

Digital inclusion and the social housing sector

Social housing providers are increasingly turning to information technology to find new ways to engage with their tenants. This briefing describes the benefits of digital inclusion, the barriers to digital inclusion for social housing tenants, and how these might be overcome. The briefing includes examples of good practice and highlights the importance of digital inclusion in the context of welfare reform.

Introduction

Increasingly, people are going online to engage with public services on matters as varied as council tax, benefits, parking permits and environmental reporting.

Social housing providers are also finding that digital delivery can help engagement with their tenants, improve customer service and save money.

However, there are challenges facing those who may need to access public services online and those trying to encourage greater online usage.

A Carnegie UK Trust [report](#) in 2014 found that a fifth of UK households do not have even basic internet services in their home, rising to more than a third of households in the lowest socioeconomic groups, and to nearly 70% of households aged over 75.

The barriers to going online may include:

- > access - the ability and affordability of connecting to the internet
- > skills – the ability to use the internet
- > motivation - knowing the reasons why using the internet is a good thing
- > trust - the fear of crime, or not knowing where to start to go online.

Digital inclusion initiatives can help address these obstacles by providing everyone with the opportunity and skills to use and benefit from information and services on the internet.

In 2014 the UK government launched its [Digital Inclusion Strategy](#) setting out how government and partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors aim to encourage more people to go online. Digital inclusion initiatives have also been launched by devolved administrations in [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#) and by the [Mayor of London](#).

In addition, many local authorities have launched their own digital inclusion strategies, such as those adopted by [Bury Council](#), [Hampshire County Council](#) and [South Cambridgeshire District Council](#).



Underlining this activity is the belief that greater digital inclusion can help tackle social issues (such as unemployment), support economic growth, close equality gaps, and improve quality of life.

2 Housing: the importance and benefits of going digital

With the backing of Martha Lane-Fox, the government's digital inclusion champion, a 2012 [report](#) made the case for digital inclusion in the social housing sector. The report found that almost half of the UK's adult population who do not use the internet live in social housing. The report's contributors (including the Chartered Institute of Housing, the National Housing Federation, and Peabody housing association) argued that digital inclusion gives tenants more choice and control and better access to lower-cost, better services.

The report quantified the savings that could be made from greater digital inclusion in housing:

- > £340m in annual savings for landlords in communications costs
- > £530m in annual consumer savings to tenants
- > £360m in annual savings to local government

For housing providers and their tenants, other benefits of digital inclusion may include:

- > Helping housing providers to transform and improve customer services and efficiency
- > Improving the service and experience for tenants and employees
- > Responding to increasing demands
- > Releasing scarce resources and making financial savings for housing providers

Welfare reform has introduced an added impetus towards greater digital inclusion. The nationwide roll-out of Universal Credit (see case study) means that people will be expected to claim and manage their benefits (including housing benefits) online.

3 Digital services from housing providers

In recent years, growing numbers of social housing organisations have been investing in technology, to improve communication channels between themselves and their tenants. Among the digital initiatives introduced by housing providers are:

- > Social media, including Facebook, Twitter and texting platforms
- > Blogs, to engage in interactive discussion with tenants

Case Study The Digital Deal

Aware of the difficulties in encouraging social tenants to get online, in 2013 the UK government established the [Digital Deal](#) project. Applicants made bids for a share of £400,000 for innovative programmes to provide low cost internet access and improve tenants' motivation to go online.

Among the successful bids were those from Bron Afron Community Housing, Leeds Federated Housing (see case study), South Essex Homes and Queens Cross Housing Association in Glasgow.

The Digital Deal [evaluation report](#) was published in 2014, setting out the impact and benefits of the project. Overall, there were positive outcomes for all the participants.

"Evaluation data shows clear and measurable benefits across all the organisations involved in the programme. As well as the benefits recorded for tenant beneficiaries, projects have made permanent improvements to their capacity through new delivery partnerships, staff training, integration of digital with other support services, and buy-in among staff from the frontline to senior level. Improvements to access, skills training and signposting have also helped projects to adapt to current and prospective impacts of welfare reform."

At individual project level, a number of ideas emerged from the Digital Deal, including:

- > Digital equipment lending, allowing tenants to discover the benefits of being online without having to make a financial commitment
- > Providing young job seekers with strong digital skills as "digital champions" to train tenants
- > Working with frontline staff, such as caretakers, housing officers, and financial inclusion teams to promote digital support services for excluded and vulnerable tenants.



- > Interactive features on housing websites, allowing tenants to check their rent accounts or book appointments
- > Online chat services: enabling tenants to engage directly with housing staff
- > Online surveys / group forums

Housing providers have also looked beyond housing issues, for example supporting their tenants in developing digital skills to help them into employment, education and training, preparing them for Universal Credit and helping them to find new properties online.

