The Role of Technology in Combating Loneliness and Social Isolation:

A Guide for Housing Providers
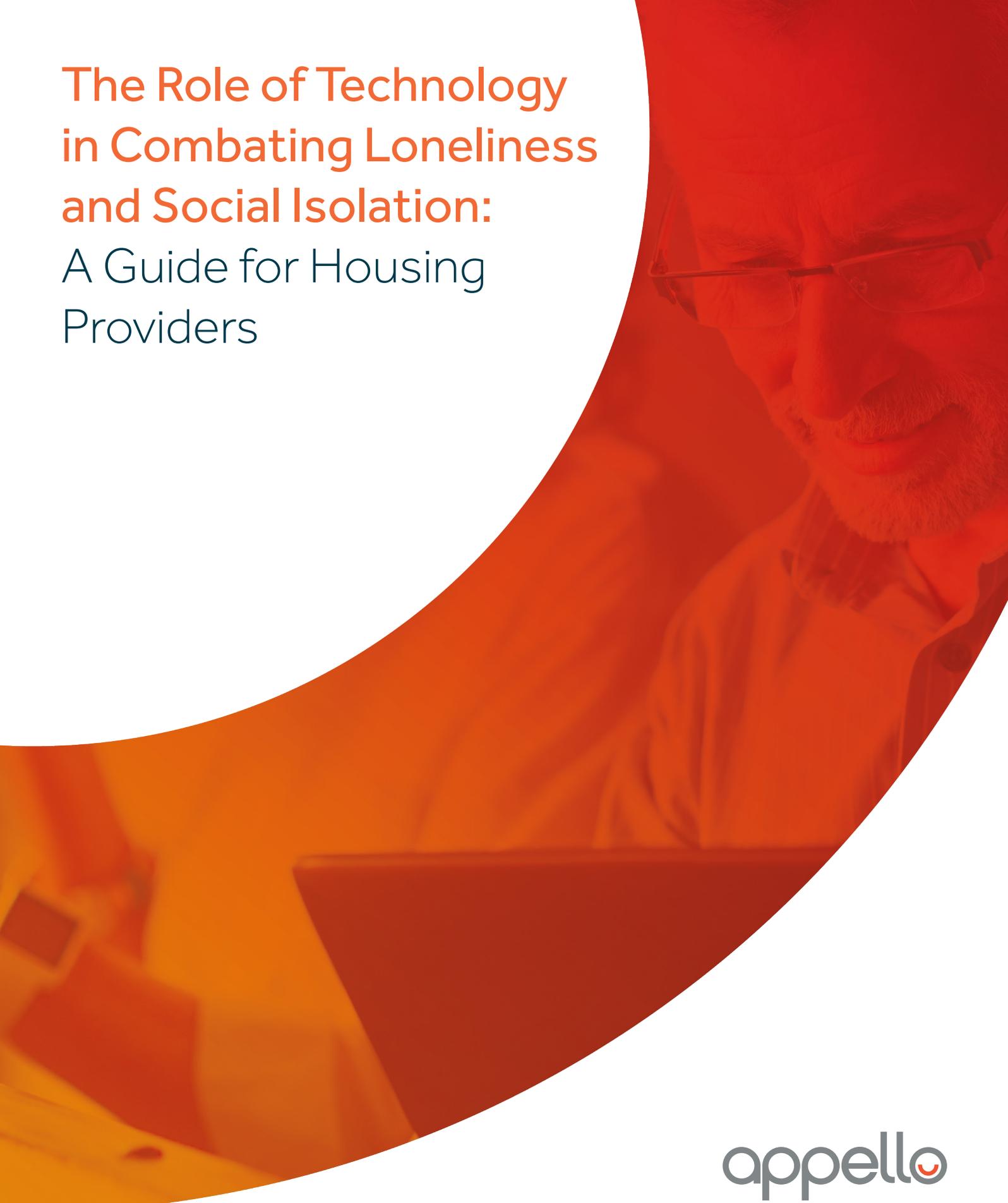
appello

FOREWORD

Social isolation and loneliness are big national issues. While loneliness affects people of all ages, it is particularly prevalent among older people as it is this age group that is most likely to be physically challenged and therefore less able to leave their homes or socialise freely.

