BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE: HOW HOUSE BUILDERS ARE USING DIGITAL EXPERIENCES

ADAPTABLE

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INTRODUCTION

When you're buying a home, you're buying into an experience. Especially because it's a new home, as a housebuilder you need your customers to be able to imagine and envision living in your developments and creating a life there.

The market is full of housebuilders catering for a range of budgets and demographics. Amongst the housebuilders included in this report are those selling family starter homes, bungalows in retirement communities and city centre apartments. Each needs to be able to deliver a **digital experience** that reflects what they want to be known for - whether that's affordability, premium quality, a sense of community, and increasingly, energy efficiency.

You might assume that the biggest national UK housebuilders would be at the forefront of digital innovation - they've got the biggest budgets, teams and the most resources dedicated to sales and marketing.

In this report, we've set out to test this hypothesis and see just how well the UK's top housebuilders are performing from a digital perspective. Are they moving quickly enough to keep up with digital trends? Can they be agile enough to market to the next generation of buyers who demand more from digital?

HOW WE PUT THIS REPORT TOGETHER..

To create this report, we undertook an *audit* of the websites and surrounding digital experiences of the **top 40 housebuilders** in the UK in terms of revenue (full list in the appendix).

We evaluated them quantitatively and qualitatively on a range of aspects of their digital experiences:

✓ **CMS platform**

✓ **Presence of interactive & immersive tools/features:**

- Interactive site plans
- Mortgage or stamp duty calculators
- Customer portal
- 3D/Virtual property tours
- Live chat

✓ **Use of headless technology**

✓ **Elements of user experience:**

- Property/development search functionality & experience
- Navigation and intuitiveness
- Innovation and unique features
- Immersive content

Each housebuilder was given a score out 5 for the elements related to user experience, adding up to a maximum possible score of 20 for their digital experience.

EXPLORING DIGITAL TRENDS IN HOUSEBUILDING — HOW THEY HELP SELL MORE OFF PLAN

As technology advances and the options open up to housebuilders to create more immersive and engaging experiences online, there are several key trends and tools that they can take advantage of to help boost enquiries and sell more off plan.
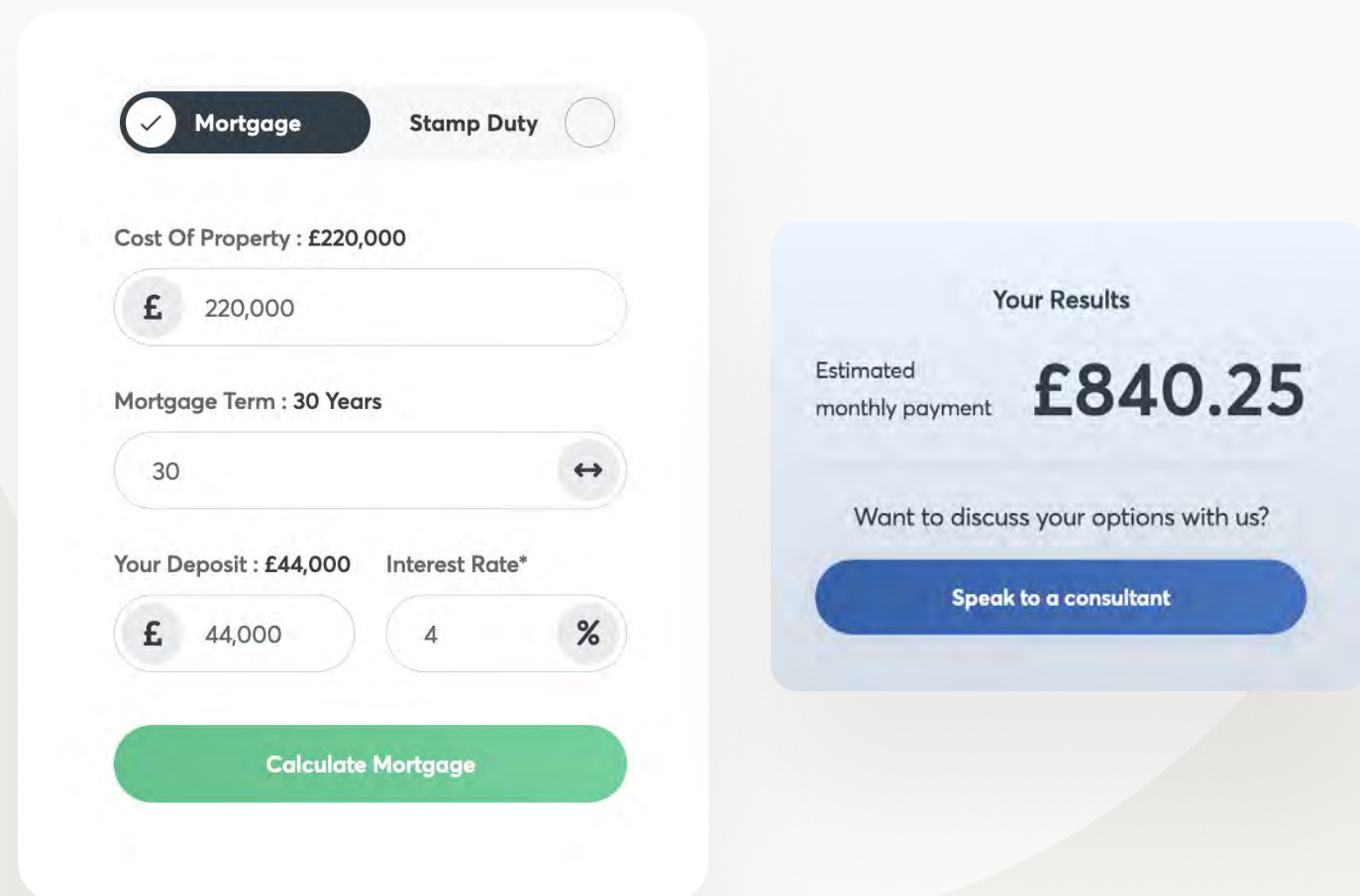
© Taylor Wimpey

INTERACTIVE SITE PLANS

Interactive site plans usually present an overhead view of the development with clickable plots. The level of detail varies, but it usually includes some sort of key (sometimes with clickable filters) that enables you to differentiate between plots with different statuses, e.g. available, coming soon and sold. These plans enable the buyer to visualise the location of the plot within the development, getting a sense of the environment as well as the property itself, obviously a key factor when deciding on a house purchase. Additionally, it also helps the user navigate around the development and between pages on the website in a more visually engaging way.

