

# THE TECH PANDEMIC

## The long-term impact of COVID-19 on the usage of technology in specialist housing.

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Including insights from 133 specialist housing professionals  
via research undertaken in partnership with Housing LIN.

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# Foreword

**Tim Barclay,**  
**CEO, Appello**

Whilst the events of the last 18 months have delivered unprecedented challenges, they have also presented opportunities. Across all industries there has been a requirement to question how we operate, a need to think outside the box, and an opportunity to implement new ideas, processes, and innovations. The barriers we all previously faced in our industries and lives, have been lowered, and perhaps on reflection we realise many were only ever superficial.

We have seen specialist housing embrace technology, from staff to customers, even the less tech-savvy have welcomed the benefits of digital technologies. As the market leader in digital Technology Enabled Care, we have always said that when you highlight the benefits, as opposed to the functions, and you design with the user front of mind, then nearly everyone is open to technology – COVID-19 has been a real catalyst to highlight many of those benefits.

Now is the time to ensure we put these learnings into practice, we need to build on this momentum. Technology will never be a replacement for human interaction; however, it can be a great delivery tool for them and can unquestionably be a great compliment to the service delivered by dedicated people in specialist housing. The challenge now will be striking the right balance moving forward and I'm glad to see the findings of this report indicate that technology is part of the future.

## **What is specialist housing?**

Specialist housing is any housing scheme where housing, support and sometimes care services are provided as an integrated package.

It provides invaluable housing and support for disabled people, homeless people, older people, people with mental health problems, people who have experienced domestic abuse and many others.

It can have an enormous positive impact on an individual's quality of life: from their physical and mental health to their engagement with the community.



# The long-term impact of COVID-19 on the usage of technology in specialist housing

## Introduction

This report follows a series of reports produced in Summer 2020, which looked at the initial changes in perceptions towards technology in specialist housing following the first wave of COVID-19.

Those reports identified significant changes in perceptions as specialist housing providers turned to technology to enable them to maintain services for their customers and ensure a safe living environment.

Has 18 months of living in a pandemic environment, operating under enforced restrictions changed our initial perceptions or is technology a long-term solution? This report looks to understand whether the initial novelty and appreciation for technology has waned or is this something we want to embrace as part of the future of specialist housing.

Developed with the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN), this report is based on research undertaken between April-May 2021, with 133 senior housing professionals representing housing association and local authorities across the UK.

## Value of technology

As the pandemic initially started to impact the UK's housing and care sectors, organisations quickly became very reliant on technology. Those who had already implemented modern, digital technologies and innovation into their organisation's strategy found they were reaping the benefits of these investments. Therefore, unsurprisingly, our initial research in May 2020 found 85% of housing providers claimed that COVID-19 had highlighted the importance of technology provided to residents. A year later, even with significant loosening of social restrictions, the value is still being felt, 80% of housing professionals still claim that COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of technology provided to residents.

## Changing customers

It has long been predicted that future generations, moving into specialist housing environments, would have greater expectations around the technologies available to them. This forecast is largely due to the likelihood that these generations will have already utilised technologies such as computers, mobile phones, the internet in their work and social lives.

Research has continuously identified that those aged 65+ in the last decade have increased the adoption of technologies such as the internet and mobile devices<sup>1</sup>, however this has been at a reasonably slow, steady, predictable pace. COVID-19 will prove to be the catalyst for a monumental jump in that adoption. As a result of technologies, such as video calling becoming one of the only means for maintaining connections with loved ones, or online shopping for non-essential items, even the more adverse have been persuaded to adopt technology for the benefits of their wellbeing.

This change has been reflected in specialist housing, with 81% of housing providers revealing they have seen greater interest in technology amongst their residents. Of those, almost 1 in 5 (17%) believe that the change has been a significant increase.

## Technology enabled employees

For those working in a housing development providing frontline services, the pandemic has created significant challenges in maintaining day-to-day operations. Many of whom have been required to work remotely with reduced contact with customers.

Embracing technology has been the only option for many looking to maintain services. This has proven to be a positive experience as 89% of housing professionals believe that the appetite for technology has increased amongst those working in frontline positions.

With onsite staff playing an important role in educating and supporting residents with using technology, this may prove to be a significant benefit in the long-term adoption of technology in specialist housing.

## Evolving delivery of services

As highlighted in the report '4 Reasons housing providers must revise their telecare needs', remote working was unlikely to only be a temporary measure.

