Places for People — Delivering insights, sharing foresights

One Community. A simple enough statement that Places for People has at the core of their values, recognizing that their differences are what make them who they are and what allows their Communities to thrive. Having begun the task of building and managing Communities for people to live more than 50 years ago, the organization continues to change and enhance the lives of people of all ages, circumstances, and needs. The goal is simple in idea, but complex in execution — create opportunities and enrich the Community by investing in the future and working to solve the UK's housing crisis.

For such a noble and worthy cause, it's clear that Places for People has not only touched the lives of those they serve, but also their People that make these ambitions a reality. With over 230,000 homes and half a million Customers, the People behind Places for People are the driving factor for all its success. Whether directly involved with the upkeep and management of affordable housing, retirement homes, and city apartments, or working across one of over 100 leisure facilities, or even taking on more of a behind-the-scenes approach to customer service, website development, and data engineering, the enterprise touches all parts of society.

It's no surprise that this also includes the work of the internal audit team and, in particular, Jessica Keegan — Senior Audit Data Analyst. Jessica works within the Business Assurance team at Places for People which provides internal audit and assurance services for all the Group's companies (spanning the breadth of the UK)

and includes the team's Director, the Group Assurance Manager, five principal internal auditors, a trainee auditor, and a Junior Audit Data Analyst.

Karen Featherstone, Group Director of Assurance, and Sarah Nye, Group Assurance Manager with Places for People, have each been involved with the internal audit space for more than 21 years. In close alignment with the organization's Chief Executive Officer, their focus is to ensure that the internal audit team is much more involved throughout the organization, helping to drive positive change in the most "effortless" way possible.
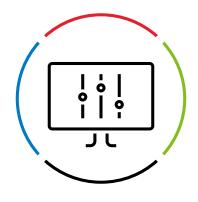
As a result, from leadership on down there is continued support for the internal audit team. They are viewed as an independent function that helps to improve not only efficiencies within the organization, but also drive better outcomes for their Customers. An outcome that offers tangible purpose for real people.

The drivers behind their good work

Regulation and compliance is a primary focus of Places for People. Not least of which is landlord safety and financial data analysis. As one might expect, the data behind these functions plays a key role, and it's up to the internal audit team to give assurance over these activities. Being able to extract data and analyze and establish an accurate baseline audit process that can be replicated is a valuable contribution to the overall audit process. It's through these efforts that others within the organization have acknowledged how important data-driven insights are to their continued success. What they can learn from the data analysis — both the insights and the foresights — and how this information can be used more effectively enhances their overall service levels, providing efficiency opportunities to nearly every corner of the business.

One such example involves the customer service department and the incoming data that it receives. While direct customer feedback is incredibly important to the housing industry, the insights that are gleaned from this data are used to demonstrate valuable forecasting. The data that is extracted can be evaluated and presented back to the customer service department to better manage the service provided to Customers. Jessica presented insights and trend analyses on the complaints that were received, which proved so useful that the team have since employed their own Data Analyst to continue with this monitoring and reporting.

"When it comes to data analytics, this was clearly the direction we needed to go to offer more assurance on strategic risks and help us explain the issues in greater detail to the business. They sit up and listen more closely when we can state that our data samples have increased from an average of 10% to upwards of 50-100%. It definitely adds more weight to our findings."

Sarah Nye
Group Assurance Manager

TeamMate Analytics: One piece of the larger puzzle

Places for People conducts a three-year audit plan which is reviewed and refreshed annually. This utilizes the robust set of tools offered by TeamMate+. From fieldwork, evidence storage, and issue recommendations to implementations and monthly reporting to the audit committee and executive board, TeamMate+ is their end-to-end audit management and workflow solution.

Continuous audit monitoring and planning has become an operational change that the Assurance team are seeing embraced across multiple different divisions of the Group. One such example is with the Affordable Housing arm of the Group ("Homes Plus") and their determination to maintain the highest quality of work. Whilst several audits in that area are planned for each year, they have reached out directly to the Business Assurance team to conduct more frequent reviews, assessments, and recommendations to ensure greater consistency in the work that they do, to mitigate risk and to make sure they are constantly fulfilling the Customer needs.