The Aynesdale ✕
Plot 56
Coming Soon

3 Bedrooms

Enter Plot

© Persimmon Homes
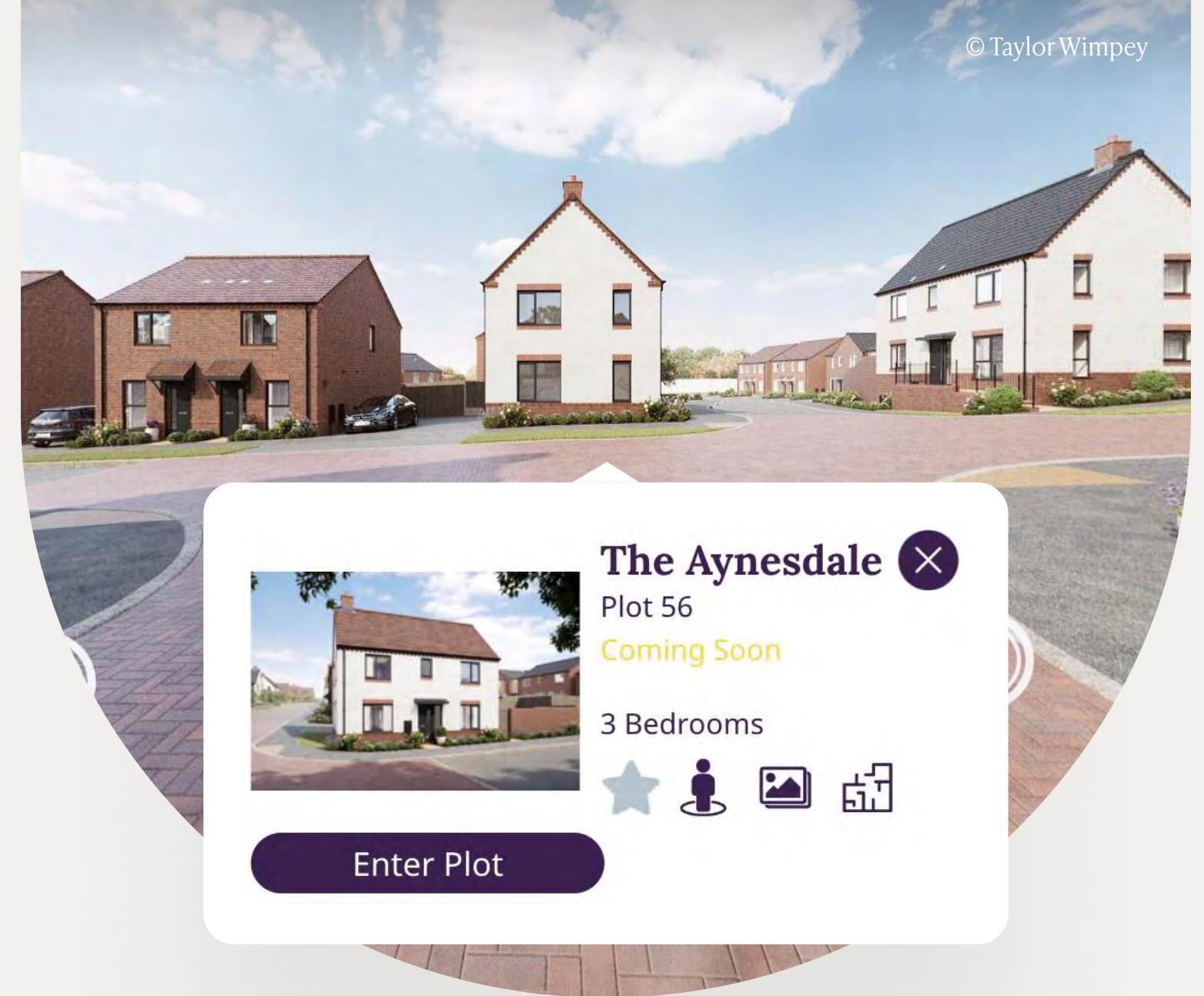
VIRTUAL TOURS

This is the next level of engagement beyond interactive site plans, hi-res imagery and video. Giving the potential buyer the power to "tour" the property, controlling their own journey, means they can get a sense of the home without having to visit initially. And even if they do end up visiting a show home, they'll likely be "warmer" and a bit further on in their journey due to already having had that immersive experience. When it comes to selling off plan, virtual tours can also help with selling a particular property type even if you don't have an available show home at the development the buyer is interested in.

MORTGAGE & STAMP DUTY CALCULATORS

These tools essentially act like pieces of useful content to help guide users through the funnel and along the buying journey. By offering this functionality you're helping them to validate their decision-making process and hopefully progressing them to enquiring. Additionally, you can also choose to make these tools "gated" - i.e. ask the user to input an email address to use them - give you more lead generation opportunities as you're able to collect their details to follow up with them if their not quite ready to make an enquiry or book an appointment.

CUSTOMER PORTALS

Customer portals are a whole other aspect of the digital experience for housebuilders that could fill another report. A dedicated customer portal for a housebuilder is usually a custom digital product which enables the digitalisation and streamlining of various aspects of the buying process. This includes uploading and viewing documentation, selecting options, tracking build progress, adding snags and asking for support. Offering these tools creates more transparency and improved communication in the pre and post-buying process, creating more trust with the buyers. Customer portal experiences are tricky to evaluate in detail (without actually buying a house!) but if housebuilders are offering them, it shows their commitment to delivering an elevated digital experience.

LIVE CHAT

Live chat is now a generally ubiquitous functionality across the range of online experiences in both B2B and B2C. If you're offering a "manned" live chat service (i.e. messages are answered by a real person) - this enables users to get answers to queries more quickly and get a personalised service without having to pick up the phone. You can really supercharge live chat by using AI to automate, streamline, save on resources and answer frequently asked questions. Some websites also offer live chat via familiar tools and apps like WhatsApp, making it even easier for the user to engage with them.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

SEARCH FUNCTIONALITY

Property or development search functionality isn't so much a trend or innovation, more so the bread and butter of a housebuilder website. When you're marketing and selling properties, location is obviously key. A potential buyer may have seen some of your advertising but be unsure of exactly where the nearest development is, so an intuitive search is vital. Poor search functionality can put a buyer off right at the beginning of the process - if they're unable to find a property or development easily, they'll likely go elsewhere. Additionally, utilising a good map view can also make searching easier and create a more visual sense of development locations whilst making navigating and finding developments easier.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

According to Zoopla's 2022 survey of buyers in the new home market, location is a top priority for buyers, with 51% of respondents identifying it as a key consideration. Additionally, in a recent market update for 2023, Zoopla identified that buyers for new homes come from more than 10 miles away - strongly suggesting they'll want and need to learn more about the local area before committing. These stats highlight the importance of contextualising the location of developments and properties throughout the digital experience. Housebuilders can achieve this in a number of ways, from local area map views showing key amenities and more in-depth "editorial" content about the local area.

HOW THE UK'S TOP 40 HOUSE BUILDERS ARE PERFORMING..

KEY OBSERVATIONS

✗ The average score out of 5 for **search functionality** was **2.6**. This suggests that across the board, top housebuilders aren't getting this vital piece of core functionality quite right.

✗ One of the top 40 biggest housebuilders in the UK **does not have** any *developments or properties available to view* on their site, which is a massive missed opportunity.

✗ We found that while some of the housebuilders were offering virtual property tours, this premium immersive content was often quite **difficult to find rather** than being *front and centre* and showing off the property.

✗ Seven of the housebuilders **were not using** a single one of the digital tools or trends we'd identified that *boost immersiveness* and engagement (one of them was in the top 3!)

✗ There were a few examples where search functionality had been **"overengineered"** - rather than focusing on getting the basics right on a really solid search experience, some housebuilders had tried to do something *"different"*, which doesn't always pay off.

✗ The housebuilders utilising **live chat** seemed to be taking advantage of using *AI and automated responses*, which is a good way of engaging visitors and generating leads.

Average score →

10.6

/20

OVERVIEW

It's interesting to note that the top 5 house builders in terms of turnover *didn't directly translate* to the top 5 in terms of **digital performance**.

The best performer out of the top 5 was Taylor Wimpey, who got the highest score according to our criteria. The 5th largest housebuilder in terms of turnover, Berkeley, scored just 9 out of a possible 20. Three of the top performers were outside of the top 30 housebuilders by turnover. This tells us that more revenue does not necessarily translate to a better digital experience.

