



Embracing Digital:  
**Housing Associations**

**spindogs**

## Introduction

The digital landscape has shifted massively over the last few years, and technological capabilities and tenant expectations are changing just as rapidly. For housing associations, meeting these expectations means investing in new technologies to service users better.

As many housing associations look for ways to cut costs, generate additional income and find efficiencies within their businesses, some are turning to digital as a tool to achieve these new goals.

We've worked with numerous housing associations of all shapes and sizes over the last 15 years, to help them reach their digital ambitions. From United Welsh to Linc Cymru and Bron Afon, getting digital 'right' has resulted in these organisations achieving a more efficient service delivery; a better, more convenient tenant experience; increased job satisfaction for staff, and savings that can demonstrate value for money. All whilst meeting regulatory requirements.

“

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Ben Black - Bron Afon

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.

## SIX key digital strategy questions to ask your Board

- 01 What will it take to meet our customers' expectations in a digital world?
- 02 Do our business plans reflect the full potential of technology to improve our performance?
- 03 Is our portfolio of technology investments aligned with opportunities and threats?
- 04 Do we have the capabilities required to deliver value from the technologies?
- 05 Who is accountable for digital and how do we hold them to account?
- 06 Are we comfortable with our level of digital risk?

## 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?

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

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

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

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

The digital shift is not only about building a new website, but improving internal operations; creating more effective communication channels with tenants and driving efficiency through closer operational relationships with suppliers and facilities management teams. This all starts with utilising the right digital tools.



# 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-to-date 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.



Communication channels between housing associations and tenants should be easily accessible, simple to use, streamlined, convenient and robust."



## 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.



## 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.

## Did you know...

Over a  
**1/3**

of housing providers have no formal digital inclusion strategy.\*

**0.1-1%**

Most housing providers are spending 0.1-1 percent of their annual turnover on digital inclusion projects.\*

**63%**

of tenants predominantly contacted housing associations through call centres or by phone.\*\*

The cost and complexity of integrating digital inclusion services with existing back-office systems is the most important factor hindering housing providers' digital inclusion activities.\*

Only a  
**1/4**

of tenants are 'fully included' and almost

**50%**

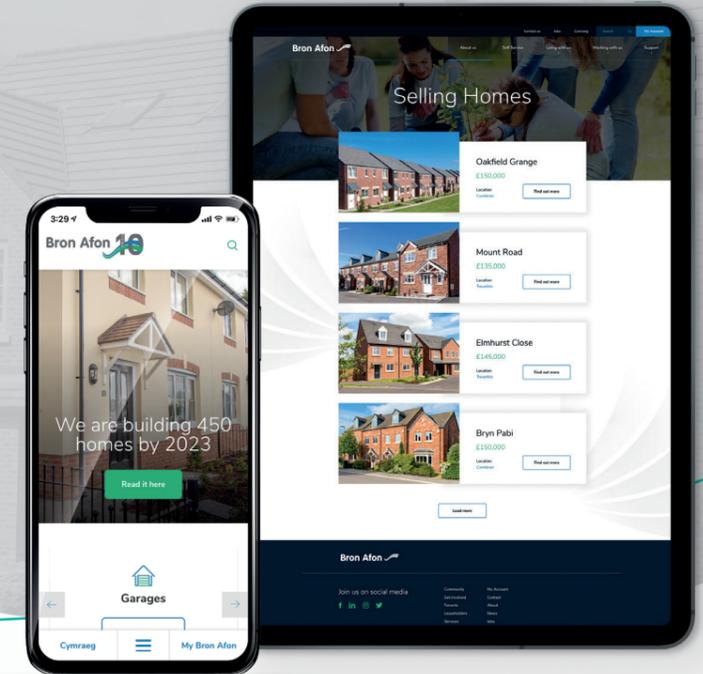
of tenants are not digitally included in any way.\*

**25%**

of housing associations say they use six systems or more to manage their perspective of customers.\*\*



## Case Study: Bron Afon



### Bron Afon

As the largest housing association in Wales, Bron Afon manage over 8,000 homes in Torfaen and are building new homes every year, all maintained to the Welsh Housing Quality Standard.

