Embracing Digital:

Housing Associations

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Introduction

In the case of housing associations, digital isn't only about updating your website. It can open the door to better internal operations, more effective communication with tenants and drives efficiencies through closer operational relationships.

Spindogs has helped some of the UK's front running housing associations overcome individual challenges and get ahead. Together, we've eased pressure points, given tenants the ability to self-serve, initiated cost savings, better utilised resources and streamlined tenant journeys.

Accelerating the use of digital across the social housing sector has never been more pressing. We thrive at working at pace, delivering secure and scalable web infrastructure that goes hand-in-hand with your brand story to drive your digital performance.

The opportunities that exist once a housing association has defined a digital strategy can be huge. In this paper, we present to you some key pointers for those thinking of using digital to combat current challenges.

What are the major challenges faced by housing associations?

In a sector where the demand far outpaces supply, and as the cost of living continues to rise in the UK, housing associations are under increasing pressure to deliver affordable housing.

The need to 'go digital' has never been more apparent, but according to a recent survey carried out by Inside Housing, the social housing sector is significantly lagging behind its corporate counterparts when it comes to embracing new technology. Traditionally, there is a tendency for too much legacy thinking in housing associations, and not enough of a growth mindset. To understand how to change, it's important to recognise what the key challenges are:

Slow moving IT systems:
Are we able to integrate the systems we currently use?

Lack of understanding:
How can we provide solutions that will resonate with our tenants?

Fear of failure:
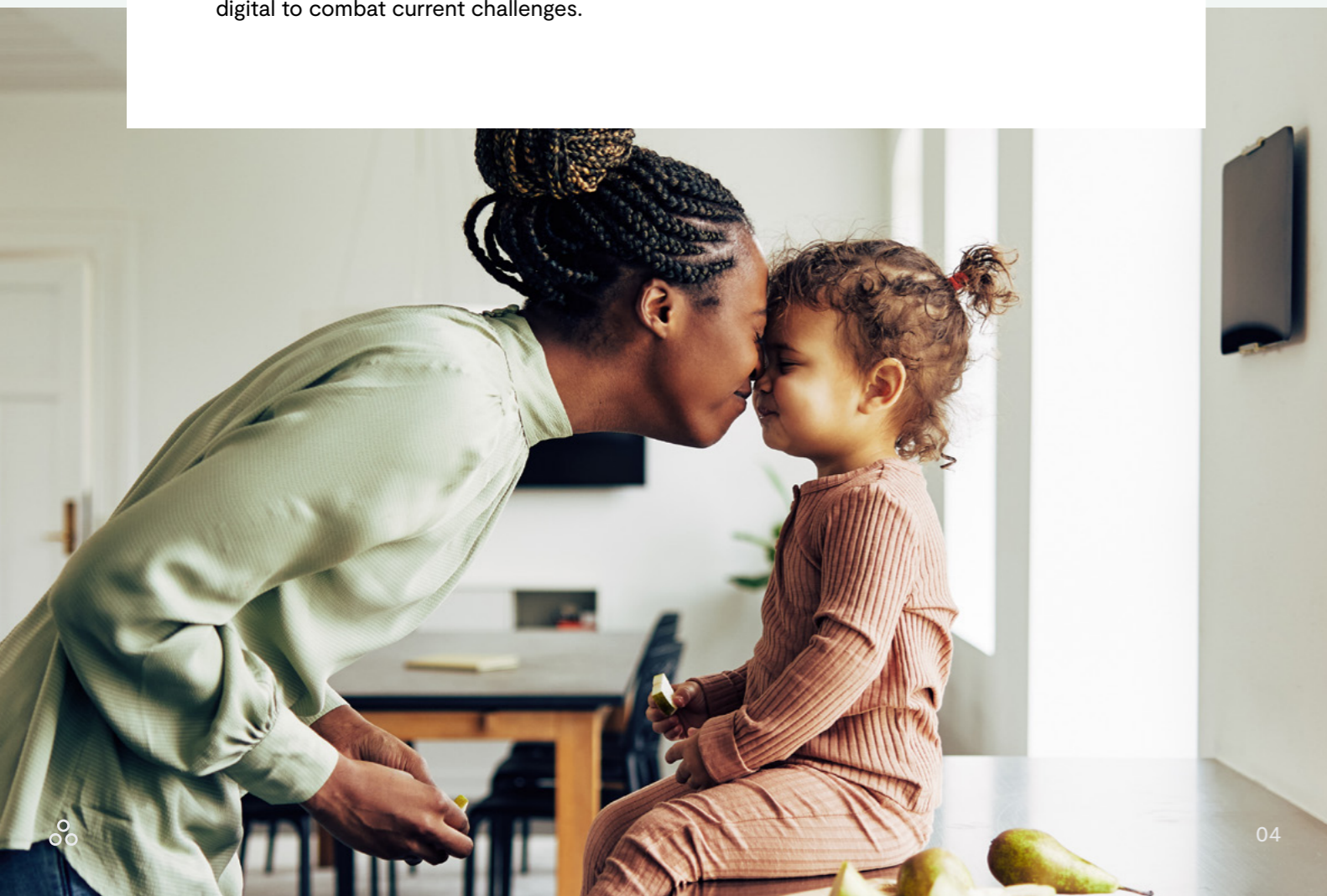What if we invest in a big project and don't see the results we were expecting?

Fast moving functionality:
How long will new functionality serve us?

Digital commitment:
How do we encourage uptake and digital shift after we have completed the project?

How is new technology transforming the way housing associations operate?

Automation

Often the elephant in the room is that staff worry about job security, automation has the ability to free up staff to take on more meaningful roles. Embracing advances in technology can reduce the amount of paperwork and manual processes required. Automating processes like applications, maintenance requests, the rental life-cycle and managing payments, staff are free to provide more support to tenants and the business more pro-actively.