ANALYSING THE TOP FIVE

To provide a bit more insight into what makes the top performers in our report so strong from a digital perspective, let's dig into the detail in terms of their digital experiences and what makes them so good. And just because we're perfectionists, some insight on areas they could improve too.

1. TAYLOR WIMPEY

WHAT WE LIKED MOST

The "From your last visit" section on the homepage is helpful for nurturing returning users by displaying searches they've already made and developments they've looked at previously. The local area map on the development pages with the interactive overlay showing notable nearby landmarks is a useful feature. As mentioned earlier in the report, this local area information can be a game-changer for potential buyers, particularly if they are looking to move from out of the area to the development.

THINGS TO IMPROVE

We marked down Taylor Wimpey slightly on their search experience, just because it felt quite clunky to use. The fact that the map in the search results view isn't immediately interactive and requires an extra click is not ideal. The search bar on the homepage is also a bit buggy, and other housebuilders use drop-downs or sliders to enable users to select a minimum and maximum budget, which is a bit slicker and easier to use than manually typing in the budget.

Strongest area: Innovation and unique features

From your last visit...

Search again...

£ £ £ Any price
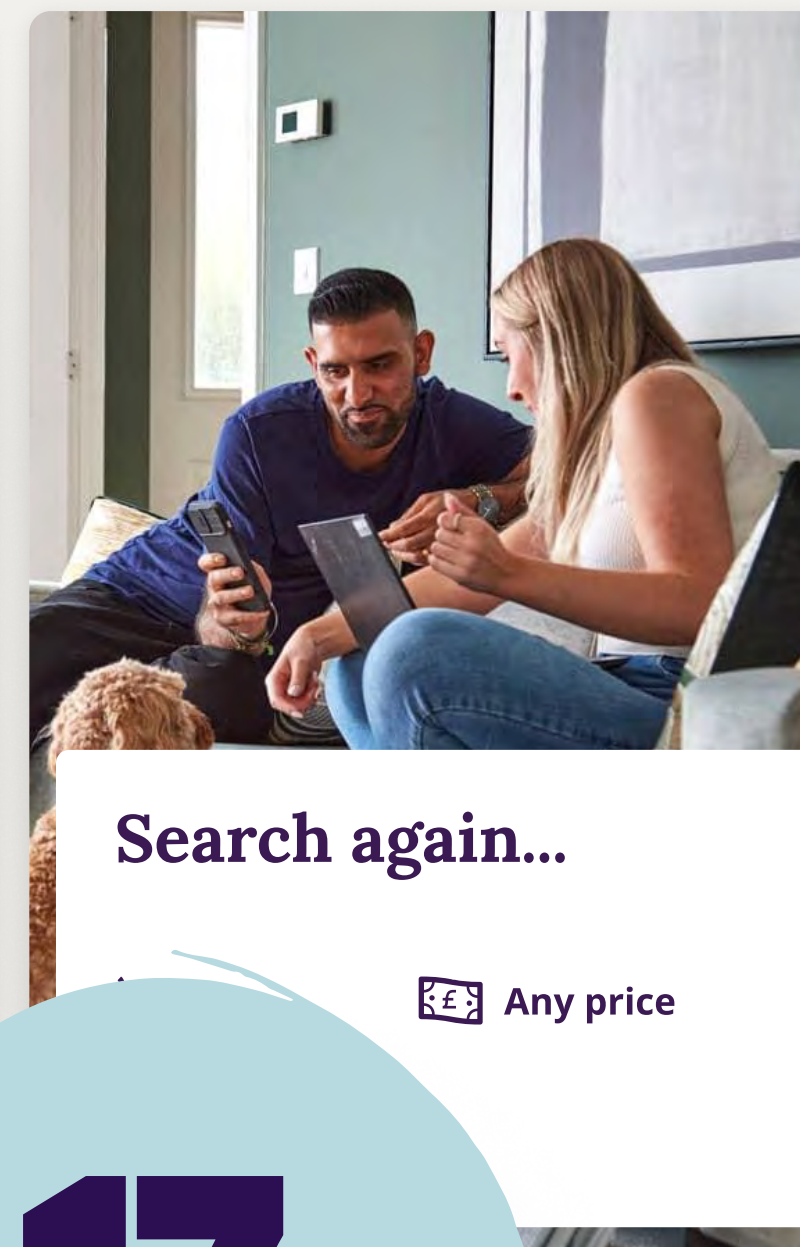
17 /20

2. CALA GROUP

WHAT WE LIKED MOST

The user experience in most places is quite intuitive. The search results page has nice visual buttons for the filters (even if the text on the dropdowns is a little small). The way that interactive content and development information are separated into tabs on the development pages feels a bit neater than other housebuilder sites that structure this vertically and can feel a bit overwhelming as you scroll through.

THINGS TO IMPROVE

Not all property and home types have virtual tours, and for those that don't, the content on the property page feels a little bit light. You also have to log in or create an account to make an enquiry about a property, which feels a bit unnecessary and is putting extra barriers to the user getting in touch.