For this demographic, feeling disconnected and isolated can often be compounded by separation from family and community when they move into supported housing, or when they experience difficult life events such as the loss of a spouse.

Unfortunately, loneliness and social isolation is having a knock-on effect on physical and mental health, which in turn puts additional pressure on already overstretched health and social care services. And, while the ideal is to have older people live independently in their own homes, we know that this is not always possible and many require more assisted living.

As such, housing providers are often at the frontline of dealing with people feeling lonely or socially isolated, and so they are in a unique position to be able to help. While not a substitute for human interaction, we also know that technology has huge potential to help alleviate some of these issues, offering a lifeline to older people in their homes and supporting caregivers to fulfil their roles more efficiently and effectively.

We believe that with the right support, housing providers are well placed to offer communication technologies that can help connect older people, particularly those at risk of becoming detached from family and friends when they move into supported housing.

At Appello, our mission is to raise awareness of the life enhancing potential of digital technologies amongst housing and care providers. We hope you will join us in working to empower older people to live happier, healthier lives through greater adoption, and use, of these technologies to combat loneliness and social isolation in later life.

BACKGROUND

In November 2017, we surveyed almost 200 older people (aged 75+) across the UK, in collaboration with digital and social inclusion charity, Good Things Foundation, to better understand this demographics' lifestyle, social interactions and attitudes towards communications technology.

These insights not only help to inform our own products and solutions roadmap and innovations, but also enable us to make recommendations to housing providers on how and what technology can be adopted to better support older people in order to help them lead happier, healthier lives.

The main results of this survey are presented in this guide together with recommendations on how housing providers can play a role in alleviating loneliness and social isolation among older people. But first let's look at the external factors:

An ageing population

Exploring ways to address loneliness and social isolation among older people is timely given the UK's ageing population. According to data compiled by Age UK, by 2040 nearly one in four people in the UK (24.2%) will be aged 65 or over; the population of over 75s is projected to double in the next 30 years; and nearly one in five people currently in the UK will live to see their 100th birthday.

Improving life expectancy of people in the UK presents us with huge challenges and opportunities, not least for supported housing providers. With an ageing population, there are pressing questions about how we as a society support those in later life through appropriate housing and technology.

Loneliness and social isolation defined

Loneliness is a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want (Perlman and Peplau, 1981).

Social isolation is an objective state whereby the number of contacts a person has can be counted. One way of describing this distinction is that you can be lonely in a crowded room, but you will not be socially isolated. (Campaign to End Loneliness)

Loneliness and isolation are growing concerns

There is growing concern that loneliness could be the next biggest public health crisis. To help address this, in January 2018, Theresa May unveiled new plans to tackle loneliness and social isolation as part of an initiative established by the late Labour MP Jo Cox.

According to Age UK, 3.6 million older people in the UK live alone, of whom over 2 million are aged 75 and over. With so many people living alone, there is significant risk of increased loneliness and/or social isolation.

For older people in particular, loneliness can define their lives and have a significant impact on their wellbeing.

The link between physical and mental health

Extensive evidence shows that having good quality relationships can help us to live longer and happier lives, with fewer physical and mental health problems. Having close, positive relationships can give us a purpose and sense of belonging, according to the Mental Health Foundation.

Conversely, people living without close friends and family are more likely to suffer significant health complications. Loneliness and social isolation are harmful to our health, according to research compiled by the Campaign to End Loneliness:

- Loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26% (Holt-Lunstad, 2015)

- A lack of social connections is as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad, 2015)

- Lonely individuals are also at higher risk of the onset of disability (Lund et al, 2010)

- Loneliness puts individuals at greater risk of cognitive decline (James et al, 2011)

- Social networks and friendships not only have an impact on reducing the risk of mortality or developing certain diseases, but they also help individuals to recover when they do fall ill (Marmot, 2010).

