost benefit analysis to inform their digital development. One in particular has calculated that old contact methods e.g. phone call, post etc. cost around £10 per transaction, but that digital alternatives cost around 10p per transaction. Another found that face-to-face transactions were costing approximately £14 each and this was reduced to 28-30p for the same transactions with the same outcomes via self-serve.

Learning from others

Halton Housing use a range of metrics to measure success against the aims set out in their Digital First strategy.

- Customer satisfaction levels - Halton Housing have been specific about how they use levels of satisfaction. They ask customers how satisfied they are with 'online services' rather than satisfaction more broadly and as of March 2018 their tenants' satisfaction level was running at 93 per cent.
- Percentage of customer led contacts made using digital channels - as of March 2018 this was 62.4 per cent.
- Percentage of households accessing services digitally - 73.5 per cent had done so between April 2017 to March 2018.
- Number of incoming and outgoing calls to the customer service team - incoming calls have fallen by 62 per cent and outgoing by 81 per cent.
- Percentage of key contacts made digitally - currently 99.5 per cent of rent balance enquiries, 43 per cent of repair requests and 79 per cent of ASB reports are made online.



Top tip

- It is important to understand tenants' current relationships with online services. You should conduct some form of consultation exercise to develop this understanding
- Make sure you ask specific questions to get the most complete starting picture and avoid making assumptions about specific groups. For example, when assessing what proportion of your tenants have online access, broaden your question to include having access with 'any device'.
- Make sure you are tracking your progress against your digital aims. Having indicators to measure success will help you understand if you are achieving what you intended. Metrics can include a range of indicators including tenant satisfaction, cost savings and the number of digital transactions over time and be sure to have a baseline position to compare your progress with.



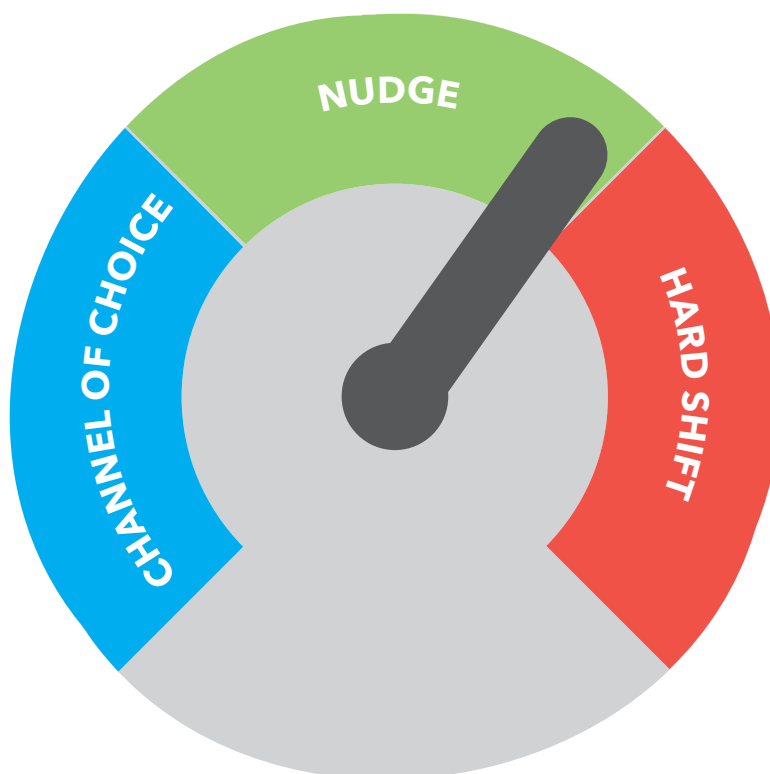
How are social landlords approaching channel shift?

There were different types of organisational approaches to shifting tenants towards alternative channels of communication or service provision. These approaches to channel shift can be

characterised across a spectrum ranging from 'hard shift' to 'channel of choice'. Some landlords may find themselves firmly within one of the types set out below but others maybe in between types.

Taking a phased approach to allow them to work on barriers tenants face accessing internet (training or installing WIFI etc.), and then gradually increasing the push towards digital.

Merely providing another channel for customers to use but by no means withdrawing any other more traditional means of access/communication.



Removal of services available via certain means and forcing people to use the digital routes by removing other options or making it more difficult to use them. Digital by default.

Some organisations are prepared to be more "hard shift" in their approach to channel shift than others but most of those we spoke to feel that more work should be done to encourage or push tenants towards their digital services before they consider removing traditional options altogether.

online contacts over time. One landlord referred to this as using the 'carrot' first by encouraging or 'nudging' tenants towards digital routes. They would then move towards 'carrot and stick' and then just the 'stick' approach which sits closer towards the 'hard shift' end of the spectrum.

