Opening new avenues for funding:

Technology delivers real benefits quickly to Housing Associations

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Technology can deliver real benefits, quickly to Housing Associations. So, how can we open up new avenues for funding?

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Earlier this year, with a long career working with technology companies and in housing management – and having served almost three years on the Board of Management at Cunninghame Housing Association – I joined Idox, the UK's leading provider of funding and information services. I took on the role of Head of Business for GrantFinder and The Knowledge Exchange, our comprehensive funding database and information portals that help connect local businesses, charities and academic institutions with external funding opportunities.

Over the last six months I've watched as housing associations (HAs) across the country have struggled with the challenges of COVID-19. Face-to-face services were paused and many staff furloughed. Many tenants have faced income insecurity and the stress associated with that. For vulnerable residents, they also had to shield, losing their normal support networks.

It's often hard in crisis situations to start looking to the future and think about recovery. Idox works with councils, charities and HAs across the country. We've seen that those organisations taking a strategic approach to digital transformation, seeking out funding to invest in infrastructure, have a stronger foundation for resilience.

Cue the internet of things

There is no doubt that the Internet of Things (IoT) is changing the way we interact with the world round us. It's a technology that is increasingly permeating our lives and providing us with smart solutions across all facets of business and day-to-day life. According to recent estimates, there will be between 25 to 75 billion connected devices by 2025.

Across the world we're already seeing IoT solutions being deployed by smart cities to control and optimise streetlight networks, parking, waste collection and environment management, for example:

- Facilities Management companies are using IoT to provide better services to tenants, improve air quality, reduce CO2 emissions, and provide energy efficiency to buildings to save millions, each year.
- Enterprises of all sizes are deploying IoT solutions to monitor assets remotely, reduce supply chain disruptions and improve overall business efficiencies.
- Real estate companies are using IoT to analyse office usage and provide solutions that combine dynamic allocation of real estate and office resources for their clients.

Organisations in many sectors are finding that IoT is creating real business value and contributing to the bottom-line. It is most definitely a growth area within technology, and yet its potential benefits for housing associations are still only just beginning to be explored. infrastructure, have a stronger foundation for resilience.

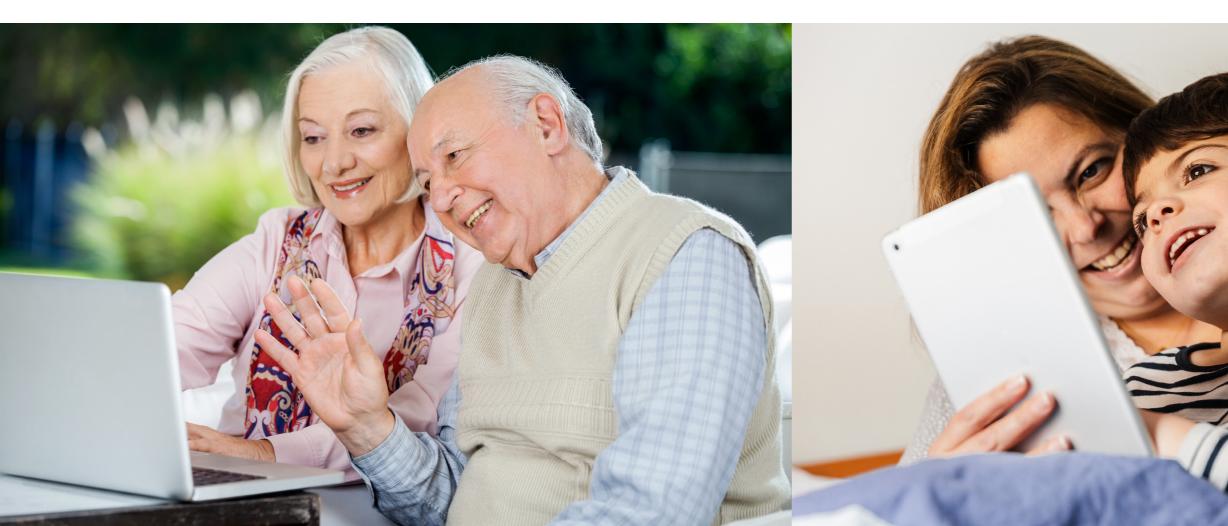# Why invest in the internet of things

It was interesting to read a report earlier this year by the Housing Associations Charitable Trust which looked at the potential of smart homes, within the social housing sector. It noted that despite lots of pilot projects, the technology is still to become normalised or rolled out at scale.