4 The barriers to digital inclusion

A 2015 [survey](#) identified a number of barriers to digital inclusion among social tenants and their housing providers, including:

(i) Tenants

- > Poor broadband coverage / no internet access at home
- > Lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills
- > Lack of confidence / interest / motivation among tenants about using computers
- > Social isolation and unwillingness to

- trust people
- > Concerns about access costs, data security, fraud and theft

(ii) Housing providers

- > Constraints on software installations on organisational devices
- > Poor / non-existent broadband access
- > Limited resources, including lack of skilled staff to set up and manage digital platforms, or to provide support and training for other staff and tenants
- > Difficulties in attracting tenants to digital activities, and maintaining interest

Case Study Digital Inclusion and Universal Credit

Welfare reform is one area where digital inclusion is taking on particular importance. Across the UK, by 2017, Universal Credit will have replaced [six different benefits](#) (including housing benefit) with a single monthly payment. The new scheme requires claimants both to apply and to manage their claim online.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which is administering Universal Credit, has been piloting its introduction in different parts of the UK, including Greater Manchester, Cheshire, Hammersmith and Inverness.

In 2013, the DWP published [survey data](#) on the experiences of the first wave of Universal Credit claimants, in the north-west of England. With regard to claimant experience of making online claims, the survey found that:

- > The vast majority of Universal Credit claimants reported making their claim online (90%)
- > 7% made telephone claims, and 3% made claims in person at a Jobcentre
- > Of those who did not claim online:
- > 7% first tried to claim online but gave up and instead used another method because of problems they encountered
- > 2% reported they knew it was possible to claim online but chose not to because: they did not have access to the internet; they preferred to talk to someone face to face; or other reasons
- > 1% of claimants said they did not know it was possible to claim online

However, the requirement to claim Universal Credit online has given rise to concerns from housing organisations and other agencies supporting benefits claimants.

- > In 2013, a [pilot study](#) by Citizens Advice suggested that 9 out of 10 clients will need support in a number of capability areas, including getting online.
- > A 2013 [report](#) from the Children's Society observed that "the implications of a shift to claiming online for the most vulnerable claimants who are not able to use the internet, or do not possess the means to do so, has not yet been sufficiently addressed"
- > In a 2014, [survey](#) of more than 700 housing associations in England found that 90% were concerned about the capability of tenants to access online systems
- > A 2015 National Housing Federation [report](#) on the impact of welfare reform highlighted that 94% of housing associations were concerned about the capability of tenants to access online systems in order to make and manage Universal Credit claims.

5 Overcoming the barriers and improving digital inclusion

[The Tinder Foundation](#) is a social enterprise which works with social housing providers around the UK to help them tackle digital exclusion. The foundation's [social housing handbook](#) includes guidance on how social housing providers can support tenants in getting online and gaining basic digital skills.

The tips include:

- > Consider which devices your tenants are most likely to have access to at home
- > Ensure digital services are so simple and intuitive that they become the preferred channel for tenants, including those who are going online for the first time



- > Invest time and money in staff training
- > Partner with local support organisations, such as Citizens Advice Bureaux and [UK online centres](#)
- > Test out a variety of session formats to see what works, e.g. informal drop-in sessions, or home-based support
- > Consider the best way to market digital training. Labelling it as “computer classes” may not attract people.
- > Make the learning space a place people want to go
- > Seek out tenants who already have online skills and access and who might be able to support friends and neighbours



Case Study Reading Room and Catalyst Housing

[Reading Room](#) is a digital consultancy which joined the [Idox Group](#) in 2015. Since November 2014, Reading Room has been working with [Catalyst](#), one of the leading housing associations in London and the South East, helping them to become a more digital business and improve communications with customers.

Following meetings with Catalyst and their customers, and drawing on behaviour research, Reading Room created a strategic framework to guide Catalyst's digital development. This framework included the way that digital should operate within the organisation, customer experience themes, guiding service principles and technological foundations.

The projects emerging from this work include:

- > Optimising Catalyst's web platforms for mobile devices and making them more user friendly
- > Developing a plan to implement new online services
- > Training and developing internal teams with digital best practices including content creation and customer service through social media
- > Engaging the business and creating a team of digital champions
- > Embarking on an innovation programme towards building smart homes

Once the work is complete, Catalyst customers will be able to report and track issues directly through the new web platform, while contractors can view available jobs and location data.

Further down the line, Reading Room and Catalyst are working on [plans](#) to use the [Internet of Things](#) to create smarter buildings with sensors able to detect changes before they become problems, notifying the repair company and updating the customer automatically.

Other ideas have emerged from the Digital Deal project (see case study), including:

- > Subsidising and enabling the installation of Wi-Fi in homes
- > Making web sites accessible for all diverse groups that use the organisation's services, including people with disabilities and those whose first language is not English
- > Seek feedback from tenants and users about usability, accessibility and usefulness of content and technologies and being ready to change and innovate

Further reading

Doing digital inclusion: social housing handbook. Tinder Foundation (2015) http://www.tinderfoundation.org/sites/default/files/research-publications/doingdigitalinclusion_socialhousing2.pdf

Housing survey 2015: online customer self service. Yorkshire Housing (2015) <https://yhcomms.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/housing-survey-results-customer-self-service-june-2015.pdf>

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Welfare reform impact assessment: final report. National Housing Federation (2015) http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/pub.housing.org.uk/WR_impact_final_report.pdf

Communities 2.0: six years of digital inclusion in Wales. Wales Cooperative Centre (2015) <http://www.walescooperative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/communities-2.0-legacy-report-eng.pdf>



The Digital Deal Challenge Fund: evaluation findings - summary report.