'Hard shift' approaches to increasing online transactions were characterised by the removal of options to contact by phone or in person, or by making it more difficult for tenants to use these methods of contact. In these cases, it is important that safeguards are in place to meet the needs of tenants for whom accessing online services is either inappropriate or impossible for whatever reason.

For many landlords, use of digital technology is currently a tenant choice rather than organisational necessity and while they aim to encourage digital engagement rather than discourage other forms of interaction they still want to have a 'channel of choice' scenario where people can choose to use the digital channels but are not compelled to. One landlord made the link with their social purpose and said they will not be forcing people down the digital route. These landlords see themselves as providing options but are not forcing channel shift. Instead, they plan to support people to use online services if they choose to, because they recognise the positive impact this can have on both tenants and the organisation.

Many landlords have decided to take a more phased or 'nudge' approach to channel shift, keeping existing channels open for those who do not wish to, or are unable to shift to digital methods. However, these types of landlords often shared a vision to increase

One size does not fit all

There is a general acceptance that one size will not fit all and that there will always be some customers who will never make the shift to digital platforms. However, those who are aiming to become 'digital first' are relying on a strong understanding of their tenants to inform this. For instance, when online services cannot or will not be used, they aim to find out why and work with them to encourage a shift.

'Hard shift' or 'nudge' landlords seem to feel that those who can self serve should be encouraged to, or even forced in some circumstances, to do so. They then use the resulting efficiency savings to focus resources on more vulnerable tenants, especially those who are being affected by welfare policies like universal credit.

Learning from others

Offering a range of activities is the best way to increase awareness and use of online services. There are many reasons why someone may not use online channels, including digital illiteracy, lack of access (whether due to lack of a device or internet connection, or both), lack of trust, reluctance to change or because they are simply unaware of their digital options. A strong inclusion plan will encompass the needs and learning styles of many individuals and will account for the varying reasons why people may not use your digital channels.

Here, we have provided examples of activities carried out by some of the finalists in the **Outstanding approach to promoting digital inclusion category of the UK Housing Awards 2018**.

Digital champions or mentors can help increase tenants' use of online services and also identify issues that present as barriers to achieving this. They can help and support people to use digital technology, as well as how to identify barriers to people using online services.

Fortis Living recruits digital champions from all ages and backgrounds who are usually looking for work. They are formally interviewed and put through a selection process which provides good experience for their own job searches. If successful, they are trained and supported with ongoing one to one support from a 'digital connector' who acts as their mentor. Volunteers not only support the organisation's digital inclusion plans but they also gain high levels of knowledge, people skills and professionalism. At the point of writing this report Fortis Living had 48 volunteers who had worked on

Top tip

- If you are planning a hard shift approach, make sure you have safeguards in place to identify tenants and applicants who might need additional support to access your services.
- Make sure your digital offer is fully set up, reliable, accessible and easy to use before you start discouraging or switching off non-digital channels.
- If you identify tenants who cannot or will not use online services try to find out why, and offer support where appropriate to help you become a digital first organisation.



the programme, 25 of which were in employment. Overall their digital champions had given 1,387 hours of support to 1,679 people.

Community access hubs can offer a range of resources to help people develop digital skills at the same time as providing a variety of activities to tackle isolation. Activities arranged in community settings can provide the perfect opportunity to engage people with what the online world has to offer. For example, **Glen Oaks Housing Association** showed people in their Knit and Knatter group how they can use computers to search knitting patterns online. Once confidence is built Glen Oaks aims to engage people in other ways they can benefit from being online like saving money through researching price comparisons, job searching and managing their money online.

Property solutions provider, **Fortem**, aims to take digital resources to the customer with their digivans. Their two digivans are vans that have been modified into mobile classrooms that bring IT training, free internet access and online support into communities for local people. Each digivan has internal WiFi for usage by up to 20 users, four work stations, wheelchair access and they are solar powered with internal heating. This mobile approach to digital inclusion allows Fortem to target areas and maximise their reach.

Digital skills training in the community can build the capacity of local communities to enhance online access and opportunities. **Stockport Homes Group** takes a community organising approach to digital inclusion. They deliver a successful Digital Heroes project that supports local people to encourage their communities to get online. Heroes help their

communities access funding for targeted projects, Wi-Fi access, equipment and training but they also benefit from the experience, skills and confidence they gain often leading to employment opportunities.

whg Housing Association have developed a team of 'community champions' to run a range of activities as part of their Click Start programme which is aimed at breaking down barriers to employment and tackling poverty and social exclusion across the Midlands region. It involves a varied programme of activities at community venues, plus one-to-one tailored support and training, for people who need and want it, in their own homes to boost their confidence and skills to use online services.