Not only can IoT save HAs money, it can also help them reduce their carbon footprint and, evidence shows, help improve tenant engagement with housing maintenance. There are lots of ways that IoT can be embedded into housing stock. Sensors can help with heating controls, fire safety and damp detection. In turn, this can help HAs identify tenants who may be struggling with fuel poverty and prioritise support for them.

A proactive approach can reduce the ongoing costs of property maintenance and the need for regular property visits.

Other ways in which HAs have successfully used IoT technology is to manage emergency lighting in communal spaces and access routes. Within the home, smart lighting can offer residents more control of light levels in different spaces. And it can also help vulnerable tenants to live more independently.

IoT projects often go hand-in-hand with installation of improved high-speed broadband and fibre connectivity. Research shows that the groups least likely to be online are older people, people with disabilities and those living in social housing. Embedding IoT applications within a wider project to tackle digital exclusion can be an efficient and holistic approach.

Where to find the money?

There's often a perception within HAs or charities that there's no point applying for funding if you don't have specialist bid management staff or external funding officers. In fact, our own surveys of the grants sector have shown that many funding schemes are under-subscribed. From our last survey of funders, we found that only 70% of respondents reported that they fully allocated their funding in the last year.

Funders are also very open to engaging with potential applicants to help them understand if they are eligible for particular funding.

From the same survey we learnt that 86% of funders provide support for organisations to help them submit their application and make it as strong as possible. They recognise that not all groups who could benefit from funding have the experience or skills to be confident in searching for and applying for it, and they don't want to just keep funding the same beneficiaries.

Finding available funding

GrantFinder employs a research team to identify new funding opportunities at local, regional, national and European level. The grants alerts functionality can flag up potential new funding opportunities which meet your needs, without you having to search the database yourself.

At the start of September, for example, there were 20 funds currently open for housing associations to apply to for investment in new technologies. More generally there were 43 funds for projects tackling digital exclusion.

For those HAs that also have charitable status, they may potentially be eligible for further grants. There are over 100 funding opportunities for charities investing in digital technology and at least 250 for digital inclusion projects. The total value of this available funding is hundreds of thousands of pounds.

There are additional emergency funds available just now, created in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Since the start of 2020, Idox has added over 400 completely new funding schemes for the voluntary and social sector to GrantFinder. However, many of these can be short-lived and stay open only until the available money is allocated.

It's worth thinking creatively when considering how to find funding for a particular technology project. Many digital or digital inclusion funds are themed around a specific outcome area such as combatting loneliness, tackling unemployment, or generating community cohesion.

Examples of available funding

We've all heard about the National Lottery Community Fund (aka The Big Lottery) but there are over 6000 funders on our GrantFinder database.

Two examples of lesser-known funding schemes, which cover digital inclusion are:

- Masonic Charitable Foundation – Later Life Inclusion grants programme, which provides grants for local and national charities in England and Wales that are working to reduce loneliness and isolation in later life.
- Community Facilities Programme (Wales) – Offers capital grants for voluntary and community sector organisations to develop and improve facilities in Wales, in order to tackle poverty and its effects.

Developing new partnerships can be an alternative way to deliver innovative projects. For example, universities are recipients of large sums of research funding which would not normally be available for HAs or voluntary organisations to apply for themselves. They are often on the look-out for community partners, either on joint research to test approaches in a real-life situation, or for skills and capacity building.

Initiatives such as the UK's Digital Catapult innovation centre, bring together universities, the private sector and the third sector to pilot new technologies in real-world situations. They have an ongoing programme focused on IoT and its application, with companies looking for ways to access councils or housing groups to ensure they are developing solutions that meet a real need.

Digital transforms lives

One of the most rewarding things I've found about working in the funding sector, having come from the social housing sector, is the satisfaction of feeling that we are helping housing associations and charities to realise their potential.

When we hear from clients such as East Riding of Yorkshire Council that they have had a return on investment of £49 for every £1 spent on their GrantFinder subscription it really does make our team feel that we're helping to make a difference in communities and businesses across the UK.

Orbit Group, one of the UK's leading providers of affordable housing, has found that GrantFinder helps them "identify policy trends and future need, and attract external funding so that we make our own money stretch further and achieve more outcomes for more people."

As HAs struggle with the financial after-effects of COVID-19, including rent recovery and repair backlogs, thoughts are already turning to business planning for the future. This is also a time to learn any lessons, particularly in areas such as communication and engagement. Investing in digital technologies, including IoT, can be seen as a statement of intent. This is about looking to the future and ensuring our residents and communities are as resilient as possible, not just for the coming year but the coming decades. IoT should no longer be viewed as a niche technology but as an essential component of social housing delivery.

Call us now on 0333 011 1200 or email marketing@idoxgroup.com for more information about Idox's funding services.