

Spring 2017

# Designing online services that work for all: Are housing associations incorporating inclusive design into their websites?

A research report by digital user experience agency, Sigma



# Introduction

The internet and consequent proliferation of online services in all sectors is impacting every aspect of our daily lives; whether that's checking our bank balance, doing our weekly shopping, or paying our council tax – all of this can now be done online. In the public sector specifically, the Government's plan to make the UK 'digital by default' is underway, and more and more everyday services are moving online.

The housing sector is beginning to realise the importance both of this approach and of finding better ways to engage with tenants through technology. Plus, budgetary constraints mean that housing associations are increasingly moving towards providing more self-service options on their websites.

Despite this, only a small number of tenants are currently making use of these options, according to Housing Technology and Go ON UK's 2016 'Digital by Default' report – which revealed that only one in four had transacted with their housing provider via at least one online channel. The factors said to be preventing tenants from getting online were predominantly a lack of knowledge or training, and a lack of confidence.

This is, in a large part, a result of increasing digital exclusion – an issue currently causing nationwide concern. Indeed, MPs reported last year that more than 12m UK adults lack basic digital know-how. What's more, over a third of housing associations have no digital inclusion strategy, according to the Housing Technology and Go ON UK report.

Aside from issues surrounding digital exclusion, the housing sector is widely-known to not prioritise the user experience (UX) – an individual's experience with a product, system or service, including their perceptions, emotions, and behaviours – of its websites as it should. A lack of awareness around the importance of digital strategy and constraints imposed by budgets are two of the main reasons for this shortfall.

However, recent years have seen more and more companies, in a number of sectors, recognise the importance of good UX and what it can mean for organisations. In the housing sector specifically, it has the potential to increase tenant engagement, improve customer service, cut costs and simplify processes. So, it's in the best interests of housing associations to think about how they might improve the online experience for their tenants.

**In our research, we investigated the user experience of 10 UK housing association websites in February 2017, paying particular attention to:**

- **Usability – Were the sites fit for purpose, easy to use and learn?**
- **Online self-service – Did the sites offer self-service options, such as online accounts and the option to pay rent online?**
- **Cross-device experience – Did the sites work well across devices such as mobiles and laptops?**
- **Accessibility – Were the sites accessible for those living with visual, auditory, cognitive, or other disabilities?**

We end this report with a number of recommendations for those housing associations that are still struggling with where to start. We hope you find the results of this research useful.

**Hilary Stephenson, managing director at Sigma UK.**



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# Methodology and results matrix

To provide a fair evaluation of UK housing association websites we selected 10 sites at random and performed a heuristic evaluation of each. We also enlisted the help of Molly Watt - an independent consultant who lives with Usher Syndrome, which affects her sight and hearing - to test how well each of the sites accommodated users with visual and auditory impairments.

Each website was ranked on several elements relating to usability, online self-service, cross-device experience and accessibility, and given a score out of 30. The performance of the sites is listed below:

1. **Wulvern - 20/30**
2. **A2Dominion - 19/30**
3. **Wrekin Housing Association / Yorkshire Housing - 18/30**
4. **Sanctuary Housing - 16/30**
5. **Accent Group - 15/30**
6. **Places for People - 14/30**
7. **Great Places Housing Group / New Charter Group - 13/30**
8. **Genesis Housing Association - 9/30**

The average score across the 10 sites was 15.5/30 and the scores above demonstrate that work needs to be done by all of the associations to provide a better user experience. A full results matrix can be found on page 17 of this report.

The pages that follow highlight the best and worst practice examples of user experience as found in our testing, in each of the four areas.

# Usability

*Web usability, put simply, is how easy a website is to use. This could include factors such as ensuring that information is presented in a clear and concise way, there is a lack of ambiguity, and the essential information is displayed in appropriate areas on the site. We must also be mindful that while usability in general does incorporate elements of accessibility, we've dedicated a whole section of this report to it due to its growing importance.*

To assess the general usability of each website, we looked at factors such as:

- Was it clear from the homepage what the site had to offer?
- Were primary calls to action clear?
- Did the pages have a good visual hierarchy?
- Was the design of the pages uncluttered?

Most of the websites had considered aspects of usability. 70% of the sites made it clear from the homepage what they had to offer, and most of them made good use of content chunking - ensuring content was displayed in an easy to read way. However, only six of the menus highlighted where the user was on the website, while just two of the sites were easy to read by those with a reading age of 12-13 on the 'About' page (WebAIM recommends that content should be reasonably read by a person with roughly nine years of primary education). In addition, only three of the websites avoided carousels - a popular design trend which can frustrate users and cause them to miss vital information.

