INNOVATION IN HOUSING SERVICES
CASE STUDIES
Lessons from examples of innovative practice

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INNOVATION IN HOUSING SERVICES
CASE STUDIES
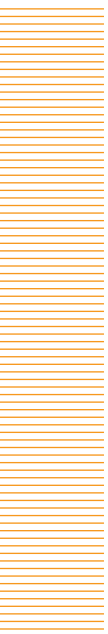## Lessons from examples of innovative practice

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INTRODUCTION

From *Our Public Service* (2017) to *Making Innovation Real* (2020), it is clear that driving higher levels of innovation across the public service is a policy priority. The latter strategy defines innovation in the public service as '*the creation of a new, viable offering that adds value*' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2020: p. 6). Efforts to innovate are intended to improve the efficiency of processes, and to enhance the quality of public services and how they are delivered to citizens.

Local authorities in Ireland deliver over 1,000 services. Introducing greater levels of innovation with regard to how public services are planned, organised and delivered has been a longstanding commitment of local government. Of course, innovation has to be a continuous process to help effectively meet changing customer expectations and needs.

The Covid-19 pandemic has driven a wave of innovation as many local authorities have redoubled their efforts to adapt and improve services. These changes have helped achieve a greater level of operational efficiency, while enhancing the accessibility of services for the public (see Local Government Management Agency (2020) for an overview).

Along with the pandemic, Ireland's continuing housing crisis has placed significant demands on local authorities. In this context, many busy Housing Departments have introduced innovative changes into how they plan, organise and deliver services. The Institute of Public Administration (IPA) and the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) have worked collaboratively on a project to bring some of these changes to light and disseminate the findings across local government. The LGMA report for this project can be found here: https://www.lgma.ie/en/publications/local-authority-sector-reports/local-authority-housing-innovation-case-studies.pdf

The LGMA, on behalf of the County and City Management Association's Housing, Building and Land Use Committee, undertook a survey of local authorities in June and July 2021 to identify examples of innovation and to share learnings across the sector.

For the purposes of this research, innovation was defined as *doing things differently to produce positive results or learnings in the workplace.*

The survey aimed to capture innovation in its many different forms. These included changes to administrative processes, new approaches to the provision of services, advice or guidance, and the adoption of new technologies. As will be illustrated, an innovation can produce small or incremental improvements, or it can have a more significant impact. Learnings were also extracted from innovations that did not realise their initial objectives. Examples with unintended consequences (either positive or negative) or a failure or inability to complete a project can provide useful insights for others in the sector.

Several innovations implemented by council Housing Departments, and identified from the survey responses, are the focus of this research paper. These are examples of new or amended practices, adopted as part of the day-to-day work of the Housing Departments concerned. They display varying levels of innovation and impact. Each example is explored in terms of its development, implementation and outcomes. The aim of these case studies is to examine the challenges, benefits and costs associated with these innovations and highlight practical lessons of relevance to the local government sector.

TERMS OF REFERENCE AND RESEARCH APPROACH

The examples of innovative practice selected to develop as case studies were based on:

- relevance to the overall direction of housing policy
- how innovative they were
- readiness for roll-out
- how transferable they were to other local authorities.

Each case study is based on:

- survey feedback
- a documentary review
- interviews with key local authority personnel involved with the innovations concerned.

STRUCTURE OF THE CASE STUDIES

The format for each case study is broadly similar. Each case study outlines the origins, development and implementation of the innovation. It sets out the background to the innovation and the issue that it sought to address. The steps involved in each project are explored; any challenges encountered during the development and implementation phases are outlined. The benefits arising from the innovative practice and the lessons learned during the process are described. Finally, consideration is given to future plans and transferability to other local authorities.

CASE STUDY 1:
REIMAGINING THE TENANT HANDBOOK
DÚN LAOGHAIRE-RATHDOWN COUNTY COUNCIL

SUMMARY

This case study focuses on the development of a new handbook for tenants of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (DLRCC) accommodation. The revised Tenant Handbook was part of a wider plain English project that the council's Housing Department was working on with the National Adult Literacy Agency's (NALA) Plain English Editing Service. The project sought to change the way in which staff in the Housing Department communicated with their customers. The new Tenant Handbook is divided into standalone documents written according to the principles of plain English and covers key topics relevant to a Council tenancy. This innovative approach to a Tenant Handbook has been seen as a success from a customer service perspective.

1. INTRODUCTION

The specific task that is the subject of this case study is the production of a new version of a Tenant Handbook for local authority tenants. The production of a new handbook was itself part of a programme of measures designed to bring about a culture change in the way in which officials, in this case from DLRCC, communicate with their tenants and others seeking housing services.

In *Our Public Service 2020*, a key action is to '*make services more accessible to all*' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2017: p. 13). The *Programme for Government* promises to introduce a plain language requirement for public service communications (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020: p. 121). In this context, the work by DLRCC to create a highly accessible Tenant Handbook can be viewed as part of a wider move to improve the quality of customer service through the provision of clear information.

2. BACKGROUND

In June 2020, the Housing Department of the local authority entered into a partnership with NALA to introduce changes in the way in which official documentation was designed and written. One in six people in Ireland have a literacy issue. There can be many reasons for this, including, in some cases, a poor school experience, a disability or not having English as one's first language. An initial survey found that a third of DLRCC staff thought that the council's own guidance documents, forms and standard letters were somewhat difficult to understand.

3. THE PROJECT

The aim of the partnership with NALA was to embed changes in the way in which DLRCC communicates with its tenants and others accessing housing services. A number of specific projects were undertaken, including the redesign and rewording of the Tenant Handbook.[1] The broad intention of the new handbook was to make it easier for customers to avail of housing services and to create better awareness among them of their rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, the project sought to reduce the time spent dealing with queries and issues. The production of a new version of the Tenant Handbook, as part of this wider plain English programme, was expected to improve the understanding of what exactly tenants could ask for when submitting a request for a housing service. A secondary benefit was to assist customer service staff in dealing with customer queries by making it easier for them to respond to issues arising without having to refer to the housing section concerned.

Alongside work to reword key documents in plain English, NALA undertook a six-month programme that involved a staff survey, a document audit and the provision of plain English training and resources for staff members. While the work on the publication of the Tenant Handbook has been completed, the overall programme to make official documentation easier to understand continues. Figure 1.1 below shows the phased approach to the Housing Department's plain English programme with NALA.

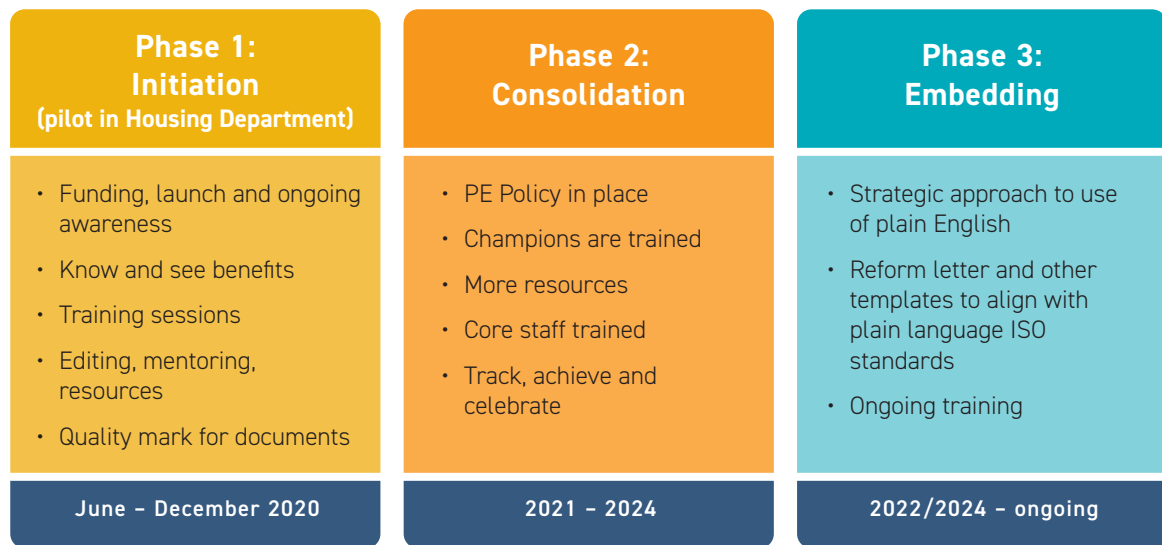| Phase 1: Initiation (pilot in Housing Department)	Phase 2: Consolidation	Phase 3: Embedding
• Funding, launch and ongoing awareness • Know and see benefits • Training sessions • Editing, mentoring, resources • Quality mark for documents	• PE Policy in place • Champions are trained • More resources • Core staff trained • Track, achieve and celebrate	• Strategic approach to use of plain English • Reform letter and other templates to align with plain language ISO standards • Ongoing training
June – December 2020	2021 – 2024	2022/2024 – ongoing