- Lonely individuals are more likely to visit their GP, have higher use of medication, higher incidence of falls and increased risk factors for long term care (Cohen, 2006)

Overstretched health and social care

We have seen how feelings of loneliness and social isolation can have a negative knock-on effect on physical and mental health, which leads to increased reliance and pressures upon health and social care services, as highlighted by the Social Care Institute for Excellence report.

With a projected shortfall in the social care fund of £2.6 billion by 2020, and around £19 billion in the NHS by 2030 in the current system, even without taking into consideration the needs of an ageing society, there is clearly work to be done to tackle issues that add unnecessary pressure. Supported housing providers are in a unique position to help.

Of the 18.7 million adults admitted to hospital last year, around 7.6 million (41%) were aged over 65. Between 2004-05 and 2014-15 the number of hospital admissions of people aged 60 to 74 and over 75 grew by 51.1% and 58.4% respectively. With health and social care already struggling to meet demand, housing and technology that supports older people and helps them maintain their independence is key to easing some of this burden.

This is further compounded when you consider data compiled by Age UK that suggests that poor housing for older people costs the NHS at least £634m every year.

Technology assisting care for older people

We're already starting to see a proliferation of technologies to support older people to continue living independently into older age, with even greater innovations in this area on the horizon.

These technologies range from wearables such as Fitbits and GPS-enabled personal devices to smart and networked home devices and the development of the Internet of Things (IoT) to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics.

We're seeing home appliances networked; sensors on taps and toilets to monitor usage; "smart floors" that can detect if a person has fallen; ovens that turn themselves off if they detect burning food; mobility and personal care devices such as a GPS-enabled intelligent walking stick that uses AI to learn its owners' regular movements; smart hearing aids that can be controlled via a smartphone and connected with a smart smoke alarm or doorbell, to name just a few examples.

All of these technologies have huge potential to change the lives of older adults with regard to their safety and wellbeing. But, today, the market for these technologies is not mature. In most cases these technologies are in their infancy, running as pilots only, or are prohibitively expensive for wide adoption by housing providers.

So, what technologies are on the market right now that are affordable, suitable for older people to use in supported housing, and satisfy an identifiable need? We'll come on to look at that below.
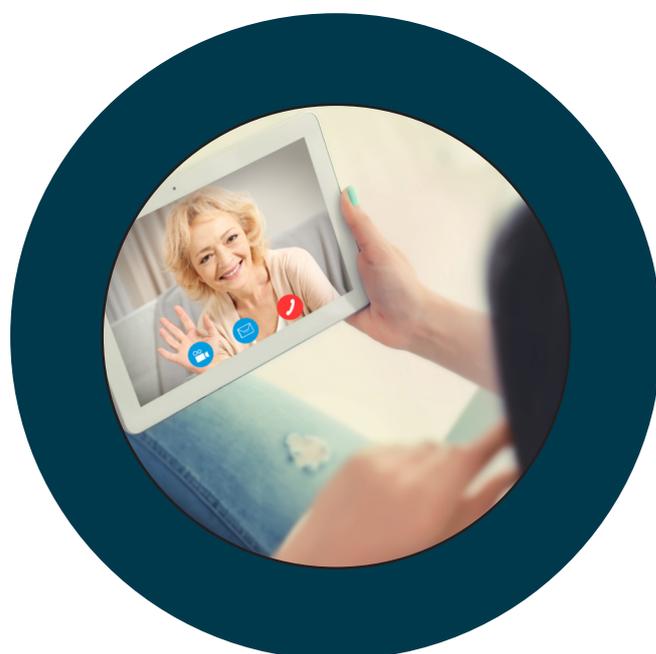
"Technology has the power to link people to signposting and wider community activities beyond existing friends and families and can be used for circles of support, chat forums, and even community channels which enable people to re-connect with their communities and build new friendships. Many charities and organisations provide telephone befriending and call groups which can also build those wider social connections."

Janet Morrison, Chair, Campaign to End Loneliness

RESEARCH: KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOUSING PROVIDERS

Loneliness and social isolation – the scale of the problem

The Appello study revealed that 7% of people aged over 75 don't see a single person in an average week; and 7% don't speak to anyone in an average week. More than a quarter see two or less people in a week; and 45% speak to two or less people in a week.