Moving transaction processes online also offers excellent cost savings for housing associations, with online payments being 20 times cheaper than phone transactions and a staggering 50 times cheaper than face-to-face.

Data Analysis & Record Keeping

In a world of GDPR, there are some real benefits to those within the social housing sector making a move to keep all customer data and records online. A well defined online infrastructure can provide greater security for keeping online records safe and secure.

Utilising digital technologies for customer data is also an excellent opportunity for better data analysis and upkeep. Maintaining customer records online allows them to be accessed and edited as required, providing housing associations with up-todate information that is easy to manage

Improved Customer Service

One of the most significant benefits that digitalisation has in the social housing sector is the ability for tenants to receive a customer experience. Help and advice can be made available 24 hours a day, seven days a week with the help of a knowledge portal and accessible online account information.

Many actions have the ability to be completed online, meaning customers have no restrictions on when they can resolve their issues or speak with the correct department. Putting real-time communication at your customer's fingertips creates a seamless transaction and results in the customer being able to help themselves.

Such innovation in a sector that is yet to fully embrace technological solutions will also deliver considerable reputational benefits, impacting positively and directly on brand experience.

A Remote Workforce

With the rise of cloud technologies, it is now possible for housing association teams to work remotely, allowing them to focus their time and energy on being out among their tenants. Having a digitally enabled and mobile workforce also reduces the need for multiple physical office locations.

Remote working allows staff to be more connected with those that need help the most. Less time will be spent on the mundane transactions, and more focus can be made on what really matters; enabling the organisation to become more human with greater face-to-face interactions

Better Connected

Connected devices and smart metres offer a great opportunity for housing associations to diversify their offerings. Embracing these innovative technologies within social housing can detect how people are using their accommodation and allow providers to alter services, such as heating, in real-time.

When used effectively, this technology can help housing associations to anticipate and handle issues faster, as well as be more proactive and strategic in commissioning repairs or replacements quicker in order to minimise costs and disruption.

Did you know?

32% of respondents said that digital transformation is a top priority

65% said digital transformation was key to their development

53% of respondents, say the main barrier to digital adoption is the lack of digital skills or resource

41% believe improving tenant engagement will bring a quick win to their organisation

48% said that the lack of good quality data is a digital adoption barrier

80% have seen an increase in resident demand for digital products in the past 18 month

