Disruptive Innovators Network

Be more DIN'ish, PIN'ish - or FINN'ish - the results might be the same!

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Many housing associations are facing the most challenging agenda in their histories.

To become genuinely 'customer led' by working with residents to build more (and more suitable) homes in a better sector, while also dealing with building safety, changing regulation, Net Zero targets and an increasingly uncertain economic environment. None of this can be achieved without better use of digital technology and data to reinvent old and broken business models – it's just a fact.

Making sense of Proptech in social housing

I attended the recent Property Innovation Network (PIN) event 'Making sense of Proptech in social housing'. A procession of impressive speakers made for a great day. I won't name anyone in particular because they were all really good (quite different but all genuinely inspirational on their chosen topics). For me, the thing about these events is that they provide answers to many of the questions that the housing sector is grappling with – just like that! That sounds glib but taking the time away to listen to different perspectives for a day can open your eyes and achieve more than discussing the same issue internally for months or even years! We covered a lot of ground – with stories from VC investors to Microsoft to housing practitioners. We saw frameworks for Building Information Modelling (BIM), heard how digital twins are really a 'data-play' rather than a sexy 3-D model in the marketing suite. When talking about the Internet of Things (IOT) we could see the obvious advantages in managing and maintaining our housing stock but also pondered why this relatively old technology is not in mainstream use in the housing sector in the UK – too many scars from inadequate pilots...? We also saw great work being done in government and UKRI to modernise construction and to tackle the Net Zero retrofit challenge.

I also attended a recent event to promote Finnish technology companies in the UK. Looking at 'the digital workplace', five Proptech companies - all born out of the demise of Nokia's mobile phone business in 2014 when thousands of Finnish engineers found themselves unemployed - presented very narrow tech solutions (digital twin, indoor air quality measuring, connectivity and indoor positioning) which, when combined, offered hundreds of use-case solutions to improve well-being and productivity in the workplace.

Just as interesting as the technology is the culture of business collaboration in Finland which seems to be the norm.

Closer to home at Notting Hill Genesis, we have built our own Cloud-based platform - WorkWise - to modernise and improve our housing management services. WorkWise allows us to leverage Proptech products such as the Plentific SaaS platform (to improve our delivery of day-to-day repairs cross our 66,000 homes) and to work with Microsoft to deploy their technology (e.g. to deploy IOT sensors to alert us to leaks and temperature issues in large developments).

A win-win for social housing

Proptech offers some great readymade solutions to address the housing sector's big problems. Solutions that borrow from other sectors and plug and play with our Cloud infrastructure providers (Microsoft, Amazon, Google). As I said earlier, the range of Proptech solutions available can provide answers to big questions but it still feels like we are a hesitant sector when it comes to embracing technology to really change how we work. Housing associations are doing important work, in a complex, risky environment and right now the challenges seem a bit all-consuming but we have to get executive teams and boards to find the time and space to explore new ways of solving problems (Proptech being one example). Just as a closing thought - it wouldn't be right if I didn't mention it - we also need to collaborate more to solve common problems. It's 'win-win' - we all know it but again we are a hesitant lot. We could definitely learn a thing or two from the approach to collaboration in the world's happiest country (Finland, World Happiness Report 2021)!

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