



Social landlords need clear lines of communication and strong data to really understand their tenants' wants and needs, but in an era of technological change and transition this is easier said than done, especially as they can't leave the analogue generation behind

THERE'S a spectre haunting housing; the spectre of that global consumer logistics leviathan, Amazon. But the shadow it casts is perhaps more one of the sector's own making, if the discussions at *Northern Housing's* first Working Lunch are anything to go by.

The event, held in Gusto, Manchester, and hosted by TriPartum, brought together a cross-section of industry leaders to discuss issues around the development of customer insight and engagement.

On the menu (aside from the food) was the impetus for digital transition, the challenges presented to housing providers by changing technologies, and how

this could either deepen or hinder their relationships with tenants.

Given the topics of conversation, perhaps it was inevitable that Amazon was going to be invoked; certainly, it was no surprise.

"Whether we like it or not, the customer's expectations are going to be much higher. We have to adapt to that, I think, as a sector," said Jamie Hutchinson.

It's a seductive comparison, of course; if Amazon can deliver a pair of trainers the next day, why does it take a housing association 14 days, say, to fix the fence?

But adapt doesn't necessarily mean emulate; after all, as guests pointed out, Amazon is an entirely different beast, so it's a chalk and cheese comparison.

"Our business model is more complex," chair, Ailsa Dunn pointed out.

Lauren Carey added: "It's a difficult comparison with Amazon because we're not ever going to be like that. How much human interaction do you ever have with them? They are pretty much always going to transact through digital communications, whereas [we're] always going to have some human element... Amazon has a very different model."

Repairs is a case in point: it's a far cry from opening the door for a delivery driver to drop off a parcel, to opening the door for a tradesman to enter, spend time in the home, and fix what may not be the straightforward job initially diagnosed.

There's a relationship that must be fostered, across a swathe of business functions, that a retailer – even a behemoth like Amazon – would be loath to become embroiled, but which is essential to the housing sector's workaday life.

"I get the idea that generally customers always look for their best experiences in whatever sector it is, and then compare you; so, you are always going to have that challenge. But it's managing that expectation," observed James Shand, of the event's host, TriPartum.

Pointing out that the housing sector is heavily regulated compared to Amazon, Hutchinson

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Who's who

Hosts:



James Shand
Managing director,
Tripartum



David Pickett
Business
development
manger, Tripartum

Chair:



Ailsa Dunn
Head of insight &
innovation, Prima
Group

Guests:



**Amanda Van
Duyvenvoorde**
Operation director,
Progress Housing
Group



Stacey Healey
Brand &
communications
strategist, Accent
Group



**Jamie
Hutchinson**
Director of
customers, Peaks
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Lauren Carey
Marketing
business partner,
One Manchester



Pauline Jones
Director of
housing, Halton
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Mark Cantrell,
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added: “There’s always a trade-off between what customers want from Amazon, but what we in turn deliver or can deliver. The gap for me is how we communicate that... It’s an engagement piece.”

On the face of it, the Amazon discussion may seem like a tangent. But in many ways, it illustrates something of the overall theme: social landlords require a deeper relationship with their customers, and this adds layers of complexity not only to their communications channels, but also the approach, and the technologies they use. They can’t just chase the cutting edge, unless they want to cut themselves out of their core business.

By the nature of their work, housing associations find themselves at the forefront not only of technological change but of generational change, too. The sector provides homes and services not just to the new breed of tech-savvy digital natives, but to the old hands of the analogue age; somehow these all must be accommodated.

“That’s quite a challenge because we have, not just older residents, but younger ones [who] don’t necessarily want to receive the things we want to tell them by email or by text message,” Carey said. “There’s still that balance of understanding what customers want, hearing their views and trying to work out a two-way conversation rather than just thinking we know what they want.”

Customer satisfaction “means different things to different customers” said Amanda Van Duyvenvoorde, and this has implications for a housing provider’s process of digital transition.

“We took the decision of digital by choice [rather than digital first] because not everybody is ready to go digital,” she said. “There’s a real mixed bag of customers’ wants and needs and that ultimately will drive satisfaction.”