These findings support Age UK statistics that suggest that 1.7%

45%

SPEAK TO TWO OR LESS PEOPLE IN A WEEK

or 200,000 older people (65 and over) in Great Britain have not had a conversation with friends or family for a month and 3.1% or 360,000 have not had a conversation with friends or family for over a week.

Given the above, it is not surprising that a third of over 75 year olds we surveyed admit to feeling lonely, and almost a third feel socially isolated "occasionally" or "often". Age UK statistics suggest that in Great Britain alone 8.5% or 975,000 of older people (65 and over) are often or always feel lonely.

While the assumption may be that loneliness is exclusive to older people in their own homes, we call upon housing providers to recognise that this affects residents in supported housing too.

Moving into supported housing can help alleviate the issue of social isolation, but we know that loneliness can still be prevalent amongst older people. For many, leaving their own homes, or a family home, and moving into unfamiliar accommodation can be unsettling.

A Finnish report found that loneliness is prevalent among residents in nursing homes and assisted living facilities too - 9% felt lonely often or always and more than a quarter (26%) are sometimes lonely.

We recommend housing providers talk to their own residents to understand the scale of the problem within their own properties. To tackle and find the right solution, you must first understand the scale of the problem when it comes to loneliness and social isolation. Your residents may have their own suggestions when it comes to tackling these issues.

Barriers to older people socialising more

The biggest barrier to socialising more is mobility, cited by 57% of those we surveyed. According to Age UK compiled data, 18% of adults aged 60 to 69 and 38% of adults aged over 70 have a mobility difficulty. The second biggest barrier is ill health, indicated by one in three people aged over 75. In fact, an estimated 4 million older people in the UK (36% of people aged 65 to 74 and 47% of those aged over 75) have a limiting longstanding illness, according to Age UK.

Our survey found that distance or travel is a concern for more than a quarter of older people when it comes to socialising more.

Highlighting a willingness to embrace technology, as well as acknowledging a barrier, 13% of those surveyed stated that lack of access to communications technology prevents them from interacting more. For housing providers, there is huge potential to harness the power of communications technology to break down barriers for older people – we will touch more on that below.

56%

AGREE THAT "TECHNOLOGY CAN AID COMMUNICATION AND HELP CLOSE THE PHYSICAL GAP BETWEEN DISTANT FAMILY AND FRIENDS"

Connecting the unconnected

Our study challenges some common misconceptions around older people's willingness to embrace technology. The study found that older people are willing to embrace digital technologies provided they are easy to use and can improve their wellbeing.

There is agreement that technology can aid communication, and lack of access to it is even acknowledged as a barrier (as above): 56% said they welcome new technology if it improves their quality of life; over half (56%) agree that "technology can aid communication and help close the physical gap between distant family and friends". And a third of older people said they find the use of technology to communicate appealing.

Interestingly, personal safety alarms – offered by many housing providers today – are the second most favoured method of social interaction (cited by 33% of survey respondents). However, a landline remains the most popular form of communication for this age group (cited by 93% of survey respondents). Almost a third of those surveyed use a laptop or computer, 31% use a mobile or smart phone, 15% use a tablet and 11% use social media to communicate.

When it comes to personal safety alarms in their traditional analogue form, they are of no value as a two-way communication tool and are used primarily as a point of contact with a carer or monitoring centre in an emergency situation rather than to socialise.

33%

PERSONAL SAFETY ALARMS – OFFERED BY MANY HOUSING PROVIDERS TODAY – ARE THE SECOND MOST FAVOURED METHOD OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

However, the fact that they already feature as a popular means of communication highlights the opportunity for housing providers to further add value simply by upgrading existing analogue technology that residents are already familiar and comfortable with to digital. This enables residents to benefit from a host of additional services from video calling and messaging to controlling the lights and heating.