But how do data-driven insights and analysis play a role in the ongoing success of Places for People?

Every organization — and each function within those organizations — is continuously looking for rich data to better inform decision making. Whether that's the budget for marketing, operational efficiencies, or across a variety of distribution channels, everyone understands and can appreciate the importance of data. And while there may be some hesitancy within the internal audit space to adopt these data initiatives, Jessica Keegan and the team of internal auditors have embraced and incorporated data analytics into their corporate assurance planning and work using TeamMate Analytics to help inform the audit activity.

A recent payroll audit helps illustrate this point.

Working with 12 months of payroll data, Jessica utilized TeamMate Analytics to provide greater assurance. Beyond just the standard monthly payroll, the data was also sorted and analyzed by organization, employee start and end dates, the occasional variances of monthly pay in excess of an acceptable overtime allowance, and identifiers of payroll fraud.

While other analytics tools are currently available in the market, very few have been designed specifically with the internal auditor in mind. And therein lies the biggest impact TeamMate Analytics has provided to customers like Places for People. Working from a foundation of Microsoft Excel, TeamMate Analytics incorporates easy-to-use functionality that makes duplicate checks, merging data sets, identifying outliers, and expansive data review across subsidiaries a process that is quickly and seamlessly integrated into their workflow "with the click of a button."

Opportunities to utilize the TeamMate Analytics test library have also been identified. As a teachable moment, collaborating with internal auditors who were initially hesitant to incorporate data analytics into their workflow, Jessica Keegan demonstrated how the test library offers a wide range of analytical options. Over time, this has helped the team become more comfortable with the benefits of data analytics, while allowing them to grow and become stronger internal auditors.
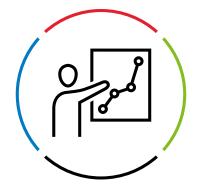
Reporting what's important

Reporting is an important part of an internal auditor's responsibility. It should be compelling, tell an accurate and complete story, and be informative to its audience. A robust, end-of-audit report is one way that an internal audit team can further demonstrate their value to an organization and better outcomes to the market they serve. But it's important to understand there's a difference between audit analytics and data visualization. Audit analytics uncover hidden risks, while data visualization helps to convey those findings.

Business intelligence solutions like Microsoft's Power BI® and Tableau® are visualization resources that are often adopted as more traditional data solutions. Having the flexibility to integrate with these tools using TeamMate+ has proven to be incredibly important for the internal audit team at Places for People and it has given them the added support they need.

The Business Assurance team understand that the audit and risk committee is always looking for greater assurance. When internal audit presents their findings in a more visually consumable and engaging manner, they are confident their delivery represents an accurate "snapshot in time" which helps the Audit and Risk Committee clearly understand what was tested, what the key findings were, and what the agreed actions to correct will be.

This focus on reporting was utilized during a recent review of the resource management. After pulling the required time tracking data, Jessica was able to identify where individual auditors may have exceeded the allocated time to conduct an audit and, based on those findings, better plan for the next year's audit schedule in a way that accommodates for any needed resource management changes. The visual output from this specific project made the reporting process easier to interpret, discuss, and work through, as well as highlight the accomplishments of the team and create a heightened sense of morale, teamwork, and a mutual desire to strive for continuous improvement.
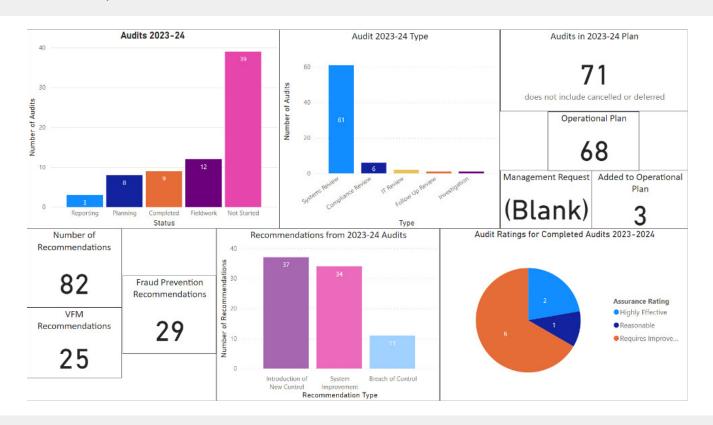
Painting a picture through reporting API