Awarding grants to community groups that focus on digital inclusion can inject a welcome boost to generate activity that can become self sustaining once initial support has ended.

Clarion Housing Group's charitable foundation Clarion Futures has a digital inclusion and money strand which aims to help residents get online and improve their digital skills to make a difference to their lives. Their specialist digital team can award Digital Communities Grants of between £1,000 and £5,000 to local groups who are able to support resident to improve their basic digital skills. Clarion makes these grants available alongside basic skills training sessions in community locations; 171 digital champions volunteering their time across the country; and a dedicated centre that offers a range of digital workshops and accredited courses.



To what extent have landlords achieved true end-to-end services?

77 per cent of our survey respondents said they plan to increase the proportion of services available for their customers via self-serve in the next two years and almost all organisations we interviewed told us they want to move towards more 'end-to-end' self service models. One organisation we spoke with during our research has introduced a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) to have 70 per cent of customer transactions made via self-serve.

Landlords are already providing more self service models where tenants and customers can access or interact with services via front-end website resources like e-forms or web portals. However, these self-serve options are rarely fully integrated across entire transactions. Currently most options still require a person in the 'back office' to pick up tasks and action them - these are not true end-to-end services.

A true end-to-end transaction would mean customers can access and receive a service that is fully automated through a digital system without needing to see or speak to someone - there would be no manual element from the landlord's side. Until landlords achieve more end-to-end transactions they are unlikely to fully realise the efficiencies and cost savings digital technology can offer. Organisations need to be prepared to invest in the kind of technology required to make this happen.

Several landlords we interviewed highlighted the importance of investing in technology to maximise the potential of digital innovation and that legacy systems are not necessarily ready for the new world of digital platforms.



How can data be used proactively?

Landlords recognise that in order to succeed and remain fit for purpose, they need to make more use of data. This includes making sure the information they have is accurate and up to date; being more intelligent about collecting and profiling tenants with it and using it to target services, manage assets and predict the impact of national policy changes.

Many social landlords are using the data they hold to understand their tenants better - to help them provide services more effectively and to reduce their costs and risks. Good quality data can enhance landlords' understanding of tenants and can increase satisfaction by enabling them to provide services tailored to their needs.

Through our research, we found limited evidence of landlords taking a strategic approach to their use of data. However, most of the landlords we spoke with acknowledged the opportunities created by proactively managing a tenant insight process to reduce costs or improve service provision as part of a continuous improvement approach. An example of this would be to use data modelling to predict the likely impact of policy change on tenants and on their organisation's financial viability.

IT-based data modelling can provide an efficient and cost-effective method of understanding tenants' needs and informing future business planning. A fully integrated service would allow tenants to use a digital platform to provide their own data and ensure it is up to date. Use of services would all be logged to feed into a sophisticated system that can help inform strategic planning and service provision.

Many landlords told us they are using data to identify tenants considered to be most affected by universal credit for example, and who they consider will need extra support to make or manage their claim. Running these types of reports can help target additional support to these individuals.

It was important for all organisations to ensure they comply with the Data Protection Act and General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Landlords need to think about how they collect data, how they store it and ensure that tenants are providing express permission for the data to be held, having been properly informed of what their data is being collected for.

Learning from others

There are opportunities to use digital technology and data to manage assets better so investing in technology can help vulnerable tenants and save money in the long run. One example mentioned during our research was having temperature sensors in properties that could help landlords recognise if an old or vulnerable tenant has not had their heating on for some time over winter, or alternatively, if it could be a potential void issue.

Using IT systems that use the "cloud" to store and share data - like Office 365 and Sharepoint for example - can encourage more collaborative way of working. Some landlords told us they see this as a way of breaking down silos and driving data compliance. It has produced a more open and collaborative environment where access to documents can be determined by users rather than IT policies/processes.

Top tip

- Are your current IT systems ready for the new world of digital platforms? Investment will be crucial to organisations with big ambitions for digital development and achieving fully integrated end-to-end services. Reliable and effective IT systems can help you use data more creatively for the benefit of your organisation and your tenants.
- Make sure your data collection, profiling and retention systems are GDPR compliant and that all staff members are sufficiently trained to understand the implications of the new requirements to their areas of work.



What is the role of organisational leadership and culture?

Our research found that an organisation's culture and its leadership role have a strong influence on how plans for digital development are agreed and acted upon. Achieving successful digital transformation means getting commitment and buy-in from the leadership team.

Landlords with clear plans to develop their use of digital technology have leaders who support strategic or corporate aims for digital development. This level of support can pave the way for further investment in IT, new posts, projects or entire teams. It also provides the right environment for culture shift.