Devices such as mobile phones, smartphones and tablets, as well as the apps and services they support, are now so prominent a feature of modern society that it's easy to overlook or take for granted the opportunities they present older people for enabling and maintaining social connections – but we shouldn't underestimate the potential.

We know that there are various technologies in the market today or on the horizon to improve the care of older people, but we believe the answer lies in making these mature communication technologies readily available to older people via housing providers. They are simple and cost effective to introduce, mutually beneficial for residents and carers, and can have an immediate positive impact on the health and happiness, and ultimately, wellbeing, of older people.

Appetite for technology increasing – but more to be done

While older people are becoming increasingly tech-savvy, there is still work to be done to get them switched on to communications technology; our study found that a third of older people find the use of technology to communicate appealing, but this means that two thirds don't. Why?

There are still some barriers to the adoption of technology among older people; the study found a strong link between older people who find technology unappealing, and a lack of understanding or difficulty using it, as well as concerns about how accessible it is to them. Two in three older people admit they don't understand technology or know how to use it, over half (55%) state that it's the cost of technology that prevents them using it and two fifths of older people cited health or medical conditions (i.e. hearing or visual impairment) as factors inhibiting their use of technology.

This suggests that there is clearly work to be done to demonstrate that the benefits outweigh the challenges. And that, with the right support and guidance, any perceived hurdles can be overcome. Certainly, accessibility and cost concerns are barriers that can be broken down by housing providers.

We urge housing providers to look at examples of how this technology has been used in other developments and the way in which it is improving residents' lives. And, crucially, to share this information with their residents.

Once in place, for the technology to be fully embraced and used to full advantage, we recommend that housing providers offer guidance or training for both staff and residents, as well as ongoing support.

64%

OF OLDER PEOPLE AGREED THAT SEEING THE FACE OF THE PERSON THEY ARE TALKING TO IMPROVES THE CONVERSATION
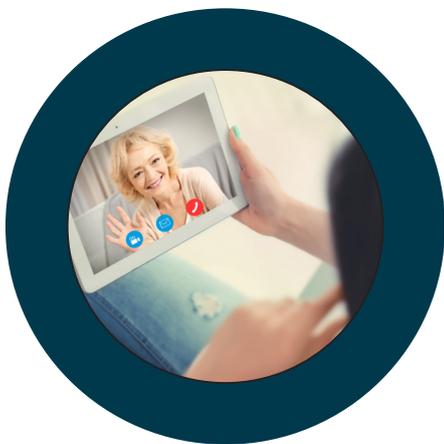
The untapped potential of video

Of those surveyed that said they find technology "unappealing" for communication, the majority (94%) indicated that this is because they prefer face to face communication; this suggests a lack of awareness for the benefits of video calling technology.

Although 64% of older people agreed that seeing the face of the person they are talking to (as opposed to just hearing them) improves the conversation, we know that mobility and travel or distance remain factors preventing this type of interaction (as above). We also know that social isolation is more prevalent when mobility problems lead to a lack of face-to-face contact.

However, 83% of over 75 year olds said they "never" use video calling such as Skype , FaceTime or similar capabilities that can be installed into apartments. At Appello, we believe that these technologies represent the most underutilised, yet readily available, easy to implement and affordable, method of communication.

Perhaps one of the best ways to demonstrate value to housing providers and residents is to share stories of how the technology has improved lives already. We know that for those already utilising video technology in supported housing, it has had a really positive impact.

As one Housing & Care 21 resident recently told us: "I struggle to get up the stairs to see my friend and I'm hard of hearing, but now I can just video call her to check she is ok and arrange to meet up". This sentiment is echoed by a comment from a housing manager: "When we are having a cup of tea in the communal lounge, we video call everyone's apartments, it's great to see so many new faces join us".

Case Study: Housing & Care 21

Housing & Care 21, a leading national provider of Retirement Housing and Extra Care services for older people, is setting new standards in supported housing with the expansion of digital care services in 100 of its developments in the UK. It has partnered with Appello to design and develop a modern tablet that replaces the traditional alarm units.

This joint innovation brings many advantages to the digital system, including the improvement of social inclusion with video enabled room-to-room calling, better security and a less intrusive lifestyle monitoring of residents.