Strongest area: User experience

16

/20
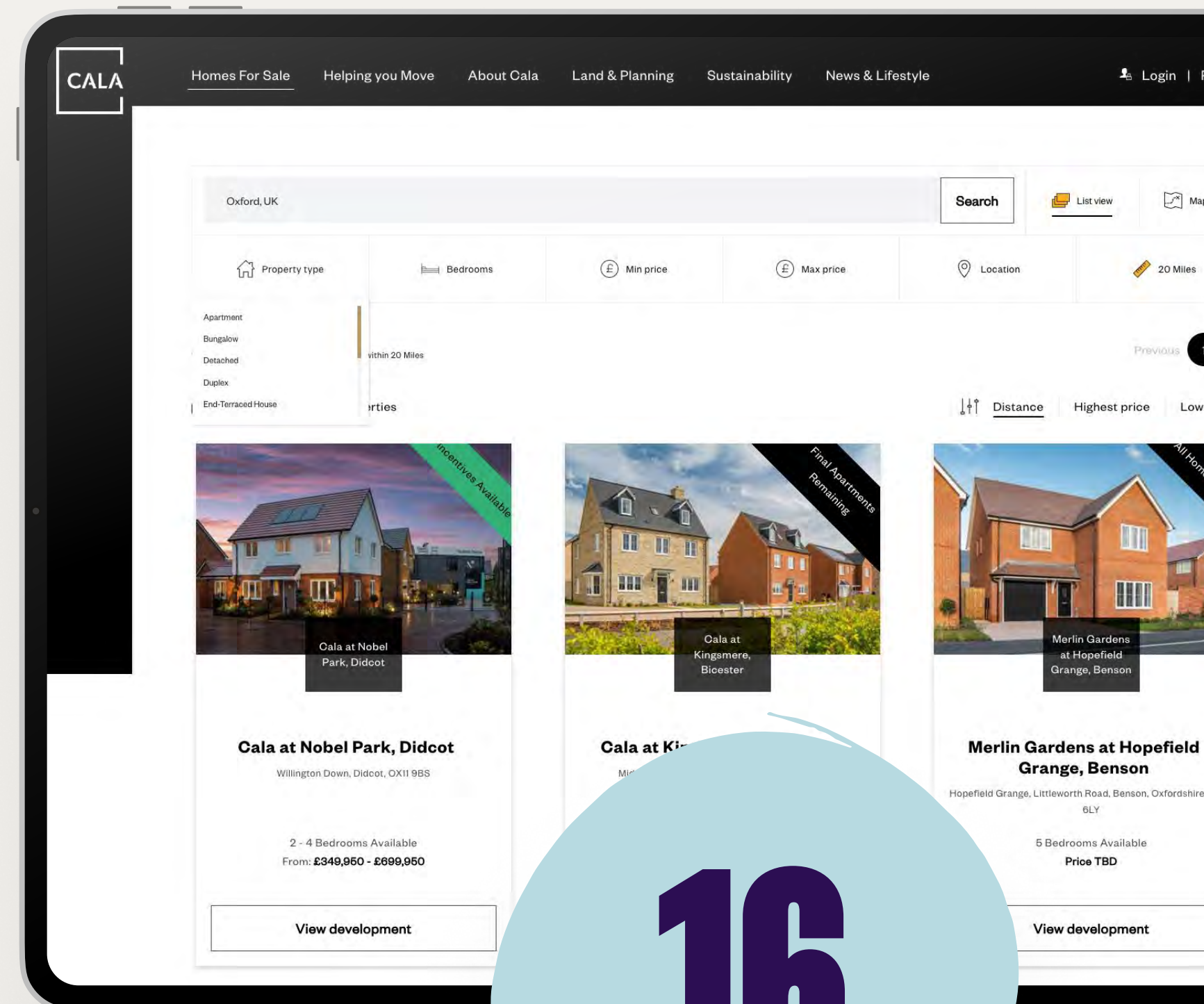
3. STORY HOMES

WHAT WE LIKED MOST

Little touches like the ability to toggle furniture on or off when viewing the floor plans are nice features. They also have a great selection of immersive and engaging content on both developments and individual properties.

THINGS TO IMPROVE

An issue we've identified with other housebuilders, it's a little clunky and not ideal that the siteplans are not immediately interactive, and you have to click another button to interact with them. The "welcome back" pop-up which appears when you return to the site and is designed to show you recommended properties or ones you've viewed before is a good idea in principle, but doesn't work that well in practice. When we tested it, it either showed homes that were not available, or developments that were miles and miles from our location.

Strongest area: Immersive content

15

/20

4. STRATA HOMES

WHAT WE LIKED MOST

Strata have created a very specific and strong visual style with the imagery and immersive content for their developments and properties, and the UI complements this content really nicely. They've clearly tried to be innovative and differentiate themselves in the way that users interact with them, which has paid off in some places but not so much in others (which we'll elaborate on in a moment).

THINGS TO IMPROVE

We lowered Strata Homes' rating for their search function due to it feeling slightly over-engineered. The interface offers options like "show me everything" or "let us match you", complicating rather than simplifying the search process. The "let us match you" option misleadingly suggests immediate results with each step. The map view also has low contrast which could make navigation challenging for some users.

Strongest area: Immersive content
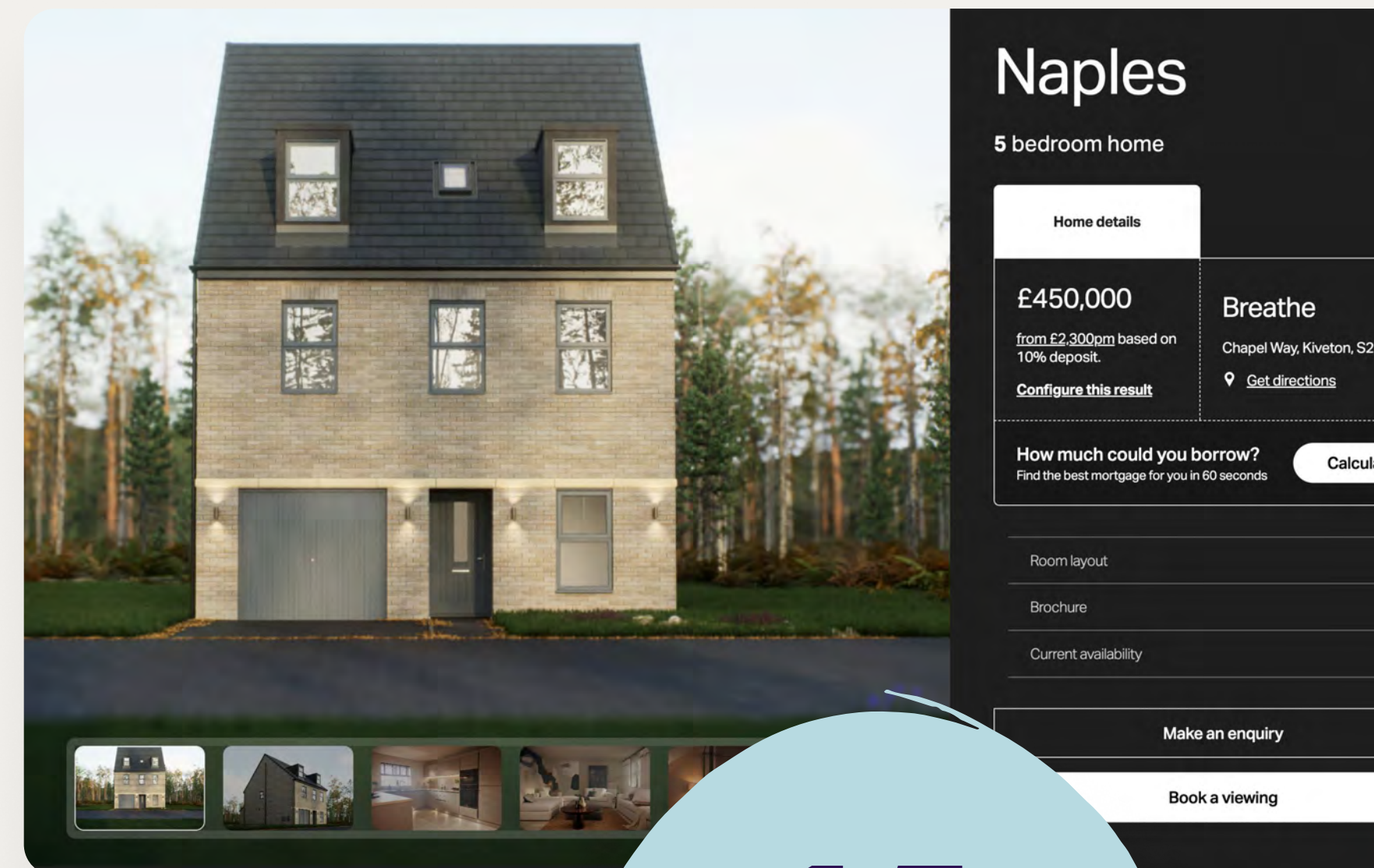
14 /20

5. ABBEY NEW HOMES

WHAT WE LIKED MOST

The UI is simple, quite intuitive and easy to use - you can find what you want quickly and easily. The Abbey site might not be as "innovative" or have as much immersive content as the other sites in the top 5, but it does the basics quite well and there's a lot to be said for that.

THINGS TO IMPROVE

Some more immersive content and high-quality imagery around individual properties and home types could improve engagement for users. The search functionality could be improved slightly just to make the experience slightly smoother - such as not defaulting the search radius to 60 miles and adding the ability to filter by budget.