Cultural factors were prominent for most landlords we spoke with. Approaches to channel shift and whether digital development is service or tenant-led is potentially a reliable reflection of a landlord's culture. For example, whether or not there is a hard shift, nudge or channel of choice approach, how plans are rolled out will depend on how prominently tenants have been involved or are considered.

Changes to working practices

Use of digital technology in approaches to mobile/ agile working and the importance of staff engagement were also consistently highlighted. Landlords told us that staff members need to be able to see the positives from increasing use of digital to maximise the potential benefits. Releasing resources can help staff think and act

differently by being more proactive. We found that the most effective way to achieve this recognition among staff was via training that provides a full overview of how their digital offer can benefit both tenants and members of staff. The way change is communicated and how much staff members are involved in making changes can also help with achieving the most productive environment for channel shift.

Many landlords are also keen to promote more flexible working arrangements for staff and they see digital technology as offering a good opportunity to do this. The idea that "work isn't where you go, it's what you do" is becoming a more accepted approach to managing people. Providing ways for staff to work remotely can free up valuable time. For example, Halton Housing have calculated a saving of 30–45 minutes per visit after 16 modules for mobile working were used by over 100 members of staff.

One landlord said it is working to shift its management culture so colleagues do not need to physically see someone to have confidence they are being productive. Supporting channel shift across the organisation and amongst tenants will require changes to working practices but our research highlighted that landlords must allow for the fact that agile, mobile or more flexible working looks different for different people and in different roles.

Learning from others

Rhondda Housing Association (RHA) were finalists in the category for Outstanding approach to digital inclusion at the UK Housing Awards 2018. Their three-pronged strategy targets tenants, staff and board members as they see the need for digital transformation as a necessity for both tenants and staff.

RHA have made agile working available to all by providing all of their staff with smart phones and tablets. They have seen many benefits as a result including:

- A reduction in sickness absence of 3 per cent, saving £9,000 per year in total and a 15 per cent increase of staff who feel RHA is a great place to work.
- Two hours per day, per staff member, saved by eliminating paperwork, unproductive travel and streamlining workflow.
- 19 per cent increase in daily repairs carried out.
- 36 staff members have become mentors, sharing skills and knowledge with tenants in an outreach capacity.

Top tip

- Have you got board level or executive level buy-in for your plans? Having leadership support or involvement is important for making digital development a strategic priority, leading to investment and support for developing the right culture.
- Having a strategic plan will help formalise your digital aims by providing clear actions for achieving them. Plans can take the form of a dedicated digital strategy or your aspirations for digital development can be included in wider corporate strategies in the form of supplementary projects.
- Staff members need to be able to see the benefits from increasing use of digital technology. Try to come up with ways to engage staff by showing how mobile or agile working can help them do their jobs better or how channel shift can help tenants get easier and better access to services. You might wish to invite staff from a progressive digital landlord to come along and share their experiences.



Conclusion

It is clear that social landlords are recognising the potential of digital innovation to drive efficiencies, reduce costs, target resources, improve service delivery and increase tenant satisfaction. However, not all landlords are taking the same approach. Some are further ahead than others and the ways in which channel shift is being implemented vary, from 'hard shift' to having digital as 'channel of choice'.

It is important that landlords take the time to understand tenants' current needs, challenges and requirements for using online services to fully inform their plans for developing use of digital technology. Having a clear picture of tenants' current relationship with online service can help landlords shape a digital strategy or a formal programme that reflects the organisation's digital aims.

Strategic approaches to digital development can provide a framework to commit resources, direct actions and review progress. Targets to measure success can include how satisfied customers continue to be during your channel shift, how much cost saving can be realised and how many times a tenant uses one of your digital platforms.

While some landlords may be taking a more 'hard shift' approach to channel shift, all landlords acknowledge that there might be occasions when

other forms of communication or access should be available. However, landlords may benefit from exploring if there is scope to support people to move more towards digital platforms when this happens.

There is little doubt digital innovation can help cut day-to-day running costs and that resulting efficiency savings can be invested in improving services for tenants and applicants through refocusing resources to support those who need it most. However, organisations will need to balance how they prioritise financial drivers with the needs of their tenants.

Making sure IT systems work properly so tenants have faith in your channel shift will help with achieving this.

Reliable and effective IT systems can help you use accurate data more creatively for the benefit of your organisation and your tenants but organisations will need to ensure they comply with new data protection requirements and that staff understand how they will impact them in their roles.

How social landlord's digital aspirations are realised will depend in part on the level of leadership buy-in and support there is. It is equally important to make sure staff, tenants and other stakeholders fully understand the direction they are travelling in. Involving, consulting and engaging with everyone involved can provide valuable insight to inform a plan but can also make implementing them a lot more successful.

