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Innovative Housing and Care Specialist Wins Major Digital Award

Housing and care experts, who put technology at the forefront of helping people with disabilities live independently have been recognised with a major award.

Edinburgh-based Blackwood Homes and Care is renowned for its clever use of leading-edge technology to transform lives as part of its social housing and care services across Scotland.

Now it has claimed one of the biggest accolades in the social housing world, after collecting a UK Housing Award – the sector’s equivalent of the Oscars - at a glittering ceremony in London.

Chief Executive Fanchea Kelly, who collected the ***Outstanding Approach to Promoting Digital Inclusion Award***, paid tribute to the work of the 500 hundred staff at Blackwood, who work across 29 of Scotland’s 32 local authority areas.

She said: “The housing and care sectors are facing some of the toughest challenges we’ve ever seen. However, at the same time the leap forward we are seeing in technology is giving us tools to meet these challenges, while greatly improving how people can live life to the full.

“Since Blackwood was founded more than 40 years ago, we’ve been renowned for pushing the ways in which technology can help people with disabilities, age-related conditions or other impairments to live more independently.

“But in the past few years the way our staff have embraced and developed digital technologies to benefit our customers has been a step change. This award is a fitting recognition of that huge effort and commitment from the entire team.”

The annual UK Housing Awards are organised by Inside Housing and the category was fiercely contested. Judges were looking for an organisation that had done outstanding work to help customers get to grips with the digital world.

Blackwood’s customers were traditionally among the most digitally excluded people in Scotland as a result of disabilities, age, or complex care needs. So, it developed its CleverCogs system, a touchscreen home hub installed in customers’ properties.

It allows customers to enjoy benefits others take for granted, including entertainment, access to services and real-time communication with family and friends. It also strives to make Blackwood’s services more accessible and efficient.

Since rolling out the system an impressive 75% of users moved from being extremely digitally excluded to being more confident, less lonely with increased high levels of user engagement.

An initial test involved 100 customers with varying care and mobility needs across Dundee, Stirling, Ayr and Edinburgh. More than 100,000 interactions and 2,100 family and friends communications were made during this time.

During testing, Blackwood continued to evolve the system to overcome hurdles raised by users, from having the right stylus for arthritic hands, or to preparing additional on-line user guides – and that resulted in stunning success stories.

One customer at Blackwood's Broom Court in Stirling has cerebral palsy and is a wheelchair user with limited verbal communication. CleverCogs allowed her to be more independent, socialise regularly and communicate effectively with staff. She regularly enjoys virtual family time as she can now 'visit' her sister through the video function.

She has become a pioneer of the system, tutoring other residents and building a better sense of community within Broom Court and has developed the digital skills to be able to browse the internet, listen to music through YouTube and play games. Her outstanding efforts were recognised when she picked up the 2016 Scottish Care Award for Individual Achievement.

Another customer in Dundee was enthusiastic about the system but suffered anxiety because he had never previously used a computer. However, weeks after receiving his device, he told how it broadened his horizons, provided him with newly-found access to news and sports websites and *"opened up a lot of avenues for me."*

Blackwood's employees have also seen huge benefits, with many workers praising the system for raising their own digital skills. Meanwhile CleverCogs also allows employees to save valuable time by reducing admin and allowing workers more direct contact with customers.

Now Blackwood is testing home automation products that link into CleverCogs. The pioneering new Blackwood House features many of these products which enables customers to control blinds, doors, lighting as well as featuring smart devices to enable extra services like falls monitoring, smart heating and health monitoring.

Judges were wowed by Blackwood's work, including CleverCogs and said: "the ethos and values of the organisation came through and the impact on the customers was incredible".

More than 700 housing sector influencers attended the event in London, with the awards attracting a record 414 submissions.

Fanchea Kelly added: "We all know that necessity is the mother of invention. The challenging financial climate for the care and housing sectors means everyone is having to get more innovative. That's what makes winning this award all the more gratifying."

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