Sources: Inside Housing & Futr survey 2021

Yorkshire Housing

Yorkshire Housing is the biggest housing association based in Yorkshire. With more than 20,000 homes across the region, Yorkshire Housing pride themselves on making it possible for people to have a place they're proud to call home. As well as providing social and affordable homes, Yorkshire Housing continuously strive to tackle the housing crisis.
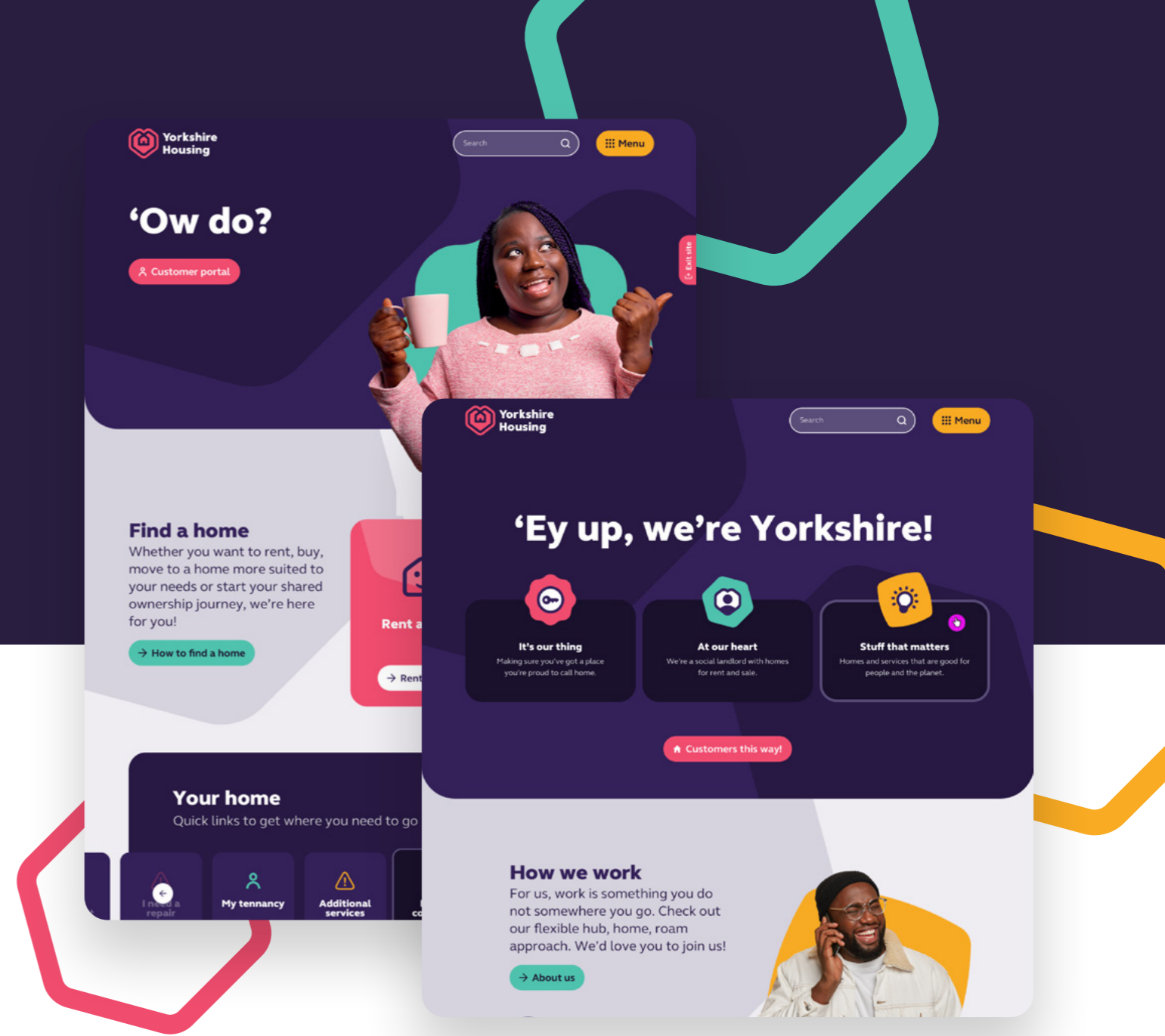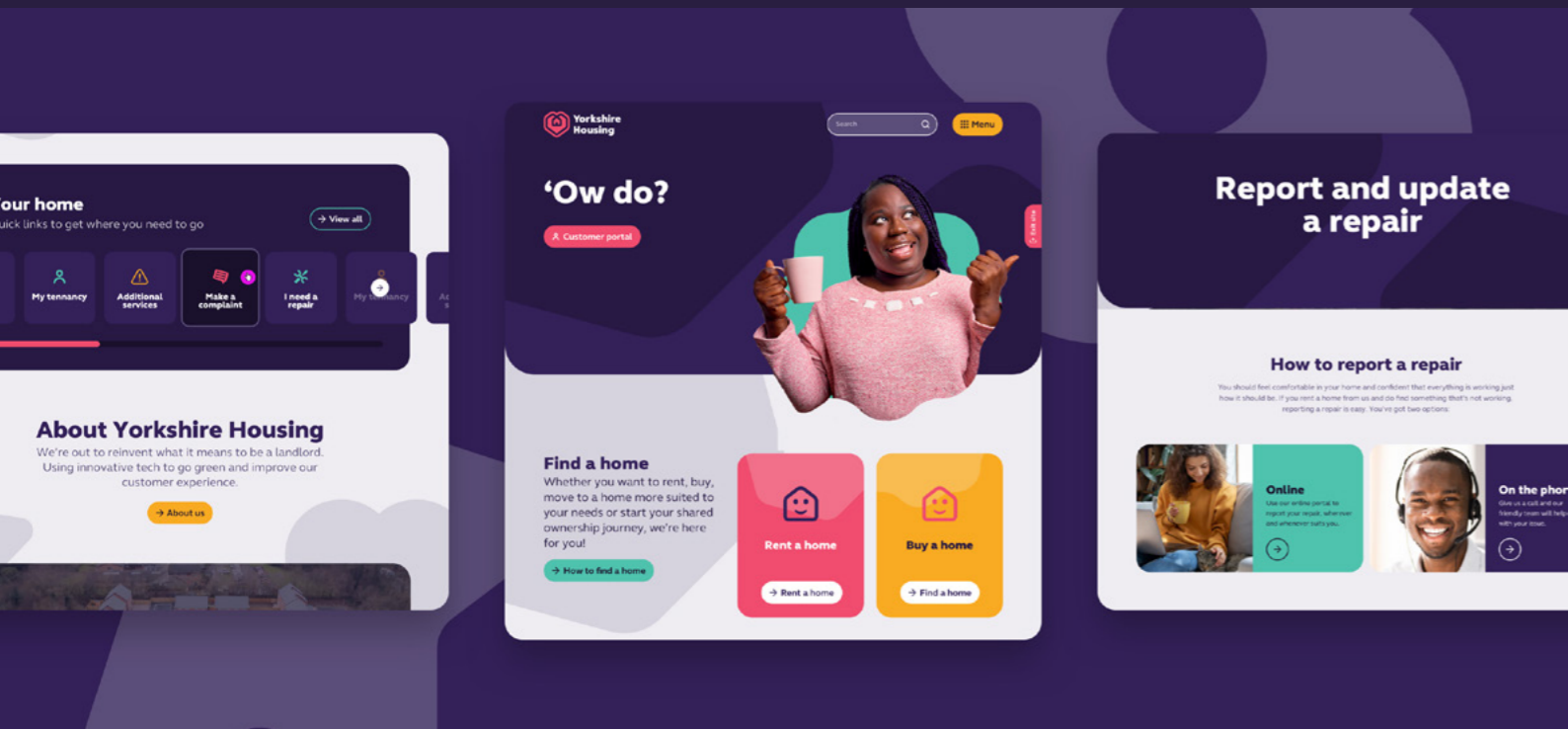
The challenge

To help Yorkshire Housing to continue to lead the way in innovation, the team approached us to deliver a brand-new website that reflected their vision as an organisation.

The current website didn't reflect Yorkshire Housing as a forward-thinking, strong and resilient organisation. The team are continuously looking for opportunities to stand out in the housing association industry, and the dated website didn't reflect their pro-activity or ambition for the future.

One of the main objectives for a new website was that it needed to open opportunities for collaboration. Driving interest from partners and investors was key for the new website – it had to be designed in a way that showcased Yorkshire Housing as a leading organisation that partners would be excited to work with. While the website needed to influence partners to work with the housing association, it also needed to serve existing and future Yorkshire Housing customers.

The process

Our first approach was to kick off the project with a discovery phase. Working collaboratively, the discovery process gave us a bigger picture of the project. Through a series of workshops, we defined the website's objectives, their users, current challenges, and insights into the makeup of the organisation.

The discovery phase enabled everyone to have a deeper understanding of who uses the website and to establish what their user journeys look like. As the website is used by every department and multiple types of customers, it was important that we took

the time to listen to a variety of users. We needed to understand their requirements and how they use the website, making sure that we recommend features and functionality that are going to support their user journeys. That said, the discovery phase gave us the insights we needed to propel the project forward and lay the foundations for the new website design.