If a Trust property doesn't meet your physical or sensory needs, we offer our adaptations service to give you peace of mind, reassurance and security, whilst also letting you live independently in your home for longer. We will work with you and other agencies to offer support and advice.

**What is an adaptation?**

An adaptation is a change to your home that helps you to live more easily and independently on a day-to-day basis. We will fund minor adaptations costing up to £1,000 for all Trust properties and will use our own in-house trades team to carry out the work.

**Minor adaptations include:**

- Grab-bars
- Stair-rails
- Drop-down rails
- Lever taps
- Half-steps
- Modular ramping
- Temporary metal ramping

**Major adaptations**

All requests for major adaptations come via the Local Authorities Occupational Therapist Service and will be considered in accordance with our Adaptations policy.

**Major adaptations include**

- Level access showers
- Large ramps
- Room extensions

However, it is not always possible to adapt a home. If we cannot adapt your home, the Adaptations Team will discuss other options to help you find a home more suited to your needs.

*Content is split up with headings and bullet points which makes it easier to read*

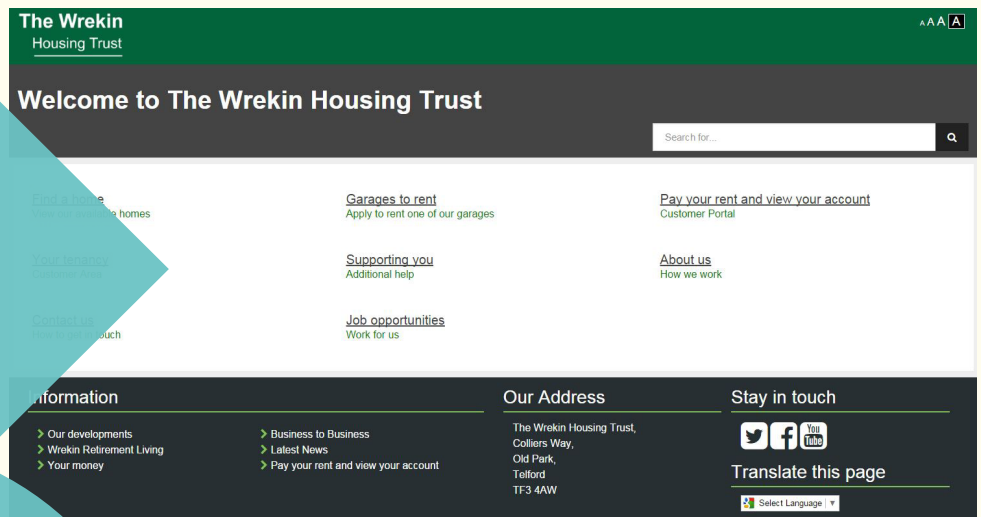
**Who does usability well?**

One of the websites that scored best for usability was Wrekin Housing Trust, because:

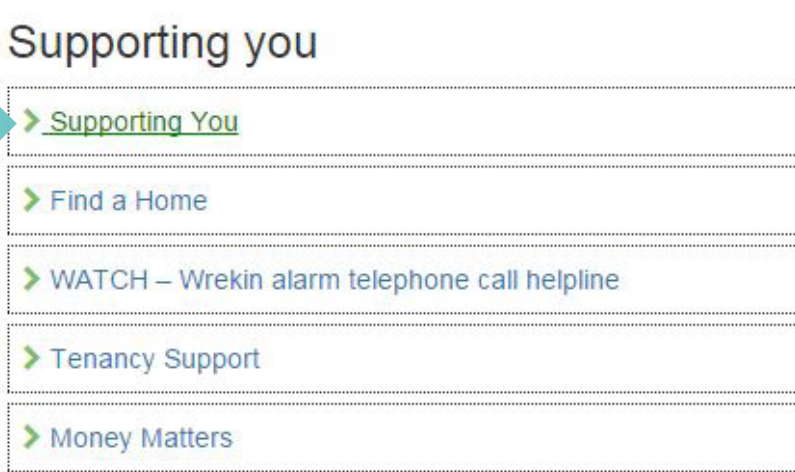
- It used a strong visual hierarchy – elements on the page weren't competing for attention;
- The site used good content chunking which made the site easy to read;
- It avoided the use of carousels;
- It used hover states – the links are underlined when hovered over so those using a mouse will know it is clickable, for example.

However, it's worth noting that although the site scored the highest for usability, the navigation of it is fairly difficult as there is no menu and the side navigation is on the right when traditionally, this is found on the left.