Tinder Foundation (2014)

http://www.tinderfoundation.org/sites/default/files/research-publications/digitaldealevaluationfindings-august2014_revised.pdf

Making digital real: case studies of how to help the final fifth get online.

Carnegie UK Trust (2014)

<http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=7c91c88b-0a25-47ec-bb95-a6191f9dfe0f>

UK government digital inclusion strategy.

UK Government (2014)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy>

Transforming local public services using technology and digital tools and approaches.

Local Government Association (2014)

Case Study Communities 2.0

Between 2009 and 2015, the Welsh Government's digital inclusion programme – Communities 2.0 – supported initiatives to help digitally excluded groups overcome barriers, build their confidence and create opportunities for them to use new skills. Communities 2.0 worked with a variety of partners, including housing associations, and one of the programme's specific goals was to reduce levels of digital exclusion amongst residents of social housing.

Among the digital inclusion housing projects supported by Communities 2.0 were:

- > Clwyd Alyn Housing Association: beginners information and communications technology courses in sheltered and extra care schemes across North Wales. The courses have helped social housing residents to alleviate isolation, develop skills and save money.
- > Family Housing Association, Swansea: focused on people on housing benefit, those living in social housing and over-50s to provide skills and support to become digitally included. 161 tenants have been supported to get online and a further 6 tenants have been trained as digital champions
- > Monmouthshire Housing Association: provided a “web wise” service to help tenants access online services, improve knowledge, skills and stay safe online, and a “computers in the community” scheme enabling tenants to borrow laptop computers to improve their digital skills.

Case Study HUGO

In 2013, Leeds Federated Housing Association launched the HUGO (Helping U Get Online) project to support digital inclusion and engagement among its tenants. The project was one of 12 initiatives as part of the UK government's Digital Deal programme (see case study) to encourage more social housing tenants to get online.

After consulting with more than 2000 households in Leeds, the housing association developed services to encourage and support tenants going online for the first time. These included:

- > A dedicated HUGO centre and two digitally-equipped buses to bring learning opportunities to the community
- > 'Digital Tea Parties' to engage with older residents
- > A 'Digital Champs' programme, bringing online gaming together with physical activity to connect digital inclusion to health and wellbeing.

The outcomes achieved as a result of the HUGO project included digital support for more than 4200 people, over 500 new internet users and 86 people supported into full-time employment. The project won the Excellence in Digital Engagement Award at the 2015 [Tenant Participation Advisory Service \(TPAS\) Awards](#).

Impact of welfare reforms on housing associations: early effects and responses by landlords and tenants.

Ipsos Mori Social Research Institute (2014) <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/sri-ipsos-mori-nhf-report-impact-of-welfare-reforms-on-housing-associations-2014.pdf>

The online lifeline: How a housing association's remarkable educational initiative gave hope to tenant battling long-term illness and depression.

The Independent (2014) <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/further/the-online-lifeline-how-a-housing-associations-remarkable-educational-initiative-gave-hope-to-tenant-9278704.html>

Case Study Digital Inclusion in Scotland



In 2011, a [briefing](#) from the Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland highlighted a number of examples of good practice among social housing landlords who have sought to promote digital inclusion.

- > Moray Council: provides webcasts to enable tenants and members of the public to view committee meetings from home / office. Archival material from previous meetings may also be viewed.
- > West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative: offers an affordable broadband service to tenants. Participants also have access to low cost telephone calls and can make cheap international calls.
- > East Lothian Housing Association: enables tenants to report repairs, pay rent and make housing applications via the housing association's website. There is also an "online housing office" enabling tenants to "chat" with a member of staff at specific times during the week.
- > Glasgow Housing Association (GHA): provides 27 Click & Connect computer learning centres around the city, providing tenants with free internet access and expert advice to help them log on to job sites, create a CV, pay their rent and complete online benefit forms. In 2015, GHA launched improved online services, allowing tenants to see their account balance, make payments, book a repair and request other services whenever it suits them. Social media has proved to be a popular way for tenants to communicate with the housing association; GHA has more than 11,000 followers across Facebook and Twitter.

Cities supporting e-inclusion and citizen participation. Eurocities (2013)
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Universal Credit pathfinder evaluation: interim results from the Universal Credit claimant survey, wave 1.

Department of Work and Pensions (2013)
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Universal credit managing migration pilot: final results - how we can support universal credit claimants to successfully manage under the new system.

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Universal Credit: The Children's Society key concerns.

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The role of social intermediaries in digital inclusion: the case of social housing. Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (2013)
<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/curds/publications/documents/RR2013-10.pdf>

Social landlords and digital inclusion in Scotland. Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland (2011)
<http://www.cih.org/resources/PDF/Scotland%20Policy%20Pdfs/Digital%20Inclusion%20Briefing%20Final.pdf>

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