Reviewing and recommending a new sitemap also made sure that content was categorised appropriately and would make it easier for users to navigate the website and for the internal team to organise content on the website.

The solution

After identifying the organisation's wants, needs and challenges, it was clear that Umbraco would be the most suitable platform for the website. A range of flexible content blocks enables the team to create different types of content and page layouts to inform investors on what they do, and guide customers on looking after and managing their homes.

With investors being an integral part to the new website, it was important that the homepage was designed with this audience in mind. The design was a shop window for partners who were interested in Yorkshire Housing and an opportunity to shout about the organisation's work and strategy, encouraging these users to get in touch.

The website design needed to make it easier for customers to self-serve on the website. A dedicated landing page for customers would enable them to find what they're looking for and navigate the content on the rest of the site. Being able to report a repair or get a quick update within a few steps, was a key factor for customers. Umbraco enables the team to create multiple forms for their customers, allowing them to engage with Yorkshire Housing at a click of a button.

The result

From the offset, the whole project has been a collaboration between Spindogs and Yorkshire Housing. By working together and introducing different expertise at various stages of the project, we were able to ensure that we had a deep understanding of the travel of direction, the brand and the purpose for the new website.

As well as listening to the Yorkshire Housing team about their requirements and challenges, we were able to guide them on the best design and functionality to support their needs and meet their expectations. As a result, Yorkshire Housing has a website that attracts investors and enables customers to self-serve online.
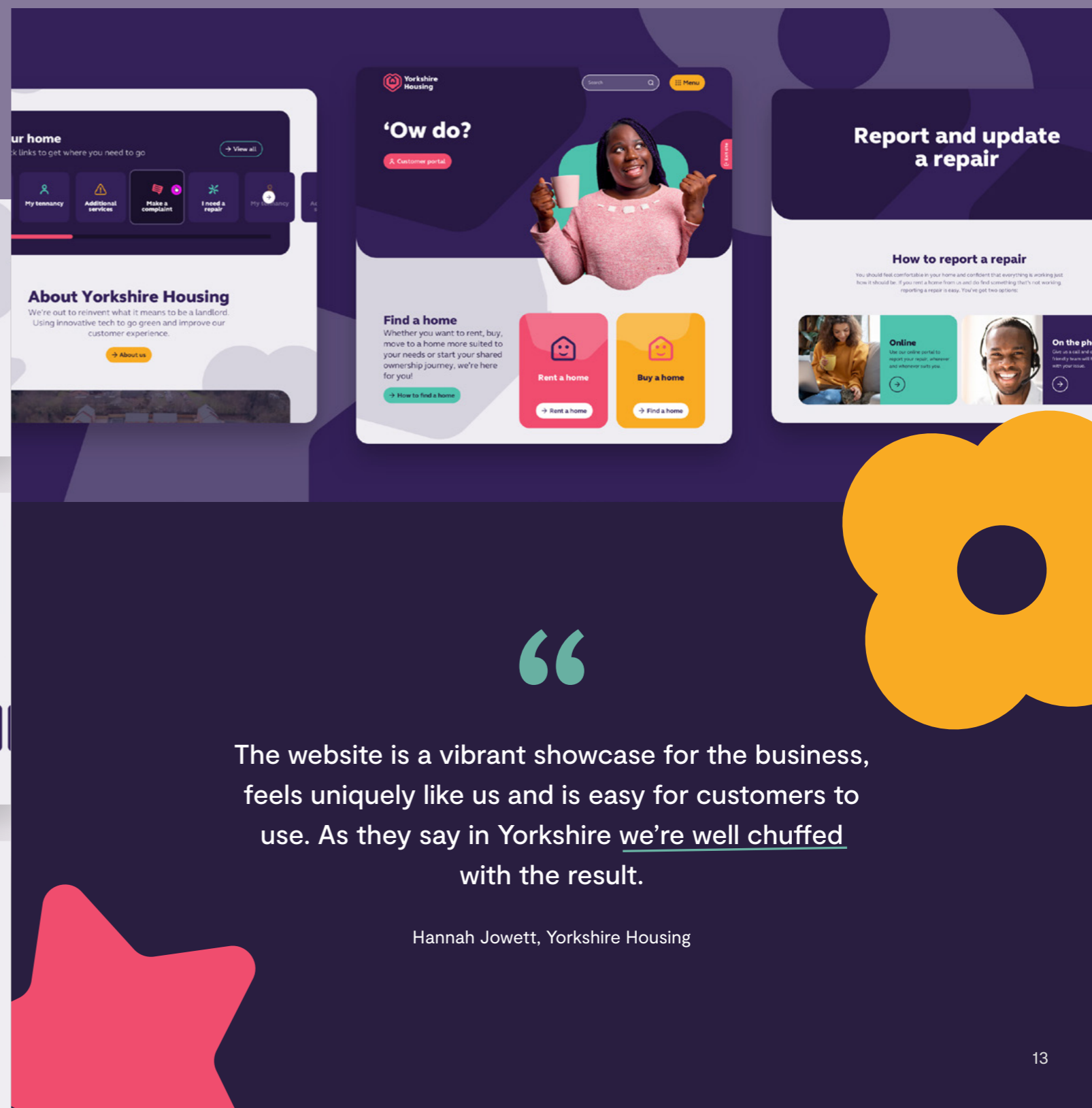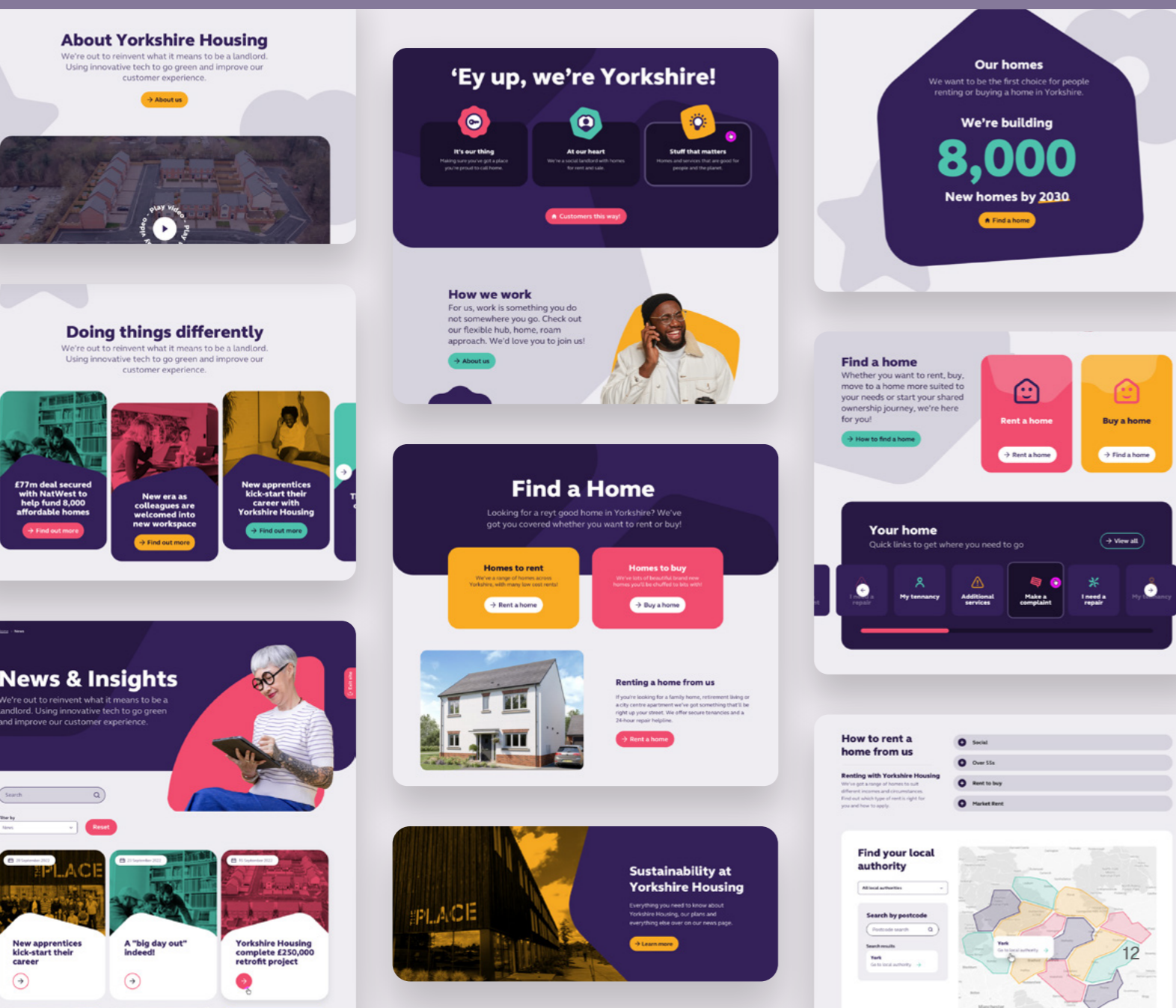