Housing & Care 21 has been particularly pleased with how these benefits contribute towards its goal of providing a high-quality living experience for residents, with more than half of those surveyed saying they felt their wellbeing had improved as a result of the installation of Smart Living Solutions. ▶
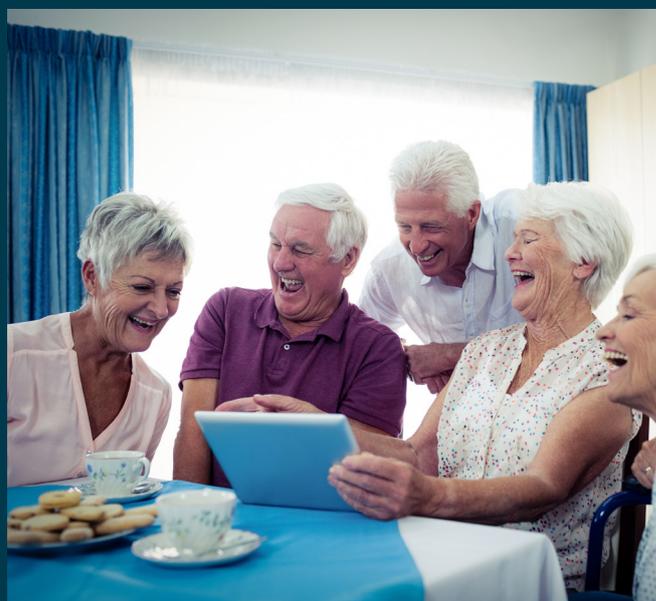
Tony Tench, Chief Operating Officer at Housing & Care 21, says, "Currently, a Retirement Housing environment can seem quite intrusive, especially as part of our service typically includes contacting residents to make sure they are okay. A digital system will allow us to provide a lifestyle monitoring arrangement where people's normal routines are understood and supported discreetly, with an absent-until-needed service. Resident feedback to the digital services has already been very positive with 83% of residents agreeing that communicating with the Court Manager via video is less obtrusive.

78 percent of residents strongly agree or agree that communicating with the Court Manager via video is less obtrusive.

2/3 of residents agree or strongly agree that the system is easy to use.

90 percent of residents feel safer being able to see who is entering their property.

half of residents feel that video has increased interactions amongst residents.

THE BENEFITS OF VIDEO- IN SUPPORTED HOUSING

- Seeing the person you are talking to as well as hearing them improves the conversation - 64% of older people we surveyed agreed.

- Video enables people who are less mobile to see people that they might not otherwise see in person. With mobility presenting the biggest barrier to socialising more (57%), video offers the best next alternative. People within a community, who find it difficult to always be physically present, can more easily keep in touch with friends, family and neighbours. 51% of Housing & Care 21 residents feel that video has increased interactions amongst residents.

- Video enables carers/supported housing employees to visually check the wellbeing of an individual via room2room calls across a residential development. Staff can also maintain visual contact with residents without being overly intrusive. Residents are also able to video call onsite staff. Enabling two-way interaction between resident and carer is mutually beneficial for housing providers: older people can be responded to more quickly and feel comforted knowing there is a quick and easy way to call for help when they need it; and staff can monitor people within their care without having to always be physically present.

- Video enables independence - not all residents will feel lonely or social isolated all the time – those feelings may change day-to-day. By utilising video technology, residents have greater control with housing providers delivering an absent until needed service. 78% of Housing & Care 21 residents strongly agree or agree that communicating with the Court Manager via video is less obtrusive.

- As well as video calling each other and their carers, residents can see who is entering the property, set intruder alarms and place emergency calls to a monitoring centre

- Video supports people with hearing difficulties

CONCLUSION/ NEXT STEPS

Housing providers are uniquely placed to positively impact the wellbeing, as well as the safety, of their residents. And, the good news is that there are now proven digital technologies available that combine and integrate both. We've seen that digital technology in supported housing can help connect older people at risk of becoming detached from family and friends. It can dramatically improve communication between onsite staff and residents, as the Housing & Care 21 case study, survey results and testimonials highlight.