*Carousels are avoided and elements are not competing for attention*



*Links have hover states, they underline and go green when hovered over*





## Who needs improvement?

The Great Places website scored low for general usability, because:

- A fast-moving carousel is used on the homepage. This can be hard to read for a variety of users and also difficult to zoom in for users with visual impairments. There is also no progress bar to let users know how many items are in the carousel, meaning they might miss vital information;
- It is not clear what the homepage has to offer as it looks cluttered and busy. Elements of the site are competing for attention;
- The left-hand navigation is confusing, with lots of arrows and indentation and a muddled hierarchy;
- The menu is also difficult to read - there are lots of items in it without adequate spacing in between them, meaning that it's difficult to use on a mobile or tablet device;
- There is no favicon or descriptive page title which mentions 'Great Places' so it is difficult to find the website when a user has lots of tabs open and is moving between them.

*The carousel on the homepage is confusing for users*

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*The hierarchy of sub menu options also lacks clarity*



# Accessibility

*Web accessibility is the inclusive practice of removing barriers that prevent access to, or interaction with, websites by people with disabilities. It's about ensuring everyone is able to access websites and the information contained within them, regardless of whether they have a visual, cognitive, physical, or auditory impairment. It's also important to consider that accessibility can cover short term disabilities and situational circumstances – e.g. having a broken arm, struggling with glare from the sun etc. With an ageing population, and an increasing number of people living with disabilities, prioritising accessibility is crucial. Housing associations who realise the importance of this will set themselves apart.*

In addition, last year the European Commission announced that public sector websites and mobile applications across Europe must become be accessible by law – especially for the blind, deaf and hard of hearing. This means accessibility will no longer be a choice, rather, a requirement.

**To assess the accessibility of each website we looked at factors such as:**

- **Was the site screen reader friendly? (The software which allows blind or visually impaired users to read the text displayed on a computer screen with a speech synthesizer or braille display)**
- **Was there sufficient colour contrast across the site?**
- **Were forms on the site accessible? (Forms can be tricky for many users, including users with disabilities, and particularly screen reader users)**

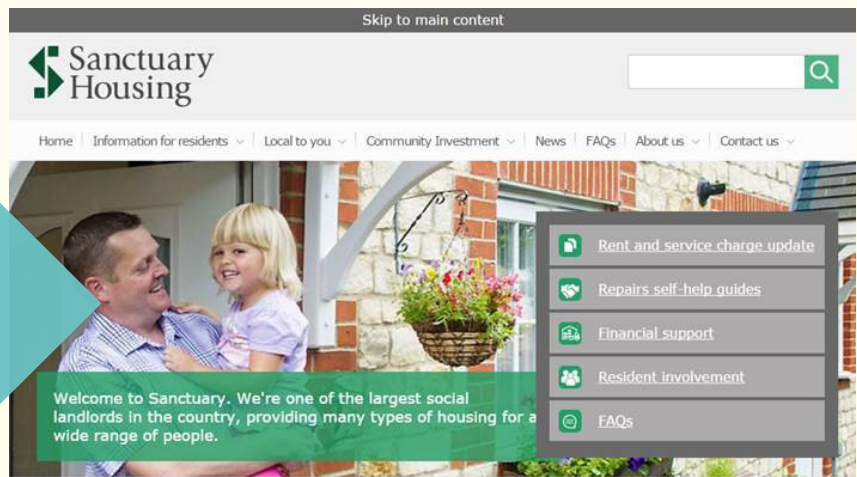
Seven out of the 10 websites scored way below average (50%) for accessibility. None of the sites contained descriptive and appropriate alternative text and only three of the sites contained skip links – internal page links which aid navigation around the current page, rather than to completely new pages. Skip links are mainly used by screen reader users for bypassing over repetitive page content. In addition, only one of the sites used sufficient colour contrast.

## Who does it well?

While none of the sites scored particularly well when it came to accessibility, Sanctuary Housing was one of the highest scoring sites. This was because:

- The site has a 'skip to content' link, which allows keyboard and screen reader users to access the content quicker, so they can skip the navigation;
- Forms throughout the website are accessible for screenreader users;
- There is more than one way to navigate through the site – e.g. through the use of search or a sitemap;
- Users can successfully zoom in and out of the page on a touch screen device (e.g. iPad)

*There is a skip to content link so users can bypass the navigation easily*

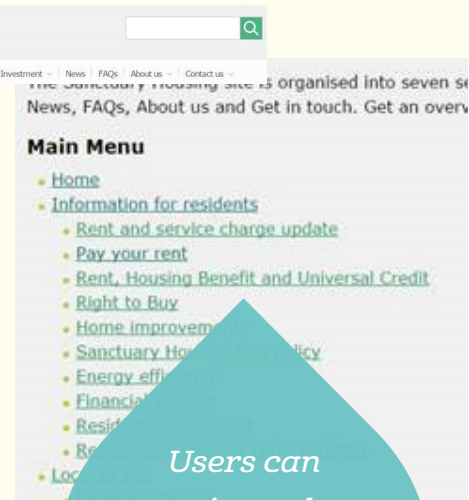


*There is the ability to zoom in on the pages, on touch-screen devices*

A screenshot of a "My details" form. It has several input fields with labels: "First name", "Surname", "Address", "Email address", and "Telephone number". Each label is followed by a small green icon of a person. The "Telephone number" field has a dropdown menu with "+44" selected. The form is designed with clear labels and fieldsets to assist screen reader users.