Figure 1.1. Phases of the plain English programme (source: NALA)

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1   In the initial audit of official documentation, the Tenant Handbook came out with the lowest score in terms of ease of understanding.

Key decisions

The starting point was the creation of a special post within the Housing Department to focus on strategic issues, change management and the implementation of new IT systems. This person was not required to deal with operational issues. Without this initial step, supported by management within Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, the project would not have got off the ground.

The original Tenant Handbook was 29 pages long and written in reasonable English but often containing large blocks of text. The first decision was to break it up into more manageable parts so that the tenant could more easily find the information that they were looking for. But it wasn't just about the way that the text was written. Changes were also made to the design of the handbook, with greater use of graphics and checklists.

In terms of the timeframe, DLRCC began working with NALA in June 2020. The work on the Tenant Handbook itself took three to four months, with extensive engagement with the staff involved. The finalised handbook was signed-off in January 2021. The new handbook was introduced over several weeks; copies were sent to all new tenants and key sections were distributed to existing tenants. The handbook was also made available on the DLRCC website. In total 10 booklets were prepared, seven for general tenant use and three relating to Traveller-specific accommodation.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

The basic aim of the new Tenant Handbook is to provide clear information to tenants and prospective tenants in respect of their rights and duties and to outline the services that DLRCC provides as a landlord. The project was also intended to showcase the benefits of developing a culture of writing in plain English.

In producing and distributing the handbook, the following measures were decided:

- Rather than a single large document, the handbook would be broken down into separate documents relating to specific topics.
- The text used in the handbook would be tailored to reflect the differences between standard social housing tenancies and Traveller-specific accommodation tenancies.
- Clear information would be provided to tenants about their obligations and the conditions attaching to the tenancy as well as on the sections within the local authority to contact and what services were available.
- All new tenants would be given a copy of the handbook as part of their pre-tenancy training course. Key sections of the handbook would be sent to existing tenants and the full documentation made available online. All the councillors would receive a communication on the new handbook.

Figures 1.2 to 1.5 at the end of the case study show how the use of plain English text and changes to the design can make things easier to understand.

5. CHALLENGES

Traditionally, somewhat technical and unclear language was used by the Housing Department in its communications with customers. But the handbook initiative wasn't a simple rewording exercise; rather it was a 'reimagining' of the handbook and part of a cultural change in how the Department would communicate with customers going forward. Getting the staff to think differently in terms of how they drafted text in accordance with the plain English principles was a cultural challenge.

Getting some staff to step back from their daily tasks to work on the new handbook was another challenge. The Project Team asked each section within the Housing Department to review and rewrite the part of the handbook relevant to their area of work. However, given their heavy workloads, it was initially difficult for staff to find the time to commit to the process.

To overcome these challenges, the Project Team stressed to their colleagues the importance of the exercise and how a revised handbook written in plain language would improve customer service and productivity within the Housing Department; a better understanding among tenants of their rights and responsibilities would ultimately help reduce the volume of queries on tenancies.

6. EVALUATION AND NEXT STEPS
Benefits

From DLRCC's perspective, the most tangible benefit was a reduction of 15% in the number of maintenance requests logged within six months of the new handbook's launch. This equates to approximately 1,000 requests over a 12-month period. On the narrowest of measures, this involves a saving of 23 working days per year. This was a combination of a reduced number of initial requests and improved knowledge among staff at the DLRCC customer service centre, who had a clearer understanding from reading the handbook, of how to answer queries directly without having to generate an actual maintenance request. Feedback from tenants, staff and councillors on the revised handbook has been positive.

From a customer service perspective, the new Tenant Handbook has improved understanding of the tenancy agreement. For example, the checklist (see Figure 1.5) has made the maintenance process clearer for tenants in terms of submitting an appropriate maintenance request to DLRCC. The maintenance responsibilities of the tenant and the council are very clearly explained in the checklist.

Cost and potential

The cost to implement the project was very reasonable. The budget for the six-month programme with NALA was just over €5,000. Internally, however, the project has been resource-intensive in terms of redrafting the handbook and the staff training that was involved. In total, 30–35 staff were trained in the writing of plain English, 10 of whom meet monthly and act as champions for the programme for the Housing Department as a whole.

Separate booklets were prepared for Traveller-specific accommodation, which were able to address particular concerns. There is the potential to produce further booklets in plain English for apartments and for tenants in receipt of other types of social housing support.

7. LESSONS LEARNED/REFLECTIONS

Be aware of the potential challenges ahead: According to an interviewee, a key lesson is that project leaders should go into it 'with their eyes open' and be aware of the challenges of implementing change in a busy working environment.

Sell the benefits: The process to produce the handbook was time-consuming and involved many staff. To generate greater support for the project within the Housing Department, it was important for staff to understand the longer-term benefits to be gained from the project's success.

Managerial support: The initial decision by senior management to create a special change management post in the Housing Department was crucial. The post-holder had the autonomy to make decisions and get on with implementing change.

8. CONCLUSION

Some projects stem from a clear failure in systems or procedures. Others have their origins in changes in public policy. This case stemmed from a local commitment to bring about change that leads to productivity gains and improvements in service to the public. It was a decision taken in-house, and it engaged the support of management and directly involved staff through an internal survey. It was backed up by a plain English audit of key documentation, carried out with the help of NALA, which provided a basis for prioritising actions.

Spreading the use of plain English in the documents produced by local authorities is a worthy goal and one for which the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown experience provides useful lessons.

The specific project to produce a Tenant Handbook in the form of multiple booklets written in plain English and designed for easy access is one that can be rolled out by other authorities making use of the work already undertaken here.

The Tenant Handbook can be found here: https://www.dlrcoco.ie/en/housing-provision-tenants/tenant-handbook

For further information on the Tenant Handbook, please contact James Ryan, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, jamesryan@dlrcoco.ie

What is tenancy?

Tenancy occurs when a person (a tenant) is assigned a home by the Council. When you are assigned a home, you must sign a tenancy agreement. You will then receive the keys to your home and are expected to move in immediately. See the Tenancy Conditions section for more information on the tenancy agreement.

Shortly after you move into your new home, an Inspector of Services – a member of staff from the Housing Department – will visit your home, introduce themselves to you and answer any questions you may have. They may also call to you at other times during the year with your Rent Statement or to help you in any way they can with your tenancy.

Figure 1.2. Tenancy information (original document)(source: Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council)

About this leaflet

This leaflet explains what it means to be a tenant of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and answers some questions you may have.

What is a tenancy?

A tenancy happens when we give (assign) a home to you. You rent the home from us and we become your landlord. We ask you to read and sign a tenancy agreement. We then give you the keys to your new home, and we expect you to move in immediately.

What is your tenancy agreement?