#### Digital objectives:

- Online customer transactions
- Streamlined customer communications
- CRM integration
- Bespoke form builder

#### The Brief

Bron Afon came to us with a need to completely transform their old website in order to support their growth and development as Wales' largest housing association. A key part of this project was to reduce the number of calls to the customer services team. The team were previously experiencing over 9000 calls per month from tenants and prospects which led to a significant need to streamline their customer services strategy into a digital process.

#### The Solution

We understood that Bron Afon had a number of objectives that they wanted to achieve with their new site such as; a more efficient customer service experience, as well as the need for tenants to easily access services to pay rent, bills and keep track of their accounts easily and quickly. Our web designers and developers, along with our experts in user experience worked to create a personalised

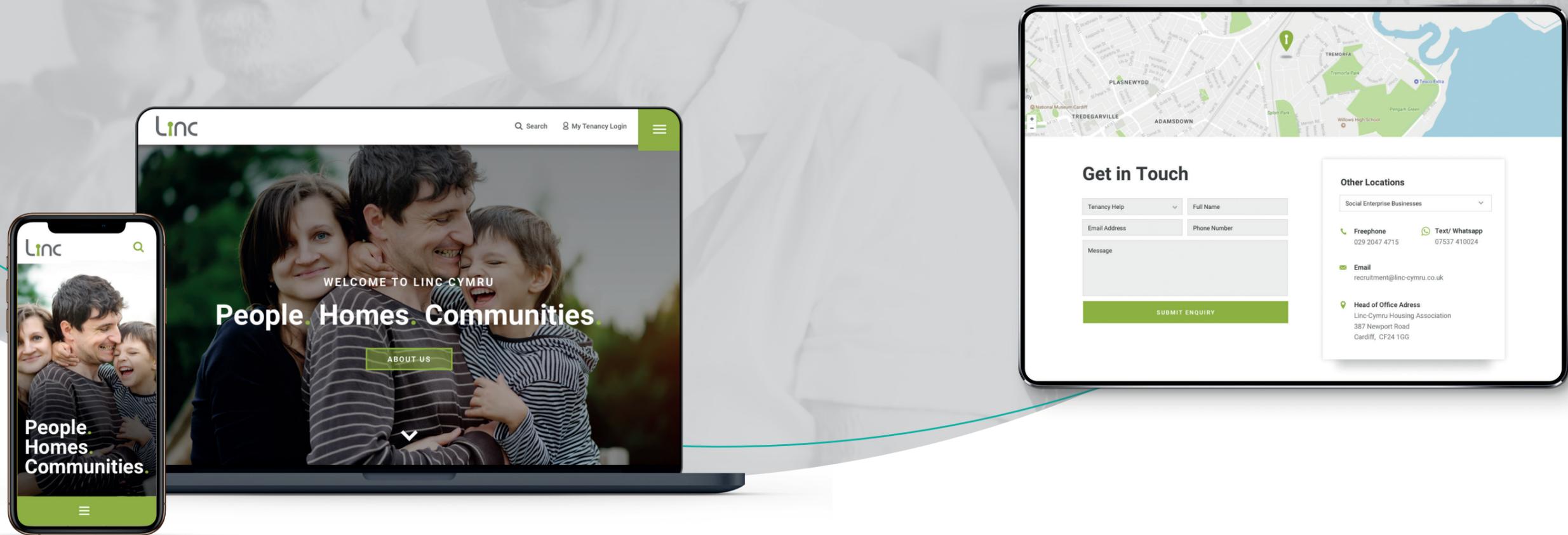
website with dedicated navigation options, as well as ensuring that services and information could be easily accessed by the users.

What really sets this project apart from others is the full form builder that has been developed to assist Bron Afon with their customer services process allowing for a better user experience. The form builder enables Bron Afon to create their own bespoke forms to send to anyone, such as renting a garage or reporting environmental issues affecting the local area. We also developed a tenant account link leading to an external site, as well as a fully integrated web chat linked to their CRM allowing for an enhanced customer service experience.

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## Case Study: 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.

### Digital objectives:

- Improving brand image
- Optimising UI and UX
- Online customer transactions
- Integrated careers RSS feed

### The Brief

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

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.