*On the contact form, fields have associated form labels and fieldsets to assist screen reader users*

*Users can navigate the website by using the menu, search and sitemap*





## Who needs improvement?

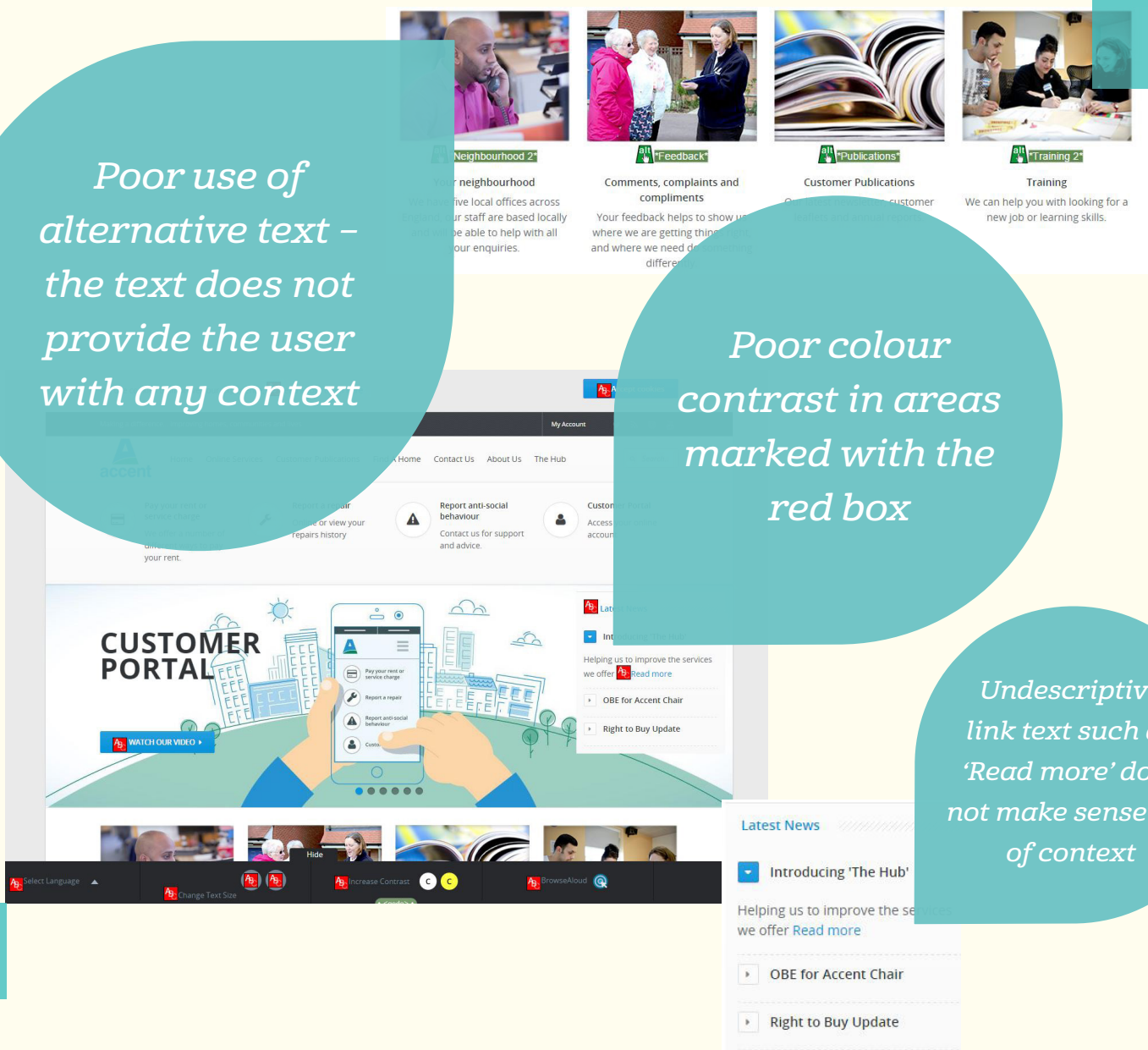
Many of the sites we tested scored badly for accessibility. Accent Group is one of the organisations which needed most improvement in this area, because:

- Text is not successfully enlarged when the browser font size settings are changed to large, as the menu text remains the same size and the carousel text overlaps each other;
- Alternative text (which is read out to screen reader users) does not describe what is in the images;
- The website uses un-descriptive link text which does not make sense out of context – this should be avoided as it causes issues for screen reader users who often browse the page by reading the links and the ‘Read More’ option doesn’t provide any information;
- Many areas have insufficient colour contrast meaning it will likely be difficult to read for users with low vision.