> The website is a vibrant showcase for the business, feels uniquely like us and is easy for customers to use. As they say in Yorkshire we're well chuffed with the result.

Hannah Jowett, Yorkshire Housing

Linc Cymru

Through 'Linc Homes' and 'Linc Care', Linc Cymru provide affordable home ownership, Extra Care schemes, sheltered housing, nursing homes and enterprise businesses. The businesses manage over 4,500 properties between them.
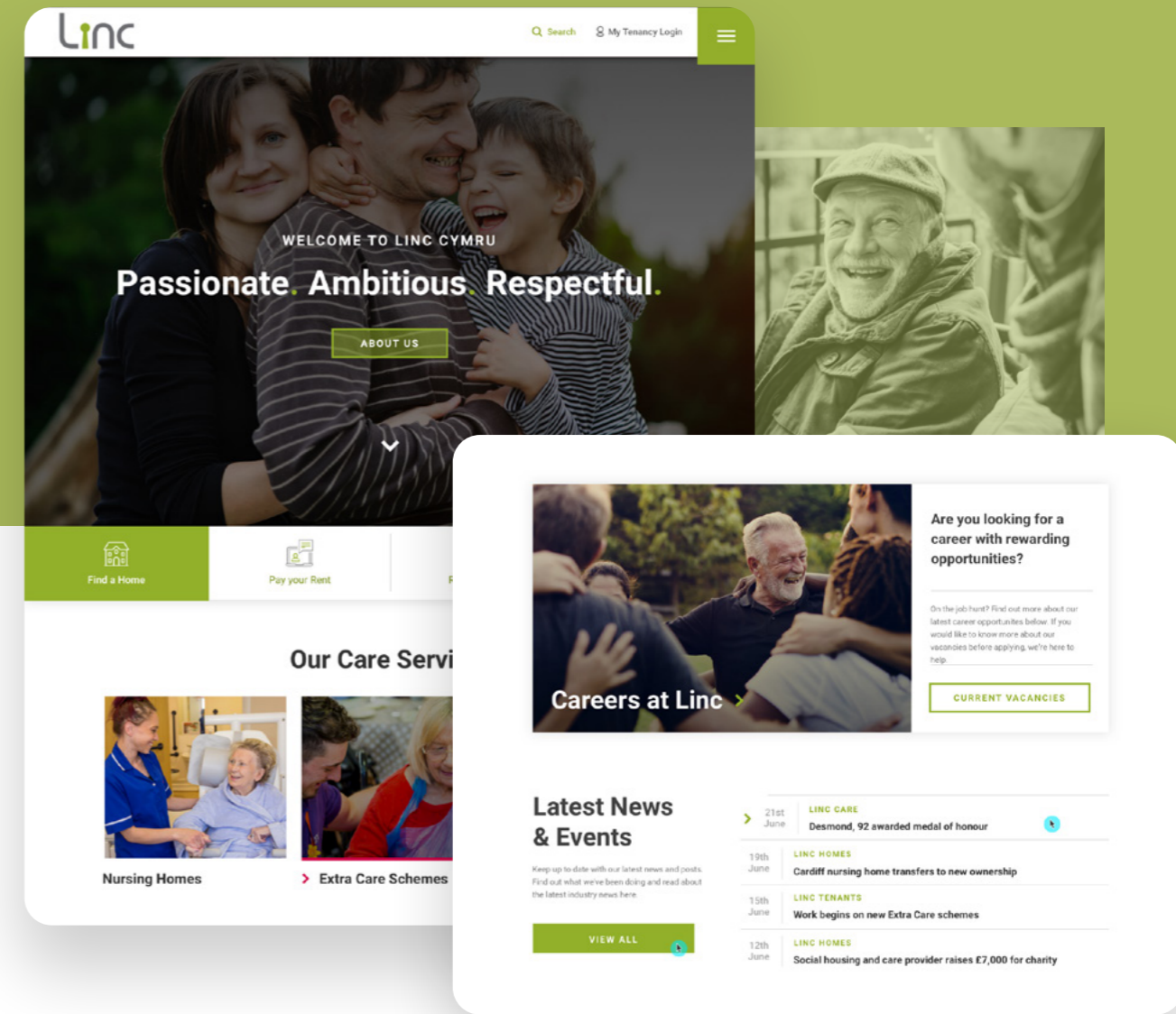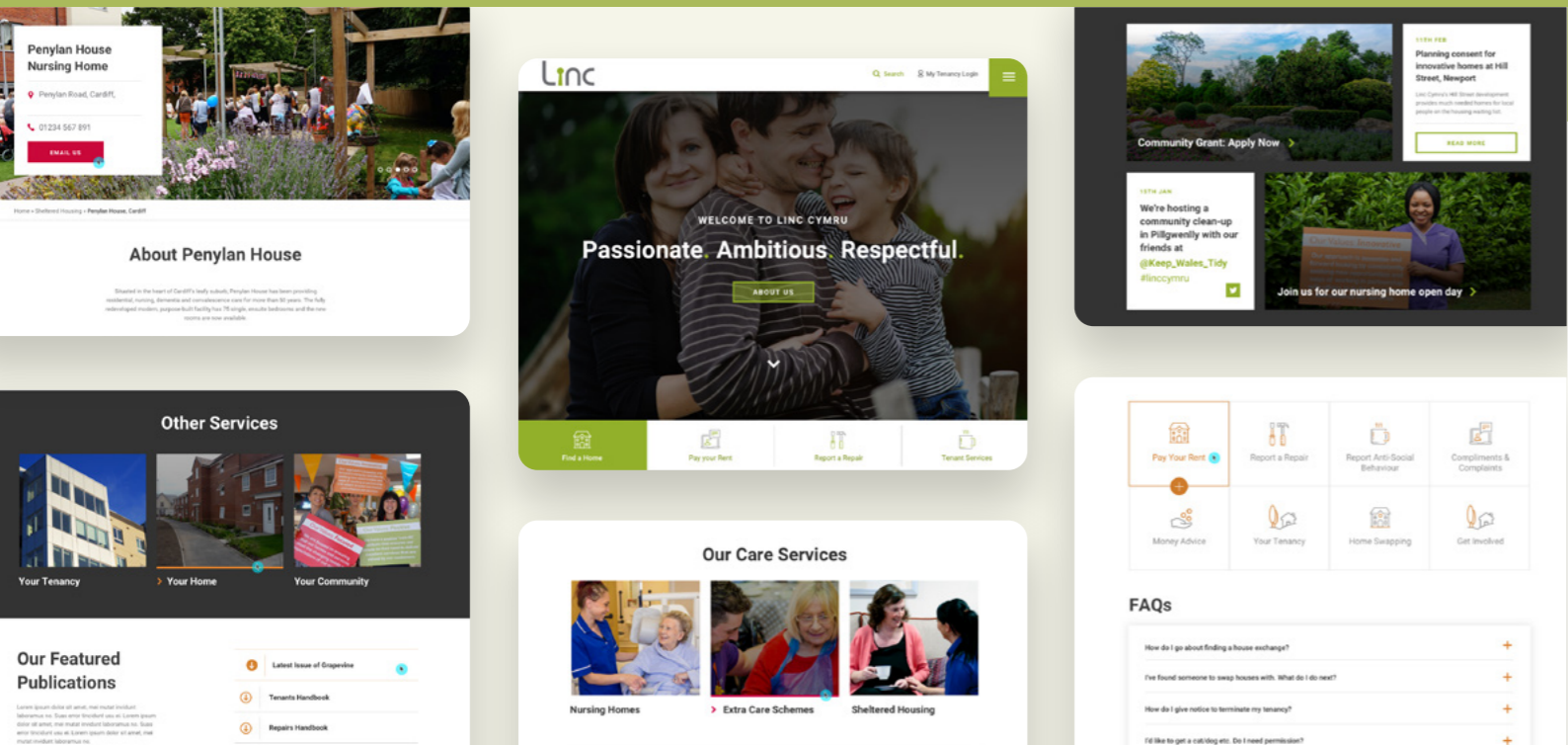
The challenge

The two main aims of the web project we worked on with Linc were to improve the online presence of the housing association and to optimise the user experience for their customers. We broke these down into corporate image and customer experience.

The legacy Linc website was dated and didn't look very professional, which meant it didn't create an accurate brand image. The aim of the new site was to update their image and portray Linc as a capable, customer-focused provider of quality Care and Housing services.