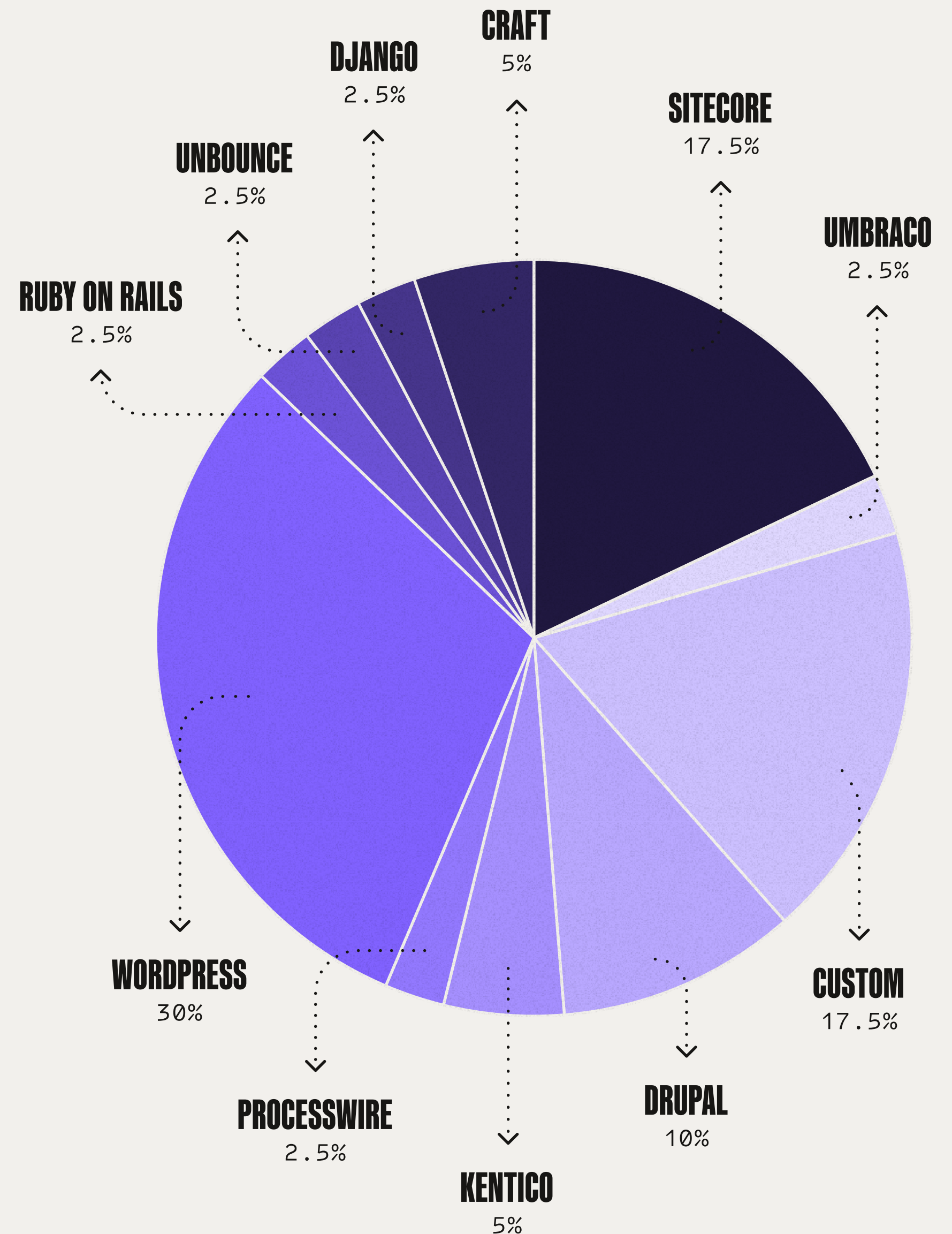**Strongest area:** User experience
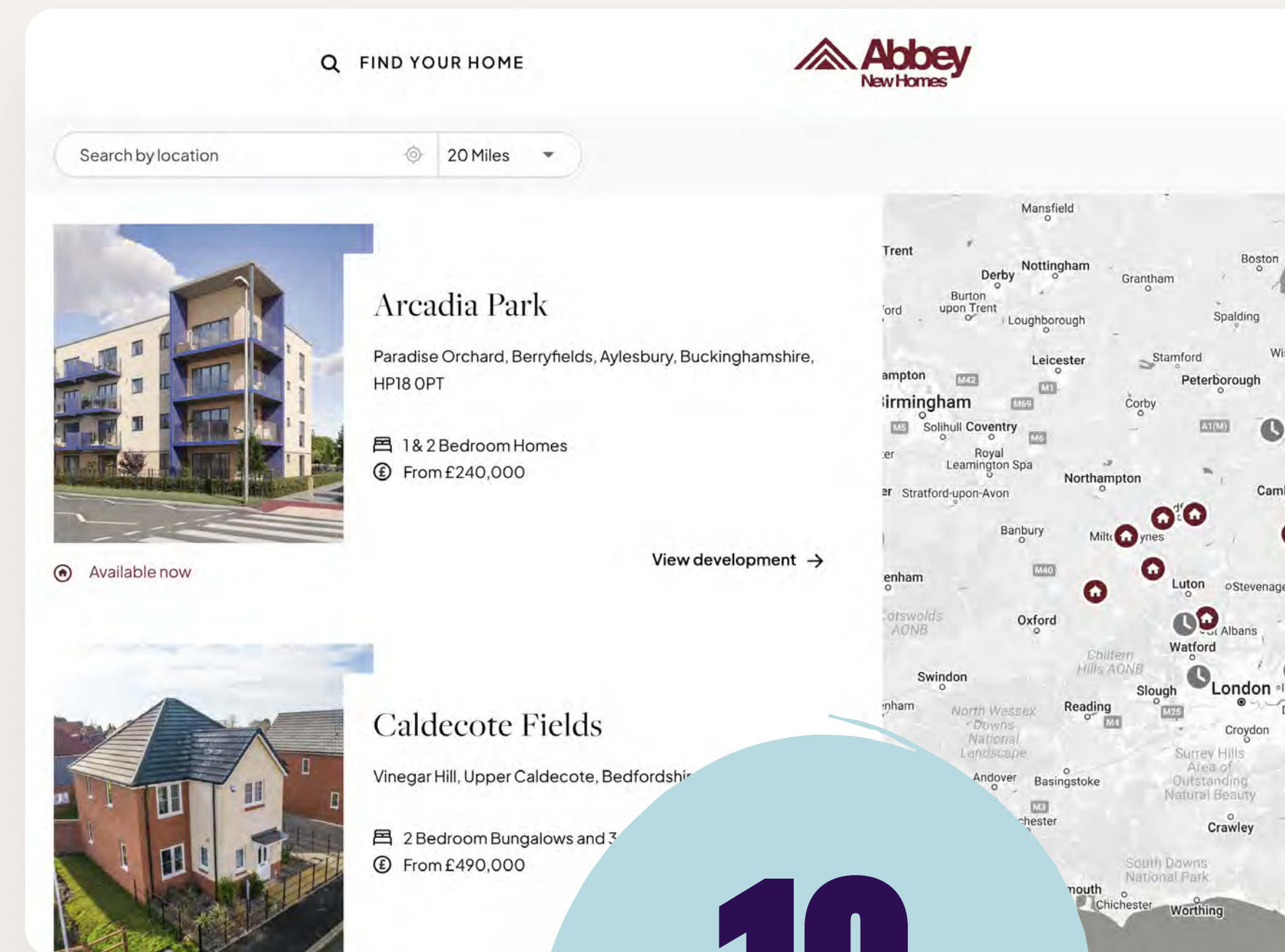
13

/20

TOOLS & TECHNOLOGIES BREAKDOWN..

CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

The most popular CMS powering housebuilder websites was WordPress - not particularly surprising given that WordPress powers around 43.2% of all websites.

WordPress is a solid option for housebuilders because of its scalability and flexibility. Other popular platforms included SiteCore, Drupal and Craft. 17.5% of housebuilders on the list were running a custom CMS platform.

DJANGO
2.5%

CRAFT
5%

UNBOUNCE
2.5%

SITECORE
17.5%

RUBY ON RAILS
2.5%

UMBRACO
2.5%

WORDPRESS
30%

CUSTOM
17.5%

PROCESSWIRE
2.5%

DRUPAL
10%

KENTICO
5%

HEADLESS

A headless website or headless CMS is a way of setting up a website that separates or decouples the front-end (what a user sees when they visit your website) from the backend content management (e.g. what you see when you're adding or editing content via a platform like WordPress).

Rather than being bundled into a single application and everything being delivered as one every time a page is requested, your front-end website is a static layer, and content is fed to it from your CMS and cached as data via an API layer. This presents a number of benefits including increased speed, performance and stability as well as flexibility in terms of the frontend framework you use.

We noted that several of the websites were quite slow to load, particularly on media-rich pages. Setting up in a headless environment would help these organisations deliver media-rich content without compromising on speed and performance. It would also give developers more flexibility in the frontend framework they could use to present these interactive elements, giving them even more options creatively and technically.

7.5%

JUST 7.5% OF
THE HOUSEBUILDERS
HAVE HEADLESS
WEBSITES
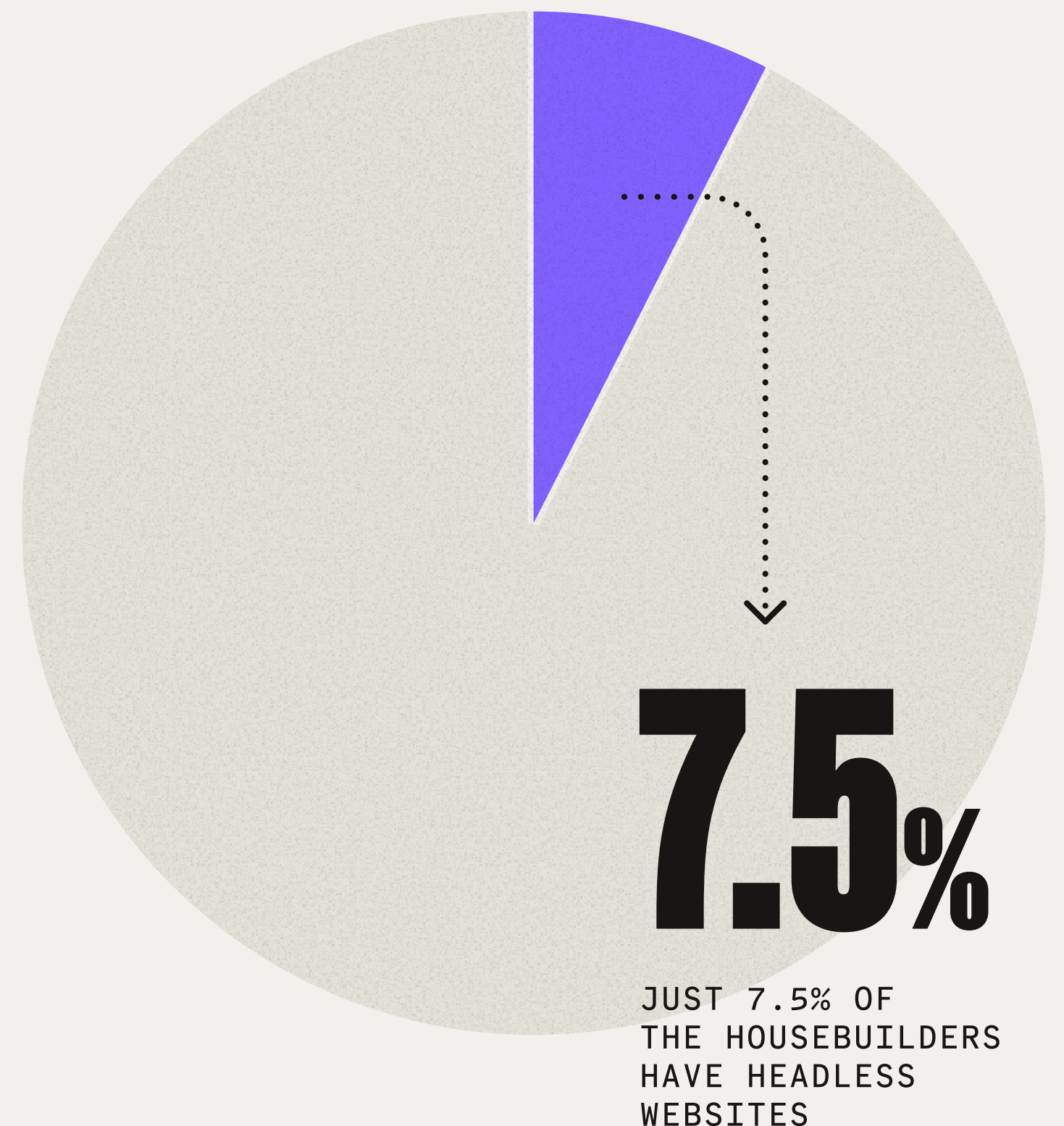
INTERACTIVE SITE PLANS

We were quite surprised to discover that **less than half** of the top national house builders were utilising interactive site plans.

Executed in the right way, interactive site plans can be an incredibly effective tool in selling properties off-plan, helping potential buyers to visualise where their plot would be, as well as helping them navigate through developments in a more intuitive and engaging way.