*Poor use of alternative text – the text does not provide the user with any context*

*Poor colour contrast in areas marked with the red box*

*Undescriptive link text such as ‘Read more’ does not make sense out of context*



# Online self-service

*As the ability to directly access services online ourselves becomes even more important, increasing numbers of housing associations are attempting to transfer more services online. Not only this, but the proven return on investment of digitalising services speaks for itself – it is predicted that face-to-face contact costs on average £8.62 per transaction, phone contact costs £2.83 per transaction, while web contact costs a meagre £0.15 per transaction (SOCITM Insight, Potential for channel shift in local government (England), 2012). From a resourcing and economical point of view, online self-service makes total sense.*

But just how many associations are already on this journey, and are current self-service offerings simply ticking a box or providing a good user experience? In this part of the testing we looked at:

- Did the site have an easy to find and secure account area?
- Did tenants have the option to pay online?
- Were there options to request and view repairs?

Most of the associations we tested were well on their way to achieving good things with online self-service. In fact, almost half of the sites scored full marks in this area of testing. All of the sites had the option to pay rent online and eight out of 10 had an online account area. However, this area was only easy to locate on half of the sites. An additional 60% of the sites had the ability to request and view repairs online.

## Who does it well?

A number of the sites scored well, including A2Dominion. This was because:

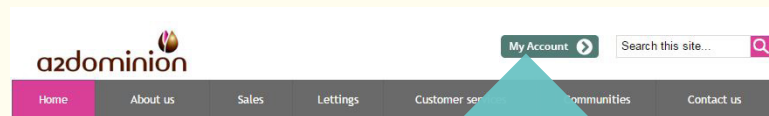
- There was a clear link to the account area – in the header – so it can be accessed from every page
- The account area is secure
- It is clear what the account area offers

## Who needs improvement?

Great Places was one of the associations that fell down when it came to online self-service.

This was because:

- It offered an online account area but it was not secure (HTTPS) which is essential to ensure that data is protected



*The website has a clear link to the account area*

*The account area is well laid out and it is clear what it has to offer*

A screenshot of the 'My Account' page on the A2Dominion website. The page is divided into three columns. The left column is titled 'Welcome to My Account' and contains text about registering for an account and accessing it. The middle column is a list of services: 'Request repairs', 'Check statements', 'View repairs', 'Pay bills online', and 'Tell us about an issue', each with a corresponding icon. The right column is titled 'About A2Dominion' and contains text about the company's residential property group, along with logos for 'Housebuilder Awards 2015' and 'WhatHouse? Awards 2015'.

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# Cross-device experience

*Having a seamless experience across devices – whether that’s on a desktop, tablet or mobile phone – is crucial in today’s connected world. In 2016, web browsing on mobile (smartphone and tablet) overtook desktop for the first time. Consumers are increasingly demanding to be able to access information and services on the move, so for housing associations, this is a crucial consideration. For this section of our testing we looked at:*

- Were the websites responsive or adaptive?
- Did the associations have a mobile app?
- Were the websites mobile and tablet friendly?

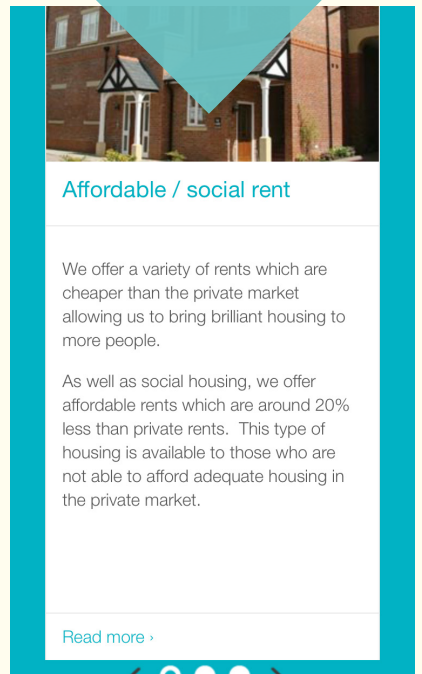
The results of this section were a mixed bag, with some associations scoring extremely poorly, and some scoring well. Most of the sites had invested in a responsive or adaptive website, yet only three out of the 10 sites were tablet friendly.