In the immediate wake of the pandemic, housing providers outlined their top priority for technology was to ensure staff could maintain visibility of property and customers whilst working remotely. Remote working has been a strategy for many even prior to the pandemic, with the benefits to wellbeing highlighted and the capability to potentially manage multiple properties.

<sup>1</sup> Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index 2018 Report

Our latest research shows that at least 63% of housing providers plan to increase remote working for traditionally development-based employees.

Whilst 25% are unsure of their long-term plans, only 1 in 10 housing providers have no plans to change their remote working policies.

This aligns to the revelation that 68% of housing professionals believe that video communication between their staff and customers is becoming increasingly important to their organisation. These organisations are potentially working towards greater adoption of video communication as part of a strategy to maintain service levels from a remote location.

## Meeting expectations

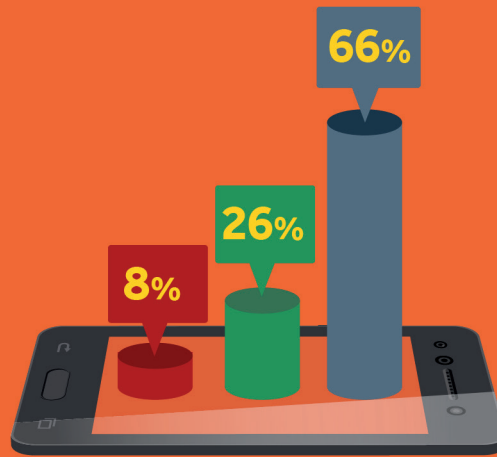
The benefits of technology appear to have been realised. Digital innovations have been shown to enable many individuals and organisation's meet head on unprecedented challenges. The adoption has led to a new normal, and the challenge now will be to ensure that we take the learnings forward, creating a balance of the older and newer ways of operating. The housing sector appears to be embracing technology and thinking positively, with 82% of housing providers stating that they think the changes in perceptions amongst staff and customers, will be an influence in the long-term delivery of specialist housing.

As a result of the expected long-term impact, housing providers will need to re-evaluate their strategies, the utilisation of technology and innovations, and the wider impact on the organisation.

There is a need to start acting on the immediate changes in expectations now, and it appears to be recognised that resource and investment will be critical with 62% of housing professionals believing their organisation will increase their investment in technology.

The door for embracing technology has been flung wide open, now is the time for us to act and take our opportunity. Whilst some are unsure of their capabilities to do this, the majority of housing professionals, 66%, believe their organisation is going to be able to keep pace with the technology expectations resulting from the pandemic.

79% of housing providers feel there has been an increase in interest in technology amongst supported housing customers as a result of COVID-19.



66% of housing providers are confident they will keep pace with changing customer expectations towards technology, 26% are unsure and 8% are not confident.

89% of housing providers believe their frontline staff have a greater appetite for using technology due to COVID-19.



82% of housing providers believe that changes in perceptions towards technology will have a long-term influence beyond COVID-19.

26% of housing providers think they will significantly increase their remote working for traditionally site staff, 37% will slightly increase, 24% are unsure and 13% will make no changes.

62%

62% of housing providers say their investment in technology will increase following COVID-19, 36% think it won't change significantly, 1% think it will reduce.

39%

1%





# Closing Thoughts

**Jeremy Porteus,**  
**Chief Executive, Housing LIN**

COVID-19 has shown the variable levels of digital maturity in our sector. The pandemic has also offered opportunity to quickly adapt existing service provision or adopt new technological and system innovations. The Housing LIN is therefore pleased to have partnered with Appello in this latest survey that demonstrates how 'going digital' is, and will be, a part of supported housing moving forward.

This paper builds on earlier survey findings on the telecare needs of housing providers post COVID-19 that revealed where senior executives experience great use of technology within their organisations to support their service priorities and meet their customers' growing expectations.

Now, this timely survey will both contribute to policy development as the government announce a task force on specialist housing, in addition to providing insightful information that will help inform the ongoing Technology for our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation (TAPPI) inquiry that recognises this unique opportunity to drive the 'digital revolution' across housing, health and care.

In conclusion, the results of this survey and findings outlined in this paper are increasingly important for the specialist housing sector and the role of technology post-COVID, as well how we live with COVID, to support people in specialist housing and inform how services will be further enabled.



Find out how Appello can support you with your digital telecare requirements.

[www.appello.co.uk](http://www.appello.co.uk)



For more on housing and digital technology generally, visit the Housing LIN's pages:

[www.housinglin.org.uk/going-digital/](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/going-digital/)