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– Amanda Van Duyvenvoorde

Stacey Healey added: “This is what we’ve found, our highest levels of satisfaction is definitely scored on the ability to transact online, so its repairs service, the need to know the urgency around that, but when it comes to the bigger matters it is that face-to-face contact that people want. Our new service offer puts them both equal so that people can choose.”

Hutchinson said: “People still like to talk to people.”

Strangely, this can be something of a strange revelation for the modern world, but in response Peaks & Plains Housing Trust is shifting towards a customer first approach to its communications and engagement, rather than digital first.

This doesn’t mean rejecting

digital technologies – it’s not about being a cyber-luddite – but it also means not being some kind of digital Darwinist by rejecting other channels.

“That’s probably the key – choice,” Shand said. “But then that brings other challenges for you, providing the means for individuals to know what their choice is, and recognising the choice may change.”

We’re in a transition period, then; not just the sector, but our whole society, where an older analogue generation overlaps with the first waves of the cyber generations to come. Somehow, the housing sector’s transition must keep pace with both. Easier said than done, no doubt, especially given the role that new



technology plays in catering for all of this.

“Our systems don’t talk to each other; we have to do stuff in the background to make them [do that],” Van Duyvenvoorde said. “Our suppliers can be quite difficult to work with because they all work in silos, they don’t work together, which makes our job ever more complicated.

“[This] just makes the whole job of getting that customer view, of getting that rich data at the hands of somebody who works in our contact centre [that much harder]... and having that relationship [to] improve our customer experience, we’re not able to do that.

“We achieve that in a very clunky manner at the minute, which is not good for the customer and it’s certainly not good for some of our staff, because it takes an age to train somebody up in our contact centre because of the multitude of systems that they have to use.”

The downside of two decades and more of digital revolution; layers of legacy systems and conflicting compatibilities.

In part, this is where TriPartum comes in. Accent Housing has recently introduced the company’s solution for providing simplified and personalised rent and service charge statements for tenants,

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which helps to streamline the process.

“We’re about customer communication, so customer content is what we do,” Shand explained. “That’s making it clear and in plain English, but more importantly it provides personalisation.”

Essentially, TriPartum’s system processes the data from a housing provider’s existing systems and presents it in a clean and accessible manner as an A5 booklet. There’s no bundle of mismatched sheets, generated from spreadsheets and mailmerge, but a singular document, with consistent design, layout and branding that is personalised to registered provider and tenant alike.

“Effectively, even though it is an A5 booklet, it is designed so when you open it, it is an A4 page because that is what you are naturally used to looking at when you receive

documents,” Shand added.

TriPartum’s method cuts out zero lines in the data, listing only the service charge elements the individual pays for, for example, thereby cutting out a lot of “noise”. This is said to make it easier for customer and (in this case) Accent alike.

David Pickett, also of TriPartum, added: “Rather than just giving people information [as it comes out of the system], we can start to use some of this data to develop and tell a story that is actually giving all of the information [needed to comply with regulatory requirements], but we can put another layer on that so that people do understand what they are receiving.”

Accent is new to the system, but feedback from other housing associations that have adopted it are encouraging, according to TriPartum: 80% of people in a survey agreed the information is easy to understand; there was

a 95% reduction in query calls; 47% reduction in resource time; 92% of customers agreed the call to action was clearer; there was a 20% reduction in billing costs; and a 66% reduction in paper usage. So, all in all, it’s getting the message across for the housing associations and tenants concerned.

Obviously, there’s a lot to consider as the sector modernises, shifts to digital, and looks to better communicate and engage with tenants and residents. Technology is just a tool, but it’s the human element that turns them into the implements of meaningful relationships.

And there’s always something new potentially around the corner, as Van Duyvenvoorde reminded. Voice activated technology is one of the next big things in the digital revolution. Her organisation is currently looking at the potential of such technology to engage tenants of both the analogue and digital generations: “Alexa, what’s my rent balance?”

“I’m quite excited about that, because it’s not something as a sector we’d do; we tend to stick to traditional stuff, but all of this is available to everyone,” she said.

Hutchinson echoed the sentiment: “Digital voice is going to change everything,” he said.