Whether the final internal audit report is represented by a dashboard, or the inclusion of graphical charts and tables inserted into a larger written report, the information that is shared with the audit committee needs to be relevant, easy to understand and discuss, and paint an accurate picture for the larger audience.

Sarah was involved in the initial pilot of the API reporting function in 2019 which helped produce a few of the reports that were not available from Team Insights. However, her lack of data analysis skills prevented her from using it to its full potential. This was one of Jessica's first tasks when she joined the team a year later.

Utilizing the functionality of Power BI®, Jessica can access the various audit data, status information, and recommendations and map them to the specific taxonomy within TeamMate+ to create and display the final report. "For anyone with a base level knowledge of data analytics, the process could not be any more straightforward," says Jessica Keegan, Senior Audit Data Analyst.

After the initial reporting output process has been developed, users of the TeamMate+ reporting API are able to quickly and seamlessly repurpose and reuse that reporting structure for all other audits currently being developed; allowing the team — from auditor to management and director levels — to focus on the details of the audit and dedicate their time to value add, rather than spending time on the administrative tasks of the workflow.

Using TeamMate+ reporting API has become a critical component of their overall audit function and an undeniable long-term return on investment. "It makes life so much easier. We receive several last-minute report requests, and the reporting API makes it possible for us to respond in a timely manner. And at the end of the day, it's your data and you should be the best person to understand it," explains Keegan.

When stakeholders at Places for People better understand the data, information, and recommendations the internal audit team is presenting, there are fewer follow-up questions and far less uncertainty and confusion. Clearly, a win for everyone involved.

"Anything that can minimize the reporting process is going to be a bonus for us. Jessica has been able to take the lead on this initiative and present the audit report in a completely different format for the audit committee. We have gone from a standard word document to a more visual report that utilizes screen captures, graphs, and pie charts, along with the associated commentary. This is much more impactful and easier to read and understand for our stakeholders," says Sarah Nye, Group Assurance Manager.

Predicting the future of Internal Audit

When asked what the future of internal audit may look like in the next few years, the team are focused on increasing the role data analytics will play within the internal audit function.

"Data Analytics is the future of internal audit, which is why we recruited Jessica to lead us on our data analytics journey," explains Karen Featherstone, Director of Assurance.

"Internal auditors will need to have some level of data analytics skills to be able to move forward and advance their careers," says Nye.

"Processes will continue to be established that will allow internal auditors to focus their time meeting with the people. The data will signal to the auditors in real time where there may be potential issues that need additional investigation, allowing for a much more responsive audit plan and detailing those priorities that ultimately drive the highest value," says Keegan.

TeamMate Analytics is the easy-to-use tool that encourages all your auditors to include analytics more consistently into their workflow, allowing them to expand their value, save time by working more efficiently and effectively, and provide deeper insights into underlying records while uncovering additional items of interest. TeamMate Analytics is designed by, and for, auditors, includes a tool for virtually every data analytics task you wish to perform, and offers features that you won't find in other analytics tools not made specifically for auditors.

Contact information

Americas
4221 W Boy Scout Blvd #500
Tampa, FL 33607
U.S.A.

Europe, Middle East, and Africa
8th Floor
30 Churchill Place
Canary Wharf
London
E14 5RE
United Kingdom
Phone: +44 20 3197 6566

Asia Pacific
5 Shenton Way
#20-01/03 UIC Building
Singapore 068808

Please visit tm.wolterskluwer.com
for more information.

Wolters Kluwer