

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF DIGITAL INCLUSION IN LEVELLING UP

BE News and Swish Fibre brought together a panel of experts at the UKREiF conference earlier this month to discuss how the development sector is promoting digital connectivity

THE PANEL

Andrew Atkins, development director, Kier Property

Liz Banks, partner, Freeths

Mary-Anne Bowring, chief executive, The Ringley Group

Nick Bratt, head of business development, Swish Fibre

Olivia Harris, chief executive, Dolphin Living

Conor Nolan, co-founder, Swish Fibre

Amanda Rennie, operations director, Moda Living

Thomasin Renshaw, chief development officer, Pocket Living

Hardeep Thandi, director, property development, UTB

Anastasiya Viazmikina, B2B marketing manager, Swish Fibre

Simon Creasey, head of content, *BE News*, chair



inequality comes in many forms, as demonstrated by the government's Indices of Multiple Deprivation. Moreover, its definition flexes and changes over time, hence why the indices are updated with each iteration.

Perhaps most prominently in recent years, people have started talking about digital exclusion. After all, if you don't have access to a reliable internet connection and the right devices, life is not only more inconvenient – it is also more expensive.

As a result, digital inclusion has a critical role to play in the government's levelling-up agenda. It was with this in mind that *BE News*, together with Swish Fibre, brought together a panel of regeneration and housing experts at the recent UKREiF conference to debate the role that the development industry has in promoting digital connectivity.

Here we share the edited highlights of what was a lively, wide-ranging debate.

QUESTION: How important is good digital connection to attracting tenants and buyers to a development?

RENNIE: When visitors come to us, I think there's an expectation that everything is included and that everything is thought of for you. Convenience is one of the biggest reasons you would live in one of our developments. A big part of that is that



they may want to run their businesses from their home.

When we're showing apartments, people come in and they see the televisions and that everything's connected. It's plug and play – you get your key, open the door and everything's connected. I think people really like that. It's a real selling point.

RENSHAW: We actually have an annual residents' survey, so I can tell you that connectivity is at number three on their list of requirements after access to transport and space. So, it's really important to our buyers.

We also know from that survey that 60% of our residents always or often work from home, so it's really important that they can do what they need to do. We have a lot of third sector and creative industry workers.



It's plug and play – you get your key, open the door and everything's connected. It's a real selling point

Amanda Rennie



Amanda Rennie



Thomasin Renshaw



Mary-Anne Bowring



Buyers expect to have some hassle and expect a delay to getting connectivity. It's different with renters

Mary-Anne Bowring

BOWRING: There is a difference between a buyer's mindset and a renter's mindset. Buyers expect to have some hassle and expect a delay to getting connectivity. It's different with renters. Also, we've got sites where there are clauses that say you can't work from home in the tenancy agreement. With BTR [build to rent], you can sell that you can work from home. In some centres we've actually got business names on the walls in reception.

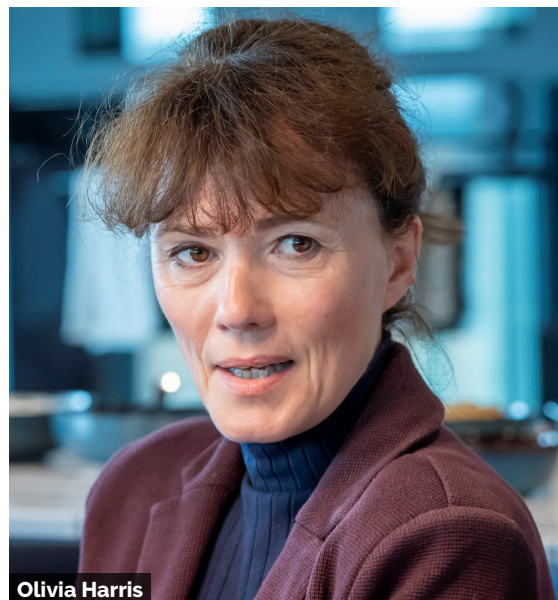
THANDI: I think you're right there in terms of the differentiation between purchasers and renters. Renters expect a certain level or standard of amenities, especially in BTR developments and also in co-living schemes nowadays as well.

QUESTION: Has the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on how highly customers rate connectivity in terms of importance?