37.5%

62.5%
DON'T
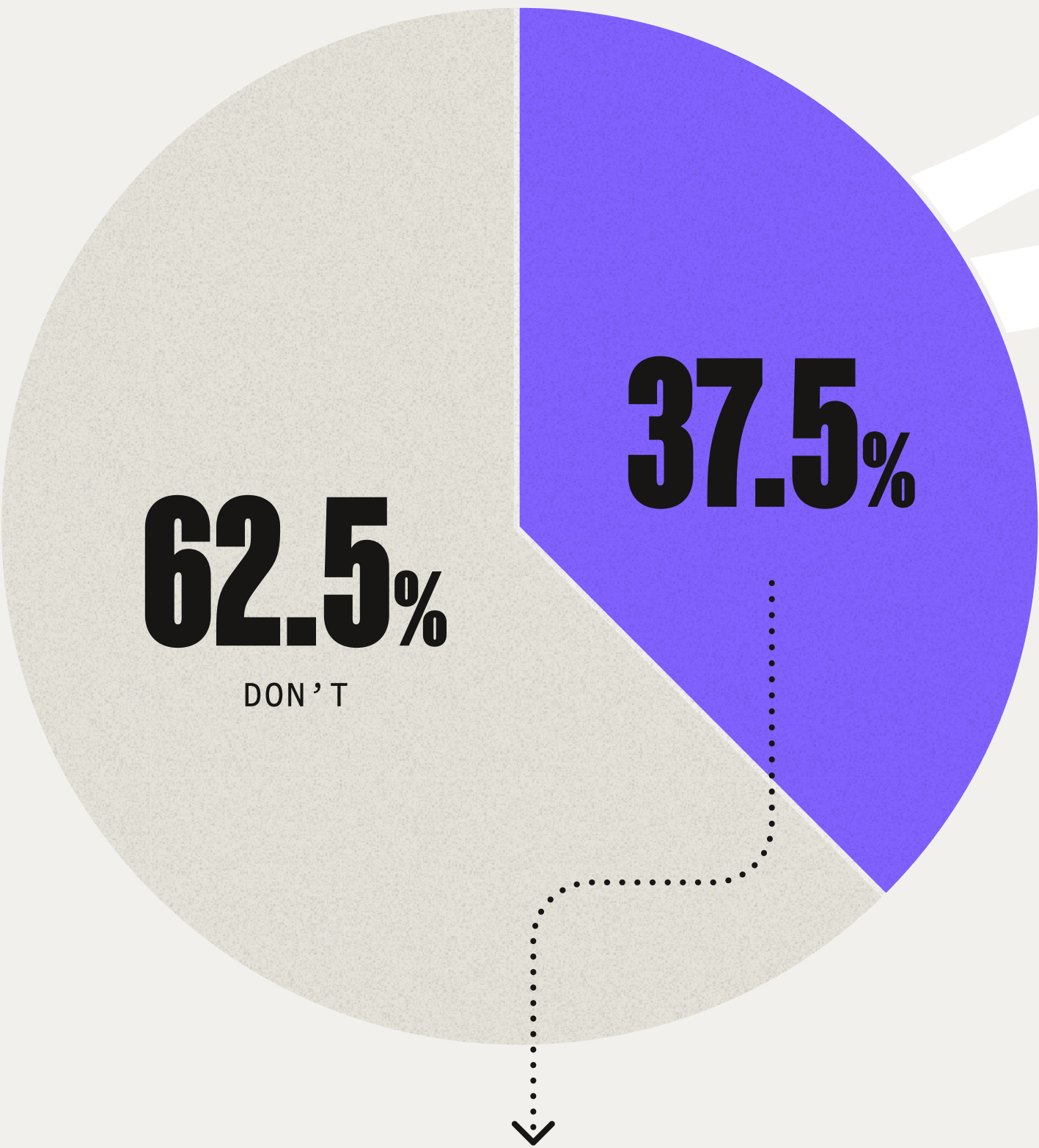
JUST 37.5% OF THE TOP 40 HOUSE BUILDERS USE INTERACTIVE SITE PLANS

VIRTUAL PROPERTY TOURS

Just over a **quarter** of the housebuilders were offering virtual property tours. This is again another element which is key in selling off plan - offering an immersive experience helping the user to envisage the property without needing to visit a showhome.

Housebuilders not offering virtual property tours were generally lacking in immersive and engaging content, with an **average score of 2.4** for that element. We were also quite surprised that some of the housebuilders that were offering virtual tours seemed to hide or bury them with hard-to-spot CTAs or within accordions - rather than putting such an important piece of immersive content front and centre.

25%

75%
DON'T
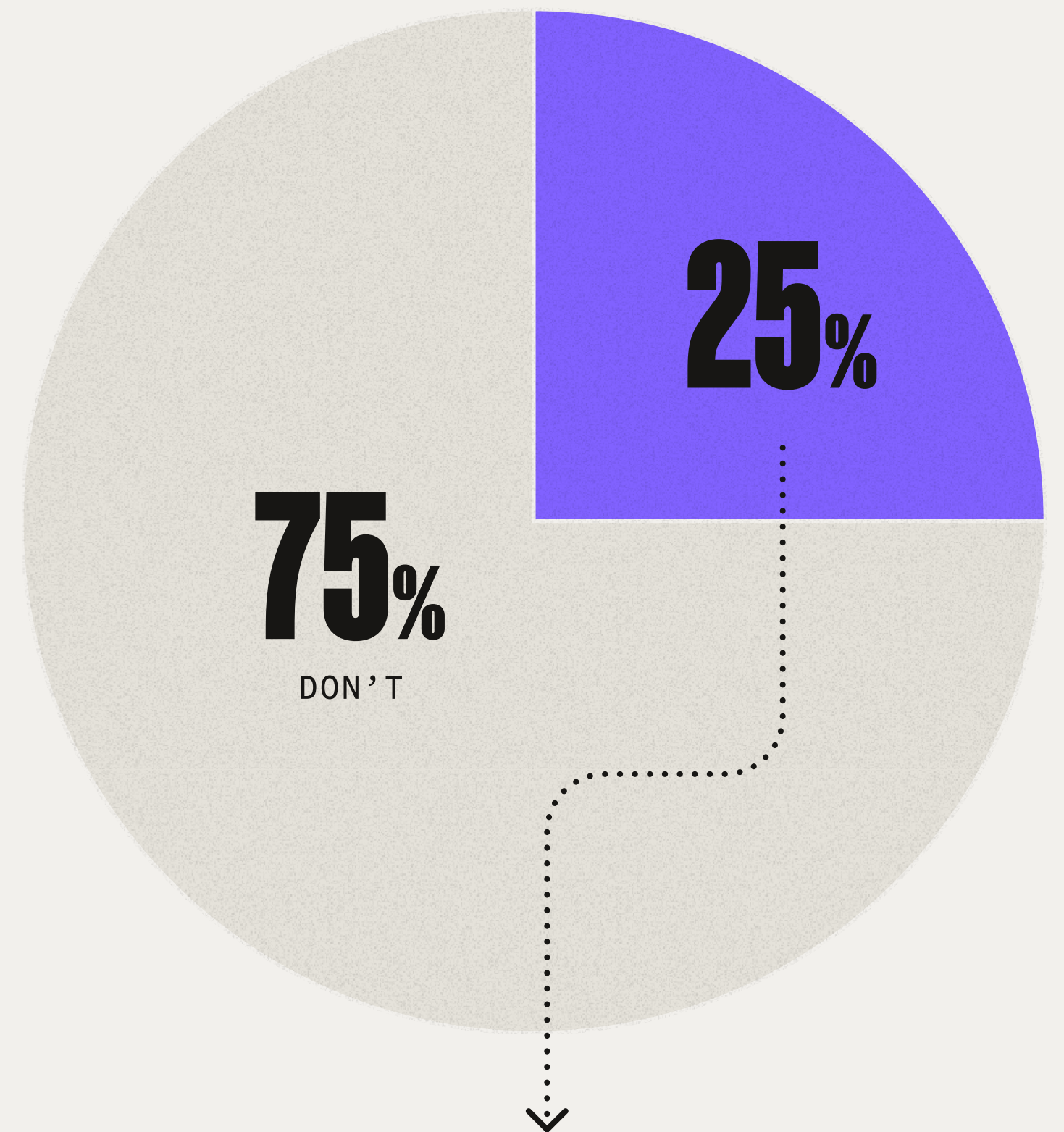
JUST 25% OF THE TOP 40
HOUSE BUILDERS USE
VIRTUAL PROPERTY TOURS

LIVE CHAT

Just 17.5% of the housebuilders offered any sort of live chat functionality. Those who didn't offer live chat seemed to offer quite good appointment scheduling functionality - but that still involved getting a callback.

Callbacks may not always be convenient, and the advantage of live chat is that the user can make an enquiry while they're doing something else, at a time that's convenient for them. Others required you to call or fill in an enquiry form - again this feels a bit outdated, and obviously less instantaneous than being able to ask a question via live chat.

