

TRANSFORMING YOUR HOUSING MANAGEMENT OFFER

By Jon Slade (jon.slade@campbelltickell.com) and Greg Campbell (greg.campbell@campbelltickell.com)

For many years, efforts to improve performance in housing have focused on service lines: “How do we improve our ASB offer; reduce our void turnaround times; and manage rent arrears in the face of Universal Credit?”

Now the talk is all about transformation: it’s the word on everyone’s lips. Why? Because all parties - Council as shareholder, Board, Executive Team, staff and residents - look at antiquated non-digital service offers and say “Really, is this the best we can do?”

It is clear that digital services can offer significant improvement. But that’s been true for more than 10 years. The difference now is two-fold: the gap between retail/commercial and housing sectors – and customer expectations with them - is enormous; and the need to reduce costs. All the stakeholders think “Surely we can do it better?” And the Council, Board and Executive think “Surely we can do it cheaper?”

How to approach it though? The shortest route to an underwhelming outcome is to wrap a digital skin around an old-fashioned service model.

We should focus on the principle of ‘fit for purpose’. This is a prompt to start with the question ‘What is our purpose?’ i.e. what type of landlord do we want to be? Is it about:

- Being a bare bones, bricks-and-mortar landlord?
- Creating communities?
- Supporting our residents in the face of shrinking public services?

Effective digital transformation requires an organisation to define:

- Values (what type of landlord are we?);
- Scope of service; and
- Quality of service.

All of the above need to reflect the current operating environment in order to create a clear framework upon which to build a digital offer.

It is tempting for an ALMO to look at the RP sector for inspiration. But it’s important to recognise that ALMOs have complexities that RPs don’t:

- They may often be tied into council IT provision and/or support;
- Efficiency savings may, wholly or partially, be for the greater good of council finances rather than the specific good of the ALMO’s finances;
- The Council as sole shareholder will have its own position on digital and transformation, which may or may not support what is best for the ALMO.

Over many years, service delivery approaches have circled from centralised to decentralised and from generic to specialised. But the underlying model has always been a person-to-person (tenant/housing officer) relationship. The retail/banking/commercial sectors moved long ago to transaction-based service delivery. A key question for organisations wanting to transform digitally is: why have our housing services barely changed in 30 years? This takes you into issues of culture and how residents are perceived, and towards a realisation that services have been primarily built around the needs of the most needy 10% of customers rather than the ‘silent majority’, a polarity that needs to be rebalanced.

There is widespread recognition of the digital opportunity, and there exists the opportunity to improve the accessibility of services, improve the quality of service delivery, and to reduce cost to serve. But achieving these outcomes requires building a fundamentally different service model, and also requires identifying the cultural factors that have kept existing service models largely unchanged for the last 30 years.