This is a contract between:
- you, the tenant, and
- us (Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council), the landlord.

The tenancy agreement sets out in detail the conditions or rules of your tenancy. It tells you what is allowed and what is not allowed. It also tells you about the support we will give you as our tenant.

Your tenancy agreement is an important legal document. Please read it carefully and keep it somewhere you can easily find it.

Here are the main points of your tenancy agreement.

- You must pay your rent in full each week.
- You must use the house as your main home.
- You must not pass the tenancy to anyone else.
- You must not take in lodgers or sub-tenants without written permission from us. This includes family members returning home or partners moving in.
- You must not make any structural changes to your home without first getting written permission from us.
- If you will be away from your home for more than six weeks, you must tell us.
- You must not use your home for any type of business.
- You must keep your home and garden in good condition.
- You must let our staff enter your home to carry out repairs, maintenance or inspections. We must give you adequate notice that we plan to call to your home.
- You are responsible for the behaviour of everyone (including children) living in or visiting your home. You and your household or anyone visiting your home must not annoy, disturb or be a nuisance to your neighbours.

We have the right to end your tenancy and repossess (take back) your home if you do not keep to the conditions of your tenancy agreement.

Figure 1.3 Tenancy information (new Tenant Handbook) (source: Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council)

04 :
Housing Maintenance

The Housing Maintenance Section is responsible for managing, repairing and controlling the Council's rented housing.

How do I request repairs to my home?

You may make a request in person at the Council's offices in Dún Laoghaire or Dundrum. The addresses are in the Introduction. You may also request repairs online through our website, www.dlrcoco.ie, or you may telephone the Council on (01) 205 47 00, ext 4118 and 4119.

Will the Council carry out any repairs I want?

No, we will just carry out structural repairs to your home and then only if your rent is paid up to date. You are responsible for arranging and paying for all other repairs.

What types of repairs am I responsible for?

You are responsible for certain general internal, external, electrical and plumbing repairs. You are also responsible for repairs to doors and windows and to electrical appliances. You will find examples of these below and on the next page.

Internal repairs

- › Filling plaster cracks
- › Decorating
- › Repairing or replacing cupboards, wardrobes, kitchen units and their doors, hinges, handles, locks, catches and drawers
- › Repairing or replacing curtain rails and window boards
- › Chimney sweeping
- › Repairing, replacing or fitting wall and floor tiles
- › Repairing woodwork including floors, doors and skirting boards
- › Repairing or replacing ventilator
- › Carrying out repairs due to condensation*

*Note: Condensation is caused mainly by not opening windows, especially in bathrooms, or by drying clothes in rooms with no windows or vents open. Condensation appears as black mould on walls and edges of windows. Always make sure that vents are clear to allow air to flow into a room.

Doors and windows

- › Repairing or replacing external and internal door locks and handles
- › Repairing window stays, catches and restrictors
- › Draught proofing doors and windows
- › Replacing broken glass
- › Repairing permavents where fitted
- › Repairing or replacing internal tiles on windowsills and window boards

Figure 1.4. Maintenance information (original Tenant Handbook) (source: Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council)

Your guide to knowing what your responsibilities are as our tenant inside and outside your home.

Follow this checklist to keep your home in good condition. It outlines:

• what you have to do to keep your home in good repair, and

• what we will do to help.

Not every point on the checklist will apply to your home. Please read this checklist carefully and keep it safe to refer to. Ask us any questions if you are not sure about the information.

Responsibilities inside your home	You	Us
Heating systems		
Paying for the supply of gas by bill or prepay meter	✓	
Moving from bill pay to prepay meter **if** your choice	✓	
Bleeding radiators or airlocks	✓	
Central heating you installed	✓	
Central heating **you / we** installed **if** you are paying us a boiler maintenance charge on your rent account		✓
Maintaining gas boiler, gas pipe work, radiators, valves, time clocks and thermostats we installed		✓
Bathroom		
Fixing damaged bath, basin, toilet or cistern, toilet rails, clothes dryers and shaver sockets	✓	
Buying new toilet seat if broken	✓	
Plumbing		
Making sure sinks have plugs and chains	✓	
Repairing or replacing taps	✓	
Solving blocked sinks, drains and toilets	✓	
Repairing pipe work to sink, basins and baths		✓
Kitchen		
Repairing kitchen units	✓	
Repairing or replacing flooring	✓	

Figure 1.5. Maintenance information (new Tenant Handbook) (source: Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council)

CASE STUDY 2:
USE OF 360 CAMERA TECHNOLOGY
MONAGHAN COUNTY COUNCIL

SUMMARY

Funded by the Public Service Innovation Fund, the use of a 360-degree camera by Monaghan County Council (MCC) has facilitated innovative approaches in the inspection of council properties and in the housing allocation process. It has significantly reduced the time required to carry out an inspection and to prepare the associated paperwork. The 360 camera has also improved customer service by providing successful housing applicants with the opportunity to virtually view a council property.

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of this case study is the operation of 360 camera technology by the Housing Department in MCC. The combination of a fall in the cost of the technology and access to external funding made the project financially viable. In 2020, MCC secured funding from the Public Service Innovation Fund, operated by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), to buy cameras and equipment and develop the necessary software.

The council's successful application to DPER proposed using the camera as a technical solution to serve two purposes:

- It would provide a user-friendly digital tool for council staff to assist in housing inspections and maintenance
- It would allow housing applicants to experience an immersive tour of a council house, using virtual reality technology, before deciding whether to accept an offer of a tenancy.

The successful introduction of the 360 camera has enabled the Housing Department to take high-quality images of its housing stock much more efficiently than before. It has also provided new tenants with an interactive digital experience of a council house. MCC sees considerable potential for the camera in other services that it delivers.

2. BACKGROUND

MCC aims to refurbish its social housing units as efficiently as possible between tenancies. An engineer from the Housing Department is tasked with inspecting a property in order to assess which repairs need to be carried out before a new tenancy begins. Typically, an engineer used to spend 20–30 minutes inspecting a property that was in good condition; in general, the worse the condition of the property, the longer that the inspection would have taken. The inspection process involved the engineer taking 2D photographs of each room and making notes of which items had to be repaired or replaced; up to 100 photographs

of a property could have been taken. Once back at the office, the engineer uploaded and assessed the photographs and completed the necessary paperwork to organise a programme of work for the vacant property. The inspection and the subsequent administrative work were time-consuming and lengthened the overall period that it took to refurbish and re-tenant a house.

Traditionally, if a prospective tenant wanted to view a property before accepting an offer, a staff member would have had to show the property in person. Management in the Housing Department believed that there was scope to use the 360 camera to allow its customers view a property online, similar to the virtual tours offered to tenants in the private market. It was thought that such an initiative would not only enhance the quality of customer service but also help to reduce refusals of offers of council housing. If a prospective tenant viewed the property virtually and saw the quality of the accommodation on offer, it was felt that they would be more likely to accept it.

While MCC knew how it could potentially use the 360 camera to drive efficiency and improve customer service, initially such technology was financially unfeasible for the Housing Department. The award of €29,900 in funding from the Public Service Innovation Fund was the trigger to make the idea a reality.

3. THE PROJECT

Once MCC was awarded the funding by DPER, it was given a deadline to deliver on the project. The project, which had full support from senior management and councillors in MCC, was undertaken from March to November 2020.

Initially, managers from the housing and IT departments discussed the structure needed to carry out the proposed project. It was decided to create two working groups within MCC:

- a core working group made up of staff from the housing and IT departments, and an external software developer
- a wider working group with the members of the core group, along with other senior managers and potential users of the technology.

The core working group focused on designing the software for the camera, and brought prototypes to the wider group for their feedback. The latter group was pivotal in feeding practical improvements into the development process.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

The working groups met regularly to design and refine the software needed to operate the camera. It was a lengthy process to ensure that any technical issues were ironed out and that the camera worked effectively to meet MCC's needs. Once the software had been developed, very little training was needed for the user in terms of operating the camera as it was quite user-friendly.