#### • Customer Experience

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

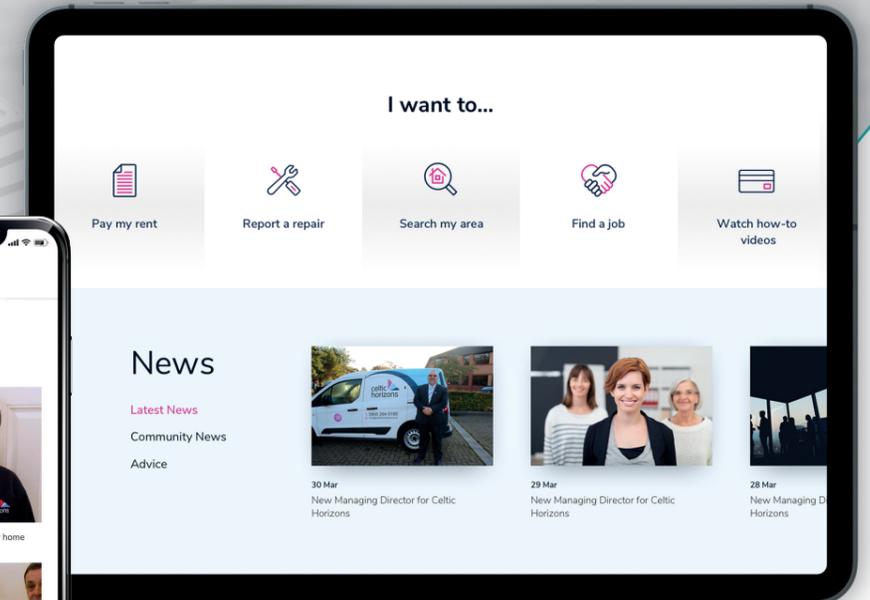
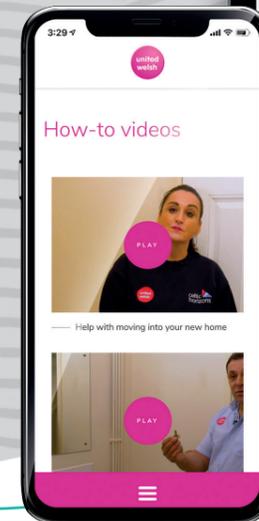
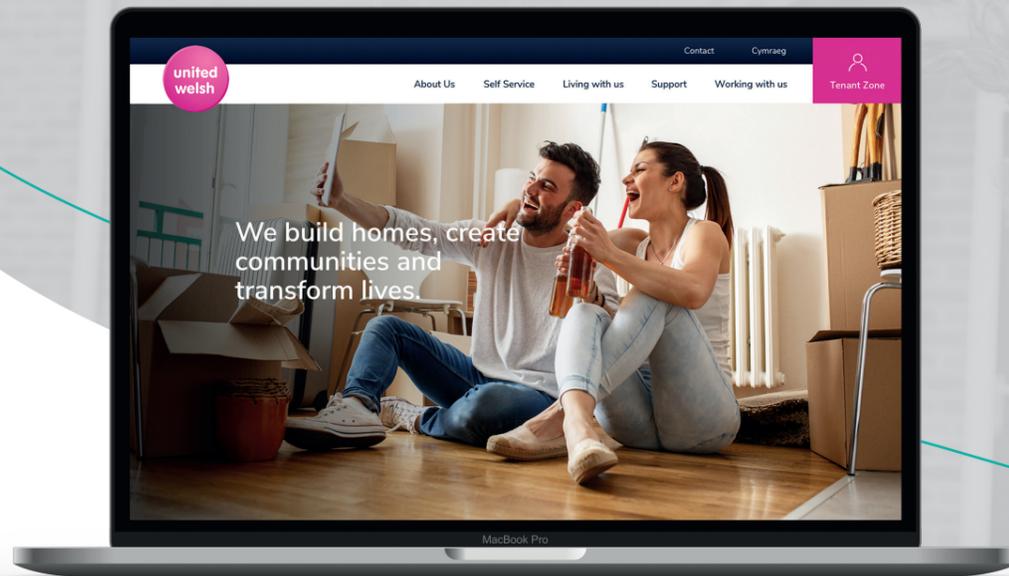
In order to tick all the boxes for Linc, we decided to build an Umbraco multisite. This would allow them to access both the Linc Cymru and Barrack Lane websites via the same Umbraco login, saving them precious business time.