## Who does it well?

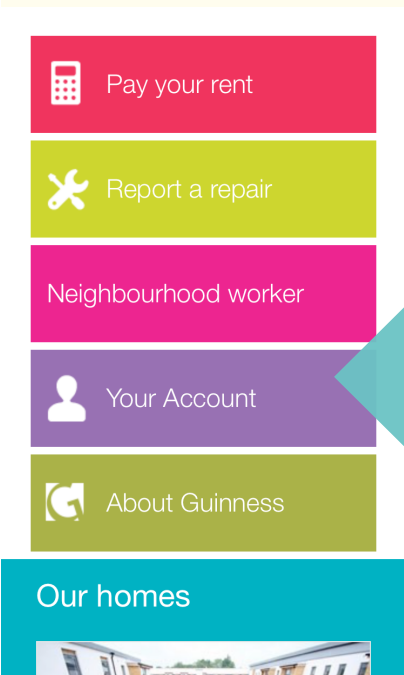
Wulvern was the only website that scored full marks for cross-device experience. This was because:

- It has large touch points (big buttons) and large text so no zoom is required
- The text is large enough to read on a small device

*Text is easy to read on a mobile device*



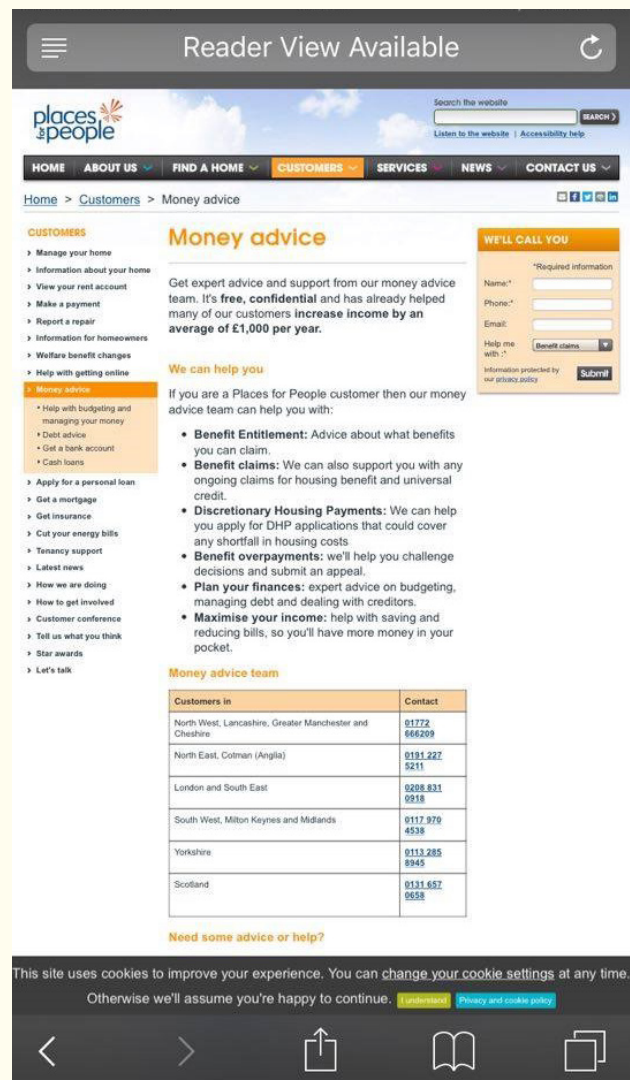
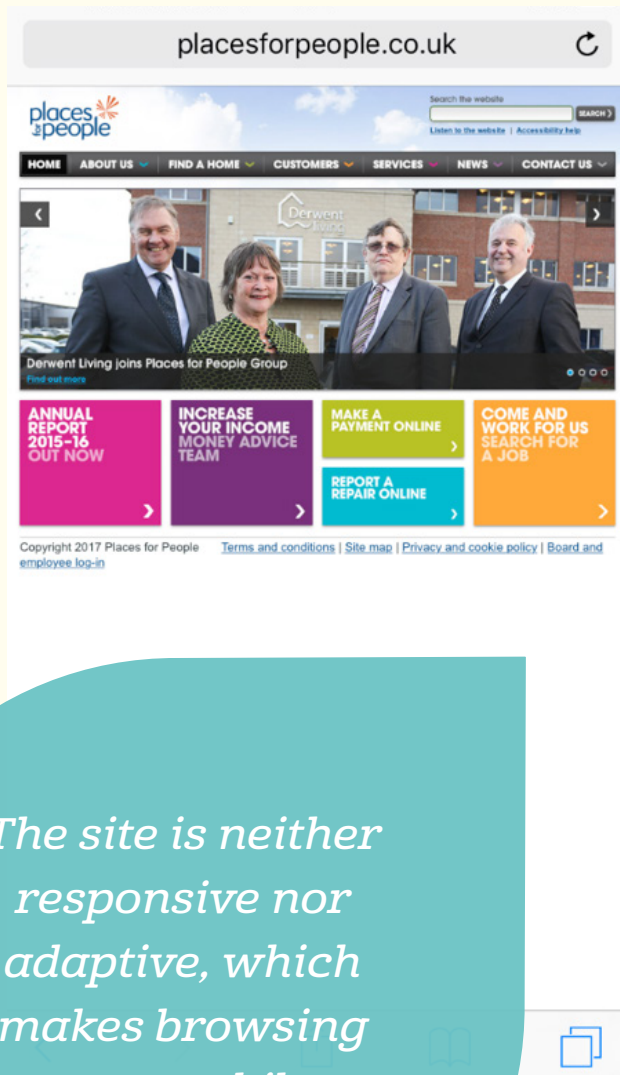
*Buttons are large and easy to understand and interact with on a mobile device*