The camera and app – how it works

Inspection process

- The 360 camera requires only one photograph per room.

- A digital app guides the inspector through the inspection process to ensure that information is gathered in a structured way. The app automatically uploads photographs taken by the camera to a cloud storage platform.

- The software uses Artificial Intelligence and Voice Recognition to record issues. This enables the inspector to speak key words into the app (e.g. broken windows, crack in the wall) as the house is inspected.

- Staff in the office use a desktop app to organise the photographs and enter any missing information. This information is then automatically exported to the housing management system.

Virtual tour

- After the 360 camera has been used to take photographs of a house, a virtual tour can be created. Once a tour has been prepared and is ready to view, housing applicants are emailed a link that can be clicked on using their smart phone/tablet/PC, and they can then view the property virtually.

- For security, the email link to access the virtual tour expires after a period of time. In addition, the link cannot be forwarded to other email addresses.

5. CHALLENGES

During the course of the project, technical issues arose that had to be addressed. For example, it was decided to enhance the security of the virtual tour, so restrictions were placed on who could view it and when. Also, the quality of the images produced by the camera was initially disappointing, therefore the team worked on improving the resolution so that a greater level of detail could be shown.

6. EVALUATION AND NEXT STEPS

Benefits

A tangible benefit has been the time saved by engineers in the carrying out of house inspections. MCC estimates that an inspection of a property is about 50% quicker using the 360 camera. Figure 2.1 below shows the average length of time it can take to complete a property inspection using the 360 camera in comparison to the traditional approach.

Re-letting inspection time	Property in good condition	Property in poor condition
360 camera	10–15 minutes	20–30 minutes
Traditional process (using mobile phone camera)	20–30 minutes	40-60 minutes

Figure 2.1. Time to complete a property inspection (source: Monaghan County Council)

Under the old approach, a significant amount of time was spent in the office uploading photographs of the property onto MCC's IT network, which used up a lot of space on the shared drive. Now, using the 360 camera and inspection app, images are uploaded automatically along with information on the property. Furthermore, staff do not need to meet a contractor or a tenant in-person at a property, instead, the house can be shown to them through a virtual tour. It is estimated that as much as 2–3 hours can be saved in the overall inspection process for each property through this innovative way of working.

Most council tenants in Ireland do not get a chance to view a property before they sign a tenancy agreement, partly explaining why some applicants refuse offers of housing. Virtual tours give prospective tenants the opportunity to explore each room of a property online and they can inspect its features by zooming-in for a closer look. This virtual experience affords the viewer a greater sense of being there in comparison to viewing 2D photographs. According to MCC, in 2021, approximately 10 virtual tours of council houses were undertaken by prospective tenants.

Technology is improving all the time, which means that even better quality photographs can be taken. Additionally, the costs associated with a digital camera are reducing, making it more affordable.

Future plans

The team in MCC see this innovative approach to the inspection process as part of a wider project. According to an interviewee: '*We plan to build on our achievement by extending the software to achieve further efficiencies'.* For example, the camera could be used for the inspection of properties in the private rented sector and for properties being used by recipients of the Housing Assistance Payment. Figure 2.2 below outlines the actual inspection figures for 2021 and the projected volume of inspections for 2022 using the 360 camera.

Inspection type	Inspections in 2021 (actual)	Inspections with 360 camera in 2021 (actual)	Inspections in 2022 (projected)	Inspections with 360 camera in 2022 (projected)	Total potential projected inspections (2022)
Housing stock re-letting	34	16	5	50	55
Capital projects (new build etc.)	0	34	0	100	100
Housing Assistance Payments	Due to Government restrictions, physical inspections were minimised in 2021. Inspections based on submitted photos	Potential expansion of 360 camera survey system	Currently inspections will be via normal camera	Potential expansion of 360 camera survey system	150
Private rented inspections					150
Housing stock maintenance					300
TOTAL:	**34**	**50**	**5**	**150**	**755**

Figure 2.2. Inspections with 360 camera (source: Monaghan County Council)

Interviewees suggested that the system could be used by other departments in MCC; for example, it could be incorporated into the inspections carried out by the Roads, Water Services and Fire Services departments. Virtual tours of public buildings, such as art galleries and heritage sites owned by the council, could be created for online viewing. The 360 camera could also be used to create promotional videos to attract tourists to the county.

Adoption by other local authorities

The main expense for other local authorities to adopt this innovative approach would be a once-off cost for cameras and equipment and a subscription fee to the software developer. The software for the camera has already been developed by a private IT consultant in partnership with MCC. This means that only minor technical changes would be needed to reconfigure the software so that other councils could use it.

It was suggested by interviewees that local authorities using choice-based letting (CBL) could easily incorporate virtual tours of their housing stock into the CBL process.

7.   LESSONS LEARNED/REFLECTIONS

Push the benefits: When staff are busy and their time for project work is limited, there may be a need to generate greater buy-in from them. Some staff may need to fully realise the longer-term benefits of a project and this can help to ensure their involvement. As an interviewee put it: '*staff must be fully aware of the benefits the new system will provide for them'.*

Collaboration is crucial: Cross-departmental collaboration, which brings together key personnel from different areas to utilise their expertise, is important in order to get the most from the system.

Need for a dedicated resource: Another lesson is to provide, if possible, dedicated staff for the implementation of a project. The staff involved in the working groups were juggling the demands of the project along with their day-to-day workloads and it was challenging for them to devote time to the project. A dedicated resource would have supported the delivery of the project by alleviating some of the pressure on those involved.

8. CONCLUSION

The use of 360 camera technology by MCC strongly supports national objectives to digitalise services and drive efficiencies in work practices. According to interviewees, the camera has led to significant time savings in the inspection process for council houses and has improved customer service by allowing prospective tenants to take virtual tours.

This highly innovative approach offers possibilities for other departments in MCC in terms of improving work practices and customer service. The availability of this technology and software, combined with falling costs, should make it a feasible system for other local authorities to adopt.

For further information on the 360 Camera, please contact Nuala Woods, Monaghan County Council, nwoods@monaghancoco.ie

CASE STUDY 3:
PAYMENT OF RENT VIA A CUSTOMER APP
ROSCOMMON COUNTY COUNCIL

SUMMARY
In early 2021, tenants of Roscommon County Council (RCC) were given the option to access their rent account information through a digital app. This has been a success for the council, as more tenants opt to pay their rent through the app as it is convenient and user-friendly. Not only has it improved customer service by giving tenants greater control over their account, but from the council's perspective, it has increased rent collection and reduced the level of queries and paperwork for staff.

1. INTRODUCTION
A key priority under RCC's current Corporate Plan is Quality Service to Our People. The Plan commits to '*Provide opportunities for customers to access our services through the use of digital technology and online services*' (Roscommon County Council, 2019: p. 24). The development and roll-out of a Customer Services App is a clear example of how the council responds to the needs and changing expectations of its customers by improving its service delivery.

Customers' expectations have changed in recent years in terms of digital services. In this context, the council wanted to give its tenants greater choice in how they engaged with their rent account. The app for council tenants, and Rental Accommodation Scheme tenants, has proved popular as a convenient and efficient way for them to manage their rent account and household budget. Likewise, there have been benefits for the Housing Department: the app has helped reduce the number of queries as customers can now access their account information whenever they want. Improved account management by tenants can be beneficial in terms of reducing arrears. The app can also provide electronic statements and instant messaging to users.

2. BACKGROUND
A Digital Transformation Team manages the development and roll-out of the council's digital programme. It seeks to create quality and accessible online services for customers. In 2020, the Transformation Team worked with a private software company to introduce a Customer Services App. Initially, the app was being developed for payers of commercial rates; however, there was scope to extend its usage to other customers.