For most housing providers, this does not involve a complete rethink of solutions already in place but rather, it is a case of upgrading or improving upon monitoring technology already installed. As such, we recommend that housing providers invest in technology that delivers the functionality associated with traditional monitoring such as pendant alarms for assistance and door answering; but also, crucially, enables residents to benefit from face-to-face contact via video calls with friends, neighbours/other residents and caregivers and across their development.

In the future, we believe that smart devices that support mobility, social inclusion and independence in supported housing, will become as indispensable as inbuilt appliances and personal alarms are today. Housing providers that embrace this technology are primed to be at the forefront of a move to ensure multiple generations of older people can live happy, healthy, engaged and independent lives for as long as possible.

Helen Milner, Chief Executive Officer at Good Things Foundation

"Digital technology has a huge potential to connect people and can help to reduce loneliness and improve the quality of life for older people. There is a clear correlation between digital exclusion and social exclusion, and people who don't have digital skills and confidence are for more likely to face other social exclusions as well. This means that helping people to access technology is about far more than just connecting them to friends and family, but helping them to access the opportunities that many of us take for granted.

There are a number of complex barriers that stop people from getting the full benefit from technology, including concerns about safety, and not feeling the internet is relevant for them. There are 5,000 Online Centres across the UK offering help so people can get to grips with technology in their local community, supported by friendly staff and volunteers. We'd encourage anyone looking to learn more about digital, or support their family members to do so, to find their local centre."

Janet Morrison, Chair, Campaign to End Loneliness

"We've seen that older people often demonstrate worrying levels of loneliness and isolation.

Many experts believe that social interaction is limited primarily because of barriers created by physical disability and/or cognitive impairment among residents in supported housing – we know that these are certainly factors. However, we should acknowledge that additional barriers are created by risk adverse housing providers and/ or a failure to recognise the importance of maintaining social connections for older people.

The impact of technology on loneliness for older people has been hotly disputed, with some arguing that the increasing use of technology has exacerbated the exclusion of older people, while others pointing to the vital role that technology can play in enabling older people to maintain and develop their social connections.

It is true that some technologies are currently inaccessible and unpalatable to older people, others – such as the telephone – are now commonly accepted and accessible to older people. These accessible technologies could play a particularly important role in supporting the delivery of services in supported housing and over time, as new cohorts age, the range of commonly accepted and accessible technologies may widen, opening up new possibilities for technology-based solutions to tackle loneliness.

We've seen technology serve as both an enabler of social connection and in making the provision of support more cost effective and easy to deliver."

About Appello

Appello is committed to widening the debate about digital health, and has led the way in gathering industry leaders to talk and debate the issues in a series of roundtable events.

We have 30 years' experience providing technology-enabled care and life safety services that help housing, health and social care organisations to deliver better outcomes — ones that improve the lives of their customers, patients and residents.

We harness technology innovation to support the different aspects of integration in care provision and leverage digital technologies to create smarter homes to deliver life-improving health, inclusion and support. At the heart of our operations is the UK's leading digital care services centre, which is supporting the health, safety and security of 170,000 people throughout the UK.

Resouces

Appello Social Isolation and Loneliness Customer Survey 2017

Age UK: Later Life in the United Kingdom, December 2017

Campaign to End Loneliness

Mental Health Foundation: Relationships in the 21st century

The Journal of Nursing Home Research: Loneliness in Nursing Homes and Assisted Living Facilities: Prevalence, Associated Factors and Prognosis

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APPELLO AT A GLANCE

Over 29 years experience in life safety, out of hours and technology enabled care service provision.

Markets span social and private housing, local authorities, NHS, care providers, charities and consumers.

We support over 400,000 individuals across the UK.

Partnerships with 3 of the 4* largest housing associations in the UK.

Expertise in consulting, system design and integration with a deep knowledge of progressive technology.

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* Source Focal Research 2015 :Top 4 Housing Associations based on stock - Sanctuary, L & Q, Circle Housing Group, The Guinness Partnership.