

# Evolving approaches to resident safety

As part of *Inside Housing's* continuing resident safety campaign in association with Aico, we look at two landlords' innovative work around fire risk assessment and education

Thirteen Group and WHG have been adapting their approach to resident safety. Thirteen has focused on intensive customer engagement and education around building safety, while WHG has taken a high-tech approach to fire safety by creating 'digital twins' of its buildings. *Inside Housing* speaks to managers who have led on these projects below and also gathers the views of sector experts who have been involved with the resident safety campaign this year (see box, far right).

## THIRTEEN GROUP

For Teesside-based Thirteen Group, customers are at the heart of home safety. In response to the Hackitt Review, it developed a programme of customer engagement tailored to reach as many residents as possible.

The campaign involves a range of communication methods, including social media and text messages, leaflet drops, socially distanced drop-in sessions and good old-fashioned door-knocking. It has been developed with plenty of resident input; a building safety-involved customers' working group has worked with Thirteen's staff on every element of the campaign.

"The broad aims [of the campaign] were to ensure that all our residents and our homes remain safe," says Stephanie Kelley, building safety operations manager at Thirteen. "We wanted to educate our customers and residents to ensure they knew what to do in the event of a fire, how to contact us and how we would respond."

The campaign is based on succinct, bite-sized chunks of information about practical steps people can take: the importance of keeping clutter out of corridors and communal spaces; or about electrical and gas safety.

"We want people to contact us if there's anything they are unsure of, because we are really keen that our service isn't just reactive," says Ms Kelley.

Thirteen has put a lot of effort into educating its staff as well. "The building safety team leads on this, but we ensure all our staff are engaged," says Ms Kelley. "So, at any point, our neighbourhood or ground maintenance teams, for example, can give consistent advice."

The group delivered a webinar to its 1,300 staff

covering building safety and how to communicate it.

"So if a customer has a query, it doesn't matter what touch-point they use to engage with us, they are getting the same consistent advice," explains Ms Kelley.

During the launch of the campaign, the group asked for colleagues across the organisation to volunteer to become building safety advocates who can work on the ground to support the building safety team. It is also working with its involved customers' working group to devise a 'feeling of safety' questionnaire that it says will help inform future campaigns or educational activities.

Thirteen's campaign is meeting its aims. Since launch, there has been a 63% reduction in false fire alarm activations. According to Ms Kelley, these were usually the result of someone cooking without ventilating their kitchen sufficiently or smoking where they shouldn't be. There has also been a significant reduction – 36% – in the number of 'fire risk actions'; that is, items of concern noticed by staff as they conduct regular fire risk assessments. These could include a lack of sufficient safety signage, or clutter that needs to be removed from a communal area. Ms Kelley suggests this means residents are more aware of their own responsibilities, and are noticing and reporting incidents more often.

"It really is about tailoring our messages to the needs of our residents – and that has really paid off for us."



Kimberley Craig, Thirteen's building compliance specialist, with involved customer Michelle Bendelow

*"It really is about tailoring our messages to the needs of our residents – and that has really paid off for us"*

Stephanie Kelley, Thirteen

*"[The Twinnedit model] brings the building to life. That's got to be the best technology we could adopt at this stage. And that's what we created"*

Paul Dockerill, WHG



WHG's 'digital twins' models "helps to develop the resident fire safety strategy within a building"

## WHG

West Midlands-based landlord WHG has partnered with Deeo, the digital design and engineering consultancy, to create 'digital twins': comprehensive, computer-generated 3D models of its high-rise buildings.

Each building's exterior is mapped by drones. Workers then move around the interior with handheld tools that scan every corridor, kitchen and stairway to an accuracy of 10mm. The whole process takes just a few days.

These digital twins confer several safety benefits. Firstly, they educate residents about fire safety while helping to make them feel safer in their homes, too.

At a recent open day, WHG handed out iPads to residents and showed them how to navigate around the digital version of the building in which they lived. To begin with, the residents had fun exploring parts of the building that they had never seen before: they looked inside cupboards and ventured out onto the roof.

"And then we talked about the evacuation process, and why it's important to stay put [in the buildings under discussion on the day], and we were able to show on the model what compartmentation means," says Paul Dockerill, director of energy and programme management at WHG. It enabled WHG to show residents exactly how the safety procedures protect them.

"If we had tried to say that on bits of paper with loads of writing – it doesn't work like that," he says. "But this way, they understood that every area of the building is safe, on its own."

## Sector views

Monica Barnes, chair of the Resident Strategy Group at Optivo, came to London as part of the Windrush generation. She became an involved volunteer with Optivo, which led her to being recognised for an MBE.

Darren Hartley has worked in the regulated housing sector for almost 20 years. Since 2016, he has been chief executive of the tenant charity TAROE Trust, lobbying for change at a national level.

Tina Mistry, relationships manager at Aico, has been a driving force in developing partnerships to facilitate change.

*"It's great to see residents being informed and empowered about fire prevention"*

Tina Mistry, Aico