HARRIS: Anecdotally, I think people can live without hot water for two hours, but if you turn off their internet for two hours you'll get complaints. So it's important. And obviously, more and more people are working from home since the pandemic. So we've been through a project recently where we had to refresh the technology because it is changing so much. The problem was that the organisation we contracted didn't have the capacity to deliver it.



Hardeep Thandi



Olivia Harris



Nick Bratt



Liz Banks



Conor Nolan

QUESTION: So, it's not just about having connectivity per se, but having the right connectivity?

BRATT: That's one of the things we try and talk to developers about. We've futureproofed our technology for years and years in terms of the spec of what we're putting in. So, we're talking to developers and trying to get their heads around that and saying "you're going to massively inconvenience yourselves if you just think about what you need today". They don't want to have to dig up the street again or pull all of the wiring out of their flats.

NOLAN: It required a massive investment at the beginning, which was a decision that didn't sit very comfortably with our investors at the time! We are delivering a 10GB service to

every single property as and when they need it, with no latency. So, everybody on a street could all start downloading everything all at the same time and they wouldn't be affected.

QUESTION: How does the availability of good-quality connectivity vary across the country?

THANDI: There are a lot of people here [at UKREiiF] from London and it's surprised me how much I'm picking up on how far behind the scene London is compared with other major global cities in terms of connectivity. That's ultimately going to affect growth.

HARRIS: We're based in Westminster and it's because of the density of the population and the fact there are quite a lot of organisations competing [for the same bandwidth]. But



It's surprised me how far behind the scene London is compared with other major global cities in terms of connectivity

Hardeep Thandi

you go outside the central London areas and there's less competition and you're less likely to have a problem.

BANKS: I live out in the sticks and I had a big presentation that we were doing, a big tender on Teams on Monday. So I actually went into the office, just in case there were problems with my wifi because I didn't want to be the one on the screen who you couldn't hear or who was glitching. But you can have problems in the city centre as well.

QUESTION: Is there a balance that needs to be struck between the quality of the tech and affordability?

HARRIS: In our case, people are very focused on affordability. With the majority of our homes, people earn between £30,000



Andrew Atkins



Our minimum product is ridiculously good. It's really cheap and we don't bind people into contracts

Nick Bratt

and £60,000 a year, so they can't afford to market rent in London, or if they can afford to market rent, it's not meeting their housing needs. So, connectivity is probably not the reason they make the decision to move in with us. But it's still one of the things that needs to be functional as soon as they move in.

ATKINS: When you're doing big regeneration schemes and actually working across tenures, then there's perhaps a bit of a nuance here. You can bring the fibre in but

then you've got to have an ability to talk positively about pricing and engagement so that everybody in every tenure across that development doesn't get left behind in terms of access.

And that can be difficult when you're there at the start and you're making a decision about, say, a fibre provider, which is then going to have a monopolistic position for ad infinitum.

So, how do you reconcile the point about affordability in 10 years' time or 20 years' time so that every member of that community has access for an affordable price?

BRATT: We try to be quite disruptive in this area, so we do all sorts of different things. Our minimum product is ridiculously good. It's really cheap and we don't bind people into contracts, so it's very affordable with the various offers. If you haven't got the money you can leave and that's fine.

I think a lot of the providers need to be a bit more responsible and stop trying to tie people into three-year contracts when their economic circumstances can change all the time. Suppliers need to be a bit more flexible.

RENSHAW: What we have done is collaborated with [a provider] who gives all our residents a three-month free trial. Literally, all they have to do is fire them up and it's instant. Everybody has it. For us,

it's good because it means our clients will always have broadband as soon as they move in, but then they've got three months to figure out whether they want to change or not. It's a good solution.

QUESTION: Can developers and landlords also make use of top-quality connectivity, in terms of energy efficiency, for instance?

RENNIE: I think there's definitely a lot there. We get a lot of data from our buildings. So we have a partnership with [a technology firm] where we have these wellness sensors in every apartment and we can monitor carbon footprint right down to the apartment level. You can measure air quality. You can do noise pollution.

It's valuable to residents, too. The system can give them a score so it gamifies it and people in different parts of the building can start to have a bit of a competition, albeit anonymously, around sustainability. □



**For more information on
BE News content solutions events,
please contact:
sian@benews.co.uk**