The Housing Department in RCC is very busy and receives many queries from tenants relating to their rent account, among other matters. Traditionally, most tenants paid their rent by standing order through a bank or by phoning the Housing Department to pay by debit card. There was a view among staff, and some tenants, that there ought to be more options in terms of how to pay the rent. It was felt that there would be strong interest in using a digital app.

3. THE PROJECT

The Director of Services for Housing and Digital Transformation fully supported the idea of tenants using the Customer Services App. The main objective of the initiative was to give tenants greater choice in terms of how they paid rent and managed their account – app users could access their account information anytime and anywhere. As an interviewee put it: '*tenants wouldn't always be just getting a letter in the post, but would be able to view their account online and so be able to better manage and plan the household budget*'.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

After configuring the Customer Services App for rates payers, the digital team in RCC worked with the software developer to adapt the app so that tenants could use it in respect of their rent account. This process involved meetings between housing staff, the Digital Transformation Team and the software developer to discuss technical details, what was needed from the mobile app, and branding. There was also a testing phase for the app using a dummy rent account before it went 'live'.

The work to adapt the app for tenants took about three months and was finished by the end of 2020. Councillors on the Housing Strategic Policy Committee were kept informed of the app's development and they welcomed the convenience that it would afford tenants.

The Customer Services App was launched in February 2021. Along with an annual financial statement from RCC about their rent account, each tenant was posted a letter and flyer explaining the benefits of the app and how it could be downloaded and used. Furthermore, the app was promoted on social media and an article appeared in a local newspaper about it. The Customer Services App was presented as another option to allow tenants to engage with their rent account. It was important for tenants to understand that the app was not mandatory: it would not replace the traditional payment methods.

How the mobile app works for tenants

- The app is multiplatform and can be used on iPhones and Android phones.
- For tenants without a smart phone, there is a web version that they can log into using a tablet or computer.
- Tenants simply download the app from the Play Store or the Apple Store.
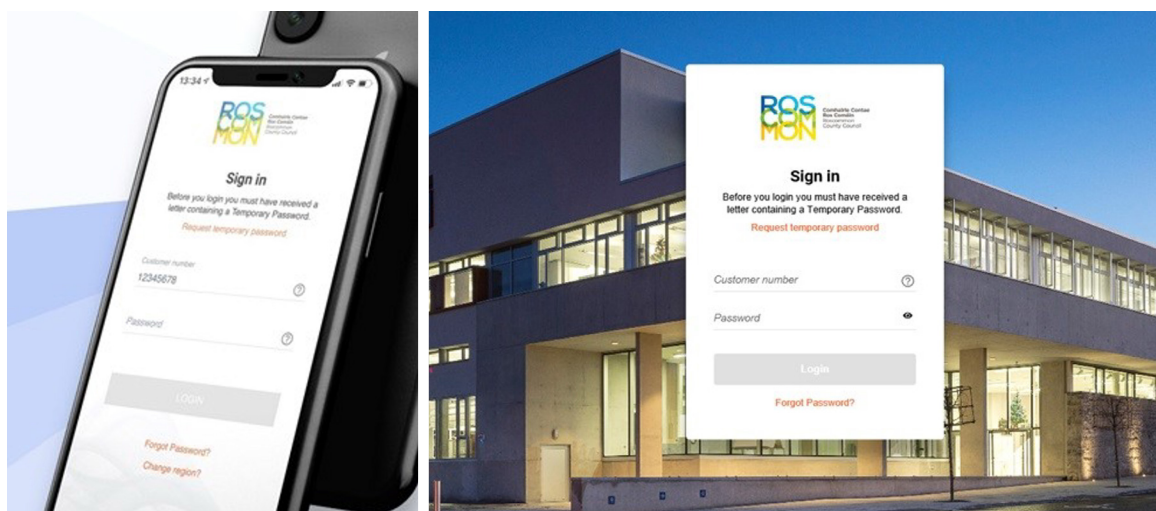- The customer then receives a letter from RCC with a temporary password.

Figure 3.1. The Customer Service App interface (source: Roscommon County Council)

5. CHALLENGES

Technical issues: After the app was launched, an issue arose if a user logged out of it too quickly, which resulted in payments not being processed. After feedback from tenants, a solution was quickly implemented. While tenants had received a communication and 'how-to' guide on the new app, the initial period after its launch was somewhat intense in terms of queries on how to download it and reset the password. Such queries have since reduced considerably as tenants and staff have become more experienced with using the app.

Increasing the number of users: A challenge for the Housing Department is to get more tenants using the app. Initially there was a good take-up among tenants; however, a cohort of tenants are used to paying by standing order and are reluctant to switch to the app. Also, some tenants lack the technical know-how to use an app. While there is scope to get more tenants using it, this cannot be undertaken in a heavy-handed manner. Interviewees spoke about the need for an ongoing information campaign to highlight the app's benefits.

6. EVALUATION AND NEXT STEPS
Benefits
The benefits for tenants are that they can:

- view their balance 24/7
- view their account history
- make rent payments easily online
- receive an electronic copy of a receipt
- view and print statements (up to six months).

From the council's perspective, the benefits of the app are:

- improved customer service
- fewer rent-related queries, which saves staff time
- paperless statements can be sent, which reduces paperwork and postage costs
- better account management by tenants.

According to an interviewee, the app was welcomed by many tenants who '*took to it straight away*'. It has given them a convenient new way to access real-time account information whenever they wish and offers ease of payment. It is particularly beneficial for tenants who, for example, are night workers and so perhaps struggle to access a post office or bank during the day.

Tenants can better monitor and manage their account, reflected by the increasing number of user engagements with the app. Interviewees emphasised that some tenants can now manage their arrears more effectively and conveniently make extra payments when possible. With the onset of the Covid pandemic and the associated restrictions, some tenants feared falling further into arrears after RCC had to close the Cash Desk in public buildings.

The level of rental income being paid through the app is increasing month by month as more tenants use it. There are approximately 370 tenant users of the Customer Services App, equating to about 30% of all tenants, indicating a demand for such technology and also a potential to grow the number of users.

Future plans

There is scope to develop the app further to provide greater functionality. For example, tenants could potentially notify the Housing Department if there is a change of personal circumstances or they could submit a repair request through the app. RCC could send direct messages to all app users or a cohort. For example, a communication about a survey could be sent to all users or to users in a certain municipal district.

The Cash Desk in RCC processes a high level of customer payments. Managing the payment process can be quite labour-intensive, involving a lot of paperwork and account queries. In this context, interviewees stated that there is potential for other customer streams to be added to the app to drive more efficiencies. For example, loan customers could be added so they could access account information on their loan. It could be possible for a customer to pay a service fee through the app, for example relating to a Fire Services call-out.

Adoption by other local authorities

RCC is one of several local authorities that have adopted the Customer Services App. The main expenses facing other councils wishing to follow this innovative approach would be software costs and maintenance fees to the IT company involved.

7. LESSONS LEARNED/REFLECTIONS

Plain English: A key lesson was to ensure that communications to tenants about the app were written in plain, jargon-free language. The Housing Department was mindful that some tenants are not technologically minded. Before the app was launched, much effort was made to rephrase communications on how to download and use it: the language had to be clear and understandable to tenants.

Phased approach: In hindsight, a phased approach to rolling out the app might have been better, rather than making it available to all tenants at once. Despite receiving some initial training, staff in the Housing Department were themselves learning about the app after it launched. This made it somewhat challenging when staff had to respond to customer queries about it. The app could perhaps have been rolled out by municipal district area, one after another.

Promotion of the app: Interviewees thought that there is scope to get more tenants using the app. Existing tenants who don't currently use the app ought to be periodically reminded of its benefits. It is important that they understand that it's not just for paying the rent, but users can also monitor their account and thereby better manage their household budget.