17.5%

82.5%
DON'T

JUST 17.5% OF THE TOP 40
HOUSE BUILDERS USE LIVE
CHAT
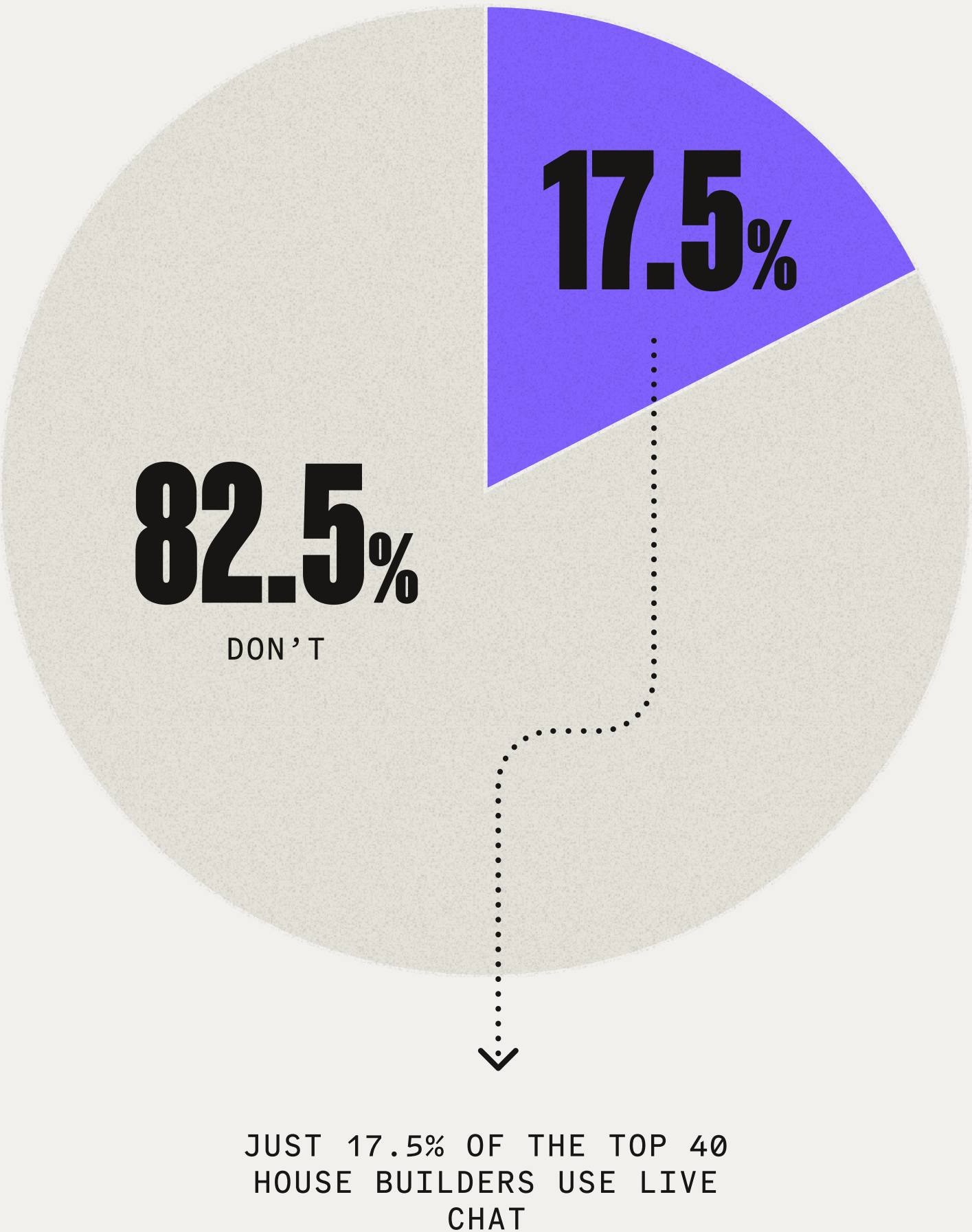
SUMMING UP

Through putting together this report, our analysis tells us that even the biggest, national housebuilders aren't necessarily providing the best digital experience for their users. We identified plenty of opportunities for top housebuilders to better utilise digital tools and innovations in order to create a more engaging user experience.

As a housebuilder, there are several things you should prioritise to ensure you're delivering on digital:

- ☑ **Solid search functionality**

- ☑ **Intuitive UI & navigation that does the basics well**

- ☑ **Immersive media-rich content that incorporates high quality imagery, video, interactive siteplans and 3D virtual tours**

- ☑ **Useful supporting content around local area features & amenities**

- ☑ **Providing tools like mortgage & stamp duty calculators**

- ☑ **Utilising tools such as intelligent property enquiry forms, live chat & WhatsApp integration to improve lead gen**

- ☑ **Harnessing cutting-edge technologies like headless to put you ahead of the rest of the market**

SEE HOW YOU STACK UP..

Use this checklist to assess your digital performance against some of the criteria we've used in our audit.

TOOLS & TECHNOLOGIES

- ☐ Headless website
- ☐ Fully interactive site plans
- ☐ Customer login area/portal
- ☐ Mortgage/stamp duty calculator (or both)
- ☐ 3D virtual property tours

CONTENT

- ☐ Hi-res imagery
- ☐ High-quality video
- ☐ Local area information
- ☐ Floor plans
- ☐ Useful content - e.g. buyer guides, trends & inspiration

SEARCH EXPERIENCE

- ☐ Filter by budget
- ☐ Adjust search radius
- ☐ Filter by no. of bedrooms
- ☐ Use current location button
- ☐ Map & list view
- ☐ Search bar above the fold on homepage

BONUS FEATURES

- ☐ "From your last visit"/ "Recommended for you"
- ☐ Smart appointment booking with live availability
- ☐ Energy efficiency/energy bill spend calculator
- ☐ Mobile app

APPENDIX

44 housebuilders used as reference, ordered by turnover.

Barratt Developments
Taylor Wimpey
Persimmon
Bellway
Bovis (part of Vistry)
Berkeley Group
Redrow Group
Countryside Properties (part of Vistry)
Bloor Homes
Cala Group
Miller Homes
Crest Nicholson
Hill Holdings (The Hill Group)
Keepmoat Homes
Morgan Sindall*
Avant Homes
Gleeson Homes (MJ Gleeson)
McCarthy Stone
Morris Homes
St Modwen Homes
Telford Homes
London Square

Wain Homes
Fairview Holdings
Springfield Properties
Lendlease Europe*
Weston Group
Stewart Milne*
Beacon Hill Group
Croudace Homes
Mount Anvil
Anwyl Group
Hopkins Homes
Inland Homes
Story Homes
Harron Homes
Abbey Developments
Emerson Developments (Jones Homes)
Strata Homes
Churchill Retirement
Fastflow/United Living*
Bewley Homes
Galliard
William Davis/Broadthorpe

To create this report we referred to Housing Today's Top 50 Housebuilders 2022 table - https://www.building.co.uk/top-50-housebuilders-2022-full-table/5120951.article

Note that some housebuilders (denoted with asterisks) were excluded as per below. We also referred to the list up to 44 in order to keep the number reviewed to 40.

- Morgan Sindall, Lendlease and Fastflow/United Living were excluded as they do not have customer-facing websites for their residential properties.

- Stewart Milne were excluded as they went into administration in January 2024.

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