The other main priority was to combat the navigation issues with the current website, and in particular, the difficulties Linc's tenants were having around accessing the provides support, information and guidance available in the 'Homes' section. The new site needed to be highly accessible, easy to navigate and cater to the primary customer group using the website, encouraging tenants to transact via the website as opposed to calling the Customer Contact Team.

The solution

Before starting the optimisation work, we had to make sure the website was in good shape to ensure the SEO work would be successful. We carried out a technical SEO audit on the website to identify any broken links and pages, and assess the current state of the website. The SEO audit highlighted that there wasn't any structured data on the site, which is a crucial element for an ecommerce website. Structured data is fundamental for optimising a site for SEO, as it allows businesses to label the name of a product, service, etc., for search engines to understand the content on the page.

We implemented custom structured data on every web page to increase their search visibility and prepare the website for the optimisation work we were about to do.

Keyword research was also a large part of the preparation stage. The research gave us an insight into what users were searching for, what keywords competitors were ranking for, and what opportunities we could take to target and reach new customers and increase the website's conversion rate.

United Welsh

United Welsh is an award-winning housing association is based in Caerphilly and manages around 6,000 homes across 11 local authorities. Building homes and creating communities, United Welsh provide a range of accommodation including general needs, supported housing and Extra Care.
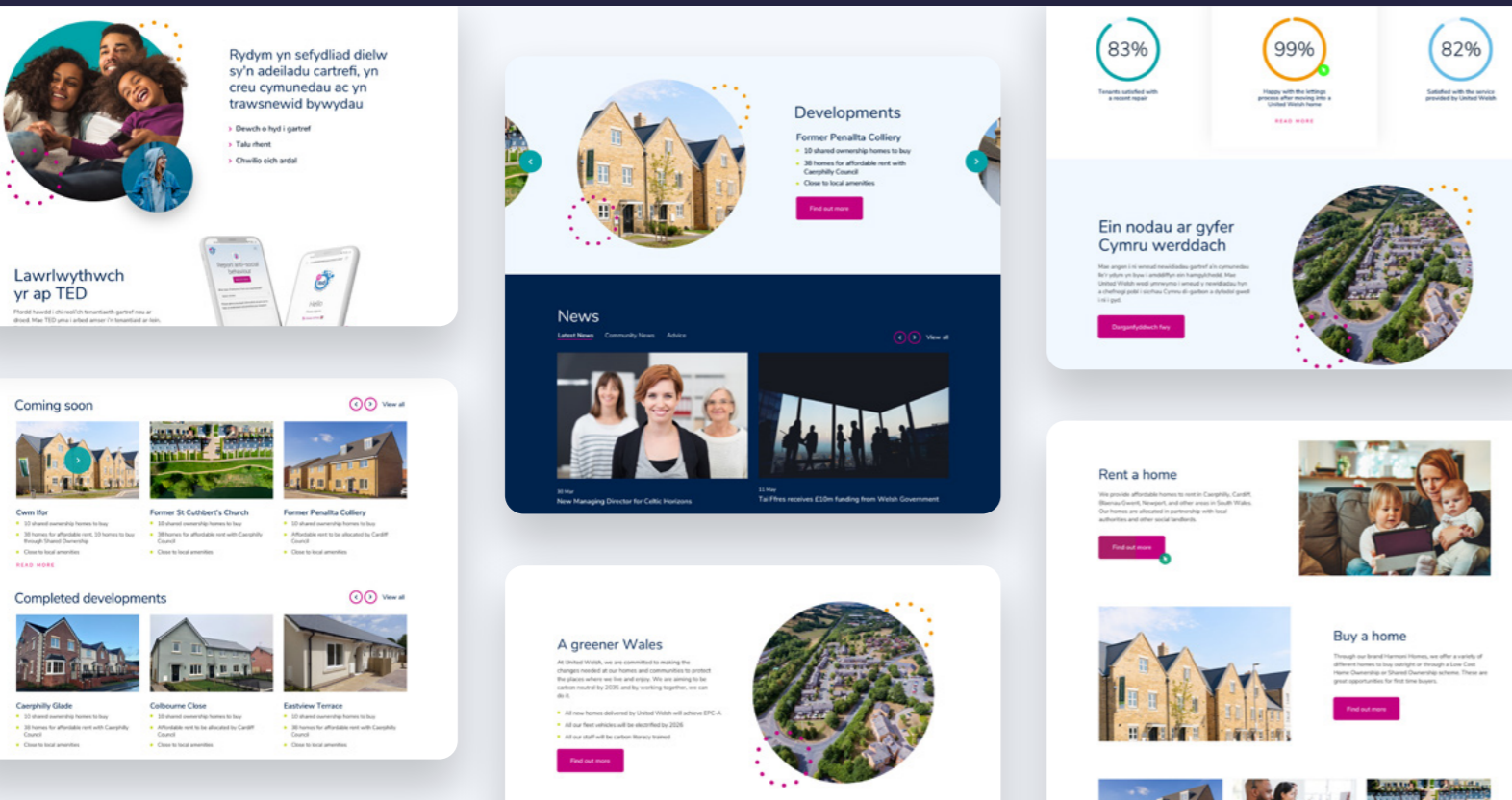

The challenge

The project began with a bespoke discovery phase, giving United Welsh the opportunity to fully identify what they needed to achieve from their new website. Tenant workshops helped to give Spindogs insight into the core audience and understand what they too – most importantly – needed from the new website. Of utmost priority for both United Welsh and its tenants was flexibility alongside increased efficiency.

Tapping into the audience allowed us to focus on what tenants expected from a digital service. These expectations included an easy way to pay rent, report maintenance issues, and ways to find affordable homes.