## Who needs improvement?

Places for People didn't pick up any marks for cross-device experience, because:

- The mobile site is not responsive or adaptive – zooming is required on the site; the font is very small and difficult to read on a mobile device
- The content pages are particularly hard to read



*The site is neither responsive nor adaptive, which makes browsing on a mobile or tablet very difficult*

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# Results overview

*Overall, it became obvious from our research that all of the housing associations had considered the usability of their sites to some extent. Most explained clearly to users what they had to offer and made good use of content chunking. However, accessibility was lagging across most of the sites, meaning they might be difficult to navigate and to understand by users with varying disabilities. Online self-service was an area where most organisations scored well – clearly recognising the importance of offering services online. And while some had considered what the user experience was like across various channels – mobile and tablet – most still had work to do in this area.*

## **Where should housing associations go from here?**

With so many different areas to consider, housing associations could be forgiven for not knowing where to begin. However, there are a number of sensible starting points for those wanting to improve their user experience.

**In order to make a website usable, businesses should look to:**

1. **Ensure the page layout / design isn't too cluttered**
2. **Have an easy to use navigation system**
3. **Avoid the use of carousels – a popular design trend which can be confusing and lead to missed information**
4. **Make it clear from the homepage exactly what the website has to offer**
5. **Ensure the primary calls to action are clear**

**In order to make a website accessible, housing associations should:**

1. **Ensure the zoom function is not disabled so tablet users can zoom in and out**
2. **Ensure all areas of interactions are accessible using a keyboard and screen reader**
3. **Make sure images contain descriptive alternative text to ensure users with sight loss know what they contain , or alternatively, blank if the images are decorative or the context is provided in the surrounding text**
4. **Ensure sites have sufficient colour contrast**
5. **Use skip links – so users using screen readers can easily skip past repetitive content**



To ensure a website has a good cross-device experience, organisations should:

1. Invest in a responsive or adaptive website
2. Make sure the website is mobile and tablet-friendly
3. Consider the development of a mobile application.

In order to optimise their self-service options, housing associations should:

1. Develop a secure online account system which is easy to operate for all users
2. Ensure tenants can easily find what they're looking for within an account
3. Consider offering a bigger range of services online.



# Key takeaways

**Online self-service:** As the development of online services across multiple sectors continues to make life simpler for consumers, housing associations will be expected to provide a comprehensive portfolio of their services online. Add to this, increasing budgetary constraints on associations, and optimising self-service is likely to be one of the most important points on associations' agendas in coming years. And while our research did show that most organisations are making inroads in this area, they will need to do more moving forward around service design and the end-to-end customer experience.

**Prioritising accessibility:** With an ageing population, and an increasing number of people living with disabilities, providing online services that are accessible will only continue to grow in importance. Accessibility was one of the lowest scoring areas we looked at within our research, so associations need to take note and be doing more to streamline the experiences of everyone using their online services, regardless of ability. While many organisations hold a number of misconceptions about accessibility – it costs too much money to make an accessible website, accessible sites aren't aesthetically pleasing – this couldn't actually be further from the truth. As long as it's considered from the outset, accessibility can be incorporated into a website pretty simply, without leaving a huge dent in budgets. Not only this, but it's also important to remember that accessible websites benefit most users – having factors such as descriptive headings and good colour contrasts, for example – so it doesn't make sense not to adopt them.

