



# VIEWS

Autumn 2021

## Time to change the conversation around retirement housing

– *Chris Munday, Senior Consultant DTP*



A few years ago, I visited Spain to see how technology is changing the way our older people are supported. During the visit, I had an illuminating conversation with the manager of a contact centre which provided central monitoring operations for a retirement housing provider.

British visitors, he said, were sometime sceptical or fearful of the new technology. They thought immediately of it as a threat – or an opportunity to make huge savings by doing away with people. Staff working in social housing retirement schemes wouldn't buy into the idea, they believed, nor would the older people they supported.

For me, the trip was a watershed moment. I came away thinking we could reimagine how social housing providers delivered care and support for older people living in retirement housing. This would involve rethinking how we use technology, but also taking a different view of the role of people and buildings too.

Fast forward to 2021 and the world has of course changed beyond all recognition. The social care sector more broadly appears in a perpetual state of crisis, and we are still trying to make sense of the implications of the Covid pandemic. The headlines are filled with talk of staffing shortages. Meanwhile, being old is still too often seen as something to dread, not enjoy.

Taken together, are there potential opportunities here – to remodel and reimagine what life looks like for society's older people? How can we live a better life – in better places – as we get older?

Let's start with retirement housing, which represents a big share of older persons provision registered providers of the kind DTP works with. While we have seen adopters using the kind of the technology I saw in Spain – it hasn't been nearly enough.

For many, the processes and monitoring are still a "people heavy" task. How many of our retirement housing schemes have instead installed I'm ok buttons or sensors in kettles and fridges, or as wearable devices to carry out these basic tasks? Not enough in my experience.

Perhaps we haven't done a good enough job of persuading people of the benefits. Maybe if we could change the conversation, so it's not about technology replacing people but complementing people, things might be different?

In my view, we shouldn't just explain that technology can often do as good a job as a human being knocking on a door or picking up the phone. Instead, we should talk in terms of tech enabling an entirely different model of retirement housing provision. The technology is also developing so fast it can also do much more than check and monitor. In fact, it offers us a potentially rich data source which can tell us a great deal about our customers. Just one example is its ability to provide 'early warning' for a range of health problems, including cognitive decline by noting changes in behaviour.

So what might a new model of retirement look like: one which was built on three pillars of people, buildings and technology? Firstly, it would be more flexible than current approaches. It would acknowledge the basic fact that retirement contains a broad section of people – some as young as 55 and some who have received their telegram from the Queen!

Retirement housing needs to reflect that and not offer people exactly the same service irrespective of their age or needs. Using technology could, in my view, give us the freedom and space to do this.

Registered provider staff in retirement housing could instead have a much broader role – one which was more satisfying and rewarding for the employee and which focused much more on quality of life for the resident. Some staff might not get it, but I think most would embrace it.

Staff would have time to consider people's broader health and wellbeing needs, with training to recognise where people needed more complex support. This would give staff an important signposting and referral role – linking in with local community physical and mental health services, citizens advice, financial and welfare services etc.

And we could also reimagine the role these schemes played in our local communities. We could see schemes having a much more outward focus – offering activities and services which would draw in the wider community. This requires staff to have the space to think creatively and imaginatively to ensure it is done in a way which residents are comfortable with.

Let's not forget bricks and mortar too. Many retirement housing schemes run by registered providers were built decades ago and things have moved on dramatically in terms of what people want and expect from a retirement home. Yes, we need to build great new homes for older people, but we also need to improve existing stock – much of which is also way behind when it comes to the carbon agenda.

Adopting this alternative model starts with having a new conversation around retirement housing. And where can DTP come in? We can work with providers who want to change their operating models; helping them to review and improve those models, in a way which works for the provider, their staff and their customers.

We can help providers understand the role technology can play in that process of change and support them to carry out thorough and effective service reviews. We can also support providers through that process of transformation, so you are able to bring both your staff and your customers with you.

Who knows, perhaps when I next visit Spain the conversation might be different. Perhaps we might have moved on from our defensive view of technology. We can but hope.