8. CONCLUSION

In recent years, the demand for online services has grown. Financial institutions and utility companies now offer digital apps to their customers so that they can access their account information on mobile devices. A similar trend is taking place in the context of public services as app technology is being leveraged to change the way in which customers engage with their accounts.

The roll-out of the Customer Services App to tenants was intended to improve customer service by making it easier to pay the weekly rent. The app has been popular with tenants and the number of users continues to grow. Mutual benefits have been gained. The app has also improved the collection of rental income by RCC and has helped reduce customer queries in relation to rent accounts.

For further information on the Customer Services App for tenants, please contact Una Ni Chuinn, Roscommon County Council, unichuinn@roscommoncoco.ie

CASE STUDY 4:
RIGHTSIZING FOR OLDER TENANTS – PROUDSTOWN ROAD SCHEME MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL

SUMMARY

This case study explores the rightsizing of tenants by Meath County Council (MCC) into age-friendly housing at Proudstown Road in Navan. It was the first such rightsizing project undertaken by MCC for older tenants on a previously derelict site. It represented a policy innovation, as the lessons learned from the experience informed the local policy for other rightsizing projects.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen an enhanced national policy focus on supporting Ireland's ageing population. Policy aims to help older people live in accommodation suited to their needs by providing them with greater choice through adapted and specialist housing.

Local authorities play a central role in meeting the housing needs of older persons within communities. Age Friendly Ireland (AFI), a shared service initiative of all local authorities run by MCC since 2017, supports local authorities in the delivery of age-friendly housing. AFI has developed a dedicated online information platform featuring guidance, toolkits and case studies, in an effort to promote rightsizing. In addition, it has prepared a rightsizing policy template for local authorities.

The information platform can be found here: https://agefriendlyhomes.ie

The under-occupancy of some council housing is a recognised issue and experts have recommended the building of smaller council units to facilitate tenants wishing to downsize (Norris and Hayden, 2018: p. 8). Furthermore, given the lengthy housing waiting lists, an objective within the *Housing for All* action plan is the more efficient use of social housing. To this end, the government will develop a national rightsizing policy in relation to social housing (Government of Ireland, 2021: p. 113). It is in this policy context that the housing scheme on Proudstown Road ought to be seen.

The development by MCC of a scheme of four age-friendly residential units on an infill site at Proudstown Road proved to be a significant project, as it:

- enabled MCC to better meet the housing needs of older tenants
- freed-up council units for families on the housing waiting list
- tackled the issue of a site on the derelict sites register
- informed the rightsizing policy for similar projects in the county.

According to Age Friendly Ireland: *'Rightsizing generally means moving home in later life into housing that is more suitable. It was more usually known as "downsizing". It can also mean adapting your home to make it more age-appropriate, or considering other housing options'* (Age Friendly Ireland, 2021b: p. 3). Rightsizing can relate to people living in private and social housing. The term 'rightsizing' is preferred to 'downsizing' as it is seen as having a more positive connotation.

2. BACKGROUND

Ensuring that tenants are accommodated in appropriately sized housing has long been a priority for MCC. However, as the council hosts the age-friendly shared service, there is an even greater focus and awareness of rightsizing in Meath, and this objective is now a feature of relevant plans and policies. For example, the council's most recent corporate plan and allocation scheme explicitly reference rightsizing.

An objective of MCC's current corporate plan is to: *'Provide a blend of solutions to the complex housing challenges at local level'* which involves the provision of rightsized and accessible housing (Meath County Council, 2019: p. 9). The new Allocations Scheme contains a section on the rightsizing of older tenants. Indeed, the promotion of rightsizing has become part of the culture within MCC.

Proudstown Road site

Originally, the site on the Proudstown Road, Navan, contained a derelict dwelling (Figure 4.1), which attracted antisocial behaviour and complaints from neighbours. Navan Town Council eventually bought the site through a compulsory purchase order and demolished the derelict building. The location lent itself to a development of homes for older people; it was close to the town centre, a bus stop, local amenities and existing social housing. As an interviewee put it: '*the opportunity was ripe to encourage existing tenants to rightsize within their community'.*

Figure 4.1. The Proudstown Road site (source: Meath County Council)

After securing the necessary funding from the Department of Housing, MCC set about the development of the age-friendly units on Proudstown Road. By doing things differently to produce positive results (as per our definition of innovation), in terms of the location of accommodation for older tenants, MCC learnt valuable lessons which informed its policy approach for other rightsizing projects.

Research carried out by *Age Friendly Ireland* provides valuable insights into the awareness, perceptions and experiences of older people in respect of rightsizing:

Factors that might make the prospect of moving more appealing

- 79% of survey respondents indicated a desire to remain close to their friends/support network and community

- 77% said their home was too large for their current needs

- 77% need to be close to amenities

- 72% need to be close to public transport

- 72% would like to see the existence of suitable accommodation in their desired location

Priority requirements for a new home

- 98% of survey respondents want an energy-efficient home

- 95% want to live somewhere they feel safe

- 97% said the accommodation needed to be designed to suit their future needs

- 93% wanted a minimum of two bedrooms

(Age Friendly Ireland, 2021a: p. 31)

3. THE PROJECT

The Project Team within MCC's Housing Department decided to construct four age-friendly units on the infill site on the Proudstown Road. The architect commenced working on the project in May 2017 and the construction phase began in mid-2018. The scheme was launched and tenanted in May 2019.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

The design and fit-out of each unit, and the layout of the site, in terms of security and usability, were key considerations:

- Four single-storey houses in a courtyard setting; 2 × 2 bedroom houses (65 sqm) and 2 × 1 bedroom houses (50 sqm)
- Units designed according to the *Universal Design Guidelines for Homes in Ireland* and recommendations from AFI
- Each unit wired for an intruder alarm and fitted with video monitoring
- All the units were wheelchair friendly; each had a wet room and easy-grip handles and taps throughout
- Older persons' car parking provided
- The courtyard layout, featuring communal seating and raised flowerbeds, was designed to facilitate passive surveillance.

Three to four months before the new units were scheduled for completion by the building contractors, the Allocations Team in MCC issued a call for expressions of interest in the age-friendly homes from tenants living in nearby council housing. The team targeted older tenants living in family-sized dwellings that were potentially too large for their needs and who were perhaps struggling to maintain the property. Of the estimated 50 tenants contacted by MCC, four expressed interest in rightsizing. These tenants had been living in accommodation not suited to their needs; it was too big, too costly to heat and maintain, and in need of modernisation. Ultimately, after discussions with the council, these four tenants agreed to rightsize by moving into the new housing scheme on Proudstown Road.

Figure 4.2 shows the age-friendly units that were constructed.

Figure 4.2. Age-friendly units at Proudstown Road (source: Meath County Council)

5. CHALLENGE/KEY CONSIDERATION

Reluctance to rightsize: MCC didn't have a problem finding tenants to rightsize into the Proudstown Road units, but it was acknowledged that the expressions of interest received were relatively low given the number of tenants initially contacted. According to an interviewee, 'we need to be realistic about the challenge' of tenants being reluctant to rightsize. Tenants will often have lived in a particular council house for many years and may have a strong emotional attachment to it. The council can only encourage tenants to rightsize: whether or not an individual rightsizes will always be a voluntary decision.

6. EVALUATION AND NEXT STEPS
Benefits

Tenant well-being: The impact of housing on the health and well-being of older people is well known (Orr et al., 2016). According to a Tenant Liaison Officer who worked on the Proudstown Road project, the main benefit of the new housing scheme was its positive effect on the welfare of the tenants concerned. Some of these tenants had previously lived in accommodation that, for one reason or another, had negatively affected their well-being. A new house, better suited to their needs and in new surroundings, had a positive impact on their mental well-being.

An interviewee described the move as almost a 'fresh start' for the tenants in their lives. The new tenants took charge of maintaining the scheme's communal green space and flowerbeds. This act of taking ownership reflected feelings of pride among the tenants in their new homes, and contributed to a community spirit within the housing scheme.