We used Umbraco Forms to help improve Linc's online services by giving their team the power to create and manage bespoke forms. This enabled them to generate unique contact forms at the bottom of each landing page, which send information to the most relevant member of staff and take users to a unique 'Thank you' page linked to a unique Google Analytics tracking code.

As part of the project, we also completed a number of integrations, including a Careers Feed which uses an external RSS feed of jobs generated by Linc's existing system, as well as a Cisco Web Chat which feeds into their internal CRM.

Since the launch, Linc have noted substantial cost and time savings thanks to the improvements to their online services. The updated digital offering enabled the housing association to attract more quality suppliers and contractors, successfully promote the benefits of working at Linc and seize more opportunities for growth.

## Case Study: United Welsh



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

### Digital objectives:

- Responsive website with user friendly CMS
- Streamlined customer communications
- Online customer reporting portal
- Postcode finder
- Bilingual

### The Brief

When United Welsh approached Spindogs the award-winning housing association were looking for an agency to create a responsive website that could be easily accessed across mobile and tablets, as well as a website that was flexible, easy to navigate and provided information to users quickly and easily.

In addition to improving the functionality of the CMS, United Welsh were looking for a website that was bilingual, could be easily updated by staff across the organisation and allowed their customers to communicate with them effectively.

### The Solution

The first step was for our experts in user experience to conduct a discovery phase to enable us to gain a deeper understanding of the main website goals. This involved conducting a series of workshops with tenants to find out what they needed from the new website. We also conducted a series of internal workshops with the United Welsh team to determine what functionality would add flexibility and efficiency to the site.

United Welsh wanted a website that would easily work in conjunction with their social media channels, as well as providing advice and support to their users, while reducing calls to the customer service team. Previously the navigation of the site was outdated and lacked flexibility. Our team worked with United Welsh to restructure the site to develop a flexible WordPress website with easy to navigate modules that enhanced the user experience.

Our team of talented developers built bespoke modules and a custom form builder allowing their users to report problems and issues via an online system, as well as a postcode finder for local users to find relevant information quickly and easily.

As an agency, we've worked with a portfolio of housing associations but our work isn't exclusively based in the social housing sector. We have a healthy mix of housing and non-housing clients helping inform and improve what we do in the housing sector, and vice versa.

We have the digital knowledge to create and build bespoke websites and intuitive portals across a range of CMS's, that deliver great results. Our dedicated online marketing team also work with our clients post launch to encourage and develop service promotion strategies.

## About Spindogs

We are a full-service digital agency helping organisations with marketing both online and offline. We love delivering great website design & development, marketing and brand solutions for our clients, so whether you're looking to drive more value from your digital marketing budget or bring your

business to life with a visually stunning website, we have the full package to take your online presence to the next level. That's how we've built successful, results-driven relationships with clients for over 15 years.

### Websites

- > Web Design & Development
- > eCommerce
- > Multiple CMS platforms including WordPress, Umbraco and Kentico
- > Intranets & Extranets

### Marketing

- > Outsourced Digital Marketing
- > SEO
- > PPC
- > Social Media Advertising
- > Analytics
- > Conversion Rate Optimisation
- > Email Marketing
- > Training & Workshops
- > Content Creation

### Creative

- > Brand Consultancy
- > Logo Design
- > Graphic Design
- > UX
- > Website Design
- > Print
- > Branding



## Get in touch

To learn more about partnering with Spindogs for your next project, get in touch with our Business Development team:

**E: [info@spindogs.com](mailto:info@spindogs.com) | T: 02920 480 720**

The image features a light gray background with a large, thin teal circle that is partially cut off at the top and right edges. In the bottom-left corner, there is a solid teal shape, also partially cut off, which contains the word "spindoogs" in white lowercase letters. The overall design is minimalist and modern.

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