**Considering digital exclusion:** In a world spurred on by technological innovation, where even our Government is striving to be 'digital by default', digital inclusion has never been more important – whether an organisation operates in the public or private sector. Obviously, to be fully digitally inclusive, the job goes much further than simply designing a user-friendly website and streamlined online services. We've not investigated the state of digital exclusion within this report, but it's something that cannot be ignored. Housing associations must consider training tenants on digital skills where needed, and possibly even affording them access to the equipment they need to be able to access services online in the first place.





# Can we help you?

## We are Sigma

Established in 2007, Sigma is a leading digital User Experience (UX) agency, which designs, develops and supports information-rich web sites, intranets, mobile solutions and applications. By putting users at the heart of its solutions, Sigma helps to add genuine business value and bring people together.

Sigma works with companies large and small, in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, nationally and internationally. The team believes strongly in developing long term, mutually beneficial strategic partnerships with its customers, with key clients including InterContinental Hotels Group, Sport England and the BBC.

In addition, Sigma also runs the North's leading digital UX event – Camp Digital. Now in its sixth year, Camp Digital attracts world-class speakers who discuss the most important topics and trends in the UX and digital community: [www.wearesigma.com/campdigital](http://www.wearesigma.com/campdigital)

Sigma is part of Sigma IT Consulting – a Swedish IT Services firm with over 3,000 staff throughout the world.

For more information please visit: [www.wearesigma.com](http://www.wearesigma.com)



# Full results matrix

## Usability

		Great Places	Places for People	Accent Group	Sanctuary Housing	Wrekin Housing Trust	New Charter	Wulvern Housing	A2Dominion Housing Group	Yorkshire Housing	Genesis Housing Association	Score
21	Homepage is clear on what the website has to offer	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	7
22	Primary calls to action are clear	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	5
23	Buttons and links have hover states	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	7
24	Good terminology of nav	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	6
25	Menu highlights where user is	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	6
26	Pages have good visual hierarchy	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	5
27	Page layout / design isn't cluttered	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	3
28	Good use of content chunking	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	9
29	Page is easily read by people with a reading age of 12-13 year olds (using the 'About' page)	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	2
30	Carousels are avoided	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	3
Total		3	6	6	7	7	3	7	6	6	2	

# Accessibility

		Great Places	Places for People	Accent Group	Sanctuary Housing	Wrekin Housing Trust	New Charter	Wulvern Housing	A2Dominion Housing Group	Yorkshire Housing	Genesis Housing Association	Score
10	The site is screen reader / keyboard friendly	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	1
11	The website clearly shows the focus area when tabbing around the site	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	2
12	The heading levels go in a sequential order and are not skipped	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	4
13	You can successfully zoom in and out of the page on a touch screen device e.g. iPad	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	8
14	Images contain descriptive alternative text, or blank for decorative images	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	0
15	Link text describes the destination (e.g. not 'Read more')	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	7
16	Forms are accessible (e.g. form labels associated with form entry fields)	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
17	There is sufficient colour contrast	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	1
18	Text is successfully enlarged when the browser font settings are configured	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	4
19	There are skip links	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	3
20	There is more than one way to navigate around the site (e.g. search, sitemap etc.)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	10
Total		5	4	2	6	5	6	4	6	4	5	



## Online self-service

		Great Places	Places for People	Accent Group	Sanctuary Housing	Wrekin Housing Trust	New Charter	Wulvern Housing	A2Dominion Housing Group	Yorkshire Housing	Genesis Housing Association	Score
1	The site has an account area	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	8
2	Online account is easy to find	Y	N	Y	N/A	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N/A	5
3	The account area is secure (HTTPS)	N	Y	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N/A	7
4	You can pay rent on-line	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	10
5	You can request and view repairs	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	6
Total		4	4	5	1	3	3	5	5	5	1	

## Cross-device experience

		Great Places	Places for People	Accent Group	Sanctuary Housing	Wrekin Housing Trust	New Charter	Wulvern Housing	A2Dominion Housing Group	Yorkshire Housing	Genesis Housing Association	Score
6	The site is responsive/adpative	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	8
7	There is a mobile app	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	2
8	The website is tablet friendly	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	3
9	The website is mobile friendly	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	6
Total		1	0	2	2	3	1	4	2	3	1	
Overall Total		13	14	15	16	18	13	20	19	18	9	
		8th/9th	7th	6th	5th	3rd/4th	8th/9th	1st	2nd	3rd/4th	10th	



# Talk to us!

We're always happy to listen, talk and help. Please contact us with any questions, ideas or suggestions.

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**P:** +44 (0)1625 410 982