Prior to engaging with Spindogs, United Welsh were at the mercy of a site that could only be managed by the internal IT team who had the technical knowledge.
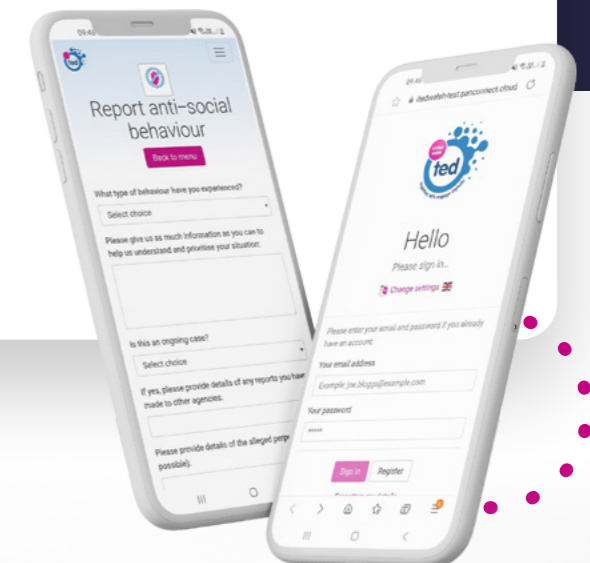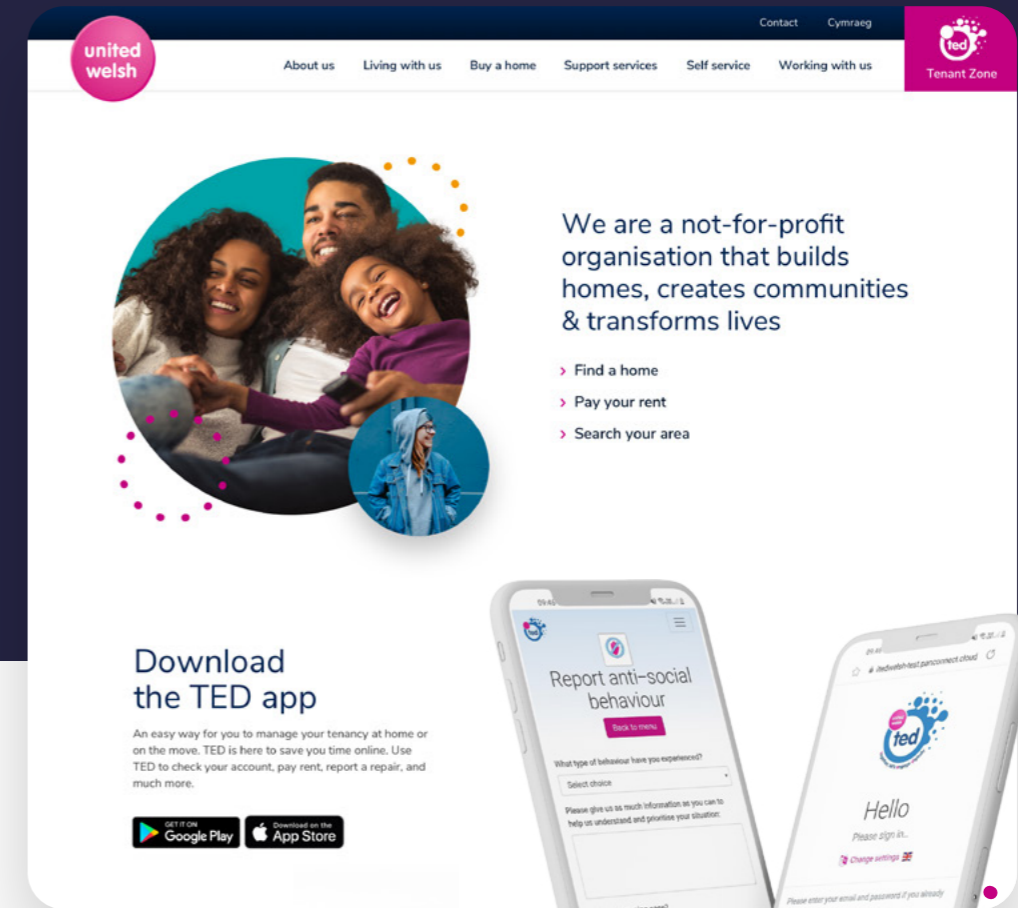
The solution

Spindogs quickly identified that WordPress would be the best CMS to allow for flexibility of content, specifically a flex page builder. This makes adding flexible content to a website a lot easier. The flex blocks Spindogs designed means the site is manageable by more people without relying on other departments.

A requirement for United Welsh was a responsive website that could be easily accessed across mobile and tablets. They also wanted the website to be flexible, easy to navigate and provide information to users quickly and easily no matter what device users access this from. We supported this requirement by signposting towards a 'Ways to pay your rent' page. This advised tenants on which methods they could use to pay rent – 'Direct Debit', 'Tenant App',

'Online' and 'Paypal' all being mentioned. Through Spindogs' support, the internal teams are now able to update pages like this, they can add relevant site content whenever they need to without relying on other teams.

A bilingual offering was essential for tenants and applicants, so Spindogs built a dedicated, dual-language postcode search function that could be easily updated by staff across the organisation. Tenants and applicants can type a postcode into the search bar to find details of Neighbourhood Officer, Rent Officer and Local Authority services, further helping to better react to the changing needs of tenants. Welsh-speaking users can easily change the website's language with the click of a button as part of the dual-language website.

Digital is at the heart of everything we do

For nearly two decades we've evolved alongside the latest technologies to create bespoke digital solutions for a variety of sectors. This includes building new websites, developing intuitive systems and taking established businesses to the next level with transformational rebrands.

We work with global clients in housing, education, automotive, professional services, membership and transport — to name a few!

We care about the same things our clients do — brand visibility, lead pipeline and the bottom line. In essence, realising client success is what gets us out of bed in the morning — your success is our success.

Get in touch

To find out more about how we can support your digital journey, contact us on:

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