Return of a derelict site to productive use: Neighbours were very pleased with the development as it transformed a site that had been a public eyesore for about 20 years and had attracted antisocial behaviour. Given the proximity of the scheme to the centre of Navan, it was also deemed to be a success from a town planning perspective.

Freed-up council houses: The new units on Proudstown Road had a knock-on effect as several council-owned family units became available. MCC carried out refurbishment work on these properties and re-let them to households on the waiting list.

Future plans

The Proudstown Road scheme is an exemplar age-friendly housing project in terms of quality of design, fit-out and location. It also demonstrated the social and economic benefits of building such units on an infill site. Lessons learned from this innovative project helped inform other schemes. Interviewees spoke of its success in terms of being a catalyst for other rightsizing projects undertaken by MCC on small sites. Examples of older tenants happily living in appropriately sized accommodation can encourage reluctant tenants to rightsize.

Using its vacant homes action plan and derelict sites register, the Housing Department has since identified infill sites close to town centres in Meath for development. For example, on Carrick Street in Kells, vacant properties are being renovated and will include 12 age-friendly units.

7.   LESSONS LEARNED/REFLECTIONS

Target tenants within the community: When seeking expressions of interest from council tenants, it was important to target those already living in the vicinity of Proudstown Road. People who have lived for many years in a particular area are likely to want to remain living there because of their connections to the community.

Incentivising tenants: Tenants cannot be forced to rightsize: it can only ever be a voluntary decision. Some tenants may be very willing to move; others may have little or no interest. According to an interviewee, the key selling points for prospective tenants of age-friendly units are location and a quality, well-designed house. Examples of successful rightsizing projects, such as Proudstown Road, are therefore important as they showcase the benefits of age-friendly housing.

Location: Careful consideration needs to be given to the location of housing for older people. The Housing Department in MCC prefers the targeting of infill sites rather than the traditional approach of providing a small number of older person dwellings within a larger social housing scheme at the edge of a town. Very often, infill sites are small and close to town centres; ideal for bespoke housing schemes and ease of access to local amenities. The use of such sites also complements other national policy objectives, namely compact urban development and tackling urban dereliction.

Close liaison with tenants: It was important for the Housing Department to understand any concerns or queries that prospective tenants had and to provide them with the information to make an informed decision on rightsizing. Also, MCC assisted some tenants with the logistics around moving house (e.g. organising a skip to dispose of household waste and a removals lorry). As an interviewee said: *'it shouldn't be underestimated that link/liaison person to explain, encourage and outline the benefits of rightsizing and holding their hands to some extent'.*

Well-being: While the policy arguments put forward to address the issue of under-occupancy have tended to take an asset management view by emphasising the need to better utilise existing council stock, sight should not be lost of the well-being benefits for tenants gained by living in appropriately sized accommodation.

8. CONCLUSION

The development of four age-friendly units on Proudstown Road was widely seen as a success. It provided older tenants with high-quality accommodation suited to their needs, and made family-size council units available for others. It also had a wider impact by transforming a derelict site, which had attracted negative social behaviour, into an attractive and compact development.

By taking a different approach to housing for older people, the new scheme led to positive results for tenants and those living in the area. The experience taught MCC valuable lessons for future rightsizing housing projects that contribute to the development of sustainable communities.

For further information on the Proudstown Road rightsizing scheme, please contact David Jones, Meath County Council, david.jones@meathcoco.ie

For further information on rightsizing and age-friendly housing, please contact Emer Coveney, Age Friendly Ireland, Meath County Council, ecoveney@meathcoco.ie

CASE STUDY 5:
AFFORDABLE HOUSING APPLICATION PORTAL

FINGAL COUNTY COUNCIL

SUMMARY

An online portal system to accept applications for an affordable housing scheme was introduced by Fingal County Council (FCC). This initiative made it easier for customers to apply to the scheme, while it also reduced the administrative time required to process applications. The development of this portal for affordable housing was the start of a wider project to digitalise the application process for various housing services, as the technology can be adapted to other areas. Its introduction can be seen as part of the council's drive to provide quality digital services to the public.

1. INTRODUCTION

FCC's Housing Department launched an online portal to accept applications electronically for new affordable houses. With national policy seeking to significantly increase the delivery of affordable homes in the coming years, this service and technology innovation will be of great value to the Housing Department from an efficiency and customer service perspective. The move away from paper application forms to an electronic system marks another step on the council's digital journey.

2. BACKGROUND

In an increasingly digital world, with improving levels of access to the internet, FCC has sought to enhance the way in which the public interacts with its services through an ongoing programme of digital innovation.

Under the Digital Government pillar of the *Fingal Digital Strategy 2020–2023*, the council is '*committed to driving innovation in public services and is continually striving to improve and develop the services we provide to the public*' (Fingal County Council, 2020: p. 39). This pillar focuses on three key objectives:

- deliver excellent customer service
- increase the availability of user-friendly, accessible online services
- promote a culture of continuous improvement, transparency, innovation and sustainability.

A key motivation behind the portal's development was to enable the public to apply online for different housing services. Initially, the system was to receive applications for affordable houses, and the intention was to later adapt it to receive electronic applications for other services. Catering for members of the public who are less familiar or comfortable with online systems, or perhaps lack internet access, is an ongoing consideration for the council in terms of what support this cohort may require.

In 2019, plans progressed in Fingal to develop a scheme of affordable houses at Dun Emer, Lusk, Co. Dublin. Given pressures in the local housing market, the scheme was expected to generate considerable interest. In this context, council management was keen to introduce an online portal to support the application process. Such a portal would enable members of the public to apply electronically for an affordable house rather than having to submit a paper application. The expected benefits were:

- It would help to relieve the administrative burden for council staff, as they would not have to process a flood of paper application forms and supporting documentation.
- An accessible IT system would guide applicants step-by-step through the process and enable them to submit an electronic application in full.
- It would improve and modernise the customer service experience.

Once the online portal was developed for the affordable housing scheme, the intention was to adapt it for other housing services. The focus of this case study is the portal's initial development and its use for an affordable housing scheme.

3. THE PROJECT

In late 2019, the change manager in the Housing Department was tasked by management to oversee a project to develop an online system to receive electronic applications. A project team was then established to collaborate on the design and build of the application portal. The core members of the team included the change manager and housing and IT personnel; in addition, an external developer and the council's data protection officer were heavily involved at certain points. The primary aim of the project was to develop and launch an accessible portal that would enable applicants to set up an account, upload their details and supporting documentation and submit a full application for an affordable house.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

In early 2020, the project team held initial meetings with IT developers to discuss what was feasible from an online system. After a successful proof of concept was prepared, the design and build phases of the portal's development began in earnest.

A rather intense process of engagement followed between all those involved in the project, even after the onset of the pandemic. According to an interviewee, there were '*continuous online meetings throughout the early months of Covid-19 in relation to how we were going to design it*'. Different issues had to be considered. For example, what type of information should the portal accept from the applicant? How much information could legitimately be requested? Considerations around data protection and IT security were foremost in the minds of the project team.

In the autumn, the pilot portal system underwent robust testing. As the portal would collect personal information from applicants, a Data Protection Impact Assessment was carried out to help mitigate possible data protection breaches. From a data protection perspective, it was vital to ensure that the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

procedures were adhered to, that the portal did not collect too much information, and that what it did collect was processed correctly. Furthermore, penetration testing was conducted to identify potential vulnerabilities to help maximise the system's security against a possible cyber-attack.

Following the testing phase, the project team produced a video tutorial to assist users in navigating their way through the application process via the portal. To further support applicants, a section on FCC's website was dedicated to the Dun Emer affordable housing scheme, which contained information on the types of houses that would be available, the eligibility criteria, details on how to apply, FAQs and the tutorial video. It was essential that the application process was clearly understood by those applying as the houses were to be assigned to successful candidates – who submitted a full application with supporting documentation – on a first come, first served basis.

FCC was mindful that applicants who might have struggled with using the online application process – for example, those with a literacy or language difficulty – would have to be supported as necessary.

In early 2021, in line with the Scheme of Priority for Affordable Dwellings, details on the housing scheme and how and when to apply were publicly advertised. In total, 318 applications for affordable houses were submitted via the portal.

How the application portal worked

The portal was a robust, user-friendly IT system and an alternative to a paper-based application approach.

- Intending applicants were asked to register an account on the portal. This required a valid email address, and a mobile phone to receive a one-time pass code via an SMS.
- After they registered their personal details, an email was sent to the user to click on a link to activate their account.
- Intending applicants created a password, filled out key details, uploaded the relevant documentation and submitted it as part of their application.
- Relevant housing staff were provided with administrative access to the portal so they could log into the system, assess the eligibility of applications and supporting documents and query details if necessary.
- Any communication from FCC to a candidate on their submitted application was sent via the portal; an email generated by the system prompted the candidate to log into their account and read the message about their application.
- After the period for applications closed, the system enabled housing staff to produce and download reports that helped determine which successful candidates were on which panel and in what order.
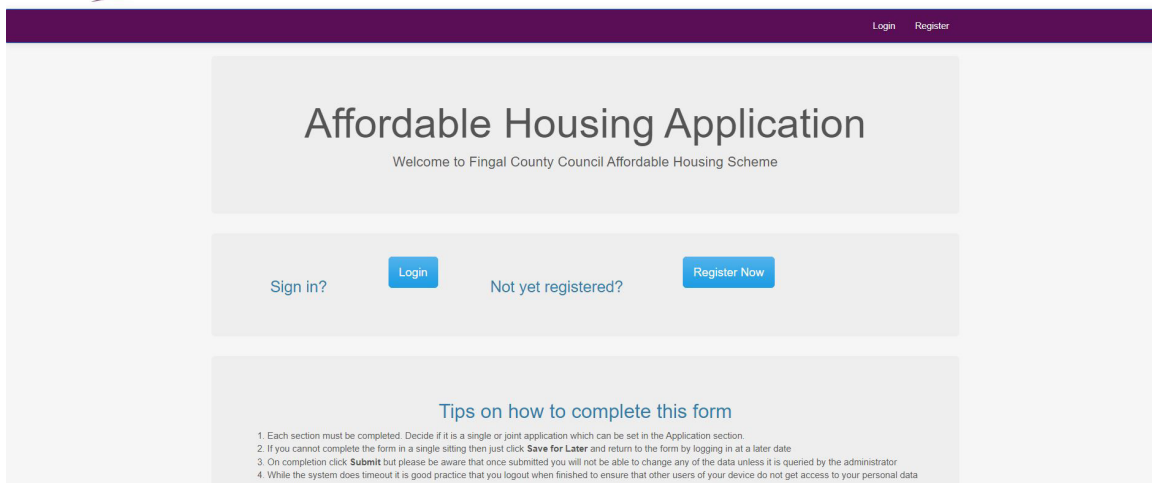
Figure 5.1. Portal homepage (source: Fingal County Council)

5. KEY CHALLENGES/CONSIDERATIONS

The collaborative nature of the project, involving different sections within the local authority, was somewhat challenging as participants already had heavy workloads. It was important for there to be clear and continuous communication between all those involved to help manage expectations with the project and to ensure that no details or steps in the portal's development and roll-out were overlooked.

Given the nature of the scheme, FCC needed to request personal and financial data from the applicants. So consideration of the GDPR was a priority for the project team in terms of collecting, processing and storing personal data electronically. To ensure that FCC's legal responsibilities as a data controller were fully adhered to, the advice of the data protection officer was sought at key points. As an interviewee confirmed: '*you need to have a very solid reason to be asking someone for certain things … we sought advice from the data protection officer about what type of info we were asking for, and why*'.

Ensuring the robustness of the portal so that it could successfully manage a high volume of applications was another crucial consideration. To ensure that the portal did not 'crash' after it opened to applications, a super-computer, with extra processing speed, storage and capacity, was used to support the online system.

6. EVALUATION AND NEXT STEPS
Benefits
For FCC, the use of the portal for the affordable houses meant that the Housing Department did not require extra staff to manually process over 300 applications. According to an interviewee, without the application portal, the administrative process would have been much more labour-intensive.

Increasingly, members of the public expect to be able to submit applications online. Rather than having to send a paper application to FCC, customers were able to apply electronically through a convenient online portal. The system removed some of the risks associated with paper applications (e.g. possible postal delays).

Future plans

After the success of the online portal for the affordable housing scheme, staff moved on to the next phase of the digitalisation project, which was to extend the system's use to other housing services. The IT developer subsequently worked with housing staff to reconfigure the system so that applications for the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) could be submitted through it. Since September 2021, applications for the HAP scheme can be made through the portal here: https://hap.fingal.ie

Other areas where the portal might be used include the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan scheme and the annual Social Housing Needs Assessment.

Adoption by other local authorities

Ireland's affordability crisis in housing means that the delivery of affordable homes will remain a priority for local authorities in the coming years. As FCC has successfully demonstrated, there is scope for other Housing Departments to adopt an online application system for housing services like affordable housing and HAP. As an interviewee observed: '*within local government, a lot of the information that we ask for in applications for services is the same*'.

7. LESSONS LEARNED/REFLECTIONS

Management support: The managers in the Housing Department were very supportive of the portal being developed and they provided the project team with the necessary resources and autonomy to progress the project in a timely manner.

Impact of the pandemic: While efforts were underway to develop the portal before the Covid-19 pandemic had struck, there was a sense that the pandemic gave added impetus to the project as it meant a greater focus and urgency in the digitalisation of services.

Future projects: Lessons learned from the experience were later applied to the development of the HAP online portal: for example, practical lessons regarding data protection, user guides and testing.

8. CONCLUSION

This project arose from the construction of a new affordable housing scheme by FCC and an administrative need to introduce a robust IT system to manage a high volume of applications for these houses. FCC's development of an online portal received strong support from the management team, who are keen to progress the digital transformation of services.

Multiple benefits were associated with moving away from a traditional paper application process to an IT system. For example, it resulted in productivity gains for the Housing Department as additional staff were not needed to manually process applications; staff could also generate reports from the system. Applicants were able to use an online system to submit their documentation for an affordable house efficiently and securely.

The portal will be used in the future as the council develops other affordable housing schemes. The same technology has since been used for HAP applications, and there are plans to extend its use to even more housing service areas.

For further information on the Affordable Housing Portal, please contact Housing Department, Fingal County Council, housing@fingal.ie

CONCLUSION

In the context of this report, innovation is defined as *doing things differently to produce positive results or learnings in the workplace*. A lot of work is underway in local authorities to develop innovative approaches by doing things differently in respect of service delivery. Through innovation, by improving the planning, organisation and delivery of services, benefits can be gained by councils and customers alike. It can make work practices more efficient, or result in services that more effectively meet public needs and expectations.

From this research into examples of innovation by council Housing Departments, several key points can be made:

- It is clear that an appetite for innovative practice exists within the Housing Departments concerned, to introduce new practices and amend existing ones.
- As staff have to deal with heavy workloads, support from management and dedicated resources are often crucial to effectively implement change. Managers can help to free up staff from other duties to work on projects, whether on a full- or part-time basis.
- With increasing demands being placed on Housing Departments, the continued development of innovative work practices will be important from a productivity perspective.
- There is good scope for local authorities to capitalise further on new technology in order to deliver greater operational efficiency and to provide more digital services.
- As local authorities deliver the same core housing services, the innovative practices examined in this report appear to be highly transferable across the sector.

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